

## **Her Kingdom for a Life: The Forgotten Works Of California's First Poet-Laureate, Ina Coolbrith**

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*"There, little girl, there is California! There is your kingdom!"  
-Jim Beckwourth to Coolbrith*

Niece of Joseph Smith, patriarch of the Mormon faith, Ina Coolbrith was a pioneer, poet, librarian, editor of the *Overland Monthly*, and literary mentor to distinguished writers of her day. She was also California's first Poet Laureate. Still, this once celebrated figure in the California literary tradition has faded from the limelight. Her collections of poetry, appearing between 1881 and 1929 (a year after her death) have become relics of the past, and her poems are now virtually forgotten. Given that Coolbrith played an influential part in the development of San Francisco's literary scene, I find it intriguing that her work has fallen through the cracks and goes unnoticed today. My goal in this project is to familiarize myself with the life and works of Ina Coolbrith in order to rightfully place her within the context of American literature. Through a critical reading of her biography and three collections of poetry, I hope to revive awareness and appreciation of California's first Poet Laureate. In the long run, I hope to compile a thematic collection of Coolbrith's poetry to share with readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The title of Poet Laureate has traditionally been bestowed on esteemed poets to honor their work and contributions to the genre of poetry. In China, the Emperor selected court poets to read at ceremonious occasions, and England has a long history of appointing world-renowned British poets such as Wordsworth and Browning to the position of Poet Laureate. The United States has adopted a similar practice, officially calling our country's crowned poet "The Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress." Yet, before Congress began

acclaiming distinguished poets, California became the first independent state to appoint a Poet Laureate. What do we know about the first poet to earn this distinction, and what was it about her accomplishments that warranted the designation of such a prestigious title? Through a close reading of the biography and published poems of Ina Donna Coolbrith, I hope to reveal why she was selected as the first person in California (and the United States) to hold the title of Poet Laureate, and how audiences might relate to her work today.

Coolbrith's poems were first published in 1881, and continued to appear in print in literary magazines up through the turn of the century. A posthumous collection of poems appeared a year after her death, in 1929. But her work and accomplishments were essentially forgotten in the 20<sup>th</sup> century until a short revival in the 1970s. There are only a handful of books discussing Coolbrith and her work, and no more than a dozen academic journal articles offering studies of her poetry. I was expecting to find more critical analysis of a poet whose work and life were influential enough to earn her the designation as first Poet Laureate of California. Biographers Josephine DeWitt Rhodelhamel and Raymund Francis Wood took up the task of writing the only biography published on her life in 1973, and this is considered to be the authoritative text to consult when studying Coolbrith's life.

Her poetry speaks for itself, but Coolbrith has an equally fascinating life story. Ina Coolbrith's family name was Josephine D. Smith. As a young child of 10, Josephine moved to California with her mother in 1851. Her mother was running away (with her

second husband) from the polygamy of the Mormon Church. The family migrated to Los Angeles where, at the age of 17, Josephine published her first poems and married Robert Carsley. A rocky period followed, during which her marriage failed (it was dissolved just three years later, in 1861) and her infant son died. In 1862, following a deep depression, she moved to the Bay Area, taking the name Ina Donna Coolbrith. Coolbrith arrived in San Francisco with a reputation as a poet, and she befriended several prominent writers of her day: Samuel Clemens, Bret Harte, Charles Warren Stoddard and Joaquin Miller.

In September 1873, Coolbrith was hired as librarian of the Oakland Free Library. During the next twenty years, she exercised her influence on Oakland's young writers and artists, most notably future writer Jack London and the mother of modern dance Isadora Duncan. Then, in 1906, Coolbrith's house was severely damaged in the devastating earthquake/fire that struck San Francisco. Most of her correspondence was burned, and the disaster quelled Coolbrith's hopes of writing an autobiography.

Today, those familiar with Coolbrith know her primarily through her associations with Harte and Clemens, or through her influence on Duncan and London. Scholars who discuss Coolbrith's work praise her influence and mentorship, but seldom offer a critical discussion of her legacy as a poet. Through my research, I hope to uncover critical discussions of her work that can serve as the basis for my own critical analysis of her poetry and its role in the literary traditions of California and the United States.

Focusing on Coolbrith's posthumously published *Wings of Sunset*, I have picked up on some common techniques and themes that seem to arise throughout her work. Initially, I noticed a prevalence of references to nature within her writing. But her nature poetry left me with a satisfied/peaceful feeling that was

difficult to pinpoint. It wasn't until I took a nostalgic drive along my elementary school bus route through rural Manteca that I realized the same sentimental familiarity I felt toward the sights, smells, and sounds of the San Joaquin Valley landscape is precisely what is evoked in me while reading Coolbrith's poetry. While the content is exceptional and important only in relation to its time, the sentiment expressed through her verse may hold resonance for 21<sup>st</sup> century readers. Though the landscape of Coolbrith's time is largely altered or non-existent today, the connection she identifies between humans and nature still exists. It is, however, something the average person rarely contemplates. With industrialization and urbanization, we have lost our connection to the intense bond with nature expressed in Coolbrith's poetry. The calming, crisp smells of almond blossoms, freshly cut alfalfa, or a new seasonal rain can bring out the same emotions that Coolbrith expressed in her poems. Digesting her poetry, the reader is re-connected with a nostalgic time before the rise of urban cityscapes.

