

SIR JOHN BEAUMONT OF GRACEDIU

by

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Sir John Beaumont (1582-1627) of Gracedieu in the county of Leicester was, says William Burton in his *Description of Leicestershire*, "a gentleman of great learning, gravity and worth".¹ He was brother to Francis Beaumont, the dramatist, and like him a poet, though a minor one.

The family sprang from Sir Thomas Beaumont, a Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, who died in 1457. Sir Thomas had two sons: John, who succeeded to the family honours at Coleorton, Goadby Marwood and Congeston, and Thomas, who received a younger son's portion at Thringstone. The Thringstone lands eventually passed to Thomas's grandson, John Beaumont, who was a lawyer. As early as 1529 he was acting for the Corporation of Leicester; he was also surveyor for Leicestershire on the commission for the dissolution of the monasteries, and in 1539 obtained for himself the house and lands of the suppressed nunnery of Gracedieu. In 1550 he was Recorder of Leicester, and was also elevated to the Bench as Master of the Rolls. There he acted so dishonourably that he was deprived of his office, and his property confiscated to the Crown. He died before 1562; the exact date is not known. He had married, as his second wife, Elizabeth Hastings of the Ashby-de-la-Zouch family, and she was able to recover the property, which passed to their elder son, Francis. He, too, was a lawyer and became a judge in the Court of Common Pleas, one of great probity—a "grave, learned and reverend judge".²

Francis Beaumont had three sons: Henry, John and Francis. In February 1596/7 all three of them were entered at Broadgates Hall (later, Pembroke College) at Oxford, but they left without taking degrees. They then went to London, and were enrolled at the Inner Temple. Their father died in 1598, and Henry succeeded to the privileges and duties of a landed proprietor. He represented the Borough of Leicester in the Parliament of 1605 and was "a loving true-hearted man to the town".³ He died later the same year, aged 24.

Meanwhile, John and Francis had joined the circle of poets and men of letters who foregathered at the Mermaid Tavern with Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton. Drayton called them his "dear companions" and "rightly born poets"; Jonson, in lines addressed to Francis, wrote:

*How I do love thee, Beaumont, and thy Muse.*⁴

John Beaumont's first poem, the *Metamorphises of Tabacco*, was published anonymously in 1602, and it was dedicated to Drayton. It had, doubtless,

been passed round in manuscript among his friends, several of whom wrote prefatory verses for it. The poem carries echoes of their professional talk

*As when the actors of some interlude
Which please the senses of the multitude,
Are backt by the spectators of the Play
With a wisht laughter or a plaudite*⁵

Beaumont also numbered among his friends and patrons Henry, third earl of Southampton, Shakespeare's friend, and George Villiers, first duke of Buckingham. The Beaumonts could cry cousins with the duke, whose mother was a Beaumont from Glenfield.

When Henry Beaumont died without male issue, John became head of the family. He married Elizabeth, daughter of John Fortesque, and they had a number of children. Fortesque was employed in the Queen's Wardrobe and he lived near Puddle Wharf in the City of London, in a house owned by William Shakespeare. The family adhered to the "old religion", and Mistress Fortesque, who was related to the earl of Southampton, notoriously befriended priests. Yet, as A. L. Rowse points out, that did not affect John Fortesque's position at the Wardrobe. John Beaumont and his wife were fined for recusancy in 1607, and in 1625 he was again in trouble on that score. In the main he lived quietly in Leicestershire, but did not lose touch with London friends. Buckingham presented him at Court and, in 1626, King Charles created him baronet. According to George Farnham, he died at Gracedieu on 17 April 1627, and Alexander Grosart says that he was buried in Westminster Abbey ten days later. His *Inquisitio Post Mortem* was taken at Hinckley on 16 May 1627. He was succeeded by his eldest son, another Sir John, who also wrote verses, was a friend of Philip King and the younger set, and contributed to the anthology of elegies of which *Lycidas* was chief.

Sir John, the younger, edited his father's poems and they were published in 1629 under the title *Bosworth Field . . . and other Poems*. The volume was dedicated to Charles I, and it includes elegies for Beaumont by his sons John and Francis and by Thomas Nevill, Thomas Hawkins, Ben Johnson, Michael Drayton, Philip King and others.

