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ABSTRACT

Sara Powell Haardt, when she is remembered at all, is remembered as the wife of the newspaperman and critic, H. L. Mencken. Educators and scholars of history, writing, and literature may find Haardt's work interesting, as it centers on the conflict between the new South and the old. She taught high school English, and then taught at Goucher College, her alma mater. Her literary contributions include poems, short stories, and non-fiction sketches. Haardt published some 40 short stories and articles in her career, in periodicals that included "The Smart Set," "The American Mercury," "Scribner's" "Woman's Home Companion," and "The Virginia Quarterly Review." Haardt's work is virtually unknown today, out-of-print or buried in back issues, but it is worth reading, particularly her autobiographical sketches which display a perspective of the South now all but lost: that of the privileged class. Haardt was attuned to the voices of Blacks only as she acknowledged them, that is, as servants. "The Etiquette of Slavery" addressed the situation of Southern farmers in the antebellum days, i.e., their difficulty in getting slaves to perform their duties without relinquishing the upper hand. Haardt also spent some time in Hollywood working on screenplays, none of which were actually produced. By the time she died in 1935, she was a moderately successful writer. Her quiet achievements are triumphs over her Southern heritage, and yet remain indubitably and inimitably of the South. (Contains 20 references and a 40-item bibliography of Haardt's work.) (TB)

SARA HAARDT: THE NEGLECTED CONTRIBUTIONS OF A UNIQUE VOICE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE NEW SOUTH

by Gail Shivel

SARA HAARDT: THE NEGLECTED CONTRIBUTIONS OF A UNIQUE VOICE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE NEW SOUTH

Sara Powell Haardt, when she is remembered at all, is known as the wife of the newspaperman, critic and author, H.L. Mencken. A competent, if not distinguished, writer, Haardt left a legacy of work of interest mainly for its evocation of the post-Reconstruction South and Southern society before the Depression. Her contributions include poems, short stories, non-fiction sketches and movie scripts.

Haardt's earliest published writings were short stories and poems for Kalends, the literary magazine of Goucher College, from which she graduated in 1920 with a liberal arts degree. (Rodgers, 1987, 28). She returned home to Montgomery, Alabama, to teach high school English. She soon returned to Baltimore as the youngest member of the Goucher faculty, and was a popular instructor until her illness forced her to stop teaching in 1925. From then until 1929 she was in nearly constant financial difficulty, trying to support herself on her writing alone. Mencken, whom she met in 1923, kept a close eye on her ripening talent, and by the time they married she had achieved a respectable reputation as a writer. Through diligence, and with much help and advice from Mencken, she developed a unique voice that deserves a wider attention.

Her short stories and novel mostly center on the conflict between the new South and the old; a South that doggedly remembered the War Between the States and a South that needed to

forget and go on. She wrote of the peculiarly Southern disease of obliviousness to bare fact, a theme abundantly commented upon by W.J. Cash and others. Her heroines, whether naive girls on the brink of disillusionment or old maids with illusions intact, wilt sometimes under the harsh light she cast on them. A bit more sympathy toward her characters may have added a degree of sophistication to Haardt's writing. Apparently, Haardt's preference was for fiction writing; the most ambitious examples of her work are fiction. Haardt's characters, while accurate in their own ways, do not ring true as those of a master storyteller like Mark Twain. She displayed a facility for capturing dialect: "Do, Fahder, what kine o white mens is dat?" says a black nursemaid in "Southern Credo," reacting to a tale of "Them Yankee debbils ... that kilt mah puhty Miss Lucy," (Haardt, "Southern Credo," 107). "Southern Credo" was one of Haardt's several collections of semi-autobiographical sketches of small-town Southern life, including stories she heard as a child from the black women who took care of her. Haardt was at her most convincing in the autobiographical vein.

Haardt published some forty short stories and articles in her career, in periodicals that included The Smart Set and The American Mercury (edited by Mencken and George Jean Nathan), Century, Scribner's, North American, Woman's Home Companion and The Virginia Quarterly Review. After her death, Mencken put together a collection of sixteen of her short stories, published by Doubleday as Southern Album, the title she had intended for a

book she died without finishing (Haardt, 1936, i). About thirty university libraries, including the Richter Library at the University of Miami, received copies of Southern Album from Mencken (Mencken, letter, April 1936).

