

Homage to Heyward

Islander offers his perspective of one of the Lowcountry's legends

Thanks to Richard H. "Dick" Ellis of Sea Pines for sharing a different glimpse at a Lowcountry writer best known for the opera "Porgy and Bess."

Dick draws our attention to Charleston poet and novelist Dubose Heyward because he is a kinsman. As president of The Heyward Foundation, Dick helps tie the binds of one of South Carolina's oldest families with many footprints in our community. Thomas Heyward, signer of the Declaration of Independence, is buried nearby in Jasper County, where a school bears his name. Bluffton's Tommy Heyward and Heyward House Historic Center in Bluffton are part of the Heyward heritage.



Dick writes:

"Until very recently, Dubose Heyward, 1885-1940, was known as the collaborator in the 'Porgy and Bess' opera that gave so many extremely talented African-American actors and singers their very well-deserved introduction to the American stage.

"Actually, his literary prowess ranged from short stories and superb poetry to the heights of Broadway plays. His deep Southern roots gave him rare perspective into both black and white cultures, and he portrayed a mingling of the two with the dignity and respect they deserved.

"Heyward never strayed from the South he loved so much, and his poetry and novels portrayed that devotion throughout his short but noted career. I urge you to rediscover Dubose Heyward through his works offered at most any library."

Dick shared with us a several first editions: "Jasbro Brown and Selected Poems" by Dubose Heyward (1924), "Carolina Chansons: Legends of the Lowcountry" by Dubose Heyward and fellow member of the South Carolina Poetry Society Hervey Allen (1922), and "Brown Jackets" by Heyward's mother, Jane Screven Heyward, published by The State Co. in Columbia in 1923.



South Carolina Historical Society/ photos special to The Packet

Dubose Heyward, center, with Ira Gershwin, left, and George Gershwin. George Gershwin wrote the music to "Porgy and Bess," with libretto by Heyward and lyrics by Heyward and Ira Gershwin.

Heyward was a sickly child whose father died when he was a toddler. His mother helped preserve the Gullah dialect in word and performance, which would then become one of her son's legacies. Heyward left his gentlemanly job in insurance to be a full-time writer after marrying playwright Dorothy Kuhns. It was Dorothy who suggested her husband's novel "Porgy" could be a play, and she wrote its

rough draft. Together, they made it a successful play, which piqued the interest of composer George Gershwin. George and Ira Gershwin used Heyward's lyrics to make Charleston's Catfish Row a household name. The story is best told in the James M. Hutchisson biography, "Dubose Heyward: A Charleston Gentleman and the World of Porgy and Bess."

Below are three Heyward poems about

the Lowcountry from the book "Carolina Chansons." One bit of background: Poet Edgar Allen Poe spent a year on Sullivan's Island near Charleston while in the service. He was stationed at Fort Moultrie. Sea Foam appears Mondays. Share ideas by fax at 706-3070, or by e-mail at dlauderdale@islandpacket.com. All items and photographs published in Sea Foam become the property of The Island Packet.

Heyward's poetry . . .

Dusk

They tell me she is beautiful, my City,
That she is colorful and quaint, alone
Among the cities. But I, I who have known
Her tenderness, her courage, and her pity,
Have felt her forces mould me, mind and bone,
Life after life, up from her first beginning.
How can I think of her in wood and stone!
To others she has given of her beauty,
her gardens, and her dim, old, faded ways,
Her laughter, and her happy, drifting hours,
Glad, spendthrift April, squandering her flowers,
The sharp, still wonder of her Autumn days;
Her chimes that shimmer from St. Michael's steeple
Across the deep maturity of June,
Like sunlight slanting over open water
Under a high, blue, listless afternoon.
But when the dusk is deep upon the harbor,
She finds me where her rivers meet and speak,
And while the constellations ride the silence
High overhead, her cheek is on my cheek.
I know her in the thrill behind the dark
When sleep brims all her silent thoroughfares.
She is the glamour in the quiet park
That kindles simple things like grass and trees.
Wistful and wanton as her sea-born airs,
Bringer of dim, rich, age-old memories.
Out of the gloom-deep water, when the nights
Are choked with fog, and perilous, and blind,
She is the faith that tends the calling lights.
Hers is the stifled voice of harbor bells
Muffled and broken by the mist and wind.
Hers are the eyes through which I took on life
And find it brave and splendid. And the stir
Of hidden music shaping all my songs,
And these my songs, my all, belong to her.

Edgar Allen Poe

Once in the starlight
When the tides were low,
And the surf fell sobbing
To the undertow,
I trod the windless dunes
Alone with Edgar Poe.

Dim and far behind us,
Like a fabled bloom
On the myrtle thickets,
In the swaying gloom
Hung the clustered windows
Of the barrack-room.

Faint on the evening
Tenuous and far
As the beauty shaken
From a vagrant star,
Throbbled the ache and passion
Of an old guitar.

Life closed behind us
Like a swinging gate,
Leaving us unfettered
And emancipated;
Confidants of Destiny,
Intimates of Fate.

I could only cower,
Silent, while the night,
Seething with its planets,
Parted to our sight,
Showing us infinity
In its breadth and height.

But my chosen comrade,
Tossing back his hair
With the old loved gesture,
Raised his face, and there
Shone the agony that those
Loved of God must bear.

Oh, we heard the many things
Silence has to say;
He and I together
As alone we lay
Waiting for the slow, sweet
Miracle of day.

When the bugle's silver
Spiraled up the dawn,
Dew-clear; night-cool,
And the stars were gone,
I arose exultant,
Like a man new born.

But my friend and master,
Heavy-limbed and spent,
Turned, as one must turn at last
From the sacrament;
And his eyes were deep with God's
Burning discontent.

Landbound

Bring me one breath from the deep salt sea,
Ye vagrant upland airs!
Over your forest and field and lea,
From the windy deeps that have mothered me,
To the heart of one who cares.

Clear to the peace of the sunlit park,
You bring with your evening lull
The vesper song of the meadow lark;
But my soul is sick for the seething dark,
And the scream of a wind-blown gull.

And bring to me from the ocean's breast
No crooning lullaby;
but the shout of a bleak storm-riven crest
As it shoulders up in the sodden West
And hurtles down the sky.

That, breathing deep, I may feel the sweep
Of the wind and the driving rain.
For so I know that my heart will leap
To meet the call of the strident deep,
And will thrill to life again.

