Classic Poetry Series

Blanche Edith Baughan
- poems -

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Blanche Edith Baughan(16 January 1870 - 20 August 1958)

 Early Life

Blanche Edith Baughan was born on 16 January 1870 at Putney, Surrey, England. She was the youngest of six children of Ruth Catterns and her husband, John Baughan, a scrivener. Her father died when she was 10 years old.

Baughan was one of the first women to attend Royal Holloway College when it opened to students studying for University of London degrees. She left in 1891 having gained the first first-class honours BA degree in Classics awarded to a member of the college. Soon after graduating Baughan became involved in social work in the slums of Shoreditch and Hoxton, in east London. Much of her spare time between 1893 and 1898 was spent writing the poems that were collected in her first volume, Verses (1898).

In the 1890s Baughan visited Germany, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland. On her return, she had the responsibility of nursing her mother, then a psychiatric invalid. (For fear of having inherited this illness, Baughan never married.) She must have had some assistance, for she was able to undertake a position teaching Greek to Adeline, Duchess of Bedford, and to some of her friends. Baughan's brief association with the aristocracy at a time when her memory of the slums was still vivid highlighted the vast gulf between rich and poor in England and set her in the direction of social reform. She had already been actively involved in the suffrage movement since her student days. However, Baughan's main interest at the time was to further her literary career.

New Zealand

Baughan travelled to New Zealand in 1900, disembarking at Wellington. She knew nobody, and remained only a short time before making a tour to the Pacific Islands, South Africa and the Victoria Falls. She then returned to New Zealand, and soon came across 'friends of friends' who were farming at Ormondville, in Hawke's Bay. They arranged for her to help with the housework in return for her keep. She continued, part-time, to work at her chosen career of poet. In 1902 Baughan moved to Chorlton, a tiny isolated community on Banks Peninsula.

Blanche Baughan became interested in developing a style of poetry relevant to a new colony. Her earliest published New Zealand poems, 'Young Hotspur' and 'The

old place' , were first published in the London Spectator in 1902, and reprinted in Reuben and other poems (1903). In her most significant volume, Shingle-short and other verses (1908), she attempted some of the stylistic innovations usually associated with modernist poetry: demotic imagery, the anti-hero as subject, juxtaposition of picturesque and sordid imagery, an open form, unpredictable rhythm, and a consciousness of the subjectivity of perception. Some attempt at literary innovation may also be seen in her volume of prose sketches, Brown bread from a colonial oven (1912), with her choice of unpretentious characters throughout, and, especially in 'Grandmother speaks' , her attempt at commonplace colloquial speech. Notable, too, is her effective use of domestic imagery.

After an illness about 1910 Baughan was aware that her creative talent was fading, at least as far as poetry was concerned. The mediocre quality of most of the work in her slim volume Poems from the Port Hills (apparently written before the First World War, but not published until 1923) confirms her judgement. About 1910 she moved to a cottage at the top of Clifton spur, near Sumner, Christchurch, where she lived until 1930.

Baughan's essay on the Milford Track, 'Finest walk in the world' , was printed in the London Spectator in 1908; it led to a commission for a series of similar essays to be published in booklet form. Extensive walking and alpine climbing trips throughout New Zealand preceded the writing. In 1916 these popular essays were collected together and published as Studies in New Zealand Scenery , and in 1922 they were reprinted, with one additional essay, under the title Glimpses of New Zealand scenery . In the essays Baughan displays a considerable knowledge of indigenous plants. Her interest in natural history had put her in touch with the eminent botanists Robert Laing and Leonard Cockayne, and she made a significant collection of hitherto unrecorded plants from the Westland slopes of Copland Pass.

 Beliefs and Activism

Blanche Baughan considered herself a mystic. Her claim rests on two psychic experiences, the first taking place in Chorlton in 1905 and the second, 20 years later, at her home in Sumner. She became interested in Indian Vedanta teachings, and in 1915 travelled to the Vedanta centres in California to seek further enlightenment. She became a lifelong convert to the philosophy. Baughan returned to New Zealand in 1916. Between then and 1922 she made two trips to England and also visited India.

