

10-1999

## Laureate of Texas: The Poetry of Karle Wilson Baker

Sarah R. Jackson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Sarah R. (1999) "Laureate of Texas: The Poetry of Karle Wilson Baker," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 37: Iss. 2, Article 12. Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol37/iss2/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

**LAUREATE OF TEXAS:  
THE POETRY OF KARLE WILSON BAKER**

*by Sarah R. Jackson*

At the time of her death in 1960, Karle Wilson Baker was unique among the poets of Texas in her literary talent and in the recognition she had received for that talent. She was a charter member of the prestigious Texas Institute of Letters, the Poetry Society of Texas, and the Philosophical Society of Texas. Only the third person to be named a Fellow of the Texas Institute of Letters, she followed J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb in that honor. Her first two books of poetry had been published by the exacting and highly-respected Yale University Press. Indeed, she was the best known poet from Texas in her lifetime. In 1929, A.J. Armstrong, chairman of the Department of English at Baylor University and a connoisseur of good writers, especially poets, wrote to Baker asking her to introduce Edna St. Vincent Millay at a program at Baylor. He wrote, "I conceived the idea that it would be nice to have the greatest of Texas' poets introduce the greatest woman poet in the world."

Born on October 13, 1878, in Little Rock, Arkansas, the daughter of Kate Montgomery Wilson and William Thomas Wilson, Karle Wilson attended public schools, Little Rock Academy, and Ouachita Baptist College. She enrolled at the University of Chicago for a year and two summers where she studied under the tutelage of poet William Vaughn Moody and novelist Robert Herrick. Throughout her life she felt a debt to William Vaughn Moody for all that she had learned under his direction. An unpublished manuscript on Moody's life and works describes her undying devotion and sense of obligation to her poet-teacher. Never graduating from college, she continued her studies at such prominent schools as Columbia University and at the University of California at Berkeley. She received an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Southern Methodist University in 1924 because of her widely recognized talent as a poet.

In 1897, W.T. Wilson moved his family from Little Rock to Nacogdoches and opened a grain-and-feed company. Karle first came to Nacogdoches in 1901, returned to Little Rock to teach high school for two years, then came back to Nacogdoches. Engaged in free-lance writing, she published poetry, short stories, and essays in a variety of magazines. She married Thomas Ellis Baker, a Nacogdoches banker, in 1907. They had two children: Thomas Wilson (1908) and Charlotte (1910). Karle Wilson Baker taught in the department of English at Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College from 1924 to 1934.<sup>2</sup>

Her earliest poems were published under the name, Charlotte Wilson. Her first published work, "The Poet," appeared in *Harper's Magazine* (1903). She quickly gained state and national attention between 1903 and 1914, publishing in *Century Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and the *Yale Review*. The March 1908 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* included Karle Wilson Baker's "Bed-Time," a poem that illustrates her faith and confidence in facing

both life and death – a theme she would repeat in later poems. Other contributors to that issue were Edith Wharton, Robert Herrick, and Irving Babbitt. Another early poem, “Bluebird and Cardinal,” an ode of forty-two lines, communicates the poet’s interest in birdlife and nature, a subject which continued to occupy many of her poems and prose works. When it appeared in *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1910, it was illustrated as the *Frontispiece* for the magazine.

A study of Baker’s poetry reveals the wide range of interests that occupied her writings throughout her life. Her poetic styles include the lyric, sonnet, narrative, and ode. Baker had a strong sense of imagery and of figures of speech, especially metaphor. Her subject matter was always influenced by her personal life, and many of the subjects first manifested in her poems were later subjects for prose writings. The early poems focus on family matters, religion, and nature, followed by contemporary concerns and the role of women, and the last poems lead us to her life-long interest in Texas history.

The real breakthrough came for Baker when the *Yale Review* published “A Group of Sonnets” in October 1914. This issue included two previously unpublished poems by Robert Browning. The sonnets by Karle Wilson Baker, still under the name of Charlotte Wilson, were “The Young Poet to Italy,” “Evening,” “Desire of Fame,” and “To My Enemy.” Upon receiving these sonnets, the assistant editor, Edward Bliss Reed, wrote enthusiastically to Baker: “This is the first time I have had the pleasure of seeing anything of your work, and I should be glad to read anything you may wish to submit.” Reed also added, “Will you kindly send me a few items about yourself, for we always publish brief information about our contributors.”<sup>3</sup> Baker responded:

As to myself, I am a Southerner born and bred and – with exception of about two years spent at the University of Chicago, where I studied English Composition under Robert Herrick & Wm. Vaughn Moody – I have lived all my life in the South... I am Mrs. Thomas E. Baker, and I have a ‘husband of my own and a small son and daughter. I am a ‘self-made author’... Perhaps a dozen published stories and some fifty poems in various magazines constitute my title to a right to exist.

