

# Mary MacLane:

by CAROLYN J. MATTERN

One of the major accomplishments of the recent feminist movement has been the discovery of many women whose lives and contributions had been previously ignored by historians. In the summer issue of this magazine, Leslie Wheeler introduced readers to Mary Elizabeth MacLane, one of Montana's most fascinating literary figures.

Mary MacLane was born in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1881, but her family moved to Great Falls, Montana, in 1891 and then settled in Butte during the middle of the decade. As a high school student, Mary was introverted and studious, and the people of Butte took little notice of her. This inattention ended in 1902 when she published *The Story of Mary MacLane*, an intimate portrayal of her innermost thoughts and feelings which had been written when she was nineteen. Underscored by her powerful style, Mary's ideas about religion, marriage, and morality created an instant sensation, both in her hometown and across the nation. Some critics, titillated by her unconventional ideas, praised her originality; middle-class Butte, however, worried that her ideas might be considered representative of the city and bitterly criticized her immorality and degeneracy. Whatever their reaction, few people could resist reading Mary MacLane's book.

Emboldened by her royalties, Mary left Butte within a few months of the book's publication to travel in the East. For a time the yellow press followed her every move, savoring every unconventional thing she did and every outspoken thing she said. Ultimately the admiring crowd lost interest, and Mary settled in Boston to resume her writing. Her second volume, *My Friend Annabel Lee* (1903), attracted little notice, and although Mary continued to write, she increasingly associated herself with members of the eastern literary bohemia. In 1909 she returned to Butte, where she wrote a series of newspaper articles, renewed her local reputation for peculiar behavior, and worked on a new book. This volume, *I, Mary MacLane*, which was several years in the writing, did not appear until 1917, and although similar in conception to her first book, it attracted only moderate attention. It did, however, earn her a contract with a Chicago studio to write and star in a film version of one of her feature stories, "Men Who Have Made Love to Me." On this last bizarre note Mary dropped from public notice, and she died, alone and impoverished, in a Chicago hotel in 1929.

Certainly, there is much in the outward aspects of Mary MacLane's life and ideas to suggest that she should be interpreted merely as an eccentric woman who wrote strange, shocking things. Such an interpretation, however, is superficial and does little to illumine our understanding of women's life in the past. While it is granted that she was not typical of the young women of her time, Mary MacLane's ideas arose and developed for reasons that are fully explainable within the context in which she lived. Indeed, her ideas were not only understandable, they were, in large part, representative of the mainstream of feminist thought. In this light, Mary MacLane's story emerges not as an historical footnote, but as an important document in the history of women in the United States.

# A Feminist Opinion

POSE NO. 2. She rests her chin in her hands—elbows on her knees. She wears a bright and interested look. This pose is not so common with her as is No. 1.



POSE NO. 3. She grasps the arms of the chair vigorously, and reclines. Her expression is that of expectation, verging on impatience.



POSE NO. 4. Here she has a picture pose. She sweeps the train of her gown in line with her body, straightens her arms and spreads her fingers on the window sill, her back to her companions.



POSE NO. 5. She stands at her full height, with head thrown back and a disposition to be haughty. This is her attitude when inclined to defy the world and its opinion.



Adapted from  
Butte Intermountain  
July 12, 1902

POSE NO. 1. Miss MacLane leans forward with her arms straightened and her hands clasped between her knees. Her eyes are half closed and she wears a reminiscent expression. A faint smile plays on her face. Her fingers are never quiet.

“Our Little Mary MacLane Will Outgrow It”

IT IS EVIDENT from her writing that Mary MacLane craved understanding and self-expression. Her few books and articles were avowedly written so that the world might know her “Bloody Self Just Beneath the Skin.” If for no other reason, it is time that she received objective appraisal. Yet, in spite of the fact that she wrote almost exclusively about herself, it is not easy to perceive the woman she was. A partial explanation for this apparent contradiction is that most of what is known about Mary MacLane comes from her own pen. She claimed in her first book that she could stand off and analyze herself dispassionately, but, as she came to realize, she was subject to all the biases which human beings have about themselves. A further obstacle to valid assessment arises from her literary abilities. While even hostile critics lauded her powers of description, Mary herself was frequently dissatisfied with her abilities of self-portrayal.<sup>1</sup>

Historians are accustomed to appraising sources which exhibit these kinds of problems; they are less capable of dealing with subjects who behave in a manner that belies their honesty. Mary MacLane, many sources suggest, acted in this way consciously and intentionally. Moreover, she once wrote that her early life was shot through with deceit and falseness and that it was not unusual for her to tell one hundred lies in a day. As a high school student, she learned to gain attention with unusual conversation or by playing a game which she called “posing.” When prying reporters later annoyed or ridiculed her—and they frequently did—Mary used similar tactics. Sometimes she resorted to outright lies. An elusive, ironic humor in much of her writings suggests that she may have also extended these “deep games” to her writing.

