

Twilight Reflections: The Hold of Victorian Baltimore on Lizette Woodworth Reese and H. L. Mencken

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To the old, as Faulkner wrote in “A Rose for Emily,” “all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches.” Certainly for Baltimore’s two preeminent native authors, the spring meadows of their youth remain forever green in a set of autobiographical masterpieces, in many ways the crowns of their respective achievements. Taken together, Lizette Woodworth Reese’s *A Victorian Village* (1929) and *The York Road* (1931) and H. L. Mencken’s *Happy Days* (1940) and *Heathen Days* (1943) provide sensitive and vivid glimpses of the last forty years of nineteenth-century Baltimore. Even more, they reveal the Victorian Baltimore of their early years to have been a fertile soil and salubrious climate for the nurturing of their geniuses. Combined, these reminiscences allow a shape and color to their times often unnoticed by social historians and highlight a dimension to their work usually neglected by literary historians concerned more with *belles lettres* than with autobiography.

They were vastly different people, the sentimental schoolmarm and poet and the satiric editor and columnist. From their more popular works one will infer two characters as far apart as the sonnets and squibs that became their respective literary trademarks. Yet after their reputations had long since been made. Reese in her seventies and Mencken in his sixties specified Baltimore as the seed-bed of their common Victorianism. As Reese observed, “None of us ever escape the first few years of our lives. They make a mould into which we are cast” (*Victorian* 39).

Lizette Reese was born in 1856 in what is now Waverly, but was then called Huntingdon, a village two miles north of Baltimore. Of Welsh and German parentage, she led the quiet life of a spinster schoolteacher for forty-eight years, from 1873 to 1921, during which time she produced eleven volumes of poetry to national acclaim. Before her death in 1935, she collected her early memories in the two volumes centering on Waverly from 1856 to 1865, the year in which her family moved to North Gay Street in Baltimore City.



Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856-1935)
Photography courtesy *The Baltimore Sun*

As a poet, Reese won attention for her sharp sensory appeal, a subtle sense of atmosphere, and an intensity that belies the surface simplicity and imitativeness of her poetry. Her style reveals affinity with the English poets Herrick, Herbert, Wordsworth, Keats, and Tennyson, but, as she confesses in *A Victorian Village*, it was the Maryland countryside and not the meadows of Devonshire that inspired her verse (253). In “A Wet June Day,” for example, she recreates a Baltimore Country rural scene, probably along the York Road:

Scents, sounds, as of November fill the air:
Of myriad blossoms down wet pathways strown:
Of ragged leaves off steaming branches blown
And dropped into dank hollows here and there.
Keen little gusts go whirling through the hush,
Driving the mist before them up the lane.

And lo, the lovely world grows ours again' .--
The orchard fences, the one elder bush,
Prone with its white face in the thick drenched grass.
The rows of apple-trees, gnarled, dripping, sweet,
The highway with its pools a gleam like glass;
Then, as still speeds the mist on shining feet,
Meadow, and wood, peaked roofs – beyond them shows
A windy west, the color of a rose. (*Lavender* 19)

Likewise in “Sunrise,” Miss Reese depicts a cityscape, most likely Gay Street:

