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# Colby Library Quarterly

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JEWETT, TARKINGTON, AND THE MAINE LINE

By RICHARD CARY

IN the long history of human warfare, one of the least fatal but most acidulous conflicts has been that between country-folk and city-folk; in particular, that between permanent country-dwellers and transient city-vacationers. The enmity roused by this stressful juncture of opposing cultures has been a source of special concern for Maine, self-styled the nation's Vacationland. The recent publication of *Booth Tarkinton* by James Woodress prompts another scrutiny of this endless, dissonant problem.

In the Spring of 1893 Maine's most eloquent spokesman, Miss Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909), noted with some trepidation the growing hordes of seasonal visitors and the resultant clash of simplicity and sophistication. In a letter to F. M. Hopkins, one of her editors, she said: "You know there is a saying of Plato's that the best thing one can do for the people of a State is to make them acquainted with each other, and it was some instinctive feeling of this sort which led me to wish that the town and country people were less suspicious of one another."

In her Preface to the second edition of *Deephaven* (October 1893) she paraphrased freely the contents of this letter but expanded her remarks to include a general review of the conditions of rustic life around her. She deplored the "fast-growing New England cities" which twenty years ago had begun "to be overcrowded and uncomfortable," thereby motivating "a reflex current that set countryward in summer." She was "possessed by a dark fear that townspeople and country people would never understand one an-

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other,” and strove by the might of her pen to correct the misimpression of urban ladies that selectmen of her Maine hamlets were tramps, and, in turn, that “these same timid ladies” were either proud or patronizing. She tried, almost forlornly, to explain that her stalwart farmers and fishers were not rubberstamps of “the caricatured Yankee of fiction, striped trousers, bell-crowned hat, and all.” In her desire to preserve the individualism of the natives and the traditions of her region, Miss Jewett inveighed against the plentiful cash “that the tourist or summer citizen left behind him.” There lay corruption. “The quaint houses, the roadside thicket, the shady woodland” were swept away; residents “hastened to spoil instead of to mend the best things that their village held.” Welcome though they were, “the well-filled purses” of casual travellers symbolized the barbarian at the gates, flagrant, irrepressible. A note of unconscious bitterness crept into Miss Jewett’s pleas, despite her wish to effect reciprocal understanding. Resentfully, she watched as “the irresistible current” swirled over and carried away “all the individuality and quaint personal characteristics of rural New England.” She hoped bravely that one day “our injury of what we inherited” would be redressed, and visualized a time when the “aggressions and ignorances of city and country cousins” would give way habitually to “compliments between the summer boarder and his rustic host.”

The sheer optimism of Miss Jewett’s view has been demonstrated too unfortunately often over the years to be elaborated upon here. Last November’s squabble over Bernard DeVoto’s criticism of Maine landscape is a case in point which just missed turning into a *cause célèbre*. On the other side of this prepossessingly drear picture, however, is to be found an occasional bright instance when aborigine and outlander have achieved the harmony Miss Jewett so dauntlessly predicted. One of the more prominent exceptions was Booth Tarkington (1869-1946), native of Indiana, who adopted the state of Maine as his alternate home.

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Tarkinton's first acquaintance with New England terrain and character came in 1887 when he enrolled at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire—coincidentally, the hometown of Miss Jewett's maternal ancestors. Absence of dormitories necessitated Tarkinton's living in the village. "The shock of new people, new places, new ideas . . . jolted him beneficially," says Woodress, and adds, "his adjustment to the new life was rapid."

Tarkinton's first vacation in Maine seems to have occurred at Bar Harbor during the summer of 1893 while on holiday with his mother and sister. Evidently impressed by the resort scene, Tarkinton used it as background for a full-length farce comedy, *The Ruse*, which was produced that Christmas by the Indianapolis Dramatic Club but never published. Another increment of this visit appears in an early draft of Tarkinton's first novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana*. The opening chapters took place in Bar Harbor, and it was not until five years later, when he resumed the unfinished novel, that the action was transferred to its appropriate locale, Indiana.