On the other hand, it is possible that her lying was largely artistic license. For example, she later admitted that her claim to have stolen money was simply a “quaint lie” told for effect. Some evidence also suggests that her supposed alienation from friends and family may have been a similar allegorical exaggeration.<sup>2</sup>

There is also the possibility that Mary deceived her readers by professing complete frankness, but keeping parts of her personality to herself. “I set down only the outside layer,” she wrote in a schoolgirl essay, “It [the inner Mary] is too good for you. Anyway I want to keep it for myself.”<sup>3</sup>

Although these factors must be kept in mind in examining her life and literature, it would seem that there is little in them to suggest that Mary MacLane was not basically sincere with her readers.

1. Between 1902 and 1910 Mary tore up two complete manuscripts, and she apparently labored for seven years before she was satisfied with *I, Mary MacLane. I, Mary MacLane* (Chicago, 1917), p. 69, 192; *Butte Evening News*, Jan. 30, 1910; *The Story of Mary MacLane* (Chicago, 1902), p. 90.

THERE IS NO DOUBT, of course, that Mary MacLane was an extremely unhappy young woman. The sources of her melancholy consequently emerge as fundamental to understanding her complex personality. It is not surprising, however, that few contemporary critics tackled the matter. Because they were unaccustomed to taking seriously the problems of young girls, most critics failed to view her depression seriously. Rather than offering understanding, they attributed her feelings to a warped mind or an insane craving for notoriety and impertinently suggested that she needed a good spanking.

Mary completed her literary career before the theories of Sigmund Freud gained acceptance in the United States, and it was one of the tragedies of her life that she undertook her self-analysis without the assistance of psychoanalysis. It is also unfortunate for historians, for psychiatry might have illuminated some of the dark corners of her personality. For example, her lifelong conviction that she was unlovable is particularly interesting. In *The Story* Mary wrote that James MacLane, her burly, “whole-souled” father, was nothing to her. Contrary to what she said in print, it is likely that his sudden death when she was only eight had much to do with her emotional development. Mary also expressed a similar lack of feeling toward her mother, a sensible, hardworking woman, who undoubtedly did not understand her younger daughter. Family members testify that although Margaret MacLane loved her four children equally, Mary was tormented by the belief that her mother did not love her.<sup>4</sup>

Although psychological disturbances cannot be ruled out as a source of Mary’s despair, recent historical scholarship suggests that the changing role of women may have had a determining effect upon her personality. There is no doubt that Mary herself understood her sex was central to her mental state. “Oh,” she wrote, “it is a hard and bitter thing to be a woman. . . . Is a woman so foul a creature she must needs be purged by this infinite pain?”<sup>5</sup>

It is equally clear that a considerable number of Mary’s readers in 1902 viewed *The Story* as a feminist

2. *The Story of Mary MacLane* (Chicago, 1911), p. 344. The final chapter of this edition was devoted to a discussion of her life since the volume’s first publication.

3. The article from her high school newspaper was quoted in the *New York World*, July 13, 1902. In her exclusive interview with Mary, Zona Gale noted the contradiction within Mary’s professions of sincerity. Mary explained herself this time by merely saying that sometimes she felt like revealing all, and that at other times she did not. *New York World*, August 17, 1902.

4. The characterization of James MacLane appeared in the *Great Falls Tribune*, May 2, 1902, which recalled him vividly from his early investments in the area. See also the *Tribune* of June 1, 1889, and the *Fergus Falls Weekly*, August 1, 1889, for further estimations of MacLane. The characterization of Mrs. MacLane appeared in the *Butte Miner*, May 4, 1902. Mary’s feelings toward her family appeared on pages 6-8 of *The Story . . .* (1902); this contrasts with the opinions of Jane Joyce, a niece, in a letter to the author.

5. *The Story . . .* (1902), p. 101.

document. The *Chicago Record-Herald* suggested that Mary's bitter cry of loneliness and revolt represented the combined voices of all pioneer women who had lived on the isolated frontier. Another journalist editorialized that the book was not immoral "unless the longing of the feminine nature for its masculine affinity is immoral." Renowned literary critic Barrett Eastman wrote: "All women feel, but few know what or how or why. Mary MacLane knows and is not afraid to say." On the other hand, the *New York Times*' reviewer disparaged her entire literary conception by saying that a woman should not complain because she could not "scratch a match boy-wise." Others suggested that the book would have a damaging impact on impressionable girls. Indeed, the novel struck such a responsive chord among a certain group of young women that it triggered a rash of suicide attempts.<sup>6</sup>

In a revealing interview with a Butte reporter Mary speculated about the cause of these suicides. "I think," she said, "that I have written something that creeps into the barrenness of their lives and illumines the darkness that is within them. . . . Girls of strong mentality after reading the book realize that there isn't anything left for them. They are, in the coarse Butte parlance, 'dead ones'."<sup>7</sup>

