

"She Acted Her Way to Feminism" by Mary McGreevy,
a Review of
Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952

Notice of Publication in *The Vassar Quarterly*, Volume 92, Number 1.
December 1995

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Archive,

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[This same issue reviewed Anthony Bourdain's *Bone in the Throat* in
preceding pages and included a feature article on Jane Smiley's *Moo*, which
had spent weeks on the best seller list.]

Mary McGreevy adds a "Disclaimer" in the following issue, VQ Spring 1996,
p. 2, also from the online archive.

A Coincidence of Vassar

Anthony Bourdain credits the relentless encouragement of his Vassar roommate, literary agent Gordon Howard '77, with launching his writing career. But by an odd coincidence, a number of Vassar grads have played a role in this author's story. At Villard Books, Mr. Bourdain's publicist is Brian McLendon '92, Annik La Farge '82 is Villard's associate publisher, while Andrew Krauss '91 is an assistant editor at this division of Random House. Publicist McLendon says that aside from Mr. Bourdain's ties to Gordon Howard, the VC connection is a coincidence, but he is pleased that so many alums are contributing to Mr. Bourdain's—and Villard's—success.

A.A.S.

and embarked on a highly successful career. Since his graduation from the CIA, Mr. Bourdain has worked in some of New York's most prestigious restaurants; at the time of this writing, he was executive chef at One Fifth Avenue.

Entrenched in a demanding and rewarding professional life, Mr. Bourdain wasn't looking for a writing career when his Vassar roommate, literary agent Gordon Howard '77, approached him about writing a book. "Gordon cajoled, threatened, and bribed me into writing and submitting 128 pages of a novel, which he was convinced he could get read," he said. To Mr. Bourdain's surprise, Random House not only read the sample, but bought the novel. Once he'd gotten this positive reaction, he no longer needed to be strong-armed into writing. In order to make room for a second career, he adopted a grueling schedule—rising at 5:30 every morning to write for three or four hours, then working a twelve- to fourteen-hour day in the restaurant.

Those early morning hours paid off. *Bone in the Throat* is a riveting thriller filled with aspiring young chefs, tough-talking mobsters, foul-mouthed special agents, and a wealth of details about life in the restaurant business. That the author evocatively presents the ins and outs of the restaurant world is no surprise, considering his nearly two decades in the kitchen. But those years also gave Mr. Bourdain some knowledge of organized crime. "In the restaurant business, it's unavoidable that you do business with these people. They're in the trash business, the meat business—every aspect of the service industry."

But Mr. Bourdain's fascination with mobsters goes beyond nominal contact with them at work. He admits to being a "mob buff." "I love reading wiretap transcripts—the elliptical, repetitive dialogue, the jargon—it all reads like poetry to me." His second book, to be published by Villard in autumn 1996, is also full of mobsters, this time set in the Caribbean.

Despite *Bone in the Throat's* success, Mr. Bourdain has no plans to abandon his cooking career. Though the author calls the experience of writing enormously satisfying and addictive, he says of cooking, "I love the business I'm in. All my friends are cooks and restaurant people—I know very few writers." His restaurant colleagues are a bit wary of Mr. Bourdain's writing, eyeing it with what the author refers to as "tolerant derision." "They see restaurant work as honest work and writing as something else. I kind of agree with that, but I can live with it!"

Amy Arner Sgarro '83

Ms. Sgarro works for a multimedia education company in New York City and is a frequent contributor to the VQ.

She Acted Her Way to Feminism

Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952

Actress, Novelist, Feminist

by Joanne E. Gates '72

University of Alabama Press, 1995

Joanne Gates's biography of Elizabeth Robins is a detailed history of an American actress, writer, and feminist who played an ancillary role in the violent protests of the British suffrage movement. Yet Robins had no overt feminist motive when she left her family to strike out for fame and fortune as an actress. Rather than trying to revolt against her father's wishes, she hoped he would approve of her desire to help support the family. Unlike her contemporary, Edith Wharton, Robins's brand of feminism was always based on a pragmatic, financial need.

It was not in the country of her birth that Robins was able to solidify her career aspirations, but in London, where recreation of Ibsen's heroines (the first being Hedda Gabler) united her talents with the characters and scripts that best suited them and let her speak with words of the feminist she was later to become.

For Ms. Gates, now an English professor at Jacksonville State University who holds degrees in both drama and English literature, the study of Robins was a way to unite her interests in the theater and in writing. She majored in drama at Vassar and remembers that her introduction to Robins came in a class taught by Everett Sprinchorn. "He mentioned two American women whose performances of Ibsen's plays—particularly *Hedda Gabler*—introduced that playwright's work to an American audience." Although he didn't mention the women by name, years later, when Ms. Gates was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts, she encountered the name of Robins in connection with research she was doing on Ibsen and remembered Sprinchorn's comments. She began her research on Robins the actress, but the more she read, the more she was inspired to consider

Robins's entire career.

