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Gladys Hasty Carroll

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About this Person

Born: June 26, 1904 in Rochester, New Hampshire, United States

Died: April 01, 1999 in York, Maine, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *Cockatoo* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).
- *Land Spell* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).
- *As the Earth Turns* (New York: Macmillan, 1933; London: Macmillan, 1933).
- *A Few Foolish Ones* (New York: Macmillan, 1935; London: Macmillan, 1935).
- *Neighbor to the Sky* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).
- *Head of the Line* (New York: Macmillan, 1942).
- *Dunnybrook* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).
- *While the Angels Sing* (New York: Macmillan, 1947; London: Hale, 1953).
- *West of the Hill* (New York: Macmillan, 1949; London: Hale, 1951).
- *Christmas Without Johnny* (New York: Macmillan, 1950).
- *One White Star* (New York: Macmillan, 1954; London: Hale, 1956).
- *Sing Out the Glory* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957).
- *Come With Me Home* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).
- *Only Fifty Years Ago* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962).
- *To Remember Forever* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963).
- *The Road Grows Strange* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).
- *The Light Here Kindled* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967).
- *Christmas Through The Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968).
- *Man on the Mountain* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).
- *Years Away from Home* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).
- *Next of Kin* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).
- *Unless You Die Young* (New York: Norton, 1977).

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Gladys Hasty Carroll, who had previously published short stories and two books for children and adolescents (*Cockatoo*, 1929; *Land Spell*, 1930), gained fame with her first three novels for adults, *As the Earth Turns* (1933), *A Few Foolish Ones* (1935), and *Neighbor to the Sky* (1937). Each of these adult novels, as well as *Land Spell*, portrays a large family in rural Maine. Although Carroll has continued to write prolifically, these three remain her best novels. *As the Earth Turns*, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and a remarkable best-seller, was translated into sixty languages and dialects, selected for inclusion in the White House Library of American books, and published in a special large-type edition as a Keith Jennison classic. It appeared in March 1933, at the depths of the Depression, in the month of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inauguration and his proclamation of a four-day nationwide bank closing. Carroll remarked that her parents had "put their bank books in the bottom of the bureau drawer" as worthless relics. While she wrote *As the Earth Turns*, she had become increasingly aware of the Depression and hoped to help people facing hardship recognize choices they could, or must, make. As editor of a page for young women in *Householder* magazine, she was receiving 300 letters a month, answering half of them, and had set up an "exchange" of baby clothes among the readers. Many readers of *As the Earth Turns* saw the hardships of Mark Shaw and his family as universal rather than just regional. By the end of the first week of publication, the novel topped the New York best-seller lists and within six weeks topped such lists in every state.

Writing two or three stories each week while her husband, Herbert A. Carroll, was in graduate school (1925-1930) after her own graduation from Bates College in 1925, Carroll strenuously marketed them in periodicals such as *Youth's Companion*, *Householder*, *Torchbearer*, *Classmate*, and the *High Road*, and the best were collected in *Head of the Line* (1942). Some of her short stories have in recent years been adapted for radio and television. Carroll has had twenty-two books published, predominantly romantic, domestic novels that emphasize the "good order" of the difficult life of rural New England, past and present.

In all of her work Gladys Hasty Carroll has stressed the value of harmonious family relationships, commitment to a relatively stable community, and deep psychic awareness of nature with its orderly turning of the seasons. Her best work has been compared in its regional emphasis, emotional depth, and restrained style to fiction by Willa Cather and Sara Orne Jewett, occasionally to Ole Rølvaag's *Giants of the Earth* (1924-1925), and even to the pastoral poems of James Thomson (1700-1748). Carroll's many letters to her mother (written between 1925 and 1933 from her homes in Massachusetts, New York City, and Minneapolis and included in her autobiography, *Years Away from Home*, 1972) reveal how significantly the rural New England landscape and community and her sense of belonging to a family dominated her imagination. In her novels the primary setting is often a modification of the Hasty house on the old farm near Berwick, Maine, settled in the early eighteenth century by her forebears. She, her husband (a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota and later at the University of New Hampshire, near Berwick), and their two children returned to the home place in 1937. For many years their neighbors presented an outdoor drama based on *As the Earth Turns*, with proceeds going to community needs.

