

# The Top Ten Reasons a Prolific Indiana Author Isn't Better Known:

A Discussion Paper Presented to the Indianapolis Literary Club

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**T**his evening the Indianapolis Literary Club is trying something new. Rather than having a paper presented on a topic unknown to the audience prior to its presentation, tonight the plan is to have a discussion about a book that most of us have had an opportunity to read. The book is a biography of Meredith Nicholson, a former member of the club, that I completed three years ago. As its title, *Meredith Nicholson: A Writing Life*, indicates, Mr. Nicholson was primarily a writer, and he produced twenty-seven books in a literary career that lasted, unfortunately, only twenty-seven years as a full-time writer, from 1903 to 1929. As some of you will instantly note, Nicholson wrote, on average, one book a year over that period.

Counting two earlier publications issued while he was otherwise employed, Nicholson is the author of twenty-nine books. He also wrote hundreds of articles, short stories, newspaper editorials and columns, and book and performance reviews, as well as countless letters. By way of comparison, Kurt Vonnegut, another famous Hoosier author, also wrote about twenty-nine books, including, like Nicholson, a play, but Vonnegut's writing career was twice as long as Nicholson's.

Most of Nicholson's books were novels, but his publications include two books of poetry, two collections of essays, one book of short stories, one history, and one co-authored play. Virtually all of these books and his other writings had something good to say about Indiana, and he developed a contemporary reputation as one who loved his home state. Indeed, as literary historian Arthur Shumaker phrased it, Nicholson was the "most rabid" Hoosier author of them all.

Before turning to the "Top Ten" list, which will be presented by a group of volunteers—really draftees—and, we hope, generate questions and suggest topics for discussion, I thought, for the benefit of those

unable to read the biography or its companion “reader,” I would offer a very brief overview of the author’s interesting life, mention the still-unresolved mystery concerning his final years, and offer some background information about the books on Nicholson that were published in 2007.

Nicholson was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, on December 9, 1866 (John Milton’s birthday), the son of two Civil War veterans, a soldier and a nurse, who met when Miss Emily Meredith helped care for an ailing artilleryman, Edward Willis Nicholson. The young couple married immediately after the war and planned a life together on a farm in northwestern Indiana. That plan didn’t work out because of the former soldier’s uncertain health, so the Nicholsons moved to Indianapolis in 1872, to the near westside of the city. While growing up, Nicholson obtained very little formal education, but nevertheless he valued learning, read voraciously, and studied hard as a self-taught boy, while holding a series of odd jobs. At first, he decided he wanted to become a poet and managed to place a few verses in the local newspapers. He also

managed to meet James Whitcomb Riley, who became a life-long friend and mentor. At this time Nicholson was working in law offices and later he became a newspaperman, serving many years on the staff of the *Indianapolis News*.

By fortunate happenstance, Nicholson met and soon afterward married a bright (she was a Phi Beta Kappa at Vassar), beautiful, and wealthy (a banker's daughter) young woman from Omaha, Nebraska, named Eugenie Kountze. This led the young groom to attempt, like his father-in-law, a business career, first in Indianapolis and, later, in a position with a mining company out in Denver, 1898-1901.

In another happy coincidence, while living in the West he was approached by Professor George Edward Woodberry, who invited him to write a book about Indiana's literary heritage. This led to *The Hoosiers* (1900), and literally transformed the man's life. He quit business life, at the urging and with the support of his wife, moved back to Indianapolis, and became a fulltime author. One best-seller after another followed, including, of course, *The House of a Thousand*

*Candles*—his fifth book and his third novel, which appeared in 1905 and he continued producing enormously popular novels year after year. This amazing streak, however, suddenly stopped in 1929—there are no more Nicholson books after *Old Familiar Faces* appeared in that year.

Two reasons may be suggested: first, the Great Depression hit the family with devastating impact. A second factor was the sudden death of Eugenie, Nicholson's beloved wife, in 1931.

Nearly destitute, Nicholson's political friends came to his assistance and managed to obtain for him a choice diplomatic appointment. As such, he became President Roosevelt's top representative in the three Latin American countries, serving successively in Paraguay, Venezuela, and Nicaragua between 1933 and 1941. After this, he divorced in 1943 his second wife, his former secretary who had been with him during the diplomatic years, and briefly continued his new role as a columnist for the *Indianapolis Star*. Ironically, not only did Nicholson die in 1947, sixteen years to the day

following the death of his first wife, but also he died in December, just as he had said poetically back in 1891 that he wanted to do.

*In Winter I was born,*

*So all my years I've loved the frost and snow. . . .*

*In Winter I was born,*

*And as I came so let me pass away,*

*Out from the world on a December day . . . .*

Then he slipped almost completely from view and from the memory of most Hoosiers.

