

MARGARET ASHMUN: WISCONSIN AUTHOR
AND EDUCATOR

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Americans are sometimes impressed with the matter-of-fact way that the Englishman—or any other European—knows and enjoys the literature not only of his own land but of his own locality, regarding it as a commodity to be kept in constant use. With our cosmopolitan tendency to look abroad for greatness, we have sometimes in the past been too modest about our product and failed to perceive that in its relation to our own scene it is not duplicated elsewhere. Among Wisconsin possessions which it would be a misfortune to lose is the work of Margaret Ashmun.

Margaret Eliza Ashmun was born in Rural, Waupaca County, Wisconsin. She was a graduate of Stevens Point State College. She took her Ph.B. at the University of Wisconsin in 1904, and her A.M. in 1908. She was the head of the English Department at Stout Institute, Menomonie, Wisconsin, 1904-06, and a member of the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin 1907-12. In 1912 she went to New York, and from that year on she gave the greater part of her time to writing. She kept up her home in Rural, spent some winters in Madison, and was several times abroad for considerable periods. In 1928 she adopted a little girl, whose death ten years later was a great shock and grief to her. Miss Ashmun died in 1940 at the age of 65.

Her literary work falls into several distinct categories. First, her educational work, which includes several books: *Prose Literature for Secondary Schools* (1910), "with some suggestions for correlation with composition", *Modern Prose and Poetry for Secondary Schools* (1914), the selections being accompanied by notes, study helps, and reading lists, *Modern Short Stories* (1924) including an introduction, biographies and bibliographies, and finally, in 1914, *The Study and Practice of Writing English*, of which last she was joint author with Mr. Gerard P. Lomer.

These books throw sidelights on her work in general, her interest in education and in the young, her critical theories, and her methods of writing.

In the second place we have the material published in maga-

zines including articles, stories, and poetry. The most important of Miss Ashmun's short stories is "The Birthplace",¹ published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911. It is a poignant little tale of loss and resignation, the scene, vividly realized, being a small town in Illinois and more particularly an old-fashioned garden, on a June afternoon and evening.

Miss Ashmun produced a considerable amount of verse, which was rather extensively published in the *New England Magazine*, the *Overland Monthly*, *Good Housekeeping*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and other periodicals, but never collected in a volume. Miss Ashmun did not take her verse very seriously but thought of it as a minor part of her work.

Among the finest pieces are some sonnets published in the *New England Magazine*. One, "On an Old-Russian Candlestick", paints the chiaroscuro of some "strange-set" board, where, long ago, the flame of the candle lighted "wine-wild faces" and was caught by studded swordhilts,

" . . . till, coarse-carousing with her lord,
Some jewelled woman flashed it back again."

And now

"This bit of brass forlornly braves its doom—
To waste with me the silent day's desire,
To watch long nights of quietness and gloom,
To share the lonely glimmer of my fire
And cheer the hired bareness of my room."²

It may be that the greatest service of Margaret Ashmun to her generation is found in her books for children. That these have been appreciated is well enough seen from the worn copies in our public libraries. How many little folk in small chairs at small tables have pored over *No School Tomorrow* (1925), *School Keeps Today* (1926), *Brenda Stays at Home* (1926), *Mother's Away* (1927), *Susie Sugarbeet* (1930). The very titles are alluring. Who could resist *No School Tomorrow*?

One is impressed with all the inventiveness that went into these little books—the devising of ever-new play, that is at the same time grounded in the essential psychological appeal of all the old games of the world.

These are glorious places, seen in high lights and rich shadows: hayloft, woodshed, attic, a garden, an old mill, a flowing brook, the kitchen with its gay ragrugs, "and the bright dishes

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (February, 1911), pp. 233-241.

² *New England Magazine*, n.s. 35: 345. November, 1906.

in the glass cupboard and yellow gingham curtains at the windows, and Flora, the black and white cat, washing her paws in the square of sunshine on the floor." And there are happy companionships: kittens, birds, dolls, and a real playmate whose tastes complement one's own, whose love of doing real things keeps pace with one's more fanciful imaginings.