Although Ms. Gates discovered that "scholarly work was more suitable to my psyche," she earlier tried her hand as a playwright, even writing a number of plays on



historical women as part of an application for Vassar's William K. Rose Fellowship. She never won, but did use one of the plays as part of her application to graduate school, and her abiding interest in narrative is evidenced in the structure of her biography, in which each chapter begins with a fictionalized scene taken from Robins's life. "I tried to make her come alive as a person," says Ms. Gates in a telephone interview. "I chose segments of her life that provide a close-up look at who she was." The epilogue of the book is set at Vassar's own Alumnae House, where Robins actually spent some time late in her life.

More recently, Ms. Gates has been the coeditor of a diary Robins kept during her trip to Alaska to visit her brothers, one of whom was an itinerant preacher. The diary, which will be published in late 1996 by the University of Alaska Press, had particular interest for Ms. Gates because it captured the moment "[Robins] was turning away from the stage and toward a career as a novelist."

Eventually, Robins's public speaking in regard to British suffrage vied with her writing career. But with the insights she gained through her involvement with the struggle, she was able to publish more overtly feminist literature. In her profound study of the position of women through the ages, *Ancilla's Share*, she wrote what could serve as a fitting epitaph to her own rich and diverse experiences: "To posterity, the biography is indeed life."

Mary McGreevy '57

Mary McGreevy's third volume of poetry will be published by the Poets of Palm Beach in late 1995.

Noted

NONFICTION

Scottie

The Daughter of...

by Eleanor Lanahan
HarperCollins, 1995

A biography of Frances Scott Fitzgerald Lanahan Smith—Vassar class of '42—the daughter of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, by her daughter.

Evenings On and Off the Roof *Pioneering Concerts in Los Angeles, 1939-1971*

by Dorothy Lamb Crawford '54
University of California Press, 1995

Underground Harmonies *Music and Politics in the Subways of New York*

by Susie J. Tanenbaum '87
Cornell University Press, 1995

Hernando de Soto

by David Ewing Duncan '80
Crown Publishers, 1995

Beauty Queens on the Global Stage *Gender, Contests, and Power*

by Colleen Ballerino Cohen
Associate professor of anthropology and women's studies
Routledge, 1995

Black London

Life Before Emancipation
by Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina
Associate professor of English
Rutgers University Press, 1995

The Aphrodite of Knidos and Her Successors

A Historical Review of the Female Nude in Greek Art
by Christine Mitchell Havelock
Professor emerita of art history and curator of the classical art collection at Vassar
University of Michigan Press, 1995

Catholic Devotion in Victorian England

by Mary Heimann '84
Oxford University Press, 1995

Babies in Bottles

Twentieth-Century Visions of Reproductive Technology
by Susan Merrill Squier '72
Rutgers University Press, 1995

Women, Politics, and the United Nations

Edited by Anne Winslow '30
Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995

Out in All Directions

The Almanac of Gay and Lesbian America
Edited by Lynn Witt, Sherry Thomas, and Eric Marcus '80
Warner Books, 1995

Child-Wise

by Cathy Rindner Tempelman '79
Paper, Avon Books, 1995
(Hardcover, Wm. Morrow, 1994)
A guide to your child's first year through first grade.

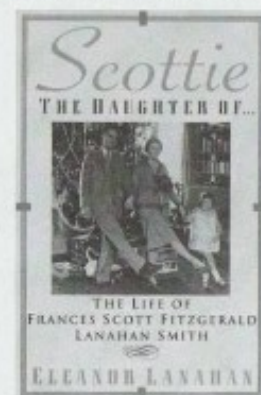
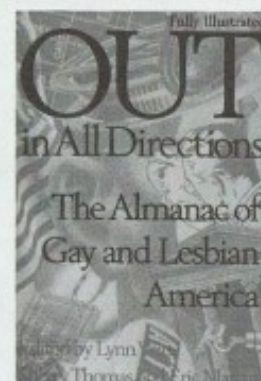
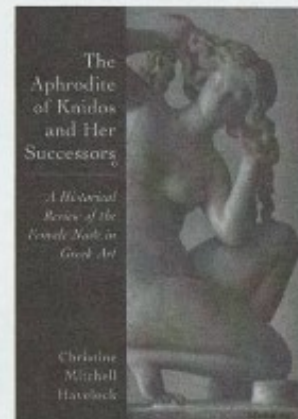
POETRY

Worldling

by Elizabeth Spires '74
W. W. Norton & Co., 1995

The Light of Memory *Collected Poems*

by Marcello Fabbri
translated by Jeanne R. Bonaca '66
Olive Press, 1995



LETTERS

The Quarterly welcomes letters to the editor, preferably typed, double-spaced, and no longer than 350 words.

