

Robert Lucas in Verse

Few associates of Robert Lucas suspected that the hawk-eyed Indian fighter and uncompromising Governor of Ohio and Iowa was a poet at heart. Among his personal papers, however, over a hundred and fifty pages of manuscript verse testify to a latent vein of artistry in his character. A few of these poems were written in early manhood, but most were the work of his leisured years between 1851 and 1853. All were painstakingly copied by the old man into two commonplace books which he had thriftily contrived by filling the blank pages of his great leather-bound Copy Book of Executive Letters and those of a much smaller book in which he had recorded in journal form his adventures with the British and Indians in the War of 1812.

In crabbed handwriting which, as he passed into his seventy-third year, became more and more difficult to read, he preserved a few of his early poems. Then, as he composed his later verses — pious meditations and musings — he copied them into these two books. Apparently he entertained a lurking hope that posterity might be interested in these effusions, for he signed most of them with his full name or else with the initials R. L. and

added the exact date of composition. Many also included as a superscription or footnote the occasion for composition and a few identify places or personal names to which allusion had been made in the poems.

The last years of his life were spent in his comfortable farmstead home at Plum Grove on the outskirts of Iowa City, in sight of the Stone Capitol which had been planned and begun while he was Governor. There, in the enforced leisure of age, he meditated upon life, perused his Methodist Hymnal, and diligently read his Bible.

What else he read is difficult to ascertain, but very probably he knew the seventeenth-century writers of religious verse, for his numerous acrostics, meditations, epigrams, hymns, and even his attempts to write vision literature, resemble those of Francis Quarles, Richard Crashaw, and George Wither, particularly the last of these. The works of these poets and those of other writers of pietistic verse were readily available to him in the fifty volumes of *British Poets* listed among the books chosen by Lucas himself and "his literary friends" for the Territorial library of Iowa.

Robert Lucas wrote much pietistic verse but seldom, if ever, did he achieve the blending of thought, emotion, and artistry which characterizes true poetry. His use of this medium was unskill-

ful, but his religious verse, written with simplicity and sincerity, must have given him considerable personal satisfaction.

Not long ago Stephen Vincent Benet discovered a similar vein in the doughty Confederate general, Stonewall Jackson. Benet's characterization might as well have been written about Robert Lucas, for it exactly describes the poetic vein which lay deep in the nature of the Iowa warrior.

Hard on his followers, harder on his foes,
An iron sabre vowed to an iron Lord,
And yet the only man of those men who pass
With a strange, secretive grain of harsh poetry
Hidden so deep in the stony sides of his heart
That it shines by flashes only and then is gone.
It glitters in his last words.

Like the Confederate general, Robert Lucas was hard on himself, hard on his friends, and harder on his foes whether they were Indians, British soldiers, or political enemies. Throughout his life he disciplined himself to meet the tasks which the frontier had demanded of him. Yet truly beneath his stern exterior lay "a strange, secretive grain of harsh poetry" of which his contemporaries knew little. Probably none of his poetical writing, which revealed his inner nature, was printed in his lifetime.

In spite of the imperfection of his poetry, its lapses into doggerel, and its limited range, the verses of Robert Lucas do possess significance. Hidden "deep in the stony sides of his heart", they both vivify and verify the character traits which his biographers have ascribed to him — firmness of conviction, loyalty to his family, and a deep concern for the integrity of his beliefs. Although crises in his early life had found expression in short poems, most of his verses show his belief in his "iron Lord" and in the principles inherent in the Methodist Discipline, the Methodist Hymnal, and in the Old and New Testament. These truly "glitter in his last words", for nine-tenths of his verses were written at his walnut secretary near the fireplace at Plum Grove where, as an old man, he viewed life in the perspective of his own past.

In 1851 at the age of seventy, Robert Lucas began to collect his verses and continued to write them almost up to the day of his death in February, 1853. The earliest was composed in 1806 when he had been commissioned to muster a company of militia. He gave this poem no title but when he copied it he noted that it had been set to the music of the "Soldier's Return" and sung by the volunteers who had rallied to his call. It is obvious from the first stanza that the spirit of patriotism rises above its musical qualities.

Come on ye heroes never pause
So our fathers died so let us
Defend our Country's righteous cause
Against all who dare oppose us.
Let us resolve that we'll march on
And when in Canada landed
Our injured rights we'll think upon
And pull down the British standard.

Much of Lucas's manuscript verse reveals an aspect of his life which did not appear in the newspapers of his day. In dealing with Ohio politicians and with the first Iowa Territorial Secretary, Governor Robert Lucas showed little humility, yet this trait is revealed in many of his poems. A "short time before" he joined the Methodist Church at the age of thirty-eight, he wrote "Robert Lucas's Constant Prayer" in which he expressed his humbleness before God. It was composed in his favorite octosyllabic quatrain with alternate lines rhyming and presented a theme which continually recurred in his verses — his desire to conduct his life on earth so that he could reach heaven. Two stanzas are typical.