How many of her ideas Mary borrowed from the feminist movement is not clear. It is known that as a high school student she had contact with members of the small but active Butte suffrage club. In the school library, which she frequented, Mary would have met Sarepta Sanders, one of the leaders of the state suffrage organization. Teacher Fannie Corbin, the "Anemone Lady," who exerted such a profound influence on Mary's developing intellect, was one of a family of prominent Butte suffragists. While still in her teens Mary also read a number of feminist authors, and in an article on the subject demonstrated an early familiarity with the history of the movement as well as support of the suffrage cause.<sup>8</sup>

Even if she was inspired by the Butte suffragists, the ideas which Mary expressed went far beyond the kind of social change advocated by them. This is not to say, however, that Mary MacLane at age nineteen was a feminist in the commonly accepted sense. The rights of women were never a driving concern in her life, but like the feminists she believed that women should be free to live fully expressive lives. Like many of them, she also set out to construct such a life for her-

self. Unfortunately she failed to carry her ideas to their logical conclusion or to extend her analysis beyond her own immediate situation. After her residence on the east coast, she did broaden her perspective somewhat, but she was to remain throughout her life so self-centered that she failed to understand that other women faced similar situations or that her experiences and ideas might be of use to them. As a consequence, Mary MacLane never associated herself with any feminist or suffragist organization.

**A**S A CHILD Mary MacLane was a tomboy. She called herself "the kid primitive," recalling that she often played so violently that her clothes were always dirty and unkempt. After she discovered books a voracious love of reading tamed her outward rebelliousness. Mentally too undisciplined to be a scholar, Mary was nevertheless a good student, and thanks to inspiring teachers she developed a deep intellectual curiosity. She later wrote in *Annabel Lee* that as a student she had regarded life as something which would one day open wide to display wondrous and beautiful things.

Graduation from Butte High School in 1899 rapidly dispelled Mary's illusions. Perhaps she even saw the irony in the newspaper coverage of her commencement. The reporter for the *Butte Miner*, for example, noted that the young ladies in the class looked lovely, but stated that the boys presented every appearance of giving a good accounting of themselves in life.<sup>9</sup>

This reporter was simply giving expression to the common turn-of-the century belief that marriage and motherhood were the natural and only lifework for women. While a few options were beginning to become evident, these possibilities were closed to Mary because of family finances, her temperament, and limited employment opportunities for women in Butte. As a result, Mary remained at home, her life consumed by monotonous household routine. As the days passed she waited with increasing unhappiness for escape from the emptiness. Like most of her female contemporaries, Mary at first focused upon romantic love as the only possible salvation from her predicament. But because she was plain and introverted, she despaired of attracting a husband and feared that she might become a "stagnant old woman, spiritless, hopeless, with a declining mind and body."<sup>10</sup>

6. *New York Times*, May 10, 1902; *Butte Intermountain*, May 24, 1902; *Red Lodge Pickett*, May 9, 1902; *Chicago Record-Herald*, April 26, 1902. The opinions of noted critic Jeannette Gilder on the deleterious effect of Mary's book were quoted in the *Butte Miner*, May 1, 1902.

7. *Butte Intermountain*, May 24, 1902.

8. Mary MacLane, "Mary MacLane Wants the Vote for the Other Woman," *Butte Evening News*, April 17, 1910.

9. *Butte Miner*, June 3, 1899.

10. *The Story* . . . (1902), p. 12-13; 15. The role a predominately male, immigrant, mining economy played in shaping Mary's ideas deserve further examination. Joseph Kinsey Howard in *Montana High, Wide and Handsome* (New Haven, 1959), p. 94 noted that as late as 1930 the mining city offered limited employment opportunities for women.

Despite her youthful romanticism, Mary MacLane differed from the majority of young women in 1899; she wanted something more than the life which convention reserved for women. Just what constituted her “unspeakable vision of the Happy Life” is not clearly defined in her early writing, but it does seem that she wanted love, happiness, and fame, and that she wanted to experience life to its fullest. With a growing envy Mary realized that had she been born a man she would have been able to give vent to her ambitions in the manner she desired. As a woman she could do nothing of the kind. Instead she must be content with a vicarious existence; she must wait for life to come to her.

In her diary Mary symbolically depicted the kind of life she wanted, a life society reserved for men, by brilliantly comparing it to the fiery, red, western sunset. Only that kind of life would bring her real happiness and satisfaction, she realized, and for it she vowed to sacrifice anything. “There is nothing in the world quite like this red sky at sunset. It is Glory, Triumph, Love, Fame! . . . Devil, Fate, World—someone bring me my red sky! For a brief time, and I will be satisfied. Bring it to me intensely red, intensely full, intensely alive! Short as you will, but red, red, red!”<sup>11</sup>

This envy of men, which was not uncommon among feminists at the turn of the century, emerged at some points in her diary as outright hostility. It was also this sentiment which led her to condemn nearly all aspects of middle-class life and morality. Traditional marriage, for example, was a “monstrous fraud” that had nothing to do with love, and she vowed never to have anything to do with its “paltriness, . . . contemptibleness, . . . and utter degradation.”

