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Life at Hard Labor

By Rosellen Brown;
Published: Sunday, December 13, 1992

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

THERE are two remarkable women speaking in "Trials of the Earth:
The Autobiography of Mary Hamilton." One is Mary Hamilton, a
courageous homesteader in the Mississippi Delta at the end of the
19th century; the other is Helen Dick Davis, a modest writer who
recognized a story that needed to be recovered 60 years ago and
made a handwritten journal into a memoir.

It tells a compelling story, for Mary Hamilton (1866-about 1936)
worked harder in a week than most of us will in a lifetime, and
surely she complained less. While many wax nostalgic for the days
when men and women were healthily dependent on each other's work, "Trials of the
Earth" is a reminder of how punishing the physical struggle could be, and how
unspeakably lonely a woman's life was when men were clearing the land.

This book differs from the many accounts and journals we've read of westward-wending
pioneers in pursuit of an American Dream that demanded endlessly new horizons. Mary
Hamilton's family wasn't trying to go anywhere; skilled and vigorous, eager to settle but
dislodged from one home after another, they simply struggled to survive.

Mary Hamilton's story begins with her stark memory of how in the early 1880's her
father brought his family from Missouri into "the wild country of Arkansas as that was
just beginning to settle up" -- and then died within a week, leaving his wife and their six
children "stranded and helpless in a strange country." Within a year Mary's oldest
brother and mother also died. Obeying her mother's deathbed injunction, at the age of
18 she married Frank Hamilton, an Englishman older than she. Though honorable and
hard-working, he had a drinking problem and a mysterious past that had made him
bitter and secretive. When Mary wasn't mind-numbingly busy, she contemplated Frank's
previous life -- he spoke five or six languages, he had been in the army in Bengal, he
suffered some irrevocable breach with his family and fled to America.

But for much of the time, thinking was a luxury. Frank opened a series of
boardinghouses, and when the loggers who were clear-cutting the land came through,

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Mary found herself cooking and baking for as many as 115 men, plus staff, which meant "115 loaves of bread a day." Though she longed for a proper home, the Hamiltons moved often, dogged by bad luck and losses, not marching toward a manifest destiny, simply looking for a reasonable living. They settled finally in the Mississippi Delta that Faulkner would later write about so elegiacally. Mary Hamilton saw that "a man couldn't get through any of the woods without a compass in one hand and a cane ax in the other to blaze every foot of the way."

Here they lived through every conceivable adventure in the wilderness -- tornadoes, floods, fires. With Frank often away, Mary protected her family with a gun when she needed to; she was skeptical, cheerful and desperately lonely: "A [lumber] camp can be made a happy home as well as any other. I had not seen a woman for over a year . . . and no child but my own." One by one, four of her children died, consumed by awful and sometimes mysterious fate, though six others survived. She was easily made joyous: give this decent woman neighbors, a garden, an occasional fragment of leisure and the beauty of the land when it's benign, and she writes rapturously, with apparently full recall and a dramatic grasp of the details. She embellishes occasionally or sounds a little slicker than seems consistent with her voice. "There are times in every woman's life when it is a greater relief to swear than to pray" and "Women can stand more work, more trouble, and more religion than men." We can only speculate and forgive.

We must also forgive, though a deeper woman might have overcome the prejudices of her time, Mary Hamilton's blindness to blacks as genuine human players in the same rigged game she and her husband were caught in, and, in one incident, her blindness to Jews.

In many ways what makes her story so enthralling is that she was a fairly ordinary woman, but one whom necessity and native grit teased to a grand self-possession and authority. And the story of her relationship to her husband is a complex blend of anger and resentment, confusion, sympathy and the unquestioning devotion of a woman trained to serve and comfort. Frank Hamilton is, in any event, a fascinating character, unique among the lumbermen and farmers he lived with, harsh, disciplined, affectionate, but unyieldingly solitary. By the end, we might believe she loved him.

There is a frame that distinguishes this memoir from so many others and gives it a context in time. A young Mississippi writer named Helen Dick Davis met the aged, much reduced Mary Hamilton "on a raw November day" in 1931 at the home of one of Mary's surviving daughters in the Delta sawmill town of Philipp. An extraordinary dream that urged the older woman to seize the moment before death took her finally persuaded Hamilton to set down her memories in a journal. Davis, who, with her husband Reuben Davis, later published several novels and stories, must have labored as hard to make a viable memoir as Mary Hamilton ever did cooking in her kitchen, to judge by the sample journal pages at the back of "Trials of the Earth." Accurate spelling, punctuation and a clear hand are almost equally lacking.

The manuscript was sent off to a writers' competition sponsored by Little, Brown in 1933, didn't win and disappeared. A carbon copy was found in July 1991 in a box tucked underneath Davis's granddaughter's bed. It was submitted to the University Press of Mississippi, and Davis saw the copy-edited version before she died in February of this year at the age of 92. The finished book includes a few pages of Helen Dick Davis's own journal and makes us wish for more. Two kinds of labor are thus evident in "Trials of the Earth," what Mary Hamilton experienced and what Helen Davis wrote. Both represent lives well lived, and it is stirring to enter them after all these years.



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Photo: Mary Hamilton with Nick and Louvica Davis, the children of Helen Dick Davis, 1933. (From "Trials of the Earth")

Rosellen Brown's most recent novels are "Before and After" and "Civil Wars."

A version of this review appeared in print on Sunday, December 13, 1992, on section 7 page 25 of the New York edition.

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