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Abstract
On April 13th, 1905, at eight o'clock in the morning, a young English woman, Blanche Edith Baughan, was standing among the pine trees of Long Look-out, a hill on Banks Peninsula, New Zealand. She was looking up at the sky, when suddenly 'the heavens opened'. As she recalled later, I was swept up and out of myself altogether into a flood of White Glory. I had no sense of time or place. The ecstasy was terrifying while it lasted. It could have lasted only a minute or two. It went as suddenly as it came. I found myself bathed with tears, but they were tears of joy. I felt one with everything and everybody, and somehow I knew that what I had experienced was Reality and that Reality is perfection. (Hall 104)"
Blanche Baughan with her dog Gale at Akaroa, 1935
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/4)
The Ashram at Akaroa: Blanche Edith Baughan, India and the Literature of Maoriland

On April 13th, 1905, at eight o’clock in the morning, a young English woman, Blanche Edith Baughan, was standing among the pine trees of Long Look-out, a hill on Banks Peninsula, New Zealand. She was looking up at the sky, when suddenly ‘the heavens opened’. As she recalled later,

I was swept up and out of myself altogether into a flood of White Glory. I had no sense of time or place. The ecstasy was terrifying while it lasted. It could have lasted only a minute or two. It went as suddenly as it came. I found myself bathed with tears, but they were tears of joy. I felt one with everything and everybody, and somehow I knew that what I had experienced was Reality and that Reality is perfection. (Hall 104)

Writing sometime later, she adds, ‘no words seem to me able to convey a thousandth part of the depth and reality of that experience, even so far as my own taste of it has gone. I fancy all one’s normal faculties are first fused and then transcended’ (Hall 104).

In her 1998 work, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief, Gauri Viswanathan discusses the experience of religious conversion, and asks ‘whether individual change ever occurs independently of drifts and currents in intellectual and political life, and whether the sorts of commitments made by individuals to new belief systems can at all be separated from their responsiveness to new and ever changing historical conditions’ (184). In this paper I intend to suggest a number of frames by which Baughan’s individual mystical experience may be contextualised in terms of ‘changing historical conditions’, in an attempt to answer the question Viswanathan poses, ‘How does a focus on conversion facilitate the writing of a life story into history rather than as history’ (184).

The first interpretive frame I intend to suggest is that of family, psychiatry and madness. Baughan’s maternal grandfather had been an inmate of Broadmoor, the English asylum for the criminally insane, for most of his life, and when Baughan was ten years old her mother killed her father in a fit of homicidal mania. She was judged insane, and Baughan and her sisters looked after her until her death in 1900. The fearful fascination of the Victorian age with madness was a private and unexpressed part of Baughan’s adulthood. Her ‘progressive’ interest in birth control, eugenics, and the responsibilities of heredity were surely connected to this personal history, as was her refusal to marry. Was the ecstasy on Long Look-out the sinister emergence of her family history of instability? Did she see it as such? Was her
Revisiting Long Look Out, 1935
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/5)
interpretive insistence of the benevolent nature of its message a way of warding off a deterministic family teleology?

An alternative interpretive frame for Baughan’s experience at Long Look-out is that of the nineteenth-century crisis of faith and religious doubt. In this context, we might see it as a dramatically envisioned alternative to the narrow and stale restrictions of Baughan’s childhood Anglicanism. There is a balance here between the personal and the historical moment. As Viswanathan says, ‘Individual conversions are an index of cultural change without themselves being subject to a crude form of determinism’ (185). Modernity, science (in particular Darwinian theory), biblical scholarship and new relativist readings of mythological and sacred texts moved many in the nineteenth century away from conventional forms of belief. In her 1898 volume, Verses, published before she left England, Baughan expresses a widely felt dissatisfaction with existing religious forms:

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. (‘Church’ 24)

It is not belief here that is problematic. Rather it is form and access. The escape, which the second stanza of the poem identifies with the natural rather than the acculturated world, the conflation of that landscape with mystical union — ‘My heart was hid in God’ — suggests a further possible interpretative frame for Long Look-out, that of Victorian refractions of Romanticism and the Wordsworthian sublime.

