

AMAZING BEST SELLERS BY KENTUCKY WOMEN WRITERS

BY MARIAM S. HOUCHENS
Louisville, Kentucky

Some of Kentucky's most popular women writers have made their mark not by writing novels, but by portraying the wholesome, quaint, human appeal of people and places in short stories, essays, diaries or letters.

Eliza Calvert Hall back at the end of the last century was told by eight New York publishers that her *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* could not be accepted because "short stories in dialect would never sell." Little, Brown and Company of Boston finally took a chance, and in 1910, "Aunt Jane" had sold 80,000 copies.

Mrs. Lewis H. Mayne of Bowie, Maryland found a diary of her mother, Mrs. Kirtley S. Cleveland, in the attic of the family home at 1453 St. James Court, Louisville. It was the diary that her mother had kept when she was 10-year-old Virginia Cary Hudson in school at Margaret Hall in Versailles. Mrs. Mayne took the book to many publishers with no success. MacMillan finally published it, and as *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps*, the little book sold some 400,000 hard-cover copies, without benefit of book club boost, and remained on the best-seller list for nearly 30 weeks. Considerably more copies have been sold in the paperback edition, and the book is still selling. When Mrs. Mayne was ready to publish some of the letters that she had received from her mother as a book entitled *Flapdoodle, Trust and Obey*, Harper and Row, who had refused *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps*, was anxious to get the manuscript.

Back in 1921 Cordia Greer-Petrie brought out a little book of dialect called *Angeline at the Seelbach*. Angeline was a typical Kentucky hill woman, a skillfully executed comic character, and "Lum," her husband, was equally as good. Mrs. Petrie knew the Kentucky hill country, for she had lived in various mining towns with her physician husband, Dr. Hazel Graham Petrie, originally from Fairview, Kentucky. Angeline's and Lum's trip to the Seelbach with Judge Bowles on a lawsuit case produced some puzzling situations for them, which still make hilarious reading. The fact that the book was in dialect seemingly did not stem the tide of its popularity. In May, 1962 it was in its 27th edition.

Cordia Greer-Petrie died on July 15, 1964, at 92, in Louisville. She was still a delightful personality and an authentic recorder of the

dialect of the Kentucky mountains early in this century. Miss Adelaide Bostick, with whom she spent her last years, has remaining some few copies of *Angeline at the Seelbach* and later stories in the Angeline series.

The first chapter of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (mentioned earlier) was called "Sally Ann's Experience." This tale first appeared in *The Cosmopolitan Magazine* in July, 1898. It had been rejected for two years by one magazine after another. Not many weeks after it appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, it re-appeared in a woman's paper in far-off New Zealand, and finally there was not an English-speaking country where Sally Ann had not told her experience. The *Woman's Journal* of Boston published the story three times, and each time the edition containing it became exhausted.

It appeared as the first chapter of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* in 1908, and a few months later President Theodore Roosevelt recommended it as "a charming little book written by one of your clever Kentucky women."

Then, through the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Sally Ann preached her gospel to a million readers. What was her experience? It was actually a prayer meeting talk—the plain tale of plain people told in the plain dialect of a plain old woman. It was a plea for women's rights, pointing up the injustice of the old common law of England in regard to the property rights of married woman. In 1888, at the time that agitation for reform began, Kentucky was the only state in the Union where a married woman could not make a will. No married woman could buy or sell with the freedom of the single woman.

In July, 1908, ten years from the date of its first publication, the *Cosmopolitan* republished the little tale. It was used for years by dramatic readers and teachers of elocution.

For at least 12 years Eliza Calvert Hall continued to receive letters from doctors, lawyers, editors, business men and women in various walks of life, all endorsing Sally Ann and thanking her for her experience.

Eliza Calvert Hall's parents were Dr. Thomas Chalmers and Margaret Younglove (Calvert) Hall of Bowling Green. In private life she was the wife of Maj. William Alexander Obenchain, a professor at Ogden College in Bowling Green. The couple had four children. Their youngest, Cecilia, was born in the same March that *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* came out. Later the Obenchains lived in Dallas, Texas. The "Goshen" used as the locale for "Sally Ann's Experience" is evidently not the Goshen out U.S. 42 from Louisville, but a fictional hamlet.

The fourth author whose book became an unexpected best seller was Fannie Caldwell Macaulay (in some references spelled Macauley). Published under the pen name of "Frances Little," her first book, *The Lady of the Decoration*, was brought out in 1906 by the Century Company of New York. There is an interesting little story about its publication.

