

Henry van Dyke at Seal Harbor

By Carl Little

Here is the place to see it all, and to drain the full cup of delight; not a standpoint, but a sailing-line just beyond Baker's Island: a voyager's field of vision, shifting, changing, unfolding, as new bays and islands come into view, and new peaks arise, and new valleys open in the line of emerald and amethyst and carnelian and tourmaline hills.¹

—Henry van Dyke

Author, pastor, poet, scholar, outdoorsman and diplomat: these are a few of the hats Henry van Dyke (1852–1933) donned in his incredibly full life. For the last thirty or so years of his life, van Dyke made summer sojourns to Seal Harbor, a place that nurtured his writing and his soul, and heightened his passion for the natural world.

Born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, of Dutch ancestry, van Dyke spent his childhood in Brooklyn Heights, where his father, the Reverend Henry Jackson van Dyke, was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. It was his father who introduced him to the outdoors and nurtured in him a lifelong commitment to fostering companionship with nature.

Van Dyke went on to study at Princeton University, where he received his AB (1873), master's (1876) and doctor of divinity (1877) degrees, the last from the Princeton Theological Seminary. He was ordained in 1879. He later was awarded honorary degrees from, among other institutions, Harvard, Yale, and Wesleyan.

Van Dyke married Ellen Reid of Baltimore in December 1881; they had nine children. Following in his father's footsteps, he became

This essay was inspired by discovering Henry van Dyke's book Days Off and Other Digressions (1907) in the Northeast Harbor Library many years ago and being struck by his evocations of Mount Desert Island. Special thanks to the late Betsey Pfeiffer, who shared memories of her Uncle Henry; Scott Planting at the Maine Seacoast Mission for having scans made (by Jeff Dobbs) of several van Dyke items; and Amanda Shields at the Brandywine River Museum of Art for providing the Schoonover illustration.



Henry van Dyke with fly rod. *Courtesy of the Maine Seacoast Mission*

a minister, serving as pastor of the United Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island, before taking the same position at the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. In 1890, he became one of the five “Harvard preachers” and served in that capacity off and on until 1907. He was also an eminent lecturer, holding forth on topics of religion and philosophy at Yale, Johns Hopkins, and the Sorbonne in Paris, as well as at his alma mater.

In the 1915 edition of the *International Who's Who in the World*, van Dyke's address is given as “American Legation, The Hague.” At that critical time in world history, he was US minister to the Netherlands and Luxembourg, appointed by his former Princeton classmate, President Woodrow Wilson. He played a significant role in aiding Americans living in Europe who sought refuge in Holland as World War I broke out.

The bibliography of van Dyke's writings runs nearly six pages single-spaced.² Among the diverse volumes are numerous collections of sermons, poems, and essays, as well as the much-beloved Christmas stories and verse, a study of Tennyson's poetry, and a number of travelogues, among them *Out of Doors in the Holy Land*. “Literature,” van Dyke wrote in *The Spirit of America* (1922), “consists of those writings that interpret the meaning of nature and life, in words of charm and power, touched with the personality of the author, in artistic forms of permanent interest.”³

Like many a world traveler and man of letters, van Dyke sought respite and inspiration on the coast of Maine. Starting around 1900, he spent summers at his cottage Sylvanora in Seal Harbor.⁴ The property, “about eight acres,” covered “the whole western shore of the harbor.”⁵

There, van Dyke wrote in a small bungalow he called the “Green Door,” which he had built on the shore, looking out on Bunker's Ledge. “When asked what distinguished visitors had come to the Green Door,” Bird reported, “[van Dyke] replied ‘the chickadees, a dozen kinds of warblers and this year a charming visit from a group of white-winged cross-bills, who sing entrancingly, better than canaries.’”⁶

In 1927, van Dyke oversaw a “Sylvanora Edition” of certain of his books. Wishing to place his work “within the reach of all,” the publisher charged a dollar per volume.⁷ These volumes were reprints



G.P.C., *Sunbeam II*, 1932, charcoal drawing. The 37-ton ship was designed by Albert Condon and built at the Jonah P. Morse Shipyard in Damariscotta. *Courtesy of the Maine Seacoast Mission*

issued in a format that the author termed “the reverse of the *édition de luxe*. You might call it an edition of economy.” In a prefatory note to the edition, he sent “hearty greetings” from his “little wooden cottage among the fir-trees on the rocky coast of Maine.”⁸

