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*Ina Coolbrith: Librarian and Laureate of California* Josephine  
DeWitt Rhodehamel

Helen Hinckley Jones

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that he was accumulating it. Power, I mean, at least as the driving wheel of his people's industry.

Although she shows a constant interest in polygamy as practiced by her various hosts, she never speculates about Brigham Young's numerous families.

Everett Cooley's introduction gives valuable information about Thomas L. Kane's relationship with the Mormons, including a revisionist view concerning his early motives for befriending the Saints. The editor's footnotes are almost all of an explanatory nature, made necessary by Elizabeth Kane's attempt to conceal her hosts' identities by changing their names. Cooley's identification of these people along with other biographical notes makes Mrs. Kane's narrative much more interesting and informative.

There is very little to criticize about this publication. Perhaps some mention could have been made about Thomas Kane's role in publicizing myths concerning the seagull and cricket episode of 1848, but this is a relatively minor matter. One disappointing aspect of the book is that it ends too soon—just when they arrive in St. George. There is no description of the two-month stay in Utah's Dixie. The editor has attempted to supply this information but is not even certain of their place of residence. Perhaps more extensive research will fill this gap in the Kanes' interesting and informative experience.

Rhodehamel, Josephine DeWitt, and Raymund Francis Wood. *Ina Coolbrith: Librarian and Laureate of California*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1973. 531 pp. \$11.95.

Reviewed by Helen Hinckley Jones, writer and recently retired teacher of creative writing at Pasadena City College.

Can one, after reading a book twice, write an objective critical review of a biography which is the result of years of careful, even loving research? One need only scan the fifty pages in small print of footnotes and the thirty pages of bibliography to get an idea of the time and care that have gone into the effort to make Ina Coolbrith live for a new generation.

I met California's first poet laureate through a brief chapter in *California Mormons* by Annaleone D. Patton. This, in brief, is Ina's story.

Ina was born in Nauvoo in 1841, the third daughter of Don Carlos Smith, youngest brother of the Prophet Joseph, and Agnes Coolbrith Smith. She was named Josephine for the Prophet, but she was called Ina. She was never to remember her father, who died at twenty-five when she was a year old. She might have remembered her next older sister, Sophronia, and the assassination of her uncles, Joseph and Hyrum. When the Mormon exodus began Agnes, with Lucy and Emma, three Smith widows, went to St. Louis. Lucy and Emma returned to Nauvoo, but Agnes stayed in St. Louis and married William Pickett, a lexicographer who had fought with the Saints in defense of Nauvoo. Agnes bore Pickett two sons, Don Carlos and William, twins. Later Pickett was attracted to California, and the family went West, living at Spanish Ranch, Marysville, San Francisco, San Bernardino, Los Angeles, then back to the Bay area.

In Los Angeles at the age of seventeen Ina made an unfortunate marriage which ended in divorce. In those days divorce was a disgrace, and the violence which attended this one made it particularly painful. Leaving her happily married sister Agnes in Los Angeles, Ina and the rest of her family moved to San Francisco where Ina adopted her mother's maiden name; she kept secret to her death her relationship to Joseph Smith and her unhappy marriage.

Literature was very much alive in San Francisco. Ina was accepted by Bret Harte, Charles Warren Stoddard, Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Ambrose Bierce, and a host of other young writers as an equal. She became part of the Golden Gate Trinity—Ina, Harte, and Stoddard. During this time much of her poetry was written, poems about nature, about love and loss. Her lyrics appeared in each copy of the *Overland Monthly*. Soon Bret Harte left for the East and he was followed by others. There were five of the San Francisco group in England at the same time. Ina dreamed of England and she could have supported herself there with journalism and poetry, but she had heavy home responsibilities. In order to earn enough to support her enlarged family—her mother, her widowed sister and two children, and the half-Indian daugh-



ter of Joaquin Miller—she took the position of Oakland's first librarian.

During this period of worry, domestic drudgery, and difficult work in the library she wrote little poetry. Later, when she returned to San Francisco she turned most of her writing powers to prose. Quite remarkable was the resurgence of her poetic powers in her old age. She was seventy-four when she became poet laureate of California.

This meager biography in Mrs. Patton's book sent me to the rare book room of the Pasadena City Library to read all the Coolbrith poems in print. Here, I thought, was a woman who deserved a full biography. Though all of her poetry has a delicate charm, a natural "singing without being sing-song," it was her tremendous ability as a catalyst that impressed me most. Everyone who was associated with her became more creative, more productive because of that relationship.

