

Thoughts on Mary Austin

Sage and Tumbleweed

September 24, 1934

by *Inyokel

Mary Austin is dead. To our poor mind she had long stood forth as one of the masters, or mistresses, of our language, and one critic has called her the greatest American word craftsman. She wrote much after leaving Inyo, and her philosophy might not, and unquestionably did not, please many, but we can never forget her. Here she dwelt, a humble school teacher in Independence and Lone Pine; here she immortalized the latter as *El Pueblo de las Uvas*. Here fame found her in her *Land of Little Rain*. She knew us before we had lost our birthright of green swales and laughing rivers, and she wove them into her *Water Borders*. It is hard to think that this wizardry in words is ended. With a true artist's knowledge of color and a fearsome certainty of touch possessed only by the elect, such as Pierre Loti, Lafcadio Hearn and Willa Cather, she transformed California from a lifeless outline on the map to a Maxfield Parrish fairy land of sapphire seas, golden slopes, beckoning purple canyons and shimmering mirage. "The land of the sun," she wrote, "expands the soul." May the God whom she glimpsed and the glory of whose handiwork she limned so truly give that great soul rest in meadows eternal, whose beauty "eye hath not seen nor ear heard."

She found herself in Inyo, as she hints in one description of sagebrush country. "There is a Paiute proverb to the effect that no man should attempt the country east of the Sierras until he has learned to sleep in the shade of his arrows. This is a picturesque way of saying that he must be able to reduce his wants to the limit of necessity. Those who have been able to do so, and have trusted the land to repay them, have discovered that the measure is over-full. A man may not find wealth there, nor too much of food even, but he often finds himself, which is much more important."



The Padre thinks that Mary Austin's description of the Lone Pine that was is one of the finest pieces of genre writing in English. He likes to quote her description of the First Communion class and he believes that God will not be too hard on a woman who could write thus of a faith that was alien to her. "I used to peck in at them, ever so softly, in Dona Ina's living room; Raphael-eyed little imps, going sidewise on their knees to rest them from the bare floors, candles lit on the mantel to give a religious air and a great sheaf of wild bloom before the Holy Family. Come Sunday they set out the altar in the school house, with the fine-drawn altar cloths, the beaten silver candlesticks and the wax images, chief glory of Las Uvas, brought up mule back from Old Mexico 40 years ago. All in white, the communicants go up two and two in a hushed, sweet awe to take the Body of their Lord, and Tomaso, who is priest's boy, tries not to look unduly puffed up by his office. After that you have dinner and a bottle of wine that ripened on the sunny slope of Escondito. All the week Father Shannon has shriven his people, who bring clean conscience to the betterment of appetite, and the father sets them an example. Father Shannon is rather big about the middle to accommodate the large laugh that lives in

him, but a most shrewd searcher of hearts. It is reported that one derives comfort from his confessional, and I for my part believe it.

"...I am persuaded only a complex soul can get any good of a plain religion. Your earth-born is a poet and a symbolist. We breed in an environment of asphalt pavements a body of people whose creeds are chiefly restrictions against other people's way of life, and have kitchens and latrines under the same roof that house their God. Such as these go to church to be edified, but at Las Uvas they go for pure worship and to entreat their God. The logical conclusion of the faith that every good gift cometh from God is the open hand and the finer courtesy. The meal done without buys a candle for the neighbor's dead child. You do foolishly to suppose that the candle does no good... Come away, you who are obsessed with your own importance in the scheme of things, and have nothing you did not sweat for, come away by the brown valleys and full-bosomcd hills to the even-breathing days, to the kindness, earthiness, ease of *El Pueblo de Las Uvas*."

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February 7, 1937

by *Inyokel

The late Mary Austin is unquestionably the greatest teller of tales that Inyo has known, and her descriptions of "this long, brown, and lonely land" are alike marvels of accuracy and limpid English prose. She laid no claim to be an historian; in fact, she deliberately used false names for participants in incidents we all know well, but she left us pictures of Lone Pine and Independence in their heyday that live and speak. Notable particularly are *The Land of Little Rain*, *The Basket Woman*, and *The Ford*, with her autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, supplying the background for the former fictional and descriptive sketches. (Houghton Mifflin). But Mary Austin wrote nothing about Death Valley.

*Inyokel – Fr. Crowley's pen name.