

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Rebecca Wallace

Stanford exhibit peers into the works and life of Mary Webb

story by Rebecca Wallace
photos by Kimihiro Hoshino

The early-20th-century English novelist and poet Mary Webb may have been respected, but her works haven't been easy to collect.

In 1933, the author and bibliophile A. Edward Newton wrote: "From a book-collector's point of view, Mary Webb in first editions is difficult, almost impossible.

"Her books were published at a bad time (during war-related materials shortages); everything was bad — printing, paper, cloth, binding, everything. The editions were small and the books fell to pieces in the reading."

Nowadays, gathering first editions of Mary Webb might seem even more daunting. The author's writings, filled with lush descriptions of her native Shropshire and the ways and passions of its inhabitants, gained popularity in the years after her 1927 death. But today

her six novels and poetry are not widely known, especially outside Britain. A visitor can go from one American library to another and come up empty. Her fans have a Facebook page called "Has No One Ever Heard of Mary Webb?"

Mary Crawford, though, is not a woman easily put off. The Stanford University alumna and book collector is the driving force behind "Mary Webb: Neglected Genius," the current exhibition at Stanford's Green Library.

Filling 20 glass cases in the library's Peterson Gallery and Munger Rotunda, the show is an assortment of Webb's books, manuscripts, hand-written letters and poems, and other items. The "Webbiana," nearly all from Crawford's private collection, include: a first edition of Webb's novel "Precious Bane,"

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Above: Mary Crawford visits the Mary Webb exhibit; most of the items are from her personal collection. Right: A manuscript of Webb's novel "Armour Wherein He Trusted," damaged after its despondent author threw it into the fire. Below: The earliest known manuscript (circa 1894-97) by Webb, the story "Clematisa & Percival."



A writer rediscovered



Mary Crawford with an enlarged illustration made by Peninsula artist William Bishop for the exhibition.

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inscribed to the author Thomas Hardy; a 1927 letter from British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin praising "Precious Bane"; and a script from "Gone to Earth," the British version of the Jennifer Jones film made from Webb's novel of the same name.

Photographs of Shropshire, taken by Crawford on research trips, provide a bucolic background. Illustrations by Peninsula artist William Bishop combine dreamlike faces, birds, gossamer insect wings.

Bishop's images are also in the exhibit catalogue, much of which was written by Mary Crawford and her husband, Bruce; and in Webb's children's story "Clematisa & Percival." Webb wrote the tale as a teenager, and the Crawfords had it printed for the first time last year. Both story and catalogue were published through New York's Grolier Club, where the exhibit was shown earlier this year before coming to Stanford in May.

New York Times writer Eve M. Kahn covered the East Coast show, noting that Webb's fans included the author Rebecca West, who "predicted that Webb would become one of the era's great writers."

Webb, though, died at 46 after a long struggle with a thyroid disorder and intermittent poverty that led her to burn her manuscripts for fuel. She put out only six novels, and her books did not sell well, even when

they earned praise.

For instance, her novel "Gone to Earth," about an innocent country girl's tragedy, was described by West as "Novel of the Year" for 1917. However, Mary Crawford wrote in the exhibit catalogue: "Even though the novel was well received by critics, few people during wartime had the leisure or inclination to read fiction, and the booming guns of the Western Front drowned the voice of the poet."

Crawford herself discovered Webb about 25 years ago, when she was looking for a novel to read and her late father-in-law suggested "Precious Bane." Crawford had married into an avid book-collecting family, and began collecting Jane Austen, J.R.R. Tolkien and other authors. Mary Webb brought her down a different path.

"I felt, upon first reading 'Precious Bane,' that I had rediscovered an ancient tale, filled with collective human truths," Crawford wrote in the catalogue. "Old countrywoman Prudence Sarn's first-person narrative about her life on the Welsh borderlands after Waterloo is told in Shropshire dialect. The cadences of her narrative echo the rhythms of the Bible. Webb's descriptive passages evoke a keen, ethereal beauty and also presage tragedy."

In one such passage, old Prudence sits and looks back over her life. Webb wrote: "Ah! Those be the ways grouse laugh, and that was how I laughed in those days. But now I sit here between the hearth

and the window, with the tea brewing for one that will be home afore sundown, and the clouds standing upon the mountains, and when I laugh, I laugh easy, like the woodpecker in spring."