Very sincerely yours,  
Karle Wilson Baker<sup>4</sup>

Karle Wilson Baker’s fame as an important poet is directly related to her publications with the *Yale Review*. She received praise and encouragement from the senior editor, Wilbur L. Cross, who urged her to send poems often for the *Review* to consider for publication. Cross was known as a maverick and pioneer for his willingness to publish works by little-known authors, women, and writers from areas other than the Eastern seaboard in spite of the fact that wartime restrictions on paper and publishing meant that editors had to be highly selective.

Between 1914 and 1920, Karle Wilson Baker became the most frequently published poet in the *Review* with some twenty-six publications. She used her real name, instead of Charlotte Wilson, beginning with the October 1915 issue, which contained “At the Picture-Show,” a narrative in blank verse that relates the emotions of a working-class wife and mother. Cross wrote to her: “I like

very much your poem 'At the Picture-Show,' and will publish it in the course of the year... On the whole, the poem seems to me one of the best that I have seen in the new style."<sup>5</sup>

Again, in November 1915, Cross wrote: "We like every one of the poems which you have let us see, and are keeping 'A Little Boy's Bath,' 'A Clear Night,' and 'The Family.' ...I wish that you would let me see some more of your poems in the course of a month or two. Perhaps additions might be made to the group."<sup>6</sup> The poem, "A Clear Night," reflects Baker's use of metaphor and imagery:

I have worn this day as a fretting, ill-made garment,  
 Impatient to be rid of it.  
 And lo, as I drew it off over my shoulders  
 This jewel caught in my hair.

By the time of publication in October 1916, the *Yale Review* contained seven poems by Karle Wilson Baker under the heading "A Group of Lyrics."<sup>7</sup> A poem by John Masfield, who would later become poet laureate of England, appeared in that issue also. Domestic life and the rearing of children became a popular theme for Baker who was occupied with family life in a rural area of East Texas. "Apple and Rose," one of Karle Wilson Baker's poems in the October issue, is a gentle dedication to her two children:

My little daughter is a tea-rose,  
 Satin to the touch,  
 Wine to the lips,  
 And a faint, delirious perfume.  
 But my little son  
 Is a June apple,  
 Firm and cool,  
 And scornful of too much sweetness,  
 But full of tang and flavor  
 And better than bread to the hungry.

O wild winds, and clumsy, pilfering bees,  
 With the whole world to be wanton in,  
 Will you not spare my little tea-rose?  
 And O ruthless blind creatures,  
 Who lay eggs of evil at the core of life,  
 Pass by my one red apple,  
 That is so firm and sound!

In December 1917, Wilbur L Cross wrote again to Baker:

Dear Mrs. Baker:  
 A group of your poems is appearing in the present number of The Yale Review, and I am herewith sending you a modest honorarium. Have you in your desk some more very fine poems which you would like to let me see? Believe me  
 Yours most sincerely,  
 Wilbur Cross<sup>8</sup>

Baker did not limit her publications to the *Yale Review*. In 1915, when the *Texas Review* published "Poet's Song," the editor, Stark Young, called it the best of the poems in the *Review*<sup>9</sup> "Poet's Song" displays the reverence toward

God and Nature typical of Baker's poetry. Also in 1915, Baker published "The Housemother" in the influential journal edited by Harriet Monroe, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (November 1915), which included poems by Edgar Lee Masters and Wallace Stevens as well as Baker.

