

Helen Reimensnyder Martin's "Caricatures" of the Pennsylvania Germans

Any farmer seeking a wife should haunt the rural districts of Pennsylvania, where women were born to be farmers' wives, and where they continually thank God for the fact!¹

LONG before the first years of this century, the Pennsylvania Germans were a nationally recognized regional minority. They had been the subject of several descriptive books, including Phebe Earle Gibbons' *Pennsylvania Dutch and Other Essays* (1872) and William Beidelman's *The Story of the Pennsylvania Germans* (1898), which interpreted their history and their manners to the outside world. In common with other ethnic minorities, they came in for their share of ridicule, for humor at the expense of minorities was common in the early twentieth century. But it was in the novels of Pennsylvania-German born Helen Reimensnyder Martin that they were most unfavorably portrayed, so much so that commentators often refer to her depiction of them as "caricatures." However, in actual practice, her use of the Pennsylvania German people and background goes far beyond caricature; from the publication of her popular *Tillie: A Mennonite Maid* in 1904 until her death in 1939 she wrote and rewrote the story of Pennsylvania German women as repressed victims of a harsh, male-dominated, illiterate social group, sometimes in terms of pure melodrama.

The position of the woman in Pennsylvania German society has often been discussed, of course, and certainly not always unfavorably. Wallace Nutting, writing in 1924 in *Pennsylvania Beautiful*, his illustrated scenery guide book, found nothing to criticize; while in a much more recent study, *The Pennsylvania Dutch: A Persistent*

¹ Wallace Nutting, *Pennsylvania Beautiful* (Framingham, Mass., 1924), 123.

Minority (1976), William T. Parsons quotes, without negative comment, the Pennsylvania German notion of woman's domain: "Kinner, Kich un Karrich" (children, kitchen and church). Naturally, nineteenth-century commentators saw little to criticize, though William Beidelman hoped that Pennsylvania German farmers would soon follow the example of their "English" neighbors and keep their women out of the fields (p. 143). The most extensive sympathetic fictional treatment of the Pennsylvania German lifestyle was the work of Elsie Singmaster (1879-1958), whose own Pennsylvania German background provided her with material for her gentle descriptions.

Regional material or local color was at the height of its popularity at the time that Helen Martin published *Tillie*. Although *Tillie* did not make the bestseller list for 1904, several novels of regional life did, among them *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and John Fox, Jr.'s *Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*. The tone of most popular regional fiction was fairly sympathetic, in contrast to Martin's treatment of the Pennsylvania Germans. Even though John Fox, Jr. always removed his heroes and heroines from the mountains to educate them, the romance and glamour of the region still predominates in his stories. While some of those writers associated with the local-color movement did not romanticize the regions they described, that only held when they sought a more critical audience. When writers like Hamlin Garland and Mary Hartwell Catherwood looked to the popular audience, they turned to sentimentalism and melodrama. Helen Martin, who also wrote for the popular audience, has no claim to realism. Her depiction of the Pennsylvania German society is colored by personal bitterness and ideological disagreement, not all of it directed at the Pennsylvania Germans.

Helen Martin's novels champion the oppressed as she saw them: women and the poor. Quite simply, her fiction is a vehicle for criticism of her society. While I do not know enough about her personal life to speculate on biographical sources for her ideas, we might examine the basic facts of her life, for she is not a well-known figure. She was born in Lancaster on October 18, 1868, to an immigrant German clergyman, a Lutheran, the Rev. Cornelius Reimensnyder and his wife Henrietta Thurman Reimensnyder. Educated at Swarthmore and Radcliffe, Martin taught school for a while in New

York City (where she observed the society folk she was later to depict) and was married in 1899 to Frederic C. Martin, a music teacher. The Martins made Harrisburg their home, living in a house they built and traveling a good deal so as to avoid the stagnation of what Mrs. Martin called "a provincial town."² Two children, a son and a daughter, survived her. Throughout her life, Martin defended the rights of women, working actively for suffrage. She was also a socialist, attacking the capitalistic establishment of business and its partner (as she thought), the church, in many of her novels. Despite the fact that such ideas ran counter to those of the majority of novel readers of her time, her books gained acceptance. Between 1896 and 1939 she published thirty-five novels and many short stories. This acceptance, I feel, is due in large part to the disguise offered her material by her use of the Pennsylvania German background.

