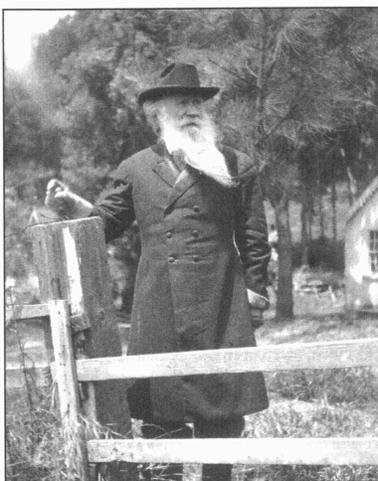


## **La Miglior Fabbra: Ina Coolbrith and the Provenance of Bay Area Literature**

On April 29, 1893, Ina Coolbrith, poet, writer, librarian, and doyenne of San Francisco's literary scene, traveled to the southeastern section of Oakland — to Fruitvale, an area celebrated for its cherry and apricot orchards. There she met David Lesser Lezinsky, a young poet with a passion for sociology and psychology, and Edmund Russell, a portrait painter — of fashionable society women — who preferred to wear silk robes and heeled shoes.

They met to ascend the Oakland hills to visit the home of Joaquin Miller. Recognizing Russell's being unable to walk through the countryside in what his companions characterized as “kids pumps,” Lezinsky rented a small horse and cart — and a small young driver — to transport Ina and Russell — slowly up the hill. Lezinsky and a reporter for the Stockton Evening Mail made their way on the well-trodden path to “The Hights,” Joaquin's Miller's compound, nestled in the hills. The compound featured four whitewashed structures: one for dining, another for work and sleep, and another — for his mother. Miller reserved the fourth — and largest — structure for the gardener and to support his work tending to the landscape and especially the terraces of roses.



Joaquin Miller at The Hights. Courtesy The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

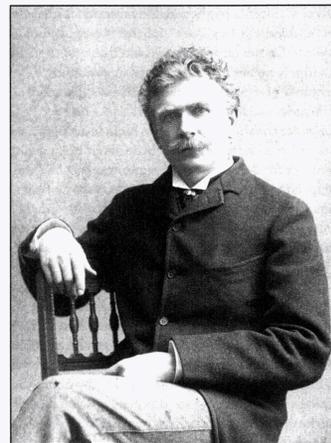
Miller drew numerous visitors to the “Hights” — each eager to catch a glimpse of this tall man who fashioned his appearance in a manner causing him to look like Walt Whitman on steroids — but with little of the poetic muscularity of America's “Good Grey Poet.” Joaquin Miller was one of the most famous and readily recognized poets of the West in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but few admirers at that time knew that Ina Coolbrith had prompted

Miller to change his name — from “Cincinnatus Hiner Miller.”

Miller was born c. 1839 in Millersville, Indiana, a town he claimed his father had founded while on a wagon train heading west, where his family settled in Oregon’s Willamette Valley.<sup>1</sup> Miller held as many jobs as enabled him to keep moving: mining-camp cook, lawyer, judge, newspaper writer, Pony Express rider. Writing poetry remained his life-blood, and he became perhaps the most flamboyant personality of late-19<sup>th</sup> century American literature. In some respects, his appearance earned him as much fame as his verse. He was the rugged man from Oregon with "long blond hair flowing from beneath a wide-brimmed hat."

Miller drifted in and out of Coolbrith’s life for decades, and during one sojourn in 1870, Ina asked him, “How do you expect to climb Parnassus and be crowned among gods with such a name as Cincinnatus Hiner Miller?” Miller observed: “It’s my name, what can I do?” Ina suggested he take the name “Joaquin”; “It will identify you with your first little song venture and be sure to attract attention.” “By Jove,” he said enthusiastically, “I’ll do it.”

He would return two years later as Joaquin Miller, the rugged man from Oregon, long-haired and sombrero-clad. In many respects, the identity Miller assumed earned him as much fame as his verse. Ambrose Bierce, a prominent writer and critic as well as a friend of with both Miller and Coolbrith, summarized Miller in these terms: “He cannot, or will not, tell the truth, but he never tells a malicious or thrifty falsehood.”



