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Philo Calhoun

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IN MEMORIAM:
LAURA E. RICHARDS
1850 - 1943

JANUARY 14, 1943

*"There will be feasting in the House today.
Get out the silver service for the tea;
Fine linen and the old mahogany.
Put toast and crisp sweet cookies on the tray.*

*There will be music — whimsical and gay —
A chanty first and then a campfire glee.
There will be friends. Stout hearts that love the sea.
Great names. And children from across the way."*

*The golden streets were silent. The glad choir
Was still to hear God's voice — wings quiet, furled —
"For one," He said, "Who saw in all my world
The Glory of my Coming . . . Build a fire —
Light every candle under Heaven's dome.
My daughter, Laura Richards, has come home."*

PHILO CALHOUN



A LATE PHOTOGRAPH OF LAURA E. RICHARDS

Taken by Philo Calhoun in 1941

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LAURA ELIZABETH HOWE RICHARDS

This lady of redoubtable name and fame wrote over a hundred books and assuredly lived over a hundred years, despite her demise at 92. Life burned with Pater's hard gem-like flame within her. One tribute to her invincible zeal points out that "In 1940, well past ninety, this frail-appearing but stout-hearted daughter of the woman who wrote 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,' published stirring verses on the British heroism at Dunkerque. And in 1941 the daughter of the man who had aided the Greeks in their struggle for independence a century before dedicated a poem to the modern Greek resistance against the Fascist aggressors." Stronger than any Great Wall of China were the impassable barricades of her spirit.

Her initiation and growth as a professional writer of children's literature came about in a quite typical way for her. She had written her first story when ten, but merely for amusement. After the birth of her first baby she "made up jingles for her." Some of these she eventually sent to St. NICHOLAS—"and that was the beginning." Seven babies in their time called forth many more jingles, as well as stories. As they became big girls and boys, she turned out stories and verses for older children. And the spiral continued until she had published biography, autobiography, and practically every other form of writing. Singleminded love of family was the core of her being.

But this did not curtail her other relationships. Perhaps the most eloquent indication of the spread of her mind and heart was the diversity of her friendships: Edwin Arlington Robinson, Theodore Roosevelt, Alexander Woollcott, Conrad Aiken, Ogden Nash. There was something of all of these in her unwavering flame.

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MORE STEPS WESTWARD: A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF LAURA E. RICHARDS

By PHILO CALHOUN

As becomes an elderly and unregenerate sentimentalist I am commencing the writing of this paper on the desk of Laura E. Richards at Roscahegan, her last and well-loved summer home at the tip of Indian Point in Georgetown, Maine. It was here that I first met her and it is here that, having acquired this lovely place, my wife and I have lately found ourselves the custodians of a happy tradition, and the humble inheritors of a very special brand of beauty and peace.

It was the Skipper who really discovered the Point. Henry Richards was little more than a boy in the late sixties, when the stately Kennebec River which flowed almost past his dooryard, no longer a highroad from the woods and farms of Maine to the battlefields of Virginia, became again a way of happiness and tranquility.

Georgetown Island is the last land to the eastward before the river storms past Seguin Light into the North Atlantic, and Indian Point is the easternmost of three fingers of rocks and spruce at the river end of its ragged coastline. In those far-off days there was no road to the Point, so that when Henry and his brother Robert sailed into Sagadahoc Bay on one of their voyages of discovery the shore was a pristine wilderness of unforgettable beauty.

Tides, winds and weather must all be just right to make the Bay by sail, and the trip by sea was not repeated. But H.R. never forgot the island, even though more than half a century went by before his second visit, this time by car and mostly over a pair of dusty ruts which only by law and extreme courtesy could be called a road. It seemed impossible that after all those years the Point should be still virginal, but, except for one or two inconspicuous white houses on the lee shore, so it was, and so, at the end of the Point at least, it is today.

It was not until 1933, at the age of 85, that the Skipper gave up Merryweather, the camp in the Belgrade district at which, under his inspired tutelage, two generations of boys had ab-

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sorbed some of the wonders of woodcraft and sportsmanship and books. And it was then that two of his children, Rosalind and John, remembered Indian Point as one of the Skipper's "places." L.E.R. says that he never forgot any of these. "They became his spiritual property: indeed he is in this wise one of the largest landed proprietors in the country, Plymouth Grant and Kennebec Purchase being alike largely his own, with no taxes to pay." Now, for a few of these acres, spiritual title materialized into actual possession, taxes began, and the Skipper acquired a new interest in life. He located and designed the house and supervised every detail of its building.

