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Henrietta Alice Metcalf: Sketch for a Quarter-Length Portrait*

James Ringo

Henrietta Alice Metcalf (1888-1981), a forceful, vibrant woman capable of both stimulating and exasperating her friends, attained the matriarchal years of almost an entire century. Highly educated, volatile, opinionated about every possible subject, impatient of the views of others when those opinions ran contrary to her own, she was a fount of information on historical figures famous and infamous, those magical individuals who give character to—indeed, define—an age. She spoke of them freely as equals, in a manner in which I feel certain she spoke directly to them in life; for when she knew and associated with them they had not yet been frozen into icons, a fate which the necessities of legend have since forced them to become. With few exceptions, she stood eye-to-eye with them, was in the swim of life with them, and never saw the necessity of deference to even the most awesome cultural giants.

Her background was among the well-to-do of Chicago, a roaring, brutal, brawling metropolis in the 1880s, anxious for material success and none too particular as to how it was attained; at the same time, these midwestern burghers, conscious of their civic responsibilities, made timid advances toward the finical niceties of high culture, well aware that success in that area heightened the effect of their business triumphs. It was a world well known to the reader of Henry Blake Fuller's sadly underestimated "Chicago novels."

Henrietta Metcalf had a genteel education, upholstered by all the advantages of money; the seed fell on fertile ground. French became a second language to her, which she spoke like a native (purer in manner than most natives, as a matter of fact); and her grasp of Italian came not far behind. Until her last days she subscribed to an Italian newspaper, that she might keep in motion within her mind the wheels of that beautiful idiom, so mellifluous and at the same time so tough-fibered. Following her death, a copy in Italian of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel *Il gattopardo* was found atop a bedside dresser. According to her son, the late Addison M. Metcalf, Henrietta was proficient in German as well, although her fierce Francophilia overturned any positive allegiance to Teutonic cultural patterns.

As was perhaps inevitable, she went to Paris to study singing, the rich young lady’s equivalent to the boy’s Grand Tour. It was at this time that she encountered her fellow midwesterner Carl Van Vechten, then critic, later novelist and photographer. An early incident involving Van Vechten still rankled in Henrietta’s mind more than half a century later, and brought heightened color to her cheeks as she self-deprecatingly recounted it. Henrietta was to perform at a student recital; subject to stage-fright, she was in a state of extreme nervousness. She opened her mouth to sing at the appropriate moment in the music’s course, and the result was a note far wide of the mark. The piano accompanist thumped out the required pitch as a guide to her; the next vocal attempt strayed even further from true north. Desperation made each succeeding attempt more erratic. Wild-eyed, Henrietta sought throughout the audience for a sympathetic witness to her misery; all were stony-faced except for a blond man in the front row, a handkerchief stuffed in his mouth to stifle laughter, his fair-skinned cheeks lobster-red as the result of his effort at self-containment. It was Van Vechten.

Despite an inauspicious beginning, they became lifelong friends—Van Vechten, after his fashion of giving new names to friends, conferring upon her the nickname “Pam”—a friendship marred only by an interruption enforced by Henrietta’s first husband, the noted American Impressionist painter Willard Leroy Metcalf, who objected to Van Vechten’s flamboyant bohemianism. Following the Metcalfs’ divorce, Carl once again, without rancor at the break in their relationship, was Henrietta’s friend. According to Van Vechten in a 1951 essay “Some ‘Literary Ladies’ I Have
Known," which first appeared in the *Yale University Library Gazette* and became one of the papers collected in the two-volume *Fragments from an Unwritten Autobiography* (1955): "When I first met [poet and novelist] Elinor Wylie she was in a car with Henriette (Mrs. Willard) Metcalf." Bringing together compatible people was one of Henrietta's specialties. (It should be mentioned in passing that Henrietta herself frequently employed the French form of her first name.)

Another early friend, Alyse Gregory, who later became managing editor of *The Dial* magazine and married the author Llewelyn Powys, has given in her autobiography *The Day is Gone* (1948) her view of Henrietta during these early Paris days:

The young girl who was to live with us, to whom I gave the name of Fifirella [this was Henrietta], arrived shortly after me. Though she was born in Chicago, she had been educated in a French convent and spoke English almost as if it were an acquired tongue. She was small, with an original and charming countenance, and her large brown eyes expressed fervor and an inquiring innocence. She longed to enter into the sophistications of Parisian life and immediately bought herself a whole wardrobe of new dresses.

Fifirella's comings and goings were taken as a matter of course. Our tastes differed. She sought out actresses, journalists, men and women who lived by their nerves, their effrontery, and who moved in the bright light of the moment towards coveted goals.

Despite essential character differences, Henrietta and Alyse Gregory re-established their friendship after years apart, which friendship, drawn thin only by the distance in miles separating them, endured until Gregory's death.

Another friendship that Henrietta sustained into old age was with Florida Scott-Maxwell, a remarkable woman and a brilliant letter-writer. After a stage career, Florida took up writing in earnest, with books and plays to her credit; she was an active women's suffragist; in middle age she launched another career, as analytical psychologist, studying under Carl Jung. Her book about
her personal experiences of old age, *The Measure of my Days* (1968), is, perhaps paradoxically, one of the most joyous literary celebrations of life in recent years.