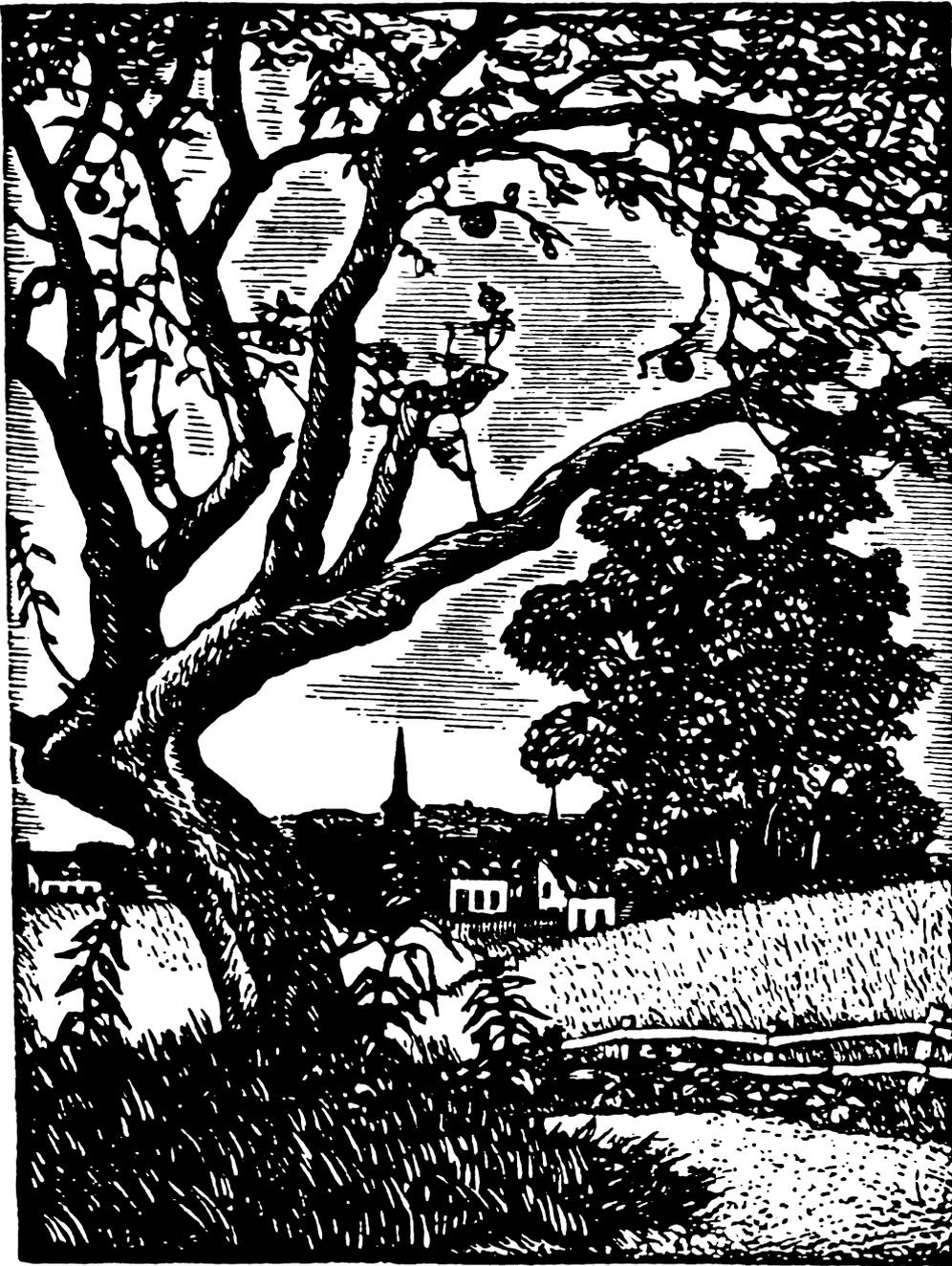
The east is yellow as a daffodil.
Three steeples – three stark swarthy arms – are thrust
Up from the town. The gnarled poplars thrill
Down the long street in some keen salty gust--
Straight from the sea and all the sailing ships--
Turn white, black, white again, with noises sweet
And swift. Back to the night the last star slips.
High up the air is motionless, a sheet
Of light. The east grows yellower apace,
And trembles: then, once more, and suddenly,
The salt wind blows, and in that moment's space
Flame roofs, and poplar-tops, and steeples three;
From out the mist that wraps the river-ways,
The little boats, like torches, start ablaze. (*Lavender* 22)

In both sonnets, an external nature is localized. As the wind restores and freshens a country lane in the first, in the second, the sun awakens east Baltimore. Nature quickens both poems by tactile, aural, and visual touches that eclipse a cinematic technique. We follow the wind westward with slow, wet sounds in “A Wet June Day” as we watch the growing intensity of morning color in “Sunrise” from the yellow daffodils of the early verse to the fiery boats in the last. These are early poems, but they reveal a sense of place however intentionally obliterated by her Victorian tendency to understate and universalize it.