It is unlikely because of her hostilities that Mary expected to find lasting happiness in a relationship with any man, but she had no moral reservations about short liaisons. These episodes in her diary led critics to interpret her use of the devil as a romantic Prince Charming figure. Considerable evidence, however, argues against such a facile interpretation, although it must be noted that Mary herself was somewhat inconsistent on the point. At times a belief that she might find happiness with a man in a romantic adventure seems to predominate in her diary; at other times her love affairs with the devil seem to represent not only a desire for love but also a desire for a more generalized fulfilling, worldly experience. This interpretation is given further credence by a revealing comment written in 1910: “That extraordinary devil,” Mary wrote at that time. “How *useful* he was as the foil character and how *plausible* (italics added) did he render the book! . . .”<sup>12</sup>

11. *The Story* . . . (1902), p. 32-34.

12. *The Story* . . . (1911), p. 348; *New York World*, July 21, August 17, 1902.

Further complicating Mary’s ideas about men and marriage was an awakening sexuality which she expressed in her book with a frankness that was then almost unknown among women. Despite her envy of men, Mary MacLane delighted in what she called her “slim, young woman’s body.” Her diary also contains several imaginary, but highly sensual relationships with men. Given her negative attitudes toward men it is not surprising that her diary also reveals strong evidence of a suppressed lesbianism.

As the months passed and Mary contemplated her empty future, she became increasingly depressed, the unusual aspects of her personality became more pronounced, and her sense of alienation increased. Other women, whom she viewed as “from behind a high board fence,” seemed very different and her family, who failed to comprehend her unhappiness, told Mary that she thought too much! Gradually she withdrew from most aspects of home life so that she eventually saw her family very little. On her darkest days she seriously contemplated suicide.

Economics only worsened Mary’s situation. James MacLane, a moderately successful frontier entrepreneur, had left a comfortable estate, but in subsequent years the wealth had dwindled away. As a result Mary was financially dependent upon a stepfather whom she disliked intensely. “Oh, to leave this house and these people and this intense nothingness,” she wailed. “But where can I go, what can I do? I feel with mad fury that I am helpless. The grasp of the stepfather and mother is contemptible and absurd.” Although she raged inwardly at the helplessness of her situation, Mary found herself beset by a nervous disfunction which seemed to sap all her energy and initiative. “I long hopelessly for will power,” she stated, “for resolution to take my life into my hands, to walk away from the house someday and never return.”<sup>13</sup>

MARY MacLANE BELIEVED that she suffered alone, but in reality her symptoms were not uncommon among educated, middle-class women of her generation. In an important essay, Christopher Lasch has demonstrated that the economic changes of the late Nineteenth Century freed these women from old responsibilities and permitted devotion to self-fulfillment. But the “New Woman,” as she was known, found her leisure illusory and frustrating in its purposelessness and indulgence. For such well-known women as Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Margaret Sanger nervous conditions, similar to those experienced by Mary MacLane, were a

13. *The Story* . . . (1902), p. 126; *The Great Falls Tribune*, April 30, 1902, remembered vividly the peculiarities of H. G. Klenze, Mary’s step-father, and Jane Joyce confirmed that Mary blamed him for the family’s reduced circumstances and, in effect, her own situation.

common response to the era's economic, social, and cultural dislocations.<sup>14</sup>

These women succeeded in throwing off their depression and lethargy by turning to the feminist movement; Mary MacLane turned to writing. Precisely when she decided that writing was not only therapy but also a vehicle of escape is not certain. Certainly by Autumn, 1901, she had determined to build a book around the diary she had been keeping. "Let me but strike the world in a vulnerable spot," she vowed, "and I can take it by storm." After that there was nothing in the world for her but her book and her hopes for it.<sup>15</sup>

The problem was to find a vulnerable spot. Fortunately, Mary already understood what would make the reading public sit up and take notice, for she had perceptively editorialized in her school paper several years before: "If we were not told so often that this book or that would harm our morals we would never rush to read that particular kind of book." To be successful she must write her book in a shocking manner.<sup>16</sup>

After its publication in April, 1902, the possibility that *The Story* might be a calculated literary effort was advanced by two very different groups of Butte citizens. The press, intent upon demonstrating that her "immorality" was not typical of the community, vehemently charged that Mary was either insane or a literary fraud out for money. For very different reasons, the small group that supported Mary tended to agree on the second charge. To protect her moral reputation, this group suggested that the book and its author were two different things. Mary was merely pursuing the main chance, they said.