Ambrose Bierce. Courtesy The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Joaquin Miller served his guests roasted geese and claret during their visit to the Hights. Lezinsky recited Miller’s essay on Westminster Abbey, which the group then analyzed, and Miller

---

<sup>1</sup> Miller later changed his birthdate to November 10, 1841, for reasons yet to be determined.

recounted tales of his London adventures. He then led them on a tour of his estate and its structures, and when one guest observed the lack of books in his rooms, Miller bellowed: “To hell with books. When I want books, I write them.”

On the walk down from Miller’s picturesque Hights, Ina Coolbrith likely took special pleasure in viewing fields filled with wild flowers, including the California poppy. She chose to speak of it in Spanish: “la copa de oro,” the cup of gold, and a few weeks later, Coolbrith published “La Copa de Oro” in the San Francisco Bulletin:



**William Keith, *With a Wreath of Laurel*, 1900-1911\***

Thy satin vesture richer is than looms  
Of Orient weave for raiment of her kings.  
Not dyes of old Tyre, not precious things  
Regathered from the long forgotten tombs  
Of buried empires, not the iris plumes  
That wave upon the tropic's myriad wings,  
Not all proud Sheba's queenly offerings,  
Could match the golden marvel of thy blooms.  
For thou art nurtured from the treasure veins  
Of this fair land; thy golden rootlets sup  
Her sands of gold - of gold thy petals spun.  
Her golden glory, thou! on hills and plains  
Lifting, exultant, every kingly cup,  
Brimmed with the golden vintage of the sun.

A decade after Coolbrith wrote “La Coppa de Oro,” the California poppy would be named the state flower.<sup>2</sup> Years later, a broadside of this poem would be distributed to visitors to the California pavilion at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.<sup>3</sup>

At the World Congress of Representative Women, held at the outset of the Columbian Exposition, Coolbrith was characterized as “the best-known of California’s writers . . . who stands peerless at the head.” Ina had accepted an invitation to attend the Exposition during its final month to read a poem, “Isabella of Spain” — to commemorate unveiling a statue honoring the Queen’s having financed Columbus’ voyage to the New World.

While at the Columbian Exposition, Coolbrith found herself moved by the plight of the Native Americans on display at the Exposition. Her poem, “The Captive of the White City,” documents the changes in Coolbrith’s attitudes toward Native Americans — from her fears during her family’s journey on the Overland Trail to her sympathy for Native Americans as they were pushed to the margins of America’ collective consciousness at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Here’s the final stanza:

. . . And the throngs go up and down  
In the streets of the wonderful town;  
And jest of the merry tongue,  
And the dance, and the glad songs sung,  
Ring through the sunlit space.  
And there, in the wild, free breeze,  
In the House of the Unhewn Trees,  
In the beautiful Midway Place,  
The captive sits apart,

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1915, when Ina was named California’s first poet laureate during the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, botanist Luther Burbank told her he had created a hybrid poppy and named it ‘Crimson Eschscholzia Ina Coolbrith.’ She responded she couldn’t anticipate becoming a member of the such an eminent family when she wrote “Copa de Oro.”

<sup>3</sup> Slightly more than a century after that Exposition, Robert Hass, UC Berkeley professor of English and former U.S. Poet Laureate, chose these same lines to represent Ina Coolbrith among the engraved poetry tablets lining the sidewalk on Addison Street between Shattuck Avenue and Milvia Street in Berkeley.

Silent, and makes no sign,  
But what is the word in your heart,  
O man of a dying race?  
What tale on your lips for mine,  
O Rain in the Face.

When Coolbrith returned to the Bay Area, she had become a literary celebrity, admired across the nation and recognized as a counter example to challenge one prominent critic's assertion that "California is not a congenial soil for the placing of her children of genius."<sup>4</sup> She had encouraged and nurtured the aspirations and efforts of the most talented writers and painters who had gathered in San Francisco throughout the Post-Civil War decades.

Despite enduring numerous personal challenges and financial hardships, Ina Coolbrith never equivocated in her commitment to pursuing a life dedicated to writing. The qualities of her verse anticipate several of the hallmarks of imagism: a simple, unobtrusive presence encountering the world with intellectual and emotional distance — akin to what a photographer might capture in the natural world. So, too, there's a "still-life" quality to Coolbrith's verse as well as glimmers of the distanced perspective and ironic control of a poet such as Robert Frost, born in San Francisco in 1874, but who settled in rural New England to write about the actions of ordinary people in natural settings and their efforts to use metaphor to create "a momentary stay against confusion."

