

Thomas Bracken, 1843 – 1898

Paul Hunt

Thomas Bracken was New Zealand's most famous and well-loved poet of the nineteenth century. He was considered by many to be New Zealand's national poet, and he has an enduring place in New Zealand's literary history because he wrote the words to the national hymn 'God Defend New Zealand'. He was considered to be New Zealand's Tennyson, and he encouraged the comparison himself. Although his poetry is sentimental and possesses too strong a focus on England for modern readers, it exhibits Bracken's love for his country, and provides a fine example of popular Victorian sentiment.

Thomas Bracken, born at Clones, 21 December 1843, County Monaghan, Ireland, was the son of Thomas Bracken, postmaster, publican, and grocer, and Margaret Kernan. Bracken's mother died soon after his birth, and his father died when he was ten years old. Bracken then lived with his aunt until 1855, when he emigrated to Australia to live with his uncle, John Kernan, on his farm at Moonee Ponds near Melbourne. Bracken only lived on his uncle's farm for a year. He then moved to Bendigo and worked as a chemist's assistant. There is no indication that Bracken undertook formal schooling in his early life.

In 1858, Bracken moved to Colbinabbin, near Bendigo, and worked as a farm hand on a sheep station. Little is known about the following years in Bracken's life, but it is believed that he spent some time as a gold digger, a stockman, and a shearer. During this time he began to write poetry, and published a collection called *The Haunted Vale: A Legend of the Murray, and Other Poems and Lyrics* (1867).

Bracken emigrated to New Zealand in 1869 and settled in Dunedin. Soon after arriving, he began working for the *Otago Guardian* as a journalist. He continued writing poetry, and wrote the Otago Caledonian Society's prize poems in 1869 and 1871. Also in 1871, Bracken published his second book of poetry, *Behind the Tomb and Other Poems*. This collection contained poems that he had written during his time in Australia, and some of those that he had written in the previous few years in Dunedin. Bracken quickly became a popular poet in Dunedin, and attended many social functions, often composing and reading lines especially for the occasion. This popularity assisted both his careers as a journalist and later as a politician.

In 1874, Bracken, sympathetic to the Catholic Church despite being raised a Protestant, was employed by R. A. Loughnan to canvass shares in the new Catholic paper *New Zealand Tablet*. Bracken hoped to get a position on the staff of the new paper, but Bishop Patrick Moran, one of Bracken's friends, declined his services.

In 1875, Bracken co-founded the *Saturday Advertiser, Timetable, and New Zealand Literary Miscellany* with John and Alexander Bathgate. Alexander Bathgate contributed prose fiction and verse, and Bracken was the editor, and wrote most of the leading articles. The first issue was printed on 17 July 1875, and the paper was an instant success. This was partly due to the booming print trade in Otago during the 1870s, but also due to Bracken's local popularity. Bracken is famed for encouraging local writers in the pages of the *Saturday Advertiser*, and he also published an item of literature of his own composing almost every week, often using the pseudonym 'Paddy Murphy'.

It was under the name 'Paddy Murphy' that Bracken published five stanzas in the *Saturday Advertiser* on 1 July 1876, titled 'National Hymn'. He also announced a competition to compose an air for the poem at a prize of 10 guineas. Three eminent German musicians in Melbourne judged the twelve entries in the competition. The judges voted unanimously and without consultation for the entry by Joseph Woods, a young schoolteacher from Lawrence, under the pseudonym 'Orpheus'. The first public performance of the music was in December 1876 at a street parade by the Dunedin Royal Artillery Band. The first time the music and words were heard together was on Christmas Day the same year in the Dunedin Queen's Theatre, the hymn being sung by the Lydia Howard Burlesque and Opera Troupe. The hymn became very popular, and it is for the words of this hymn that Bracken is most remembered. Bracken gave the copyright to 'God Defend New Zealand' to Joseph Woods in 1877, who immediately published the words and music together. The copyright passed to Charles Begg & Co before the First World War, and then to the New Zealand Government in 1934. In 1940, the government declared it to be New Zealand's national hymn, and in 1977 the Queen approved it as equal in status to the National Anthem.

