

# *A portrait of a mind-set*

*Poetry in The Natal Witness,  
November 1899 – February 1900*

Even before the first shot was fired, poetry appeared in *The Natal Witness* which made it clear that, unlike the First Anglo-Boer War, 'empire' in the new war would command the allegiance and the sentiment of all classes, and that the guiding muse of this alliance between 'the masses and the classes' (to paraphrase Gladstone) was the barrack-room balladry of Rudyard Kipling. Says one of the young intellectuals in a novel by H.G. Wells: 'The prevailing force in my undergraduate days was not Socialism but Kiplingism... he provided phrases for just that desire for discipline and devotion and organized effort that the Socialism of our times failed to express...' (quoted by Rayne Kruger in *Good-bye Dolly Gray*, p.30).

And if Kipling had taught that the female is the more dangerous of the species, it seems that in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, the best exponent of Kipling's style was indeed female, and, a few weeks before war broke out, sharpening her sword for overdue vengeance. Kate Bishop's pieces were regularly published; here is an excerpt from one of the 3 November, 1899. (The '43rd' referred to is, of course, the regiment that had had the worst of it at Majuba in 1881.)

*Whispers of War.* Told by one of the 43rd.

It was only just a murmur, but a murmur low and deep,  
Like a lion's angry growling when you rouse it from its sleep;  
But it's reached the golden Indies and the wild Canadian shore,  
Bound to speak again in cannon, as the lion's bound to roar.  
And the burden of them whispers ran like this, 'It's bound to come  
Pull the lion's tail and wake him and you'll find he isn't dumb;  
And if you want to work him up to action rougher still  
Rouse his memory too, and whisper in his ear "Majuba Hill!"...'  
...Now there ain't a Rudyard Kipling in the fighting Forty-third;  
But it just expressed our feelings and our very souls is stirred...

It is not to be denied, by the way, that patriotic verse could, in the intensity of public emotion, render its exponents open to danger. Within a few weeks of hostilities beginning, the *Witness* reports that 'at a concert in the YMCA Hall the other night, Mr Henry Miller recited Clement Scott's "Midnight Charge..." A lady of Dutch sympathies in the audience...met Mr Miller outside and threatened to bring several male friends to chastise him...'.  
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The alliance of the ‘masses and classes’ was signalled by the unbounded success of a Kipling-Sullivan collaboration: ‘The Absent-minded Beggar’ – the song that reminded the better-heeled segment of Empire that Tommy Atkins was distinctly in need of their charity.

When you’ve shouted ‘Rule Britannia’, when you’ve sung ‘God save the Queen’,  
 When you’ve finished killing Kruger with your mouth,  
 Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine  
 For a gentleman in khaki ordered South...?

The sentiment, and the tune, had a mesmerising hold on the imperial mind: when at Maritzburg’s Scott’s Theatre a concert raised £64 4s 7d for war relief, Mr Douglas’s rendering of ‘The Absent-minded Beggar’ added another £10 16s 6d to the takings.

But its very success was bound to produce parody. The famous pastiche in the Christmas number of *Punch* might have been more influential, eventually, than the original song itself. It found its way into the *Witness* of 17 January 1900. *Punch*’s doggerel was a response to the War Office announcement that 50 000 plum puddings had been sent out to the troops at the front:

When you’ve eaten Christmas pudding – when you’re groaning in your grief –  
 When you’ve woken with a taste about your mouth –  
 Will you drop a tear of pity in your little handkerchief  
 As you think of all those puddings ordered south....

To the ear glutted with the original, *Punch*’s riposte was a greater relief (one suspects) than the relief of Mafeking. The columnist ‘Q’ of *The Natal Witness* complained that ‘When you get the “Absent-minded Beggar” groaned out from the phonograph, sung at every concert, shrieked by every alleged elocutionist, when there is hardly a paragraph about our soldiers in which they are not referred to as ‘gentlemen in khaki’... I think the enjoyment begins to fizzle out...’.