From about 1920 Baughan experienced 'one increasing purpose' in life: a more

humane and effective treatment of prisoners and 'society's misfits'. Her belief that social service, too, was an art consoled her for the evaporation of her literary talent: the 'unseen Beauty can, and should, rule all our destinies, & can be served in all sorts of ways'. She claimed that her philosophical outlook was directly responsible for her work with prisoners.

An article in the London Spectator concerning the Howard League for Penal Reform inspired her in 1924 to help form a New Zealand branch. She believed that many prisoners were socially immature and should be reformed as well as punished. Her main objectives were the proper reform of the criminal justice system, reform of the prison system to promote the self-respect of prisoners, training of officials, classification of prisoners, and the extensive use of probation.

Baughan moved from Clifton to Akaroa in 1930. She made her home an unofficial halfway house, frequently giving shelter and financial assistance to ex-prisoners and others on the fringe of society. Baughan studied prison conditions and prisoners first at Point Halswell, Wellington, where she instituted mental testing for women prisoners.

She later became official visitor at Addington Reformatory for Women in Christchurch. Baughan's outspoken commitment to prison reform frequently put her at odds with prison authorities. Following a complaint from the controller general of prisons in 1925 that she had written to the press in her capacity as official visitor to the Addington women's prison, Baughan resigned, protesting about the futility of dealing with alcoholics and psychiatric invalids in prison without adequate qualified assistance. She made a first-hand study of both male and female prisoners in the 1930s, and recorded some of her successes and failures in a small volume, People in prison. The book was controversial at the time, and was particularly criticised by prison authorities.

In addition to her work for penal reform, Blanche Baughan was an outspoken opponent of capital punishment, a financial supporter of the Red Cross and a member of the Akaroa Borough Council. Baughan was recognised for her contribution to social services with the award of the King George V Jubilee Medal in 1935. For her literary work she deserves recognition for indicating new directions in the nation's literary history and as a significant harbinger of change in early New Zealand poetry. She died at Akaroa on 20 August 1958.

Five Prayers

TO taste
Wild wine of the mountain-spring, fresh, living, strong,
Running and rushing like a triumph-song
  Round hearts new-braced:

To smell
A growing cowslip, some glad morn of Spring,
And breathe the breath of every fragrant thing
  From every bell:

To touch
A sliding wavelet, supple, smooth and thin,—
Just ere the pois'd and perfect crests begin
  To bend too much:

To hear
Amid May twilight, by the murmuring sea,
Some blackbird warbling from a budded tree,
  Tender and clear:

To see
Down young rose-petals how the deepening light
Glides gradually, till, somewhere out of sight,
  What light must be!—

O Thou, intense
Rapture of Beauty! All-pervading Lord!
Is not this worship? So art Thou ador'd
  By every sense

Blanche Edith Baughan

God's Acre

’NEATH the spiring of spruces
Above the blue sea,
Lo, a field of white crosses,
A garden of grief!
—And a riot of roses,
Of red and white roses,
Rich Death! all in blossom,
Fair Loss! all in leaf.
Aye, their warm cherub-cheeks
To cold marble they press;
With sweet summer-kisses
Dead names they caress;
Yon tomb, see, all garlands,
All roses this cross!
—So breathe, my lamenting!
So bloom, O my loss!

Blanche Edith Baughan

On The Just And The Unjust

OUTCAST, a horror to his kind,
At night he to the forest fled.
There, the birch-bark made fire for him,
The brown fern made a bed.

The river murmured lullaby,
The moisty mosses breathed of balm,
The clean stars carried light to him,
Unterrified and calm.

Aye, as they would have served a saint
Freely all served the guilty guest.
They only saw their Father’s son,
And brought their brother rest.

Blanche Edith Baughan

The Greatest Gift

IF of us two might only one be glad,
Pain I’d pursue, and struggle to be sad.
If of us two one only might be great,
Safely obscure I’d triumph in my fate.
O Soul more dear than mine! if of us two
One only might love God, it should be you.

