

Literature and Ethnology in the Career Of Caroline Dormon

by Arthur S. Williams, Ph.D.

The 1920s were anxious years for Caroline Dormon. Despite achievements in forestry, conservation and education, she was weary of the uncertainties of public life and frustrated by the distractions of teaching, which, she confided to Cammie Henry, “takes so much precious time and strength” (Scrapbook 83). In 1926 she refused an offer to work in conservation for the state of Mississippi, explaining to Mrs. Henry that “it was public work, and I have already given the best years of my life to the public—the rest I want to live as privately as possible. I’ll stay here and manage to pull through somehow” (Scrapbook 83).

Writing was both a motive for wanting to live privately at Briarwood (Scrapbook 83) and also a way to achieve financial and personal independence. “If I could make a ‘Lit,’” she wrote to a relative, “and by that means make enough money (I’ll take the fame for lagniappe) to help us get out of debt and finish making Briarwood beautiful, I would feel that my life had not been wasted” (Folder 1078). The urge and the necessity to write led Dormon to become a regular contributor to *Holland’s* magazine and other periodicals in the 1920s.

Although an important and familiar part of her resume, Dormon’s horticultural works and journalistic writing constitute but a portion of her literary activities in the 1920s and early 1930s; even while otherwise fully employed, she was actively trying to publish her fiction and poetry. For Dormon the pursuit of a literary career and reputation was a long-sustained and serious—though largely unsuccessful—undertaking. She offered her poems for correction by the Alabama poet and critic Clement Wood (Folder 839); sent poems and stories to national publications including *The Dial*, *Harper’s*, and *Century Magazine*; and received offers of assistance from both Josiah Titzell (Folder 486) and Lyle Saxon. Saxon, although struggling

with his own career in New York, was tactful and courtly in his literary exchanges with the diffident Dormon. “I’m tremendously glad that you sent them,” Saxon wrote upon receiving a batch of stories from Briarwood, “but for heaven’s sake get the notion out of your head that *I’m* helping *you*. . . . that’s worse than ridiculous; it’s silly” (Folder 556).

We should not be surprised that Dormon, though most closely associated with living things, should have turned to words for a livelihood. While her father was an amateur naturalist as well as a lawyer, her mother had written a novel, *Under the Magnolias* (Johnson 18-19). Of her own upbringing Dormon once wrote, “I was born between the covers of a book, and grew up in a tree top” (Letter; 1937; folder 978). From an early date she was at home with words and valued them. “As you put wonder notes into the tiny throats of birds,” she writes in a poem entitled “A Prayer,” “Give me, at least in some small measure, the Gift of Words!” (Folder 839). She continued her literary education at Judson College, where she roomed for one year with the future writer Ada Jack Carver, and Carver along with Saxon offered encouragement in later years.

Housed in the archives of the Watson Library are manuscripts and typescripts of over twenty stories, mostly written during the 1920s, many of which were submitted for publication while others exist only in rough drafts. They represent a potpourri of subjects and styles, including one Cajun story “*Langue du Femme*” (Folder 909) and two “negro” stories of the sort popular in the 1920’s, “Possum” (Folder 920) and “The Nineteenth” (Folder 919). While the latter two stories avoid the farcical extremes characteristic of their kind, “*Langue du Femme*,” superficially an account of Cajun life in the tradition of local color, turns out to be a satire on greedy women. The acquisitive women of the old Cajun Gros Jean’s

household believe he is hoarding a treasure known to local legend, but the hoard proves to be hard-earned savings put aside to help his son Ti Jean rise from poverty.

