

Rebekah Carmichael (Hay)

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There is sparse reliable information on Rebekah Carmichael, who married John Hay in 1793 but was widowed in 1806, resulting in destitution for her and her four children. Prior to being betrothed, she was able to self-publish a compilation of her poems, sold through Peter Hill in 1790. Although there is limited information about Carmichael's success as a poet, she flourished literarily between the years of 1790 and 1806. This success is indicated through her book's subscriber list, giving a detailed account of who wanted a copy, and how many copies were to be purchased (Huber). Among the list of subscribers, the famous Scottish poet Robert Burns appears, who was not only a literary admirer of the poetess, but a friend. Carmichael's lack of upper-class subscribers, apart from one Countess of Dalhousie, is indicative of a critique of the upper class not only in her personal life, but in her poetic work as well.

Carmichael's strong Scottish connections led to her poems often containing themes relating to Scots ancestral activities or common practices. This can be found in poems such as "The Star of Eden Vale," "Written in the Hermitage at Braid," and the poem below, "On the Sudden Death of a Young Gentleman." Carmichael uses the Scottish name "Ross" for the protagonist of this poem and also describes the Scottish practice of hunting. Scotland was a popular location for hunting due to its abundance of game and lush forests. Many British aristocrats made their way to Scotland to hunt, and they sought to keep Scotland's land wild and untamed to best do this. Carmichael's book, however, is dedicated to David Steuart-Moncrieffe, a landowner and agricultural improver (Huber). The different opinions of land management between the aristocrats and the man to whom the book is dedicated imply Carmichael's critique of the upper class. Carmichael uses this poem to explore the protagonist's "luxuriant pride," a terrible quality to have, and one she projects onto a generic upper-class person. Their arrogance causes them to only care about hunting, and not what happens to the land they are hunting on. However, she still chooses to grant Ross entrance to heaven in the last stanza.

The tragic death of a young man would have been an event with which Carmichael and her readers would have been quite familiar. Many of her readers would have also drawn parallels between this poem and "Lord Randal," a traditional ballad recounting the death of a lord following his hunting expedition. "On the Sudden Death of a Young Gentleman" is a lament in ballad stanza with an abab rhyme scheme, making it accessible for many of her readers.

Further Reading

- Bassett, Charlotte. "Hunting and Agriculture: An Examination of the Functional Aspects of Landscape Architecture in Post-Restoration Scotland." *Studies in Arts and Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 94–114.
- Lockwood, Rose. "Birth, Illness, and Death in Eighteenth-Century New England." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1978, pp. 111–28.

References

- Huber, Alexander, ed. "Carmichael, Miss (Rebekah) (fl. 1790- 1806)." *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

On the Sudden Death of a Young Gentleman⁴⁷

The veil⁴⁸ of night was drawn aside,
 The sky was beaming red;
 In youth and health's luxuriant⁴⁹ pride
 Ross lightly left his bed.

He call'd his dog—he seiz'd his gun— 5
 He flew to yonder⁵⁰ plain,⁵¹
 Elated⁵² with the rising sun,
 But ne'er return'd again,
 “In luck,”—he cries, “I’ve shot my bird”—
 He stops—and pants for breath— 10
 He never spoke another word,
 But clos'd his eyes in death.

An Angel mark'd him from his birth;
 And, when the doom was given,
 Did crop the sweetest bud on earth 15
 To bloom and blow in heaven!



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⁴⁷ *Poems*, printed by Peter Hill, 1790, pp. 10-11. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*.

⁴⁸ *Veil*: a covering, indicating sunrise commencing.

⁴⁹ *Luxuriant*: “excessively prosperous” (*OED*).

⁵⁰ *Yonder*: at some distance.

⁵¹ *Plain*: flat land.

⁵² *Elated*: to be made happy.