

## *Mapping Montana's Poetic Past*

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**Note:** Poet Tami Haaland is director of the Montana Poetry Project, Montana State University–Billings, an initiative devoted to creating an accessible record of Montana's poets and their publications. The Montana Poetry Project will establish a website containing pages of Montana poets—defined in the broadest of terms—both past and present. As part of the project, the MSU–Billings library is in the process of collecting all work in print by contemporary Montana poets and will host the website of Montana poets' biographies, photos, poems, and links. For further information, contact Tami Haaland, [thaaland@msubillings.edu](mailto:thaaland@msubillings.edu).

Since early in the twentieth century, individuals within Montana have advocated the literature of this state and of the Northwest. In 1931, H. G. Merriam, chair of the English Department at The University of Montana, published *Northwest Verse*, which featured many of the writers who regularly appeared in his journal, *The Frontier* (later *The Frontier and Midland*). Rufus Coleman, who taught at The University of Montana during the same period, also served as an advocate of regional writing in his anthology, *Western Prose and Poetry* (1932). In *Montana Margins* (1946), Joseph Kinsey Howard of Great Falls created the first, all-Montana anthology. He favored prose over poetry and included only a handful of poets in his 511-page volume. During the time between Kinsey's anthology and Richard Hugo's arrival in Montana, even less attention was

given to poetry and its publication within the state. Then, in 1978, *Where We Are: The Montana Poets Anthology* emerged from Missoula. Edited by Lex Runciman and Rick Robbins, it focused on contemporary authors who had “lived and written” (xi) in Montana.

*The Last Best Place* (1988), edited by William Kittredge and Annick Smith, included a significant collection of both historical and contemporary poetry. During the past twenty years, this edition combined with work on single poets (Lee Rostad's research on Grace Stone Coates, Alex Swaney and Rick Newby's focus on Frieda Fligelman's poetry, and Sue Hart's research on Gwendolen Haste) have done much to bring the poetry of Montana's historic writers into the late twentieth and early twentieth-first centuries. Yet many poets have disappeared entirely from sight or have not been recognized in the first place.

### “To Look Once More”

In rereading poetry from earlier periods, I am often struck by how familiar it sounds, perhaps because of the way landscape helps to shape the imagination. Consider “On the Two Medicine River,” for example, written by Ralph Micken of Great Falls, whose work first appeared in *The Frontier and Midland* in summer 1937. “A tolerant, lazy rattlesnake/ Flowed from his coil at sound of our approach/ Leaving his warm place on the cattle trail” (6–8). Gnats, cottonwoods, rainbow trout, grasshoppers, nighthawks, and frogs also populate the scene.

Like Micken, other voices of this era surfaced and then receded. Among them was Marion Lemoyne Leeper, who taught at Northern Montana College. Her slim volume of poetry, entitled

*Once Heaven Was Music* (1939), contains poems that previously appeared in *Harper's*, *The Frontier and Midland*, and the *Breadloaf Anthology*. Her poetry often focuses on the loss of someone close to her, presumably R. D. L., to whose memory the book is dedicated, but it explores characters as well, most noticeably, Judas Iscariot, who says: "I was a simple man and plain/ Who had not lacked an honest name." In her poem, "Advice to Shepherds," she appears to be offering wisdom for writers:

Most words are sheep  
That softly go  
In two's and four's  
As shepherds blow;

But now and then  
A Lion Word  
Roars and snaps  
And will be heard;

(1-8)

Another eastern Montanan, Dorothe Bendon, moved from Glendive to Claremont, California, in her youth and published her first and only volume of poetry, *Mirror Images*, in 1931. In the foreword, Gertrude Atherton celebrated this relocation and called Glendive "hardly a poetic background." In his review of the book, H. G. Merriam, while praising her "fine sense of phrase and . . . image," says "one feels, however, that she writes too infrequently out of realized experience." He indicates that she was influenced

by the "unseeing ideas" of people such as Atherton to "see beauty in acquired information, about Dionysius, classical music, Chillon, and the conventional paraphernalia of 'culture' rather than in rooted life experience" (*The Frontier* 12.1.87). The criticism draws attention to the standard advice, "write what you know," which was apparently as much an issue for discussion in Bendon's day as in ours. The book contains twenty-three sonnets in forty-three pages, and despite Merriam's criticism, Bendon's rural upbringing is sometimes evident:

The prairie, yellow as a meadow-lark,  
Sings no more the shimmer of wild oat,  
The wind that ruffled feathers on its throat,  
The blond fox-tail combed out beneath the dark.

