

Elizabeth Yates McGreal Wildflower Garden in Shieling Forest

The following article paints a vivid picture of Elizabeth Yates McGreal. It appeared in the October 15, 1969 issue of Friends Journal.

A Quaker Profile: Elizabeth Yates McGreal

by Elizabeth Gray Vining

THE POND SPARKLES under a light breeze that speaks in the hemlock and the pines, under which a small, brown cabin is patterned with splotches of sunshine. Threaded through the murmur of the trees are the rippling sound of water lapping against the dock, the occasional glunk of a frog, the churr of hunting kingfishers, the chatter of chickadees. Sometimes a beaver may thwack the water with its broad tail, a great blue heron rise on slow majestic wings or very rarely- a doe swim slowly past. The beauty, the quiet, the peace are all-embracing.

This is Elizabeth Yates McGreal's retreat, her place for work and relaxation, her sanctuary. Here she comes to do a particularly demanding piece of writing, to swim, to canoe, to think about the characters in her books, to reexamine and renew the philosophy of life expressed and implied in her writing and in her daily life as author, homemaker, citizen, Friend, and friend. Tall, slender, active, brown-eyed and brown-haired, almost incredibly youthful-looking for her age, which is sixtyish, she reveals in the serenity and warmth of her face the resources of her spirit.

"The Acre"-and more-of land on the pond was acquired nearly twenty years ago as a birthday present for her husband, William McGreal, whose loss of sight in midcareer had brought them back from the stimulating and busy life they had been leading in London and on the Continent in the thirties to build anew in an old farmhouse on the outskirts of Peterborough, New Hampshire.

One does not think of Elizabeth without thinking also of Bill, for theirs was a marriage of two strong and beautiful personalities, at once independent and interdependent, like two straight, tall trees whose roots are intertwined deep in the earth.

It was Bill's strong faith in her ability to write that kept Elizabeth persisting through the ten often discouraging years of her apprenticeship, before she broke through into the success that has been hers; Bill, who, as she wrote in the dedication of one of her books, gave her confidence when she assigned to herself what seemed to be an almost impossible task.

It was Elizabeth who undergirded Bill when darkness settled over his eyes, who was ever sensitive to supply a need but never imposed help when he could manage for himself, who painted for him so vividly in words what she saw when they went about together that they could still have the joy of shared experience. William McGreal never appeared blind; his eyes behind the dark glasses seemed to see as much as most others and more than some; his face was radiant, his voice warm and confident, his humor flashed, his interest in the world continued fresh and vital.

Elizabeth has told the story of their life together in the most beautiful and moving of her books, *The Lighted Heart*, published in 1960 when Bill could still enjoy it. After his death in 1963, after thirty-four

years of marriage, Elizabeth wrote *Up the Golden Stair* (1966), in which is distilled the wisdom of her heart and her deepest insights about death and sorrow, life and hope.

Elizabeth Yates was born in Buffalo, New York, the sixth of seven children. The Franklin School in Buffalo was followed by a year in boarding school and a year abroad, but perhaps even more important for her development as a writer were the summers spent on her father's big farm where there were horses to ride, a garden to tend, and butter to make, and a hideout in the barn where she kept the notebooks in which she wrote down the thoughts and happenings of her days.

When she took herself off to New York at twenty, she knew that above all she wanted to write; the jobs she got were aimed at furthering that purpose and her poem published in F.P.A.'s "Conning Tower" gave her encouragement for the future.

The ten years in Europe were full and happy ones, with mountain-climbing in Switzerland and Iceland and at last, after jobs of editing, article-writing, and ghosting, a book published: *High Holiday*, 1938, the story of two English children on the Swiss mountains. The following year the McGreals returned to the United States and made their home in Peterborough. *Patterns on a Wall* (1943) grew out of the discovery, under layers of wall paper, of the stencilled room in the old house they restored. This was the first of Elizabeth's books to win the Herald Tribune Spring Festival Award.

The tombstone of Amos Fortune in the graveyard at Jaffrey Center awakened Elizabeth's interest in the life of the Negro slave who purchased his own freedom and that of many others. She told his story in a beautiful, deeply understanding book, *Amos Fortune, Free Man*, which won both the Newbery Award (1951) and the William Allen White Award.

