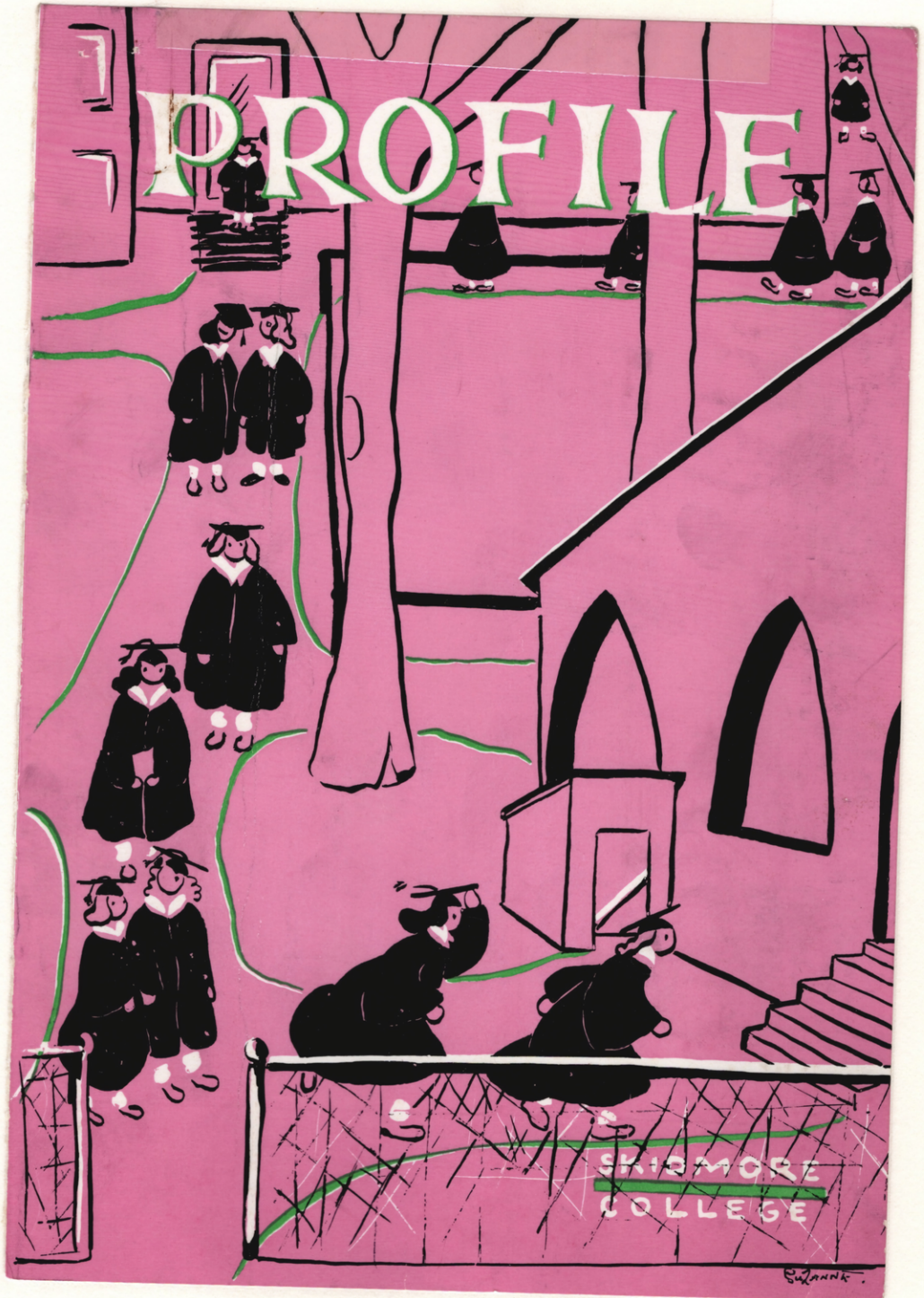


VI - 73 D - 23. "Yaddo Today" - The Profile, Skidmore College,
December, 1944.

