



MADELEINE RUTHVEN

*Mountain Fire
and Other Poems*

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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A CRITICAL READING EDITION

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THE TEXT-TECH PAPERS

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CONTENTS

Five recoverable poems and editorial matter

Introduction

Archival Images

Editorial Note and Sources

From the Primavera Press Books

To a Victorious Rival

Mountain Fire

Yerba Buena: Epilogue

Later Magazine Poems

The Mountain Road

Chrysler Building

Bibliography

INTRODUCTION

Between the studio, the city, and the mountains

Madeleine Ruthven's poems keep changing the distance. One moment she is close enough to see mountain fog pearl in moonlight or a yucca flower burn white against the chaparral; the next she is measuring a wildfire across sixty miles, a car skidding at the edge of death, or the Chrysler Building as the exhausted monument of an age. The eye belongs to someone trained by silent pictures and early sound film—quick framing, hard cuts, exact visible detail—but the conclusions are rarely cinematic comforts.

Ruthven knew Hollywood from the inside. She wrote stories, titles, treatments, and screenplays while building a second life among Los Angeles poets, printers, artists, and political organizers. Jake Zeitlin's Primavera Press published *Summer Denial and Other Poems* in 1932 and *Sondelius Came to the Mountains* in 1934, with Ward Ritchie involved in both productions. The first book looked at institutions and modern California; the second followed the people, fire, plants, and weather of the western Santa Monica Mountains.

Neither rare book is present as a complete scan in the project archive, and no complete public digital copy could be located. This edition therefore does not call itself a collected poems. It resets five complete works that can be checked from surviving page images or full-text reproductions: a comic malediction from *Summer Denial*, two poems from *Sondelius*, and Ruthven's two later appearances in *Poetry*. The result is provisional but textual, not facsimile: every available poem is set in normal type, and the source note beneath it explains precisely what witness survives.

Life and Work

Madeleine Dwight Skinner was born on October 26, 1893, in Hornick, Iowa, to Dwight Skinner and Catherine Bingham. An older secondary source gives October 20 and Sioux City, so the exact civil record remains worth checking, but the later Hornick identification is supported by a more specific family reconstruction. She grew up in Texas with four siblings and began her professional life in journalism, working for the *Houston Press* from 1918 to 1920 and publishing fiction in magazines including *The Black Cat*.

She married Samuel D. Ruthven in 1918. The 1920 census places Madeleine, Samuel, and his son Ormond in Houston; the marriage later ended in divorce. By the early 1920s she had moved to Los Angeles. Jim Tully called her the city's most promising young woman writer in 1922, and she found her first film work with Marshall Neilan's company. Like many women in silent film, she moved among story, adaptation, scenario, and title writing—categories that later filmographies often flatten into a single screenwriting credit.

Her credited or documented pictures stretch from *The Rendezvous* (1923) through westerns such as *The Frontiersman* and *Spoilers of the West*, title work for *The Ship from Shanghai* and *Anna Christie*, and the crime dramas *Shock, Dangerous Corner, Straight from the Shoulder*, and *The Accusing Finger*. By 1925 she was identified as one of the women behind the scenes at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and worked as an assistant to executive Harry Rapf. At least sixteen films carry some connection to her writing between 1923 and 1936, though a final credit-by-credit account must distinguish original story, titles, treatment, adaptation, and screenplay.

Poetry developed beside that studio career. Jake Zeitlin and the Primavera Press issued *Summer Denial and Other Poems* in 1932 in an edition of 304 copies. Grace Marion Brown designed the book and Ward Ritchie printed it; an inscribed copy locates Ruthven at MGM in September 1932. The collection's known poems combine institutional bleakness with abrupt humor—Ruthven reportedly explained that poetry was cheaper than psychoanalysis. Edward Weston made her portrait in 1933, placing her in the overlapping modernist circles around Zeitlin, Ritchie, photography, and Los Angeles book arts.

After visiting Yerba Buena in the western Santa Monica Mountains, probably in September 1932, Ruthven wrote a linked group of narrative and landscape poems for *Rob Wagner's Script*. Primavera Press gathered them in 1934 as *Sondelius Came to the Mountains*, a thirty-six-page pamphlet of two hundred copies. The sequence remembers homesteaders and solitary mountain people, but its true scale is ecological: fire crosses watersheds, fog erases the lower world, and spring returns as colored flame. Lawrence Clark Powell later credited the poems with helping draw him toward Malibu.

