

A Dream of Return

By: Will Johnson

I am now busy reading "A History of English Literature" by William Allan Nielson and at the same time as a compliment to it I am also reading Plutarch's Lives. It is interesting to see that in the Anglo-Saxon period (426 – 1066) as well as from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer (1066 - 1350) that England seemed to have forgotten the Roman Empire. The Romans had ruled over the British Isles for nearly four hundred years. They were the inheritors of the Greek civilization which had produced outstanding literature.

As men develop they become interested in a wider and wider range of things, and their feelings and thoughts become more varied and more individual. The expression in words of these thoughts and feelings grows accordingly; and much of this in each generation is preserved and added to the store of what men deem most worthy of remembering. Thus literature becomes an ever growing record of human life, joining the past to the present, and enabling us to share with sympathy in the best that men have thought and imagined.

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) by being exposed to Plutarch's Lives based his play on the life of Julius Caesar on that history of Julius Caesar written some fifteen hundred years earlier by Plutarch. Much later Goethe wrote: "The observation that all greatness is transitory should not make us despair; on the contrary the realization that the past was great should stimulate us to create something of consequence ourselves."

Besides Beowulf and Caedmon's hymn during the whole Anglo Saxon and Norman period very little other than Christian poems written in monasteries was written in the English language. Very little was known about the civilizations which had existed before the Christian era.

The story of how Caedmon became a poet has an interest beyond the national one. It is the English version of a legend found in many lands which seeks to explain the source of the poet's inspiration. There has always seemed to men to be something supernatural in this. Caedmon who could not sing was requested in a dream to "sing of created things." And so even in small island societies one is always in search of some form of poetry which we can call our own. One such poetess from Saba was Beatrice Pfaffhauser from The Gap. Regrettably all of her work was lost except one poem which Charles Borromeo Hodge was very excited about and begged me to do more research on this lady and try and find more of what she had written. He wrote: "Will, I was extremely impressed by the very beautiful and heart-rending poem by Beatrice Pfaffhauser which appeared on page 24 of "FOR THE LOVE OF ST.MAARTEN". It is a deep, soul-stirring poem that brought haunting memories of St.Maarten washing across my consciousness like the waves on the shores of Great Bay. I felt as if the poetess was speaking directly to me:

sensing every desperate, pent-up emotion. That poem is a very powerful piece of writing. I only wish I could know more about her and see more of her poetry.”

I was assisted in this search by her niece Mrs. Gladys Whittemore of Pinellas Park Florida. She lived well into her nineties and is now long deceased.

Beatrice Pfaffhauser was born on Saba on September 1st, 1880 and died August 2nd, 1962.

Her father was Albert Pfaffhauser born in Zurich Switzerland on July 10th, 1839 and who at the age of 46 died on Saba on December 12th, 1885. His parents were Christopher Pfaffhauser and Ann Elizabeth Huber.

Beatrice’s mother was Rose Elvina Simmons, daughter of Phoenix Simmons (my great- great uncle) and Martha Johnson of Barbados.

They lived in a large two storey house at the Gap where the home of Eric and Patsy Linzey is now located. In former times many of the famous captains lived on that street. Their schooners would be anchored at The Ladder Bay and it is easy to run down the path when weather was coming and take off for a safer haven to weather the storm.

Aunt Glad in a letter of October 19th, 1987 informed me as follows:” Answer to yours, so welcome, is delayed. I had to wait for an answer from Elisa at Satellite Beach first. She found another little poem, which Bea called a “blurb,” about her Northern garden. She always had a garden.

When our mother died in 1905, we children had no one to question about Saba or relatives. Did not know Aunt Bea’s married name. I was about 18 when I began to question my father (in stolen moments!).”

Aunt Glad’s father was a Captain from Prince Edward Island and had met her mother on Barbados when the family lived there. He did not know Saba. Aunt Glad continues: “He had kept in touch with Rosalvina (his mother-in-law) but the correspondence stopped when she re-married, and when I wrote to Mrs. Rosa Cecil my letter was returned, marked deceased. She died in 1914.

“Aunt Bea’s father Albert Pfaffhauser was sent by the Swiss doctors to the West Indies for his health. He and his brother Hans Theodore came to St.Thomas. Their retail store carried silks from their factory in Zurich.

The little Saba lady Rosalina Simmons was visiting there and took refuge in their store from a rain storm. The romance that followed ended in marriage.

Albert took Rosalina to Switzerland. Their first child Martha was born there in 1868. When Albert's health deteriorated again the Swiss doctors recommended the climate of the West Indies. Rosalina longing for Saba readily agreed. Her people the Simmons family furnished land and the young couple built a home and raised quite a family. The father Albert died in 1885 at the age of 46. He was well educated and spoke several languages. Aunt Bea remembers him in white suit and pith helmet, sitting on balcony, with preacher and governor discussing news of the day. The people in Zurich were to take care of this family group and assure their education providing Rosalina did not remarry. But Rosalina did. Her second husband was from Grenada and was a veteran of the civil war in the United States. The family began to scatter. Two sons went to New York City, one daughter to Canada and another to Curacao and Beatrice to the United States. She graduated from Frats Hospital in Chelsea, Mass. around 1902 or 1903. My father told us she visited her sister Elizabeth, (my mother) in Prince Edward Island, Canada. There were no cars there then, so Dad hired a double seated carriage and off they all went for a picnic at a beach on the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They thought it was great fun then, but Dad thinks a fifteen miles ride now would be punishment (he lived to be 103).

