
REVIEWS

Chelsea Blackbird and Barney Nelson, eds. *Mary Austin's Southwest: An Anthology of Her Literary Criticism*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005. 302p.

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In his book about the way in which water has been managed and mismanaged in the American West, Marc Reissner cites an interview that Mary Austin had with William Mulholland in the early years of the 20th century. During their conversation, she warned the developer that the Owens River, although it appeared to carry sufficient water for the needs of the projected two million inhabitants of Los Angeles, would be drained dry by the needs of a city that would not stop growing until it “owned the whole river and all of the land.” Mulholland’s reported response to a subordinate, after Mrs. Austin’s visit, was “By God, . . . that woman is the only one who has brains enough to see where this is going” (79).

It is appropriate that Austin was the one person able to recognize the potential disaster awaiting the annexation of the Owens River as a water source for the burgeoning city. During her years in California, she developed a unique connection with the landscape and the peoples of the area which led to her rather singular philosophy about the way that humans and their arts are influenced by the landscapes they inhabit, and an ardent belief that the American Southwest “would eventually develop into the world’s next great culture” (5). Although she proved prescient about the fate of the Owens, her conviction that the hybrid culture of the Southwest would rise to new heights was not to be. Even with the tremendous efforts she made to bring Native American and Mexican poetry, stories, and drama to the attention of the general public, the world represented through those cultures’ art found little resonance in the rapidly industrializing western United States of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In this representative collection of essays, not all of which fall under the strict title of literary criticism, Austin argues for the acceptance of diverse regional literatures rather than a more generic “American” literature, which she sees as “shallow,” a weakness due in part to what she sees as publishers’ unwillingness to familiarize themselves with the particularities of the numerous geographical and cultural regions of the United States. Austin further argues that in order for such fiction to be rec-

ognized as stellar examples, it cannot simply be about a region. The landscape and its inhabitants, animals, and plants must be intimately entwined with the characters and plot; it must be a story that can take place in no other place.

It is in writing about the geography and plant life of the Southwest that Austin is at her best. Rather than using her signature pedantic tone to educate her readers about the Indian and Spanish cultures she assumes they know little or nothing about, she loses herself in loving and lovely descriptions of the landscape, in one essay delineating the Spanish names for the geographical formations unique to the area. In the same way, she showcases the flora of the region, expressing her wonder and delight through specific botanical information. Reading these sometimes exuberant, often spiritual, descriptions, the reader is able to see, even smell, what the writer is portraying. In “Art Influence in the West,” Austin writes of an almond orchard:

A blossoming almond-orchard is not only a beautiful thing; it is also an inescapable thing; it scents the air for almost as many miles as its delicate roseate cloud takes the eye along the foot-hill slopes. Swarms of fallen petals drift in the roadways like snow. And the long rows of the low-trimmed muscats, reaching out from vine to vine with advancing summer as though to take hands against the weight of the harvest—how they assault us with the visible process of earth and sun and air made into wine and food for man! (83)

Here there are no theories about how and why the indigenous cultures’ poetry and drama are forerunners of Greek drama. There is no defensive railing against European forms of art and literature. Instead we have the words of an extremely observant woman connected to the land, willing to drop her defenses against the Nature-ignorant intelligentsia ensconced in the eastern United States and write about what she is most engaged with.

The strongest essay in this collection is also the result of an observation. It is an excellent example of Austin’s ethnographic ability, written, for the most part, without editorializing. “The Trail of the Blood: An Account of the Penitent Brotherhood of New Mexico” is written in four sections. Austin begins the essay like a short story. This is followed by a brief history of the establishment of the group that practiced penitence by whipping themselves with cords, binding *cholla* branches to themselves, wearing rose-briar crowns and staging a ritualized re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ during Holy Week. This practice resulted in the death of more than one penitent chosen for the role of Christ.

With beautiful, even reverent language, Austin writes of the group’s extraordinary expression of love for God, foregoing her usual sermonizing on the symbolism of their actions. Near the end of the essay, however, her voice becomes almost shrill as she points out the superiority of this homegrown ritual to its parallel in Oberam-

mergau. To her credit, she quickly moves back to the style of the earlier portions, allowing us to come to our own conclusions about the penitents' religious fervor.

As the editors of this volume acknowledge, Austin often repeats herself, sometimes using the exact words that she used in an earlier essay on the same or a similar topic. At other times she contradicts herself—often in the same essay. Her theories about the development of Indian poetry and drama are a bit difficult to espouse. Yet readers may feel compelled to stop and ponder their efficacy, if only in light of the period in which Austin was writing. In addition, for all the claims to the contrary, the way she writes about the indigenous peoples of the Southwest is, when seen through the current lens of sensitivity to racism and exoticizing of other ethnic groups, a bit questionable. But for anyone interested in the development of the American Southwest, its mythos, the clash and mesh of its various cultures, its art forms, geography, botanical wonders, or unique fauna, Mary Austin's essays are an entertaining and enlightening place from which to view them. ✱