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Celia Thaxter: Seeker of the Unattainable

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A Garland for Celia Thaxter 1835-1894

On the 70th Anniversary

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Fitting the time, in plenitude of power, 
At close of summer, that her life should cease. 
Not as a stranded wreck, 
Sea-swept from deck to deck. 
But fading swiftly into that great Peace, 
At night and silently, like some sweet flower. 

A. W. E.
Mrs. Thaxter in 1886
CELIA THaxter once said: "I longed to speak [those] things which made life so sweet, — to speak the wind, the cloud, the bird’s flight, the sea’s murmur, — and the wish grew." Had her wish been granted, she would have been merely another of the writers of the "genteel tradition" that flourished in the latter part of the nineteenth century — a composer of ditties about flowers and babies, of essays concocted from one part Emerson diluted with two parts of Henry Ward Beecher. She would have joined the ranks of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Fannie Fern, and Louisa May Alcott, an estimable company with only one serious taint, that of glibness — glibness in style and, more reprehensible, glibness in their approach to life, which they generally conceived of as a gay frolic through which one romped hand in hand with God. Celia Thaxter never achieved this comfortable glibness, though she understandably longed for it. She spoke of the wind, to be sure, but also of the hurricane; of the cloud, but also of the tempest that wrecked ships; of the bird’s flight, but also of birds dashed to death against lighthouse windows; of the sea’s murmur, but also of the sea’s roar.

Nine miles off Portsmouth, New Hampshire, lies the tiny archipelago of the Isles of Shoals. Historically and geographically it is of small importance, but just as Selborne had its White, Walden its Thoreau, the Aran Islands their Synge, the Isles of Shoals had their Celia Thaxter to put them on the literary map. Celia Thaxter’s poems, widely read in her day but now relatively ignored, and her prose, which still commands limited but devoted readership, were outgrowths as indigenous to the island soil as the plants and flowers she so lovingly de-
scribes. She was so closely attached to the islands, the home of her childhood and most of her adulthood, that she was never entirely at ease unless she was on them, or at least within sight of them, as at the Champernowne Farm at Kittery Point, where she spent her later years.

But in spite of their lure she was not entirely at ease on the Shoals either. Her writing is the record of struggle for an equilibrium between the attraction and the repulsion the islands exerted upon her. “Landing for the first time,” she wrote, “the stranger is struck only by the sadness of the place,—the vast loneliness; for there are not even trees to whisper with familiar voices,—nothing but sky and sea and rocks. But the very wildness and desolation reveal a strange beauty to him. . . . He sleeps with all the waves of the Atlantic murmuring in his ears, and wakes to the freshness of a summer morning; and it seems as if morning were made for the first time. For the world is like a new-blown rose, and in the heart of it he stands.” Ever since her parents had brought her there as a child of four, the islands had worn for her this two-faced aspect of desolation and caressing loveliness. Rummaging in the seaweed on the beach, where she loved to play, she feared she might find a corpse. “It is not good for men to live their whole lives through in such remote and solitary places,” she once wrote. Yet the islanders when they go to the mainland suffer disabling homesickness, like the boy who hid in a cellar on his first visit to Portsmouth.

Celia Thaxter’s first poem, “Land-Locked,” published in the Atlantic Monthly in March 1861, is the cry of her own nostalgia when away from the islands:

O Earth! thy summer song of joy may soar
Ringing to heaven in triumph. I but crave
The sad, caressing murmur of the wave
That breaks in tender music on the shore.

All serious writing may be regarded as an account of an author’s coming to terms with existence as he has known it. Celia Thaxter’s experience of life was restricted almost entirely to the minute confines of the Isles of Shoals. Her creative efforts, which included painting and gardening as well as writing, were directed towards finding meaning and beauty in an environment that, despite its apparent sterility, exerted an irresistible attraction on those who lived in it.
Celia Thaxter's life on the Shoals was much fuller than that of the few fisher-folk who were her all-year neighbors there. During late fall, the winter, and early spring — that is, for about eight months — she shared with these people their dependency on the vagaries of a bitter climate and treacherous sea. But in summer, after her earliest years of utter isolation with her family at White Island Lighthouse, she entered into the highly sophisticated, intellectual, and varied life of the resort hotel that her father had established on the island of Appledore. The list of guests at the hotel over the years included the names of an astonishing number of America's foremost artists, writers, musicians, and professional men — Lowell, Hawthorne, Whittier, Childe Hassam, William Morris Hunt, Ole Bull, Julius Eichberg, John Weiss, Henry Ward Beecher, to mention but a few. For several months every summer in eastern America the intellectual and esthetic life was, and still is, transplanted from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington to the seaside and mountain resorts of New England. An impressive representation found its way to the Isles of Shoals. Hawthorne, who was a visitor there with Franklin Pierce during the summer when Celia was sixteen and recently married, memorably describes in his *American Notebooks* the fascination the islands held for the vacationer. Having seen and duly recorded all the sights the tourists are supposed to see, he is left with one dominant impression — that of the loneliness of the islands in their ocean setting. As he emerged from the Thaxter cottage after a social evening, after the "song and pretty youthfulness of woman, the gay young men, there was the sky, and the three-quarters waning moon, and the old sea moaning all around the island."

