March 1979

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 15, no.1, March 1979, p.48-57
Ruth Moore: Maine Coast Writer

by DONALD F. MORTLAND

Among all those writing today, one way or another, about the Maine coast, surely Ruth Moore is outstanding. She has thirteen novels to her credit, all of which deal with Maine settings and Maine characters. She has also published two books of poetry. She is now at work on another novel. It is the quality of her writing, however, not the quantity, that places her, in my judgment, at the head of the group of living Maine writers. Although different from her predecessors Mary Ellen Chase and Sarah Orne Jewett, she is of their calibre.

Piles of books have been written about the Maine coast and its people, some of which are sentimental slush, some simply wrong. A native of Gott’s Island and a nearly lifelong resident of the coast of Maine, Ruth Moore does not idealize either the place or its people, nor does she see them as quaint, nor does she patronize them.

There are several ruinous rocks to be skirted in writing about the Maine coast. One is the danger of being sentimental. Another is the tendency to be folksy. A third is the danger of falling into ruts made by previous writers that lead into folksy stories about quaint people with hearts of gold who speak a peculiar dialect, mourn about the past, and spend their lives dealing with trivia over which the author makes them triumphant in some miniscule way. Ruth Moore avoids all of these.

In my opinion, to see her at her best, one need only look into Spoonhandle or Candlemas Bay or The Gold and Silver Hooks; but her greatest work so far, again in my opinion, is Speak to the Winds. I shall refer to this book more often than her others in this paper. In Speak to the Winds, as so often in Ruth Moore’s novels, the setting is an island just off the coast of Maine in nearly the present day. Chin Island was settled in the nineteenth century by Robert MacKecknie and Ansel Gilman. Following MacKecknie’s dream, they established granite quarries, brought their families, and hired men who brought theirs; and as the quarries flourished, a town grew and flourished. As the book takes place, Elbridge Gilman, grandson of both founders (MacKecknie’s daughter married Gilman’s son), first selectman of the little town, is struggling to keep the community together and to preserve the good life of the island even though the quarries have long since ceased to provide much work and the town has “gone down.” Indeed, much of the book
is based upon Elbridge’s struggle to keep his little ship of state from splitting upon the very threatening rocks of dissension, near-poverty, and the melancholy that comes to a declining town.

Yet the book is far more than just a sigh for the days of yore. Miss Moore uses the island as a microcosm of the world. Like the Pequod in *Moby Dick*, it is the better suited to be such a microcosm from the fact that the people are of many nationalities, descended from the good and varied immigrant stock, the best men that Gilman and MacKecknie could find, who were hired to work the quarries. Names testify to this: Liseo MacGimsey, Orin Vira, Elbridge Gilman, Bill Lessaro. The characters are as varied as their names. As in the world, so on Chin Island the people are a variety of mixtures of good and evil. Some are essentially good with just a streak of meanness in them, like Willard Lowden; some few are essentially mean with just a streak of goodness in them, like Stella MacGimsey. There is the central character, Elbridge Gilman, born to be a selfless leader, but a very human man as friend, father, husband, son—a well balanced man, and one who loves his island and its past, present, and future, so deep are his roots in it. By contrast there is Miss Roxindra Greenwood, tiny, ugly, cultured, a lady transplanted from Philadelphia, whose love of her adopted island has led her to have a house built upon a rock in a remote part of the island and who becomes a resident, yet is always outside the circle of townspeople. An old maid who cares for her deaf and blind mother, who seems to have no other relatives and no close friends, incredibly ugly, Miss Greenwood yet can thank God for her good life. She is also apart from and oblivious to the town’s quarrels. More important, she is a window on the world for the island children. Each year she has a Christmas party for them:

There were thousands of little things on the tree. But the toys, above all, seemed wonderful and romantic and from far away, because, as all the children knew, they came from places like Germany, and South Africa and the Pyrenees, places Miss Greenwood had been when she was a child and had travelled all over the world. She had said so, one night of a Party, when some of the children were asking about the toys.