Elizabeth Yates's interest in the Negro has found further expression in two other books: *Prudence Crandall, Woman of Courage* (1955), the story of the Quaker schoolteacher who admitted a Negro into her little school in Canterbury, Connecticut, in 1833 and was persecuted as a result; and in her fine biography, *Howard Thurman: Portrait of a Practical Dreamer*, which grew out of the long friendship of Elizabeth and Bill with Howard Thurman, who often came to enjoy the hearth at Shieling.

Out of a long list of novels and stories for adults, young adults, and children, it is feasible here to comment on only a few. *Pebble in a Pool: Widening Circles in the Life of Dorothy Canfield Fisher* is a biography for young adults and the only full-length account so far of the life and writings of that much-loved novelist and social reformer. *With Pipe, Paddle and Song*, a novel for young adults about the voyageurs, is an absorbing story, hitherto largely untold, of the men who took their long canoes deep into the Canadian wilderness to trade with the Indians for furs. *Your Prayers and Mine*, a collection of choice prayers with interpretive designs by Nora Unwin, can be found much worn on many a bedside table. *An Easter Story* interprets the meaning of Easter for children, as the newly published *On That Night* evokes for adults the essential poignancy and power of Christmas.

Some Day You'll Write, a suggestive manual for the beginning writer, now issued in paperback, comes out of some twenty summers of teaching in writers' conferences and workshops across the country from New Hampshire to Wisconsin. Elizabeth Yates's students, some of whom have gone on to achieve success, look on her as friend as well as mentor.

In her own community, she takes her share of responsibility. She is one of three on the board of the local library, which was the first tax-supported public library in the United States and perhaps in the world; she is a member of the State Library Commission and of 'the Committee to Restore Robert Frost's Homestead at Derry; she is on the Board of the New Hampshire Association for the Blind.

In her search for spiritual truth, Elizabeth McGreal found an answer in the silence and openness of the meeting for worship, and a little less than ten years ago she became a member of Monadnock Monthly Meeting, a new, small Meeting which, beginning in the Meeting School at Rindge, has expanded to draw in members from villages within a radius of twenty miles. It meets now in the Library Hall at Peterborough, and Elizabeth has for the last year been its clerk. One has only to attend its meetings over a summer, as I have done, to see how much her quiet leadership contributes to its strength and vitality.

Shieling is the home that Elizabeth and Bill together created, where now she lives alone, attended by her graceful, handsome sheltie, Gibbie, who is attuned to her as a devoted and sensitive dog can sometimes be. The two hundred-year-old farmhouse with the big center chimney sits under maple and pine trees on a high ridge looking out over a field and wooded valley to the long undulations of Pack Monadnock Mountain to the east. A big barn on one side contains the car, the great stacks of firewood, and the swallows that fill the summer skies with their twittering flight. Opening on the barnyard are the henhouse, where live the "seven girls," the little house which was Bill's office when he was head of the New Hampshire work for the blind, and the old carriage house that has been made into a studio apartment. Here for a number of years Nora Unwin, the English artist, illustrator, and writer whose life has been intertwined with that of the McGreals, lived and worked until Elizabeth and Bill built for her Pine-Apple Cottage on the other side of Shieling beyond the vegetable garden.

The Scottish name, Shieling, means shelter and implies also healing. Within its hospitable walls, the porch with its wide view of the mountains, the dining-room where firelight is reflected on panelled walls and pewter, the livingroom where books and music and good talk, as well as companionable silences, enclose the hearth, the stenciled bedroom, gather many visitors: Children for story hours, nieces and nephews eager to talk about their hopes and plans, occasional tired and discouraged folk, .friends of all ages, to bask in its beauty and shelter, often to find healing.

"Everything here is expendable," Elizabeth will say. "Everything is to be used and enjoyed."

Everything, one sees at once, is beautiful, simple, appropriate. Many of the appointments are old and valuable, many hand made with the patina of careful use and love. There is in Elizabeth's house as in her life, no clutter; nothing that is not functional, nothing for show, no ravelled edges. One realizes that the great number of things she manages to get done are possible in large part because she has to waste no time or energy on hunting for the mislaid or coping with confusion. There is everywhere manifest a beautiful order that is the outward expression of an inward clarity and commitment.

"What enables a man," Elizabeth asks in her biography of Howard Thurman, "to gain such control over his own life that he can put himself at the disposal of life?" It is a question that one might well ask of Elizabeth herself, and it is a question that she could answer. It is what she herself has done.