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## Books & Authors

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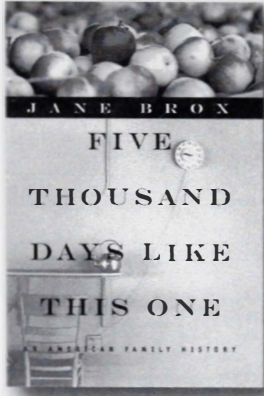
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## Grace, and a Life Well Lived

Jane Brox '78 writes tenderly and knowingly about the passing of a generation

By Sally Baker



*Five Thousand Days Like This One*  
Beacon Press  
182 pages

The day before Christmas, 1994, John Brox took ill enough for someone to call 911. He'd been failing for a while, his handwriting growing weak along with his eyes, his hearing, his knees and his kidneys. He'd begun to talk urgently to his daughter Jane about such things as where the important papers were kept. When the ambulance came and packed him inside for the trip to the hospital, Jane followed in her car. She was thinking about how, lying flat and able to see who knew what out the ambulance window, he might be glimpsing for the last time the Merrimack Valley farm where he lived all his life.

*Five Thousand Days Like This One* is Jane Brox's meditation on her father's death and her heritage. Broader by far than is suggested by its subtitle—*An American Family History*—the book is a heart-gripping evocation of the past, as well as a glimpse, as

we approach the end of a century, into one probable future.

John Brox was the son of Lebanese immigrants. His parents, born subjects of the Ottoman Empire in what was then Syria, immigrated to Massachusetts and then, miraculously, saved enough money to buy 35 acres of good farmland halfway between Lawrence and Lowell. They raised dairy cows; their son favored corn and tomatoes, apples and squash—a good thing, since the Midwest overtook local farms as a source of fresh, clean milk for New England cities.

He kept the farm going as the cities and suburbs pressed in, an accomplishment few matched. And amid the dung and baling wire, the worn-out tractor parts and handsome plows, he also reared a writer who remembers him in tender and revealing ways. In an essay about disappearing apple varieties Jane Brox writes: "Here, the remaining Baldwin tree is framed in my bay window. The late light backs it in all seasons, and I watch its changes as I work, and read, and eat my breakfast and lunch. The man who planted this tree also built my small, white farmhouse—he repaired with scrap, insulated with newspaper, saved string, lived a more frugal life than I could ever imagine. Who knows why, but it's this tree that reminds me of his effort and economy and the rough stone over his grave."

Brox covers more ground—historical and emotional—in this small book than seems possible. A reader won't forget

Thoreau on the wild Merrimack, paddling with his brother and cadging well water and bread at riverbank farms. Brox makes the cloth dust swirl in the air and down hapless workers' lungs as they take their places in the factories, segregated by language and privilege, in Lowell and Lawrence mills. She describes the smell of bread flowing across dirty streets and through tenements. (Bread is a cultural touchstone for the immigrants, worth an agonizing strike when the factory owners try to cut pay the equivalent of two loaves a week.) And she brings back the 1918 influenza epidemic, which raged through the mill towns and killed more people than the late war.

With Brox it's all personal. That, backed up by the careful language of a poet, is her gift in this book. When she writes about the farmland disappearing it isn't just nostalgia. Watching the farm become untenable, she wrestles with the meaning of her ancestors' lives and wonders whether she'll betray their dreams and hard work if she can't hold on. But at the same time she reveals a stubborn practicality that recognizes how everything changes.

She quotes Thoreau on the wild apple trees farmers once planted, not in neat orchard rows but beside stone walls in inches of unused land: "I fear that he who walks over these hills a century hence will not know the pleasure of knocking off wild apples. Ah, poor man! there are many pleasures he will be debarred from."

And Brox writes: "So we also are aftercomers of a kind and cannot guess the beauty been."

In the days after her father died—he lay in intensive care for less than a week—Brox went through his desk, making sense of the papers and coming upon keepsakes, "mute things that had



Jane Brox '78

lost the one who could best speak for them."

Sitting there she remembered a story he told. He was so quiet, Brox says, that you paid attention to the stories. Appropriately, it was about apples.

"No one believes me," I remember him saying, "but I stood by the Bay of Fundy on the eve of the war and saw apples coming in on the tide. The bay was full of apples. The ships had dumped their cargoes to take on supplies for the war."

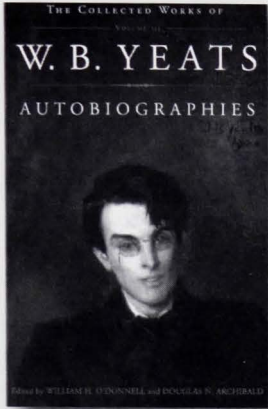
"That's all I know," Brox writes. "And no matter how much, I want to know more."