Oh Lord, my soul from sin relieve,
And from a mind extremely blind,
Oh that the truth, I could believe,
With all my heart, and soul, and mind.
Prepare me Lord, to meet the day,
When death's appointed time is come.

And with a faithful heart to say,
Oh Lord, thy gracious will be done.

In the Methodist Church a hundred years ago the class meeting was an important part of worship. Men and women assembled in separate places for the study of the Scriptures, for discipline, if necessary, for exhortation, for testimony, and, more important than these, for confession. Once a quarter they met together in a "love feast". From the confessional meetings, Robert Lucas received much inspiration. Several of the "vision poems" which he wrote in old age contain vivid memories of his experiences at class meetings. The second poem in the Lucas collection is entitled, "Reflections at Class Meetings and Love Feasts". In a pencilled note Lucas said he had composed it to the tune of "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing". The final stanza read:

Lord, send down thy holy spirit,
Search and cleanse our every heart;
And thy sanctifying spirit
Through thy grace to each impart.
Make us humble, make us holy,
Fill our souls with perfect love,
Rule and reign within us wholly
Till we are called to thee above.

In the decades of the eighteen-forties and fifties, the vogue of the autograph album was in full

swing. Members of the family and friends, both young and old, wrote above their autographs anything from nonsense verses to proverbial wisdom. Neither nonsense nor personal compliments flowed from the pen of Robert Lucas. Instead, he displayed his ingenuity with the popular acrostic, little realizing perhaps that the necessity of beginning each new line with a letter prescribed by the accident of a name necessarily inhibited his small poetic gift.

As he penned his acrostics and laboriously copied each into his commonplace book, he dedicated them individually to friends and relatives, dating each, and adding his signature. A prayer for the Lucas family, for instance, which he wrote on March 7, 1851, was entitled, "An Acrostic Robert Lucas, to his Wife, Children, and Grandchildren. Amen". The initial letters in the first stanza, it may be noted, are the first four letters of Robert and those of stanza twelve spell Amen.

Regard us thine, Father above.
On each heart, stamp thy pardoning love;
Beneath the cross may we all fall,
Ever listening to the gospel call.

And this, oh Lord, our prayer shall be;
Meekly, we all may live in thee,
Exalted at death, to heaven above,
Never more to part from them we love.

He dedicated another to his wife, "Friendly Ashley Lucas", two to his sisters, Lavisia Steanburgen and Rhoda Boynton, and three to his sons. One, written on February 20, 1851, was inspired by the memory of his son, Robert, who had died almost a quarter of a century earlier at the age of ten months. His daughters were the subjects of their share, and not less than seven granddaughters were recipients of these pious acrostics.

Only in the verses which he wrote for his grandchildren and very possibly copied into their albums, did he include any Christian names. Even more than in the acrostics which he formulated for adults, these poems fall into a type of moralistic verse, known as *Advices*, which had been very popular in the preceding century. In America the tradition of expressing moral precepts in verse began with the *New England Primer*, and was perpetuated in the publications of the American Tract Society, which supplied the Sunday School reading material on the frontier, and in denatured form was popularized in the early editions of the McGuffey readers.

One acrostic is brief enough to be quoted in full since the acrostic letters number only nine. In this case Lucas again showed his preference for the quatrain and filled out his third stanza with three extra lines.

Meekness, patience, truth and love
Are ways that lead to peace above;
Remove all sin, for Christ was slain,
Your soul to save from endless pain,

Lo, his grace now is free to all.
Unto you his spirit now doth call.
Come unreserved by faith to me
And you shall from your sin be free.

Saviour I come; thy grace bestow,
To guide me through the world below.
May my soul be sunk in Thee,
Prepare me, Lord, thy face to see.

After 1851, although Robert Lucas remained in constant touch with schemes for future railroads, lent his influence to the promotion of temperance in Iowa and to the advancement of education, his verses reflect none of these interests. In addition to his predilection for acrostics, he filled page after page with imitations of the seventeenth-century "vision literature", and more with meditations and hymns.

A group of four poems suggests a trace of mystical experience in his remembrance of various dreams of his youth which continued to live vividly in his memory as moments of exaltation during his earliest connection with the Methodist Church. His use of these visions somewhat resembles the allegorical treatment employed by Henry Vaughan

and John Bunyan. In "Thoughts on a Future State", he began by saying that many years before in a vision he had seen Christ who gave him a Book and an angel for a guide. This celestial being had led him into a "spacious Hall" and "bade him view the paintings on the wall."

I turned to the wall, saw clearly painted there
Every act of my life, conspicuous and clear.
The dangers I had passed through I trembled to see
God's Mercy and Goodness did much astonish me.

