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*Lady of the Woods:
Some Correspondence
of Fannie Hardy Eckstorm*

by DONALD H. WILLIAMS

DURING the next-to-the-last year of her life—from October 1944 to January 1946—Fannie Hardy Eckstorm¹ indulged a young serviceman with an eloquent exchange of letters dealing with various aspects of their mutual love affair with the State of Maine. The subjects included book collecting, Indians, Maine woods lore, logging history, and modest political commentary. The primary interest dealt with books relating to Maine, a subject that motivated the writer, a neophyte bibliophile, to introduce himself to the lady by way of correspondence from overseas during the late war years.

Mrs. Eckstorm's response was immediate, sympathetic, and helpful. The accumulation of that correspondence, resulting in forty-two letters from her ancient typewriter, showed her steady interest in the kindred pursuits of Maine Americana which she was ready to share with a newcomer. During this period she guided the selection of titles and editions—and values, when she knew them—of books essentially relating to Maine, its history and literature.

It all started when the writer ordered by mail a copy of *The Penobscot Man*² from the legendary Portland bookseller, A. J. Huston. Huston, temporarily out of stock, requested a new supply from the author and in time a friendly contact was made. One letter led to another and a continuing exchange was developed.

Mrs. Eckstorm's assistance and friendship exceeded the fondest hopes of the novice collector. She was by that time in her life willing to part with some of her own treasures, apparently to simplify some of her personal estate, and offered many books from her own library to the newcomer. The titles—and prices (!)—of the things she sold to the writer are enough to make a Maine collector of today ill. Many things were outright gifts and the prices, almost apologetically asked—were virtually gifts in themselves.

For the Maine collector there were mouth-watering titles, and curiously enough, often in mint condition. Many of these books were in her attic, which was physically beyond her increasingly feeble reach at that time, so she depended on her housekeeper for their retrieval. Other books she ferreted out of un-named sources, presumably through old book dealers she had known.

The letters described in the following essay are on deposit in the Colby College Library, Special Collections.

1. See Elizabeth Ring, "Fannie Hardy Eckstorm: Maine Woods Historian," *The New England Quarterly*, XXVI, 1 (March 1953), 45-64.

2. Fannie H. Eckstorm, *The Penobscot Man* (Bangor, 1924).

Many of the books she made available at that time will interest Maine scholars. After *The Penobscot Man*, which she provided in the first, second, and third editions, came an early serendipitous find of the *Jackson Surveys* of 1837–38. No thought had been given to locating this exotica, but in a letter of unparalleled enthusiasm she described the yellowed pages, and the colored Atlas, fondly and carefully.

From her own shelves she parted with L. L. Hubbard's *Woods and Lakes of Maine* with map (1884), Springer's *Forest Life and Forest Trees* (1851) in pristine condition, a complete file of *Sprague's Journal of Maine History*, a complete file of *The Maine Naturalist*, Williamson's *Bibliography*, two of the DeBurian Club (of Bangor) titles (those on Moses Greenleaf and on Peter Edes), and many other rare volumes about Maine.

She urged vigilance in seeking White's *Belfast* (1827) and Whipple's *Acadie* (1816, printed by Peter Edes), but the former alone yielded to the endless hunt, thanks to her "nose" for such items. So many Maine town histories were, even forty years ago, genuine rarities, and only now are some beginning to reappear in reprinted editions.

She also located, much to her own surprise, the first private copy she had seen of the almost legendary Penhallow's *Indian Wars* (1726) and gave it a strong "pitch" indeed. But even in 1945 this esoterica was not for impecunious beginners. She found (for she did not then have them in her possession) elusive and forgotten copies of her own books—*Woodpeckers* (1901), *Birds* (1901), *David Libby* (1907). Her then forthcoming final work, *Old John Neptune* (1945), was sold by subscription.