To see this clearly, we need to look at her other work. Martin's first three novels, *Unchaperoned* (1896), *Warren Hyde* (1898), and *The Elusive Hildegard* (1900) were not well received, but they tell the same story as most of her other books. None of the three concern the Pennsylvania Germans. In all three novels, a humble but strong-willed young woman wants to make something of her life and is hindered by her high society background. Martin makes society the villain, with its shallow values and its treatment of women as property to be disposed of to the highest bidder (and men as fair game for ambitious women). Martin did not find popular acceptance for this version of her theme until she had made a name for herself with her Pennsylvania German stories. Then she returned to high society many times, scoring several real successes, including two such novels made into films, *The Snob* (1924) which starred John Gilbert and Norma Shearer, and *The Parasite* (1925) with Owen Moore and Madge Bellamy. But by then she had mastered the art of melodrama, which she first practised using the Pennsylvania German background. The feminism in her first novels was given fairly direct treatment, but in her Pennsylvania German novels it was disguised by the unusual background. When she went back to

² *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1927, p. 28.

the theme of high society, she used melodramatic elements she had perfected in her Pennsylvania German novels.

From the first, Martin's Pennsylvania German men are outrageous, usually portrayed as ignorant, greedy, and brutal. Their interest in women, aside from sex, is purely material; women are worth money, either as household slaves or wage earners who turn over all their money. Mr. Getz, the father of Tillie the Mennonite maid, is typical. In this novel, Tillie, sensitive and intelligent, is caught between the demand of her heritage, mainly represented by her father, that she become a mindless workhorse for the family, and her own desire for an education, fed by a well-meaning female schoolteacher. When the teacher lends her a copy of *Ivanhoe*, Mr. Getz finds it and burns it in the stove. At the age of fourteen, Tillie decides to turn plain, which enrages her father for she will not be able to earn as much money for him in plain garb. In spite of overwhelming family problems and at least a ten-hour workday, Tillie educates herself, gets a teaching job, and finally marries another teacher, a Harvard graduate, having given up her plain garb for him. Thus the little household drudge becomes a well-educated, genteel "lady."

For Tillie, as for most of Martin's heroines, Pennsylvania German or not, money of her own is the key to control of her own life. And the father, uncle, or husband who stands in the way of the heroine always has money as his motive. The average American woman of Martin's time was quite willing to believe that the values of people in high society were crass and materialistic, but of course she was not interested in analysis of the economic situation of more ordinary women. Martin's Pennsylvania Germans, however, led lives so removed from those of her readers that she could comment on them unfavorably and not appear to be critical of American life. Journalist Grant Overton, in his piece on Martin published in *The Women Who Make Our Novels* (1922), tells about her feminism and socialism, but then writes that she does not deal with these issues in her work because the folk she writes about are not aware of such questions. Just because the people she wrote about were unaware of these issues, however, does not mean that Martin shaped her stories to suit their opinions. The absolute necessity for a person to be independent of others, educated, able to earn a living, free to choose a

vocation, these elements could easily have been explored in the life of an average young woman in a typical American family of the period, and in the same negative way. But of course readers would not like to hear it. So Martin wisely disguised her material by setting it in alien cultures. Reviewers of her books often pointed out the crudity of her satire or her exaggerations, but usually treated these as artistic flaws. The Pennsylvania Germans provided colorful background and "characterizations," as they put it. For instance, in a story in *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1927, she repeats her usual theme of the domination of a young girl by a stupid, materialistic Pennsylvania German father who wanted to marry her to a man his age (he himself had just taken a young bride). The story ends happily by the medium of blackmail, the young lover getting the girl at the expense of a mistake made by the father. About this story, the editors wrote, "again we have the atmosphere and type of characterization which the writer employs so successfully."³

Martha of the Mennonite Country (1915) will serve to show in detail what Martin's Pennsylvania German stories are like. It begins with a pair of society folk, the popular novelist Edward Oliver Potter and a rich girl, Beatrice Jenkins Ford, both going among the Pennsylvania Germans under assumed names. Beatrice Ford, who against the wishes of her hardened society mother went to college, went even farther against her mother's plans and took a teaching job in Adamstown High School, but under the name Beatrice Jenkins. Potter, needing inspiration for his next novel, took a job as principal at the same school, under the name Edward Oliver.

