

MARGARET JUNKIN PRESTON,

LEXINGTON POETESS

A study of the work of Margaret Junkin Preston (1820-1897), daughter of Dr. George Junkin, president of Washington College from 1848 to 1861.

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MARGARET JUNKIN PRESTON'S POETRY AND THE LIFE THAT INFLUENCED IT

An Introduction

Even in 1950 one can enjoy reading Margaret Preston's poems, which were written for a Victorian audience. She wrote in many forms and metres, and because of this almost everyone can select from her volumes certain examples that entertain. She especially satisfies those many people who find delight in changing and alternating patterns of poetry, condemning as repetitious and monotonous works of any consistent, single-styled writer. Most of her books are divided into sections of contrasting types of poems; they are like anthologies. Because of the various metre arrangements, the reader, as he goes from verse to verse, thinks he has seen many before - the reduced cues of lines similar to some of Longfellow's or Bryant's or Elizabeth Browning's strike a familiar note which, because it is not completely recognizable, perseveres to haunt the mind until the original reference is remembered. LA ?

Margaret Preston might be called a poet of the people in the sense that Longfellow was - both wrote for the people but were not of them; and both wrote for intellectual minds as well. Yet she lacked indigenous material even though she wrote with simplification. This must explain the fact that her popularity never reached the height of his. I would not hesitate to call her eclectic, but today that word connotes an unpleasant quality, so I will reduce the harshness by saying that she was an experimenter.

Life in Milton and Germantown

Margaret Junkin Preston was born in Milton, Pennsylvania, on May 19, 1820, of parents of Scottish ancestry. Her father, George Junkin, told her in her childhood heroic tales that were handed down by his grandfather, who fled from Stuart persecution to Ireland and then to Pennsylvania during the reign of George II. These

George II. These stories of family tradition fired Margaret's imagination all through her life. Julia Rush Miller, her mother, married George Junkin in Philadelphia on June 1, 1819. She too was Scotch but was more used to wealth and luxury than her husband, who was born in a stone mansion in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, the sixth of fourteen children. This man was absorbed in religion and education; he was an unselfish reformer for God and a person of acute intellect. Mrs. Junkin served as a calming force on his bold and turbulent character, which was often excited by his intense convictions.

At the time of Margaret's birth Dr. Junkin was a minister in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Milton at country churches. There is ^{only} nothing but a vague record of her first ten years. The Junkins lived an exceedingly plain and simple life; they had to live on a narrow income because Dr. Junkin, being of the opinion that money meant the power to do good, used most of his earnings to educate young ministers. Margaret never went to school and, on looking back, she regretted this lack of the companionship that usually accompanies the discipline of childhood education. Perhaps it was this loss that molded her shyness and morbidness of mind. She obtained her schooling at home, first from her mother and then at six from her father, who wished her to be a scholar; this education was much more intense than that of the schools and never allowed her time for play. Many of the childhoods of the Old Masters, of which she wrote, paralleled hers in strictness, and they might have solaced her if she knew of them then. Or do such poems express only a desire to justify a studious childhood by its reward of adult success? Many of her later poems moralize this idea of conscientious perfection which she believed throughout life.

When Margaret was ten, her father moved to Germantown, Pennsylvania, to take charge of the Manual Labor School there. For two years she knew the glamour of the city and the ties of family affection, and she always remembered these years. Not until old age was she to live in the city again - then in Baltimore. Charles F. McCay, who was ten years older than Margaret, became an unselfish brother to her. He taught Margaret and her sister Eleanor, played with them, and was their closest comrade at this time. Their friendship lasted until he died. By 1830

the Junkin family had increased by five sons and one daughter, and Margaret's burden increased proportionately, for it was upon her that the responsibility of their care fell. At this period Margaret was of slight build with fair skin and blue eyes. She was quick and sensitive, and very tender to the younger children whom she influenced; to her elders she was obedient. As I have mentioned before, her youth was made busy by many household chores and by her own ambition to be scholarly. Even then was she a lover of poetry and romance.

also, by FATHERS -

Life in Easton

When her father moved to Easton, Pennsylvania, in 1832 to establish Lafayette College, her life remained practically the same - all work and no play. Here her home studies were supplemented with private lessons from college professors. As she was small of stature, it was often remarked that the weight of these studies in early life had stunted her growth. But there was a Scotch superstition that explained it too - to be tossed on the horns of a cow when young dwarfs a child. It was at this time that her eye trouble began. She was forced to study and recite by candle light because there was no time during the day. This intense reading took its toll, and the rest of her life was troubled by poor sight. When she was twenty-one and during the following seven years she was hardly able to do any reading. This torturous period did much to thwart her ambition. This malady also kept her from drawing and painting-the arts she loved best. Had she emphasized them, we may never have seen much of her poetry.

When did Margaret begin to accept God? Did she grow into it naturally as most people do? Her early Calvinistic training must have been partly responsible for instilling in her a deep conviction of sin. But a childhood incident at Lafayette precipitated this guilt complex which caused her to doubt acceptance by God. One afternoon a student of a religiously fanatical nature privately conversed with her as to her spiritual welfare. He questioned her about the regen-

erative power of the Holy Spirit. She was unable to answer yes when he asked if she had experienced the illuminating power of new birth. This moved the boy to suggest that Margaret was among the damned. Even her later notebooks indicate that there was no difference between her religious faith and the general theories of Calvinism. So we see that the anxious fears and struggles of her childhood persisted until old age, only gradually becoming alleviated. Often in her later years she seemed to doubt the sincerity of her faith and devotion to God although she did believe in God's infinite loving-kindness.

Predestination helps explain Margaret's fear of death also. The thought of damnation after life must indeed have been prominent in her mind. She believed that death would not bring joy. But there was another cause for her dismay. Once when still a child and playing, she was suddenly called away from her rejoicing and taken to a funeral. She was shown the corpse, and her hand was placed on the cold brow. The event filled her with horror and she could never look on the dead after that. In 1891 she wrote an article for The Sunday School Times called "Giving Children Right Impressions of Death," in which she admits her fear of dying and the effect of that childhood incident: "The impression of that day and night has never worn away though long years have passed over my head since then."

