

## B. E. Baughan, 1870 – 1958

*Jane Stafford*

Blanche Edith Baughan was born in London in 1870. Her family background was one of tragedy and melodrama. Her grandfather had been a patient in Broadmoor, the asylum for the criminally insane, and her mother had attacked her father in a fit of homicidal mania. Baughan and her sisters looked after their mother until her death, and Baughan, in the manner of the time, felt that her family history made marriage on her part impossible.

Baughan was unusually well educated for a woman of her period, gaining a first class honours degree in classics from the Royal Holloway College for Women, London University, in 1891. She worked as a tutor, as a volunteer in social projects in the East End of London, and travelled in Europe. Her first book of poems, *Verses*, was published in 1898. It contains suggestions of dissatisfaction with conventional religion, a stance that would develop later:

The people bent above their books,  
And sweetly pray'd the priest,  
My heart stay'd frozen by their fire,  
And fasted at their feast.

But where the lonely breezes blow  
Above the lonely sod,  
Where mountain heads are hid in mist,  
My heart was hid in God.

In 1900 she embarked on a world tour, stopping in New Zealand, but travelling on to the Pacific and to South Africa. *Reuben and other poems* appeared in Britain in 1903. While many of its verses are undistinguished, New Zealand subject matter was already registering. 'The Old Place' describes the ambivalent feelings of a farmer forced from his land by economic stringencies, facing 'the end of the hope, an' the struggles, an' the messes I've put in here'. The farm is 'briar, tauhinu an' ruin...Where the Missus was always homesick, and where she took fever and died'. But it is also beautiful, in that it resembles the 'Old Country', and on its own terms, with 'the glossy karakas there, twinkling to the big blue twinkling sea'. Baughan returned to New Zealand in 1903 and settled there, at first in Hawkes Bay, and later in Chorlton, Banks Peninsula. Her impact on the literary life of the colony was immediate. She was included in the first serious New Zealand anthology, W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie's *New Zealand*

Verse (1906), and wrote to Alexander 'I wish I had been born in New Zealand, so you can imagine if I am willing to be called a New Zealand writer!'

In 1905 Baughan had the first of two mystical experiences, 'swept up out of myself altogether and into a flood of White Glory', which she contextualised in terms of the Indian philosophy of Vedanta, an offshoot of Hinduism, then popular in North America through the charismatic agency of Vivekenanda, a glamorous and Westernised follower of the movement's more ascetic founder Ramakrishna. Baughan travelled to the Vedanta centre in California in 1915, and visited India during the early 1920s. Her papers show a continuing correspondence with swami from both the Californian centre and the movement's Indian base in Mayaviti, and financial contributions to Indian orphanages and schools.

Baughan's most important collection of poetry, and perhaps the most significant collection of New Zealand poetry to date, was *Shingle-Short and Other Verses* (1908). Its central poem, 'A Bush Section' expresses the cultural and physical bleakness of the new place, in between the native bush, which has been destroyed and the pasture land which has not yet been established:

Logs, at the door, by the fence; logs, broadcast over the  
paddock;  
Sprawling in motionless thousands away down the green of the  
gully,  
Logs, grey and black. And the opposite rampart of ridges  
Bristles against the sky, all the tawny, tumultuous landscape  
Is stuck, and prickled, and spiked with the standing black and  
grey splinters,  
Strewn over its hollows and hills, with the long, prone, grey-black  
logs.

This world is 'made, unmade and scarcely as yet in the making', although Baughan does at the conclusion express the usual pieties about the inevitability of settler progress. In contrast to this limbo, other poems delight in the fanciful portrayal of a Romanticised landscape informed by Māori myth and legend, a favourite source for writers from this period of New Zealand literature:

Tongariro! O Taranaki,  
Your splendour! Your shooting of spear-points, keen, sea-wet, to  
the sun!  
Ruapehu, Kaikoura, Aorangi, Tara-rua, long armed Ruahine!-  
Midsummer clouds curling luminous up from the sky-line:  
Far-fallen islands of light, summon'd back to the sun:

Soaring *Kawahai-birds* –

How ye soar'd, shining pinions! Straight into the heaven high  
above you:

How ye shot up, bright Surprises! seizing, possessing the sky:

How firm, great white Clouds, ye took seat!

