

# The War Poems of Katharine Lee Bates

by Leonard Miele

Katharine Lee Bates, the most celebrated resident of Falmouth, was passionate about ending the “war to end all wars” and actively supported President Woodrow Wilson’s effort to establish a League of Nations. Frustrated by the senseless death and destruction of World War I that ravaged Europe, Katharine Lee Bates used her literary voice to protest the war by publishing a book of poems in 1918 titled *The Retinue and Other Poems*. Within this volume, she compiled 42 war poems that had been printed between 1914 and 1918 in such publications as *Life*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Boston Transcript*.

In her poem “How Long,” Katharine Lee Bates wrote this poignant line about war: “How long shall bomb and bullet think for human brains?” In this single phrase, she made it clear that it was time to put an end to the armaments of war and to embrace the brain’s capacity for rationality and diplomacy. The following poems reinforce her belief that war is futile and is the darkest reflection of man’s inhumanity to other men. In “Mother,” Katharine Lee Bates describes the intuitive reaction of a mother when her son dies in battle thousands of miles away; in “The Horses,” she personifies the 80,000 horses that were shipped to Europe to die alongside American soldiers.

## MOTHER

“Mother! Mother!” he called as he fell  
In the horror there  
Of a bursting shell  
That strewed the red flesh on the air.

Far away over sea and land  
The knitting dropt  
From an old white hand,  
And a heart for an instant stopt.

But it was Death, dark mother and wise,  
All-tenderest,  
Who kissed his eyes  
And gathered him to her breast.



Katharine Lee Bates  
Courtesy Falmouth Museums on the Green.

## THE HORSES

What was our share in the sinning,  
 That we must share the doom?  
 Sweet was our life's beginning  
 In the spicy meadow-bloom,  
 With children's hands to pet us  
 And kindly tones to call.  
 To-day the red spurs fret us  
 Against the bayonet wall.

What had we done, our masters,  
 That you sold us into hell?  
 Our terrors and disasters  
 Have filled your pockets well.  
 You feast on our starvation;  
 Your laughter is our groan.  
 Have horses then no nation,  
 No country of their own?

What are we, we your horses,  
 So loyal where we serve,  
 Fashioned of noble forces  
 All sensitive with nerve?  
 Torn, agonized, we wallow  
 On the blood-bemired sod;  
 And still the shiploads follow.  
 Have horses then no God?



A 1918 poster by Haskell Coffin.

From the Library of Congress.

### About the Author

Leonard Miele is the co-editor of *Spritsail* and the author of *Voice of the Tide: the Cape Cod Years of Katharine Lee Bates*.