

# *MARTHA KELLER, POET*

*WITH BIOGRAPHICAL CONTRIBUTIONS  
BY HER DAUGHTER, MARTHA R. GOPPELT*

by Miriam E. Bixler

**M**artha Eleanor Keller contributed to many periodicals. She published three volumes—*War Whoop of the Wily Iroquois*, a juvenile picture book *Mirror to Mortality*, and *Brady's Bend and Other Ballads*. Born November 11, 1902 at 1016 Wheatland Ave., Lancaster, Pa., she was of a family well known and revered by the citizens of that city and state.

*The New Era's* January 17, 1945 first page obituary of the poet's father, William Huestis Keller (8/11/69-1/16/45), former Judge of the Superior Court of Pennsylvania, lauds this illustrious jurist in three columns. The General Hospital, Franklin and Marshall College (of which he was a graduate) and the First Reformed Church (in which he held many offices) were some of the interests he championed. He was known for his "unfailing courtesy, his sound knowledge of his opinions." The latter were looked upon as classics in English.

A spot check of old residents confirmed that the Judge was truly loved by the community. He had built the Wheatland Avenue house for his bride and there he died at seventy-five of a heart attack shortly after edging off a neighbor boy's snow shoveling job. Martha's "Keepsake" in *Brady's Bend* was



*Martha Keller Rowland*

written in his memory. Both he and Martha's mother, Anna Dickey Keller (11/3/71-12/2/1960) are buried in Lancaster's Greenwood cemetery.

Tom O'Reilly, former *Intelligencer Journal* reporter, in his 1946 review of *Brady's Bend and Other Ballads*, in the *New York Telegram* tells of his own age thirteen impression of the Judge.

There was a great man—down in Lancaster where I was raised. This was an elderly gentleman, tall and straight as a ramrod. He always wore a tailcoat and carried a gold-headed stick once owned by Thaddeus Stevens. He had a keen eye and an air about him. It wasn't the elegance of his dress that fascinated me so much as his courtly manners. If I spied Judge William Keller on his morning walk to the Court House I actually used to cross the street in his direction just to hear him say "Good morning."

When the Judge was born his father was a Montgomery County, Maryland, lawyer but the family shortly settled in Centre County. On October 13, 1893 William Huestis Keller married Anna Dickey, daughter of Oliver J. Dickey, prominent law partner of Thaddeus Stevens. He was a penniless law student when he proposed, but his prospective mother-in-law, then the Mrs. Return Fahnesstock, thought he had a future so she permitted the long

engagement. "Nee Elizabeth Shenk" of *Brady's Bend* tells of this remarkable maternal grandmother of the poet. When we have finished reading the poem we felt privileged to have "made her acquaintance" and know we shall never forget her.

Mrs. E. G. Wallick recently told how she worked as a maid for the Kellers after Martha married. She loved Mrs. Keller like a mother and with her husband and son always shared the Christmas table with the homecoming Keller family. Mrs. Wallick recalled how Mrs. Keller comforted her when a son was missing in World War II. The Kellers' son, Daniel, died overseas during World War I. Part two of *Brady's Bend* is dedicated to him. Mrs. Keller entertained occasionally but by Mrs. Wallick's time her company was mostly the children visiting with their children. She belonged to Reading Class and Iris Club as well as the First Reformed Church.

Our poet had two brothers and two sisters. Deceased are Daniel Schneck Dickey (8/15/1898-9/29/1919) and Oliver James Dickey (2/9/1898-1/5/1968) former editor of the *Lancaster New Era*, *Pittsburgh Gazette* and manager of Radio Station WTAX of Springfield, Illinois. Elizabeth Dickey (b. 12/14/1895), married Robert E. Miller, and lived in St. Petersburg, Florida and was a helpful correspondent. Mary Dickey (12/28/1912-12/27/1970) was unmarried.

