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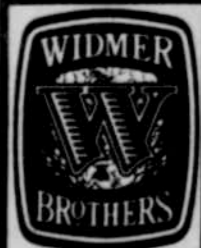
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BOOKS

Ahead of her time

A new biographical study of a sexy, radical poet

BY ORIANA GREEN

I received a volume of poetry by Edna St. Vincent Millay for my 12th birthday. As a teen-ager I memorized many of her poems and loved to go off into the woods and shout them to the sky—an inherently natural thing to do, since her work is so rooted in her spiritual connection to nature.

Although I wholeheartedly recommend readers acquaint themselves with the poetry of Millay, it is the extraordinary life she led in the first half of the 20th century that fascinates most. An early feminist and radical innovator, she blithely changed American ideas about what women could do simply by living an unorthodox life.

Millay was as adventurous in her sexuality as she was in all other aspects, and all her most important early connections were with women.

Savage Beauty (Random House, 2001; \$29.95 hardcover) is the new authorized biography by Nancy Milford, who had access to all of the poet's papers through her only surviving sister, Norma. The author spent 20 years plowing through what sounds like truckloads of disorganized material to write this book and has conveyed the 58 years of her restless life in chronological order.

What's missing is historical context to emphasize the rarity of many of Millay's actions and to interpret her experience for 21st century readers. Nowhere is this lack more felt than in the recounting of her college years at Vassar.

Millay entered college at age 21 on a full scholarship. She often chafed at the strict rules designed for younger women. Petite, with flaming red hair and brilliant green eyes, she presented herself with great drama—dressing with flair and exhibiting the posture of one who is steeped in self-confidence.

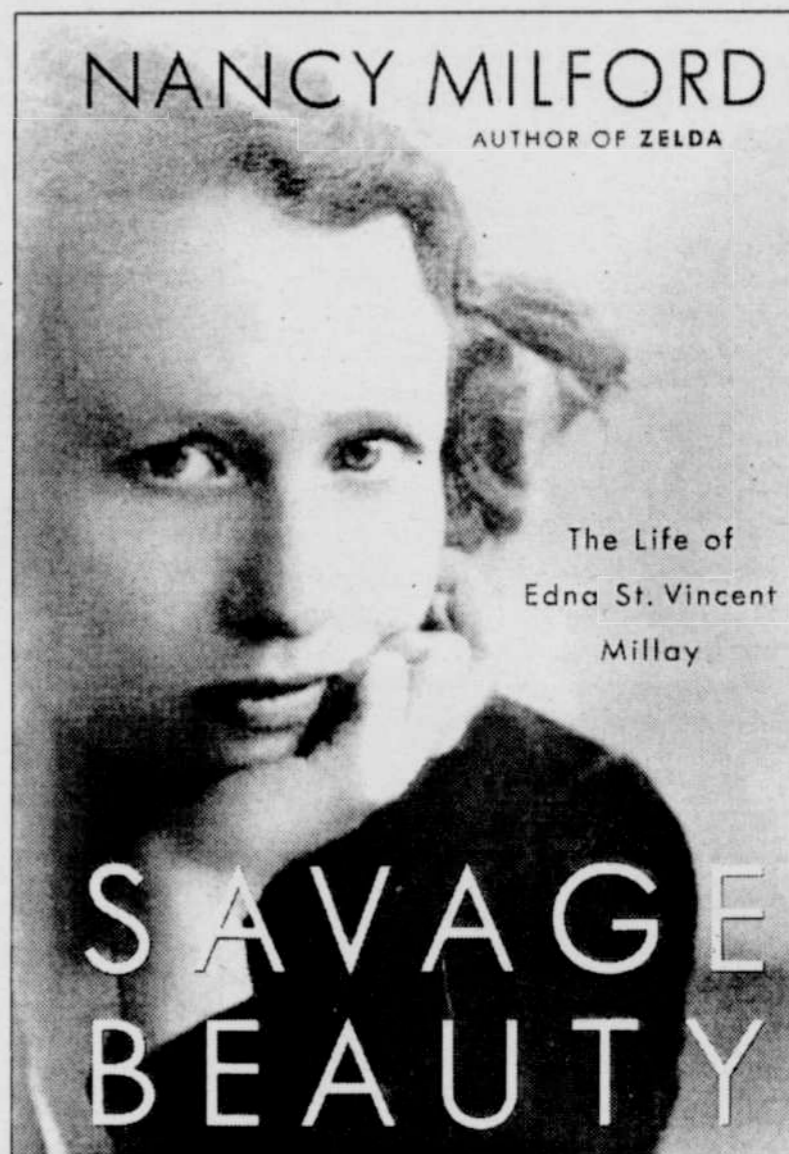
In fact, she frequently jeopardized her education by defiantly maintaining overt affairs with female classmates, who besieged her with passionate love letters, such as this one: "How I want to come back to you—yes I know I have just left—but the longing in me never leaves and this is a night that seems for you and me."

At the same time, Millay corresponded with one of her many male suitors to whom she had, as Milford pejoratively writes, "confessed" her love of women. Arthur Hooley's response reflected the devaluing of lesbian relationships at that time: "Even if you had cared for a girl, and even if you had given yourself (so far as you could), I do not think I should care greatly."

Millay, at least, was offended by that and replied to the insensitive Brit, "God forbid that I should give my heart to a dyspeptic Englishman!"

After college Millay and her sister moved to barely habitable rooms in Greenwich Village, already a haven for free spirits. The poet wrote of a novel method to acquaint her sister with the language she'd hear there: "So we sat darn-ing socks and practiced the use of profanity. Needle in, shit. Needle out, piss. Needle in, fuck. Needle out, cunt."

Despite her diminutive size, Millay never



saw herself as a victim. When two young men tried to force their attentions on the sisters out walking in the country, Edna (or Vincent, as she preferred to be called) summoned them closer, saying directly: "It is true that we have vaginas and breasts, but we are walking alone together because it pleases us to and that is our right. We have selected to be alone, and we intend to so remain." The men took off like rabbits.

In 1921 Millay was commissioned to write a play for the 50th anniversary of Vassar. *The Lamp and the Bell* centered on the love between two young women who, to make the subject somewhat less scandalous, became stepsisters. It was typical of her to forge ahead so boldly—and appropriately, actually, because Vassar was, as she had written, a hotbed of Sapphic intrigue.

Although Millay eventually married, it was an open marriage to a bi man, and they for some time enjoyed a three-way relationship with another bi man. And she always had admiring women in her life whom she bedded whenever she wanted.

As one of the first women to tour the country regularly giving public readings, the first with her own national radio program and the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, Millay was one of the most famous women in the country during the 1930s. And undoubtedly the most liberated. She was living the life of a sexual revolutionary decades ahead of her time, blazing a trail for future generations.

By Millay's last decade, she was caught under the twin spells of alcohol and morphine. Although knowing all of the sordid details of the poet's life is not a requisite for appreciating her writing, it does certainly place it in a vastly different light, helping us value even more the remarkable body of work she created under sometimes harrowing circumstances. **JM**