With the sea a stone's throw on three sides of the house lot, and a foghorn just off shore, H.R.'s soubriquet seemed singularly appropriate. Indeed, when I first heard him called Skipper, I never doubted a genuinely salty provenance. More than that, it would not have needed much to convince me that he was the original of Captain January himself. His white beard was of a pattern strongly reminiscent of the cover drawing in the book, and one looked around hopefully for the oilskins and sou'wester to complete the picture. He seldom talked much, and it took a bit of knowing to discover that he was really by profession an architect, by necessity a business man, by instinct a teacher, by nature a lover of all outdoors, but alas, no lighthouse keeper, ex or otherwise. I found out too that the title "Skipper" antedated even Merryweather days. Originally indeed it was a title bestowed by L.E.R. herself, an affectionate concession to connubial authority.

The house at Roscahegan — six bedrooms, an enormous living room, a kitchen, two bathrooms and an ample screened porch — was completed late in the summer of 1934. It was not too different in design from the usual large shore cottage of the early nineteen hundreds, except for four odd little glassed-in turrets, two on each long side, whose sole purpose was to brighten the living room. H.R. confessed that these were a rather nostalgic touch of Nuremberg; tribute, not wholly professional, to a sentimental journey in the seventies with a new bride.

There was already a tiny two-room shack on the Point when the Richards family took over. Empty then, except for a rude built-in cot and a pot-bellied iron stove, it was until lately the

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castle of Horatio Nelson Drake, a bearded old squatter who eked out a precarious livelihood from his fishlines and lobster pots. He had moved down to the shore after the death of his wife; said he couldn't bear the village without her — "it was just too lonesome!" "Uncle Raish" was the stuff of which legends are made, and at the prevailing pace of legends in this neighborhood it is reasonably certain that in a couple of generations he will merge as a close kin to the Admiral, proper heir to the glory of Trafalgar, and a sort of benign retired pirate in his own right. Be that as it may, the fact is that in the mid-twenties he was a sturdy, literate, friendly old gentleman, bound and beholden to the sea which he had fought and loved for eighty years.

John and the Skipper saw the old man a few times, but when the Point went to the Richards family, physical and mental decrepitude had already translated the Captain to a daughter's home up the coast, where he died not long afterwards. But the place still stands, much as Uncle Raish left it. The board on which he printed "Snug Harbor" is even now over the doorway.

In 1931, in her eighty-second year, Laura Elizabeth Richards finished and published *Stepping Westward*, charming autobiography of a happy, active and productive life. A Bostonian by birth, she had moved to Gardiner, Maine, with her husband in 1876, five years after their marriage. Henry Richards and his forebears had deep roots in that community; many a great name in the long history of the state — pioneer, scholar, soldier or statesman — was an offshoot of his family tree. And the daughter of a distinguished humanist and of the scholar-patriot who had electrified a nation with her "Battle Hymn of the Republic," could not fail to find warm welcome in such surroundings, particularly if married to a Richards, and even more particularly if she were Laura Elizabeth, an eager mind enriched with a great heart.

I had little personal contact with Mrs. Richards as Gardiner's first citizeness. Part of the long record of her untiring devotion to the civic and cultural interest of that justly prideful community is compiled in *Laura E. Richards and Gardiner*, published by her friends and neighbors for her ninetieth birthday in 1940. Two or three times we had tea at her Gardiner home, the "Yellow House," during the eight years of our memorable

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friendship. I cannot recollect precisely what we had for tea, who was there, what was said. I think we only felt that we were privileged to sit at the feet of all New England, in its innermost sanctum.

That was long after we first met the Richards family. In 1935, the year after Roscahegan was completed, the center of Georgetown was Todd's Store, presided over by Will Todd, postmaster, town clerk, storekeeper, general factotum of the entire island. If one had Will's approval it was acceptance. If not, there were two, maybe three strikes against you. Fortunately, the final judgment took time. I never heard him say a really unkind word about anyone, but I, in common with other friends, sometimes detected a certain lack of enthusiasm which might be appraised with fair accuracy.

Will fits into this record on several counts. His father owned the Point and a good many other acres before a real estate syndicate took over. It was the elder Todd who gave tacit permission to Uncle Raish to live there, but the name "Roscahegan" was Will's suggestion. It is Algonquin for "rough water," and reputedly was the first name for the whole island. The suffix is not unfamiliar in Maine geography — Monhegan is said to mean "beautiful water," Skowhegan, "falling water," among others.