Yet Ina Coolbrith's "place" in American literary history might be likened more to that of Ezra Pound. Her verse provides glimmers of what would become imagist poetics, and more importantly Coolbrith, much like Pound, served as the nexus and the principal motivator and "architect" of a community of renowned writers and artists.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Ella Sterling Cummins, *The Story of the Files; A Review of Californian Writers and Literature, World's Fair Commission of California*: Columbian Exposition, 189.

Like Pound, Coolbrith encouraged and supported aspiring such writers and artists as Bret Harte, Jack London, George Sterling, Charles Warren Stoddard, as well as Charles Keeler, the author, poet and ornithologist; Edward Markham, the poet, among many others. She encouraged, edited, nurtured, and inspired decades-long friendships with writers and such celebrated painters as William Keith, naturalists as John Muir, along with the leaders of San Francisco’s business, social, and educational institutions.<sup>5</sup> Ina Coolbrith served an essential role — and a gravitational force in building and sustaining a community of writers and artists in the Bay Area — stretching from poetics to social and political activism.<sup>6</sup>

Much like Pound, Coolbrith’s poetry is grounded in the force of her engaging directly with the natural world — within the immediate range of her insight. Unlike Pound, she seeks to recognize what is “elegant” and enduring in the world around her. Yet, like Pound, she cultivates durable artistic relationships with writers and artists, finding intellectual and creative inspiration and sustenance in such relationships. Like Pound, Coolbrith not only built and sustained a community of writers but also worked diligently as “a better maker,” alert to the conditions necessary for literature and art to flourish.

Unlike Pound, Coolbrith’s recognition had taken decades to achieve, and against all odds.

#### Early Life: On the Road — to L.A.

If few today know Ina Coolbrith’s verse, even fewer know she played guitar, spoke Spanish, danced the fandango, loved white Angora cats — and especially her beloved Angora, “Popcorn.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Ina was asked in 1871 to write the commencement ode for the University of California. Her poem, “California,” was read to a small auditorium and a graduating class of five students. Five years later she would write another ode for the university, this time for a class of thirty graduates, including two women. The women of Dominican College in San Raphael turned “California” into an occasion of pageantry in 1916: they accompanied singing the words with music and dance in an oak shaded glade in the presence of Coolbrith, a pageant repeated at the college for many years thereafter. The poem concludes, “...the day darkened down the ocean rim, /The sunset purple slipped from Tamalpais, /And bay and sky were bright with sudden stars. . . .”

<sup>6</sup> For example, William Keith, John Muir, and a group of friends met in San Francisco in 1889 to advocate establishing Yosemite National Park. This group also encourage Muir to establish an association to protect the Sierra Nevada. In 1892, the [Sierra Club](#) was founded.

Ina Coolbrith was born in 1841 in Nauvoo, Illinois. Her birth name was Josephine Donna Smith, and she was the niece of Joseph Smith Jr., founder of the Mormon faith. Her father and a sister died of malaria a few months after her birth. Her mother then married Joseph Smith in 1842, becoming his sixth or seventh wife. In 1844, Smith was killed by an anti-polygamy mob, and Ina's family moved to Saint Louis, where she married an apparently alcoholic printer/lawyer named William Pickett. They had twin sons and left on a wagon train for California in 1851. Ina read Shakespeare, the Bible, and Byron on the road to what was then the town of Los Angeles. She entered California in front of the wagon train, riding on a horse with the famous African American scout, Jim Beckworth — through what would later be called the Beckworth Pass.

Ina's personal life remained something of a mystery during her lifetime, and only now can we see with some clarity the events that prompted her to adopt her mother's surname. Her family settled in L.A., where Ina experienced the beginning and end of her two years of formal education.

She would eventually distance herself from her Mormon heritage, due principally to her strong disavowal of polygamy and the volatile circumstances surrounding the Mormon Reformation — including the Mountain Meadows Massacre in 1857, when Mormon militia (officially called “the Nauvoo Legion”), appearing in the guise of Paiute Indians, killed 120 men, women, and children migrating from Arkansas to the West. They spared only 17 children under the age of 7. Following this massacre, Ina's parents ignored the call to join their relatives in southern Utah and chose to remain in California.