This same sense of place dominates her two autobiographical volumes, though in them Waverly is explicitly personalized and localized. Reese is patently direct: “To remember Waverly as it was, and the York Road as a track have been two of my wealthiest experiences” (*York* 277). In *A Victorian Village* and *The York Road* those experiences come alive in scenes, character, and customs, all of which constitute the personal roots of the poet's Victorian values that she carried unchanged into the present century. During the years recreated in the two books, Waverly was a pastoral village flanking York Road and consisting of two general stores, St. John's Episcopal Church and school, a tollgate, and a scattering of garden-enclosed country cottages dotted among orchards and meadows. Settled largely by southern Germans, it had a population of 3,790 in 1881 (Scharf 888).¹

Three main scenes dominate Reese's memory of Waverly: her home, St. John's, and the family orchard. Her German grandfather Gabler's house, where she was born and spent her first nine years, was an old cottage of one story in front and two behind. Facing westward it fronted the York Road and was shaded by Paradise trees and mantled in roses. Behind were a henhouse, a workhouse, and an

orchard, all encompassing three to four acres. In the house, Reese remembers the fright of going upstairs to bed, her reassuring mother with a candle at the foot of the stairs, the country-night noises, the general hush punctuated by the sibilant whispers of visiting German neighbors downstairs. She recalls also the cinnamon-and-coffee fragrance of the kitchen, the herbal solicitations of mother and grandmother to ill children, and the family recreations of reading, singing, and game-playing. To Reese the house, on which centered all the Victorian sensibilities, is a symbol of stability and permanence made more appealing by its happy and loving inhabitants.²



Waverly in the late nineteenth century with St. John's steeple near the center. The frontispiece of *A Victorian Village*, this woodcut epitomizes Reese's rural world. "Altogether it was a green, quiet country, with scattered houses, with

stretches of orchard and meadow, and although within easy reaching distance from Baltimore, almost as obscure as though it stood on the edge of a desert. A green, quiet place, well-beloved, and long-remembered.” (*A Victorian Village*, p. 24)

St. John’s is a second dominant influence in Lizette Reese’s early life. In a number of her poems, and frequently in the autobiographies, she depicts the Episcopal Church as the centerpiece of Waverly. On a still February night she recalls,

The stars were out, a great number dim with mist. Mist floated in the grass, and in the boughs of a tree overhead. Behind them the roofs were shadowy, and behind the roofs, St. John’s spire, a long pencil, incredibly delicate, more shadowy still. Before them a light glowed in a front window or two. The old York Road lay cloudy, too, and with the same hush upon it (*York* 109).

The gray stone church with its school nearby was the scene of innumerable Sunday services, Christmas celebrations, and handkerchief-hemming sessions for the village. Sheltering waifs and feeding tramps, St. John’s was for Reese charity in stone. At Christmas the church took on a woodsy smell from the spice and tang of freshly pulled cedar and holly decorations, while the floor, dappled in colored light from the stained glass windows, linked the revered church still more closely to its natural surroundings. The vividness and frequency of such images of St. John’s suggest its importance to Reese as a child. The familiar statues of Saints Matthew and Luke and the stately carved pulpit and reading desk highlight in her memory the faith that she never abandoned. Here in one setting were synthesized the best of the social, divine, and natural words for the young girl.

A third dominant place in *A Victorian Village* and *The York Road* is the family orchard, two acres of trees and fantasy between the York Turnpike and the Old York Road. In the former work, Reese provides lush and loving descriptions of the orchard, yet notes that at dusk, stretched out against a west of honeysuckle-yellow, it has the effect of a medieval carving. There is a grave loneliness about it then that makes you think of a strain of music coming out of a half-closed door. It is as full of secrets as an old house (*Victorian* 92). It is the perfect setting for the young poet, a scene merging beauty and mystery. To Reese, the orchard was also “a playground, sanctuary, closet, a stage from which the bustling of life could be seen and kept in mind” (*Victorian* 92-93). She tells us that from her orchard post she watched tramps, gypsies, ragmen, and haywains move up and down York Road. In her books the orchard becomes the classic *locus amoenus*, a literal and symbolic setting that first provided Lizette Reese with both the subjective involvement and the objective distance that together constitute perfect focus in poetry.