Naturally Celia Thaxter's awareness of her own island world was heightened by her awareness of the outer world. She learned from the latter that one can find an outlet for one's feelings about life in music, poetry, and painting. She learned also that there are various philosophies with which one can approach life as one lives it and attempt to explain its enigmas. Christianity, though neither she nor her family professed it, she knew about already and found inadequate for the alternations of terror and beauty that as an all-year resident on the islands she found to be the reality of her sea-girt existence. "The 'consolations of religion' I cannot bear," she wrote after the death
of her mother. “I can bear my anguish better than their empti­ness.” Naturalistic determinism, which in the period of Dar­winism and Spencerism in which she lived was in the intellectual air of Europe and America, she found more helpful, especially in facing the cruelties of nature. But naturalism was defective in accounting for the loveliness and the benignity of nature in other moods which were no less real to her and which appealed so directly and overwhelmingly to the soul, a part of man’s make-up that naturalism either ignored or denied to exist. For this side of her experience spiritualism and, later, theosophy, both of which were then quite in the ascendency in the United States, had more to say. As did many Americans in her century she came under the spell of Buddhism and Hinduism. The Bhagavat-Gita spoke more compellingly to her than did the Bible of her ancestors.

The paradox of coexistent good and evil in a universe created by a supposedly omnipotent and benevolent God was, then, central in Celia Thaxter’s consciousness. She stated this paradox first and most frequently in her poetry, she broadened her expression of it in her prose expositions, but only in her gardening did she really approach a resolution of it. To her contemporaries she was best known as a poet, and this doubt­lessly was as she wished. But as a poet she was least success­ful, if durability of reputation is any test. In her own lifetime “the sweet singer of the Isles of Shoals” was highly enough regarded by a sufficiently large public to induce a cigar manu­facturer to give his brand her name and adorn his boxes with her portrait — which puts her in a class, among smokers, with Robert Burns and W. D. Howells, who were similarly honored. Today the Celia Thaxter cigar is no longer on the market and her poems, with a few exceptions, are unread. Notable among these exceptions is the delightful “The Sandpiper,” which is contained in many a grade-school reader, and “My Lighthouse,” which is widely sung as a hymn.

Two other poems that deserve a continuing audience are “The Heavenly Guest” and “In Kittery Churchyard.” The first is a sincere, simple rendering of Tolstoy’s lovely parable “Where Love Is, There God Is Also.” Published in St. Nicholas maga­zine, the poem catches beautifully the spirit of the original. Though Celia Thaxter would probably not have agreed with the
minutiae of the Russian’s theology, she was obviously deeply impressed by the essence of it as expressed in this parable.

The second poem, “In Kittery Churchyard,” is a late but impressive example of the graveyard school of poetry which includes Gray’s “Elegy” and Bryant’s “Thanatopsis.” The inspiration for the poem was actually not Kittery Churchyard but a small and ancient burial plot near the beach on Celia Thaxter’s Champremowne Farm. Among the headstones within the walls of uncut, unmortared boulders is that of Mary Chauncy (née Cutt) aged twenty-four years and wife of Charles Chauncy, president of Harvard. On the stone, which is dated 1758, Chauncy had had engraved an epitaph in rather crude heroic couplets:

In this dark silent mansion of the dead
A lovely mother and sweet babe are laid.
Of every virtue of her sex possest
She charmed the world and made a husband blest.
Of such a wife, O righteous heaven, bereft
What joy for me, what joy on earth is left.
Still from my inmost soul, the groans arise,
Still flow the sorrows ceaseless from my eyes.
But why these sorrows, so profusely shed?
They may add to, but ne’er can raise the dead.
I soon shall follow the same dreary way
That leads, and opens, to the coasts of day.
There clasp them both, upon the happy shore
And bliss shall join, nor death shall part us more.