In addition to their distinction as regional fiction, several of Carroll's novels, such as *A Few Foolish Ones* (1935), *Sing Out the Glory* (1957), and *Next of Kin* (1974), reflect her strong interest in New England history and family history. So also do certain non-fiction works that document both daily routine and special events in her life and the lives of her ancestors: *Dunnybrooke* (1943), a family-centered history of a pre-Revolution village, settled in part by her ancestors; *Only Fifty Years Ago* (1962), a detailed recording of activities in 1912 on her parents' farm; *To Remember Forever* (1963), a diary of her sophomore year at Bates College; and *Years Away from Home*, an account of her life from 1925 to 1933, which focuses on her strategy for success as a popular writer.

Consistently optimistic, Carroll's work has been called sentimental. Her first three novels, however, are different from her short stories and from the romantic "escape" novels or the sentimental domestic fiction popular in the women's magazines in the 1930s. Carroll's best novels do not avoid mundane daily life or gloss over hardships, prejudice, stupidity, shiftlessness, and eccentricity in the households and communities she creates. Unlike the sentimental escape literature with which they competed in the 1930s, her popular early novels avoided mystery, suspense, and tempestuous action; they avoided conventional plotting with action rising sharply to a climax in favor of a simpler recounting of daily life and revelation of character; and they did not emphasize moments of passionate ecstasy nor bitter despair. The sensationalism and moralistic sermonizing of many popular novels of the 1930s are not present in Carroll's long fiction of that decade, but her short stories and most of her nine novels written between 1945 and 1970 are sentimental, vigorously inspirational, and weak in characterization and dialogue. Even in some of these works, however, there are strong scenes, a few moments of fine humor, and considerable use of irony and satire. Her two novels of the 1970s, *Next of Kin* and *Unless You Die Young* (1977), return to the restrained, balanced, and moving artistry of her first three adult novels and offer promise of further fiction depending on strong characterization, slow pacing, and predictable change.

When she began to write *As the Earth Turns*, Gladys Hasty Carroll had already developed the large family of Mark Shaw and their old farm in twelve short stories and in her novel for adolescents, *Land Spell*. She was frustrated by the demands imposed by the short-story formulas popular among editors of denominational publications and women's magazines and by the sales promoters' expectation that juvenile books should include mystery. She found that she increasingly preferred to emphasize, instead of adventure, stronger characterization, more effective regional dialogue, and the relationships of her characters' lives to the slow movement of nature and the seasons. At this crucial time, Constance Skinner, critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, encouraged Carroll to write a full-scale adult novel and urged her to persevere in producing "the big farm novel," better than any that Willa Cather had created. Skinner's best advice to the young woman writing alone in Minnesota was that she limit her scope to a time just before a big change was to occur in the affairs of the family. Carroll complied by focusing the action on the year before the marriage of Mark Shaw's daughter Jen, thus giving the novel unity. The book's five parts are divided by changes in nature as the seasons progress from "Winter" to "Winter Again." The movement is paced also by family celebrations of holidays and by a marriage, a birth, a death, and the promise of Jen's marriage. Mark's memories and the references at crucial moments to the "steeple clock" of Mark's dead first wife emphasize the slow passage of time and enlarge the action beyond the single year.

Mark and his oldest daughter, Jen, left in charge of the household at fifteen because of her mother's death, function both as the main characters and as the relatively stable center around which the activities of the others revolve. Jen, in particular, becomes the chief observer, as well as compelling the reader's interest as she falls in love with the neighborhood "outsider," the Polish immigrant Stan Janowski. Though Jen's goodness may be idealized, her common sense, humor, and affection keep her from becoming a glorious martyr for the family rather than a human being.

