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Poet Taylor Graham began focusing her work on Elihu Burritt in 2006. Burritt, born in 1810, was a blacksmith who became a world traveler and peace advocate.

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Poet's fascination with Elihu Burritt defines her career

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Taylor Graham admits to having an obsession with Elihu Burritt.

Graham has written more than 100 poems about a man who – though practically unknown today – was a famous American 150 years ago.

Trained as a blacksmith, Burritt became a world traveler, a consul to England appointed by Abraham Lincoln and a reader of 50 languages – including Sanskrit – all self-taught.

Graham's poetic dedication might be merely curious, except for a few facts:

- She is a descendant, albeit indirect, of Burritt.
- This year is the bicentennial of his birth, and Central Connecticut State University in his hometown plans a celebration.
- Graham is quite probably the most distinguished poet in her community, El Dorado County.

"Graham has worked outside the official world of poetry, and she has never been given anything like the attention she deserves," said Dana Gioia, former head of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Gioia's response came by e-mail in response to questions about Graham, who contributed two poems to "California Poetry," which Gioia co-edited.

"Although her independence has cost her external honors in the back-slapping, favor-trading world of Po-Biz," Gioia added, "it has also given her the clarity and freedom to write as no one else can manage."

As he suggests, Graham is not tucked into academia, the haven of most successful American poets.

She's no cloistered Emily Dickinson, either, and contributes a lot to El Dorado's poetry community.

Cecilia Outman, a participant in one of Graham's groups, calls her "a professional poet who still cares to make herself available to people. It's really something."

Aside from her poetry, Graham has spent decades working with search and rescue dogs, including harrowing experiences after the 1985 Mexico earthquake in the effort to find survivors among the dead buried in the rubble.

She dresses in work clothes, as befits the country life she lives with dogs, sheep and her husband, Hatch, outside Placerville.

"When I was little, I was told I had this famous ancestor," she said. "'He taught himself 100 languages.' That was the story."

It took a long time before Graham, now 65, began working on her project on Burritt.

In 10th grade, she decided she would be a poet after studying Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar."

At USC, she got a master's degree in comparative literature but didn't write poetry.

"For some reason," Graham said dryly, "school didn't seem to agree with my muse."

After she started, it took 10 years to write anything she felt was worth keeping.

But when Gioia edited a literary review at Stanford, he took one of her works.

"Although it was a challenging and disturbing poem, it was so good that I knew we had to publish it," he said.

Graham has published many more in journals around the country.

She was pleasantly surprised in 2005, when she won a contest and Texas Review Press published a whole book of her poems, "The Downstairs Dance Floor."

It is printed under her poet's name, Taylor Graham, though she is Judy Graham to friends.

Elihu Burritt took over in 2006.

"I'd written, just out of the blue, a couple of poems about him, angry about an election," she said. "I sort of looked to him for guidance."

He was an advocate for world peace in the 1800s and traveled widely to speak to the common man about it.

He also walked from London to the far end of Scotland, to get a feel for how the people there lived.

Graham's poem "Ten Hours at the Forge" speaks of how Burritt, "the Learned Blacksmith," read as he worked.

Her "To Fire the Forge" is a sharp villanelle – a poetic form – about Burritt in a British coal mining town.

Her poem "Fugitive" tells of his generosity.

Together, they are a kind of poetic biography.

"The Elihu poems deserve really widespread recognition," said Moira Magneson, a Placerville friend of Graham's who is also a poet and English instructor at Sacramento City College.

They should be a book, Magneson said. Graham would like that, but she's not counting on it.

"Elihu is my obsession," she said. "I can't imagine ever being quite through with the project.

"I'm having too much fun."

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