Carved in the moss-grown marker, this memorial, so true to the eighteenth century in its poetic form and in its spirit and also so poignant as an expression of a universal human feeling, casts a hush upon the thoughts of the beholder standing there in the breeze off the water, with the sea-rote whispering at his back. Celia Thaxter has perfectly caught the mood. She transcribes verbatim certain of the original verses and adds her own meditation, writing in the same unpolished, but effective couplets. The eighteenth-century flavor is preserved along with the timeless pathos of bereavement in the context of nature’s eternities.

In general, however, Celia Thaxter’s poetry suffers from an unimaginative traditionalism, from the propensity for the genteel that blighted much of American art and thought in her day. She is a facile versifier, especially in the ballad and the sonnet.
Her most distinctive characteristic is her ability to catch, within the conventional forms, the rhythms of the sea which, indeed, throb in everything she wrote, whether verse or prose:

The waves are full of whispers wild and sweet;
They call to me,—incessantly they beat
Along the boat from stern to curved prow.

Comes the careering wind, blows back my hair,
All damp with dew, to kiss me unaware,
Murmuring, "Thee I love," and passes on.

An examination of the caesuras, the assonance, and the alliteration will show how Celia Thaxter, probably quite unconsciously, insinuated the beat of the waves into the iambic meter.

Her subjects are the flowers, the sea-fowl, the graves of drowned mariners, the tempests and the calms of the parading seasons, the loneliness and the joys of island life. Her theme repeated with a multitude of variations is the one that underlay all her thoughts and moods: the irreconcilability of the goodness and the evil in God's universe. One example will have to suffice, the poem entitled "A Tryst," which is strongly reminiscent of Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain" (published years later). In effective quatrains, Celia Thaxter follows the converging courses — plotted by a cruel fate — of an iceberg and a ship on the North Atlantic:

From out the desolation of the North
An iceberg took its way,
From its detaining comrades breaking forth,
And traveling night and day.

At whose command? Who bade it sail the deep
With that resistless force?
Who made the dread appointment it must keep?
Who traced its awful course?

To the warm airs that stir in the sweet South,
A good ship spread her sails;
Stately she passed beyond the harbor's mouth,
Chased by the favoring gales;

And on her ample decks a happy crowd
Bade the fair land good-by;
Clear shone the day, with not a single cloud
In all the peaceful sky.
The versification, approximately that of the folk-ballad, and the conventional poetic language are suitable for the subject, which is one with a folk appeal. After ten more stanzas, which bring the iceberg and the ship into close proximity, the poet asks:

Was not the weltering waste of water wide
   Enough for both to sail?
What drew the two together o'er the tide,
   Fair ship and iceberg pale?

Scarcely her crew had time to clutch despair,
   So swift the work was done:
Ere their pale lips could frame a speechless prayer,
   They perished every one!

The theme of the poem may be a trite one, triter now after the Titanic than when Celia Thaxter wrote — but it will never be too trite to warrant another treatment of it, unless the eternal why that it wrings from the human heart is someday answered.

Celia Thaxter, of course, found no answers, but, as her verse testifies, she did move slowly from despair to hope. She touched the nadir of hopelessness at her mother's death, when her refusal to accept finality led her into the blind alley inhabited by spiritualists and mediums. Her struggle out of the depths began with a voracious reading of books on immortality and the next step was her discovery of theosophy. Her struggles relaxed into comparative equilibrium in her later years with conviction that she was a loved child of the Creator. This last phase is apparent in the hymn "My Lighthouse," wherein the lighthouse symbolizes the transcendental light that shines within every one:

Immortal spark of the great Light divine
   Against whose power no tempest shall prevail.

A selection of Celia Thaxter's poems, including most of those cited here, has been printed as an appendix to Miss Rosamond Thaxter's recent fine biography of her grandmother. Though few would class more than three or four of these higher than second rank, they merit republication for the things they say and the questions they ask, if not for the power of their expression.
General A. W. Greely, returning from two years of horror in the Arctic, told Celia Thaxter that her poems, especially "A Tryst," had comforted him and his men during their ordeal. Persons with less reason than General Greely to ponder the ironies of life and the indifference of nature to man's lot will also find that her poems are relevant to the human condition.

