



The Power and Passion of M. Carey Thomas

Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz

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M. Carey Thomas (1857-1935) was an extraordinary woman whose career spanned the Victorian and modern worlds.

Her story is superbly told in a biography that resonates with the complicated interplay between her necessarily hidden private life and her eminently visible and successful public life as president of Bryn Mawr College, as a founder of the Johns Hopkins medical school and the Bryn Mawr School in Baltimore, as a leader in the women's suffrage movement, and as the preeminent spokeswoman for education around the turn of the century. Behind close doors, however, Carey Thomas was by no means the "proper Quaker daughter" many of her contemporaries assumed her to be. She was a freethinker. She was an ardent admirer of Swinburne, Rossetti, and the Pre-Raphaelites. She was a passionate woman whose lovers were women.

In rich detail and with insight and balance, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz recounts a life lived outside the bounds of nineteenth-century convention. She shows us the child overcoming a life-threatening and disfiguring burn; the schoolgirl deciding to devote her life to scholarship -- and ultimately becoming one of the first American women to study for a doctorate in Germany. We see the Cornell woman -- in an age when marriage eliminated the possibility of a serious career -- promising her parents to avoid all encounter with men students; the young educator outwitting college trustees to develop her dreams of a rigorous education for women. Throughout, as the book reconstructs Thomas' consciousness and her understanding of herself as a woman of passion, Horowitz provides fresh insights into emotional and sexual life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Carey Thomas was complexity itself. She was at once visionary and narrow, warm and hard, spontaneous and calculating. She demanded everything of the world and of herself. She brought equal intensity to her professional responsibilities and her personal relations. She lived at fever pitch.

Helen Horowitz has given us a brilliant portrait of the vivid and sui generis woman who -- in a world that held no models for her -- created herself, full scale, in the grand manner.

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