The Richards family, gentlefolk in their own right and citizens of Maine to boot, had no trouble achieving a Class A status in Will's book. And a useful accolade it was, too, because the Store was a sort of combination information center and immigration bureau with its own technique of screening outsiders. I am sure Will would never actually misdirect such people as mendicants, salesmen, curiosity seekers or obviously inconvenient visitors, but I would hazard a guess that his report of road conditions and obscure turn-offs might occasionally be colored by his estimate of the inquirer. The net result was a not inconsiderable contribution to privacy and tranquility.

However, for accredited householders Todd's Store is the social center of the island, and mailtime, about half past eleven in the morning, is when you greet old friends and start making new ones. Thus it was that on one of these occasions, in the summer of 1936, Josephine Shain, friend of many years' standing, presented me to Miss Rosalind, L.E.R.'s daughter, whom I

came to know as the gentle and tireless mind, heart and spirit of the entire Richards household. She was shopper, arranger, buffer, manager, "cheerer-up-er," among other functions. She had, and still has, a genius for giving the impression that her life is a comparatively arid vista punctuated happily by the oases of her meetings with you. I am not suggesting that she is not discriminating. She is that, and even fastidious, but her interest in people as such, and her sureness of the essential goodness of most of them, is an article of faith with her, and one not easily shaken.

So when Jo introduced us, and I mentioned that since the age of five I had successively fallen in love with practically all of L.E.R.'s little girl heroines, and was hopeful that the camaraderie of the island might embrace a meeting with their creator, I was promptly invited to tea, and accepted with what I suspect was almost indecent alacrity.

I have said this much about Rosalind, because from that first tea party at Roscahegan, I am unable to entirely separate Mrs. Richards and Rosalind in my thoughts. Fundamentally different as they were, together they suggested a curious symmetry, as though the one were an old, precious and very fragile museum piece, and the other its dedicated curator, prideful not only in the immense value of her charge but in its appearing only to the best advantage. One was sensible of a meticulous care of preparation, of dress, of entrance, of seating, of lights and shadows even. I think it was all quite unmediated, born only of gentle pride, and a lifetime of unrelenting selflessness.

At any rate there she was, eighty-six now, almost last of the great names which earned for Boston its title of Hub of the Universe, writer of tales, singer of songs, champion of noble living and brave dying, first lady of all New England. Her hair, soft, thick, pure white, was drawn back neatly, but not harshly, into a loose twist. Her skin was so finely wrinkled that in the dimly lighted room it seemed the texture of rose petal, faintly pink and clear as Dresden china.

Her dress was ankle-length, some small flower print in pastel colors, as I recall it, with a soft neckline centered in an old-fashioned brooch. As the afternoon grew cool, Rosalind laid a light shawl over her shoulders, and again you had the fleeting impression of a "fair linen cloth" shielding a sanctuary. It

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was pure period-piece down to her feet — which I guess was where Rosalind stopped and Laura Elizabeth took over. Sneakers here, clean, but worn and comfortable, and no apologies. (Rosalind tells me that about this time she and her mother were preparing to attend a rather formal reception in Augusta. Finally Mrs. Richards announced she was ready, and appeared in brocaded gray silk and lace, set off with her mother's pearls, — and — elkskin moccasins from L. L. Bean! R.R.: "Everything else looks absolutely right; but darling, aren't those rather funny shoes?" L.E.R.: "Yes, dear; and when you are in your eighties, you will find that you wear very funny shoes, because you have very funny feet!")

The blue eyes behind her rimless spectacles were friendly, but keen and bright, and she smiled with her whole face, with an effect almost roguish. I never heard her laugh beyond the point of a faint, infectious chuckle. The instincts of a lady may have had something to do with that. I fancy that Oliver Goldsmith's discouraging line on the subject was not unfamiliar. But it was not something missed. Her eyes were clear pools of merriment; even her smile seemed a mellow afterglow of laughter.

If Mrs. Richards had been in the pattern of most celebrities, even of an age far less than her impressive vintage, she would have needed no hearing aid. Reminiscing about the golden age of one's fame ordinarily requires only strong vocal chords and a series of polite listeners. But L.E.R. was not like that. She wanted to talk about you, not herself, and she particularly wanted to delve for whatever you had of mind, knowledge, human sympathy and talent for living. And pretending to no degree of clairvoyance she wanted to hear it from you. Her hearing device, however, was no great spur to conversation until you had become well accustomed to it. She called it her "snake," which was a rather terrifyingly accurate description. At one end was an ear appliance, at the other, a speaking tube, and in between was about two feet of pliable cable which appeared to stretch indefinitely when the tube was handed to you. Before you got used to it, you could hardly avoid the feeling that you were recording for posterity. My then small daughter Sally has told me that she felt as if her words were dropping dead somewhere along the snakeline, and she found herself

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talking in an excited highpitched rush in an effort to get them through alive.

