

Classic Poetry Series

Victoria Grace Blackburn
- poems -

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Victoria Grace Blackburn(17 April 1865 - 4 March 1928)

Victoria Grace Blackburn, journalist, poet, playwright, novelist (b at Quebec City, 17 Apr 1865; d at London, Ont 4 Mar 1928). Born in Quebec City, Blackburn attended Hellmuth Ladies' College in London, Ontario. After graduation she worked as a teacher in Faribault, Minnesota and as principal at the Diocesan School of Northern Indiana in Indianapolis. Following her work in education, Blackburn moved to New York to study journalism, theatre and dramatic criticism. In 1896 she returned to London, Ontario and worked for the London Free Press, a newspaper owned by her father, as a literary and dramatic critic. Blackburn became an assistant managing editor in 1918, and worked at the Free Press until her death in 1928.

In addition to her work as a journalist, Victoria Grace Blackburn wrote numerous poems, 2 single-act plays and a novel. Her poetry explores themes such as ill-fated love, varies in form from satire to tragedy, and shows Blackburn's interest in foreign locations for her settings. Blackburn's plays evidence her interest in both personal and social matters. *Seal of Confession* explores ideas of self-sacrifice through the perspective of a French priest, and *The Little Gray* shows Blackburn's reflective side as it mocks her own social class and its fascination with fashion and aesthetics. Neither play was officially published, but Blackburn's hand-written scripts are currently held at the Archives and Research Collection Centre at the UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO.

Blackburn's most critically acclaimed work, *The Man Child* (1930), takes a much more serious tone than her previous works. Published 2 years after her death, the novel follows Jack Winchester, a Canadian boy who leaves London for the trenches of France during WORLD WAR I. The novel extols the virtues of the war volunteers and the Allied armies. It is not a novel praising war, however. Instead, *The Man Child* celebrates the soldiers and their dedication to the cause. Blackburn plays with form throughout her novel, switching from a traditional narrative structure to an epistolary one as the story moves from London to France. This change in form not only demonstrates Blackburn's skill as a writer, but also mirrors the change in her protagonist as war becomes a personal experience and not just something read about, thousands of miles away. Victoria Grace Blackburn was one of the founders of London's Women's Canadian Club, and served as its president from 1918-1919. She also served as president of the London Women's Press Club (1921-1923).

Epic Of The Yser

Dead with his face to the foe!
From Hastings to Yser
Our men have died so.
The lad is a hero-
Great Canada's pride:
We sent him with glory,
For glory he died-
So ring out the church-bells! Float the flag high!

Then I heard at my elbow a fierce mother-cry.

On the desolate plain
Where the dark Yser flows
They'll bury him, maybe,
Our Child of the Snows:
The message we sent them
Through fire and through flood
He signed it and sealed it
To-day with his blood-
United we stand! Our Empire is One!

But this woman beside me? . . . The boy was her son.

Victoria Grace Blackburn

If Winter Come

Disdainful Earth!
Hooded in clouds and snowdrifts—
Great gray Earth,
That shivers and gathers her garments!
Just for a space you lower your eyelids,
Just for a moment you turn me the cold of your shoulder.
There! There! Already!—
Now I have caught you—
A turquoise rift in the rack,
That was relenting!
And back of the pine-trees a flash like a smile,
That, O earth, was your promise!

Below the depth of the frost
Is the warmth of your bosom.
The ice in your veins
Is troth to the rain and the runnel.
The catch in the call of the wind
Is your lip at my ear—
Your whisper of breezes,
Of breezes and blossom—
Of summer—of sweetness—of love!

Victoria Grace Blackburn

Sing Ho For The Herring

Along the sea shore, surf-beaten and brown,
The Fisher-Lass hastes to the Fishing-Town,
In kirtle of blue and bodice of red,
The sun at its nooning over her head,
And braw is the salt wind blowing—
Then sing, sing ho for the Herring,
The shimmering, sliddery Herring!

Along the sea shore the Fisher-Lads sigh
For the daffing mouth and the daunting eye,
And they sue and they woo, Rubin, Lubin and Bill,
But she taunts and she flaunts as a Fisher-Lass will;
And sleek is the water flowing—
Then sing, sing ho for the Herring,
The gleeking, glamourish Herring!

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Along the sea shore she shadeth her eyes
To where on the wave his white sails rise,
For it seems there's a wraith in the midst of the glare,
And a voice that she loves calls shrilly and rare,
Ah, sly is the under-towing—
Then sing, sing ho for the Herring,
The spectral, the silver-hued Herring.

Along the sea shore in the teeth of the gale,
In its rage and its roar, its swash and its swale,
With faltering steps and staggering tread
They bear him up softly the stark, stark, Dead;
Oh, lang and dour is the knowing—
Then sing, sing ho for the Herring,
The life-giving, death-dealing Herring!

Victoria Grace Blackburn

The Chant Of The Woman

Clash the cymbals!
String the harp and sound it—
Cymbals and harp, there, you Makers of Music!

I will chant to my Comrade the chant of my being,
Woman to Man will I chant it.

I am as old as any. I too have a lineage.
I have come up by forms and through æons;
Forms of manifold fashion, æons of infinite dream.

I, too, am projected of Poets, offspring of the Singers:
I have lain in the womb of the World and incarnate its wonder—
I have played with the Child of the ages and captured its glee—
I have been kissed with the kisses of Kings—
Great Lovers have whispered their lore for my learning.

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Then and now and always, wide away and the length of a span,
I gather that I must gather, by impulse, election:
In me only is attraction,
It alone could attract me,
So am I myself, and none other,
Myself—a mystery! a mouthpiece!

Myself and yet yourself, we two inexplicably one—
Flesh in its consummation, Soul in its incompleteness—
And because of the incompleteness of Soul,
Woman to man,
I chant you the chant of my being.

I cannot live on the crumbs that fall from a Table:
I must be lifted,
Lifted level with my love and with my Lover.
I must be clothed with the purple, made free of the signet—
I must put my hand in his dish, my head on his bosom—
Eye to eye must we lean, loquacious together.

So, and so only
Can I give him to drink of the wine of my winning,
My strange new wine that seethes and bubbles.
So and so only
Can I kiss on his lips the message of Kings–
Whisper the wonder of Life,
The laugh of the Child–
The lore of the Lovers.

Level! Level! Level!
Level with your lips and your eyes my Comrade,
Swing to the height of your heart,
Caught in your soul and kept there
Pervading and peerless!

So, and so only, your Lover, your Servant:
Every passionate pulse-beat
Under the blue veins in my white wrist
Your Servant and Lover–
I cannot live on the crumbs that fall from a Table!

Victoria Grace Blackburn

The Cypress-Tree

Out of the clod of earth
That holds me to this melancholy place,
As ancient servitors
Held flambeaux for their lords
In draughty corridors,
I leap into the sky.

I am a torch with an inherent blaze,
No winter bears me or my verdure down:
The whirling snow and ice
Fall on me to their peril, not to mine:
The swift and sudden wind
Deflects but can not quench
My everlasting fire,
My fire that mounts out of the cerecloth of the dead
And draws its essence from mortality,
Transmuting dissolution and despair
Into aspiring form—
A shape that is a symbol—
A pose prophetic!
I am the Cypress-Tree men plant on graves,
And on their graves—I flame!

Victoria Grace Blackburn

The Evening Star

Above the sunset's many-tinted bar,
Where light on light, a smiling iris gnar,
Mellows to mystery of near and far,
Swings passionately pale the Evening Star!
Queen of the twilight—from a conquered sky
She smiles to see the Day grow faint and die.

Victoria Grace Blackburn