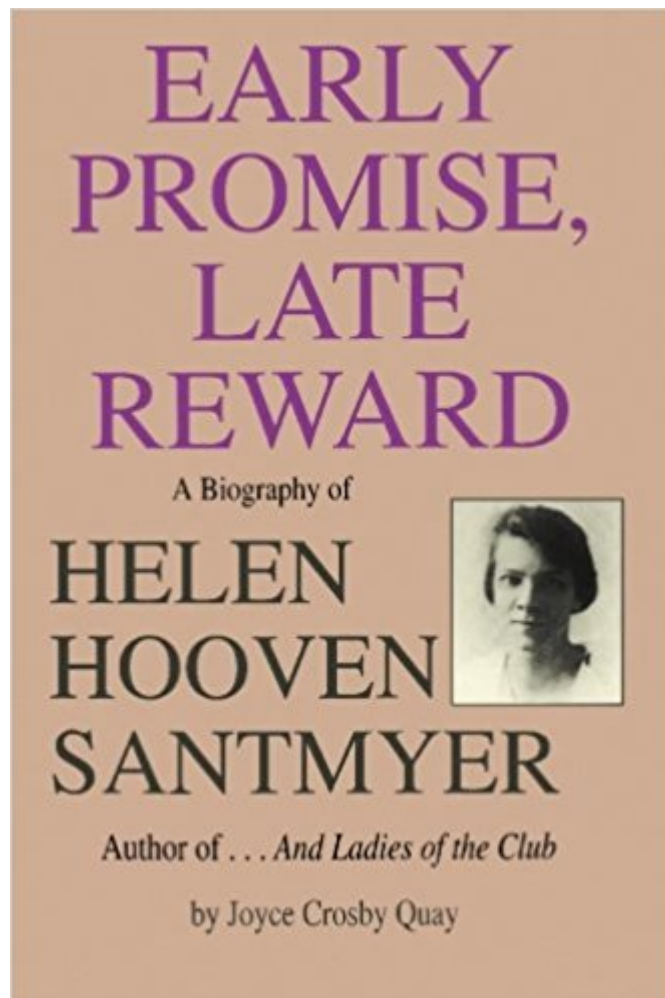




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Early Promise, Late Reward: A Biography Of Helen Hooven Santmyer



Synopsis

Biography: Helen Hooven Santmyer, author of best seller "...and Ladies of the Club". Life of one who sought fame and fortune and achieved it at age 88. About life in small town Ohio during the early part of 20th century, when life was simpler and people more self reliant. A graduate of Wellesely College and Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University in England. College professor and Dean of Women at Cedarville University.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Buckeye by birth and devoted Ohioan. Educated at Knox School in Cooperstown, NY and Simmons College in Boston MA. Author of many articles for national publications; author of Sam Walton, Founder of Walmart. Marquis Who's Who of American Women 2000

After reading Helen Hooven Santmyer's epic novel "...And Ladies of the Club" early last year, I decided that I would read all of her books immediately afterwards. I also looked into the author's long life story, using the many biographical sources that I am fortunate to have easily at hand since I work in a large public library. In regards to longer material, much to my pleasure and surprise, a biography of Santmyer already exists. Early Promise, Late Reward: A Biography of Helen Hooven Santmyer, Author of "...And Ladies of the Club" by Joyce Crosby Quay was published in 1995, the year of Santmyer's centenary. I was very much looking forward to reading this book, but was dismayed by the profusion of spelling errors and inconsistencies throughout. Before I even write about the life of Santmyer herself, I have to discuss this embarrassment of errors, as it unfortunately

