

A Girl from Lyon Mountain

Esther Casier Quinn

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Painting an impressionistic portrait of a ninety-one-year-long life, this author has written a charming memoir that entertains and inspires.

Reading *A Girl from Lyon Mountain*, by Esther Casier Quinn, a brilliant ninety-one-year-old writer, scholar, professor, and sophisticated raconteuse, leaves one wishing that Quinn had written this memoir twenty or so years ago when her memories may have been more extensive. Still, Quinn has penned a charming and entertaining story. She candidly points out in the preface that the book was written to fill the gap created by her husband's death and to share her memories of her life. It certainly accomplished the latter purpose.

Born in 1922 to a miner's family in upstate New York, Quinn had to overcome a serious hearing deficit, the result of scarlet fever, which she contracted at age seven. Eventually she was enrolled in a local school for the deaf. The author refers to this experience in only a few pages; this episode in her young life actually warrants several chapters.

Ultimately, Quinn graduated with honors, including membership in Phi Beta Kappa, from Hunter College and went on to graduate school at Columbia University. These were the World War II years, and Quinn paints an impressionistic portrait of life in the metropolis. She relates how she met a navy officer at a dance held for servicemen. They enjoyed a brief interlude at the end of which, says Quinn, "he gave me as a parting gift, a book titled *This is My Beloved*, by Walter Benton. There were exchanges of letters, then only memories." There are, however, sufficient details that provide a well-defined sense of what her life was like at that tumultuous time.

Quinn has a delightful habit of understatement. Along with her scholarship and writing, the author also maintained an interest in drawing, especially human profiles. During a summer writing program in Vermont, she drew a profile of Robert Frost and presented the drawing to the poet. Frost pronounced, "I've seen worse," and that was the end of the story. During that same summer writing program, the author met Louis Untermeyer, the renowned poet, critic, and poet laureate. Yet all there is in this memoir is the mention of the poet's name with no further discussion of the nature of her interaction with him.

But the author is able to recount in stark reality the details of significant events in her long life without embellishment or overblown reflection. Quinn is painfully matter-of-fact about an episode in Central Park during the war, when she lost her virginity. And she describes with equal aplomb giving birth to her first child while finishing her dissertation. There are some who would consider either one of these events as prodigious. To Quinn, doing them at the same time appears logical and just a part of life.

A Girl From Lyon Mountain is a brief memoir, only 126 pages in manuscript form. Perhaps Quinn has more to say about her rich and rewarding life. That would be a good thing. But even in its current state, this memoir makes for a charming and entertaining read.

JOHN SENGER (November 6, 2013)

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