



Anderson, Margaret (1886-1973)

by Linda Rapp

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Margaret Anderson.
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As editor of the literary and political journal *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson published the work of important writers of the early twentieth century, including James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Djuna Barnes. Her three-volume autobiography chronicles not only her career but also her personal life as a woman-loving woman, while her posthumously published novel is even more revealing.

The oldest of three daughters of a middle-class businessman and a homemaker, Margaret Carolyn Anderson was born November 24, 1886 in Indianapolis, Indiana and grew up in Columbus, a smaller city some forty miles south. From an early age she showed an independent nature, frequently locking horns with her mother, whom she described as "one of those persons who gets an infinite pleasure out of making things disagreeable."

Anderson enrolled as a piano student at Western College, a women's institution in Oxford, Ohio. She enjoyed the independence of campus life and the camaraderie of her fellow students but was, by her own admission, not a particularly diligent student, and she left after three years without earning a degree.

Anderson returned home to Indiana but longed to "escape" to Chicago, where she would be able to enjoy greater cultural opportunities. Her parents were not enthusiastic about the idea but eventually relented.

In Chicago, Anderson found a mentor in Clara Laughlin, the literary editor of *Interior* (later renamed the *Continent*) magazine. Anderson did interviews and book reviews for *Interior* and also picked up work writing reviews for the *Chicago Evening Post*. In addition, she began working at *Dial* magazine in 1912 and was "initiated into the secrets of the printing room--composition (monotype and linotype), proofreading, [and] make-up"--knowledge that would stand her in good stead when she went into publishing herself.

The following year Laughlin left the *Continent* and, on her recommendation, Anderson replaced her as literary editor. Her tenure was relatively brief. When she had been with the magazine for about a year her favorable review of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* drew irate letters from readers and a complaint from the *Continent's* editor, who felt that she should have specified that the novel's content was "immoral." The incident was a harbinger of things to come: Anderson never hesitated to speak her own mind in matters literary or anything else.

Throughout her life Anderson was perpetually short of money--"I never have a cent--in any season," she wrote in her memoir *My Thirty Years' War* (1930)--but never lacking in confidence, ambition, or devotion to fine literature and music and the freedom of individual expression. Against all odds, she founded her own magazine, *The Little Review*, in 1914.

"I have a single superstition," she wrote, "that the gods are for me and that anything I want will happen if I play at it hard enough." Such was the spirit with which she undertook the project.

She sought--indeed, she wrote, "demanded"--advertisements from publishing companies to help finance the venture. She wrote articles as well as editorials herself and successfully requested contributions--for which she offered no remuneration--from figures in the literary world, most of whom she had met through her participation in the social circle of *Chicago Evening Post* literary editor Floyd Dell.

Although Anderson admitted the "[t]he first number [of *The Little Review*] betrayed nothing but [her] adolescence," she quickly made it into a publication that Jane Rule many years later called "marvelous reading not only because it contains a great deal of literary and musical history but also because of the courage, arrogance, and high joy of its author, who should be exasperating but rarely is."

In 1915 Anderson heard Emma Goldman lecture and "had just enough time to turn anarchist before the presses closed" on the third issue of *The Little Review*. Anderson's laudatory article about Goldman caused a rift between her and DeWitt Wing, a journalist who was, she wrote, "the only person who really 'saw' the *Little Review*" when the project was in its infancy, helped her organize the venture, and covered the costs of printing and office rent.

The withdrawal of Wing's support meant a fiscal crisis for the new magazine, but with characteristic confidence, Anderson declared that "nothing can stop the *Little Review*." To have enough money to continue its publication, Anderson gave up her apartment and pitched tents on the strand of Lake Michigan, where she, along with a staff member, one of her sisters, a cook, and the children of the latter two, lived "a North Shore gypsy life" from May until November.

In 1916 Anderson met Jane Heap, whom she recruited as a writer for--and eventually co-editor of--*The Little Review*. Heap also became the first of what Anderson called "all my lovely companions."

Anderson was frank about her rejection of traditional heterosexual roles. "I am no man's wife, no man's delightful mistress, and I will never, never, never be a mother," she wrote. She chose instead to share her life with a series of female partners, beginning with Heap.