Between the publication of Verses in 1898 and her collection Shingleshort and Other Verses in 1908, Baughan’s mother died and she emigrated to New Zealand. She took with her the language of sublimity — lonely breezes, mountain heads hid in mist — but this was no longer appropriate to her objective surroundings. The landscape with which she was now constrained was disconcertingly strange, new and in the process of being re-formed. Romanticism can deal with the desolate urban landscape; it can deal with awe and terror in the natural landscape; but it has no language to deal with the clearance and refiguring of the physical that the modern colonial project entails. In her short story ‘An Early Morning Walk (North Island)’, Baughan describes the new landscape:

Beyond this cottage, Millicent found herself between wide, bare paddocks, simply divided off from the road by fences of barbed wire. Just as far as ever she could see, the land between her and the mountain distance still beckoning ahead was all one huge ocean of naked grass country, running away into lumpy ridges, traversed by sharp line gullies and everywhere alas! strewn with the unsightly remains of burnt Bush. 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 mouldering 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. (119)

Baughan’s poetic version of this scene, ‘A Bush Section’, tries to replicate in its language the fragmentation of the landscape:

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. (79)

Gone is the formal regularity of verse and metre of her early works, the conventional markers of textualised landscape, the confident resolution.

Colonial writers of the Maoriland period (1880–1920) have a consciousness of the artificiality of the cultural landscape, the willed and arbitrary nature of its exported linguistic markers. Baughan’s work from this period is innovative in that it attempts new ways of writing, which take into account the newness of place. The language of Romantic sublimity had its place in colonial discourse, but was most comfortably situated in the reworking of indigenous mythological material from Maori sources, as Baughan does in poems such as ‘Maui’s Fish’, where the land is configured not as raw and new but as archaic, by virtue of the appropriation of Maori material:

Tongariro! O Taranki,
Your splendour! Your shooting of spear-points, keen, sea-wet, to the sun!
Ruapehu, Kaikoura, Aorangi, Tar-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! (53)

In Maoriland, the landscape is both peopled and empty — peopled by the ghosts of Maori, emptied of their actual presence as they are figured in terms of the ‘dying race’ topos. ‘There isn’t a Maori left in the Bay now, as you know’ says the old woman in Baughan’s short story, ‘Grandmother Speaks’, ‘— not a full blooded one. Some they went to the North Island; most is dead ... well, well ...!’ (23). The land is thus simultaneously mythicised, and made available for settlement and colonisation. A form of imperial Orientalism, the Maoriland use of Maori mythological texts was part of nineteenth-century comparative mythological and anthropological scholarship. This in turn fed the search for alternative sources of spirituality uncontaminated by European scepticism and modernity. India, the ‘mystic east’, was a central part of this imperial network.
Hunter's House at Chorlton
(Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/3)
It is clear from her papers that the interpretive frame that Baughan herself used to give Long Look-out coherence was that of India and Vedanta. I have been unable to find at what stage Baughan made formal contact with the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement through its American mission, but by 1916 she was corresponding with Swami Pragnananda at the Avaita Ashrama at Mayaviti, and with an unnamed Swami from the Webster Street Temple in San Francisco. Her poems were being published in the Indian journal Prabuddha Bharata. She visited California, and may have visited India. When she moved to Akaroa, she named her new house 'The Ashrama'.

