

## Let Us Now Praise Famous Women

[FINAL Edition]

The Washington Post (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Washington, D.C.

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Date:	Feb 14, 1993
Start Page:	X.05
Section:	BOOK WORLD
Text Word Count:	1034

TRIALS OF THE EARTH The Autobiography of Mary Hamilton Edited by Helen Dick Davis University Press of Mississippi. 259 pp. \$25

THE LETTERS OF A VICTORIAN MADWOMAN Edited by John S. Hughes University of South Carolina Press 260 pp. \$24.95

SOMETIMES it's hard to be a woman, and "Stand By Your Man" is rarely the answer. For the troubled Southern women in these two new books, there are no princes on white horses. One stands by her husband, but he dies; the other stands by herself - in a ceaseless, lifelong struggle against the most powerful man in her life. He is her doctor - and her warden.

Trials of the Earth, Mary Hamilton's autobiography, is available to us precisely because one woman stood by another. Hamilton, a tough, Missouri-born pioneer, was by 1932 a tiny, 65-year-old hunchbacked woman living in a Mississippi backwoods cabin - when a young writer named Helen Dick Davis stumbled upon her, and found her fascinating.

Davis, who nudged Hamilton to write her memoirs, stood by the author, literally - talking over the story, editing it. But after publishers didn't bite, the manuscript languished for nearly 60 years, until Davis's daughter-in-law found it in an old box under the bed. She, too, was hooked, and this time, so was a publisher. Davis, who died last year at 93, lived long enough to supervise the editing.

Trials of the Earth is enthralling, a sad but never sorry tale of a woman born to toil. When Mary was 17, her father abruptly moved the family to rural Arkansas - where, three days later, he died, stranding his penniless wife and children. They took in boarders - Mary sometimes baked 115 loaves of bread a day - but soon the mother also took sick and died. And so Mary married Frank Hamilton, a mysterious boarder: It was that or let the younger children starve.

The Hamiltons's struggles were elemental. They trekked from one timber camp to another, Mary following the scraps of paper Frank thoughtfully left to mark his trail. She was the first white woman to set foot in the area that is now Parchman, the site of the Mississippi State Penitentiary, and the details of everyday life are riveting.

While Frank cleared the Mississippi wilderness, Mary cooked for as many as 800 men a day, and sometimes went a year without seeing another woman. Of her nine children, only five lived to adulthood, and their world was full of menace: malaria, malnutrition, fires and floods, hailstorms and hurricanes. And then, after a 30-year marriage in which the Hamiltons did come to love one another, Frank died when a backwoods surgeon, treating a work injury, accidentally destroyed his bladder.

This is the rare story of a Southern woman, neither rich nor educated, who endured long enough to recall a unique slice of Americana, sometimes with poetic awe: Her children, she writes, "were my flower garden in my hard years of toil and work and loneliness." THERE IS no such joy in the Letters of a Victorian Madwoman, the claustrophobic story of another Southern white woman who came of age in the 1880s, to her unending sorrow.

Alabama-born Andrew Sheffield (1849-1920) seems to have led a dull life until her thirties, when a "disappointment in love" turned her into a drug addict. (Chloral hydrate was the Valium of her day.) Within a few years an unscrupulous doctor, supplying the drug in exchange for sex, seduced her into trying to torch his enemy's house. Andrew's socially prominent family immediately had her thrown into the Bryce Hospital for the mentally ill - where she remained, untreated and never brought to trial, for the last three decades of her life. Her colonel father shot and killed the doctor a few days later, but no one ever put Sheffield out of her misery.

She was placed in the "back wards," among filthy, violent and senile patients, and her letters are desperate cries to head physician James Searcy and other officials. She wants clothes, food, solitude, sometimes she pleads for a trial, preferring prison or a "hemp necktie" (hanging) to the horrors of the asylum. The answer is always no.

Andrew Sheffield's letters, at first moving, eventually become tedious, but that is not her fault. No matter how often she

hurls herself against the bars of her cage, she will never get out.

Editor John S. Hughes, unfortunately, does not empathize with his heroine (nor does he explain her having a man's name). He disparages some letters as "racist" (by modern standards) or "irrational"; criticizes her for not bonding with the nurses; and often defends the men in charge. Although Hughes cites (male) scholars on "insanity," he should have read Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness*; he should have studied the lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

Aggressive, creative, unconventional women have often been labeled "insane." Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a Sheffield contemporary, and Zelda Fitzgerald in the 1920s were designated insane when they wanted to express their creativity in unconventional ways; as historian G.J. Barker-Benfield has shown, other assertive but less famous 19th-century women were treated with lobotomies, hysterectomies and clitoridectomies.

Hughes fails to see the story the letters tell: of an intelligent, passionate, amazingly persevering woman who waged an unceasing battle for 30 years - yet still suffered and died in an insane asylum, because her family feared disgrace. Her father and male relatives were in league with hospital officials, who often confiscated her letters, refusing to read or mail them.

Yet in Hughes's eyes, Sheffield is ungrateful, petty, emotional. Blaming the victim, Hughes fails to stand by his woman - and so, once again, Andrew Sheffield is unheard, betrayed.

Mary Hamilton was luckier, for Helen Dick Davis and then Ellen Douglas - who writes the introduction - know a heroine when they see one. They make her the center of their story, they see the world through her eyes, and they celebrate her strength. They stand by their woman. -

Emily Toth, who teaches at Louisiana State University, has published biographies of Kate Chopin and Grace Metalious and written about alleged menstrual madness in "The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation."

**[Illustration]**

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