Publication will be as space permits. We reserve the right to edit letters for style and length.

Letters reflect the opinions of the writers and not those of the magazine, AAVC, or Vassar College.

To be eligible for publication, letters must be signed and include a current address.

Send letters to:
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Poughkeepsie, NY 12601
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Traditions

Although mentioned in the article on "Traditions" (Winter '95 VQ), "sporting the oak" seems to have all but disappeared as a tradition from Vassar, or at least it was not universally known or practiced during my daughter's (VC '94) years at the college. Gone too were the quiet and certainty of uninterrupted study (or sleep) that came with a "sporting" sign on one's door.

While at Vassar I did not know either the literal meaning or origin of "sporting the oak." However, some years after graduating I came across the term in a novel (possibly Victorian) in which it was used to describe the closing of the outer door of a house (presumably made of oak) to signify that the occupants were not receiving visitors. If the outer door were left open, exposing the inner door to the house, the opposite would be true—visitors would be welcome. If "sporting the oak" lives on at the college, I should be interested in knowing where. Though I was much in favor of this venerable and polite tradition while at Vassar, later it took some years to learn to "tune out" and concentrate in the midst of extraneous noise.

Jo Kaplan Nasoff-Finton '67
Amherst, New York

The Devil: A favorite in the '50s and probably before. Served at the Dutch. As I remember it (and wish I remembered my college course material nearly as well!), it was a column: chocolate cake cube, topped by vanilla ice cream, topped by second chocolate cake cube, runneth over with chocolate (hot fudge? perhaps) syrup and whipped cream (no marshmallow sauce). A meal in itself.

Another favorite: chocolate-chip mint ice cream, sold in Arlington—almost as good as lemon ice cream, also available in those days.

Eileen Katz '54
Princeton, New Jersey

A Disclaimer

[Re: "She Acted Her Way to Feminism," about the book by Joanne E. Gates '72, *Elizabeth Robins, 1862-1952, Actress, Novelist, Feminist, OmniumGatherum*, Winter '95 VQ] I did not write the [article] as printed with my signature in the *Vassar Quarterly*. One sentence in the review as printed could never be written by me as long as North is snowy, and I do not want that sentence especially attributed to me. ["Unlike her contemporary, Edith Wharton, Robins's brand of feminism was always based on a pragmatic, financial need."] I do not think comment on a

writer depends on comparing her to her contemporaries, but would not argue the case. Rather, I think the sentence that appears in the review in question is extremely unclear, and absolutely philosophically inaccurate.

Does the [books editor] mean to imply that Wharton is a feminist? Someone wrote an article that convinced me of Charlotte Brontë's feminism, but so far I am unaware of an article or reference to Wharton as a feminist. Perhaps someday I will be so informed.

Does the writer mean to imply that Robins is a pragmatist? Hardly the case. Her severe financial straits often required her to ask for the dole from relatives and friends as well as depend on them. Although she hoped to earn from her acting career, that is hardly the choice of a pragmatist, or one with "pragmatic concerns" (although I object to this usage, preferring the "pragmatic person," rather than the "pragmatic concern.") Writing seems to be a better paid activity, and I think this was a factor in Robins's choice of the later career, but again, not terribly rewarding during her lifetime. A friend of mine said, "We (feminists) are all either visionaries or administrators." Had she been pragmatic, Robins would have been an administrator.

Mary McGreevy '57
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

Challenging Assumptions

[Sociology professor] William Hoynes, in his interview with Willa Panvini ("Do the Media Limit Political Debate?" Spring 1995 VQ), says we need to have "the issues of the day . . . discussed and debated, not just . . . based upon traditional assumptions . . . but where we really allow the boundaries to be pushed open . . . The limited . . . terrain the news depicts right now . . . does a disservice to citizens. . . ."

One such assumption that limits the society's terrain is that it is impossible for a nonreligious person to oppose abortion, that it is impossible for a right-to-lifer not to be religious and not to want prayer in public school. (In contrast, pro-abortion people are given the freedom to have any degree of religiousness, and religious people are allowed to have any opinion on abortion.)

Realizing that for a nonreligious person to support protecting the lives of the unborn is not only rationally possible but also part of the diversity of opinions is a way to push open the boundaries. Whether the Vassar community accepts it or not, "allowing" someone to be both right-to-life and nonreligious would do a service to citizens.

Jeanette Diane Wolfberg '78
Mount Kisco, New York