

Out of the Window

Article by Lee Granville

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During the summer season of 2005, I had a chance to look through boxes of old documents that had been compiled by History House founder, Louise Helen Coburn, and stored for more than a half-century in an upstairs closet.

Within these papers I came across a short poem written by Miss Coburn, a page from an original manuscript. The poem tells the poignant story of a lonely old lady whose main contact with the world comes from observation of life on the sidewalk, outside her window.

As I read, I came to realize the story was that of Abby Tilton, the last resident of History House, who passed away in 1908 at the age of 86. She and her sister, Sarah, came to live there as young girls in the 1860's, living with their widowed father until his death and continuing to reside there as spinsters for the balance of their lives.

Louise Helen Coburn lived directly across the intersection of Elm & Pleasant Streets from the Tilton home. After the Tilton sisters passed away, the house was vacant for many years until Miss Coburn purchased it in 1936 and restored it to create a museum she named Skowhegan History House.

Out Of The Window

By Louise Helen Coburn

*She sat at her window and looked out;
The room was low and shadowy
But in the garden shone red and white roses,
And warblers nested in the honeysuckle bush,
And hummingbirds hung on the lips of the columbines-
She saw them from her window.*

*Life flowed up and down the sidewalk,
Young life, decrepit life, somber life, merry life, sweet life, twisted and broken life;
No life was indifferent to her,
No humanity was alien to her
As she looked out her window.*

*Hers has been a narrow life and gray;
Sorrow had supped with her;
Travel and art, the zests of the great world she had not known;
The whisper of love had missed her ear;
But she looked out of the narrow room
Through her window.*

*The crises of other's lives were the events of hers,
Coming life, meeting life, passing life,
She had a smile and a tear for each,
And a biting word and a laugh
From her window.*



*She was avid of the details of life,
Slight or sordid, secret or shameful,
What he paid for his horse or she her curtains,
Whether he was near or she was shrewish,
When they quarreled and made up and which gave in;
These were her literature and drama and moving pictures, - - -
Wagging a keen tongue, but with kind eyes,
She looked out of her window.*

*Black eyes with a spark in them,
Lean cheeks and a pointed chin,
Black hair with a wave and a streak of Silver,
A lace cap and a knitted collar,
She sat at her window day by day,
A window un wired (she hated strained air)- -
And watched the passers, friend and stranger, dwelling in a peopled world.*

*A large world became a human one with all of life in it, full of laughter and tears, full of desire and disappointment and always interesting and always wonderful to her,
As she looked out her window.*

*She sits no more at her window;
The roses in her garden are untended;
Life still swings along the street,
But the watcher is not at the window.
There are days when some of us
Remember how with kind eyes
She looked at us through her window.*

The line that first tipped me to the fact that the subject of the poem was Abby Tilton was this: “the window unwired (she hated strained air).” There is a humorous anecdote attributed to Miss Tilton by Louise Coburn in *Skowhegan on the Kennebec*.

When metal window screening became available to Skowhegan homeowners in the late 1800’s, Sarah Tilton had a screen made for her bedroom window. She was so pleased with the results she urged her sister Abby to do the same for her side of the house. Abby replied indignantly. “Nonsense Sarah, I ain’t breathin’ none of that strained air!”