As a writer of prose, Celia Thaxter's position is unassailably in the first rank, though of her three most remarkable pieces—Among the Isles of Shoals, "A Memorable Murder," and An Island Garden—only the last has been recently reprinted. Among the Isles of Shoals takes its place with such other evocations of place as Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi, Synge's Aran Islands, Hudson's Far Away and Long Ago and White's Selborne. Like them, and no less successfully, it presents to the reader the appearance and the atmosphere and spirit of a locality. Celia Thaxter's method is to provide exhaustive historical, botanical, meteorological, and sociological data on the Isles of Shoals, always taking care to record the moods and thoughts generated in her by the physical environment. The moods, of course, are the alternating sadness and joy inspired by the benign and the malign faces of nature. The thoughts are variously phrased statements of the same riddle: "And all the pictures over which I dream are set in the framework of the sea, that sparkled and sang, or frowned and threatened, in the ages that are gone as it does today, and will continue to smile and threaten when we who listen to it and love it and fear it now are dust and ashes in our turn." Thus in prose whose grammatical and verbal repetitions echo, as does her poetry, the beat of the waves against her island shores did Celia Thaxter state the burden of this and all her writing.

In a Preface Celia Thaxter says that she wrote Among the Isles of Shoals, which like Mark Twain's "Old Times on the Mississippi," series appeared first as a number of essays in the Atlantic Monthly in 1869 and 1870, in reluctant response to repeated suggestions by summer visitors that she provide "some account of the place." Essentially, then, the book is an attempt to answer the countless questions put to her over the years by "rusticators." "What is it like here in winter?" "When were the islands settled?" "Have you ever seen a shipwreck?" "What sort of people live here?" "How do they make a liv-
ing?" "How do they amuse themselves?" Celia Thaxter answers these questions and many more. And the facts about the islands are interesting, as are those of any place, however small, if presented by an accomplished and enthusiastic narrator. But the Isles of Shoals perhaps provide exceptional interest with their history going back to Captain John Smith, the many changes in the numbers and characteristics of their population, their points of interest like the old stone church on Star Island and the graves of the Spanish sailors on Smutty-nose, and their roster of disasters in the surrounding seas.

Interestingly, in the very first sentence of Among the Isles of Shoals Celia Thaxter mentions Melville’s “Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles,” published not long before (in Putnam’s), which had made a vivid impression on her. She takes as a challenge Melville’s statement: “It is to be doubted whether any spot of earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group.” She believes that the Isles of Shoals can meet the test in desolation. “Very sad they look, stern, bleak, and unpromising, yet they are enchanted islands in a better sense of the word than are the great Galapagos of which Mr. Melville discourses so delightfully.” The enchantment of the Galapagos resembles nothing so much as the blasted landscape in Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” a poem which Celia Thaxter, the wife of a celebrated Browning reader, knew well. But the enchantment of the Isles of Shoals is a “better” one in that it does not exclude normal plant, animal, and human life. Celia Thaxter’s task was more difficult than Melville’s. She had to depict the beauties as well as the ugliness of life superimposed on and modified by desolation. What life there was on the Encantadas consisted of grotesques and deformities: “tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes, and that strangest anomaly of outlandish nature, the iguana. . . . The chief sound here is a hiss.”

Only the briefest sampling of the contents of Among the Isles of Shoals can or should be given here. Among the many tales of shipwrecks is that of the Spanish vessel Sagunto in a blizzard on the night of January 14, 1813. The hull was cast ashore almost at the doorstep of a kindly islander who habitually kept a lamp burning in his window at night to help ships at sea. Some of the Sagunto’s crew, escaping from the water, saw the
light and tried to reach it, but were found in the morning frozen
to death against a stone wall. Fourteen corpses in all were re-
covered and buried in graves whose crude markers can be seen
to the present day. Celia Thaxter composed one of her better-
known poems on the subject of these graves, but the prose ac-
count has more poetry in it. As one beholds the graves, she
writes, on "summer afternoons, when the wind is quiet and there
steals up a fragrance and fresh murmur from the incoming tide,
when the slowly mellowing light lies tranquil over the placid
sea ... a wistful sadness calms one's thoughts. ... How in-
ocent and unconscious is the whole face of this awful and
beautiful nature! But, listening to the blissful murmur of the
tide, one can but think with what another voice that tide spoke
when it ground the ship to atoms and roared with sullen thunder
about those dying men." On another occasion Celia Thaxter
describes how one winter night she and her family were awak-
ened by shipwrecked men pounding at their door, their ears,
feet, and hands already frozen. And she records how her par-
ents forced her as a child at White Island Lighthouse to look as
a foundering ship, guns booming for help, drove by in a gale
to destruction on the mainland shore. Present always to the
islanders were the sounds of the sea in its varying moods; pres-
ent always in Celia Thaxter's writing are the same sounds, not
only in the rhythms of her phrasing, but in the meanings and
onomatopoeia of her words.

