



Mary Evelyn writing in one of her journals at Arcady, her lakeside camp, around 1914.

The Writer Who Walked These Woods Before Me

BY PHIL PRIMACK

Mary Evelyn Folsom Blair and I have been connected for nearly 50 years. Never mind that she died a year before I had ever heard of her.

Back in 1974, Mary was just a name on a property listing when I bought a farmhouse with 65 acres in Epping, New Hampshire, from her estate. Focused on building my own little house deep in the woods, I didn't care about who had walked this land before me.

Then I began hearing about this Quaker born in 1881 who ended her 50-year teaching career in the same wooden schoolhouse she'd attended as a girl. Long before hot lunch programs, Mary kept stew warming on the school's wood stove so that Depression-era children could eat. She used the forest as an open classroom long before the concept became trendy. Decades later, former

students still warmly recalled their miles-long hikes with Mary to Arcady, her bungalow on Pawtuckaway Lake.

I was already fascinated by this woman, but then came the clincher: Mary was quite a writer.

The old farmhouse was mostly emptied out after her death, but someone had salvaged and lent me two diaries of a girl and woman "known on a time as Mary E.," as the 22-year-old author had dubbed herself in 1902. I read the handwritten pages in one sitting. Over the years, the entries evolved from those of a carefree 15-year-old skating down frozen rivers to much deeper thoughts and reflection, such as Mary's bitterness about "the pain and sorrow this old world holds for a woman." Then she would scold herself for falling into "the blues" and instead richly described "little side trips to Bohemia . . . Thanks

be to whatever gods there are for that lure of the unknown that's ever haunting us—the strange faith that beckons with a mysterious strength."

Mary wrote with wit and wisdom and, even as a teenager, drew from a deep literary reservoir. Some entries were especially resonant. As I walked the forest trails, I'd wonder if this was where, in 1906, the "hemlocks stood so thickly and were so weighted down with snow that it seemed like some dim mysterious pagan temple whose gods might whisper in my ear some message."

The reporter in me knew Mary made a great story. I didn't know it would take me decades to write it.

I tracked down more of Mary's writing and interviewed others who knew her. I located Arcady, where, decades before Jet Skis upended its lakeside "peace of the pines," Mary wrote the names of visitors and poems, now barely legible, onto the walls.

For a time, work pulled me away to other projects and Mary and her journals stayed on a shelf. Most of those who knew her had died. Mary deserved a story, but I lacked the discipline to write it.

But now having reached my 70s, I'm bundling loose ends. With COVID-19 keeping me inside, I've returned to my Mary pile, which includes hundreds of letters. One from 1917 triggered a eureka moment.

It was to Mary from Anne Reed, whom Mary dubbed "Anne of Arcady" in tribute to their close relationship and time together at the lakeside camp. I'd been unable to learn more about Anne, but details in this single letter helped me locate and e-mail her great grandson in Durham, New Hampshire.

He was intrigued by my query. So on a late summer day, he and his mother—Anne's granddaughter—joined me at Arcady. We sat on the same porch where Anne and Mary had contentedly watched "its sunlight and shadow and silvery nights and flitting fogs."

Mary wrote those words well over a century ago. Now I had brought them—and Mary—back to her beloved bungalow.

Phil Primack is writing a book about the life and words of Mary Evelyn Folsom Blair. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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