Lizette Woodworth Reese at the turn of the century. “A Garden is a place for the healing of the spirits. Who knows what ethereal balms we drew out of this lovely old Gilead?” (*The York Road*, p. 152). Many of her book titles suggest her consciousness of her early rural world: *A Branch of May*, *A Handful of Lavender*, *A Quiet Road*, *Spicewood*, *A Wayside Lute*, *Wild Cherry*, *White April*, *Pastures*, and *The Old House in the Country*. Photograph courtesy *The Baltimore Sun*.

St. John’s, the Waverly cottage, and its orchard are the tap-roots of Reese’s sense of place, a sense heavy with the feeling of security.

For an imaginative child, living on the York Road, to wake up at night and remember the closed toll-gate half a mile below, and the closed one farther up the pike, was to have a feeling of safety not to be put into words. That feeling and the knowledge that my mother slept near at hand in an alcove of the big attic enraptured me in a honeyed security which none could disturb (*Victorian* 23).

It is this secure and early sensibility that inclines her poetry to its certainty and faith, and that also, conversely, allows her recurring images of lonely houses, forlorn winds, and gray skies to complete a tight poetic tension. These counter images, in their own way, might be the symbolic residue of the early communal fears reported in *The York Road* and *A Victorian Village*. Her memories of the Civil War's effect on Waverly, for example, are especially vivid. Pinning small Confederate Bags to undergarments, hiding pictures of Southern leaders, fearing both the presence of Gilmor's raiders in Towson and of the federal garrison nearby, listening to the whispered states' rights discussions of her elders downstairs after her bedtime, harboring the anxiety of arrest and imprisonment in Fort Monroe, and watching Lincoln's funeral pass through Baltimore, all are images of fear crowded into her story. "Martial law was proclaimed. Gloom settled upon the town. In this gloom we walked; we ate, and supped in it. Black draped flags hung from the windows. The shops closed early. People went about in a strange, unfriendly fashion. They were hushed, bewildered, suspicious, fearful" (*Victorian* 73).

Etched deeply into her memory, these primal fears of war and also of fire, abandonment, and murder juxtapose with the more pleasant images of a loving family, country pastimes of blackberrying, sledding, reading the comfortable Victorian novelists, and Christmas shopping junkets to Baltimore City. Together, the fears and pleasantries produce a fine tension and texture in both her poetic and autobiographical volumes. And further, the German family tradition of love within a formal reserve, the domestic conventions of personal responsibility and discipline, the states' rights tendencies of her father and grandfather, and her own preference for the Christian strain in English poetry all mark Lizette Reese as a woman firmly in the genteel and conservative Victorian tradition.

As Lizette Reese specifies the rural side of life around Victorian Baltimore, H. L. Mencken details its urban character in *Happy Days* and *Heathen Days*. Frequently in his letters and early writings, Mencken's allegiance to his city moved him to an uncharacteristic rhapsody. In *The Smart Set*, for example, he claimed that "Baltimore delights the painter, and stands sentry for the South, and looks back to the seventeenth century, and has given the nation not only heroes but poets to sing them" (112). And in *Prejudices, Fifth Series*, he decreed that escaping from New York "to so ancient and solid a town as Baltimore is like coming out of a football crowd into a quiet communion with a fair one who is also amiable and has the gift of consolation for hard-beset and despairing men" (206-10). Wittingly, he became Baltimore's leading publicist.

Mencken was sensitive to places. Among cities, Salisbury was "the Alsatia of morons." Chicago, Patuxent, and Kalamazoo, among others, "give a barbaric brilliancy to the American map." New York was "the ugliest of towns, the seat of hideous architecture, grotesque monuments, alien peoples, and swindling shopkeepers." Whole states too were pricked by his pen. Virginia was "an intellectual Gobi or Lapland," Arkansas "a miasmatic jungle of dead brains," Pennsylvania a feast for "the libido of the ugly," Georgia "crass, gross, vulgar, and obnoxious," and California a circus "of retired Ford agents and crazy fat women – a paradise of 100% Americanism and the New Thought." More mildly, Maryland was "the apex of normalcy."³ This hardhitting and abusive style, so typical of the public or

“vintage” Mencken, masks the temper of the man who could write so wistfully of his salad days in Victorian Baltimore.



