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Lincoln Colcord: At Sea and at Home

by DONALD F. MORTLAND

With the two exceptions of those who are left among his many friends in various parts of the country and those who are over fifty among the citizens of Searsport, Maine, few readers today remember Lincoln Colcord or his works. However, in the 1920's he had a wide reputation and seemed destined to take a permanent place in American literature. His name appeared regularly in The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature between the years 1908 and 1937, the heaviest concentration being between 1919 and 1921, when it appeared twenty-five times. His works were reviewed by publications such as The New York Times Book Review. His book-length poem, Vision of War, caused a considerable stir when it came out in 1915, and his novel, The Drifting Diamond, was said to be "uncommonly interesting and promising" when it came out in 1912. In Book Review Digest it was described as "a tale of bewitchment with interesting flashes of Oriental culture," and it was praised by reviewers in Outlook and in The New York Times. 2 The Dictionary of American Biography devotes three columns to his life. In short, he was no small potatoes in the literary world during much of his career.

Among his personal friends were such men as Waldo Peirce, Samuel Eliot Morison, Sterling Hayden, Rudy Vallee, and Walter Muir Whitehill. Mr. Whitehill attests that conversation in the Colcord library and garden in Searsport was lively and often heated:

To this house there came an extraordinary diversity of people, among them journalists, seamen, historians, actors, poets, and painters. In his back yard you might find almost anyone. Similarly there were few limits to the range of his ideas. He dearly loved to talk. His friends wished he would write as he had spoken, but in later years he seldom did, save in book reviews in the New York Herald Tribune and exuberant letters that still remain uncollected and unprinted. 3

Someday a volume of his letters may yet appear. Colcord is further remembered as one of the founders of The American Neptune in Salem and the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport.

2. Quimby, p. 5.
His career was unique in a number of ways, as was his life. In the first place, he played an important part in the writing of another author’s book, Ole Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*. Colcord persuaded Rolvaag to translate *Giants in the Earth* into the best English that he could command, which Colcord then rewrote in more felicitous English prose. The Harper’s Modern Classics edition of 1927 and other early editions carry a foreword by Rolvaag and an introduction by Colcord that tell the story.

Second, although he seldom receives credit for it and received very little remuneration, Colcord was the author of “The Stein Song,” the college song of the University of Maine, which he attended intermittently from 1900 to 1906. He dashed off the lyrics in a half hour one day in 1904. The song was made overwhelmingly popular in 1930 by Rudy Vallee, at that time a young Maine alumnus. An article by Professor Parker Albee, Jr., gives a complete account of how Colcord, with Rudy Vallee as his ally, attempted to see justice done regarding remuneration. The song was being played everywhere. The words were on everyone’s lips. By the spring of 1930, “it was Number One all over the country,” Professor Albee quotes Rudy Vallee as saying, and furthermore it was “the most popular record and song of the big night clubs of Shanghai, China, Lisbon, Egypt, and ... every Oriental port.” But Colcord had not received a cent. Together Colcord and Vallee eventually confronted the publisher in New York; but Colcord, weary of haggling, rather suddenly settled for three thousand dollars, and returned to Searsport. Ironically, then, his best known work is something that meant very little to him, was created in a half hour, and is totally out of the stream of his work.

In the third place, although *home* for him was Searsport, Maine, he was not a native of any town or city, in the strictest sense of the word. He was a native of a latitude and longitude, as he wrote in an article entitled “I Was Born in a Storm at Sea.” In it he recounts how he came into the world on August 14, 1883, aboard a sailing vessel, the *Charlotte A. Littlefield*, of which his father was captain, while rounding Cape Horn in a storm on a voyage from Valparaiso to New York. (In those days, it was common for captains of sailing vessels to take their families with them on long voyages.) August is mid-winter in that region. A “black southwester” was blowing a gale. The ship had sprung a leak two days earlier. It was his father’s first command. The captain had now reached the ripe age of twenty-six; his wife was twenty-four. They had been married in Searsport one afternoon in June two years and two months earlier and had set out immediately on a voyage that would last three years. Seventeen months before the birth of their son, a daughter had been born to them in calmer seas and gentler weather off New Cale-


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donia, with a midwife in attendance. Now seventeen months old, Joanna Carver Colcord surely did not make matters easier for her mother at the time of the birth of her brother, Lincoln Colcord. No midwife was aboard this time, no nurse, no other woman. The young husband and father served as midwife while also serving as the captain of a vessel in considerable danger.

It was an appropriate beginning, just a century ago, for one who would become a writer of sea stories, some of which include scenes aboard ship off Cape Horn, and of a handful of poems, one of which is called “Goodbye, Cape Horn,” written at the completion of the Panama Canal, which obviated the necessity of rounding the Horn.

Soon after the day of his birth, conditions improved for the Colcords. The baby was born without complications, the storm abated, the ship stopped leaking, and they sailed northward through pleasant weather to their destination.

The rest of his life was hardly more conventional. Lincoln Colcord went to sea on his father’s ship most of the time until he was of high school age, educated when at sea by his parents, as were all boys and girls who lived at sea in this way. They sailed all over the world, but often to Eastern ports, going across the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa, across the Indian Ocean, through the Straits of Sunda (between Sumatra and Java—a place that fascinated Colcord) and thence northward or northeasterly to Singapore or Manila, Hong Kong or Shanghai, or on to Yokohama.