("The Sacramento," 1-4)

In another sonnet, we see some of the conflict—the work ethic of rural Montana against this author's desire for a different kind of life:

I'd like to sit all day beneath a tree,  
Like Buddha, hunting in alert repose,  
Though busy people called me slovenly  
For not remaining home to mend my hose.

("I'd Like to Sit All Day," 1-4)

And in “Glass House” we see the subtlety of her imagery:

Since we have chosen to be more discreet,  
Let us withdraw and watch our passions coil,  
Blue, naked, glistening, like fire on oil,  
While we remain aloof above the heat.

(“Glass House,” 1–4)

Bendon was young when this book was published, only twenty-four. Afterwards, she turned her considerable talent to fiction and criticism, focusing on Keats and Cather, among others. Her most successful volume appears to be a textbook: *The English Novel, Form and Function*.

In 1932, Marjorie Frost, daughter of Robert and Elinor Frost, married Willard Fraser and the couple settled in Billings (where Willard would later serve as mayor). In 1934, after the birth of their first child, Marjorie died a slow and painful death of childbed fever. Two years later, her parents published her poetry in a slim volume entitled *Franconia*, named after the Frost family home. The Frost children were trained in writing from an early age, but Marjorie and her brother, Carol, showed real promise as poets. Robert Frost praised Marjorie’s work and intended to write a preface for the book. He said her “poems are good enough for publication regularly [that is, not only in a memorial volume], though I doubt if we would have the heart to submit them to public criticism” (letter to Lesley Frost Francis, December 1934).

The only copy of *Franconia* available in Montana is in the Billings Public Library Montana Room, and it is otherwise in the

catalogs of thirty-nine libraries throughout the U.S. While her mother hoped that some of the poems might appear in *The Atlantic* and *The Yale Review*, three were published by Harriet Monroe in *Poetry* magazine. At first glance, many of her poems, like this one, seem childlike.

### Coming Away

I meant to walk once more  
On my old, old lawn,  
But it began to pour,  
And I had no rubbers on.

I meant to look once more  
At my old, old place,  
But the taxi window wore  
A veil of liquid lace.

The sound of regret emanates from these three-beat lines and rhymed quatrains. “If I Should Live to Be a Doll” opens the volume, and Frost originally planned to call the book by this name. Something about her work is reminiscent of her first teacher’s poetry; “A Road Not Taken,” for all its simplicity, doesn’t yield easily to criticism.

### Poems of an Earlier Period

Though translations of American Indian poetry appear in *The Frontier* and early anthologies, there are few examples overall. During the 1920s and 1930s, some historians and writers feared the loss of traditional Native songs and poetry and made efforts

to translate or to approximate the originals. Among these writers were Eda Lou Walton, Mary Hunter Austin, and Lew Sarett, who also served as a contributing editor to *The Frontier*. Their approximations—poetry written in the style of Native poetry—were interesting attempts to preserve a poetry they felt was vanishing.

More than forty years later, W. S. Merwin published excerpts from Robert Lowie's *Crow Texts* in his *Selected Translations 1968–1978*. Taken from an oral tradition of poetry and song, the following is the first in an untitled series of eight poems:

Whatever place  
I come on trouble  
my death will not be there

I shall pass through

though there may be many arrows  
I shall reach  
where I am going

as the heart of a man should be  
mine is

Overall, there seem to be few translations of Montana's Native poetry. Recent and older anthologies contain only brief samples of Crow, Assiniboine, Chippewa, Salish, and Blackfeet poetry and prayers. In 1930, H. G. Merriam published a book entitled *Tsceminicum: Snake River People*. The author uses the

pseudonym, "Donald Burnie." He writes: "The essential purpose of the poems which follow is to bring out the spirit of pioneer times, to catch that *élan* which has disappeared forever under progress." It was an age when "passions ran hot and fierce. There was no place for the coward" (Burnie, 6).

