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**Believing in the Robin's First Call:
Belle Owen and *A Prairie Winter***

Eric Gardner



One of the most overlooked examples of works of turn-of-the-century American literature that romanticizes rural life and childhood in the face of impending change is Belle Owen's *A Prairie Winter*. This remembrance/diary is worth notice not only for its lyrical description of rural Illinois (the Mokena area) and of farm life, but also because it is a wondrous reflection of the conflict between progress and the past that much of rural (and urban) America was feeling. Very little happens in terms of plot in *A Prairie Winter*; it is a series of pictures of an Illinois farm family in a just pre-1900 winter. Through these pastoral pictures, which are sometimes invaded by foreboding images of modernization, *A Prairie Winter* documents one woman's way of coping with the conflict of progress. But to more clearly understand the images of *A Prairie Winter*, one should first examine the life of Belle Francis Owen—as well as the history of the book itself.

Belle Francis Owen was born in October of 1866 to William B. Owen (who was born in 1826 in Kentucky) and Anttonet C. Owen (who was born in 1841 in New York—her maiden name is, as yet, undiscovered). Belle was probably born in Will County, Illinois, where her father was one of the first settlers; she was the third of eight children (seven of whom survived to adulthood).¹

It was in 1871 that Belle's father, William, purchased twenty acres of farmland outside of Mokena (in Frankfort Township, Will County) from Simon and Sophronia Merwin, adding on to his ninety acre farm.² This farmstead, surrounded by wood, grass, and the tracks of the Rock Island Railroad became the world where Belle Owen grew to adulthood. She attended school in the area until she was at least 14, but, as far as is known, never went on to learn a profession.³

Her adulthood well may not have been the ideal one for a turn-of-the-century woman. By 1900, when she was 33, she was still single and still living with her parents on their farm; in short, Belle Owen had neither the traditional means of female "satisfaction"—a family of her own—or the newer possibility—a career. The blank on the 1900 census for occupation is left blank for Belle Owen; quite simply, she was, at 33, a spinster, who had no career of her own and was helping her aging parents care for the farm (and their three children who remained at home—the youngest of which was 19).⁴ In rural Illinois of 1900, this was grounds for pity; in the growing and changing community of Mokena, living with aging parents, with no husband and no career, Belle Owen must have longed for the mythic, safe, and free childhood/past she recalls in *A Prairie Winter*.

A Prairie Winter, Belle Owen's only known work, was published in April of 1903 by the Outlook Company of New York and was printed by the Mount Pleasant Press (the J. Horace McFarland Company) of

Harrisburg, PA.⁵ It is unknown whether or not Belle Owen even received any credit or compensation for her work at the time; the byline of *A Prairie Winter* reads “By an Illinois Girl.”⁶

Regardless of whether she was given any credit or not, it is, at this time, undiscovered what happened to Belle Owen after 1900; by 1910 she was probably either married or dead—there are two “Belle Owen’s” listed in the 1910 US census of Illinois, and neither fits the information known about Belle Francis Owen.⁷ There is a distinct possibility that she died before *A Prairie Winter* was published and that the work was published as a memoriam.

Thomas Kilpatrick and Patsy-Rose Hoshiko, in their *Illinois! Illinois!*, were the first researchers to cite Belle Owen as the author of *A Prairie Winter*⁸ and Robert Bray, in his essay “Fiction to 1915” in *A Reader’s Guide to Illinois Literature* notes this identification⁹. But how Kilpatrick and Hoshiko came to the conclusion that Belle Owen was the author of *A Prairie Winter* is never disclosed in *Illinois! Illinois!*.

