

## Lucy Massey: A Forgotten Poet

FACING the Haymarket in Norwich and sheltered on the north by the great mass of St. Peter's Mancroft Church, where Sir Thomas Browne's statue now sits, contemplating a funerary urn held in his hand, there was formerly a substantial if somewhat ramshackle house, built probably in the seventeenth century, its first floor projecting a little and having an attic story with gabled dormer windows. Here in 1822 Simon Wilkin had opened his bookshop and set up his printing works. Here, after Simon left in 1834, Josiah Fletcher brought his bride, Sarah Williams, and here were born their three children—Benjamin Edgington, Emma, and Lucy, the youngest, in 1842. The premises must have been a hive of activity for besides housing the growing family in reasonable comfort, they provided for a considerable business enterprise, which after 1845 included the editing and printing of the *Norfolk News*. For the children the location had much to commend it. Apart from all the interest provided by being in the heart of the city, two or three minutes' walk took them to the Castle mound round which the girls were wont to run with their hoops before breakfast. Benjamin went to school but the girls had a governess, who, Lucy wrote later, "taught us much of thought and poetry, but not the grounding education she was supposed to be giving".\* In due course they learned Latin and the early morning hoop runs gave way to reading Virgil with father before he started his day's work.

On Sunday a ten minute walk took the family down the hill and across the river to worship at the Baptist Church in St. Mary's and to partake of the solid intellectual fare provided by the preaching of the Rev. George Gould. Josiah Fletcher was a deacon of the church so no doubt the family felt a sense of importance there. It was then no surprise when Emma and Lucy applied for baptism on profession of their faith. They were baptized in July 1856 at the same time as Jeremiah James Colman and John Godfrey Howlett who were later to be deacons of the church.

At an early age Lucy showed literary leanings. Encouraged by her father she compiled an anthology, *Christian Lyrics, chiefly selected from modern Authors*, which was published in 1861 and met with considerable success. The 27th thousand were printed in 1865 and a further edition followed. She was herself a writer of verses. A volume of her poems, *Thoughts from a Girl's Life*, containing fifty-two pieces largely descriptive of her Christian faith, was printed by her father in 1864 and published by Macmillan and Co. Despite her youth she was

well grounded in the faith and confident of the path she trod. "We that have believed do enter into rest" was perhaps prompted by a sermon on Hebrews 4.3:

"Although the port be distant, sweet haven of our peace,  
We have a pilot with us, whose words bid tempests cease.  
We know that Thou wilt guide us through all unto the shore,  
Where waves and storms and dangers are past for evermore.  
For we that have believed do enter into rest,  
We know that Thou wilt guide us, we know Thy way is best."

Though her faith was firm she realised that her understanding was incomplete:

"The unsolved problems that we touch  
At every word, not pondered much,  
Because they lie so near;  
O Thou, the Infinite, Allwise,  
Solve Thou for me these mysteries,  
Or teach me wiser thought;  
I cannot see, but Thou art light;  
I err, but Thou canst guide aright—  
By Thee I would be taught."

*Thoughts from a Girl's Life* was well reviewed if we may judge from the notices reprinted at the back of later editions of *Christian Lyrics*. The *Athenaeum* remarked, "The poems are all of them graceful and they are marked throughout by an accent of reality"; the *Spectator* declared, "There is in at least two or three of Miss Fletcher's poems a delicate transparency and music which raise them decidedly above the level of mere 'elegant verses'." The *Nonconformist* found the book "deeply thoughtful, sweetly musical, full of heart and bathed in cheerful piety".

Shortly after the publication of a second edition of *Thoughts* in 1865, Lucy resigned her membership of St. Mary's on her marriage to an aspiring Anglican clergyman who was still studying at Oxford. But married life and the change of denomination did not greatly alter her outlook nor her versification. Shortly after her marriage she compiled *Later Lyrics of the Christian Church*, which was printed by Fletcher and Son (her father having taken her brother into partnership) and published by Hamilton Adams and Co. of London. It contains 112 short poems. There are eleven of German origin from *Lyra Germanica* and other sources, Archbishop Trench of Dublin contributes eight poems, Longfellow six, Keble's *Christian Year* four, Horatius Bonar, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti three each, and there are seven pieces of Lucy's own composition.