He went to high school at home, a tiny high school in a tiny town (population about 2,000), but he was among boys and girls some of whom had travelled as widely as he, for the Colcords were only one of many seafaring families of sea captains in this town; indeed, it was at about that time that Searsport had the distinction of being the home of one tenth of all the captains in the American merchant marine.

After graduating from Searsport High School, he entered the University of Maine, then (in 1900) a relatively small college at Orono, about forty miles “up river” from Searsport. He attended intermittently from 1900 to 1906, majoring in civil engineering. There followed a period of working for the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad, in the Maine woods, as a surveyor.

His writing career began in 1908 with the publication of his first short story. After that, he seems to have settled down to the life of a writer, living in Searsport, where in 1910 he married Blanche Morgan Nickels, the adopted daughter of another sea captain, J. C. Nickels. A daughter, Inez, was born to them in 1913. Between 1910 and 1917, he published short stories and poems and essays, most of the stories having to do with the sea and many of them set in the East, usually China, or at sea, most of the characters being American seafaring people. During this period he had two major publications, both well received: his novel, The
Drifting Diamond, in 1912, and his book-length poem in free verse, Vision of War, in 1915. In the same period, in 1914, he brought out his first collection of sea stories. The years from 1907 to 1917 must have been a very full, productive, and active decade for him. His life as a writer, living with his new family, must have been quite different from either slogging around in the Maine woods, helping to build a railroad, or going to sea.

His life changed greatly again in 1917 when he moved to Washington, D.C., where he became a staff correspondent in the Washington Bureau of the Philadelphia Public Ledger. In 1919 he moved to New York, where he worked as associate editor of The Nation. He returned to Searsport in 1920, and a new period of writing and publishing fiction began. He published short stories regularly, and in 1922 he brought out his second volume of stories, which also included three short poems.

His first wife died in 1924. Shortly thereafter he moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. There he worked with Rolvaag, as already described. There too he remarried, was divorced within a year, and married a third time, to Frances Brooks, with whom he had a son, Brooks, the next year. The family returned to Searsport “for good” early in 1930. There he lived for the rest of his life. Lincoln Colcord was home again, after a different sort of voyaging.

He published comparatively little during the remaining seventeen years of his life, but spent much time gathering data regarding maritime history, entertaining friends, writing letters in great numbers, helping to found the Penobscot Marine Museum (he and his first wife’s nephew, Clifford Nickels Carver, were the principal founders), instigating the founding of The American Neptune in Salem, Massachusetts, and publishing a few articles in that magazine and others. “Captain Robert Belknap Goes West,” perhaps his best poem, was published in this period.

He died suddenly in Searsport—actually in the hospital in Belfast, six miles away—on November 16, 1947, at the age of sixty-four. Walter Muir Whitehill has written of how he and Samuel Eliot Morison made the sad journey to Searsport to attend the funeral the following Wednesday afternoon in the Congregational Church, the same church from which Colcord’s parents had emerged as bride and groom and had gone to their waiting ship, the Charlotte A. Littlefield, a little more than sixty-six years before, and now a little more than one hundred and two years ago. Today the church is almost surrounded by the buildings of the much enlarged Penobscot Marine Museum.

Lincoln Colcord was home from the last voyage of all.

Lincoln Colcord’s father was a member of an old Searsport family.

that had been seafaring people for four or five generations. His mother came from another Searsport seafaring family, the Sweetsers. The heyday of seafaring for Maine men in their comparatively small Maine-made wooden sailing vessels was over by the time that Lincoln Colcord's generation were young men and women. "When I grew up, there was no sea career for me. The day of sailing ships was done, and I did not give a thought to steam," he wrote. However, the circumstances of his life admirably suited him for the task of writing about seafaring, of contributing to American literature of the sea, sometimes composing elegies of the days of sail and sometimes bringing them back to life, peopling his works of fiction with men and women of New England who made the oceans and the ports of the world the stages on which their lives were played.

In an introduction written for a book by his sister in 1938, Colcord wrote:

A solemn thought attaches itself to the memory of an era that has completely passed away. The traffic of deepwater sailing ships is done, and will never return to the seas it crossed and conquered for man. No conceivable circumstance, except the ending of the world, can now bury the knowledge of steam, electric and internal combustion engines, of artificial power, which is the foundation of a new industrial age. And with this knowledge man will never again feel the need of the ancient natural means of water propulsion—the sails which have brought him forward, a long and desperate voyage, out of the remote regions of antiquity. Sails are inefficient now. The word has been said, and man is wedded for all time to his machine.  

His letter to American Magazine in 1915, published under the title "New Ships for Old," is almost a photograph in words of Lincoln Colcord, home from the sea for good, ruminating upon the past and the changed present—upon the days of sailing vessels, only yesterday in his life and so important to almost all of his ancestors for several generations—and upon the strange present (1915), shortly after the death of his father (aboard his ship in Bremerhaven, Germany) and the death of the way of life of his fathers.  

He seldom wrote any overt expression of regret that he had been born too late to command a sailing vessel, that he was the end of that long line of captains, or rather, the one to break the line; but in his autobiographical essay is the poetic and wistful passage:

When I came ashore, I left my heart moored, I think, in the fairway of the Straits of Sunda, the gateway of the East, the portal of the dawn, where any ships that passed into the China Sea would sight my mooring buoy. It lies there yet, for all I know, unless it has broken adrift and started on one of those long sea journeys in the march of ocean currents. I have a notion that it will never drift ashore.