H.L. Mencken was at the height of his literary influence in the 1920s, in his capacities as editor of The American Mercury, columnist for The Sun of Baltimore and chronicler of American social and intellectual developments, good and bad. He was always encouraging new writers in whom he saw promise, and Haardt was one of them. They met in the spring of 1923 when she acted as chaperon for her friend Sara Mayfield of Tuscaloosa, who had won the Goucher College prize for freshman short story - part of the honor was to have dinner with Mencken. Goucher deans being far too prim to allow a young freshwoman to go out unaccompanied with the Bachelor of Baltimore, Haardt was enlisted to go along. She had already submitted a story to The Smart Set that year, and Mencken had turned it down. They became friends and thereafter would meet frequently for lunch or dinner, to discuss their projects with one another.

Undoubtedly, Haardt's reputation grew largely because of her association with Mencken. But in no way did he make a particular favorite of her. Nearly all new writers who were published regularly in the 1920's owed much of their success to Mencken's literary patronage, among them Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and Ruth Suckow. The extent of Mencken's influence in literature was formidable, indeed totally unequaled before or

since in American letters.

Southern Album, published in April 1936, was reviewed on the same page of the same issue of Booklist with another book of the South with a larger destiny: Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind. Mitchell's novel, of course, achieved instant popularity and her characters today are cultural icons. Patricia Storace writes in the New York Review of Books: " ... the prose style and structure of Gone With the Wind is descended from the style of features journalism," (Storace, "Look Away, Dixie Land," 30). Scarlett O'Hara is vivid and engaging, and the rendering Mitchell gave of the civilization of the old South is more or less just a backdrop for her life story. Haardt, on the other hand, made her characters as accurate as she could, using them to supplement her descriptions of atmosphere. As a result, her figures are not as compelling and could in some cases be accused of being Southern Gothic stereotype. For instance, "Alabama April," a story Haardt was working on around 1925-26 but never had published, contains all the classic elements of Southern melodrama: a shooting, an elopement, a family scandal, the hiding of silver from the Yankees. ("Alabama April" could be the definitive Haardt story - it is a tale of the old South, told from the point of view of a woman confined to bed in a tuberculosis sanatorium.)

Southern Album and Haardt's one novel, The Making of a Lady, are faithful portraits of the South, but Gone With the Wind endures and continues to dominate the popular perception of Dixie. Mitchell's novel is still read; Haardt's work disappeared

and is difficult today even to locate. Reviewers were not enthusiastic about The Making of a Lady, and it was Mencken's opinion that some of them were trying to attack him indirectly (Rodgers, 47). Whether this was true or not, the book did not sell and faded away. Haardt was discouraged, as so much work (seven revisions) had gone into the novel and subject was close to her heart. Mencken would write, "She had no illusions about the social purpose of the novel, but she felt that she had a great deal more to say about Southern ideas and prejudices, aspirations and agonies, than she had said here" (Haardt, 1936, xviii).

Ellen Glasgow was one of the early influences on Haardt's writing. Glasgow wrote 19 novels between 1898 and 1941, winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for They Stooped to Folly. Her work was the harbinger of realism in Southern literature. However, her novels bear more resemblance to the romantic Victorian works she repudiated than to the stark and fantastic realism later developed by Faulkner and Tennessee Williams. She exposed some of the myths Southerners had lived by, but her style retained their grace and dignity. She has been called a "necessary bridge" between romantic Victorianism and modern realism in Southern literature (Auchincloss, 46).

Haardt's "Ellen Glasgow and the South" appeared in Bookman in April 1929. In accordance with Haardt's sensibilities, a good bit of the article was about the furnishings of Glasgow's home in Richmond. But she also made some keen examinations on Glasgow's

place in Southern literature: amounting to that she was almost an anomaly. Haardt, like many Southern writers, had left her homeland to pursue her career. She shared with Mencken the perception of the South as a cultural desert. Haardt contends that Glasgow's work did not become a battle flag of realism for modern Southern authors because her style was so conventional. She may have been the most important of the first to rebel against the platitudinous works on which she was raised, but she was after all a privileged Virginian lady with prejudices and conventionality intact. Glasgow was a pioneer in lifting the veil from the miseries of Southern Victorian womanhood; Haardt followed her example.