Van Dyke preached regularly in half a dozen Mount Desert Island churches.⁹ Regarding his prowess in the pulpit, Tertius van Dyke cited the testimony of a carpenter who had made a spar for the pastor’s boat: “I always went whenever he [van Dyke] preached and so did every one else. He was the only man I knew who could *rightly* make a joke in the pulpit. He was the kind of fellow that you *wanted* to hear preach,—or go fishing with.”¹⁰

For many years, van Dyke served as president of the board of the Maine Seacoast Mission, a social service organization still active today that provides care and education to isolated islanders along the coast of Maine. According to van Dyke’s son, when one of the mission’s *Sunbeam* boats was launched in Damariscotta, the president was “there with a poem.”¹¹




Alice M. Peasley of the Maine Seacoast Mission admitted to the biographer that, having invited van Dyke to read some of his stories and speak to a group of fishermen on one of the Maine islands, she





Little Ship Sunbeam



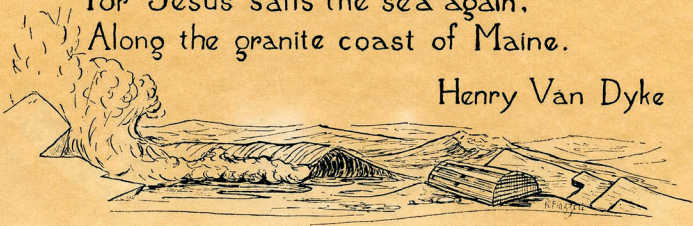
blessing on our "Sunbeam" craft,
Larboard and starboard fore and aft;
May God protect and guide her way
Through rocky reach and isle strewn bay!

Her freight is golden gospel love; 
Her power comes from Heaven above; 
Her chart is right her compass true; 
Her captain Christ His friends her crew.

To lonely folk she brings good cheer; 
Relief to those in pain and fear;
To children something warm and bright;
To those who sit in darkness, light. 

Then let the wind blow high or low,
Serene and brave our boat shall go;
For Jesus sails the sea again,
Along the granite coast of Maine.

Henry Van Dyke



Henry van Dyke, "Little Ship Sunbeam," broadside, printed on the occasion of the launching of *Sunbeam II*, Damariscotta, Maine, August 28, 1926. *Courtesy of the Maine Seacoast Mission*

may have “overdid it a little in reminding them [the islanders] that they were to hear a distinguished American author.” At the end of the meeting, she reported, “Uncle Allie came up to me and said severely: ‘Well, I listened to your great American author and I sat right there and understood every word he said.’”¹²

Elizabeth “Betsey” Pfeiffer (1920–1999), van Dyke’s grandniece, who lived at Seawall Point in Manset, remembered that as a young girl, she considered her great-uncle Henry her “favorite grown-up.” It was van Dyke who opened her eyes to her natural surroundings. “He appreciated everything, and passed on his love of nature to children.”¹³

Often after finishing her chore of bailing out her family’s sailboat in Manset, Betsey rowed by herself to Seal Harbor, taking the inside passage between Bear Island and Northeast Harbor—no mean feat for a ten-year-old girl. Landing the boat in Seal Harbor, she walked up the shore where she was met by her Uncle Henry, who greeted her with open arms, pleased to see his grandniece; he then went inside to phone her parents to report that she had arrived safe and sound. “After tea and cookies with Uncle Henry,” she recalled, “he sailed me back to Manset in *Wanderer*, his Friendship sloop.”¹⁴

Van Dyke frequently went sailing on the waters around Mount Desert Island aboard *The Wanderer*. In describing the island from a sailor’s perspective, he produced some of his most lyric prose. In the following passage, he studied the island’s topography.

You can count all the summits: Newport, and Green, and Pemetic, and Sargent, and Brown, and Dog, and Western. The lesser hills, the Bubbles, Bald Mountain, Flying Mountain, and the rest, detach themselves one after another and stand out from their background of green and gray. How rosy the cliffs of Otter and Seal Harbor glow in the sunlight! How magically the great white flower of foam expands and closes on the sapphire water as the long waves, one by one, pass over the top of the big rock between us and Islesford!¹⁵

Van Dyke’s stays in Maine served as inspiration for his poetry and prose. The poem “Turn o’ the Tide” from the collection *Songs*



Frank E. Schoonover (1877–1972), “She Took the Oars and Rowed Me Slowly around the Shore,” illustration for Henry van Dyke’s “In the Gulls’ Bath-tub” in *Days Off and Other Digressions*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 1907, 35 by 24 inches. *Courtesy of the Brandywine River Museum of Art, gift of S. Hallock du Pont Jr., 1984*

out of Doors (1924) describes the impact of the tides on the boats anchored in Seal Harbor, but also on the sailor gazing upon them.