Martha married chemical engineer Edmund Rowland June 29, 1929 and settled in the Philadelphia area. He died in 1972, less than a year after Martha. Both are buried in Greenwood Cemetery. Two daughters survive; Randa (Eliot Randall) who, according to Mrs. Wallick, inherited the Judge's big blue eyes; and Martha Randa, Mrs. Carl Marhenke of Aptos, California, is proficient in the Japanese language which she used to advantage as a tourist guide for the Roaring Creek and Big Trees Railroad running to the Sequoia Forest near Sacramento. Martha, an English teacher at Agnes Irwin, a private school in Rosemont, Pa., is married to Dr. John W. Coppel, psychiatrist of Haverford. Her mother writes poignantly about her in "To Martha—Aged Three,"

### *Mirror to Mortality.*

The poet tells of writing children's verse at eight years and of sending a book of it to a publisher at twelve. She was indignant when it was rejected. "They had been telling me to write about things I knew," she said, "and I thought that was an ungrateful way to treat me. So I started writing about subjects of which I knew absolutely nothing." She drew on her memories of childhood in "Introduction to Conformity," a poem in fifteen parts about little girls at play. There are references in both her poetry volumes to the writer's childhood or things she knew or heard about then. There is a bright peek at a small girl as well as a song of love to her nurse in "Mary Kendig," *Brady's Bend*. One reviewer asserts, "Singing her songs of the nation she pushed her

own state and her own town, Lancaster, into solo position." Her memories of her beginnings in Lancaster bloomed into "The Wreath" (Lancaster streets), "Hemlock, Hawthorn and Juniper," "James Buchanan," "Thaddeus Stevens," "Peter Grub," and "Center Square".

Our subject's early education was at Shippen School for Girls. When she entered Vassar in the 'twenties she already had filled three large ledgers with verse. There she became unhappy with formal history studies and her interest in people led her into research of legends. Not much later she began publishing in periodicals and in 1924, the year she graduated, she won the intercollegiate poetry prize. She studied at Stanford University in 1924-25.

**H**er business career began as assistant at George H. Doran and Co., publishers in New York City. Mrs. Louis May tells the story that the Judge was heard to remark, "It cost me more for Martha to have a business career than it did to send her to Vassar." She was advertising manager for G. F. Putnam and Son 1928-29.

Mrs. Goppelt writes of her mother's plans to marry a Philadelphia man and continue her career until children came. "She looked over the modest job market in Philadelphia with a cool and appraising eye. There was only one job she wanted, that of advertising and publicity manager at Lippincott's, then based in that city. She got the job by recommending that Putnam's hire her counterpart at Lippincott's to take her place. Then she applied for it."

Mrs. Goppelt added, "She made good money in those days, more than my father. Most of what she knew about balancing a checkbook she learned from him who believed that no woman should be allowed to pass through life without learning how to manage her money. She saved it (my father was supporting them) and invested it as he advised at the dinner-table harangues. When she had more than doubled her money she got nervous, told him what she had been doing, and asked what she should do now. This was just before the crash. My father had thought that he had been "just talking." He introduced her to a stop-loss order post haste. They used the money she made to pay most of the cost of the house they bought at sheriff's sale in which my sister and I grew up and which they sold in 1970."

*The Upper Darby Review* reported on the house situated at 456 Fairview Road, Drexel Hill, Pa. "Mrs. Rowland lives in a charming red brick house that is approached by a red brick sidewalk and entered by a door painted white with black hinges. One wing of the house is covered with ivy. The living room reflects her love of books. One wall contains built-in bookcases and these are full of books and some porcelain." She told the reporter that though she loved books she wouldn't bother trying to accumulate first editions, that she loved to travel but didn't very much. She'd visited England, France and Canada as well as Florida and California.

When the anecdote about investments was sent to Mrs. Miller, she commented, "I think she was a good business woman and enjoyed it. As was I. I, too, was completely educated in such matters by my husband. My father thought economics no subject for a woman. When I suggested taking Economics in college, at his urging, I had three years of Greek instead."

After marriage Martha continued other writings and was Poetry Reviewer for the *Philadelphia Ledger* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. When the *International Who's Who in Poetry* 1970-71 was published she lived at 16 W. Montgomery Ave., Ardmore. It lists article contributions to fourteen magazines and poetry to numerous others. Many of the latter are in her volumes. It states she won Vassar quarterly honors, the Grace Healy Poetry Prize 1924, Witter Bynner undergraduate poetry prize 1924, and "various poetry awards in 1950."