Also in 1876, Bracken published *Pulpit Pictures*, a collection of sketches of local clergymen reprinted from the series of the same name that appeared in the *Saturday Advertiser* under the name 'Didymus'.

Bracken began his political career in 1879 when in the general election he stood for the City of Dunedin, encouraged by his friend Robert Stout. Bracken,

a Liberal, openly supported Sir George Grey. But he refused to enter public debate or canvas support before the election, considering the pre-election tactics employed by politicians to be contemptible. Much to his disappointment he came last of six members standing for the City of Dunedin seat.

The same year Bracken wrote his most popular poem, 'Not Understood', a plea for sympathy and understanding that touched a common chord:

Not understood. How many breasts are aching
For lack of sympathy! Ah! day by day,
How many cheerless, lonely hearts are breaking!
How many noble spirits pass away
Not Understood!

The poem first appeared in the *Saturday Advertiser*, and popular myth had it that the verses were inspired by either Bracken's dissatisfaction over his unsuccessful application for the editorship of the *Tablet*, or his disappointment over being refused a drink by a barman at his favourite pub, the Octagon. In 1885, R. N. Adams even associated the poem with political faddism. Whatever inspired Bracken to write the poem, its universal theme has no doubt led in part to its enduring popularity. It appears in Bracken's later collections and in a posthumous collection, *Not Understood and Other Poems* (1905). This collection was reprinted eight times up to 1928. 'Not Understood' even reached an international audience as part of the repertoire of Mel B. Spurr, professional reciter, and was for many years one of the most popular poems written in New Zealand.

In 1879 the *Saturday Advertiser* became the weekly edition of the *Morning Herald* and in 1880 the title changed to *New Zealand Public Opinion, Sportsman and Saturday Advertiser*. Bracken continued his practise of publishing poems and articles that he had already published in newspapers in book form. In 1880 he published *Paddy Murphy's Budget: A Collection of 'Pomes, Tiligrams, an' Ipistols'*, and the *New Zealand Tourist*. Throughout this time Bracken remained as editor of the *New Zealand Public Opinion*, and he left in 1881, when he became editor of the *Evening Herald*.

In 1881, Bracken was encouraged by the Dunedin Trades and Labour council to stand again for parliament, and this time with the help of an actual campaign he won the seat of Dunedin Central. In parliament, Bracken challenged the government for their dealings with the Parihaka Māori, and spoke on education and Labour reform. Bracken enthusiastically championed

the rights of the working man, and famously broke into song, telling members in Thomas Moore's words, to 'Behave yoursel before folk' during a hotly debated session. Bracken was the representative for Dunedin Central for the next three years. On 1 February 1883 he married Helen Hester Copley at St John's Church in Roslyn. In late 1883, he travelled to Samoa as an advocate for the New Zealand policy of annexation.

In 1884, Bracken lost his seat in parliament to J. B. B. Bradshaw by just three votes. He also resigned from the *Evening Herald* in July, when the proprietors of the paper attacked his political ally Robert Stout. Bracken resolved to leave Dunedin and find employment in Wellington. A well attended farewell was arranged for him on the eve of his departure at the Dunedin City Council Chambers, and George Fenwick, Managing Director of the Daily Times and Witness Company, gave a highly complimentary speech, lamenting Bracken's departure from the 'scene of his literary success'. He also presented Bracken with a gift of 175 sovereigns from the citizens of Dunedin, and the Independent Order of the Odd-Fellows presented him with a diamond locket. The New Zealand Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association expressed appreciation of his moral and intellectual worth as a citizen, and presented Helen Bracken with a diamond brooch and diamond earrings.