In Adamstown, Potter rooms with a really rotten Pennsylvania German family, the Millers. Mr. Miller is a mean, penny-pinching farmer; Mrs. Miller, the third Mrs. Miller, is a woman who has gained a good life for herself by sex. Always soft-spoken and slyly sexual, Mrs. Miller has everything money can buy. It is otherwise with Martha, his daughter by his second wife (who died because he wouldn't send for a doctor). Martha has a deformed arm which could be fixed with a fifty dollar operation, but he won't have it. Despite her handicap, she does all the housework with her one useful

³ *Ibid.*

hand, while Mrs. Miller lounges around all day. So Martha is a dramatic version of the domestic slavey.

The Millers are pleased to have Potter as a boarder for they are very greedy. He observes Martha's situation, and then witnesses a really sensational incident, central to the turning of the plot. Uncle Jo, Mrs. Miller's brother, comes home from the West to die. The Millers try not to invite him in; they want to turn him out into the streets, for they think he is poor. And yet he had sacrificed his own marriage plans to provide his sister with a dowry to marry Mr. Miller, although the well-to-do farmer had no need of Jo's little savings. However, Martha and Potter help Uncle Jo upstairs and set him up in a room. By the time he is finally expelled, he has a house prepared to go to (seems he is really rich) and Martha goes with him. Of course when he dies he leaves everything to Martha, who has the operation and marries Potter. Meanwhile, Beatrice Ford has found her own happiness by marrying Archibald Starr, an artist. So our two heroines escape the confines of their backgrounds to make new lives for themselves—Martha escapes her Pennsylvania German prison and Beatrice Ford her life as a social butterfly.

In its barest outlines, *Martha* is a story of an overbearing, money-hungry man who only lets women have money in exchange for sex. And the woman who takes his terms is a greedy, scheming creature who would send her own brother out into the streets to die. The only liberation for the oppressed woman in the Miller home, Martha, comes when money is made available to her. Then all the rest follows; she can lead her own life once she has the means. In this novel, Martin strongly underlines the materialism of the Pennsylvania Germans, using it as a dramatic device to represent the economic bondage of all women. The use of the society girl points out the parallel case in another social system.

As in most of her Pennsylvania German novels, in *Martha* Martin represents the "typical" Pennsylvania Germans as stupid. They speak poor English and reveal a cavernous ignorance of anything beyond the confines of their personal lives. Often she shows semi-educated Pennsylvania German men who boast of their knowledge and brilliance, usually in poor English, as they try to force the heroines to marry them. In one book, she shows the Pennsylvania German community in an uproar when the minister, in a pamphlet

about them, wrote, "The natives of Virginsburg are all descended from one common stock," for they thought "stock" meant cattle.⁴

Despite the bitterness and melodrama of the story, *Martha* was regarded by the *New York Times* reviewer as good comedy. Calling his review "A Mennonite Comedy," the reviewer specially complimented Martin on "the skill with which she has used the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect," finding the "quaint grotesqueries of speech and thought that she puts into the mouths of her Dutch characters" add greatly to the "fun" of the novel.⁵ Perhaps there is no better way to disarm defenders of the established order than humor; yet it seems that Martin used her wit against a group already seen as comic and thus did not make her points clearly enough to reveal her biases. Accustomed as they were to stereotyped ethnic portrayal, her readers found her Pennsylvania German villains comical.

Tillie and *Martha* are fairly typical of Martin's Pennsylvania German novels. Some show parallels between Pennsylvania German treatment of women and that of high society, as in *Martha*. Others mix Pennsylvania German and society elements in various other ways. There are some sympathetic Pennsylvania German men, usually those who are "artistic" or educated beyond the understanding of their families, just as there are good men in society, often doctors or judges. But the Pennsylvania German male functions mainly as an oppressor of women, albeit in somewhat melodramatic terms. These men think nothing of ruling over their wives, daughters, or sisters like tyrants, threatening them, withholding things they need, or keeping them virtual prisoners in their homes. Most of them are corrupted by excessive love of money, often cheating their relatives out of inheritances or refusing to be responsible for the care of their own children. While most of her Pennsylvania German men are farmers, we don't see them in relation to the farm cares, but rather as dictators in the home. Some of her meanest Pennsylvania German men, in fact, are not farmers at all, but professional men, like lawyer Danny Leitzel of *Her Husband's Purse*, who is dishonest and miserly; or the young doctor in *The Crossways* who tries to break the will of his delicate southern bride who is so physically and

⁴*Those Fitzenbergers* (New York, 1917).

⁵*New York Times*, Mar. 14, 1915, p. 90.

mentally abused by his treatment that she threatens to leave him. For a woman with Martin's view of the wrongs of the male-female relationship in American society, the Pennsylvania German attitude toward women would of course be considered outrageous, and could easily serve as a symbol of all of women's mistreatment at the hands of men. But her actual characters are so exaggerated as to seem ridiculous.