In the references to death in her notebooks she pursues two main ideas. The first of these is a fear of death itself and the separation from the rest of the world. In the 1837 notebook she wrote:

But, oh our churchyard's lonely
 And desolate and bare,
 And bright with green grass only,
 Oh, do not lay me there.

modern Jun King, beware!

The second fear was that death would come to her during her youth before she had time to express the beauty within her soul. This reminds one of a similar dread in another American writer, Thomas Wolfe. In her notebook for 1841 we find:

Oh, it is hard to close my eyes
 While I am still so young,
 And feel and know that I must die,
 And leave so much unsung.

But not all of Margaret's verse in her youth is sad. Sometimes a strain of humor shows up in her revolt against the strict morality to which she was subjected. After a temperance address in 1839 at a new church by a very young man she composed:

Virgil praised the nectared cup,
Horace drank its contents up

.....

What although a New Kirks near
Yet I will have naught to fear
Youthful warnings are in vain.
They should come from older men,
But we're off the hallowed ground
And beyond the warning sound.
Here's a brimming bumper then
To thy glories, Oh Champain.

A letter to Charles McCay dated November 13, 1840, was entirely in rhyme - it was an epithalamium written for his marriage and consisted of several pages of wedding-song and then this retrospection:

I well remember all your care (would I had prized it more!),
To open to my wayward mind the gems of Roman lore;
When with you I o'ertraced the paths the pious Trojan roved,
And sighed to think how fruitlessly the Tyrian Dido lived.

This is the first word about her childhood that we read from Margaret herself. This confirms her familiarity with great books and authors. Besides classic mythology she had read many essays and studied much philosophy. She was also a very good language student. Another verse shows youthful happiness tinged with poetic melancholy:

Why do the birds seem now to pour less thrilling strains along,
Than when our childish hearts were wont to echo to their song?

Margaret was gifted with a wonderful insight into the character of people. When her sister Eleanor was fourteen, she wrote this description in her notebook:

And round her lips
Lurks mischief, when she can she snips
The nose, as often pulls the hair
Or draws away the expected chair,
Or when our lips just touch the brink
Tilts up the draft we meant to drink.
But she can be demure and prim
Whenever fancy takes the whim
And look as staid and grave no less
Than some well lectured Quakeress.

One immediately recognizes the similarity of this verse to parts of Chaucer's "Prologue." Her powers of observation and perception were very keen - she saw the ordinary little things that others often pass over (unaware of their poetic qualities). Her early verse showed this rhythmically and delicately. At sixteen she wrote "Twilight Thoughts," in which she projects her personal feelings into nature and shows a sense of observation that is wonderful for one of that age although inferior to her later works:

'Tis not a night on which to weep;
 And yet this silent sky
 Has wakened thoughts and feelings deep,
 And summoned to my eye
 A drop that dims my reaching sight,
 And all my vision mars
 With such distortion, that the night
 Hath thousands more of stars.

It is a very pretty poem in spite of its Edgar Guest sentimentality. Margaret took the events of the life about her to use for poetic subject matter. She did not suffer from vague themes, but from a too-close attachment of her feelings to the subject. Her inadequacy at this time forced her to use pathetic fallacy in order to express and focus emotion. Yeats early poetry in Crossways echoes the same faults. Another unfortunate move, in my opinion, is her resetting of American themes in other locales - to be effective an action must have a specific setting unless it is imaginary.

But what of her life in Easton? It seems that she got more pleasure living within herself and writing poetry than from mingling with others. Her letters show that she kept very busy during this period reading, or being read to, and writing poems, stories, and letters. Even at sixteen she was the center of a circle of literary personalities. Yet she was not completely detached from the general society of Easton. A letter in 1845 states that she was "helping with a Bazaar for the college." For this she did some painting, which caused the first absolute breakdown of her eyes. They never really recovered after this. Her writings indicate that her three main interests were religion, family affection, and writing.

Margaret had little time for love outside of her family and intellectual associations. The strictness of her father did not allow her much contact with the

opposite sex. An unfortunate episode in very early life closed her heart to any thought of deep love or marriage until she met Major Preston. This vague affair probably occurred when she was eighteen. The object of her affection was a boy of about her age, but, when her parents disapproval of a marriage at this time caused the boy to become at odds with her father, she was forbidden to see him again. This incident gave her a sense of "hopeless attachment." There are few traces of this romance in her verses, but, as in death, a time of intense feeling was not prolific in verse-making for her. As she had studied the Greeks much, she might have caught something of their restraint of expression which prevented her giving vent to any great emotions. Here and there, however, there is some evidence of this experience in the farewell verses which she published around this time without her name. "A Farewell" is a trite poem which conveys the hope that she will meet her lover in heaven. It could easily have been influenced by the seventeenth century Cavalier poets. The poem begins passionately;

Forget me? Ah, I ask it not!
 I could not bear that thou shouldst blot
 My name from out the record fair
 That memory's volume treasures;

In 1841 Dr. Junkin resigned as president of Lafayette College. He would not compromise on a discipline case in which he upheld his faculty, but the trustees took the part of a refractory student. He then received the presidency of Miami University at Oxford, Ohio. The years he spent here were filled with agitation and were very tempestuous for him and his family. Margaret wrote a letter to Miss Helen Dickey of Oxford, Pennsylvania, complaining of this unhappy life at Miami, but adding, "When there is so much sorrow in the world, I would not dare to murmur if we too are called to bear a small share of the burden; for small are all our troubles compared with many that we constantly hear of." Dr. Junkin was recalled to the presidency of Lafayette in October, 1844, and he continued here for four successful years.

Then trouble occurred in organizing a Second Easton Presbyterian Church. This along with the failing health of the second son, Joseph, whose pulmonary condition demanded a milder climate, prompted him to move to Lexington, Virginia,

in the fall of 1848 as president of Washington College. From this time on Margaret cast her lot with the Southern people and became their poet, but she never denounced the North. The days in Easton formed her religious character and intellectual development; she never forgot them or lost their effects. As the daughter of the college president she had associated with cultivated and refined people; as poet and artist she became familiar with the beautiful and romantic scenery of Easton.