Ina's first published poem appeared in the *Los Angeles Star* in 1855, when she was fifteen. In 1858, she married Robert Carsley, her first — and last — husband. To make a grim story brief, Carsley threatened Ina frequently and attempted to kill her in fits of



Ina Coolbrith approx. 11 years old.  
Courtesy of Oakland Public Library

jealousy and anger. Following a public divorce trial, Ina quietly buried the secrets of her heritage and marriage, some of which would not surface again until after her death, and then only as anecdotes told by relatives, including her having given birth to a son who had died. Then known as Ina Carsley, she divorced by the age of twenty and, along with her mother, stepfather, and twin half-brothers departed for San Francisco, where she took her mother's maiden name and became Ina Coolbrith. She taught school as an English teacher — and continued to write verse.

### Moving on Up: North to San Francisco

Ina had published numerous poems while living in Los Angeles, but the number had decreased significantly after her marriage to Carsley. Her arrival in San Francisco marked a resurgence in her life as a poet, and she would never marry again, remaining adamant in rejecting suitors and well-meaning matchmakers. At one point, her long-time friend, the naturalist John Muir, introduced her to a Mr. Brown. Ina replied in verse:

But this is certain—write it down—  
Or if you smile, or if you frown,  
I do not want your Mr. Brown.

Coolbrith published twelve poems in the *Californian*, a magazine edited by Charles Henry Webb. Bret Harte, a frequent contributor and sometime editor, invited Mark Twain to write a weekly article for the magazine. Twain later characterized the *Californian* as “the best weekly literary paper in the United States.” Ina, Webb, and Harte had all previously written for the *Golden Era*, at the time San Francisco's sole literary newspaper. After the *Californian* folded in 1866, several of Ina's poems appeared in the *New York Galaxy*, sharing the pages with such other, and celebrated, names as Mark Twain and Walt Whitman. Early anthologies of California poetry began to include Ina's work.

Unbeknownst to most current readers, Coolbrith had labored in the field of poetry for decades before receiving national and international accolades at the 1893 Columbian Exposition and the 1915 Pan Pacific International Exposition. She was published in such magazines such as *Harper's* and *The Galaxy*, where she appeared alongside Twain and Whitman. From all accounts, Coolbrith never received a rejection letter in her life.



Ina Coolbrith, 1871 when she was 29 or 30

Bret Harte, a renowned writer of short fiction and poetry as well as editor of the *Overland Monthly*, wrote the following celebratory verses describing his friend and colleague in 1870:

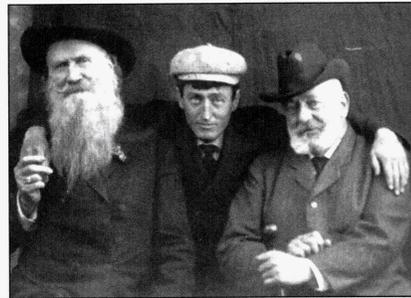
There is a poetic divinity,  
Number one of the *Overland* Trinity,  
Who uses the muses  
Pretty much as she chooses,  
This dark eyed, young Sapphic divinity.

Coolbrith's verse had frequented the pages of the *Overland*, while she dealt with unrequited affection for Harte. Coolbrith was indeed one of a trinity of literary figures, including Harte and Charles Warren Stoddard, who called Ina "the pearl of all our tribe." Coolbrith's "tribe" also included, most notably, John Muir, Mark Twain, George Sterling, and Ambrose Bierce. Despite such accolades, the details of Ina Coolbrith's personal history and life-long commitment to verse remained known to only a few and explored only in two biographies, the most recent published in 2015 by Aleta George and entitled [Ina Coolbrith: The Bittersweet Song of California's First Poet Laureate](#).



Francis Bret Harte. Courtesy The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Unfortunately, Ina's time as one of the *Overland* Trinity was short-lived. Charles Stoddard took to touring the world and writing travel stories, while Bret Harte moved east, eventually settling in Europe. Ina's life of poetry would suffer greatly under the burdens she was about to shoulder. Her sister, Agnes Charlotte, died in 1874, leaving Ina alone to care for their mother and her sister's two children, in addition to Joaquin Miller's daughter, named "Calla Shasta," while Miller toured Europe and realized the dream he shared with Coolbrith: to visit Byron's tomb.



Joaquin Miller, George Sterling, Charles Warren Stoddard. Courtesy The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

### Working in the Stacks: The Librarian

To deal with these unfortunate circumstances, Coolbrith soon sought an appointment as the first librarian at the Oakland Library Association, at the time a private library, where she worked fourteen hours a day, six days a week for a salary of seventy dollars a month. In 1878, the library was donated to the city of Oakland, but Ina kept her position as head librarian.