Sally never forgot the later occasion when Mrs. Richards took her hand and said, "You know, Sally, when I was a young woman I sometimes visited a much older cousin, who once told me that one of her first memories was of being led out onto the veranda of her home to watch a procession. Finally a man rode by on a white horse, and her mother said, 'Look at him, my child! And all your life remember that you have seen General Washington!' So, Sally dear, you may tell your grandchildren one day, that when you were a girl you talked with someone who had known a woman who had seen George Washington. That might brighten up the history book, don't you think so, Sally?"

But I am getting away from that first tea party, which I should finish telling about, because it was more or less the prototype of others that summer and in the years that followed. Tea was brewed in a large old-fashioned china teapot, and I do not recall that it was ever very strong. But that mattered little because, although the ladies thinned out their tea still more with hot water, the gentlemen were invited to fortify theirs with a touch of New England rum. John was probably responsible for this mild depravity, and I sensed that L.E.R. felt that it lent a comforting lusty flavor to an occasion which would otherwise be a bit pallid for masculine tastes.

John was the youngest son of the house, and during the summer of these years was on holiday from St. Paul's School, where he was master of English for many years. That is, he was on holiday as much as John ever was, or is. Added to which, he was a vital part of the household at the Point. He hand-pumped water for years before electric service was available; he was the uncomplaining fireman, handyman, stevedore, messenger, and general diagnostician of all the strange ailments which bedevil the simplest appliances when they are fifteen miles from the nearest repair shop. And with all this John seemed to find time for reading and writing, making a garden, painting his boat, fishing in the bay or attending some civic affair or scholars' meeting in Gardiner. But there was always time for a warm concern in the welfare of his friends and a

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happy talent for adding to that privileged company. He is in retirement now, but still completely and contentedly busy.

John always had tea with us when he was at home; the Skipper less frequently. No one ever really apologized for this absence. I remember L.E.R. saying once, "I don't know where Mr. Richards is. Some afternoons he is trying to finish his biography and other times he is working on living to be a hundred. I'm not sure which it is today."

I found her reluctant to claim personal intimacy or even friendship with any of the great literary figures in the Boston of her girlhood. She grew up in an age when young people of a household, if permitted to sit at the table with guests, were expected to maintain a modest and respectful silence. It was not in her character to exploit and certainly not to exaggerate her largely formal contacts with friends of her parents. She has admitted to me that Dr. Holmes, Agassiz, Sumner, Booth, Emerson and others were not infrequently guests at the Howe dinner table, but I felt that she was disinclined, almost to the point of distaste, to enlarge on the bare facts. She makes no reference to such occasions in her autobiography. The publisher of that work, in the blurb on the dust cover, has this to say: "Among the friends with whom she grew up were the Hawthorne family, Louisa Alcott, and many other literary figures of Boston, Cambridge and Concord." In her own copy of this book, L.E.R. has penciled opposite this statement: "No! Neither Hawthorne nor Alcotts were more than valued, but seldom seen acquaintances." I would guess that this was particularly true of the Alcott family. *Little Women* was not permitted reading in the Richards household, by reason of "certain vulgarities."

Sometimes, when the weather was warm and sunny, Mrs. Richards would like to sit in the sturdy old porch rocker on the broad veranda. It was here, I think, that we had our best talks. We had gradually emerged from the status of great lady and humble admirer, and acquired a more comfortable sort of friendship, and interest in each other as people, each with ideas and devotions and loyalties, with ambitions realized and otherwise, with accomplishments and stumblings. She talked often of her parents, in whom she had a large and understandable pride. I once showed her a letter of Mrs. Howe, which I

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had procured from some antiquarian. "Dear Mamma's own handwriting!" she exclaimed, and kissed the letter before she handed it back. "Read it to me, and tell me where you found it," she begged.

Although her respect and admiration for her mother was genuine and unbounded, I am sure it was her father who commanded her passionate devotion. Between them there was a community of spirit, a sense of comradeship and unspoken understanding. And hers was a lovely sort of hero worship for the stalwart young man who at large sacrifice gave his talents to the cause of the Greek patriots, for the careful, patient physician who brought usefulness and happiness to the blind and deaf Laura Bridgman, for the humanitarian to whom human need and injustice was a continual challenge.

