Shooting star

The pioneer whose poetry flourished only briefly but helped us find our voice.

by CHRIS MOORE

Carol Markwell’s robust biography of writer and penal reformer Blanche Baughan (1870-1958) begins at a cracking pace. Murder, madness and an unexplained death in Victorian England lead us into ENOUGH HORIZON: The life and work of Blanche Baughan (The Cuba Press, $40). The young English woman’s sedate middle-class life was perhaps haunted by a family history, which included her maternal grandfather’s murderous insanity, her mother’s mental deterioration and her father’s mysterious death in 1880. Markwell proposes that a history of mental illness might conceivably explain Baughan’s fear of having children and apparent determination to remain single.

What is undeniable is that the woman who graduated from London University in 1891 with a BA Hons possessed sufficient reserves of character to survive and endure long after emigrating alone to a new life in 1900. Baughan had written (and published) poetry since 1898, but her early New Zealand poems and short stories were arguably the first to reflect a truly authentic Kiwi voice. In short, Baughan was a ground-breaking poet.

The power and resonance of The Old Place (1902) is a universe away from the “Maoriland Fairy Tales” school of verse. Young Hotspur bounces along fuelled by youthful rebellion, and her later poems, including the 1908 collection Single-Short: And other verses, are distinctively sinewy reflections of early 20th century New Zealand. A Bush Section still deserves its status as one of the best New Zealand poems ever written (“Logs, at the door, by the fence; logs, broadcast over the pad-dock; / Sprawling in motionless thousands away down the green of the gully.”)

Markwell’s biography places the timeless qualities of Baughan’s verse alongside her short stories and travel pieces. But after three volumes of acclaimed verse, she suddenly stopped writing poetry. Markwell offers several explanations, ranging from a serious illness to a spiritual awakening when Baughan became a disciple of the Hindu Vedanta movement. Although she continued writing travel pieces and essays, the poetic voice fell silent.

The author explores Baughan’s subsequent life, one filled with social campaigns (notably prison reform), her friendships and life in the close-knit community of Banks Peninsula and Akaroa. She even briefly became a local body politician. The biography provides a warmly affectionate and carefully researched portrait of an inspired and inspiring woman, but it is still a book of two halves where the second serves to highlight what New Zealand lost when the poet’s voice fell silent.