Mrs. Eckstorm's writings have been well-described in the excellent bibliography by Mrs. Jeanne Patten Whitten.³ This very helpful publication cites Mrs. Eckstorm's published work, unpublished manuscript materials, and some of her letters (excluding correspondence that furnishes the basis for this essay).

Mrs. Eckstorm was an admirer of Joanna Colcord of Searsport, barely alive at that time in her final illness, whose new book, *Sea Language Comes Ashore* (1944), was heartily recommended. She also spoke warmly of the work of a new octogenarian poet in Rockland, Anna B. Coughlin, whose *Master Mariner* (1944) was then quite new on Maine's literary scene. She was also fond of Celia Thaxter and Holman Day, and was delighted to acquire the latter's *King Spruce* (1908) at the late date of 1945. This old book she liked for the fanciful but yet truthful portrayal of the real John Ross, famous boss of the historic West Branch drive before the turn of the century. Her comment on Day is of interest:

His Pulaski Britt is largely John Ross, but not a portrait. One might take the worse traits of several head lumbermen I have known, or known of, and get very nearly that picture; but to do it you would have to suppress all their good traits. I know a little of both sides—Day's picture is like a

3. Jeanne Patten Whitten, "Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, A Descriptive Bibliography," *Northeast Folklore*, XVI (1975), 107.

colored poster of the same object that an architect would represent by a measured drawing. They do not look much alike, but both have truth, of different sorts, in them. (3/26/45)

Arthur MacDougall of Bingham was another favorite, for the realism of his fishing tales:

A writer almost unknown except to sportsmen, but very good and very native is Arthur MacDougall of Bingham. He has done the Dud Dean yarns, capital tales of fishing trout and salmon on Kennebec waters. Bliss Perry is a good friend and fellow fisherman with Mr. MacDougall and approves him heartily, as I do.—You had better secure copies while they are available. (3/8/45)

Her comments on other Maine writers were of interest and value and were expressed incisively, to put it mildly. She was no shrinking violet on this subject. On the whole, her literary criticism was balanced. In one letter she wrote,

But the average historical novel is a decidedly sad flop. That is why, in judging books about Maine, I so much prefer books of small literary merit, if they smell of the soil and the sea, to some far better executed. Sarah Orne Jewett, who is an artist, is one who keeps Maine like a flower pressed in a book. (2/2/45)

She admired Theodore Winthrop and David Wasson, who portrayed the Maine she knew. She detested Thomas Sedgwick Steele and Ben Ames Williams, the latter because of what she regarded an improper reflection on Bangor and its people in his novel, *The Strange Woman* (1941). Her remarks on both men are peppery; for Steele, the author of those popular travel narratives, *Canoe and Camera* (1880) and *Paddle and Portage* (1882), she ventured into invective:

Lately I got his two books from the Library and was vexed at the lies he told. There are quite a number of these people who are worthless. (3/26/45)

The man is a liar. His books are early (about 1880) but he is better left unknown. For one thing he tells of their making a birch canoe 28 ft long and only 4 ft wide at the Hunt Farm on the East Branch Penobscot for the artist [Frederick] Church. They were making it while he was there! There isn't water enough in the East Branch to float such a leviathan—nor birch bark enough to make one of; and it would take a derrick to lift the thing. (7/9/45)

The Strange Woman bothered her more deeply; this hit closer to home and she wrote sternly:

I did him [Ben Ames Williams] the greatest favor I could; told him not to undertake *The Strange Woman* with a Bangor background. . . . I was a good deal annoyed to find that first of all he thanked me for helping him (in his preface). . . . People here were very much annoyed by the book. . . . when I got around to reading the book, I intimated to Mr. B. A. W. from Mississippi that was not the way we did things in Maine! It is rather a satisfaction to think that he cordially hates me. (1/20/45)

Her critique of Thoreau's *The Maine Woods* (1864) is well-known⁴ but it was never intended to be negative. She regarded Thoreau as a "pasture man" not a "wild man," a conclusion he himself would not have quarrelled with in his later years. Of course his book was published posthumously, based on his journals for the Maine journeys of 1846, 1853, and 1857, as edited poorly by