When her step-father Cecil died it was Beatrice who got the U.S. government to send his Civil War pension to her mother on Saba. At one time I remember all claims to the property were signed away legally in favour of the Curacao branch of the family. But neglect finally caused the place to be torn down as I understood it.

After graduation she became nurse to an invalid gentleman. The daughter of this family was educated at the Sorbonne, Paris and later in Hollywood became a writer for the Cecil de Mille studios. She also has books in the public libraries. Beulah Marie Dix and Beatrice were close friends for many years, no matter how separated by circumstances, Bea felt quite at home in this literary environment.

She married Laring Weed a reporter for a Boston newspaper. When his studies were completed and he became Dr. Laring Weed, Osteopath, they lived in Newburyport, Mass. The Dr. was also a member of the Library board.

So began a new and always heedful life for Beatrice, but always she kept in touch with her beloved West Indies.

The house they lived in was three storied and an older one. Later, when it was demolished, the beautiful marble mantle and fireplace were taken to a museum in New York, so I am told.

In the thirties, my husband and I were involved in the courts over his father's will. A step-mother was involved. Before it was heard by the Supreme Court – she (and others) had run the business into bankruptcy. When we decided to go to Florida we gave up our home in Wellesley, loaded all household possessions and sent them to Aunt Bea.

It was about 1934 when her plans matured to go see Saba again. My eight year old niece went with her. They sailed from New York City for St.Thomas. It was in the fall and some rough weather kept her in her stateroom a lot.

At St.Thomas the harbor-master was a Simmons (a cousin) and they were well taken care of, while waiting for a steamer to Saba. While waiting this was when Pams comb caught fire near a candle. Panicking she threw it on a bed. Smoke soon brought Beatrice and the damaged bed things were thrown from the balcony to the garden below. Then came disappointing news. Husband Laring sent a telegram saying he had fallen, broken his right wrist and “do come home.”

Saba and Curacao had been alerted about her coming. So now there was disappointment all around. No wonder her poem was so nostalgic.

I regret we saw so little of her, busy working people as we were. She was a quiet person, with a special dignity and a great sense of service to others.

She had one son – married and with a family. Lost track of him. She died of a heart attack at Wheelwright House in Newburyport, Mass.They wrote me a letter, Quote: “Mrs.Weed was greatly liked at Wheelwright House and all were saddened by her sudden death of heart failure. I personally feel we have lost a good friend and a real lady. She fitted into the life so well and was always so gentle, kind and thoughtful of others. We miss her very much. Her service was conducted by the son of former Bishop Sherrill of Mass. The letter was from Margaret B. Little, President of the Board.”

The following poem reflects her longing for the islands. She had lived on Saba but also on the other islands as well. The family lived for awhile in Sam Lords Castle in Barbados. Another curiosity in the Pfaffhauser family is that with the exception of the poetess most of the children died at the age of 27 including Elizabeth the mother of Aunt Gladys Whittemore. After a long search for Saba relatives, she contacted me in the nineteen sixties. We became great friends and she gave me the gold medal which she received when she graduated with honours from her high school on Prince Edward Island in Canada.

The skies are gray, my spirits low.

I sit within the firelight glow.

My thoughts go back to other days,

To coral sands and sunlit bays.

Again I see tropic trees
As delight the eye and scent the breeze.
Poinciana, oleander, frangipani, these
And many others my mind's eye sees.

A banyan is home to a bright macaw,
A monkey sits eating some fruit from his paw,
A land crab scuttles on his way to the cove,
A coconut falls with a thud in the grove.

Ah me! Ah me! That I could go
Where palm fronds clash and trade winds blow,
For these are the things I used to know
So far away and so long ago.

The red-roofed house, by the tall palm tree,
In the long ago, was sweet home to me.
I think of it now as a haven of rest
Where I wish I could go as a bird to its nest.
But the years that are flown have made the wish vain,
I could only return to sorrow and pain.

The letter from Charles Borromeo was written from New York in 1987. He returned to St. Maarten and it is ironic that he suffered the fate as predicted in the poem he admired. He returned only to sorrow and pain.

In ending this tribute to Beatrice Pfaffhauser I quote from H.W.Longfellow's: THE DAY IS DONE.

"Come, read to me some poem,
Some simple and heartfelt lay,
That shall soothe this restless feeling,
And banish the thoughts of day.

Read from some humbler poet,
Whose songs gushed from his heart,
As showers from the clouds of summer,
Or tears from the eyelids start;

And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away."

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