Crawford's love of this book and of Webb's other writing is evident on a recent afternoon as she strides through the Green Library exhibit, enthusiastically directing visitors from case to case. A financial planner who works in Palo Alto, Crawford has clearly found great joy in her avocation.

"We love gathering," she says modestly of herself and her husband.

The gathering in this instance included working with San Francisco bookseller Tom Goldwasser, who helped the Crawfords obtain many pieces of Webbiana from the libraries of early collectors. Many of the items also had belonged to Henry Webb, the writer's husband.

In the catalogue's foreword, Webb biographer Gladys Mary Coles writes, "The assembling in this exhibition of so many rare sources, disparate in their provenance, is a triumph of literary collecting."

One particularly prized item in the show is a manuscript of "Armour Wherein He Trusted," Webb's last novel, which she did not live to complete. The manuscript is written in black and brown ink and pencil, on various types of paper.

The manuscript is interesting enough just for displaying the author's handwriting and a glimpse into her creative process; it is also

strikingly poignant for the fire damage on some of the pages. A despondent Webb, unhappy with her writing and convinced she would never finish the book, had thrown the manuscript on the fire, Crawford said. It was rescued by her husband.

"It's hard to handle because it's so fragile," Crawford says of the manuscript. "I own this thing and I wasn't willing to do it."

Crawford then walks on, past Polish and French translations of "Precious Bane," and a program for a theatrical adaptation of the book that was staged in London. Dust jackets for "The Golden Arrow," Webb's first novel, sit with Henry Webb's own copy of his wife's book.

"To a Blackbird / Singing in London," one of the many handwritten Webb poems on display, captures the author's longing for Shropshire during a period of time when she lived in London. She wrote: "O sing me far away, that I may hear / The voice of grass, and, weeping, may be blind / To slights and lies and friends that prove unkind. / Sing till my soul dissolves into a tear, / Glimmering within a chalice daffodil."

A handwritten version of the story "Clematisa & Percival" shows Webb's youth at the time — the author's geometry homework is scribbled on the back of the page.

Also on the walk with Crawford is Becky Fischbach, exhibits preparator and designer for Stanford's special collections, who also worked on this exhibit. She makes a confession: Even though she is

surrounded by books every day in the university's libraries, she had not known Webb's writing before now.

"Mary (Crawford) lent me 'Precious Bane.' I felt very immersed in the Shropshire of that time," she says. Crawford beams.

That's the kind of experience Crawford is hoping for with this exhibit. Even introducing one person to this author she admires so much seems to be a success.

In the exhibit catalogue, Crawford wrote that "a writer who has fallen out of current academic or public consciousness is not doomed to obscurity. Literature is, in large part, the study of the human heart.

"A novel establishes a personal, one-on-one dialogue between the writer and reader. So long as a communication of interests, ideas and heartfelt emotion exists, there is relevance — a universal connection." ■

What: "Mary Webb: Neglected Genius," an exhibit of books, manuscripts and other items
Where: Bing Wing, Green Library, Stanford University
When: Through Aug. 29. The gallery is accessible whenever the library is open; call 650-723-0931 or go to library.stanford.edu for hours. First-time visitors need to register at the south entrance portal to Green Library's East Wing.
Cost: Free
Info: Go to marywebb.org/exhibition/.



Glen Worthey, digital humanities librarian at Stanford, talks about the Webb archive.

The Mary Webb exhibit has been on both coasts, but that doesn't mean it's accessible to everyone. So book collectors Mary and Bruce Crawford, and Stanford University, are taking their efforts a step farther.

Besides displaying Webbiana at the university's Green Library, the Crawfords have also allowed Stanford staff to scan many of the materials and create a permanent digital collection, available for free

viewing online. Visitors can click and read Webb's letters, or peer at manuscripts, photos and dust jackets of first editions. Descriptive paragraphs put the items in context.

"We like to think of this as a digital reproduction of the archival experience," said Glen Worthey, digital humanities librarian at Stanford.

In the 1930s, many people wrote master's theses on Webb, but then the author dimmed in popularity,

Crawford said. She hopes the digital collection will help increase interest in Webb, and also make it easier for scholars — and just plain enthusiasts — to see these rare items.

"This is the perfect private collector-public institution collaboration," Crawford said. "When Stanford says, 'We're putting up an exhibit,' people want to see it."

To view the digital collection, go to marywebb.stanford.edu. ■

— Rebecca Wallace