"I guess you must have been a lot of places."

"Oh, yes. Yes. We were great travelers, once, Mother and I. When we were younger. When I was little, too."

"Have you ever been to London?"

"Oh, yes. I’ve been to London."

"Paris, France?"

"Yes, Paris, France."

"The North Pole?"

"No, not the North Pole. Only Admiral Peary has been there. And Santa Claus."

And she laughed and began to take the presents off the tree.1

Roxindra Greenwood and Elbridge Gilman, perhaps also Willard

Lowden and Stella MacGimsey, are as memorable as any characters in Dickens.

Stella MacGimsey is immortalized in the section of the book that describes her activities on the morning after the terrible snowstorm. A widow in her forties, she runs the general store, situated in part of her house, and serves as the island's postmistress, the post office being in her store. In addition, she takes care of her bedridden and very aged grandfather-in-law, Luther MacGimsey. We follow her thoughts and her doings in this section, and a very oddly effective kind of suspense is created by her simply not answering Luther’s calls for attention. We expect every moment that she will at least answer him, but she does not. She starts a fire in her kitchen stove, eats her breakfast, goes to the outhouse, milks the cow, and then goes to “tend to” Luther. Meanwhile we have seen much of her daily round and understand a bit better the acidulousness of her complex personality.

That the island is intended to represent the world in microcosm is also substantiated by several passages planted with decent subtlety in various parts of the book. On page eight, MacKecknie recalls that Gilman once told him, “I have it in mind to start a stone quarry, not a kingdom.” Seventeen pages later, MacKecknie, now an old man, observes to his grandson, Elbridge Gilman, “What we have here is a microcosm of the world.”

Although Ruth Moore does not say so, the quarrel between two factions of townspeople is from start to finish like a war. It is ignited by elements deep within human nature. Neither side is wholly right. The people of the island are a group of human beings trying to get along as best they can. They must battle the elements and are affected by the struggle. Their lives are always affected by the weather and by their conflicting personalities. Insularity has something to do with it. They are bottled up together, or “islanded up,” insulated, as men are upon the earth which they must share.

The lumber that is washed ashore in the storm is to the islanders what a bit of unprotected valuable country is to nations. It is something valuable put before them, belonging to one as much as to another. We are tempted to make the hogs-at-the-trough comparison, too. It brings out the worst in them. It is echoed in the incident of Stell’s taking food left at the vestry. Here again we see how different Ruth Moore is from the sentimental writer. She paints her people warts and all. She sees the value of island life and people and surely regrets the passing of island villages and island virtues; but she has her eyes wide open to the streaks of narrowness and meanness in us that island life seems to broaden. At one point Elbridge quotes from his grandfather Gilman’s journal: “We had a bloody fight today, Rocco and Jarvis pounding each other groggy over a jackknife. I separated them, but the fight goes on in each man’s mind. Sometimes I think that it is not the forces of nature that we have
so much to fear, but the ill-will over little things that breaks out of even
good Christian men” (p. 237).

So it was on the island still in Elbridge’s day, and so in the world. Reading his grandfather’s journal helps Elbridge to remember that his troubles are not new, and seeing itself reflected in such a book helps the
world. Elbridge realizes that his grandfathers had more to work with than he has. The town has declined since his grandfathers’ days. But he sees that it is not the place that causes men’s ills but men themselves:

Not the place; there was nothing in places for a man to fear. The natural disasters—two storms meeting overhead and bashing it out together, lightning striking, the sea rolling up to drown—were land and sea and sky and weather, minding their own business. They were what a man coped with the best he could, but not afraid so much as watchful. Death in its own good time; but in between, breakfast and birds’ nests, the buds on the trees, apples and sunsets, grass with dew on it, a winter overcoat, a man’s wife and his children, spring coming and full-turned leaves, a hot buttered rum on a cold night, and clean spruce chips and clam chowder and snow. Not the place, or the dark, or the nightmare of the bears’ woods; but the malice, the ill-will, the rancor, running like pus out of the minds of men. (p. 240)

