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In memory of  
David D. Anderson  
(1924-2011)

## PREFACE

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, an Indiana woman was taking huge cameras with glass plates into the Limberlost, a swampy area in the east central part of the state, to photograph the birds and moths and other fauna and flora of the region. Gene Stratton-Porter's career developed into writing best-selling novels, nature books, poetry, and magazine columns and finally into making films of the novels. She became well known as an early environmentalist; her readers wrote asking advice on family issues, politics, and writing.

One hundred years later, scholars are discussing her feminism and her conservation ethic. Her star is rising in children's and adolescent literature, where her protagonists, strong women and thoughtful men, model conservationist and socially advanced practices, and her nature books inspire incipient scientists. Indiana University Press is publishing most of the fiction and other publishers have found a niche for the nature works and poetry.

The centennial in 2009 of the publication of Stratton-Porter's most popular novel, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, initiated a series of three panels on Stratton-Porter's works. Some of the best of those papers appear in this issue. The articles honor the books and their author for the interest that they continue to generate, and for the freshness of their relevance in this new century.

In "Gene Stratton-Porter: Scholar of the Natural World in *A Girl of the Limberlost*," Cheryl Birkelo examines and emphasizes the significance of Stratton-Porter's environmentalism in the novel and in her other writing. Robert Mellin pursues the author's feminism in an eco-critical context and proposes a defense against twenty-first century critics with his essay, "The 'Talking Trees' of the Limberlost: Negotiating a Class-informed Ecofeminism." Continuing the discussion of feminism, Mary R. Ryder also makes a strong contemporary case for Stratton-Porter's realism in a later novel, in "'A Story of American Grit': *A Daughter of the Land* as Realist Manifesto." Susan A. Schiller explains the relationship between one of the novels and its adaptation as a film, and in the process illuminates the writer's knowledge of bee-keeping in "Nature Writing and Popular Culture in Gene Stratton-Porter's *The Keeper of the Bees*." Mary DeJong Obuchowski brings the proceedings full circle by exploring the link between the outdoors and the spiritual in "Gene Stratton-Porter's *Music of the Wild: Nature, Belief and Activism*."

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GENE STRATTON-PORTER: SCHOLAR OF THE  
NATURAL WORLD IN *A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST*

CHERYL BIRKELO

In 2009, Gene Stratton-Porter's *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), her best-known work of fiction, celebrated its centenary. However, her works of natural history were her true calling; the most familiar are *Moths of the Limberlost* (1912), and *Homing with the Birds* (1919). While critics often relegate her fictional works to the genre of adolescent novels filled with sentiment and romance, she infuses them with the same message of conservation and environmental concerns that she addresses in her nonfiction, and especially focuses upon the birds and moths of the Limberlost wetlands of northeastern Indiana. Critics have overlooked the environmental import of Stratton-Porter's principal works of fiction, wrongly positioning her as a popular novelist and minor scientific observer, despite her fidelity to scientific field work.

Stratton-Porter, as a knowledgeable and sensitive nature writer, fills her sentimental fiction with issues of the environment, conservation, and responsible stewardship of the land in order to educate her audience. She transmits these messages to her readers through fictional narrative as exemplified in *Freckles* (1904), *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), *The Harvester* (1911), and *The Keeper of the Bees* (1925), all of which pronounce her ecofeminism. Her nonfiction works, *Moths of the Limberlost*, *Homing with the Birds*, and *Let Us Highly Resolve* (1927), while reaching a much more limited readership, reinforce the subtle ideas of her early fiction. She continuously fought frustration at the lack of endorsement she received from professional biologists and naturalists, despite her pioneering documentation of flora and fauna of the Limberlost and Midwestern regions.

Although many of her scientific observations are now dated, recognition of her contribution to American letters as an early ecofeminist is long overdue. Her ability as a writer stems from her easy melding of scientific writing and documentation with the formula of the popular romantic novel, as revealed in *A Girl of the Limberlost*.

Readers are, however, often unaware of her skillfully crafted works of natural history that had a smaller readership and print run. Her best known is *Moths of the Limberlost*. She is not only a gifted story teller but also a self-taught acute observer and recorder of the natural world. What is only beginning to be acknowledged, as a result of rising interest in women nature writers, is Gene Stratton-Porter's integration of natural history into *both* her fiction and nonfiction works. Both genres serve to teach her audiences about the natural world which she so revered and to propel her work beyond the limitations of popular, sentimental fiction.

In photography, as in natural history, Stratton-Porter was self-taught; she never finished high school and could not attend college due to family and financial difficulties (MacLean 7). Struggling all of her adult life with the lack of recognition that her work received from academic and scientific quarters because she lacked college credentials, Stratton-Porter would challenge reputable scientists, even Audubon himself, on reported bird facts that she had gleaned from firsthand experience, facts that scientists had erroneously recorded. She called Audubon an unconscionable "bloody butcher" and killer of specimens because he had regularly shot them for ease of reproducing species in his art (*Homing with the Birds* 373). Her own skill with a camera would not be challenged as readily, however. Kodak, after seeing the quality of her prints in *Outing* and *Recreation* magazines, sent representatives to her home to learn her methods. She recorded that she was too embarrassed to show the small, cramped bathroom and the common kitchen platters she used for developing prints and film. Yet she writes of her methods with pride in her essays and in issues of *The American Annual of Photographic Times-Bulletin* (1901, 1903-4 and 1905).

The sentimentality that characterizes Stratton-Porter's anecdotes of her observations on wildlife led academic and scientific scholars of her day to dispute her claims often, yet when compared to works of contemporaries such as Jean Henri Fabre, John Muir, Harold Bell Wright, Mary Austin, Mabel Osgood Wright, and Neltje Blanchan

Doubleday, hers are no more anecdotal or less objective. Bertrand Richards suggests:

Perhaps the stigma of having clothed nature in fiction kept Gene Stratton-Porter from being recognized as the great authority she was. It is a rare reader indeed who displays an equal interest in sentimental romance and natural history . . . Scientists were unwilling to sift out the nature from the fiction no matter how accurate the observations of the former might be. (138-39)

Osgood Wright—fellow female nature writer, ornithologist, and editor of the Audubon Society's *Bird Lore*—responded to Stratton-Porter:

I want to tell you how very much I have enjoyed your book [*Friends in Feathers*]*—*for its common sense coupled with humanity in the way in which you approach the bird family in the nest, for the spontaneous expression of all you see and enjoy so the feeling passes on to those who read, and for the moderation of statement in never over-drawing the picture, the great fault of the present day in non-scientific nature writing. (qtd. in Meehan 199)

Osgood Wright went on to discuss with Stratton-Porter how its Audubon department would also see to it that her work would be made available and placed in public school libraries for student and teacher use to further educate the public (Meehan 199). This was Stratton-Porter's goal—to educate her reading public, especially young people, about the natural wonders found in her region of Indiana.

A critic of *Moths of the Limberlost* said of her book that which can apply to the majority of Stratton-Porter's fiction and nature writings: "The nature lover rather than the naturalist in the strict scientific sense of the word has been kept in mind throughout the preparation of the work whose aim is to teach . . . Her observations are scientifically valuable, her narrative is entertaining, and her revelations stimulating" (Banta 366). A woman of strong personal conviction, Stratton-Porter would readily tackle critics with whom she disagreed. One such emphatic response is to Frederick Taber Cooper's charges in the *Bookman* that she was a "Nature Faker":

If "serious critical opinion is agreed" concerning me, where does it stand concerning a critic who will pronounce the work of a nature writer "grotesque" and "faking," and then himself fakes an entire

quotation in an attempt to prove his point? . . . he goes on to state that I have "a single talent of rather limited range." And here I had been thinking that when I went afield and brought in the first-hand material for five nature books, illustrated them with half-tone from life, and water-colour paintings; wrote stories containing thousands of natural history references none of which have as yet been authoritatively contradicted, designed my covers and front material, and furnished the bird work for the New International Standard Biblical Encyclopedia, that I was doing several things well enough for some of the world's best editors to accept them. ("My Work and My Critics" 152)

Stratton-Porter's tone is one of justifiable pride and outrage at being so wrongly judged (as she reportedly felt). Yet despite some negative critical reviews, her reading public supported her efforts. They found her work understandable and accessible, if judged by the phenomenal sales records of her books. Her tone was comforting and engaging to the mostly female readers of her time, who had on average an eighth-grade education and would perhaps be repelled by too much scientific jargon.

Alice Payne Hackett estimates Stratton-Porter had eight best sellers with approximate cumulative sales for six of Stratton-Porter's titles at a record-breaking \$85,355,391 (*50 Years of Best Sellers* 8). Frank Luther Mott quantifies Stratton-Porter's sales: "Up to this time only two authors had made a higher [best sellers] score—Dickens and Scott— . . . At the time of her death between eight and nine million copies of Mrs. Porter's nineteen books had been sold. Grant Overton once estimated that she made two million dollars out of her literary activity" (*Golden Multitudes* 218-19).

Raised during a time of reconstruction, continued western expansion, and industrialization, Stratton-Porter (sometimes classified as being one of the Outdoor School authors) early identified the need to preserve natural settings as well as the need for humans to make a living. She experienced firsthand what oil drilling, deforestation, and draining of wetlands had done in her corner of the Wabash and of the Limberlost. Her father's farming and land acquisition were on drained and deforested acres. Her husband's commercial pharmacy and banking successes had their start by his investments in oil properties in the region. Sydney Landon Plum notes that this dilemma concerning the use of natural lands for profit is present in Stratton-Porter's novels. Plum states that Stratton-Porter was "vehement

about conserving natural resources," yet her characters "live quite well from the exploitation of nature" (xv). While Stratton-Porter's environmental ethic was heavily swayed by her father's Judeo-Christian attitude towards land use and stewardship, her sense of moral justice reveals a sensitivity to environmental concerns and an understanding of people's need to seek a unified relationship with society and nature (*Let Us Highly Resolve* 295-300). Several such examples of this dilemma of using land for profit versus preservation and conservation appear in *A Girl of the Limberlost*, *The Harvester* and *A Daughter of the Land* (1918). Respectively, the characters Elnora Comstock, Ruth Jameson, and Kate Bates are faced with this dilemma. Elnora must collect butterflies and moths to pay for schooling, Ruth must pay off an old debt by producing artwork from nature and medicinal products from ginseng, while Kate must provide for her young fatherless family by taking over and profitably running the family farm.

Frank Wallace, a forester and state entomologist for Indiana, in a *McCall's* article, "Afield with Gene Stratton-Porter," recalls how he first came to work and study with the naturalist. Stratton-Porter had him come to Limberlost Cabin North and Wildflower Woods to inspect the native hardwood forest that remained on her property after the surrounding Limberlost region had been destroyed by commercial and farming interests. He estimates that over the span of twelve years of working with her "she planted more than seventeen thousand flowers, plants, and shrubs" and that for her "the finding of a new wildflower for her collection was a real adventure" (10). He states that her methods of collecting the specimens were "always fair—she never took all the plants she found. If there were only a few, she marked them with stakes and returned later for the seed." Her intent was not only to create a haven for the native wildflower, plant, and tree species of Indiana but someday to turn the land over to the State of Indiana as a preserve to facilitate the study [of] the plants and to allow the public to "become acquainted with the wildflowers native to their own State." Wallace goes on to emphasize that "the work she did in Wildflower Wood served as a working basis for the material she used in her 'nature stories' as she always liked to call her novels. The fundamental purpose of her books was to interest people not only in the preservation of wildflowers but of all wildlife." Wallace states that Limberlost Cabin North was indeed a bird sanctuary, recalling that he had "never seen so many different birds or

seen them in so great numbers as there were in the trees surrounding the Cabin" (108). Wallace had a lifelong friendship with Stratton-Porter and married her secretary, Lorene Miller, in 1911 on the grounds of Limberlost Cabin North.

Creating homes and domestic spaces played an important role in Stratton-Porter's life and novels, as did creating sites of preservation and conservation for the natural world. She placed great importance on the roles that these two factors, domestic space and natural space, played in the development of human character. She would teach of the "ideal" in both her fiction and nonfiction works and the consequences to humans and the rest of the natural world when humans disregarded the ideal. Thus, Stratton-Porter, a skillful weaver of moral instruction and ecological concerns, went about teaching her audience conservation methods principally through what she deemed as responsible stewardship of the land and the "ideals of the natural moral code" that nature could signify to humanity (*Let Us Highly Resolve* 351-366).

Critical assessment of Stratton-Porter varies greatly, with few reviewers claiming middle or neutral ground in their responses to her writings. "Neither the critics who were for her nor those against her rendered a fair evaluation; the former were overebullient their praise, the latter too harsh in their condemnation" (Richards 128). Most early critics paid little attention to Stratton-Porter's accounts of natural history, considering instead her novels as mere moral tracts, while more modern critics focus principally on biographical elements in her fiction or on her photographic studies. Her work as serious literary art thus has received short shrift.