Haardt's work is virtually unknown these days, out-of-print or buried in back issues as it is. But her writing, particularly her autobiographical sketches, is worthwhile reading because it displays a perspective on the South now all but lost: that of the privileged class. While the tone of her stories and recollections may be out of style, all the same they welcome a fresh reading for their now-historical charm. Haardt's childhood memories and loving but cynical pictures of the South, and her sentimentally morbid accounts of life in a tuberculosis hospital, are rewarding reading to anyone interested in the South and in writing that captures dialect and mood effortlessly.

Haardt was attuned to the voices of blacks only as she acknowledged them, that is, as servants. "The Etiquette of Slavery" (American Mercury, May 1929) addressed the situation of

Southern farmers in the antebellum days, with their difficulty in getting slaves to perform their duties without relinquishing the upper hand. The hand that held the whip does not figure in Haardt's portrayal of the slave days; instead, the overworked mistress of the Southern household is a virtual slave to her own servants.

"The Etiquette of Slavery" probably would not get past any editor today. Haardt used examples that came easily to her but would be unsuitable for a writer sensitive to today's prejudices. For instance, she writes:

> "As a matter of actual fact, anybody who has had the most superficial experience with Negro servants knows that they are moody, fractious, and peculiarly resentful of criticism; the best of them are subject to temperamental fits that cloud the whole atmosphere and serve as a perfect defense mechanism against corrections and orders." (Haardt, "The Etiquette of Slavery," 36)

Yet, in "Southern Credo," it is the black woman, Callie, who allows Sara and her classmates to strip her garden of flowers to take to the cemetery for Confederate Memorial Day. "Ah ain't nevah refused de so'jers," she says, proud of providing her flowers when the white families were stingy with theirs. (Haardt, "Southern Credo," 109)

The Civil War and the situations created by it have been used by almost all Southern writers in one way or another. Like

Mitchell, Haardt recorded the memories she heard when she was young from those who were old, before the War had passed from living memory. She portrayed the Cause as doomed by a basic tendency of Southerners to resist reality in favor of pleasantness and gentility. Again in "Southern Credo" (104), she brought up the historical evidence that General George Pickett had himself not participated as fully as he might have in the battle of Gettysburg. So ingrained was unquestioning admiration for Pickett, even in the face of proof of his spending most of the battle behind a barn with his entourage, that a small outrage over the piece ensued among Southern readers of the Mercury. This delighted Mencken but upset Haardt.

Although she wrote with a measure of affection and an even greater measure of pride about the South, Haardt also had a deep aversion to the land of her heritage, including a tendency to blame some of her own shortcomings on the Southern atmosphere in which she was raised. She writes: "I like to think of myself, in exalted moments, as an enlightened Southerner. At such moments I adhere strictly to my certainty that the South entered upon the Civil War over the question on slavery, but all the while I find myself behaving as if I believed it went in over the principle of independence." (SC, 103)

Marion Rodgers, editor of Mencken and Sara, a collection of letters the two exchanged before and during their marriage, suggested in her preface that Sara's German ancestry somehow prevented her from ever feeling like a true Southerner (Rodgers,

16). Actually, she must have felt just as Southern as anybody. Indeed, most white Southerners have recent origins in Western Europe or the British Isles, and are no less Southern for it. H.L. Mencken's Teutonic blood certainly never prevented him from being the Baltimorean par excellence.

Haardt was often less than kind to the culture that had produced her, and at times was positively scathing. The region that had earned the title "The Sahara of the Bozart" from Mencken (Farrell, 1957, 69) was also wide open to the quietly vicious feints of his wife. But while Mencken attacked the cultural poverty of the region (and did much to correct that by encouraging Southern writers), Haardt held up to examination the weakness of the genteel society. Not the corrupted, Faulknerian South, nor the conventional one of Ellen Glasgow, but the softly scented twilight of the gods that still fogged the Southern consciousness.

Mencken wrote to a discouraged Haardt in 1925, after turning down an article she had submitted to The American Mercury: "Don't get impatient about your writing. You are doing it better month by month. The hard labor of the past years will come home to roost, so to speak, later on" (Forgue, 1961, 282). Haardt seems to have been always willing and wise enough to take Mencken's advice. It did not make her a great writer; her work is edifying and entertaining, but has not "worn" well. Her fiction is typical, if rather better than the average, of the sort of thing that appears in magazines that also print recipes. The pieces

that were good enough for The American Mercury were naturally among her best.

