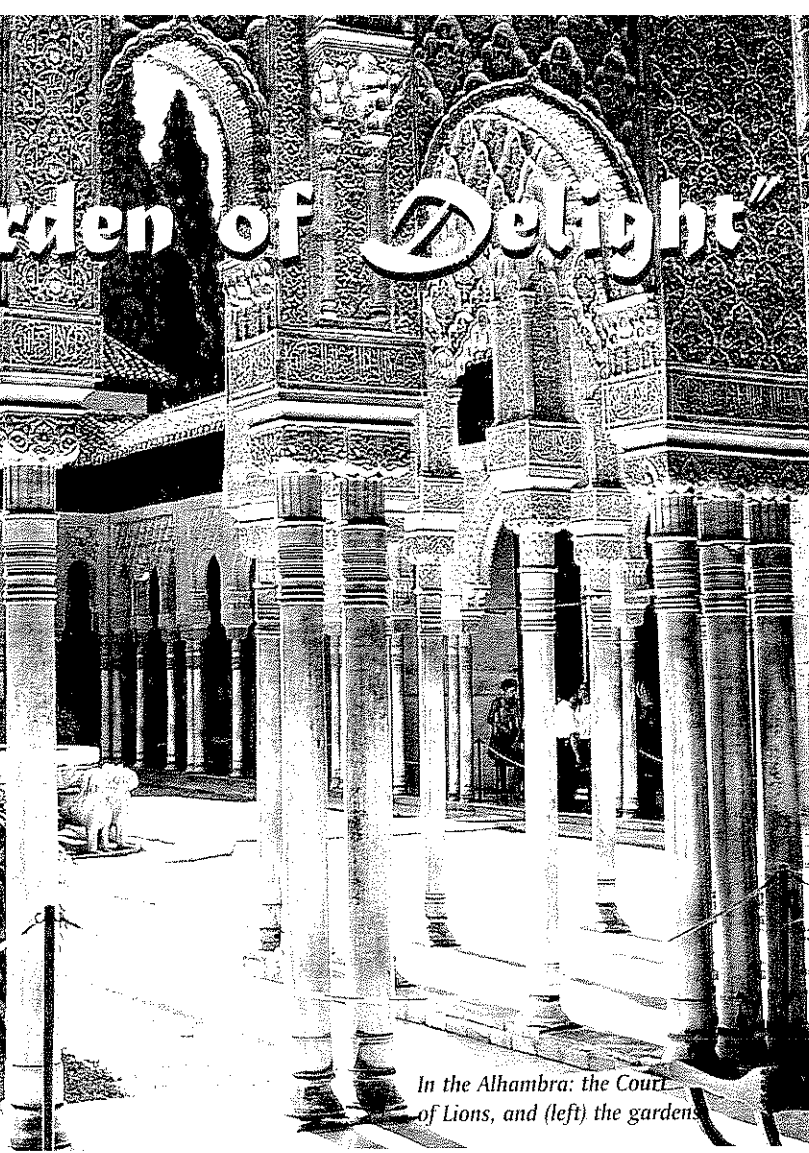


# Spain: "A Garden of Delight"



In the Alhambra: the Court of Lions, and (left) the gardens

## Researching the Life of Katharine Lee Bates in Spain

by Melina M. Ponder, Professor of English

*It is June 1, 2004 and I am enjoying the cool morning breezes in a garden shaded by palm trees and lined with pale pink roses. Around me are the remains of Moorish palaces and fortresses within the walls of the storied Alhambra, built mostly in the 13th and 14th centuries, in southern Spain.*

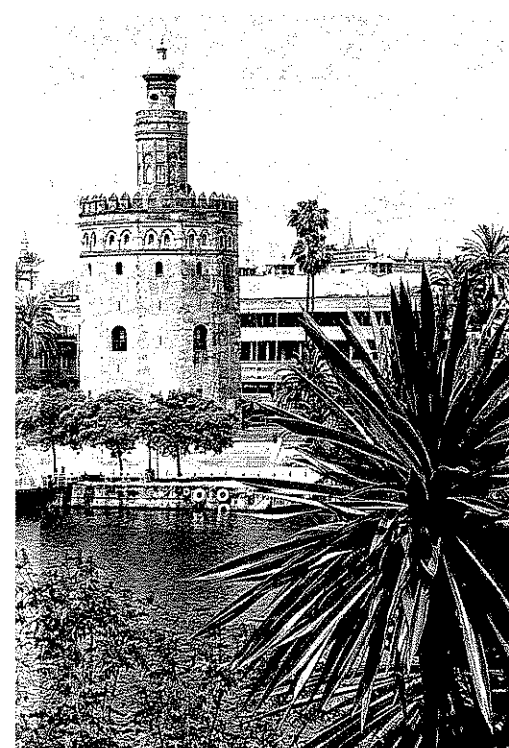
I imagine Katharine Lee Bates (1859–1929), poet of "America the Beautiful," exploring its beauty in 1899, listening to the sounds of cool fountains and rills that flow down from the snow-covered ridges of the Sierra Nevada mountains into these terraced gardens and courtyards high above the town of Granada.