Fannie Macaulay was the young aunt of Alice Hegan Rice, famed author of *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*. From 1899 to 1902 Fannie Macaulay had taught kindergarten in Louisville. Then, partly in an effort to forget an unhappy marriage, she steamed away to Hiroshima, Japan to teach kindergarten at a mission school. Gay-hearted, she had never missed a Kentucky Derby, and had serious inner doubts as to what her adjustment would be to missionary life. Her worries were needless. Despite long bouts of aching homesickness, she adored "her children" in Japan, and grew to love also the quiet "half-medieval town" of Hiroshima with its towering castle and lotus-filled moat.

Her letters back to Mrs. Rice were "too entertaining, too sparkling, to be kept for private consumption," said the creator of Mrs. Wiggs in her autobiography, *The Inky Way*. She felt that they would make an excellent book, despite the prejudice against novels in the form of letters. Continuing, Mrs. Rice said, "I cut out the more personal parts, provided the thread of a love story, reversed her family name 'Little Fan,' and gave her the family name of 'Frances Little.'" Mrs. Rice presumably found a publisher with ease. "The book was accepted in both England and America and leaped into immediate favor, holding its place among the best sellers for two years," she said.

Mrs. Macaulay's enthusiasm for the Orient fired Mrs. Rice and her husband, Cale Young Rice, with the desire to join her in Japan. Even though the Russo-Japanese War was in full swing, they put out from San Francisco in April, 1906, carrying Fannie Macaulay's book which she did not even know had been published. One morning in Yokohama Harbor they found Mrs. Macaulay bobbing about in a sampan to welcome them. "Her amazement at seeing her book was excelled only by her joy at seeing us, and a happier reunion cannot be imagined."

Each time that Fannie Macaulay pinned on her little enameled watch, her Japanese children called her their "Lady of the Decoration." From that appellation the book's title came. Whether she was teaching Little Japan to skip (the children had never skipped before) or wipe its nose, she loved each child. She remained there until 1907.

By that time, her book was at the top of the nation's best seller list, and she came home. Melville O. Briney, writing about her in the *Louisville Times* December 8, 1949, says that on December 21, 1907, *The Courier-Journal* quoted from *The New York Times*: "A book whose popularity . . . seems destined to break the records of all the big sellers is *The Lady of the Decoration* . . . published about 20 months ago. In that space of time many a good book is born and dies, but 'The Lady' still goes on at a pace that outdistances all rivals. Last Christmas the book was a big seller but this season it has attained a popularity far ahead of what it had then. It is now in its 21st edition. Last week, 15,000 copies were sold, and there is never a day that the sales fall below 1,000 copies . . ."

She lectured on Japan here in Louisville, and wrote other books, but for 20 years her heart was in Japan, and she spent the greater part of her time there, making five trips to the Orient.

She had been born in Shelbyville and educated at Science Hill Academy. During her Louisville years she lived for a time at least in St. James Court, one of the colony of poets, writers and artists who made the lovely Court their home. Mrs. Marguerite Gifford mentions her in her book, *St. James Court in Retrospect*, which was brought out in 1966. In 1936 Mrs. Macaulay was living at the Cortlandt Hotel. Besides *The Lady of the Decoration* her better-known books were *The Lady and Sada San*, *Little Sister Snow*, *Jack and I in Lotus Land*, and *The House of the Mistry Star*.

She died in Louisville in 1941, four years before the bombing of her beloved Hiroshima.

REFERENCES

Books:

- Hall, Eliza Calvert, *Sally Ann's Experience*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1910.
 Hudson, Virginia Cary, *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps*. Macmillan and Company, 1962.
 Little, Frances, *The Lady of the Decoration*. The Century Company, 1908.
 Petrie, Cordia Greer, *Angeline at the Seelbach*. John P. Morton and Co., 1922.
 Also 1962 edition, published by Angeline Publishing Company.

Other References:

- Gifford, Marguerite, *St. James Court in Retrospect*. McDonald Business Service, Louisville, Kentucky, 1966.
 Rice, Alice Hegan, *The Inky Way*. D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940.
 Magazines, clippings and collections:
 Briney, Melville O. — "A Louisville Made Pre-Atomic Hiroshima Famous." *Louisville Times*, December 8, 1949.
 Kentucky Authors' Scrapbook, 1909 (Kentucky Room, Louisville Free Public Library).
 Louisville Library Collections — Biography Series, Vol. II. (Kentucky Room, Louisville Free Public Library).
Saturday Review, May 28, 1966, Trade Winds column (Publishing information about *O, Ye Jigs and Juleps*).
Southern Folklore Quarterly, June 1965. "Cordia Greer-Petrie and *Angeline at the Seelbach*" by Mariam S. Houchens. Based on personal interviews with Mrs. Petrie.
 Townsend, John Wilson, *Kentucky in American Letters*, Vol. II, pp. 181-184. The Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1913
 Who's Who in Kentucky, 1936 edition.