The book contains poems in Latin, English translations from Latin authors and original English ones. It is with these last, that reveal an interesting and attaching character, that the remainder of this paper is concerned. It must be conceded that most of the verses are not high poetry. *The Elegy for my Son Gervase Beaumont* is probably the only well-known one, though students may note the lines to King James, *Concerning the true Form of English*, in which Beaumont voiced contemporary dissatisfaction with slack blank verse, and provided some notes on prosody that Dryden and his successors might well have found useful. In his sentiments and opinions, Beaumont was very much an Elizabethan—not least in his devotion to his Sovereign, respect for social degree and for his view of important historical events.

Shakespeare, as is well known, dealt dramatically with what were then regarded as the crucial battles of English history, Agincourt and Bosworth,

and Drayton had written a ballad of the former. Beaumont, the Leicestershire man, tackled Bosworth. He followed the same narrative line as that in *Richard III*, Act V— the protagonists' visions, Stanley's holding aloof, Surrey's loyalty, the final duel between Richmond and Richard. But, whereas Drayton's Agincourt is a stylised, heraldic battle with shields opposed and limbs severed bloodlessly, Beaumont's Bosworth is more realistic, with confusion, noise and pain. This effect owes much to animal imagery, in which the poem abounds,

*Here Stanley and brave Lovell try their strength
Whose equal courage draws the strife to length,
They think not how they may themselves defend
To strike is all their care, to kill their end.
So meet two bulls upon adjoining hills
Of rocky Charnwood, while their murmuring fills
The hollow crags, when striving for their bounds
They wash their piercing horns in mutual wounds*⁶

or Norfolk's tactics:

*He thus attempts to pierce to the heart
And break the orders of the adverse part,
As when the cranes direct their flight on high
To cut their way, they in a trigon fly*⁷

and

*The King's side droops: so generous horses lie
Unapt to stir, or make their courage known
Which under cruel masters sink and groan*⁸

In this poem Beaumont puts into Surrey's mouth the Elizabethan view of loyalty in extremest form:

*Set England's royal wreath upon a stake
There will I fight, and not the place forsake*⁹

Beaumont's own devotion to the Crown was complete, and he subscribed to the contemporary convention of hyperbolic compliment dutifully and easily. He even worked a polite reference to Queen Elizabeth into his poem *Tabacco*:

*Others do tell a long and serious tale
Of a fair nymph that sported in the vale
Where Cipo with her seven streams doth go
Along the valleys of Wingandekoe—
Which now a far more glorious name doth bear
Since a more beauteous nymph was worshipt there—*¹⁰

and he provided a footnote in case we miss the point:

*Wingandekoe is a country in the north part of America, called by
the Queen, Virginia.*¹¹

This kind of thing often seems to modern ears excessive, as in his second sonnet for *the End of His Majesty's First Year* where he likened the blessings of the accessions of James I (24 March 1603) and Charles I (27 March 1625)

with those of the coming of Spring, the Annunciation and Easter. Yet, if his elegy for James is examined for substance beneath the compliment, it will be found that Beaumont praised that pusilanimous runtling for virtues he really had—his descent from four royal lines (“it kindles virtue to be nobly born”); his surviving the quite inordinate dangers of his infancy; his love of and skill in debate; his achievement of peace both at home and abroad:

*Our king preserves for two and twenty years
This realm from inward and from outward fears.
All English peers escape the deadly stroke,
Though some with crimes his anger durst provoke¹²*

A period of twenty-two years without a member of the peerage perishing on the scaffold was more remarkable in Beaumont’s day than in ours. And, what most appealed to Beaumont was the King’s learning and love of the English tongue:

*It is sufficient for my creeping verse
His care of English language to rehearse.
He leads the lawless poets of our times
To smoother cadence, to exactor lines.¹³*

The same kind of fundamental good sense is evident in his epithalamium for Buckingham and Lady Katherine Manners. The poet extolled his kinsman’s looks in terms that are certainly strong but hardly excessive considering that his physical endowments carried that younger son of an obscure squire all the way to a dukedom. Beaumont then addressed the bride and hoped for a son who would resemble *her* and might grow to be equal to his father’s rank.