Life in Lexington

Lexington furnished the Junkin family with their most congenial and peaceful home because there was no friction in Washington College. Margaret was now described as of slight figure and fair complexion. Her hair was beautiful auburn, but she was "not exactly pretty." She was not proud or sophisticated and never talked about herself. This humility can be seen in many of her religious poems. Since her mother was growing deaf, Margaret told her everything she did and heard through an ear trumpet. This desire to communicate and teach is important in poetry. On September 9, 1852, she wrote that she was very happy in her new home. With the skill of painter and poet she pictured the bright colors around Lexington. At places her description of the countryside is much like those of Fitzpatrick in his contemporary Traveltalks:

And, then, as the ascending sun rose higher over the mountain, and the full orchestra of bird music began to settle into a subdued murmur that seemed fading away into the forests

Her romantic nature would never allow her to tell a tale without touching up the facts.

The ^{second} next year in Lexington brought news from Florida of the death of Joseph. This was her first experience of parting. She suffered much then and at similar times throughout her life because she could never become resigned to death. Here is a portion of the letter she wrote to her brother George a few weeks after Joseph's death:

She (mother) has not dwelt as much as I have upon the far-off, lonely grave, and the forsaken clay; but with a Christian's vision she follows the spirit of her darling child into the mansions which Jesus has prepared for those who love Him.

As a record of her first great sorrow she wrote "The Hallowed Name" about that lonely grave in Florida:

They dream not, as the brief sad line
They frame with thoughtless air,
Through what a gush of tears my eyes
Would read it graven there!

Then she returned to cheerfulness. In November, 1850, she wrote a letter describing winter in Virginia and the visiting that occurred at this season among her neighbors. Included in this letter is a delightful description of the marriage of two slaves of a local family. In this gay episode she shows the good side of slavery and the sympathetic mistress. Her stand on the slavery question was neutral - she realized that many slaves were treated well. In her 1848 notebook she wrote "A Ballad in Reply to Topper's 'Ballad to Columbia,'" in which she shows that the assertion that slaves were mistreated is exaggerated:

Believe it not! Traducers
And traitors stamped the brand
Of foul exaggeration
That fastened on our land.

Margaret spent much of her free time writing prose during these first years in Lexington. Although she had no gift for story-telling, her prim heroes and pasteboard heroines won her prizes in story contests. These moral and religious stories were very dainty and graceful. She spent most of the money they brought in on gifts for others.

On the twenty-third of February, 1854, Margaret's mother died suddenly. This was the greatest sorrow of her life because she and her mother had been very close. Her grief was overwhelming. Her conscience accused her of bringing this anguish upon herself by loving her mother too much. There is only one letter that gives her own feelings at the time; it was written to Charles McCay in June, 1854:

...And for us - for us to live without that dearest, sweetest sympathy, that wonderful untiring love that never in our pleasures or our sorrows for one instant failed us - it was bitter - it is bitter indeed!

But she gradually recovered from this great loss, and, in speaking of her brother William's marriage, she wrote to Rebecca Glasgow:

... you cannot think how my heart ached while I smiled on them on Wednesday night. Mother and Ellie were constantly before me, and their graves.... ... But God be praised! I have only to be patient, and after a little while I shall be with my heart's best beloved again.

For a brief time the love for her mother overcame her fear of death. Except for her story Silverwood and a few poems, she wrote less during the five or six years that followed her mother's death than at any other period in her life. In 1855, one year after her mother's passing, Margaret composed "A Year in Heaven," which she revised several times. In the initial poem the images describing her mother in heaven are unoriginal and uninteresting. This poem might be called a half-hearted triumph over sorrow.

Silverwood was her only attempt at writing a novel. It is a sweet story in the style of the nineteenth century, very graceful and wholesome. Because she published it without her name, it was not noticed very much. She wrote that it was written "to embalm the characters of dear mother, Ellie (her sister), and brother Joe." The main contribution that this book makes is its satire of the emphasis upon ancestry around Lexington. This satire is strengthened by bringing out the fact that American culture has been neglected because of an excessive interest in that of Europe. This promotes a paradox because Margaret herself was guilty of the latter neglect - her interest in foreign themes is easily seen in any of her books. Her only defense could be that the publishers padded her collections with verse of European content. In Silverwood Milbourne stands for Lexington and the Irvines stand for the Junkins. The Grantleys are the victims of her satire, being endowed with all the traits she dislikes. Throughout the book they pursue the old English customs. It was Margaret's thesis that allegiance to the family had hindered the development of Virginia. Family tradition, as such, she did not condemn, but she was aware that it often was used as an excuse to avoid further progress. In "The Literary Profession in the South" she said, "The absurdity is, for their descendants to satisfy themselves with the fact, and be content to sup on past recollections." The "Proem" to the novel is a beautiful

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expression of sorrow as the motivation for creative art. Perhaps she was influenced by the theme of Tennyson's "In Memoriam." Here is an allusion to the Ruth story:

Like an exile in her sorrow,
Seeking, 'midst the cast off leaves,
Golden grains of thought and feeling,
Dropped from out the garnered sheaves.

It was about four years after her mother's death that Major J. T. L. Preston asked her to marry him. The Major, then a professor of Latin in the Virginia Military Institute, was a widower with seven children. He had a very attractive personality, was well-educated, and travelled, and he liked the enjoyment of reading. Major Preston also fit into Margaret's strict religious nature with his strong Christian character. It was evident that she loved him very much; this was her first sign of affection since that early unfortunate affair in Easton. She often wrote him in rhyme. The following is a part of a letter from Philadelphia:

Now what shall I call you? ...
Beloved - would anything else I could say
Be sweeter than that? ...

Their marriage took place August 3, 1857, after which they lived for awhile at Oakland on the James. She was as good and kind to her stepchildren as she was to her younger brothers and sisters in her youth, and they all grew to love her.

