

Books of the Times

By ORVILLE PRESCOTT

WHEN New England flowered during the last century and the great men wrote their books and delivered their lectures and preached their sermons it was still largely a man's world. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott could write successful books and Margaret Fuller could be a one-woman natural phenomenon; but it was the men who



Louise Hall Tharp

wore the beards and acquired the most enduring fame. Yet some of their wives and women friends were equally interesting. Three of the most interesting were sisters, Elizabeth, Mary and Sophia Peabody, the heroines of an excellent biography in triplicate, "The Peabody Sisters of Salem,"* by Louise Hall Tharp. This charming and exceedingly readable book is distinguished for its painstaking research and for its fresh, feminine look at life during one of the most important phases of America's cultural history. It is a pleasure to read because of the engaging personalities of four women, the three Peabodies and Mrs. Tharp. The sisters were unusual women and thoroughly likable ones, too. Mrs. Tharp is an unusual biographer. Her ability to capture the warmth of Peabody personality on paper is exceptional. Her book is smoothly, crisply written without affectations of any kind. It brings its three heroines to triumphant life and twines their separate lives neatly together with no loose ends. And only rarely does Mrs. Tharp commit the comparatively venal sin of indulging in fictionalization.

The Peabody sisters of Salem were born to proud poverty and lived in it most of their lives. Elizabeth, the eldest, was an intellectual and a reformer. Mary, the middle sister, was the wife of Horace Mann. Sophia, the youngest, was the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne. All three were courageous, charming, talented women, and very different from one another.

Elizabeth was a scholar who mastered French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, theology and Transcendentalism. She was a life-long school teacher. She was the first woman lecturer in this country. She ran a celebrated bookshop in Boston. She was the publisher of the Transcendentalist magazine, the Dial, and of Hawthorne's early work; a writer of articles on theology, education and her celebrated friends; a lecturer and writer on history and a peddler of charts of historical dates, and the founder and champion of the kin-

dergarten movement in this country. She was a fighting idealist, a born manager of other people's affairs, a mighty talker, a tactless, stubborn, exasperating, generous and loyal woman.

Mary was the quiet one with a sense of humor. She also was a school teacher, sometimes in Elizabeth schools and sometimes in her own. Her devoted love for Horace Mann is a touching romantic story if there ever was one. She did not marry him until she was 36. Her long wait for that brilliant lawyer and great educator to make up his mind was not made easy by the fact that Elizabeth nearly caught him herself. Mary wrote a book on "Christianity in the Kitchen," a biography of her husband, articles about the kindergarten movement in which she aided Elizabeth, and, at the age of 80, her first novel.

Sophia was the invalid, driven into that state by the solicitous bullying of her mother. Sophia was a talented painter who helped the family budget by copying pictures by better-known artists. She was a gay, sociable, attractive girl, less intellectual than either of her sisters. After her marriage to Hawthorne at 33 she recovered her health completely and became a radiantly happy wife who worshiped her husband. "Say what you will," Sophia wrote to her mother, "there never was such a husband to enrich the world since it sprang out of chaos. I feel precisely like an Eve in Paradise. * * * He blooms into more consummate perfection every day."

Sophia endured, her lot as the wife of a penniless writer with cheerful courage and considerable resourcefulness. It was not until after Hawthorne's death that her grief and her discovery that his publishers had been cheating him so preyed upon her mind that she lost her former buoyancy. Her aging was pitiful compared with that of her busy sisters and she died long before them.

In writing "The Peabody Sisters of Salem" Mrs. Tharp spared herself no pangs of research and discovered considerable new material. All three sisters were indefatigable letter-writers, to their mother and to each other, and they wrote well. Their letters are spontaneous, natural, frank and lively. In Mrs. Tharp's sprightly pages they seem human first, and nineteenth-century New England only second.

The social, cultural and political world in which they lived is indicated only briefly by Mrs. Tharp. This is a "life" but not a "times." Their famous acquaintances, Channing, Alcott, Allston, Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, are merely part of a colorful background. But the two great husbands, Mann and Hawthorne, are portrayed at considerable length and with persuasive understanding.

"The Peabody Sisters of Salem" is not one of those massive biographical monuments which offer few inducements to potential readers. It is a sound biography which is also delightfully good reading.

*THE PEABODY SISTERS OF SALEM. By Louise Hall Tharp. 372 pages. Little, Brown. \$4.

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