Evidence of the change lay all about him. Along the shore at Searsport, before his very windows, lay the silent remnants of several shipyards that had been so busy when he was a boy and when his father was a boy, and that had played so large a part in creating the prosperity and activity that Searsport then had known. The town itself was there—the center of the village just to the right a few rods as he gazed upon the bay from his south windows, its captains' mansions emptying one by one as the old men died and no younger ones took their places. Men of Colcord's generation were looking elsewhere. A very few "went into steam," but most picked up what remnants there were of the family fortunes and went to Massachusetts or New York or Iowa or California to go into farming or into one business or another. Others got appropriate schooling and entered the professions. Many would return one day for part of the summer, as would their descendants, and would be "summer people."

The bay itself, so busy with sails in his boyhood, with ships coming and going to and from Searsport and Stockton, Belfast and Rockport, Bucksport and Winterport, Islesboro and Castine, Bangor and Brewer—the bay now found its traffic diminished to a trickle, and half of that was steamers and tugs and barges. Just beyond the bay was the open sea, which Colcord once referred to as "my old hunting grounds usurped by a meaner race of men."^{13}

But, unlike so many of his generation, Colcord came back to Searsport and occupied the old home, and meditated upon all that he had heard and seen. He wrote about these events and places and people—after he had shaped them at the forge and anvil of his thought and imagination—in his stories and poems and novel.

He was born at the right time and in the right circumstances, also, to see the opening of the Panama Canal and to know, perhaps painfully well, the significance of the change that this made in navigation. In his poem "Goodby, Cape Horn!" (written in sailor's dialect) one chorus is:

\[
\text{Then it's goodbye, oh, Cape Horn! (We loved you, too.)}
\]
\[
\text{With a hey-yah! And a goodbye!}
\]
\[
\text{For the times are changed, and the courses laid anew.}
\]
\[
\text{Oh! Goodbye, Cape Horn!}^{14}
\]

Such a poem would seem to be sentimental, yet it goes deeper. It is a true elegy. There is a kind of mystery here that is perhaps close to the heart of what made Lincoln Colcord tick. Knowing from his own experience and thousands of accounts of others the extreme dangers and towering frustrations of rounding the Horn, as described by him in "I Was Born in a Storm at Sea" and in his story "Moments of Destiny," why would he be anything but pleased to witness the opening of a canal

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that would render that perilous journey unnecessary from that time forth?

The life that Colcord knew on sailing vessels included the possibility of great danger and required great courage and great skill that were inspiring to behold. In addition, the vessels themselves, the sailing ships, were both practical and beautiful. Colcord saw this. In 1938 he wrote, "For a term of years ... the American clipper ruled the seas without a rival, a supreme blend of beauty and utility, fulfilling the mind's desire for power and the heart's romantic and passionate aspiration to a degree perhaps never before attained by the efforts of man." 15

Thus a man did not have to split himself in two. While pursuing the very practical matter of making a living by moving cargo from one port to another, he was surrounded by beauty and was indeed a part of a beautiful thing, and often found himself in situations that required great skill and great courage that were themselves beautiful. Thus Colcord's expressions of regret at the passing of the days of sail are not mere sentimentality, not just nostalgia, not a longing for "the good old days."

Having chosen seafaring as a way of making a living, sea captains were doing what they needed to do and what they loved to do (most of them) at the same time. This is an ideal combination. Robert Frost says it in "Two Tramps in Mud Time":

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes. 16

On such ships, love and need were one. They loved to do what they needed to do. If the need were taken away, the situation would no longer be ideal.

Men sail pleasure boats of various sorts, now, for the fun of it and for the beauty of their little crafts, but they have made their livings elsewhere. There is no need to sail a yacht. It is only love.

In the matter of rounding Cape Horn, when it was practical, when there was a need to do it, men rounded it, and they sometimes brought out the best in themselves, plumbed depths of courage and skill such as man had scarcely known before. Cape Horn was a challenge that the staunch of heart would answer. The dying captain in Colcord's late poem "Captain Robert Belknap Goes West" recalls a voyage when the young mate was ready to give up as they were rounding the Horn, but the captain urged him on. "Why do they always make the right things hard?" asked the young mate. No answer was needed, but the old captain observes, "Each generation has to go round the Horn." 17

15. Songs, p. 18.
What captain would or could afford to cling to sailing vessels when they were no longer practical? Steamers became the practical thing. In one of Colcord's stories, an old captain does try to cling to his sailing vessel, with tragic results. He loses everything and eventually has to sell his ship to be dismasted and used as a coal barge. For a final irony, he becomes captain of the coal barge, as he has to have some way to make a living, and he dies aboard her. Love and need are not always wedded, and beauty and practicality seldom are.

If Colcord himself had been a completely practical man, he probably never would have written. He would have "gone into steam" or started a business or entered a lucrative profession. Instead he became the poet, historian, and chronicler of that splendid blending of beauty and practicality, love and need, that was the sailing vessel and life aboard her.

