Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 211

Volume 211

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
Project Editors

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Barbara Baynton
1857-1929

(Born Barbara Lawrence) Australian short story writer and novelist.

The following entry provides an overview of Baynton's life and works. For additional information on her career, see *TCLC,* Volume 57.

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Baynton has been praised has a significant figure in early twentieth-century Australian literature. Although her literary output is relatively small, she is remembered for her stark, brutal depictions of life in the Australian outback, which countered the sentimental and nationalistic narratives of the country produced by her contemporaries. Baynton's most acclaimed work is *Bush Studies* (1902), a collection of short stories, although recent scholarship has increasingly focused on her novel, *Human Toll* (1907). In these works of fiction, Baynton examines the grim reality of life in the Australian bush, exploring a variety of themes based on her personal experience, such as alienation, betrayal, loss, death, and revenge. Her work especially illuminates the female point of view, focusing on women's struggle to survive despite fear, repression, and the threat of violence, including rape and death. For many critics, Baynton's confrontational fiction prompted a reconsideration of the stereotypical representation of the Australian outback. Rosemary Moore has observed that "Baynton has chosen to write in what would generally be regarded as a distinctly masculine genre—the bush tale. What is interesting is what she does with it, for she is writing against the grain of the culture, and is therefore not interested in endorsing romantic or nationalistic male myths about the bush. She creates a new genre of story which reflects on the old genre. Moreover, she uses the conditions of the bush to explore the nature of femininity."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Baynton was born Barbara Lawrence in 1857 in the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales, Australia. Little was known of the author's life until Baynton's great-granddaughter, Penne Hackforth-Jones, published a biography, *Barbara Baynton: Between Two Worlds,* in 1989. Throughout her lifetime Baynton repeatedly claimed, both privately and publicly, that she was the illegitimate child of Penelope Ewart and Robert Kilpatrick, although her birth certificate indicates that her parents were Elizabeth (Ewart) and John Lawrence. According to Hackforth-Jones's research, Elizabeth, Baynton's mother, was originally married to John Lawrence and emigrated with him from Ireland to Australia, after which she left her husband to live with Kilpatrick, a carpenter who emigrated from the same port in Ireland to settle in Australia. Hackforth-Jones speculates that when John Lawrence died, Elizabeth married Kilpatrick, who then changed his name to John Lawrence to avoid scandal.

Whatever the truth of her parents' identities, Baynton's childhood, spent in Upper Hunter, near Scone, and Murrurundi, was fraught with poverty and friction. At the age of eighteen, Baynton traveled to a farm in the far northwest of New South Wales, where she had been offered a housekeeper position. When she arrived, however, her employer found her to be too unattractive to satisfy his romantic expectations (the true purpose of the job) and rejected her. Not long after this incident, Baynton accepted a governess position in Merrylong Park, located northwest of Scone, for the Frater family. She found the job rewarding and developed a close relationship with the family.

In 1880 Baynton married the second son, Alex Frater. They established a household in Coonamble, on property that the Fraters had given them. Alex, however, did not take well to farming and spent little time at home. When Baynton was pregnant with her third child, she invited her niece, Sarah, to live with them and help with the farming and domestic chores. After a year, she discovered that her husband and niece were romantically involved. Baynton confronted them, then moved to Sydney with her children in 1887. She took various jobs to support herself, working briefly as a milliner and, later, as a housekeeper. Divorce in New South Wales was legally difficult at that time, but in 1889, after the Matrimonial Causes Act became law, Baynton was able to divorce Frater and gain legal custody of her children. Soon after, she married Thomas Baynton, a wealthy retired doctor from Sydney, for whom she had worked as a housekeeper.

In her second marriage Baynton found both financial and emotional security. She developed an interest in fine furniture and collectibles and began pursuing a lit-

erary career. In 1896 she published several poems and a short story, "The Tramp," in the magazine the *Bulletin.* As a result of these publications. she developed a friendship and professional relationship with A. G. Stephens, the influential critic and literary editor of the *Bulletin.* With Stephens's encouragement, Baynton traveled to England in 1902 to find a publisher for a small volume of fiction that she recently completed. She enjoyed access to English society, provided by her Sydney connections, and was introduced to Edward Garnett, a well-connected writer and critic. Her introduction to Garnett, who had previously assisted such writers as Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence, resulted in an offer from the respected London-based publishing firm of Duckworth and Company. Her collection *Bush Studies* was published that same year. The volume consists of six short stories, including "The Chosen Vessel," a reworking of the previously published "The Tramp." As a result of Duckworth's advertising and several literary endorsements, *Bush Studies* was well received in both England and Australia.

