

## *A Biographical Sketch* MARY E. CRAWFORD

Mary Gladys Meredith (known as a child as "Glad" or "Gladys," but after marriage and throughout this text as "Mary") was born in 1881 in the Welsh borderlands, the eldest by six years, of the six children of George Edward Meredith (1841–1909) and his wife, Sarah Alice (née Scott 1852–1924, and known as "Alice"). George Meredith, an Oxford M.A. and country gentleman of Welsh descent, ran a boarding school for boys and kept a home farm. Known as a cultured man who wrote poetry and painted, he was by reputation generous, humorous and a lover of nature.

In the seven years spanning 1887 to 1894, five additional children were born to George and Alice Meredith. Mary's siblings, close in age, gravitated toward each other's company. Mary's six-year seniority made her a solitary child and, according to Webb's biographer, Gladys Mary Coles, young Mary saw little of her mother, who was busy with the latest baby and a nursery filled with toddlers.

George Meredith, although busily engaged with his students and oversight of the farm, schooled Mary at home alongside his pupils. From her earliest days, precocious Mary was her father's special child. Coles states in *The Flower of Light* (1978) that George nicknamed his eldest child his "precious bane," from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (I. 692). She was given free run of her father's library. Young Mary acquired from her father a deep love of the Welsh borderlands and knowledge of local history, legends and folklore as he took her on long walks and drives. An amateur poet himself, Mary's father encouraged her to express her perceptions of nature in poetry and prose. Allowed to wander the Shropshire fields, woods, and lanes. Mary developed an acute perception of the smallest elements in nature (e.g., the sparkle of dew on grass, the sound of leaves falling from their branches, the ripple of water in changing winds).

When Mary was ten, Miss Edith Lory, known as "Minoni" to the Meredith children, joined the family as governess; she eventually taught all six of the Meredith children. Biographies state that Minoni did a great deal to widen young Mary's literary horizons at an impressionable age. Mary's studies included her favorite writers: Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantic poets, the Brontës, Richard Jefferies, and Thomas Hardy. Miss Lory later told Hilda Addison: "Gladys would sit by the hour while

I read Shakespeare to her, and she grew to love the plays more than anything in literature." Mary could quote at length from the major poets and was thorough and knowledgeable when discussing literature and history. At the age of fourteen, Mary was sent to Mrs. Walmsley's Finishing School in Southport for two years. Upon completion of this education, Mary helped her father and Minoni to raise her younger siblings after her mother, having suffered a riding accident during a hunt, had taken to her bed as a semi-invalid.

The next few years, while her mother kept to her bedroom, were among the happiest of Mary's life. Mary dedicated herself to her family with a maternal and protective attitude. She enjoyed being needed and shared with her father his "unfailing delight" in the children. As an adolescent, Mary was said to have created stories, poems, and plays to amuse her younger brothers and sisters. In keeping with her nature—firmly believing that her father and the children should have whatever they wanted—Mary was unstinting in her generosity. Coles in *The Flower of Light* (1978) states: "She [Minoni] had vivid recollections of Mary's creative zeal—arranging charades and plays to amuse her brothers and sisters, boldly ransacking her mother's wardrobes and chests for silk clothing in which to dress them as fairy characters or flowers—poppy, primrose, forget-me-not, daffodil." The family returned Mary's affection. As long as she lived, their eldest sister was particularly beloved by her siblings.

In the spring of 1900 Mary's mother unexpectedly reappeared, after many years spent in her bedroom as a semi-invalid, and rejoined the family without comment. Biographers speculate that Alice, a proper Victorian matron, arose from her bed when she believed that the lack of economic sense showed by her husband George and daughter Mary was leading the family to financial ruin. Nineteen-year-old Mary was henceforward relieved of family responsibilities. She was expected to obey her mother's wishes respectfully and to follow her iron discipline.

Alice Meredith's sudden reappearance was an emotional shock for Mary. Relieved of her family duties, she took her bicycle on long expeditions through the countryside. In 1901, after a particularly long bike ride, twenty-year-old Mary collapsed and became ill, causing her family grave concern. Her first symptoms were exhaustion, moodiness, weight loss, nervous irritability, goiter and protrusion of the eyeballs. Diagnosed with Graves' disease (a then-incurable glandular disorder in which the thyroid becomes overactive), Mary was tenderly nursed by her

father for the next six months. During this time, she withdrew into an introspective isolation. Using the next two years' convalescence to read and write, Mary was encouraged by her father and Minoni to express her thoughts, perceptions, and observations in prose and poetry. Her early essays, written during these years, were published fifteen years later under the title *The Spring of Joy* (1917).

Sensitive and painfully conscious of her altered appearance, Mary found solace in writing over the following decade. She sought to capture her ever-changing thoughts and moods in verse and prose. With a keen sensory awareness, Mary was able to detect and describe with poetic feeling the subtlest qualities and minutest of details. Walter de la Mare in his introduction to *Poems and The Spring of Joy* (1928) said: "The mere statement of facts that she was interested in is poetical in effect. 'The pollen grain of chicory—an outer and inner hexagon united by rays—is a rose window in a shrine of lapis lazuli. It needs no light behind it, for it illumines itself.' Few observers have taken the pains to describe an object so minute in terms so precise, yet the words are poetical in effect; they are charged with life and significance, and only a loving rapture in the thing itself could have found them for this purpose." Mary's physical limitations helped crystallize her thoughts—her writing became a creative, imaginative, and philosophical outlet. She worked assiduously on her verse, submitting poems and prose for publication, and was more than occasionally gratified to see her work printed in local periodicals.