In the book we see in miniature a civilization struggling to survive. This is nicely symbolized by the church invaded by the snow, having been left empty by the un-Christian and uncivilized backbiting of the quarrel. It is also symbolized by the trees growing up in fields and orchards. It is civilization threatened by the wilderness and by man’s own meanness of spirit, a meanness that keeps him from joining with his fellows to keep proper watch against the advance of wilderness. Any culture must guard against the invasions of barbarism, vulgarity, and crudeness. The book portrays this.

At one point, Liseo half seriously calls the quarrel a war and compares it to the actual war in which he served. “War . . . the big one I was in, we smashed around regardless, anything to hurt the other feller. You know that” (p. 173). Shortly afterward, Willard Lowden expostulates: “Majority rules,” he said. “Don’t it? Well, does it or don’t it? Live in a democracy, do we, or where they’s just a few run things, regardless of what the most of the people want?” (p. 177). A few pages later, we find Elbridge mulling over town records and town history:

“One town, this size, it doesn’t amount to much; but the world, after all, is only a mess of towns some big some small. The history of the world’s nothing but town records of one kind or another, records of government. And government, when you boil it down, is decent people getting together and making decent laws for themselves to live decently by. If you have it, you’ve got the best thing there is so far; if you don’t have it, you’ve got nothing—a mess of thieves and pirates.” (p. 180)

The island, like the world, has a history. It needs government and leaders. It worries about its economy. It has religious differences. Like the nation and the world, the island has economic problems, political problems, social problems, and even religious problems. The central
conflict influences and is influenced by all of these. It is a kind of inter-necine war.

As wars sometimes do, the village quarrel begins with a misunderstanding. Elbridge's young son has been assigned by the teacher to recite "The Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight" as his contribution to the entertainment at the annual Christmas party. Understandably "turned off" by the piece, he appeals to his father, who happens to know a delightful parody of it. The boy learns both, recites the right one at rehearsals but on the night of the performance goes rollicking through the parody. Alas! The "piece" just preceding his was the real thing, delivered "with appropriate gestures" by one of the ladies of the parish who fancies herself an accomplished elocutionist, Imogene Cayford.

This incident, a significant cog in the plot, also illustrates Miss Moore's handling of humor. She is a master in describing the wrath of a narrow-minded woman.

Heat is added to the conflict when Miss Greenwood wins the prize in cooking, the prize being a quilt on which Stell MacGimsey had her eye; when Willard throws water into the furnace to get all home quickly as the storm is coming up and is blamed by some for cracking the hearth; when another church is established; and when a load of lumber is washed ashore in the storm from the deck of a schooner. Some are thought to have gotten more than their share of the lumber while others were out searching for any people who might have been washed off the ship as well. This is a major root of the quarrel. The squabble over the lumber shows clearer than anything else the weak spots in whatever civilization man has built up here in the world. How like beasts they are, fighting over what they have found; and how often is this repeated in more or less sophisticated ways in other places and times.

In a village or on an island, this is called squabbling, but it is all parallel to what in the world are called international events or affairs of state. The villagers' war with one another, the storm in their community, is balanced by the actual storm that covers the town with snow and drives the lumber ashore. They must always be on the alert for attacks by natural forces. Nature seems determined to snuff out their civilization not only by dramatic storms but by the steady onward creep of the woods as it reclaims the land, and by such scenes as that of the snow in the church when a window has been left open. Yet the breach through which wilderness comes, symbolized by the window left open, is man-made, the result of man's anger and ill will.

The breach made in the community as a whole is not completely closed during the period covered by the book. As the storm split them apart, another tragedy helps to bring them together—the destruction of Miss Greenwood's home and the drowning of Willard Lowden. (The townspeople also suppose that Miss Greenwood died in the fire, but the reader knows that she collapsed before the fire started, with hot ashes in
her hand, and thus started the fire.) Here too we think of world wounds, sometimes healed by sacrifice of life or by a common tragedy.

