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American handicraft, local history,
Eugene and Portland Oregon, Appalachia,
New England, New York, 20th century
American social and political history.

Allen H. Eaton, Dean of American Craft

by David Van Dommelen

Professor emeritus, Pennsylvania State University

**The only biography of mid-20th century
America's leading handicrafts advocate.**

“Van Dommelen has contributed a fascinating chapter in the history of American craft with this biography of a gentle visionary who believed in the power of art to change lives, and devoted his life to pursuing social justice through ‘handicraft’. Eaton’s vision is still very relevant today.”

Janet L. McCall,

Executive Director, Society for Contemporary Craft

“...the amazing true life story of Allen Eaton, a social worker by training who brought global respect to the crafts produced by the people of southern Appalachia, New England, immigrants, and even the prisoners of Japanese-American relocation camps. Black-and-white photographs enrich this soulful testimony of one man’s search for beauty within human creation, and his drive to share that beauty beyond boundaries. A highly recommended and uniquely heartwarming addition to art history and biography.”

Midwest Book Review

Culmination of 20 years of research.

Thanks to this well researched and heartfelt biography, Allen H. Eaton (1878-1962) retakes his much-deserved place in the history of American craft. A tireless advocate for craft, Eaton almost single-handedly established the relationship between art, beauty and life, a relationship not previously acknowledged or appreciated until he pointed it out. His work brought prominence and respect to handicrafts produced by the people of Oregon, Southern Appalachia, New England, immigrants, the blind and even prisoners in Japanese-American internment camps. Widely known as the “Dean of American Crafts”, this is his story.

Van Dommelen spent over twenty years researching the life of Eaton and conducting a number of in-person interviews with Eaton’s colleagues, family and friends as he developed this first-ever biography.

Eaton influenced politics as well as art.

As a member of the Oregon legislature during the early 20th century, Eaton was a tireless advocate for the referendum system of government now such a popular feature of the western political landscape.

Some things never change.

Eaton was forced out of the Oregon state legislature for bucking corporate interests in favor of public safety. He was also fired from his university faculty position, branded a traitor for associating with some who expressed dissenting political opinions during wartime. (The university eventually awarded him an honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 1938, recognizing not only its error in dismissing him but also his later achievements apart from the university.) These heartbreaking events caused Eaton and his family to leave their beloved Oregon and head east.

His Life’s work.

In New York, Eaton joined the new Russell Sage Foundation, a platform from which he launched his true life’s work, the elevation of handicrafts. His gentle demeanor, deep insights, and integrity earned him the respect of his colleagues, craftspeople, and the powerful alike. His most ironic friendship, perhaps, was with Eleanor Roosevelt who penned a foreword to one of his most controversial works, *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire*, a celebration of crafts in the Japanese-American internment camps (it was Franklin Roosevelt who signed the executive order creating the camps during World War II).

From the book:

Jerome Nathanson, eulogizing Eaton in 1962 said: *If any human being in my experience ever enriched people's lives, Allen did... He was a person of great courage.*

Helen Keller, in the foreword to Eaton's *Beauty for the Sighted and the Blind*: *He affords an impressive, concrete realization of life that will enrich the blind and discard the remoteness which used to be their lot... Mr. Eaton will build up the delightful subjects of common interest between the blind and their seeing fellows.*

From the citation for the honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Berea College: *Student and scholar who has found beauty in the common creations of man and interpreted the arts of mind and hand for the enrichment of life for all.*

On Eaton's *Beauty Behind Barbed Wire*: *...a story without parallel in this country.*

From the citation for the honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Oregon: *In recognition of his foresight and courage as legislator, citizen and public servant. His tireless endeavor in promoting an appreciation of beauty and art and creative craftsmanship, and his sympathetic and enlightened understanding of the vital contributions which foreign-born citizens have made to the culture and civilization of America.*

On Eaton's departure from the legislature: *...there is little doubt that Eaton's involvement in important policy-making legislature was deep, and there is every right to consider the fact that big industry and banking concerns would attempt to unseat him from the (Oregon) State Legislature and make him appear undesirable in his community by any method they found most convenient.*



Clockwise from upper left: Wooden pig at the Franklin Delano Library. Buffalo Arts and Crafts Exhibition from *Immigrant Gifts to American Life*¹. Wooden rooster photo by A. Burton Carnes¹. Rural Arts Exhibition photo by Theodor Horydczak¹. Photo of Eaton in 1955 by Edward DuPuy. Eaton in India, 1960¹. Rural Arts Exhibition photo by Theodor Horydczak¹. (¹ Courtesy of Elizabeth and Martha Eaton.)



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