



Katharine Lee Bates.

Bates, Katharine Lee (1859 -1929)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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Katharine Lee Bates was an American poet, literary scholar, and a mentor to Wellesley students from 1886 to 1920. Her best known work is the poem "America the Beautiful," which became the nation's unofficial hymn.

Her romantic friendship with Wellesley colleague Katharine Coman inspired, upon the latter's death, a collection of poetry, *Yellow Clover*, that has been described by Judith Schwarz as "one of the most anguished memorials to the love and comradeship between two women that has ever been written."

Bates was born in the seaport town of Falmouth, Massachusetts on August 12, 1859. Her father, a Congregational minister, died just before she was born. Her mother raised the family on a livelihood cobbled from her widow's pension, piecemeal jobs, and support from relatives, including her sons.

In girlhood Bates was an outdoors enthusiast who wrote poetry and recorded her support of women's rights in her diary. Throughout life she remained an energetic walker and traveler, her knowledgeable observations of nature providing a well of imagery for her poetry.

With financial support from her brothers, Bates entered Wellesley College the year after it opened, graduating in the class of 1880. She concentrated in English, Greek, and history and mastered the classic poetic forms.

Bates taught high school until joining the Wellesley faculty in 1886. She taught English there for the rest of her career, chairing the department from 1891 until 1920.

Wellesley in that era provided an environment that Palmieri characterizes as a "female Harvard." Its faculty were a tight-knit group whose professional *and* private lives centered around the college and each other. A majority of them were unmarried but many formed primary romantic friendships--what one of the students termed "Wellesley marriages"--that "conjoined public and private spheres."

Bates' relationship with colleague Katharine Ellis Coman was such a union. Coman, an author on U.S. economic development, joined Wellesley's faculty in 1881. In 1900 she became the first chair of its new economics and sociology department. She had socialist sympathies, followed labor issues and the work of Jane Addams at Hull House, and was involved with similar projects in the Boston area.

Bates and Coman traveled together on research sabbaticals. In 1902 they co-authored *English History Told by English Poets*.

From 1907 they lived together in Bates' house near campus, Coman in an upstairs room designed specifically for her.

Both admired the religious poetry of Christina Rossetti and shared a devotion to the Christian "social gospel"

philosophy that underlay many of the progressive reforms then underway. Their correspondence when apart professed their love, and often explored issues of faith and doubt.

Bates' writings include literary studies, research into English religious drama, and travelogues on Spain, Egypt, and Palestine. She also wrote prose and poetry for children, including a poem that popularized Mrs. Santa Claus, "Goody Santa Claus on a Sleigh Ride" (1898).

In addition, she wrote introductions to new editions of literary classics, compiled anthologies, and published on a variety of topics in such venues as *Atlantic Monthly*, *Boston Evening Transcript*, and *Christian Century*.

Her literary reputation was largely derived from several collections of poetry that frequently invoked themes of nature, faith, and patriotic idealism.

The majestic imagery of "America the Beautiful" was inspired by the Rockies when Bates taught a summer session at Colorado College in 1893, especially by an excursion to Pike's Peak. "Alabaster cities" denotes the "White City," the stuccoed neoclassical buildings at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, which she saw on her trip west.

The first version of the poem was published on July 4, 1895 in *The Congregationalist*. In 1910 a Rochester, New York minister paired it with the familiar hymn melody by Samuel A. Ward and in 1913 Bates finalized the text as we sing it today. Bates retained copyright but beyond her original payment from *The Congregationalist* received no other fee.

Breast cancer struck Coman around 1906. Metastasis was not well-understood at the time; in spite of surgeries in 1911 and 1912 the disease progressed. Bedridden from the autumn of 1914 and nursed by Bates, relatives, and friends, Coman died in January 1915.

In her grief, Bates moved into Coman's room and wrote two notable tributes to Coman and their relationship.

A private memoir distributed to Coman's family and friends (and eventually published nine decades later) described Coman's demeanor and course of treatment over her final weeks. Through coded language, necessitated by the constraint against naming the disease outright, emerges a loving portrait of courage in the face of pain and disfigurement. Literary critic Ellen Leopold characterizes it as the earliest American example of a breast cancer narrative.

Yellow Clover, a tribute in poetry to Coman, employs a formal architecture of meter and rhyme and concludes with a tightly-constructed "corona of sonnets" (a cycle of seven sets of seven poems) that plumbs the bereaved's longing to be reunited after death:

"Let us hold fast the Life Eternal!" So

You bade me, so I strive, a better lover

Than I shall be a saint. Oh, starspace rover,

Would we might stroll once more, as long ago,

Startling the bobolinks, across the glow

Of Wellesley meadows lit by yellow clover

In later years Bates gave moral support to the peace efforts of the League of Nations. After retirement in 1925 she continued to write poetry until her death on March 28, 1929.

Contemporary efforts to claim the Bates-Coman relationship as part of the lesbian cultural legacy have provoked objections because the term "lesbian" implies a sexual dimension that cannot be assumed with certainty for most nineteenth-century romantic friendships.

However, the partnership between and Coman was primary, co-residential, mutually supportive of career aspirations, and attested to--in both public and personal writings--by prolific declarations of love, a constellation of traits congruent with the ideal of egalitarian marriage favored by modern feminists.

It was clearly a companionship beyond the scope of ordinary friendship, and one that only death could part.

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