

Susanna Blamire 1747-94: The Lyrical Cumberland Poet

By Christopher Maycock

Susanna Blamire was born on 12 January 1747 at Cardew Hall, near Dalston, Cumberland, the youngest of the four children of William Blamire (1703–1758), a yeoman/statesman farmer, and Isabella, née Simpson (1709–1753), of the manor of Thackwood Nook, Stockdalewath. Isabella's mother was a Richmond of nearby Highhead Castle. The de Blamys themselves originated in the lost village of Le Blamyre north of Carlisle, sacked by the English when the parish of Kirkandrews-on-Esk was in Scotland. She was, then, a true 'Borderer'. According to her contemporaries, Blamire was 'a bonny and verra lish young lass' - a beautiful and very lively young woman. She had 'a graceful form, somewhat above the middle size, and a countenance - though slightly marked with the smallpox - beaming with good nature; her dark eyes sparkled with animation, and won every heart at the first introduction'.ⁱ She was so full of life that her brother William, the young medical student, joked that the most vivacious youths of his day were dull and phlegmatic compared with his vibrant sister. Her fame as a dancer was proverbial, and her passion for dancing so intense that if she met travelling musicians on the road she would dismount and dance to a jig or hornpipe. Blamire's enthusiasm for her poetic art was such that she would pin scraps of verse to oak trees outside the old manor house, Thackwood Nook, where passers-by could read this strange but elegant flowering. She jokingly likened her own exuberant personality to Queen Charlotte's celebrated zebra at Buckingham House. During the winter months of the Carlisle social season she was a huge asset; indeed there was at the very heart of Blamire's poetry a joyful hedonism. But despite this delight in pleasure, her writing was pierced by a compassionate realism that spoke of the pain and transience of human life. Even in later years when illness had taken its toll, Maxwell records in her collected *Poetical Works*: 'She had then lost much of that vivacity which was so characteristic of her earlier years, but none of that amiability of which she was ever possessed; she was pensive, but not melancholy, and amused herself by playing on the flageolet, which ... she did exceedingly sweetly.'ⁱⁱ

Blamire's first major emotional crisis occurred at the age of seven when her mother died. Surprisingly, instead of remaining with her father at the ancient Blamire house The Oaks, Dalston, she went to live at Thackwood with her shrewd but unfailingly kind widowed aunt Mary Mary Simpson (1703–1785). Her father's second marriage produced a half-sister Bridget (1757-1832). Blamire's elder brother William (1740-1814), was a distinguished naval surgeon and physician, who had trained at the University of Edinburgh and at St. George's Hospital, London; her other brother, Richmond (1742-96) was the London publisher of books by the high priest of the picturesque, the Revd. William Gilpin. Her sister Sarah (1739-98) married a Colonel in The Black Watch, Thomas Graeme of Duchray Castle, Stirlingshire, Scotland, on the edge of the Trossachs.

After briefly attending the Dame School at nearby Raughton Head, Blamire was taught at home by assistants from the distinguished grammar school at Sebergham, where the poet Josiah Relph had been Headmaster. That she was initially well educated and later self-taught is evident from her poetry that ranged from the profound, to joking, laughter and gaiety, and back to nostalgia. Her interests extended

from painting, English Literature (Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Prior, Otway, Ramsay, Collins, Pope, Goldsmith etc.), science (static electricity, 'prismatic' light, Galen, medical treatments, 'chemical art' and 'anodyne'), to Greek legends for expressing her deepest emotions (references to Endymion, Echo and Narcissus, Sappho, etc).

The second and greatest emotional event of Blamire's life was a short but passionate romance in 1766 at the age of nineteen with Charles Bennet, Lord Ossulston, son and heir to the 3rd. Earl of Tankerville at Chillingham Castle, Northumberland. Ever concerned for her niece's welfare, her Aunt Simpson wrote anxiously in 1766 to William Blamire about Blamire's impending and fateful visit to Charles' sister, Lady Frances Bennet, at Chillingham:

The two young people only are to be down which I like it the worse for, - yet they have such good characters one may hope for the best. Lord Ossulston tells her he depends upon seeing her at Chillingham this summer - and Lady Tankerville that she must lay at the castle that Lady Frances may have her dear friend always with her. She has had nine letters from Lady Frances and three from Lord Ossulston - all friendly!ⁱⁱⁱ

