

**THE COLLECTED
POEMS OF
RUPERT BROOKE**

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The collected poems of Rupert Brooke by Rupert Brooke

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THE
COLLECTED POEMS
OF
RUPERT BROOKE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
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AND A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
BY MARGARET LAVINGTON

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INTRODUCTION

I

Rupert Brooke was both fair to see and winning in his ways. There was at the first contact both bloom and charm; and most of all there was life. To use the word his friends describe him by, he was "vivid." This vitality, though manifold in expression, is felt primarily in his sensations—surprise mingled with delight—

"One after one, like tasting a sweet food."

This is life's "first fine rapture." It makes him patient to name over those myriad things (each of which seems like a fresh discovery) curious but potent, and above all common, that he "loved,"—he the "Great Lover." Lover of what, then? Why, of

"White plates and cups clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines,"—

and the like, through thirty lines of exquisite words; and he is captivated by the multiple brevity of these vignettes of sense, keen, momentary, ecstatic with the morning dip of youth in the wonderful stream. The poem is a catalogue of vital sensations and "dear names" as well. "All these have been my loves."

The spring of these emotions is the natural body, but it sends pulsations far into the spirit. The feeling rises in direct observation, but it is soon aware of the "outlets of the sky." He sees objects practically unrelated, and

INTRODUCTION

links them in strings; or he sees them pictorially; or, he sees pictures immersed as it were in an atmosphere of thought. When the process is complete, the thought suggests the picture and is its origin. Then the Great Lover revisits the bottom of the monstrous world, and imaginatively and thoughtfully recreates that strange under-sea, whose glooms and gleams and muds are well known to him as a strong and delighted swimmer; or, at the last, drifts through the dream of a South Sea lagoon, still with a philosophical question in his mouth. Yet one can hardly speak of "completion." These are real first flights. What we have in this volume is not so much a work of art as an artist in his birth trying the wings of genius.

The poet loves his new-found element. He clings to mortality; to life, not thought; or, as he puts it, to the concrete,—let the abstract "go pack!" "There's little comfort in the wise," he ends. But in the unfolding of his precocious spirit, the literary control comes uppermost; his boat, finding its keel, swings to the helm of mind. How should it be otherwise for a youth well-born, well-bred, in college air? Intellectual primacy showed itself to him in many wandering "loves," fine lover that he was; but in the end he was an intellectual lover, and the magnet seems to have been especially powerful in the ghosts of the men of "wit," Donne, Marvell—erudite lords of language, poets in another world than ours, a less "ample ether," a less "divine air," our fathers thought, but poets of "eternity." A quintessential drop of intellect is apt to be in poetic blood. How Platonism fascinates the poets, like a shining bait! Rupert Brooke will have none of it; but at a turn of the verse he is back at it,

INTRODUCTION

examining, tasting, refusing. In those alternate drives of the thought in his South Sea idyl (clever as tennis play) how he slips from phenomenon to idea and reverses, happy with either, it seems, "were t'other dear charmer away." How bravely he tries to free himself from the cling of earth, at the close of the "Great Lover!" How little he succeeds! His muse knew only earthly tongues,—so far as he understood.

Why this persistent cling to mortality,—with its quick-coming cry against death and its heaped anathemas on the transformations of decay? It is the old story once more:—the vision of the first poets, the world that "passes away." The poetic eye of Keats saw it,—

"Beauty that must die,
And Joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu."

The reflective mind of Arnold meditated it,—

"the world that seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain."—

So Rupert Brooke,—

"But the best I've known,
Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies.
Nothing remains."

INTRODUCTION

And yet,—

“Oh, never a doubt but somewhere I shall wake;”

again,—

“the light,
Returning, shall give back the golden hours,
Ocean a windless level”

again, best of all, in the last word,—

“Still may Time hold some golden space
Where I'll unpack that scented store
Of song and flower and sky and face,
And count, and touch, and turn them o'er,
Musing upon them.”

He cannot forego his sensations, that “box of compacted sweets.” He even forefeels a ghostly landscape where two shall go wandering through the night, “alone.” So the faith that broke its chrysalis in the first disillusionment of boyhood, in “Second Best,” beautiful with the burden of Greek lyricism, ends triumphant with the spirit still unsubdued.—

“Proud, then, clear-eyed and laughing, go to greet
Death as a friend.”

So go, “with unreluctant tread.” But in the disillusionment of beauty and of love there is an older tone. With what bitter savor, with what grossness of diction, caught from the Elizabethan and satirical elements in his culture, he spends anger in words! He reacts, he rebels, he storms. A dozen poems hardly exhaust his gall. It is not merely that beauty and joy and love are transient, now, but in their going they are corrupted into their opposites,—ugli-

INTRODUCTION

ness, pain, indifference. And his anger once stilled by speech, what lassitude follows!

Life, in this volume, is hardly less evident by its ecstasy than by its collapse. It is a book of youth, sensitive, vigorous, sound; but it is the fruit of intensity, and bears the traits. The search for solitude, the relief from crowds, the open door into nature; the sense of flight and escape; the repeated thought of safety, the insistent fatigue, the cry for sleep;—all these bear confession in their faces. "Flight," "Town and Country," "The Voice," are eloquent of what they leave untold; and the climax of "Retrospect,"—

"And I should sleep, and I should sleep,"—

or the sestet of "Waikiki," or the whole fainting sonnet entitled "A Memory," belong to the nadir of vitality. At moments weariness set in like a spiritual tide. I associate, too, with such moods, psychologically at least, his visions of the "arrested moment," as in "Dining Room Tea,"—a sort of trance state—or in the pendant sonnet. Analogous moods are not infrequent in the great poets. Rupert Brooke seems to have faltered, nervously, at times; these poems mirror faithfully such moments. But even when the image of life, imaginative or real, falters so, how essentially vital it still is, and clothed in an exquisite body of words like the traditional "rainbow hues of the dying fish!" For I cannot express too strongly my admiration of the literary sense of this young poet, and my delight in it. "All these have been my loves," he says, if I may repeat the phrase; but he seems to have loved the words, as much as the things,—"dear names," he adds. The

INTRODUCTION

born man of letters speaks there. So, when his pulse is at its lowest, he cannot forget the beautiful surface of his South Sea idyls or of versified English gardens and lanes. He cared as much for the expression as for the thing, which is what makes a man of letters. So fixed is this habit that his art, truly, is independent of his bodily state. In his poems of "collapse" as in those of "ecstasy" he seems to me equally master of his mood,—like those poets who are "for all time." His literary skill in verse was ripe, how long so ever he might have to live.

II

To come, then, to art, which is above personality, what of that? Art is, at most, but the mortal relic of genius; yet it is true of it that, like Ozymandias' statue, "nothing beside remains." Rupert Brooke was already perfected in verbal and stylistic execution. He might have grown in variety, richness and significance, in scope and in detail, no doubt; but as an artisan in metrical words and pauses, he was past apprenticeship. He was still a restless experimenter, but in much he was a master. In the brief stroke of description, which he inherited from his early attachment to the concrete; in the rush of words, especially verbs; in the concatenation of objects, the flow of things *en masse* through his verse, still with the impulse of "the bright speed" he had at the source; in his theatrical impersonation of abstractions, as in "The Funeral of Youth," where for once the abstract and the concrete are happily fused;—in all these there are the elements, and in the last there is the perfection, of mastery. For one thing, he knew how to end. It is with him a dramatic