

Minna Irving

A Profound Character, On and Off the Page

Minna Irving was born on May 17th, 1865 in Pennybridge, Tarrytown. During her life, she proved herself to be a talented writer and outstanding poet, with an eccentric sense of style. She died on July 4th, 1940 at the age of 86, and is buried in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

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Sleepy Hollow High School, May 26, 2010

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The Warner Public Library is where I discovered an aged copy of Irving's very own Songs of A Haunted Heart. Within the first few pages of the book, the Preface, Minna Irving divulged her heart's deepest feelings out in ink and syllables. An all-too-true story of a lost love flashed before my eyes. There it was: a man pleading with her to run away with him, and live in a foreign land. For whatever reason, Miss Irving declined, and through her written words she expressed a sincere sense of regret. *Why did she not go?* The thought wandered through my mind, yet I almost knew the answer. It could have been fear, or the sense of not wanting to give up the familiar; all reasons that still exist today. The most astonishing aspect was the fact of how real it all sounded. Love, anguish, heartache—the connection was there, and as any writer knows, it's all about the connection between the words and the reader.

Born locally, Minna Irving's parents were William Roamer Odell and Marian Van Tassell. Her birth name was Odell. Growing up, Miss Irving often veered away from so-called stereotypical activities, like playing with dolls, and instead frequently wrote down her thoughts. As a pre-teen, her literary exposure ranged from Gibbon to Shakespeare (Bunning 1). By the age of 15, she had already written her way into magazines, under the penname of Minna Irving. Throughout her years, she wrote for *The New York Times*, *The New York Herald*, and *Century Magazine*, among others (Canning & Buxton 289). She studied music abroad in Rome, Italy for a few years, instructed by Ferdinand di Angelis (289).

Minna Irving married twice in her life, first to Hasbrouck Delamater, a member of the West Point military academy. As described in *Peterson's Magazine*, dated October,

1890, “This was something of a runaway match” (Bunning 1). Unfortunately, such a hasty marriage ended with a divorce. In the year 1911, she married her second husband, Californian Mr. Harry Michener. They lived in Tarrytown.

Minna Irving soon became a nationally-known figure. Her poetry ranged from patriotic, wartime poems, to ones about love and passion. She was given a gold medal in 1899 for her poem about the survivors of the Maine battleship incident. She is also recognized in the National Library of Paris. Some of her most well-known works are “Songs of A Haunted Heart”, “The Old Hat”, “The Celestial Feminine”, “Our Honor Roll of Glory”, and many others (Canning & Buxton 290).

In addition to all of her writing achievements, Miss Irving was known by the people of the Tarrytowns for her bold sense of style, and unconventional usage of makeup and perfume. She and her mother were seen every day walking from Paulding Avenue to the Tarrytown post office to get their mail, long after that was necessary. The mother, always in black, would be “four paces behind Minna” (Buxton 1 -1965). Miss Irving herself always accessorized with a huge hat, whatever the season, to go along with her “tailored gowns, shoes and parasols.” No stranger to jewelry, “She wore two rings on each of her eight fingers” (1) ranging from diamonds and emeralds, to sapphires and opals. The community either accepted the look, or viewed it as overkill, even risqué.

Once involved in a local trial on April 6th, 1892, published in the *New York Times*, Minna Irving “floated, rather than walked” into the courtroom, displaying her exotic taste in dress; “Her slender form was encased in a black silk dress, the train of which spread out like an immense fan”(1). Descriptions like these were not a rare find; any local source that had her name mentioned her apparel.

Even on the day after her death, she was described in the *Daily News* as “known for her brilliant attire” (1) as well as for the “gracefulness and ease” that was her writing style, showing that the public took as much interest in her appearance as in what she wrote (Buxton 1- 1965).

Minna Irving was, for her day and age, a very brave figure. Being a successful woman writer, as well as having a heightened sense of bravado and fashion, set her apart from women of her time especially between the 1880s and the early 1920s. She was celebrated worldwide for her poems, yet she was known locally for being her own person; an individual who would not be held back from expressing herself. In the end, these are the attributes that one remembers. It is for all of these reasons that Minna Irving is a notable figure in the history of the Tarrytowns.

Sources

- 1) Bunning, T.W.P. “All American Poetess”. *Peterson’s Magazine*. Philadelphia, Oct. 1890.
- 2) Buxton, Wally. “Combining the Villages”. 13 Dec. 1975.
- 3) Buxton, Wally. “Memories of Tarrytown’s Nationally Known Poetess”. *Daily News* 17 May 1965.
- 4) Canning, Jeff & Buxton, Wally (William C. Gross) History of the Tarrytowns. Purple Mountain Press, Ltd. Fleischmanns NY. Copyright 1975.
- 5) Irving, Minna. Songs of a Haunted Heart. Belford, Clarke & Co. Copyright 1888.
- 6) “Editor Lant’s Trial”. *The New York Times*. 7 April 1892.
- 7) “Miss Minna Irving, Well Known Author and Poet, Dies at 83; Burial Here Tomorrow”. *The Daily News* 1940.

Other artifacts used were on file at the Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow Historical Society.