On the national scene no less a literary critic than H. L. Mencken suspected that Mary's writing was the product of artifice. He commented in print some years later that Mary MacLane was "a highly competent performer with the stylus—so competent that she manages to conceal her competency almost completely. On the surface her book is all school-girl naughtiness and innocent prattling; beneath there is a laboring artificiality which must needs evoke professional commendation. One fancies her painfully concocting her phrases, testing her effects, planting her bombs. . . . I do not hesitate to say that I admire the lady, let the chips fall where they may. She is one of the few damsels in this republic. . . . who actually knows how to write English. . . . She senses the infinite resilience, the drunken exuberance,

the magnificent power and delicacy of the language. She knows words; she has style. . . . But Mary MacLane the stylist is not the Mary MacLane who sells so copiously in the department stores and is touted in the newspapers."<sup>17</sup>

But the best evidence about her motivation for writing *The Story* comes from Mary herself. Within her book she planted a cryptic paragraph which becomes clear when her motivation is interpreted in this manner. "This Portrayal is my deepest sincerity, my tears, my drops of red blood," she wrote. "Some of it is wrung from me—wrung by my ambition to tell everything. It is not altogether good that I should give you all this, since I do not give it for love of you. I am giving it in exchange for a few gayly-colored things."<sup>18</sup>

This calculation within Mary's self-portrayal need not detract from appreciation of the book, nor does it mean that the book was dishonest or insincere. In fact, in many ways, this motivation enhances Mary's reputation as a writer. From this perspective the reader perceives *The Story of Mary MacLane* and its symbolism and sustained emotion not merely as the product of an intuitive gift, but as evidence of skilled use of the writer's craft. In addition, the book's entire conception appears original in a sense that contemporary critics failed to appreciate. The restless, discontented "New Woman" would later become a literary cliché, but in 1902 Mary MacLane's confessions were the first such expression of this important phase in the feminist movement.<sup>19</sup>

MARY WAS CONFIDENT that her story would "take" with the public, but she was surprised by the controversy it aroused and bewildered by the personal attack she received, particularly from the people of her hometown. Regardless of the character of the attack, however, the public attention pleased her in an important sense, for it suggested that she had at last mastered her fate and the empty life it seemed to hold for her in Butte.

Mary sometimes seemed aimless and distracted in her interviews during the summer of 1902, but she behaved for the most part like a woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it. She bargained astutely with the *New York World* and paid close attention to what the Anemone Lady called her "advertising technique." At her publisher's urging she left Butte in July, 1902, to travel through the East to increase sales, find a more amicable literary climate, and possibly further her education. Mary was not certain that she wanted a

14. Christopher Lasch, "Woman as Alien," *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963; The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, 1965), pp. 56-68. Also Carrol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth Century America," *Social Research* (Winter, 1972), pp. 652-678.

15. *The Story* . . . (1902), p. 23; *The Story* . . . (1911), p. 334.

16. Quoted in the *New York World*, July 13, 1902.

17. H. L. Mencken, "The Cult of Dunsany," *Smart Set* (July, 1917), pp. 138ff.

18. *The Story* . . . (1902), p. 166.

19. Lasch, *New Radicalism*, pp. 38-46.



Mary MacLane in 1906

career of the type her publisher suggested, but she acquiesced nevertheless. Certainly she needed no adviser to tell her that her substantial royalties would allow her to find a new life for herself.

At first the world failed to live up to Mary's expectations, and she had scarcely departed from Butte when she began proclaiming to the reporters who pursued her that only in Butte's sand and barrenness could she find her soul's affinity. This, coupled with the failure of Radcliffe College to admit her, shook Mary's much-touted belief in her own literary genius. Perhaps as a result, she finally accepted an offer from the *New York World* to write a series of feature articles about her reactions to the East.

This assignment, which included a visit to Newport, Rhode Island, and Wall Street, aroused Mary's social conscience. The juxtaposition of extreme wealth and grinding poverty was something she had never before witnessed. Her resulting articles sympathetically mixed social commentary with serious literature, but they were

not what the sensationalist *World* had expected of the notorious Mary MacLane. The relationship ended with mutual dissatisfaction after a few weeks.

After this experience Mary returned to Boston to resume the writing of books. Although she had felt the city was aloof and unfriendly, she settled there, determined to write another successful volume. Some reporters suspected that she intended to return to Butte once she had conquered eastern social and literary circles.