PROFILE



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Yaddo Today

The Editors

Afternoon tea with Agnes Smedley and Katherine Anne Porter.

Yaddo, on the outskirts of Saratoga, represents one of the finest tributes in the world to creative talent. Its five hundred acres, four lakes, and vast living accommodations, are all dedicated to the artist. There, he can carry on his work without conflict, without care of money or interruption. Painters, musicians, and writers come to Yaddo's sanctuary; Edgar Allan Poe is said to have written part of his *Raven* on its grounds. For many years, Yaddo has been an ideal impetus to artistic expression, and it is an honor to Spencer and Katrina Trask who conceived its spirit and perpetuated it.

There are only two writers living at Yaddo at present, yet they, alone, are great enough to carry on Yaddo's spirit.

Goethe once said, "Genius is spontaneous and original." This is a fitting way to describe Katherine Anne Porter. Vitality springs from her intense and quickly moving mind. Her sense of humor is alive as her laugh is catching. A soft southern accent adds to her grace, and a delicate charm tinges all her movements. As she is a scintillating person, she is a dynamic person. There is power behind her delicacy as a running brook must have its spouting source.

Her recent book, a collection of nine short stories, is titled "The Leaning Tower." "It was written all over the place," Miss Porter laughs. "I began it in Berlin in 1931, and finished it on election night of 1940 in the Murray Hill Hotel in New York. The *New York Times* calls the book "practically perfect in style" and prophetic of brilliant success as a novelist.

Miss Porter is an example of the self-made woman. Born in New Orleans, she received merely the basis of learning in a convent there. At sixteen she ran away to get married. It was only through intense and varied reading that her education was attained. Today Miss Porter has traveled widely,

and speaks several languages besides being one of the foremost literary craftsmen of our time. Recently she was offered various positions as a professor. "All those degrees," she laughs, "B.A.'s, M.A.'s, I don't have one of them."

Her vast education has come primarily from the great masters of literature in whom Miss Porter has implicit faith. "To know them is the only way to develop the critical sense necessary in a good writer today. Read the great, and let the second-rate alone. There's much that's great in the world." Miss Porter believes in a thoroughly humanistic education. "To know our time is not enough. Know the world, know its history." To her reading is the key to this.

It was at sixteen that Katherine Ann Porter began to write. Once when she was twenty-one, a story was accepted by a magazine. Although already in print, Miss Porter refused to release it. "It wasn't good enough," she explains. Without instruction, with painstaking practice, she began then to train herself to write. She wrote, she rewrote, and she rewrote again. Now her first draft is usually her final draft. Once, she finished two short novels in two weeks.

"Art is a full time job," Miss Porter says. And her whole life has been devoted to it. After leaving New Orleans, she went to Denver to work on the *Rocky Mountain News*. "I was very romantic about getting a newspaper job." After that she traveled; first to New York, then to Mexico, and from Mexico to Europe. In Europe, she lived in Paris and traveled through Germany, Spain and Austria. It was in 1940 that she came to Yaddo for the first time.

At Yaddo she wrote the preface to a novel she had translated from the Spanish, "El Periquillo Sarniento," and also the preface to a volume of South American stories. In Miss Porter's opinion,

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"there is no place like Yaddo in all Europe, nor in America, either."

Shortly after 1940, Archibald Mac Leish sent her to Washington as Fellow of Regional American Literature in the Library of Congress. There she studied and wrote about American Letters between 1769 and 1820 following as guide the original trail of Daniel Boone, from Pennsylvania into Kentucky.

American Literature is a potent and rising thing to Miss Porter. Five authors are outstanding: Emily Dickenson, Henry James, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry Thoreau. The trouble with too many present day writers is that they are too influenced by their contemporaries. As she says, "They take in each other's washing."

Her very definite ideas on art are as interesting as they are philosophic. "An artist," she says, "must live in his own time. His political and social instinct must be intense. But he must not preach." "If you read Dostoievsky," she goes on, "you know there is something wrong with the times, but he never tells you so directly. Art should be art alone, not propaganda. Save that for pamphlets and political speeches. You are humble before your art. Do not betray it."

