

H.D.'S MORAVIAN HERITAGE

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The Moravian Church has a long, complex, and well-documented history reaching back nearly six centuries. Much of the substantial historical documentation and literature is in Czech or German with a considerable amount in English. While this is well-known to scholars and specialists, it is not widely known otherwise.

The first roots become discernible in the reforming, and sometimes radical, preaching of several priests of the Roman Church in Bohemia in the late fourteenth century and take decisive historical shape in the personality and work of John Hus, who was burned as a heretic at Constance in 1415. These reforming tendencies, social and political as well as theological, were part of a larger dissatisfaction with the secular and economic power and corruption of the Western Church that also called forth the opposition of Wyclif and the Waldensians. A long period of war and confusion followed the death of Hus, and the Hussites broke into two different groups: the Utraquists, who, had they survived, would have been more like the Anglicans; and the Taborites, who would have been more at home with Cromwell and the Puritans. The year 1457 is taken as the date of the founding of the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Unity of Brethren, as the old Moravian Church was named. It was the time when a group of Hussites, weary of the wars and lost hopes, withdrew to the isolated valley of Kunwald in Bohemia to form their society to live "quiet and peaceful lives in all Godliness and honesty," as the Moravian Litany would put it. Other like-minded groups were attracted to their way and in 1467 they established their ministry with bishops, prebysters, and deacons, orders which continue in the Moravian Church today.

For their first generation they were strongly influenced by the ideas of Chelcic, a radical Czech pacifist, whose writings much later had considerable influence on Tolstoy. By 1500 they had grown larger and returned closer to the mainstream of Christian doctrine, which change caused a split among their ranks, the only schism that has occurred in their more than five hundred years of history.

The sixteenth century was the time when the old *Unitas Fratrum* flowered. They were never a legally recognized church and several times suffered severe persecutions that sent many of their members into exile in Poland, where they formed permanent congregations with Lezno as their center. But many were protected by powerful nobles

who became members, and they were able to build fine large church buildings and schools. Their press at Kralice printed their six-volume Czech translation of the Bible with its scholarly annotations, as well as their beautiful hymnals.

This was not to last, however, and at the Battle of White Mountain the Protestant nobles of Bohemia and Moravia lost to the Hapsburg forces and with that loss the old Unity of Brethren was destroyed in its homeland. Many went into exile in Poland, Hungary, Germany, and elsewhere. By 1628 there was no minister, teacher, intellectual, or prominent lay leader of the *Unitas Fratrum* left in their homeland. But the faithfulness of the Unity remained in quiet places and was nourished in the families of farmers and artisans who treasured their hidden copies of hymnals and Bibles. These close-knit families and villages were later remembered in the history as the "Hidden Seed," an image which caught the imagination of H.D. The most famous exile of this century was John Amos Comenius, a pastor and bishop, and a teacher of international stature. He preserved, in hope against hope, the Episcopacy of the *Unitas Fratrum*, against the day of its renewal.

The Renewal began in 1722 with the migration of several families of the Hidden Seed who found refuge on the estate of the young Count von Zinzendorf in Saxony. Over the decade several hundred would follow and build the village of Herrnhut, the Lord's Watch. Five years later the community underwent a powerful spiritual experience which set their future direction. In 1732 they began their missionary work among the slaves in St. Thomas; in 1734 they were in Greenland among the Eskimo; and in 1735 in Georgia to reach the Indians. It was the remnant of that small colony which were to be the founders of Bethlehem in 1741.

The Moravians, though a distinct church, have thought of themselves as a branch of Christendom and not as a sect. They have not developed a peculiar system of doctrine, though they have had a particular emphasis at times. In the old Bohemian Brethren one can see the call to be faithful to the Word of God as they understood it, whatever the cost. One can see this in their old hymns, sturdy, solid, and Biblical. And their faithfulness cost them much in an age before tolerance was known. In the experience of the Renewed Moravian Church in the eighteenth century, they added to this the joy of being the Saviour's happy people, the religion of the heart which Zinzendorf stressed. This, too, one sees in the hymns they wrote, in the music they composed, which is both gentle and joyful, and in the way they looked at people. People were to be awakened to the love of the Saviour, not frightened into the Kingdom. An English friend of the Moravians in the eighteenth century, describing her first contact with the Moravians in

a children's service, commented on their "sweet singing and mild preaching." Theologians have observed that the Moravians have fallen more under the spell of the Gospel and Epistles of St. John than the teachings of St. Paul.

In the Moravian Church the sense of fellowship has always been unusually strong, implied in their name *Unitas Fratrum*, and ritualized in the Lovefeast which so impressed H.D. And though always a small church, it is international, and its ties across national, linguistic, and great cultural gaps are strong. Today three quarters of all Moravians are black and live in the Third World.