H. L. Mencken (1880-1956)
Photograph courtesy *The Baltimore Sun*

At the time he was writing the *Days* books, however, Mencken was increasingly saddened by the changes wrought in Baltimore. In frequent columns in the *Evening Sun* he protested vigorously against the construction of new and stinking factories, the rush to the suburbs, and the ubiquitous automobile. By 10 September 1923, for example, he concluded that

Baltimore has lost its old charm and individuality, and is now almost indistinguishable from Buffalo and Kansas City. Bringing in more oil refineries, more glue factories, more canneries, more sugar refineries, more foundries, more slaves, more stinks – is bringing the cow into the parlor. The carpet is ruined – and the milk is no better.

For Mencken, the city had never recovered from the great fire of 1904, for it turned “loose the Babbitts who still rage. They converted a charming city, dignified, well-to-do and contented, into a den of absurd go-getters... and so drove all self-respecting Baltimoreans into the sewers. The social structure

has never recovered” (*Evening Sun*, 15 Feb. 1926). Not that Mencken was a reactionary. He campaigned vigorously for improvements in the city’s water system and for purer milk just as on the national front he led the fight against censorship, prohibition, and the genteel tradition in literature. Nor was he a romantic. Mencken duly conceded that the Baltimore of his youth was noisier, less sanitary, and more disease-ridden than the Baltimore of the twentieth century. But what the old town had had was charm.

Charm is the key word for Mencken’s memory of the Baltimore of the late nineteenth century. It suggests a pleasantness, beauty, propriety, and comfort that is at bottom Victorian. For Mencken, charm is not found in the ugly architecture, the hypocritical and doltish city fathers, or the frenzied pace of modern Baltimore. Consequently, much of the old city’s charm is touted in the Baltimore of his *Days* books.

In *Happy Days* and *Heathen Days* Mencken’s Baltimore was a tolerant and expansive place which allowed young Harry a normal boyhood. In these delightful books we watch Mencken pull his share of pigtailed, march armed with the No. 14 Engine House gang, swipe turnips and potatoes, devour pecks of seafood, taunt cops and alley preachers, sip sarsaparilla on a saloon’s brass rail, stoke election-day bonfires, build snow-forts, dam gutters, picnic at Darley Park, discover Mark Twain, raid the Enoch Pratt library, summer luxuriously in a pastoral Ellicott City and Mount Washington, drink in tall tales at the Reveille’s livery stable, staunch cuts and nosebleeds with gobs of cobweb, and manfully endure sessions at Sunday school and the Y.M.C.A.⁴ It is a breathless junket through a happy Baltimore that was comfortable, familiar, and individual. From the Hollins Street backyard with its fruit trees and summer house, the Greek Temple in Union Square, the alley and livery stables to Mr. Thiernau the grocer, Cookie the cop, and a gallery of nicknamed cronies, schoolmasters, baseball players, and black originals, Mencken colors the map of west Baltimore of the 1880s and 1890s to reveal a charming place in which everyone had a name and character and every place a permanence.

Of all the cartoons and portraits preserved in the gallery of *Happy Days* and *Heathen Days*, the most sharply angled and memorable is Mencken’s father, August, Sr. “There was never an instant in my childhood when I doubted my father’s capacity to resolve any difficulty that menaced me, or to beat off any danger. If we needed anything, he got it forthwith, and usually he threw in something that we really didn’t need, but only wanted” (*Happy Days* vii). Books, toys, a piano, a Shetland pony, a baseball uniform, and a printing press were some of the presents, but his father’s lasting gift to Mencken was his character. Besides his love for his family, August Mencken’s salient traits were his penchant for practical jokes and for conservative economics and politics. Mencken reveals in the *Days* books his father’s suspicion of political reform, his acceptance of the inevitability of political corruption in a democracy, his disdain for borrowing and credit spending, and his intense hatred of labor unionism. No idealist, he was at best a religious skeptic. What moved him to send his son to Sunday school “was simply his overmastering impulse to give over the Sunday afternoons of Winter to quiet snoozing” (*Happy Days* 177). After the boy’s return from his weekly religious sessions, August would conduct a satirical cross-examination of young Harry’s knowledge of the Bible.