No wonder satiric versions began to proliferate; even ‘Q’ found a way of getting his message back past the censors:

*The Absent-Minded Duffers*

When you’ve finished with your pipe-clay,  
 Won’t your try a little change  
 (It’s useless killing Kruger with your mouth),  
 By sending out some cannon of a slightly longer range,  
 For the gentlemen in khaki falling south?

Beating the censorship was the thrill of the hour for the editorial staff at the *Witness*. By making use of an even more illustrious piece, ‘Q’ was able to assure his readers that, so far as the censor went, ‘nightly at 12 o’clock promptly the staff of this paper warble through their telephone:

Send him censorious  
 Red pencil glorious  
 Long to out-score-ius  
 Greatest of men...’.

If we admit that the major war poems did not emanate from Natal itself, we must nevertheless accept the proposition of one excited *Witness* correspondent that a masterpiece did arise from this city. Paul B. Statham, writing to the paper on December

30th 1899, gives notice to his readers of what they have lost through a new type of imperialism, that of plagiarism:

Will you allow me through your columns to ventilate a certain matter, if only to give the public a chance to profit by my own misfortune, and to give an idea as to what sort of characters we have to guard against in so-called 'upper circles' of the business community. I have recently written and composed a patriotic song entitled 'The Call to Arms', and from several little things which I have noticed I have very strong reason to suspect that certain gentlemen (?) in this town, taking advantage of the fact that I am unable, from financial causes, to copyright the production, have made a copy of it – with a view to publishing it under one or other of their own names....

The writer gallantly decides to give us the words if not the music 'in order to forestall matters in a certain measure...'

Now if Paul B. Statham was a relative or descendant of Francis Reginald Statham, the public might well have had the measure of the tone of martyrdom. Francis Statham was the sometime editor of the *Witness* who had long since supported the Colensos and was an inveterate critic of imperial policy. In this case, however, Paul Statham rose gallantly to Britannia's aid, as an extract or two will show:

...Then rise at your nation's call  
Flinch not from the whistling ball;  
The God who can govern all battles  
Is watching over all....  
...For vengeance every heart is calling;  
For justice stern, though sadly overdue;  
Your dead rise up in hosts appalling,  
And hark, they say, my gallant lads, to you!  
See yonder is the shade of slaughtered Gordon,  
Ah, who could mistake that manly brow?  
He smiles on you, a smile so true,  
From heaven he's watching o'er you now.  
  
Stand firm as you meet the attack,  
And ne'er let the foe see your back;  
The eyes of all nations are on you -  
Strike! Strike for Britain's UNION JACK!  
  
Yours etc.  
Paul B Statham

If Rudyard Kipling was the poet laureate of the Anglo-Boer war (that is, from the imperial view), there is no doubt that his legion of followers might, at any moment, out-Kipling Kipling. As we have said, Kipling managed to make the imperial bourgeoisie believe that it sided with 'the common man', often by adding the odd 'bloomin' this or 'bloomin' that to his unquenchable and stylised balladry. Of the two poems that follow, the first shows all the mawkish patriotism very deft at imitating a cockney waif who has lost his papa to the call of 'the front'. Contrast this with the poem that follows, and you have more than an indication of what made up the imperial mind-set at the turn of the

century. As if to make the point, both were published in *The Natal Witness* for Saturday 10 February 1900. Here are extracts from 'A Tragedy of the War' by Joseph Lyons.

"'Eavy fightin'! 'Ere y'are Sir; Second Hextry Hevenin' News!"  
 Cried a ragged little urchin, boasting neither hat nor shoes.  
 I watched his perseverance as he shivered in the cold,  
 And tried to count the coppers for the papers he had sold.

He must have seen me standing, and came over with a run;  
 "'Ere y'are, Sir, Second Hextry. Yuss, the British troops 'as won.  
 Thank'ee, Sir! It's worf a penny, an' it won't go to the pub!  
 There's the kid and muvver waitin' till I bring 'em home the grub.  
 That 'arf a dollar? S'elp me; are you the Prince of Wiles?  
 Or maybe Barin Rofschild, what they writes about in tiles....

