

Preface

SOME YEARS AGO MY AGING PARENTS HAULED THREE DUSTY CARDBOARD cartons through a trap door, down a rickety wooden ladder to the second floor, and into my sister's childhood bedroom. In their uninsulated attic, the forgotten boxes had weathered decades of Cleveland's frigid winters and humid summers. My parents suggested I have a look at them: they'd be pleased if I'd take them off their hands.

The cartons contained treasures. Five generations had assembled the raw materials for a family chronicle that spanned nearly 250 years. When I examined them more closely, I encountered Anna Gertrude Hitz Burton, my maternal great-grandmother. My first impression was of a loving young mother, writing to her two small sons, one of whom—my grandfather—was six years old. In a rounded, fluid script, she signed her messages with “twenty kisses” or “20,000 kisses and fifty special hugs.” The letters had been bound in two leather volumes stamped in gold: “Gertrude Hitz Burton to Felix Arnold Burton 1891-96” and “Gertrude Hitz Burton to Harold Hitz Burton 1894-96.” As I began to read Gertrude's letters, I knew I needed to investigate more thoroughly. I repacked the bits and pieces—diaries, early daguerreotypes and later photographs, scrapbooks, and loose sheets—into four hefty packages, and Fed-Exed them to my home in Maine.

When they arrived, I began to sort through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century materials. They revealed many untold family stories, and Gertrude's, especially, beckoned. Through her prolific correspondence, and the allusions to people, places, and events in her father's journals, I began to piece together Gertrude's forgotten life

story, her links to well-known public figures and to the women's movement known as the Purity Crusade. Her unique experiences embodied broad themes connected with the rapidly industrializing Gilded Age: beauty and morality, spirituality and sexuality, illness and death.

My goal was to come to know Gertrude Hitz Burton: an ardent, ambitious young woman with a promising future, who was hindered and frustrated—and finally transformed—by her own ideals and an incurable illness.



Anna Gertrude Hitz was born in Washington, DC, in May 1861, just after the outbreak of the Civil War. I followed her journeys across years and miles to the places she lived and worked during her peripatetic life: from Washington to Switzerland and back to Washington; then Boston; Maine; Florence, Italy; and upstate New York, before she arrived again, finally, in Switzerland, her father's native land. As an adult, Gertrude hardly alighted anywhere for longer than a year. Even as a wife and mother, she was never mistress of her own home. She became an outspoken advocate for sex education, marriage equality, and women's rights. Her eventful, but sadly brief, life was ended by tuberculosis. She died in a Swiss sanatorium in 1896, just months before her thirty-fifth birthday. The more details I gathered from family archives and the collections preserved in libraries here and abroad, the more I was persuaded that Gertrude's story was worth sharing beyond the family circle.

Some initial discoveries proved thrilling. During her short lifetime, a network of friends and colleagues respected and supported her, and she, in turn, influenced them. Many of them were renowned. I found personal letters from Clara Barton, American Red Cross founder and Hitz family friend, and from Mabel Gardiner Hubbard Bell, the wife of Gertrude's first employer and mentor, Alexander Graham Bell. Arctic explorer Robert E. Peary's daughter, Marie, had sent a note to Gertrude's sons explaining that her father's diaries included a first-hand account of their mother's courtship by Peary's

college roommate, Alfred Edgar Burton. Naturally I wanted to find those diaries! I discovered them in Peary's collected papers in the National Archives.

Gertrude maintained lifelong friendships begun in her late teens and early twenties. I eagerly inspected a cache of letters to her college chum, Frances Haldeman Sidwell, written when they were students in the 1870s and '80s and kept for over fifty years. Gertrude's handwriting crisscrossed her square, onion-skin stationery to save space. Sidwell, who co-directed the prestigious Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC, sent them to Gertrude's sons in the 1930s, with selected lines discreetly snipped out.

I also excavated personal correspondence between Gertrude and her young friends, Mary Whitall Smith and Bernard Berenson, who later became internationally known art historians and connoisseurs. I traced more of their exchanges to the Berenson Library archive at I Tatti, the Harvard Center for Renaissance Studies, near Florence, Italy.

Gertrude's intimate friend and her most prolific and captivating correspondent was William Bliss Carman, a Harvard-educated author and editor, later acclaimed as Canada's poet laureate. Their letters (many housed at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario) and Carman's poetry introduced me to his bohemian Boston cohort, which included poets Richard Hovey and Louise Imogen Guiney, architect Ralph Adams Cram, and photographer F. Holland Day. The group called themselves "The Visionists." Cram described the years from 1880 to 1900, the verging-on-modern Gilded Age, as a time when for their idealistic generation, "There was nothing static in life: all was in motion, and the movement was, we believed...inevitably forward...."

