

Homesick For That Place: Ruth Moore Writes About Maine

Jennifer Craig Pixley

MIT
(Formerly The University of Maine)



Photograph Copyright Jennifer Craig Pixely, 1996.

"That was the place you were homesick for, even when you were there." This is the epigraph with which Ruth Moore prefaces her first novel, *The Weir*. Like Moore herself, this line seems simple. We appear to be in the familiar territory of nostalgia for home and family, but the thought behind this line is deeper and more complex than it seems on the surface. This is characteristic of Moore's fiction, I think, and it is certainly true of Ruth Moore, herself. Journalists for the last decade of her life tried to summarize her with an easy tag: "grandmother of Maine letters," "regional writer," "the weir fisherman's daughter." Moore detested all of these for she knew, and quite rightly, that her unconventional life through almost the whole of the twentieth century could not be summed up in such glib terms. She herself could not be so easily placed.

Nevertheless, Ruth Moore (1903-1989) is frequently remembered as a regionalist, a writer of physical place, and, while this hardly describes her value as a novelist and a poet, it is a good point at which to begin. Moore does locate her novels and her poetry specifically on the coast of Maine. This is the geography of her childhood and the memorized terrain in which she is most at home. This is the location that she dreams of, even when she is not there, but her images of this locale are not sentimental. Moore's physical place is that of the real earth rather than one of distant scenery.

Born and raised on Gott's Island, she knew what it was to live by the tides and by the vagaries of Maine weather. In her adult years after she had returned to Maine with her friend, Eleanor Mayo, the two women studied natural history, geology, archaeology, anthropology, and botany, informing themselves about the natural world. Moore was an early and ardent environmentalist, and she understood her physical place perfectly. The Maine coast was the only place that Moore ever loved; it was the only place for which she was ever homesick.

Moore's biographical specifics seem simple enough. Born in 1903 on Gott's Island, two miles off the coast of Maine, Moore was the second of four children born to Philip and Lovina Moore. Moore, her

older brother, Harvey, and her two younger sisters, Esther and Louise, grew up in the small island community where the Moores had lived for five generations. Her father supported the family as many Maine workers did and do, by a number of seasonal and part-time jobs. Philip Moore lobstered, fished a weir, and ran a small store in an ell of the Moore house. He was also the postmaster for Gott's Island and turned his hand to whatever other work came his way. Lovina Moore was a hard-working woman who took care of her children, ran the house, kept chickens and a cow, and planted a big garden. She also took in a few boarders and fed summer people who vacationed elsewhere on the island but came to the Moore house for their meals. "She was a strong woman," Esther Trask, one of Ruth's younger sisters, comments. Trask feels that Lovina Moore was the model for the strong, resourceful, and emotionally resilient women characters that abound in Ruth Moore's books.¹

As in many Maine families, the Moores worked all the time, and it was not different for the children. Harvey Moore fished and Ruth Moore helped care for her sisters, did housework, worked in the garden, and waited on table for the summer visitors. Esther Trask recalls that she and Louise, the two younger daughters, helped with the boarders and in the store, especially when Philip Moore was fishing.

Moore attended grammar school on the island, but, when she was fourteen, she left to attend high school in Ellsworth, boarding with relatives during the school year and returning only for brief visits and the summer vacations. She hated Ellsworth High School, her sister, Esther Trask, recalls. The other students laughed at her homemade clothes and her accent and teased her because she was smart and outspoken, but Moore persisted.² After high school (1917-1921), she went on to the State Teacher's College at Albany. This particular college seems to have been chosen because a summer person who lived in Albany and taught at the college offered to sponsor her. Besides the emotional support, this offer meant that Moore could pay in-state tuition which Trask remembers as being \$10. per semester.³ Moore graduated in 1925 with a degree in English and a minor in Economics. Moore was twenty-two years old. She was already far from home, but she would travel much further geographically and emotionally before she returned to Maine.