The Vedanta movement was at this stage relatively new. Having its origins in India at the time of the Bengali Renaissance in the 1860s, Vedanta had first appeared in the United States with the attendance of Ramakrishna’s follower, Vivekananda, at the World Parliament of Religions, part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. This occasion was the first time authentic Asian teachers had direct contact with Western audiences (Jackson 26). While Ramakrishna himself was a traditionalist and mystic, with affiliations to Kali, Vaishnavism and Tantrism, as well as Vedanta, Vivekananda was far more attuned and acceptable to the Western and especially the American religious scene. He was born in Calcutta in 1863 to a middle-class professional family, and educated at the Presidency College and the Scottish Church College. There he read Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte. His first awareness of Ramakrishna came from his English teacher William Hastie in a lecture on Wordsworth’s nature mysticism, a somewhat paradoxical source, but one that suggests the complexity of imperial intellectual dynamics.
As with Baughan’s contemporary Annie Besant and the Theosophy movement, the syncretism of Vedanta was one of its strongest attractions. In her commonplace book, Baughan records those Vedanta teachings which she found most useful alongside passages from Emerson, Plato, Annie Besant, St John of the Cross, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Thompson, Plotinus, Tagore, Voltaire, Julian of Norwich, and Swedenborg, as well as a transcription of Dr Arnold’s prayer (MSX-2383, Turnbull Library, Wellington). The monism of Vedanta was a counter to the theological problem of suffering and evil, a major issue for doubtful Victorian Christians such as Baughan. Vedanta accepted Darwinian science and saw it as consistent with Vedantist teaching. Baughan’s reforming social activism was likewise validated by the specifically reforming, activist slant of Vedanta. And in a sphere that included the bad and the duplicitous as well as the holy, Vedanta’s intellectual integrity appealed. As one critic puts it, ‘their favoured religious mode was the lecture, and their preferred form of ritual was serious conversation’ (Jackson ix). Vivekananda himself was scornful of the more bizarre practices of American spiritualism, wondering whether Hindus were really in need of ‘dead ghosts of Russians or Americans’. He recalled a domestic disturbance between two spiritualist mediums at a boarding house where he was staying in New York, when the wife of one of them appealed to Vivekananda, ‘Is it fair of him to treat me like this, when I make all the ghosts?’ (Walker 169). ‘I am perfectly aware’ he wrote in a letter in 1895 ‘that although some truth underlies the mass of mystical thought which has burst on the world of late, it is for the most part full of motives unworthy, or insane’ (8:335).

Perhaps, too, the un-colonial nature of Vedanta appealed to the nascent colonial nationalism of the Maoriland period. Unlike Theosophy, which was part of the texture of the imperial Indian scene, and in some respects compromised by it, Vedanta’s Western links were through America, and integrated with and tolerant of American intellectual spiritual traditions such as Swedenborgian Trascendentalism and Unitariansim. In Baughan’s case, Vedanta coalesced with her support for imperial federation, Home Rule, and dominion status in diverse parts of the empire, and resulted in a less locally delineated internationalism, what some contemporary critics call ‘intercoloniality’ rather than the more overt nationalism of many of her Maoriland contemporaries. Newton’s judgement that ‘Baughan’s rapturous transcendentalism negotiates and accommodates the colonialist imperative’ (94) is only partially true. To be transcendent is to be universalising. Nationalism is a concept about which she expresses anxiety. The idea of India is of crucial importance here. A letter to Baughan from Swami Prajnananda in 1916 reassures her that nationalism is only in opposition to ‘noble universalism in thought and culture’ when it is political and egotistical. ‘But when nationalism is spiritual,’ he asserts, ‘the collective pursuit of man’s higher altruistic duties becomes the foundation of nationality’. India is the place where that spiritual nationalism is most possible, thus ‘it is in the interests of all mankind to work for Indian nationalism’ (Letter of Nov. 16th, 1916. MS-Papers-0198).

Gauri Viswanathan suggests that in the case of the Theosophical Movement, Besant’s advocacy for universal brotherhood with its underlying belief in continuing evolutionary progress, has implicit within it the notion of racial hierarchy, and amounts to a re-inscription of empire (186). In Baughan’s case, the Vedantic universalism of her later poetry blurs the particularity of place which the Maoriland writers of the late colonial period made a central part of their nationalist project. In her final collection, Poems from the Port Hills (1923), Vedanta and its universalising transcendence is overt. The ‘tawny, tumultuous landscape ... stuck, and prickled,
and spiked’ (‘A Bush Section’ 79) of her earlier verse has been subsumed into a discourse of lyricism and abstraction. In the poem ‘The Summit Track’, she writes:

Far now below lie all humanity's
Close claims; and that which more than human is
In us awakes! And deeply grows aware
Of that dear Other-One, with which we share
This Earth-life. (32)

Unlike her earlier volume, where literary language focused on the materiality of the colonial scene, these poems use their surroundings to point beyond. The physical settings of the poems are merely a means to transcendence. The language of the poems is abstract and generalised, uninterested in itself as poetry. In a letter to Baughan in 1917, Swami Pragnanada of Mayaviti warned that poetry as written process might be merely a stage towards a more complex creative engagement:

Poetry is the dharma, the law of your individualised being, only you have to give up writing in order to better live it .... From poetry, the form, your soul is seeking to lose itself in poetry the substance. ... The sooner the very substance of poetry possesses the soul of a poet beyond any manoeuvring to play with rhyme, the more fortunate indeed is he or she. (6 August, 1917. MS-Papers-0198)

I began with the question posed by Viswanathan, 'How does a focus on conversion facilitate the writing of a life story into history rather than as history'. Baughan's conversion experience on Long Look-out writes Baughan into history in a number of ways — in terms of the Victorian fear of and incapacity before mental illness; in terms of the nineteenth-century crisis of religious faith; in terms of the Romantic configuration of landscape and the sublime, and its colonial reconfiguration; and in terms of the influence of India and Vedanta on the West. If Baughan is critically celebrated now, it is for her early writing — the 1908 volume rather than the Vedantist later works, as a colonial nationalist rather than a mystic internationalist. But perhaps the two are not opposed. Coming from an intellectual climate of religious doubt and uncertainty to a colonial setting where the newness of place demanded new ways off seeing and writing, Long Look-out gave her a further, new way of seeing, and a new landscape, one coloured by the unbounded and transcendent certainties of Vedanta.

In 1925, when she was fifty-five, Baughan experienced a second epiphany, occasioned by her falling down a flight of stairs and injuring herself. She saw 'a point of bright light, within me yet beyond me. It was like a diamond or a star, very bright and very peaceful, very secure' (Johnson 53). She felt a sensation of safety, of calm and of triumph. 'I had not the sense of unity which was so strong in my first experience, 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.'

To be ‘everywhere and with no sense of “me” at all’ is the antithesis of contemporary conceptions of authorship, especially those inflected by postcolonial issues of positionality and location. But if seeing anew is the task of the colonial and postcolonial writer, it is surely also that of the mystic. Is what we see in Long Look-out a demonstration of postcolonial mysticism?
NOTES
1 In this account, Baughan is identified only as ‘B.E.B.: Case 15’. The identification of her as its subject comes from a typescript biographical memoir by her friend Berta C. Burns compiled in 1969, in the Turnbull Library, Wellington. (MS-Papers-0198, folder 6)
2 Robert S. Ellwood states that he has been unable to find evidence of formal Vedanta organisations in New Zealand (235). But a letter to Baughan from Swami Pragnananda (Nov 26th, 1916, MS-Papers-0198, folder 6, Turnbull Library, Wellington) talks of ‘Vedanta centres and clubs in New Zealand’, and in ‘Vedanta in Early New Zealand: a Tribute to Blanche Edith Baughan’ (Vedanta for East and West 116, Jan-Feb 1971, 5). Mrs Burns refers to a report in the San Francisco publication The Voice of Freedom in 1916 on ‘study classes formed by Miss Baughan under the guidance of Swami Prakshanananda’.
3 A note to this poem acknowledges the influence of ‘the teaching of Plotinus, of Fechner, and of the Vedanta’.
4 If the trigger seems strange, it should be said that the medieval mystical tradition habitually used pain as an initial stage. Julian of Norwich, to whom Baughan refers in her commonplace book, experienced her visions while suffering a severe illness.
5 Again, the identification of Baughan as the subject of this passage comes from Mrs Burns’ biographical note.

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Blanche Baughan with her dog Teddy during her residence at Sumner (Blanche Edith Baughan papers. MS-Papers-0198-6/1)