As for my two books on Mr. Nicholson, I first developed an interest in him around 1978, when I learned there was no book about this member of the so-called Big Four in Indiana Literature, whose other members were George Ade, James Whitcomb Riley, and Booth Tarkington, about whom a number of books have appeared over the years. I made this discovery in the process of preparing a two-volume reader on Indiana history for my Indiana History class (*The Hoosier*

*State: Readings in Indiana History* [2 vols., 1980]) that included a selection by Nicholson whom I needed to identify. So, as soon as possible, I began to look for Meredith Nicholson materials. On my first call for some Nicholson letters at the Indiana Historical Society library, I learned they were not available at that time because someone else was using them. That's how I met Professor Allegra Stewart, who told me she was writing a book about Meredith Nicholson at the request of her friend, Roberta West Nicholson, the author's daughter-in-law, who, herself, had been reminded of this bibliographic "gap" upon reading my Indiana History book! So, having already spent a short time investigating Nicholson, which included productive research visits to the National Archives and the Princeton University Library, I laid my Nicholson notes aside.

I did, however, write two articles about Meredith Nicholson for *Traces* and then three short pieces about him and his books for the *Encyclopedia of Indianapolis*. Then, well into my retirement from teaching at IUPUI and given the fact that Professor Stewart's

manuscript, completed shortly before her death, was not accepted for publication, I was asked by Ray Boomhower, the editor of *Traces* as well as the new *Indiana Biography Series*, to do a volume about Nicholson for this series.

So I did. In fact, while awaiting its publication in 2007, a full year and a half after the due date for the manuscript to be turned in, I also assembled a number of Nicholson's writings, and that book, too, was published in 2007. So now, instead of there being no books at all about Meredith Nicholson, there are currently two books with his name in their titles.

As for the continuing mystery surrounding Nicholson's life in its final years, no one has yet been able to identify the second Mrs. Nicholson, known to him and others as Dorothy Wolfe Lannon. Dorothy claimed to have come from Marion, Grant County, Indiana, and she was identified in the press as, like her husband, a writer, but none of her writings have been found, and very little else about this mysterious lady has been found in the press or in libraries around the state. She is



unknown to historians, including the county historian of Grant County, to librarians in Marion and elsewhere, and to the professional genealogists from Fort Wayne that I hired to help me find at least a birth place, a birth date, and a death date, and any other information. But their search revealed very little, maybe nothing. The genealogists did suggest one possibility that I consider unlikely. Briefly, they discovered in the 1930 census a person named Dorothy G. Lannon, born in 1894. She was married to Carl Lannon, 53 years her senior (i.e., Carl was born in 1841). So it is possible that this lady, identified as a stenographer in the census, could have been widowed and available for marriage to Nicholson in 1933. The photographs we have of Dorothy Nicholson (one of which is reproduced on p. 326 of the *Meredith Nicholson Reader*) do not suggest, to me, a woman twenty-eight years younger than Nicholson, then her husband, but maybe so. Some of her notorious activities in South America do suggest a younger woman, and I'd value the opinions of others on the point of the mystery woman's age.

Finally, as a conclusion to my remarks, let's turn to the Top Ten list. What are the top ten reasons that Meredith Nicholson, enormously popular during his lifetime and an amazingly prolific writer in the days before modern technology, is not better known today? (For this pre-discussion version of the paper, I'll add a few comments regarding some of the non-self-explanatory reasons.)

**NUMBER TEN: There was not enough sex and violence in his novels.**

(Violence, yes, particularly in *The House of a Thousand Candles*, which the author called a "fairy tale with pistols"; but not sex.)

**NUMBER NINE: Nicholson was born on the wrong side of the tracks.**

(Unlike his contemporaries, Ade and Tarkington, among the Big Four authors, whose families were well-to-do and able to send their children to college, Nicholson was born into a dysfunctional family and lived on the flats of White River. As an adult, however, he traveled in the best social circles in Indianapolis.)

**NUMBER EIGHT: He made a bad second marriage.**

(The second Mrs. Nicholson, among other things a chain-smoking alcoholic, was heartily disliked by the Nicholson family.)

**NUMBER SEVEN: Most of his personal papers were lost.**

(This, too, was probably the work of the second Mrs. Nicholson.)

**NUMBER SIX: Nicholson had no college education.**

(True, but he was born in a college town, associated with the learned as an adult, and received honorary degrees from Wabash College, Butler University, and Indiana University.)

**NUMBER FIVE: He had no HIGH SCHOOL education, either.**

(Also true. He dropped out as a freshman and was a self-taught linguist and scholar.)

**NUMBER FOUR: He befriended too many lawyers.**

(He was the office boy in two prominent Indianapolis law firms and once aspired to become an attorney himself.)

**NUMBER THREE: He wrote too many light romances, not really serious literature.**

(He himself recognized this as a defect and vowed to reform. See his "Confessions of a Best-Seller.")

**NUMBER TWO: Nicholson was too good looking to have his novels taken seriously.**

(He was a tall, dignified, distinguished-looking man who was once described by one of his editors as "his ideal of a diplomat.")

**AND . . . .**

**NUMBER ONE: He was a DEMOCRAT!**

(Also true, although he was born into a Republican family in a Republican state, but he converted in 1884 and remained a Democrat. This worked to his advantage when the Democrats came to power in the 1930s.)