

Reflections on *Early Candlelight* by Maude Hart Lovelace

Written by Eileen Larkin Wilkin

Early Candlelight is one of my favorite novels, one I've read three times and will read again. While doing background research for this reflection, however, I let myself get caught up in looking at online reviews of the book and was surprised to see negative ones. Some critics were unhappy with certain characters. Others didn't care for the "flowery prose." One said she wouldn't reread it because she found it "rather sad." A few didn't like the cringe-worthy terminology that in today's world would be considered racist and sexist. Some were disappointed in the ending. I had to ask myself why it's one of my favorites. Should it be?

Armed with a more critical approach, I went back to the "work" of rereading it. Yes, the characters are flawed, but that's what makes them believable. The beautifully descriptive prose may test the patience of some in our modern culture of Twitter and Instagram, but I happen to love it. Of course, the story is sad, but it is also romantic and even funny, and it is historical fiction, after all. Racist and sexist? Through the modern lens, perhaps, but I don't remember seeing any shockingly offensive words. The characters spoke as they would have back then, and to whitewash the language would give an untrue depiction of history. A disappointing ending? Really? Maybe they read the wrong book.

I finished rereading it, and had to admit the truth: I do love it, it is still one of my favorites, and its detractors don't.

Maude Hart Lovelace (1892 – 1980) grew up in Mankato, Minnesota. Best known for her popular Betsy-Tacy series, based very closely on her own life, she also wrote six historical novels, two of them with her husband Delos, as well as short stories and poetry. For her writing of *Early Candlelight*, the Lovelaces spent a full winter in St. Paul so that Maud could visit the History Center daily to learn as much as possible about the time period of this novel. She studied diaries and journals, early maps, even the clothing styles. She travelled with her family up to the Minnesota River valley, visiting old fur posts and other historical sites along the way.

The setting for *Early Candlelight* is at the confluence of two rivers, the Mississippi and the Minnesota, and the people in the story are a confluence of different cultures. The territory had long been home to the Dakota Indians, but by the 1830s, when this story takes place, Fort Snelling already stands sentry from high above the water and is home to officers and their families. Voyageurs travel the rivers. They, too, have settled their families alongside fellow Canadians and other squatters below the fort. Traders have set up fur posts. Also, the Chippewa, Menominee, and Winnebago tribes all visit the fort as well.

From the very first paragraph, the beautiful prose Lovelace used for the descriptions of scenery, the character development, and the weaving of the story, drew me in so powerfully that it stayed with me even when I wasn't reading, and also after I finished the book. The time, the place, and the people – the real historical ones as well as the fictional – are indeed brought to life. There is this description of early winter's effect on the people:

Until the new year [winter] held a willing captive. The first falling snow, the first covering of the naked hillsides with feathery white, the first glassing over of the waters, these had been pleasant. The children of the garrison floundered joyfully upon new skates. The children of the settlement screamed down the slopes on barrel staves. Moreover, the ladies and gentlemen of the command glided forth in tinkling, fur-laden sleighs to the mill at the Falls of St. Anthony, where a sergeant served hot little suppers and one returned beneath a spangled sky. (p. 46)

Then we see the effects of winter's lingering:

However, with January – the hard moon, the Indians called it – winter grew less charming. Snow and ice and bitter cold held the fort in a relentless barricade. Mountains of wood were chopped, to vanish in hungry fireplaces. Hunting was impossible; rations grew monotonous. Officers drank too heavily, gambled, called one another atheists and seducers, and quarrelled with their wives. Soldiers were flogged until their bare backs bled. They threw their moldy black bread on the parade ground in attempted mutiny. They drank forbidden liquor, and were frozen to death in snowdrifts, or drunkenly invaded the Indian huts... (pp. 47-48)

In some ways, the story unfolds like the winter. The harmony among different cultures living side-by-side is at times as lovely, fresh, and pleasant as the early days of the season, despite the cold. However, as the harsh conditions persist, stretch too long, become too wearying, forbearance gives way to anger, frustration, bitterness, and sometimes cruelty.

Again, why do I love the story, returning to read it again and again, when there is so much sadness in it? Because there is so much else, too.

