

East Texas Historical Journal

A Publication of the East Texas Historical Association

Volume 15 Issue 2 Article 10

10-1977

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Recommended Citation

Gaston, Edwin W. Jr (1977) "Karle Wilson Baker: First Woman of Texas Letters," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol15/iss2/10

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KARLE WILSON BAKER: FIRST WOMAN OF TEXAS LETTERS

by Edwin W. Gaston, Jr.

From shortly after the Anglo-Americans' arrival in Texas to the present, women have been numbered among the foremost writers of the place even if they have generally been less recognized than such men as J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb. Mary Austin Holley, a cousin of the colonizer Stephen F. Austin, was the first woman author. In 1833, she published in book form a series of twelve letters[1] intended to encourage immigration to the area still under Mexican rule. Her more notable nineteenth century successors after Texas nation- and statehood included Augusta Jane Evans, a teenager when she wrote a novel about the Alamo; Mollie E. Moore Davis, author both of novels and poetry; and Amelia E. Barr, also the author of a novel about the Alamo.[2] Then, from that nineteenth century beginning, such twentieth century Texas women as Ruth Cross, Katherine Anne Porter, and Dorothy Scarborough have fashioned successful careers in fiction; and Ruth Averitte and Vassar Miller have earned renown in poetry.[3].

But the achievements of all those women writers notwithstanding, the position of "First Woman of Texas Letters" properly belongs to Karle Wilson Baker. She followed Mrs. Holley, Miss Evans, Mrs. Davis, and Mrs. Barr, but preceded the others. An essayist, fictionist, and poet, Mrs. Baker was the first Texan—woman or man—to earn international recognition for her works and the first woman to be elected a Fellow by the prestigious Texas Institute of Letters.[4] And if her fiction has been somewhat overshadowed by Miss Porter's psychological depth and her lyric poetry somewhat eclipsed by Miss Miller's wider range in content and form—in either or both events, Mrs. Baker's overall achievement in three literary genres has preserved her place of eminence.

To the novelist and poet Dorothy Scarborough, Mrs. Baker once wrote wryly, "I am the possessor of a biography without facts."[5] Her characteristic understatement, however, did not obscure the story of her distinguished career. Born October 13, 1878, in Little Rock, Arkansas, she was the daughter of William Thomas and Kate Florence Montgomery Wilson. She studied at Little Rock Academy and the University of Chicago, the latter then including on its faculty the poet William Vaughn Moody and the novelist Robert Herrick. Both Moody and Herrick deeply influenced Karle Wilson, who, in 1910 following Moody's premature death, acknowledged her indebtedness in her elegy, "W.V.M." Later, Mrs. Baker would study at Columbia University and the University of California. The only institution that awarded her a degree, however, was Southern Methodist University, which in 1924 conferred an honorary Doctorate of Letters degree upon the author. Mrs. Baker once remarked, "I am embarrassingly shy on degrees;"[6] but the apparent deficiency was more obvious to her than to the students who attended her college and university lectures and to her many admirers in the academic community at large.

Karle Wilson taught four years at schools in Bristol, Virginia, and Little Rock, and then in 1901 joined her family that had moved to Nacogdoches, Texas. At that point in her life, she regularly hiked, rode horseback, and played tennis. As a tennis player, in fact, she quickly earned admiration in Nacogdoches, but dismissed the acclaim by saying, "Oh, they just thought I

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played well because few women played tennis then."[7] Indeed, she minimized all her activity in those days, declaring that she was just "hanging around" the town.[8] In actuality, however, Nacogdoches and its abundance of natural beauty—its flowers, trees, and wildlife—were impressing her as almost Edenic. And she was absorbing the impressions that would become translated into her major literary subjects and themes.

With Nacogdoches, then, Karle Wilson was associated for the remainder of her life. There, on August 8, 1907, she married Thomas E. Baker, a banker; reared a son and daughter, the latter herself an accomplished author and illustrator;[9] taught from 1923-34 at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College (now State University); and wrote essays, poems, and novels. In Nacogdoches, too, Karle Wilson Baker died November 9, 1960, and was buried.

