

On the Trail of Katharine Lee Bates[©]

Talk for the Wellesley Reunion of Class of 1966, June 3, 2016

by

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Welcome to everyone—I'm glad to share my excitement about what I have learned while working on a biography of Katharine Lee Bates. How many of us knew, as we sang "America the Beautiful" in our student days, that its writer, Katharine Lee Bates, for whom the Bates dorm is named, was truly a pioneering and complex woman?

Although I loved "America the Beautiful," that was not why I began what has become a wonderful project for me while being Professor of English at Pine Manor College.

When I was on a panel of Nathaniel Hawthorne scholars twenty-five years ago, most of us singled out the

commentaries by someone named Katharine Lee Bates as some of the most lively, the most brilliant, and for me, the most feminist in spirit.

I was amazed—How did the poet of "America the Beautiful" know so much about Nathaniel Hawthorne? Had she written anything else? Had I found the woman who could be the subject of my next book?

When I came out to the Wellesley Archives, I found the 30 books Katharine had written or edited along with her very legible (thankfully) diaries and letters. Best of all, there were her six big scrapbooks full of clippings of the poems and stories she had published in leading newspapers and magazines, that would have been almost impossible for me to track down any other way.

Born in 1859 on the eve of the Civil War in Falmouth on Cape Cod, she was the youngest of four children. Her father, the minister of the big Congregational church on the Falmouth Green, died a few weeks after her birth, leaving her brilliant mother and literary aunt, both Mount Holyoke Seminary graduates, to raise four young children. This sea-faring village with many impoverished widows and children, where it was “share and share alike,” as her mother said, showed Katharine what a true community was like.

She entered Wellesley in 1876 in its second class of students, becoming “Katie of ’80,” Class President and Class Poet, (positions she held for life!).

Here in Tower Court today, we are on the hilltop where the original building, College Hall, stood. In the huge “Victorian pile,” as one commentator described it, students and faculty lived, ate their meals, and went to class, chapel and the library.

Henry Durant and his wife Pauline had founded the college on the land of their country estate, originally planned as a legacy for their young children. But after their children died, they decided to dedicate their land and their lives to some great ideal, something that would be part of a huge reform movement in the country. They thought of having a prison here....but decided on a college for women. It became Katharine’s new community.

Durant believed that young women should be educated to re-form the nation after the Civil War—with many becoming teachers to replace the many men killed in the war. He wanted their

lives to become meaningful through their work and gave the college the motto we remember:

“Non Ministrari sed Ministrare.”

Katharine was drawn to this handsome and charismatic older man, fatherly and intellectual, someone to teach, mentor, inspire, and admire her for the next four years. And he could see that she was just the kind of bright, curious, engaged, and imaginative student that he wanted at Wellesley on the beautiful campus he had decorated with thousands of crocuses and the six snow-white English swans he had imported for his Lake Waban, the name he had given to Bullard’s Pond.

Durant had once dreamed of being a poet, and he did all he could to encourage and help Katharine get started on her literary career.

He invited live poets he knew to the campus, and one unforgettable day took her in to Cambridge to meet the most popular poet in America, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, at his famous Brattle Street home. Longfellow complimented Katharine on her poem “Sleep” that his friend William Dean Howells had published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Durant having probably pulled some strings with his friend William Dean Howells, the *Atlantic’s* editor), an unbelievable compliment from the poet who encouraged American writers to establish a new and unique field, American literature. Years later, Katharine helped do this with her original college course and by writing one of the earliest American Literature textbooks, the first by a woman. Creating an inclusive canon that included many women and (then) outsiders such as Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, she blazed the trail for today’s American literature courses. She later befriended and mentored the unknown Robert Frost, advising a friend to help him with his platform manner (!), and she helped build national audiences for poets like Frost and Amy Lowell.

But Katharine was more than a literary scholar. In 1885, when the young charismatic college president Alice Freeman called Katharine back to Wellesley to join the English Literature department, her life took a new direction. Her new young colleagues were energetic social reformers determined to help solve the country's social and economic problems. She helped them organize a settlement house for immigrants and college women in Boston, and they tutored her in the country's urgent need for social reform.

