

Former Winnsboro native

# Radcliffe honors Hanna Rion as one of 16 prominent U. S. garden writers

By Jane McMaster Roehrs  
Contributing Writer

The late South Carolina author/artist/musician Hanna Rion, a Winnsboro native, received recognition as one of 16 prominent women garden writers of the early 20th century in a spring exhibit at Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library Women. The writers were important to the "garden fever phenomenon" of the first four decades of the 20th century, according to Virginia Lopez Begg, graduate student compiling the garden writers' portion of the "Women-Land-Design" exhibit.

An exhibit brochure said opportunities for landscape education have grown since World War II as well as opportunities for women to become landscape designer.

Displayed in the exhibit was Rion's, "Let's Make a Flower Garden," published in 1912. Her first garden book, "A Garden in the Wilderness" appeared in 1909 under the pseudonym "A Hermit."

The exhibit also carried a photo of Rion (furnished by Nelle McMaster Sprott of Winnsboro) and of a Bermuda garden she created. The garden was said to be "one of the most beautiful" on the island. Married several times, she created gardens in the United States, England and Bermuda before she died in 1924 at 49, according to the exhibit. "Rion's unconventional lifestyle and wholehearted commitment to art illustrates the diversity of the garden fever phenomenon," according to the display legend.

The garden writers' part of the exhibit was subtitled "A Room of One's Own," using English novelist Virginia Woolf's phrase that called for women to have space of their own for their creativity. Their gardens offered this space for some women.

Husbands may have been puzzled at times at their wives' garden fever — and one objected to his wife's use of the term "manures" so frequently in her garden writing: he thought it wasn't ladylike, according to the exhibit.

Rion was the youngest of nine children of Colonel James Henry Rion, who fought for the Confederacy and practiced law in Winnsboro; and Mary Catherine Weir Rion. Her mother, the daughter of a Columbia publisher, had written a garden book, "Ladies' Southern Florist," before the turn of the century.

Early in Hanna Rion's extensive literary career, she wrote verses for a children's book, "Ver Beck's Book of Bears," published in 1906. She continued to collaborate with artist Frank Ver Beck. She also wrote extensively on the subject of "Twilight Sleep," a method of anesthetizing women during childbirth to abolish memory and pain but retain muscular power. Various drugs used included morphine followed by small doses of scopolamine administered at intervals.

Her one child, a daughter, settled in England and Hanna Rion trained as a nurse in London in World War I, becoming matron of a maternity ward. She wrote a series of articles on "Twilight Sleep" for Lord Northcliff's Weekly Dispatch and several books including "Painless Childbirth in Twilight Sleep," and "The Truth about Twilight." Her obituary said she helped deliver her own grandson by the "Twilight Sleep" method.

Later at a time when "Twilight Sleep" chemicals, hosine or scopolamine were being used at San Quentin prison as a truth serum, she had a novel out in London in 1923 called "Fate and a Marionette" in which truth

serum was used on a suspected amnesia victim.

She attended College for Women in Columbia and first married a musician, W.V. Abell with whom she had joint concerts, reportedly winning a lion's share of the applause. She studied musical composition in Berlin under Heinrich Barth, taking time off for a dirigible ride in the Black Forest.

She became a painter in watercolors and oils, some of her bright landscapes capturing a vivid Bermuda blue. Her work, including portrait, was exhibited internationally.

She married the Rev. Alpheus Baker Herve, former president of St. Lawrence University of Canton N.Y., two years before she died. In a newspaper interview in Bermuda, she said she wrote her books in the summer when it was nice to be indoors, and

painted in the winter when it was nice to work beside the sea.

Her Bermuda gardens on several levels were walled with coral rocks and included a mixture of flowers and vegetables. "I never disturb a self-invited guest," she told the reporter who asked about the hyacinth among the strawberries.

The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America on the Radcliffe College campus in Cambridge, Mass., includes 40,000 books by and about women, and some 2,000 collections. Its documents include personal papers of such notable women as Susan B. Anthony, Julia Child, Betty Friedan and others.

*Editor's note: Jane McMaster Roehrs is a Winnsboro native.*



Hanna Rion