For ten years she hardly wrote at all. She once said that the reason for this was that her husband "didn't approve of his wife's giving any part of herself to the public, even in verse!" There was another reason also - her domestic conscientiousness. She gave birth to two sons, but her hands were so full with the stepchildren that she was never fully able to appreciate her own babies. She was trapped between two fears, each contributing to the other. The first was that she was neglecting her children in order to spend too much time on trifles and homely duties, which in turn was an attempt to counteract the second fear of spending too much time in literary pursuits. Undoubtedly she did ~~she~~ her duties in the wrong perspective.

Life during the Civil War

In less than four years after her marriage the Civil War brought disturbance to Margaret's home. It is fortunate that she kept a journal during the last three years of the war, from April 1862 to April 1865, which not only gives a good account of her activity then, but also a wonderful first-hand report of the war's effect on a Southern housewife in Lexington. Much of the source material for the long narrative Beechenbrook, which she was to write, came from these pages, since it is based on many personal experiences which she suffered. During the first flare-ups her husband was moved around different army posts, under Jackson most of the time. Preston, who was loyal to the government, but owed his first allegiance to Virginia, deplored secession. He wanted union, but when Virginia seceded, he felt that to not secede at that time would be accepting tyranny. At the outbreak of the war Dr. Junkin left Washington College and went back to the North because he personally felt offended by the students' action of flying a Confederate flag over Washington Hall.

Margaret's journal of 1862 tells of her strong hatred for war. On April the third she wrote:

Darkness seems gathering over the Southern land; disaster follows disaster; where is it all to end? My very soul is sick of carnage. I loathe the word - war.

Much of the journal is given over to cost records of food and clothing, both of which were lacking and becoming dearer every day. It is interesting to note that she never lost her sense of security even though Lexington was devoid of men. She commented several places on the quietness and subordination of the slaves, which fact must be partly responsible for her courage. The battle descriptions, though horrid and gruesome, are told in a detached way without feeling - an unusual treatment for a poet. These same cold battles provide the facts for the more emotional ones recorded in Beechenbrook.

On May 10, 1862, she wrote passionately an expression of personal feeling that is echoed in Beechenbrook by Alice Dunbar:

Oh, this heart crushing suspense. No news from the scene of the battle, except the report that Major Ross is among the killed ...
... Oh, my husband, could I but know he was safe. I wonder at

myself that I do not lose my senses.

When her son Willy was slain in battle, she describes wonderfully how her husband attempted to bring the body back to Lexington. It reminds one of Faulkner's As I Lay Dying without Faulkner's humor.

The temporary victories of the South were not so inspiring for Margaret as one might think, because the South's enemies were her own people. This dual sympathy made the war especially terrible for her. Even though she was true to the South, her blood remained in the North - the conflict could not be resolved. She also felt that the South would not see final success and realized the futility of the struggle. In the October 23 entry she hinted at this attitude:

W What is to become of the country... ...It is a very serious question how the army is to be clothed and fed this winter.

Again at Jackson's death in an entry dated May 12, 1863, she wrote:

Who thinks or speaks of victory? The word is scarcely ever heard.

On Christmas Eve she depicted a scene that was later to find its way into Beech-enbrook and penned:

How different the scene our house presents tonight, and this time last year!

This gloom settles on quite a few Southern homes that Christmas because the war had robbed them of their men. There was a more immediate closeness in the South between soldier and wealthy family than in the North since the Southern soldier was generally taken from the more educated class. Margaret Preston felt the effects of this. When Confederate troops invaded Pennsylvania, she expressed the following opinion in her notebook:

Well! Virginia has endured it for more than two years! So I must not think it hard that another state whose troops have been helping to ravage her all this time should take its turn.

The 1864 notebook is full of the sorrow that a poverty-stricken nation embodies. Margaret always maintained a faith that God would protect; when the enemy was at Staunton and Waynesboro, on June 7, she wrote:

Yet the enemy may not come; we have expected them do often they didn't come, that we may be delivered again.

But they did come, and she described the Yankee occupation of Lexington vividly. Her notebook style does not differ much from the on-the-scene news-broadcasts that we hear on radios today.

Beechenbrook

Sometime in 1864 Colonel Preston sent his wife a poem that was popular in Richmond, saying that she could do much better. She did do much better in writing Beechenbrook, which pictures the environment, scenes, emotions, and sorrows of the war. This melodious work was first written on rough paper by firelight, partly for secrecy and partly because candles were scarce. She had this to say about it:

I have simply tried to present a true picture of these war-times in which we live.

I think she succeeded. Perhaps the "true picture" is exaggerated in places, but it is not a factual poem, and Mrs. Preston's use of "we" in the preceding quotation connotes that the picture is true in the sense of being not only what she saw, but also what she felt. In other words the picture is subjective, and subjectivity is often apt to exaggerate. A work of commemorative nature like this one often overdoes sentimentality, but even though she is not so detached here as in most of her other poems, Mrs. Preston does not indulge her sentiments excessively except in three or four places. However, she does suffer exaggerated patriotism. If the poem is taken merely as a rhyme of Southern propoganda this may be excused, but, if it is a "rhyme of the war" (as she subtitles it) in the artistic sense of poetry, this over-expression is a weakness that cannot be condoned. A further defect along these lines is a strong tendency toward martyrdom.

Beechenbrook is a narrative poem with ballad characteristics. It does not reach the heights of epic poetry although it is long and dignified and treats of national events. The main story is told omnisciently in something of a chorus effect. Certain verses, especially those which state a derived moral, use the collective "we" as a chorus does. There is much direct address that adds to the dramatic action. This address is effective in individualizing the characters be-

cause each speaks in a different metrical arrangement, thereby being contrasted to the others. It is through these speeches that the reader is able to understand the different personalities, which are never described by their physical characteristics. This lack of visionary images might have resulted from Margaret's failing sight, just as we find a similar situation in Joyce's writings. As in ballads time and space gaps are often jumped between the ten sections. Also as in ballads the reader finds much pathetic fallacy and bathos.

