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Beverly Seaton

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*"Beautiful, entire, and clean":
The Maine Farm Novels
of Margaret Flint
and Gladys Hasty Carroll*

by BEVERLY SEATON

*Let us do our work as well,
Both the unseen and the seen;
Make a house where Gods may dwell,
Beautiful, entire, and clean.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

WHENEVER an economic depression has occurred in modern industrial America, people have turned back to the land and publishers have capitalized on this interest, be it practical or romantic. In the nineteenth century, readers bought quantities of back-to-the-land success stories such as Edmund Morris's *Ten Acres Enough* (1863), while the depression of the 1930's saw Americans buying M. G. Kains's *Five Acres and Independence* (1935), a practical guide to small acreage farming. But of course much of the appeal of such books lies in pastoral visions of the good life lived close to the earth, secure from the "pecuniary convulsions" of an industrialized society. Thus, readers of the 1930's were also very receptive to novels about farm life which pictured hard-working plain Americans whose everyday tasks included such timely things as raising chickens or making wild grape jelly. Two Maine novelists, Margaret Flint (Margaret Leavitt Jacobs) and Gladys Hasty Carroll, were among those writers who came to prominence by writing farm novels during this time.

Gladys Hasty Carroll's first adult novel, *As the Earth Turns*, had a well-deserved success. Published in 1933, it was a May selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and finished the year second on the best-seller list. Carroll followed this novel with another farm novel set in rural Maine, *A Few Foolish Ones* (1935). Margaret Flint's first novel, *The Old Ashburn Place*, won the Dodd, Mead-Pictorial Review prize for the best first novel of 1935. It got good reviews, although it nowhere equalled the success of *As the Earth Turns*. Flint then published five more novels set in and around Parkston, Maine, but perhaps none was as well done as her first book.¹

1. Mrs. Carroll wrote many other novels, of course, and Mrs. Jacobs wrote several others; my study is restricted to their novels of farm life. Mrs. Jacobs' Parkston novels in addition to those noted in subsequent footnotes are *Breakneck Brook* (1939), *Back o' the Mountain* (1940), *Down the Road a Piece* (1941), *October Fires* (1941), and *Enduring Riches* (1942).

These Maine farm novels satisfied the reader's appetite for such nostalgic stereotypes as idyllic rural scenery in the style of N. C. Wyeth, cheery farm kitchens which were the centers of busy households, and hand-wrought farmhouses which had been in the same family for generations. Their best characters are practically Earth Mothers and Father Adams, solid figures whose unthinking acceptance of life may seem exaggerated from a purely realistic point of view, but whose capacity for work and whose basic decency make them very attractive, and they are portrayed carrying the others in the story, the "whiffle-minded" brothers and sisters, husbands and wives and children. While the conflicts which form the plots vary, rural values always win out over "modern" ideas. Writing in 1951 about what rural readers want to read, Mrs. Carroll, in a back-handed attack on current publications, portrayed rural readers as wanting to read just such books as she and Margaret Flint published in the thirties and early forties, describing them with such words as "clear," "vital," "inspirational," "true," "worthwhile." These readers, she said, want to read books "which most Americans would be the stronger and better for reading."² Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of these novels to be explored today is the structure of values they present and its interaction with stereotypical versions of the rural experience.

When Charles Ashburn, the hero of *The Old Ashburn Place*, looks through a book of Longfellow's poems once owned by his mother, he comes upon "The Builders," which includes the line, "Beautiful, entire, and clean." Those words seem to him to sum up all his dreams, all the ideals which his mother had worked so hard to instill into her children. "That must have been what his mother was driving at all those years. That must have been the inspiration of her admonitions, her ambitions, her labors."³ While Flint does not go on to develop those values Hilda Ashburn lived for in terms of the words *beautiful*, *entire*, and *clean*, I feel that these three words rather neatly sum up the qualities of life which both she and Carroll found in Maine farm life.

Those viewing farm life from outside frequently comment on its beauty; the standard aesthetic attractions of rural life include the fields and wood lots, the farmhouse and its quaint furnishings, and food scenes to which Dutch genre painters could hardly do justice. Carroll does not write as much description of physical objects as does Flint, but when she chooses details they are such things as fence posts hidden in snow, bare tree branches by the well, wild grapes on old stone walls, and glasses of bright jellies on the window-sills, unless of course she is characterizing an unkempt homestead, such as that of George Shaw, the shiftless, dissatisfied son in *Earth*. Her favorable characters do not talk

2. Gladys Hasty Carroll, "Rural Residents Waiting for Something Fit to Read," *Publishers' Weekly*, 6 October 1951, pp. 1476-77.

