

Women and Literature

By S. VICTORIA MARIE FORDE

Unfazed by being called "scribblers" and "crazy ladies," women writers of the mid-nineteenth century forged ahead. New themes in the literature of women novelists during that era reflected in some ways the strength and independence of the Sisters from Emmitsburg in Cincinnati. The independent thinking of both groups led to actions or writings that many in civil and religious society questioned and even reviled.

At the time both Sisters and novelists sometimes used men's names, in the novelists' case to be better accepted. British Mary Ann Evans, as George Eliot, was able to

advocate a strong moral basis for themes that featured strong women. French writer George Sand wrote bold statements about the rights of women in nineteenth century society. Like the young

Mrs. Elizabeth Seton, Sand too was influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Her passionate personal revolt may have been expressed differently from S. Margaret George

writing to Emmitsburg, but each would have recognized the other's motivation.

Besides writing about heroines with the inner strength to conquer obstacles, Louisa May Alcott, like S. Anthony O'Connell and companions, tended the wounded of the Civil War. She never

completely recovered from the pneumonia she contracted, but continued writing, using her six other pseudonyms.

The first of two famous writers who lived for a time in Cincinnati was Frances Trollope, mother of British novelist Anthony Trollope. Although she did not write complimentary words about Americans, parallels may be found between the early Sisters and her strong and unconventional women characters.

The second, named by Abraham Lincoln as "the little woman who brought on this big war" with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who believed herself "an instrument of the Holy Spirit."

Though often misunderstood and underappreciated in those turbulent times, both the writers and the Sisters of that era have grown to the stature they deserve.

During the 150th anniversary year each issue of Intercom will focus on a particular ministry or cultural area, highlighting Sisters who were pioneers in the field, and some who continue their rich history of caring and excellence.

The Pioneers

Mother Margaret George

Among the many employments in which S. Margaret George engaged

both in Emmitsburg and in Cincinnati, one that was close to her heart was recording the Community's unfolding history. She realized the importance of

preserving a record of the events and people involved so it could be faithfully passed on to a new generation of Sisters. In "The

Treasurer's Book" she painstakingly compiled a record of the age, year of entrance, and background information for each woman who entered the Community from its beginning to the early 1840s. On the flyleaf she wrote, "I would express a wish that [this list] may be continued." Another record S. Margaret kept from 1837-1841, while serving as treasurer of the Community, was a daily journal, "The Diary of St. Joseph," which provides valuable information and insight into the personalities and events at the Motherhouse.

In addition to these Community histories, S. Margaret George kept personal journals recounting her experiences in opening and directing the missions at Frederick, Md., and Richmond, Va., and of directing missions in Boston and Cincinnati. She also kept scrapbooks and diaries in which she wrote poems and personal reflections, as well as collecting quotes and other memorabilia meaningful to her. Each of these manuscripts offers insights into her as a person and tells us of her feelings and responses to events. In taking seriously her role as





record keeper and storyteller, S. Margaret made an invaluable contribution to preserving the history of the Sisters of Charity.

S. Mary Agnes McCann

Mary McCann was one of the star pupils who attended Mount St.



Vincent, Cedar Grove, in its earliest days. From this vantage point she watched the history of the Community in the making and had personal encounters with Mother Margaret George and the other founding members.

When S. Mary Agnes entered the Community in 1867 there were 130 members; when she died in 1931 there were 1,130! Her fertile mind and keen powers of observation, as well as her personal participation in events, placed her in an excellent position to become the recorder of Community history. For the 1909 centennial of the founding of the Community she wrote a biography of Elizabeth Seton. Three years later, she wrote one of Margaret George. At the same time she was writing words for hymns and poetry, which was eventually published in two volumes as *Little Blossoms*.

S. Mary Agnes's dissertation, "Archbishop Purcell and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati," qualified her to become the first Sister of Charity to receive a Ph.D. Her three-volume *History of Mother Seton's Daughters* showed her to be a fierce champion of the Sisters of Charity as the true descendents of Elizabeth Seton. As a member of the American

Catholic Historical Association she was the only woman to present a paper at the organization's first annual meeting. Undoubtedly, S. Mary Agnes's writing made a contribution both to the Sisters of Charity and to U.S. Catholic history.

S. Leona Murphy

Another Sister of Charity who loved to research and write Community history was S. Leona Murphy. Besides her assigned duties as teacher, administrator, school supervisor, secretary general of the



Community and archivist, S. Leona found time to pursue her interests in Elizabeth Seton and in the Sisters of Charity.

William Vincent Seton, Sea Rover and *These are My Jewels* are two manuscripts she prepared on the lives of Elizabeth Seton's children. Although neither was published, they reveal her dedication to promulgating the fascinating story of Elizabeth Seton to school children. S. Leona also wrote a full-length manuscript, *The Life Story of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati*. This and another sketch of the Sister of Charity foundation in Cincinnati, written at the request of Rev. Joseph B. Code, are her major works on Community history.