He felt strongly that the way of life that he had known and loved aboard ship brought out the best in men. He also believed that man's greed and ignorance were responsible for most of the world's ills. He must have known that most men followed the sea to make money—not for what it would do to build character, and not just for the love of it, although they may also have loved it. As late as 1916 Colcord wrote: "... even the making of money, upon which the enterprise was necessarily founded, never crushed out the romance and sentiment, the sense of inward satisfaction, the reactions of true art, which sprang from the keeping, handling, and sailing of a ship under the old regime." Yet few would have chosen that way of life if it had not held out the promise or possibility of wealth. It was the necessary ingredient. When it was gone, they had to abandon it.

Joanna Colcord wrote:

The writers of these letters [her ancestors] were not rollicking adventurers, swashbuckling carelessly through life; they were cautious New Englanders doing a hard job which some of them even disliked, because by its means they could provide a better livelihood for their families than in any other way open to them. But home was where they always longed to be; and at home most of them now lie, in the cemetery facing south across Penobscot Bay.

But Lincoln Colcord condemned the pursuit of wealth again and again, and in various ways. Clearly, to him need was one thing but wealth was another, or "gaining a better livelihood for their families" was one thing and amassing fortunes was another. In his criticism of our materialism, he is aiming at the materialism of Americans, or indeed of mankind, in his day, not just that among seafaring people.

Colcord often wrote about the East, which he knew so well; for when he was a boy, his father's career as a sea captain was at its height, and commerce with China was active in those years. Consequently Colcord

was as familiar with the harbors of Hong Kong and Shanghai and Singapore as he was with New York and Boston.

Colcord created a character and narrator named Captain Nichols who owned and commanded the small bark *Omega*. Capt. Nichols came from a small town in New England, but hadn’t been home for years—unusual in the lives of New England seafarers. Instead he carried on a business entirely in the East, making voyages from Batavia to Hong Kong or Singapore, or from Anjer to Shanghai or Australia. Unmarried and without close relatives, middle-aged in most of the stories in which he appears, he is content to stay in the East. He is for Colcord what Marlow is for Conrad. He spins his yarns for his listeners (and for us) under the awning on the quarterdeck of his ship on balmy evenings in the harbor at Hong Kong or Shanghai. In a passage from “De Long: A Story of Sunda Straits,” we see him clearly outlined:

A few of us had gathered that evening on board the bark *Omega*, to welcome Nichols once more to the harbor-society of Singapore. He had arrived at noon from Batavia, standing across with the early sea-breeze from the mouth of Rhio Strait. For some time his trips had kept him off among the islands; of the fleet that he had left in Singapore three months before, my ship alone remained. I’d introduced the later arrivals; and talk had drifted down through Banka and across the Java Sea, along the route that Nichols had just sailed.\(^{21}\)

The opening lines of “The Game of Life and Death” are supposedly of a later time:

There aren’t any more of those evenings under the awning in Hong Kong Harbor, the evenings that Nichols used to like so well. The ships and the trade have dropped away; and Nichols is gone, too, for that matter. But we who are left remember him always in connection with those friendly gatherings. We came to look for his little bark on our arrival; and more than often she would be lying under Kowloon-side, a small vessel painted in the most extraordinary colors, cream-white above and bottle-green below the water line, with a good deal of bright yellow on the woodwork about her decks.

Nichols stood apart, a singular and interesting man. His experience in the coastwise trade of China had been remarkable. A certain alien strain had crept into his blood; he held the reputation of knowing half a dozen Chinese dialects and dealing in matters beyond the impenetrable border of the land.\(^{22}\)

These passages, well spiced with the Eastern names that he loved so much, are typical of the way Colcord introduces his narrator and the setting, and the second passage sounds the elegiac note that often creeps into Colcord’s writing and that he does so well.

At least three quarters of his stories have Chinese or at least Eastern settings, but most of the main characters are American or English. However, a character who figures prominently in many of the stories is the Chinese businessman Lee Fu Chang. He is almost a symbol of the old China: astute, inscrutable, mysterious, totally scrupulous, drawing wisdom from his aged land. Among the opening lines of *The Drifting*

\(^{21}\) *The Game of Life*, , pp. 101-02.
\(^{22}\) *The Game of Life*, , p. 1.
Diamond is this short paragraph: "Lee Fu Chang, merchant, philosopher, and unfathomable Chinaman, dropped the first hint, sitting with his hands clasped somewhere in the folds of long silken sleeves."  

Let us leave Nichols and Lee Fu Chang there for a moment and return now to a theme that often appears in Colcord’s fiction and that seems to have been born from his own thinking and his own life. Without precisely stating the theme, let us say that it expresses a criticism of materialism and the pursuit of wealth. Recalling the incident of his settling for three thousand dollars rather than haggling for the much larger sum that he probably could have gotten through weeks and perhaps months of strain and fret and litigation, and considering letters that Professor Albee quoted in his article on “The Stein Song,” we get a first clear glimpse of this quality of anti-materialism in the writer’s own life and thought.

After they had become friends through correspondence, Vallee had written to Colcord that he was eager to see satisfaction obtained for him, and then added a note concerning his own hectic life at the time. Colcord’s reply, from his peaceful home in Searsport, is like a hand held out to comfort the younger man. Sitting in his back yard, or perhaps by one of the many windows on the south side of his house that overlook the Bay, he wrote: “Here I sit, just above the headwaters of Penobscot Bay, looking out over a range of deep blue water and islands covered with bright spring green, on one of the most divine afternoons God ever dropped on the old world. . . . Peace, and quiet living. Why should we strain so hard at the leash? Why should we tie ourselves in hard knots and trouble our hearts, when nature offers such scenes as this? 24

This reveals an almost Thoreau-like love of natural beauty that is to be prized above wealth that has to be pursued in a life of quiet desperation.