Photograph Copyright Jennifer Craig Pixely, 1996

The summer community that I see in 1996 is not the year-round working community that Ruth Moore grew up in at the beginning of the twentieth century. The only thing that is similar is the physical beauty of the place. This must have been what fueled her longing for that place, her homesickness. But

surely homesickness is soothed when one goes home. Moore's epigraph "Even when you were there" suggests that she has another sort of place in mind. Place is, as Ryden suggests, more than physical location. And could she mean place in the sense of a usual and correct order, or might she mean place as one's position or rank with a social network? Or does she mean that the invisible and essential quality of a place and one's apprehension of that place can change even when it looks the same to the swift glance?

When I actually see Gott's Island and the smallness of the village, the way that everyone and everything is seen and known, I think of Moore and her appetite for knowledge, her unconventional ideas, her liberal attitudes, and I wonder what it's like to be homesick for a place in which you have no place, or in which you don't want the place you have. It seems to me that this is something of the dilemma in which Moore found herself.

Ruth Moore lost her place in that coastal Maine world, and, although she made a new place for herself, both in terms of space and in relationships, the effects of the early dislocations permeate her early novels and perhaps account for the melancholy tone of some of her sonnets and lyric poems.

The first way in which Moore lost her place was involuntary. Like other Maine families, the Moores witnessed the collapse of a particular way of life in which a family was able, through its own labor, to be economically self-sufficient. Already the depletion of the fishing grounds had begun, and growing urban centers lured Maine youth away from the family fishing and farming with promises of professional jobs and salaries. Transportation and the expanse of a leisured class made "rustication" a trend. Maine became a vacationland, and many Maine families became workers in the tourist trade, needing the cash that the collapsing fishing industry could not provide. Not only did old Maine families like the Moores experience what it was to move from working for themselves to working for others, they also knew what it was to be pressed into selling family land to people from away who turned that land into summer retreats and hired the Maine families to work on pleasure boats and in the summer kitchens.

Philip and Lovina Moore moved off Gott's Island in 1927. There is some suggestion that it was due to health reasons, but also that it was because the island community was dying.¹⁵ Ted Holmes, a lifelong friend of Moore's and a Gott's Island summer person, claims that the easy availability of the gasoline engine contributed to the demise of island fishing villages. When a fisherman had to row or sail to his traps, Holmes points out, he wanted to live on an island to be closer to his work. Gasoline engines in boats made it possible for fishermen to live on the mainland. It also changed the structure of community life, Holmes believes. People were no longer so economically and socially dependent on one another.¹⁶

Esther Trask recalls Gott's Island being "pretty good sized" when she was a child. She compares it to the community in *Speak To The Winds*, a vital, busy place, but, by 1927, she says, "everyone moved off. Everyone wanted a car." She explains that they garaged their cars in Bass Harbor or a nearby town,

and, she says with an ironic laugh, "then they wanted to live next to their cars." Trask says, more seriously, "We tried to hang onto the Gott's Island place, but we couldn't."¹⁷ Ruth Moore's letters of the 1930's reflect the struggles of a family in a post-Depression economy, forced into selling family land by inflated real estate prices and their need for cash.¹⁸ According to Ted Holmes, the selling-off of Moore family houses and land continued through the 1940's. Although Moore had had success with her

writing, even that was not sufficient to be able to hold onto family property.¹⁹ The anger and frustration of these experiences is reflected in several of her novels, but perhaps most eloquently in *Spoonhandle*, her second novel, in which the rich Mr. Witherspoon tries and finally succeeds in buying and re-naming a piece of land while the previous owner struggles for economic survival in the village.

Moore's second dislocation came when, at fourteen years old, she left the tightly integrated island community for the mainland life of Ellsworth. All the young people who wanted to go to high school had to do the same, but for many of them, raised in an island community where the values were significantly different from those of the mainland, this experience was a real shock. This is not to idealize island communities nor to demonize Ellsworth, but what I mean to point out here is that this is one of the early places in which Moore found herself out of place.

Living at the margin of things, she honed her talent for observation. She had seen the demise of a small pastoral community, the shift to a new sort of community, and she'd witnessed the effect of this on the most vulnerable: the very young and the oldest. In *The Weir*, *Spoonhandle*, *Fire Balloon Speak To The Winds*, and *The Walk Down Main Street*, Moore repeatedly recreates the experience of discordance when a young person moves from the village way of life to the bright lights of the regional, mainland high school. Moreover, she never loses sight of the position of the elderly members of the community.