Next to Frederick Taber Cooper, who labels her a "Nature Faker" ("The Popularity of Gene Stratton-Porter" 670), Carl Van Doren was perhaps her most severe and often quoted critic. When assessing the novels of the first half of the twentieth century, Van Doren wrote that "the domestic sentimentalism with which the American Novel had begun was still a staple . . . of Stratton-Porter who piled sentimentalism upon descriptions of nature in soft, sweet, heaps" (*The American Novel* 269). Yet critic Christopher Morley's opinion, sent to her publisher Doubleday after Morley had read *Homing with the Birds*, was "a spontaneous utterance of admiration." He declared it "a book to be proud of . . . [giving him] a deep and complex pleasure" to have read (Meehan 210-11).

Still, Stratton-Porter's fiction was largely relegated to the genre of popular fiction as described by Russell Nye, who asserts that popular fiction at the turn of the century could be arranged thematically. He groups and defines these themes as nostalgic, fairy talelike, sacrificial, romanticizing of the commonplace, and appealing to the basic emotional responses of humankind (*The Unembarrassed Muse* 57). Indeed, many of these themes can be attributed to Stratton-Porter's work. Certainly *Freckles*, *The Harvester*, *A Daughter of the Land*, and *A Girl of the Limberlost* share some of these traits. Their heroes all overcome adversity through strength of character, determination, and hard work. The sublime natural settings of the works become symbolic of moral rectitude and a curative for human foibles and evil, places where a person can find strength in nature. Yet on careful reading, a reviewer will find that these works are not dominated by any one of these themes but are informed by an amalgamation of them all. Both *Freckles* and David Langston of *The Harvester* can be read as "princely," gentle, protectors of women and the forests. Elnora in *A Girl of the Limberlost* and Kate in *A Daughter of the Land* are "old-fashioned girls" who, "Cinderella-like," overcome adversity through sacrifice, strength of character and hard work. All are attributes which Stratton-Porter endorses in her writings (Meehan xi-xii). During her lifetime Stratton-Porter accepted the praise and also readily rejected the criticism which her work elicited. She responded to unfavorable commentary in the essay, "My Work and My Critics" in which she reasons that she never intended her work to be judged solely as fiction, but as stories containing nature messages (150-1).

These extremes of opinion can still be found today. Keeping Stratton-Porter's work within a historical context challenges the modern reader. Possibly to maintain a sense of objectivity, current scholars often look to her life and photography rather than to her fictional works. Sydney Landon Plum has produced *Coming through the Swamp: The Nature Writings of Gene Stratton-Porter* (1996), an anthology of Stratton-Porter's nature writings illustrated with photographs taken by Stratton-Porter herself. Each selection in the work has a headnote by Plum that emphasizes how Stratton-Porter wishes to convey the facts and the "feel" of Nature to her audience. Plum succeeds in compiling some of Stratton-Porter's best-recorded observations, as well as some of her best photographic records.

The few other current assessments of Stratton-Porter focus not only on her natural history but on her influence on women young and

old or on her feminist credo. Jane S. Bakerman points to Stratton-Porter's depiction of women characters who "display a certain intensity" and exhibit "strength and capability" beyond the norm of her time. Stratton-Porter's women are "able, productive citizens, usually equal partners in their marriages, who value the money earned for the independence it represents" ("Gene Stratton-Porter" 179). Mary DeJong Obuchowski posits that this support of women's abilities indicates Stratton-Porter's "double role" as an "advocate of women and for them . . . hence the emphasis here on her portrayal of women—and even girls—as influential role models for her readers and on her advocacy of certain women's rights" (Obuchowski 75). Indeed, themes and motifs which re-emerge in her fiction and non-fiction reveal women in multiple roles. They are family and career women who can succeed "despite the challenges of various negative forces" (Obuchowski 77). Obuchowski further observes, "She perceived women as confined by clothing, custom, and architecture, and proposed that they be freed or free themselves . . . She insisted that women should have rights of inheritance equal to those of men" (78). Obuchowski notes that Stratton-Porter best taught her readers through the use of models in her fiction and nonfiction and in her personal life. Obuchowski then places Stratton-Porter's life into historical context:

For Porter it was daring enough to propose—and carry on—a career that was compatible with marriage and family. Such a career could be made more possible with sensible and comfortable clothing, with a healthy and convenient environment at home, with women's right to her own money and property—and the skill and determination to manage them—, and with the self-respect engendered by a uniform (rather than a double) standard of morality. Porter built her own life by making use of or creating those advantages for herself. Thus, what she advocated for the women in her audience was no less than what she achieved for herself and demonstrated through her heroines. (81-82)

Bakerman expands upon feminist and Marxist critical approaches to Stratton-Porter in her essay, "Gene Stratton-Porter: What Price the Limberlost?" Bakerman debates the economic issues of the alleged exploitation of the Limberlost swamp by Porter and her characters for monetary gain, a dilemma Plum also addresses. That dilemma, however, was and is germane to the times. The use of natural resources for the good of mankind is a continuing debate as to

how much is too much for modern conservationists and preservationists. To what extent the natural world can be utilized before it becomes endangered or extinct was an issue Stratton-Porter wished to discuss with her readers. As one of the founders of the Izaak Walton League, she implements that plot dilemma in her novels to point out the cost to society that human use and interference exact upon the natural world. Yet, Bakerman reads Porter as depicting the wilderness as valuable and Nature as having something to teach us, but, she argues, the "author's ideas are inverted and made shabby . . . the American Myth, elevated by Cooper and Twain, has become in Stratton-Porter's works the American Dream denounced by Dreiser and Fitzgerald" (184). This so-called shabbiness can be read as Stratton-Porter's use of realism versus the romantic ideal that most critics attribute to her writing. Economic class structures did and do prevail in society, and Stratton-Porter realistically portrays these structures in her characters, female and male alike. Her fictional characters, such as Langston and Elnora Comstock, gain individual freedom through applying and marketing their knowledge of the products that nature could provide them.

The critical debate as to Stratton-Porter's romantic or realistic view of the natural world will be quelled only when her works *in toto* are explored in light of their ecological import, thus situating Stratton-Porter among the practitioners of nature writing, a genre that can successfully encompass both her "sentimentalized" fiction and her scientific nonfiction works. Stratton-Porter separated the two genres by calling the fiction she wrote "Nature Stories" and the natural history "Nature Books." ("Afield with Gene Stratton-Porter" 108). Early in her career, she made an arrangement with Doubleday Page to publish one work of fiction for every work of nonfiction (Richards 78). She fully realized that her fiction would sell in larger numbers and reach a greater audience than would her nonfiction. Yet, she demanded that her nonfiction be as accurate and as scientifically true as possible for a more critical scholarly audience and, perhaps more importantly, remain accessible to the lay person and nature enthusiast. She realized that most of her scholarly audience shared her concern for and love of nature, but she wished to educate the less informed of the important role natural science and history play in life.

Of Stratton-Porter's nature books, *Moths of the Limberlost* (1912), *Homing with the Birds* (1919), and *Music of the Wild* (1910) are considered her best. Selecting a single title as foremost depends



upon the individual's reader response to each. As their titles imply, *Moths* deals specifically with the study of her local Lepidoptera, *Homing* with the study of ornithology, and *Music* with the natural harmonies/ecology of her local environs. When searching for critical response to these works, one is stymied, for little published criticism exists.

Bertrand Richards credits Stratton-Porter as claiming *Moths of the Limberlost* as her "crowning achievement in writing of nature." He goes on to say that "[i]t is in the illustration of the book rather than in its content that the volume is outstanding" (103). Later he adds that "[h]er work was not suggestive but was actual mimicry of nature" (105). He praises Stratton-Porter for the techniques she painstakingly developed in order to reproduce scenes and specimens from nature, saying "the book suffers little in comparison with miracles achieved by modern [current] photography and printing." He asserts that for her "to secure these illustrations was a Herculean task" (104).

Stratton-Porter undertook that Herculean task in order to help preserve nature by promoting a better understanding of the creatures that nature lovers could encounter in their own yards. She asks in the opening chapters of *Moths of the Limberlost*, "But what of the millions of Nature Lovers who each year snatch only a brief time afield?" (16). She expands on this question by saying, "It is in the belief that all Nature lovers, afield for entertainment or instruction, will be thankful for a simplification of any method now existing for becoming acquainted with moths, that this book is written and illustrated" (20). Stratton-Porter argues that any guide available to her and the public was so heavily laden with "colourless pinned specimens used for most illustration and the scientific impossibility of the text, for their [the Nature Lovers'] purpose, [that] they abandon it at the first chapter" (19).

Stratton-Porter assumed a definite line between the Naturalist as scientist and the Nature Lover as ordinary common man or woman. She defines the Naturalist as one who "devote[s] his life to delving into stiff scientific problems concerning everything in nature from her greatest to her most minute forms," while the Nature Lover is one who "works at any occupation and finds recreation in being out of doors and appreciating the common things of life as they appeal to his senses" (15).

Stratton-Porter's appreciation of nature shows through her ability to create a text for her nature-loving audience. Plum calls *Moths* "... a supreme exercise in patience" and additionally observes that "[h]er writing does such justice to her powers of observation that this book might be a nature writer's primer" (xviii). The difficulty of engaging one's audience, both scientific and lay alike, is not lost on Stratton-Porter. She is, as she laments due to fear of boring her readers, "compelled to use scientific names and technical terms" because no other nomenclature was correct (13). Stratton-Porter confesses openly her own limitations and offers *Moths* as an "introduction to the swamp, its history, and evolution . . . This book professes to be nothing more" (10, 13).

Yet Stratton-Porter was at her scientific best with the writing of *Moths of the Limberlost*. In her novels, she was criticized heavily for her use of sentiment and anthropomorphism, elements absent in *Moths*. This shift in her writing style stands out for readers like scholars Plum and Richards. Plum asserts that "Stratton-Porter's objectivity and total lack of use of anthropomorphism is at its best when [she] notes the life history of moths" (xxviii). Richards concurs: "When she resisted the temptation, her nature writing was at its best. Her powers of observation were so keen and her description so accurate she could vie with the scientists for veracity while at the same time remaining readable" (97). It takes careful reading and the divorcing of Stratton-Porter's novels from her nonfiction to appreciate the shift in tone and observation that Stratton-Porter achieved. Such an example is the following passage from *Moths*:

One can admire to the fullest extent the complicated organism, wondrous colouring, and miraculous life processes in the evolution of a moth, but that is all. Their faces express nothing; their attitudes tell no story. There is the marvelous instinct through which the males locate the opposite sex of their species; but one cannot see instinct in the face of any creature; it must develop in acts. There is no part of their lives that makes such pictures of mother-love as birds and animals afford. The male finds a mate and disappears. The female places her eggs and goes out before her caterpillars break their shells. The caterpillar transforms to the moth without its consent, the matter in one up building the other. The entire process is utterly devoid of sentiment, attachment, or volition on the part of the creatures involved. They work out a law as inevitable as that which swings suns, moons,

and planets in their courses. They are the most fragile and beautiful result of natural law with which I am acquainted. (76-77)

Porter's writing in her Nature Books, including *Moths*, was "directly grounded in observation" (Plum xx) and her reasoning clearly stated. She would also test her findings against those of others. In 1903, W.J. Holland produced *The Moth Book*, a scientific text and guide that included color plates of pinned specimens, which Stratton-Porter uses as one of her own references (*Moths* 28, 36). She pondered how best to use her prints and negatives of moths and "found no work ever had been published wholly illustrated from life" (*Tales You Won't Believe* 107). In her attempts to follow the methods of scientists, she was frustrated by their contradictory information, saying, "My complaint against them is that they neglect essential detail and are not always rightly informed. They confuse one with a flood of scientific terms describing minute anatomical parts and fail to explain the simple yet absolutely essential points over which an amateur has trouble, when only a few words would suffice" (*Moths* 20-21).

Stratton-Porter was especially intrigued with comments regarding how sight and hearing were accomplished for moths and how these senses were identified by taxonomists. She states that to learn of these things was "woefully difficult" (*Moths* 38). She questioned the ability of the creatures and how they functioned in the wild while completing their life cycles or their "mission" as she referred to it. She says, [A.S.] Packard writes . . . but fails to tell what I want to know most; the range and sharpness of their vision" (*Moths* 35). She also disputes the findings of the acclaimed lepidopterist W.J. Holland regarding a moth's ability to identify color and the vision range of either a day or night-flying species:

Holland writes, "The eyes of moths are often greatly developed," but makes no definite statements as to their range of vision, until he reaches the Catocalae family, of which he records: "the hind wings, are however, most brilliantly coloured. In some species they are banded with pink, in others with crimson; still others have markings of yellow, orange, or snowy white on a background of jet black. These colours are distinctive of the species to a greater or less extent. They are only displayed at night. The conclusion is irresistibly forced upon us that the eyes of these creatures are capable of discriminating these colours in the darkness . . ."