### *The Gates of Gold and Green*

Nature has opened her gates again!  
Her gates of gold and green;  
Has opened them wide to welcome me  
Back to her glorious liberty,  
To her wholesome grass and sun and rain,  
Through her gates of gold and green.

The infinite sky bends close to me  
With a great protecting calm,  
And wave upon wave of its peace profound  
Steals on my spirit and circles me round  
With the stillness of eternity  
And a great protecting calm.

Mary Webb: *Collected Prose and Poems* (1977)

In January 1909, when Mary was twenty-eight, George Meredith died. Mary's intense, long-lasting grief for her beloved father undermined her already fragile health. Over the next three years, she again suffered long spells of recurring Graves' disease, with its accompanying symptoms of exhaustion, high fever, nervousness, severe headache, and gastric distress. The physical manifestations of her illness became more pronounced. Mary again sought solace in poetry and writing.

As Mary's health improved, she attended Cambridge University Extension lectures in Shrewsbury. In 1910, at a local literary discussion group, Mary met her future husband, Henry Bertram Law Webb (known to his family as "Bertie," but referred to throughout this text as "Henry"). A Shropshire native, Henry was a recent graduate of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge, whose parents had recently moved to the village of Meole Brace where the Meredith family was then living.

Mary loved Henry instantly and rapturously. They shared a deep appreciation for nature and literature and she considered him a brilliant scholar. In 1911, the Bodley Head published *The Silences of the Moon*, Henry's philosophical treatise about man's place in nature. He spoke encouragingly to Mary of her poems. Gladys Mary Coles says in *Mary Webb* (1990): "Henry gave Mary companionship and understanding such as she had known only with her father. He filled the emotional vacuum in her life." Henry proposed to Mary and was joyfully accepted. When they married on June 12, 1912, Mary was thirty-one and Henry was twenty-six.

After their wedding, in order to be near his newly-widowed mother, Henry and Mary moved to Weston-super-Mare on the Somerset coast, where Henry had secured a two-year position at a local boys' school. While at Weston, Mary persevered in her efforts to write poems and short stories. Although homesick for her native Shropshire, she was delighted that some of her writings were accepted for publication, and she gained in confidence. Mary began to formulate the plot of a novel to be set in the Shropshire landscape that she knew so well. Henry, for his part, found teaching both tedious and a distraction from his own writing.

Henry gave up his teaching post in 1914 in order to return to Shropshire, hoping for more leisure to write. The Webbs rented a small house at Pontesbury (near Shrewsbury) and planned to live on Mary's £100 annual allowance, given to Mary by her mother, supplemented by sales of their writing. Mary concentrated on poems and imaginative short

stories, while Henry composed poetry and worked on translations of scholarly works from other languages. After long mental incubation, Mary rapidly penned her first novel over a period of only three weeks. *The Golden Arrow* was published in 1916, when Mary was thirty-five. Critics reviewed the novel favorably. It did not sell well, largely because the reading public was distracted by anxiety over the Great War.

In order to help the war effort, Mary chose to sell their surplus garden produce at Shrewsbury market. For two years, Mary and Henry sold their extra fruit, vegetables, flowers, and honey from their garden. The work was physically strenuous. On Saturdays, Mary would walk the nine miles each way to Shrewsbury where she would listen, watch, and absorb the odd words and impressions in market dealings. As the cost of living increased with the war years, Henry and Mary became impoverished—especially because Mary was not temperamentally equipped to economize. She suffered great anxiety for her three brothers—Kenneth, Douglas, and Mervyn—who were then serving on the Western Front.

After 1916, marketing efforts ceased. According to Coles, Henry Webb escaped military service during World War I, partly on the grounds of ill health (due to his bad back and acute short-sightedness) and partly because he was one of the few men left to teach young boys (first at the King's School in Chester and then at the Priory School in Shrewsbury).

Mary completed her second novel, *Gone to Earth*, during the year of the Battle of the Somme. Published in 1917, the novel (although set in Shropshire and never directly mentioning the war) is a passionate cry against man's inhumanity to man. Rebecca West, in her review of *Gone to Earth* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, stated unequivocally "Mary Webb is a genius." In a later symposium on novels for a leading London newspaper, West proclaimed *Gone to Earth* as "Novel of the Year" for 1917. Even though the novel was well received by critics, few people during wartime had the leisure or inclination to read fiction, and the booming guns of the Western Front drowned the voice of the poet. Mary was again disappointed by the lack of public attention for her books. She keenly felt her unique gifts, and was unhappy that her writing did not bring her the public recognition that she craved.

Because of the critical appreciation for her earlier two novels, Mary secured large advances from British and American publishers for her third book, *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920). She and Henry were able