



Edgar Lee Masters: A Biography

Herbert K. Russell

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This is the first book-length biography of Edgar Lee Masters, author of the celebrated "Spoon River Anthology", one of the most widely read and discussed volumes of poetry ever written in America. Like Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, and the other "prairie poets," Masters (1868-1950) left his small midwestern hometown for Chicago in the hope of becoming a successful writer. He was a family man and a partner in Clarence Darrow's Chicago law firm - writing on the side - when, at the age of forty-six, his boyhood dream of literary success suddenly came true. His "Spoon River Anthology", a series of monologues spoken by the dead in a midwestern cemetery, became a literary sensation overnight. Castigated by some critics for its "shredded prose" and offensive subject matter, "Spoon River Anthology" was hailed by others as a watershed in American poetry: a direct, unsentimental, realistic treatment of the blood, grit, and pathos of life in middle America. It was Masters's only lasting success. Herbert K. Russell, acknowledged as the foremost authority on Masters, brilliantly conveys the internal contradictions that drove Masters throughout his life and kept the happiness, love, security, and success he dreamed of always out of reach. Masters was one of America's most prolific authors, publishing fifty-three books during his lifetime; yet only one of his works afforded him lasting recognition. He was a successful Chicago lawyer yet he detested the practice of law and always regarded it as an obstacle to his writing. He married twice but constantly pursued other women, seeking an elusive combination of intellectual compatibility, sexual fireworks, and uncritical admiration. After "Spoon River Anthology", Masters too often shunned the terse, compact style of the poems that helped revolutionize American poetry, displaying throughout his career an inability to distinguish between trash and treasure in his own work. The first scholar to be allowed to read and quote from all of Masters's diaries, his correspondence, and the unpublished chapters of his 1936 autobiography "Across Spoon River", Russell crafts a nuanced account of the poet's tempestuous relationships, impetuous business decisions, and artistic struggles. The narrative skillfully tempers Masters's own version of events with information left by his two wives, his children, his lovers, and contemporaries such as Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, Harriet Monroe, William Jennings Bryan, and Clarence Darrow. Rich in detail and unprecedented in depth, "Edgar Lee Masters" is an insightful and compassionate portrait of a man who changed the course of American poetry yet was tragically unable to chart his own course for personal fulfillment and artistic success.

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