

Birds on My Brush Book Review

A compelling account of an unknown artist's life!

The life and times of 18th-century wildlife artist Elizabeth Gwillim are shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. She was born in England in 1763 and moved to India with her husband in the early 1800s, where she worked diligently to perfect her art.

She never achieved public recognition in her lifetime and she died, an obscure, undiscovered artist, in her mid-40s; it appeared, for the longest time, as though her art may have gone to the grave with her.

Nearly two centuries later, Gwillim's wildlife watercolours were "discovered" in a London, England art shop. Today, in death, Gwillim has achieved what she could not in life; her wildlife art, notably her precision sketches of birds, has been widely praised as among the finest of its era. Gwillim's work now forms part of the Blacker-Wood Collection of Zoology and Natural History at McGill University in Montreal, one of Canada's pre-eminent schools of higher learning.

Carole M. Lidgold, a Canadian writer fascinated with Gwillim's life and art, has painted a fascinating portrait of Gwillim's life in her new, fact-based fictional novel entitled *Birds on My Brush*. Lidgold has taken what is known of Gwillim's history and has built around the edges, crafting a fully-realized novel from the sketchy framework of Gwillim's remarkable life.

She has created a lead character, Sarah Purcell, utilizing the Purcell character as a stand-in for Gwillim, and producing a sweeping, engrossing tale that lovers of art and history will find both hugely enjoyable and dramatically memorable.

The story covers the artist's life from the early years in England, through the productive artistic period in India, to the point of the artist's comparatively early death. Along the way, this much is made very clear: author Lidgold's fascination with Gwillim's life and artwork shines brightly throughout the novel's 280 pages. A particular bonus for readers is that *Birds on My Brush* offers up not only some factual context of the details of Gwillim's life, but also some representative samples of her artistic work.

Lidgold is an accomplished writer, whose stories typically brim with life and vitality. *Birds on My Brush* offers something beyond that – an historic and artistic integrity that takes readers well back in time to contemplate the challenging life of an artist who produced first-rate work, but couldn't break out from the prison of artistic obscurity.

The novel is a well-constructed triumph. It is a triumph that the artist herself could imagine only in her dreams.

Reviewed By Anonymous Reader