How did Martha Keller prepare herself for her writing? Mrs. Goppelt tells it well. "From those years when we were growing up I remember my mother's passionate love of Beowulf, Chaucer and Elizabethan literature—particularly Marlowe. She also dabbled in archaeological reading, with an interest in prehistoric matriarchal cultures. She was influenced by Fraser's *The Golden Bough*. She returned from Vassar enthusiastically expounding on it only to find that my grandfather had it all along on his library shelves carefully hidden from her because he was afraid it would destroy her faith. She was influenced, too, by Grave's *The White Goddess*. She read omnivorously about witchcraft and Celtic cultures and enjoyed Margaret Murray's *The God of the Witches*."

After reading the above by Mrs. Goppelt I re-read and relished the poet's "Herbs and Simples" and "Hexerei." Mrs. Goppelt continues, "In later years she planned a trip to pre-historical sites in Great Britain with the aid of the British Museum which responded to her plea for a list of sites accessible to an 'old' woman with back brace and cane. The whole family traipsed around the country-side looking for Long Meg and her Daughters (a mini-Stonehenge) and crawling down Weems Holes (underground hideaways for Celtic resistance fighters.) When she died she was putting the finishing touches on a poetic drama, *Voice from the Nettles*, a retelling of the Arthurian legend, drawing on all she knew about Celtic folklore and experimenting in English with certain Celtic poetic devices."

Mrs. Goppelt continues "*Brady's Bend* sprang out of her deep concern in the late thirties and early forties for America. She and my father were deeply patriotic and deeply committed to the 'Free World'. They hated fascism as black hearted Republicans, and were proud of the story in which a Communist acquaintance had allowed that 'it would take two generations to stamp out them and their militant commitment to the bourgeois way of life.' She and my father saw the Second World War coming long before their friends would

admit anything was wrong in Europe. Each night and each morning they anxiously listened to the news, and I can remember the sound of hoarse cheering and excited gutturals distorted by the rasp of short-wave static. Their anxiety permeated the house. During those years I was troubled by nightmares and once or twice walked in my sleep, usually during the eleven o'clock news.

"She sought relief and reassurance by turning back to America's past, the past that was directly accessible to her through her own family and through the experience of camping and frontier life my father gave her." One reviewer reported she liked hunting and gunning but she insisted that she was better at rifle shooting than shotgun shooting.

**M**rs. Goppelt tells us that during this time she studied the Civil War of which the Keller family had many mementos including a Lincoln letter to Mr. Dickey and the gold-topped black ebony cane that belonged to Thaddeus Stevens. Mrs. Oliver Keller of Springfield, Illinois owns the letter as well as a signed Lincoln photograph. Two very old dolls that once belonged to Mrs. Fahnesstock, nee Shenk, and her mother were recently displayed at the Lancaster County Historical Society. Mrs. Goppelt owns the Thaddeus Stevens cane. At the Historical Society there are two painted portraits of Martha's great-uncles, Abraham and Rudolph Shenk. A Buchanan wardrobe bought by Mrs. Fahnesstock from the Buchanan estate was returned to Wheatland, home of Buchanan, after the Judge's death.

Mrs. Miller feels that these meant little to the poet except that Lincoln, and to a lesser degree, Stevens, were both concerned about freedom. "What shaped her young life far more was that our brother, Daniel S. Keller, was killed at Monfaucon, France, when she was sixteen. Hence the valor." Martha spent hours reading Sandburg's *Lincoln*. A section of *Brady's Bend* is titled "Lincoln Memorial" for the single poem it contains.

Mrs. Goppelt's deft words continue: "She would like your use of the word 'poet.' She resented the word 'poetess' which she felt to be more of a patronizing diminutive than an indication of sex. She wanted her work to stand on an equal footing with others, male or female. As I remember it, she always thought of herself as an oral-aural poet. She wrote for the ear, was fascinated by sound and rhythm. She was the first to acknowledge her debt to Kipling even though she knew her contemporaries regarded him as an old-fashioned and second-rate. To some extent her poetic interests ran counter to mid-twentieth century tastes. Many of her contemporaries were writing for the eye, with more concern for images than sound. She felt that to neglect the music of poetry was to deny one of its strongest appeals, as well as to lose contact with its roots in the oral culture of pre-historic times. For these reasons she didn't much like the poetry of T. S. Eliot. Her definition of a poem

was anything which sent chills up and down her spine. Her own poetry had a strong emotional drive. She was herself a passionate and emotional woman. She said what she felt—often dramatically!” Mrs. Miller remembers that when she was asked to read her poetry at the Highland Park Club she expressed her reluctance to read to “all those Quakers because *Brady's Bend* was primarily about valor” or words to that effect.