In Autumn, 1903, Mary completed *My Friend Annabel Lee*, a lengthy dialogue with a porcelain statue. This effort was considered tame in comparison with its forerunner, and as a result, its sales were small. The book is important, however, as a sign of the degree to which Mary MacLane's personality was evolving. As early as the summer of 1902, Mary had told reporters she was no longer concerned by the question of her genius, and in *Annabel Lee* she was totally silent on the point. Even more interesting is the complete absence of her "kind Devil." Whatever her true feelings about men may have been prior to publication of *The Story*, her attitudes definitely hardened after its publication. By August, 1902, she was telling reporters that she did not want love, what she wanted was experience. Clearly Mary was at an important transitional stage in her life. The youthful rebelliousness which had given *The Story* so much of its purpose and pungency was now gone, but her ongoing search for identity had not yet brought her fulfillment.<sup>20</sup>

WHILE SHE FAILED to achieve lasting fame, the years between 1902 and 1910 were to bring Mary MacLane the only happiness she was to know during her life. Rather than retiring to a quiet, literary niche, she determined to go out and experience life in the manner she had dreamed of in Butte. Carefully husbanding her financial resources, she traveled up and down the East coast in the company of writers, actors, artists, and celebrities. About 1907 she settled in New York City, where she rapidly became part of the Greenwich Village café society. In the village, which was then emerging as the focus of America's intellectual bohemia, Mary at last found a congenial atmosphere and open acceptance, even encouragement, of her unconventionality. "I felt at last," she stated, "that I too, was a human being, one with the multitude and the masses."<sup>21</sup>

20. *New York World*, July 22, August 17, 1902; *Chicago Record-Herald*, August 29, 1903.

21. *The Story* . . . (1911), p. 339; Mary MacLane, "A Waif of Destiny on the High Seas," *Butte Evening News*, May 23, 1910.

Although Mary harbored ambivalent feelings about New York, she always referred to it as the place of her dreams. In several nostalgic pieces written shortly after her return to Butte (one of the articles she appropriately entitled "The Vampire on the Isle of Treacherous Delights"), she described both the cruelty and the enchantment which she found during her life there. It is significant that what Mary found in New York was a sense of intimacy that she had not experienced in Butte; this she attributed to the fact that New Yorkers seemed to recognize and accept each other's humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to her discovery of people—"the most enthralling that the world contains"—the Mary MacLane who lived in New York was far different from the introverted young woman who had lived in Butte. In New York her life was filled with afternoons at the Café Martin, sipping absinthe and enjoying conversations with all kinds of people; strolls along Broadway; evenings at the theatre; and prize fights at Sharkey's. She dressed fashionably, used "complexion," developed a fondness for cigarettes and martinis, and became an extroverted hedonist surrounded by a host of friends.

A good number of these friendships were with men. By her own admission, Mary knew over a thousand men during the eight years she was absent from Butte; also by her own admission, many of these men seem to have fallen in love with her. Although she seemed to have entered fully into many of these relationships, apparently finding temporary happiness and even consenting to marry several of her suitors, the fact does not contradict a feminist interpretation of her writing.

In 1910 Mary discussed several of her love affairs in "Men Who Have Made Love to Me," an article she later adapted for the screen. Examination of this essay suggests that Mary's earlier feelings toward men and marriage had intensified. As a young rebel, Mary had railed at marriage for its hypocrisy. As a result of her eastern experiences, Mary ceased to take either life or love seriously. Relationships with men were now "a fascinating, fascinating game."

Although Mary evidently enjoyed scandalizing people with the number of her affairs, she was surprisingly coy on the precise nature of her promiscuity and only once did she comment on the subject in print: "When I was seventeen I stood on a threshold and peered curiously into a dim-lit strange-scented Room. . . . At five-and-twenty I crossed the Room's threshold. I breathed lightly the odd fragrance. I looked curiously around. I touched some amorous-looking grapes and some love-promising apples that lay about; I bit into one and burst a grape with my finger and thumb. I gathered a weak-petaled flower or two. I gauged the

22. Mary MacLane, "Mary MacLane Meets the Vampire on the Isle of Treacherous Delights," *Butte Evening News*, March 27, 1910.

Room and its furnishings and was unthrilled by anything in it. Even bodily it left me unthrilled."<sup>23</sup>

This passage also makes clear the manner in which Mary reconciled her many affairs with her anti-male sentiments. Based on her published comments it would appear that her relationships with men were either devoid of love or affairs in which she was the dominant personality who "triumphantly" ended the matter. In a perceptive comment in 1918, one reviewer of the pictorialization of several of these affairs suggested that Mary MacLane regarded men as so many biological specimens to be examined under a microscope.<sup>24</sup>

To her attitudes toward men, Mary added a more pronounced sense of female superiority. She had always believed that women were nicer and more interesting than men, but she had previously found herself unable to communicate with them. This ended during her eastern residence, where at the theatre, in the tea rooms, and the Café Martin, and in the apartments of friends, Mary suddenly found her life "seething" with women. More importantly these friendships with women were now "the real and informing incidents of her life."<sup>25</sup>