But perhaps the dislocation that was to separate Moore from her place in her community most irrevocably was her continued pursuit of education. What must it have been like to have been born a woman on an island off the Maine coast in the early part of this century? Moreover, what was it like to be born that woman with a mind, burning with curiosity, burning with passion for poetry and philosophy? According to Ted Holmes, summer visitors noticed Moore's interest in knowledge, lent her books, and encouraged her to go to college.²⁰ Esther Trask describes her sister's decision to go to college as one that was hard for the family. Lovina was sure that it was the right thing for her eldest daughter to do, but "father was old-fashioned. "Women should stay home'." ²¹ Although Philip Moore remained a proud father, he found it difficult to accept that his oldest daughter would choose college and a professional, self-sufficient life. Certainly it did not fit the traditional roles open to Maine women from working class families in the 1920's. However, Lovina Moore was determined. If her daughters wanted to go to college, then they'd go. Esther Trask recalls that, six years later, she would attend the University of Maine at Orono, and Lovina Moore would give her the last \$200.00 of "egg money."

But the family tensions that resulted from Moore's pursuit of education did not result only from her rejection of a woman's traditional place in the community but also from the distance that education put between her and that community. Generations of Maine young people have learned what Ruth Moore must have known early on: education is a double-edged sword. While education can cut you free from back-breaking, dangerous labor, from seasonal jobs cobbled together to make a living for your family, education can also make you different. Working with your hands for a living and working with your mind are two ends of a broad spectrum. Between them is a significant shift in how one knows the world, and not many can know the world both through the immediacy of labor and the perspective of theory. One of the strengths of Moore's novels is that she works to span that gap and, in trying to do so, produces a taut, realistic fiction that represents both ways of knowing.

Although Moore may try to heal this rift by her fiction, we cannot know that she was able to do so in her own life. Certainly she remained a loved and cherished member of a large family network. If she and Philip Moore experienced tensions over these choices, he continued to be proud of her

accomplishments. She and Lovina Moore remained close, as Moore's letters reveal. However, after she graduated from college in 1925, Moore did not return to Maine (except for brief visits) until she and her friend, Eleanor Mayo, moved back to Maine in 1947. For nearly twenty years, Moore lived someplace else other than her beloved Maine.

Why didn't Moore return to Maine after college? Since so much of her work is a celebration of this place and her Maine people, why does she stay away? Like many people who are both modest and private, Moore has left very few traces of her life. Some letters have been found and published in Sanford Phippen's *High Clouds Soaring, Storms Driving Low*, and other letters remain in personal collections. Most of the published letters are determinedly cheerful when all logic tells us that there must have been another truth there, too. But, as the authors of *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* point out, biography depends upon the intersection of individual and social history, so it's worth thinking about what Moore had to sacrifice in terms of her niche in the community in order to pursue education, independence, and art.²²

Moore probably realized, like many of the women who went to college in the early twentieth century, that the world was hardly prepared to receive her. After all, a woman "could not trust to males (who were still jealous of what they perceived as their own territory) to be thrilled about women's achievements."²³ Thus, educated women who went into the work force often ended up accepting jobs that were somewhat less rewarding than they might have imagined for themselves. In addition, these jobs were difficult to find, as Moore often mentions in her letters to Lovina Moore.

Nevertheless, Moore was determined to be economically self-sufficient, for this meant that she was in control of her own life.²⁴ She worked hard in those years after college. Immediately after graduation, she taught for a year on Long Island, but she decided that teaching was not what she wanted. In 1926, she moved to Greenwich Village and worked as a secretary. Phippen reports that Moore worked for Mary White Ovington, one of the founders of the NAACP and a Gott's Island summer person. For the next four years, Moore worked for the NAACP in various capacities. For a while, she did fund-raising and professional writing. In 1930, she traveled through Arkansas and Tennessee, investigating a case in which young black men had been wrongfully accused of murder.²⁵

Moore enrolled in the graduate program at the English Department at the University of Maine in 1931, but she dropped out after a semester. Ted Holmes recalls that she was put off by the New Criticism. Moore returned to Greenwich Village in 1932, taking jobs as a secretary and an editor where she could find them.

