

No End to Snowdrops

A BIOGRAPHY OF
KATHLEEN RAINE

Philippa Bernard

*The snowdrops in the Manse garden were countless,
there were always more, giving a kind of knowledge that
nature is inexhaustible, that multitude is her secret,
her deep mystery. There could be no end to snowdrops.*

KATHLEEN RAINE



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	xi
I Bavington	1
II Ilford	10
III Cambridge	17
IV Blackheath	33
V Martindale	48
VI 9 Paultons Square	65
VII Sandaig	81
VIII Girton College	100
IX 47 Paultons Square	113
X On a Deserted Shore	130
XI Temenos	144
XII India	154
<i>Notes</i>	173
<i>Checklist of the Works of Kathleen Raine</i>	183
<i>A Select Bibliography</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	188

CHAPTER I

Bavington

BY THE ROADSIDE at the edge of the village of Great Bavington in Northumberland is a low grassy bank, where daffodils grow in spring. Beyond the grey stone wall leading to the school, the church and the Manse, are the sweeping hills of the north country, stretching away into the distance to Hadrian's Wall. Close to this spot were scattered the ashes of the poet Kathleen Raine, nearly ninety years after her brief stay in the village. She had come there as a child of six, sent from her home in the south at the outbreak of the First World War. Here she had found the one place in the world where she felt afterwards that she truly belonged and where she had been happy. And here she had returned.



KATHLEEN JESSIE RAINE was the only child of George Raine and Jessie Wilkie, born in Ilford in Essex in 1908. The Wilkie side of Kathleen's family came from Scotland, and she loved them for it. Jessie herself was born in Cumberland, near Gretna Green, in the border country. Her mother Jane was from Edinburgh, her father, Alexander, from Forfar. All that Kathleen could remember of her grandfather was that he was a great fisherman, loved the poetry of John Milton and had a weakness for whisky. In his later years he acted as Secretary to the Shipwright's Society and attached great importance to giving his children a good education. He himself had been a schoolmaster though his father, James, was a miner, and his eldest daughter, Catherine, was also a schoolteacher. When Alexander and Jane, eight years his senior, died in their early forties, the second daughter, Jane after her mother, kept house for the three orphaned girls. They lived then, thanks to Catherine's profession, in the School House at Bewshaugh in Northumberland, not far from Hexham, though all three girls were born at Longtown in Cumberland almost within sight of the border with Scotland. Jessie saw to it that her own daughter gradually learned to love the music and poetry and traditions of the country of her ancestors, and she herself kept her soft Scottish lilting accent to the end of her life.

In these quiet Cheviot hills lay Kielder Forest, now mostly underwater after the construction of the great Kielder Dam in the nineteen fifties. Much of the surrounding land was owned by the Percy family, the Earls of Northumberland, and it was in Kielder Kirk (never church) that young Jessie sat with her sisters and her mother near the five beautiful Percy girls, Louisa, Edith, Margaret, Victoria, and Mary, admiring their beautiful hair, a bright gold as with most of the Percy clan. Mary, who married Aymer Maxwell, was the mother of Gavin, who was later to play such an important part in Kathleen's own life. As long as she lived Kathleen never failed to be grateful for her Scottish inheritance, only wishing that she had been able to do greater justice to it in her poetry. She did in fact write several poems to her mother. One, published in *The Oval Portrait* in 1977, reveals something of the beauty in natural things she learned to love from a very early age.

Your gift of life was idleness
As you would set day's task aside
To marvel at an opening bud,
Quivering leaf, or spider's veil
On dewy grass in morning spread.¹

Jessie was sent to study as a trainee teacher at Armstrong College at Newcastle. The college had been founded as The College of Science by the distinguished engineer and shipbuilder William Armstrong and later became the nucleus around which the University of Newcastle was formed. While studying at the college, Jessie stayed at a hostel in Jesmond Dean which had originally been the home built by William Armstrong for his bride. The house and grounds were magnificently furnished and landscaped and when the Armstrongs left they were converted by the college for the use of students and the general public. It was here at the College that Jessie met her future husband, George Raine, a fellow student. He had already taken a degree at Durham University and like Jessie had gone on to take teacher training qualifications.