The two women were distinctly different, both physically and in temperament. Anderson, ebullient and ever optimistic, is revealed in Man Ray's photograph of her in the frontispiece of *My Thirty Years' War* as a classic and stylish beauty. A portrait of Heap by Berenice Abbott shows her in masculine attire and sporting a short haircut that emphasized her mannish features. Of a more pessimistic and depressive turn of mind than Anderson, Heap was often disconcerted by Anderson's irrepressible confidence and bold decision-making, however unlikely the plan.

Shortly after Heap had joined *The Little Review* and she and Anderson had begun living together, Anderson moved the operation to San Francisco. The arrangement was not a success, and so Anderson decided to return to Chicago, but, she wrote, "at once I knew we should go to New York." Heap had misgivings about the plan, but Anderson, as always confident and determined once she had made a decision, prevailed.

The Little Review offered its readers the works of Djuna Barnes, William Butler Yeats, Ernest Hemingway, Hart Crane, and Ford Madox Ford, among others. Ezra Pound, with whom Anderson had been corresponding for several years, proposed himself as foreign editor, a suggestion that she readily embraced. Pound was able to secure works by T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce.

The Little Review began serializing Joyce's *Ulysses* (published in full in 1922) in 1918 and continued presenting excerpts through 1920. As a result, the United States Post Office seized and burned several numbers of the magazine. Co-editors Anderson and Heap were charged with obscenity for publishing Joyce's work. Found guilty, they had to pay a fine of one hundred dollars. Following the trial, they went to France, where they reveled in the freer social atmosphere of Paris, where "they looked on lesbians as a charming

race of people."

In 1924 Anderson and Heap began studying together under the mystic George Gurdjieff. Despite this bond, their relationship was strained. Anderson felt that "the tenth anniversary of the *Little Review* . . . [was] . . . its logical conclusion," but Heap was determined to keep it going and did so until 1929. She later moved to England, where she continued studying and working with Gurdjieff.

Anderson had meanwhile fallen in love with Georgette Leblanc, a classical singer and the widow of Belgian Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck. She described her relationship with Leblanc as one of freedom and harmony and without the emotional tumult that she and Heap had experienced. The couple remained together for twenty-one years.

They moved to Europe, planning a concert tour for Leblanc with Anderson as her accompanist. When financial backers reneged on promised support, the tour was cancelled, and the two women went to live with Leblanc's rich but miserly relatives, in one of whose generally unheated homes Leblanc caught pneumonia. The couple relocated to an abandoned lighthouse and then to a house in Le Cannet, a few miles north of Cannes.

Anderson subsequently wrote a three-part autobiography--*My Thirty Years' War*, *The Fiery Fountains* (1951), and *The Strange Necessity* (1969)--and a book on the teachings of her mentor, *The Unknowable Gurdjieff* (1962), and edited *The Little Review Anthology* (1953, 1969).

Leblanc died of cancer in late 1941. Only after her death did Anderson return to the United States, for fear of what might befall her as an American in Nazi-occupied France. Aboard a ship bound for America in the summer of 1942, she met Dorothy Caruso, the widow of tenor Enrico Caruso. The two lived together until Caruso's death in 1955, whereupon Anderson returned to the house in Le Cannet that she had shared with Leblanc.

In the 1950s Anderson wrote a lesbian novel, *Forbidden Fires*, a veiled account of her unrequited longing for English actress Josephine Plows Day, a topic not discussed in her autobiographies. The other relationships of the first-person narrator, Margaret, mirror Anderson's experiences with Heap and Leblanc. Anderson was unsuccessful in finding a publisher, and the novel did not appear in print until 1996.

Reviewer Margaret Kissam Morris states that "Anderson's openness in the novel is astonishing, and we can only speculate about the effect the book would have had if it had been published earlier." Diane Hamer echoes the thought, describing it as "striking" that Anderson employed "the word 'lesbian,' which is not used so frequently by her contemporaries in their autobiographies or fiction." (Anderson also avoided it in the autobiographies.) Hamer concludes that Anderson's "is one voice that speaks volumes about her lifestyle, unlike so many of the others who lived their lesbian lives without talking about it explicitly. As such, she remains much more of a foremother to the contemporary lesbian movement than might previously have been thought."

Anderson spent her final years in the house in Le Cannet. She died there on October 19, 1973 and was buried next to her "lovely companion" Leblanc.

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