The narrative takes us through the war years with a Southern family whose father is a Colonel in the Confederate army. Such common Civil War events occur as home front anguish, the burning of the Dunbar home, and the Colonel's death in battle. But most of these scenes are treated well. Certainly the true worth of the poem does not lie in its overall effect or totality; its value stems mainly from a few specific passages which hint of the talent that Mrs. Preston demonstrates more fully in her later volumes. I wish to emphasize these passages rather than the weaker ones.

There are notable examples of dramatic impressionism in Beechenbrook which are successful in giving the reader an overall idea of the action without the use of specific images. The following passage is from Section II:

The clangor of muskets, - the flashing of steel, -
 The clatter of spurs on the stout-booted heel, -
 The waving of banners, - the resonant tramp
 Of marching battalions, - the fiery stamp
 Of steeds in their war-harness, newly decked out, -
 The blast of the bugle, - the hurry, the shout, -
 The terrible energy, ...

That Mrs. Preston was aware of the value of the metaphor can be seen on almost any page. In one description she makes use of a simile for a very good comparison:

On tip-toe, - the summer wind lifting his hair,
 With nostril expanded, and scenting the air
 Like a mettled young war-horse that tosses his mane,
 And frettingly champs at the bit and the rein, -
 Stands eager, exultant, a twelve-year-old boy,
 His face all aflame with a rapturous joy.

In Section IV in a letter from Colonel Dunbar to his wife there is a metaphysical image on the neo-Platonic theme of sympathetic vibration between minds:

I catch my sweet little ones' innocent mirth,
 I watch your dear face, as you sit at the hearth;
 And I know, by the tender expression I see,
 I know that my darling is musing of me.

Does her thought dim the blaze? - Does it shed through the room
A chilly, unseen, and yet palpable gloom?
Ah! then we are equal! You share all my pain,
And I halve your blessedness with you again!

On a more lyrical level is the following beautiful quatrain:

The sun sinks serenely; a lingering look
He flings at the mists that steal over the brook,
Like nuns that come forth in the twilight to pray,
Till their blushes are seen through their mantles of grey.

She begins some of her sections with pathetic fallacy, which adds nothing to the poem, but at one point she reverses the usual procedure in order to contrast nature to human emotion instead of having nature reflect it:

The lull of the Winter is over; and Spring
Comes back, as delicious and buoyant a thing,
As airy, and fairy, and lightsome, and bland,
As if not a sorrow was dark'ning the land; -
So little has nature of passion or part
In the woes and the throes of humanity's heart.

One of the facets of Mrs. Preston which this poem illustrates is her extreme fluency of versification. At one place in the Colonel's letter she switches from hendecasyllabic lines to a folk song type of verse:

The hum of their voices comes laden with cheer,
As the wind wafts a musical swell to my ear, -
Wild, clarion catches, - now flute-like and low;
- Would you like me to give you their Song of the Snow?

Halt! - the march is over!
Day is almost done;
Loose the cumbrous knapsack,
Drop the heavy gun:
Chilled and wet and weary,
Wander to and fro,
Seeking wood to kindle
Fires amidst the snow.

In Section VI the dying soldier uses a different metre to speak his last words in the graveyard tradition:

Only a private; - and who will care
When I may pass away, -
Or how, or why I perish, or where
I mix with the common clay?
They will fill my empty place again,
With another as bold and brave;
And they'll blot me out, ere the Autumn rain
Has freshened my nameless grave.

The chaplain prays before battle in the simple manner of "Now I Lay Me down to Sleep:"

Arch.
378.2
Hall

Underneath thine open sky,
Father, as we bend the knee,
May we feel thy presence nigh,
Nothing 'twixt our souls and thee!

Alice, the mother, writes to her husband of the burning of the home, and the stark realization that it is no more is conveyed to the reader:

Why speak of the night when I stood on the lawn,
And watched the last flame die away in the dawn?
'Tis over, - that vision of terror, - of woe!
Its horrors I would not recall; - let them go!

Some of these letters are very effective in changing the point of view, but others seem too trite for consideration. Of course, when taken out of the context, many of the passages which I am quoting lose their power of contrast. An interesting treatment occurs at the beginning of Section X, where Alice is moaning a soliloquy of bereavement. The effectiveness of these nine quatrains would be greatly reduced were it not for the monotonous repetition of the phrase "Slain in battle!" at the end of each:

Oh! that still and stately form -
Never more will it be warm;
Chilled beneath that iron storm,
- Slain in battle!

Whereas most of the metres change according to the mood of the situation and depict the mood well, a few seem awkward. For instance Section IV ends on a sad note, describing the hardships of the troops, but describing them in a manner that recalls "The Night Before Christmas:"

The fire burns dimly, and scattered around,
The men lie asleep on the snow-covered ground;
But ere in my blanket I wrap me to rest,
I hold you, my darling, close, - close, to my breast:
God love you! God grant you His comforting light!
I kiss you a thousand times over!- Good night!

This metre is certainly incongruous to the scene. Certain scenes which are meant to instill feeling in the reader fall flat. For instance, the arrival of Alice at the hospital fails to evoke sadness:

She has strength to go forward; they enter the door, -
And there, on the crowded and blood-tainted floor,
Close wrapped in his blanket, lies Douglass: - his brow
Wore never a look so seraphic as now!
She stretches her arms the dear form to enfold, -
God help her!....she shrieks....it is silent and cold!

The rhyme ends with a moral lesson that is pro-Southern, but it achieves no emotional effect because the final idea is not motivated by any of the lines that precede it - the images do not support the moral:

By his death on the battle-field, gallantly brave, -
 By the shadow that ever will wrap her - his grave -
 By the faith she reposes, oh! Father! in Thee,
 She claims that her glorious South MUST BE FREE!