Carroll's constant emphasis on the closeness of family and neighbors ironically contrasts at times with the psychological as well as geographical isolation felt deeply by certain individuals. Mark Shaw's silences seem often more significant than his occasional comments. If the dialogue of Carroll's country folk effectively suggests the rhythms of New England speech, the relative inarticulateness of the farmers and lumbermen is also evident. The characters remain undemonstrative and talk about minor details of living, rather than their sometimes tempestuous conflicts. The emotional undercurrents in *As the Earth Turns*, *A Few Foolish Ones*, and *Neighbor to the Sky* have the tension and power of a force only barely restrained. The Shaw men may show anger only by brief looks that cross their faces or by their sudden grabbing of the milk pail and slamming the door as they stride toward the barn. A woman, like Ed Shaw's wife, Mildred, evinces joy or loneliness by playing her piano or expresses her frustration by teasing her small children when her husband refuses to hear her or fails to notice that she is pregnant one more time. In a single dramatic sequence, Cora Shaw, Mark's dull and sickly second wife, cries out in heroic fury when Mark gives her cow to E's family though she was counting on her "butter money" from its milk to finance her daughter's attendance at school in town. But for the most part, Cora watches listlessly at the window for someone not yet home as snow accumulates or darkness falls, or she hopefully scans the distance to see a wagon drive along the road or even to glimpse smoke from a neighbor's chimney or a light in a neighbor's window.

Carroll keeps in check her romanticizing of rural living by recognizing the efforts three of the Shaw children make to escape the farm. Craving adventure, Ralph has become a pilot, and only after long years of struggle does he make peace with himself and his father when he gloriously sweeps his plane down in the field next to the old house just in time for his brother's wedding. (Not many weeks later, Mark surrenders his stubborn resentment of his rebellious son. As Ralph, killed in a plane crash, lies in an unopened coffin in the front parlor, the undemonstrative, but loving, father simply lays a hand on the smooth, dark wood.) Lize and Lois May escape to monotonous secretarial jobs in the city, but they buy a car to make visits to the farm, which they hate but inexplicably remain homesick for. Also tempering the idealization of rural life is Mark's memory of the once lighthearted first wife, who never again "drew her chair up to the supper table," but lay in her room as an invalid for the year she lived after she bore their last child.

Reviewers were equally divided on whether Carroll's second successful novel, *A Few Foolish Ones*, was a better novel than her first. Certainly it has scenes more dramatic and memorable than any in *As the Earth Turns*. *A Few Foolish Ones* begins with a riotous scene in which a sanctimonious reopening of a long-abandoned country church is interrupted by drunken Jeddy Linscott and his drunken sons. They alternate between challenging anyone in the congregation to a fistfight at the altar and mourning the death of Ketury Linscott, Jeddy's unmarried daughter who has died that evening in childbirth and cannot be buried in the churchyard because of her sin. Late in the book a memorable scene of a different kind occurs as the chief character, Gus Bragdon, dies in old age after having repeated to his daughter all the memories and thoughts he had never bothered to speak aloud in the previous fifty years.

This novel lacks the unity of *As the Earth Turns*, as it attempts to cover fifty years rather than one year; to develop the lives of Gus Bragdon and Sarey, their children, and their grandchildren; and to trace the changes in some five other families in the community. Bragdon's daughter, Kate, in many ways resembles Jen in the earlier book, and whatever unity Carroll achieves in *A Few Foolish Ones* comes from her centering of the novel on the lives of Gus Bragdon and Kate. This densely populated book lacks the harmony and lyrical power which the identification of human life with the orderly progress of nature and time gave to the preceding novel, but Carroll suggests such a patterning of human events in her organization of the three sections, entitled "Morning Light, 1870," "Noontime, 1895," and "Early Evening, 1920."