Some of the poetic devices operating in her work include the precise use of rhyme and meter, tone, repetition, and imagery. Undoubtedly, her conventional form and subject matter are what led English poet and critic George Meredith to comment that Coolbrith's death brought an end to the Victorian literary period. Categorizing her as a Victorian writer would explain her strict adherence to form, meter, and rhyme. It is my hope that a further evaluation of her poetry will allow me to comment on these devices as they pertain to the conveyance of Coolbrith's noted themes.

The exciting part of this project is that I will be able to interact with primary texts and early publications of Coolbrith's work. Thanks to the interlibrary loan system, I have access to original copies of Coolbrith's three published collections of poetry: *A Perfect*

*Day and Other Poems* (1881), *Songs from the Golden Gate* (1895), and *Wings of Sunset* (published posthumously in 1929). Over the summer, I plan to visit the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, which contains Coolbrith's works and other relevant material (including letters and journals). Her early publications, appearing in literary magazines such as the *Overland Monthly* and the *Los Angeles Star*, are central to understanding the evolution of her poetic

style over the course of her life. Through analysis of her poetry, I hope to gain an understanding of her poetic sensibilities within the context of her time, and to assess the value of her poetry in the larger framework of American poetry and literature. Coolbrith's writings have revealed her to be a fascinating literary figure, and I am eager to learn more about the life and works of this forgotten California poet.

### Annotated Bibliography

- "About the Position of Poet Laureate." Library of Congress. 24 May 2006  
<[http://www.loc.gov/poetry/about\\_laureate.html](http://www.loc.gov/poetry/about_laureate.html)>. This website is a valuable resource describing the process through which Poet Laureates are appointed. It also includes links that briefly discuss past and present poets laureate, including Ina Coolbrith.
- Coolbrith, Ina Donna. *A Perfect Day and Other Poems*. San Francisco: John H. Carmany & Co., 1881. Coolbrith's first published collection of poems, *A Perfect Day* captures the essence of late 19<sup>th</sup> century California through poetic images of its coastal serenity, lush valleys, and towering Sierra Nevada mountains. This collection was received well by critics.
- Cuff, Roger Penn. "An Appraisal of the American Poets Laureate." *Peabody Journal of Education* 25.4 (Jan. 1948): 157-162, 164-166. Cuff's article presents an account of the U.S. Poet Laureate tradition. Though most of the article discusses laureates of other states, the first page briefly references Coolbrith and the process that led to her being honored as California's first poet laureate.
- "Ina Coolbrith (1842-1928)." *Prospectives in American Literature*. 23 May 2004.  
<<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap6/coolbrith.html>>. Though this page doesn't speak directly about Coolbrith, it does provide a substantial list of resources that are useful to anyone studying Coolbrith's life and poetry. Professor Paul Reuben's website compiles lists of books, academic articles, and web articles relevant to Coolbrith. Reuben places Coolbrith within the American Naturalism literary movement.
- "Ina Coolbrith." *Wikipedia.com*. 26 Feb. 2006. 24 May 2006  
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ina\\_Coolbrith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ina_Coolbrith)>. Although the biographical information on this site is brief, it provides several links vital to Coolbrith scholarship. There are links to several of Coolbrith's most famous poems, links discussing the title of Poet Laureate, and a link to the Mountain View Cemetery where Coolbrith is buried.
- Rhodehamel, Josephine DeWitt, and Raymund Francis Wood. *Ina Coolbrith: Librarian and Laureate of California*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1973. One of the few books dedicated to the life and works of Ina Coolbrith, this biography provides a vast amount of information. Reflecting on Coolbrith's often-hidden Mormon past, two failed marriages, and various other tribulations that plagued her life, Wood and Rhodehamel present an in-depth, research-based glimpse into her childhood, adolescence, and

adulthood. Wood and Rhodehamel discuss at great length the writings and achievements of California's first poet laureate. Given its valuable biographic information, genealogical charts, index of works, and extensive bibliography, this is an unrivaled resource for anyone interested in the life and works of Ina Coolbrith.

Scharnhorst, Gary. "Ina Donna Coolbrith (1841-1928)." *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: a Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. 73-76. Scharnhorst's article provides a brief and concise overview of the life and major works of Ina Coolbrith. Additionally, Scharnhorst touches on a few of the themes expressed in Coolbrith's work, and discusses poems that convey those themes. A section devoted to the critical reception of Coolbrith's work is also present, as well as a thorough bibliography. Scharnhorst's chapter provides only a brief overview to Coolbrith's life and works, but is a concise and useful starting point for further scholarship.