Her next work, *The Inner Life*, a series of hymns based on the *Imitation of Christ* and designed for use at Holy Communion, was published by James Parker of Oxford in 1871. It was dedicated to Dr. Goulburn, the Dean of Norwich, who wrote, "I have been much pleased with the devout spirit and true appreciation of Thomas à Kempis as well as with the poetical power of several of these pieces"

A few lines may be quoted by way of example:

“Come then, oh come! No happy hour  
 Shall chase my gloom away  
 Till Thou shine forth in perfect power  
 Bright morning of my day.  
 I have no wine-cup and no bread,  
 My lonely board is bare,  
 Until Thou art my guest and spread  
 The feast Thyself wilt share.”

In 1875 Fletcher and Son printed and Macmillan published *Songs of the Noontide Rest* comprising another forty-nine of her poems. One of these, “Meeting”, is perhaps autobiographical.

“An Autumn morning when we met,  
 White frost on moor and down;  
 At noontide furrowed fields were wet,  
 The bramble hedge was brown.  
 Yet Spring to my glad heart was born,  
 And winter overleaped,  
 For I was sowing golden corn,  
 Which not on earth is reaped.  
 Oh sweetest eyes, oh sunny hair,  
 Beneath the bare brown bough;  
 Life’s promise changed as you stood there,  
 Her long-told “then” to “now”.  
 A song I knew by rote before  
 Took meaning in your tone  
 And sudden learned in love-lore  
 I spoke a tongue unknown.”

Another poem, “Footsteps”, may relate to her relationship with her father:

“And will you let me take your hand—  
 ‘Tis softer than I thought of old—  
 And tell you all I’ve done or planned,  
 Where long ago my dreams were told?  
 The books I read are on the shelf,  
 Your chair stands in the fire’s warm glow;  
 The papered room, nay you yourself—  
 Untouched, are all I used to know.  
 I only am not quite the same,  
 For waxing life works growth and change,  
 And hopes you heard with praise or blame  
 Have faded in its wider range.

A power went with me to the strife,  
 And succoured me when almost spent;  
 Me, living not that pictured life  
 In thought of which you dwelt content.”

Two more volumes of poems were published by Skeffington and

Son of London—*Figures of the True* in 1890 and *Songs of the unseen Hope* in 1900. The last carries echoes of the war in South Africa:

“Then tidings spread through all the land of grief and loss  
and death,  
While Britain’s sons made strong their hand, and nations held  
their breath.  
Came brighter days, forgotten fears, loud shoutings, flags that  
waved,  
Hand wringing hand, unbidden tears, for Mafeking was  
saved!”

Following the rejoicing comes news of a loved one killed rescuing a fallen comrade:

“So the shot found him. Yet not flame of hot-mouthed  
belching gun  
But God’s voice called him at his post, and God will say  
‘Well done’.

’Tis when this little life drops down in darkness that we see  
The edge of crescent morn make clear God’s great Eternity.”

But the troubles of the times had not blunted her faith. In one of the last poems she wrote:

“Those who have seen Christ’s face have looked on God.  
Who sets his feet where feet of Christ have trod  
Goes whither Christ did go.”

In 1918 at the age of 76 Mrs. Massey wrote an account of her childhood in the house in Norwich Haymarket. She remembered the goings-on in the nearby marketplace—elections and the chairing of the chosen member, civic processions with Snap, the canvas dragon, in attendance, punch-and-judy shows and displays of conjuring. She remembered visitors to the house: “One morning I was playing on the floor in the drawing room and I saw an old man in the doorway, shaking his long bushy head of hair as he greeted my mother—our visitor was George Borrow, author of *Lavengro*” Another literary visitor was Amelia Opie, and there were political visitors concerned with Josiah Fletcher’s activities as printer of the radical *Norfolk News* and philanthropic visitors to discuss her mother’s various charitable works which included prison visiting and running a home for orphans. She remembered that in the year of the Irish famine—1847 or ’48—the family were forbidden potatoes that there might be more for the children of Ireland.

Lucy Massey may not have been a great poet but at least she was a consistent writer of verse who never lost her zest for life nor wavered from her Christian hope.

CHARLES B. JEWSON.

\*The quotations are from a manuscript belonging to Mrs. Humphrey Paine, a great-niece of Mrs. Massey.