

By Stephen Doster, December, 2020

On September 28, 1963 Eugenia Price typed a letter at her three-story greystone townhouse (still standing at 648 Wrightwood Avenue) in Chicago. The recipients were Douglas and Alberta “Berta” (Gould) Taylor who lived on St. Simons Island over a thousand miles and a world away from the bustling Windy City. At the time it must have seemed to all involved a simple correspondence that began with Price’s thanking them “for that beautiful and meaningful and happy Sunday afternoon I spent on your front porch under your lovely trees.” In hindsight, it marks the genesis of a remarkable a love affair with the island and its people, a literary triumph, and renewed interest in St. Simons as a tourist destination.

Local resident Jim Bruce, the Taylor’s grandson, recently donated two of Price’s letters to the Coastal Georgia Historical Society. “My grandparents had just asked her to write a book about Anna Gould,” Jim recalls. “Eugenia was just moving here and had made the rounds to talk with all the Taylors and Stevens about the Church [Christ Church Frederica] and the Fort [Frederica].”

Price was already a successful author of inspirational books and writer-producer of popular radio serial dramas before coming to St. Simons. She and her longtime confidante and fellow writer, Joyce Blackburn, chanced upon the mention of the island in a travel guide while on a tour of the East Coast promoting her newest work, *Beloved World*. Their AAA guidebook mentioned James Oglethorpe, the Wesley brothers preaching on St. Simons, and Aaron Burr’s time spent at Hampton Point on the north end after his duel with Alexander Hamilton. But what got their attention was a blurb about Anson Dodge whose his first wife tragically died on their wedding trip. He rebuilt Christ Church (1884) in her memory and later married Anna Gould, Berta Taylor’s aunt.

“I think you will both be glad to know that yesterday I wrote the first 7-1/2 pages of ‘our’ novel!” she continues in her letter to the Taylors. “In those pages there is no one present but young Anson Dodge, age 19, and the horse he borrowed to drive up the beautiful Frederica Road alone the day he saw the old church for the first time. . . . It must have captured him immediately as it captured both Joyce and me. . . . I love your island more than any place on earth, and I have come to love not only all of you my dear friends there now, but Anson and Anna Dodge too as though they were members of my own family.” In a later book by Price, *At Home on St. Simon* (1981), she wrote, “By noon of our first day on St. Simons, I knew I had to write a novel about the Reverend Mr. Dodge.”¹ “Our novel,” the book about Anna Gould, became *The Beloved Invader* (1965), the first of her island trilogy.

Price had crisscrossed the country on speaking tours for twelve years, looking for “the one place where I felt I belonged” and almost settled on the Big Sur region of California. “When I

¹ *At Home on St. Simons*, Peachtree Publishers, 1981, pp. 10-11.

saw coastal Georgia-most especially the Frederica section of St. Simons-all doubts were gone. I had come home to stay.”²

The second Price letter and accompanying document donated by Jim Bruce to the historical society was dated September 4, 1962. It includes lengthy accounts of Gould family history assembled from hand-written family documents loaned by the Taylors, which Price had typed. Passages in this document contributed to both Price’s second book in the trilogy, *New Moon Rising* (1969) and third book, *Lighthouse* (1972).

The fourth paragraph on page 6 of the 1962 document begins, “Great-Grandfather [Gould] learned that the Government was accepting bids for the construction of a lighthouse on St. Simon’s Island. He put in his proposal which was accepted. He immediately secured a good mason and started construction.” This and other passages helped Eugenia lay the groundwork for *Lighthouse*, about James Gould’s building of the island’s tabby lighthouse.

On page 18 of the 1962 document, we learn that Horace Bunch Gould (James Gould’s son) was away from St. Simons for almost a decade and returned after working as a purser on a Mississippi River passenger boat that was “notorious for gambling, drinking and fighting crowds.” It goes on to state at the bottom of page 18, “It was one of his early rides down the Frederica Road that he [Gould] first saw and fell in love at once with his future wife [fifteen year-old Deborah Abbott] whom . . . was hanging over her home fence in order to see him pass by.” This and other passages are the basis of *New Moon Rising*.

Eugenia Price wasn’t the first popular author to write set a novel on St. Simons. In 1945, Helen Topping Miller published *Dark Sails: A Tale of Old St. Simons*, the story of a young girl living at Frederica during the Spanish Invasion of 1742. But no book about the island had the impact of Price’s novels before or since.

The significance of these two letters cannot be overstated. Over 40 million copies, printed in 18 languages, of Price’s island trilogy and subsequent books have been sold. Avid readers flocked to the island by the bus-loads. Today, her fans still come to the St. Simons. New visitors learn about her books while taking trolley rides to Christ Church and make a bee line to local bookstores afterward to buy her trilogy. Though an economic impact study of Prices’ books has never been done, long-time local residents will tell you there was a definite resurgence in tourism and area growth after her three island books were published, and that surge has steadily increased over the past fifty years.

Bill Brown, whose ancestors arrived when Georgia was still a colony, says Price’s books, “had a tremendous impact on the area. They put St. Simons on the map.”

² *At Home on St. Simons*, p. 11.

Jingle Davis, a noted journalist and author whose family roots here go back generations, offers these thoughts on Price's influence on area tourism:

"I have no doubt that Eugenia Price's St. Simons trilogy — *Beloved Invader*, *New Moon Rising* and *Lighthouse* — introduced millions of readers all over the world to the lush beauty and fascinating history of the island. Because Genie and her long-time companion and fellow writer Joyce Blackburn presented St. Simons in such an appealing light, thousands of visitors trekked to this Golden Isle and others, providing a major boost to the coastal economy. Some stayed, just as Genie and Joyce did, and made the island their part-time or permanent home.

"Genie and Joyce worried that St. Simons might be loved to death by all the newcomers drawn to the island by their books. To help compensate, they gave time, talent, and money to local causes. They spoke often to local clubs and organizations. They became environmental activists, helping to publicize the need to protect the fragile flora and fauna of St. Simons and the Georgia coast. They promoted the arts and humanitarian causes. That legacy continues through the Communities of Coastal Georgia Foundation which holds the copyrights for more than 50 of their books. Well after their deaths, royalties continue to fund foundation activities.

"Their warmth and generosity helped dozens of islanders in financial and emotional need. They supported one writer while she completed her first novel, which later won high praise from critics and national awards.

"Eugenia Price and Joyce Blackburn were major island assets."

Price's first land purchase on St. Simons were two plots in Christ Church Cemetery. One day she and Joyce were visited by Dutch and Mary Gould Everett at their 11th Street East Beach cottage (where they stayed while looking for island land to build on). Mary, a granddaughter of Horace Bunch Gould, said, "Get out your checkbooks!" Two grave plots located between the Everett's and Berta and Doug Taylor's Christ Church cemetery plots had become available. "It's...right on Gould row," Mary explained, "and we don't want any outsiders in there. We want you!"³

Eugenia Price died of congestive heart failure on May 28, 1996 at the age of 79. Joyce Blackburn passed away in 2009, having reached the age of 88. They are buried side-by-side in those plots between their beloved Gould friends, one hundred feet from Anna Gould Dodge and Rev. Anson G. P. Dodge, Jr.

Price's tombstone reads, "Light and eternity and love and all are mine at last."

³ *At Home on St. Simons*, p. 26.