Following her husband's death in 1904 Baynton worked as director of the Law Book Company, her late husband's legal publishing firm, and traveled extensively between London and Sydney. Her only novel, *Human Toll,* was published in 1907. During this time Baynton was interested in various political and social issues, campaigning for a writer's union and the rights of single mothers. She spoke out against the unfair treatment of domestic servants and, at different points, rallied on both sides of the women's suffrage issue. In 1921 Baynton married George Allanson-Winn, Baron Headley, a widower. They separated in 1924. Soon after, Baynton returned to Australia, settling in Toorak, near her daughter, Penelope. According to her biographer, Baynton continued writing fiction during this time, although none of these later writings were published. After a serious fall, Baynton died on May 28, 1929.

MAJOR WORKS

Bush Studies is Baynton's best-known work. The stories in the collection are primarily concerned with female suffering and the struggle to survive in a harsh and brutal environment dominated by men. The volume opens with "The Dreamer," which establishes a bleak, naturalistic vision for the remaining stories in the book. The tale relates the events of a pregnant woman who makes an unannounced visit to her estranged mother in the bush. When she arrives at the train station she finds no one, and she is forced to walk three miles in the rain to her mother's house. Baynton presents her protagonist as a stranger in an alien land, and her journey takes on the significance of a quest. When she arrives at her destination, she discovers that her mother has died within the last few hours.

In contrast to the other stories in the collection, "Scrammy 'And" has a male protagonist. Like the women protagonists in the book, however, he also experiences an extreme sense of vulnerability when he is left home alone in the bush. Critics have noted that Baynton's shift from female to male "victim" in the story is significant, demonstrating that while the prospect of danger in the bush is felt most acutely by women, it is not limited to that gender. In "Billy Skywonkie," the author emphasizes the barbarity and perversity of the men who populate the bush, while in "Bush Church," she portrays the people of the community as backward and ignorant, who find more joy in mundane events, such as when a hen that had stopped laying resumes laying eggs, than in spiritual matters.

In "The Chosen Vessel," one of the most acclaimed stories of *Bush Studies,* a woman is left alone with her baby in an isolated hut in the bush. A "swagman," or tramp, wanders by and demands food and shelter, holding the woman hostage. He rapes her, then tries to kill her, but the woman escapes with her child. A man on horseback, who is in the midst of a religious crisis, passes her on the road, but when she cries out to him (in her white gown and her baby in her arms), he mistakes her for a vision of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, and gallops off. The woman dies, but the baby is found alive in her arms. In addition to the brutality and dangers of bush life, "The Chosen Vessel" explores other acutely human themes, such as the perversion of Christian faith and the sacrifices of motherhood. With regard to this latter theme, Susan Barrett has concluded that "the baby is rescued by a boundary rider, but this does not mean that motherhood emerges as a positive force in the story. Baynton's title 'The Chosen Vessel' implies that the abstract concept of the maternal can exist only at the cost of the woman by denying the mother the right to exist as a person: The Virgin Mary exists only to provide God with his Son, a wife is there to ensure the transmission of power and property from father to son."

In "Squeaker's Mate," another story from *Bush Studies* that has attracted considerable critical attention, Baynton examines issues of marriage, sexuality, and adultery, as well as the related themes of isolation, neglect, and jealousy. In the story an unnamed bushwoman is married to a callous man named Squeaker. Squeaker's wife, or mate, is hardworking, but she is injured when a tree she is cutting down falls on top of her. As a result of the accident she becomes paralyzed. Squeaker initially ignores her calls for help, and when he does come to her aid, he only provides minimal care. Eventually he moves her into a back shed. Squeaker stocks the shed with food and water, but then leaves his wife for days at a time. At one point he returns with a mistress, who is already pregnant. Squeaker's second mate, also unnamed, is reluctant to do any work, and is even afraid

