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MY NOVELS ABOUT MAINE

By MARY ELLEN CHASE

IN a prefatory letter, which serves as the dedication of a new novel, one of the best of modern English novelists describes the discontent of all writers as "the long despair of doing nothing well." To me it is an apt description of what most of us feel as we labor over our books. Willa Cather echoed and enlarged upon it one day in 1929 when, on Grand Manan Island, she was working on *Shadows on the Rock*. "I wrote one good sentence this morning," she said to me. "I mean *really* good; but I realize far too well that it can't redeem my general sense of failure."

I'm sure that those who read and perhaps even like our books can never understand how deep and real this sense of failure is; this painful knowledge that we can never do what we long to do; this unwilling recognition that a character hasn't really come to life, that a scene is overdone or underdone, lacks strength and conviction; this irritating or, perhaps better, heart-breaking admission that words might have been more happily chosen; this sudden realization that some dramatic or appealing detail has been overlooked, has come to mind too late. For now the final proofs have gone to New York, or to Boston, or to London, and nothing can be done to correct, to improve, or to enhance. Only "the long despair" remains. This is why, I am sure, we rarely sit down when the finished product comes and read what we have written. We may, for some odd reason, have had the courage to write our books; yet we lack the fortitude to read them ourselves, once they are bound and ready. I, at least, lack that fortitude.

Among all my novels I am most fearful of those about Maine, largely, I suppose, because I am conscious of failure not only in myself and in whatever small power I may possess over words and their elusive ways, but also toward the rich heritage which I have been given, either by happy chance or by the Grace of God. For to have sprung from Maine seafaring people; to have spent my childhood and many of my later years on a coastline unsurpassed in loveliness; to have inherited a wealth of thrilling history and tradition; to have been born at

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a time when great ships, built by Maine people in a hundred seacoast villages, had been for nearly a century making Searsport and Rockland, Belfast and Thomaston, Wiscasset and Calais better known in Canton, Singapore, and Sydney than even New York and London were known; to have been brought up with men, and with women, too, who knew the Seven Seas too well to be bounded in their thoughts by the narrow confines of their own native parishes; — such an inheritance of imperishable values imposes a debt which cannot possibly either be underestimated or ever fully discharged.

Of all Maine writers—and what a Renaissance our State has known, during this 20th century, in poetry, biography, history, the essay, and the novel!—Sarah Orne Jewett alone has truly paid the debt which we all uneasily, yet gratefully carry. She will be known long after the others of us are forgotten. How we envy her complete simplicity and clarity; her quick preception of humanity and of life; her sure, yet subtle language; her Mrs. Todd, her Queen's Twin, her Captain Littlepage; her unpretentious understanding of the child, who climbed the great pine at dawn to watch the white heron. She is justly the master of us all, the Dean of Maine Letters. Even the best among us distantly follow her footsteps, stumbling and fumbling among the words which she so perfectly set down on paper, among the people whom she so unerringly portrayed, among the marshes and islands, the coves, the hills, the villages which she saw with a vision denied to all other Maine authors.

When I was a little girl of ten, I was taken to see her in her old house at South Berwick. It was my first literary pilgrimage. I don't recall too much about it or about her except that she wore a lavender dress and had the kindest of eyes. She asked me, I remember, as one does ask of children, what I meant to do when I grew up; and when I shyly said, to the surprise and consternation of my father, that I meant to write books, she smiled at me and at my distressed parent.

"I'm sure you will," she said, "and good books, too, all about Maine."

Well, the first part of her prophecy has been fulfilled. I have written novels about Maine, although I would be most hesitant to say that they possess much merit. All that I can honestly claim is that they are the best that I can do. And since the

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editor of this COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY has asked me to write about them, their genesis, their characters, their purpose, I am very glad to do so since of all my books they mean the most to me. More than *A Goodly Heritage*, which, seemingly an autobiography, is more truly an account of the traditions behind the formation of New England life and thought; more than my books about the literature of the Bible, which I have taught for many years at Smith College; more even than *The White Gate*, which I wrote purely for fun and got that fun, "pressed down and running over."

