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978-1-108-00434-3 - William Bateson, Naturalist: His Essays and Addresses Together with a Short Account of His Life

Beatrice Bateson

Excerpt

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MEMOIR

WILLIAM BATESON, the second child in a family of six, was born at Whitby on 8 August 1861. His father, William Henry, the fifth son of Richard Bateson, a prosperous merchant of Liverpool, was educated at Shrewsbury under Dr Samuel Butler, and at St John's College, Cambridge. He was a sound classical scholar. After reading for the Bar, he took orders, but eventually he settled in Cambridge. He was elected Public Orator in 1848, and Master of his College in 1857.

In the obituary notice by Professor Bonney, he is described as

especially distinguished by a clear logical intellect, by a singularly acute judgement and by a remarkable faculty for seeing the weak points of any scheme or argument. He was an excellent man of business, of great industry and patience, a first-rate chairman of a meeting, discerning its feeling with marvellous intuition.

An outward dignity of demeanour was combined with a real simplicity of character, and beneath a slight external coldness of manner lay a heart remarkably kind.

He married (1857) Anna, the elder daughter of James Aikin, a prominent citizen of Liverpool. The son of a Writer to the Signet in Dumfries, Aikin came to Liverpool at about the age of 15 (1806), and after some few years in a merchant's office set up business on his own account.

He made many very successful voyages, chiefly to the West Indies, and subsequently introduced a fleet of clipper schooners, which at that period were amongst the fastest vessels afloat. He settled in Liverpool as ship-broker, owner, and merchant. A staunch Liberal, he took a leading part in municipal affairs.

He was eminently practical as a public man, and though short in his observations, they were remarkably terse, and frequently

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very epigrammatic. . . . There was no man who could so effectually silence an opponent by the vigour and readiness of his repartee as James Aikin. . . .

Of personal bitterness he never had more than was sufficient to point the moral of perfidy, or to brand the baseness of a public policy without nobility or ideas; but he had enough plainness of speech to do this with effect, and if he made no enemies there were not a few who found his short sword of retort and epigram sharp and direct in its thrusts. (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 8, 9 July 1878.)

His scholarly tastes and interest in art and drama are noted.

Will's mother was also remarkable for her vigorous vitality, lively spirit, and versatility. She was a very beautiful woman.

My sister-in-law, Miss Anna Bateson, adds this note :

My grandfather, James Aikin, was an important figure in our early days, an adorable companion to his grandchildren. He was of very striking appearance, and extremely vigorous, mentally and physically.

A successful man who had made his way unaided and had preserved high ideals and simplicity of character, he was one of those who inspire confidence at first sight. My brother certainly inherited many of his characteristics, especially his tireless physical energy and his power of endowing everything he touched with a peculiar exciting thrill of interest.

In his prime he had been a man of indomitable determination and almost excessive severity. To the last his own children regarded him with an awe which was unintelligible to us grandchildren. He was a lively talker; where he was dullness disappeared; his whole person radiated zest in life and vigorous health. When we knew him he was an old man, but he preserved to the last the freshness of youth. It was characteristic that he should die at the age of 86, from a chill caught sea-bathing before breakfast, a habit he would never abandon.

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Many a child shews curiosity and interest in natural knowledge, and it is but a phase in his development. With Will however the desire to know was not the normal, superficial curiosity of childhood, it was a passion that stayed by him through life to his last conscious days. He was always a student of nature—an enthusiastic student—and from quite early days commanded an extraordinary range of knowledge in his subject.

In an undated letter (about 1875) to a friend, Will's mother wrote: "Well, I am getting Willie a stunning little book by Sir John Lubbock on the Influence of Insects in the development of Flowers. I will see if he likes it. I expect him to burrow down in it like a bee in a flower himself".

Other small incidents are remembered which mark his very early interest in nature. As a little boy of seven or eight years he parried unfavourable comment on a somewhat disreputable-looking figure who haunted the ditches round Cambridge, exclaiming reverently, "That man is a naturalist".

His sister, Anna, tells me too of a school-room discussion of future careers in which he announced his intention of becoming a naturalist... "if I am good enough," he added doubtfully, "if not, I suppose I shall have to be a doctor". (About this time he procured by some means a copy of Gray's *Anatomy*, to which he was much attached.) His sister also recalls a children's party—occasions generally dreaded by the little Batesons—which Will enjoyed hugely. He spent the whole time talking to another boy. "That boy knows a lot about bones", he said, on his way home, in brief explanation of his unwonted pleasure.

At his Preparatory school (Mr Waterfield's, Temple Grove) all went well enough, and in 1875 he won a Scholarship at Rugby. Dr Jex-Blake, the Headmaster at that time, sent the Socratic Essay which Will wrote for this competition to Dr Bateson, describing it as "one of the best things done in the Examination".

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Rugby Scholarship Essay, June 1875.

A. (Head of Eleven). Hope we win the match.

Socrates. How so? What good will it do you?

