Innovators

By Emilia S. Boehm

Elizabeth A. Wade a.k.a. "Bessie Bramble"

A school teacher and mother of two, Elizabeth A. Wade used the pen name "Bessie Bramble" to critique Pittsburgh and the nation in the late 19th century, earning notoriety as one of the city's first female journalists.

Born c. 1835 near Newcastle-on-Tyne, England, Elizabeth Angus Wilkinson came to the Smoky City as a young girl. While singing in her church choir, she met her future husband Charles I. Wade, who played the organ. By the time the two were married in 1864, Elizabeth was already writing anonymous reviews for local newspapers. Charles became a banker with the Pittsburgh National Bank of Commerce and the couple moved from the Hill District to Edgewood and later to Shadyside. They raised two children, a son Charles and daughter Elizabeth, nicknamed "Bessie."[1]

As her family grew, Elizabeth Wade continued a teaching career, which had begun in the church. She taught and served as assistant principal at Pittsburgh's Pike Street School and also at the Ralston Industrial School, where she eventually became principal. At this same time, writing by the 1870s as "Bessie Bramble"—an apparent combination of her daughter's nickname and a prickly plant—Wade engaged in a remarkable career in editorial journalism. She offered candid observations on issues of her day, often mixed with biting criticism only possible behind the safety of her pseudonym. Her columns chastised local society, weighed in on international matters, and reflected her displeasure with the actions of civic leaders and politicians around the nation. In one 1888 column, Wade even denounced the reading choices of several politicians.[2]

Bessie Bramble's sharp pen targeted people and events in Pittsburgh, the nation, and the world. Not all of her thunderings were on topics from the political arena, as she discussed poetry and literature, issued travel reviews, and offered tips for proper behavior and successful marriages. Unsurprisingly, education was also a frequent column topic. Expounding on issues that are relevant today, Wade argued in 1888 for the inclusion of music in the public school curriculum and the co-education of the sexes. "Her style is terse, breezy, yet full of weighty argument when she attacks a subject on which she feels strongly," relayed *The Social Mirror*.[3] Wade's writing reveals her to be intelligent, well-read, and well-traveled, with articles filed after trips to Washington, D.C., New York, and Aiken, South Carolina, among other locations.

For nearly two decades, Bramble's true identity remained the subject of speculation as her articles appeared in leading Pittsburgh newspapers, including the *Leader, Dispatch,* and *Chronicle*. Wade's name was not formally revealed until 1886, soon after her retirement from public teaching. Her disguise lifted, she continued to write as Bramble and defy the expected behavior of a woman of her stature. When she wasn't teaching, writing, or caring for her family, Wade was also active in several area women's organizations. In 1875 she was a founding member of the Woman's Club of Pittsburgh, a literary and cultural club of professional women who gathered together to discuss topics in art, literature, history, philosophy, and science.[4] She was also a charter member of the Women's Press Club of Pittsburgh, a group organized in 1891 and still in existence today.[4]

Wade's young daughter Bessie died in 1889 from tuberculosis. This tragic loss did not silence Wade's pen, but it marked the beginning of her final years in the public eye. As the turn of the century approached, Bessie Bramble's articles waned, and Wade and her husband retired to the west coast, where their son Charles lived. She died there in 1910.

The collections of the Heinz History Center contain artifacts and records related to Elizabeth Wade, including four scrapbooks of newspaper clippings—with numerous Bessie Bramble columns—kept by Wade herself. These unique resources provide insight into the life and work of this influential Pittsburgh journalist and educator.

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[1] Cushing, Thomas, et al. *History of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: A. Warner & Co., 1889).

[2] Elizabeth Wade ("Bessie Bramble") Scrapbooks, 1876-1892, MSS #183, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

[3] Nevin Adelaide Mellier. *The Social Mirror: A Character Sketch of the Women of Pittsburg and Vicinity During the First Century of the County's Existence* (Pittsburgh: T. W. Nevin, 1888).

[4] Records of the Woman's Club of Pittsburgh, 1875-1957, MSS #95, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Elizabeth A. Wade. a.k.a. Bessie Bramble, at far right in this undated photograph, was one of Pittsburgh's first female journalists. HC L&A, Elizabeth Wade Photographs, MSQ #183.