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by LESLIE A. WHEELER

PERCH OF THE DEVIL

BY
GERTRUDE ATHERTON



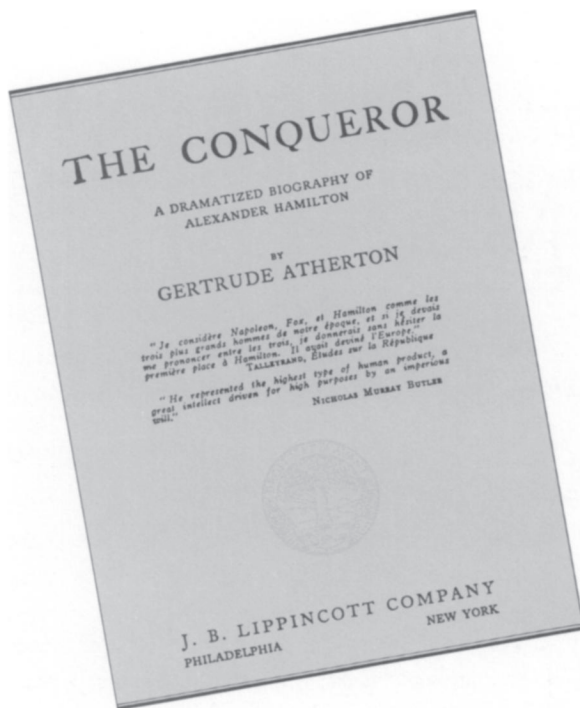
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d the LADY NOVELIST

“Don’t you think there could be romance and tragedy in Butte?” the heroine of Gertrude Atherton’s novel, *Perch of the Devil*, asks another young Montana woman. The two have been traveling in Europe for several months and have just visited a fine, old Italian palace. Does their hometown contain the romantic possibilities suggested by a European palace? The heroine’s companion doesn’t think so — and certainly there were American writers of the period and later who would have agreed with her. For them Europe provided the most evocative background for fiction. Mrs. Atherton was attracted to Europe, too, but she was still able to find “romance and tragedy” closer to home — in Butte, Montana. Her novel, *Perch of the Devil*, published in 1914, was the result.

From the 1890’s onward, American fiction had been moving westward, but Montana had remained relatively untouched. The state had produced Mary MacLane, the nineteen-year-old poet and “peripatetic philosopher” whose book, *The Story of Mary MacLane*, had created a stir in the East around the turn of the century. But by 1913, when Gertrude Atherton visited Montana, Mary MacLane was pretty much forgotten. So were other Montanans, like Marcus Daly, W. A. Clark, and F. Augustus Heinze, who had earlier made a name for the state, and varying fortunes for themselves. Montana was neither firing the national imagination or doing very well in claiming the allegiance of many who had lived and prospered there. Increasingly, it seemed as though as soon as Montanans made their million, they left the state for either Southern California or New York. Indeed, so doubtful was Mrs. Atherton of the reading public’s acquaintance with the town of Butte, Montana that she felt it necessary to indicate the correct pronunciation as “Bute” on the first page of her novel. What intrigues us today is why Gertrude Atherton, a writer who moved in the most sophisticated circles of society and who had traveled extensively and lived periodically in Europe, chose a rough and ready mining town, which she herself described as the ugliest in the country, as the locale of one of the more than forty novels she was to write.



ONE REASON FOR this lady novelist's receptiveness to Butte was, no doubt, her own western background. Gertrude Franklin Horn was born in San Francisco on October 30, 1857. She spent part of her childhood in that city and part on her grandparents' nearby ranch. At nineteen she married George Atherton, thus becoming a member of one of the Bay Area's wealthiest and most exclusive families. The young couple went to live at the family's Fair Oaks estate, now known as Atherton.

Soon bored with married life and the narrow social world of the Athertons, Gertrude read widely and also began to write. She did this in spite of the disapproval of her Spanish mother-in-law, who claimed that proper Spanish ladies did not write. Mrs. Atherton persisted, however, and contributed several articles to "The Argonaut," a new weekly magazine based in San Francisco. It was this magazine which published her first novel, *The Randolphs of Redwoods*, later published under the title *The Doomswoman*. The book dealt with a scandal involving her husband's family, and caused a sensation when it came out. Two other novels followed, but both were rejected by the eastern publishing houses to which they were sent. Nevertheless, Mrs. Atherton was determined to succeed as a novelist. When the death of her husband — he died on a voyage to Chile and his remains were embalmed in a keg of rum and sent back to the family — left her free at thirty to do as she pleased, she left for New York to devote herself to a literary career.

1. Gertrude Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist* (New York, 1932), p. 481.

SOME TWENTY YEARS later, when she came to write *Perch of the Devil*, Gertrude Atherton had seventeen published books behind her. Among them were two for which she is best known today: *The Californians* and *The Conqueror*, the latter a biography of Alexander Hamilton. Often controversial, her books had nonetheless succeeded in winning a place for her in American letters. Mrs. Atherton was known as a writer who had little fear of taboos, and was able to deal with sex in a frank manner. Her work was admired for the fierce, independent spirit which informed it rather than its stylistic finesse.