Miss Greenwood's house is a kind of symbol of herself. Both are physically ugly, nearly unique, and out of place; yet both are strangely appealing and command the interest and perhaps the affection of the townspeople. The house is apart from other houses as she is apart from other people. The house is high on a ledge; no one's life seems to have a firmer foundation than Miss Greenwood's. She is outside the village and so outside the quarrels of the villagers and seems also above them. She has usually a calming and uplifting effect upon the community, and brings out the best in people. Her house has a similar effect upon the more sensitive, such as Elbridge Gilman:

This house, he thought.
This house was a part of the strong foundation of the town. The same men built it, the same skills went into it. Good, square-cut granite, bolted into rock. Maybe that was what he had been feeling about it. Might be that. All the same, there was something else.
Well, I don't know what it is, he thought, glancing curiously around the quiet room. All I know is, I feel better. (pp. 136-137)

Her house is also a symbol of the town and so (without their realizing it) an inspiration to the townspeople. By great labor, patience, intelligence, and skill, Miss Greenwood has created something beautiful in an unlikely spot, just as the early settlers created the town and way of life on the granite of Chin Island.

Like her house, her name, Roxindra, is appropriate: it is odd and not pretty, yet it has strength and dignity and femininity.

Ruth Moore is concerned with preserving or trying to salvage a way of life, as seen in Elbridge and Liseo and their attempts and attitudes. She sees that the narrowing of life there threatens to narrow them, however, and that one thing that can destroy the precious thing that they have in their life upon the island is narrowness or meanness leading to internal strife. So in the world? She never says, "This island and the way of life here are precious," but she shows it to us through her characters and their attitudes, through descriptions of the scenery, through simple talk between a man and his wife over cups of coffee in a plain kitchen, talk in which love is resonant.

In the process of preserving a way of life, Miss Moore also preserves a way of speaking that television and formal education will probably soon expunge. Many writers try and fail to reproduce the speech of the Maine coast, the speech of the man on the street there, or the man at the oar or the throttle. Miss Moore invariably succeeds.

The secret of her success is not immediately apparent. She eschews a jungle of apostrophes, and allows the dialogue to look nearly normal on the page. The result is something much easier to read than the verbal contortions of James Russell Lowell in his dialect poems, or of Eugene O'Neill in Desire Under the Elms. Part of her success seems to come
also from what her characters say rather than how they pronounce it. She has a marvelous ear for local idioms and those original expressions for which the Down East Yankee is noted. Some words are commonly used on the Maine coast that one seldom hears elsewhere. I remember my surprise and excitement in finding the word orts, which is used by Shakespeare but not by most of us, still in use on Mt. Desert Island, or parts of it, Ruth Moore’s home territory. There are also words like cultch, and gorm and gormy, lunkhead, and the expression by gorry. In reproducing the Maine coast speech, Miss Moore has retained these words, and she knows the context so that they are not just inserted like candles on a cake.

For instance: “‘You think there’s another woman in town would feed her prize cake to a couple gumps like us, come round and did a couple chores, Liseo?’” (p. 76). The placing of gumps is right, but so is the judicious omission of relative pronouns and subordinating conjunctions. The passage continues: “‘No, sir, by gorry!’ Liseo said. ‘That’s hospitality.’” Clearly another part of what she does is to record speech as elliptical, as it surely is.

“For heaven’s sake” is of course a common expression, but many a good village wife doesn’t really pronounce it just that way. Again Miss Moore has caught it exactly, it seems to me, and uses it in several passages, one of the best of which follows, recording the exact pronunciation of this and several other expressions:

“Yes, for heb’m sakes, Wid,” Carrie Hitchman said, “and let other folks eat theirs. Every time you spread, poor old Herbie flies off like a bat ball. There, now, Herbie, you ain’t hurt. Crawl in here, on t’other side of Mumma. Now,” she went on, transferring her son’s plate to her sheltered side, “you start me off of here, you’ll need more, Wid.” (p. 79)

And again: “‘For heb’m sakes, what ails them men?’” (p. 149).