Essays, poetry, and short stories comprised the first literary genres in which Mrs. Baker worked. Later, she also wrote novels and historical articles. But poetry represented her finest achievement even though she once told an interviewer she "did not intend to become known as a writer of verse" nor had "ever worked toward that end."[10] Mrs. Baker's early work appeared in such notable journals as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Century*, *Harper's*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Scribner's*, and the *Yale Review*. Then, the Yale University Press published her first volume, ninety-two lyric poems collected under the name of the title poem *Blue Smoke* (1919).[11] Yale also published a second collection of her poems *Burning Bush* (1922),[12] as well as two prose volumes discussed later in this paper. A third and final volume of Mrs. Baker's poetry, *Dreamers on Horseback* (1931),[13] was published by the Southwest Press of Dallas. Even though *Dreamers* represented her final published collection, it was followed by the frequent publication of individual poems in journals.

Between *Blue Smoke* and *Burning Bush*, Mrs. Baker's *The Garden of the Plynck*[14] had appeared in 1920. Ostensibly stories for children, *The Garden*, as Dorothy Scarborough aptly observed, had "charm" for adults as well.[15] Then, following *Burning Bush*, Mrs. Baker's second prose work, *Old Coins*,[16] had been published in 1923. It consists of twenty-seven short allegorical sketches. Both *The Garden* and *Old Coins*, like Mrs. Baker's first two volumes of poems, were published by the Yale University Press.

With the publication of *Old Coins*, Mrs. Baker began devoting her work primarily to prose. In 1925, she published *The Texas Flag Primer*,[17] a Texas history for children that was adopted for use in the public schools. A revised version of it, entitled *Two Little Texans*,[18] appeared in 1932. Between the *Flag Primer* and its revision came Mrs. Baker's nature essays *The Birds of Tanglewood* (1930).[19] Tanglewood was the name that Mrs. Baker gave to a pristine area around her parents' home immediately north of the high school campus on Mound Street in Nacogdoches. The property passed to Mrs. Baker and her own family about 1917, who lived there until 1925.

Mrs. Baker's most notable prose works, however, were two novels published when she was in her late fifties and early sixties, an atypical age for a beginning novelist. *Family Style* (1937)[20] is set against the background of the East Texas oil boom but finally is a study of human motivation and reaction. *Star of the Wilderness* (1942)[21] is a historical novel in which figures Dr. James Grant, the Texas revolutionary in the 1830s. Both were published by the prestigious Coward-McCann of New York.

Of Mrs. Baker's prose works, the *Tanglewood* essays and the two novels should be considered further here. *Tanglewood* consists of four essays, the first of which is the title piece. That initial essay constitutes something of a social

register of the birds that came in the summer of 1901 to the "tangle of grapevines and underbrush and great forest trees" around the author's parents' new home in Nacogdoches. Mrs. Baker finds that the thrush looks middleclass even though it is a poet at heart. Her favorite blue bird has a "high seriousness" of soul; but the mockingbird is not the Shakespeare of birds, as Lanier declared, but a dazzling second-rater.

The second essay, "Window Lore," was written by Mrs. Baker as the result of an illness that had imposed upon her a close view of the bird visitors to the sill of a window by which she lay for months. It abounds in description of the color of the birds' eyes, the shape of their eyebrows, and the ways of special crippled ones.

"An Aerial Harvest," the third essay in *Tanglewood*, records a storm in April, 1922, in Nacogdoches that left a wreckage of dead and injured birds. Mrs. Baker and her daughter carefully nursed and then set free the survivors, and they accorded "Christian burial" to the victims. During the course of this strange visitation, they identified about twenty-five species of birds, including the rare Redstart and the Blackburnian warbler.