And yet this book knows everything. ♦

## The Man He Was

### Archibald co-edits Yeats's autobiographies

By Phillip L. Marcus



#### **W. B. Yeats, Autobiographies**

Scribner  
539 pages

More than 100 years ago the Irish writer W. B. Yeats, then at the beginning of his literary career, had to justify to himself the value of literature. Poetry, he wrote, "will not help you to make a fortune, or even live respectably that little life of yours. Great poetry does not teach us anything—it changes us." It appeals to "the whole nature of man" and thus helps create what Yeats was later to call "Unity of Being," the full realization of our entire self, body and soul, thought and feeling, inextricably fused.

Because poetry was "no rootless flower" but grew in the mind of man, it required a special integrity on the poet's part: "a poet's life is an experiment in living, and those that come after have a right to know it." And certainly Yeats's own life was by any standard a fascinating one: son of a great painter, brother to another, and father of a third; Irish nationalist involved with the secret revolutionary organization that became the IRA; lifelong student of the occult; frustrated lover of "the most beautiful woman in the world"; successful lover of many

other women; co-founder of the Irish theater movement; member of the Senate of the Irish Free State; winner of the Nobel Prize; "wild, wicked old man."

Yeats himself responded to the imperative of recording at least portions of his own experiment in living by publishing a number of autobiographical volumes, including *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, *The Trembling of the Veil* and *Dramatis Personae*. Until recently, however, they have been available only in editions of questionable textual authority and with little or no apparatus to help the reader. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald's *Autobiographies* at last provides an authoritative edition. The editorial team is an ideal one. O'Donnell, professor of English at the University of Memphis, may be the best of all Yeatsian textual scholars, while Archibald, one of our wisest interpreters of the poet's life and work, has published book-length studies of both WBY and his improvident but wonderful painter father, John Butler Yeats. The result of their combined efforts is a volume of impeccable scholarship that will prove invaluable to specialist and general reader alike. The introduction traces the history of the various memoirs that eventually coalesced into *Autobiographies*, and 130 pages of annotations illuminate the text. Regrettably, the format of the series in which this volume is published prohibits the inclusion of extended critical analysis, depriving Professor Archibald of the opportunity for further brilliant meditations on this complex figure and his world.

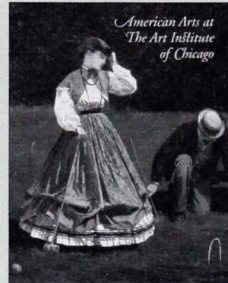
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## fresh prints

*American Art at the Art Institute of Chicago*

Judith A. Barter, Kimberly Rhodes and Seth A. Thayer '89

The Art Institute of Chicago



This beautifully printed and bound coffee-table book showcases the Art Institute's collection of American paintings, decorative arts and sculpture. Highlights include paintings by Mary Cassatt, Winslow Homer and Albert Bierstadt and furniture by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The book catalogues the Art Institute's collection from roughly 1650 to World War I but emphasizes works from the second half of the 19th century, which dominate the museum's holdings.

The book has 220 color illustrations and detailed descriptions of each piece. Thayer, a former member of the institute's department of American art and now an independent consultant, wrote several of the essays.

*Unraveling Somalia: Race, violence and the legacy of slavery*

Catherine Besteman (anthropology)

University of Pennsylvania Press

Besteman's years of research in Somalia, a country ravaged by civil war during the past decade, provide the basis for her theories on how and why the country's disintegration occurred.

Besteman counters the popular notion that Somalia's troubles are the product of clan rivalries played out on a vast scale. The pattern of violence, she says, can be traced to a deeply stratified social order rooted in slavery and developed over the past 150 years. The collapse of the Somali state offers clues to how race and class divisions may mask problems in Africa typically characterized as "tribal."

vided, however, we can read Yeats's text with pleasure. Moreover, we can see that the act of writing these memoirs was itself an effort on Yeats's part towards his own attainment of Unity of Being. As the editors point out, we are witnesses "to the process by which accident and incoherence become complete, by which life, passing through phantasmagoria, becomes meaning, and experience becomes myth. It is that great Romantic achievement: a vision of personal history as art.... It shows Yeats at work—summoning his people, realizing his places, making a world—and so continues to dramatize and fulfill his belief that the act of writing entails a complex creation of a self."

In one of his last letters, Yeats

told a friend that "man can embody truth but he cannot know it. I must embody it in the conclusion of my life." The manuscripts of his last poem, "The Black Tower," show him struggling while literally on his deathbed to decide whether a line of the poem should read "that banner" or "those banners." W. H. Auden was right in asserting, in his ambivalent elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," that "The words of a dead man/Are modified in the guts of the living," but also that they might "still persuade us to rejoice." Reading *Autobiographies* today allows us to do so once again. ♦

Phillip L. Marcus is professor of English and director of the M.A. in literature program at Florida International University.