In 1936, Moore began working for Alice Tisdale Hobart, a novelist. She moved to Washington, D.C.,

and then to California with the Hobarts. In addition to editing Ms. Hobart's manuscripts, doing her correspondence, and generally lending a hand with the household, Moore also managed the Hobart's ranch in Martinez, California. In 1941, Moore returned to New York City and worked as a secretary; in 1942, she became an editor at *Reader's Digest* and worked there until 1947.

Emily Trask-Eaton says that Moore seemed to enjoy her days in Greenwich Village and the literary circles in which she roamed there.²⁶ Ted Holmes echoes this but from a different perspective. His sister, Betty, and Moore lived near one another in the Village, and Holmes, a college student, was welcome at either place. Moore, he reports, invited him to use her apartment once, when he and his girlfriend

needed a place to stay. Moore was a "rebel, part of the flaming youth of the 20's," Holmes says. He recalls happy parties with "bootleg liquor and a relaxed atmosphere." No wonder, he says, that his father worried about Moore's influence on his sister, Betty Holmes.²⁷

Brian Trask reports that Moore talked about her other years of work but "never with terribly fond memories."²⁸ And, it's interesting to read Moore's letters to her mother during those years. Although she makes the letters amusing through her anecdotal style and her careful shaping of incidents, it's also possible to glimpse her frustration and exhaustion in her repeated references to money, to illness, to the never-ending details of ranch life in California, to her sense of distance from the family. Her self-sufficiency in those years came at a fairly high price.

So, as an educated, self-sufficient woman, Moore no longer fit into the place her coastal Maine life had for her, if it had any at all. In order to return home on her terms, she would have to accomplish two tasks: to achieve economic independence and to find emotional intimacy that did not trap her into a conventional domesticity. Economic independence came to Moore through her art.

When did she know that she wanted to be a writer? Ted Holmes believes that this realization happened early, but Esther Trask says she cannot recall when this became evident. We do know that Moore published at least one very accomplished sonnet in her college literary journal and that a collection of sonnets later published in *Time's Web* are dated to 1933, eight years after she graduated.²⁹ Her family recalls that she really thought of herself as a poet, and, according to Betty Holmes, Moore wrote only poems during those early years in Greenwich Village.³⁰

Although she published a long poem, "Voyage," in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1929, it was her fiction that made her a popular writer. According to Moore's report, she wrote and destroyed five novels before she sold *The Weir* in 1943. *Spoonhandle*, published in 1946, was sold to 20th Century Fox for \$50,000 and was produced as *Deep Waters*. Moore hated this film and said so. However, it was this money that freed her from her secretarial jobs and bought the land in Bass Harbor where she and Eleanor Mayo, with Mayo's father's help, built a simple house.

For the rest of her life, Ruth Moore was a writer whose books were enormously popular and who supported herself entirely by her own writing. She wrote thirteen novels, and she has been compared to Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Caldwell. She also wrote humorous, bawdy ballads, some of which have been published, and a number of lyric poems that have been published in two volumes.

But what about emotional intimacy? Moore always remained close to her family members despite the minor irritations that often occur in families, and she had many good friends. However, there is no record or recollection of any early intimate relationships with men or with women. Once, a boyfriend came to the island, Esther Trask recalls, but Moore sent him home again.³¹ Occasionally, a roommate or friend is mentioned in her letters, but, other than that, there is very little indication of Moore's personal life. It is worth noticing that her 1933 sonnets can be read easily as passionate love poems and that at least one of her lyric poems contains veiled but unmistakable erotic references. Despite that, we know very little about Moore's emotional life until she met Eleanor Mayo in 1940.

Letters show that Moore visited Maine only occasionally in the late 1930's. The expense of train travel and the Hobarts' dependence on her made it difficult for her to come home even when her father died in 1937. She was clearly homesick for "that place," yet she remained in her job on the Hobart ranch,

supporting herself adequately in the depressed economy of that decade. Moore managed to get home to Maine in 1938 and then again in 1940 when her sister, Esther Trask, introduced her to Eleanor Mayo.

