

# A Measure of Light illuminates a woman's struggle in 1600s New World

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Published July 5, 2015 - 5:33pm

Last Updated July 5, 2015 - 6:10pm



New Brunswick author Beth Powning's latest book *A Measure of Light* tells the story about the complex inner life of Mary Dyer, and the rigid view of society in the 1600s.

Mary Dyer has come down through almost 400 years of history with two signifiers. She left her children to become a Quaker and she was the "mother of a monster."

"I wanted to save her from that and put her back in the historical record and say this is unfair," says New England-born writer Beth Powning.

She rescues Dyer from her bleak history in a compelling, gorgeously written novel, *A Measure of Light* (Knopf Canada, \$29.95), in which she illuminates Dyer's complex inner life, the rigid societies of 1600s America and England and the glorious natural world of the New World.

Powning discovered Dyer when she was researching the Quakers for a different project. "I read that the Puritans in Boston hanged a Quaker woman in 1660 and I was absolutely horrified. I grew up as a Quaker and I never heard of her.

"When I started dipping into it, I was absolutely fascinated," she says in a phone interview from her New Brunswick home. "It's all true and it's all there and it's all so little known."

Dyer was a "sidekick" to better-known New England religious figure Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643), banished as a heretic from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for questioning the theology, rigid leadership and misogyny of the Puritan leaders.

The novel takes Dyer as a happy newlywed from England to the Boston area with her husband, a merchant. She attends Hutchinson's weekly meetings for women and joins her in protest. When she has a stillborn child, she is castigated publicly as a heretic and "the mother of a monster."

In *A Measure of Light*, she and her husband settle in Narragansett Bay but Dyer remains unhappy spiritually and emotionally disconnected from her children and her husband. She finds inner peace when she meets Quaker leader George Fox in England, returning home as a Quaker and flouting the Puritan rule banning Quakers from Boston. She returns to Boston even knowing it meant certain death.

"Was she mad? Perhaps she was," says Powning. "The Mary Dyer I made up in *A Measure of Light* is not mad. I wanted to understand her as a woman and it's a psychological profile."

Readers, she admits, might be repelled by this complex character. "The first thing you think is she left her family. The thing I find real interesting is you're more likely to be shocked by that because she's a woman. Mr. March in *Little Women* leaves his family to participate in the Civil War.

"I think there are readers who'll be angry with Mary and I challenge them to think very carefully about Mary."

The time period was very different from ours. "It was quite common for people to farm out their children and to be taught you should love your children too much. That was a Puritan thing. You were putting the Creation beyond the Creator."

Powning documented her own experience with stillbirth in *Shadow Child*, a 1999 bestseller that still elicits grateful letters from readers who've had a similar experience. "The stillbirth and all the circumstances around it are all true and that is such a tragic story," says Powning, who is sure Dyer must have suffered from postpartum depression.

In her extensive research, she waded through original 17th-century texts, visited the Plimoth Plantation living history museum and read "the best biography of Mary Dyer that exists," an unpublished book generously given to her by its author, Johan Winsser.

"I want to make that leap from the dryness of history. I want to make the story come alive, not only the worlds of the characters but but a visceral rendition of time and place."

Fans of Powning know she is excellent at describing nature as part of the rhythm of daily life. Goose Lane recently released *Home: Chronicle of a North Country Life*, her 1996 classic based on life at her New Brunswick farmhouse and illustrated by her own exquisite nature photographs. (This seminal book, originally published in Canada as *Seeds of Another Summer* and as *Home* in the U.S., is where she found her voice as a writer.)

When writing a scene, whether it's set in the 1600s or the 1900s, Powning says "the first thing I think is what is the weather, what is the room, what does it smell like?"

"If I see a scene and it's spring, I will have red-winged blackbirds. That is so deeply ingrained in me I'm not aware of it. Nature will always be in everything I write. I grew up in the woods. I grew up surrounded by dairy farms."

The natural world in the 1600s was so rich, she says. "It just broke my heart. I read a description of the world in the 1600s and the abundance of nature. The sky would turn black with birds and ducks and geese flying over. When they described the harvest of fish and the animals in the forest that they would hunt, every description was heartbreaking when I think of the world we've lost."

At her own farm near Sussex over the last 40 years, she has noticed the loss of wildlife. "We now have five red-winged blackbirds outside the window and 50 years ago we'd have 150, maybe 300."

The time in *A Measure of Light* "is a time when all of this started, this blunder."

Powning won't write again about this time period. "I only have so much time in my life and there is so much I want to learn. I had people very angry because I wouldn't write a sequel to *The Sea Captain's Wife* and I thought, no, I'd have to spend four years."

More interested in the past than ever, she plans to research the period of 1890 to 1905 in New Brunswick. "My mother's family came from St. Stephen and it's something I want to explore. I'll see where it takes me."

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