A. Well, it won't do me any particular good, but it would be such an honour to the school.

Soc. Then you think it an honour to your school when you win a match, or, in other words, you think it is an honour to your school when 11 of your school can hit a ball better than 11 of S...?

A. Well not exactly.

Soc. Well then, perhaps you think it an honour to your school that your Master and boys are richer and therefore better able to keep the field, etc., in good order than the Master and boys of S...?

A. I can hardly say I do.

Soc. Well then, where is your honour? Perhaps you think it an honour when you have been employing 4 or 5 hours in practising cricket while the boys of S... were improving their minds; or rather, do you think it does you credit to have been wasting half the day in sport?

A. No, I don't think it is.

Soc. Do you think it does honour to yourself or anybody else, when a lot of vagabonds have collected together to bet and get drunk, and all to see you and some others making a show of the way you run, etc.?

A. No, I don't think that is an honour.

Soc. Well then, what do you consider the honour?

A. I don't know exactly, now you ask me.

Soc. No more do I. It seems to me there is not much left. It is all very well to take exercise for your health, that everyone must admit, but it is another thing to think about nothing else but amusement.

But in spite of his very evident ability, Will was no success at school. Quarter after quarter his school reports express the dissatisfaction and disappointment of his masters, and his name figures ominously near the bottom

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of all his class lists. He was unpopular among the boys. Probably his intense and emotional sensitiveness, combined with an unusually alert critical faculty, made him an object of dislike to his school-fellows, and made his masters objects of dislike to him. Three letters written by him at Rugby shew clearly enough how sore was his need of friendly encouragement and sympathy in this dismal period.

10 March, 1878.

Dear Mamma,

Thank you for your note. I went to dinner with Hutchinson to-day, and to breakfast with Lee-Warner on Thursday. I happened to meet him yesterday when I was going a walk and we went together. It is delightful to have some one that you can talk to. He is so different from the other Masters and the fellows one sees. Sidgwick said the other day that I was doing better this term. . . . He was not like a Master at all. I think I enjoyed myself more then than all the time I have been here.

I am going to begin Morley's *Life of Rousseau* which he recommended, next week. I have not been a walk of less than 6 miles any half-holiday since my headaches, and once 14, and twice 10. I have been all right since then. I have read a great deal this term, and have been happier than usual—and I don't want you to tell this—but somehow I never feel really happy,—I suppose I never shall, at least I don't think I ever did except when I got my scholarship; and when Sidg. says I am doing better. It never seems any better. Is anyone happy? I don't think I shall be. You will say, this is all morbid nonsense, but it is true. I never get on with anybody for long; at home even I am always in some scrape except when I am alone. And don't please write back that I am foolish and that, and then not tell me how to cure it.

Yours affectly.

W. Bateson.

A letter to his father was enclosed in the same envelope:

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Dear Papa,

I am very sorry that I have spent so much, but I don't think I could have curtailed anything except pencils and the blotting book. With regard to the former I ordered the second lot because I had lost the first, which I have since found, and I sent a fag down for a blot book and he brought up that one, and I did not know the price until I had used it and it could not be sent back. We are supposed to use a separate note-book for each subject we do, but I do not near do that. The paper is the paper we use. I am sure I have always wanted a packet every three weeks before, but I will try and curtail it now. And I do so hope you won't despise me for what I have said to Mamma. I know I have no pluck. Fellows have kicked that out of me long ago. And I do mean it all. I could not tell you before, but now it would come.

Your affectionate son,

W. Bateson.

The third letter was written on the occasion of his grandfather's death.

Rugby,

July 8, 1878.

Dear Mamma,

When I saw another letter again so soon from you I feared what had happened.¹ Let us indeed be thankful for Grand-papa's long grand life! I felt so glad I saw him once more after all my bad reports. Don't you think he was more satisfied? We were all talking about the Certificate Exam. downstairs when I opened my letter. I am afraid I shall have to wait till next year. Shall you be disappointed? I had calculated the time to too great a nicety and made no allowance. You must have had a very sad Sunday. Is poor Mary very much cut up? She is so sensitive always. I have got a great deal to tell you, but I must wait till some other time.

¹ His grandfather Aikin died 5 July 1878.

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I can leave from Wednesday morning till Friday night. I am afraid of my things not being done in time. Thank you very much for writing instead of telegram.

Ever your affectionate son,

W. Bateson.

Will's interest in Natural Knowledge never failed him; it held him straight and steady through these discouraging years; it armed him with the dogged endurance, which seemed "self-satisfaction", offensive to his Headmaster, but in later years stood him in good stead. If he referred to these early days, the memory was either of his misery at school, or of some boyish triumph of collecting or observing in the field. He would dream through a summer chapel service, watching the open windows. "Would a *Convolvulus* hawk fly in? What should he do if one actually did? Would they let him catch it?"

Under "Science", i.e. chemistry, the school reports record that he is "attentive", and "really intelligent" and his work is "V.G."

The indications seem clear; but Dr Bateson was a classical scholar, and perhaps Natural Science did not strike him as a possible "pursuit" in life. He wrote to his friend (the Rev. Jermyn Cooper of Fylingdales)

Oct. 1877.