Mayo (1920-1981) was eighteen years younger than Ruth Moore.³² Raised in Southwest Harbor, Mayo was "an exceptional student" of Esther Trask's.³³ Trask introduced the two women when Mayo was home on summer vacation from Bryant Stratton Business School in Boston, feeling sure they'd like each other since both were interested in writing.³⁴ They did, and, at the end of the summer vacation, Mayo returned to California with Moore. Although both families report that there was no disruption over this swift relationship, they do acknowledge that there was some tension.³⁵ However, as many families do, the Moore family and the Mayo family accepted the two women and their unconventional lifestyle into the family folds. Leonard and Joy Mayo recount the weekly family meal that they shared with Moore and Mayo, ranging from picnics to dinners out at Annabelle's Seawall Restaurant in Manset.³⁶ Esther Trask and her children, George ("Bud"), Philip, Muriel, Emily and Brian, recall the hootenannies, the fishing trips, and many family parties in which Moore and Mayo were centrally involved.

Both families agree that Moore and Mayo were "right for each other." "They seemed like friends"; "Their relationship seemed perfectly normal"; "They were a couple from the beginning."³⁷ And, indeed, the two women were well-suited to one another. If Moore could sometimes be "abrupt" or impatient, Mayo often smoothed things over.³⁸ If Moore liked privacy and solitude, Mayo was the one who arranged their social life.³⁹ If Moore preferred to spend her energy writing, researching, and gardening, Mayo ran the house and kept up with their investments.⁴⁰ Although Moore was more famous for her novels, Mayo's novels were well received also. Both women enjoyed working in the gardens. The big vegetable garden was Ruth's territory while Eleanor managed her English garden. The women pursued craft and art work. Mayo, for example, made some of the furniture in the Bass Harbor house. She was a skilled photographer, and she was an accomplished silversmith.⁴¹ Moore painted and polished rocks, some of which became part of Mayo's jewelry.

Eleanor Mayo is described as "strong-minded," "even-tempered," "handsome," "intelligent," and "witty."⁴² A woman who enjoyed being in the world, Mayo served as Town Clerk, the first female Tax Assessor, and a term as Second Selectman, as well as several terms as First Selectman. Moore describes the community reaction in a 1950 letter: "A great flurry. It got in all the papers and on the radio, and all the old diehards and shellbacks in town, who think 'wimmen's fit fa one thing and that's all, by God,' are standing on their heads and spinning."⁴³

There is, of course, no specific proof that Eleanor Mayo and Ruth Moore were more than good friends. There are no love letters, no diary or any reference that can be produced, and yet there is evidence everywhere of the close, passionate nature of their relationship. There is Moore's dedication of her book of poems, *Time's Web* (1972), to Mayo and also her dedication of *Fire Balloon* (1948). Mayo, in turn, dedicates her novel, *Loom of the Land* (1946) to Moore. There are the repeated affectionate references in Moore's business correspondence to "you and Eleanor."⁴⁴ There is the fact of their close companionship; for forty years, they were rarely separated. There is the homestead in Bass Harbor with the simple house, the outlying buildings, the camp on the shore, the gardens and orchard now all slightly overgrown and weathered but then the realization of a joyous dream. There is their very resolute privacy and the way that Mayo protected Moore from the press and from casual visitors. And we must observe that, after Moore met Mayo, she seemed better able to settle down to her writing and that she began to publish steadily. Most eloquently, there is Ruth Moore's deep silence after Mayo's

early death in 1981. By family accounts, Moore was distraught during Mayo's final illness, and Len and Joy Mayo recall that Moore would not attend Eleanor Mayo's funeral. "She had a complete change of personality," they say. "She turned into herself and drew away from us."⁴⁵ In brief letters to friends Mary Kamenoff and John Gould, Moore writes of "my friend, Eleanor's, death" in language so uncharacteristically spare and reserved that it signals the intensity of her grief in a way that pages of sentiment never could.⁴⁶