As she wrote, Mrs. Atherton moved around the United States and Europe pretty much as the spirit moved her. She lived for about eight years in England, six in Munich. She visited many other European cities, and spent months at a time in cities in the United States. Around 1912 she returned to California from England to write *Julia France and Her Times*, a novel based on her observations of the suffrage movement in England. She also did some political campaigning at the urging of her good friend, Senator Phelan of California.

Mrs. Atherton made some twenty-seven speeches in California in support of Woodrow Wilson for the presidency. It was a busy time for the novelist, yet it was during this period that she "conceived the idea of laying the scene of a novel in one of the little-exploited North-Western States. Both New York and California were over-worked, and I had written enough about Europe for the present. I longed for a new field, and I had never lost my craving for mental adventure."¹

After inquiring about the various northwestern states, Mrs. Atherton finally chose Montana, obviously attracted by stories of the state's vast mineral wealth and of the men who exploited it to become millionaires. Early in *Perch of the Devil* she describes Montana as "the most romantic subdivision of the U.S. since California became a classic. Montana, her long winter face a reflection of the beautiful dead face of the moon, bore within her arid body illimitable treasure, yielding it from time to time to the more ardent and adventurous of her lovers."²

Mrs. Atherton visited Butte briefly, read up on local history, and collected information and impressions. Then she went to Genoa to write the novel. But after six chapters, she began to get involved in mining matters of which she was totally ignorant, and realized she would have to return to Montana to finish the book.

2. Gertrude Atherton, *Perch of the Devil* (New York, 1914), p. 16.

THIS TIME her arrival in Butte did not go unnoticed in the local press. In the column, "Topics of the Streets," *The Butte Miner* of June 8, 1913 noted that "Gertrude Atherton, the famous novelist, is in Butte gathering material for a novel she is just now writing."³ The story said that Mrs. Atherton would be in Butte for only a week before going on to Helena. However, according to her autobiography, Mrs. Atherton ended up spending a month in Butte.

Mrs. Atherton's projected arrival in Helena also made news. The headline in *The Helena Independent* of June 9, 1913, proclaimed, "Famous Novelist Now in Butte, Expects to Spend a Week in Capital City."⁴ According to the story, the novelist would be in Helena in about a week to spend several days visiting people to whom she had letters of introduction: "She is writing a new story and is in Montana to secure coloring."

The novelist, the article continued, said she had been through Montana several times but never stopped. "However," the Helena editor said, "she was impressed with its beauty and on that account declares she returned from Europe on purpose to visit the state and become familiar with its people and scenery." The article quoted Mrs. Atherton as saying that she expected to spend a month in the state. But here again the novelist's expectations did not match reality: it was several months before she left Montana.

Meanwhile, back in Butte, Mrs. Atherton was busy absorbing the atmosphere of "that noisy, bustling, swarming, ugly, but highly interesting city" where it seemed "that the inhabitants never went to bed, or, if they did, they got up immediately. There were groups under my window all night, talking and arguing. Trucks, laden with ore, shook the hotel as they clattered by on the cobbled streets. I thought longingly of the profound silences that must pervade the mine three thousand feet below my bed."⁵

During her stay in Butte, Mrs. Atherton did go down into one of the great mines, but the experience was hardly as pleasant as she had imagined. She found the atmosphere "so exhausted and the heat so oppressive" that she wondered how the miners could endure it. She also observed that "Everywhere were signs: SAVE YOURSELF, which added nothing to one's mental

comfort." Summing up, she wrote that the visit "was all very interesting and I would not have missed it, but never before nor since have I been so glad to see the light of day."⁶

Butte society interested the novelist as well. Although she had brought no letters of introduction, "everyone" called on her. Returning the calls, she decided that servants must be the major problem of Butte society ladies "for I was left waiting on the doorstep while the slatternly maid, having closed the door in my face, strolled off to ascertain if the lady of the mansion was 'in'."⁷

Nevertheless, Mrs. Atherton perceived that "... the few women of consequence remaining in Butte were very much of 'the world'. They had traveled extensively, visited in New York and bought their clothes there. The appointments of their houses were quite perfect, and if the cooks were bad, the food on their hospitable tables was abundant and the best the market afforded."⁸

The novelist's most memorable visitor was Mary MacLane. The two writers spent several hours talking, and Mrs. Atherton was impressed with the brilliance of the other woman's conversation, as Mary paced nervously back and forth across the room. Apparently the admiration was mutual, for some four years later in her last book, *I, Mary MacLane*, Mary included Gertrude Atherton in a list of living Americans she most admired.⁹

ALTHOUGH FASCINATED by Butte, Mrs. Atherton felt that its hectic atmosphere was not congenial to the writing of her novel. Therefore she continued on to Helena to finish the book. Helena she found delightful. In her autobiography she describes it as "a beautiful mountain city high in the Rockies. Although its population was only twelve thousand, it was said at one time to have more wealth per capita than any city in the United States, and still bore the evidence of its former importance in a Catholic cathedral second only to that of New York in size, handsome houses surrounded by lawns scattered over its uneven and picturesque surface, and you learned immediately that thirty thousand dollars had been taken out of its main street. It was by no means

3. *Butte Miner*, June 8, 1913, p. 2.