Less depressing than her stories of shipwreck are her descrip-
tions of odd characters like the constable who, called to break
up a fight, merely knocks down an aged bystander and leaves
the scene; or the magistrate who binds a fellow magistrate and
takes him to Portsmouth; or the superannuated fisherman, Peter,
who does his haking only in moonlight. Equally amusing are
the stories of the supernatural, like that of the shovel that mys-
teriously appears on the beach as if inviting the beholder to dig
for treasure but vanishes as one approaches it; or that of Babb,
an evil man long since dead, whose ghost delights to brandish a
glittering knife "in the face of terrified humanity." In not so
light a vein is the account of a skeleton some girls dig up. Celia
Thaxter appropriated the skull; and as she sat by a "driftwood
blaze late into the still autumn night," it would keep her "com-
pany, — a vase of brilliant flowers on one side, the skull on the other, and the shaded lamp between, equally lighting both.”

Published in the Atlantic in May 1875, and really a sort of appendage to Among the Isles of Shoals, though never included in it, is the story “A Memorable Murder,” the account of a crime that actually occurred on the islands and attracted nationwide attention. Celia Thaxter’s theme in her treatment of the event is man’s infinite capacity for evil. A murderer rows across to Smutty-nose Island from Portsmouth one calm, moonlit winter night. His destination is the house of a friendly Norwegian family for whom he had worked and whom he plans to rob, knowing the men folk are away. Celia Thaxter describes unflinchingly the axe-killing of two of the women he finds alone in the cottage, “no help near them in heaven or upon earth.” Like Claggart in Melville’s Billy Budd, the murderer is depicted as an embodiment of “depravity according to nature.” But abetting this natural evil is natural beauty — the beauty of the glass-like sea glimmering beneath the moon which lights the killer as he rows the nine miles each way from Portsmouth and back. Again Celia Thaxter asks the questions that cannot be answered.

Celia Thaxter’s prose is, of course, mainly autobiographical in that it relates her own experiences and observations. It is not surprising, then, that most of the virtues of her prose written for publication are also present in her letters, many of which appeared a year after her death in a collection edited by Rose Lamb and Annie Fields, the wife of the famous publisher. To the present-day reader excerpts from these and from hitherto unpublished letters have been made available in Rosamond Thaxter’s Sandpiper: The Life and Letters of Celia Thaxter. Miss Thaxter, in fact, has found that she could present much of her grandmother Celia’s life as she herself told it in the letters. Many of her correspondents were members of her family, but among the friends to whom she wrote were some of the most prominent intellectuals and artists of her times: Annie Fields, Sarah Orne Jewett, William Dean Howells, Whittier, Bradford Torrey, John Weiss, Julius Eichberg. In the letters are recorded the high points in her intellectual and esthetic life. She tells of reading Dante while she peels squash. She describes a lecture by Emerson, during which she forgets “all weariness and perplexity on the crest of a breaker of earthly bliss.” The con-
troversy aroused by Tyndall’s Belfast Address and her reading of Huxley is the subject of several letters, as is her admiration for Browning. Other letters record the extraordinary pathos conveyed to her by the human faces in William Morris Hunt’s paintings and tell of the new world that her own efforts at painting opened up to her. She writes at length of the overwhelming impact upon her of the Bhagavat-Gita, which temporarily frees her from the fear of death, and of her satisfaction in reading of E. D. Walker’s scholarly book *Reincarnation*. She describes her joy in the thought of the transcendentalist Bradford Torrey as she encountered it in his beautiful book *Rambler’s Lease*. She lovingly characterizes Beethoven, for whose music she had a passion, as “a splendid old German lion with a northeast hurricane in his hair.”

In the letters also are recorded the crises of her emotional life: the joy of her first years with Levi Thaxter, whom she speaks as being as “beautiful and gentle and good and unselfish as mortal man can be”; her realization thirteen years later that her home and marriage are disintegrating, with Levi constantly absent on journeys for his health; the horror of the murder one winter of the two Norwegian women, companions of hers on the island; her fearful grief at the death of her mother, after which she feels as if she could never breathe or look upon the light of day again; her finding William Morris Hunt’s body in a pond on Appledore where, in the grip of a nervous breakdown, he had drowned himself.