“De Long: A Story of Sunda Straits” provides a good illustration of his opposition to materialism. De Long was a grossly fat man, rather short, of uncertain race, who kept a ship chandler’s shop at “Old Anjer, that busy port of call on the Java shore at the Straits of Sundae.” 25 As De Long grew older, he grew enormously rich, and put his wealth into gold and diamonds, which he wore sewed into the lining of his coat. Thus he was literally weighed down by his fortune. In time he married a beautiful young Eurasian woman, who in time took a handsome young Eurasian lover, a man who had bought out De Long’s rival in business. When the eruption of Krakatoa came, it caused a terrible tidal wave. As many as could do so escaped to the hills. De Long’s wife escaped, but De Long was impeded by his own great weight and that of his fortune, and he drowned. The wife’s lover also drowned, for he cared more for

De Long's fortune than for De Long's wife, and he stayed with De Long, trying to help him, and making sure that he was not separated from the fortune. The implications are clear. It is a sordid story that takes place in a region so beautiful that life should be beautiful there, too. (Incidentally, the historic eruption of Krakatoa occurred in August of 1883, the very month of Colcord's birth in another part of the world. Several Searsport ships sailed through the volcanic ash that was in the water for years.)

Colcord strikes nearer home in a story called "A Friend." Here his hero has managed to gain the command of a ship that will make him prosperous enough to marry; but he has done it only with the aid of a friend who has had better luck than he and whose family is far more wealthy. The hero has refused his friend's help for several years, but at last gives in to the argument that it's not fair to keep his fiancée waiting any longer. Along the way our hero-narrator observes that "... the silly conventions formed to protect a selfish society, had branded us with the mark of pride and shame."26 Probably it is not necessary to point out that this strikes home because the society portrayed in this story, as in most of his stories not laid in the East, is the society of the seafaring families of Searsport, very exactly reproduced.

Colcord struck his strongest blow at materialism and the pursuit of wealth in his novel, *The Drifting Diamond*. This book, in my opinion, deserves to be listed among American classics. Surely it is Colcord's masterpiece. It is easy to see that the circumstances of his life helped to create this exotic novel.

It is the story of a diamond so huge that it is enormously valuable. Almost the size of an egg, it has only one or two rivals in the world. Because of its great value and beauty, men strive to possess it. It seems to lure men into doing evil deeds and does harm to almost all who possess it. Like Hawthorne, Colcord is careful only to suggest that there may be something supernatural at work here. It may also be simply men's greed that does the harm. Like so many of Colcord's stories, *The Drifting Diamond* is set in the East (Singapore, Hong Kong) but with brief scenes in Australia and on one of the Gilbert Islands in the South Seas. It has Captain Nichols as a narrator and important character, and Lee Fu Chang as another important character.

The diamond is possessed in turn by the vulnerable young Englishman, Rodney Lane; by Nakamoa, the physically and spiritually magnificent young native of the Gilbert Islands; by a white bartender named Fred who has a black birthmark covering nearly half of his face; by pirates; by natives of an obscure island in the East Indies; by Nichols and Lee Fu Chang briefly; and by Lane again, from whom it passes into the hands of his wife. Of these, only Nakamoa is a great enough man to

be impervious to its influence, and that is because he admires it only for its beauty. He is innocent of its value in dollars and cents or pounds and shillings, so that it cannot engender greed in him. He does not fear it and has no superstitious notions of its powers. Thus in his hands it is what it should be—merely an extraordinarily beautiful object, which he uses in a very impressive dance. It is "powerless" because its power really lies in men's greed or fear. The diamond passes at last into the hands of a strong woman, Lane's wife, the feminine counterpart in western civilization of Nakamoa, a woman strong enough to resist its attraction even though she knows its value and hence its potential for causing evil among men.

The novel is deepened and embellished with symbolism and allusion and the presence of at least four very memorable characters. It is given greater power and deeper significance by a forcefully projected theme. It also contains an extraordinary and magnificent description of a typhoon at sea and of its effects upon a ship and those on it. Few writers could equal it, for to write it at all requires a person who has both experience and the ability to write—a rare combination. The whole book is written in a firm, clear style that rivals that of any of the most exemplary stylists of this century.

The Chinese element in Colcord's work is strong, and usually in his comparisons of Chinese and Americans the Chinese are represented as superior. It seems not far-fetched to say that one of his purposes in writing was to explain the Chinese and the East to America, to explain East to West.

We have seen his Lee Fu Chang, who appears in many stories besides *The Drifting Diamond*, as does Nichols. Another Chinese type, not always the same individual, is the Chinese steward. Here again Colcord seems to be drawing upon his own life, giving imagination free play as he does so. In the last century, it was common for American ships to have Chinese cooks and stewards. Lincoln Colcord speaks of their Chinese cook in "I Was Born in a Storm at Sea." His sister, Joanna, wrote at least two articles about domestic life aboard their ship, and she says that "Chinese were preferred as cooks and stewards, because they were more cleanly and efficient than whites who would take such jobs."27 She speaks of them fondly: "The Chinese steward was a crony of ours, and we were allowed to visit the carpenter in his shop and the Chinese cook in his galley after the mid-day dinner was over. . . ."