Besides his love, his conservatism, and his religious skepticism, August Mencken was a practical joker. In an amused yet appreciative tone, Mencken recounts some of the pranks, such as unsettling the Mount Washington neighborhood by proposing to build a piggery on his summer property, writing a bogus credit rating to arouse a friend, spreading news of his imaginary missionary brother, silencing an enthusiastic neighbor by telling police he was a wild man, wrecking the cigar-makers union by a ruse,

and encouraging Mencken to play at the piano to get unwelcome guests out of the house (*Happy Days* 247-62).

Mencken's father's practical joking was as influential in Mencken's own later tendency to the literary hoax as was August's conservatism and skepticism in his son's similar mature inclinations. Throughout his life H. L. Mencken's bourgeois faith in capitalism and competition, his rejection of socialism, unionism, and democracy, and his practice of the domestic economic virtues are directly traceable to his strong Victorian father – and to his father's father. Burkhardt Mencken had come from Germany to Baltimore in 1848, not as a liberal refugee, but as a man with \$500 and high commercial hopes. The local family's tradition of small business and the family's German ancestry of professors and lawyers inclined him to an economic independence and an intellectual elitism, about both of which he boasted. This strong, close family – apparently the norm in Victorian Baltimore – undoubtedly determined Mencken's later course.



The Mencken family, summer 1892, Charlie, Anna Abhau Mencken, Gertrude, August, Jr., August Mencken, Sr., and Henry. Photograph courtesy *The Baltimore Sun*.

Beyond the normal Baltimore childhoods reported in their books, what were the chief metropolitan influences that provided the climate for the Victorian Baltimore of Lizette Reese and H. L. Mencken? First, there was Baltimore's demographic composition, especially its German citizenry. The city's population, around 425,000 in the late nineteenth century, embraced a large German community, estimated at one-quarter the total census (Stenerson 3; also see Hirschfeld 23-24).⁵ This large

subculture made for a strong unity and stability. One good indication of its strength is the fact that by the turn of the century, Baltimore had seven English-German public schools, five German Catholic parochial schools, and a few independent German schools; moreover, the city harbored numerous German building and loan associations, churches, newspapers, and social organizations.⁶ Another fact of demographic importance is that the neighborhood pattern of rowhouses and the close living it necessitated produced a further sense of community characterized by a high regard for privacy and individualism. Lizette Reese's Waverly, itself originally a German settlement, was likewise not a community of large estates; cottages were in close proximity and neighbors knew one another well. Neighborhood gathering places noted by Reese and Mencken – especially churches and saloons – further provided a communal identity. Finally, the stability of Waverly and west Baltimore – with families remaining in the same houses for generations – is significant in the forging of Victorian Baltimore's domestic values. Home ownership, not rentals, was a chief reason for this stability. As we have seen, both Reese and Mencken talk lovingly of their neighborhoods and the values that radiate from them.⁷ Both Baltimoreans of strong German backgrounds, they carried into their lives and writings the incontestable certainty of those values.

A second local influence on the two authors was Baltimore's commercial tradition. Between 1870 and 1900, the city's port and railroads made it a center for banking, insurance, law, and business in general. During those years it was not an industrial city, but instead was characterized by small business such as the Menckens' cigar firm. Outside the city limits the economy was agricultural, using, among other routes, the long York Road to link the farms to the ports. And the bustling Bremen Line, connecting Baltimore with the European continent, so quickened its commercial life that the city became known as "the Gateway to the South, the Liverpool of America." Baltimore's small businesses and Waverly's small farms produced a commercial climate that valued hard work, individual effort, private enterprise, and competition on a human rather than on a corporate scale. Both Reese and Mencken write of the values of small-scale enterprises that marked the Baltimore of their youths and bemoan the devastation that modern industry has wrought. Likewise, each praises the sense of personal responsibility and individualism that the old Baltimore promoted.