When the Earl and Countess returned to Northumberland, they realised that the young couple had fallen in love. To strangle the affair at birth, Charles was despatched to Italy, and an intensely humiliated Blamire, still aged only nineteen, was summarily sent back to Thackwood. She complained that the Countess intercepted her letters and had accused her of having an eye on Charles' riches. Blamire then speaks wistfully of her own lost paradise, quoting Eve's: 'With thee conversing I forget all time' from Milton's beautiful evocation of paradise – a paradise that is meaningless for Eve without Adam. This heartbreak haunted her for the rest of her life, and became a huge stimulus for her poetic muse. She poured out her heart in a passionate *Lament*. Its imagery anticipated the Romantic view of Wordsworth and Coleridge - neither yet born - that the natural world 'obeyed the power of [the] mind.'^{iv} She later composed in Lowland Scots a mature and heart-breaking rendering of these profound feelings of lamentation: 'What ails this Heart o' Mine?'

Fortunately Blamire had been distracted from her emotional catastrophe by the marriage in 1767 of her sister Sarah Graeme, whom she visited frequently in Stirlingshire, and where influential neighbours, the Grahams of Gartmore House, befriended her. She so enthusiastically embraced Scotland and Scottish manners, language, legends and music that she began writing songs in Scots' dialect with the 'idiomatic ease and grace of a native minstrel'.^v Her most famous nostalgic Scottish song 'The Nabob', tune 'Old Lang Syne', anticipated Burns' well-known song by eight years.

On Col. Graeme's death in 1773, Blamire, then aged 26, left Scotland for good, suffering her first recorded attack of illness – her third life crisis. She would go on to describe this illness so accurately in heart-touching poems that a diagnosis of recurrent Rheumatic Fever can be made today. In the eighteenth century, it was a dreadful recurrent disease requiring months of agonising bed-rest with swollen painful joints – a nightmare for someone as sociable as Blamire.

As a consequence of this, in the mid to late 1770s Blamire spent time in London, for as she remarked: 'I am to try what a southern clime will be indulgent enough to afford me - a better allowance of health 'tis hoped - as I find a northern one very stingy indeed.'^{vi} It was here that she wrote cheerful poems, in particular her paean to the picturesque - the poem 'Hope', set at Painshill Park, Surrey. However, towards the end of this period she had a confrontation with Charles Bennet, now the married 4th Earl of Tankerville. This seems to have stimulated the writing of some of her most poignant Scots' works, notably her celebrated song 'The Siller Croun', alias 'And Ye Shall Walk in Silk Attire' published anonymously c1780. Intriguingly, Charles Dickens, not knowing Blamire's authorship, quoted her first two lines in his novel 'The Old Curiosity Shop' of 1841. In the story, Dick Swiveller has just come into money:

'Sir' said Dick, ... 'we'll make a scholar of the poor Marchioness yet! And she shall walk in silk attire, and siller have to spare, or may I never rise from this bed again!'

Dickens must have heard 'The Siller Croun' sung to the haunting tune composed many years after Blamire's death by the prolific early 19C composer Sir Henry Rowley Bishop (1786-1855). A much bleaker song 'The Waefu' Heart' was also later set to music by another British composer, John Parry (1776-1851).

Blamire returned to domesticity in Cumberland in the 1780s where she worked as an early woman practitioner of orthodox medicine, learnt presumably from her brother William, who had retired from the Royal Navy in 1782 as a physician. There are a number of references to this in her *Poetical Works*. In 'Stoklewath' she jokes about how she has learnt to practise the mystique of Medicine:

And now the sisters take their evening walk;
One fam'd for goodness and one fam'd for joke,
For physick, too, some little is renown'd,
With every salve that loves to heal the wound;
The pulse she feels with true mysterious air, ...

Many amusing poems, some in dialect and others such as 'Stoklewath' in Standard English, were written in the 1780s. A hilarious one, 'The Cumberland Scold', praised by the radical Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid as 'this perfect masterpiece of dialect poetry', was composed jointly with Catherine Gilpin (sister of William Gilpin) after overhearing a marital row. The wife quite properly has the last word:

But, hark ye, Dick! I'll tell ye what, -
'Twas I that meade the blunder;
That I tuik up wi' leyke o' thee,
Was far the greetest wonder!