Speech typical of the angry woman is illustrated in Stell’s speech after she has lost the prize: “Stell said, ‘You kids cut out that ranting this minute. This is a church and it ain’t no place to act in the way you act to home. You git and set down, every last one of you’” (p. 81). Other expressions common to the locality, such as “by criminy” and “by joppy” are slipped in unobtrusively in the speech of characters who would use them. Ruth Moore has something to her advantage in that by accurately recording the common expressions of her characters she produces something uncommon to most of her readers. Sometimes the advantageous expression is an unusual figure of speech, such as “You sound like a dead rat in a foghorn” (p. 173), imaginative, but coming from the character’s own experience. Sometimes, too, she uses expressions of the sort in passages that are not conversation but follow the thoughts of a character and use his language, such as, “Orin felt some old ashamed” (p. 249).

She never apologizes. She never puts quaint expressions in quotation
marks, only conversation. She just uses the expressions in both conversation and passages that follow the characters' thoughts.

Allied to this is her deft handling of tone and point of view, and her altering her style to suit the tone and point of view. Throughout the book she speaks in the third person, but she shifts the focus of awareness from one character to another. With an artist's precision, she shifts the style as the point of view shifts so that the language fits the speech of the character whose thoughts she is following.

In other passages, the author assumes omniscience and speaks to the reader almost personally. In such passages one sees the elegance of style of which Miss Moore is capable:

The sky in the west was clear gold-green from the sunset still, translucent as a cat's eye. Stars were coming out, big and quiet, and the tip of the moon lay as in a niche in the place where the sky met the ocean, making a faint squiggle of reddish fire across the water. Below the hill, the island spread out, savage and cold, swamp and pasture and water meadow buried in white. Tonight no wind blew, but the sound of the sea still hung muted in the air. (p. 151)

In dealing with both her people and her subject, she is sensitive without being sentimental. This success can be attributed partly to her realism and partly to her sense of humor. Involved in her realism is the recognition of the presence of both good and evil in the world, and in most people, including those living on islands off the coast of Maine. Often in her novels there is someone whom I have fallen into the habit of calling "bad brother"—a character who is as close to being thoroughly evil as a writer could realistically make him. Examples are Josiah in The Gold and Silver Hooks and Harold in Lizzie and Caroline and Florence Baker in The Dinosaur Bite. There is no such person, quite, in Speak to the Winds, although Stell MacGimsey comes close at times, but the worst side of humanity is seen clearly enough. As to evil in the world and in the nature of things, Ruth Moore implies her thought as she follows the musings of Elbridge Gilman concerning the past and present and future of the island town. The Christmas party is a more subtle representation of good and bad in people. Here we see Miss Moore's artistry. She gives an excellent account of a community church or school Christmas party and immortalizes this social phenomenon: supper, pageant, recitations, Santa Claus, and gifts. It is homely, realistic, and humorous—and as delightful as a comparable scene in Dickens. It is by no means all sweetness and light; rather, it shows how easily people can turn cruel. Underneath, however, in the best of them at least, her characters have love and consideration—Liseo and Elbridge following Miss Greenwood in the storm to make sure that she arrives home safely. In her own way Miss Greenwood is a "minority group," yet she is loved by the community.

A more sentimental writer would have made a sweet old lady of Miss Greenwood, but not Ruth Moore. There is a stubborn side of Miss
Greenwood that sends her home through the storm at night even though it will cause others to worry and follow her to make sure of her safety. Her physical ugliness is never mitigated or veiled, and the fact that she is unable to be close to anyone, except perhaps Little Sarah, is well brought out. She is a complex and intriguing character. Her loneliness, kindness, self-sacrifice—all are shown as well as her ugliness; yet we overhear her thanking God for her good life. There is the irony, too, of her attempting to do something for the town by getting the Episcopalian chapel built, and by so doing only widening the rift in the town.