1524 Hollins Street, Mencken's home for sixty-eight years, is the typically Baltimorean rowhouse down to its white marble steps. "The charm of getting home," said Mencken, "is the charm of getting back to what is inextricably my own – to things familiar and long loved, to things that belong to me alone and none other. I believe that this feeling for the hearth is stronger in Baltimore, that it has better survived there than in any other large city of America – and that its persistence accounts for the superior charm of the town." (*Baltimore Evening Sun*, 11 May 1931). Photograph reproduced by permission of the Maryland Historical Society.

A third influence was Baltimore's Southern character. After the Civil War a great rush of migration from the South brought thousands of new families to Baltimore (Owens 302). Displaced by the frustration of reestablishing their essentially agrarian culture, Southern professionals, businessmen, and workers gave a definitely Southern cast to the city. Their preference for home life, their Democratic politics, their distaste for industry, and their leisurely pace all reinforced Baltimore's own native style.

In all these ways Reese and Mencken remain Baltimorean from first to last.

Vastly different as their careers and characters were, Lizette Reese and H. L. Mencken reveal the luxury of living in Victorian Baltimore. Never outgrowing its influence in terms of their basic values, they are remarkable in that their attitudes never really changed. Her Currier-and-Ives manner counterpoints his Brueghel technique, but as each wrote reminiscences during dark days of the present century – she during the Depression, he during World War Two – they together recreate a fantasy world that really was. The sentimental poet herself recognized their common bond when she responded to the satiric critic’s praise of her. Mencken had called Reese “one of the glories of American letters and the most distinguished woman who has ever lived in this town.” When told of this paean and asked what she in turn thought of “The Bad Boy of Baltimore,” “Lady Baltimore” replied, “We are both Victorians.”⁸

NOTES

¹ In 1888, Waverly became part of Baltimore City.

² Passim in Reese, *Victorian* and Reese *York Road*. The appeal the house held for Reese is perhaps best illustrated in the following passage from *York Road* 47-48: “When your gate clanged behind you, and your foot touched ancestral gravel, your democratic warmth began to cool a little. The aristocracy of possessions demanded upon you. It was good to remember a bedstead.”

³ Such blasts echo through many of Mencken’s letters. *Evening Sun* columns. *The American Language*, *Prejudices*, *The Smart Set*, and *The American Mercury*. For his view of Maryland in general, see Mencken’s article. “Maryland: Apex of Normalcy.”

⁴ Passim in Mencken. *Happy Days* and Mencken *Heathen Days*. See especially the chapter, “The Baltimore of the Eighties” in *Happy Days* 54-73. Mencken also offers good local accounts of his schooling at Knapp’s Institute in *Happy Days* 19-38, and at the Baltimore Polytechnic in *Heathen Days* 37-56.

⁵ Hirschfeld notes that in 1880, the year of Mencken’s birth, the German-born constituted 62.6% of all immigrants; in 1900 they were still a remarkable 48.4% of the total. In Baltimore the foreign-born population was 21.1% of the total in 1870. 13.5% in 1900.

⁶ Cunz describes the German-American influence in Baltimore between 1865 and 1900 in *The Maryland Germans*: 319-94. Note also Mencken’s own review of I. A. R. Wylie’s *The Germans* in *The Smart Set*, March 1912, 112, in which he sums up the qualities of the Germans in defining the word *Gemutlichkeit* as, “in the first place comfort, ease, peace, divertissement, good eating, good drinking, a warm fire, an untroubled mind, but it also means politeness, urbanity, hospitality, friendliness, toleration, general good humor.” These are some of the same qualities that Mencken frequently ascribes to Baltimore.

As to the German schooling in the city. it is interesting to observe that Lizette Reese taught for twenty-one years at the No. 3 English-German School on East Baltimore Street near Aisquith, and Mencken attended Knapp’s Institute on Holliday Street, a school enrolling predominantly German-American pupils.

⁷ Though she moved from Waverly in 1865, Reese lived for a long period at 2926 Harford Road in Baltimore City. And for all but eight years of his life, Mencken lived at 1524 Hollins Street.

⁸ This exchange is reported in the Baltimore *Evening Sun*, 9 Jan. 1956. Mencken’s praise is high when one recalls his terming poetry “chiefly a function of intellectual immaturity” (*A Mencken Chrestomathy* 431), and his confessing in *Happy Days* to a “lifelong distrust of poetry” (161).

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