3. Margaret Flint, *The Old Ashburn Place* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1936), p. 66.

much about beauty, leaving that aspect of life for those who value city ways, such as Cora Shaw, the whining stepmother in *Earth* who spends her time doing fancy sewing. But Stan Janowski, the romantic lead in *Earth*, is a beauty-loving Pole who plays the violin and composes poetry, finding beauty and romance in the earth and Jen Shaw, the stolid heroine. By contrast, Flint's main characters usually show real appreciation for the beautiful rural scenery around Parkston and have a more aesthetic approach to life than most of Carroll's farm folk.

Since many of Flint's heroes and heroines are young people about to settle down, naturally the plots concern their choices of lifestyle and partner. Aesthetic considerations are often important in their decisions. Her first two novels about Parkston life, *The Old Ashburn Place* and *Deacon's Road*, both deal with a young man who is attracted to the wrong sort of woman. Charles Ashburn never marries, having loved Marian Witham from afar all his life, but young Eph Squire gets over his infatuation with the city cousin and proposes to Lois Ashburn, the proper sort of wife for a farmer. Eph has to decide between farming and the city girl, but curly black hair has no chance against Eph's vision of farm life, symbolized by the ruins of the original Deacon Ephraim Squire's homestead. Several central scenes occur at the Deacon's place, and in the opening chapters Eph dreams of scenes of the past life at the homestead. Ruins of the burned-out house and the daguerreotypes of these original settlers do not represent any sort of reality to him, as he reconstructs their lives, focusing on traditional, inspirational images.

By cartloads the harvest must have come in—apples, potatoes, squashes and pumpkins, carrots, turnips, cabbages and onions. Dug deeply back into the mountainside, the cellar had maintained almost an even temperature the year around, the ideal and natural storage.

Separate from the vegetable and apple bins was a room for barrels and crocks. Here were stored cider, in the various stages, from mildly sparkling juice fresh from the press to tart and zestful vinegar, three years old; smoked hams and bacon; pork put down in brine; pickles, preserves, and mincemeat; homemade wines in wide variety.⁴

Eph Squire never argues his decision in economic or social terms; while he speaks of "freedom" he envisions such pastoral scenes as the above.

Flint's heroines, in other novels, visualize the beauty of rural life in terms of scenery (for Thurlow Parks, the loveliness of her country home, Breakneck Brook, finally brings her to see which suitor she should marry) or charming kitchens. The Amos Lord kitchen, in *Down the Road a Piece*, is a large room with windows overlooking farm fields and orchard, pine floors, old painted wainscoting, braided rugs, "a long upholstered sofa, with its graceful lines and delicate carving," and a set of Hitchcock chairs. Faced with choosing between a modern, money and society-centered life away from home, and life amidst such lovely surroundings, the young women are always won over by aesthetic con-

4. Margaret Flint, *Deacon's Road* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1938), p. 4.

siderations. They also make a habit of pausing to look at the mountain-side or driving somewhere to look at the fall tree colors. For Margaret Flint's people, the beauty of rural life is one of its most significant attractions.

In the novels of both writers, we find much description of beautiful things and some appreciation by the characters of the same. Mrs. Carroll wrote a juvenile novel about the Shaw family of *Earth*, which she called *Land Spell*.⁵ Without doubt, the land holds the Maine farm characters in these novels under a spell, one element of which is beauty. The reader, too, is caught in the familiar enchantment of country road, quiet pine forest, and Sheraton furniture placed against painted paneling.

In title, *As the Earth Turns* suggests the circle of the seasons, complete and eternal. Both Carroll and Flint emphasize the completeness, the mystical circularity, of the natural world, relating it in terms of landscape and family relationships. To be *whole*, to be *entire*, to be *complete*, is to be close to the earth, both in occupation (farming, operating a canning factory, raising Rhode Island Reds) and in personal life (marrying and having children). While there are numerous examples in the novels of both women which can illustrate their portrayal of the wholeness of nature, perhaps the best is Carroll's description of Gus Bragdon's feeling for his trees. Gus, the hero of *A Few Foolish Ones*, is inarticulate and unsociable, hard-working and tight-fisted about money; but he loves his trees.