4. *Helena Independent*, June 9, 1913, p. 4.

5. Atherton, *Adventures*, p. 489.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 490.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Mary MacLane, *I, Mary MacLane* (New York, 1917), p. 238.

dead now, although its placer mines had been exhausted; it had the finest hotel in Montana, good shops, and several banks. 'Society,' I had been told in Butte, consisted of the twelve women who could afford to lose the most money at bridge."¹⁰

Indeed, Mrs. Atherton's only complaint about Helena was that due to the high altitude, she was never able to draw a long breath during the months she spent there. She did not stay at Helena's newest and finest hotel, the Placer, because she decided that it was too crowded and busy with conventions coming and going. Instead she settled in at a quieter, more residential hotel on a hill some distance from the center of town — the Grandon.

Once established in Helena, Mrs. Atherton did not mingle with the best society as she had in Butte. Helena society was much more exclusive than that of Butte, and since the novelist had brought no letters of introduction, it was largely closed to her. However, this did not trouble her, since the novel she was working on was to be her first which dealt with "the great American Middle Class." Her concern, therefore, was with meeting representatives of this class.

On the train from San Francisco to Butte for her first visit, Mrs. Atherton had met two young Helena women, a beauty specialist and a milliner. Recalling the beautician's offer of a "complimentary facial" if she ever came to Helena, the novelist looked her up. During the two-hour beauty treatment, Mrs. Atherton learned all the local gossip. She used both the milliner and beautician as models for minor characters in the novel, accurately reproducing their slang-ridden speech. Still, she felt that she hadn't found the middle class woman she was looking for. In her autobiography Mrs. Atherton wrote, "I wanted to know women who possibly did their own work but had a certain amount of education and refinement."¹¹

Fortunately, the novelist was able to find the type of woman she was seeking right at the hotel where she was staying. Another of the guests, a Mrs. Edwards, had the proprietress tell Mrs. Atherton of her desire to meet her. Mrs. Atherton promptly called on her and liked her and her husband, Frank Edwards, a local politician, very much. Through them she met their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Wilton Brown. The three women were soon on very friendly terms. According to Mrs. Atherton,

she was "in and out of their houses every afternoon, sat with them in their kitchens while they cooked, gossiped, discussed the affairs and books of the day with them."¹²

She did not, she states in her autobiography, put either of the women into the novel, but through them gathered "impressions." Mrs. Atherton found that Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Edwards were as well acquainted with current literature as she was, and also learned from the local librarian that while most of the townspeople read "trash," some ten to fifteen men and women requested the best in history, fiction, and memoirs.

Her experiences in both Butte and Helena led Mrs. Atherton to resent Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*, when it first came out "for it gave no hint of these intelligent groups. . . . These little communities are astonishingly diversified. In Helena there was a small group of 'decadents,' as they were politely called: men — clerks for the most part — who betrayed themselves by their thin voices and that switch of the coat-tails that so aptly expressed their sense of superiority. They, too, were patrons of the best the library afforded."¹³

Mr. Brown and Mr. Edwards were also helpful to the novelist in gathering material for her book. From Brown, a geological engineer, Mrs. Atherton received lessons in "ores," while Edwards informed her about the agricultural potentialities of the state, which was dependent on a proper system of irrigation. Irrigation bored Mrs. Atherton, but she "fell in love with ores," finding them "as fascinating to study as a new language."¹⁴

Although the Browns and the Edwards are the only people mentioned by name in Mrs. Atherton's autobiography, she did meet other Helena residents. One in particular, Miss Frieda Fligelman, recalls sitting out on the porch of her family's house in the evening after supper and talking with the novelist. Miss Fligelman was just back from college for the summer and her impression was that Mrs. Atherton had "some queer ideas about the people in Montana." She expected the people to be much cruder than they actually were, put on airs of being superior, and "seemed to think we weren't the same quality."

However, Miss Fligelman remembers being amused rather than angered at the novelist's behavior, thinking

10. Atherton, *Adventures*, p. 492.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 495.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 497.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*



FRANK EDWARDS



WILLIAM A. CLARK

to herself: "Here is a woman, a successful novelist, and I know more about people than she does." The hat Mrs. Atherton was wearing also made a strong impression on Miss Fligelman. It was a toque with a large bird made of real feathers poised on its edge, and when the novelist walked down the street, people stared at her. Otherwise, Miss Fligelman remembers Mrs. Atherton as being quite formally dressed but with individual touches. According to her recollection, the novelist called on three different occasions, each time staying about an hour.¹⁵

Another Helena resident who did not actually meet Mrs. Atherton recalls that at the time of her visit there was some comment about her thinking being a little too advanced for most of the townspeople. Certainly, in her friendship with Frank Edwards, twice mayor of Helena and a progressive candidate for governor, the novelist had allied herself with a more radical element. Helena was still the town of the mining magnate, W. A. Clark, and Edwards was an opponent of Clark's. He acquired a reputation as a defender of the rights of individuals against the "interests," and eventually wrote a pamphlet entitled "Uncolored History," denouncing Clark for fraud, deceit, and corruption.