Baughan's short-story collection, *Brown Bread from a Colonial Oven: Sketches of Up-country Life in New Zealand* appeared in 1912. It is group of stories and sketches infused with a rather odd nostalgia given the relatively recent settlement of New Zealand. This stance is a common one in settler literature which seeks, by reason of history, to establish its claims to the land it occupies. Baughan claims that *Brown Bread* records 'a phase of New Zealand life that is already passing', and goes on,

Young things alter very quickly; the lapse of five years can render unrecognisable one of our Bush settlements; and what with roading and bridging, telephones and motorcars, moveable wash-tubs, and acetylene gas, the rate of our up-country progress is becoming in these days so rapid that it is quite doubtful whether I another twenty years there will be left so much as one colonial oven for a batch of brown bread to come out of.

The stories, which had been previously published in local newspapers, deal with rural experience at a time when the majority of New Zealanders were becoming urban. Yet the tone balances nostalgia with a sharp sense of the price of change. 'Café au Lait' suggests, with no great confidence, that the past – both of the early days of settlement and of Europe – might have some place in the modern world. The elderly immigrant drinking Swiss coffee with New Zealand milk thinks, '[W]hat if, at the same time one could mingle with the insipidity of the present something of the poetry, the aroma, of the beloved past?', while fearing that '[m]ilk and money, milk and money - that was all this country ever cared about'. But he admits, 'Home? Home was gone; it no more existed; it was no longer real. There was no such place in the world any more'. In 'Grandmother Speaks' the old woman remembers her mother's interaction with local Māori, but reflects, 'There isn't a Māori left in the Bay now, as you know – not a full blooded one. Some they went to the North Island; most is dead ...well, well...!' In 'Pipi on the Prowl' the only representative of Māori is a rascally old woman who may come 'from a princely race' but is now reduced to impotent trickery as she is outwitted by the Pākehā who, significantly possesses not only Māori land, but also Māori language. In 'Aboard a Coasting Schooner', Māori are represented as picturesque, exotic and hybridized:

Sometimes the natives would come off in their own boats – I remember one that looked exactly like a flax-leaf, for it was painted bright green both inside and out, and had a gunwale of red – and our deck was full of brown faces, and melodious with talk that lacked a "s". The scene ashore meanwhile was the most picturesque. Beside the open store houses of bright yellow grain, groups of natives would be gathered about the fragrant fires of corn-cobs. Perhaps a few of the girls would be shelling maize, and a pretty sight that was. Dressed generally in dark-blue cotton, their long hair rippling down their backs, they squatted beside the yellow heaps already shelled, against which their smiling faces showed like darkly sparkling jewels....

Their world is contrasted, in another story, with the bleakness of the landscape the settlers have created:

Here and there, it is true, a clump of native trees might yet be seen; but even these were doomed, for Bush trees are gregarious, and will not long continue to survive without the shelter of their fellows; and for inches of such verdure there were acres and acres of the barren devastation. The great half-burnt skeletons of the forest, grey and black and bleached and piebald, stood gauntly up, as though in mute protest from tawny hillside and green flat. They were splintered and shattered; at their feet lay multitudes of their brethren - enormous rotting logs, and their moldering black stumps from which they had been severed; and it was only a question of time before they too would rest their ruins on the ground. ('An Early Morning Walk')

While Baughan certainly continued writing after these two publications, it is clear that the orientation of her work changed after the publication of *Brown Bread*. She moved to Clifton Spur, Sumner in Christchurch. The series of travel guides which she wrote for the Department of Tourism, were collected as *Studies in New Zealand Scenery*. The collection is characterized by a concentration on the sublime aspects of landscape, haunted by Māori ghosts of an archaic but noble past. Its print run of 4,000 compared to 625 for *Shingle-Short* and 100 for *Brown Bread*. In 1926 Baughan helped found the New Zealand branch of the Howard League for Penal Reform, and contributed money, writing and practical assistance to that cause. Her 1936 book *People in Prisons* was the result of first hand experience as a prison visitor at Addington Prison in Christchurch, and expressed the frustration she felt with the inflexibility of the existing prison system.