L.E.R. congratulated me when I told her I had bought a first printing of her mother's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." I suspect she was a little weary of being interviewed about the Battle Hymn. But she kissed me when I said I had her father's *An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution*. I wish I might have shown her my wife's copy of Volume I of the *Cyclopedia for the Use of the Blind*, folio, in raised type, compiled by Dr. Howe. A labor of love, if ever there was one.

From the porch at Roscahegan one can see the wide glare of Seguin Light, but not the lighthouse itself. Often in these last years she was asked if this was really the "Light Island" of *Captain January*, and whether that was her reason for summering on the Point. "I have been asked about that so many, many times," she confided. "I told in my biography what there was to tell. A trip to Bar Harbor with my husband, — sitting on the rocks and seeing a light far out to sea. And beyond that, nothing but romancing and imagination." "And did you never find out," I asked, "what light it was?" "No," she smiled. "People have tried to tell me. I stop them. I don't want to know. Somehow I felt it might spoil something."

She graciously inscribed my first issue of that book. "For three reasons," she said. "First, because it's a true first issue, and I know you must have had trouble finding one; next, because it is close to the fiftieth anniversary of the copyright; and finally — I shan't tell you the last reason — I'll write it." And

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she did, bless her. "Inscribed for our good friend and neighbor Philo Calhoun, by Laura E. Richards, July 6th, 1940."

One time she asked me which of her books I liked best. "And don't say *Captain January* or I shall be sure you never read another." I replied that I thought it was *Isla Heron*. "At least," I added, "well enough to have read it half a dozen times." She was really pleased. "How nice to hear that," she said. "I had such pleasure in writing it. I think it is one of my favorites too. Although I'm afraid," she sighed, "it didn't sell very well."

In addition to her numerous prose works, L.E.R. wrote verse. A prodigious amount of verse, published and unpublished. For her children, her friends, her friends' children, to say nothing of the Red Cross, the Library Drive, and every other Good Cause which asked that its claim to support be suitably rhymed by Mrs. Richards. The rest of it was largely humorous jingles for children, the sort of thing that keeps singing in the back of your mind years after other childish things have been put away.

She loved to write verse, and did so even after Sarah Orne Jewett had sensibly advised her that her forte was prose and that she should stick to that. She says of her own ambition as a poet: "I did not want my poetry simple. I wanted it to flash and ring and roll; bells and trumpets for Laura Elizabeth!" I haven't found many such. The chief justification of L.E.R.'s verse is that it gave a good deal of pleasure to a great many people. Perhaps that is enough.

There was and is a square piano of uncertain age at Roscahegan. Rosalind bought it somewhere. It was and is villainously and unredeemably out of tune. Mrs. Richards invited me to try it out occasionally. Unfortunately my repertoire is limited to hymns, Bach chorales, Beethoven's "Minuet," "Humoresque" — which I play well enough — and a number of other things which I play in a manner acceptable only to tone deaf people of unusual tolerance. Mrs. Richards would listen patiently for a while and then ask, "Do you know anything more lively, Phil?" Sometimes I could induce her to sing one of her own songs. She liked "The Hottentot" best, and sang it softly, but with great gusto and obvious enjoyment, to her own chord accompaniment on the old piano. Sometimes these musical

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sessions would evoke a word from Rosalind. "I think perhaps Mother may be getting a little tired, Phil dear." I'm sure she was, or should have been. But what nice times they were!

I wondered sometimes whether L.E.R.'s runaway imagination, her unlimited energy, her eager interest in new things, new people, her flair for "bells and trumpets," might have brought moments of impatience — depression, almost spiritual claustrophobia — at life in a small town and work in a small summer camp. I think I once shocked Rosalind a little by suggesting that in a different age, under other conditioning, her mother would have had a glorious time being a lady pirate. Or else:

The streets . . .
Led at last to water black and glossy. . . .
There on a shabby building was a sign
'The India Wharf' . . . and we turned back.

I always felt we could have taken ship
And crossed the bright green seas
To dreaming cities set on sacred streams
And palaces
Of ivory and scarlet.

I don't know. Probably not. She was a perfectionist at heart, and in her code that meant giving, not taking; standing up, not running away. Within this creed she lived, and when she died in 1943, I could be sure that as for Bunyan's Mr. Great-heart, "all the trumpets sounded for her on the other side."