This conclusion is not "irresistibly forced" upon me. I do believe, know in fact, that all day-flying, feeding moths have keener sight and longer range of vision than non-feeders; but I do not believe the differing branches of Catocalae group, or moths of any family, locate each other "in the blackness of night," by seeing markings distinctly. I can think of no proof that moths, butterflies or any insects recognize or appreciate colour. (*Moths* 36-37)

Stratton-Porter then explains that the most sensitive of all organs on the moth or butterfly are the antennae (38). She offers several examples of how the male moth uses its antennae in identifying a receptive female and how, if deprived of antennae, its behavior changes:

It starts the moth tremulously shivering, aimlessly beating, crazy, in fact and there is no hope of it posing for a picture. Doctor [Brackenridge?] Clemens records that *Cecropia* could neither walk nor fly, but wheeled in a senseless manner when deprived of its antennae. This makes me sure that they are the seat of highest sensibility, for I have known in one or two cases of chloroformed moths reviving and without struggle or apparent discomfort, depositing eggs in a circle around them, while impaled to a setting board with a pin thrust through the thorax where it of necessity must have passed through or very close (sic) the nervous cord and heart. (*Moths* 42)

In fact, Stratton-Porter's *Moths* can be used as a nature primer, as Plum has noted. To aid the inquisitive naturalist, current *Audubon Guides* describe the habitat, range, food, sounds, flight, webs, and life cycles, with additional comments on species behavior, environment and folklore of insects (Milne 27-30). The 1992 *Audubon Guide* reports that "[t]his is the only field guide to use vivid color photographs of insects and spiders as they appear in their natural habitats" (25). That may be true today since Stratton-Porter is now out of print, but she intended and was one of the first in 1912 to photograph and illustrate from life in color. Her text also catalogs the same attributes as does the *Audubon Guide*. A major difference between the two can be found in the organization of the works. Stratton-Porter's text is lengthy and organized by chapters, while the current *Audubon Guide* is encyclopedic and bullets information. However, when comparing the language, one finds a similarity of style. *The Audubon Guide* describes Stratton-Porter's beloved *Cecropia* moth:

Wings speckled grey-brown with rusty shading, especially near body, and have white crescents (lunules), white and red crossbands, tawny

outer margin, and pale lilac tip eyespots. Body dull red-orange with white collar and white rings on abdomen . . . This is the largest North American moth. Its caterpillars spin large brown cocoons that weather to gray. The cocoon is attached along one entire side to a branch, sometimes incorporating the branch and even twigs into its structure. There is 1 generation a year. (775)

Stratton-Porter's adult description and recollection of her first encounter with *Cecropia* as a small girl (long before *Audubon's* publication) applies and combines many of the same descriptors:

It clung to the rough bark, slowly opening and closing large wings of gray velvet down, margined with bands made of shades of gray, tan, and black; banded with a broad stripe of red terra cotta colour with an inside margin of white, widest on the back pair. Both pairs of wings were decorated with half-moons of white, outlined in black and strongly flushed with terra cotta; the front pair near the outer margin had oval markings of blue-black, shaded with gray, outlined with half circles of white, and secondary circles of black. When the wings were raised I could see a face of terra cotta, with small eyes, a broad band of white across the forehead, and an abdomen of terra cotta banded with snowy white above, and spotted with white beneath. Its legs were hairy, and the antennae antlered like small branching ferns. (87)

Stratton-Porter was especially thankful for the gift of a specimen from a friend to her work, "I do not suppose Mr. Hardison thought he was doing anything unusual when he brought me those cocoons, yet by bringing them, he made it possible for me to secure this series of twin *Cecropia* moths, male and female, a thing never before recorded by lepidopterist or photographer so far as I can learn" (*Moths* 121).

Stratton-Porter describes further how "nature loving city people" can collect the cocoons of these moths, the newly emerged caterpillars and adults, and their favorite habits and haunts (121). She expands on the *Cecropia* folklore and calls it "the Robin Moth" due to its lifestyle: "The robin is the bird of the eaves, the back door, the yard and orchard. *Cecropia* is the moth . . . [T]heir emergence at bloom time adds to May and June one more beauty, and frequently I speak of them as the Robin Moth" (130). She details specifically the foods, temperatures, times, and locations required for collecting and raising one's own specimens for study. So, too, does Holland. Their tones are similar, reflecting the time period of the work, as is their

pitch/desire to instruct others. In Holland's book, a portion of a chapter is dedicated to instructing the method of "Sugaring for Moths" (146-150). He uses an indicative, inclusive voice and many descriptive exclamations in the same manner as Stratton-Porter does in her text, thereby nullifying authorial gender differences:

Let us stealthily approach the next tree. It is a beech. What is there? Oho! My beauty! Just above the moistened patch upon the bark is a great Catocala. The gray upper wings are spread, revealing the lower wings gloriously banded with black and crimson. In the yellow light of the lantern the wings appear even more brilliant than they do in sunlight. How the eyes glow like spots of fire! The moth is wary. He has just alighted; he has not yet drunk deep. Move cautiously! (Holland 147-148)

Stratton-Porter's descriptive usage reads similarly:

There I lifted the lid slightly to take a peep, and then with a cry of joy, opened it wide. That particular shoe box had brought me an *Actias Luna*, newly emerged, and as yet unable to fly. I held down my finger, it climbed on, and was lifted to the light . . . Together we studied that moth. Clinging to my finger, the living creature was of such delicate beauty as to impoverish my stock of adjectives at the beginning. (*Moths* 174)

Of the leading naturalists of her time, Stratton-Porter compared herself most to Jean Henri Fabre, a French naturalist and entomologist. She openly mused that if she had published her nature works in European markets instead of American ones, she would possibly have received more credibility and monetary success:

The Fabre books are part of my religion, but I cannot see that Fabre goes deeper, paints life history more accurately in the case of any insect he has studied than I do in *Moths of the Limberlost*, while my book has added proof and attraction of the illustration. Yet France went wild over Fabre. I have a feeling very strongly entrenched that if I had made the mark I have on the homes of the United States or written and illustrated my seven nature books, in any country in Europe, my reception would be very different for my nature work. (qtd. in Meehan 210).

Fabre and Stratton-Porter, indeed, have similar styles and philosophies. One reason for Stratton-Porter's distaste for scientific guides such as Holland's was the pinned black and white drawings

and those whose "essayed colour gave no real impression of the brilliant multi-colours to be found on the wings" (*Tales* 107). Fabre also asserts his preference for being "much more interested in watching life history take place than on a pin in a cabinet" (*The Passionate Observer* 9).

Fabre and Stratton-Porter also agreed on the practical value of the study of insects. Fabre suggests: "[t]o know thoroughly the history of the destroyer of our vines might perhaps be more important than to know how this or that nerve-fibre of a Curriped ends . . . all this ought surely to take precedence of the number of joints in a Crustacean's antennae" (*Passionate Observer* 13-14). Not only in *Moths* but also in many of her other works, Stratton-Porter backs the benefits which come from leaving natural predators such as birds and small mammals to control insect deprivations on crops and fruit trees. She was taught early by her father to take no more than a fair share of Nature's bounty and not to disturb the natural order of life. When she was a small girl in the family orchards and garden, spraying was unheard of (*Let Us Highly Resolve* 300), and she encouraged others to believe that "every small bird of the trees are exploring bark and skinning upper and under leaf surfaces for eggs and tiny caterpillars, and if they escape these, dozens of larger birds are waiting" to devour them (*Moths* 370). Stratton-Porter regularly advocates the benefits of leaving nature to work her special magic: "I am quite sure you can trust nature to balance her forces" ("Hidden Treasures" 62). This trust Fabre shared and he "appreciated the wide variety and lushness of life once humans leave and nature takes over a specific habitat" (*The Passionate Observer* 12). This ecological ethic Stratton-Porter carried over to her audience in her entwined nature stories, *Freckles* and *A Girl of the Limberlost*. Bertrand Richards concludes that "a comparison between *Moths of the Limberlost* and *A Girl of the Limberlost* is inevitable" with "many experiences common to both books," especially the "'moth bait' incident" (105-106).

The swamp and woodland setting of *A Girl of the Limberlost* "furnishes Stratton-Porter with a dramatic naturescape" and also provides for "the ideal classroom where knowledge is happily digested" through the "cunningly veiled nature study lessons" (Green 3, 6). This story is deliberately infused with facts of nature in order to teach the town or city dweller and school pupil how to go about educating themselves about their backyard flora and fauna. She includes the miracle of a Luna moth's emergence not only in *Moths of the*

*Limberlost* but also in *A Girl of the Limberlost*, *Freckles*, and *The Harvester*. She fully appreciated that in order to spread this type of knowledge she must insert natural history into as many works as possible and that her fiction would reach many more readers than would *Moths* alone. This description of a moth's habits, with slight modifications from one work to another, appears in several of her works to encourage the study of natural history to her audience. In *Freckles* she writes:

A peculiar movement under a small walnut tree caught his eye. He [Freckles] stopped to investigate. It was an unusually large Luna cocoon, and the moth was just bursting the upper end in its struggle to reach light and air . . . . The moth cleared the opening and with great wobbings and contortions clung to the branch. He stared speechless with amazement as the moth crept around the limb and clung to the under side. There was a great, puffy body, almost as large as his thumb, and of the very snowiest white that Freckles had ever seen. There was a band of delicate lavender across its forehead, and its feet were of the same colour; there were antlers, like tiny, straw colored ferns, on its head, and on its shoulders little wet-looking flaps no bigger than his thumbnail. As Freckles gazed, tense with astonishment, he saw that those queer, little, wet-looking things were expanding, drooping, taking on color, and small, oval markings were beginning to show . . . . The rapidly growing wings began to appear to be of the most delicate green, with lavender fore-ribs, transparent, eye-shaped markings edged with lines of red, tan, and black, and long, crisp trailers . . . . It began a systematic exercise of raising and lowering its exquisite wings to dry them and to establish circulation. Freckles realized that it would soon be able to spread them and sail away. (22-23)

As acclaimed young adult natural history writer, Jean Craighead George, notes in her afterword to the 1988 edition of *Freckles*:

Stratton-Porter's *Freckles* still has its impact. The description of the luna moth emerging from its cocoon is so beautifully precise that it cannot be improved upon. After reading *Freckles* as a child, I sat three hours watching a luna moth cocoon open and the adult unfold its gorgeous pale green wings. My children have witnessed this, too, and not one among us, we decided, could add anything to Stratton-Porter's wondrous description. (271)

Such accurate descriptions of natural phenomena have led many young people, including me, to collect moths and insects. While read-

ing *A Girl of the Limberlost* and then *Freckles*, I was also a young 4-H member exhibiting my collection, inspired in part by Stratton-Porter and also by my mother who had read Stratton-Porter's works.

Another real life experience Stratton-Porter shares with her readers is the miraculous night during which she was covered by hundreds of moths in the light of the moon. She recounts this factually in *Tales You Won't Believe* (1-13) and also in *A Girl of the Limberlost* (130, 133). After being sprayed by a female moth over the length of her nightgown, Stratton-Porter stood as,

"the best moth bait that the world knows and the night became a vibrant thing, a thing of velvet wings, of velvet sound and brilliant colour, a thing so exquisite that God Himself must have enjoyed the excellence of His handiwork. I had no way of numbering the moths that came fluttering around me. They alighted on my head, on my shoulders, on my hands; they clung to my night robe; they walked over my feet; they flocked over the apple trees; they fluttered through the moonlight, and there was no one to see or to know the poignant beauty of that perfect May hour." (*Tales* 12-13)

In *A Girl of the Limberlost* Stratton-Porter recounts this same event happening to Kate Comstock and uses it to enthrall Kate in natural history phenomena and help her mend her relationship with her daughter. Kate, distraught at having destroyed the last moth Elnora needed for her collection and that would have paid for Elnora's college tuition, finds in the moths clustering about her a vehicle for conveying the love for her daughter which she is reluctant to express.

In addition, Stratton-Porter consciously enacts in her works the ongoing dilemma of conservation (limiting human use of natural resources) versus preservation (protecting natural resources for their own sake). Ralph Lutts notes that at the turn of the century collecting fervor was heightened with the publication of *A Girl of the Limberlost*: "There was even a significant market for specimens by trade or sale that became an important element, perhaps exaggerated, in Gene Stratton Porter's 1909 novel" (25). Indeed, Stratton-Porter acknowledges this market when she lists the current market prices of cocoons and pupae cases as well as the names and addresses of collectors in her magazine article, "Hidden Treasures." Plum relates that "[i]n response to *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Dr. Frank Lutz of the American Museum of Natural History bemoaned the implication in a novel of such wide appeal that someone could earn not just a liv-

ing but a small fortune collecting moths . . . —an exploitation that if practiced on a larger scale would be devastating" (xv). Stratton-Porter, however, imparts her collecting ethic to potential harvesters in "Hidden Treasures," emphasizing that "I believe that any form of nature is a gift to us, for our use, and that we are free to take our share, if we exercise justice and reason. We have no right to more than a fair portion; *wanton destruction is one of the blackest of sins*" (32).