The *Upper Darby Township Review* found that the poet's writing habits were modest. She produced her first draft in pencil in the morning when her mind was fresh but edited and rewrote almost anywhere and “all over the place”, on a bus, on a subway, in a crowded station or in a room full of people who were engaged in animated conversation. She hated to be disturbed when writing the original and admitted having a “bad temper” when duly interrupted.

Mrs. Goppelt says, “She worked mornings at the living-room desk. The French doors were shut tight against interruptions and we had to need her very much to penetrate her inner sanctus where she sat typing in a haze of eye-stinging cigarette smoke.”

## REVIEWS

### *War Whoop of the Wily Iroquois*

Coward McCann 1954

I was able to unearth just one review of the juvenile picture book *War Whoop of the Wily Iroquois*. *Virginia Kirkus bookshop Service*, February 1, 1954 reported, “There's a folk tale feel to this intriguing story of a pioneer family and a sort of adventure with a happy ending that every pioneer-minded youngster imagines happening to him. The wily Iroquois didn't reckon with the wily Dexters and this is the story of how they won the siege, a story that invests its humor in the rigors and maneuvering of pioneer life—and gets returns in one dead Indian after another. Even the children had a part in it—and readers have a fine 'hearful hardiness' too. Richard Power's wiry drawings are effective.”

Copies of *War Whoop* are almost non-existent in this area.

### *Mirror to Mortality*

E. P. Dutton and Co., 1937

The author was married six years and her first girl, Martha, was four years old when this volume was published. There are no illustrations. The table of contents lists these sections: The Arraignment of Adam, To Spring, Sonnets, In Praise of Winter and Introduction to Conformity.

*Book Review Digest*, 1937, quotes Barrett Parker of “*The Boston Transcript*: “*Mirror to Mortality* is not deep, perhaps not consequential, but accomplished, felicitous, with the occasional forthrightness of the Elizabethan, with due unflinching acceptance of what life must bring, and after life and love, the strange, freighted destiny of ever-approaching death.”

Marion Strobel wrote in *Poetry*, January, 1938, "There are two sides of Martha Keller's poetic face that are as divergent and provocative as a tragic-comic mask. Extremes (the brutal eye and downcast mouth, or the leer and laugh) are her forte. It is these that stamp her features with force and make her voice memorable. In milder moods she at times indulges familiar archaisms. But once she has taken the pure role of tragedy or comedy she becomes Martha Keller and nobody else. I wish she had the forbearance to give us only these triumphant evidences of herself, but it can at least be to those that bring our applause.

*Commonweal's* review by Laura Benet states that "a more natural and arresting title for the book would be *A Sulky Spring*. (Winifred Well's quote at the book's beginning—"This was a dark and sulkyspring Rebelliousness about blossoming") It's best poems are earnest of a heart's progress in living—early love, sorrow, fulfillment and unlike many modern poets there is nothing cryptic, strained or pretentious about these poems. With the exception of that powerful piece "The Bull," the collection falls into two distinct parts, the first containing many specimens of a pretty fancy playing around legend, the second witness to an intense poetic maturity. . . . One is greatly moved by 'The Bull,' 'Sonnets,' 'The Thread,' 'In Praise of Winter' and the tribute to a child, 'Martha, Aged Three'. To the reviewer these alone in their excellence are worth the entire book, especially the crystal sadness of 'In Praise of Winter.' "

## *Brady's Bend and Other Ballads*

Rutgers University Pres, 1946

Illustrated by Edward Shenton who also did

Marjorie Rawlings Yearling

The publisher affirms, "Carl Sandburg, the late Stephen Vincent Benet, Archibald Rutledge and Katherine Garrison Chapin are among the scores of American poets and critics who have grown enthusiastic as Martha Keller's ballads have appeared in leading American Magazines. The talent for meter, the gift for language, the originality of imagery which distinguish Martha Keller's work are appropriately only the tools of her craft; with them she strikes out boldly to recapture the spirit and the vigor of the American that exists today so richly in the deep valleys and the dark hills where the stuff of folk tales is nurtured. The result is wonderfully exciting; not only has a keenly sensitive artist discovered the strong pulsebeat of America, but America in return has discovered a new poet of enduring importance.

