

Marguerite Eyer Wilbur

1889–1982

by Taylor Coffman

I CAME TO Marguerite Eyer Wilbur through George Vancouver, and I came to Vancouver through William Randolph Hearst. I've come to most things in my antiquarian pursuits through Hearst. The man's life is a boundless vehicle of history, one that's been leading me in dozens of directions for the past four decades. It happens that the North Coast of San Luis Obispo County, California, lies partly within the huge Hearst San Simeon ranch, on one of whose knolls stands Hearst Castle in all its fabled glory.

In 1984 I began writing a book about that subject, meant for the local market, *Hearst Castle: The Story of William Randolph Hearst and San Simeon*. By early in 1985 I had to rush the job to completion; its California history part came out far from my liking. I resolved to redo it soon. Thus was born *Hearst's Dream*, one of whose sections was "Prologue: San Simeon." I researched and massaged my new edition intensively for three years, right up until press time in 1989 through E Z Nature Books of San Luis Obispo, headed by Ed Zolkoski.

Ed let me write that prologue exactly as I saw fit. No previous book, except for Geneva Hamilton's *Where the Highway Ends* (1974), had gone as deeply into North Coast history. And thus my inclusion of George Vancouver, the English mariner. I'd learned that he'd sailed past the Cambria-San Simeon area in the late 1700s. But I didn't know yet whether he'd been heading north—or south. He was on a southward course, it turns out, in the fall of 1793, preceding a winter layover in the Hawaiian Islands.

On the subject of Vancouver there was only one source to turn to—one practical source, that is, short of tracking down his multi-volume journal, first published in 1798. The handier way, yet one that required its own share of hunting, was Glen Dawson's petite three-volume set called *Vancouver in California*, published in 600 copies through Dawson's Book Shop in 1953–1954. The set was part of Glen's memorable Early California Travels Series. Marguerite Eyer Wilbur had served as editor on the Vancouver project. It was through those Dawson books that I became familiar with her exacting work, more so than through anything else bearing her name since the late 1920s, when she entered the Californiana field.

I'd also encountered her name while working on *Hearst Castle* in the mid-1980s. That was when Eugene Duflot de Mofras, the Frenchman who visited the California missions in the 1840s, first caught my eye. His legacy was the two-volume reprint of his work of 1844, which included an invaluable map of California, published by The Fine Arts Press in Santa Ana in 1937 as *Duflot de Mofras' Travels on the Pacific Coast*. Mrs. Wilbur had been the translator and editor of that reprint.

Not only had she worked on the *Duflot* project, she'd also been translator-editor of two items published by the Arthur H. Clark Company during its Cleveland years. One was the book in 1929 on the Jesuit priest Juan Maria de Salvatierra, the other on the French pirate Raveneau de Lussan, dated 1930. The original Lussan book was truly rare, "having been published in London in 1702 and only known in three copies in this country." From one such copy did Mrs. Wilbur evidently proceed—this according to the bibliography of the Clark Company by Arthur Clark's grandson Robert A. Clark, published in Spokane in 2002.

In 1927 Mrs. Wilbur translated a book called *A Frenchman in the Gold Rush*. That first work of hers was published by the California Historical Society, San Francisco. She played the field widely. In 1929

she teamed with two of the Southland's fine-press publishers, Bruce McAllister and Jake Zeitlin, in behalf of Ludwig Salvator's *Los Angeles in the Sunny Seventies: A Flower from the Golden Land*, first published in Prague in 1878. Little was said about her role as translator of the McAllister-Zeitlin version. The emphasis was on the book itself, an expensively produced number (pre-Wall Street crash in '29), of which 900 copies were printed. Presumably it was Mrs. Wilbur who compiled the seven pages of notes the book included. But that's only a plausible guess. In any event she knew German, too, not just French; and thus in 1941, for The Calafia Society in Los Angeles, she translated Heinrich Lienhard's *Pioneer at Sutter's Fort 1846-1850*. French must have been her preference. Or maybe it was just that more French texts crossed her path than did German ones. All told, four of her translations were from the French, two of them based on books by the prolific Alexandre Dumas, *A Gil Blas in California* (1933) and *The Journal of Madame Giovanni* (1944).

Mrs. Wilbur's work on English texts would seem to have been an easier task. And yet one should look at old British typography, as conveyed by George Vancouver's journals, before making any such assumption. She had her hands full on that job for Glen Dawson nearly as much as on any of her French or German efforts. Phrases like "The whole ipace, fo far as they were able to difcern" were the standard form, line after tedious line throughout the original Vancouver volumes.

Meanwhile, soon after World War II, Mrs. Wilbur began shifting toward "fictionalized biography." Her first effort, touted on the dust jacket as "A New Romantic Biography" and as one written with "color and imagination," dated from 1949 and was entitled *John Sutter: Rascal and Adventurer*. Liveright Publishing Corporation in New York did the honors. The title page said the book was "Based on Source Material, Manuscripts and Letters pertaining to Captain John

Augustus Sutter, leading figure in the Gold Rush and the founder of Sutter's Fort." Mrs. Wilbur's "Note of Sources" further said that "John Augustus Sutter left only fragmentary records of his life in California—a brief diary, some business correspondence, a few letters to friends and relatives in Switzerland, and his *Reminiscences*, written in his old age when his memory was failing." The fictionalizing of his story might therefore have been especially justified.

She further noted, "There is also available, however, considerable information, both published and unpublished, about the founder of New Helvetia." To which she added, "The most important single item is the record of Heinrich Lienhard, who lived for several years at the fort during the Gold Rush era." She also noted that "Sections of his verbose record have been published." Yet she humbly avoided saying that she'd been the editor-translator in 1941 of *A Pioneer at Sutter's Fort 1846–1850*, brought out by The Calafia Society in Los Angeles, a book whose least expensive copy today costs \$225 through AbeBooks. Nonetheless, as Mrs. Wilbur went on to say in the Calafia Society volume, "The Lienhard record is probably the most valuable item of Sutterana yet found."