Scott-Maxwell (who lived in Great Britain) and Henrietta were devoted correspondents, receiving mutual benefits. Henrietta, a confirmed believer in all manner of vitamins and food supplements (including the ingestion of bee’s pollen for energy), sent Florida a steady stream of bottles containing her favorite nostrums; she also put herself to considerable pains to search out and mail hard-to-obtain volumes that she thought Florida might enjoy (or simply to underline an epistolary point she, Henrietta, had previously made) as well as newspaper clippings detailing changes in Florida’s native America, a land Scott-Maxwell had last seen years before. In return, Florida sent Henrietta splendid letters—fair exchange indeed—of everyday events viewed with a keenness of wit, a depth of intellectual and emotional penetration beyond the capacity of most. Henrietta appreciated them at their worth and shared them with her friends, aware of their value as exercises of a superior mind. There are few books the world is actually the poorer for not having, but one such is a published collection of Florida Scott-Maxwell’s letters.

Undoubtedly, somewhere near the center of Henrietta Metcalf’s interests was her passion for the performer. This is not at all unusual in her case, for in a sense she was very much a performer herself. To witness her seated in her living room, to hear her speak of yesterday’s great, to spar with her decorously about pressing contemporary issues, was to savor some of the tang of those legendary creatures who held influential salons during an earlier, more leisurely age, when wisdom and sharp opinion reigned, before being unhappily supplanted in order of importance by today’s crisp potato chip and the double extra-day martini.

The tone of this theatrical passion was set for Henrietta by her veneration of, and subsequent friendship with, Sarah Bernhardt. As a girl, at a party in Chicago for the celebrated French actress, Henrietta came upon Bernhardt’s hat lying on an upstairs bed; taking scissors, she snipped a small portion of a streamer decorating the hat, a small fragment of cloth that she preserved as a precious relic. One wonders if the Divine Sarah, who had an uncommonly sharp, lizardlike eye, ever noticed the difference. At any rate, they remained friends until Sarah’s death.

A succession of friendships with glittering performers followed:
Helen Hayes, operatic soprano Lina Cavalieri and her tenor-husband Lucien Muratore, Enrico Caruso (who drew a caricature of her which Henrietta destroyed, irked by the whimsical exaggeration of her features), Olga Nethersole, Eva Le Gallienne, Tallulah Bankhead, Marian Anderson, Gregor Piatigorsky, Fania Marinoff—the list could be extended almost indefinitely. Happy stories involved housewifely exchanges with Helen Hayes, or animal gossip with Fania Marinoff; a particularly sad tale centered on a hotel-room meeting with Tallulah Bankhead, extremely ill and dispirited immediately after an abortion.

Following the Metcalfs' divorce, Henrietta married Marcus Goodrich, author of the best-selling novel Delilah. When this marriage, too, dissolved, Goodrich went on to wed movie actress Olivia de Havilland.

During the glory days of Frank Crowninshield's Vanity Fair, Henrietta Metcalf worked for the prestigious magazine, thus enlarging her circle of influential friends and acquaintances to include Edmund Wilson and others. She seems to have perceived advantages in retaining the name of her first husband. Mention of her is to be found in the Edmund Wilson correspondence collected as Letters on Literature and Politics: 1912-1972 (1977), although the fanatical precisionist Wilson misspells her surname by adding a final e, not an uncommon fault among those writing of her or her painter-husband.

Henrietta Metcalf's association with writers and writers-to-be began at an early age. As a young girl she double-dated with a female friend whose companion for the evening was a burgeoning author named James Branch Cabell. Years later, Henrietta could remember little of the social proceedings of the occasion, although she vividly recalled Cabell's handsome appearance and winning manners. One wonders if, on that long-ago evening, Cabell's attentions dwelt on the naughty sexual metaphor of the lance, staff, and sword, whose brazen appearance in print so titillated early readers of the novel Jurgen and infuriated the Mrs. Grundys of a puritanical society to near-apoplexy.

But Henrietta Metcalf was not merely an artistic consumer and friend of artists; she was, in a very modest way, a producer as well. Her translation of Dumas fils' La dame aux camélias, under its usual English title of Camille, is considered standard. It is still available in the Samuel French acting edition. According to Addison Metcalf, she also translated Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame,
published in a de-luxe edition, but a cursory attempt at locating the volume was futile.

At another stage in her life, Henrietta collaborated on original stage works with Dorothy Donnelly, who successfully worked with composer Sigmund Romberg on the operettas *The Student Prince* and *My Maryland*. The Donnelly-Metcalf efforts proved to be abortive. No surviving manuscripts were found among Henrietta's effects following her death.

Henrietta Metcalf's final years were tranquil. She lived in a comfortable converted barn on the property of her son, in Newtown, Connecticut. She devoted her considerable energies to animal welfare; next to animals, her greatest public cause was the crusade of consumer advocate Ralph Nader, along with Winston S. Churchill one of her greatest heroes. Despite her Catholic upbringing, she veered in her last days increasingly toward Quakerism, because of its firm stand for peace in the world; still, she kept until her death a shrine of the Holy Virgin in her living room, with a lighted candle before it. Of such apparent contradictions are we all made. For the rest, she railed at obtuse politicians, scolded all of us for our inadequacies, and advised everyone on everything under the sun, whether that advice was sought or not.

She was perfectly lucid until a few short months before the end. When death struck, of dehydration, it struck quickly. Her body rests in the Chicago soil from which she sprang, that generous and fecund midwestern earth which Henrietta Alice Metcalf had ignored for so many decades that they amounted quite literally to generations.