She continued to grind through the days and nights at the Oakland Library. "Someone has to provide the bread, and so I am back in my prison." Despite the long hours, which kept her from



Jack London, age nine, with his dog Rollo. Courtesy Oakland Public Library, Oakland History Room.

writing much poetry, her time there was not all in vain. Ina would later reflect on the near-decade she served the Oakland community, "I am prouder of being the first public librarian in California than I am of being the first woman author, for I think the public libraries have been a greater help to the people." Ina's inspiring presence and service as Oakland librarian prompted Jack London, among

many others, to celebrate the personal attention and thoughtful assistance he received from Ina. In a letter dated 1906, London wrote:

Do you know, you were the first one who ever complimented me on my choice of reading matter. Nobody at home bothered their heads over what I read. I was an eager, thirsty, hungry little kid — and one day, at the library, I drew out a volume on Pizzaro in Peru (I was ten years old). You got the book & stamped it for me. And as you handed it to me you praised me for reading books of that nature. Proud! If only you knew how proud your words made me. . . I stood greatly in awe of you . . . and I named you ‘Noble.’

That was what you were to me — Noble. That was the feeling I got from you. Oh, yes, I got, also, the feeling of sorrow and suffering, but dominating them, always riding above, was noble. No woman has so affected me to the extent you did. I was only a little lad. I knew absolutely nothing about you. Yet in all the years that have passed I have met no woman so noble as you.” In that same letter, London called Ina his “literary mother.”<sup>7</sup>

Coolbrith also mentored Isadora Duncan in her youth, and Duncan later characterized Ina as a “very wonderful woman” with “very beautiful eyes that glowed with burning fire and passion.” In an ironic twist, a magazine writer reported in 1927 that Ina had an affair with Duncan’s father, causing the breakup of his marriage and prompting his wife’s move, along with her children to Oakland, where Ina help open Isadora’s intellectual vistas.<sup>8</sup>

After nearly two decades, Ina’s time as Oakland’s librarian came to a close. Following an interview with the *Oakland Times* about the poor physical and financial state of the library, Ina was given three-days-notice by the library’s board and dismissed from her position. In an especially painful irony, Ina was replaced by her nephew, Henry Peterson, whom she had raised and supported for several decades.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hartzell, David. "Jack London's Literary Mother". JackLondons.net. Retrieved February 20, 2010

<sup>8</sup> See, Ann Daly (1995). *Done Into Dance*. Indiana U P. p. 12. For another view of Coolbrith’s relationship with and encouragement of Isadora Duncan, see a 1965 episode entitled “Magic Locket,” in the syndicated western series, *Death Valley Days*, hosted by Ronald Reagan. In it, Coolbrith, played by June Lockhart, develops a tenuous friendship with a teenager, “Dorita Duncan.” Joaquin Miller also appears.

Ina tendered her resignation “under protest,” and was offered little explanation from the board, at the time comprised entirely of men without any literary interest. After leaving Oakland, Ina visited Chicago and New York, where she was received with admiration among literary circles.

### The Kindness of Friends

Coolbrith remained an eager participant in spirited conversations with the Bay Area’s most celebrated writers, artists, and financiers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. She devoted much of her social life to those who were artistically inclined, including William Keith, Charles Keeler, Edward Markham, , and William Greer Harrison, an insurance executive and one of the founders of the Bohemian Club. Many of her friends were literally and figuratively Bohemians. Aware of what would be Ina’s decades-long struggle to stay solvent, several well-placed members of the Bohemian Club, encouraged by artist members such as William Keith, began what became decades-long financial support of Coolbrith. For example, the Bohemian Club hosted an event for her which raised six hundred dollars and named her, along with Margaret Bowman, the first women honorary members of Bohemia — at an induction ceremony in May 1874 called the “Ladies Jinks.”

The early years of the Bohemian Club’s history reflect Ina’s work in its library. She attended many of the Club’s events and commemorated them with occasional poetry, though she preferred not to read her own work aloud. The generosity of Bohemians supported Ina in times of need for much of her life. Ina was no doubt grateful for the generosity, but it was not enough to release the full pressure of caring for such a large family.

Nearly 20 years later, in 1892, Joaquin Miller wrote an article (“California’s Fair Poet”) for the San Francisco Call in which he urged the University of California to pay Ina an annual stipend, based on two commencement odes she had written years before. Miller intended to include a biographical note about Ina, but “admitted he knew little about her, even though he had known her for decades.”