Till the end of her days S. Leona shared her love of Community history, both through her writing and by sharing stories with the novices each Sunday evening at recreation.

S. Marie Emmanuel Streit

It seems that S. Marie Emmanuel Streit was born with a poem in her heart. From her earliest days she received encouragement and support from her loving family. She had her first poem published in the *Chicago Daily News* when she was 13.



During her years as a teacher and moderator of school papers and yearbooks, Sister also found time to write for secular, religious and professional publications. Her book of poems, *Songs of Immolation*, was published before she made final vows, and in the early 1960s she wrote *Let in the Sun*, monthly meditations for Sisters.

Sister also wrote many booklets and pamphlets, as well as articles, poems and book reviews for magazines such as *Sisters Today*, *Review for Religious*, *St. Anthony Messenger*, *Immaculata*, and *Today's Catholic Teacher*. After her retirement in 1974 she devoted all of her time to writing and succeeded within just a few years in having more than 60 articles published by more than 20 different publications.

Another favorite topic was researching and writing biographies of Sisters of Charity. Sisters Elizabeth Seton, Anthony O'Connell, and Mary de Sales Leheny were some of her subjects, as was S. Fidelis McCarthy in a pamphlet entitled "Sister Fidelis Goes to Trinidad."

A gifted writer, S. Marie Emmanuel's "second ministry" of writing touched thousands of people.

The Followers

S. Marilyn Therese Beauvais

Writing poetry began as a hobby around 1967, but really came into fruition in 1983. A Christmas poem submitted to the World Library of Poetry earned a certificate of merit. That became an open door to writing more poetry. Enclosing poems in cards for the holidays became customary and added an extra something for those receiving them.

Next were patriotic poems inspired by national celebrations. Special mention must be given to "This Flag." It merited two presidential letters. President Bush had received a copy for Labor Day just prior to the infamous 9/11.

Poems have found their way to various locations for special events, namely Washington, D.C., New York, Texas, Cincinnati, Colorado and even Peru and France.

A birthday tribute, "The Father Danced the Day You Were Born," was recently set to music by S. Terry Thorman. This was the first ever for this honor.

Lastly, there are a few amusing poems, eulogies, dedications and narratives.

The poems are written to carry a special message. Many have received certificates and are in publications of the International Library of Poetry.

In March I received the silver cup trophy and bronze medal for excellence in poetry.

A future goal is to publish theme booklets or a book after completing the "Poet Laureate" course.

S. Imelda Cooper

In the 1960s in Findlay, Ohio, I was blessed with three evergreen trees outside my window. One day I sat down at my desk and wrote about my three "friends." So began my discovery of this joyous gift.

One evening I received a call from S. Terence Marie Mahoney requesting that I write a poem for S. Marie Colombiere Bugganer's retirement from leadership. I asked Sister to join me in prayer that I succeed in this effort. Returning to my room, I sat in my easy chair and prayed, listened and wrote. The gift was given and the poem "Fourfold Light" was born.

So it has been for the past 30 years. I find in my spirit evidence of an innate love and relationship to nature, where I find the truth of life and the symbols of life.

Much of my work is about my own Sisters and my friends. I absorb something of their beauty and richness and that is what is expressed in my words. Some poems emerge from joy; some from pain. If I can receive the first line the rest follows swiftly. I have at times sat in the parking lot of a garage to write the thoughts that are coming so quickly.

I truly need to be "inspired" to experience an emotion in order to have a result. Writing is not an everyday occurrence for me. I am not a published author. I am a responder to a surprising gift that has brought great joy to my life and for which I am grateful and most happy to share.



S. John Miriam Jones

Words fascinate me – colorful, rich, descriptive words. One sometimes has to sort through a number of possibilities to find the one word best suited to convey a concept. Perhaps the sorting can be likened to fashioning a mosaic, searching for a piece of a certain size and shape to fit the space exactly. Just as mosaic building is an art form, so too is crafting words into sentences and paragraphs that say just what one intends.

Although at times writing can be tedious, I love to do it. I find choosing the right words and shaping their combination to be life giving. And one can surely hope they hold life for those who read or hear them. If so, writing is indeed a ministry. I have found it so in people's reactions to pieces I have written – articles, papers, homilies and, especially, *With an Eagle's Eye*, a book designed as a self-directed Celtic retreat. It has been a joy to learn how the written words come to life and bear grace for those who read them.

Now I am in the early stages of another book – a book based on the lessons I learned from our older Sisters in the years I spent at the Mount. Its evolution is too slow and I am learning the need to discipline myself to carve out time and space in order to write. Just as forming a mosaic requires time and patience, finalizing the thoughts and finding those precise words can be demanding. But like all other worthwhile endeavors, there is not only the struggle, but life and joy to be found. ✚