“*Langue du Femme*” is not the only Dormon story to satirize modern materialism. Somewhat reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence’s allegory “The Rocking Horse Winner,” Dormon’s “Little Ways” tells the story of *Frou Frou* and Christopher, young socialites whose marriage consists in equal parts aestheticism, materialism, and sentimentality. Their marital happiness depends upon maintaining a precious diffidence about money, a reserve that shatters when frankness and household economy become necessary. An antique clock, their prized possession and the center of their household, serves as a symbol of their marriage. When the marriage itself loses its sparkle, the clock becomes duller as if in sympathy: “The Empire clock had been moved to the table in the middle of the room—the most conspicuous place possible. The Cupid and Psyche were there, but they looked dull, lusterless—and there was one clear crack in the glass case that covered them” (Folder 913).

Although in “Little Ways” and elsewhere—a story entitled “Recompense” (Folder 922) is another example—Dormon writes in a sophisticated modern style, she is perhaps more interesting and complex when writing about her native landscape in a quasi-autobiographical vein. One intriguing example is “The Little Girl Who Didn’t Know She Was Ugly” (Folder 912), which tells the story of Midge, a girl reminiscent of the young Dormon, who shuns society but identifies with the beauty and wildness of her native hills. She is befriended by the painter Jerry Drisdale whose ambition is to paint the “Simplicity of the Hills.” “Just hills,” he would say: “Plain hills. Everybody paints mountains and the sea. I want to paint hills and little streams.”

When Midge inadvertently overhears herself described as “homely,” she finds comfort in Mr. Jerry who reassures her that she is an “elf,” explaining that “elves are made of dew-drops and

fire and March winds and the love-song of birds and mists on the hills at daylight.” Mr. Jerry then expresses his desire to paint Midge, and the portrait is displayed in a major museum where it brings him the recognition he had been seeking while trying to paint “The Simplicity of the Hills.” The point, of course, is that Midge, though without conventional beauty, personifies the beauty of nature, and that the painter has managed to capture that beauty by painting Midge.

I would argue that aspects of Caroline Dormon inhabit both Midge, the wild and lonely girl who shuns society but loves nature, and the painter Jerry who seeks recognition for capturing the delicate beauty of the hills. From a biographical and psychological point of view, “The Little Girl Who Didn’t Know She Was Ugly” is a complex story that captures some of Dormon’s ambition for recognition as well as her personal diffidence.

In the 1920s Dormon invested her hopes for literary success in a collection of stories called *Sand Hill Tales*, which relate the lives of small farmers in Louisiana’s piney hills. Much as she believed that the Kisatchee Hills themselves defied conventional views of the Louisiana landscape, Dormon insisted that their inhabitants were likewise little known and not well understood. “It seems to me that the real story of these people has never been written,” she wrote in a note attached to her story “Molly’s Children,” “yet they seem fascinating to me” (Folder 914).

A hand-written document among Dormon’s papers lists eighteen titles under the heading “Sand-Hill Tales,” but of these only the following nine are clearly marked within the Dormon Collection at Northwestern State University: “Molly’s Children,” “Nex’ Year,” “Pine Knots,” “Lam,” “The Box Supper,” “Al,” “Clothes Lines,” “Jap Cagle,” and “Rainy Spell” (Folio 975). Dormon’s fondness for these stories is suggested by the fact that, along with a list of titles, she compiled a list of the characters and their traits, perhaps because she thought of them as a community of neighbors. This perception

is underscored by the fact that some characters appear in multiple stories.

The *Sand Hill Tales* are simple, unadorned stories that record the cycles of hope and despair in the lives of independent hill farmers and their families. They thus represent an instance—perhaps unique in Louisiana--of “plain folks” fiction that first appeared following the Civil War (Cook 11). Sometimes the cycles are generational, as in the stories “Nex’ Year” and “Clothes Line,” both of which relate the dreams and disappointments of two generations of women. At other times the cycles are seasonal, following the rhythms of the agricultural year, or simply contingent upon circumstance.