During these exciting years of early publication, Karle Wilson Baker became well-established as one of the best female poets in the South. In 1918, when she was preparing a book of her collected poems for publication, it was only natural that she turn to her editor and friend, Wilbur Cross, for advice. Many of the poems in her collection had already been published by the *Yale Review*, and Cross encouraged her to submit her poems to the Yale University Press. Doubtless, Wilbur Cross' introductions helped to pave the way for Baker at the press. As a result, Yale University Press published her first book of poems, *Blue Smoke*, in 1919. Bird and nature imagery best express the free spirit of the poet herself; she blends the desire for freedom with her commitment to responsibility in "The Tree" from *Blue Smoke*:<sup>10</sup>

My life is a tree,  
Yoke-fellow of the earth;  
Pledged,  
By roots too deep for remembrance,  
To stand hard against the storm,  
To fill my Place.  
(But high in the branches of my green tree there is a wild bird singing:  
Wind-free are the wings of my bird: she hath built no mortal nest.)

In the October 1920 issue of *Yale Review*, Edward Bliss Reed reviewed *Blue Smoke*:

Blue Smoke, a volume whose very form is a delight, will place its author in the foremost ranks of our lyric poets. In every page there is distinction, a power of suggestion, an emotion deep in its restraint, clear in its freedom from the blight of sentimentality... this poet gives only her best. Her style is simple, vivid, never precious; there is perfect ease in all the beauty of these songs... To find much in little, to hold the world in a grain of sand, to see where two worlds meet, is, in part, the endowment of a poet, and Karle Wilson Baker possesses it.

*Blue Smoke* caught the attention of Rebecca W. Smith, an assistant professor of English at Texas Christian University. Smith wrote that she liked the book and asked Karle Wilson Baker for her opinion of the important tendencies in American poetry.<sup>12</sup> Baker's response is important because it gives insight into her thoughts about poetry.

[Feb.1921]

My dear Miss Smith:

Let me thank you very much for your kind words for "Blue Smoke." They are very heartening... It [art] is one of the great means of fostering the life of the spirit – which, when all is said, is 'what men live by.' It is a human instinct to think of 'the life of the spirit' in too narrow and rigid a way; and it is the special business of those who are born servants of the beautiful – artists and art-lovers – to show the world that beauty is one of the eternal ministers of man's spirit. At least that is part of my own belief.

Which brings me indirectly to one of your questions: what I think of the tendencies in current poetry. I think the aliveness of it – even including the

extravagances, the quarreling, the clamor ... is 'all to the good.' It stirs people up; it sets them to asking, in self-defense, what is Poetry, any how... Nobody knows what is great and what is worthless in contemporary work; what is indispensable is that it all be given a hearing, and Time will do the winnowing. My own favorites among our outstanding poets are Lindsay, Sandburg, Frost and Sara Teasdale.<sup>15</sup>

In 1921, a tribute to Karle Wilson Baker appeared in the *Library of Southern Literature*, submitted by the Texas writer, Dorothy Scarborough:

Karle Wilson Baker is an author of whom the south may well be proud ... she is an authentic poet ... 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.<sup>14</sup>

Also in 1921, Baker wrote to W. S. Lewis, the editor at Yale University Press, of her hopes that they would publish a second book of her collected poems.<sup>15</sup> *Burning Bush* was published by Yale University Press in 1922.

Also in 1922, Baker began to turn to a subject that would interest her in both poetry and prose for the remainder of her writing career. A poem pivotal to her career, "Song of the Forerunners," won first prize at a poetry contest sponsored by Southern Methodist University. It was about the men and women who dreamed and made Texas. Much of Baker's writing that followed focused on Texas and its fascinating history. Harriet Monroe remarked about the award in an issue of *Poetry*: "John Hall Wheelock, gave first place to Karle Wilson Baker's 'Song of the Fore-runners,' and probably the state of Texas will endorse his verdict by remembering it longest."<sup>16</sup>

As Baker wrote more about her state and its history, she collected the poems for another book, *Dreamers on Horseback*. This collection was published by Southwest Press in 1931. "Song of the Forerunners" and "Within the Alamo" are two well-known poems from this collection. The latter poem begins with a prose statement explaining the situation at the Alamo just before Santa Anna's final attack when William B. Travis allegedly drew a line on the floor with his sword-point and asked that every man who was ready to die with him cross over to his side.<sup>17</sup> The ballad ends:

But as long as there travails  
A Spirit in man,  
In a war that was ancient  
Before Time began,  
Here will the brave come  
To read a high Word – Cut clean in the dust  
By the stroke of a sword.