1903, however, is to be counted the most significant year in Tarkinton's relation to Maine. Convalescing from a harsh attack of typhoid fever, he was advised by his doctor to spend the summer in "the healthiest place in the United States . . . Kennebunkport, Maine." The climate, the food, the primeval quiet intrigued Tarkinton to the extent that he became a regular visitor thereafter. In 1916 he purchased land on a hill above town; in 1917 built an impressive colonial frame house which he called *Seawood*. Every year he returned lovingly to this country of beaches and mountains, pine woods and splendid sunsets. During the Summer and Fall he was to be seen relaxing on the sand at Kennebunkport, puttering in his boathouse or on his ancient coasting schooner *Regina*, or, poised above a drawing-board in his study, filling large sheets of yellow paper with indistinguishable signs.

Of Tarkinton's five published works with Maine set-

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tings, all but one are in light or comic vein. *The Wren* (1922), a three-act comedy laid in a summer boarding-house, presents country-city dissension in the form of a struggle between the daughter of a sea captain and a pretty summer visitor for the love of a young artist. Significantly, the Maine girl wins. Upon Tarkington's invitation Helen Hayes, who starred in the Broadway production with Leslie Howard, spent a week in Kennebunkport, soaking in the tang of the seacoast town and the twang of its inhabitants. The play survived for only twenty-four performances.

*Tweedles* (1924), a comedy of manners based on urban-rural controversy, took some four years to arrive on Broadway because of the reluctance of Tarkington's manager to attempt another play with Maine background. Tarkington sets in opposition two equally proud and venerable families, one from Pennsylvania, one from Maine. Neither the snobbish Main Line Philadelphians nor the humble Maine Line pioneers can accept the thought of union through the marriage of their children. The result is a stalemate of crackling opprobrium, which the youngsters of course circumvent.

*Mary's Neck* (1932), written originally as a series of stories in several periodicals during 1929-1930, is focused upon Kennebunkport and the antics of a midwestern family vacationing in Maine for the first time. There is constant prestidigitation on both sides, but the "foreigners" are usually outwitted by the canny natives.

The last of Tarkington's genially satiric treatments of the resident-visitor theme is "High Summer," published as a serial in the *American Magazine* (July-October 1931) but never issued in volume form. As before, his sympathy is not difficult to locate; the outcome generally favors the hardrock natives.

In all his other works Tarkington handled the mutual-animosity motif playfully, but in *Mirthful Haven* (1930) he turned on it with such craggy seriousness that Robert E. Sherwood exclaimed: "Thoroughly and violently unneigh-

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borly." The thesis of this novel rose out of an actual altercation in Tarkinton's Kennebunkport experience. For some grievance, real or fancied, Captain Blynn Montgomery, an elderly employee of the River Club, was suddenly and unconditionally discharged by a dominant faction of non-resident members. Tarkinton tried to bring about a reversal of this action but was defeated by a determined cabal. He resigned furiously and would have nothing to do with the summer colony thereafter. He bought a house by the river, set it up as a rival club, and hired the captain for life as caretaker. In a burst of outrage at the contemptibility of his associates, he dramatized the incident and established it at the core of his book. With the chips down, Tarkinton showed his hand: it was Maine natives, aces high.

By 1930 Tarkinton had spent better than a quarter-century, off and on, within the borders of Maine. He wandered about in a state of lively appreciation, captivated by its multiple charms: the distinct flavor of its vernacular, the depth and excellence of its customs, the singularity and probity of its habitants. (In latter days, Tarkinton admitted that he liked Maine better than Indiana.) He was swift to grasp the implications of the social structure in the summer resort and the discrepant relations between dwellers and transients. With the insight of an artist and the compassion of a humanitarian he sensed the underlying ire of the Maine native in his role of servitor to summer colonists. He studied his unpretentious Kennebunkport neighbors acutely, passing as much of his time among them as he could afford. Gradually he wore down the barriers of mistrust and indignation. Gradually he lost the hue of alienism and came to be accepted as one of the community, respected for his own sake, lauded as a man among men.