Colcord uses the name Ah-Man for a steward, but in their lives it was the name of a Chinese businessman, perhaps the pattern for Lee Fu Chang. His sister wrote:

We were taught to be especially polite to Chinese business men for whom father's liking and respect was great. We felt distinctly honored when Ah-Man with his violet silk robe,

long fingernails and braided hair, would deign to share our cabin meal. . . . The unquestioned potentate, the Yankee master mariner, always somewhat lofty toward men of his own race whatever their station, accorded to the Chinese merchant alone a trifle better than equality. 28

In port, the Colcord children played with Chinese children, sometimes spending a day with some Chinese family. "We played with the Chinese youngsters without a word of common language, swapped cake and candy for gaudy paper lanterns, fished and had a generally gorgeous time." 29

We see some of this cosmopolitanism reflected in Lincoln Colcord’s work in his great praise of the natives of the South Sea Islands, his patent admiration of both so uncomplicated a man as Nakamoa, in The Drifting Diamond, and so fathomless a man as Lee Fu Chang, often set off to good advantage by his criticism of chauvinistic and shallow Americans.

In "Saving Face," 30 a satire upon the jingoism that may have been prevalent in America at that time (1909), Colcord has created a Babbitt several years before Lewis’s Babbitt appeared. Colcord’s Babbitt is an American salesman named Bartlett whom an American manufacturer of farm machinery has sent out to China to open new markets. He embarrasses Americans like Nichols by his breezy superficiality, egocentricity, and total ignorance of China and the Chinese and his condescending treatment of them. Lee Fu Chang brings him to his knees.

The Chinese cook aboard the Colcords’ vessel had the ineradicable habit, among other exotic qualities, of smoking a pipe of opium and resting for a short time every afternoon, lost in the euphoria produced by the opium. He never smoked more than one tiny pipe, enough to produce a period of rest. 31 The Chinese steward in at least two of Colcord’s stories has the same custom. Understanding that this was part of the man and that the cook had the habit under absolute control, Captain Colcord accepted it, but forbade his son to be in the cook’s room while he was smoking. The cook always took on every voyage a supply of opium, and Captain Colcord prudently kept some on hand in case the cook should run out, realizing that he would be useless if this should happen, or worse.

Colcord’s fictitious American captains are not so wise. In his first story, "Ah-Man," 32 once at sea, the captain seizes the steward’s opium, no questions asked, to break him of the habit, even though, as his first mate reminds him, the captain has to have his "little nip" of liquor

29. "Childhood at Sea."
every morning. The steward eventually goes out of his mind and murders the captain and his wife in their bed, quite literally hacking them to pieces with a hatchet.

In "Servant and Master,"33 the situation is both different and similar. Here the loyal old steward, who had sailed happily for years with the present young captain's father, means to keep a fatherly eye on the young captain, whom he knew and loved when the captain was a boy. The brash young captain, however, who must have everything shipshape, decides that the old steward is not clean enough and that his opium habit is a slackness that cannot be tolerated. In this story the old steward remains faithful, however, and when Chinese pirates board the ship, he manages to save the young captain's life.

In *The Drifting Diamond*, he extends his criticism beyond Americans. Speaking of the young Englishman Lane and Lee Fu Chang, Nichols (as narrator) says: "There stood the West and the East—the West so timid, so squeamish, so saving of its worthlessness, so insincere; the East, so outright, so wise, so fundamentally true."34 To be fairer to the two individuals, he might have reminded us that Lane was a young man and Lee Fu was at least middle aged; but that is part of his observation—that the West by comparison is so young, so new, so lacking in wisdom, but doesn't know it.

Just a bit earlier in the book, Lane had said to Nichols, "... And then, you don't seem to have much of an opinion of Chinamen," to which Nichols (who seems to be Colcord's *alter ego*) replies:

Nonsense, my dear fellow. ... You haven't much of an opinion of Cardiff coal-heavers—or wouldn't have, if you knew them. You must have learned in Singapore that Chinamen are much like the rest of us—there are good ones and bad ones. No gentility in the world is so old, so honorable, so noble as China's. Our friend Lee Fu traces his family for a thousand-odd years. He's the soul of truth and wisdom."

Let us give the final word on the subject to Captain Belknap who, in criticizing American politics, says the following (the italics are mine):

> Has it ever struck you how we spend our lives  
> Sailing around the world and carrying cargo,  
> Seeing how trade goes on, and *seeing how*  
> *Nations are all alike, and men the same*  
> *In China or in Russia or at home,*  
> And trade the same, that makes the nations live;  
> And then we quit the sea and settle down  
> To watch them make a monkey of the show.36

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36. "Captain Robert Belknap," p. 152. Colcord settled down, but he did not just watch them make a monkey of the show. He spoke out. Between 1915 and 1921, he wrote many articles on world affairs and politics, and even his long poem, *Vision of War*, published in 1915, has a political theme. I have purposely avoided this chapter of his life and works as it is almost wholly another matter. I wish to deal only with his fiction and non-political poetry. Readers wishing to look at the political side of Lincoln Colcord in the years during and just after World War I are directed to Christopher Lasch, *The New..."
For all his criticism, Colcord loved America. He also loved his own little town of Searsport. In addition, however, in a different way, perhaps, he loved quite other places like the Sunda Straits and Java, Singapore and Hong Kong, and he loved the sea. It seems, therefore, that he was trying to make one friend love another, or at least understand and appreciate another, or he was like a young man in love who is trying to make his family (whom he loves) understand his sweetheart (whom he also loves). Perhaps one could say, too, that, native of nowhere, he was a native of the world and loyal to it.