The fourth and final essay, "Domesticity—With Wings," describes Mrs. Baker's own new home, "West Windows," successor to "Tanglewood" as a haven for birds. It includes an extended chronicle of the Titmouse family that the author christened in Dickensian fashion, and an account of a visit of a Whippoorwill's nest in the vicinity of the Lone Star Church in Nacogdoches County. The essay evaluates Mrs. Baker's association with nature:

> Indeed, in looking back over the memories and written notes of more than twenty years of bird study, I have been lately struck by the comparative meagerness of my records of domestic life. Certainly this has not been due in any degree to a lack of interest; for my own ideal has always been precisely that of the birds—domesticity with wings . . . Thus, though I have at last gained the thrush as a householder, I have not lost him as Idea. As I had realized long ago, he comes from the realms of things that 'age cannot wither . . . nor custom stale.' But even if it were not so; even if, being human, I have bartered adoration for tenderness, exchanged a mystery for a friend, and left some heavy coin of dream, never to be redeemed, in the hollow of his root-lined nest; yet is life kind to the stumbling worshipper of wings.[22]

The *Tanglewood* essays, however, are about more than birds. Like Burroughs, Mrs. Baker endows the creatures with human traits; and, like him, she uses them as a springboard to philosophize about life in general. But she goes farther than Burroughs in finding symbolism in nature—in seeing a kind of allegory in birdlife. The resulting mysticism is reminiscent of that in her poetry.

Mrs. Baker's first novel, *Family Style*, is set in and around Kilgore and Longview before and during the East Texas oil boom that began in the early 1930s. The novel ostensibly derives its title from signs seen often in those days in the bustling communities springing up with the boom: "Meals Family Style." But actually the title results from the concern of the novel with family life styles related to sudden riches—that is, to family success and failure in ethical and moral ways.

The principal character, Kathleen Priest, wife of young Duke, looks forward to the oil activity as a means of enabling the two to fulfill dreams that could not be realized from the marginal farming in which Duke and his father have engaged. Prior to the boom, the area—a 50-mile stretch of red hills and

sandy flats of blackjacks and pines—had depended primarily upon small cotton farms for its precarious livelihood. Kathleen's father-in-law, Matt Priest, likewise hopes that the boom will bring financial security to his family; but his wife resents the intrusion of the activity upon their lives. Ultimately, the elder Mrs. Priest goes insane. Oil indeed does gush from the Priest land, but the well is devastated by a fire that lasts for days. While Duke Priest helps fight the fire, Kathleen opens a small restaurant (meals served family style) to supplement the family income. She also undertakes the care of the invalid boy Henry, ultimately becoming the guardian both of his person and his property enriched by oil discovery. Finally, then, Duke and Kathleen successfully make the adjustment to the new way of life that Duke's mother cannot accommodate and with which Duke's father Matt dies.

But if the Duke Priests adjust successfully, Duke's cousins do not. Fred Priest, a lawyer, accumulates vast wealth from his own oil property and also that which he swindles from others. But his marriage to Marie ends in dissolution because of his unethical conduct and drinking. And Harlowe Priest's marriage to Rose Anne ends, when she leaves him for an oil-field supervisor.

Mrs. Baker's other novel, *Star of the Wilderness*, has as its background the Texas Revolution in 1836. But rather than focusing upon the more famous battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto, it concentrates on the ill-fated Matamoras Expedition. That attempt by Texans to invade Mexican territory was led by Dr. James Grant, who died with all of his fifty men except one in an ambush March 2, 1836, near San Patricio, by Urrea's Mexican forces. More centrally, however, the novel focuses upon the trials of home life in Nacogdoches, Texas, during those historic times. The opening sequence takes a well-to-do-family from its home in Cincinnati down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers on the luxurious river boat "Star of the Wilderness", which partly inspires the title of the novel; then up the Red River to Natchitoches, Louisiana, on a much less comfortable boat; and thence to Nacogdoches most uncomfortably by carriage. The journey to Texas, however, would not itself have been so bad if the husband, Paul McAlpine, had shown good sense and if his wife, Jessie, had not been pregnant.

Settling Jessie and their two children—a son Mac, 11, and a daughter Ione, 10—in Nacogdoches, Paul McAlpine journeys on to Mexico to join his cousin Dr. James Grant. Jessie struggles to provide for her family, taking in boarders and working in other ways in the frontier community. In 1836, seven years after the start of the novel, Dr. Grant's dreams of uniting the northern tier of Mexican states (including Texas) with the American Union are shattered in the ambush at San Patricio. There both he and Paul McAlpine die. Meanwhile, other of Santa Anna's Mexican forces, having crushed the Texan defense of the Alamo, move toward Fannin's men at Goliad. Having grown to young manhood, Paul McAlpine's son Mac is a member of the Goliad force. However, Mac manages to escape before the massacre of Fannin and the others. The novel concludes with Santa Anna's capture at San Jacinto, the battle which established the Lone Star of Texas as a Republic and then as a state of the American Union. Finally, then, the title of the novel assumes a two-fold meaning: the "Star of the Wilderness" which brought the McAlpines to a new land is transmuted into a nation-state that was itself a star in the wilderness.