What lay behind this cohesion? What made it possible for Tarkinton to be incorporated so completely by the villagers? First, perhaps, is his New England backdrop. Although Indiana-born of Indiana parents, Tarkinton

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could point to roots in his mother's ancestry which reached back to Thomas Hooker, belligerent founder of Connecticut. Add to this heritage Tarkington's nimble ability to absorb influences: of his early Exeter sojourn he had written: "[It] began to open my eyes to the world."

Secondly, Tarkington exuded simplicity, the common touch; there was no patrician rigmarole in his nature. Francis Mulberry Chick, his chauffeur from 1913 on, said it for all his friends: "We folks around here like the Tarkingtons. They're so common." These words, in effect, echoed one of Tarkington's own characters in "High Summer": "Why I like Joe Nutter, it's because he's cawmun." And as a fillip in this respect, Tarkington modestly declined honorary degrees from Colby and Bowdoin colleges (among others), protesting, "What use is a collection of hoods?"

Thirdly, Tarkington had the capacity of evoking loyalty. Kenneth Roberts, a Maine neighbor, offered him a place on the title page and a cut of the royalties from *Northwest Passage* for his magnanimous aid. Tarkington refused, of course. His aforementioned chauffeur, the gargantuan Mr. Chick, and an Indianapolis cab driver, Peg Hamilton, both named their sons Booth out of grateful esteem.

Last, in a list which might well be much longer, is courage—Tarkington's ineradicable gayety in the face of tragedy. In the last two decades of his life Tarkington's eyesight was so dim that he had to depend upon friends to guide him when out-of-doors. After some months of total blindness and two unsuccessful operations for cataracts, Tarkington was still able to joke about his condition. To the normally stoic natives this was surpassingly admirable. "Gosh! If I had to go through what that feller's been through, you wouldn't hear me laughing about it any!" The ultimate tribute of one brand of courage to another.

These were the elements—and humility, courtesy, fellowship—which breached the massed antipathy between

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provincial and metropolitan, the elements which Miss Jewett foresaw would "bind together men who had once lived far apart." However, the epithet which best epitomizes this vision is Kenneth Roberts'. He called Tarkington "A Gentleman from Maine and Indiana." That's what Tarkington was *wherever* he went. Essentially, that's what Miss Jewett meant. And, everything considered, that's what made the difference.\*



### "TORRENT" NO. 27 LOCATED

AT the time of compiling our Jubilee Census of Edwin Arlington Robinson's *The Torrent and The Night Before* (see our issue for February 1947, page 9), we were able to list as Copy No. 27 one which Robinson had given to John W. Marr in January 1897; but we were forced to add: "This copy . . . is now in the hands of an owner whom we have been unable to trace." Well, after the passage of nearly ten years, the long-lost copy has turned up. It is now in Philadelphia, in the Library of the University of Pennsylvania. We are indebted to Mrs. Neda M. Westlake, the Assistant Curator of the university's Rare Book Collection, for this information.



### ON EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

By CONRAD AIKEN

IT is refreshing to see at least a modicum of justice done to the American poet EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON, and especially in England, where, during his lifetime, he got precious little; but the statement of an English re-

\* Acknowledgment is made of use of the following sources: Sarah Orne Jewett, *Deephaven* (Boston, 1893); James Woodress, *Booth Tarkington* (Philadelphia, 1955); Dorothy R. Russo and Thelma L. Sullivan, *A Bibliography of Booth Tarkington* (Indianapolis, 1949); Carl J. Weber, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Waterville, 1947); Kenneth Roberts, "A Gentleman from Maine and Indiana," *Saturday Evening Post* (August 8, 1931).