In spite of an unsuccessful year for both his political and journalistic careers, Bracken published a collection of poems called *Lays of the Land of the Maori and Mōa* (1884). The collection was introduced by the Presbyterian minister Reverend Rutherford Waddell, and the title page mentions two other works by Bracken, 'Golden Foundations', and 'Asleep in the Forest'. This collection was published in London, indicating that he was unsure of his audience despite his reputation as New Zealand's first national poet. Bracken continued writing to a New Zealand audience who considered England to be their home, even when the majority were by now New Zealand born rather than immigrants.

Bracken spent only a few months in Wellington after his very public departure from Dunedin. In early 1885 he formed Thomas Bracken and Company Ltd. with John Bathgate and others, to purchase the Dunedin *Evening Herald*. He managed the paper and wrote a regular column called 'The Humourist'. Bracken continued with the *Evening Herald* until the paper was sold in September 1890, and was replaced by *The Globe*.

In 1886, Bracken published another collection of work from his newspaper columns entitled, *Paddy Murphy's Annual*—described on its title page as a

record of political and social events in New Zealand. He also continued his political career, albeit briefly. Bradshaw, Dunedin's representative in parliament died in office and Bracken took his place after a local by-election. The parliamentary session concluded seven weeks later, and Bracken did not seek re-election.

Turning from politics to focus on the newspaper industry and his own publications, Bracken produced *A Sheaf from the Sanctum* (1887) and in 1890 produced his most ambitious and lavish volume of poetry, *Musings in Maoriland*. The collection was published to commemorate New Zealand's 50th jubilee, and was dedicated to Alfred Lord Tennyson. The poems were prefaced by an essay on the 'Rise and Progress of New Zealand' by Sir Robert Stout and an introductory comment was written by Sir George Grey. This edition was expensively bound and contained many illustrations. It collected many of Bracken's best-known poems, but it did not sell well internationally. Bracken's financial supporter convinced him to promote the book and boost sales with a lecturing tour of Australia. During his time in Australia, Bracken managed to increase sales by more than 700 copies, but his own financial situation became strained. Sales in New Zealand were not much better and the book was reduced in price from thirty shillings to one guinea.

Returning to New Zealand and without permanent employment, Bracken continued to publish in local newspapers. In 1892, he published *Dear Old Bendigo: A Sketch of the Early Digging Days* and *The Triumph of Woman's Rights*. In 1893 he published another collection of poems, *Lays and Lyrics: God's Own Country and Other Poems*. Although this collection is mostly republished work, it contains the poem of its title 'God's Own Country'. Bracken wrote this poem during his tour of Australia in 1890 and it is the source of the common reference to New Zealand as 'God's own Country', and the more modern 'Godzone'.

In 1892, Richard Seddon offered Bracken a clerical position in the Land and Income Tax Department, apparently aware of Bracken's financial difficulties. Bracken turned down the offer, and in May 1894 took up a position as bill-reader and record clerk in Wellington. He continued in this position for a little over a year before resigning due to poor health and returning once again to Dunedin. In 1896 he published a collection of literary miscellany, *Tom Bracken's Annual*, and a second annual of the same name appeared posthumously in 1897. Also at the start of 1896 he became a member of the

Catholic Church. Shortly afterwards, on 16 February, he died ravaged by goitre.

In his later years Bracken struggled with poor health and failing finances, and his poetry decline in popularity. The man who had been New Zealand's most famous and popular poet, as well as a successful journalist and politician, saw his verse become something of a joke as New Zealand literature developed its own voice. Yet Bracken's poetry deserves respect for the examples it offers of muscular Victorian imagery and the rhetoric of early nationalism. His poem 'Not Understood', may no longer be the most famous and well-known New Zealand poem, but Bracken's fame endures as the poet who penned 'God Defend New Zealand'.

LINKS

[1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

[Ministry of Culture and Heritage—History of the NZ Anthems](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

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