George came from a Durham mining family, but whereas his brothers John and William had followed their father, also George, down the pit, young George found his vocation in teaching. The Raine family were devout Methodists, proud that an earlier Raine had heard John Wesley preach, and George remained an active believer and lay preacher all his life. He never felt comfortable among his working class family, and was determined that his only child should be brought up well away from the dirt and smoke of his native Durham, making sure while at university that he lost his northern accent and learned to speak the King's English. Kathleen later dimly recalled visits to her father's old home, the

distasteful sights and smells of the pit villages of the north. But her father's early life had a more benign influence on her than the squalor of his home. For he passed on to her his passion for country things, the farms and fields of the north, the brown earth he had learned to plough, truanting from school, and of the flowers of the seashore which his daughter, too, loved so much.

George Raine and Jessie Wilkie were married at Bellingham in Northumberland in the winter of 1906 and came south to Essex where they took a house in Ilford, No. 6, Gordon Road, near Cranbrook Park. It was a small semi-detached villa with a pretty garden, and George found a teaching post in the town, happy to continue with his work for the Wesleyan Methodists at the Cranbrook Park church in The Drive, round the corner from Gordon Road. Jessie looked after her garden, the roses, especially her favourite Maiden's Blush, and the spring bulbs which she had so loved to see growing wild around her northern home. A year or so later she became pregnant and gave birth to a little daughter (her only child) on 14th June, 1908. George put into the baby's hand a bloom from the Maiden's Blush rosebush, her first flower, and a rose she always loved.

Kathleen remembered those earliest years as a lost paradise. She grew up in a happy home, learning children's poems by heart, picking flowers and feeding the animals in the house next door. Her mother sang the songs and told the stories of the Scottish hills she knew in her own childhood. Even her father, strict Methodist though he was, and not often showing outward expressions of affection, gave her his love and tried to protect her from the harsher realities of life. It was a fantasy land she dwelt in then, and looking back more than sixty years later she could still recall the fields at the end of the garden, 'where the lark's nest was in the meadow grass, and saw in that small sanctuary first the eggs, then those naked wedge-shaped heads, all gaping beak and blind eyes.'²

When Kathleen was three years old the family moved house, not far away, where still there were flowers and fields and birds singing. Snatches of memory came back to her later: the outbreak of war in 1914, when she saw a Zeppelin crashing in flames, schoolboys taught by her father sent off to France, and walking with her mother in Valentine's Park close by. She loved the Park, with its wishing well and ornamental lake where she fed the ducks and dropped pennies into the well. The new house, West View, was a rather ugly double-fronted villa, Number One, Hamilton Gardens, set back from Cranbrook Road on the way to Barkingside. Opposite was Little Gearies, a small manor house, and farther along Great Gearies, a larger derelict mansion in the grounds of which Kathleen and her friends were allowed to play. A great Cedar of Lebanon was a favourite hide-out, its huge branches laden with fir cones, sweeping down almost to the

ground. She recalled it long afterwards, associating it with a more aristocratic society of which she was not part. Her neighbours seemed somehow to lead a lighter, more carefree existence than her own, enclosed as she was by her father's closely observed Methodism. She went every day to Miss Hutchinson's School round the corner, a house with a large garden, where she fed the school tortoise. Then to Highlands Elementary School, severe and restraining, where even small children were caned and no naughtiness went unpunished. But a little girl could escape into dreams and fancies, where the world of her imagination set her free. All her life Kathleen set great store by her dreams, and by those of others, and remembered some of them for many years; these childhood fantasies and romantic imaginings remained with her, woven into the infant stories she read with such excitement.