The three novels which are based securely upon Maine history and Maine life, both past and present, are *Mary Peters* (1934), *Silas Crockett* (1935), and *The Edge of Darkness* (1957). The most recent, *The Lovely Ambition* (1960) is about Maine, too; but since it is in its early chapters laid in England, since it deals with matters and with people not distinctly of Maine, and since it is a novel of incident more than one of manners, I do not think of it as a Maine novel, any more than I should myself place *Windswept* in that category. What then shall I say about those three which have as their chief aim and purpose (or mine for them) the portrayal of Maine background and of Maine people?

Sarah Orne Jewett once said to Willa Cather that a novel which has lain long in one's mind and imagination before any of its words are placed on paper is bound to be a better book than one written upon the first impact of an idea or a desire. This, I have all my life learned, is entirely true.

Mary Peters was born in my mind at least twenty-five years before Mary, her mother, Sarah Peters, her father, who was captain of the *Elizabeth*, the officers and sailors of the ship, and the village of Petersport had any shape at all beyond dim dreams and visions. I suppose its beginning goes back to my grandmother's stories when I was a child in Blue Hill. My grandmother, Eliza Ann Wescott Chase, who was born in 1827 on a farm ten miles north of Blue Hill village, went to sea for eight years between 1852, when she set forth on a disastrous honeymoon with my grandfather, Captain Melatiah Kimball Chase, and 1860 when my grandfather retired from his job as master of three successive ships—ships which sailed to Mediterranean and South American ports and even to the Far East during

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those wonderful years when our American Merchant Marine, largely of New England origin and genius, became famous throughout the world. One of my grandmother's favorite stories, which she always told us on Sunday afternoons, was of the port of Cadiz in Spain. It was a snow-white city, she always said, rising from the blue water, gleaming in the Spanish sun, like some New Jerusalem awaiting tired, seaworn exiles from home. I first learned from her, I am sure, the meaning of a symbol; and although I myself have never read *Mary Peters* because I lack the courage, I *think* it begins with the words: "Mary Peters first saw Cadiz in 1880. She was nine years old then."

My grandmother always hated and feared the sea, and with ample cause. Yet she understood what it had to give to women of her generation who loved their shipmaster husbands *too* much to remain at home while they sailed upon it. And this perception she somehow managed to convey to me as a child—this understanding of its gifts as well as of its terrors, this sense of a great and various world beyond our own small harbor and our own Maine hills.

Cadiz thus became a symbol to me, too, remaining always in my mind, together with my grandmother's memories of long hours on a quarterdeck while the benign tradewinds blew; of gay, fearless days in one port or another; of this sailor and that; of strange harbors and tongues; of gallantry and cold and danger; and, above everything else, of a life bigger and wider and more full of meaning than that of my inconsequential childhood. She also taught me to see the sky, especially at sunset when many-shaped clouds lay above the horizon, in terms of the foreign harbors which she had known. "That looks like Riga on the Baltic," she would say, "with the dark hills beyond." Or: "There's Marseilles. I can almost hear the clatter upon the piers."

The University of Maine contributed more than a little to *Mary Peters*. I knew the Searsport Colcords there, Lincoln, Joanna, and Maude, all of whom had been reared at sea. They gave me the material for *Mary Peters*' lessons there, for they had all prepared for college in a ship's cabin under the teaching of their respective mothers and of well-read ships' officers, like *Mary*'s beloved Mr. Gardiner.

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My own voyages across the Atlantic contributed perhaps most of all. I crossed it in 1921, 1924, and during the four summers between 1930 and 1933 when *Mary Peters* was at long last beginning to be written. From the decks of whatever ship I was on I studied the sea and the sky; took careful notes on every phase of the weather, on every flight of birds; observed colors or their lack; saw a rainbow in both sky and sea; let no detail of fog or wind or waves escape me. The sad episode of the drowning kitten happened before my very eyes in 1921. I went to Marseilles, spending hours along its untidy waterfront, and more hours looking at London Post. I went to Genoa, Naples, the Piraeus and Athens, the Balearic Islands. I never went to Cadiz, for I have learned that symbols do not often bear exploration.