"Alabama April" had been accepted by Mencken for publication in The American Mercury in July 1928, but instead Mencken decided on "Jim Tully," a character study Haardt had written at Mencken's suggestion while in Hollywood. Tully was a writer and a friend of Mencken's who escorted Haardt during her six weeks in Hollywood. "Alabama April" was never published (Rodgers, 381n).

In the fall of 1926 Haardt went to Hollywood, under a six-week writing contract with Lasky-Famous Players-Paramount Studios. Mencken had shown some of her work to Walter Wanger, a friend of his and Paramount's production chief. In the six weeks she was in Hollywood, she submitted several scripts to Paramount producer Herman Mankiewicz (who would later write Citizen Kane with Orson Welles) but none of them were ever filmed. Jim Cruze, an important Paramount director, was interested in her screenplays. Cruze had made his reputation in 1923 with the Western epic "The Covered Wagon." He offered her $20,000 for the rights to "Way Down South," a story about Southern landowners who exiled themselves to Brazil after Lee's surrender. He paid her $1,500 right away, but she never received more than the advance of $1,500, because the picture was never produced (Rodgers, 45).

Mencken kept close tabs on all of Haardt's dealings with movie agents. Her life, he felt, had not prepared her for the gaudy money-grubbing of the film industry. She wrote anxiously to him: "I know you'll never forgive me if I don't sell these Jews

something - I know the stuff I've cooked up is better than the stuff I hear talked around the studio, but there's a bare chance in a thousand that I can put it over" (Rodgers, 305). "The Jews" was how she and Mencken continually referred to the film people in their letters to one another. After being continually evaded, frustrated and strung along by Mankiewicz, Haardt wrote: "This whole business is simply impossible and these Jews insufferable. I am rapidly developing a Nordic complex that is mounting to a phobia" (Rodgers, 301). Mencken's perceived anti-Semitism has been much commented upon lately, and Haardt's attitude was no less typical of her background than his was. New York Times columnist Russell Baker has noted: "In that setting, southwest Baltimore in the 1930's and 1940's, we were all racists and anti-Semites, and much more that now seems just as unsavory" (Baker, "Prejudices Without the Mask," 31). The letters she sent to Mencken from Hollywood were among the few from her that Mencken saved. His passion for documentation is well known, and these letters record a great deal of the conversation and arrangements Haardt made with Mankiewicz, Cruze, Wanger and other people Mencken knew from his own travels to Hollywood.

Haardt was extremely protective of her independence. She had set out as a young woman to make a career for herself as a writer, and, when she fell ill, kept silent to her family, choosing to remain on her own and support herself with her writing and teaching. She worked diligently even when she was bedridden.

The struggle between life and death is evident in much of Haardt's work, both literally, as in her autobiographical account of tuberculosis, and metaphorically, in the stories od the old, sick South sapping the strength from the new. Naturally her persistent illnesses had a profound effect on her perspective, Her very will to live was modified by romantic feelings about death (Mayfield, 136). Haardt wrote in "Dear Life," in 1934: "How many times I had been reminded of death -- my own death -- in the tropical flower gardens of the South. There, with every bud bursting into bloom, with the scents of roses, Cape jasmine, and lavendar [sic] floating on the still heat, I had seemed closer to death than in my hospital bed" (Haardt, "Dear Life," 1936).

Haardt died of tubercular meningitis in 1935. By this time, she had achieved moderate success as a writer. "Absolutely Perfect" was one of the O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1933, and her work was included in Edward J. O'Brien's yearly collection, The Best Short Stories, for 1924 and 1935. Far from being one of the languishing Southern women she despised, she was accomplished and successful and had not let her illness make her too much of an invalid. Her quiet achievements are triumphs in a way over her Southern heritage, and yet remain indubitably and inimitably of the South.

The real South that Haardt loved and struggled with and wrote about no longer exists. The legendary South has been through the popular culture mill so many times that only a warped echo remains of the truth. Her work is no longer read because her

style and her notions are outmoded and politically incorrect. The times have passed her by twice, for she was in spirit an old-fashioned Southern lady and in fact a successful jazz age writer. Nevertheless, her message and her point of view deserve regard and investigation, because cultural heritage and literature are inextricable, and their value undiminished by changing times.

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