No doubt seafaring brought this about. Although Colcord was never really old—he died at 64—he is the finest example of what Sarah Orne Jewett meant when she wrote that in many Maine coast villages one found older people whose eyes have looked at far-away ports and known the splendors of the Eastern world. They . . . have rounded the Cape of Good Hope and braved the angry seas of Cape Horn in small wooden ships; they have brought up their hardy boys and girls on narrow decks. . . . More than this one cannot give to a young state for its enlightenment; the sea captains and captains’ wives of Maine knew something of the wide world and never mistook their native parishes for the whole instead of a part thereof; they knew not only Thomaston and Castine and Portland, but London and Bristol and Bordeaux, and the strange-mannered harbors of the China Sea."

He knew, indeed, that his beloved parish was not the whole world, that things were done differently, and perhaps in some ways better, in other places; and those strange-mannered harbors of the China Sea were not strange to him. "Where everything is foreign, nothing is foreign," he once wrote. 38 Thus he condemned derision and condescension bred of ignorance and provincialism. He was able to take a more objective view of his own country and countrymen, and he sought to improve them by pointing out their faults.

The whole subject of how captains’ families lived aboard ship is an attractive one, fascinating to those interested in maritime history. 39 The subject of the relationship between captains and crews is another matter and one that Colcord also knew well. His stories "The Final Score" and "Brutality" reveal most. "The Final Score" opens with this ominous passage: "The sea is a primitive place; and following the sea is a man’s business. Power rules on shipboard, through the medium of fear; as it was in the beginning and ever shall be. The failure of this natural law brings death to many, and works harm until the final score is paid." 40

In "Brutality," his usual narrator, Nichols, gives a lengthy preface on this subject to the effect that the public doesn’t understand why the

37. The Queen’s Twin and Other Tales (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. 1.
39. cf. Joanna Colcord, "Domestic Life on American Sailing Ships."
40. The Game of Life . . . , p. 221.
captain of a ship must be harsh. “People believe that the officers are savages; it makes the profession more romantic,” he says, and “Let ’em learn that sailors before the mast are the scum of the earth, the outcasts of society. . . .” In “The Final Score,” the Nebraska-born consul at Batavia condemns Captain Brey for having dealt harshly with a mutinous crew. Of the consul, Colcord says contemptuously: “Ever since reading a book called Two Years Before the Mast he had deplored the atrocities of the merchant marine.” Thus he lays at Dana’s door some of the blame for the public’s misunderstanding.

In “Brutality,” Nichols (if not Colcord) tends to excuse Capt. Forrest Thorndike even though he had kicked a man for letting the ship get a half point off course—knocked him down and kicked him all the way from the wheel to the main deck, breaking six ribs—and later had shot the leader of the mutiny. Ironically Colcord defends his fictitious Capt. Thorndike on the very grounds on which Dana says lawyers successfully defend actual officers—that his family situation was so sad, that he had much on his mind, etc. Also Dana says accused captains are defended by witnesses who are friends and neighbors at home, who know nothing about him at sea, and here Colcord falls in line as he shows that Capt. Thorndike was a gentle, sentimental, affectionate man ashore, but a tyrant at sea.

It must be borne in mind that Colcord was writing from the cabin and Dana from the forecastle, figuratively speaking. It should also be borne in mind that Colcord was writing early in this century, at the end of the era of sail when crews were apt to be whoever could be picked up, “shanghaied” if need be, and Dana was writing of the 1830’s, when crews were apt to be boys from home, young men getting necessary experience to become officers.

Colcord’s implied criticism of Dana is the more surprising for the fact that, as Colcord no doubt knew, Dana is really much milder than one would think from the general reputation of Two Years Before the Mast. In his book, the captain of Dana’s ship (who is contrasted with other better captains) does on one occasion flog two men for no very good reason. He has lost his temper with them and uses his authority and power to vent his anger. But this is only once in two years. The captain’s next greatest cruelty is that even in terrible ice storms, during which the sailors’ tasks are almost intolerable, the captain keeps a pot of coffee hot for himself, or has his steward do so, but will allow his crew none. If Dana had been out to “get” captains, he could have done more than this. Furthermore, in his final chapter he says that he does not urge the

42. The Game of Life . . . , p. 234.
44. Dana, pp. 100–04.
45. Dana, pp. 360–01.
passage of laws to prevent corporal punishment aboard ships and would not like to go to sea as a captain himself without the right to use corporal punishment and with the crew knowing that he had not the right. 46

In his own life, Colcord seems to have had a higher regard for crews, although the matter does not bulk large in his autobiographical pieces. He speaks of his fondness for the cook, not exactly a member of the crew, and in an account of having fallen overboard when he was a small boy, in a harbor where sharks were plentiful, he states that his father, the mate, and one of the crew immediately dived in to save him, as he had not learned to swim. 47 His sister, in relating the same incident, says the sailor’s name was O’Brien and that he was “a privileged character thereafter.” She goes on to say: “The hierarchy of ship’s discipline conveyed to us no feeling that the sailors were inferior beings. I always knew that my father and the officers, as well as the other captains we met, had lived in the forecastle in their young days.” 48 She also wrote, in another article, that children might chat with officers who were not on duty, but never with the men.