From 1789-94, most of Blamire's *Works* involved a profound outpouring of nostalgic emotion and political passion occasioned by worsening health and the imminent prospect of death. She may have taken laudanum for her illness. In her most light and fanciful poem, 'To the Flower Love-in-idleness, and a Petition to the Fairies to Bring Indifference. Thackwood Nook, 1790' she begs:

Indifference bid his poppy give
To calm this aching head,
And o'er the feelings that will live
Its opiate juices shed.

In this highly imaginative and nostalgic poem, with its imagery taken from her first years in Scotland immediately following the thwarted romance, the moving lines reach the emotional centre of her poetry. She entreats the Spirit of Memory to let her remember only the most joyous events of the past. But regrettably this cannot be: 'while one dear shade, still bends its form to me'. The shade (or ghost) was of course Charles Bennet.

During the last five years of her life, Blamire showed in common with other Romantic poets that she was passionate about politics. In her most profound allegory 'The Nun's Return to the World by the Decree of the National Assembly of France, February, 1790', she displays enthusiastic and unequivocal support for the principles of the French Revolution; an opinion only modified after the appalling September massacres in Paris in 1792. Jonathan Wordsworth remarked about 'The Nun's Return': 'We might be listening to Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon*'. The similarities of theme and wording hint at the possibility that Byron might have read a transcript of 'The Nun's Return' before or during his marriage to Annabella Milbanke. It is known that Blamire's nephew William Brown (son of her half-sister Bridget) had been tutor to Lady Byron before her marriage. The Byron scholar Jerome McGann believes it is 'possible that Blamire's poem was somewhere in Byron's mind when he wrote *The Prisoner of Chillon*'.^{vii}

Alongside the politics, there was room still for humour. Blamire's amusing Cumberland dialect song, 'Wey Ned Man!' was based on a political argument between two farming neighbours, Joe Stalker and Ned Ward, which she overheard while resting behind a thorn hedge near Thackwood. The song reflected the ferment stimulated, even in remotest Cumberland, by Thomas Paine's revolutionary *Rights of Man*, published in 1791. In the last verse, Joe uses the local philosopher Dr. William Paley's argument against revolution, to counter Ned's radical views.

During a severe attack of Rheumatic Fever in 1793, Blamire composed 'A Petition to April'. Jonathan Wordsworth enthused:

Sickness does not subdue Blamire's talent. Inevitably the high spirits go, but there are new compelling moods of saddened gaiety. Few poets have achieved so much within this 'shortened measure', where rhyme returns so fast, and where so little space is available for rhythmic variation. 'Invite me forth with busy bees ...'. It is Marvell, seventeenth-century master of the octosyllabic, whom this last line calls to mind^{viii}

Blamire died in Carlisle on 5 April 1794 of rheumatic heart disease. A kind-hearted farmer, who greatly regretted the loss of 'Miss Sukey's lively and friendly company at 'merry-neets' - late night revels - remarked: 'Weel, weel, t' merrie neets wullent be worth gangin' till at aw noo that she's gean'.^{ix}

It was not until some 50 years after her death that Blamire's *Poetical Works* were published, in 1842, by which time the Romantic Movement had virtually been and gone, and her poems were viewed through the sentimental, patronising prism of early Victorian England. In fact, her words are perfectly chosen, easy to understand, deceptively simple, and inspired by accurate and affectionate observation of people and places. As this short biography has shown, Blamire published little in her lifetime, and what she did publish, in common with many of her contemporaries, was issued without authorial attribution. However, as an amusing and thoughtful writer of surprisingly wide range, Blamire encapsulates the transition from the formal poetry of the 'Augustan Age' to the 'Major Romantics'. An early Romantic poet, she wrote Gothic allegories in Standard English and songs in Lowland Scots to express deeply felt emotions, and lively vignettes in Cumberland dialect about local people and scenes.