15. Miss Fligelman's recollections provide an interesting contrast to the novelist's own version, describing the "intelligent groups" she found in Helena, and written some twenty years later. Possibly Mrs. Atherton's visit to the Fligelman home occurred early in her stay in Helena before she had become friendly with the Edwards and the Browns or had spoken with the Helena librarian.

WHEN IT APPEARED, *Perch of the Devil*, whose title came from an early euphemism for Butte, was dedicated to Frank Edwards and Wilton Brown. The two men and their wives read the novel when the first copies arrived in Helena, and, according to Mrs. Atherton, they were the only people in all Montana who did not hate the book: "No State, I have observed, can stand the truth about itself; it is as resentful of stark realism as of the one-sidedness of *Main Street* which was certainly truthful as far as it went. Like any individual whom you 'put in a book,' it wants unadulterated flattery."¹⁶

However, Mrs. Atherton's statement about the overwhelmingly negative reaction to her novel in Montana cannot be taken at face value. She was sometimes given to exaggeration; moreover, she was used to having her books arouse controversy, and had perhaps come to anticipate and even enjoy it. Certainly if the novel had offended as much as she claimed it did, it might well have been banned from the local libraries. (Over twenty years later Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was banned from the public library in Stillwater, Oklahoma, because of the unfavorable picture it painted of Oklahomans.) But copies of *Perch of the Devil* did appear at libraries within Montana, and were eagerly

16. Atherton, *Adventures*, p. 498.

borrowed, especially in Butte. The novel was also reviewed in the local papers. While the reviewers were critical of certain aspects, they were, nevertheless, able to find some merit in the book.

The first review of *Perch of the Devil* appeared in *The Great Falls Tribune* of September 2, 1914 in a column containing brief reviews of a number of the latest books. Here the novel was described as “a cherless [sic] and gloomy tale of sudden wealth in Montana.” The reviewer went on to say that “it would seem that the acquiring of a measure of means, in Butte, at least, is sure to occasion imprudent enjoyments, illicit marital relations, and an eager pursuit of all shallow treasures. There may be families in Butte and other American cities where wealth and refinement are on friendly terms, but the reading of Mrs. Atherton’s novel does not promise it.”

Still, the reviewer acknowledged that “more than a modicum of truth is found in the narration of the suffering of the state politics and public morality in Montana at the time when Clark and Daly and Fritz Heinz played prominent parts in the political ugliness brought on by the avarice of the Amalgamated Copper Company. This has its interest and the account of mining operations seems to be the result of careful study.”

The *Tribune* reviewer did not feel, however, that the book would “offer any impetus to moral laws or proper rules of conduct. If it pretends to be a picture of contemporary American life, it is overdrawn and untrue. Its gloominess, though, is pretty well dissipated by its liveliness and action.”¹⁷

In a review published in *The Butte Miner* of October 26, 1914, John Davies, the city librarian who wrote the weekly book review column, noted that *Perch of the Devil* was so much in demand that it was “almost too bad to mention for fear of more people asking for it who will have to wait their turn.”

According to Davies, Mrs. Atherton attempted two things in her novel: to portray a new type of heroine and “to incorporate the local color of a great mining camp.” He believed that she succeeded in her first objective, but failed in the second, and her portrayal of Butte was purely “artificial.” He went on to say that “there is considerable good writing, but on the whole

the consensus is that it is not up to the mark we have a right to expect from Mrs. Atherton’s genius.”

As for the title, *Perch of the Devil*, Davies felt that “it is not a complimentary title and the fact that Butte does have the kind of reputation that it has, not only for mining but for a certain class of morals, it is to be attributed in part to the indifference of its inhabitants.”¹⁸

Judging from these two reviews, it seems unlikely that Montanans reacted as unfavorably to the novel as Mrs. Atherton asserted in her autobiography. One Butte resident, for example, recalled reading *Perch of the Devil* in 1926 on the recommendation of a friend. He said he enjoyed the book very much, and added that “more people have copies of that book than you would believe.”