Miss Bates lived in Spain immediately after the Spanish-American War, sending letters of her "impressions" of this country known for its exotic and romantic culture back to *The New York Times* and then writing two books on Spain. She had come to study Spanish drama and to see a newly established school for Spanish girls supported by several women's colleges, including Wellesley College, where she was Professor of English.

As her biographer, I have been on her trail in her native village of Falmouth on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, at Wellesley College, at Oxford, England, and at Pike's Peak, Colorado. I could see how each place had widened her horizons. Now with the help of my Spanish-speaking daughter, Abby, I wanted to see Spain through Miss Bates's eyes,

Like her, I loved the elegant grace of the Alhambra's Moorish gardens and airy rooms, designed to give pleasures to the senses as one journeys through their archways and along their shaded galleries. As Bates wrote, "*Still Arabian arches span the gorge [of the Darro river], and many of the toppling old houses that lean over the swift, mountain-born current...are beautiful with arabesque and fretwork, carven niches, delicate columns and open patios, where fountains still gush and orange blossoms still shed fragrance.*"

As Miss Bates had done, we climbed the narrow streets between the white-washed houses of the Albaicín quarter opposite the Alhambra, where "*...the exceeding beauty of the view at first claimed all our power of seeing. Below was the gray sweep of the city and beyond the fruitful plain of Granada, its vivid green shading into a far-off dimness like the sea.*" Where Bates had met fortune-



Seville, "La Torre del Oro," the Golden Tower



In the Alhambra: Reflection Pool



A street in Seville

telling gypsies, we listened to flamenco guitar in a café serving both almond cakes and hookahs for a special smoke!

On we went to Córdoba, first colonized by Julius Caesar, familiar to Bates from her teaching, with its Roman architecture and artifacts.

Wandering in its famous Moorish mosque that surrounds its subsequent Catholic cathedral, its courtyard of orange trees, and minaret, we saw, like Bates, "...in that weird half-light the marvellous forest of pillars—hundreds of columns—granite, serpentine, porphyry, jasper, marbles of every kind and color—seemed to be dreaming of those pagan temples, in Rome, in Athens, in Carthage, from which, in the days of Arab splendor, they had been pilfered by the victorious Calyphs of Córdoba."

I then fell in love with Seville's welcoming people and beauties, like Miss Bates, who wrote: "And when, at last, we saw...the world-praised Giralda, the Moorish bell-tower of the cathedral, soaring pink into a purple sky, we felt as if we were really arrived in fairyland."

The maze-like "echoing streets of cities founded some thousand or fifteen hundred years ago" were "a living picture book" to us, as they had been to her, of medieval walled neighborhoods, their balconies now overflowing with pink and red geraniums. We went to sleep at night, as Bates had, in an old, beautiful Seville home built around courtyards of fountains and bougainvilleas.

Like Bates, we found that "Seville sight-seeing is no brief matter" and also enjoyed "Las Sierpes, too narrow for carriages, but boasting the gayest shop windows and merriest cafés." We enjoyed some of the same food, reviving ourselves after serious shopping by dipping "crisp dainties...the Andalusian version of twisted doughnuts" into "cups of chocolate as thick as flannel."

While we did not need chaperones to enjoy the big tapas festival, sangria, and watching two exciting flamenco dance performances, we did come to feel at home in our little plaza, and

quickly got used to being greeted by "Hola!" each morning as we ate our breakfast under the trees.\*

Like Bates, I began to feel changed by my time in Seville: "The Sultana of the South lifted her gleaming coronets of domes and pinnacles above such a kingdom of idle, delicious mirth...Our hereditary bits of Plymouth Rock were melted up in that fervent heat...we shall ever go homesick for Seville, for her palm trees and orange gardens, her narrow streets like lanes of shadow, her tiled and statted patios, with caged birds singing answer to the ripple of fountain...her fragrances of rose and jessamine, her poetic sense of values."

Seeing Bates's favorite Golden Tower from which Christopher Columbus and the famous "Silver Fleets" sailed to the New World, I understood that in Seville, she recognized that she too was an explorer in a world far larger than her own nation, beautiful as America was, "from sea to shining sea."

In Spain, Bates came to feel part of a global homeland. She wanted her readers, old and young, to "imagine how it would feel" to be Spanish. It was the "graciousness of Spanish manners," and the warmth and charm of its people, in addition to its history and beauty, that she wanted to convey.

No wonder. When our waiter realized we were finishing our last bowl of gazpacho, he unexpectedly brought a complimentary plate of desserts to us, wiping his eyes at our imminent departure.

As Bates wrote of Spain:

"How had we lived so long without it?"

(All quotations are from Katharine Lee Bates's books on Spain: *Spanish Highways and Byways* and *In Sunny Spain*.)

Above: Katharine Lee Bates circa 1900, courtesy of Wellesley College Archives. Photos by author and her daughter, Abigail Klima.