As to characters in books, it is difficult if not impossible to describe their creation. I think it is safe to say, however, that no character in pure fiction is *ever* founded upon any actual person. Bits of conversation, tricks of speech, the odd use of hands, a pair of eyes, episodes and events, countless mannerisms—these, of course, all help in the creation of people in books; yet the people themselves remain the mysterious creation of the author, or of some Power quite outside him. He is rarely if ever sure of just how or whence they come. *Mary Peters* (whose name is that of my great-great grandmother) is an idea more than she is a person. She is modelled upon no one, nor is any other character in her book. She was created solely for the purpose of showing how a childhood spent largely at sea might help to form a mind and an imagination invulnerable against time, chance, and tragedy. I hope that she does this.

So far as any contribution to the social history of Maine is concerned, I consider *Silas Crockett* the most significant and the most valuable of all my books. It was written under ideal circumstances, in the village of Grantchester in England during 1934 and 1935, when I had no housekeeping to attend to (for I like most other women run a house, cook, clean, wash, iron, dust), no Smith girls to teach, and long, uninterrupted hours in which to write. I had a small cottage in Grantchester which looked out across the flat, green East Anglian fields toward the distant gray towers and spires of Cambridge—those of King's Chapel, Great St. Mary's, the University Library, the University

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Press, the Church of Our Lady and the English Martyrs. In the short winter days my coal fire blazed in my living room; in the spring the cuckoo sounded from dawn until dusk; in the cold of January nights I heard the bleating of new-born lambs, later to be described in *The Lovely Ambition*. My English housekeeper looked after the mysterious details of British cookery. I was free to write about the Crocketts.

They represent, of course, four generations of a Maine seafaring family, from the great days of sailing ships to the humbler ones of fishing for cod off the Banks of Newfoundland. In them and through them I tried to give the story of Maine life upon the sea. A great deal of careful research was necessary, and I owe more than I can ever say to books, especially to Samuel Eliot Morison's magnificent work, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts*, which was literally never absent from my writing table. The characters in *Silas Crockett*, all purely fictional, are, I hope, typical of Maine coast men and women. I never knew them in the flesh; but I really know them better than if they had actually lived, as, indeed, they *do* live for me. I chose the name Crockett as a grateful tribute to a certain Captain Crockett, who used to let me hold the wheel of his small steamboat, the *Catherine*, which during my childhood was on the run to Rockland where she connected with the Boston boats of the Eastern Steamship Lines.

I even intruded into the fields of poetry in *Silas Crockett*, myself writing the ribald songs of the sailors and the Biblical verses sung by Abigail Crockett to her grandson Nicholas!

The Edge of Darkness, the last of the three Maine novels, had a title years before it was set down on paper. That lovely phrase is used in Eastern Maine to describe the twilight, the end of day; and I seized upon it early during the sixteen summers spent at *Windswept*, my cottage on Petit-Manan Point. This book, perhaps to me the favorite of all which I have written, portrays a small coast village sadly changed from its former days. Its people now fish for herring and for lobsters; and, were it not for Sarah Holt, whose death frames and forms the book, they might be unaware of those times when their village was an integral and important part of the seafaring world.

This novel, which to some readers may seem formless, is, in point of fact, more carefully designed than any other of my

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books. It is composed throughout on the principle of understatement, that is, on the desire to arouse in the reader's mind thoughts and perceptions which are purposely never allowed to appear on the pages. Each chapter in the main section called "The Neighbors," from "Samuel Parker" to "The Children," is intended to be a short novel by itself, each a life story of accident, fear, or tragedy, of love and wisdom, of thwarted hopes and desires, or of wrong and its resultant misery; and each is in some way dominated by the old woman who is dead. It is seemingly a short novel and was designed to be just that; yet, to me at least, it is not only the most comprehensive book which I have written over a period of thirty years, but the best in terms of form and of language.

In closing I would wish to thank not only the editor of the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY for his gracious invitation to me to write these paragraphs, but all those unknown friends of mine, in Maine and elsewhere, who have read my books. No one so much as I myself could wish them better than they are; yet no one can be more grateful to the incomparable State of Maine which gave them their life.