to procure her own drinking water. Thirsty, she enters the paralyzed wife's shed to steal her water. Squeaker's wife, overcome by jealousy, grabs the woman's arm and tries to kill her by cutting off her circulation. Squeaker, who just returned home from a long absence, breaks the women apart but kills his wife in the process. Some critics have noted the symbolism and dream-like quality of the story, both of which defy logic and consistency. Others have emphasized Baynton's harsh critique of male chauvinism in the tale, and her attempt to illuminate the silenced female perspective in the Australian outback. Rosemary Moore has remarked that in "Squeaker's Mate" Baynton "embodies in the story the fact that women are marginalised, and highlights the fact that they have no place. While they have no place they must remain voiceless and faceless, without an identity. Baynton represents the problem by revealing her bushwoman as split open by her husband's view of her." Moore concludes that "Baynton gives depth to her story by relating the tale to its historical context and in creating a gap between its superficial and dominant meaning with its hidden and more complex range of meanings. By exploiting this gap she has encouraged the reader to read the story against itself from a female perspective. She has therefore created a space in which the unsung lament and unspoken complaint of Squeaker's mate can be heard."

Once generally neglected, *Human Toll* has received increasing interest from critics in recent years. A. A. Phillips has maintained that the novel includes some of Baynton's "most effective and characteristic writing," even achieving "maturer insights into human behaviour" than those displayed in her short stories. In the novel Baynton once again addresses the issue of alienation and focuses on themes of motherhood, love, death, and sacrifice, as well as the quest for identity. Ursula, the protagonist, is an orphan of illegitimate birth who is sent to live with a widow named Mrs. Civil. Once there, she befriends a boy named Andrew Palmer, for whom she has a growing affection. As she grows older, Ursula is disturbed by the concepts of sexuality and motherhood, and she determines to pursue a literary career. Meanwhile, Andrew is seduced by a manipulative girl named Mina, who tricks him into marrying her. Although she longs to pursue her own life, Ursula follows Andrew and takes care of his pregnant wife. After Andrew abandons the two women, Mina gives birth but tries to murder her child. Fearing for the child's life, Ursula leaves with the baby, who dies soon after their escape. Ursula continues on, still clinging to the corpse of the child. After several trials, she returns with water, only to find Mina's dead body. In the ambiguous ending of the novel, Ursula and Andrew once again meet and call out to each other, suggesting a reunion of the two lovers.

Joan Kirkby has asserted that "*The Human Toll* recounts an extraordinary journey undertaken in flight from the maternal—only like some grim nightmare—to be brought back to the fate one has fled. Blood, eggs, cobweb, dead baby, the bleeding wound of the Bush Christ, reconciliation with the earthly lover." For Rosemary Moore, however, "Baynton has endowed Ursula with the capacity to escape this plot: by giving her the means to recognise the sexual stereotypes, and, therefore, of distancing herself from them; by giving her the power to remake herself, to become her own mother; and by endowing her with her own power of self representation. Once she has realised what she has repressed, Ursula is free to realise her ambition—to develop her powers as a writer."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The publication of *Bush Studies* in 1902 established Baynton's reputation as an important new voice in Australian literature and garnered her praise for her stark, unromantic picture of life in the Australian bush. During the 1920s and 1930s the collection was especially favored by a small group of writers and critics who regarded themselves as benefactors of the so-called bush-realist tradition of the late nineteenth century. Yet, while many commentators recognized the significance of Baynton's anti-nationalistic treatment of her subject, especially her presentation of the brutality of outback life from the female perspective, some found her vision excessively and unnaturally grim. In his 1961 history of Australian literature, H. M. Green described Baynton's stories as "founded on the harshest, ugliest, cruelest aspects of primitive outback life, which she isolates from anything that might alleviate these qualities, and she darkens and dwell upon them until they combine to produce the effect of a nightmare." While Green acknowledged that Baynton had "considerable art and power" and was "as powerful a writer as Australia has produced," he concluded that her writings seem "invented and unnatural," as a result of the "accumulation" of so many grim details, and thus could not be considered "masterpieces." With the republication of *Bush Studies* in 1965, a new generation of critics came to regard Baynton as a literary pioneer, whose dissident vision of the lives of bushmen and women stood as a necessary corrective to the sentimental, nationalist output of her contemporaries. In his introduction to the reissue of *Bush Studies,* A. A. Phillips argued that "hers is at once an impressively individual and a significantly expressive voice from the epoch of the nineties. Moreover, the tone of her work piquantly contrasts with that of most of her Australian contemporaries. She asserts what they are more likely to hint in incidental asides."