The poems from this book are set in Idaho, "at the junction of the Snake and Clearwater Rivers" (Burnie, 1). In this setting, Burnie gives voice to historical figures such as Meriweather (sic) Lewis, but he also gives us aging characters with names such as Cherokee Bob, Ah Chung, and Wild Moll, who may be composites of historical figures or entirely fictional.

#### **Wild Moll**

Stabbed to my molten heart  
With the long, keen dagger of life,  
I danced in the lean, blue flames  
Of the passionate bonfires of the Frontier  
To the applause of barbaric, epic men,  
Twisting the poniard and tasting  
Of the delicious pain of living.  
Even now, in my conventional old age  
The dagger still lies hid  
Beneath the folds of my stiff, black dress. (1–10)

Some of the poems were subsequently anthologized by both Merriam and Coleman. Who was Donald Burnie? So far, I don't know. Merriam published the book, held the copyright, and sometimes autographed copies.

### An Overlooked Modern

J. V. Cunningham was raised in Billings from the time he was four until he was twelve, and he claimed Montana quite publicly. A prominent classicist, Renaissance scholar, and poet, Cunningham may have been overlooked because he moved on to Denver and lived outside of the state for the rest of his life. The Academy of American Poets website lists him as one of only nine poets associated with Montana. In an interview with Timothy Steele, Cunningham indicates that his family lived in four locations on the south side of Billings, but says, “a most important part of our lives was the summers we spent—and we went out every summer—on a dry-land ranch, thirty-six miles from Billings, over the rimrock in the Wheat Basin country” (Steele, 3). Cunningham indicates this country is “exactly” the setting of his well-known poem, “Montana Pastoral,” which he refers to as a “curt autobiography” (Cunningham, 140).

#### Montana Pastoral

I am no shepherd of a child’s surmises.  
I have seen fear where the coiled serpent rises,

Thirst where the grasses burn in early May  
And thistle, mustard, and the wild oat stay.

There is dust in this air. I saw in the heat  
Grasshoppers busy in the threshing wheat.

So to this hour. Through the warm dusk I drove  
To blizzards sifting on the hissing stove,

And found no images of pastoral will,  
But fear, thirst, hunger, and this huddled chill.

Hayden Carruth, Robert Pinsky, and W. S. DiPiero all refer to this poem in their analysis of Cunningham’s poetry. Written in 1941, and published in his book *The Helmsman* in 1942, “Montana Pastoral” has not appeared in any of our state anthologies.

### What We Can Learn From the Past

What is a Montana poet? What is Montana poetry? Are these categories legitimate? Should we count people who passed through? People who lived here only a short while? Where should lines be drawn?

When I started this research project a little over a year ago, it felt as if there were pieces scattered and they needed to be collected. There is still much more to be uncovered in *The Frontier* and *The Frontier and Midland*, *CutBank*, *Montana Arts*, *Montana Review*, *Alkali Flats*, and other journals published in the state, as well as in anthologies, public libraries, and universities. Until we know what we have, it’s difficult to answer any of these questions. But it is certain the mix of poetry that emerges will contribute to the history of this region.

The canon of literature is semimalleable, and certainly many of our contemporaries are engaged in canon-making. In reading through volumes of *The Frontier*, I am struck by the activity within the literary community of that day. Merriam, Coleman, and their peers were attempting to create a canon of Northwest literature, an engagement that involved reviewing, publishing, anthologizing,

and establishing camaraderie among the writers of the period. Beginning in 1930, Grace Stone Coates wrote the “Literary News” for *The Frontier*, a column that contained news of publications, such as can be found in the *State of the Arts*, and advice of the sort one finds in *Poets & Writers*.

Certainly engagement and camaraderie are good for poetry, and our book festivals are among the events that have allowed contemporary poets to gather and reflect. Beyond connecting, however, it seems a healthy response to discuss questions that concern poetry, review new work, and write about the poetry of one’s place.

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