

10-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Furman, Necah Stewart. "Mary Austin, "The High Priestess of Regional Literature": A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 55, 4 (2021). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol55/iss4/6>

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MARY AUSTIN, "THE HIGH PRIESTESS OF REGIONAL LITERATURE": A REVIEW ESSAY

NECAH STEWART FURMAN

LITERARY AMERICA 1903-1934: THE MARY AUSTIN LETTERS. Edited by T. M. Pearce. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979. Pp. xv, 296. Illus., appendix, index. \$17.95.

ROOM AND TIME ENOUGH: THE LAND OF MARY AUSTIN. Lines by Mary Austin. Edited and Introduction by Augusta Fink. Photographs by Morley Baer. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1979. Pp. vi, 75. Illus. \$20.00.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS INDICATE a resurgence of interest in the life and works of Mary Hunter Austin. The person most responsible for this revival is T. M. Pearce, who has contributed the largest share to the collection of writings about Mary Austin with publication of his *Beloved House* in 1940, *Mary Hunter Austin* in 1970, and with *Literary America 1903-1934: The Mary Austin Letters* in 1979.

While Pearce's previous studies have been largely biographical in nature, *Literary America* helps to place Austin in perspective among her peers as one of the most highly-respected writers of the first three decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, because of the wide range of her acquaintances, the letters make information available that provides insights not only into the life of Mary Austin but also into the lives of other well-known figures of the times.

After a brief editorial introduction, the book begins with letters that pick up the strands of Austin's life in 1903 after publication of *The Land of Little Rain*, a book which earned Austin recognition and prestige as an interpreter of the Southwestern landscape, and at a point when her personal horizons had expanded to include individuals such as Charles Fletcher Lummis, Ina Coolbrith, George Sterling, Jack London, James Hopper, Frederick Webb Hodge, and later Upton Sinclair, H. G. Wells, Herbert Hoover, Ansel Adams, D. H. Lawrence, Willa Cather, Amy Lowell, Mabel Dodge Lujan, John Collier, Witter Brynner, and many others.

Correspondence from these artists intimately mirrors their human frailties, literary interests and opinions, and their support of each other, as well as their friendly feuds. The letters also reveal less well-known aspects of public figures such as President Herbert Hoover's dalliance with play production, Jack London's professed purpose in writing *The Sea Wolf* and *The Strength of the Storm*, and Austin's prophetic visions concerning the Bolshevik Revolution and the state of world affairs. The book follows a logical format in first printing correspondence Austin received at the artist colony in Carmel-By-The-Sea, then during her New York years, and finally letters sent to her in Santa Fe, where she died at her "Beloved House" in 1934.

0028-6206/80/1000-0345 \$0.50/0

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Included in an appendix are biographical sketches of correspondents that make the reading much more meaningful. In addition, detailed introductions to individual letters in the text set the stage for the writer's thoughts and unify the collection into a revealing documentary. Altogether, the editor claims, the collection is a "literary panorama of people, places, and events [and] . . . presents a truly innovative and creative period in the history of the United States." Insofar as Austin is concerned, the impression given is that of a great talent, respected—despite her eccentricities—for her contributions to literary America and for her activities as playwright, champion of feminist causes, Indian rights, and her promotion of regionalism and the arts.

While Pearce's excellent compilation is primarily an intellectual portrait, the beautiful little book entitled *Room and Time Enough: The Land of Mary Austin*, with its excellent photography by Morley Baer, provides visual interpretation of the word pictures Austin evoked when writing about the Southwest. Since Austin's writings seemed to flow from a mystical harmony with nature to become at times more poetry than prose, this volume is a particularly fitting tribute to the woman Carl Van Doren referred to as "Master of the Environment" and "The High Priestess of Regional Literature."¹ Photographer Baer, explaining the source of his inspiration, sees Austin's writings as the perfect integration of person and place with an "imagery so incessant" that he felt compelled to photograph the land of which she talked.²

Following Baer's prologue, Augusta Fink, in a well-written introduction, gives an overview of Austin's life. Starting with Austin's childhood in Carlinville, Illinois, and her development as a precocious and rather strange child deeply hurt by her mother's rejection and the death of her dearly beloved father and sister Jennie and the family's subsequent move to California, the author relates how the young girl found solace in the peaceful environment of the San Joaquin Valley. In this new locale, Austin's association with General Edward Fitzgerald Beale of the Tejon Ranch, who shared with her his knowledge of California and the West, proved to be of great importance. The information gleaned on the Tejon Ranch combined with her mystical affinity for the land soon provided material for works such as *The Land of Little Rain*, *Isidro*, *The Flock*, *Lost Borders*, and *The Ford*.

After Austin married Stafford Wallace Austin, the couple moved to Owens Valley where the splendor of this high desert country provided further inspiration for her writings and scenes which Baer interprets so beautifully in his photographs. Fink relates with sensitivity the anguish of the Austins at the birth of their retarded daughter, Ruth, Mary's discovery of prayer as a creative source that sharpened her writing skills, and her attachment to the literary group surrounding Charles Fletcher Lummis in Los Angeles, where she honed her talents and widened her circle of friends.