In "What Price the Limberlost?" Bakerman discusses the thematic inversion of pragmatic conservation versus idealistic preservation of Nature and compares Stratton-Porter's approach to the idealism of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. But what Bakerman fails to note is that although Cooper depicts Natty Bumppo living in harmony with nature, Bumppo also exploits nature for gain by trapping and selling furs and guiding others through the perils of the forests; just so do Elnora, Kate and Freckles guide others through the perils of the Limberlost. But in their role as teacher, they do so to educate further the reader about natural history. Kate and Elnora enthusiastically plan how best to instruct Elnora's young pupils by planning the curriculum around the natural rhythms of the swamp:

"They are trying to teach the children [nature work], and half the instructors don't know a blue jay from a kingfisher, a beech leaf from an elm, or a wasp from a hornet . . . I'd love it most of anything in teaching . . . We must find nests, eggs, leaves, queer formations in plants and rare flowers. I must have flower boxes made for each of the rooms and filled with wild things. I should begin to gather specimens this very day." (*Girl* 277)

Later, Kate suggests this curricular approach to Elnora:

"Give them moths for June. Then make that the basis of your year's work. Find the distinctive feature of each month, the one thing which marks it a time apart, and hit them squarely between the eyes with it . . . February belongs to our winter birds . . . Give them hawks and owls for February, Elnora." (*Girl* 319-320)

Bakerman perhaps puts undue emphasis upon the swamp as a place of peril for Stratton-Porter and her characters; she fails to observe that although Stratton-Porter does admit to dangers (snakes and quicksand, for example), she far more exults in the wonders of nature, such as the life cycle of a moth, when she has Kate explain:

... but it takes the wisdom of the Almighty God to devise the wing of a moth. If there was ever a miracle, this whole process is one. Now, as I understand it, this creature is going to keep on spreading those wings until they grow to size and harden to strength sufficient to bear its body. Then it flies away, mates with its kind, lays its eggs on the leaves of a certain tree and the eggs hatch tiny caterpillars which eat just that kind of leaves, and the worms grow and grow, and take on different forms and colours until at last they are big caterpillars six inches long, with long horns. Then they burrow into the earth, build a house around themselves from material which is inside them and lie through rain and freezing cold for months. A year from egg laying they come out like this, and begin the process all over again. They don't eat, they don't see distinctly, they live but a few days and fly only at night; then they drop off easily, but the process goes on. (*Girl* 296-297)

Descriptions of life processes such as the one quoted above can be found in both *A Girl of the Limberlost* and the nonfiction *Moths of the Limberlost*. By interjecting clear and factual natural descriptions into fiction rather than using romanticized images, Stratton-Porter spreads ecological understanding of life's miracles to her audience while still acknowledging the dilemma of conservation and preservationist ethics and the relationship between humans and their environments.

Stratton-Porter inserts the same messages for conservation of natural resources into both *A Girl of the Limberlost* and *Moths of the Limberlost*. The opening lines of *Moths* are a description of how the Limberlost had been altered due to the progress of industry and agriculture and the inevitability of change: "It was a piece of forethought to work unceasingly at that time, for soon commerce attacked the swamp and began its usual process of devastation . . . Now, the Limberlost exists only in ragged spots and patches" (*Moths* 4). Likewise, through the voice of Elnora, Stratton-Porter describes the changes wrought upon the Limberlost:

Men all around were clearing available land. The trees fell wherever corn would grow. The swamp was broken by several gravel roads, dotted in places around the edge with little frame houses, and the machinery of oil wells . . . wherever the trees fell the moisture dried, the creeks ceased to flow, the river ran low, and at times the bed was dry. With unbroken sweep the winds of the west came, gathering force with every mile and howled and raved . . . blowing the surface

from the soil in clouds of fine dust, and rapidly changing everything. (187-188)

Bakerman suggests that Stratton-Porter's expanded description of the threat to agricultural concerns and manipulation of her rhetoric indicate that she viewed the Limberlost as a means to an end (177). Stratton-Porter skillfully imbues her fiction with an emotional appeal for conservation that exceeds the rational appeal of her nonfiction works. Admittedly, Stratton-Porter was a realist when fighting the preservationist battle. She saw firsthand the inevitability of agricultural and industrial "progress." Without close reading of both her fiction and nonfiction, though, her readers could possibly fail to balance and acknowledge the efforts put forth by Stratton-Porter to preserve and educate others about the native beauty of the Limberlost. Stratton-Porter created with great effort and then dedicated her second home, Wildflower Woods, to the state of Indiana as a preserve for native plants and animals before moving to California in 1920. As noted by Bertrand Richards (36) and others, it would have been interesting to see the outcome of Stratton-Porter's own evolution as an educator, conservationist, and preservationist, but her untimely death in 1924 intervened.

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THE "TALKING TREES" OF THE LIMBERLOST:  
NEGOTIATING A CLASS-INFORMED ECOFEMINISM

ROBERT MELLIN

William Cronon wrote at the end of the twentieth century that "[t]he dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living . . . (80). This observation echoes Raymond Williams's cultural criticism of literary representations of the countryside, which, in his landmark work, *The Country and the City* (1973), he faults for shielding us from the harsh conditions of labor in rural areas. Cronon's cultural criticism-inflected work has helped to turn ecocriticism toward social justice concerns, which had been neglected by much of the ecocriticism produced in the US during the 1970s and 1980s; however, this turn has led to contemporary ecocriticism that nevertheless continues to misrepresent rural lives by conflating an interest in the physical environment, rural conditions of living, and social justice.

Janet Malcolm's criticism of Gene Stratton-Porter in "Capitalist Pastorage" exemplifies this unsympathetic representation of rural lives. Malcolm writes that "consumerism . . . is at the heart of Stratton-Porter's literary enterprise," and that her work was the "first of the consumerist fairy tales packaged as nature novels." Similarly, Michael Bunce observes that literature produced from an Anglo-American pastoral ideology "dominated the best-seller lists" during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the US (56). Malcolm and Bunce both consider the popular US environmental literature of the early 1900s to be socially irresponsible.

It is true that nature works were popular during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but it is much less certain that Stratton-Porter was engaging with a socially irresponsible fantasy.

Edward Westcott's *David Harum* (1898) sold 750,000 copies by 1904, and *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903) by John Fox, Jr. and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) by Kate Douglas Wiggin were among the "most popular American books of all time" (Bunce 57). Stratton-Porter's first novel, *Freckles* (1904), sold more than 600,000 copies by 1914 (Long 184). Between 1900 and 1930, only five US novels sold more than a million and a half copies each, and Gene Stratton-Porter had written four of them (Schmitt 125). Some of Stratton-Porter's rural characters did, indeed, traffic in pastoral fantasies, but they did so as a means to alter the rough conditions of labor in the actual countryside—not through escapist fantasy but by actually altering their conditions of labor by exploiting mainstream perceptions of the land as rural idyll.

*A Girl of the Limberlost* depicts an agrarian laboring-class character, Elnora Comstock, struggling to participate in the romantic narrative of the unworked countryside. An understandable goal of her struggle is to improve her conditions of labor, but, most important to Elnora, another goal is to prevent the ecological devastation of the countryside. These two goals conflict, though, since the route to her first goal can most easily be accomplished by sacrificing her second one; that is, easy money was available by compromising the ecological integrity of the Limberlost region.

This dilemma is illustrated by Elnora's relationship with the trees on her family's property. Early in the novel, when Elnora realizes that she needs money to attend school, she turns to her neighbor confidante, Uncle Wesley, who wonders why Elnora has to be "so dratted poor," since there is "fine timber" to be cut down on her family's property (17). Uncle Wesley's wife, Aunt Margaret, notes that Elnora's mother, Kate Comstock, is worried about going to the poorhouse even though, as she notes, "there is a big farm, covered with lots of good timber" (31). Uncle Wesley is particularly distressed, though, saying that he knows of "one tree that [Kate Comstock] owns that would put Elnora in heaven for a year" (32). "I'll go to the law for Elnora's share of the land," he declares, and offers to "oversee clearing [the] land" (32-33). "Any day you say the word you can sell six thousand worth of rare timber off this place easy," he adds (56). Elnora is tempted. She does indeed mourn the "straggling trees of the rapidly dismantling [sic] Limberlost" (76). In addition, she theorizes that "clearing available land . . . wherever corn could grow" is degrading the environment, since "Wherever the trees fell the mois-



ture dried, the creeks ceased to flow, the river ran low, and at times the bed was dry" (187). However, Elnora needs money desperately so she can further her formal education and opportunities for change. She contemplates what will happen as she becomes older, saying she is "meant to sell enough of her share of her father's land" to finish college (188-189). "Next year," she says, "I am heir to my share of over three hundred acres of land covered with almost as valuable timber as was in the Limberlost" (211). She wants to save the land, but she needs money to attend school. What's a poor girl to do?

Throughout *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Elnora does not focus as much on the trees as she does on the moths of the Limberlost. She also has other organic sources of income available to her, such as ferns and American Indian relics. Her fixation on the trees is intriguing on two, perhaps more, levels. First, trees are foundational to the early phases of capitalism. Carolyn Merchant is among the many who have commented on the indispensability of wood to the rise of capitalism. As she notes, "sixteenth century commercial expansion and national supremacy" depended upon timber, especially old oak trees that were felled to make the hulls of ships (65). "The disruption of the forest ecosystem by the rise of early modern industry," Merchant continues, "bears striking parallels to current environmental issues and is illustrative of the fact that today's environmental crisis is not new in kind, only in degree" (67). Although Elnora might not have stated her concern in this manner, the tension her limited access to capital has caused for her with regard to the trees on the family's property is a fundamental problem as her agrarian community enters into modernity. Her mother, who becomes a wonderful human being at the close of the novel, is not so troubled. Although Kate is loath to cut down the trees of her idealized husband, Robert, she tells Elnora, who wonders how her mother will pay for their new house in town, that if money becomes an issue, "I'll sell some timber and put a few oil wells where they don't show much" (347). While it is true that Kate Comstock's comment might call into question the commitment to environmentalism in *A Girl of the Limberlost*, it is not a damning inconsistency. That Kate Comstock hasn't succeeded in finding an alternative to capitalist development of the land is not the exception but the rule. Again, what's a person to do? Remain poor in the actual, unromantic countryside? Perhaps Janet Malcolm, toiling from a position of privilege in the academic field, would say "yes."

Another reason to focus on the trees in *A Girl of the Limberlost*, though, is that Elnora's unease concerning the instrumental value of trees has immediate precursors in US literary history. In his *The Mountains of California*, published fifteen years before *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Wisconsinite John Muir describes riding out a wind storm while he is perched at the top of a tall fir. During a windstorm in the Sierras, Muir has chosen to take a stroll in the forest, listening to what he called the "passionate music" (246) of swaying and falling trees. Muir writes, "Even when the grand anthem had swelled to its highest pitch, I could distinctly hear the varying tones of individual trees" (248). At noon, Muir reaches the summit of the highest ridge of the area. He decides to climb to the top of the highest Douglas fir on the summit to ride in the music made by the wind in the forest. The experience in the trees, concludes Muir, is instructive: "We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones, it is true; but our own little journeys, away and back again, are only little more than tree-wavings—many of them not so much" (253). Muir's proclamation is lofty and masculine—boundless pronouncements about the universe from his big tree.

Muir's experiences in the forests of California precede the publication of Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" (*A White Heron and Other Stories*, 1886) by several years; both works, nevertheless, share key experiences with trees, and both provide the context for understanding Elnora's resolution to her dilemma concerning the trees of the Limberlost. Like Elnora, Sylvia, the young female protagonist of "A White Heron," spends much of her time outdoors and meets an attractive male visitor who arrives at her rural home. This stranger, an ornithologist who shoots birds for his studies, asks Sylvia if she has seen the nest of the white heron he has been tracking, since Sylvia knows the woods so well. Hoping to please the stranger, Sylvia climbs a tree that is described as being "like a great main-mast to the voyaging earth" (8). Sylvia is so high up in the tree that she can see all of "the woodlands and farms [that] reached miles and miles into the distance; here and there were church steeples, and white villages, truly it was a vast and awesome world" (8). Sylvia eventually sees the white heron's secret nest; however, when she arrives home, she thinks that "No, she must keep silence!" (10). Unlike Muir, who is eager to air his thoughts about the secrets of the

universe as he weaves in the wind from his spot at the top of a Douglass fir, Sylvia concludes that she “cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (10). “A White Heron” ends with Sylvia’s devoted silence and the narrator’s apostrophe to “woodlands and summertime” to remember and “[b]ring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!” (10). She has gained knowledge while in the tree, but it cannot be spoken; Sylvia instead is left to be a “lonely country child.” This poor country girl seems to choose something like martyrdom.

