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The Brief Career of Eliza Poe

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The Brief Career of Eliza Poe. By Geddith Smith. (Granbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988. Pp. 174. \$26.50.)

Few readers today would associate Edgar Allan Poe, the creator of the modern short story, with having any connection to the state of Maine. Poe was born in Boston, and this was the nearest he ever came to Maine. His connection derives through his mother, an actress, who had a short theatrical season in Portland. There is another closer connection that I will mention later in this review.

Geddith Smith's biography of Eliza Poe deals with her theatrical career, unfortunately as brief as her tragic life. The author has scrupulously searched the meager sources afforded the researcher and recorded much new information concerning the early development of the American theater during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Eliza was a daughter of Elizabeth Arnold, an English actress of considerable talent, who played in London at Covent Garden. In 1796, she and Eliza came to Boston, where shortly she established herself as a popular actress at the Federal Street theater. At this time, there was no native-born talent — all English imports. The Calvinistic clergy denounced the theater as immoral. Most of the plays presented were English comedies or farces, other than those by Shakespeare or Sheridan. Mrs. Arnold introduced Eliza into the theatrical world at the age of nine; the pair made their Maine debut at Portland in late November through January of 1796. Beginning with small parts singing and dancing at the Assembly Hall there, Eliza gradually assumed more important roles, but her career closed with her untimely death in 1811. She married first at age fifteen, but second married David Poe, the father of the famed writer and poet. Edgar Allan Poe was born in January 1809.

During Eliza's brief career, she participated in some 300 roles, becoming well-known in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Richmond, and Charleston. This biography provides

useful insights into the origins and development of the American theater. The author's sensitivity to his subject is strengthened by his own acting background. A graduate of the University of South Carolina, he has worked for over twenty-five years in the professional theater, appearing on Broadway, off-Broadway, and on national television.

The second Poe association with Maine came in the mid-nineteenth century following the poet's death in 1849. Poe's literary executor was Rufus Wilmont Griswold (1815-1857), a prominent critic, who obtained Poe's manuscripts, letters, and copies of his writings. In 1853 Griswold met Harriet McCrillis of Bangor. After a whirlwind courtship, they were married; only then did Harriet learn that her husband already had an estranged wife. She sued for divorce, but Griswold died suddenly in 1857.

After her husband's death, Harriet inherited the Poe manuscripts and took them to Bangor, where she resided with her wealthy brother, William McCrillis, a lawyer and extensive timberland holder. In 1902, Mrs. Griswold presented a portion of Poe's manuscripts to the Boston Public Library; others were retained by her son, William McCrillis Griswold. Who would suspect that at one time the bulk of Poe's manuscripts would be found in Bangor?

James B. Vickery
Bangor

Kenneth Roberts: The Man and His Works. By Jack Bales.
(Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1989. Pp. xxi + 312.
\$37.50.)

This is not a biography of Kenneth Roberts, as one might suppose from the subtitle, but 85th of the reputable Scarecrow Author Bibliographies. Others in that series this reviewer is familiar with have sub-titles immune from misinterpretation: for No. 20 on Norman Mailer, *A Comprehensive Bibliography*; and for No. 37, on E. B. White, simply *A Bibliography*. The