After publication of *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin became one of the first members of the artists' colony at Carmel, thus initiating another productive period in her life. Fink next tells of Austin's trip to Europe where she expected to die of illness diagnosed as cancer (but a seemingly miraculous cure saved her

life), her years in New York, and finally her decision to make Santa Fe her home after extensive journeying throughout the Southwest.³

Appropriately, *Room and Time Enough* is organized according to where Austin lived in the Southwest: Owens Valley, California; the Monterey Peninsula; and New Mexico and impressions of journeys into Arizona. The annotations are taken from quotations that each environment inspired. The title of the book comes from *The Land of Little Rain* where in the high desert hills near Bakersfield, California, Austin found "Room and Time Enough" to develop her talents as a writer. In this section of the book, the photographs of Coldwater Creek are particularly outstanding as light illuminates the rapids to give the illusion of water charged with electricity. The visual images of the Monterey Peninsula, where at Carmel Austin enjoyed the camaraderie of kindred souls, feature the tidal rocks at Garrapata Beach standing in stark and monumental grandeur as if part of a scene from a space odyssey.

After an extensive trip throughout the desert states which resulted in publication of *Land of Journey's Ending* in 1924, Mary Austin decided to make her home Santa Fe. This book, which most critics rank as equal to or better than *The Land of Little Rain*, provides a holistic view of the essence of the Southwest. Along with *Starry Adventure*, it provides stunning descriptions of New Mexico and shows Austin's love affair with her adopted state and its people. Utilizing literary imagery she tells of the "vast cactus gardens" between Tucson and Phoenix, the "plantations of thistle poppies" and the "golden palo verde flowers" decorating the lower slopes of the Sangre de Cristos, the beauty of the seasons along the Rio Grande, the symbolism of Indian art and religion, and the splashing color on earthen walls of the garlands of red chilis in the Española Valley.

Although Austin wrote many novels, essays, and a few political tracts, she is best remembered for those works that reflect her tremendous appreciation of the Southwest and its unique culture. Accordingly, many of the letters in Pearce's *Literary America* testify to the intensity of her interest in the promotion of regionalism, while *Room and Time Enough* exemplifies in two mediums her sense of time and place that make her a standard bearer for the regionalistic fervor sweeping America in the years between 1918-1930.

During this period "regionalism," defined as a growing rebellion against the mechanization and regimentation of an increasingly technological society, was mirrored in the efforts of writers and artists around the country. In the Middle West, for example, regionalists tended to devote their energies to social and economic liberalism. Southern Agrarians, on the other hand, attempted to revive the intrinsic values of the Old South; but southwesterners like Austin emphasized the unique native culture, environment, and the arts of their region. As a transplanted easterner, Mary Austin, perhaps more than natives of the region, grew to appreciate and glorify in poetry and prose the southwestern landscape.⁴

Eventually, through the efforts of Austin and other regionalists, New York as the symbol of the American literary world began to crumble. Everyone read what New York wrote, sang what New York sang. But centers of rebellion began

to spring up in America—among Austin's artist crowd at Carmel; at Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and in Texas, where J. Frank Dobie's works began to make an impression. The Dallas Little Theater and the *Southwest Review*, which included Mary Austin as a member of its editorial board, stood in the vanguard of this movement. In 1929, as editors of the *Southwest Review*, John H. McGinnis and Henry Nash Smith featured a symposium on regionalism. Most contributors to the Summer 1929 issue of the *Review* agreed with Austin's viewpoint that southwestern landscape and the region's common traditions had spawned a unique culture deserving of its own literature and art.⁵

Both books under review reflect the intense regionalism of Austin's works—Baer and Fink's volume overtly through photographic interpretations and Pearce's in letters to and from friends and associates. As a believer in regionalism, Austin had no compunction about writing a friend in Santa Fe: "You can jump on Henry Canby for his long editorial number in the current issue of the *Saturday Review* . . . in which he says he does not know where to look for any body [sic] who writes about America with love. . . . The real trouble is that Henry has not looked west of the Hudson, but I do think it is time for that silly snobishness [sic] of New York to have its quietus."⁶

As a champion of this regionalistic trend, Austin was very much a part of a distinctive era in American literary history—an era when not only Mary Austin as an individual was searching for identity and a sense of place, but a time when America as a nation was experiencing a coming of age and a desire to cast off its image as a European stepchild. At the same time, people began to feel the need to counteract the rapid and unsettling changes taking place and affecting their lives in the name of technology and progress.

Regional works such as *The Land of Little Rain* and *The American Rhythm* contributed much toward the attainment of these goals. For Austin, however, publication of *Land of Journey's Ending* in 1924, as Fink has correctly analyzed, stood as a pivotal point in Austin's personal life; the experience of her long journey through the Southwest resulted not only in her paean to the beauty of the region but also in the personal conviction that the land had opened its vastness to welcome home a kindred spirit. Thus both books under consideration constitute worthy contributions to a better understanding of the complex personality of Mary Austin and, at the same time, focus on a transition period in American society and artistic achievement.

NOTES

1. "Mary Austin is Guest in Pasadena," *Pasadena Star News*, October 24, 1933, Mary Austin Collection, AU Box 2, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California (HEH); and "Mary Austin—One of America's Distinguished Women," *World Celebrities Publicity Flyer*, AU Box 23 A, HEH.

2. [Mary Austin,] *Room and Time Enough: The Land of Mary Austin*, edited and intro. by Augusta Fink; photographs, Morley Baer (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1979), p. viii.

3. Austin, *Room and Time Enough*, pp. 1-13.
4. See Mabel Major and T. M. Pearce, *Southwest Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliographies*, 3rd ed. rev. (Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1972), pp. 1-10 for a good discussion of regionalism in America.
5. "Regional Culture," *New York Times*, February 15, 1931; Henry Smith to Mary Austin, Dallas, Texas, May 11; June 8; September 25; November 26, 1930, AU Box 20, HEH. See also Mary Austin, "Regionalism in American Literature," (typescript), pp. 12-13, AU Box 26, E II: Articles, HEH.
6. Austin to Louis Untermeyer, Santa Fe, New Mexico, November 12, 1930, AU Folder HM 41066, HEH.