

Rebel Pen *the writings of Mary Heaton Vorse*



by Jan Kelly

(Provincetown) There is a book at the Provincetown Book Store which would be of interest to all of us. Not just for the parochialism of the fact that it was written by a Provincetowner, but because we are all members of the human race and citizens of the world. The book is *Rebel Pen, The Writings of Mary Heaton Vorse* edited by Dee Garrison. Mary Heaton Vorse for more than forty years was America's foremost labor journalist. Her strength was timing. Being there on the spot to see, to hear, and to report, not to receive information and grind it out second hand. She lived with miners in Duluth, Minnesota. She visited migrant workers' quarters—many of them. She went to farm auctions and house evictions. She went to court when demonstrators were tried. At one courtroom session held for Frank Tannenbaum and 189 others, Mary Heaton Vorse was present in the court room, interviewing the "arrested." They were led by Frank Tannenbaum to a church for shelter, sanctuary from hunger and freezing temperatures. Many of them didn't speak English. Penned overnight with standing room only and no food, they understood less of the courtroom procedure. Mary Vorse spoke with one man in his native German to find the other side of the story. The priest's behavior, the arrest, the hor-

rendous night, the hunger, the disgrace were nothing to him compared to having no work. He said, "Looking for work and not finding it is the hardest work I know." Mary Vorse reports that fine strong men with enough defeats turn into bums, victims of a system of many poor and few rich.

The government was against the labor unions. Mary Heaton Vorse called attention to this. She was the voice of the poor, forgotten people, the hidden people. She fundraised for herself. She was accused of Communist backing. She was dubbed dangerous by the government and the FBI covered her moves for years. She believed in the individual doing the job rather than an organization. She had commitment, was and is an inspiration to others. She could lead, she could organize, she could teach through her writings. Being a person of action and covering her material first hand made her writings vivid and believable. Both conservative and liberal read her works to know what was going on. If a farm was being auctioned off, a lone bid of ten cents would buy it back. Unity and a plan could win. If an eviction took place people would be moving in the furniture as fast as the police moved it out. She championed the poor, the immigrants, the migrant workers, the unemployed, women, and children before the age of welfare. She called atten-

tion to what the majority of the populace had little information about.

Mary Heaton Vorse was born into a comfortable life and was expected to and could have had just that, till her 92 years. But a career and writing was her choice. The first wave of Feminists mid 19th century chose their careers, shunning marriage and therefore motherhood, thinking these roles incompatible. But Mary's generation wanted career, marriage, motherhood, all. These few women didn't fit into any of the standards of womanhood, they were rebels. Courageous in their choice and in their consequences, they changed the world as well as their individual lives.

Her home bases were Greenwich Village and Provincetown with much travel in between. During her first marriage to Bert Vorse, she, Bert and young Heaton went to Europe to live and write. This stint lasted seven years, added many successes to her writing career and a daughter, Maryellen. On the return voyage in 1910, Mary Vorse received news of the death of her husband and mother. Because her mother did not approve of Mary's career choice, she was disinherited. This made the next year, her choices, and the future difficult. But Mary was determined to write and to write about the unfortunates in hopes of raising their standard of living.

In 1911, she joined the Pure Milk Crusade in New York City. Then the Triangle Shirt Company fire drew her to action. By 1912 and the Lawrence Textile strike, Mary knew it was not just an abstract or intellectual or obvious problematic route, but it was visceral. The cost of human labor was too unbalanced to ignore. She wrote and helped more than ever. She became editor of *The Masses*.

In 1907, she bought the Kibbe Cooke House, two doors east of the Art Association Her son Heaton Vorse still lives there, carrying on the family tradition of journalism. She lived between Greenwich Village and the Kibbe Cook House. In the Village, in 1915, the Provincetown Players had their first performance on her fish wharf across from her house. Summers gave some social life and artistic enjoyment away from the grueling travel and journalism.

In 1913 Mary Vorse was invited to the Womens' International Suffragettes Convention in Budapest. Remarried to Joe O'Brien, Mary had a son Joel. She went off to the Women's Suffragette Party at The Hague as the New York City delegate. Joe stayed in the states caring for Heaton, Maryellen, and Joel. (Joel O'Brien and wife Jill live in their own house on the Kibbe Cooke property, also continuing the family tradition.) The time must have been of extra importance to the four of them, since Joe died unexpectedly the next year. While Mary was on the 1915 trip, she wrote several war reports for American magazines. The effects of the war on the ordinary people, especially the women and children were the content. These experiences alienated Mary from the lighter side of Village living, her writing became more Messianic. The United States entry into the war fractioned the Village

group and Mary went deeper into her travelling journalism. In 1921, she was one of the first journalists to visit famine Russia. In 1922, she was present at the United Mine Workers' strike. In 1937 both Mary and Heaton Vorse were wounded in separate skirmishes. Undaunted, Mary addressed the crowd next day wearing a head bandage. But timing and being there was always a requirement of good reporting.

In the 1930's she wrote warnings of Hitler and Stalin. Her factual accurate reports attracted all political hues. She had the information. It was real and it was interesting. She wrote for the workers in their newsletters, also. The promotion of industrial unionism was pursued and covered in all directions. At seventy years of age, Mary Heaton Vorse was the US's oldest war correspondent covering Italy. So difficult a life would have defeated most of us long before, but Mary Heaton Vorse led the force fighting nuclear waste dumping on the Cape in the 50's and in 1965 was spearheading the anti-Vietnam movement. She died at 92, here in Provincetown, leaving her diary and formal papers to the Labor Archives in Detroit.

Mary Heaton Vorse's life is an inspiration but more tangible is her writing, so clear and so informative. Dee Garrison spent six years compiling and editing this book. Dee was teaching the strikes of the 30's at Rutgers. She noticed that all the articles used for the lectures were by MHV. She became curious. Dee spent two summers in Provincetown in a rented room, going over Mary's personal papers and mementoes so graciously loaned to her by Joel O'Brien and Heaton Vorse. She went to Detroit, winters, to study the formal papers and diary. Dee Garrison is writing a biography of Mary Heaton Vorse.

My present doubles partner, Ros Baxandall, gave me a copy of the book. Ros was on the editorial staff. Since Ros is doing research on Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mary's best friend, also a labor leader and single mother and travelling journalist, the librarian at the Labor Archives gave Ros, Dee's address. They travelled together to Washington, DC to go through the unfilled thousands of micro films of the FBI, each looking for information on both women.

I'm enjoying the book. When I left the courts with it, I met Donn Hagerty who asked me to take his heavy bundle home. As I turned up Washington Ave, there was a convertible with so many liberal bumper stickers you couldn't tell the color or make, but I knew it was Joel O'Brien I showed him my new treasure. He was delighted. Heaton exited 5 Washington Ave, empty cardboard of Meals on Wheels, humming and fussing with the car door. "Heaton, Heaton," Joel insisted, "Look, Kelly's trying to show you—she has mother's book!" I'm enjoying the book; you will too. Besides the Labor Rights, Feminism and political pieces you'll enjoy the last piece: "Why I Have Failed As A Mother," written for *Cosmopolitan* in 1924. Quite avant garde for 1924. And we all know she didn't fail at all. She succeeded at everything in her grasp. We have the proof right here.