Years later, when Miller inquired about her at the Bohemian Club, one member said, “She is the patron saint of the Bohemian Club, and has been since its birth. . . . Her life has been as pure and pathetic as her poems. In fact, her poems are her life.”

In 1893 Ina composed a celebratory poem for the Club, with the title “*Bohemia*.” Here’s the first of three stanzas:

No lurking shadows here appear;  
The weaving spider comes not here;  
Here, if the solemn Owl doth sit,  
’Tis but above the tapers lit,  
To blink at wisdom’s shinning wit.  
The skies are blue, the winds are fair,  
Nor place nor space for tyrant care  
Within the bounds, Bohemia.

Later in the poem, Coolbrith characterizes distinctive character of the Bohemian Club in these affectionate terms.

The sparkling jest, the laughing lips  
The royal, genial fellowship --  
Of these thy wealth, Bohemia

Ina counted many members of the Bohemian Club among her friends and patrons, and though the



Ina Coolbrith at age fifty, c. 1885. Courtesy Oakland Public Library, Oakland History Room.

city of Oakland had neglected her, the Club did not make the same mistake. As part of a project to promote writers in California, the Bohemian Club helped finance a new collection of Ina's poetry. The first, *A Perfect Day and Other Poems*, had been published years earlier in 1881. Her new book was titled *Songs from the Golden Gate*, published in 1895.

Ina's health began declining steadily, and she remained unable to support herself through writing. In 1898, she began working as librarian at the Mercantile Library in San Francisco, a full-time position she kept for about a year before her health threatened to fail her. In 1899, the Bohemian Club invited Coolbrith once again to work as its part-time librarian for \$50 a month, providing her some modest financial support while allowing her time to write. Ina observed, "This is the first time the doors of freedom have been opened to me since I was fifteen years of age."

During the 1906 earthquake and fire in San Francisco, she lost the vast majority of her possessions, including 3000 books, including many signed first editions, paintings by William Keith, as well as a manuscript on California's literary history, including apparently her own personal history and accounts of her relationships with various celebrated writers. She never resumed the project.

### Darkening Shadows: The Later Years

Ina recovered from the disaster, though her health would continue to decline. After various stretches of living part of the year in New York, Coolbrith eventually found a flat on Russian Hill where her parlor once again became a destination for patrons and writers. Friends donated books to her new library, and for her seventieth birthday, the California Writers Club asked guests to bring more. She received hundreds.

Coolbrith had developed rheumatoid arthritis, and by 1910 the debilitating condition had spread to one of her eyes. She would never fully recover her health again, but she would not allow it to deter her. Rather, Ina gained some momentum after the long years spent tending



libraries. She became vice president, then president of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association, and when they decided to host a Congress of Authors and Journalists during the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, Ina herself sent out four thousand invitations.

During the exposition, Coolbrith was awarded the title of "Poet Laureate of California" by Benjamin Ide Wheeler, then president of the University of California, who called Coolbrith the "loved, laurel-crowned poet of California." It was an unofficial title at the time, and Ina accepted it on behalf of "those who are passed away and for my sister women." She often said she did not deserve it, but the state of California disagreed, and her laureate status became official in 1919.

For the next four years, Ina spent her winters [oddly enough] in New York, where she wrote a great deal and joined the Poetry Society of America. She found her rheumatism alleviated by the city, though it would return each summer as she travelled back to California to escape New York's oppressive humidity. However limited her energy, it was enough to enable her to write more verse in those winters than she had for twenty-five years



Ina Coolbrith died at the age of eighty-six on February 29, 1928. She was buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, and her grave remained unmarked until 1986, when the Ina Coolbrith Circle funded a headstone. While her name may not be known in many literary circles today, her memory and poetry remain.

The Coolbrith Circle, formed in her later years, continues to hold meetings, celebrating California writers as well as their namesake, the poet who trekked to California and made it her own.

The palette of her poetry remains distinctly Californian, and while the rhythms and rhymes of her

verse more than occasionally sound flat, her verse anticipates—in many respects—the clarity, directness, intense focus, and powerful imagery of the more widely known American Imagist poets of the early twentieth century, including Amy Lowell and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), and their counterparts in the Eastern United States.

There is still much we do not know about the life of Ina Coolbrith: her lost child, her unknown loves. Ina left no memoirs to fill the gaps in our knowledge. She once told a reporter in New York, “Were I to write what I know, the book would be too sensational to print; but were I to write what I think proper, the book would be too dull to sell.”