Trees were what he fully understood of all that lived. They never confused him. They were born and had a period of growth, some longer and some shorter, and then died. They drove their roots deep, and every day pushed a little higher toward the sky; but nobody saw their growth. Even the pine now. A pine grew from twelve to eighteen inches in a year. Every spring each tree was finished off at the top with a small bunch of buds, and by another spring each bud had become a branch spreading wide and the main stem had put out another branch of buds higher up; but nobody saw it grow, and most people had forgotten, when it came to sawing, how very small a tree it had once been. Not Gus; he remembered; he had watched it all the way and never grown impatient as he waited. This was a way of doing which seemed to him natural and right.⁶

In popular sentiment, the seasons of the year and their symbolic representations in plant life and growth have a sort of unexamined, mystical significance which neither Flint nor Carroll attempt to explain, but which both draw on and foster.

Family life is central in all the farm novels of both writers. Flint's Parkston is populated by a number of interrelated families who appear in greater and lesser roles in all the Parkston novels. When Carroll comments on the changes time has brought to York Road, in *A Few Foolish Ones*, she names the families who lived there and left, and her story concerns several of these families. Individuals are seen as family representa-

5. G. H. Carroll, *Land Spell* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).

6. G. H. Carroll, *A Few Foolish Ones* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 115.

tives in the context of the small community, and the major characters are all ones who stay in the community, have a sense of belonging there, and feel satisfied with their family identity. One common theme found in both novelists is the importance of the family homestead. In *Deacon's Road*, Flint uses the old Eph Squire place to symbolize the dreams of the young Eph Squire, and while the young man inherits his grandfather Hicks' farm, as expected, he also somehow manages to finally own the old Squire property. Gus Bragdon, in *A Few Foolish Ones*, inherits as his portion a lot with no road frontage, but it is the lot on which the original Bragdon made his start in the area. He builds his house with his own hands, even making some of his own furniture. In other Flint novels, the family homestead is practically a character in the story; Clem Dennis weds the Amos Lord place along with Elinor Lord, and in *Enduring Riches* Judith Squire's relationship with her home is plainly as important as her marriage. Farm homes are not merely homes; they are family homesteads, representing the enduring qualities of family life.

The popular image of the family circle, often pictured as the family members sit around the table at a meal, is fully drawn on by both novelists. Mark Shaw, the patriarch of *Earth*, never feels satisfied unless all his children are around the table at holiday times. On the fourth of July, he looks around the table and sees "a circular row of young and older ones reaching around the table as far as his wife."⁷ While he does not pay attention to what his family talk about, he takes comfort in their very presence, and thinks about those who are not there. His youngest son, John, already promising to remain contented on the farm, gives him a feeling of fulfillment. In the novels of both women, there is considerable conflict over the pleasures and troubles of child-bearing and the expenses of a family, yet naturally the heroines are happy to find themselves pregnant. Even in *Earth*, when Jen Shaw, at the end of the novel, is not yet married, there is reference to her future pregnancy, for as Stan sits waiting for the birth of Ed and Margaret's baby he thinks ahead about a year, to when Jen's time will most probably come. Carroll parallels her seasons with central events in human life; there is a wedding in the spring, a funeral in the summer, and a birth in the winter, promising the circularity of life its natural fulfillment.

Besides the family circle at the table and the celebration of central natural events in life—birth, marriage, death—there is another very strong image of rural family life which is fully realized in these farm novels. The members of a farm family work together for the family survival. Jen Shaw runs the kitchen while her father works in the fields; together they keep the family going. Those who don't work with the others are portrayed unfavorably, as Cora Shaw who, in a usual scene, fusses over the table setting while Jen prepares the entire meal. Natur-

7. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

ally, in these novels the emphasis is on the work done by the farm women; the men's work is not much detailed, except that the good ones do it. The point of the plot in several of Flint's novels is the capacity of the young heroine to be a farm wife, to support her husband by taking on her share of the work. And the children are part of it, too. As Charles Ashburn remembers his mother and her influence on the family, he thinks in terms of family unity: "Well could he remember the code they lived by, the morale that made the family a coherent entity. They must all go to school; they must be clean in mind and body; they must work hard and not fuss about it; they must pull together all the time, in all things; and they must boil the dish towels every day."⁸ In these idealized farm families, the good characters work together for the success of the family, for one is measured by his family identity, not by some standard of individual achievement understood by the outside world. In both of Carroll's novels, one son of the family becomes a worldly success—one in college, the other in music—but they are accepted for the good family members they are, not for their achievements. The family is the important social unit in these novels as clearly as in a Norman Rockwell illustration.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous adjective in these farm novels is *clean*, used to describe everything good, with the relentless perspective of a very particular housewife. Jen Shaw says, when speaking to her brother of cleaning an old farmhouse he has bought, "If there's anything I like, it's cleaning something awful dirty!"⁹ The farm housewives of these novels may not have much money to spend on their homes, but they keep them clean. Among Flint's housewives, Hester Hicks of *Deacon's Road* stands out as the most efficient, orderly, soap-minded woman of the lot, who enjoys the same challenges as Jen: "It was odd that, greatly as she loved cleanliness and order, Hester thoroughly enjoyed tackling such a chaos as this, of a men's day at home. She built up the fire full blast and opened all the windows to air out the tripe; then she sang as she collected dirty dishes and washed them, set the table, fresh and clean, and mixed up the biscuits."¹⁰ The good women are clean in appearance, too: Eph Squire finds Lois Ashburn "clean enough to eat," while Ollie Shaw realizes that Doris Carpenter "was not really clean, although she looked so." Incapable, slatternly farm women are pitied and patronized by the successful housewives of these books, and they are usually symbolized by dirty children. Kate Dennis in *Back o' the Mountain*, while overworked and poor, keeps her brood clean, but Mildred Shaw's children are dirty, as is her home, while her husband is a slack farmer (and a Democrat).

Cleanliness is not only a physical virtue, however; Flint and Carroll

8. Margaret Flint, *The Old Ashburn Place*, pp. 9-10.

9. G. H. Carroll, *As the Earth Turns* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), p. 18.

10. Margaret Flint, *Deacon's Road*, p. 168.

both consider moral cleanliness to be a proper complement to physical cleanliness. When Charles Ashburn, for example, has an affair with Elsie, his brother's wife, he feels unclean, but even before the death of Elsie in an auto accident clears the way for a proper family at the old Ashburn place, he straightens it all out with his brother. After all, it wasn't his fault; she went after him. There is less concern with realistic moral issues in Carroll's work, but her characters also take moral stands when necessary, as when Jen Shaw treats the Janowski family no differently from any other family, or when Gus Bragdon stands up for the Linscott family in church. Flint's heroes and heroines have to straighten out their own romantic and sexual involvements in order to achieve the moral status they aspire to, and they usually do so. Hester Hicks, for instance, slept around when she was younger, but at forty-odd she feels a new sense of morality and holds out for marriage with Zenas Hosmer. The cleaning up of the Weaver farm by Ellie Pegrim, Zenas' male housekeeper, and then Pegrim's subsequent marriage to Adele Weaver, nicely parallel Hester's "new morality" and subsequent marriage to Zenas. The soap and hot water of conventional morality get quite as much use in these novels as do their literal counterparts, cleaning the "unseen" aspects of life to match the shining surfaces of the "seen."

These novels, written by women with considerable knowledge of their subject, conform in all important ways to popular stereotypes of rural life. The heroes and heroines are solid figures who work hard at natural tasks such as plowing, haying, bread-making, and dish-washing. Their homesteads, described with down-home, Christmas card "realism," are furnished with antique sideboards and picturesque dishes. Naturally, the Maine setting insures beautiful surroundings for the farms where at least some of the circle of family members are willing to live out their lives. After all, the standard values acceptable to readers of such novels are not much different from their images of rural life; in fact, depiction of rural characters living by such values is probably more natural than trying out these standards in terms of modern city life. But neither Flint nor Carroll glamorize their main characters, and Flint shows her farm folk engaged in shoddy affairs, difficult marriages, and such, especially emphasizing the role of sex in human experience. Thus neither writer turned out the sort of highly idealized, romantic version of farm life we find in Gene Stratton Porter's *Laddie* (1913), despite the use of popular images. After all, readers in the thirties and forties were not looking for sugar-coating so much as for the crunchiness and "honest" flavor of real country life, according to their most cherished concepts of it.

Ohio State University
Newark