

This Month in Moravian History

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Hilda Doolittle, “H.D.” (1886-1961)

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the death and 125th anniversary of the birth of the Imagist poet and novelist, Hilda Doolittle, better known as “H.D.” Born September 10, 1886, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, she was the daughter of Charles Doolittle, a professor of mathematics and astronomy at Lehigh University, and his wife, Helen Wolle, former teacher of art and music at the Moravian Female Seminary where her father, Rev. Francis Wolle, served as principal. Later in life H.D. recalled a happy childhood growing up surrounded by her maternal relatives on Church Street, including her favorite uncle, J. Fred Wolle, church organist and founder of the Bach Choir.



Had Hilda Doolittle’s family remained in Bethlehem, her life may have remained quite unremarkable. But her sheltered life changed dramatically in 1896 when her father accepted a prestigious position at the University of Pennsylvania and her family moved to an affluent Philadelphia suburb. There in 1901 Hilda met the avant-garde poet, Ezra Pound, who changed the course of her life both personally and professionally. After attending a few semesters at Bryn Mawr College to study Greek literature, she and Pound were briefly engaged in 1907 against her parents’ wishes.

They broke it off but later resumed their engagement and Doolittle followed him to London, where she discovered he was engaged to someone else. Not wanting to return home, yet unable to marry Pound, Doolittle focused her energy on writing poetry, which Pound promoted in literary circles, recasting her as “H.D. Imagiste.” H.D., Pound, and the poet Richard Aldington (whom H.D. would later marry and divorce) formed the core of the Imagist circle of poets and modernist writers at the turn of the 20th century.

H.D. remained in Europe and published numerous works of poetry and prose during her lifetime. In 1933 she began psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud, who encouraged her to explore her religious heritage as a means of self-understanding. Freud believed that people inherit symbolism from their ancestors through “hereditary transmissions,” a concept that appealed to H.D. Some of her poetry has been compared to eighteenth-century Moravian “Sifting Time” hymns, although H.D. has asserted there was no trace of this “exoticism” in her childhood church.

During the air raids over London during World War II H.D. survived the mental strain by recalling her Moravian upbringing in Bethlehem and recording these “biographical memories” in her memoir, *The Gift*. “Now, this minute, the flying-bomb is on the way—now this minute, there is a distant crash and we are safe for this minute... Comfort and peace came to me, in recalling the strange mystical adventures of Count Zinzendorf and in a later chapter... the spiritual or psychic sub-strata of the religious inheritance of the race [Moravians].” H.D. believed she had inherited a psychic “gift” through her mother’s Moravian ancestors. She was intrigued by 18th-century Moravian

mysticism, especially Zinzendorf’s ecumenical plans to unite all true Christians, which she explored in a later novel, *The Mystery*. H.D. read Moravian history extensively, including critics of the church like Henry Rimius. The concepts that most aggravated the critics are those that H.D. found most attractive: mysticism, “enthusiasm,” the Holy Spirit as mother and comforter, and the idea that all people have feminine souls. She regretted that these concepts were lacking in the modern Moravian Church. “I have felt all along a deep gratitude for the place of my birth and for my people—but my people, as I have tried to show are not parochial, not conditioned by small boundaries, not shut-in by provincial barriers... In the very early days, there was not very much, even superficially in common [with the modern church].”

H.D.’s Moravian heritage remained important to her throughout her life. When visiting Bethlehem with her publisher in 1956, H.D. attended a service at Central Church and signed the guest register, “baptized Moravian.” H.D. died in Zurich, Switzerland, on September 27, 1961. Her funeral service was held at Central Church a month later, and her cremated remains interred in the Doolittle family plot in Nisky Hill cemetery.

Sources

Image: Hilda as a young girl growing (coll. Francis Wolle, MAB). • H.D., *The Gift*, ed. Jane Augustine (1998); H.D., *The Mystery*, ed. Jane Augustine (2009); Janice Robinson, *H.D.: The Life and Work of an American Poet* (1982); Obituary of Hilda Doolittle, *Bethlehem Globe-Times*, Oct. 28, 1961.