...I regard you as fortunate in one respect with regard to your son Robert, that he has a distinct and decided inclination for one pursuit in life. It is a great advantage where it exists and it can appropriately be gratified. We have been wishing that our eldest boy could manifest some special propension but as yet there are no signs of any...

As a matter of fact, the boy knew very well what he wanted to try to do, but his experiences at school had not developed self-confidence. The remoteness of his interests from his father's doubtless contributed to the illusion of

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aimlessness. Parental misgivings cannot have been allayed by the receipt of the following note from the Headmaster :

Rugby,

Dec. 16, 1878.

Dear Dr Bateson,

Your son's work is far inferior to its true level; and for him to be 25th in Classics of Lower Bench, below Gedge, Court, Cross—and below Downing too, a good mathematician, but no Classic—is scandalous. His Divinity with me is very poor; and in short the whole result is poor. Unless the two next Terms are wholly different I cannot advise you to send him back after the summer holidays; and it is very doubtful whether so vague and aimless a boy will profit by University life.

He is certainly capable, and certainly much to blame. He ought to work during the holidays; and the Horace Prize will give him a good target. While so exceedingly disappointed in your son, let me say how glad I am to have seen his sister; so cheerful a visitor and so nice in all the real points.

With kind regards to Mrs Bateson and regrets that I cannot think well of your son while so self-satisfied, indolent and useless, I am,

Yours sincerely,

T. W. Jex-Blake.

In July 1879 Dr Jex-Blake made some amends. He writes:

I wish the report were better, though it is less bad than most of late. You are right in removing him early, for he is very self-satisfied and desultory—even indolent in most things here. But he has vigour and character, though a little abnormal, and I do not despair of seeing him make a mark in the world yet. I enclose Mr M's report. . . .

In after-life, addressing the Salt Schools (1915), Will recalled his school-days:

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I look back on my school education as a time of scarcely relieved weariness, mental starvation and despair. There came at last a moment when I was turned into a chemical laboratory and for the first time found there was such a thing as real knowledge which had a meaning and was not a mere exercise in pedantry. Our staple was of course Latin and Greek, of which I made nothing. Some emotional pleasure came towards the end of my school course from the Greek tragedies but otherwise those years were almost blank. Now what I, and thousands of other boys like me, discover in after-life is that by those very same materials, perhaps more than by any others, we might have been “waked to ecstasy” and to the joy of development.

Extremely sensitive, he was unable to assert himself in face of such discouragement. The same sensitiveness responded quickly enough to sympathy and interest, and this is evident in an immediate improvement in the school reports after the walk with Lee-Warner, also in his vivid happy memory of days when such encouragement came his way. Half-holidays spent with Mr Linnaeus Cumming (mathematical master and field-naturalist of distinction) were bright in his memory.

Later in middle life he came across an old lady, Miss Lakin, in Reading,¹ who had been governess in his family. With but little knowledge of Natural History she had shewn sympathy and interest in the boy's holiday pursuits, trying to help him collect his treasures on land and sea-shore. From this chance meeting he came home excited and moved by his memories of childish gratitude to her. Until her death he never failed to go and see her on the occasions of his visits to Reading; amusing her with accounts of his own boys, and helping her with small gifts of one sort or another. I have now her manuscript note-book with lists of “the seven wonders of the

¹ At that time Messrs Sutton and Sons generously allowed him a free run of their glass and gardens, giving him opportunity and material for study and research otherwise unobtainable, and he was often in Reading in consequence.

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world”, “The Labours of Hercules”, the dates of the Kings of England...her stock-in-trade as governess—which he brought back in triumph one day after visiting her.

He left Rugby in 1879 and was entered at St John’s College, Cambridge, of which his father then was Master.

But the grim cloud of school still overshadowed him. He was “ploughed” in mathematics in the “Little-go”.

This difficulty he referred to many years later in a letter to *Nature*¹ on compulsory Greek:

Cambridge,

Feb. 1905.

The experiences of Mr Willis and others suggest that mine may be in point. Mr Willis was behind in Classics. He wasted 105½ hours on Greek and passed. His present knowledge of Greek is *nil*. Mathematics were my difficulty. Being destined for Cambridge I was specially coached in mathematics at school. Arrived here, I was again coached, but failed. Coached once more I passed, having wasted, not one, but several hundred hours on that study. Needless to say, my knowledge of mathematics is *nil*. My case is that of hundreds. Why then are not compulsory mathematics to be reformed away?

Because they can be used in trades and professions for the making of money. But the things that put the touch of art in the life of a dull boy, that open his eyes for once to another world, where “utility” does not count—they, forsooth, must be dispensed with because in the market they have no value. And, verily, they are without price.

The teaching of mathematics since his school-days has been greatly improved. Often he envied his sons the easy grasp they had acquired of this subject, though none of them were “mathematical”. When he needed help in his calculations he sought it frankly from a professional.

Once quit of school and “pedantry”, free to choose

¹ *Nature*, LXXI, No. 1843, 390.