TURNING TO the novel itself, we can see that Mrs. Atherton did have quite a few positive things to say about Montana and its people. She definitely had eyes for the physical beauty of the state, for the most lyrical prose of the novel is devoted to the grandeur of its mountains: “They will never grow old, those mountains of Montana; man may take the treasure from their veins and the jewels from their crowns, but they drink forever the elixir of the air. The blue dawn fills their spirit with a deathless exultation, the long blue-gold days, their bodies with immortal life, the starry nights, swinging their lamps so close to the snow fields, unroll dramas of other worlds. They are no mere masses of rock and dirt or even of metal, these mountains of Montana, but man’s vision of eternal youth.”¹⁹

Even Butte, despite its “sand and barrenness” about which Mary MacLane complained so bitterly, had its moments of magic for the novelist. There was the red School of Mines, which stood on the high western rim of the city and had “a permanent expression of surprise, natural to a bit of Italian renaissance looking down on Butte.”²⁰

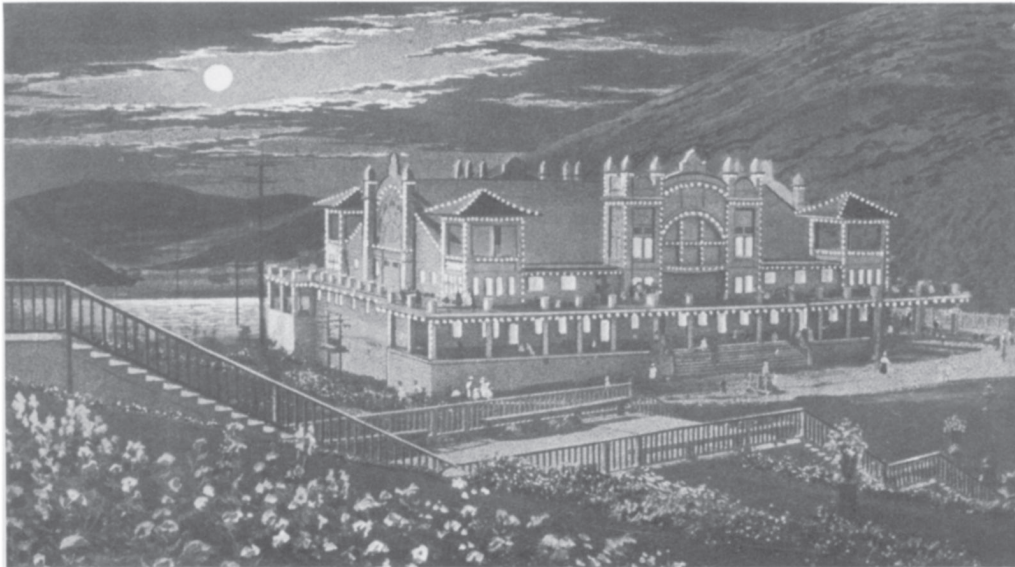
There was Columbia Gardens, “a happy-go-lucky jumble of architectures” which “at night look like a fairyland: The immense room is hung with Chinese lanterns depending from the rafters, the music is the best in Montana, and the richer the women, the plainer

17. *Great Falls Tribune*, September 2, 1914, p. 5. The same review also appeared in *The Missoulian* of Sept. 8, 1914. It is evident from a brief examination of some of the other reviews in this column that *Perch of the Devil* was a much too realistic and serious book for this particular reviewer. He clearly preferred books such as Kathleen Norris’ *Saturday’s Child*, described as “a delightful story of a young girl and filled to the brim with cheeriness, commonsense and charm;” and James Elroy Flecker’s *The King of Alsander*, whose “only purpose is to provide enjoyment and in this it admirably succeeds. We could spare quite a number of current novels for more *King of Alsanders*.”

18. *Butte Miner*, Oct. 26, 1914, p. 4. The same review appears in the *Anaconda Standard* of the same date under the headline, “Local Readers Clamor for *Perch of the Devil*.”

19. Atherton, *Perch*, p. 134.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 57.



Regardless of how Gertrude Atherton dramatized him and his kind in her book, *Copper King* W. A. Clark did subsidize the building of Butte's fabulous Columbia Gardens. After its grand opening in 1899 and until its closing and partial dismantling in 1973, this was a place of fairyland magic, offering a choice of quiet solitude or the gaiety of arcade and dance pavilion. The latter is seen in the photograph above, taken at night. Across town to the west of the Gardens, standing on a stark and barren hill, is the main red brick building of the School of Mines, which opened its doors in 1900 and is known today as the Montana College of Mineral Science and Technology. Butte, looking west from the intersection of Main and Granite Streets, presented this scene when Mrs. Atherton visited in 1913. Note the School of Mines building standing alone on the eminence in the left background.



their frocks. A sort of informal propriety reigns, and the millionaire or clerk pays ten cents for the privilege of dancing with his lady.”²¹

Finally, there was the city’s tremendous vitality — its “jubilant expression of one who coins the very air, the thin, sparkling, nervous air, into shining dollars, and confident of the inexhaustible riches beneath her feet, knows that she shall go on coining them forever.”²²

Gertrude Atherton may not have done full justice to the local color of Butte, but she still observed the city with a fresh and enthusiastic eye. Some thirty years later, a W.P.A. writer named Frank Burke apparently thought enough of her observations to include one — that the city seemed to have only forty minutes in the hour — in his book.²³

Another aspect that pleased Mrs. Atherton was Butte society’s lack of exclusiveness. In the novel she compares it to that of London “in the hearty welcome extended to the newcomer with either money or personality to command its attention. . . .”²⁴

