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Klippert to Speak at Moraga Library

By Sophie Braccini



Zoe Klippert Photo Sophie Braccini

Zoe Klippert has lived in Moraga for close to 40 years. She was an original member of the prestigious San Francisco Chamber Singers (now Volti San Francisco), and among other jobs was a contract editor for the UC Berkeley Lawrence Hall of Science. For the past 10 years she has immersed herself in the life and work of Catherine Hubback, an English woman who lived from 1818 to 1877. It all started when Klippert came in contact with 44 letters that Hubback, who immigrated to United States in her fifties, wrote to her family in England. The result is a book, "An Englishwoman in California: The Letters of Catherine Hubback," which Klippert will discuss at the Moraga Library on April 16th.

In the summer of 1998 Klippert took a three-week class in Oxford that changed her life. The class, "Recovering the Past," was taught by David Vaisey using documents belonging to the Bodleian Library, where he was Librarian Emeritus. On the second day of the class, the participants were offered different sets of original diaries or letters. Klippert chose Hubback's letters, unaware that Hubback was Jane Austen's niece and had written 10 novels; but she immediately spotted the letters' historical value as Hubback described everyday life in the 19th century Bay Area and contained the spirited perspective of a middle-age English woman on the American society of the time.

"The letters had been acquired by the library in 1977, but to do the research someone had to be from this area," said Klippert, who felt that she was the right person to do it. As a young woman, she studied English literature at Cornell University and then earned a master's degree in teaching from Harvard. It took a lot of persistence and support from her family because she quit her job to dedicate herself to research.

Klippert formed an emotional bond with Hubback's story, as evidenced by five trips to England, long hours spent in libraries, genealogical and historical societies, and time spent studying Hubback's novels for insights into the life of the reserved English woman. "It was a lot of work, but I enjoyed it immensely," she said, "now I know more about her than about some of my own ancestors, and somehow I feel related to her."

Hubback was indeed an interesting woman, with real struggles and hardships, and sometimes surprising opinions on Americans that were not free of prejudice. Klippert's work allows the reader to enter Hubback's world and relate to her experience easily. Her intimate understanding of Hubback and her family is accessible and informative.

Vaisey suggested that the Bodleian Library publish the work. "This book is the result of being at the right place at the right time," says an unpretentious Klippert, "because it is an academic book published in England, it is a bit pricey. But many libraries have purchased it, including the Contra Costa County Library."

Klippert will be at the Moraga Library on April 16, from 2:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m. Her book is available online at Amazon.com.

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