Such are the materials of her letters, written in vivid but unself-conscious prose. Many of them are dated in the tedious, empty winters that she stayed on the Isles of Shoals alone with her mother and her “unfortunate” son Karl, and these are obviously prompted by a desire to establish contact with those she loved and respected most in the outside world. Others, written under the stress of some shock to her emotions, are clearly a discharging of tensions too great for her to bear alone. Still others are composed on a lower key, simple sharings of thoughts and feelings with friends she knew would care.

Toward the end of her life, as we have seen in her poetry, after the shipwrecks, the murder, the loss of her mother, the misery of an unhappy marriage, the heartbreak of bearing and bringing up a marred son, nature’s beauty was still, as always,
a saving preoccupation. Only now it had become the dominating preoccupation, leaving less time for brooding on the terrors of life. Her last book, *An Island Garden*, written just before her death is an account of her lifelong cultivation of flowers. Basically it is horticultural, an exposition for inquiring friends of her methods as a gardener possessing an extremely green thumb, and as such the book is still highly valued. But it also is her final and most complete comment on life, and reveals her dependence on beauty in all its aspects to give life the meaning that she must find if she is to go on living. Superbly illustrated by her friend Childe Hassam, it is the richest of her works in literary allusions, containing quotations from the Bible, from Moschus, Bacon, Ruskin, Emerson, and Gilbert White, among others, and avowals of her enthusiasm for Schubert, Beethoven, Chopin, Rubinstein, and Mozart.

In her Preface she cites Moschus’s “Lament for Bion”:

> When man dies he never awakes, but flowers when they die come to life again in another year. Celia Thaxter is still oppressed by the bitter hug of mortality; she still discounts a personal afterlife; but she finds happiness in the evidence of God’s handiwork in the growing things she so painstakingly nurtures. She marvels that flowers take form from a handful of dust and “that every plant should select only its own colors and forms from the great laboratory of nature.” With Emerson she asks nature “why the star form she repeats.” With the French astronomer Camille Flammarion she speculates as to whether plants may not have conscious minds, and she records instances from her experience in support of this possibility.

All her life, as her friend the preacher John Albee has said, Celia Thaxter had been “one of those souls whom God sends into the world to seek the unattainable.” In *An Island Garden* she came as close as is humanly possible to grasping the unattainable: “Who can behold the unfolding of each new spring and all its blossoms without feeling the renewal of ‘God’s ancient rapture,’ of which Browning speaks in ‘Paracelsus’? In that immortal rapture, I, another of his creatures, less obedient in fulfilling His laws of beauty than are these lovely beings [flowers], do humbly share, reflecting it with all the powers of my spirit and rejoicing in His work with an exceeding joy.”
In these words, among the last she ever wrote, Celia Thaxter accurately stated the law of her being as an artist. She existed to create beauty. Doubtlessly she recognized, too, that her own writings, especially her prose, were as natural and inevitable growths as were the flowers she grew in her garden. Her best writing grew from two necessities: that of expressing her experience of life and that of fascinated visitors to the Shoals to learn of the impact of this strange environment on another human being. All art rises from these two necessities. An author needs not only sensitivity and talent but also an audience receptive and eager to hear him. Given these conditions, artistic creation becomes inevitable. In Celia Thaxter’s case these conditions were signally present. She had an outstanding talent and she had the nation’s intellectual elite as an eager and appreciative audience. After seventy-five years the audience has shrunk but it has by no means vanished. Visitors still throng to the Shoals each summer — writers, artists, ministers, teachers — as in Celia Thaxter’s lifetime. They too must feel the enchantment of the islands and must wish to read the most eloquent interpreter of it. But the potential readership is much larger than this. In the current surge of paperback publishing Among the Isles of Shoals will surely be reissued and its vivid, pensive pages will not go unread.

THE MULTICOLORED SPIRIT OF CELIA THAXTER

By Richard Cary

Attitudes of authors towards the letters they write vary as distinctly as the shades and shapes of segments in a kaleidoscope. Some writers resent correspondence as an intrusive onus which robs them of precious working time, thus turn out brief and usually peevish missives of small value to future biographers or critics. Others, with an eye to posterity and publication, lavish hours upon well-wrought, self-conscious compositions which are fundamentally quite as useless. Still others find in letter-writing a respite from the intensity of creative effort