My heart goes round with the vessels,—
My wild heart, my child heart, in love with
the sea and the land.¹⁶

On several occasions in *Days Off and Other Digressions*, first published in 1907 (a reprint appeared the same year, as well as in 1908, 1910, 1920, 1924 and 1927), van Dyke wrote of the rusticator's life on Mount Desert Island. One essay, "A Holiday in a Vacation," contains this delightful description of the island's social life and makes reference to the then very hot debate concerning motorcars on the island: "There were dinner parties, and tea parties, and garden parties, and sea parties, and luncheon parties, masculine and feminine, and a horse-show at Bar Harbor, and a gymkhana at North East, and dances at all the Harbors, where Minerva met Terpsichore on a friendly footing while Socrates sat out on the veranda with Midas discussing the great automobile question over their cigars."¹⁷

More to van Dyke's liking were the natural beauties of Mount Desert Island. At one point in his essay "Some Remarks on Gulls," he asks, "Were there ever waters so blue, or woods so green, or rocky shores so boldly and variously cut, or mountains so clear in outline and so jewel-like in shifting colors, as these of Mount Desert? Was there ever an air which held a stronger, sweeter cordial, fragrant with blended odours of the forest and the sea, soothing, exhilarating, and life-renewing?"¹⁸

"Some Remarks on Gulls" also includes an informed description of the bird populations of Great and Little Duck islands, some ten miles out to sea from Seal Harbor. On the occasion of a sail to these islands, van Dyke made some very conservation-minded observations concerning the fate of seabirds—observations that, to a certain extent, anticipated the work of ecologists and biologists presently involved with the reestablishment of bird species on Maine islands. At one point, he delivered the following cogent editorial: "It has taken a long time to awaken the American people to the fact that the wild and beautiful creatures of earth and air and sea are a precious part of the common inheritance, and that their needless

and heedless destruction, by pot-hunters or plume-hunters or silly shooters who are not happy unless they are destroying something, is a crime against the commonwealth which must be punished or prevented.”¹⁹

Writing about Great and Little Duck islands, van Dyke noted that the ducks that inspired their name “have been almost, if not quite, extinguished,” adding, “and the herring gulls would probably have gone the same way, but for the exertions of the Audubon Society, which have resulted in the reservation of the islands as a breeding-ground under governmental protection.”²⁰ He described the keeper of the light and the seagulls, Captain Stanley, as an “ardent Audubonite” and shared his detailed account of the island’s ecology.

In an issue of *The Illustrated Outdoor News* from 1906, van Dyke is listed as one of the top ten “greatest living sportsmen.”²¹ He served on the advisory committee for the American Game Protective Association along with John Burroughs, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Ford. While he produced many narratives of outdoor adventures, in short stories and personal essays, he was not a naturalist per se. He pursued themes of religion and nature, no better exemplified than in his famous poem “God of the Open Air.”

An avid angler, van Dyke took pleasure in trying his luck on the rivers of Quebec (including the Restigouche) and the waters of Mount Desert Island.²² He preferred freshwater sport to what he called the “rather childish, but amusing, game of salt-water grab-bag.”²³ The latter pursuit, he reported, might produce any of a wide range of unseemly fish, from a “silly, but nutritious cod” to “a soft and stupid hake from the mud-flats.”²⁴ The author was particularly disdainful of the dogfish, which he likened to “tax notices and assessments; the man who gets one of them gets less than nothing, for they count against the catcher.”²⁵ Little did van Dyke know that the dogfish would become an important species in disease research, prized today by the scientists at the MDI Biological Laboratory.²⁶

“In the Gulls’ Bathtub,” part three of the essay “Some Remarks on Gulls,” tells of a fishing trip van Dyke took one day on Jordan Pond with a companion he referred to as “the Gypsy girl.”²⁷ There is “no tradition or legend of any kind connected to Jordan Pond,” as far as van Dyke could ascertain, aside from the fact that it was