There is the portrait of strong family life demonstrated through the DuGays, French Canadian squatters whose patriarch, Denis, had been a voyageur, and whose three eldest sons were already following in his footsteps when the novel opens. The DuGays share a deep familial bond, despite the most aged three being “of somewhat obscure maternity.” In them, we see love, the joy of being together, the strength in staying together and helping one another through the many difficulties they face. From them flows generous hospitality that makes everyone – army officers, Native Americans, fur traders, fellow squatters and voyageurs – feel genuinely welcomed by them. The DuGays' love of home is evident even when Jasper Page finds their house empty after they've been forced to move:

. . . the neat log bunks, the fireplace which the boys had built of large round stones, lugged one by one up from the river. The room had been lovingly swept. It contained none of that litter commonly left behind when a house is deserted. The sunlight streamed across it as though trying to fill it again with the presence of the light-hearted DuGays.” (p. 140)

Forced to rebuild further from the life of the fort, we read of the DuGays amid another winter:

But with the latch dropped and the fire roaring, the father puffing at his pipe and the boys, crowded toward the lighted hearth, playing at checkers or one of the many games their solitude devised, or, as often happened, the whole family singing through their repertoire of ballads, the DuGays were not lonely. (p. 171)

The reader may feel that the family's love for one another is blind at times, especially in their dealings with Narcisse. This love is true to life. The question of how to best love someone who makes poor choices that affect others, sometimes tragically, is genuine. The question of whether we can or should do anything to help someone close to us, to bring about change, is also real.

In Dee DuGay, the only daughter among ten sons, and the oldest after her three half-brothers, we have a heroine we can admire. She is unpretentious, tender and compassionate, devoted to her parents and brothers, a real help to her mother, and wise beyond her years. None of this means she is above having emotions and heartaches, so we are drawn into her story and into wanting everything to turn out well especially for her.

Jasper Page, called Walking Wind by the Indians, is a hero we can admire in many ways, also, although I suspect readers will vary in their opinions of him. We meet him first at the age of twenty-three when he arrives to set up a trading post at the confluence. "And shortly – within the year, that is – Jasper Page was all things to all men at the Entry of the St. Peters." (p.8) From a well-to-do family, he is smart, well-educated, handsome, strong, and has an appealing personality. Years later he is still much favored and liked.

Travelers did not now enter the Indian country without paying their respects to M'sieu Page. Explorers . . . foreigners . . . all bore letters and accepted his abundant hospitality. The missionaries . . . the rich and the poor, the worthy and the unworthy, found M'sieu Page's latch-string out. And still the Indians climbed to his attic [to sleep] and called Walking Wind their friend. (p.134)

As in any good story, the many characters are diverse, believable, and immersed in a great melting pot with too many lumps. While the different groups manage to live amongst each other, there are character flaws and cultural differences that push things to the boiling point.

There are, too, the class distinctions that humanity never seems fully able to escape. Although Dee is not facing a life sentence behind the bars of a governess' life in England, she, like Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, struggles with similar heartache because of her low status even in so small a society as that around the fort. Like Jane Eyre, Dee knows her worth. She sees deeply into others, with a perception of the inner workings of their hearts and character that to her are the more genuine indication of a person's merit.

You don't have to be a Minnesotan to enjoy *Early Candlelight*, as one critic suggested, although the fact that it all takes place in my backyard adds extra enjoyment. I grew up in Minnesota, and now live just south of St. Paul (called Pig's Eye by the early settlers), a relatively easy bike ride to Mendota (M'dota back then - "the Meeting of the Waters"). I've visited Fort Snelling, attended Mass in historic St. Peter's church, spent time on and

near the Mississippi River, and frequently cross both that and the Minnesota River in my car.

Like the confluence of those two rivers, the confluence of the several cultures makes for an engaging story - tragic, romantic, sometimes funny, and deeply satisfying. Never mind the critics – we WRM members understand the value of a great book. Enjoy!

Eileen Larkin Wilkin writes from Mendota Heights, MN, where she homeschools the youngest of her five children, the rest having “graduated” after sixth grade. Although she holds a master’s degree in piano performance and pedagogy from the University of Oklahoma, loves music, and spent years teaching piano, she finally realized that writing is her true love, and hopes to make a career of it.