

William Golder, 1810 – 1876

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William Golder is credited with being the author of the first book of poetry published in New Zealand, and the first amateur printer who was not a missionary. He arrived in Te Whanganui-a-Tara, or Port Nicholson, on The Bengal Merchant in February 1840. He was 29, and accompanied by his wife Mary and two children. The unbroken passage from Scotland to New Zealand took a toll on the small family, weakening their first child who sickened and died two months after arrival, aged 3. Golder spent the rest of his life (until 1876 when he returned to Scotland some years after the death of his wife only to die in an accident shortly after arrival) as a settler in the Hutt Valley and an active member of the new British society being formed in this region of New Zealand. The eldest son of a soldier who settled in Strathaven, a town noted for its radicalism in the early decades of the nineteenth century, like many others of his social position William Golder learned farming and weaving. He advanced his literacy to the point where he was appointed as a school teacher; he subsequently attended the Glasgow Normal Seminary where he engaged in a training programme based on a progressive conception of how children learn and the role of the teacher in facilitating learning. His professional advancement was evidenced by his then taking charge of a school near Edinburgh, but it abruptly ended when his wife converted to Catholicism and he was obliged to resign his position. Unable to find work, he decided to emigrate when he saw the posters advertising the New Zealand Company's plans to establish a settlement in Wellington; he was refused initially as a teacher, but accepted when he produced evidence of his farming experience. Once settled, he added teaching to his other commitments, running a school in the Hutt Valley and playing a part in the establishment of a public school system in the Wellington area.

During his residence in the Hutt valley, Golder published four volumes of poetry. These volumes include ballads, lyrics, satires, odes and an epic, 'The New Zealand Survey'. One purpose for writing them was consolatory; he wrote in the preface to *The New Zealand Minstrelsy* that it was 'a pleasing pastime picturing out experiences and observations, for want of better employment, when I used to sit in my lonely bush cottage musing over the fire in the long winter evenings' (p.vi). But he also had a grander justification which contained this private, recreational activity of the literate man within a frame of Miltonic purposiveness. In his preface to *The Pigeons' Parliament*, a

satire on the colony in the 1840s 'contrasted with the character it assumed after the arrival of Sir G. Grey', he reported a conversation about writing poetry. 'It so happened one day, when assisting at the building of the Hutt stockade, I was working along with a person who, like myself, was a little acquainted with the "Muse;" during a little conversation, I asked him why he did not compose something on New Zealand; when, with a strong affirmation, he declared that he saw nothing in the place worth writing about' (p.iv). Golder's alternative view, expressed in the preface to *The New Zealand Minstrelsy*, proposes a role for literature which links it integrally to the process of constructing a national identity. He hopes that his poetry might not only 'add to the literature of our Colony, thereby extracting some of the sweets which lie hid among the many asperities of colonial life; but also to endear our adopted country the more to the bosom of the *bona fide* settler; as such, in days of yore, has often induced a people to take a firmer hold of their country, by not only inspiring them with a spirit of patriotic magnanimity, but also in making them the more connected as a people in the eyes of others' (p.v). In each aspect of this account, he presents poetry as a transformative medium, modifying self-perception and the perception of others with the outcome a society cohering around a positive and persuasive representation of itself.

His publications testify to a much larger body of work than he was able to get into print. Characteristically, he includes in three of the four volumes a 'Prospectus' or 'Prospective', in which he details other completed writing which he intends to publish. He names two major poems, 'The Philosophy of Thought', in two cantos, and 'The Progress of Piety', in fifteen cantos, as well as much other shorter verse and prose. The best indication of what might have been included amongst the prose writings is given by his 1838 volume, published by subscription as a means of raising money shortly before he emigrated. Nearly one half of this volume is made up of three prose narratives of events, one about his experience at Glasgow College and another with an anti-slavery message about his father's military service in South Africa. Documentary and explanatory notes to the poems and the prose establish a practice which he followed in his later volumes. While he reprinted a selection of the poems in this volume as an appendix to *The New Zealand Minstrelsy*, the prose was omitted.

There are three decisive aspects to his formation as a poet. His conviction that poetry and living are intimately related is grounded in a Miltonic conception of what it means to be human. Golder endorses Milton's conception of the loving couple as the foundational social unit as well as expressing his life time of thinking about this aspect of social relations in the

title poem of his final publication, 'The Philosophy of Love', a poem in six cantos or approximately 3,400 lines of blank verse which he wrote after his wife's death. He fully endorses Milton's commitment to learning and the discovery of new truth as both a revelation of the mind of God and the fulfilment of human intelligence; he adopts a Miltonic view of history and society as the product of the moral and spiritual qualities of individual human actors, whatever their social station; and he seeks a political order in which liberty is an informing concept and fact of social relations. He replaces Milton's ambivalence about the role of science and technology in the advancement of knowledge with an unequivocal conviction about progress, in which the improvement of material life and the enlarged expression of human mental powers are both achieved and exemplified by science and technology.