We see the Little Girl going through the garden with her orange in her hand, and entering the barn where "the sunshine streamed in across the plank floor, which was littered with dried grass and straw and was soft to your bare feet. Above, there was a high roof, where rays of light came through tiny cracks between the shingles, and made long dusty lines in the shadows."

"She wished she didn't remember things so vividly. Other people didn't seem to." These words occur in one of the novels for adult readers, with implications of sadness. But in the children's books this powerful recollection is a great storehouse of treasures. Vivid sense impressions, color, the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the wind, the ecstasy of running and jumping—these things are here as the child first senses them in that pre-school age before "shades of the prison house" have cut off the sharpness of their light. The books are designed to reinforce these impressions at the point where they might be lost—just when school begins to keep today and crowd them out with other needful furnishings of the mind. Wordsworth turned back to recollect these riches and make them the stuff of reflective verse. What Margaret Ashmun has done is to organize them for the child himself, while he is still a child, and so insure his permanent possession of them.

The writing of these little books was no time-serving task. The writer gave herself to the enjoyment of them. And so they are a boon not only to the child but to those grown-ups who read to children. They are interspersed with original verse of the school of Mother Goose.

There is plenty of incidental instruction, too: how to build a fire, how to make an outdoor fireplace, how to paper a wall. A recipe for pancakes becomes a narrative of high adventure breathlessly pursued by two small girls allowed to do real cooking on a rainy day.

Margaret Ashmun's work is probably known in her native state most extensively through her books for teen-age girls—the

Isabel Carleton series of five volumes (1916-19). These perform the same function as Miss Alcott's books did and still do.

That Miss Ashmun was consciously going on with Miss Alcott's mission, though quite in her own individual way, is borne out by a sonnet "On a Portrait of Miss Alcott," published in the *New England Magazine*, in which Miss Ashmun describes how in her childhood she had thought of Miss Alcott as a marvelous figure, a sort of princess "on whom a kindly fate forever smiled." The latter part of the sonnet goes on to say,

"Now where I, musing, stand
Her portrait hangs. This unassuming guise
Shows, not a princess, haughty to command,
But one most humble, human, sorrow-wise,
Who seems to live and reach me forth her hand—
A woman simple, sweet, with tired eyes."³

Of the four novels for adult readers the most notable are *The Lake*, published in 1924, and *Pa: Head of the Family*, published in 1927.

The English edition of *The Lake* came out under a slightly different title *The Lonely Lake*. The book was, I think, Miss Ashmun's own favorite of her writings.*

It is a bleak novel, at times as bleak as *Ethan Frome*, but it is a point of contrast with the New England novel that the bleakness is alleviated much as in Hardy by a warm homeliness of detail that accords well with the opulent and richly colored Wisconsin landscape.

"They turned in along the edge of the marsh, where twisted gentians stood up stiffly, and iris pods were dry and slitting. On a harder knoll a hickory tree showed its dark fruit. The squirrel instinct of the boy would hardly let him pass."⁴

The treatment of setting is profoundly integrated with characterization, affording not only frame and background but at once realistic detail of the action and poetic symbols of the essence of the theme.

"Bert set out, with the heavy basket on his arm. He was warmly dressed, in his reefer and muffler and mittens, but the cold cut avidly through his clothes. The wind was keen and slashing. He tramped along the narrow wood road, looking up at the tops of the trees against the pale, hard sky. He thought of the time, not so very long ago, when he and Uncle Alec were out in the woods, and there was a warm golden colour

³ *New England Magazine* 37:78. September, 1907.

⁴ *The Lake*, New York, 1924, p. 101.