If Ruth Moore and Eleanor Mayo were, to use a 19th century term, "romantic friends," they had good reason to keep their relationship private. Women who loved other women had very little place in the beginning and middle of the twentieth century. Their perspectives were often ignored, erased, or otherwise pushed to the margin of "normal" life. It has not been until the last thirty years of this century that women who loved other women have been able to claim that without connotations of illness and deviance. The "legacy of suspicion" had been impressed upon women like Moore and Mayo, who lived through decades of repression and reaction.⁴⁷ At first, it seems curious that the two women would return to small town life instead of seeking the freedom and anonymity of an urban bohemia, but this move on their parts indicates their desire to be close to their people and to the region in which they grew up. They had created their own intimacy, and they brought that with them. Also, they knew that, despite the opinions commonly held in the village, they'd be accepted despite their difference. And they were right. Whether or not the local residents approved of the friendship, nonetheless they protected the women's privacy. On their parts, Moore and Mayo were involved in the daily life of the town, although Moore was perhaps more reclusive than Mayo. They bowled in the Manset Ladies' Bowling League for years. Moore spent at least three years on the School Board, one as the chairperson. Mayo, in addition to serving as Tax Assessor, Town Clerk, and several terms as Second and First Selectman of the town, was also a manager of the Bass Harbor Credit Union.

But perhaps more importantly, they were key members of their families. Emily Trask-Eaton remembers being teased by schoolmates about Moore and Mayo in their blue jeans and flannel shirts, but she couldn't reconcile this joking with the two women who were so much a part of the family life. For Brian Trask, a nephew of Moore's, "their relationship seemed perfectly normal."⁴⁸ The two aunts were simply

"Uppy" (Moore's family nickname) and Eleanor. Although Trask thinks that "Uppy and Eleanor put up with us when we were young," he also remembers Moore and Mayo as generous, interested, nurturing women who spent a lot of time with him and his siblings as the children grew older. He remembers jeep rides and fishing trips, but also that Moore and Mayo encouraged him in his career as a geologist. Moore also encouraged Trask-Eaton in her musical studies, giving her original ballads to set to music and nurturing her desire to express herself creatively. Muriel Davisson credits Moore and Mayo, along with her mother, Esther Trask, as providing the strong role models that allowed her to pursue her career as a scientist.⁴⁹ The Mayos report similar instances from Eleanor's side of the family of the women's pride in the nieces and nephews.

Ruth Moore accomplished what she had to in order to return to her beloved Maine: she achieved economic independence through her writing and emotional intimacy through her relationship with Mayo. But this is not to say that Moore settled into a peaceful middle and old age with adoring nieces and nephews at her knee. This is hardly the case. In fact, moving to Maine, a geographically marginal state with its own rocky perspective, seemed to sharpen Moore's view of the events of the twentieth century. The view from the margin is, after all, often particularly clear.

And what was the view from this cultural and geographical margin? It ought to be easy to answer, but, instead, this question engages the whole matter of regional literature. Ruth Moore despised the term "regional writer" and with good reason. Regional literature may be back in favor at the end of the twentieth century, but until recently, "regionalism" was a label that carried patronizing, diminutive connotations. It hinted at provincialism. A work described this way usually included sketches of colorful characters who spoke in the local idiom; the setting was rural as opposed to the cosmopolitan background of the urban; it offered a sentimental vision of the past, hazed with the golden light of nostalgia. It was a term that could be uttered positively, even enthusiastically, praising a piece of writing while, at the same time, setting it aside from the mainstream as if such work might only interest those in the local vicinity. Not coincidentally, "regionalist" almost always described a woman writer.

However, Moore's view from her Maine perspective was closer to what we are coming to think of as regional literature. Jay Parini, in a recent *Chronicle of High Education*, tags it as "bioregional" writing, and this phrase, with its apt allusion to deep ecology, probably would have pleased Moore.⁵⁰ She understood that human narrative is rarely separate from physical place. We are grounded in the specificity of our place, and we do not (can not) know ourselves until we begin with our own personal geography. In Moore's novels, as in all regional literature, the physical setting is more than backdrop. Instead, it's part of the plot. The regional novel knits together the particular place along with the human history, the specific anxieties or events of that place, the politics, the humor and the grief, the sounds of individual voices.