A new collection of poems had been talked of in 1908, but did not appear until 1923. *Poems from the Port Hills*, unlike her earlier proto-modernist work,

is more conventional in form and heavily Vedantist in content. Many poems express her sense of her role as seeker. In 'Summer Estuary' she writes,

I know I do not see!  
 An eye to gaze, a mind I have to read,  
 A heart, a soul exult in this great scene,  
 But Ah what faculty to fill my need  
 Of knowing what its dazzling scriptures mean?

In the poem, 'Hope', an unmarried mother tells her son, recently out of prison, 'After Ruin, Renewing! so runs the merciful Life-Law./ Out of destruction, growth'. The landscape is transfigured: 'And the gorse, the bush all bloom above thorns, was a Burning Bush'.

In 1930 Baughan moved to Akaroa, a small, intensely picturesque town first settled by the French in the mid-nineteenth century. The name of her cottage, 'The Ashram', reflected the orientation of her beliefs. She had experienced another mystical epiphany in 1925, where she saw 'a point of bright light', and felt a sensation of safety and clam. 'I had not the same sense of unity which was so strong in my first experience' she wrote, 'but I recognised that this was the same kind of light as that which overwhelmed me then – though only a spark inside me, yet beyond the body, instead of being everywhere and with no sense of "me" at all'.

During this time she was writing her unpublished novel 'Two New Zealand Roses', the story of two young women Rose and Rosamund, who grow up in the final decades of the nineteenth century in Canterbury. The work is a vehicle for a number of Baughan's philosophical and social causes – temperance, Vedantism, vegetarianism, eugenics (one Rose cannot marry because of family insanity) and women's education. It contains critiques of marriage, conventional religion and its spurious alternatives. It concludes with the two women, now old, living together in marriage-like harmony, attesting the superiority of relationships between women to those with men. There is no evidence that Baughan ever tried to get 'Two New Zealand Roses' published, and she left the manuscript to her friend Berta Burns with a note 'Remember ash is "very" good for the garden'.

Baughan died on 20 August 1958 at Akaroa. By this time, the kind of literature she represented had given way to a more abrasive, largely masculinist nationalism. Burns wrote, "All I've done", she said sadly to me, as we once surveyed the garden, "is to grow a few trees. I'm sorry about the garden. I'm leaving you with an old house and an old garden." Although there

has been a certain amount of critical interest in Baughan's work in recent years, and she is cited in all histories of New Zealand literature as a significant figure, apart from the appearance of single poems or stories in anthologies, her work remains out of print and available only to frequenters of rare book collections.

## LINKS

[1966 Encyclopaedia of New Zealand](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

[Bibliography at the New Zealand Literature File](#)

[Critical article by John Newton, University of Canterbury](#)

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

## BOOKS

*Verses*. Westminster: Archibald and Constable, 1898.

*Reuben and Other Poems*. Westminster: Archibald and Constable, 1903.

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*People in Prison*. Auckland: Unicorn Press, 1936.

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Stafford, Jane. 'The Ashram at Akaroa: Blanche Edith Baughan, India and the Literature of Maoriland', *Kunapipi*, 22:2 (2000): 43-63.

Stafford, Jane and Mark Williams, 'Fashioned Intimacies: Maoriland and Colonial Modernity'. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37:1 (2002): 31-48.

## PAPERS

Blanche Baughan's papers, B. E. Baughan Miscellaneous Papers (1908-1958), MS Papers 0198, are held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.