This brief history and these generalizations all need exposition and are at best sign posts for those who would search further in order to interpret the influence of the Moravians on H.D. and her work. It is widely acknowledged that H.D. was influenced by her Moravian heritage, and the degree to which this is true becomes more accessible to us as her work is published. The extent and meaning of this influence and the way she drew upon it is now being explored.

There seem to be two points at which the Moravian tradition made a special impact on H.D.'s life and is reflected in her work. One, of course, is her family background and her early childhood in Bethlehem. These she recalled in beautiful passages in *Tribute to Freud* and *The Gift*. *The Gift* has been called a novel, but it surely has to fall in some other category, even if one unique to itself. H.D. recalls people, places, and events by their own names and many of them could be annotated without research. A great deal of Bethlehem life in the 1880s and 1890s can be recaptured in detail (for the scholar who needs them) from the local newspapers, the weekly *Moravian*, the Central Moravian Church Diary, and other Moravian records in the Moravian Archives. *The Moravian*, the weekly denominational publication, is especially rich with its column of local and general news, and its international correspondents from the Continent and England and from Mission stations. Reflecting the literary and religious culture of the time, it is far from provincial or narrow in its interests and concerns.

The other point of impact was H.D.'s reading of Moravian history in London during the Second World War and her discovery of Zinzendorf's thought and the theology of the "Sifting Period." Zinzendorf and the rudiments of Moravian history would have already been familiar to her. Moravians have always had an unusual degree of historical consciousness. H.D.'s family would not only have been aware of this history, but they had been part of it, especially the Weiss, Wolle, and Henry families in Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Philadelphia. And Bethlehem celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1891. Moravian families who move away from Moravian communities and join other churches

often retain a Moravian memory and some knowledge of Moravian history for two or three generations. H.D. moved away from Bethlehem before she would have had formal catechetical instructions and she never, as far as I know, underwent formal instructions in Moravian doctrine or history. When she came to draw upon the historical material directly in her writings, as in *The Gift* and *The Mystery*, she was less restrained by Moravian understanding of it than she might otherwise have been. And, of course, she was not writing or rewriting Moravian history, but drawing upon it for her own creative purposes.

It is important, I think, that when one looks at the Moravian influence on H.D.'s childhood one look at the Moravian Church as it was then in Bethlehem, its services and customs, its hymnals and liturgies then in use, and the sense of history of the community, as well as at the family, and at how the family and the community were intertwined. This specific situation should not be confused with eighteenth-century Bethlehem, or the hymns of the "Sifting Period," or the strong Zinzendorffian influence which was considerably muted in nineteenth-century Bethlehem. It is interesting to note, however, that the great-great-grandson of Count Zinzendorf, Bishop Edmund deSchweintz, was pastor of the Bethlehem Church when Hilda was born. He was a learned, scholarly man of great intellectual and administrative ability, and in touch with the mind of his day. And within a few years, under the direction of H.D.'s uncle, J. Fred Wolle, the community would perform, for the first time in America, Bach's *Mass in B. Minor* in the Moravian Church in Bethlehem.

The influence of H.D.'s Moravian heritage on such writing as *The Gift* and *The Mystery* are being explored. A more elusive question concerns the deeper influence that heritage might have had on the total canon of H.D. The answer may well be none, or little, but I would like to see it explored more deeply. I would like to see what a critically trained mind with both a thorough knowledge of H.D.'s canon and a profound understanding of Moravian traditions would find.

Another aspect of H.D.'s early experience might also yield insights. When the Doolittle family moved to Philadelphia they lived too far to go to the Moravian Church on Fairmount Avenue, and they went instead to the Quaker Meeting nearby. There are seeds here of later attitudes and ideas that became prominent in H.D.'s thought. While Moravians have been ecumenical, the Society of Friends have been more syncretistic. H.D. still had impressionable years ahead when she moved from Bethlehem.

Quakers and Moravians, though different in many ways, have some understanding of each other's ways. Quakers call each other "friend" and Moravians call each other

“brother” and “sister.” The one worships in silence, the other in song. But it was a Quaker who observed of a Moravian Lovefeast that the Spirit which moves through the silence of a Quaker Meeting is the Spirit which moves through the singing of a Moravian Lovefeast. And both Quakers and Moravians have been called “the quiet in the land.” In H.D. studies, this fusion of traditions in H.D.’s childhood would be worth exploring.

Most places and towns have people who feel the uniqueness each place has at any set time, who love the place and their memory of it. Only a few have the writer who can capture that place and time: Dickens his London, Trollope his Barchester, Mrs. Gaskell her Knutsford, Cather her Nebraska Prairie, Sarah Jewett her Maine folk, and Faulkner his peculiar country. Whatever else H.D. accomplished, and it was a great deal, the portraits she drew of Bethlehem in *The Gift* and *The Mystery* give her native place reason to remember her always and gratefully.