Anticipating Cronon’s observation of the cultural need for a pastoral landscape in the US, Elnora is determined not to remain a poor country girl but to avail herself of the opportunity to go out into the world that Muir, as a male in the late nineteenth century, has. She appeals to what those who do not live in the country want: a pastoral, therapeutic countryside. When Phillip Ammon, who has been sent from Chicago to the bucolic Limberlost region to recuperate from his afflictions, asks for more information from Elnora about the woods, she tells him that “The swamp is almost ruined now . . . The maples, walnuts, and cherries are all gone. The talking trees are the only things left worth while” (312). This is the moment in the novel when Elnora chooses a path out of her dilemma: to use the trees to help her to improve the conditions of living that seem to be her destiny. She has been offered a job as a lecturer on natural history at the local school, a job for which she is qualified because of the knowledge she has gained in the school of the woods. If she can position herself as uniquely able to represent the environment because, as she says, the talking trees are her “discovery” (313), then this earliest form of capital, trees, could be of value by helping her and by preserving them and their environment.

After a long passage describing what various trees have to say, Elnora is asked by Phillip, “What do the beeches tell you, Elnora?”

“To be patient, to be unselfish, to do unto others as I would have them do to me.”

“And the oaks?”

“They say ‘be true,’ ‘live a clean life,’ ‘send your soul up here and let the winds of the world teach it what honour achieves.’”

“Wonderful secrets, those!” marvelled Ammon. “Are they telling them now? Could I hear?” (313).

Elnora is an invaluable interpreter of the countryside who has helped a city resident, Phillip Ammon, recover from his illness. Of course, Phillip, like all of those who choose to participate in the fantasy of an unworked countryside, has not experienced the difficult life the residents of this rural region must scratch out. If this is how Phillip and the cultural unconscious of the middle class prefer to see the countryside, then Elnora is able to move from being a laborer of the land to being a laborer of the idea of the land. She is a teacher who works within the circumscribed space of the idealized countryside. The trees have value to Elnora and the new visitors to the land in their preservation. Is Elnora so wrong to participate in the bourgeois fantasy of the unworked countryside if doing so improves her conditions of labor and helps to preserve the integrity of the ecosystem? It is true that such a resolution to the problem that Elnora has had to confront—how to improve her life without cutting down the trees—does not offer much resistance to an economic system that is based on the exploitation of natural resources and the degradation of the environment, but to think that Elnora could overturn capitalism is more of a pipedream than conversing with the trees is. She is poor and female in the early twentieth century. This observation is not meant to be an apology for Elnora.

Stratton-Porter once commented that “very early I came to the revelation galling for a girl: Land might make one healthy; it might make one capable; but it would not bring to one as much ready money as a bank, or a store, or the practice of medical or legal professions brought” (“What My Father Meant to Me” 72). Like Porter, Elnora needed money in order to get an education that would then allow access into a profession. Stratton-Porter has noted that at the start of her writing career, she was confronting how she could stay out of poverty. She wrote:

I was squarely confronted with a “sink or swim” proposition. I was not by nature or teaching a sinker, so I lifted my chin and pulled for the shore . . . Learning to swim because you will drown if you do not is a rather messy performance—slow, but it is dead sure. You will either sink or you will swim. I swam—slowly, to be sure, but I never once went entirely under. I took up my pen. (qtd. in Long 137)

Janet Malcolm might have a difficult time grasping the problems facing rural women, but not Stratton-Porter. She wrote popular novels and less popular local natural histories, enabling her to avoid the dif-

ficult life facing poor country girls. Elnora Comstock teaches a willing public about the unworked but wild countryside and avoids the hard life confronting her. Class mobility was secured by both, but the maneuver also yields a version of ecofeminism that might essentialize women as naturally attuned to the earth. While Stratton-Porter's resolution to class problems throws her ecofeminism into question, her "fairy tales" nevertheless engage with the material conditions of living facing rural women in the Midwest.

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"A STORY OF AMERICAN GRIT":  
A DAUGHTER OF THE LAND  
AS REALIST MANIFESTO

MARY R. RYDER

The works of Gene Stratton-Porter have long been relegated to the ranks of popular and sentimental pot-boilers whose messages made them ideal for serialization in women's magazines. Indeed, readers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, feeling the stresses of city life, turned in vast numbers to Stratton-Porter's nostalgic accounts of the "simple goodness, the warmth, the neighborliness, and the kindness" (Richards 121) of rural hometown and farm life in novels like *Freckles* (1904), *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), and *Laddie* (1913). So great was the popularity of Stratton-Porter's work that by the time of her death in 1924, over ten million copies of her books had been sold, selling at the rate of 1700 copies a day during the last seventeen years of her life (Overton 312; Shumaker 411). Yet, with the passing of the centennial year of Stratton-Porter's most recognized novel, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, renewed interest in her fiction suggests that her books can be viewed as more than just domestic novels that fulfilled what she asserted was the goal of all fiction, the moral betterment of the world.

This moral emphasis, which Stratton-Porter so aptly applied in Elnora's coming-of-age story, set the stage, however, for her experiment in realism, *A Daughter of the Land* (1918). This later novel goes beyond the traditional female *Bildungsroman* and offers an account of a woman's self-actualization, much in the spirit of another text of that same year, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. In her novel Stratton-Porter expresses concerns about women's unrecognized capabilities, applauds their triumph over cultural limitations, and celebrates their successes in attaining money, property, career, and marriage. While

Stratton-Porter's own life embodied many feminist achievements, the majority of her novels embraced a formulaic plot of emergent womanhood and the conventional happy endings that readers expected and that brought her great popular success. But *A Daughter of the Land*, as an example of literary realism, demands a long-awaited reassessment of a writer whose works were once considered as "of practically no real literary value to the mature reader" (Shumaker 413), essentially saccharine fiction suitable only for the parlor table in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (Macmullen 371).

While Stratton-Porter did not embrace the naturalists' emphasis on the ugly and wicked side of human nature, she admitted to having read and been moved by "books of realism." "I know their strength and truth to life," she asserted. "What I do not know is whether they accomplish any great work for the betterment of the world. . ." (qtd. in Obuchowski 77). Yet she did not shrink from the truth of what life was for women in rural America in the early part of her century. In *A Daughter of the Land* Stratton-Porter comfortably moved beyond the conventional happy ending that defined domestic fiction and rejected, at least in part, what Ellen Hoekstra calls the "Pedestal Myth" of womanhood that dominated women's magazine fiction between 1900 and 1920 (44). While her protagonist twice lives out the boy-meets-girl plot, certainly learns her lesson through suffering, and is reunited with her mother after separation and misunderstanding, Stratton-Porter does not use these incidents to warn women readers of the devastating personal consequences of stepping off the pedestal of ideal womanhood. On the contrary, Stratton-Porter constructs a new ideal for her female hero, one which supports a woman's right to self-definition and choice. In this, her first foray into realism, Stratton-Porter writes the story of Kate Bates in accord with what Amy Kaplan terms social realism, producing in her text a social accuracy that portrays "the way things are" (8) and offers what Jane Bakerman calls "a thoughtful examination of serious human problems" (179-180).

Some early reviewers recognized at once that Stratton-Porter was stepping out of her usual mode in *A Daughter of the Land*. "Kate Bates fights her way against a father who thinks that a younger daughter's duty is to scrub and drudge so that the boys may have land and opportunities," wrote a reviewer for the *Outlook* (145). The greatest praise came from William Lyon Phelps in the *Bookman* when he defied "any unprejudiced person to read 'A Daughter of the Land'

to the end without enthusiasm for the story." He concluded that the novel was an "admirable story, with a real plot and real characters" where nothing was "shirked or softened" (301). Understandably, then, the novel surprised Stratton-Porter enthusiasts, and its realism likely contributed to lower sales and less popularity than the stories that Stratton-Porter had previously published.

*A Daughter of the Land* proves revolutionary in the Stratton-Porter canon in that it follows the development of a woman who dares to challenge the male hegemony and succeeds. While Kate does reenact to some extent the expected drama of the domestic novel in becoming estranged from her family, rejecting one lover for a less suitable one, and at first marrying unwisely, Stratton-Porter still allows her protagonist to confront an abusive father, reject a man unmatched to her intellectually, and survive an unhappy marriage to emerge as a stronger woman. Kate Bates becomes an example of "American grit," as the *Outlook* reviewer noted (145), a true-to-life and unromanticized figure.

Stratton-Porter opens her novel with the teenaged Kate in open defiance of the male-dominated world in which she finds herself. Denied the chance to attend normal school, as her older sister had, Kate rebels against the idea that it is her "duty" and "job" to work at home so that her sister may sew a trousseau and so that her brothers may each secure two hundred acres by the age of twenty-one. Reasonably she argues for equal rights for women, remarking sarcastically that a man would have "a difficult proposition on his hands to found a family without a woman; or to run the Government either" (Porter 3). Used to the buggy whip which her father wields against wife and children alike, Kate, with the help of a sympathetic sister-in-law, escapes the farm and her father's dictate that "Women are to work and to bear children" (14). Following the formula of the prodigal daughter, Kate secures her education, finds employment, marries imprudently, and lives unhappily. Still, she asserts her legal rights and accordingly becomes an advocate for women. When her father signs a contract for her to teach the home school, she refuses to do so, saying that "I am of age, and you had no authority from me to sign. . ." (47). Rather than endure the consequent physical abuse that has cowed her mother into compliance and submission, Kate dodges the chairs and meat platters heaved at her and confronts her father with the fact of the malevolence and hatred he has engendered in his offspring.

In the tradition of the female *Bildungsroman*, Kate grows in self-understanding, realizing that her desire is for the land itself, the very thing granted her brothers but denied her simply because of the accident of her gender. When her mentor, the wealthy and refined Mrs. Jardine, asks, "And what are your ambitions?" Kate replies, "To own and to cultivate, and to bring to the highest state of efficiency at least two hundred acres of land, with convenient and attractive buildings and pedigreed stock, and to mother at least twelve perfect physical and mental boys and girls" (104).

While the reply is hardly what a traditional Stratton-Porter heroine would have made, Kate echoes Stratton-Porter's belief that "women should have rights of inheritance equal to those of men" (Obuchowski 78). To the shocked Mrs. Jardine she further asserts, "Life shows us women on an age-old quest every day, everywhere we go; why be so secretive about it? Why not say honestly what we want, and take it if we can get it?" (105). In spite of Kate's progressive view, she rejects Mrs. Jardine's idea that she should educate herself, take the platform, and lecture to the masses on suffrage. Kate opts, instead, for "stern reality" over abstraction: "I think more could be accomplished with selected specimens, by being steadily on the job, than by giving an hour to masses" (105). Kate likewise rejects the premise that women are more interested in themselves than others until they are married and become mothers. "The Great Experience," she insists, never touches many women and they remain dissatisfied, trapped in a system they did not create (109). She is not ready to accept a domestic life, as did her mother, wherein women walk on Sundays to save the horses (121).

Perhaps most puzzling to critics, and to male critics in particular, is Kate's sudden and unlikely marriage to George Holt, a man whose primary motive is to claim some of the Bates's acreage and to live comfortably off his wife. Playing on the sentimental novel's theme of the unfortunate marriage, Stratton-Porter seems to marry off Kate to a wastrel with no clear reason for doing so. Kate subsequently endures the spitefulness of a witchy mother-in-law, gives up her teaching career to become a mother of twins, and watches as her inheritance is squandered by her husband. Bertrand Richards finds this plot line artificial, unsatisfactory in a realistic piece, and declares that Kate "deserves little sympathy for the outcome" because she goes into the marriage "with her eyes wide open" (44). An early reviewer called her decision to marry Holt "so inexcusably silly . . .

that it would be difficult to keep patience with her at all, were it not for the fact that one feels it to be entirely the result of an arbitrary decree on the part of the author, determined to subject her heroine to the severest sort of trial" (*New York Times* 338).

Kate's "blunder" in marrying Holt is, however, neither inexcusably silly nor contrived. Disappointed that her previous suitor, John Jardine, is not at all self-educated, Kate pridefully rejects him, confessing later that she loves neither him nor George Holt. Emotionally vulnerable, Kate then enters marriage in much the same way that Charity Royall does in Edith Wharton's *Summer*, published the previous year; while Charity's situation is more desperate, Kate's options are equally limited. In spite of her strong claims to independence, Kate is realistic enough to know that being financially cut off from her family compels her to seek security elsewhere. Teaching provides some assurance of income, but Kate cannot free herself entirely from cultural expectations. Like Stratton-Porter, Kate knows her ambitions can only be fulfilled by having career *and* family. Her character is, therefore, apparently contradictory, as Richards points out, and that contradictory nature leads her to make "all the wrong choices to what most concerns her" (84). She resigns herself to a marriage without passion or joy as long as it does not interfere with her teaching, and she continues to feel capable and independent as long as she has a salary (Porter 155).