It wasn't until I had exhausted research possibilities in California and Utah and visited every place where Ina had been from Nauvoo to tiny Coolbrith Park in San Francisco that I was told in the California Room of the State Library, "Mrs. Rhodehamel has her book on Miss Coolbrith ready for the publisher." I should have realized that such a book was in progress. Some of the letters in the Coolbrith collection in the Bancroft Library were dated by J. R. One of the librarians of the Oakland City Library had said, "One of our former librarians has been interested in this scrapbook." Although I had already sent chapters to an Eastern publisher, I withdrew them and waited for Mrs. Rhodehamel's book. After reading this biography I know that I shall not write the one that I had projected. Perhaps I shall write about Ina's pioneer childhood, her gay, tragic years in Los Angeles, and the fantastic period in San Francisco—maybe for younger readers.

Having gone over the research material myself I have even greater admiration for the work of Rhodehamel and Wood. Yet there are some details, some interpretations on which we differ. It is important to Latter-day Saints, for example, to know just when Ina ceased to be a Mormon. Rhodehamel and Wood believe that this occurred when the family left Missouri. Further, they conjecture that Pickett, Agnes, and the children avoided Utah on their journey to California. There is solid evidence, however, that Pickett was involved with

the Mormons in Kaneshville, Iowa, during the late 1840s; that he and his family lived in Utah before leaving for California sometime in 1852; and that Agnes and her children were cordially received by Church members in San Bernardino subsequent to their move to the Pacific coast. Years later when her cousin, J. Winter Smith, asked Ina why the secrecy regarding her heritage, she answered:

Long ago my stepfather was establishing himself in business in a new state, my mother deemed it expedient to keep her name secret. Prejudice against the Church was intense. Innuendo and inference could have ruined his aspirations. Sister and I made the promise. Mother died without releasing us from the vow. To me a promise is a sacred thing. When I am gone you may tell the world.

To the end of the fantastic San Francisco period, the Rhodehamel-Wood biography is well told and easy to read. In fact, the authors frequently go into the mind and heart of the heroine and we feel that we are reading a biographical novel. That this was not the authors' intentions is made clear by such phrases as "This, of course is speculation."

With the Oakland period the story moves more slowly. There are many more meticulous details, more sidetrips into loosely related matters. (This may seem slow to me because I am not a librarian.) The detail grows heavier as the book progresses. There is not enough forward moving story to carry the minutia. At times the book almost grinds to a halt when we read what affairs Ina did or did not attend. Who was or wasn't there. What poem Ina wrote for the occasion and who read it.

The story flares to life again as she seeks to hold on to her youth through encouraging and assisting such young friends as Carl Syfforth and Charles Phillips. Here again Ina is acting as catalyst, although she is failing in health and bitter about her hardships and loneliness.

The authors sometimes repeat material—about William Peterson and Joseph Charles Duncan, for example. We feel ourselves reading what we have already been told. (The editor should have drawn the attention of the authors to such paragraphs.) Probably the authors' problem lies in the organization of the whole work. Part of it is chronological, part topical. Having told about the Bohemian Club from first to last,



the information must be given again when some of Ina's dealings with the group are described in chronological order.

It is difficult to find Coolbrith poems on the ordinary library shelf and she is no longer anthologized. The authors quote some of her poems in full, more in part, placing them in the narrative with taste and discrimination.

Any reader interested in Mormons in California, in Victorian poetry in America, in California history, will read the first two parts of the book with appreciation and avid interest. Part three, devoted to the problems of the Oakland library, may interest librarians. Unless one has special background in the social and intellectual history of the Bay area, he will find parts four and five rather hard going.

The Brigham Young University Press has brought out some beautiful books. Unfortunately this is not one of them. Incredibly it is printed in lavender ink; even the jacket and photographs are lavender. Lavendar is the color of old age. Why recall the waning years of the poet when she was suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, was bitter, lugubrious, crochety, and aloof? I prefer to think of her scintillating, filled with physical and intellectual energy, dreams, poetry and love of the earth.

As a piece of meticulous research, *Ina Coolbrith*, by Josephine DeWitt Rhodehamel and Raymund Francis Wood is superb. As a readable book it is somewhat disappointing. And the bookmaking! Pour the lavender ink down the drain, Sir!