Understanding this, we quickly see that a regional novel isn't simply a vehicle for over-written scenic descriptions, but rather a form of social critique. This aspect of regional writing is often overlooked. In a number of reviews of Moore's novels, critics repeatedly describe the love plot or praise the vivid descriptions of the Maine coast without paying one jot of attention to the lucid and forthright comments that the novel makes about sexism, racism, or intolerance. Moore understood that the region is not separate from the larger world. In living on Spoon Island or Chin Island or Comey's Island or

walking down Main Street, Moore's characters encounter problems of economics and social class. The journalist might see "regionalism," but Moore knew she was writing social criticism. That she wrote it with Maine idioms, a talent for comedy, and finely edited bits of lived experience does not make it less critical or less tragic.

Social critique is clearly an element of Moore's novels, and this understanding opens the way to understanding the tradition of which Moore is part. Social critique among New England women writers has existed since the middle of the nineteenth century. Beginning with Harriet Beecher Stowe's novels and moving forward to Sarah Orne Jewett and the lesser known but still essential local color writers, we can see that critical comments upon the larger society from the position of the village are part of a tradition. Often the critique comes in a gentler form. Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs* and Gladys Hasty Carroll's *As The Earth Turns* are pastoral hymns, enshrining the rural in the face of the encroaching industrial civilization. Moving into the 1940's, 1950's and 1950's, New England women writers become more forthright. Other women working in this tradition in Maine during those decades include Eleanor Mayo, Virginia Chase, Mary Ellen Chase, Louise Dickinson Rich, Miriam Colwell, Chenoweth Hall, Dorothy Simpson, Elizabeth Ogilvie, and Elizabeth Coatsworth.

Many of these writers worked with themes similar to Moore's, but Moore is usually thought to be the strongest writer of the group. Many of these women writers use humor as a way to deflect the force of

their comment and many seem to skate on the borders of sentiment. However, the shared connections here are unmistakable. This collection of writers, now largely out of print and unremarked, were, along with Moore's darkly humor, the predecessors of contemporary Maine novelists like Carolyn Chute, Sanford Phippen, and Cathie Pelletier. Some of Tabitha King's work fits within this tradition, as well.

What sets Moore apart from her contemporaries is her particular blend of humor, fury, and sorrow. Moore's fiction and ballads reveal her comedic talents, but most readers understand that the other side of comedy is tragedy. Moore allows her readers to laugh, if only to keep our hearts from breaking at the spectacle of the human condition which, as she depicts it, includes domestic abuse, child abuse, alcoholism, suicide, violence, and various inequities. If some of Moore's contemporaries veer toward quaintness and the picturesque, Moore never does. This is American realism at its finest, the pressure of circumstance on a particular character. It's Moore's forte and one for which she should be celebrated.

Ruth Moore was an extraordinary woman in terms of her power of observation, and she's described as "psychic." Emily Trask-Eaton and Esther Trask remember that Moore had very bright, penetrating eyes. "She could look right through you," they say and recall that Moore seemed to know what others were thinking. "Sometimes she would even say what you were thinking," Esther Trask recalls. Moore understood the history of her people and her geographical place very well, but it was her ability to see ahead that seemed to make her sorrowful. Trask-Eaton, talking about her aunt's psychic ability, agrees that Moore "saw what was coming."⁵¹

Whether this vision included personal matters, we can't know, but many of her novels clearly indicate that Moore deduced what lay ahead for us in terms of environmental and social problems. Her family agrees that this caused her deep sorrow. In the 1940's and 1950's, her fictional characters struggled with the problems that are in our newspapers in the 1990's: the pollution of water, the depletion of the fishing grounds, the shift from family business to large corporate entities, the loss of family-owned land to those from out of state.

Moore stopped giving interviews earlier in her life because she became so annoyed at reporters getting it all wrong. She groused at the "regionalist" label and fumed over the fact that journalists missed her main concerns. In her prescient way, Moore was posing the questions that many writers and social critics are asking at the end of the twentieth century: What if knowing where you were from, your people and your bioregion, really meant that you knew something about yourself? What if we revised our American frontier mentality and, instead of always moving on, we settled down and addressed the problems in our own place? What if we became (as Moore thought we should be) stewards of the land? Protectors of all that is vulnerable?

