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ANTIQUES

Shining a Light on a Forgotten Poet

By EVE M. KAHN

Mary Webb, a British novelist, deprecated herself despite having published six books and dozens of poems set in her native Shropshire. Known in the 1920s for her evocative descriptions of the countryside and racy plots involving abortion, patricide and premarital sex, she nonetheless called herself “wholly un-gifted” and sometimes felt “whelmed in remorse & terror” over her perceived literary mistakes.

A few celebrities, including the author Rebecca West and the prime minister at the time, Stanley Baldwin, predicted that Webb would become one of the era’s great writers. She did earn respectable fees from publications like *The Spectator* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, but she donated her savings to London’s poor and sometimes subsisted on bread and tea. Her schoolteacher husband abandoned her; she burned drafts of her novels to keep warm; and in 1927 she died of Graves’s disease, at 46.

Her now obscure novels, with titles like “Precious Bane” and “Gone to Earth,” are celebrated in small scholarly circles; a [Facebook](#) page is titled “Has No One Ever Heard of Mary Webb?” Posting on that site these days is Mary E. Crawford, a financial planner and amateur literary historian in San Mateo, Calif., who has acquired 600 pieces of Webbiana in the last 25 years. Ms. Crawford has organized a show, “Mary Webb: Neglected Genius,” that runs through March 13 at the Grolier Club at 47 East 60th Street in Manhattan.

Display cases on the club’s second floor are full of Webb’s poetry, scribbled on paper scraps, and warm letters to her

unsympathetic mother-in-law. Ms. Crawford has also set out a singed manuscript of a novel that survived a cottage fireplace and a 1927 fan letter from Prime Minister Baldwin that ends, “Thank you a thousand times.”

“It’s a definitive collection that tells a story,” Ms. Crawford said during a recent visit to New York, while sorting through fragile first editions on her hotel coffee table. She and her husband, Bruce, have spent about \$250,000 on Webb documents and maintain a “Webb site” for enthusiasts, marywebb.org. They wrote the show’s catalog (University Press of New England, \$75) and have made four research trips to Shropshire, scouring archives for forgotten poems and correspondence.

They also surf the Internet for the latest Webb mentions: right now they’re hoping to hear back from a woman who paid \$400 on eBay for a box of books that Webb inscribed to her sisters. “Cultural philanthropy,” the Crawfords call their pro bono hours.

Most previous owners of the couple’s holdings had kept them filed away and unpublished. The Crawfords instead have let Stanford University scan the material. In May Stanford will display the Grolier show at its main library and post the scans on a university Web site linked to marywebb.org.

“I want her to be re-evaluated by the academic community,” Ms. Crawford said, and then she read aloud from a few manuscripts. From a bubbly 1911 letter: “The wonder of things gets into my head & my heart to such a degree that it must occasionally find an outlet.” From an almost illegible late 1920s poem: “Under a blossoming tree/Let me lie down/With one blackbird to sing to me.”

On the back of that page, Webb listed the periodicals she hoped might run it: “Nation/Adelphi Terrace/Saturday Review/New Statesman.” But the poem, titled “Safe,” was still unpublished when she died.

ROY ROGERS MEMORABILIA

The ranks of fans of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Hollywood’s “King of the Cowboys” and “Queen of the West,” have shrunk to the point that the couple’s museum in Branson, Mo., closed in December, after ticket sales no longer covered its \$33,000 monthly rent.

“Toward the end, sometimes we had only 40 people a day,” said Roy Rogers Jr., the actor’s oldest son, who helped run the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum in a sham Wild West storefront. He added that his father, who died in 1998, “always told us, ‘When the museum starts costing you money, y’all need to move on and get rid of it.’ ”

The Rogers family is now auctioning off the displays of taxidermied horses, rhinestone-studded costumes, Colt revolvers and licensed products including lunch boxes and comic books. The first sale, with about 20 pieces, will be held on Saturday in Mesa, Ariz.

The auction house, High Noon Western Americana, has placed estimates of \$20,000 to \$30,000 on a 1950s plastic saddle painted with roses and 1930s silver-plated spurs attached to boots inlaid with eagle patterns. Fringed shirts from “Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors” embroidered with thunderbirds and horseshoes; belts studded with rubies; and silver-heeled shoes (“in good, but probably not wearable, condition,” the catalog notes) are estimated at \$1,000 to \$10,000.

In July, Mr. Rogers said, [Christie’s](#) in New York will auction much of the rest of the museum contents, including the preserved palominos and a Pontiac Bonneville with six-shooters for door handles. Christie’s does have a recent track record for Rogers memorabilia: at a country music sale last month, it sold two dozen of the couple’s former possessions, like guitars, cowhide gloves and song typescripts, for about \$180,000, four times the high estimate.

WARTIME DOLLS

During the [Civil War](#), when young girls in Brooklyn learned about appallingly unhygienic conditions at battlefield hospitals, they decided to do something to help. They would spend their days sewing ruffled evening gowns for dolls and wearing togas while reciting poetry onstage. The girls sold their wares and performance tickets at an 1864 fund-raiser called the Brooklyn Sanitary Fair.

The two-week event, in buildings along Montague Street in Brooklyn Heights, raised \$400,000 to help the United States Sanitary Commission clean up [Army](#) clinics — at a time when officers earned a few dollars a day.

The poignant idea of teenage girls’ stitching toys while worrying about soldiers’ amputations is the subject of a narrow-bore

exhibition that opens on Friday at the [Brooklyn Museum](#)’s Herstory Gallery.

“I love this kind of footnote to history, a concise event that allows you to paint a picture of a moment in time,” said Catherine J. Morris, the museum’s curator of feminist art.

The show, “Healing the Wounds of War: The Brooklyn Sanitary Fair of 1864,” contains blond and brunette china dolls with satiny outfits that were sold at the fairgrounds and programs for a Packer Collegiate student play called “Woman in History.”

Vintage lithographs show the fair halls strung with flags, a post office staffed by female volunteers and a re-creation of a New England kitchen with a spinning wheel and pewter tankards. Such a patriotic Colonial Revival booth, Ms. Morris said, “would have had such resonance for Northerners of what they wanted to protect, what might be lost if they lost the war.”

The phrase “sanitary fair,” she added, admittedly will make some contemporary museumgoers think of plumbing or menstrual pads rather than of beleaguered military doctors and nurses.

“The name is just so weird,” she said. “It captures everyone’s attention.”

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