Katharine became a social activist from then on in all her writings. She soon wrote a Young Adult novel with scenes of poor women making clothes in the sweatshops of tenements and children dying of smallpox. Its prize money helped pay for her 1890-91 year in Oxford where she learned more about reform issues AND enjoyed being in classes with men and inviting them to her flat, shared by Harriet Beecher Stowe's niece, for "At Homes" for which she bought Oxford china, still in her family today.

Her diary (but not her letters home to her mother) told of the young socialist radical free-love advocate Oscar Triggs spending long hours un-chaperoned with her, holding forth on art and nature. Could Triggs be the mysterious "THR" of her later diaries who caused her so much heartache? Although she later burned many of her letters, Katharine left his initials in her diaries, just waiting for me to discover his identity.

Since I knew he had sent her several issues of *The Biblical World*, a short-lived publication that ran his articles, eventually I found them in a distant library. Yes, the librarian said on the phone, they held those exact issues. And yes, there were articles by someone with the initials of T. H. R.!! I had found him—Theophilus Huntington Root, brother of her Wellesley classmate.

But by the spring of 1893 her diary was full of despair and suicidal thoughts as she tried to end her relationship with him under the eye of her friend and later beloved companion, Wellesley's

economic historian Katharine Coman, good friend of Jane Addams of Chicago's Hull House. The two Katharines went west that summer to teach in Colorado Springs, a spa town, "Little London" with afternoon tea and polo on the prairie. But the country's severe financial depression caused partly by labor strikes and urban poverty had reached even Colorado Springs where homeless unemployed "family" men were on the streets.

At the top of nearby Pike's Peak, Katharine marveled at the "glorious" Colorado landscape and then explored Cripple Creek, a hard-scrabble frontier gold mining town where she was forced to unexpectedly spend the night. When I explored both places, I could see how she wrote her first version of "America the Beautiful" as a mountaintop prayer (inspired partly by Longfellow's *Hiawatha*) for God's grace to bring the warring sides in the country—the Eastern banks and robber barons fighting the farmers and miners of the West—together into a national community.

During the next decade, Katharine became a "New Woman," learning to play golf on Wellesley's new course and speaking out on international affairs in her scathing anti-Boer War poems.

In 1899, at the close of the Spanish-American War, she went to Spain for her sabbatical year, where she became a "war correspondent" for *The New York Times*, dispelling the negative stereotypes of Spaniards in William Randolph Hurst's "Yellow" press.

Her world expanded again when Wellesley president Caroline Hazard took her to exotic Egypt and the "Holy Land" in 1906-7. Intrepid travelers, they hired their own local guide, amidst camels, donkeys, Jews, Moslems, and Europeans, and when I too went up the Nile, I understood how Katharine felt like a global citizen there.

For my book, I also traveled to Verdun, France, to see where the Yankee Division soldiers were on Nov. 11, 1918 when they heard the announcement of the Armistice to end the Great War.

When Katharine learned that they then had stood in formation and had sung “America the Beautiful” at the cease-fire, she cried.

She became a tireless advocate for world peace, working to make the League of Nations a reality. In 1928, a year before she died, she explained that she would not add another verse about world brotherhood to “America the Beautiful.” But, when we sing her words, “From sea to shining sea,” we should think of them as going around the globe from the Pacific to the Atlantic to include “all the nations and all the people from sea to shining sea”—a truly global community.

While I have met her only in my dreams, I did get wonderful help from descendants of her brother Arthur, and when I met William Bates, descended from her brother Sam, I saw her wit and good cheer in his eyes, and I felt as if I finally had met the woman who has kept me fascinated for so long.

You will be able to read my biography, *Katharine Lee Bates: From Sea to Shining Sea*, in the spring of 2017---I will let you know exactly when on our class website, and I will be glad to come speak to your Wellesley Clubs about her.

You can visit my book’s website, www.MelindaPonder.com, for more information about my research on Katharine.