overshadows the rich life of this ninety-year-old heroine of American literature. Quay obviously used neither the services of a spell-checking program nor of a human editor. Misspellings abound: "disapointed", "philisophical", "champange", "Queen Elizebeth", "cemetary", "existance", "Southhampton" (twice), "H. L. Menken" (twice) and, repeated over and over, "geneology". The author interviews Santmyer's niece, yet refers to her by three different names in the acknowledgements and endnotes: "Mrs. Caroline Westmore", "Caroline Westbrook" and "Caroline Anderson Westbooks". Who the heck did Quay interview? Quay had access to Santmyer's girlhood diary and her letter correspondence from the Ohio State University Library. She quotes extensively from these personal resources and provides the reader with intimate aspects of Santmyer's life that no previous biographical source could ever dream of approaching. Santmyer travelled throughout England and Europe when she was a young woman and wrote home on the average of six times a month. Her assurances to her parents, her humbled requests for money, and her intricate details of time and place--she provided so much detail that she always included in her letters home a map of a new city she visited or a hand-drawn floor plan for a new house she was staying in--reverberated with me as I myself can identify with the layers of detail I can pile into a letter or E-mail. Early Promise, Late Reward is marked with endnotes, a good sign that shows that the author has sources to back herself up. Unfortunately there was no editor to monitor the numbering of the endnotes either, as the numbering often didn't match up in the endnotes chapter. Moreover, in almost every chapter, there are a mysterious number of notes that are never elaborated upon. It was almost as if Quay intended to provide a note for a quoted passage, then forgot about it. The most embarrassing slip is the error in the Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data page. Call it a Freudian slip on the part of the typist perhaps, but the LCC title of this book is indicated as: Early promise, late reward: a biography of Helen Hooven Santmyer, author of "...And ladies of the night [emphasis mine]. Santmyer's novel centres on a group of young women who form a book club. The LCC data page, however, would suggest that Santmyer wrote a 1400-page novel about a close-knit group of hookers. Not to be nitpicky, but the LCC page also leaves out the end quotation in the book title. I deliberately left out quotes myself when reproducing the LCC classification to emphasize this. Santmyer had aspirations of becoming a famous writer from a young age. Her diary entries, even from as young an age as eleven, show how devoted she was to her craft. She dreamt of fame, and wrote: "When I am famous someone will want to write my life. I hope it will be done before I die. I would like to read it--they can write about my death in an appendix afterward." Santmyer had opposing public and a private personas. In private she was an independent early feminist who vowed often that she never wanted to marry. She did what she wanted and didn't care who thought

what. She smoked and drank, two very unladylike activities in the early twenties. Santmyer worked as a teacher for decades and while in this persona she adopted her second self. Former students would recall her as: "distant,' different,' unfriendly,' strange,' and some of her students claimed she was 'a perfectionist' who demanded perfection from them." In reading this biography I can definitely see the similarities between Santmyer and myself. No wonder I have taken such a fondness to her. Substitute my name for Santmyer's and no one would know the difference. Others who knew her remembered that she never smiled. Can anyone ever recall me smiling in a photo? When I discovered the author of "...And Ladies of the Club" I found my inspiration. "...And Ladies of the Club" was a work that took Santmyer close to sixty years to produce. When asked why she had written the novel, Santmyer replied: "I wanted to show what life was like when people relied on themselves--when they had principles." Quay elaborates: "But Helen's books made an impact because they projected the images of that time when manners and morals were the code of behavior. It was a gentler time, and one when people knew what was expected of them and relied more on themselves." and "She had traveled to Europe and had crossed this wide country many times. However, she did not write of those places, but rather of her own time and place where morality, hard work and independence were expected. She wrote with great love of the past and tried to share her love with those who would read." Santmyer could also be quite hilarious in her letters home, and I was laughing out loud when I read about her time in Paris visiting art galleries. She loved their exhibits of jewellery, pottery, and vases, however: "'Then, of course, sculpture, almost all quite dreadful.' But Helen admitted the paintings were mixed, all modern, but some lovely and some horrible. She liked the landscapes painted in clear bright colors and pictures of the sea. Some of the portraits were fine, 'but I must admit that fat nude women predominate to an absurd extent.' Although not easily shocked, Helen and Adeline 'decided that picnic parties in the woods or along the seashore with no clothes whatsoever must be quite the thing this year.'"

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