The title of the novel refers to Gus's meditation as he looks at some birds desperately tearing away with amazing industry at an ice-covered bush in bitter cold. They are the "few foolish ones" who stayed behind in this frigid timber country just because it happened to be "the place where they pecked out of the shell." But Gus decides they are "making out." Gus's cynicism regarding the foolishness of birds or people who try to endure with him the rigors of Nubble Point or Derwich Village contrasts ironically with the hopefulness that makes him continue to add rooms to his house and acres of timber to his "fortune" over the years. Gus's ambivalent view qualifies the celebration or the grief in scenes throughout the book.

Neighbor to the Sky may be the least successful of the three novels that brought fame to Carroll. The book is less impressive in those parts which take place "away from home," where Luke Gilman is studying to become a professor at his wife's urging and where he is teaching at a midwestern university, than in those parts which take place on the Gilman farm in Maine or on the run-down Vermont farm from which his wife, Margery, came.

Margery and Luke are skillfully created figures. The strength of the book lies in the depiction of the tensions Margery experiences in breaking away from her Vermont dirt-farmer background and in her contempt for her father, who seems alien to her in his preoccupation with hard work on the land. She is compulsive about becoming educated and about becoming successful in a career as teacher and later as actress. Surprisingly, she becomes equally compulsive about substituting the success of her husband's career for the achievement of her own personal ambitions. There are other surprising reversals in her aims and preoccupations as she successively becomes associated with a spiritualist cult, decides to have an abortion and changes her mind at the last moment, becomes deeply involved in the politics of faculty wives, and then becomes disillusioned with these women. Finally, the maternal influence of Luke's mother and a new understanding of the security and stability of the family and community take the young couple and their child back home to the old Maine farmstead.

None of the nine novels Carroll published between 1947 and 1969 attained the distinction of the three which appeared in the 1930s. Of them, the most interesting, *One White Star* (1954), develops effectively a complex psychological pattern which repeats itself in mother-daughter relationships for four generations of one family. Each woman bears one daughter, who vehemently rejects her mother. Mothers and daughters repeatedly return to one another for support in crises. In order to compensate for the voids in their lives, the women also seek "spiritual parents" in less educated older women, in grandmothers, and even in older men whose existence is celibate or near-celibate. After two of the women separate from their husbands, the husbands die violently--one crushed to death by a falling tree, the other killed in a military plane crash. As in the novels of the 1930s, the primary character, Laura, returns for renewal at times of stress to the deteriorating farmhouse of her early childhood. If Carroll raises complex and interesting psychological problems, she unfortunately fails to trace the ramifications of the situations she invents--for example, Laura's reluctant but resigned acceptance of her husband's imposition of celibacy upon their marriage.

Several of the novels, though sentimental and didactic, sold well, particularly at the Christmas seasons, because of their simple and appealing subjects: love of family, sentimental religion, and postwar patriotism. *While the Angels Sing* (1947) presents a grandmother who dozes on Christmas Eve and dreams that her prodigal son has arrived and is engaged to the daughter of the town banker. In *West of the Hill* (1949), set in 1880, Molly, an orphaned girl abused by the fisherman and his wife who rear her, runs from the seashore to the farm and forest land of Maine, "west of the hill." The young man who gives the frightened girl a ride in his wagon astonishes himself and the village by marrying her that evening. With the foresight of all Carroll's Maine farm wives, Molly has brought with her bundle of clothes a box of sand with which to scrub the kitchen floor in her new husband's house. As in Carroll's earlier work, childbirth provides exaggerated drama, and the possibility of disaster, in this case a forest fire, brings out the heroism of the neighbors. In *Christmas Without Johnny* (1950) Carroll analyzes the distress of a nine-year-old misfit, whom a school official finally befriends. In *Sing Out the Glory* the patriotic narrator recounts anecdotes about life in his part of Maine in the early 1900s. He tells stories not only of the old settlers but of the Irish immigrants, the French-Canadian lumberjacks, the hired farm laborers, and the women accused of witchcraft. He emphasizes the glory of New England in a pious, celebratory, and uncritical manner.