"...Now, Sir, I ain't no scholar, but I gets a pal to see  
 Before I tikes the paper 'ome for seven-nine, sixty-three.  
 Would yer mind just a-lookin' for me? 'Ullo, wot mikes you cry!  
 'Ave you found out you've lost a pal? Well, some 'as got to die.  
 Wot? You've got my farver's number! No? For Gawd's sike s'y you're kiddin'!"  
 He dropped his papers in the street, his little face was hidden,  
 Then lifting up his head, he cried, "Oh, tell me it's anuvver!  
 I can't go 'ome and break the noos, it's sure to settle muvver."

Rudyard Kipling was of course a bigger phenomenon than such vigorous sentimentality might make us believe. He had, after all, by the time of the 1899 war completed *Kim*, the book that so poetically undermines the official argument of empire, and (though Kipling himself might not have agreed with the proposition) already shown the empire to be in its twilight. I have argued elsewhere that the haunting final pages of *Kim* are closer to the spirit of Walter Pater and the Aesthetic Movement (for instance, some of the meditations in *Marius the Epicurean*) than to the 'official' Kipling line, with its cockney/Irish voice. One of the best pieces published in the *Witness* during the siege was this, quoted from *The Spectator*, and heavily imbued with the 'autumn of empire'. Marius-like, the author evokes the unceasing cavalcade, the sheer global size of the unfolding day of the imperial realm. (The poet's very name, Gascoine Mackie, suggests his parents conceived of him as a Marius before he spoke his first word!) A tourist view it is, but, well, some tourists are more perceptive than others, and although an 'imperial hue' colours these languid lines, the quality of observation cannot be denied. This appeared in *The Natal Witness* on Saturday 10 February 1900.

*The Garden Colony: A reminiscence of Natal*

There is no winter in this land of flowers.  
 But only storm and sunshine; fiery heat  
 Bursting in furious cataracts of rain.  
 The fabled orchards of Alcinous  
 Were not more prodigal of every fruit;  
 Here, in a single garden, I have seen  
 Trees loaded with the citron and the lime,  
 Amatangulu with its milky plum  
 And star-white blossom like the jessamine,  
 The mango, the banana's drooping cone

Of purple blossom, the paw paw and the plum  
And loquat scented like our English may,  
Lemon and naartje and the granadilla,  
The shaddock with its green colossal sphere  
And glimmering orange groves, amid whose boughs  
Where fruit and bridal flower dropt side by side,  
The firefly flashed and vanished like a spark.  
And day by day in Durban streets I trod  
Where all the brilliant hues of Eastern life  
Clash with the West – the Zulu with his riksha  
The Arab trader clothed in flowing lawn  
The Kafir wives, trooping in companies,  
Carrying brown calabashes on their heads,  
Or infants slung in blankets on their backs,  
Stirred the red dust; – and when the evening train  
Crawled up the spiral track, one saw the Coolie –  
More like a meagre shadow than a man –  
Plodding the dreary flats of Durban Bay  
Beyond Congella; and running from their huts,  
With many a bracelet on their elfish limbs,  
The little coolie children clapped their hands  
To watch the train; twittering like weaver birds  
That hung their nests above the Umbilo River.  
Alas! that these clear hills and happy valleys  
Lying like liquid lakes of azure bloom  
Where nothing fiercer than the trekker's whip  
Urging his long laborious span, awoke  
The stillness of the dewy dawn, should now  
Thunder and scatter a thousand startled echoes,  
While the sweet air is maddened with the shock  
Of fiery scorpion, and the smoke of war.  
We pray for peace, and peace will come again  
The herald of a happier day, to heal  
The wounds of fair Natal; yet not in vain  
The brave have bled that man may honour man;  
And, to what end does Britain rule the wave,  
But that her Justice, like the salt i' the billow,  
Should cleanse and sweeten a corrupted world?  
Gascoine Mackie

How could one not prefer the writing of one who gulped in his views of Natal from the slow train coiling up the hills to Hillcrest and beyond!? A pity that the 'imperialist' conclusion prevents the poem having a permanent relevance.

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