I have endeavored to subordinate the worst to the best of Beechenbrook in order to show the tap roots of Mrs. Preston's later flowering branches. Beechenbrook is not a great poem, but it does show some creative work and a natural poetic talent, and it does paint vividly a picture that is based primarily on experience. The volume concludes with several other Civil War poems and sonnets of Mrs. Preston that may be overlooked because they are of definitely inferior quality. Hayne wrote that "Jackson's Grave" "is a lyric that will live for it possesses true passion and noble music" - I cannot agree.

Beechenbrook shows only a small part of the futility Margaret Preston felt after the war was over. On April 10, 1865, she wrote in her notebook:

Why then all these four years of suffering - of separations -
 of horror - of blood - of havoc - of awful bereavement! ...
 Why is our dear Willy in his uncoffined grave? ... Is it
 wholly and forever in vain? God only knows!

Then Lee came to Lexington as president of Washington College, giving Margaret the material for some very beautiful reminiscences of him. One must be reminded here that the person interested in Civil War Lexington need only look through Margaret's notebooks for thousands of enjoyable entries that throw a humanizing light on all that went on. Finally she felt the urge to produce another volume of verse. She collected most of her unpublished poems and wrote some new ones from November 1869 to March 1870. These she published as Old Song and New, a book with which she was very satisfied.

Old Song and New

I am not satisfied with Old Song and New; it is too cluttered up with insignificant poems. However, this book, like Beechenbrook, is full of the germinating promise of the poetic dialogue that is perfected in Cartoons. As in most of Mrs. Preston's poetry there are two branches of thought in Old Song and New - the narrative, the story, and the devotional, the hymn. This book of diverse styles is divided into five sections. The first is entitled "From Hebrew Story" and deals with Biblical themes. Two poems in this section stand out as better than the others - "Ruth in the Land of Moab" and "The Grief of Bathsheba." The first is a well-polished, melodious story treating of Ruth's loneliness, her remembrance of her husband, and her expression of loyalty to Naomi. The second is a dramatic monologue spoken by Bathsheba of her dying child. It is a clear picture of human frailty, grief, and tragedy. Here is Stanza III, Bathsheba's contemplating condemnation in heaven by her own son:

How could I dare
To lift in Paradise, mine eyes to his,
If he, mine unoffending one, were 'ware
That she who held God's place to him, - through this
Her bitter wrong, had robbed him of the throne, -
My princely child, - that else had been his own?

The next section is "From Greek Story;" "Alcyoné" is the best selection. The pledges of love contained here are much like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnets in content and technique:

But missing thee,
I sigh o'er many a precious love forgone,
Brooding upon it, - that none of all I cherished,
The tender playmates of my rockbound Isle,
My surf-wash'd Strongylé - do smile me back
The fond, old time, or with home-voice recall
My happy by-gone ...

"Erinna's Spinning," although not a very great poem, probably reflects Margaret's own life of household chores while others played. "Ballad and Other Verse" is the third section and the weakest. These poems concern English and American themes, Civil War poems, and personal expressions, many about death. Here we see Mrs. Preston's delightful handling of ballads for the first time; these are the best of the group. It seems as if she always wrote better on historical matters than on her

on her own experiences. I have commented on the mediocrity of "A Year in Heaven" elsewhere and also on the "Proem" to Silverwood. "Artist-Work" reflects a personal situation of her everyday life at home. The very pretty and simple "The Vision of the Snow" was written from an incident a lady once sent her.

"Sonnets," the next section, is mostly of a religious nature. "The Morrow" embodies an excellent thought, but the form is rough. "Equipoise" and "Ours" are both patterned after the seventeenth century metaphysicals, a style which we seldom find in Mrs. Preston's works. The latter develops the neo-Platonic theme mentioned elsewhere found in Beechenbrook:

No faintest pain surprise thee, but there goes
The lightning-spark along love's viewless line,
Bearing with instant message to my heart,
Responsive recognition.

The last group in Old Song and New is called "Religious Pieces." "Rabboni" is the best of the lot; it is a dramatic expression of Christ's rising from the dead. Here is a sample of the suspense aroused when Mary goes to the tomb:

She held no other thought, no hope but this;
To look, - to touch the sacred flesh once more, -
Handle the spices with adoring kiss,
And help to wind Him o'er
With the fair linen Joseph had prepared, -
Lift reverently the wounded hands and feet
And gaze, awe-blinded, on the features bared,

"Supper at Bethany" is a ballad reminiscent of the carol "Good King Wencesles." As do most of her volumes, this one illustrates Mrs. Preston's varied mastery of metre because hardly any two of the poems are alike.

The years from 1870 until she died added nothing to Mrs. Preston's life except for a tour of Europe that proved very exciting for her. She had fame during these years and was often called upon to write poetry and reviews and to rework manuscripts of others. Having the quality of being able to write well anytime, she did many commemorative poems. But the finished products do not show her spontaneity because she was constantly erasing and rewriting her works. During these years she kept record books and notebooks which furnish valuable insight into her mind. But her first duty was that of a wife; she was seldom apart from Colonel Preston. The beautiful sonnet "We Two" illustrates her feeling:

... The remotest star
 Of all the galaxies would hold in vain
 Our souls apart, that have been heretofore
 As closely interchangeable as are
 One mind and spirit: oh, joy that aches to pain,
 To be together - we two - forever more!

Cartoons

In 1875 Cartoons was published - the book which I believe to be her best. Here are little pictures of life's events tinted with philosophy, sentiment, reverence, love of art, and dramatic action. Most end with a moral epigram. Longfellow said of these poems, "They are not only full of beauty, but full of insight and thought and feeling." He liked best "The Reapers of Landisfarne," "Bacharach Wine," "The Count's Sowing," and "Lady Roberta's Harvest." The book opens with a poem in rhymed triplets called "The Good of It," which presents the humble theme that one's best is as good as the world's best, that one should not despair because he seems to be outdone. She uses several metaphors to prove her point:

O poor, proud reasoning! Shall the spray
 Of fern beside the boulder gray,
 Thrud with the morning's opals, say, -

'Whole wingèd flocks their nests have made
 In yon great oak, why should my blade
 Afford an humble bee its shade?'