It was the Declaration of War in 1914 that changed Kathleen's happy childhood. Not for the worse, for she was to find in the next few years a joyous peace which she for ever remembered as the Paradise which never came again. Worried by the dangers that war might bring, George and Jessie sent little Kathleen at the age of only six to stay with relatives in Northumberland, in the country where the Wilkie family had lived ever since Alexander, Jessie's father, had uprooted himself from his Scottish home. He had brought there to live with himself, his wife Jane and their three daughters, the little child of his sister and her husband, both of whom died young. He and Jane brought up little Margaret Black as their own child. Known first of all as Maggie, she became Peggy later, acquired a good education, mainly from her schoolmaster uncle, and took a post as schoolteacher in the little village of Bavington, some twelve miles north of Hexham. It was to her aunt Peggy, in fact her mother's cousin, that Kathleen was sent on the outbreak of war.

A small girl of six, an only child, might surely be expected to be terrified of such a strange unknown situation. Kathie had never been away from home alone before, but she seemed not to feel fear, or at least never remembered it. Peggy's home was not totally strange to her, for Jessie had taken her daughter there before, as a tiny girl, and told her much about her new home. A schoolteacher occupied an important position in village life. Peggy Black certainly did. After the minister she was the most important person in the village. When she first settled in Bavington as a young woman she lived in a stone cottage at the end of the village street. There are in fact two Bavingtons, Little and Great, half a mile apart, but Bavington, at least in Kathleen's memory, was one, indivisible. That bleak moorland part of Northumberland is full of such grey stone villages, small hamlets, with a church, a school, farm cottages, perhaps with a 'great house' as Bavington had. Bavington Hall, the home of the Shafto family,

stood on the outskirts of the village nearer to Little Bavington and was much respected by the villagers. Soon after her arrival there Peggy moved into the Manse, a status symbol in village eyes, no longer used by the Minister, who travelled between several parishes. Like the kirk, it derived its name from the close proximity of the Scottish border. The area lay, in fact, north of Hadrian's Wall, and many were the stories the old village folk told of the border raids and the fierce Covenanters of earlier times. Great Bavington inherited its Presbyterian church from the Covenanter, William Veitch, and fought a long battle to retain its independence. But eventually in the early years of the nineteenth century Bavington established its own congregation, and the Manse was rebuilt in 1855 'neat and chaste in design, substantial in structure and commodious in its arrangements.'³

In 1999, when Bavington was planning its Millennium Project, the village asked Kathleen for her memories of her time there. Even after more than eighty years she remembered those days clearly. In a booklet produced for the occasion, she recalled Peggy's firm discipline at the school, where she was well able to control even the 'big boys', and an early photograph shows her straight and tall, her hair piled high in Edwardian fashion, her long graceful neck and clear eyes, brooking no nonsense from any of her pupils. The school was small, no more than thirty children, who straggled in daily from the farms and cottages around, and Miss Black was a firm but tolerant teacher, aware that most of her pupils would never have the opportunity of any further education. In all probability they would remain in the neighbourhood, marrying, bearing children, and dying without ever leaving their native parish. But there was always the chance that some spark might ignite in a child's mind and be fanned into the flames of success. Peggy saw to it that all the children in her care could read and write, do their sums, sew and cook and know something of the Presbyterian religion, some history and the natural science of their countryside. She caned those who skipped school to follow the hunt. The sounds Kathleen remembered were of another era: clogs clattering on the stones, slate pencils squeaking, the school bell as Miss Black signalled the end of lessons. The children sang the tonic sol-fa and warmed themselves at the iron stove, washing in the great stone sink in the lobby, with carbolic soap and cold water.

Downhill from the school was 'Granny Carr's cottage', a handsome long low grey stone house, now divided into Carr House and Carr Cottage. The schoolroom, too, is now two homes, no longer a school. That closed in 1946 and became a youth hostel with Granny's son George as warden. The old Victorian post box is still set into the school wall. In Kathleen's time Granny Carr was the local village character with a finger in every pie.

