

2009

Book Review: Heart Language: Elsie Singmaster and Her Pennsylvania German Writings

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Moyer, Anna Jane (2009) "Book Review: Heart Language: Elsie Singmaster and Her Pennsylvania German Writings," *Adams County History*: Vol. 15, Article 4.

Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ach/vol15/iss1/4>

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Abstract

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By Susan Colestock Hill. Foreword by Charles H. Glatfelter. Pennsylvania German History and Culture Series. The Pennsylvania German Society. The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2009.

A new century with all its energy and expectations had slipped into place and challenged Americans with fresh promises. The year was 1900. Elsie Singmaster had spent two years at Cornell University immersed in writing classes, and she would return home to Gettysburg eager to write. Her professors had been encouraging. She would always remember one of them who commented on her work for the day by exclaiming, "Who are these queer, unreal people?"

"They're NOT queer!" Elsie retorted. "And they're very real. They are my people living in the traditional ways of their ancestors."

"Then," he urged "write more about them!" [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Book Review, German Heritage, Genealogy

HEART LANGUAGE: ELSIE SINGMASTER AND HER PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN

By: Susan Colestock Hill. Foreword by Charles H. Glatfelter.

Pennsylvania German History and Culture Series. The Pennsylvania German Society.

The Pennsylvania State University Press. 2009.

Reviewed by Anna Jane Moyer, Librarian Emerita, Gettysburg College

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"They're NOT queer!" Elsie retorted. "And they're very real. They are my people living in the traditional ways of their ancestors."

"Then," he urged "write more about them!"

Thus began a writing career that stretched for almost half a century as Elsie Singmaster (1879-1958) became a regional writer who achieved national recognition especially for depicting the life, culture, and history of the Pennsylvania Germans. Hers was a prodigious output: more than 350 short stories and articles and more than forty books.

It is with this incident between professor and student that Susan Colestock Hill opens *Heart Language: Elsie Singmaster and Her Pennsylvania German Writings*. The book contains Hill's skillfully written literary biographical sketch (pp. 1-73) that serves as an introduction to Singmaster and her work and a springboard to a selection of sixteen short stories by Singmaster that follows (pp.79-264). Hill's work is carefully researched, thoughtfully written, and extensively documented. She writes to provide a context for the stories, to re-examine Singmaster's legacy, and to discuss her work and its place in American literature.

With her, the reader considers three major influences that shaped Singmaster's literary output: her Pennsylvania German family heritage, her Lutheran background with its close ties to the Church, the social and cultural environment of the late Victorian era in the United States.

The Singmasters (originally Zangmeister) could verify their entry in America at the port of Philadelphia as 1749. Genealogical records exist that trace the family back to 1415 in Germany. Elsie's father John Alden Singmaster became a Lutheran pastor serving congregations in Schuylkill Haven, Macungie, Brooklyn NY, and Allentown. In 1900 he accepted a position as a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg; from 1906-1926 he served as President. Except during her marriage (1912-1915) to Harold Steck Lewars, Elsie as a young woman and a widow resided at the Singmaster home on campus during her active adult life. Dr. Singmaster, a graduate of both the College and the Seminary at Gettysburg, was a prolific writer and a keen

storyteller. He encouraged and supported his daughter's early aspirations to become an author, and he became a strong influence in her life.

Elsie Singmaster's first short story as a professional writer, "The Lese-Majeste of Hans Heckendorn," was published by Scribner's in 1905 while she was completing her college education at Radcliffe; it centered on the reaction of a German immigrant family to life in America. Within a few years her short stories could also be found regularly in the pages of such periodicals as *Century Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Outlook*, *Lippincott's Magazine*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *McClure's Magazine*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Harper's Monthly*, *Collier's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Youth's Companion*.

As a setting for some of her Pennsylvania German characters Elsie Singmaster created the village of Millerstown, based on Macungie (formerly known as Millerstown), a place where she had lived as a child and a place where she and her four brothers delighted in returning for summer vacations. The fictional village of Lanesville also became a background for her stories. Having absorbed the customs, the lore, and the language of the Pennsylvania Germans from childhood, Elsie Singmaster often incorporated people and places she knew into her stories. Sometimes her characters reappear. Often she wrote of women---women old and young---of their strength, their support in time of trouble, their courage. She described their shawls and bonnets, their Sunday dresses. She wrote of women and their work---the baking and the cooking and the canning and the way they kept their houses and their families. Susan Hill discusses the Victorian concept of "woman's sphere" and its orbit of home and family as it relates to the women in Singmaster's work. She points out that Singmaster "portrays these women in traditional roles but also creates situations that challenge their customary ways and social limitations." With them we experience their struggling to hold on to the old ways, yet sensing their need to yield to change.

While shaping the lives of her characters, Elsie Singmaster wrote of fertile Pennsylvania farmlands---the rich brown earth freshly plowed and planted in springtime, the cattle grazing languidly in pastures, the work horses sweaty from their labors in the summer sun. She wrote of large red barns that gave to the landscape a touch of warmth. She wrote of neat, trim houses, their parlors stiff and formal with heavy, dark furniture and their country kitchens alive with country talk and the pungent aroma of freshly baked bread and pies.

Adept at using detail, Elsie Singmaster had the ability to create word pictures that enable the reader to enter a room, meet new people, and step into a story in another place, another time. Her Pennsylvania German stories in Hill's well chosen collection offer the reader an opportunity to sample Singmaster's writing by exploring a variety of characters and situations. Singmaster's ability to evoke a sense of place and the lifestyle and customs of the people who inhabit it puts her among the writers and artists of local color working in the early part of the twentieth century. Hill discusses this regional American literary genre in relation to Singmaster's short story writing and its capturing of the ethnic identity of the Pennsylvania Germans and their folkways.

Elsie Singmaster used dialog skillfully. The speech of her Pennsylvania German characters is often tinged with patterns of word order, pronunciation, idioms, and accent that carry over from the Pennsylvania German dialect into their use of English. Susan Hill comments on the thoughts of Donald Radcliffe Shenton on fiction about Pennsylvania Germans presented before the Institute of German Studies. She writes, "He distinguished between the 'Heart' and 'Head' languages of the Pennsylvania German community and said that the dialect, the 'Heart' language, protected the Pennsylvania German value system and way of life from the outside world. Its general unintelligibility in the English world created an intentional and effective cultural barrier, slowing assimilation of Pennsylvania Germans into the English mainstream....Elsie Singmaster translates the Heart language across the barrier of dialect." It is from this comment that Susan Hill takes the title of her book.

Readers interested in Adams County history will want to note the material in the book concerning Elsie Singmaster's community service. Warmly known locally as Mrs. Lewars, she made significant contributions of time and leadership to the Adams County Chapter of the Red Cross, the Adams County Public Library, the Adams County Historical Society, and the effort to retain women as students at Gettysburg College.

A close look at the "Bibliography of Elsie Singmaster's Work" (pp.265-275) will guide the reader to other short stories about the Pennsylvania Germans as well as to Singmaster's stories related to Gettysburg at the time of the Battle and to her historical novels.

Widely read during her day, Singmaster would experience the waning of her popularity as an author as times changed and literary tastes changed with them. Susan Hill's book affords readers an opportunity to revisit Singmaster's work and her contributions. Hill writes, "It is my hope that readers of the stories reprinted in this volume will recognize that Singmaster has earned a place in the local color canon and in Pennsylvania studies.... Her legacy must now be reclaimed from the margins so that Singmaster may once again be appreciated on the merits of her life and work, and for her contribution to the preservation of the American experience."