Or the light breeze sigh: 'Loud and deep,
 The mountain-winds the forest sweep;
 Must I rock one rose asleep?'

Or glowworm murmur: 'So divine,
 So flooding, sunlight's, moonlight's shine,-
 This moth can need no glint of mine!'

Margaret Preston was like this; she always made the best of everything and helped whenever she could.

The first section of Cartoons is called "From the Life of the Old Masters." Here Venice, Rome, and Florence live and breathe again with their haunting presences and ancient memories. "Mona Lisa's Picture" is the first poem and its has as much grace as Leonardo's picture itself. Its form is that of the dramatic dialogue and shows a definite Browning influence, as do many of her verses. The

words of da Vinci, spoken in blank verse, seem natural and at the same time noble. The idea involved is what really adds the charm. To Francesco, who is growing impatient for the picture, which has taken four years, da Vinci asks for more time so that it may be perfected:

"I've not attained unto the capture yet
Of that shy, furtive beauty. Oft you've watched
The miracle of her smile? Now, see you here,
'Tis only just half caught, - not half, observe:
Next time that Mona Lisa sits, I'll work
Into it finer grace; I'll trap the charm
Somehow. You'll see -"

But Francesco insists and da Vinci replies angrily:

"... Ay, have it - have it, and you will,
In season for your guests, betwixt their cups,
To sum its lack. I marvel you should fail
To note its incompleteness!...
- But have the panel filled (if that's the point),
And barter, for one night's fresh novelty,
An immortality of loveliness
For Mona Lisa; since, once carried hence,
My brush shall never touch the canvas more."

Is not this beautiful.

Yet the whole section abounds in such verse. "The Maestro's Confession" is another worthy of special note. This dramatic monologue is similar in theme to Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxeds." It reflects Margaret's own fear of death and her sin complex. It is as weird as something of Poe or of Hawthorne. The dying Maestro, Andrea dal Castagno, feels the need to confess his murdering of another whom he envied twenty years before:

My brain
Dizzied and whirled with sudden pain,
Trying to span that gulf of years, -
Fronting once more those long-laid fears.
Confess, - why, yes, - if I must, I must;

In "Murillo's Trance" there is a truly great emotional treatment of that painter's childhood devotion to beauty. He has been kneeling before Ribera's "Crucifixion" in a motionless trance, when it becomes time to close the cathedral and a verger inquires, "What do you here so late?" Slowly the boy answered:

" - 'I wait, - I wait,' he said;
'Till Joseph bring the linen, pure and white,
Till Mary fetch the spices, till they come,
Peter and John and all the holy women,

And take Him down; but O, they tarry long!
See how the darkness grows! So long, ... so long! "

The next verse is called "From the Life of the Legends". This section is also very interesting, dealing mostly with unfamiliar religious legends. Mrs. Preston tells these stories as ballads instead of as the previous dramatic monologues and dialogues. Some of them like "The Hermit's Vigil" and "Bacharach Wine" are reminiscent of early Yeatsian folk themes. Here is the conclusion of the latter - the King has pledged his crown to the Prince if he enjoys the wine enough:

The wine was brought him, - the bowls were filled,
And they drank deep into the winter night,
Till the heart of the new-made Emperor thrilled,
And tingled with such divine delight,
That he cried: 'Prince Rupert, if thou wilt give
Three butts a year of Bacharach wine,
Just such as this, through the years I live,
Then Charlemagne's sceptre shall be thine,
Prince Rupert sware: For his royal guest,
Freedom and Bacharach wine were best.

The last section is entitled "From the Life of To-day", and this group of poems seems to lack much of the merit of those before it. That only four verses deal with local themes reflects the expatriated state of American poetic themes of the Victorian period. "Gone Forward" is about Lee, and "Through the Pass" tells of Commodore Maury's last wish to be carried through Goshen in the Spring; their only value is sentimental. These poems are too similar to those that supplement Beechenbrook and the ones in Old Song and New - they are not interesting, they are too romantic and bathetic. Foreign themes such as "In an Eastern Bazaar" show that the American was paying more attention to the oriental world than he had been. This poem contrasts the tranquility of the East to the turbulence and worry of the West - it might be called Kipling-esque:

Yes - yes - I concede we're their betters,
We Self-gratulant Goth that I am!

We have science, religion, and letters, -
 With the bane of the curse we've the balm:
They keep their inviolate calm.

Other poems set in India are "A Bird's Ministry" and "The Brahmin's Test," the latter telling a very pretty tale. "Blemished Offering" consists of two sonnets which concern hypocrisy:

We have a God who knows: And yet we dare
 On His consuming altar-coals to lay
 (Driven by the prick of conscience to obey)
 The whited sacrifice, the hollow prayer,
 In place of what we vowed, in our despair,
 Of best and holiest; - glad no mortal may
 Pierce through the cheat, and hoping half to stay
 That Eye before whose search all souls are bare.

Poems such as "Sandringham," written at the time of the illness of the Prince of Wales, hint of the Victorian anglophilism which America felt. This verse received great praise in England, and perhaps shows Margaret's desire for foreign fame.

During the summer of 1884 Margaret Preston travelled abroad on what is described as a perfect tour. She knew before she left what she wanted to see and found these places to her liking. As proof of her enjoyment she wrote to Hayne on returning to Lexington:

My Golden Summer is over and gone, and I'll never have such
 another, as I surely never had such a one before.

Centennial Poem for Washington and Lee University

Nothing was published after Cartoons until 1885 when Mrs. Preston wrote her famous Centennial Poem for Washington and Lee University. The poem gives a superficial historical account of Washington and Lee since the days of Liberty Hall, emphasizing more the school's part in war than in peace. There is a gradual progression of the names of people concerned with the college and of the names of the college itself - Liberty Hall, Augusta, Washington, and Washington and Lee. Although glorifying in a somewhat stilted style the grandeur of Washington and Lee and Lexington, the verse always maintains a beautiful simplicity. Many helpful footnotes explain the references that allude to local people and events. As in most of her work, Margaret here alternates several types of verse. I wish to

quote one passage which I liked, but it is not necessarily better than the other verse nor representative of the poem as a whole:

Upon the timbered ridge that lay
 Across the billowy hills away,
 There sprang a lowly Academe,
 So rude, that no enthusiast's dream
 Could have forshorn the fame it rears,
 Beneath its century's weight of years;
 A spring beneath an oak,
 That falling leaves might choke;
 But destined so to broaden far and wide,
 That on its bosom argosies might ride!