An instance of the latter kind is “Molly’s Children,” a story that takes place in a time of drought. With no crop to harvest, Doc, a poor but independent hill farmer, cuts timber to make crossties for the railroad. But even in this time of trouble, Doc and his wife Lurleen scrimp and struggle to fulfill a dream of taking their children to the State Fair in Shreveport, the closest thing in their lives to an actual circus. “Them poor little younguns,” Doc declares, “They’s got to see some monkeys!” Their scheme seems promising until Molly Johnson, a neighbor and distant relative, takes ill and dies of influenza. Knowing that Molly’s worthless husband Pink Johnson is incompetent to raise children by himself, Doc and Lurleen take the motherless children into their own hard-pressed household, putting an end—at least for the moment—to the dream of going to the fair. “Maybe next year,” says Lurleen in resignation, “there won’t be no flu nor nuthin’, and we can go the Fair nex’ year.”

By emphasizing a generosity and humor that help to soften the real harshness of its characters’ lives, “Molly’s Children” is representative of the *Sand Hill Tales*. Dormon was opposed to the starker forms of realism that in her view characterized fiction of the post World War I era (Hand-written note; Folder 917), and in her own stories sought to create an alternative. “I . . . have

tried to catch and hold bits of their real lives,” she wrote—“with some of the hopelessness but a little bit of strength and beauty, too, for I am not one of those who hold that realism should be all bitterness” (Hand-written note; Folder 965).

The result, as evidenced by “Molly’s Children” and many of its companion stories, is a Dickensian mix of economic determinism and sentiment that excluded anything sordid or brutal. Lyle Saxon indirectly acknowledges the edifying quality of Dormon’s stories in a letter to Dormon about Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*: “I’ve got a book to lend you that will drive you mad with rage. . . . It is called “Tobacco Road” and deals with sand-hill people, but not in Louisiana. Locale Georgia. The most brutally realistic book about poor whites that I ever read—but so good that you can’t put it down” (Letter July 22, 1932; Folder 557). While Saxon’s remarks don’t necessarily imply criticism of Dormon’s stories, for which he expressed admiration (Letter August 29, 1927; Folder 556), they do point toward her aversion to extremes of human experience found in some published fiction about poor Southern whites.

Dormon’s letters to Cammie Henry in the mid-1920s suggest the hopes that she invested in her stories as well as her frustration at failing to find publishers for them. Her disappointments contrast with the successes of her friend Ada Jack Carver during the same period. “My dear—my dear—“she wrote to Mrs. Henry in 1924—“if I’d done what Ada has, I’d be up so high, I doubt if I’d ever come down under six months!” (Folder 83).

In another letter to Henry in 1925 Dormon reports that her “children”—i.e. her stories—“are all come home again—prompt they are!” “Honey,” she goes on, “maybe I ain’t fit for anything but to feed critters” (Folder 83).

As suggested by the many references to Carver in Dormon’s letters to Mrs. Henry, Dormon’s failure to achieve publication in the 1920s represent a kind of counter-point to her friend’s successes during the same era. Local color

as a characteristic Louisiana genre achieved a late efflorescence in the work of Carver, who won O'Henry and Memorial and Harper's Awards for her stories about life in Natchitoches and along Cane River (Fletcher 1). It would be easy to assume that Dormon was seeking to do for the white farmers of Louisiana's piney hills what Carver and, earlier, Kate Chopin had done in representing the Cane River Creoles in fiction. This assumption, however, would not be misleading, for the works of the two writers are strikingly dissimilar in style as well as in subject.

While Dormon's stories, like Carver's, represent a variety of local color by utilizing dialect and focusing on the mores of a living community, such resemblances are trivial compared to the profound differences in technique and—especially—attitude toward their subjects. Dormon's response to "Redbone," Carver's best known story and the winner of the Harper's Prize in 1925, offers a useful perspective on both women's fiction. Dormon reports to Cammie Henry on having read Carver's story, and then adds the following commentary:

Well—as you know—I don't like that type of story, I think hers the most remarkable thing I ever read—absolutely unique. One can easily understand how it would stand out in the minds of the judges. Compare my little stories, for instance. They are like very pale little woods flowers by the side of a glowing poinsettia (Melrose Scrapbook 83).