In regard to Kate's marriage, Stratton-Porter again breaks the pattern of her earlier fiction. Kate succumbs to a spiritual lethargy atypical of her fictional predecessors and rejects what Jane Bakerman has called the Stratton-Porter's heroine's first obligation: "to run a perfect home and to nurture husband and children" (179). Kate rejects her newly born twins with the question, "Am I supposed to welcome and love them?" (169). She says nothing about her husband's moving out of their bedroom, and she mechanically but capably cares for her children. Stratton-Porter writes that Kate "had lost none of her ambition, but there was a limit to her capacity" (174). She learns through personal suffering to balance the traditional role of mother with the progressive role of breadwinner. Yet she never sacrifices her independence in marriage and refuses to be smothered by men's artificial rules, as her mother had been. Kate thus confirms a pattern of "consistent strength and capability" that Bakerman ascribes to Stratton-Porter's female characters (179) like Elnora Comstock.

After her father's death, Kate further asserts her power by directing her share of the inheritance into the milling business, a venture which is destined to be profitable until her husband interferes. Fearing to relinquish a "man's right" to control the family business, George Holt accuses Kate of making him look bad in the community of men. She, however, responds, "I can't help how it will look" (213), threatens to take the children and leave if he doesn't approve of her (214-15), and finally dismisses him entirely as a business partner (224). Kate dares to defy the standard that considered marriage and career incompatible for women, something Stratton-Porter herself challenged while continuing to endorse the moral importance of woman's sphere in the home. Critics might argue that Stratton-Porter allows her protagonist to triumph by too conveniently removing the male figures who would stifle her. George Holt, for instance, blows himself up in destroying the mill, and Mr. Bates dies while his wife defiantly burns the deeds which would deny his daughters their share of the estate. In freeing Mrs. Bates to express herself and champion her daughters' cause, Stratton-Porter likewise frees Kate to challenge her brothers' authority and claim the family farm. With business acumen, she fairly divides her father's estate, shocking her more timid sisters-in-law, gains their admiration, and engenders respectful fear in her brothers.

Phelps contends that Kate continues to hold the reader's interest throughout this novel "not merely by what happens to her, but by what she is" (301). Driven by a love for the land and the conviction that she can manage it as well as men can, Kate lives out the suppressed desires which many women readers of domestic fiction must have felt. And she is a survivor in the struggle. Contrary to Richards's contention that "rewards come too easily" to Kate and that she "really has a rather easy time of it" (83-84), Kate endures a long and arduous journey to self-understanding. Like Alexandra Bergson in Cather's *O Pioneers!* published five years earlier, Kate channels her energies into the land: "Kate threw herself into the dream of her heart with all the zest of her being. Always she had loved and wanted land. Now she had it. She knew how to handle it. She could make it pay as well as any Bates man, for she had man strength. . ." (253). Like Alexandra, though, Kate loses something in challenging traditional roles. She, too, becomes blinded to the complexity of human relationships. Kate finds herself estranged from her daughter Polly, whom she consigns to traditional women's work on Polly's inlaws'

farm, and is reconciled to her daughter only shortly before Polly's death in childbirth.

In following Cather's lead in *O Pioneers!* Stratton-Porter might now be expected to marry Kate to her best friend without sacrificing Kate's independence into the bargain. This she does. Again rejecting John Jardine, the self-actualized Kate announces, ". . . I have no particular desire to marry anybody; I like my life immensely as I'm living it. I'm free, independent. . ." (277). She continues to berate a social system that prizes women's beauty over strength of character. Although she asserts that "[n]o man cares a picayune about a woman who can take care of herself . . ." (323), with girlish delight she accepts the compliments and attentions of Dr. Robert Gray, her widower brother-in-law. In accepting Robert Gray's offer of marriage, Kate nonetheless remains independent and negotiates her own terms of marriage. She will marry Robert but not join his household until her own son is married and settled on the home place. She will not consent to the union until assured that Robert was not prompted by her well-meaning but sometimes interfering sister-in-law, Agatha. One does not leave the novel expecting Kate to pass quietly into the oblivion of domesticity. She is no longer the same idealistic young woman who took "the wings of morning" (1) but is a realistic woman who has known joys and sorrows, struggles and defeats, but has refused to be bested by life.

The primary readers of Stratton-Porter's fiction were middle-class American women who read for pleasure or escape (Richards 121), but they also read to discover characters like themselves or like what they aspired to be. Kate Bates was one such realistic character, a woman with true American grit. The fullest embodiment of Stratton-Porter's own attitudes toward female self-assertiveness, independence, and equality, this daughter of the land is hardly one of the "flatly 'good' or 'bad' or 'quaint'" characters of Stratton-Porter's earlier novels. She does not "beguile those [readers] who spend much of their lives averting their gaze from the glare of reality" (Macmullen 378-379). Rather, Kate is kind of female model of "courage and integrity" (Obuchowski 74) which Stratton-Porter felt belonged in American fiction, especially in a time when very capable and deserving women were seeking equal status with men. As a departure from her usual romantic fiction, then, the novel does not deserve to be shelved with the works of a Mrs. Barclay or Harold Bell Wright. Kate, as the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer notes, is

“genuine, downright, [and] practical” (585), and *A Daughter of the Land* thrusts Stratton-Porter into a new role as a realist writer who was fully conscious of the social and gender issues of her time.

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NATURE WRITING AND POPULAR CULTURE IN GENE STRATTON-PORTER’S *THE KEEPER OF THE BEES*

SUSAN SCHILLER

Gene Stratton-Porter’s purpose for writing was made clear to her public and critics in 1916 when she wrote “My Work and My Critics” for the *Bookman*, saying, “The task I set myself was to lead every human being I could influence afield; but with such reverence instilled into their touch that devastation would not be ultimately complete” (148). In the same article she answers critics who judge her work as idealistic rather than realistic because her plots do not dwell on the ugly side of life:

I elect to write only of moral men and women who work for the betterment of the world. My characters portray life as it is lived in homes of refinement and culture, where each man and woman does his level best. They represent life as it is lived in many homes all of us know, and as it might be lived in all homes, if men and women would live up to the ‘mark of their high calling’; do their best instead of their worst. (150)

*The Keeper of the Bees* (1925) exhibits both these goals by combining the actions of moral men and women with the love of nature, specifically of gardening and beekeeping. It is this particular talent for blending story telling with nature writing that allows us to value Stratton-Porter’s work as a hybrid form of literature.

Stratton-Porter wrote *The Keeper of the Bees* in the fall of 1924, completing most of it out of doors at her vacation home on Catalina Island, California. She had lived in California for the past six years and it was time for a permanent residence. This mansion, the first home in the Bel Air subdivision, was nearly completed, and she expected a December move-in date. According to biographer Judith Reich Long, she finished the book in record time. Stratton-Porter did

not think it "important . . . whether or not it reached the best-seller list," because she intended that her son-in-law, James Leo Meehan, adapt it for a motion picture version that "would be released simultaneously with the novel's 1925 serialization in *McCall's*" (249). To relax after finishing the book, she took two brief automobile trips: one to Lake Arrowhead and one north to visit the Redwoods near San Francisco. Although she was tragically killed two days after her return when a streetcar hit her automobile, her death delayed the release of the book and film only slightly (Long 249). In 1925, the novel was serialized from February to September; it became a best seller, and the film was released in October ("Annual Bestsellers").

Although book reviews ranged from negative to positive, the consensus was that this was not Porter's best effort. For example, *The Boston Transcript* review said in August of 1926 that, "as a novel it cannot truthfully be said to be a work of high literary craftsmanship. It almost approaches 'fine writing' and then again it descends to the level of the Sunday supplement" (qtd. in MacLean 38). The *International Book Review* was even harsher:

The story as a whole is less skillfully told than were Mrs. Porter's earlier tales. It is burdened with much excessive verbiage, there are repetitions and clumsiness of narrative, and the story is burdened with even more minute description of nature than the author always has insisted upon. The plot unfolds without subtlety along a central line and with not too many complications, keeping the hero always well in the limelight and having many dramatic situations and striking moments, so that it is exactly suited to the needs of the movies. (F. F. K., qtd. in MacLean 38-39)

Others like F.F. Bond of the *New York Times* were not as critical, but the book was not hailed as fine art either. Bond wrote: "Despite the coolly calculated appeal of 'The Keeper of the Bees', [sic] a sense of sincerity shines out through its pages. Mrs. Stratton-Porter wrote as she did because she felt what she was saying and believed it thoroughly. She has packed it full of her cheery optimism, her homely wisdom, her love of fields and flowers, and her own abundant and abiding faith" (qtd. in MacLean 39). Although her "devoted circle of readers" of 1925 (*International Book Review*, F. F. K. qtd. in MacLean 39) were likely to appreciate the number of references to

God, faith, pure living, honor, and goodness, today's readers are more likely to find these multiple references tiresome and outdated.

True to her life-long goal of bringing people to nature, she accurately describes bees, including the milder Italians and the angry Black Germans, two well-known varieties. Her descriptions of nature offset sentimentality as well as encourage a significant appreciation of bees. She further contextualizes her story within popular cultural concerns created by changes evolving out of World War I. Moreover, descriptions of bee life are still current and have the potential to generate a positive attitude toward bees and beekeeping. Cultural concerns and beekeeping generate the exigency of the narrative.

The plot of this novel follows the adventures of a World War I veteran, Jamie MacFarlane, who suffers from a shrapnel wound that has refused to heal. While in the hospital he overhears doctors' plans for sending him to Camp Kearney, a tuberculosis center, which is the equivalent of a death sentence. He runs away, starting what he calls his "great adventure" (*Keeper* 11). After traveling more than one hundred miles, his spirit is hopeful. He even has imagined a new healing regimen. When he reaches a point of complete exhaustion, he stops for help at a well-tended cottage that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. The Bee Master, an aristocratic older man, exits the house, groping in great pain, calling out: "Help! For God's sake, lad, help me!" Jamie silently appeals to God, "Now you've got to help me, Lord! You must help me now!" (*Keeper* 49). He assists the Bee Master into the house, reviving him with a few drops of "aromatic spirits of ammonia" (*Keeper* 51). This provides enough time for the Bee Master to request that Jamie stay in the cottage and tend his garden and bees. The little Scout, an androgynous ten-year-old who leads a pack of boys, will assist. Jamie agrees, and with support from next-door-neighbor Margaret Cameron and the little Scout, Jamie becomes the Keeper of the Bees.

Jamie simultaneously begins bee keeping and the new healing regimen. The little Scout lends a hand and teaches him about bees while Margaret Cameron provides meals. One evening he meets a girl on the beach during a storm whom he names "Storm Girl." In a chivalrous response to her deep distress and assuming he is going to soon die, he agrees to wed her the next day, promising to forego seeking her identity or future contact—a promise he later questions when his full health returns. When the Bee Master dies, Jamie and the little Scout equally inherit the Bee Master's property. There is a bit of



tension when the Bee Master's stepdaughter shows up to claim falsely that she has rights to the property, but the little Scout executes a plan that involves the Black Germans who are swarming just at the right moment. The climax occurs when Jamie is called to the bedside of a dying girl whose marriage certificate bears his name. He assumes responsibility for the baby and is reunited with Storm Girl, who at that point is revealed as chaste and pure. The falling action unites baby and grandmother, Storm Girl and Jamie, and the little Scout is persuaded by Jamie's guidance to accept her female identity.

In 1921 Stratton-Porter granted the film rights for five novels to Thomas Ince, "whose slogan was 'Clean Pictures for Clean People'" (Long 227). The melodramatic plot is more easily accepted when one considers that in 1924 Stratton-Porter wrote *The Keeper of the Bees* expecting film adaptation; readers today will easily recognize Hollywood melodrama common to the 1920s. Fine art it is not, but Stratton-Porter's genius for introducing readers to a view of nature not usually known by most people *is* finely tuned. Although Stratton-Porter's fictional setting is on the coast, the attention to gardens and design parallels that which she gave for the construction plans of her new Bel Air home. We know that "she had selected the site, a secluded undeveloped tract directly west of present-day Beverly Hills, between two canyons. Shaped like a baby mountain, its wooded terrain was wild and steep" (Long 244). She wanted to maintain the natural landscape because it contained "roadrunners and quail, chewinks and thrushes, hummingbirds and warblers. . . . [and] wildflowers, including the rare yellow mariposa lily" (Long 246). Stratton-Porter had always paid close attention to setting and aimed at preserving nature when she built homes. Her description of the Bee Master's property underscores this value.