She cleaned the church and school, listened to all the woes and joys of the villagers, and knew everything that went on for miles around. She clattered about in clogs polished on the soles as well as the uppers, in a bast apron and a 'clooty' bonnet. Produce was delivered to the village by the butcher and the grocer and most vegetables and fruit were grown locally, with dairy produce sent up by the farm or collected by the children. There was no electricity or telephone but local gossip was a fertile source of news, and entertainment relied happily on harvest suppers, church meetings and family teas, with whist drives and social occasions as special treats.

The church at Bavington was supposed to be the first Presbyterian church in England and the Spartan spirit of Calvin and Luther forbade luxuries from the Manse even for a small girl far from her home in the south. But Peggy Black did own the first motorcar to be seen in the village, an old Morris Cowley. Roads in and out of Bavington were often gated to keep the cattle and sheep in, and it was Kathie's job to jump out of the car to open and close the gates. The gates have been superseded by cattle grids now to separate the flocks of sheep. On one occasion Aunt Peggy ran into a motorbike ridden by the School Attendance Officer, who luckily wasn't hurt. The Manse was a square, austere, stone building, not unlike the Bronte Parsonage at Howarth, with long narrow windows and ivy clinging to the stonework around them. Kathleen's duties occupied all her spare time: fetching the pure clear water from the well (a relic of the fifteenth century when Bavington was the site of a monastery), sweeping away the snow, except when it lay too thick and stronger arms were needed, gathering fruit and nuts, and eggs, warm from beneath the hens. She collected the milk every day from the nearest farm and picked watercress in the clear waters of the burn that ran along the end of the garden below the raspberry canes. The seasons controlled life in the village. When the snow lay deep many of the children could not get to school, and in summer they were often kept at home working on the farms, haymaking, bringing in the potatoes and cabbages, cleaning out the byres and the horses' stables. Indeed going to school was a welcome relief from breaking the ice on the ponds or picking gooseberries, even though it meant a three or four mile walk each way.

Kathleen's later recollection of this golden childhood may seem perhaps too hazy with the warmth of happy times remembered. Was such a hard existence really paradise? She certainly thought so, recalling her icy bedroom, her black woollen stockings and the buckets of water far too heavy for six-year-old arms. She was always 'Kathie' to the villagers, an affectionate diminutive she welcomed, which was never used by her parents. They had wanted to call her Catherine, but felt that Catherine Raine was too awkward. Kathleen was easier to say. Like most country folk of the time,

the two living at the Manse were almost self-sufficient, making their own butter and jam and cakes and bread, growing beans and winter greens in the Manse garden. Kathleen could clearly recall those intricate embroidery stitches she learnt as she worked by the fire after tea, the copperplate script she was encouraged to use on invitations to a whist drive or a harvest supper, and going to bed with a flickering candle, the wind whistling in the shadowy dark.

The slate roofs and grey stone of the Manse were used on almost all the buildings of Northumberland. The 'whin' stone was locally quarried, and a special knack was needed to split the hard limestone. All the farmers used it for the dry stone walls that ran for miles across the hills keeping the sheep safely enclosed. For this harsh northern landscape was wool country, with a few cattle for dairy produce, stretching out to the horizon with only a few huddled farms tucked into the folds of the hills. Even today the walls are kept in good repair by hand cutting the stone, with local competitions for stone walling.

Learning by heart was an important part of schooldays at Bavington, arithmetic tables, Biblical verses, poems by those Victorian authors whose strong rhythms and echoing rhymes, once learned so easily after two or three repetitions, were never forgotten. No intrusive radio or telephone interrupted the lives of child or adult, and it was Kathleen's good fortune to live with a woman who could direct her to the poetry of Tennyson, Macaulay, Hood and the Scottish ballads as they sat together at the fire-side during the long winter evenings.