In her poem, "The Knight Errant," Louise Imogen Guiney called a generation to action. I chose it as this book's epigraph for its hopeful message: though a worthy goal may remain out of reach, the quest itself can redeem flawed choices and "faulty ways." An uncompromising passion for perfection can mature into tolerance for human imperfection. Even an unsung life's fears and triumphs, struggles and scars, like the Knight Errant's, merit "honour at eventide."



Fascinated by the era, I began to grasp a late nineteenth-century cast of mind that rejected Gilded Age greed, ugliness, and inequality, yet remained optimistic about humankind's progress. Gertrude and her friends considered themselves innovative and forward-looking, even revolutionary. Women discarded corsets, embraced science, cultivated artistic and intellectual abilities, and pursued careers outside the domestic sphere. They adopted more flexible definitions of sexuality, religion, and gender roles, and worked together for social change and women's rights. They nurtured independent, unique personalities, or "performing selves," to cite cultural historian Warren Susman's term. Yet Gertrude's generation still cherished the Victorian virtues of "good character"—moral integrity, loyalty, and self-discipline. Humankind's moral perfectibility was the grand idea that inspired Gertrude's life's work.

To twenty-first-century observers, these Gilded Age women appear modern in the sense that a century and a half ago, they confronted difficulties that remain unresolved. Women today share similar struggles for unrealized social and personal goals, among them educating children and adults about sexuality, asserting marriage equality and women's right to choose, and eliminating double standards underlying domestic abuse and job discrimination.



"Passion" implies intense desires and ambitions—exciting, messy, sometimes overwhelming feelings. Yet "perfection" suggests calm and consistent self-mastery. Gertrude embodied the contradictory impulses of her transitional times. The passion for perfection sometimes paralyzed her attempts to balance career and family.

Gertrude kept reproductions of two favorite works of art, a classical sculpture and a painting, representing dual aspects of womanhood—one liberated, the other nurturing. The first was of Nike, the striding, striving, *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, personifying wom-

an's natural beauty, physical strength, and forward momentum. The second was a tender *Madonna and Child* by Giovanni Battista Sassoferrato. To Gertrude, altruistic motherhood was a potent moral and social force.



Learning about Gertrude's life affected my own. I became acquainted with my extended family on my mother's side, across geographic borders and generations: a hundred distant cousins living in this country and abroad. I delved into Gilded Age cultural, literary, artistic, and scientific movements that formed Gertrude's world view. I traveled to far-flung cities to find the streets and houses where she lived. From the very room where she died, I shared Gertrude's view of snowcapped mountain peaks.

Personal keepsakes buried in the dusty cartons connected me to the past: a small silver heart engraved with the initials of Christina Brosi Hitz, the matriarch who emigrated from Switzerland with her husband, children, and grandchildren; and Gertrude's worn, pocket-sized letter opener, its handle carved with delicate oak leaves and tiny acorns, bundled with letters sealed with a thousand kisses.

In an era when handwritten messages have all but disappeared from our lives, I felt genuine pleasure as I opened envelopes long ago postmarked Boston, Deer Isle, Washington, and Lausanne, and removed thin sheets covered in familiar scrawls. I read (and reread) "my" correspondents' self-critical reflections, irreverent jokes, and helpful advice. After more than a century, their eloquent exchanges about loyalty and love, art and beauty, sex and death told Gertrude's profoundly human and remarkably modern story.

Brunswick, Maine

December, 2016

THE KNIGHT ERRANT.

Spirits of old that bore me,
And set me, meek of mind,
Between great dreams before me
And deeds as great behind,
Knowing humanity my star
As first abroad I ride,
Shall help me wear, with every scar,
Honour at eventide.

Let claws of lightning clutch me,
From summer's groaning cloud,
Or ever malice touch me
And glory make me proud.
O give my faith, my youth, my sword,
Choice of the heart's desire:
A short life in the saddle, LORD!
Not long life by the fire.

Forethought and recollection
Rivet mine armour gay!
The passion of perfection
Redeem my faulty way!
The outer fray in the sun shall be
The inner beneath the moon;
And may Our Lady lend to me
Sight of the Dragon soon!

LOUISE IMOGEN GUINEY.



Have little care that life is brief/And less that art is long.
Success is in the silences/Though fame is in the song.
—BLISS CARMAN, *Songs from Vagabondia*, 1894