Ruthven continued to publish individual poems. "The Mountain Road" appeared in *Poetry* in October 1936 and "Chrysler Building" in May 1937. The latter's second stanza is missing from the magazine scan's OCR layer even though it is perfectly visible on the page—exactly the kind of damage this edition corrects. In 1938 W. W. Norton hired Ruthven to work on a manuscript by Thomas Collins, the Arvin farm-labor camp manager who became an important source for John Steinbeck during *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Collins book was never published.

Ruthven's progressive commitments eventually cost her. In 1940 she shared a Beverly Hills household with artist and studio architectural researcher Herta Uerkvitz; both women later appeared in blacklist records. Ruthven belonged to the Women's Shopping League, which joined consumer advocacy, worker safety, and opposition to war profiteering. She was named as a Communist Party figure in testimony and appears to have lost access to film writing after the mid-1930s. The surviving record suggests continuing political work rather than retreat.

Around the mid-1940s Ruthven's life became closely joined to journalist and activist Reuben Borough, an EPIC campaigner and later Independent Progressive Party candidate for the United States Senate. They married after the death of Borough's first wife; archival descriptions report that he set several of Ruthven's poems to music. Borough died in 1970. Madeleine Ruthven died in Los Angeles on February 20, 1978, at eighty-four. Her scattered archive—rare books, periodicals, film files, political records, letters with pressed flowers, and the Reuben Borough papers—still holds the possibility of a genuinely complete edition.

ARCHIVAL IMAGES

Portrait, original page, and magazine witness



Madeleine Ruthven, photographed by Edward Weston in 1933.

Yerba Buena: Epilogue

THIS was the summer when I came
to know,
After long years,
My love for these brown hills,
And learned the peace
Their stony harshness brings,
And felt their beauty singing in my
blood.

Now in October, warm and dusty-
hazed,
I wait serenely for the winter rains
To fill the parched and stony waterways,
Knowing that Spring will follow
In a blaze—
Green fire of grass,
Blue flame of lupin bloom,
And poppies burning on the bare hill-
sides.

*Original page of "Yerba Buena: Epilogue" from Sondelius Came to the Mountains (1934),
reproduced in The Journal of Ventura County History.*

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

I saw death's wing, as blue as the sky,
His eye as bright as the sun.
I dived with him on a mountain road —
With the luck of a fool I won.

It was win or lose in an instant's flash.
I had no time for fear —
My heart and brain and blood were still,
Knowing the odds were near.

Such moments are timeless, crystalline:
My eye was innocent,
Seeing the earth as a lacquered plate
In a painted firmament.

Then the smooth tires gripped, the worn brakes shrieked,
The sky was the sky once more.
The earth flowed back to amplitude —
It was all as it was before.

The road leaped up, the hills rushed by,
Heart hammered in the breast;
Hot blood flowed back to warm the brain;
The taut nerves slacked to rest.

Madeleine Ruthven

[18]

"The Mountain Road" as printed in Poetry, October 1936.

EDITORIAL NOTE AND SOURCES

A provisional text, not a false collected edition

The complete scans of *Summer Denial and Other Poems* (1932) and *Sondelius Came to the Mountains* (1934) described in the earlier project dossier are not present in the archive. Searches of public digital collections and title-level web indexes located library records, bookseller descriptions, and partial quotations, but no complete readable scan. This book therefore prints only complete poems for which every line can be verified.

“To a Victorious Rival” and “Mountain Fire” are reset from full-text reproductions in Suzanne Guldemann’s researched account. “Yerba Buena: Epilogue” is checked against a photograph of the original 1934 page reproduced in *The Journal of Ventura County History*. “The Mountain Road” and “Chrysler Building” are reset directly from the supplied *Poetry* scans. The OCR layer for “Chrysler Building” omits its entire second stanza; the page image preserves it clearly.