The church itself was a tiny plain building with white-washed walls and simple wooden pews. The congregation gathered down the village street or walked over the moors to the few steps up to the church door. In accordance with Presbyterian tradition there was no ornamentation, no stained glass (except for a small rim round a window) no decoration, tablets or memorials. Attendance on Sundays was an essential part of the lives of all in those small Northumberland villages and at the surrounding farms. They came in to Bavington in traps and pony carts, the horses waiting patiently in the Manse stables until service was over. Some of the church-goers might be invited to stay for Sunday lunch, with Peggy's delicious fruit pies, always slightly sour to comply with Presbyterian ideas of a Spartan mode of living (no alcohol ever appeared on the table). Kathleen, even at such an early age, was entrusted with the task of cutting flowers for the church from the Manse garden. Some, she found, were godly, others not. Heavy scent was frowned upon, distracting the worshippers, strong colours, blowsy blossoms, clashing tints, were too exotic, dangerous to the senses. Sundays were attractive by their very differentness, unfamiliar clothes, Sabbath traditions, a contrast to the workaday habits of the

week. Kathleen was perhaps too young to rebel then against the restrictions of Presbyterian Sundays. Instead she loved peering into a parlour unused during weekdays, with the Manse front door open, finding a certain reassurance, like her fellow villagers, in the conventions of the Sabbath, handed down from earlier times. After all the churchgoers had left she was allowed into the empty church. She could climb up on to the high stool before the harmonium, perching there precariously, her little fingers picking out a wobbly tune and singing to her own accompaniment, until it grew too dark to see.

She made friends of her own age in the village, visiting their farmhouse homes. She remembered them for years afterwards, delighted to find that one had named her own daughter Kathleen. Although she loved them truly she was, as ever, perfectly happy alone. Solitude was as warm and comforting to her then as it always was in later life. Never lonely, she found in herself a strength, a satisfaction that the presence of others seldom brought. 'Alone, I was all the earth,' she wrote, 'as far as the horizon and to the depths of the sky. Lacking nothing, desiring nothing, but to be forever in that place of all the earth that was mine, I knew – I think I am not inventing this in retrospect – perfect happiness.'⁷⁴

Kathleen's memories of life in Bavington were those of a six-year-old child. She remembered, writing of it sixty years later, a long village street with a few houses, the life of a busy community, with big homes and long gardens. But like most childhood recollections, everything was bigger than reality. The village street is no more than a hundred yards long and very narrow, with perhaps four or five houses. It is rough surfaced in loose grey stone, and the village might seem sombre were it not for the daffodils crowding into every corner in spring, with rock plants springing out of the footings of all the houses, tall trees and wild flowers on the grassy banks; and everywhere in Northumberland the golden gorse stretching out across the fells.

It was at Bavington, too, that Kathie was introduced to the harsher aspects of country life. Death visited her for the first time in her short existence. Catching butterflies meant stabbing them through the heart to pin them on specimen trays Her beloved cat, Graysie, the first of many in her ninety-five years, had kittens which she was instructed by Aunt Peggy to drown; and did so, burying them in the garden in floods of tears. She put her hands over her ears as the pig was killed for winter meat, and grieved when the bull, king of the farming community, who had gored his owner, was shot by the local butcher. Country life was indeed hard for a small girl from the south.

Nevertheless, here in the north, Kathleen became convinced, as a natural consequence of her life there, that she would be a poet. It seemed

to the child, not yet ten years old, to be as inevitable as the coming of the seasons and the changing of the year. She consumed all the verse, the Scottish songs, the lyric poems of Wordsworth and Keats, the sonorous lines of Milton, that she could lay hands on or listen to. If it seems today precocious that such a young child should love Milton and the Scottish ballads and the novels of Walter Scott, it did not then. Kathie was unaware of what she 'should' or 'shouldn't' read, other than what church strictures forbade. She paid no heed to what was considered suitable for her age or how she might impress others. There were no 'others' except Aunt Peggy and she was only too happy to encourage Kathleen's voracious appetite for words.