She also mentioned the published accounts of John Sutter's life. Among them was *Duflot de Mofras' Travels on the Pacific Coast*, the book originally dated 1844 that she had charge of in 1937. Two postings of her *Duflot* version, currently on AbeBooks, command as much as \$650 and \$750. The first of these is described as "overall very good," the second as "fine." As with the Heinrich Lienhard book, Mrs. Wilbur avoided giving herself credit when she cited *Duflot* in the Sutter book, although credit was surely due.

In her separate acknowledgments in *John Sutter*, she thanked the Huntington Library in San Marino for "rare views of early California" that appeared within. A part-time resident of nearby Pasadena, Mrs. Wilbur relied on the Huntington for much of her research on all her

subjects, no less so on her fictionalized ones. She also thanked three people in *John Sutter* “for critical readings of the manuscript,” one of whom was Dr. William Ashworth of Santa Barbara, where she lived when not in Pasadena. My copy of her Sutter book bears an inscription: “For Dr. William Ashworth, With appreciation, from Marguerite Eyer Wilbur.”

Laid in the book is an index card, on which a man named Bill Coutts scratched the following, dated “11-25-89”:

History of M. Wilbur’s Book about John Sutter.

M. Wilbur was [a] native of Sutter County and my client at one time. This book was autographed to a Mr. Ashworth and eventually came into the possession of Ira McKibben, who repaired our vacuum cleaners in Santa Barbara. We picked it up at a rummage sale in Santa Barbara.

Garage sales are indeed a potential gold mine, often in the most unexpected ways.

What of the Sutter volume itself—its quality, its vision, its literary and historical value? I confess to not having read it. My securing of the copy, whose inscription and Coutts item weren’t mentioned by the dealer I got it from, is about as far as I’ve gone. But I did check some contemporary book reviews. “Sutter Pictured in Romantic Vein,” was the heading of one in the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*, dated April 9, 1949:

“John Sutter: Rascal and Adventurer” depicts one of early California’s strange adventurers in a romantic light seldom shed upon a figure of history in biographical writing. However, the author has hewed to facts and figures in a book based upon research in material in the Library of Congress and the Huntington Library.

The reviewer concluded with “Truly, here is history with the dust blown off and the cobwebs swept away. Here is an illustrated biography that every collector of California will want in his library.”

A brief notice in the *Oakland Tribune* of March 13, 1949, concurred in calling the book “a fresh appraisal of a fabulous figure in a fabulous time, whose character and achievements are still so controversial that any book about him is sure to contain ‘fighting words.’” However, the book had no index, frowned this second reviewer. And thus *caveat emptor* to anyone who might choose to tackle 317 pages.

Besides writing the life of John Sutter (1949) and, at the end of her active years, that of Thomas Jefferson (1962), Marguerite Wilbur made two other forays into fictionalized biography. *Immortal Pirate: The Life of Sir Francis Drake* (1951) was her first effort after Sutter. I’d been drawn to the Drake book because I recognized its author’s name, this while seeking books on Pacific voyages. I was surprised on receiving my copy to find that it wasn’t a nonfiction work. Instead, it was one of Mrs. Wilbur’s ventures into historical fiction. The book contains no front matter, no indicators of how the author came to write about Drake. I tried reading a few pages but wasn’t in the right mood. I’ll go back to that book sometime later.

At any rate, in 1952, through the same New York trade publisher (Hastings House) that brought out *Immortal Pirate*, Mrs. Wilbur offered *The Unquenchable Flame: The Life of Philip II*. Her work of 1953–1954 on the California part of George Vancouver’s journal followed closely on the heels of that and the Drake book. It was nearly a decade, however, before she came forth with *Thomas Jefferson: Apostle of Liberty*. By then she was in her seventies and had retired after a busy writing career that began when she was in her thirties.

In her dealings with bibliophiles and publishers, Mrs. Wilbur leaned toward fine-press and specialty houses, such as Jake Zeitlin,

The Quivira Society, The Calafia Society, and Glen Dawson, all of them in Los Angeles—and, likewise in the Southland, toward The Fine Arts Press in Santa Ana. In northern California, Stanford University Press and the California Historical Society stand out. In that regard she was quite like Susanna Bryant Dakin, a woman born in 1905, a decade and a half after Marguerite Wilbur. In contrast among the latter's publishers, the New York houses that Mrs. Wilbur worked with were mostly ordinary, starting with Liveright in 1944 and its edition of *The Journal of Madame Giovanni*.

Mrs. Wilbur had begun life as Marguerite Eyer in Illinois in 1889 (not in California, as Bill Couets said). Influenced by the old style of including the maternal side of one's patrimony, she added her mother's maiden name, thus becoming Marguerite Eyer Knowlton. She replaced Knowlton with Wilbur upon marrying in 1919. By the time she died in Santa Barbara in 1982 while in her nineties, she'd connected with Russell Kirk and his circle. The author of *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (originally 1953), Kirk outlived Mrs. Wilbur by a dozen years. She'd heard him speak, was deeply moved, and remained a firm supporter of his from then on. As a retiree she devoted herself to Kirk's cause, much as she had to the historical subjects she'd delved into from 1927 to 1962. The Marguerite Eyer Wilbur Foundation, established in 1975 for educational purposes, is her enduring legacy in Santa Barbara—along with her many books, Glen Dawson's *Vancouver in California* certainly counting among them.