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JEANNE ROBERT FOSTER

Jeanne Robert Foster, who was born in a farm house on Garnet Lake Road in Johnsbury over 80 years ago, daughter of a North Woods lumberman and his wife, a writer and teacher, has presented to the John Thurman Historical Society two books of colloquial verse--one from her own pen, one from her mother's.

These books, "Old Houses," by Lucia N. Oliviere and "Neighbors of Yesterday", by Jeanne Robert Foster, are rich with the local color of this area and the people who wrested a living from its rocky soil. Their stories are told with insight and sympathy, reflecting the scenes of the North Country and the idioms of its people.

Lucia N. Oliviere was one of the four little daughters of William Newell, the white-water man who was drowned at North River in river-driving time in the late 1850's or early 1860's. Her mother, who was Lucinda Weller, had stood on the bank of the Hudson with the four little girls around her, unable to help, and saw him drown. The four little girls were put up for adoption. Lucia, who was next to the youngest, was adopted by the Rev. Enos and Sybil Daly Putnam of Johnsbury. Lucia was renamed Eliza by the Putnams who called her "Lizzie".

Enos Putnam, a descendant of the Revolutionary Hero, Israel Putnam, was a minister of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, for whose members the crusade against slavery and help to escaped slaves, was a basic religious imperative. The log structure where Enos Putnam lived and which he operated as a station on the Underground Railroad in those days, is gone, but the second house which he built on the same lot, still stands on the Garnet Lake Road, a short distance from the church yard where Enos is buried.

A hidden room in the cellar of the log cabin was a haven for escaping slaves, who would arrive at night in a wagonload of hay. They would rest, sleep and eat during their stay at the Putnam home, and on the next moonless night, depart as they came, to continue their journey to Canada and liberation.

This activity stopped in January 1863 with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and the little church on the Garnet Lake Road was crowded for special Thanksgiving services observing the end of slavery. Enos died in 1865 and was buried in the church yard in the shadow of the Georgian steeple which, the story has it, he built single-handed.

His adopted daughter, Lucia, carried on with his similar talents for the same principles of equality and justice, and made a name for herself as a writer and lecturer. During the late 1800's, she served as principal of the village school at Chestertown. She married Francis Oliver, and Jeanne Robert Foster is her daughter. The name was originally "Oliviere", but it was changed to "Oliver" by Francis' father Almeron Oliver.

The Oliver family moved to Minerva after leaving Johnsbury and Chestertown. Jeanne taught in country schoolhouses for two years

before her marriage at 17 to Matt Foster. Matt was the son of the Rev. and Mrs. S.H. Foster of Chestertown.

Said to be one of the most beautiful and talented women to come out of the North Country, Jeanne Robert Foster was the subject of many drawings by John Butler Yeats, a celebrated Irish painter in his time, and father of the famous Irish poet. Many of his portraits of her hang in Dublin Gallery, the Tate Gallery in London and the Royal Italian Gallery in Rome. Other artists of the period immortalized Mrs. Foster in the early 1900's. An ethereal painting by Constantin Petrasco, curator of the Royal Rumanian Art Gallery, hangs in Mrs. Foster's living room in Schenectady.

Jeanne Robert Foster studied dramatics at Stanhope Wheatcraft Dramatic School in New York. Later, while living in Boston, she studied at Boston University and took special courses at Harvard. Horses were a passion and she became an outstanding horsewoman.

In 1913, Mrs. Foster became literary editor of the Review of Reviews. She was asked in 1924 by Ford Maddox Ford to become the American editor of the Trans Atlantic Review, and from then until 1926 she edited all foreign material coming in, in addition to her duties as editor of the Review of Reviews, which she held until 1928.

Through her friendship with John Butler Yeats, Mrs. Foster became associated with his friend, John Quinn, a noted art collector, and traveled here and abroad as his agent, forming friendships with many of the great artists of the day. John Quinn's will, after his death in 1924, dictated his last assignment for her. No one but Mrs. Foster was to be trusted to edit his vast correspondence and to select the letters she deemed worthy of presentation. Proof of his confidence is guarded in "The Quinn Letters", edited by Jeanne Robert Foster, deposited with the New York Public Library. The will provided for publication 50 years after his death (1974).

Mrs. Foster returned to Schenectady in 1933 to care for ill relatives. Income becoming a necessity, she took qualifying examinations in 1938 for a Federal Housing tenant relations counselor, and was later named by New York State as counselor for the Municipal Housing Authority of Schenectady, where she remained until her retirement in 1955.

Jeanne Robert Foster, who was first listed in "Who's Who Among North American Authors" in 1925, achieved the stature of historian with the publication of "Neighbors of Yesterday". She has also published "Wild Apples", lyrics; "Rock Flower", a folk tale in verse with a frontispiece by Yeats, a last unfinished drawing of Mrs. Foster still on his drawing board at the time of his death, and "Marthe", a one-act play, in addition to editing the Quinn letters. She was a friend and correspondent of W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

John Butler Yeats, the artist who found Jeanne Robert Foster a fascinating subject for his talented sketching pencil, was in later years brought by her to the Foster farm at Chestertown. It is not known to the writer whether John Butler Yeats died at Chestertown, but at any rate, he wanted to be buried in the cemetery there, and it is on the Foster lot, beside Matt Foster, that he lies today. It is there that Jeanne Robert Foster has decreed her last resting place.