Naturally, her Pennsylvania German women are much nicer people than her men, yet she did not show any appreciation of Pennsylvania German family life. Tillie's mother is a good woman, but weak and limited by her relative unimportance in making decisions. Tillie's plain aunt is another good woman, but one who has willingly confined herself to a narrow and unfeeling religion. *Sabina, A Story of the Amish* (1905), her second Pennsylvania German novel, gives a somewhat unclear and quite depressing view of the average Pennsylvania German woman. Sabina, a girl given to visions, tries to rise above her station but is unhappy in the world and so returns to her conceited Amish suitor. This book gives Martin's version of Amish family life—a joyless existence in which poverty of spirit is deemed a virtue. The quaint, old-fashioned home life of the Amish Germans, with their stable values, their gentleness, their closeness to the elemental things of life such as the earth, animals, and the seasons, obviously did not influence Martin's view. Her persecuted Pennsylvania German women are somewhat like the Mormon wives portrayed in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*—drab, embittered, spiritually starved, and jealous. While Grey sent a mysterious stranger on a horse to rescue the heroine from such a fate, Martin makes education and money the agents of escape.

Martin's version of Pennsylvania German life did not go unchallenged. Her 1914 novel *Barnabetta* was made into a Broadway play (and later a movie) under the title *Erstwhile Susan*. In this novel, the heroine, Barnabetta, the usual neglected Pennsylvania German daughter, is rescued by a new step-mother, "erstwhile Susan," whom the father married for her money but who has no intention of handing it over to him. Furthermore, she begins to rule the household in a way favorable to Barnabetta, making the menfolk behave and ultimately educating the girl. The play, which became a vehicle for the famous comedienne Minnie Madden Fiske, who played the step-

mother, brought Martin's work considerable media publicity. Since Grant Overton's essay on her in *The Women Who Make Our Novels* was published not long after this period, he gave a good amount of detail about the controversy over her portrayal of the Pennsylvania Germans which was set off by the publicity she received from the play's success. In an interview in the *New York Evening Post* in January 1916, Martin ridiculed Pennsylvania Germans for their speech, their dress, and the way they painted their houses. Her criticisms were answered in the same paper on April 29, 1916, by one Isaac R. Pennypacker, who pointed out all the good things about the Pennsylvania Germans which Martin had ignored in her work. In presenting Mr. Pennypacker's arguments, Overton took a lightly sarcastic tone, and then defended Martin, saying that such criticism is "the highest compliment her work could have," for it showed that "she has got under the skin of her people."⁶

And Martin did claim them as "her people." In an interview with Overton, she claimed to have received hundreds of letters from Pennsylvania Germans pointing out that she had not been critical enough of their bad points. These letters proved, she implied, that she knew what she was talking about; and her phrase, "my people," carried authority. She felt that those who were most upset by her work were "the educated descendents of the Pennsylvania Dutch" who "resent my commentaries upon the race from which they have risen."⁷ Her claims to know the Pennsylvania German character were certainly accepted outside the Pennsylvania German community, but no one asked any questions about the depth of her dislike. Part of it no doubt can be traced to the distaste for farm life which was so prevalent an attitude among artists and intellectuals about the turn of the century. But as the daughter of a clergyman, she surely had no strong personal motive in her aversion to farm life, although she no doubt observed much in the lives of others which she did not appreciate. It seems that she felt that the use of Pennsylvania German heroines in her stories balanced the dismal picture she gave of their entire culture; she was not biased, she claimed, but knowledgeable.

⁶ Grant Overton, *The Women Who Make Our Novels* (New York, 1922), 217-218. This book was first published in 1918.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

Knowledgeable or not, Martin used the Pennsylvania German background only for melodramatic stories of the mistreatment of women. Her Pennsylvania German men represent the oppressors of women, just as the frivolous society folk in her other work symbolize the oppressors of the poor; but her use of ethnic stereotypes and melodramatic situations disguised her message so totally that occasionally when she spoke more directly than usual her critics were amazed.⁸ It is ironic to consider her theme of the advancement of human rights against her practice of extreme ethnic stereotyping.

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⁸ The publication of *Gertie Swartz: Fanatic or Christian* in 1918 was met by surprise and dismay. In this book, Martin portrays corrupt business and church people and shows sympathy for the working classes. Another such novel, *The Church on the Avenue* (1923), is practically a socialist tract.