Moore once wrote to Ted Holmes: "I used to be homesick for the island, not the way it is now but the way it used to be."⁵² And many of her novels do present this Golden Era of Maine, self-sufficient, cohesive, balanced villages as an ideal, as a place for which we might all be homesick. But it wasn't an era that ever had a place for women like Ruth Moore. So when she writes, "I have seen horizons" (and this was the last line she wrote before her death), Moore reveals, I think, that the place she truly wants is still somewhere ahead of us.⁵³ For all her homesickness for that old location, Moore was a progressive woman.

In early New England, land was mapped by the metes and bounds system. "The surveyor delineated property by measuring a series of straight lines from one landmark to another. Often, the landmarks

were "witness trees," durable hardwoods whose relative permanence in the landscape seemed certain."

⁵⁴ I have begun to think of Ruth Moore and her writing in the same way. She is a witness in our century. Looking back, looking ahead, she is mapping an "invisible landscape" in her stories and poetry and in her life. But her relative permanence is not at all certain. It can only be assured if we read Moore's work and pay attention to what she is telling us about home, about common ground, about our longing for our own place.

Copyright© Jennifer Craig Pixley, 1997

Notes:

¹ Esther Trask and Emily Trask Eaton, personal interview, 15 March 1996.

² Sanford Phippen, ed., *High Clouds Soaring, Storms Driving Low: The Letters of Ruth Moore*, (Nobleboro, ME: Blackberry Books, 1993) iii.

³ Trask, 15 March 1996.

¹⁵ Trask, 15 March 1996.

¹⁶ Edward Holmes, personal interview, 4 June 1996.

¹⁷ Trask, 15 March 1996.

¹⁸ Phippen, 2-100.

¹⁹ Holmes, 4 June 1996.

²⁰ Holmes, 4 June 1996.

²¹ Trask, 15 March 1996.

²² Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry and Ingrid Winther Scobie, ed., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography*, (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 5.

²³ Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1993),

²⁴ Trask, 15 March 1996.

²⁵ Phippen, i-x.

²⁶ Trask, 15 March 1996.

²⁷ Holmes, 4 June 1996.

²⁸ Brian Trask, 14 May 1996.

²⁹ Trask, 15 March 1996.

³⁰ Holmes, 4 June 1996.

³¹ Trask, 15 March 1996.

³² Leonard and Joy Mayo, personal interview with author and Sanford Phippen, 2 November, 1996.

³³ Trask, 15 March 1996.

³⁴ Mayo, 2 November 1996; Trask, 15 March 1996.

³⁵ Brian Trask, 14 May 1996; Mayo 2 November 1996; Trask, 15 March 1996.

³⁶ Mayo, 2 November 1996.

³⁷ Mayo, 2 November 1996; Brian Trask, 14 May 1996; Trask, 15 March 1996.

³⁸ Mayo, 2 November 1996.

³⁹ Mayo, 2 November 1996; Brian Trask, 14 May 1996; Trask, 15 March 1996.

⁴⁰ Mayo, 2 November 1996.

⁴¹ Mayo, 2 November 1996; Miriam Colwell, letter to author, 5 October, 1996.

⁴² Mayo, 2 November 1996; Trask, 15 March 1996.

⁴³ Ruth Moore, unpublished letter in family collection, 23 March 1950.

⁴⁴ Unpublished letters in family collection

⁴⁵ Mayo, 2 November 1996.

⁴⁶ Ruth Moore, unpublished letters in family collection and Friendship Library Collection.

⁴⁷ Faderman, 155.

⁴⁸ Brian Trask, 14 May 1996.

⁴⁹ Davisson, 12 June 1996.

⁵⁰ Jay Parini, "Local Color: Regionalism and Literary Studies," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, (January 17, 1997), A60.

⁵¹ Trask, 15 March 1996.

⁵² Edgar Allen Beem, article with no title or date or periodical given, Sanford Phippen Collection, Fogler Library Special Collections, University of Maine at Orono.

⁵³ Trask, 15 March 1996.

⁵⁴ Ryden, 26.

Copyright© Jennifer Craig Pixley, 1997.

Developed with a grant from Women in the Curriculum at the University of Maine.