According to her, Butte society women “argue that to deprive themselves of even the casual diversion, assuming the exclusive airs of large and resourceful communities, would merely put them on a level with thousands of small towns slowly stagnating, be unworthy of their worldly experience, and of the large free spirit of the Northwest which has pervaded that isolated camp since they came with their husbands or fathers to take a hand in its history.”²⁵

The novel’s heroine, Ora Blake, exemplifies the type of cultured “woman of the world” that Mrs. Atherton must have met in Butte. The daughter of a wealthy and unscrupulous lawyer, Ora has spent most of her youth in Europe, where she lived the life of an American princess. Returning to Butte when her father’s death leaves her and her mother penniless, Ora marries an enterprising young man, who is able to maintain her in the style to which she is accustomed, including periodic visits to New York.

The other female protagonist, Ida Hook Compton, provides a sharp contrast to the cultured and refined Ora. The daughter of a seamstress and a miner, Ida is a beautiful but thoroughly common woman. She spends

her time reading trashy magazines; her bad grammar and use of slang shock her better educated husband.

Ida is very much the type of woman that an editorial appearing in *The Butte Miner* of December 14, 1913, complained about: “It has been frequently said that in no other western city are there so many beautiful and lovely girls as in Butte. And the fact makes all of this city very proud, but there are a few of our girls, who in spite of their charms and graces, chew gum and use slang. . . . Imagine a beautiful girl, gowned in airy white with dainty ribbons and fluffy bows on her frock chewing gum and saying ‘Skiddoo Kiddoo’.”²⁶

Yet, in Mrs. Atherton’s novel, it is Ida rather than Ora who demonstrates the western woman’s strong and resilient character. Contrary to the assertion of the reviewer for *The Great Falls Tribune*, Ida is not corrupted by her husband’s sudden wealth. Instead, under Ora Blake’s tutelage, Ida develops into a well-bred lady, perfectly capable of gracing the prominent social position which her husband’s money has brought her. Mrs. Atherton calls Ida “a marvel of adaptability, like so many others that had done credit to the great state of Montana, to say nothing of the fluid West in general.”²⁷

Although she is initiated into the mysteries of culture and fine society, Ida never loses her native shrewdness and practicality. These qualities enable her to triumph in the end and foil the romance which has developed between her husband and Ora Blake. Ida’s moment comes in a scene which amply reveals the possibilities for “romance and tragedy” in Butte, and which echoes the underground fights between rival groups of miners. Ida follows Ora into the depths of her husband’s mine, tries to attack her with a stileto, and finally sends Ora packing.

ON THE WHOLE, Gertrude Atherton paints a favorable portrait of native Montanans in her novel. The only real villain in *Perch of the Devil*, other than the Amalgamated Company, is an import from Boston. Anthony Cullen Whalen has missed success in the East and so has come to Butte to be an English teacher at the high school. A proud but anemic man, he lacks the masculinity and strength of character of Montana men. When he is rejected by the hero’s wife, he plots her undoing, but in the end is forced to leave the state.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

23. W.P.A. Writers Project, *Copper Camp* (New York, 1943), p. 12.

24. Atherton, *Perch*, p. 249.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Butte Miner*, Dec. 14, 1914, p. 16.

27. Atherton, *Perch*, p. 238.

All three of the main characters — Ida, Ora, and the hero, Gregory Compton, Ida's husband — share an important virtue in their loyalty to their home state. Early in the novel, Ida, faced with the possibility that her husband may become a millionaire, expresses the vulgar ambitions of many newly rich Montanans of the period: "Gowns! And jewels, and New York — Lord! Wouldn't I like to swell up and down Peacock Alley! And Southern California and Europe; and givin' balls, and bein' a member of the Country Club."²⁸

Returning to Butte after several months in Europe, however, Ida decides that her hometown compares favorably with anything she has seen abroad: "She revelled in the gaunt grey ugliness of Anaconda Hill which flung its arrogant head high above the eastern end of the great hill itself; in the sensation of driving over miles of subterranean numbered streets, some of them three thousand feet below, to which that famous mass of rock and dirt and angular buildings was the portal. She leaned far out of her car to admire the glittering mountains that looked like blue ice topped with white, and decided that they were far more original and beautiful than the Alps of Austria and Switzerland; certainly they tugged at her heartstrings and at the same time filled her with an unprecedented desire to sing. She noticed for the first time that the violet foothills against the nearer mountain east of the city seemed to close the end of the streets as the Alps did in Innsbruck, and gave the ragged overgrown camps clinging to its high perch in the Rockies a redeeming touch of perfect beauty."²⁹

Although Ora is well acquainted with Europe, she has inherited her father's intense feelings for Montana. She falls in love with Gregory, a truly western type. When her father's mine, Ora Fino Primo, for which she was named, proves rich in ores after years of disuse, she also develops a passion for mining. In the end, however, she leaves Montana for Europe, because she cannot have Gregory. Ora has lived too long in Europe and thus lacks the determination and strength of a thoroughly native product like Ida Hook Compton. Still, from her exiled position in Europe, she plans to use a large part of her fortune to develop Montana.