In discussing their seminal *Lyrical Ballads* William Wordsworth spoke about the deep feelings or personal emotions of ordinary people who 'do not wear fine cloaths'; and Coleridge of the two cardinal points of poetry: 'faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of the imagination.'^x How similar this sounds to Blamire's much earlier dialect poetry about village people; and to the vision of herself as 'the plain simple muse, whom Nature appoints as her scribe',^{xi} who allowed 'Imagination to paint with her own beautifying pencil, bestowing those shades of colouring best suited to the vivid glow of her own kindling fancy.'^{xii} Perhaps owing to this gift for dialect poetry, and her skill in depicting village people, until recently Blamire has been seen by academics as almost a 'milkmaid figure', not the sophisticated woman she really was. There has been puzzlement too about her social class. How could a simple country girl have a romance with an aristocrat: and if so, was she just used and discarded at whim? After all, as the youngest of four orphans from a Yeoman / Statesman's family, she was far from having that essential requirement, a fortune. Surprisingly perhaps, imposing buildings and grandeur would not have bothered or over-awed Blamire. Her first cousin Henry Richmond Brougham (1719-49) of Highhead Castle, had been High Sheriff of Cumberland, and the daughter of another cousin Mrs. Isabella Curwen (1728-76) of Workington Hall, Cumbria, was the sought-after heiress Isabella (1765-1820). Blamire's brother William married Jane née Christian (1749-1837), whose brother was John Christian Curwen MP (1756-1828) of Ewanrigg Hall, Cumbria (both cousins of the notorious Fletcher Christian of the mutiny on *HMS Bounty*). So Blamire can scarcely be described as a milkmaid! Indeed, Jonathan Wordsworth likened her social position to that of Jane Austen: 'the well-to-do maiden aunt's life of good works and humorous observation'.^{xiii}

Blamire was critical of Arcadian writers who she saw as 'belles of the town' oblivious of the realities of rural poverty. She did however approve of Lady Anne Lindsay's *Auld Robin Gray*, and may well have known Charlotte Smith's gothic novel *Ethelinde* (Cadell 1789) with Lord Danesforte's cavalier treatment of the heroine Ethelinde Chesterville as having an uncanny resemblance to Blamire's own life-romance with her aristocratic lover, Lord Ossulston. Significantly, in her great work 'Stoklewath: or a Cumbrian Village' Blamire uses the gender-reversed names Ethelinda and Ethelind as code for Ossulston and herself, respectively. An intriguing but unresolved question remains: did Smith use Blamire's true-life experiences as the basis for her novel –

certainly a possibility as Cadell was a colleague of Blamire's publisher brother in The Strand, London?

That Blamire was widely engaged with the literary life of the time is exemplified by a poem 'The Adieu and Recall to Love', published by Maxwell in her *1842 Poetical Works* and wrongly ascribed to her. Though Blamire would have approved of its sentiments, in her own hand-written transcript of the poem^{xiv} she attributes it to 'Della Crusca', pen name of Robert Merry (1758-98), published in 1787 in the journal *The World*. He had 'played enthusiastic host to escalating poetic exchanges [...] which attracted countless readers'.^{xv}

Two modern authorities on Romantic Poetry bear witness to a renewed and increasing interest in Blamire as a 'fine and underrated'^{xvi} poet, and as 'an unjustly neglected writer'.^{xvii} Duncan Wu asserted that 'Blamire is a writer of considerable power'.^{xviii} And Jonathan Wordsworth predicted that 'Susanna will eventually be seen as important as the other Romantic poets writing during the eighteenth century', and believed that she 'should be more widely read'.^{xix} It is therefore fitting that the inclusion of a biography on the Chawton House Library Website of this lyrical free spirit is in accord with its aims of celebrating eighteenth-century women writers.

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ⁱ *The Poetical Works 1842* p xxiii

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p xxxiv

ⁱⁱⁱ The Wordsworth Trust Library: WLMS Maycock Blamire, Record No: 1998.60.27.

^{iv} Jonathan Wordsworth, *Susanna Blamire: Poet of Friendship 1747-1794* (RJL Smith & Associates 1994) p 6

^v Paula R. Feldman p 104; Robert Chambers, *Cyclopedia of English Literature* (1844) p 275

^{vi} Henry Lonsdale *The Worthies of Cumberland* p 69

^{vii} Jerome McGann, University of Virginia, USA, personal communication, e-mail, 10 April 2000.

^{viii} Jonathan Wordsworth (ed), *Susanna Blamire, The Poetical Works 1842* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1994), Facsimile reprint, second and third pages of un-paginated Introduction.

^{ix} P. J. Bullock, & F. E. Tutor, eds. *A History of Dalston Parish from Early Times* p 21; *The Poetical Works* pp xxiv-xxv.

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- ^x *Lyrical Ballads 1798* (Woodstock Books 2002)
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