

Emily Holmes Coleman
1899-1974
by L. Margaret Pomeroy

Emily Holmes Coleman was born January 22, 1899 in Oakland, California. She graduated in 1920 from Wellesley College, marrying Loyd Ring Coleman in 1921. In 1926 she relocated to Paris where she was the society editor for the Paris *Tribune*, the European edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. While she was in Paris, Coleman wrote poems, stories, and articles for *transition* magazine as well as for *New Review*. She only wrote one published novel, *The Shutter of Snow* (1930), an autobiographical piece based on her postpartum depression following her son's birth. Other writings reflect a similar theme related to her experience with mental illness. One well-known poem, "The Liberator," is such an example. The speaker is an inmate in a mental hospital. It reads in part, "I will break all their heads/ and lay them in neat rows/ and we shall wave high the keys/ and open wide the doors/ and all of us shall dance in the snow."

In the early 1930s Emily Coleman spent a year in St. Tropez as Emma Goldman's secretary while Goldman was completing her autobiography, *Living My Life* (1931), but by the end of 1932, most of Coleman's time was being spent in Italy. Here, when she was forty-five, Coleman converted to Catholicism. Therefore, after 1944, much of her work focused on her Catholic faith. This conversion was reflected in many aspects of her life. For example, she had been married to Jack Scarborough, an Arizona rancher from 1940-1944, but following her conversion, disavowed the union. Not surprising, after Coleman's conversion her writings- poetry, stories, journal entries- all focused on her faith. She was affiliated with the Catholic left and developed relationships with Dorothy Day and Jacques and Aïssa Maritain. By the time Coleman died on June 13, 1974, she had returned to the United States and was being cared for by Catholic nuns at The Farm in Tivoli, New York.

Coleman influenced many writers during the twenties in Paris, probably more because of her intense personality than her literary portfolio. She claimed a variety of notable friends, many belonging to the distinguished "Hayford Hall Circle," and including Djuna Barnes, Hohn Holms, Edwin Muir, Peggy Guggenheim, and Antonia White. Although White's personal journey took her away from many of these people and that aspect of the literary world, it is interesting to note that her influence was apparent even in death. Joseph Geraci wrote in Emily Coleman's obituary in *Catholic Worker*:

Emily had a barbarous personality for someone so civilized. She was intense and passionate, sometimes to the point of mania. She was remarkable, reasonable and quite simply the most important influence on the lives of those who knew her.

Sources used:

Geddes, Minna Besser. "Emily Holmes Coleman," *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 4: American Writers in Paris, 1920-1939*. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1980.

Web address for U of Del.