By the 1970s scholars became increasingly interested in the feminist and potentially subversive themes in Baynton's fictional work. In 1979 Thea Astley maintained

that while the stories of *Bush Studies* may not "rank highly as literature," they are nonetheless "valuable" as "an expression of revolt, particularly a revolt against the feudal conditions of life for women in the bush." Rosemary Moore in a 1986 study emphasized the "subversive" tactics Baynton employed in her adaptation of the traditionally male-centered bush story, claiming that the author "used the genre of the bush tale to write a critique of the genre. She saw how patriarchal values were exacerbated in the conditions of bush life to make the oppression of women in the bush more visible." Moore concluded that "Baynton's analysis of the conditions of bush life leads her into a critique of patriarchy and of gender definitions."

Scholars also rediscovered Baynton's sole novel, *Human Toll,* which was virtually ignored for most of the twentieth century. In a separate essay published in 1993, Moore objected to the "conventions of realism" by which Baynton's novel had been studied, asserting that as a result of these conventions, the work was wrongly dismissed as "a lesser imitation of the established male bush writing of her period." Moore suggested instead that *Human Toll* belongs in "the context of the *fin de siecle* anxieties of the international world: manifested in literature in terms of the battle between the sexes and the rise of the image of the monstrous female as a projection of male fears." In a similar vein, Joan Kirkby in 1989 highlighted Baynton's ambivalent treatment of motherhood and maternity in the novel, claiming that through the protagonist, Ursula, Baynton dramatizes what Julia Kristeva referred to as the "psychic" split in the mother, "who is both a speaking being and a reproductive being." According to Kirkby, "*The Human Toll* is specifically concerned with motherhood; indeed motherhood is 'the human toll.' It is a fate that Ursula . . . struggles to evade. Troubled by her own sexuality—her attraction to Andrew—she asserts her determination to be a writer and separate herself from corporeal process. However, throughout the novel she is beset by evocations of abjection—of defiled maternity—which operate as emblems of female guilt toward the mother for choosing writing instead of loving, for preferring the s/word of the father to the womb of the mother. Indeed Ursula's desire to escape the body and write leads to a nightmare confrontation with 'the maternal.'"

Baynton's fiction continues to draw a small but dedicated readership, and critics today generally regard *Bush Studies* and *Human Toll* as significant contributions to Australia's literary canon. As Baynton's commentators have noted, these works provide a more thorough understanding of an otherwise marginalized group, forcing readers to reconsider stereotypical representations of life in the Australian outback. Writing in 2003, Susan Barrett, who praised the author's "sophisticated use of language," argued that "until the advent of feminist criticism in the 1980s, Baynton remained a largely forgotten figure, dismissed as a typical female writer who did not know how to control her emotions and who was unable to put her 'natural talents' to good use." Barrett asserted that the author used "obliqueness simply because this was the only form of criticism open to a woman writer in Australia at this time. The apparent inability of readers to engage with the implicit in her stories stems from an unwillingness to accept her vision of life in the bush," concluding that "what is essential in decoding Baynton's work is to accept that it is not about women but about the absence of women who are shown to be victims both of men in the bush and of language."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Bush Studies (short stories) 1902; also revised as *Cobbers,* 1917

Human Toll (novel) 1907

Barbara Baynton (short stories, novel, poetry, essays, and letters) 1980

CRITICISM

H. M. Green (essay date 1961)

SOURCE: Green, H. M. "The Short Story." In *A History of Australian Literature: Pure and Applied, Volume 1: 1789-1923,* pp. 555-83. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961.

[*In the following excerpt, drawn from his survey of the short story in Australian literature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Green comments on Baynton's single-minded focus on "the harshest, ugliest, cruelest aspects of primitive outback life" in her stories.*]

Barbara Baynton also reflects bush life in a distorting mirror; it is not the humour, however, that she draws out and distorts, but the gloom. No one who is familiar with the bush can deny that in it a gloomy element exists,[1] and again and again, reinforced by other conditions, it darkens the work of temperaments susceptible to its influence. Barbara Baynton's stories are founded on the harshest, ugliest, cruellest aspects of primitive outback life, which she isolates from anything that might alleviate these qualities, and she darkens and dwells upon them until they combine to produce the ef-