However, regardless of their presentation (or lack of presentation) of evidence, Kilpatrick and Hoshiko were correct; several textual references support the claim that Belle Owen was the author of *A Prairie Winter*; these references further support the theory that Belle Owen is also the central character of *A Prairie Winter*. In addition to the references to place (the farm outside of Mokena situated amidst woods and the Rock Island Line and many references to the surrounding countryside), one who researches Belle Owen’s life will find that the three others mentioned by name in *A Prairie Winter* (in addition to the main character who is called “Belle”) were Belle Owen’s siblings. Mary (Maria) was four years older than Belle, Cora was two years older, and Jamie was six years younger.¹⁰

It appears that *A Prairie Winter* was written either as a series of letters or as a diary/remembrance; the time of writing was most likely between 1886 and 1900. Two areas of the text support the theory that *A Prairie Winter* was originally written as a series of letters; first and foremost are the references to “you” toward the end of the text, culminating in “I’ve had to make such lapses between writings, but its all been to you! . . . Your letter has made a part of my June.”¹¹ This simple statement, far from being any kind of literary device, seems an honest expression of friendship to the person *A Prairie Winter* was written to.

The second part of *A Prairie Winter* that points to the letter-theory is the dedication—“To Minna Caroline Smith,” firstly because it is the only whole name to appear in the book and secondly because there were at least two possible Minna Caroline Smith’s in the area that could have been good friends (to the point of exchanging letters) with Belle Owen. A “Caroline Schmidt”, age 16, was a resident of Green

Gardner: Believing in the Robin's First Call: Belle Owen and A Prairie Wi Garden (a small town near Mokena) in 1880¹², and a "Wina Smith" was listed as a married resident of Peotone Township in 1900¹³.

If *A Prairie Winter* was published as a memorial, there is some credence to a theory that Minna Caroline Smith could have been the manuscript's submitter, if *A Prairie Winter* was originally written as a series of letters to her. The other seeming alternative, if Minna Caroline Smith did not submit the manuscript, is that Belle's family submitted the work, but there is little evidence to support this.

Remembrance, diary, or series of letters, (published as a memorial or not), it is clear the Belle Owen's *A Prairie Winter* is autobiographical; Bray makes a reasonable statement when he says "*A Prairie Winter* may not contain a single fictional word . . ." ¹⁴. The question of how *A Prairie Winter* came to be published (especially outside of the Midwest) is, as yet, unanswered. The Outlook Company was a reputable publisher of the time (they published a regular magazine, *The Outlook*, for over forty years), but it is highly possible that *A Prairie Winter* was published as a "vanity" book—a book whose submitter paid part or all of the publishing costs.

It is also questionable that *A Prairie Winter* ever had more than one printing; further, there is no copy of *A Prairie Winter* in the Mokena Public Library (or in any of the surrounding libraries), and Mokena is a town where authors are very few and far between. Critics of the time were ignorant of *A Prairie Winter*, and the work still holds a less-than-minor place in American literature in the eyes of most of today's critics; the only scholar to take much notice of *A Prairie Winter* has been Robert Bray, in his essay on Illinois fiction to 1915 in *A Reader's Guide to Illinois Literature*.

Much of Bray's praise for *A Prairie Winter* centers around the rural charm he sees in the book; he includes it in the section titled "'Real' Rural Life". Bray cites "the sense of being poised on the verge of change as adding poignancy to the quiet lyricism and domestic sentimentality of *A Prairie Winter*." ¹⁵ and here he is directly on target.

Bray is also on target with his comparison of Belle Owen's writing and the feelings of popular American readers and critics of the time, saying,

*Americans . . . wanted their fiction to be romantic without being exotic, . . . wanted the "semblance of realism so long as that realism conveyed an essentially romantic picture of an earlier, purer life when men and women lived closer to nature and still saw ways to find success in homely achievements." Barrie's rural vision is one with Belle Owen's . . . the life she represents in A Prairie Winter is made mythic even as she records it from daily experience.*¹⁶

The beauty of *A Prairie Winter* lies in this “rural myth” (and the “myth” of childhood) combined with the sense of impending change, a combination that must have been part of Belle Owen’s own life. Belle Owen attempts to “resolve” this conflict/combination through one of the classic “methods” of the time (described by T. J. Jackson Lears in his *No Place of Grace*); she romanticizes the “past” by painting a mythic, somewhat sentimentalistic picture of rural life (the “early” style of life of man) and childhood (the “early” life). The romantic view of rural life and childhood overpowers many of the foreboding traces in *A Prairie Winter* so much that the traces of foreboding are barely visible—but they are still present.