While one can not know for sure what Dormon objected to in "that type of story," she may have found the sensationalism of some local color fiction not to her taste.

Carver's story, for example, treats of race, adultery, and murder, and Dormon apparently believed that her own stories could not compete with such extravagant fictions. Elsewhere she notes that her stories were "of a different type" than

Carver's, and that they offered "no punch to please an editor" (Letter to Anne Titzell; 1947; Folder 486).

The differences that she notes are those of technique as well as subject matter. Carver, for example, employs a clear historical frame and very strong authorial presence that maintains a clear separation between the narrative intelligence and the subject being described. In a well-known passage from "Redbone," for example, she writes, "They are a mixture of Spanish, French, and Indian, and God only knows what besides. . . . They are shiftless and slovenly, childlike and treacherous; and yet from somewhere, like a benediction, they have been touched with something precious" (Fletcher 60). Such description, expressed in an authoritative and only partially sympathetic voice, render her characters exotic and alien.

Dormon's stories, on the other hand, rely heavily on dialogue and include little authorial commentary. She allows her characters to speak for themselves and thus to establish their own identities. They are not objects of curiosity but human beings in a difficult but identifiable plight. Such is the identification between author and subject that Dormon even writes her own identity anonymously into one of her stories. "Rainy Spell" tells of two aging sisters who share a cabin in the woods until well-meaning relatives insist upon bringing them to town. In the end, however, they are reunited and left to live independently, much like Caroline and her sister Virginia at Briarwood (Folder 921).

In distinguishing between "local color" and other "regionalist" fiction, John Bradbury touches on the issue of empathic identification versus aesthetic distancing, the latter being, in his view, characteristic of local color: "If the crucial area of demarcation can be isolated," Bradbury writes, "it must lie in the author's point of view toward his material. If he regards his subjects as phenomena whose peculiarities excite interest, rather than as human beings whose problems in part stem from their peculiar backgrounds, he can surely be labeled a local colorist" (95).

While Carver, according to this definition, was a local colorist, Dormon was a regional writer who empathized with the plight of her independent hill farmers because she lived among them in the piney hills, shared some of their crusty independence, and understood the meaning of poverty and struggle. As Dormon herself recognized (Letter to Anne Titzell; Folder 486), her stories required an ideal reader with an unusual level of empathy and attention, and this fact helps to explain why they never reached print at a time when the stories of her friends Lyle Saxon and Ada Jack Carver were being published, praised, and anthologized.

Of course, Dormon did not stop writing and trying to publish fiction in the 1920s. In the 1930s her interests turned to ethnology through her acquaintance with John Swanton of the Smithsonian Institute and her subsequent participation on the De Soto commission (Johnson 79-87). These efforts led to several different kinds of writing: a “Synopsis for Picture of Hernando De Soto’s Expedition in the Land of Florida” (Folder 1431), apparently intended to entice the film industry to the subject; an historical novel entitled *Beloved Land* about the forced migration of the Cherokee to Oklahoma; and the slender volume entitled *Southern Indian Boy* (1967), the only fiction by Dormon to be published. The virtues of her ethnologically-inspired fictions are their fidelity to fact and attention to cultural detail. Their virtues, however, are also their defects, for historical accuracy and attention to cultural detail do not equate with good fiction. *Beloved Land*, in particular, suffers from wooden dialogue and a lack of psychological penetration. In *Southern Indian Boy*, the motivating impulses are

those of the educator striving to present native-American myths and traditions in an enjoyable format rather than those of the writer of imaginative fiction. One can argue that the ethnological impulse is present in her *Sand-Hill Tales* as well, for there, too, Dormon seeks to capture the mores and folkways of a living community. But such observations are simply to say that Dormon was never a specialist, literary or otherwise. The scientist, the teacher, and the author coexisted under the same sun bonnet, and her varied interests often touched each other. If her generalist tendencies did not always lead to satisfying fiction, they nonetheless added up to something more—a useful life and a career of extraordinary richness and scope.

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