Gregory Compton, the novel's hero, is a highly intelligent young man. Possessed with a vision of the state's underground wealth, he decides to devote himself

"to the greatest of all romances, the romance of mining."³⁰ But he is not simply another Montanan who wants to strike it rich. Instead he plans to use his money to do something for the state, specifically an irrigation system.

In the beginning of the novel, Gregory tells his wife, "Business may take me to New York from time to time, but my home shall remain here. I shall never abandon my state and make a fool of myself on New York's doorstep as so many Montanans have done."³¹

Gregory is clearly meant as a counter to W. A. Clark, of whom Mrs. Atherton wrote in her autobiography, "The richest man out of Montana was named Clark. He had himself built the ugliest house in New York, and not only deserted his native State but did next to nothing for it. He could have immortalized himself by giving it a complete irrigation system. But rich men rarely know what they have missed until they are drifting about in the ether wondering what it was all about anyhow."³²

In his fight against the Amalgamated Company, which had been more or less running the state, Gregory follows the precedent of another famous Montanan, F. Augustus Heinze. But while Heinze was only partially successful in his war against the Amalgamated, the fictional Gregory is completely successful. His battle provokes comments on the famous political corruption of Montana. At one point, for example, Gregory says, "Montana may be a great state, but she has her rotten spot like any other. She's been so debauched the last twenty years by open bribery that I doubt if you could lay your hand on a hundred men in her that haven't had a roll anywhere from \$500 to \$2000 passed to them and pocketed it."³³

Distasteful as a remark like this may have been to Montanans who read the novel at the time, they would have had to concede its credibility. The reviewer in *The Great Falls Tribune* agreed that this aspect of the novel was accurate. And when the W.P.A. writers did their history of Butte years later, they recalled that the list of bribe-takers presented to the investigating committee in Washington was said to "read like a page from *Who's Who in Montana*."³⁴

30. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

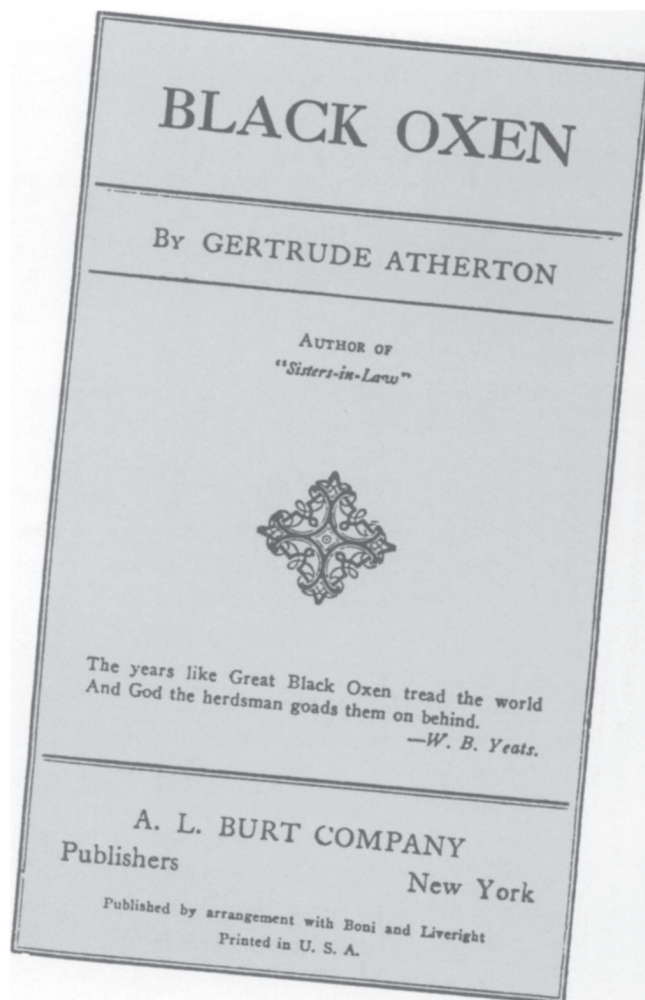
32. Atherton, *Adventures*, p. 497.