Stratton-Porter features bees, flowers, and the power of the ocean in this book rather than moths or healing roots and herbs as in *A Girl of the Limberlost* and *The Harvester*. The setting establishes a naturalist's vision of what is possible with a small piece of land. The garden surrounding the quaint cottage "covered two acres of the Sierra Madres where they meet the Pacific" (*Keeper* 63). The Bee Master carefully considered hive placement and skillfully planted extensive flower beds to serve the bees. As Jamie walks down to the ocean he notices that "[on] either hand, steadily, slowly, came the low hum of millions of working bees—bees hived, not in the ugly flat houses used in numberless apiaries he had passed on his journey, but each

stand in a separate spot raised above the earth on a low platform and having a round pointed roof that gave to the hives a beauty, a quaintness, an appropriateness of location (*Keeper* 64). Here Stratton-Porter describes the more picturesque skep hive. According to A. I. and E. R. Root, "straw skeps are not used in this country . . . Americans would know but little about them" (653). Much more common are flat boxes with removable frames, an invention of François Huber around 1789 (Root 395), a source Stratton-Porter names. It is more likely that Stratton-Porter had seen flat boxes in California, but it was more aligned with her characterization of the Bee Master and Bee Keeper, whose heritages are British and Scottish respectively, to describe the European skeps.

With Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stratton-Porter believed that "beauty is its own excuse for being" ("My Work" 154), and this belief is carried into the garden which feeds the bees. Jamie noticed that every skep is placed in "a bed of myrtle blue as the sky. And then he saw that back of the hives the fences were a wall of the blue plumbago, delicate sheets of it. And above, one after another, great lacy jacquerandas lifting clouds of blue to the heavens." Porter thoroughly describes the Bee Master's blue garden with its "blue violets, heliotrope, forget-me-nots, blue verbenas, blue lilies, larkspur, bluebells, phlox, blue vervain, blue and yet more blue" (*Keeper* 64). The Little Scout tells Jamie:

"The bee garden is blue because blue is the 'perfect colour' and bees are the most perfect of any insect in the way they live, and the most valuable on account of the work they do, and so blue would be the color they love best and it *is!* If you don't believe it, watch them. And because why—the nearest we come to a perfect insect loves perfect colour *best*, why, that's because God made them as they are!" (*Keeper* 196)

Readers today lacking knowledge of bees might question the accuracy of the little Scout's claims. However, Ken Harnick, a member of the Michigan Beekeepers Club and of the Saginaw Valley Beekeepers, is a third-generation beekeeper from Shepherd, Michigan, who is now training his twelve-year-old grandson in bee keeping. He validates the little Scout's claims and says that "bees are the most perfect and their love for blue is a possibility, because bees are dynamic creatures full of surprises" (Interview 29 Oct. 2010).

As in previous books, Stratton-Porter integrates nature into her writing to encourage her readers to value nature. Although she uses information about bees throughout the book, two chapters in particular provide a foundation of knowledge. The first, "The Little Scout," appears early in the novel, while the second, "Because of God," occurs in the middle. She offers technical information in both, but "Because of God" is more detailed and scientific. Stratton-Porter chooses a central point of view, that of the ten-year-old little Scout, as a rhetorical device to describe a spiritual philosophy of life that is developed through knowing bees and which readers may be induced to accept because the information is delivered by a child. On the other hand, if readers view a child's point of view as being unreliable, they may question the accuracy of the information.

The earlier chapter contains the first face-to-face meeting between Jamie and the little Scout. The child grills Jamie about his suitability to fill in for the Bee Master. In this early encounter, information about bees pours out of her. For example, Jamie learns that one has to be "bee immune" to work with bees. Bees have to like a person's scent. Little Scout says, "You know, a bee has got smell hollows instead of a nose. They are in two little tubes that stick out where a nose would be if it wasn't on a bee, and each one of the worker bees (which are the ones that do the business around a hive) each one of the worker bees has got five thousand smell hollows" (*Keeper* 75). Jamie also learns that the Italians are "decenter than the Germans" (*Keeper* 79) and they like music, especially "Highland Mary." (*Keeper* 75). The little Scout describes her first encounter with the Black Germans and adds, "You just naturally got to keep serene; no rough stuff goes . . ." (*Keeper* 79). The colorful colloquialism of the little Scout's words lets her appear strong, yet vulnerable. Her youth is apparent, and the Beekeeper has to hide smiles at times because he understands that the little Scout is fully engaged in judging his worthiness for the job of Beekeeper.

The little Scout even offers a historic review of the literature, as they peruse the cottage's book collection on bee keeping from Aristotle and Pliny the Elder to Lubbock, Swammerdam, Fabre, and Maeterlinck. According to Aristotle, "there are several kinds of bees, the best are small, round and variegated" (*Keeper* 91). She judges Pliny and Aristotle as "funny" —as "bunk" (*Keeper* 92). The others, however, are sound and she appreciates Lubbock, Swammerdam, Fabre and Maeterlinck because their books have "wonderful pictures

of how bees are inside." More importantly, Jamie will "want to read" François Huber, who wrote *New Observations on the Natural History of Bees*. The little Scout says that Huber "was blind, but he thought out all the experiments and made all the investigations, and a man with eyes kept the records" (*Keeper* 92). As the child reviews these sources, she also echoes Stratton-Porter's moral stance:

"[B]eing a bee master is a lot of other things besides just bees . . . I'd say you'd got to be decent . . . The Bee Master says that bees know, and if anybody's a liar and a cheat and got the odours of sin and selfishness hangin' around 'em . . . The bees know it like a shot, if you're mean; and they haven't got a bit of mercy. The minute they get a whiff of what you are, they punksher your tire. If you know, away down deep inside you, that you ain't right, and that God wouldn't let you into Heaven if you went to sleep in the night, you better throw up this job and let me hunt somebody else to look after the bees" (*Keeper* 92-93).

This idea that bees know and can smell sin resurfaces near the end of the melodrama when the greedy stepdaughter dishonestly attempts to claim the inheritance. The little Scout, believing in the power of the bees, arranges for them to expose her, attack her, and chase her away.

In "Because of God," longer passages of text are dedicated to scientific information but still presented in the child's voice. For example, the little Scout continues with her bee lessons:

". . . There's four thousand five hundred different kinds of wild bees . . . [and] one hundred thousand kinds of plants would not live any more if all these bees were blown away or burned up or something . . . a worker bee has got six thousand eyes on each side of its head so it can see the flowers that it wants to get the pollen and nectar from. And a worker bee has got two stomachs, a little one more inside for itself, and a way bigger one more on the outside for the hive. (*Keeper* 196-97)

Every bee is covered "with hair that is long for a bee and it is soft and fine" (*Keeper* 198). Later the little Scout says, "And some of the workers are builders and some are masons and some are dancers. It's the dancers' job, when the hive gets very hot inside, to dance and wave their wings until they start a breeze to cool the cells" (*Keeper* 210). She tells Jamie that "there are a lot of ways you find out about God on account of how He made Queen bees" (*Keeper* 198). Then readers receive a detailed summary of the life of the Queen bee. A

great amount of scientific detail is braided with comments about the glory of nature, the beauty of God, and man's connection to it. At the end of the chapter, the little Scout cites the Bee Master's complaints about Charles Darwin not putting God into his ideas:

"[T]he Bee Master says C.D. would have been a heap bigger Injun if he'd been willing to put God in where he belongs. He says when God does anything 'with such care, and puts so much thought in it, and deals out such splendid justice' as there is in a beehive, that a wise man will just take off his hat and lift his eyes to the sky and very politely he will say, 'Just God'" (*Keeper* 211).

When asked for his response, Jamie, "under the spell of the magic of the story he had heard" hugs the little Scout and "whisper[s] very reverently: 'I say, 'Just God!'" (*Keeper* 211-12). His acceptance of her information and of God convinces the little Scout of Jamie's worthiness to be the Keeper of the Bees. For Jamie and for readers, her point of view renders the ideas sentimental and fantastic, yet compelling.

Readers unfamiliar with bees or beekeeping will learn a great deal if they accept the material as truth. Naturally, a critical reader will want to know if Stratton-Porter was accurate in her portrayal of nature or if these magical descriptions are only figments of a child's fantasy. Ken Harnick verified Stratton-Porter's account of bees and applauded her courage. The information about bees, although detailed, is quite rudimentary and covers only the surface of beekeeping. Those critics who claim there is too much nature in this book certainly are unaware of the extent of information that could have been used. Stratton-Porter, aware of her audience, pushes them to consider the complexity of bees and beekeeping but omits a great deal that would work against her goal to make them seem magical and spiritual or suitable for film adaptation.

James Leo Meehan, Stratton-Porter's son-in-law, produced the film. When it was released in October of 1925, Porter's granddaughter, Gene Stratton Monroe, received critical praise for her performance as the little Scout. Clara Bow, a major silent film star, also played a part. Her fans today would like to find this film for viewing. Unfortunately, the sixty-minute film is "presumed lost" (IMDb). Mordaunt Hall, reviewer for the *New York Times*, wrote that Meehan was "particularly desirous to adhere closely to the original story . . . [but] he has a weakness for too many close-ups and for stressing

action which would have benefited by a touch of subtlety . . . and the film has been produced in an unconventional fashion by a director who had every detail of the novel at his fingertips. As a whole the production is superior to the story." (Hall). It is not surprising to find the film was judged to be better than the book since the book was written with film production as a subsequent goal. The highly romantic and moral melodrama embedded in the plot suits the films of the twenties much more than it does fine literary art. The melodrama also provides Stratton-Porter with space to comment on the changing quality of post-War American culture.

After World War I, contemporary literature turned to war novels that featured battles, war heroes, war wounds, shell-shocked soldiers, and returning soldiers who suffered psychological trauma or alienation. *The Keeper of the Bees* does not measure up to canonical literary examples such as Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922), Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1920), or Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). However, readers do get a glimpse of which moral standards were being lost or retained in postwar America.

*The Keeper of the Bees*, like other Stratton-Porter novels, espouses a morally clean and honest lifestyle. This signature quality of Porter's endeared her to fans as it also invited negative comments from literary critics. Of course, Stratton-Porter's protagonist, Jamie MacFarlane, is the epitome of a hero who strives to protect his spiritual integrity with just and honest decisions. After all, he is "one of ours," an American soldier of the Great War. Porter moralizes that if we are patriotic Americans who want to keep American soil safe from foreign threats, our soldiers have to be clean, moral, and healthy. Other characters, for example, the little Scout's parents and Margaret Cameron, are also formed to fit this model. Mostly characters who resist postwar societal change live by and speak for these values. They regularly wonder at or criticize new lifestyles of young people who are the first to embrace change. For example, Jamie wonders about the Storm Girl. He simply cannot accept that she does not hold values similar to his own. A rather long passage summarizes the tension between these values, identifies prewar values Stratton-Porter thinks we should preserve, and reveals Jamie's disdain for changes to these values. He thinks to himself that the woman he believes he has secretly married is not the type of person to "have been subjected

to the allurements and temptations of the girl who lives her life at the high pressure of cities”:

[He] could see how any girl who was daily dreaming of herself, of fine clothing, daily frequenting over-sexed and vulgarly sexed picture shows, nightly attending dance halls indiscriminately peopled with whoever chose to appear, from whatever condition of life they happened to come, could get into serious trouble. He could see how the mad dash in automobiles from one place of amusement to another, how irregular eating of highly seasoned foods, how the loss of sleep, the constant contact with men who had not been rigorously trained in the habits and customs and ideals of a generation or two back, might have resulted in disaster to girls too young to realize how they were abusing their bodies or imperiling their souls. The more he thought of it, the greater grew his wonder that any girl in such circumstances escaped with her virtue or with sufficient health to finish even a reasonable lifetime. And what benefit a girl bereft of virtue and health was going to be to a home or to a nation, he had not much idea. The only thing he knew definitely was that such girls were the kind that he wanted to keep away from. (*Keeper* 311-312)

This long passage reveals a new way of living, one steeped in fashion, night life, sexual activity, unhealthy eating, bad sleeping habits, excessive entertainment, and a shift away from prewar moral training. This type of lifestyle also is linked to city living rather than living close to nature. Jamie cannot comprehend how the girl he married could embrace a loose moral lifestyle, for the little he does know about her resonates so strongly with his soul—a soul Stratton-Porter shapes with prewar values and purity.

Throughout the book, Stratton-Porter uses specific terms to reiterate the values the book pushes: chastity, purity, steadfast courage, honor, honesty, integrity, loyalty, morality, clean living, self-effacing love, compassion, American patriotism, salvation, kindness, respect for motherhood, trust, God’s providence, loving God, and keeping the commandments. The negative values one must avoid are usually the reverse of those listed above. The novel preaches against financial waste, promiscuity, sin, becoming a wanton woman who has “polluted her body and smirched her soul” (*Keeper* 233), and caused society’s “finger of scorn” (*Keeper* 234) to point at her. Indeed, Storm Girl’s behavior is eventually revealed as an attempt to protect her childhood friend Lolly, who became pregnant out of wedlock. Poor Lolly, weakened by months of shame and guilt, dies the day after giv-

ing birth, and Jamie is summoned to claim the baby because his name is on her marriage certificate. Clearly, it is better to die than to be an unwed mother, even if Lolly did have sex for love and even if it is tragic that her man, a soldier, was killed accidentally before he could marry her. The fact remains that in the eyes of society she sinned when she enjoyed love and sex outside of marriage.