Despite relegating history to a background function, the novel still has historical import. The critic and historian Sam Acheson called *Star of the Wilderness* the "best fictional account of the Texas Revolution" that had been written by 1942.[23] And the critic Louise Field praised the work for its "clearly drawn pictures of the manners and customs of those early days of the nineteenth century."[24]

But, to repeat, poetry remained Mrs. Baker's chief accomplishment. It was the art form for which she received a prize in 1925 from the Poetry Society of South Carolina, as well as numerous other regional and national honors. Poetry was the art form for which she received international recognition through the inclusion of representative examples in literary anthologies. In 1958, two years before her death, she was acclaimed by the Poetry Society of Texas as an honorary vice president. The honor enhanced that afforded her by other societies in which she held membership: the Authors League of America, the Philosophical Society of Texas, the Poetry Society of America, and others.

Mrs. Baker was once called the "poet of quiet things" by Dorothy Scarborough,[25] who took the idea from one of Mrs. Baker's own poems:

I shall be loved as quiet things
Are loved—white pigeons in the sun,
Curled yellow leaves that whisper down
One after one.[26]

But as Mrs. Baker asserted in another poem, "Labels," she was impatient with being categorized:

I think I'll be going
A creature that sings
Can't wait for the labels
To stick to her wings!

If it's worth your while, catch me
(At least, if you're able:
Aristides himself
Was no match for a label.[27]

And, indeed, Mrs. Baker wrote about a variety of subjects—people, place, and event—as the poet Pamela Lynn Palmer has shown:

> Throughout Mrs. Baker's poetry her identification with her region and her subjectivity are apparent. Her most common speaker is herself or a personality or mood of herself. The people she writes of reflect home relationships, especially the mother-child relationship which was important to her as the mother of two children. She writes of her immediate surroundings—her town [Nacogdoches], trees, birds, and when she occasionally leaves her town, she absorbs the atmosphere of her new surroundings [for example, Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, all subjects of Mrs. Baker's poems] in the same way . . . It really would not have mattered where she established her roots; her point of view would have remained subjective and regional. For her, anywhere led to everywhere, and that truth allowed her to see the universal in the particular.[28]

L.W. Payne, the Texas literary historian at whose invitation Mrs. Baker lectured on several occasions at the University of Texas, called Mrs. Baker the "truest and most intrinsically artistic poet Texas can lay claim to today."[29] Dorothy Scarborough added that Mrs. Baker was "worthy to stand beside Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay in the 'essential fire' of her poetic thought and the tooled beauty of its form."[30] Further attesting to her place among the foremost national poets of her day is the correspondence that Mrs. Baker conducted with such literary artists as Witter Bynner, Willa Cather, Carl Van Doren, Theodore Dreiser, Kathleen Norris, and Carl Sandburg.[31]

Despite such praise, which truly entitles Mrs. Baker to be recognized as the "First Woman of Texas Letters," Mrs. Baker discounted her accomplishments in her poem "Half-Way Stone":

I have not much to show for all
The dedicated years:
A little tree of ecstacy,
A little jar of tears.

No lordly forest of sweet shade
To make my name be praised;
No pyramid of living stone
Such as my masters raised.

Not even any knotted scourge
Or serpent-wreathed rods
Shall lie upon the altar steps
To prove I served the gods.

I shall not leave a noisy name,
But there'll be two or three
Who'll want me, not for oracle,
But just for company.

They will be glad of one who went
So softly on her quest,
Still as an oak or daffodil
Or bird upon its nest.

Who lived alone with lovely things
And did not cry or strive,
But waited, singing to herself.
To keep her soul alive.

Who meant to wed the sun, at first,
But finding him so far,
Sat down at last upon a stone
Abashed before a star.[32]

But the disclaimer notwithstanding, Karle Wilson Baker—first in time to bring honor to Texas letters—remains secure in that initial reputation.