4. Fannie H. Eckstorm, "Thoreau's 'Maine Woods,'" *Atlantic Monthly*, CII (August 1908), 242–50.

uninformed literary executors, but his journal essays for the 1846 and 1853 trips (“Ktaadn” and “Chesuncook,” respectively) had been published in serials during his lifetime. Mrs. Eckstorm’s studied criticism of 1908 is reflected in the following unpublished later assessment of Thoreau’s writings about his Maine travels:

Thoreau was a prophet—like that earlier race of prophets of the Bible, Elijah and Elisha, who did not foretell but who *saw* what was about them and the trend of coming events. In short, they were shamans, such as I have been finding among our Indians, men who were either very sensitive to influences, seen and unseen, or clairvoyant. Thoreau’s instant recognition of John Brown, a greater prophet than himself, was a test of his own genuineness. For the prophet opens up a way, which others follow. Others are drawn into the vortex they create in their passage. If only people would read Thoreau and not twaddle about him! (7/9/45)

Mrs. Eckstorm was knowledgeable, from personal use, of most of Maine’s libraries and exhibited a special fondness for Colby. (She was an alumna of Smith College.) In this period of her final correspondence she thought Colby’s Treasure Room the most important book development in the state. In writing of possible repositories for gift collections, Colby ranked high with her:

Colby College [Library]. . . looks to me the best place in Maine. . . . It is going to grow. And it is a college of the Arts. It does not combine agriculture, technical schools, etc. I know that its standards are high, its plans farreaching and its location central and increasingly important to the State. . . . I think Colby would be the best place in Maine for [a gift] collection. . . .” (1/10/45)

And later:

Yesterday I mailed you the Library Quarterly of Colby, thinking you would appreciate both the fine typography of the little brochure and the sort of culture they are trying to create an appetite for among their students. (3/8/45)

They are really doing something at Colby, planning a side to education which most institutions will be working away from in the years soon to come, when jobs must come before culture. (3/22/45)

In addition to her abundant advice about Maine books, there were frequent references to her own woods experiences with her father, Manley Hardy. She tells of taking pictures in the Ripogenuis area in 1891, using bulky glass plates and improvised wilderness dark rooms. Her photographs were good; she passed on some of these. Her pictorial records, wherever they may now be, should be re-studied by today’s students of Maine. There were photographs of Ripogenuis gorge before the present dam was built, and scenes of forty foot logs going through that wild crest of water raise hackles on the neck.

That aspect of her letters—her own Maine woods experiences—are worthy of further annotation, and perhaps a biographer will yet appear. Until then, the excellent summary of Mrs. Eckstorm’s life by Elizabeth Ring⁵ will suffice. In all her love of Maine, one suspects her very first love to be ethnological. Indians and their languages and customs occupied a great part of her life.

5. See n. 1.

Mrs. Eckstorm had among her circle of friends several recognized literary figures. One unusual letter to her from Thomas Wentworth Higginson has been published in the *Quarterly*.⁶

The various lots of books that she parted with during 1945 were mailed by parcel post from her home, packed by a faithful domestic. Often Mrs. Eckstorm would tuck into the package some previously unmentioned title as a "filler." One such box included physical support from several Longfellow first editions. By this time she seemed indeed to be emptying the attic.