For Love's Sake

Margaret's eyes became worse in 1886 and all of her literary activity became limited . It was during this year that For Love's Sake was published. I have not seen a copy of this book, but my opinion, formed on representative selections, is not favorable. The title poem, which celebrates the marvelous fame of the Taj Mahal in India, seems to have little literary worth. "For the Love of God" tells a nice story, but in awkward metre. A band of pilgrims came upon a travelling family, and:

Stretching their hands, they pleaded, 'For the love of God, we pray
 Give us to eat, for nothing has moistened our lips today!'

The father of the travellers asked then:

'Children and wife, ye hear them! Giving God's poor our bread,
 Say - shall we trust His bounty, traveling out way unfed?'

A Handful of Monographs

A Handful of Monographs appeared in 1886 also. It consists mainly of descriptive pieces about the places that Mrs. Preston visited on her European tour. Here we find the poet's impressions on her first visit to the ancient world. Throughout there are hints of the intensified enjoyment of having her husband and family along. It reflects also the leisurely manner of travel which they pursued, being filled with sketches and recollections. Her conclusions affirm

flects her love of art and religion, and almost every poem presents a moral idea, especially those in the first section of "Sonnets." "Out of Nazareth" ends with the familiar theme of Yeats of the Second Coming:

Why should our senses not be keen as thine,
 Our eye as quick for color; our strong breath
 For poet's song; our ear for music's call;
 Since Nature's newest glories round us shine?
 Wait the time's fulness: out of Nazareth
 May come the availing prophet, after all!

"In Cripplegate Church" and "At St. Oswald's" from A Handful of Monographs are also included in this book and they show a hero-worship of great artists and writers. The section I enjoy most is "Colonial Ballads" - a group of indigenous historical legends of America's first colonies. They are all written in simple English ballad style, many in the "Sir Patrick Spence" manner. Such tales as "The Mystery of Cro-a-tàn" and "Sir Walter's Honor" can be appreciated by young and old alike. The latter begins:

"O MOTHER! fling thy fears away,
 Bid sorrow from thy brow!
 My father's ships, the sailors say,
 Are in the offing now."

"Nay, lad! Full oft before to me
 Hath come the self-same tale;
 A thousand times I've scanned the sea,
 And never seen his sail."

Two of these ballads show Margaret's childhood conflict between duty and play, in which work and study usually won - "Dorris' Spinning" and "The Puritan Maiden's May-Day."

Section Three is called "Ballad and Other Verse," and it consists of many secular tales with religious overtones. There is a resemblance to Yeats here in the use of common, everyday language instead of the stilted speech of most poetry. "The Longshoreman's View of It" shows this trait:

What did he do? Oh, nothing much;
 Standing upon the bluff one day,
 Suddenly, ere his hand could clutch
 Even his dress, the boy, I say,
 Whom he was watching, as he threw
 Yonder his tackle over the height,
 Toppled headforemost into the blue
 Wash of the sea, and was swept from sight.

Semi-Centennial Ode for the Virginia Military Institute

Two years later in 1889 Mrs. Preston wrote the Semi-Centennial Ode for the Virginia Military Institute. It is very much like the poem she did for Washington and Lee in 1885. There are the nostalgic desire for the days of old and the praises for the Institute's courage and loyalty to the state. It too is historical, beginning with the founding and going through all of the school's many periods and leaders. The poet's love for Jackson, who was her very close friend, is shown in the following passage:

From his professor's chair, at duty's call,
 Jackson passed forth, not dreaming that he went
 To build a fame that fills a continent;
 Only intent on service - that was all;
 With not one thought that his unnoted name, Virginia soon would claim
 As her best rallying word.

She described the New Market incident well because she new inside information on the battle. Of the reconstruction of the buildings she said:

So, back again, they came,
 To rear new walls above the ashes, where
 One fearful day of flame
 Had left wreck, ruin, waste, but not despair.

The ode seems to me to be a very fitting poetic history.

Death

Colonel Preston died July 15, 1890, and Margaret sold the estate. When the grounds were divided into building lots, she wrote:

This tearing up of such sacred ties proved too much of an added sorrow, and resulted in a spell of nervous illness, which has laid me on my back ever since; ...

Soon afterward she suffered a slight paralysis and never walked again. In 1892 she went to Baltimore in order to live with her oldest son Dr. George J. Preston. She remained there until she died on March 29, 1897, after a week of unconsciousness.

Perhaps Margaret Junkin Preston would have been recognized as a better writer had she remained in the North. After the war the South suffered from poverty and a lack of reading public - the South could not afford to be interested in litera-

ture. Hayne wrote to Margaret that the South owed much of their defeat to their materialism, which caused them to despise art and literature. There was a wonderful strain of oratory in the South, but only at the expense of indifference to written works. Mrs. Preston in her later years helped to promote Southern writing by doing book reviews, for many of which she was not paid. Yet as long as she was a Southern writer in the South, would she not have received more fame had she written more of local events?

I hope that I have shown in this paper something of the way that life influences creativeness. There were many forces and influences molding Mrs. Preston's life, which in turn molded her creative attitudes. The strict classical education combined with the failing sight, which it ironically caused, and which caused her to miss much that was happening around her, encouraged Margaret to subordinate the present to the past. Her strict theology was the cause of her guilt complex and her fear of death. The influence of other writers, especially Longfellow, Tennyson, and the Brownings, resulted in her imitating them too much. And the important change from North to South was mainly responsible for her lack of hatred for the North as well as her lack of sectionalism in a South where sectionalism prevailed. I believe that Margaret Preston is a good poet, who could have been a great poet.

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