Karle Wilson Baker's focus on Texas history included poems about towns in Texas. She paid special tribute to the city which was her home all her adult life. From the poem, "Nacogdoches Speaks,"<sup>18</sup> she writes:

I was The Gateway. Here they came, and passed,  
The homespun centaurs with their arms of steel  
And taut heart-strings:  
...They passed, but still I feel  
The dint of hoof, the print of booted heel,

.....  
 But I have not forgotten; and sometimes,  
 The things that I remember rise, and hover,  
 A sharper perfume in some April dusk.

Baker had a true affinity for her adopted Texas. Speaking through her poetry, she brought recognition to the state in a manner that had never occurred before or since. In the poem, "Texas Cowboy," she expresses her own puzzlement as to why she is so consumed:<sup>19</sup> (excerpt)

From garden-beds I tend, it is not far  
 To those great ranges where he used to ride;

.....  
 He is a Thought; he is not flesh-and-bone;  
 He is immortal Youth astride a Dream:

.....  
 And I...  
 A Woman with a bird, a book, a flower,  
 Who, sifting life, has kept the quiet part,  
 Whose days like pearls are sorted, hour by hour –  
 Why is it that he gallops through my heart?

Karle Wilson Baker was both poet and teacher of poetry. She taught contemporary poetry at Stephen F. Austin State Teacher's College from 1924 to 1934. Interviews with seventy-five of Baker's former students either by letter, telephone, or in person reveal the memories they hold regarding Baker. Always she was recalled as kind and considerate toward students; "gracious" and "lovely" were common adjectives. Her manner in the classroom was imposing and dignified, but her most memorable feature was the melodious quality of her voice as she read poetry.<sup>20</sup> Frequently she read to her classes the poetry of contemporary American poets such as Frost, Robinson, Teasdale, Millay, Sandburg, and Masters, but the poet most emphasized was her former teacher from the University of Chicago, William Vaughn Moody. Writing her own biographical data, Baker credits her mentor as, "the most important American poet between the Poe-Whitman Era and our own day."<sup>21</sup>

Baker continued her own studies during her years as a teacher. In 1927, she attended a class in contemporary poetry at the University of California at Berkeley. An interesting anecdote comes from those days. The story goes that the professor in a contemporary poetry class read a poem and then proceeded to explain to the class what the poet intended. He did not realize that Karle Wilson Baker, his student, was the author because he thought the poet was a male. After he spoke at some length about the poem, Baker raised her hand, identifying herself as the poet, and gave the real meaning she had intended in the poem!<sup>22</sup>

The Karle Wilson Baker Papers contain lengthy classroom notes on contemporary poetry. In the Winter Term, 1929, Baker's English 216 class presented a program on the "new poetry" (contemporary and experimental) to an assembly of students. In an introduction, one student remarked that earlier she had known "practically nothing about the modern movement or present day poets... My entire view of poetry has changed... I made the surprising

discovery that poets are people. . . After all, the best definition is, Poetry is life in words."<sup>23</sup> The program continued with students reading works by contemporary American poets.

Karle Wilson Baker was respected across the campus. The first edition of the college yearbook, *The Stone Fort*, records the founding of the dramatic club at the college in 1923. The organization was named The Karle Wilson Baker Dramatic Club.<sup>24</sup> Her influence reached from the small campus to the local community. She was a frequent speaker at clubs throughout the region. Toward the end of her career at the college, she arranged for the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Robert Frost, to speak on campus. Frost was by far the most important literary figure to come to the fledgling college, and he came because Karle Wilson Baker invited him.<sup>25</sup> The College subsidized Frost's lecture, and in addition to a large student attendance, citizens from Nacogdoches and neighboring towns came to hear him speak. The college paper, *The Pine Log*, reported that over 1200 people attended.<sup>26</sup>

After Baker left Stephen F. Austin State Teacher's College, she continued to write and to give public readings. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s she was in great demand as a speaker. Often she read her poetry at the public library in Houston and Dallas, and she gave a series of readings for a Dallas radio station. She spoke to meetings of the American Association of University Women, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, and numerous member organizations of the Federation of Women's Clubs. She was a favorite speaker at colleges and universities throughout the state. Her reputation as Texas' most famous poet brought many invitations to judge poetry contests at both high schools and colleges. Also during those years, she was active in the Poetry Society of Texas, the Philosophical Society of Texas, and the Texas Institute of Letters, serving as president of the later organization from 1938-1939.