Belle Owen’s foreboding responses to modernization are subtly written into *A Prairie Winter*; they first come to surface at the beginning of *A Prairie Winter* in the almost frightening description of the coming harvest—

*The long corn rows are beginning to rustle and stir as if they felt the advance of the man in the blouse with the swinging knife.*¹⁷

Here a common and very joyful image to farm families, the harvest, is transformed into one full of foreboding; Belle Owen may well have been one of the stirring corn stalks afraid of the advancing reaper—progress and change.

These foreboding traces continue to come up throughout *A Prairie Winter*; “and somehow I am glad it is several miles of trees instead of several miles of houses that shut out the northern horizon”¹⁸ writes Owen, celebrating in the freedom the past allowed her.

The Rock Island trains play a part in Owen’s foreboding, too—from where she says “I have never seen a train on that track before”¹⁹ to where she describes a passing double-train with combined fear and amazement—

*The two engines, twin dragons, with one eye apiece and a common tail, snorted and puffed fire and smoke, and a long train of sparks rolled over us; and, altogether, there was something so diabolical in the scene that we waxed gleeful.*²⁰

Perhaps for the older Belle Owen, a spinster that readers of *A Prairie Winter* never see (“Belle,” in *A Prairie Winter* is a young woman in her late teens), progress and modernization were very real—in the new trains, the new houses, the coming harvest of progress—and somewhat frightening, aspects of her life—aspects “so diabolical” that she had to “wax gleeful” instead of outwardly being afraid. Present here, too, is a

Gardner: Believing in the Robin's First Call: Belle Owen and A Prairie Wi combined sense of excitement about change (present in so many Americans at the turn-of-the-century) and fear of the change; many Americans were also seeing "diabolical" new aspects of progress and "waxing gleeful" instead of outwardly showing and dealing with their concerns about progress.

To deal with her fears, Belle Owen romanticized and sentimentalized two parts of "the past" in *A Prairie Winter*—childhood (her own "past" as well as the "past" of all people) and the rural/farming lifestyle (the most common lifestyle of the "past").

The romanticizing of childhood (which Lears quotes as being the idea that "children and the simple-hearted are nearer to God than most of us"²¹) is present throughout *A Prairie Winter* and most often centers around "the boy"—Jamie Owen, then a young adolescent right on the verge of adulthood—and "the youngest"—probably Arthur Owen. This romantization also begins early in *A Prairie Winter*—

*A long, busy afternoon to myself, for they all went away, leaving me to the care of one of my cavaliers, aged fourteen.*²²

This passage serves not only to show the adults leaving Belle Owen, but also shows the children (in this case, the child) staying with her; there is no greater romantization than to show one staying behind to "care" for another when all others have left.

Perhaps the most romantic and sentimental picture of childhood in *A Prairie Winter* is the sled scene (January sixth):

I have just enjoyed my first ride of this winter on a hand-sled. I was standing on the walk, undecided which path to take, when the youngest drew up his sled with a flourish.

*"Where are you going?" he asked invitingly, and the wind had whipped his cheeks to a fine red. "All right, I will," I responded promptly, and in an instant the sled was doing duty. After he had had some time of this delightful exercise, I helped him load his sled with fire-wood, he, all the time, protesting that I needn't do that, and gallantly offering his mittens for my bare hands.*²³

Here, Belle Owen paints a mythic picture of the child as a knight in shining armor, riding on his gallant steed, ready to assist one who is "undecided (about) which path to take." It is a picture Belle Owen must have very much wanted to be real, and, because of this, passages in *A Prairie Winter* like the sled scene convey all the beauty and wonder held in the hoping heart of their author.