Blanche Edith Baughan

The 'Mary Ross'

'What was the hardest hour', you ask,
'Ever I had at sea?'
There was that in the wreck of the Mary Ross
Is bitten into me.

Five merry weeks of sun and speed,
A ship well mann'd and stout—
One hour from home she falter'd, stopp'd
Short … and the lights went out.

What follow'd—O just-dealing God,
How firm must be Thy mind,
Such a beginning to have given
And such an end design'd!

…Sudden, from human eyes and hands
And kindred human breath,
Into the wild black Void, into
The unthought-on fangs of Death…

…The bitter cold was all—then breath
Again, and something cross'd
My clutching fingers; with a spar
Now was I driven and toss'd.

Where were the rest? My strain'd ear caught
No answer … Dazed and stark,
Moments it may have been, or hours,
Dash'd thro' the roaring dark.

I thought that I must have traversed Time
And touch'd Eternity,
When, high in the air, a cry, a wail:
'I am afraid! Save me!'

And yonder!—Oh what 's that blacker black
Bulged out upon the gloom?
By the glint of the whirling spray I saw
Her lifted stern-post loom.

‘Save me!’ Oh what ’s yon whiter speck
O’er the yeasty glimmer wild?
Terribly flashed the hasty moon
On—the face of a little child!

Back chased the blessed dark—but, oh!
I’d seen! Aye, all too clear
I see her still—the piteous mouth,
The great eyes fixt with fear.

Not an hour since upon my knee
Her good-night pranks were play’d,
And now—to face Death … and alone…
God! and afraid? ‘Afraid!’

Oh, I cried from the trough—I promised her
The help that I could not give.
The wind drove back my words—the waves
Drove on their fugitive.

‘Somebody save me!’ And again
For one mad second’s space,
’Mid the rushing rack the quiet moon,
’Mid the wide void, that face!

And she saw me! Great Heaven, she smiled!
Stretch’d out her arms and cried,
‘Save me!’ and half my name—and then…
Then she was pacified.

For … a swirl … a suck … when next I rose,
Naught, save the stormy roar!
Down in the darkness I thank’d God.
She was afraid no more.

Blanche Edith Baughan

The Old Place

SO the last day's come at last, the close of my fifteen year—
The end of the hope, an' the struggles, an' messes I've put in here.
All of the shearings over, the final mustering done,—
Eleven hundred an' fifty for the incoming man, near on.
Over five thousand I drove 'em, mob by mob, down the coast;
Eleven-fifty in fifteen year…it isn't much of a boast.

Oh, it's a bad old place! Blown out o' your bed half the nights,
And in the summer the grass burnt shiny an' bare as your hand, on the heights:

The creek dried up by November, and in May a thundering roar
That carries down toll o' your stock to salt 'em whole on the shore.
Clear'd I have, and I've clear'd an' clear'd, yet everywhere, slap in your face,
Briar, tauhinu, 1 an' ruin! God! it's a brute of a place.
…An' the house got burnt which I built, myself, with all that worry and pride;
Where the Missus was always homesick, and where she took fever, and died.

Yes, well! I'm leaving the place. Apples look red on that bough.
I set the slips with my own hand. Well—they're the other man's now.
The breezy bluff: an' the clover that smells so over the land,
Drowning the reek o' the rubbish, that plucks the profit out o' your hand:
That bit o' Bush paddock I fall'd myself, an' watch'd, each year, come clean
(Don't it look fresh in the tawny? A scrap of Old-Country green):
This air, all healthy with sun an' salt, an' bright with purity:
An' the glossy karakas 2 there, twinkling to the big blue twinkling sea:
Aye, the broad blue sea beyond, an' the gem-clear cove below,
Where the boat I'll never handle again; sits rocking to and fro:
There's the last look to it all! an' now for the last upon
This room, where Hetty was born, an' my Mary died, an' John…
Well! I'm leaving the poor old place, and it cuts as keen as a knife;
The place that's broken my heart—the place where I've lived my life.

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