



Edith Maude Eaton

“

I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant “connecting link.”

— “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Stories

”



Biography

Edith Maude Eaton, the first writer of Asian descent published in North America, was born in Macclesfield, England, in 1865 to a Chinese mother and an English father. Eaton’s mother was apparently schooled in England although she returned to China after her education was completed. Eaton’s father was a merchant who did trading in China; it was on one of his business trips that he met and fell in love with his future wife. According to Eaton scholars, Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks, “interracial marriage was taboo in both cultures[; thus,] theirs was an unusual union.” At age seven, Eaton and her family left England and immigrated to Hudson City, New York, and in the early 1870s, settled in the Montreal suburb of Hochelaga. She went to school until age eleven and then continued her education at home. As the second child and oldest daughter of fourteen children, Edith Eaton spent much of her childhood helping her mother care for her siblings as well as selling her father’s artwork in the city.

Quick Facts

- * 1865-1914
- * First writer of Asian descent to have work published in America
- * Wrote under the name Sui Sin Far

This page was originally submitted by Terry D. Novak, and augmented and revised by Piyali Dalal on 5/23/01.



Edith Maude Eaton

Biography continued

Eaton started her career at Hugh Graham's *Montreal Daily Star* newspaper as a typesetter at age eighteen. Her first short stories were published in the *Dominion Illustrated* in 1888; she also maintained her administrative duties as well as submitted newspaper articles. It was in her journalistic writing that Eaton openly identified herself as a Chinese American and explained her biracial heritage to her readers. She wrote under the pseudonym Sui Sin Far, a childhood nickname that means "water lily" in Chinese. Her sister, Winnifred Eaton, used Onoto Watanna as her penname and also was a writer.

In the mid 1890s, Eaton moved briefly to Jamaica, where she contracted malaria, from which she never quite recovered. During the next ten years, until 1909, she lived in Seattle and San Francisco. She wrote more articles and short stories and gained a literary reputation. Chinese American women were at the center of much of Eaton's writing, and she worked to break down cultural stereotypes. In 1909, Eaton moved to Boston where she compiled a full-length selection of short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, which was published in Chicago in 1912. In 1913, Eaton, stricken by horrible rheumatism and bad health, returned to Montreal. She died there on April 7, 1914.

After Edith Maude Eaton's death in 1914, there was decades of silence surrounding her literary career. Her book was out of print until 1995 when Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks coedited a new version of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Stories*. They included twenty-four short stories from the original collection, plus articles and short fiction which were first published in the *Montreal Daily Witness*, the *Los Angeles Express*, the *New York Independent*, *The Westerner*, and the *New England Magazine*. Annette White-Parks also published a literary biography of Eaton that explores her writing life.

Two particularly interesting short stories by Eaton are the companion pieces, "The Story of One White Women Who Married a Chinese" and "Her Chinese Husband," both included in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. The former story portrays a Caucasian American Minnie, who takes her six-year old child and leaves her American husband who has betrayed her. After the divorce is finalized, Minnie finds herself on the brink of destruction. It is at this crucial point in her life that Liu Kanghi, a Chinese man, befriends her and her child. Minnie and Liu Kanghi eventually marry, forcing Minnie to face many outside prejudices and doubts.



Edith Maude Eaton

Biography continued

Through these characters, Eaton shows how interracial love and marriage are not only possible but also fulfilling. In the sequel, “Her Chinese Husband,” Eaton continues Minnie’s life and her reflections of culture, race, and relationships. Minnie’s husband, Liu Kanghi, has died, and she is remembering their life together. She describes the tears with which she welcomed her second child into the world, and she explains the racist act of violence that took her husband’s life. Through Minnie’s experiences, Eaton grappled with the complex issues of racism, ethnocentrism, and biculturalism.

Known as “spiritual foremother of contemporary Eurasian authors,” Eaton has been the subject of two dissertations, a literary biography, and numerous articles. Notable Sui Sin Far scholars include S. E. Solberg, Amy Ling, James Doyle, and Annette White-Parks. Amy Ling writes, “If we set Sui Sin Far into the context of her time and place, in late nineteenth-century sinophobic and imperialistic Euro-American nations, then we admit that for her, a Eurasian woman who could pass as white, to choose to champion the Chinese and working-class women and to identify herself as such, publicly and in print, an act of great determination and courage.”

Sui Sin Far’s literary projects examined issues of hybridity, institutional racism and sexism. She illustrated the confusion of being both Chinese and English when both groups displayed hatred towards each other. Elizabeth Ammons commends the political nature of Eaton’s career and her contribution to American literature: “That Sui Sin Far invented herself - created her own voice - out of such deep silencing and systemic racist repression was one of the triumphs of American literature at the turn of the century.”



Edith Maude Eaton

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