Even though she had known great acclaim as an honorary Doctor of Letters and as a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the most cherished accolade of her life came when she was named a Fellow of the Texas Institute of Letters. Karle Wilson Baker was one of the founders in 1936, and a charter member of the Institute. Her old friend and secretary of the Institute, Professor William H. Vann, informed her of the selection.

October 4, 1952

My dear Mrs. Baker,

It gives me a very special satisfaction to inform you that at a meeting of the committee appointed for that purpose, you were unanimously recommended to be named Fellow of the Institute, and this recommendation has been approved by the council. . . You are aware, of course, that we have only two other fellows—J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb. . . in my opinion we need feel no obligation to recommend another any time soon.

Sincerely,

William H. Vann"<sup>27</sup>

For her acceptance address, Baker chose to read two poems to follow a short expression of gratitude. At the Awards Dinner, July 18, 1952, the Texas Laureate received the honor she so richly deserved. She responded:

I want to thank you from my heart for the honor of being made a fellow of the Institute. . . . It was a lonely and innocent thing to be a so-called "Texas writer" when some of us began. The dew was not so heavy upon us in 1936, but we would have gasped at the signs and portents erupting every day upon the Texas Literary Front in 1952. . . . For myself, thinking of these things, of old friends present and absent, of the kindness you have shown to me and of the future, I am offering you my final word in a sort of gift package. . . . I am reading you two brief lyrics – companion pieces in a way."<sup>23</sup>

She then read the poems, "Pause of the Year" and "High Summer."

No other female poet in Texas has received the recognition or honors that have been bestowed on Karle Wilson Baker. She remains the most acclaimed poet Texas has produced in this century.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A.J. Armstrong, letter to K.W. Baker, December 15, 1929, KWB Papers, Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, herein cited as SLSFA.

<sup>2</sup>KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Bliss Reed, to KWB, February 25, 1914, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>4</sup>Karle Wilson Baker, draft letter to E.B. Reed, 1914, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>5</sup>Wilbur L. Cross, to KWB, October 22, 1914, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>6</sup>Cross to KWB, November 22, 1915, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>7</sup>K.W. Baker, "A Group of Lyrics," *Yale Review* (October 1916), pp. 167-169

<sup>8</sup>Wilbur L. Cross, to KWB, December 5, 1917, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>9</sup>See note in *Texas Review* (1915), p.9.

<sup>10</sup>KWB "The Tree," *Blue Smoke* (New Haven, 1919), p. 31.

<sup>11</sup>Edward Bliss Reed, *Yale Review* (October 1920), 199.

<sup>12</sup>Rebecca Smith, to KWB, February 3, 1921, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>13</sup>KWB, Draft letter to R. Smith, February 1921, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>14</sup>Dorothy Scarborough to KWB, Box 40, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>15</sup>KWB, draft to W.S. Lewis, October 1921, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>16</sup>Harriet Monroe, *Poetry* (November 1922), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup>KWB, "Within the Alamo," *Dreamers on Horseback* (Dallas, 1931), p. 141.

<sup>18</sup>KWB, "Nacogdoches Speaks," *Dreamers on Horseback* (Dallas, 1931), p.143.

<sup>19</sup>KWB. "Texas Cowboy," *Dreamers on Horseback* (Dallas, 1931), p.146.

<sup>20</sup>Interviews by author, Summer 1997.

<sup>21</sup>Biographical Data, Box 44/9. KWB. Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>22</sup>This story was repeated by many students who were interviewed; Baker must have told the story in class.

<sup>23</sup>Student paper, Box 44/2, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>24</sup>*Stone Fort* yearbook, 1924.

<sup>25</sup>Sarah Jackson, "Karle Wilson Baker Brings Robert Frost to Nacogdoches," *East Texas Historical Journal* (Spring 1996), p. 71.

<sup>26</sup>"Robert Frost Speaks Here," *Pine Log*, April 29, 1933, p.2.

<sup>27</sup>W.H. Vann, to KWB, October 4, 1952, KWB Papers, SLSFA.

<sup>28</sup>KWB Papers, T.I.L. Fellow, Box, 34, SLSFA.