fect of a nightmare. She seems to take a grim and masochistic pleasure in placing some unfortunate man, or woman, in a situation in which he is quite defenceless, and then subjecting him to stroke after remorseless stroke up to the dreaded inevitable climax: he may be warmly affectionate, as in **"A Dreamer"**; stoically patient, as in **"Squeaker's Mate"**; unexpectedly tender, as in **"Scrammy 'And"**; or merely pitiful, as in **"The Chosen Vessel"**; but all the other characters, unless it be a dog, are shown as without bowels of compassion. Even Nature itself is among the enemies, and it might almost be said that Barbara Baynton paints the Australian backblocks in the colours of hell. All this, of course, implies considerable art and power, and indeed she is a stylist and within her extremely narrow limits as powerful a writer as Australia has produced. The emotions of her principal characters (fear, pain, disgust, disillusionment, horror) are always simple, though the sufferer is by no means always primitive, and they are not shown objectively but conveyed to the reader as by a scraping of raw flesh. What prevents these stories generally from being masterpieces is the accumulation, as in **"Squeaker's Mate"**, of so many horrors that they come gradually to appear invented and unnatural; and a straining of the style in order to intensify the effect, which is weakened also by artificialities that defeat the writer's end by distracting the reader's attention. Yet it is not often that tragedy here becomes melodrama, and once at least Barbara Baynton achieves a masterpiece: all her powers are focused in the terrible little story, **"The Chosen Vessel"**;[2] this is somewhat similar in type to "The Drover's Wife", but that is more real and human, if it has less sheer power. An English critic has compared Barbara Baynton with Gorki, but Gorki's miseries are never emphasized for the sake of effect; a much nearer parallel would be Barbusse.

Notes

1. Paterson suggests (*Three Elephant Power,* Sydney, 1917, pp. 39-40) that it is all due to the soul-destroying effect of merino sheep! There are probably a number of reasons, in particular loneliness and the recurrent attempts to create a farm with insufficient capital or, in the early days, understanding of the conditions to be found.
2. In *The Bulletin Story Book* it is entitled "The Tramp".

A. A. Phillips (essay date 1965)

SOURCE: Phillips, A. A. "Barbara Baynton's Stories." In *Bush Studies,* by Barbara Baynton, pp. 27-42. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965.

[*In the following essay, taken from his introduction to the 1965 reissue of* Bush Studies, *Phillips describes Baynton as a writer who revolted against "self-confident Australianism" and whose work is dominated by "nightmare obsessions." He also identifies a number of central themes in Baynton's fiction, such as that of the "lonely" bush land, "the fierce power of maternal instinct," and "a bitter insistence on man's brutality to woman."*]

The restoration of Barbara Baynton's ***Bush Studies*** to circulation—it was first published in 1902—is a welcome act of justice; for hers is at once an impressively individual and a significantly expressive voice from the epoch of the nineties. Moreover the tone of her work piquantly contrasts with that of most of her Australian contemporaries. She asserts what they are more likely to hint in incidental asides.

The country with which she deals is, in type, Steele Rudd country, a region of bush without majesty and of drought-stricken selectors; but the aspects of the life there which she emphasizes are those for which one must grope between the lines of Rudd's comfortable evasions. Indeed A. G. Stephens declares that conventional Australians of her time were not ready to accept her outspokenness. He writes in his review of ***Bush Studies,*** "Its truthful glimpses of Australian life, graphically expressed, could not (would not) have been printed in any Australian paper, though they rank highly as literature and are circulated widely in book form when issued by an Engish publisher. We are too mealy-mouthed (in print) and stuff far too much 'respectable' wadding in our ears."[1]

Later neglect of her work is no doubt largely due to its lack of bulk. Her claim to our attention rests mainly on the six short stories of ***Bush Studies*** which are reprinted in this volume after nearly fifty years of inaccessibility. There is also her novel ***Human Toll,*** published in 1907, which includes some of her most effective and characteristic writing, and which sometimes achieves maturer insights into human behaviour than the method of her short stories permitted her there to attempt. ***Human Toll*** was, however, her first attempt at novel-writing, and an unsure management of structure robs it of full effectiveness. Moreover, Barbara Baynton's grim prepossessions always tempt her towards the melodramatic. In her short stories her firmness of control restrains this tendency; in the last chapters of ***Human Toll*** there is a nakedness of assault on the reader's tear-ducts which weakens the book's effect.

The bibliographies indicate the existence of another volume called ***Cobbers,*** published in 1917; but this is in fact a re-publication of ***Bush Studies*** with the addition of two stories. One is a farce of outback manners, very much in the style of **"Bush Church"**; but not quite achieving the acrid vigour of that story. The other is a sketch of an Anzac, obviously based on Barbara Baynton's knowledge of Australian soldiers in the London