Historian June Sochen argues that the majority of women who gravitated toward the Greenwich Village bohemia during the years before World War I in fact were avowed feminists. Evidence tying Mary to these circles is not conclusive, but it is definitely known that she was a friend of Inez Haynes Gillmore (later Irwin), a writer and a leader of the National Women's Party. In her own writing Mrs. Gillmore indicated that she was intensely interested in Mary's views. There is also little doubt that Mary would have been attracted to this group, for she later wrote that she admired the absolute freedom and abandonment with which women lived in New York City.<sup>26</sup>

Conversations with New York feminists probably did not alter any of Mary's ideas, although they did tend to intensify her opinions and broaden her perspective. *I, Mary MacLane*, which was begun shortly after her departure from New York but not completed until 1917, contains an awareness of herself as one of a group of women of the same "psychic breed," an awareness that had been absent in *The Story of Mary MacLane*. It is likely that the village feminists may have also helped

23. *I, Mary MacLane*, p. 57; Mary MacLane, "Men Who Have Made Love to Me," *Butte Evening News*, April 24, 1910. Furthermore, Jane Joyce testified that in her conversations Mary was "vitriolically anti-male."

24. *Wid's Daily*, January 17, 1918, p. 873.

25. Mary MacLane, "The Borrower of Two Dollar Bills and Other Women," *Butte Evening News*, May 15, 1910.

26. June Sochen, *The New Woman: Feminism in Greenwich Village: 1910-1920* (New York, 1972), p. 41. Inez Haynes Irwin Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, includes an autographed copy of *The Story of Mary MacLane*. Dated Jan. 1909, the inscription indicates that Mary knew Mrs. Irwin well. In "The Life of an Average Woman," *Harper's Bazaar* (May, 1912), p. 281, she indicated her interest in Mary MacLane's opinions about men.

# DIES AS "GODS" FADE

Lovely Pagan Mary Maclane, Who Wrote of Men and Passion, Finds her "Damning Tomorrow"

By United Press  
CHICAGO, Aug. 8—Mary Maclane, whose audacious pen once wrote "men came and went in my life in a never-ending stream, like a long, glittering galaxy of little gods," is dead today—practically forgotten by a world that had toasted, feted and admired her.

Mary the author, the supreme egotist who startled the world with her book, "Men Who Made Love to Me," whose bold descriptions were translated into many languages, passed away late yesterday in a rocking chair in a crude \$10-a-week room of a South Side apartment house.

It was the same Mary, who, with her "I, Mary Maclane"—probably her most daring book—brought the literary world to attention and removed her lonesome surroundings in Montana to the gay and Bohemian atmosphere of New York, Boston and other cities of the world.

It was the same Mary who at the age of 19 had published "The Story of Mary Maclane," picturing herself the rarest of beauties, again the ugliest and always the most egotistical person the world ever knew.

And it was the same Mary who, in her later years, wrote: "I am Mary Maclane, of no importance to the wide, bright world, and dearly and damnably important to me."



MARY M'LANE

BUT today, the girl who had told of her thousand loves, had no one about her she could call her own. Today when the "tomorrow" she often wrote about, will not arrive, an aged mother was sought in Montana as the only friend who really wants to know.

After months of illness, at the age of 43, she died a victim of tuberculosis, according to doctors who were called. But her landlady shook her head and said:

"No—loneliness and a broken heart."

Undoubtedly this was a contributing cause. But to take Mary's words for it, while she had thousands of friends, she needed but one. She wrote:

"I say to me in my mirror: 'It's you and me, Mary Maclane, and another wasting, damning Tomorrow.'"

"INTO my life one winter there I blew a callow youth," she wrote. "I knew him first in St. Augustine, where I used to pass my winters."

Then she described her conversations with the callow youth in the romantic atmosphere she had pictured, and ended:

"'Twas full three weeks before he bored me."

In telling of the literary man, who had proposed, she wrote:

"He possessed that pleasant faculty of keeping me in a chronic state of tolerable misery. He was my 'bete noir' for a matter of months. He called me a liar and an evil spirit and an imp of darkness and various other names. But withal it was I who finally broke it off."

Describing herself she wrote:

"The calf of my leg is a shapely thing. I have the passionate sensual gray eyes of the weary courtesans and the virginal pink lips of a cloistered nun. It was my vanity that saved me from many a slip twixt the cup and the lip. It was not my righteousness. I am a woman of sex, and most things that go with that, with some other points.