Carroll's quiet reflectiveness redeems, in part, the sentimentality and didacticism of these books of the 1940s and 1950s, but in the novels of the 1960s she becomes more abrasive in tone and more rigid in her attitudes. She accepts, rather uncritically, the arrogance and the unthinking conservatism of her elderly characters, and she tends to oversimplify complex moral issues and complicated psychological situations. In *Come With Me Home* (1960) and *The Road Grows Strange* (1965) she focuses on elderly women who officiously intrude into the lives of their younger neighbors. *The Road Grows Strange* closes with a sentimental scene in which the heavens open to receive a saintly junior-high teacher at her death, after she has devoted the summer since her retirement to elevating work among confused parents and teenagers in her community. A far more vigorous scene occurs in the opening chapter when the teacher sneaks out of the side door of the gym after the graduation ceremony and joyously kicks off her shoes in her living room to celebrate the end of forty-two years confinement behind her desk in the schoolroom. In *The Light Here Kindled* (1967) there is not much light, and all the characters are adrift in a world which has little solidity and makes little sense. Only the two very old women from a Maine rural community who are nearing death have a sense of purpose and strength of spirit. Three couples talk ramblingly about the modern age, including the Vietnam War, but have little sense of perspective and proportion, although they can affirm the spirit kindled by the two old women who have looked peacefully and courageously toward death. In her only fantasy novel, *Man on the Mountain* (1969), Carroll moves into the twenty-first century and a land divided into four states, where people reside according to their ages. Two little boys wander into the state occupied by the elderly and converse with the Man on the Mountain, and as old people accompany the children through the other states to return them to their home, they have ample time to observe that the young and middle-aged have turned their land toward disaster.

In a resurgence of imaginative power, Carroll's last two works have exhibited new distinction. *Next of Kin*, a fine historical novel, ingeniously organizes twelve events from 1698 to 1923 that portray ancestors of Lisa and Larry, who have just moved into an abandoned Maine farmhouse left to Larry by his grandfather. The young unmarried couple hope to save money by leaving college during Lisa's pregnancy. Their motorcycles, long hair, and blue jeans at first prejudice the old neighbors, but before long the young couple are listening to the neighbors' stories and are being served fish, fried oatmeal slices, and homemade applesauce. The young people find roots through their new understanding of family history, and the older people recognize that change from generation to generation renews the community.

In *Unless You Die Young* Carroll produced another fine novel, again presenting the viewpoint of an elderly person who finds renewal through stronger relationships with young people. Unlike the grandparents in Carroll's early novels, Alice in this latest novel enjoys her independence and insists on having her own cottage as she and her children and grandchildren vacation on Cape Cod. In her blue denim skirt and old straw hat, she revels in the feel of hot damp sand on bare feet and she teaches her granddaughters to anticipate the rhythm of waves so they can jump in time with the sea. She remarks that her life is "complete but not finished." Through long flashbacks, she relives parts of her life. To "finish" her life, she integrates her remembered youth with her present experience and maintains that one's youth is never lost. The epigraph, from Samuel Johnson, is apt not only for this novel but for others by Carroll which embrace three or four generations of a family: "He that would pass the latter part of life with honor and decency must, while he is young, consider that he shall one day be old, and remember when he is old, that he has once been young."

In her best novels, those published in the 1930s, Gladys Hasty Carroll presents memorably the life of rural Maine before the Civil War, late in the nineteenth century, or during the Depression. At her best, she reveals a "solidity of specification" that is truly impressive. One learns that the barn is stained red with a mixture of skim milk and blood-root, for instance, and that there are five stoves in the old house--one for cooking--and that three will be taken down at spring housecleaning. Sawdust is banked around the foundations each fall. The children undress in the kitchen and take hot sandbags to bed. Such details result in a thoroughly realized milieu for her characters, whose inner conflicts and relationships with others are memorable because Carroll so expertly focuses person and setting and knows her people so thoroughly. Her depth of insight in her best work raises it considerably above the picturesque, and "local color" with her serves a larger artistic vision.

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