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"THE VERY TEMPLE OF DEMOCRACY"

A CAMPUS is unique. It is above and beyond [political] government. It is on the highest plane of life. Those who live there know the smell of good air, and they always take pains to spell truth with a small "t." This is its secret strength and its contribution to the web of freedom; this is why the reading room of a college library is the very temple of democracy."

From an editorial in *The New Yorker*,
February 26, 1949, page 19.



OF MARGARET DELAND AND
"OLD CHESTER"

By MARJORIE D. GOULD

WHEN Margaret Deland's moving story of the shy apothecary, Mr. Tommy Dove, and his vain love for the wealthy Miss Jane Temple appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1889, Mrs. Deland probably did not guess that this was the beginning of a long series of stories destined to make the peaceful nineteenth-century village which she called "Old Chester" as famous as her name. Within a few years the citizens and surroundings of this Old Chester came to be as familiar to her readers as their own neighbors and neighborhood.

With the publication of the first collection of these stories in 1893, *Mr. Tommy Dove, and Other Stories*, and then *Old Chester Tales* in 1898, Mrs. Deland's reading public began to inquire about visiting Old Chester itself. In her autobiography, *Golden Yesterdays* (1941), Mrs. Deland recalls the incident of receiving a letter of inquiry from a young girl whose aunt was an invalid:

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Then she said that she had read about Old Chester in *Harper's Magazine*, and it seemed to her so pleasant that she wondered if I would be willing to tell her where it was, and how she could reach it. She added that she had looked at a good many time tables, and had made inquiries at various ticket offices, but they said it wasn't on any railroad! She had told them that it was near Mercer, and she had heard that Mercer was meant for Pittsburgh, but still she couldn't find Old Chester anywhere.¹

With many readers the question of the exact locality of "Old Chester" became a controversial matter. To some it suggested New England; to others it meant some part of Pennsylvania. Whatever of either region was familiar to the reader argued the more strongly for it. The quiet conservatism of the Old Chester citizens, the abundance of genteel spinsters, the provinciality, the church-mindedness, and the unyielding conscience, all suggested New England. Yet, since Margaret Campbell Deland was born and reared in the vicinity of Pittsburgh, there would be some justification for her choosing a region close to home. Her "Old Chester" of course bears no relation to the Chester which is near Philadelphia.

Fred Lewis Pattee, a modern historian of American literature, makes this statement:

Old Chester undoubtedly is in western Pennsylvania, the author's native town, but it might be New England as well. The tales deal with universal types and with universal motifs with a broadness and sympathy and a literary art that raises them into the realm of rarer classics.²

However, a village with both a Presbyterian church and an Episcopalian church would rarely have been found in mid-nineteenth-century New England; and no small boy in New England would, like David in *The Awakening of Helena Ritchie* (1906), say: "There are two kinds of aunts.

¹ Margaret Deland, *Golden Yesterdays* (New York, 1941), page 321.

² F. L. Pattee, *A History of American Literature since 1870* (New York, 1915), page 396.

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One is bugs. *She* is the other kind." If David had lived in New England he would have learned to pronounce "aunt" with a broad accent.

However, the location of Old Chester, or its prototype, is no longer a matter of conjecture. Mrs. Deland has made her own confession. Across the title-page of an autographed copy of *An Old Chester Secret* (1920) now in the Treasure Room of the Colby College Library, she has written this explicit statement: "Old Chester was really Manchester, a suburb of Allegheny, Pennsylvania." And in her autobiography she wrote:

The setting of all these stories was a Pennsylvania village, which somehow made me think of Manchester, a place near Maple Grove. But I couldn't use that name because some of the characters might suggest people I had known. So I dropped the "Man-" and used "Old" instead.³

Mrs. Deland was born Margaretta Wade Campbell in Allegheny on February 23, 1857. Her mother died when she was still a baby and her father a few years later. At the age of four she was taken to live with her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Campbell, whose home on the banks of the Ohio River was called Maple Grove. The Campbell estate was in McClure Township, which adjoined Manchester Borough. Both township and borough were annexed by the City of Allegheny in 1873, and the rolling mills and factories eventually swallowed up what Margaret Deland remembered and loved best, so that neither Manchester nor the location of Maple Grove can be found on any modern map. Allegheny in turn was annexed to the City of Pittsburgh in 1906.

Pittsburgh itself also came to play a part in Mrs. Deland's fiction. When she had been taken, as a little girl, to visit her grandparents, the Wades, in Allegheny, they conducted her to the Episcopal church in Pittsburgh, and

³ *Golden Yesterdays*, page 315.

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there she came to know the kindly and wise old clergyman who was later to appear as Dr. Lavendar in the stories of Old Chester. Mrs. Deland identifies him for us:

A clergyman came into many of these stories, whom I thought of as looking like old Dr. Preston, of St. Andrew's Church in Pittsburgh. And as the personality developed he displayed traits of Uncle William Campbell, the old Dutch Reformed minister of New Brunswick, who had approved of *John Ward*. Occasionally I borrowed a little of Lorin's [Mrs. Deland's husband's] salt-and-pepper wit, to put into his mouth. In the story called "Good for the Soul," he made me think of Phillips Brooks, one of whose sermons in Trinity Church [Boston] had also provided my old clergyman with an idea I could use in "Sally."⁴

Compared with the tough-minded realism characteristic of present-day fiction, the writings of Margaret Deland no doubt seem a little tame, sentimental, and overly pious. Yet there is a sincerity and quiet force about them which are undeniable. Her interest in her characters as people seems genuine, and her knowledge of the communities and customs of the period is full and complete. Her honesty in reproducing the flavor of mid-nineteenth-century life in a little town is what will make her tales endure. William Allen White chose an apt simile when he compared Old Chester to a Corot painting, for there is a misty quality about the life and the people who lived almost a century ago and who are so far removed from the hustle and vigor of the twentieth century. Yet to Margaret Deland's "Old Chester" we can turn, if we would know more of a very real part of our American heritage.

Since Mr. and Mrs. Lorin Deland found Kennebunkport, Maine, a magnetic spot for their vacations, it is highly appropriate that her books should come to the library of one of the oldest colleges in Maine.

⁴ *Golden Yesterdays*, page 315.

