



Lifewriting Annual

Hoshino, Ayako. 2021. Aleta George. *Ina Coolbrith: The Bittersweet Song of California's First Poet Laureate*. Suisun City, CA: Shifting Plates Press, 2015. 337 pp. *Lifewriting Annual*, 5(1): pp. 1-5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/la.1887>



Open Library of Humanities

**Aleta George. *Ina Coolbrith: The Bittersweet Song of California's First Poet Laureate*. Suisun City, CA: Shifting Plates Press, 2015. 337 pp.**

Ayako Hoshino, Wayo Women's University, [hoshinoayako@gmail.com](mailto:hoshinoayako@gmail.com)

---



**Although** much has been written about California's rich literary history, the life of poet Ina Donna Coolbrith (1841–1928) seems to deserve a brighter spotlight. She was a literary pioneer in California, along with Bret Harte, Charles Warren Stoddard, Mark Twain, Joaquin Miller, Ambrose Bierce, and John Muir. A beloved poet in her day, she became the first Poet Laureate of California in 1915. *Ina Coolbrith: The Bittersweet Song of California's First Poet Laureate*, only the second biography of her life, shines new light on her remarkable accomplishments in the male-dominated world of her time. Published on the centennial of her becoming a poet laureate, it documents her background, her remarkable success in the face of struggle, tragedy and suffocating gender expectations, and helps reclaim her significance in history.

The biography consists of six parts that put the different periods of her life into the context of California's history and/or literary scene. Part I, "Searching for Home" covers the first twenty-one years of a life that was full of drama from the beginning. She was born Josephine Donna Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois on March 10, 1841. Her father, Don Carlos Smith, was a polygamist brother of Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of the Mormon Church (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). After his death, her mother married William Picket, and the family moved West to California in 1852. George provides previously unpublished details of the family's Mormon connection.

Ina discovered her love of poetry early. First published at fifteen, she found inspiration in the scenery and seasons of California. Married at seventeen and living in Los Angeles, she found herself in a brutally abusive relationship. Divorcing her husband, she took control of her life at twenty-one, choosing the name "Ina Donna Coolbrith,"—her pen name Ina combined with her mother's maiden name Coolbrith. She also hid her controversial Mormon roots, although she secretly corresponded with the Smith family.

Coolbrith moved to San Francisco in 1862, which she called her "home and the 'city of my love and my desire'" (37). The first half of Part II, "San Francisco," covers her brightest, perhaps most fulfilling years there. At the time, California's literary culture was just beginning. Harte arrived in 1854, Stoddard in 1855, and Twain in 1863. New literary publications, such as *The Golden Era* (1852) and *The Californian* (1864), attracted a broad readership. Then came *Overland Monthly*, the first major literary magazine in San Francisco, founded in 1868. Coolbrith met Harte and Stoddard, and they were called the "Overland trinity" (47). She was "the Pearl of her Tribe" (63) and "a star contributor in the West's most popular magazine" (76). Her poems, many of which are included in the biography, received positive reviews and were widely popular.

In the second half of Part II, we learn of new challenges that interfered with her writing career. With the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, her male fellow writers left for the East Coast and/or Europe in search of opportunity. She wanted to join them, but was tied down with responsibilities, as her sister's death left her with two children to care for. She also took on the care of the daughter of poet Joaquin Miller. Exhausted with endless daily chores, she wrote to Stoddard, "if I were only a man! I could do so much more..." (98). She cancelled a planned trip to Europe, writing to Stoddard: "Swallow, swallow, O brother swallows! Now that all are flown over the seas and away, how gladly I would follow you if my wings were not clipped so closely" (100).

Unmarried, but with a large family to support, Coolbrith needed a steady income. She took a job in a library in Oakland that required her to work from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., six days a week. She referred to this as an "inferno" (106). Part III, "Oakland," deals with this difficult period. She had no time for her poetry, but her supporters, including Stoddard and the publisher John Carmany, put her already-published works into her first book of poetry, *A Perfect Day and Other Poems* (1881). Despite it being well received, she continued to be stuck in the library. One compensation was that people appreciated her kind service. As a boy, Jack London borrowed books from Coolbrith and remembered affectionately her complementing his book choices (136–37).

The next three parts are about her life from age fifty-two on. Despite obstacles, she remained "a prominent writer in the West's 'local color movement'" (167). Although she took trips to the East Coast, she continued to live primarily in San Francisco and find acclaim there. However, when the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 struck, she lost nearly all of her possessions, including a nearly completed manuscript of the history of California literature, and letters from John Muir, whose biography she wanted to write. Rallying to her support, "The Spinners Club," a woman's book group, organized a publishing project, while "the Washington Heights Literary Circle" created a "The Ina D. Coolbrith Home Fund" to replace her lost home. At her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party, sponsored by the California Writers Club, three hundred guests brought books for the parlor in her new home on Russian Hill, which continued to be popular among writers and artists. She also continued to be active with the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association (PCWPA). In 1915, at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, she was the chair of the PCWPA's "Congress of Authors and Journalists." It was then that she was crowned poet laureate, a title which became official four years later.

Coolbrith lived a difficult but highly accomplished life. George gives a sympathetic and comprehensive treatment of Coolbrith's ambitions and intelligence, recognizing the struggles she faced in a male-centered world. George focuses on Coolbrith's life as

a poet, unlike a previous biography, *Ina Coolbrith: Librarian and Laureate of California* (1973), which had “librarian” in the title. George seems to be saying that this was not what Coolbrith was pursuing. In spite of being the first public librarian in the city of Oakland (ix), Coolbrith was first and foremost a literary pioneer and poet. If Coolbrith had not lost her manuscript of *A History of California Literature*, perhaps historians would have given her more prominent treatment. George’s book helps make up for this lack, and helps us understand why Coolbrith herself seems to have had no regrets—as she herself expressed in verse:

I CANNOT count my life as a loss,  
With all its length of evil days.  
I hold them only as the dross  
About its gold, whose worth outweighs:  
For each and all I give Him praise.

—Ina Coolbrith

---

**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