*Book Review, Digest, Commonweal, Saturday Review* (see references) all re-iterate the above. The following comments are from "local" reviews.

The March 10, 1946 *Sunday News* of Lancaster, Pa. uses a local angle in the headlines "Lancaster Spice in American Ballads" and goes on to say, "Through its people and events Lancaster takes another dimension in Martha Keller's new book. Her ballads hunt and sometimes roar as the dead past belies the recumbent shroud and the drear present stirs with forgotten vitality. It's the two fisted stuff of war and personal conflict, of individual character and familiar local flavor. The salty everyday philosophy of yesterday speaks through an idiom which the writer must have fallen in love with when she was just another Lancaster pigtail tyro at eight."

The reporter goes on to write, "the note of courage is inseparable from the ballads. It runs through them from stem to stem, a challenge and a proof of character and firm ideals. . . . the ballads tell some fragments of the people's story, legend and fact and they swing from the lurid tale of the ironmasters which she hangs on old Peter Grubb to the Victorian sentimentalism in the sad story of James Buchanan and Ann Coleman, his fiance, whom gossip drove to suicide."



The article continues that "any ballads quoted would be a mere pinch of the gun powder at hand. They can give no hint of the engaged beauty of the lighter lines nor the accurate estimates of men. . . Sympathy is scarcely the word for any part of the ballads. . . rather Miss Keller's interest is steadily in provocative values and her burden for all its ancient material discloses the core of modern American concern in her lines to Center Square and the military monument."

*The Philadelphia Record* wrote, "Pennsylvania used to be fine rich soil for poets but it lay fallow for a long time. The States's legends, dark and splendid, have gone untold for lack of someone to tell them. . . the lack is cured now. Miss Keller works in the tradition of the late Stephen Vincent Benet. She finds her sources where he found his, in the history of men rather than of events. Indeed Benet praised her work more than warmly when it was appearing in magazines, and such poets as Carl Sandburg and William Rose Benet find her talent exciting and important."

*The Upper Darby Township News* notes: "Drexel Hill has the distinction of being the home of an outstanding poet." It gives us information about Edward Shenton of West Chester, instructor at the Academy of Fine Arts of Philadelphia, who though a famous illustrator, did only a few books other than our poet's.

The reviewer says, "Mrs. Rowland is enchanted with the manner in which her book, of which there will be five thousand copies in the first edition, is being illustrated. 'It is wonderful to have it done this way.', she exclaimed in an interview at her home. "I knew at the beginning that it's the kind of thing that would illustrate beautifully but I didn't think the publisher would take it that seriously.'" There is a list of poems published in periodicals from 1939 to June, 1941.

A review in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 15, 1946 was written by Anna Jane Phillips but certainly under the careful supervision of the poet's brother Oliver, the editor. No work in the volume except the title poem, *Brady's Bend* is mentioned. (In 1846 when that town began making the first T-type railroad tracks from its iron ore there was only one other plant in the world competing. It has long since been a ghost town.) The writer says, "Martha Keller, who has found inspiration for many of her major poems in Pennsylvania's half-forgotten folk lore, has given him (Captain Samuel Brady), Pennsylvania's most ruthless Indian Killer, a chance at literary immortality."

"Miss Keller as a poet did not need to sift fact from fancy. She selected the most typical Brady legend and on it built a ballad that sings the spirit of all the great Injun fighters."

Tom O'Reilly had come across the work quite by accident and wrote this in his column:—Now it would be presemptuous of me to attempt criticizing the work of any poet, let alone one with the prestige of Martha Keller. I have too much respect for poets—after all, my forbears were Celts. . . Well, there is a small chance of misunderstanding the sweet singing poetry of Martha Keller, and instead of criticizing it I will just tell you what happened to me when I lugged the little book around among my friends for a few days, proud of my discovery. The second fellow I showed the book to, in Tim Costell's literary saloon—not salon, said, 'Hell, man, where've you been? Everybody who can tell the difference between a poet and a peasant knows Martha Keller's stuff.'

I must have shown this little book to twenty people. Fifteen of them know it well and the other five, after a quick glance decided to get a copy right away. The odd part, however, was that the ones who read it, all could quote from it. Her poems with its Center Square and streets names Cherry, Plum, Orange and Lime; rural Pennsylvania, the Civil War, both World Wars and just plain love; bring music and thoughtfulness into every man's heart."

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