H.L. Mencken Collection at McDaniel College

For our second "featured" entry Barbara O'Brien, College Archivist at McDaniel College in Westminster, has prepared an overview of a fascinating rare books collection. Thanks Barbara!

H. L. Mencken Collection at McDaniel College

This collection consists of ten books. Two of the books, which are signed by Mencken, were a gift to the Library. Purchased for the collection was a short biography of Estelle Bloom Kubitz Williams, “Gloom” A Case for Stella by R. Bryce Workman. The seven books that are the nucleus of this collection were part of Estelle's personal library. They were purchased from the New Windsor Library of Carroll County Maryland for the College's circulating collection in January 1955 by Elizabeth Simkins, Librarian. All but one of these books were a gift to Estelle by Mencken.


Bertha Estelle Bloom Kubitz Williams aka Gloom, 1886-1954

Estelle Williams is a footnote in American literature. She was born in Frederick County, Maryland, the third of six children. Estelle's family soon moved to New Windsor. Here her family did quite well until her father's suicide in 1898. At age 11, Estelle went off to work first in a creamery her father had owned and when she was sixteen as a telephone operator. She helped her mother, an invalid, at home with cooking and cleaning. When she wasn't working or cleaning she read dime novel romances popular at the time.

Barely eighteen and filled with wanderlust, romance, and the excitement of the "big city" Estelle left New Windsor for Baltimore. In Baltimore, she joined the Enoch Pratt Library where she renewed her love of reading - the one affair that lasted her entire life. It was also in Baltimore she met her first husband Hans Kubitz. Kubitz was from Germany and Estelle saw him as romantic, exotic, and very handsome. It wasn't to last - in 1913 he abandoned her in Texas as he took off to see the world.

Estelle moved in with her younger sister Marion in Washington, D.C. Here she sought to legally rid herself of Kubitz - a nearly impossible task. She rarely heard from him and when she did, it was often only a postmark that told her where he was. In 1914 it was a postmark from one of these letters that sent Estelle and her sister to the Baltimore Sun newspaper office in hopes of finding Kubitz listed as victim of a disaster reported by the paper. On this trip, her sister Marion met H. L. Mencken, newspaper columnist, critic, and iconoclast. Marion and Mencken became lovers, an affair that lasted until Marion's impulsive marriage to another in 1923.
Through Marion Estelle became friendly with Mencken. A friendship that lasted long after Mencken's relationship with Marion ended. Mencken dubbed her "Gloom" referring to the Russian novels she read so avidly. He also introduced Estelle to American novelist Theodore Dreiser. Estelle and Dreiser had a torrid affair that lasted three years. "Gloom" and Dreiser, Marion and Mencken reigned as literary couples in New York's social scene and spent summers in New Windsor. Counseled by Mencken to leave Dreiser because of his infidelities - Estelle stayed on. It was Dreiser who left following a young actress Helen Richardson to California. Dreiser was not true to Helen either but he married her just before he died. In 1923 Estelle married Arthur Williams.

When "Gloom" moved back to New Windsor in 1937 she was alone. Her marriage to Williams ended in divorce after she discovered he was cheating on her, she was no longer communicating with her sister, and her friendship with Mencken had withered. She often went to New York City to visit with friends but made little or no attempt to make friends in New Windsor. In 1945 she found out she had breast cancer and heard the news of Theodore Dreiser's death. Estelle plummeted into alcoholism and her trips to New York became fewer. She became a recluse only leaving her house to buy books and items she needed. She was found dead by her brother in 1954.

These inscriptions are from six books given to Estelle by Mencken. Mencken's last mention of Estelle is in a letter to Dreiser in 1937.

For more information on the Bloom sisters:

- Mencken: The American Iconoclast, Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, Oxford University Press, 2005