* Part of my comment on this book, repeated with permission, was published in the *Capital Times*, Madison, Sunday, March 15, 1936, under the title "A Story of Central Wisconsin."

over everything. How different it was now! How long the winter was! It had hardly more than begun. The snow would lie on the ground till March or April. Even in the latter days of April, it would not be melted in the dark places under the hemlocks, or on northward knoll-sides in the woods."⁵

The natural scene and persons alike are always beheld with the seeing eye—even the rhubarb "flaunting huge crumpled leaves on rose-colored stocks",⁶ the Hunt's cottage "unintentionally pretty."⁷

"He walked as if getting over the ground were a process of nature, involuntary and unnoticed like breathing."⁸

"Averil Faraday was a quiet woman, who would have been thought beautiful in a different environment. The country people did not like her black hair, which she wore braided and wound about her head, coronetwise; nor her deep-set eyes, which seemed to them too knowing; nor her white skin, which kept its smoothness in the heat of summer and the cold of winter."⁹

Properties are used with skill and reappear in the story at intervals with tragic effect, the flashlight "sickly yellow in the sun",¹⁰ the lad's silver watch, the screen door thrice left wide open, the kitchen table, after the devastating domestic storm has spent its fury, "placidly covered with its checked blue cloth."¹¹

The people are made real to us through their very inarticulateness, which contributes both to their power of outward control and to the danger from submerged emotions once they find a vent: Alexander and Willard able to work together all day and many days with tragic jealousy and uncertainty between them; Libbie and Averil thinking of their individual troubles.

"Each was tempted to tell her secrets to the other, but each refrained. Each was sorry for the other, but dared not make mention of her reasons, lest she appear prying or bold."¹²

A high point of characterization is in the portrayal of the Hunt family—"Caddie", whose firm, capable, young hands must disentangle the knots of other people's lives; Mrs. Hunt (called "poor Libbie Hunt" because of the behaviour of an elusive husband), who with her quiet common sense and ethical hold on life, enduring without a martyr spirit, refuses tragedy for her-

⁵ *The Lake*, p. 140-141.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 68.

self and alleviates it in others. "The whole interior of the Hunt family is delightfully presented,"¹³ wrote a reviewer in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, "and the incident of the vagabond husband's brief return to live upon her [his wife] is extremely telling."

Power of characterization is seen not only in the strong drawing of the main characters but in vivid picturing of minor ones. The scene is never over-crowded. Only those appear who have an essential part to play; yet they suffice to suggest the community life three-dimensionally.

The tragic central story is set firmly in a larger stream of experience. The passion of youth is spent before the story opens; yet the action never lacks intensity. It begins at once and moves swiftly. The dark aftermath is given fully and logically; yet it is not the end. Even in the bitter struggle with disillusionment which the younger generation have to suffer and the expiation they have to make, we are not allowed the sense of despair and finality; rather we are taken up into an onward movement toward renewal of life. Unflinching realism is combined with sanity.

The book is not without its weaknesses—notably the rather flat surface presentation of Mr. Sutton, the well-meaning young minister, and the element of conventionality and improbability in the treatment of Daddy Gleason and his part in the denouement. Mr. J. B. Priestley mentioned some weaknesses in his review of the book in the *London Mercury*, but nevertheless commented on "the power,¹⁴ the curious reality and conviction of her more dramatic scenes that are so extraordinarily good." He goes on to say, "She has imagined these incidents with intensity, and though she never raises her voice and never departs from her detached sane manner of narration, she dominates our imagination with them."

The style has many excellencies—gravity and grace, ease and reticence, thrift and high finish, and in its best passages, an unobtrusive exactness in choice of word, carrying within its simplicity a symbolism that seems at once fortuitous and accurate:

"His voice sounded far away, indistinct, and unavailing."

"She merely wanted to rest there on the surface of the lake, in the precarious safety of the boat."¹⁵

"The harvest came, as harvests will come, after the patient sus-

¹³ *The Times Literary Supplement*, Thursday, Dec. 18, 1924, p. 868.

¹⁴ *London Mercury*, Vol. 11, No. 68 (January, 1925), p. 319-20.