THE FROG

Down by the alders
 I heard a frog croak.
 Then little ripples of laughter
 Tinkled everywhere.
 Tiny specks of light
 Like bubbles floating,
 Ran along the shadows
 Of the naked alders,
 Fairies laughing at the frogs' song.
 Tho frog never cared;
 His tiny eyes twinkled
 As from out his happy heart
 Came; "Croak, croak, croak."

--Lucia N. Oliviere

Your Publications Committee wishes to thank Mrs. Jeanne Robert Foster for her gracious permission to use her material; Riedinger & Riedinger, Ltd. for prints of the W. B. Yeats sketches and drawings, and the re-prints of newspaper articles which they gave us for distribution to members and friends of the John Thurman Society; to Mrs. Myrtle Hull for her article about Mrs. Foster; and to James Magee for his suggestions as to some of the sources where local historical information may be found.

The poem quoted above, "The Frog", by Mrs. Lucia Oliviere, (Mrs. Foster's mother) was taken from Mrs. Oliviere's delightful book of poems "Old Houses" published in 1928, by the Press of Oscar A. Randel, Inc., New York.

And now, a quote from the latest letter received from Mrs. Foster: "Yes, I came out of Johnsbury. History shows that this beloved township put out by far, more persons who left at least some small imprint on the world than any other township in the county."

(The old Lumber-jack returns to the North Woods)

I went back home last year to the North Woods--

Up where I lumbered nearly fifty years ago;

It all seemed new and strange and different.

There were the broad, new roads with white guard rails,

Slashed in the hills we lumber-jacks stripped bare.

It looks to me there'll be as much again

Good pine as we cut down, in just ten years:

Not like the whopping burnt-out stumps you see

Half charred among the stubbly underbrush;

That's "first-growth," gone forever. You won't see

Pine that it took four hundred years to grow

In the North Woods again, but the new crop will be

As good as the old "second-growth" we cut.

There's miles and miles of the North Woods I knew

Blindfolded years ago; now it looks strange--

Like some new country. It's a "Park," they say.

The State has taken it and bought the farms,

But farmers can stay on, and campers come

If they obey the rules of forestry

The State has posted up all through the Woods,

And cut for firewood only fallen trees

Or the old creaking scrubs with crumbling hearts

Like to crash down in the first winter gale.

They have a name for what they aim to do:

'Tis "conservation," sort of saving up

The woods and headwaters up in the hills

For children's children:--I join hands with it.

...The country's changing fast; I wonder why
The State plans "conservation" all the time,
And yet forgets the most important thing--
To just conserve the old America

We knew. It's slipping --slipping every day,
And we won't long remember what we've been.

The timber's growing up so fast again;
The mountain streams are all a-bursting full;
The State is sending seeds and bulletins
To tell the farmers how to grow their crops,
And foreigners come tumbling in pell-mell
To do it all. It kind of makes me sad;
I'm not-at-home up here; my friends have gone--
The folks that first came over and became
Americans. I know I'm just dead wrong.

Men laugh at me and say the new folks here
Will be the same. I know it may be so,
But something's gone that never can come back.
I can't lay hands on it, no more can you;
But it's still in the woods. When I get blue
I go and sit beside an old skidway
And shut my eyes: far off the supper horn
Blows from the Shanty, and I hear the thump
Of green logs falling on the hemlock skids,--
The tapping of the axes far away.
It don't stay long. I stretch, and light my pipe,
And watch a red squirrel chattering on a bough.

The above selection was taken from "Neighbors of Yesterday" by Jeanne Robert Foster. Mrs. James (Myra) Magee had a personal telephone conversation with Mrs. Foster and received permission to use any part of this book. Due to the length of the selection, several stanzas have been omitted.

Suggested material which may be useful as sources of information for contributions to the Quarterly

LEGAL PAPERS

Early property deeds - Mortgages - Contracts, Real Estate - Satisfaction of Mortgages - Survey Bills - Hand-drawn Maps - Notices of Probate proceedings in connection with the settlement of Estates - Copies of claims filed for mineral or mining rights.

CHURCH RECORDS

Early Church membership records - maps, deeds or surveys of early Cemetery plots.

FAMILY BIBLE

Records of births, deaths, and marriages. In early times, some of these events were recorded only in the family Bible. Some public records have been destroyed by fire or otherwise lost.

PERSONAL PAPERS

Naturalization Papers - military discharge papers, commissions, citations, personal letters from soldiers to the home folks.

PERSONAL BUSINESS RECORDS

Journals - Day Books - Ledgers

DIARIES AND SCRAPBOOKS

To "Stay at home" relatives from relatives or friends who moved Westward in the great migrations in the Eighteen hundreds (1830-1900). Collections of newspaper clippings and penny post cards from grandma's old trunk stored in an unused attic.