Aside from highly personal characteristics of portions of the 1944-45 letters, which otherwise deal with the love and collecting of Maine books, Mrs. Eckstorm's life was also illuminated by other references therein. Her participation in game law reform, for example, the folklore significance of the loggers' "minstrelsy," and her revisionist approach to some of Maine's historical episodes, provide added interest in her letters. In the last connection she was scornful of Vetromile⁷ and she had provocative questions about the Norridgewock massacre.⁸ She debunked the legend of Paugus at Fryeburg in 1725.⁹ Another dedicated refutation¹⁰ she undertook was connected with the battle of Lovewell's Pond, in which she also clarified in scholarly fashion a bibliographical anomaly in Symmes's *Lovewell Lamented*:¹¹

A real rarity is worth money because it is a *rarity*, not because it is a first edition. Take, for example, the Symmes book on Captain Lovewell's Great Fight [at Fryeburg]. I am an expert on that thing, and I have [copies] . . . of several complete editions . . . the first edition is the *commonest*! I demonstrated that the so-called second edition is really the third, and of the second edition there is not a known copy in existence (that I could find when searching), but I could demonstrate that it had existed because when Frederick Kidder reprinted the book in . . . [1865] he used a copy which was unlike anything known in any of the great libraries.¹² If I had only a single leaf of that book I could prove which of the three editions it belonged to. . . . If you ever found the Kidder original of *Lovewell Lamented* [i.e., a presumed second edition of 1725 with the same title]¹³ you would have one of the greatest [Maine] rarities obtainable. (4/22/45)

In an amusing non-Maine aside on the subject of Emily Dickinson and her various editors and biographers, she was provoked into the following short philippic:

I was much amused by your enclosure of "The Dickinsons and Todds" for I well-remember Mabel [Loomis Todd] and [daughter] Millicent. The latter had a jaw which looked as if she breakfasted off ten-penny nails. If they keep on making money off poor Emily they will yet succeed in making us believe that she was a very ordinary poet. No poet can stand being represented by too much verse that he planned to have forgotten. (8/20/45)

6. D. H. Williams, "Thomas Wentworth Higginson on Thoreau and Maine," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII, 1 (March 1965), 29-32.

7. Eugene Vetromile, *The Abenakis and their History* (N.Y., 1866).

8. Fannie H. Eckstorm, "The Attack on Norridgewock," *New England Quarterly*, VII (Sept. 1934), 541-78.

9. Fannie H. Eckstorm, "Who Was Paugus?" *New England Quarterly*, XII (June 1939), 203-26.

10. Fannie H. Eckstorm, "The Old Fight at Pigwacket: . . .," unpublished typescript, 267 pp. (1931), in Bangor Public Library (Whitten, no. 181).

11. Thomas Symmes, *Lovewell lamented . . . the late heroic action at Pigwacket* (Boston, 1725).

12. Frederic Kidder, *The Expeditions of Capt. John Lovewell . . .* (Boston, 1865), 138 pp.

13. R. W. G. Vail, *The Voice of the Old Frontier* (Philadelphia, 1949). Item 347 in this catalog describes a second edition with a *new* title, dated 1725.

The last sentence above was prompted by the 1945 publication of *Bolts of Melody*, presumably a final round-up of previously unpublished Dickinson verse, by the mother/daughter team of editors from Amherst.

The unusual and extended correspondence between Mrs. Eckstorm in her advanced years and a total stranger covered a fairly broad spectrum of subject-matter but all related to Maine. Her views as a Maine historian-ethnologist-naturalist are informative, and often original. They bear directly on the literature of the passing Maine scene.

Her experiences as a girl in the woods with her father almost 100 years ago provide a nostalgic reminder of Maine's greatest adventure—lumbering—and the long-log drives on the Penobscot to the then “market town” of Bangor for shipping. The screaming saws are now stilled, the great booms gone, and the Devil's Half-Acre obliterated among the broken bricks of Bangor's “urban renewal.” But *The Penobscot Man* will remain, her indelible record for future generations of Maine people who will never see a bateau on the river, or oxen, and hardly a horse in the woods, as the harvest of Maine timber proceeds.

A critical biography of Fannie Eckstorm is over-due, and the reassessment of her unpublished papers could well make a substantial contribution to the record of Maine letters during an eighty-year period when much was changing in the Maine woods. The Whitten bibliography would make a good starting place for this.

Kensington, Maryland