This brand of melodrama, popular in various cultural forms, was very common in serialized fiction and cinema plots, because it not only sold well but effectively expressed tensions embedded in cultural changes brought on by war and then peace. According to Joseph Boggs, after World War I, “Hollywood films began reflecting a change in moral standards: sex, seduction, divorce, drinking, and drug use—new symbols of “sophisticated” life—all became standard film fare (367). Public outcry at this peaked in 1922 (Boggs 367). By 1927 the Hays Office, a governmental film censorship board, had produced the Purity Code, a dos and don’ts list that was unenforceable (Boggs 369). Immoral entertainment and profits, not morality or art, ruled the day. The Purity Code was replaced in the 1930s by the Motion Picture Production Code, a governmental censoring edict administered by the Hays Office. The Hays Office would provide films with a stamp of approval; those that did not comply with the Code could be fined upwards of \$25,000 (Boggs 369). Although Stratton-Porter’s *The Keeper of the Bees* predates the Hays Office and the Production Code, her views fit right in with the Code and demonstrate why public opinion would have supported it. She had the pulse of the moral climate and knew how to generate text that reinforced and reflected it.

*The Keeper of the Bees* is not the best of Gene Stratton-Porter’s work, but it succeeds in educating readers about nature and a moral lifestyle. Popular culture, postwar concerns, and the business of cinema production were pressures Stratton-Porter felt and understood. Today, as we read *The Keeper of the Bees*, we need to be reminded of these pressures and release any expectations for high art. Then we can lean into the enjoyment of learning about the surprising life of bees and the natural environments that support their well-being. We can embrace Stratton-Porter’s dancers, nurses, and drones. Maybe, we can even see Stratton-Porter as the Queen bee of a hybrid form of literature.

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GENE STRATTON-PORTER'S *MUSIC OF THE WILD*:  
 NATURE, BELIEF, AND ACTIVISM

MARY DEJONG OBUCHOWSKI

Gene Stratton-Porter's 1910 hymn to nature, *Music of the Wild*, provides not only a vehicle for her photography, but also a key to Stratton-Porter's writing, particularly to her environmentalism and to the connection she made between nature and spiritual matters. Her opening pages compare the forest to a place of worship (24), and her closing ones link winter and spring in the marsh with death and resurrection (425). Each chapter documents the encroachment of farming and commerce on the wilderness. Nowhere else in her writing does Stratton-Porter bring religion and a concern for the natural world so closely together.

She divides *Music of the Wild* into three sections: the forest, the meadow, and the swamp. In the first chapter, "The Chorus of the Forest," she describes the sounds of the trees, the birds, and the insects in terms of the music of worship, comparing the wind to harps and organs (24). In the second chapter, "Songs of the Fields," she says of farmland,

we rejoice that a few old-fashioned fields remain to be flooded with . . . melody in its proper environment. Here, dotted with wild trees and outlined with lichen and vine-covered old snake-fences, every corner of which is filled with shrubs and bushes sheltering singing birds and insects, the great song festival of the fields is held" (165).

But in the third chapter, "The Music of the Marsh," she calls the strains the sweetest of all because they bring the hope and cheer of the yearly return of life (425).

Photographic plates of these Indiana locales occur between every other pair of facing pages, that is, between pages 24 and 27, 28 and

31, and so on throughout the book, illustrating it lavishly (and expensively), preserving images of woodland, field, and marsh for generations of readers.

Some urgency informs the text because Stratton-Porter sees these landscapes shrinking, making way for farmland and other aspects of civilization. Nevertheless, the tone is often joyful, for she cannot suppress her enthusiasm and reverence for the plants and animals she captures on the glass plates in her massive cameras. In the opening chapter, she explains, for example, that the wood pewee with its beautifully mournful song is part of "God's great scheme of things" (72). Sometimes, however, regret for the abuse and disappearance of the land, which resonates in the novels *Freckles* (1904) and *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), turns elegiac, as in this passage from "The Chorus of the Forest":

the earth as originally given to us was almost solid forest . . . .

What the character of the chorus of the forest must have been in those days one can not imagine. The notes of our great tree harps were the first sacrificed. Before the advance of civilization the trees must fall to build homes, for fires, to clear space for cultivation, and to provide furniture and implements. As the trees vanished not only their music ceased, but the songs of all the inhabitants of their branches and the residents of the earth beneath them. The voice of the forest was hushed. (155-56)

Throughout this book as well as her other writing, Stratton-Porter's primary thrust remains distinctly Christian, though free from the details of dogma and practice that separate denominations. Faith appears most subtly in her novels, more directly in the nature books, and most overtly in her magazine articles and editorials. Although in one essay she advocates teaching the Bible in a nonsectarian way in the schools ("The Bible" 2, 78), she balances that in another:

I never have made it my business to preach either Nature or God in any book I have written, but because I have myself been literally steeped both in Nature and God, it has not been necessary. I put much Nature into my work because Nature interests one in God; studying Nature and the miracles among the birds, flowers, trees, and insects *makes* one study God. There is no line I could write naturally which would not be steeped in a spirit of reverence. There is no line I could

write spontaneously that would not glorify God through Nature. ("Religion as a Stimulus" 2)

Stratton-Porter's father was a Methodist lay preacher who had memorized the Bible, "save the books of generations" (Meehan 5), and quoted it often (Meehan 6). Regular church attendance was part of her childhood. However, she was not a churchgoer as an adult, though spiritual allusions appear in most of her writing. Characters in her novels, such as the protagonist of *Freckles* (1904), Jamie McFarland in *The Keeper of the Bees* (1925), and Dannie Macnour in *At the Foot of the Rainbow* (1907), pray, though not in church, and not according to established ritual. One exception is Kate Bates in *A Daughter of the Land* (1918), who rebels against religion all of her early life, including churchgoing. Overhearing a minister reading the text, "Take the wings of the morning," Kate takes the text literally in a very secular way, deciding to leave the family farm for a career, a decision that leads to disaster after disaster. Yet at the end, with problems resolved, she takes her granddaughter into the same church and asks that they be baptized.

Stratton-Porter did not adhere to any denomination but, in asserting that religion is part of every culture, she places all world religions on a level of equality. She insists that all faiths have common purposes and methods of expression. She has Kate Bates discuss immortality in *A Daughter of the Land* (1918):

Take the history of the world from as near dawn as we have any record, and . . . all [people] believe in the after life of the soul. This belief is as much a *part* of any man, ever born in any location, as his hands and his feet. Whether he believes his soul enters a cat and works back to man again after long transmigration, or goes to a Happy Hunting Ground as our Indians, makes no difference with the fact that he enters this world with belief in after life of some kind. (443)

In a *McCall's* editorial in 1925, she reinforces her concept of the universality of belief:

To my mind there are born in the heart of man a few great primal instincts, and no people has been discovered, not even in the wilds of darkest Africa, who is not following these impulses . . . More often than otherwise his voice is raised in praise or prayers to his God, whoever or whatever that God may be. ("Religion" 2)

Even more surprising, perhaps, Stratton-Porter adhered to an evolutionary viewpoint. She first brought it up in *Birds of the Bible* (1909). Given the information available to her at the time, she found ample reason to find the concept not only acceptable but compatible with her reading of the Bible (18-29). Citing the apostle Peter, who says, that "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day," she acknowledges that the Bible was written by humans who may have had less understanding of the passage of time than did people of her day. She goes on to assert, doubtless exaggerating in her enthusiasm, "In these days every one concedes that creation required more time than Moses thought necessary to try to explain to the Children of Israel" (19). Bringing the concept of evolution onto the practical level in *Music of the Wild*, she states that all birds, even predators such as hawks, have over time developed their place in the ecosystem (67-68).

In her most overtly Christian work, *Jesus of the Emerald* (1923), Stratton-Porter includes a long afterword. In it she narrates the origins of the Lentulus Legend that serves as the core of the poem. She later said that it should have been a foreword because it explains so much that is in the poem. There she also refers to a book by Nicholas Notovitch, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ*, which, in turn, refers to records indicating that Jesus traveled to many countries, including India and Tibet, learning about the religions of other countries. This text, of course, supports her contention that there is a certain universality in all religions. She also reiterates her belief in evolution in this afterword.

Her sense of wonder at the beauties and complexities of creation reverberates through her work, particularly through *Music of the Wild*. Stratton-Porter appears to have a personal stake in stewardship of the land. Her father provided not just her religious education but also her respect for living things. A practicing ecologist, he admonished his children to see birds as valuable consumers of the insects that prey on fruit trees. Her mother, who had a gift for gardening, inspired Porter to cherish flowers and other flora.

These influences took hold, and Stratton-Porter became an advocate for nature, branching out in two directions. One was to lead her readers to the outdoors; the other was to become active in the conservation movement. This first direction led directly to the novels, *Freckles*, *A Girl of the Limberlost* (1909), *The Harvester* (1911) and *Laddie* (1913). These, she tells us, were conceived in a way so as to

use "a slight romance as a sugar coating, in my effort to entice the housebound afield . . . The sole purpose of the book was to put the nature stuff it contained before the people" ("My Life" 13). It is necessary to note that the first three of those novels also have a conservationist edge as well. The other directed her nonfiction books like *Music of the Wild*, *Homing with the Birds* (1919), and *Tales You Won't Believe* (1924), as well as many of her magazine articles such as those in the *Izaak Walton League Quarterly* (Dec. 1922, I; cover, 173), in which she took up causes such as rescuing starving elk in Wyoming and saving forests everywhere.

Stratton-Porter deplored the practice of using bird feathers, wings, and even entire bodies to decorate women's hats ("A New Experience in Millinery" 115). She expanded on that topic in *Music of the Wild*:

The breast of the grebe is its curse. The feathers are so tiny and fine as to render adequate description impossible. There are eight members of the family having this exquisite plumage, that varies in rarity with the different species. Crested grebes are killed without mercy for this small patch of rare feathering, and their marsh cousins do not escape. (394)

Although she was an early member of the environmental movement, Stratton-Porter was not alone. She read John Muir and admired President Theodore Roosevelt. Nor was she the only woman involved; according to Sydney Landon Plum, her contemporaries included Mabel Osgood Wright, Florence Merriam Bailey, Olive Miller, and Neltje Blanchan Doubleday (*Coming through the Swamp* xv). One woman, Celia Thaxter, also attacked the use of bird parts on women's hats.

Nourished by her religious perspective, Stratton-Porter's environmentalism took on various forms. She made the grounds of her home in Rome City, Indiana, a preserve of native plants and wildflowers. Her notebooks record the numbers of plants she found or bought and transplanted onto her grounds. Sounding a warning far ahead of its time in *A Girl of the Limberlost* (187-88), *Tales You Won't Believe* (172-73), and elsewhere, her writing cautions that clear-cutting forests and draining swamps lead to climate change. In *Music of the Wild*, she expresses this warning most forcefully, revealing her awareness of the threat of climate change a century ago:

If men in their greed cut forests that preserve and distil moisture, clear fields, and take the shelter of trees from creeks and rivers until they evaporate, and drain the water from swamps so that they can be cleared and cultivated,—they *prevent vapor from rising*; and if it does not rise it can not fall. Pity of pities it is; but man can change and is changing the forces of nature. (335, Porter's italics)

In her study of nature, Stratton-Porter practiced extreme care in observing and photographing her subjects. Those who disturbed, injured, and killed birds, even Audubon, earned her scorn (*Homing* 346-47). She was as delicate in her manner with moths as she was with birds, releasing the insects after they emerged from their pupae but before they damaged themselves. This care surfaces in her fiction, where she has David Langston in *The Harvester* (1911) have the following conversation with the girl he is courting:

"I must have a mighty good reason before I kill," said the man. "I cannot give life; I have no right to take it away. I will let my statement stand. I am afraid."

"Of what, please?"

"An indefinable something that follows me and makes me suffer if I am wantonly cruel" (112).

That "indefinable something" is, of course, an unspecified but forceful spiritual and moral impulse that finds expression in almost all of Stratton-Porter's work.

The conjunction of finding spiritual inspiration in the forests, marshes, and fields and feeling a responsibility for conserving the land where they exist resonates in such novels as *Freckles* and *A Girl of the Limberlost*. In these works the regret for the abuse and disappearance of wild land sometimes turns into a lament for its loss. That concern and regret is most direct in *Music of the Wild*, where along with the religious and moral underpinning, we also see the germ of the activism that characterized much of her writing and field work.

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