¹⁵ *The Lake*, p. 41.

pense, after the sprouting and ripening of the plant, whose seed is in itself."¹⁶

In stressing the local interest of *The Lake*, we must not forget that it has a universal interest too. When it appeared, it was received with enthusiasm both at home and abroad. The *New York Times* commended it for being "psychological without being clinical," and pronounced its plot one "over which Hardy must have rejoiced." Dorothy Foster Gilman, writing in the *Boston Transcript*, described it as "an exceptionally interesting novel, well written, artistically conceived, with an emotional significance both fervent and exalted. . . . The narrative unwinds with deliberation and power . . . Miss Ashmun has shown herself the possessor of remarkable talent, coupled with a deep sense of the grandeur and significance of our human drama." The *Nation* (New York) described the book as "a lowering, sombre tale of hidden love hovering between tragedy and release; carried on a tide of intense and passionate writing which is strikingly appropriate to the theme."¹⁷ The *Cardiff Mail* said of the author, "She has a strength and dignity and a sense of architecture which are given to few writers." The *Glasgow Herald* did not hesitate to say, "The texture of this fine transatlantic novel suggests some of the qualities of the best Russian fiction." Similar comments have already been quoted from the *London Mercury* and the *Literary Supplement* of the *London Times*.

Pa: Head of the Family (Macmillan, 1927) though of less depth and power than *The Lake*, is in some ways more skillfully executed. Its values are in its intensely clear-cut setting, its sharp characterizations, and the hard clarity of the style, not a word wasted, with no ornament, no affectation, no idealization, with nothing but an ever-present ironic humor to mitigate the harsh reality. The story goes through to its logical ending. The unethical conduct of some of its persons gets no comment. If the reader has help in keeping his sense of human values, it is through the presence of Emma Doty. Yet Emma herself is not idealized. She is a sensible, right-feeling woman, kind, just-minded, patient in a humorous way, disciplined in herself through taking the circumstances of her own life in good part. In the words and thoughts given her, however, there is nothing imported from any larger range of awareness than her own.

"Pa" himself is a masterpiece of characterization.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁷ The *Nation*, Vol. 120, No. 3107 (January 21, 1925), p. 74.

"The old man sat down clumsily, letting his cane fall with a clatter. He noted with rancour that his cup of weak tea was already cooling at his place. He felt like pushing it off the table. He loved hot, strong tea, with plenty of sugar at the bottom of the cup."

If the book has a "heroine" it must be Mattie. She it is who goes through desperate adventures and makes haven at last in the secure ever-after of matrimony. Her misfortunes are not sentimentalized for the reader. Her spinal curvature and withered arm are never presented as a claim for a kindly judgment. Mattie stands on her own, in venom and egotism more than the equal of the others.

The action of the story never flags and never leaves its track. Mattie prepares with great zest for her wedding and is deserted by the bridegroom at the last moment—Pa, who hates his granddaughter, Mattie, having secretly encouraged the young man to get away while there is time. All the reactions of everybody to these events are mirrored with the utmost precision and hold our interest by their sheer clarity, like objects sharply seen in a painting of a Dutch interior.

When a new Prince Charming appears, in the person of Arne, the Swede, hired man of the Doty's, we are no more worried about his fate than about Petruchio's. True, Mattie will never be tamed, but Arne's good nature and shrewd materialism will be a match for her. He knows what he is doing, and feels compensated by the dowry wrested from the obstinate Pa by a trick which it does not even occur to Arne to be ashamed of.

The humor of the treatment is not found in comment or any pointing up of absurdity. It is in the steady, ironic eye of the author, who sees everything, but without malice.

It remains to speak of Miss Ashmun's scholarly biography of Anne Seward, a contemporary of Dr. Johnson. *The Singing Swan* was published in 1931 by the Oxford Press, and must have represented a great deal of very delightful research in England.

This book seems to me to be the high point of Margaret Ashmun's literary achievement. The style is as far as possible from being naive; yet it remains simple and unaffected. The book is scholarly and at the same time human. Over every page plays the light of delicate irony that at times reminds one of Jane Austen. Every absurdity in the human situations dealt with is relentlessly seen in the light of that irony—and yet not mercilessly, for in the very justice of every judgment there is an ever-

present human kindness and understanding rare with such penetrating humor. Though the narrative keeps the pace of a biography based on exact research, the skill of the practiced narrator is felt in the way she now anticipates and now withholds the story. In this book, more than anywhere else, it seems to me, is revealed in its maturity the personality of Margaret Ashmun, which those of us who knew her found so delightful—good sense, ironic humor, moderation, human understanding, resolute justness of mind, and a taste for simplicity.