Belle Owen's own hopes/needs also come through very strongly and

beautifully in her romantization of the rural/farming style of life (akin to what historian Lears calls “the pastoral ideal”). There is a romantic image of a rural life that is both close to nature and close to the heart on almost every page of *A Prairie Winter*, and, far from boring the reader, they entice him to continue, to see what new, beautiful image awaits; Owen “feels” her world besides just “knowing” it, and this comes through in passages like:

*I watched the colors soften in the west and take on a twilight loveliness, while the topmost branches of the almost leafless poplars stood out like delicate lace-work against the opal light.*²⁴

where her love of nature untouched by progress comes through with a strong, but still delicate and beautiful, force. Nature and myth are closely related in the romantic picture of Belle Owen’s past—

*I listened; the wind was playing an eerie harp—rattling the branches above me, gently swishing the brittle weeds at the roadside and soughing the meadow grass. I listened. The pathway of light in the meadow broadened, detached clouds barred the face of the moon. I listened, and surely that was Pan “playing on pipes of corn.”*²⁵

Belle Owen even finds beauty in getting caught in burrs and in smelling corn-fodder, not to mention in the daily work she does on the farm. It is in the presentation of a beautiful side to an often hard lifestyle, in romanticizing the rural/farming style of living, that Belle Owen shows another way she copes with her fears about her place in a new, ‘modern’ world. Her images of rural beauty are so strong and plentiful in *A Prairie Winter* that they, like her romantic portrayal of childhood, can be seen as her (conscious or subconscious) attempt to defeat the foreboding feelings caused by modernization in her own life.

Belle Owen’s *A Prairie Winter* deserves much more notice than it or its author ever received; it is a largely autobiographical work that shares the fears and the hopes of its author, a woman caught between childhood and adulthood, the past lifestyle and the coming changes of the time. It shows the “romantic” strength of a woman who was “always willing to believe in the robin’s first call”²⁶—who found ways to cope with a changing world where her place was unassured.

NOTES

- ¹ *History of Will County, Illinois*, Vol. 2. (Chicago: William LeBaron, Jr., and Co., 1878); 1880 US Census of the Village of Mokena, Frankfort Township, Will County, Illinois.
- ² Will County Deed #83172, filed for record on 25 January 1872.
- ³ 1900 US Census of the Village of Mokena, Frankfort Township, Will County, Illinois.
- ⁴ 1900 US Census.
- ⁵ Belle Owen, *A Prairie Winter* (New York: The Outlook Company, 1903), title and preceding pages.
- ⁶ Owen, title page.
- ⁷ 1910 Soundex of the US Census of Illinois.
- ⁸ Thomas Kilpatrick and Patsy-Rose Hoshiko, *Illinois! Illinois!* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), 265.
- ⁹ Robert C. Bray, "Fiction to 1915," *A Reader's Guide to Illinois Literature*, Robert C. Bray ed. (Springfield, Illinois: Office of the Illinois Secretary of State, 1985), 28.
- ¹⁰ Owen, 147–151 and 1880 US Census.
- ¹¹ Owen, 164.
- ¹² 1880 US Census.
- ¹³ 1900 US Census.
- ¹⁴ Bray, 28.
- ¹⁵ Bray, 28.
- ¹⁶ Bray, 29; here Bray quotes p. 197 of James D. Hart's *The Popular Book: a History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950) in reference J.M. Barrie's (a writer of the time who Bray compares with Belle Owen) popularity.
- ¹⁷ Owen, 3.
- ¹⁸ Owen, 7.
- ¹⁹ Owen, 65.
- ²⁰ Owen, 85.
- ²¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 151.
- ²² Owen, 18.
- ²³ Owen, 90–1.
- ²⁴ Owen, 17.
- ²⁵ Owen, 25.
- ²⁶ Owen, 129.