33. Atherton, *Perch*, p. 155.

34. W.P.A. Writers' Project, *Copper Camp*, p. 38.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 239-40.



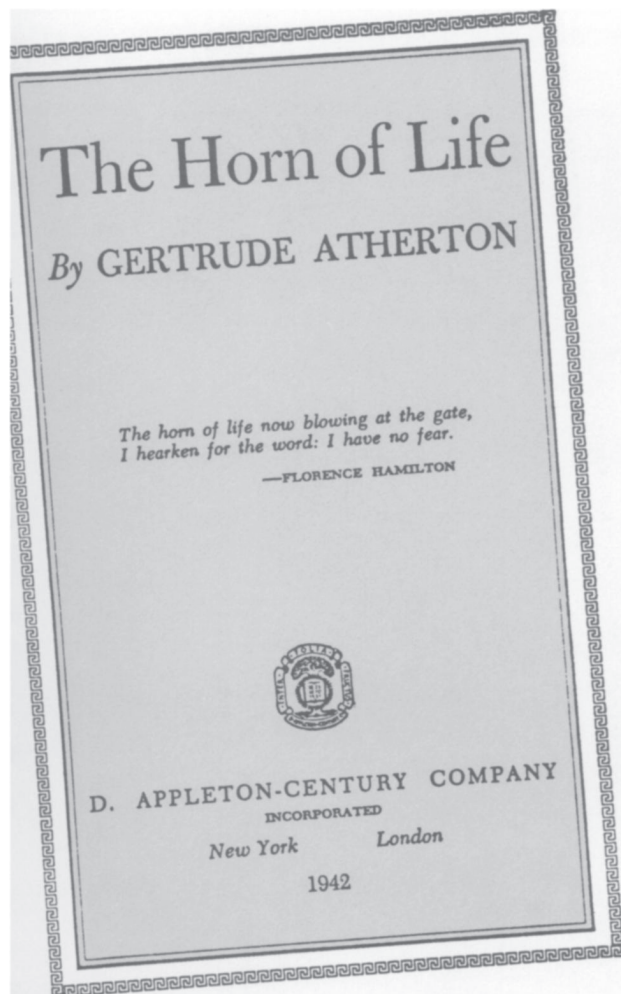
IT WAS NOT, however, Mrs. Atherton's intention to write a muckraking novel. In *Perch of the Devil* she was not trying to expose political evils in the hopes of bringing about change, because she believed that changes were already taking place. She had seen the reform spirit take over in San Francisco under the leadership of men like Senator Phelan, and felt that the same thing was happening in Montana with the help of people like Frank Edwards. In the novel, Gregory triumphs over the Amalgamated Company, and part of the reason he is able to do so is because of this new spirit of reform that is sweeping the country.

If anything, Mrs. Atherton's aim seems to have been to give the state a new hero, albeit fictional, in the character of Gregory Compton. Summing up the present state of the four who had previously brought fame to the state, she wrote, "... Daly was dead, Clark was but one of many millionaires, submerged in New York, Heinze was reaping the whirlwind, and the poet [Mary MacLane] was nursing her wounds. Montana was in the mood for a new hero, and the American press

for a new and picturesque subject to 'play up' for all he was worth."

In the last part of this passage, Mrs. Atherton might also have been expressing the hopes she had for her novel. Certainly, it presented a "new and picturesque subject," and her publisher, Frederick Stokes, expected the novel to make "a big noise." A twist of fate, however, intervened, for *Perch of the Devil* was published in August, 1914, the month that Montana celebrated both its golden and silver jubilees, and also the month that war broke out in Europe.

After she finished writing *Perch of the Devil*, Mrs. Atherton returned to New York to see it through the press. She then planned to follow her heroine, Ora Blake, to Europe, but was forced to remain in New York on account of the war. Although Mrs. Atherton continued to produce books with the same regularity as before, *Perch of the Devil* marked a turning point in her career. In her autobiography she says that it was the last thing she wrote with which she was satisfied until 1923. At this time she underwent the Steinach rejuvena-



tion treatment in New York, and wrote — in record time — *Black Oxen*, a highly controversial novel based on her experience. For another twenty years, Mrs. Atherton continued to travel and write. Her last years were spent in her native city of San Francisco. There, on October 30, 1947, on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday, she was presented with a gold medal by the city. She died the following year, leaving over forty volumes on bookshelves throughout the country.

Today, both *Perch of the Devil* and its author have been largely forgotten, although both deserve a better fate. *Perch* may not be one of Gertrude Atherton's best novels, but is highly readable and provides a fascinating and a fairly accurate picture of life in Butte before World War I. Other writers later used the rough and ready mining camp as a locale for their novels — among them, Charles Cohan, R. Francis James, Dashiell Hammett, and Myron Brinig. But Gertrude Atherton was one of the first to explore the literary possibilities of Butte — “that noisy, bustling, swarming, ugly, but highly interesting city.”

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THE LIVING PRESENT
CAN WOMEN BE GENTLEMEN?

LESLIE A. WHEELER, born in Pasadena, California in 1945, is a granddaughter of the late Burton K. Wheeler, Montana's renowned U.S. Senator. “From the time I was about five years old,” she writes, “I spent two or three weeks every summer with my family at the Wheeler cabins on Lake McDonald in Glacier Park, so I feel close connections with the state.” Ms. Wheeler graduated from Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, with a double major in English and history, then completed work on her M.A. in English, which she received from the University of California, Berkeley. Now working as a free lance writer, she has been an editor/writer for Barron's, a house specializing in educational publications, for whom she has done in-depth profiles on American colleges. Her book-length study of presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter, entitled *Jimmy Who?* appeared in June, 1976, and so far, more than 200,000 copies have been printed. Presently living in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Ms. Wheeler is working with a graphics designer on a pictorial history of Coney Island entitled *Playground of the World*.