Add to this the fact that Lincoln Colcord surely encountered many men in Searsport who went to sea before the mast (not all Searsport men were captains!) and one can only conclude that Nichols’s “scum of the earth” was not Colcord’s view and indeed perhaps even Nichols spoke in anger. This is further borne out in Colcord’s statement in “Seamanship and the Merchant Marine” that “The young men who went to sea in the ships, and who a couple of generations ago formed the backbone of our magnificent merchant marine, were far from the riff-raff of their day. They were the same young men who today are going to college.” 49

As all of this suggests, there are some contradictions or paradoxes or surprises in Colcord. On the one hand, he espouses strict discipline and a kind of toughness, a tight ship. Yet he wrote most of his poetry in free verse, which, while it may require discipline, seems to be anything but a poet’s equivalent of a tight ship. In his prose, however, his style is disciplined and clean-cut.

In a passage in “I Was Born in a Storm at Sea,” having told of the events of his birth and surrounding it, he records that years afterward he somewhat ingenuously asked of his father, “Wasn’t it pretty tough, sir?” and his father “gave a short laugh,” and said, “Tough things have to be done. . . . The memory of them gets swamped by time.” Colcord adds, “It was an epitome of the high creed of seamanship.” 50 Later in the same essay he observes: “I have passed through a typhoon on shipboard, and seen all kinds of bad weather; but I never have felt

46. Dana, p. 363.
47. “I Was Born . . . ,” p. 78.
49. “Seamanship,” p. 27.
the margin of safety disappear. The ship was always in prime condition aloft. My father was a careful and expert navigator; he did not get into tight places, because he knew how to avoid them.” What one learns at sea, he says, is “the formula of seamanship, the lesson of integrity. Life brings its own education, and the life of the sea permits no truancy. It says to a man, learn to be a seaman, or die. It takes no slurring answer, it gives no immunity. A man must get one hundred in that examination.”

When such a man turns writer, one would expect a sternly no-nonsense kind of writing, in prose that plows its inexorable way forward; and that is what we do get from Colcord part of the time but not all of the time. He does not order his characters about. Instead he is often in danger of sentimentality, dealing with tender and rather superficial emotions.

There are perhaps two keys to this. One is that he often saw captains as “officially” tough but with soft hearts which they carefully concealed while at sea. Captain Thorndike in “Brutality” is just such a man. He knocked a man down and kicked him, but wept openly in a theater at a sentimental play.

Another—a wild conjecture—is in a boyhood experience that he related. His beloved dog had been fed too well by the Chinese cook, and one day had fits and jumped overboard. His father, returning to the cabin after going to see what had caused the hullabaloo, advised not going up on deck just yet. “But I was bound to have my cup of grief,” he wrote, and he went up with a long glass and “scanned the wake astern. There I caught sight of him in the midst of his death flurry, thrashing the water into foam. It was almost too much for me. I fled to the cabin and shut myself in my room.” The wild conjecture is that some of this characteristic stayed with him as an adult writer. In “The White Satin Slipper,” the young lover goes off to sea carrying one of his sweetheart’s white satin slippers that she would have worn to a ball with him had his call to return to his ship not come quite so soon. She keeps the other. His ship is wrecked, he is drowned, and when his body is found on the beach, he is clutching the white satin slipper. But the story doesn’t quite end even then. Colcord is bound that we shall have our cup of grief. A child brings the slipper to her mother, a widow whose husband drowned, who hangs it high on the wall of her cottage “where it remained many years, until she was dead, and no one remembered where it had come from or how it happened to be hanging there.”

There is none of this sentimentality and melodrama in his best work, however, such as _The Drifting Diamond_ or “Captain Robert Belknap Goes West.” These are all shipshape.

52. “I Was Born . . .”, p. 76.
Colcord's *modus operandi* suited him well. In most of his stories, including his full length novel, he uses the first person, introducing some indefinite “I” who, after the first paragraph or two, meets Capt. Nichols, usually aboard the *Omega* in some Eastern port, and Nichols proceeds to tell a story. By using Nichols, Colcord is better able to maintain “that willing suspension of disbelief.” Many of the tales would be incredible were they not told by an experienced, successful, intelligent sea captain, a very realistically drawn character.

It would seem that Colcord fell easily into the method from his own experience as a boy in Eastern ports, where often a surprising number of English and American ships would be found at anchor at any one time in the late 1800’s—and often several from the little Maine village that was home, Searsport. Joanna Colcord has written the best evidence of this, and her paragraph will also be a fitting conclusion for this paper:

> Although sail was on the decline all through my childhood, it was still Searsport’s chief industry; and we could nearly always count on finding, among the children on ships of all nations met in every port, some of our playmates from the little village. . . . Sometimes there would be a picnic ashore for the captains and their families; and several times a week one ship would be the rendez-vous where they gathered for a social evening. Many a night, under the awning of some ship’s deck, with the shorelights sending down long taproots of flame into the harbor water and the cigar-tips glowing and fading, the child that was I listened to marvelous stories from the world’s best raconteurs—seaman—and agonized in the vain effort to stay awake to hear the end of the last and most enthralling tale.”