Her present book, "The Leaning Tower" was introduced on September 14th of this year, the day of the hurricane. To a cocktail party given for her at the Ritz, came W. H. Auden, the well-known poet, absolutely drenched, water dripping down his face. As the hurricane pounded outside, he greeted her with, "I wish you *torrential* success!"

It is fortunate that Miss Porter is at Yaddo. Her fame, her greatness are only a prelude to what is to come. Placed ahead of Hemingway, often compared with Tolstoy, her talent is a wonderfully American genius that is our acute need.

Agnes Smedley, like Miss Porter, is also a self-educated woman. Her father was a western miner who could neither read nor write. Her intense desire to learn sprang from the simple words of her mother: "Go out and get an education."

To do this, she worked as a waitress, a tobacco stripper, and as a typist. She haunted libraries. Her scope of reading was as varied as her desire to read was acute. "I read trash," she says, "Then I found Shaw."

After Shaw there was Galsworthy, and Gorki and finally the classics. She became interested in science. "This might have been my life," she mentions, "if it hadn't been for writing."

She could never attend college as a regular student because she had never been to high school. Her desire to learn drove her to taking single courses at various universities. Finally from one school she received a degree. "It was out of pity," she laughs.

Miss Smedley is a powerful person. Her eyes seem to pierce you as she talks, and her frequent laugh echoes through a whole room. She has the knack of putting people at ease with a direct forcefulness that comes from contact with many types of people. The brilliant mind, the strength of will that has typified her life stands out in all she says and does. And it is a pleasure to talk to her as it is intensely interesting.

By borrowing money Miss Smedley left the west and came to New York to work as a stenographer and attended night school at N. Y. University. Half her meagre salary went home to educate a younger sister. But she felt acutely that she was missing life. As a stewardess on a ship she sailed for Cherbourg to begin to see the world. "It was a terrible experience," she laughed. "That is, if you could know those sailors!"

When Miss Smedley reached Europe she remained there for eight years. She was admitted to the University of Berlin, but could not keep up with the work for a Ph.D., because of a dearth in science and mathematics and classical languages. "You know," she says, "European education is basically classic." So she became an English teacher at Berlin University.

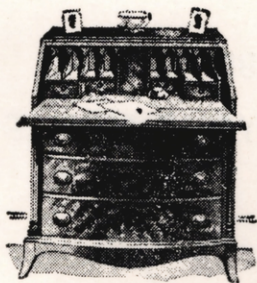
To make her students speak fluently, Miss Smedley encouraged debate and introduced controver-

(Continued on Page 40)



THE PROFILE

YADDO TODAY (Continued from Page 7)



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sial subjects to cause arguments. In this way, she first saw the rise of the Nazi mind. There were violent debates, bordering, as she says, "on fist fights" between those students who defended the Republic and those who were the followers of Hitler. Finally, a group of Nazi students reported her to the dean but in vain. "They did not like to be taught by a foreigner, especially a woman. Especially a woman who wore her hair cut short and smoked cigarettes."

However, there remained a strong group of Germans who were brought up under the democratic republic. "If they are still alive," she says, "and are released from their concentration camps, there will be hope for Germany. There was a greater struggle between Nazism and the German people than many think."

"Nazism was like a sledge hammer that fell on Germany and scattered the really true Germans to all corners of the world. These must return and teach."

Finally Miss Smedley went to China as a correspondent for a German newspaper until Hitler crushed the newspaper. When the war with Japan began in 1937, she went to the front with the Chinese Red Cross, and stayed near the battlefield until malignant malaria, shell shock and malnutrition forced her to return to America. When she returned she wrote the best seller, "Battle Hymn of China." Today she is one of the leading authorities on the Far East.

Miss Porter and Miss Smedley are very much alike in the vastness of their knowledge, in the charm of their manner, and in the very intense cosmopolitanism that makes them so influential in our present day. They have offered the world the product of their talents, and they have achieved success in spite of many acute hindrances. As Yaddo is a tribute to artistic creation, Katherine Anne Porter and Agnes Smedley are an everlasting and powerful tribute to Yaddo.