NOTES

[1]Mary Austin Holley, *Texas* (Baltimore, 1833). A more accessible edition is *Letters of An Early American Traveler,* ed. Mattie Austin Hatcher, (Dallas, 1933).

[2]Augusta Jane Evans, *Inez, A Tale of the Alamo* (New York, 1855); Mary E. Moore Davis, *Minding the Gap and Other Poems* (Houston, 1867) and *Under the Man-Fig* (Boston, 1895), the latter a novel; and Amelia E. Barr, *Remember the Alamo* (New York, 1888). For a more detailed discussion of Miss Evans, Mrs. Davis, and Mrs. Barr, see my literary history *The Early Novel of the Southwest* (Albuquerque, 1961).

[3]Representative works: Ruth Cross, *The Big Road* (New York, 1931); Katherine Anne Porter, *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* (New York, 1935); Dorothy Scarborough, *Can't Get A Redbird* (New York, 1929); Ruth Averitte, *Salute to Dawn* (Dallas, 1936); and Vassar Miller, *My Bones Being Wiser* (Middletown, 1963).

[4]The Texas Institute of Letters was founded in 1936. A charter member, Karle Wilson Baker served in 1938-39 as president of the organization. Her election as the first woman but third Fellow followed that of J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb.

[5]Dorothy Scarborough, "Karle Wilson Baker," *Library of Southern Literature*, eds. Edwin Anderson and others, vol. 17 (1923), 147-52.

[6]*The Pine Log* [Nacogdoches, Texas], February 25, 1928, 1.

[7]*Ibid.*

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]Karle Wilson Baker's daughter, Charlotte Baker [Montgomery], is the author of such novels as *A Sombrero for Miss Brown* (1941) and *Hope Hacienda* (1942), as well as of numerous children's books which she herself illustrates. She resides in Nacogdoches, Texas, as does her brother, Thomas W. Baker, a banker.

[10]*The Pine Log, op. cit.*

[11]Karle Wilson Baker, *Blue Smoke* (New Haven, 1919).

[12]Karle Wilson Baker, *Burning Bush* (New Haven, 1922).

[13]Karle Wilson Baker, *Dreamers on Horseback* (Dallas, 1931).

[14]Karle Wilson Baker, *The Garden of the Plynck* (New Haven, 1920).

[15]*The Dallas Morning News*, March 16, 1924.

[16]Karle Wilson Baker, *Old Coins* (New Haven, 1923).

[17]Karle Wilson Baker, *The Texas Flag Primer* (New York, 1925).

[18]Karle Wilson Baker, *Two Little Texans* (New York, 1932).

[19]Karle Wilson Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, illustrated by Charlotte Baker, (Dallas, 1930).

[20]Karle Wilson Baker, *Family Style* (New York, 1937).

[21]Karle Wilson Baker, *Star of the Wilderness* (New York, 1942).

[22]Karle Wilson Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood, op. cit.*, 89.

[23]Sam Acheson, review of *Star of the Wilderness* in *Saturday Review* (May 16, 1942), 37.

[24]Louise Field, review of *Star of the Wilderness* in the *New York Times Book Review* (April 26, 1942), 22.

[25]Dorothy Scarborough, "Karle Wilson Baker," *op. cit.*

[26]Karle Wilson Baker, "I Shall Be Loved As Quiet Things," *Dreamers on Horseback, op. cit.*

[27]Karle Wilson Baker, "Labels," *Dreamers on Horseback, op. cit.*

[28]Pamela Lynn Palmer, *Subjective Regionalism to Cosmopolitanism: A Study of Three Texas Poets* [Karle Wilson Baker, W.E. Bard, and Arthur M. Sampley], unpublished master's thesis (Nacogdoches: Stephen F. Austin State University, 1973), 30-31.

[29]*The Pine Log* [Nacogdoches, Texas], (February 28, 1931), 1.

[30]Dorothy Scarborough, "Karle Wilson Baker," *op. cit.*

[31]A substantial number of letters in part comprising Karle Wilson Baker's correspondence with these and other notable persons may be found in the Baker Collection of the R.W. Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University.

[32]Karle Wilson Baker, "Half-Way Stone," *Dreamers on Horseback, op. cit.*