The island is not a paradise. The author shows the drawbacks of living in the nineteenth century as well as the advantages. It is insular, and the people must deal with the threat of combustion from too great familiarity. It is a hard life, without the aids of electricity and indoor plumbing. Opportunities for them and their children are limited, and men like Liseo and Elbridge brood over this. Roger and Rosie will leave the island, however much their hearts may be there. Roger is a clear-eyed young man, and any clear-eyed young man can see that he must take hold of what lies about him, or of what opportunities are his, and see what he can do with them. Gilman and MacKecknie did that four generations earlier and were able to create something beautiful that lasted until Elbridge’s generation, but there is not enough left for Roger’s generation. A sentimental writer would have had him return to the old homestead, but Miss Moore sends him to the mainland with dreams of someday owning a pharmacy. In most cases, she treats the past, not sentimentally, but as something that the present can use to shape the future.

Ruth Moore sees things as they are among her people and hears them as they are. More than any earlier writer that I know she paints not only the simple grandeur of some of her people but also the gross vulgarity of others. They are at times disgusting and say disgusting things. Here as ever it is a matter of character realistically drawn. In or on any Chin Island, there would be Little Sarahs, who are above vulgarity, but there would also be the Stell MacGimseys who would speak wrathfully and disdainfully of “niggers and foreigners” and who would not shy away from recalling, as Stell does, that her husband had thought of making love as no more satisfying than a good bowel movement.

The speech of her people I have already dealt with, but it too includes words really used by Maine coast fishermen, or many of them, who are as profane as any longshoremen, farmers, coal miners, or other men-on-the-street. If anything, Ruth Moore has tipped the balance toward more profanity than would be likely. This is one of the differences between her writing and that of such predecessors as Mary Ellen Chase and Sarah Orne Jewett.

She has the most extraordinary knowledge of things, and of the exact terms that apply to them. She can describe accurately and minutely the
lace on a lady’s nightgown or the process of getting a boat free from a ledge. She knows both a man’s world and a woman’s world, and possesses an astonishing accuracy of vocabulary for describing either. She knows how things look and feel and smell and taste, in the setting that she uses. For instance: “He gaffed in the buoy, as Elbridge slowed the engine and put the Daisy alongside it, and without further comment, wound a bight of the warp around the hoisting drum and brought in the trap, which, as it came over the side, looked like nothing so much as a trap-shaped mound of sea urchins, piled one on top of another” (p. 305).

She can make us feel, with Elbridge, the calming effect of Miss Greenwood’s beautiful and well ordered home, or the tension arising from searching the bay for possible survivors of a supposedly wrecked ship. She seems completely at home with either embroidery or heavy machinery. Furthermore, her knowledge of things spans several generations. She can write very accurately, getting the terms right, either of driving an ox, or of a motor and radio equipment in the newest lobster boat.

Another element that saves her from sentimentality is her robust sense of humor. She does not write satire, but humor in her novels generally springs from the personalities, behavior, and speech of her characters. In Speak to the Winds, one thinks of Will Gilman reciting his parody of “The Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight,” or of Willard Lowden, ponderously stout, always walking six paces behind his slight brother, George, in the winter his creepers crunching and clicking. An inimitable scene ripples with humor when Miss Greenwood (in a flashback) confers with Luther MacGimsey about building her house.

Ruth Moore laughs at her characters as well as with them. She seems to love them all, and works hard to be fair to them, to show with even such a shrew as Stell MacGimsey that her life is hard and her sharpness may be partially excused. But she laughs at her characters when they deserve it, even her hero, Elbridge Gilman.

In a recent newspaper interview, Miss Moore said, “My object is to interpret this region realistically. After all, I grew up in it.” She has succeeded marvelously well.

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