Stanza divisions, deliberate alternating indents, punctuation, and titles are retained. Line breaks produced only by the narrow source measure—“dusty- / hazed” and “hill- / sides” on the photographed epilogue page—are restored as single verse lines. No fragmentary quotation is promoted into a complete poem. A future collected edition should replace this provisional volume when the two Primavera books and the relevant run of *Rob Wagner’s Script* have been scanned.

FROM THE PRIMAVERA PRESS BOOKS

Complete texts from surviving witnesses

To a Victorious Rival

Daughter of a limpet,
Sister of a leech,
Triumphant as a fungus
On a blasted peach,
To you the palm of victory,
Crown of laurel, too!
(They tell me laurel's poison,
And I hope to God it's true!)

Publication. First published in *Summer Denial and Other Poems* (1932); complete text quoted in Suzanne Guldemann's "Madeleine Ruthven: Poet of the Mountains."

Mountain Fire

When we came to the crest of Boney Mountain
All the lower hills and the sea were hidden
Under a cloud of fog.
Mountains and valleys and plains of cloud
Glistening pearl in the moonlight.

We turned to the north and east.
Sixty miles away we saw the mountains burning
In Santa Barbara and Ojai—
White plumes of smoke billowing over the ridges,
And a black wall of smoke,
Smooth and solid as basalt,
Thrust seaward into the horizon.

They have known fire in Yerba Buena, too,
They have faced fire and survived
Stripped and scarred, but still alive,
Ready to begin anew.

Two years ago fire came here.
It licked the thick brush from the high hills,
And filled the canyon with flame.
It leaped from the great parapet of Boney Mountain
And swept the slopes below.
The hill people fled before it.
They left the roads, arched with fire,
And followed the wild things
Seeking safety in the water courses.
The fire roared after
And did not pause in its ravening
Until it came to the sea's edge.

Then the folk went back to the blackened smoking hills.
They had nothing left but their courage
And the stoic strength of the harsh land
Under their feet.
They had no assurance
Save the promise of the rain
And the surety of the seasons
To bring life back again.

They went back—
They belong to the hills.

Publication. First collected in *Sondelius Came to the Mountains* (1934); complete text reproduced in Suzanne Guldemann's "Madeleine Ruthven: Poet of the Mountains."

Yerba Buena: Epilogue

This was the summer when I came to know,
After long years,
My love for these brown hills,
And learned the peace
Their stony harshness brings,
And felt their beauty singing in my blood.

Now in October, warm and dusty-hazed,
I wait serenely for the winter rains
To fill the parched and stony waterways,
Knowing that Spring will follow
In a blaze—
Green fire of grass,
Blue flame of lupin bloom,
And poppies burning on the bare hillsides.

Publication. From *Sondelius Came to the Mountains* (1934); reset from the photographed original page reproduced in *The Journal of Ventura County History* 53, no. 2, p. 45.

LATER MAGAZINE POEMS

Complete texts from surviving witnesses

The Mountain Road

I saw death's wing, as blue as the sky,
His eye as bright as the sun.
I dined with him on a mountain road—
With the luck of a fool I won.

It was win or lose in an instant's flash.
I had no time for fear—
My heart and brain and blood were still,
Knowing the odds were near.

Such moments are timeless, crystalline:
My eye was innocent,
Seeing the earth as a lacquered plate
In a painted firmament.

Then the smooth tires gripped, the worn brakes shrieked,
The sky was the sky once more.
The earth flowed back to amplitude—
It was all as it was before.

The road leaped up, the hills rushed by,
Heart hammered in the breast;
Hot blood flowed back to warm the brain;
The taut nerves slacked to rest.

Publication. *Poetry* 49, no. 1 (October 1936), p. 18. Reset directly from the supplied page image.

Chrysler Building

Never again in our time
Shall such pinnacles leap to the sky.
These fabulous towering spires,
These airy mountains of glass,
Are the signature of an age—
A way of life that must pass.

The delicate petals of stone,
The leaves of silvered steel,
The brassy gargoyles that fling
Their snouts to the imminent sky
Are praise of a greatness that lied,
Are wreaths for a world that has died.

Publication. *Poetry* 50, no. 2 (May 1937), p. 77. Reset directly from the supplied page image; the second stanza, absent from the scan's OCR layer, is restored from the image.

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