*We wish a son whose smile,
Whose beauty may proclaim him thine;
Who may be worthy of his father’s style,
May answer to our hopes, and strictly may combine
The happy height of Villier’s race with noble Rutland’s line.¹⁴*

Beaumont’s poems about his close relations and intimate friends show a tenderness and sense of values that are remarkable. Take, for example, Sir William Skipworth of Cotes near Loughborough:

*A comely body and beauteous mind;
A heart to love, a hand to give inclined;
A house as full and open as the air;
A tongue which joys in language sweet and fair;
Yet can, when need requires, with courage bold,
To public ears his neighbour’s griefs unfold¹⁵*

or Henry, earl of Southampton:

*When shall we in this realm a father find
So truly sweet, or husband half so kind?
Thus he enjoyed the best contents of life
Obedient children and a loving wife
I keep that glory last that is the best;*

*The love of learning, which he oft expressed
By conversation, and respect of those
Who had a name in arts, in verse or prose.¹⁶*

and Francis Beaumont, his brother:

*On Death, thy murd'rer, this revenge I take:
I slight his terror and just question make,
Which of us two the best precedence have,
Mine to this wretched world, thine to the grave:
Thou shouldst have followed me, but Death's to blame,
Miscalculated years and measured age by fame.
So dearly has thou bought thy precious lines
Their praise grew swiftly; so thy life declines:
Thy Muse, the hearer's queen, the reader's love—
All ears, all hearts—but Death's—could please and move.¹⁷*

and Gervase Beaumont, his little son:

*Dear Lord, receive my Son, whose winning love
To me was like a friendship, far above
The course of nature, or his tender age,
Whose looks could all my bitter griefs assuage;
Let his pure soul ordained sev'n years to be
In the frail body which was part of me
Remain my pledge in heav'n, as sent to show
How to this Port at ev'ry step I go.¹⁸*

Beaumont's work contains one slight conventional reference to his wife and he wrote no love poems. In fact, he disapproved of romantic or sensual love, and thought them most dangerous, as in his lines *Against Abused Love*.

*Shall I stand still and see the world on fire,
While wanton writers join in one desire
To blow the coals of love, and make them burn
Till they consume, or to the chaos turn
This beauteous frame by them so foully rent?
That wise men fear, lest they those frames prevent
Which for the latest day Th' Almighty keeps
In orbs of fire, or in the hellish deeps
How can I write of Love, who never felt
His dreadful arrow, nor did ever melt
My heart away before a female flame
Like waxen statues, which the witches frame?¹⁹*

or *A Description of Love*

*Love is a region full of fires
And burning with extreme desires;
An object seeks, of which possess
The wheels are fixt, the motions rest,
The flames in ashes lie opprest;
This meteor striving high to rise—
The fuel spent—falls down and dies*

*These lines I write not, to remove
United souls from serious love:
The best attempts by mortal made,
Reflect on things that quickly fade;
Yet never will I men persuade
To leave affections, where may shine
Impressions of the Love divine.²⁰*

Serious love of the divine was at the core of Beaumont's personality, and his most profound poems are concerned with religious themes. He experienced spiritual desolation:

*O Thou, who sweetly bend'st my stubborn will
Who send'st thy stripes to teach and not to kill!
Thy cheerful face from me no longer hide;
Withdraw these clouds, the scourges of my pride;
I sink in hell, if I be lower thrown:
I see what man is, being left alone,²¹*

he sought divine forgiveness:

*Lord from Thy wrath my soul appeals, and flies
To gracious beams of those indulgent eyes
Which brought me first from nothing, and sustain
My life, lest it to nothing turn again;
Which in Thy Son's blood washt my parents' sin
And taught me ways eternal bliss to win;
The stars which guide my bark with heav'nly calls;
My boards in shipwreck after many falls:
In these I trust,²²*

he was modest about his poetic gifts as in *Ode to the Blessed Trinity*:

Muse, that art dull and weak

*Stay, stay Parnassian girl,
Here thy descriptions faint;
Thou human shapes canst paint
And canst compare to pearl
White teeth, and speak of lips that rubies taint,
Resembling beauteous eyes to orbs that swiftly whirl.*

*But now thou mayst perceive
The weakness of thy wings;
And that thy modest strings
To muddy objects cleave:
Then praise with humble silence heavenly things
And what is more than this, to still devotion leave.²³*

Beaumont was stirred by significant dates, such as 25 March 1626, which was both Lady Day and Easter Sunday. References to Holy Writ slipped easily from his pen; those "boards in shipwreck" recall the account of St.

Paul's shipwreck in the Acts of the Apostles. He used happily the symbolism of flowers: white violets and lilies of the valley for humility, roses for devotion and the fleur de lys (blue iris) for the pure aspirations of Our Lady. His most important poem, in his own opinion and in that of his friends, was called *The Crown of Thorns* and, so far as we know, it has not survived. It was probably expressed too much in terms of medieval devotion for the younger Beaumont to be able to publish it in the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Of the poems that are preserved, *Of the Epiphany* is perhaps as characteristic as any.

*Fair eastern star, that art ordained to run
 Before the Sages to the rising Sun,
 Here cease thy course, and wonder that the cloud
 Of this poor stable can thy Master shroud:
 Ye heavenly bodies, glory to the bright,
 And are esteemed as ye are rich in light:
 But here on earth is taught a different way
 Since under the low roof the Highest lay;
 Jerusalem erects her stately towers,
 Displays her windows, and adorns her bowers;
 Yet there thou must not cast a trembling spark:
 Let Herod's palace still continue dark;
 Each school and synagogue thy force repels
 There Pride, enthroned in musty errors, dwells.
 The temple, where the priests maintain their choir,
 Shall taste no beam of thy celestial fire;
 While this weak cottage all thy splendour takes,
 A joyful gate of ev'ry chink it makes.
 Here shines no golden roof, no iv'ry stair,
 No King exhalted in a stately chair,
 Girt with attendants, or by heralds styl'd,
 But straw and hay inwrap a speechless child;
 Yet Sabae's lords before this Babe unfold
 Their treasures, off'ring incense, myrrh and gold.
 The crib becomes an altar; therefore dies
 No ox or sheep; for in their fodder lies
 The Prince of Peace, who thankful for his bed
 Destroys those rites, in which their blood was shed:
 The quintessence of earth, He takes and fees,
 And precious gums distilled from weeping trees;
 Rich metals and sweet odours now declare
 The glorious blessings, which his laws prepare*

If ever *A Directory of Leicestershire Worthies* were to be compiled, Sir John Beaumont of Gracedieu would surely command a place in it.

NOTES

The quotations from Beaumont's verse are all taken from *The POEMS of Sir John Beaumont, Bart. for the first time collected and edited with memorial introduction and notes*, by Rev. Alexander B. Grosart, printed for Private Circulation 1869. Referred to in notes as *Poems*.

1. Second edition, 1777, III
2. *ibid.*, III
3. Quoted by James Thompson in *The History of Leicester* (1849), 334
4. "Of Poets and Poetry" in *Elegies for Sundry Occassions*, 1627; *Épigrammes* (lv), 1616
5. *Poems*, 283
6. *ibid.*, 56
7. *ibid.*, 41
8. *ibid.*, 61
9. *ibid.*, 51
10. *ibid.*, 287
11. *ibid.*, 286
12. *ibid.*, 126
13. *ibid.*, 126
14. *ibid.*, 151. The wished-for babe came—and went—and Beaumont wrote wrote verses on both events; *ibid.*, 165, 167
15. *ibid.*, 181
16. *ibid.*, 200
17. *ibid.*, 182
18. *ibid.*, 183
19. *ibid.*, 99, 101
20. *ibid.*, 105, 107
21. *ibid.*, 82
22. *ibid.*, 81
23. *ibid.*, 76
24. This paper was given as an address at the Annual General Meeting of the Society on 4 October 1971.