Secondly, epigraphs and poems addressed to other poets place Golder in a very precise poetic and cultural milieu. The term 'artisan poet' has been applied to writers of the first half of the nineteenth century in the Scottish Lowlands, in order to mark a specific moment in which local publishing by largely self-taught writers in a context of drastic social and economic change became possible. These writers participate directly in and help to formulate modes of expression for an increasingly urbanised population; they place political, economic and social improvement in a protestant religious framework and they are participants in the 'popular enlightenment', the process of disseminating new thinking in literature, science, philosophy and religion through the diffusion of literacy and through institutions like the mechanics institutes and athenaeums which were formed during this period.

The writers named by Golder – James Nicholson, Robert Pollok, and Thomas Pringle – strongly identify themselves with the society and topography of the Lowlands. Even if the specific locations are different for each poet, a similar combination of named features – a town or village, rural settings, rivers, valleys for secluded meditation and high points from which panoramic views could be obtained - provides the coordinates for the formation of personal and cultural identity. In the cases of the two emigrant poets, Golder and Pringle, this local source of identity is translated into the new landscapes of New Zealand and South Africa respectively. While preserving the elements of the model, Golder replaces 'his' Aven (the principal river of his place of origin, Strathaven) with the Erratonga (the first poem in *The New Zealand Minstrelsy* is addressed to this river) and otherwise imagines himself into the 'pristine wilderness' through a vision of the future New Zealand, settled and acculturated (like settler identity) according to this model.

Golder also draws strongly upon Scottish cultural nationalism, especially as it is manifested in the figure and role of the bard or minstrel, while also affirming the nation-state and monarchy of Britain. He marks this double relationship in a way which is of particular significance for his conception of New Zealand as South Britain. Firstly, he publishes poetry in both English and Doric, or Lowland Scots, and carefully distinguishes between the kinds of poetry to be written in each language. Typically, the more serious, reflective poetry is in English, while the poetry of local or communal situations and social relationships (often ballads set to traditional tunes) is in Doric. In this respect, he anticipates the future of English as a world language which also evolves local versions representing and facilitating cultural and historical differentiation. By publishing a versification of an episode from Ossian, and by quoting from James Beattie's poem, *The Minstrel* (1771, 1774), Golder also identifies himself with a conception of the role of the poet which is both culture- and nation-forming and conserving (in the figure of the bard), and with a democratic conception of the poet as local genius which is strongly affirmed by Beattie. The latter conception acknowledges but puts to one side the canonical link between poetry and uniquely superior talent; it instead sees genius as an overwhelming and subjective pressure to write (experienced as the muse, or inspiration) which can impel any person to seek the learning and literary knowledge needed to take on the role of poet.

On the model of the double identity (linguistic and cultural) signified by Scotland and Britain, Golder builds a third, New Zealand, identity in the formation of which poetry is a crucial factor. He persistently thinks of himself not as a provincial writer but as a founder of a new national literature, a literature which will necessarily be less 'civilised' or artistically accomplished because it is interactive with the environment in which it is being composed. It is out of an imaginative and knowledgeable engagement with the specific features of one's place that a distinctive national literature is created.

Thirdly, it is to be expected that Golder, actively caught up in complex social and cultural changes (of which emigration is personally the most extreme) and engaging publicly with them through poetry, should be particularly aware of his medium of expression. His repeated and traditional metaphor for the linguistic work of the poet is that of clothing ideas with words; but he offers two other analogies, both technological – printing and photography – which extend the other traditional metaphor of picturing into the era of technical process and scientific invention. There is nothing casual about these analogies. They go a long way towards explaining a notable quality of

his poetic voice which is, in its usual register, marked by plainness of diction, the rational exposition of knowledge, and a discrete dignity of rhythm, but which can also invoke powerful moral sentiments as a proper response to the significance of what is described and imagined. The dominant effect which he achieves is one of direct engagement of the mind with a real world, that is, the effect of scientific representation and realist narration.

All of these attributes come together in one place, at the opening of his epic poem, *The New Zealand Survey*, where he writes:

Nature's interpreters, if Poets be,
While on their souls, as clearly photographed
Her features are, — a real image fair
Reflected, as if in a mirror's sheen
Men see their likeness chastely shewn, and true, —
For she a language speaks, which none but they
Know how t'unravel, or its sense expound: (1-2)

Golder's belief about the way the 'instrument' of poetry should work to produce truth emphatically assimilates science and poetry. Furthermore, this statement is suggestive of an intimate parallel between the aesthetics of the black and white photograph and the black and white page, both sharing the containment of affect, romance and fantasy by rational knowledge which is exemplified in the chaste sheen of the mirror.

This does not mean that his writing is simply descriptive and impersonal; quite the contrary, it is infused by what could be called a rational excitement, even on occasion an exhilaration, at the worlds of the past, present and the future which science and literature have made it possible to 'see' imaginatively. The effect is what Golder would call philosophical, knowledge anchored in the real (in the way that the dinosaurs, for example, are anchored by their bones but require imagination to make them 'live') but incorporating the social and moral dimensions of human consciousness as integral parts of that real.