"I am vain, shallow and false, pagan within and without."

to mold pre-existing behavior patterns. As Sochen also demonstrates, relationships with men such as Mary experienced were not unknown among the Greenwich Village women. Although she was usually the subject of mockery, the bohemian feminist was an established type. Sochen characterized the bohemian feminist (usually poet, painter, or writer, rather than lawyer or teacher) as an extreme version of feminism who reversed the traditional pattern of men-women relationships. They were typically aggressive young women who were not afraid to practice their radical values. Although men pleaded with them to marry, they refused to be tied down. In these feminists' affairs it was the man rather than the woman who was typically the romantic sentimentalist.<sup>27</sup>

27. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

IN DECEMBER, 1909, Mary Maclane returned to Butte for a visit; she was to remain in the city for seven years. Because of the stimulation and happiness she found in New York, the question of her return to Butte is perplexing. Some evidence suggests that she found the intensity and self-indulgent dissipation of her life in New York to be empty and fatiguing and that she returned to Butte to find a measure of inner peace. Although she did not say so, it is just as likely that Mary was troubled by her inability to write a second successful novel. Butte's sand and barrenness had produced her first book; perhaps she hoped that its environment might again trigger her creativity.

Whatever the reason, her return to Butte does point up the peculiar relationship Mary enjoyed with her hometown. Despite her published comments and

her disdain for Butte's booster efforts to achieve a social and cultural elite, Mary always liked the city. Butte, on the other hand, prided itself on its ability to tolerate a good deal of lawlessness and immorality among its citizens. But this was not the case with Mary MacLane. For her, Butte had only hatred and disdain.

Nevertheless, Butte was curious about its prodigal daughter, and during her first months at home Mary gave the press much to gossip about. Early in 1910, she wrote a series of revealing articles for the *Butte Evening News* which dealt with her life since she first left her hometown. She was also an active participant in Butte's night life, apparently frequenting some of the city's most unsavory spots. For awhile the West Side ladies enjoyed nothing more than gossiping disapprovingly about Mary's latest exploit, but when her visit stretched into years, the gossips gradually lost interest.

Just why Mary remained so long in a city that viewed her with contempt is not clear. It does seem to be related to another personality change that took place once Mary was back within the family fold. Careful examination of the articles she wrote in 1910 and the new conclusion to *The Story of Mary MacLane* published in 1911 with *I, Mary MacLane* (1917) indicate a vivid transformation.

When she first returned home, Mary took life lightly, although still adhering to strict spiritual values. She could even poke fun at herself publicly. In the sensationalist *News* she called herself "a frazzled old rounder," but during 1910 she experienced a nearly fatal bout with scarlet fever. From this point a sense of the fragility of life and her own mortality was scarcely absent from her writing. In the face of her "slow, seductive journey toward the grave" her life, both past and present, seemed beset by an aimless futility. Although she no longer revolted against the order of things, Mary found herself beset by another depression as deep if not so self-pitying as the episode which had preceded her first book. Once again she followed the line of least physical resistance, helpless to do anything to improve her situation. Once again she shut herself off from her family because she was convinced that she did not fit in. Of equal import is the fact that she gave up her penchant for fashionable clothing in favor of two black dresses and proclaimed that martinis no longer pleased her. Though she was "profoundly loverless" and not inclined to alter the situation, she fantasized wildly. Sometimes she contemplated what her life would have been like had she married and had children. But at other times her desire for "honest, worldly life at its biggest and humanest and cruelest and damnest" raged as strong as ever.

Whatever her mood, Mary poured her feelings out on paper and in 1917 her third book, *I, Mary MacLane*,

was published. Although the book was only moderately successful, it sparked the interest of George K. Spohr, producer for Essanay Studios. Spohr was intrigued by the article she had written several years before about her love affairs which seemed to embody the seductive "vampire" then so popular in films. He signed Mary to write and star in a series of films, and she happily departed to begin a new career.

It was perhaps the supreme irony of her life that only the negative ambiance of life in Butte was able to stir Mary's talents and her departure marked the end of her creative period. She won some favorable criticism for her performance for *Men Who Have Made Love to Me*, but because her portrayal of a humorous vampire was basically unsympathetic for American audiences, there were no more films. Mary remained in Chicago, living in obscurity and beset by failing health. She died lonely and forgotten in a Chicago hotel in 1929 at the age of forty-eight.<sup>28</sup>

**S**INCE HER DEATH the small attention Mary MacLane has received suggests that although she possessed considerable literary talent, she had little to say. The fault, it seems now, is more attributable to her audience than to the writer. Mary felt ideas and feelings intensely that were shared by many women during an important era of social and cultural change. Her genius was that she was able to give these feelings literary expression. Unfortunately, her genius was never able to find a subject other than herself. Several passages such as the article on Newport, Rhode Island, or the satiric essay on William Jennings Bryan in *I, Mary MacLane* indicate a nascent social consciousness that might have turned her literary abilities to a more useful purpose. The tragedy in the story of Mary MacLane is not that she had little to say, but that she did not say more.

28. See, for example, Arthur Mayer, *The Movies* (New York, 1957), pp. 66-69 for an essay on the decline in the popularity of the vamp. Favorable comment on Mary's abilities as an actress may be found in the film review of James McQuade in *Motion Picture World*, January 26, 1918.

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