Humble in view of his sins, he was returned to Christ and then awoke. With the vision clearly in mind he closed the poem with a petition to God and the hope that other sinners might profit by his experience.

In thee I live, to thee my all I give
As ransomed son grant me to live
In strict obedience to thy heavenly will
That I my duties while living may fulfill.

Lord, if these written thoughts are pleasing to thee
Grant that those who read may be led to see
That the cross of Christ is the only way given
That leads from death up to the joys of heaven.

Though he frequently commented on his own code of life and the evils of the "carnal world", meditations with Lucas usually took the form of reflections on such topics as "Man's Creation, his

Fall and Redemption by Christ". This particular poem runs through fifty-two didactic stanzas which review his evangelical belief in the fall of man and his faith in the atonement. Though Lucas would not have recognized the present meaning of the term, he was wholly fundamentalistic in his attitude toward the Scriptures. In 1851 he wrote a meditative poem which he called "Christ's Sufferings". In the following year he enlarged upon this theme and made it into his most ambitious attempt to trace the events of Passion Week. This long poem included the agony in Gethsemane, the trial before Pilate, the death on the cross, and closed with the ascension of Christ.

As might be expected in this collection of pietistic verses, hymns held a prominent place. For the most part they followed the themes and were written to the tunes of the evangelical hymnals of a century ago. The meter of each hymn was meticulously indicated by the abbreviations L. M. and S. M. which stand respectively for long and short meter. Long meter referred to a quatrain written in tetrameter verse, with four accents to the line. Short meter differed in that the first, second, and fourth lines were shortened to trimeter verse with three beats to the line.

In an experimental mood, Lucas often wrote several religious songs in one meter and then

transposed them wholly or in part to another. One of these which he called "A Class Leader's Hymn" was written first under the date of February 10, 1852. On April 1, 1852, by way of celebrating his seventy-second birthday, he completed the revised version, "Class Leader's Hymn, Changed to Suit the Love-Feast". The first stanza of each version will indicate as well as any his efforts at conscious artistry and his desire to perfect his medium of expression. In general he preferred the iambic form, but here he employed the anapestic measure.

We now in class meet — Jesus' praise to repeat
And implore him to meet with us here,
To inspire us with love — and our thought raise above
This world its attractions and fears.

The revised stanza was altered to:

In Love-Feast we meet — Lord thy praise to repeat
Implore thee to meet with us here
Inspire us with love — and our minds raise above
This world its allurements and fear.

During the last few months of his life he composed many hymns, some of which indicate that he was preoccupied with the theme of death. He entertained few doubts that personal immortality awaited him. While he spoke of bodies dissolving in clay and of "death's gate" and "the Valley of

Death", he dwelt much more on his hopes of heaven. To him heaven was a very real destination where friends and relatives could meet and converse, a place both spiritual and beautiful. In "Gospel News" he wrote:

Cities have pearly gates
 The streets are paved with gold
 With seas of glass, with crystal lakes
 And beauties yet untold.

There is perpetual day
 No darkness of the night
 And all who gospel truth obey
 Have a pre-emption right.

On his last Christmas Day, in 1852 when he was in his seventy-second year, he completed a "Christmas Hymn" which in the next few weeks he revised at least three times. In its dozen stanzas the narrative is carried from the birth of the Christ child to the crucifixion. The first three stanzas tell the nativity story very simply.

Look to the east, behold that Star,
 God's glorious gift, to man 'twas given.
 Its light exceeds the sun by far;
 It lights the way for man to heaven.

Angels from heaven in glory bright,
 They first proclaimed the gospel morn.
 Shepherds led by the holy light,
 Sought the Saviour there, frail, new born.

They found him in a manger laid.
He's been excluded from the inn —
God's son, by whom the world was made,
An infant lay, with God within.

On that same Christmas Day, six weeks before his death on February 7, 1853, he wrote a nine-stanza poem called "Contentment" which expressed much of his philosophy of life.

What restless creatures we mortals be!
Can never be content,
We envy others' prosperity,
Our own hard fates lament.

But true contentment cannot be found
In wealth or armour; no,
In palaces or royal ground
Contentment does not go.

It can't be found in worldly joys
Nor in the courts of kings;
The whole world with its glitt'ring toys
Contentment never brings.

Lord, let us see our actual case;
May truth in us advance
And guide us to the only place
Contentment may be found.

The significance of this manuscript collection of Robert Lucas's verses does not lie in the literary merit of his utterances. The hymns, reflections, and visions do indicate to some extent the charac-

ter of the spiritual foundations of the midwest Bible belt, and particularly reveal the steadying faith which served as a center for what Robert Lucas in manhood and old age considered wholly worthwhile in life. It was his inner calm which had enabled him to integrate the various forces in his life, to formulate his own code of behavior, and to meet friends and foes with fairness and yet with uncompromising sternness.

LUELLE M. WRIGHT