Key concepts informing all his poetry are: love and faith, knowledge, improvement, liberty, and civilisation. Human embodiment in action, society and history of these qualitative conceptions contributes to the progressive accomplishment of God's design for his creation. Poetry is itself a form of embodiment, contributing to the enhancement of social life as well as to nation-building. While Golder accepts the catastrophe theory of the evolution of the natural world, in which change is the constant factor, and demonstrates

his acceptance at large in his epic account of the geological origin of New Zealand in 'The New Zealand Survey', he sees the development of human society as the fulfilment of nature. Time is not impersonally chronological but historical, infused by the activity of mind, both human and divine. The two principal dimensions of social time which frame Golder's poetry are the past as remembered time and location, and the future as the progressive materialisation of knowledge in endlessly improving forms of scene and society.

A significant instance of his application of this way of thinking to New Zealand is his interpretation of Māori society in 'The New Zealand Survey'. The principle and fact of change in nature is also a principle and fact of every human society in itself and in its relations to nature. Among the Māori, Golder imagines that the effect of the arrival of Cook in New Zealand was to

[Excite] speculations strange, the which
 May be compared to the first earthquake's shock,
 That raised this land from ocean's depths, in that
 Such gave the mind fresh energy, and formed
 An era new, the basis of great change,
 To be effected in some future day! (53)

The arrival, following Cook, of the British settlers ('whose glory is/ Advancement in the civil arts of life') is presented by Golder as ending their state of exile and separation from a 'more cultured state,/ Or civilization' which had been the lot of Māori, a 'solitary race of men . . . A race of savages without a date . . . cut off from all knowledge of the world,/ And social arts of peace!'. Living close to the state of nature, 'far below/ Civilisation's standard', they nonetheless 'show themselves to claim a kindred tie/ To all of Adam's race' through the 'deep thought' which is evidenced in their ingenious methods, 'In absence of what commerce might supply', for dealing with 'stern necessity' (51-57). He envisages them "mid the revolution of events,/ . . . With heart and hand,/ Appreciating civilization's lore,/ To their new friends they bid God-speed, and join/ Improvement's march' (62-63).

Prospect, retrospect, and change: Golder's New Zealand publications throughout incorporate these constant features of his thinking, even in the organisation of their contents. The volumes are shaped by the distinctive subjectivity of the emigrant or exile; like the Māori, Golder is separated from his home and society of origin, which remain deeply embedded in memory in the way that the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve continues as the ideal but lost scene of truly human life. Each volume maps these subjective and

spatiotemporal relationships, beginning with poems set in New Zealand and concluding with recollections of Scotland. Many of the ballads are narratives of love lost when emigration separates a couple; they are complemented by poems envisaging New Zealand's future prosperity through the 'civil arts' as a leading Pacific nation. An overriding purpose is that future New Zealanders, those living in this imagined nation, should appreciate those whose energy, work and conviction provided its cultural and economic foundations:

. . . may these lines, to future ages, tell
 The worth of those, already who stand forth
 The hardy pioneers of future things!
 (*Pigeons' Parliament*, 101)

There is also an exact equivalence in his thinking between his physical work as a settler clearing land for farming, his social and educational work in shaping the new society and nation of New Zealand, and the work of envisaging the future form of New Zealand poetically. In each domain, effort driven by ideas about how things should be leads to the progressive civilising of nature and society. In the case of his last book, *The Philosophy of Love*, his act of printing it on what he described as his 'amateur press' is also an experiment oriented towards the future:

As regards this book, both the *printing* and the *binding* have been done by the *Author* himself, in each case, as an *amateur*. As the printing of *this* work consisted in much of experiment; I would crave the indulgence of friends: but having made considerable improvements in the *press*, I hope in future to shew a better *typography*; W.G.

PL Prospective, 209

'The Crystal Palace' includes a reflection on the process of creative work which applies equally to and illuminates all aspects of Golder's activity as a settler and poet. It links as instances of the same the poor typography of *The Philosophy of Love* to the building of the Crystal Palace as the exemplary sign of the achievements of British civilisation and the creation of the Britain of the South in New Zealand, which can in time better those achievements:

Such works, results of lab'ring thoughts, while hands
 Mould stubborn things the idea to match –
 Ev'n the objects pattern drawn upon the soul,
 From which must be wrought out the full design!
 Thus from the mind, --- emblem of deity, ---
 Though finite, aiming yet at mighty deeds,
 Proceeds the fiat, that must guide the means,

When giving forth its efforts in some shape
 Of awkward rudeness first; yet such in time
 Must have improvement's polish, shewing much
 Of man's advancement with the age; and course
 Of civ'lization and the arts of life:
 As what in one age is conceived, descends
 To other generations to receive
 Some fresh addition or improvement new,
 As way marks that bespeak man's progress, in
 The march of intellect, or how far advanced
 From degradations (into which he fell)
 Upon the road that leads to perfect bliss. (*New Zealand Survey*,
 97-8]

LINKS

[The Poetry of William Golder](#)

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