“named for a commonplace lumberman who used to cut timber on its banks.”²⁸ He waxed lyric in limning the pond’s isolated beauty, finding it “as wild, as lovely, as perfect in its lonely charm as if it were consecrated and set apart to the memory of a score of old romances.”²⁹

Van Dyke also provided a description of the Jordan Pond House as it was then, “an ancient farmhouse... extended and piazzaed and made into a rustic place of entertainment.” Here, he wrote, “the fashionable summer-folk of the various harbours come to drink afternoon tea and to eat famous dinners of broiled chicken, baked potatoes, and pop-overs.” He paid tribute to the proprietor’s marketing acumen: “Having won a reputation on pop-overs and chickens, he continues to turn them out with diligence and fidelity, like short-stories of a standard pattern.”³⁰

Van Dyke’s account of the fishing trip on the pond has all the trappings of one of the “piscatorial legends” he mentioned having been told by the Jordan Pond House’s unnamed owner. In the course of the afternoon, the distinguished angler and his Gypsy companion lost a prized trolling rod to a particularly energetic fish. A little later, they hooked onto a “noble ouananiche,” which they played for nearly three-quarters of an hour before landing. What did they catch? In the proud fisherman’s words, “the prettiest landlocked salmon that I ever saw, plump, round, perfectly shaped and coloured, and just six and a half pound in weight, the record fish of Jordan Pond!”³¹

One of the distinct pleasures of angling is the opportunity it affords to take in one’s surroundings. Waiting for a bite permits the fisherman to consider the landscape, its visual and aural details. From the following passage, we sense the bliss van Dyke experienced in this aspect of the sport and his love of Mount Desert Island:

Round the round the shore [the Gypsy] rows, past the points of broken rocks, underneath the rugged bluffs, skirting all the shelving bays. Faintly falls the evening breeze, and behind the western ridge of Jordan Mountain suddenly the sun drops down Creeping up the rosy side of Pemetic, see old Jordan’s silhouette sketched in shadow by the sun. Hark, was that a coaching horn, sounding up from Wildwood Road? There’s the whistle of the boat

coming round the point at Seal. How it sinks into silence, fading gradually away. Twilight settles slowly down, all around the wooden shore, and across the opal lake—.³²

Van Dyke found spiritual sustenance on the coast of Maine, drinking in the scenic beauty that has changed little since his day, thanks to the establishment of Acadia National Park. We, in turn, share in his vision, delight, and concern, and continue to work for the preservation of what he so aptly called the “common inheritance.”

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¹ Henry van Dyke, *Days Off and Other Digressions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 252.

² Tertius van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 427–433.

³ Grace B. Sherrer, “Literature in a Changing World,” *English Journal* 30, no. 8 (October 1941): 634.

⁴ The name, from Latin, conjures idyllic woodland by the sea. In several instances, a piece of printed writing carries the legend “Sylvanora” and the date, as with “Sketches of Quebec,” completed in Seal Harbor on July 10, 1918.

⁵ Esther Brock Bird, “The Literary Coast of Maine: Where Authors Come to Summer,” *Lewiston Journal*, September 5, 1925.

⁶ *Ibid.* Bird also visited the homes of authors William Dean Howells, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Arthur Train, and many other authors of the day.

⁷ *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, November 25, 1927, 255.

⁸ Prefatory note to *Days Off and Other Digressions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927).

⁹ “Dr. Van Dyke to Preach,” notice of appearance at the Congregational Church in Bar Harbor, *Lewiston Daily Sun*, August 6, 1927. “For years Van Dyke has spent his summers at Seal Harbor and each summer he gives a Sunday to the church there.”

¹⁰ Tertius van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke: A Biography*, 385.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 384. That poem was “Little Ship Sunbeam,” which ends with the lines: “Then let the wind blow high or low./Serene and brave our boat shall go;/For Jesus sails the sea again,/Along the granite coast of Maine.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 242. Alice Peasley played a major role in developing a cottage industry in hooked rugs among Downeast women through the Maine Seacoast Mission. See Judith Burger-Gossart, *Sadie’s Winter Dreams: Fishermen’s Wives & Maine Sea Coast Mission Hooked Rugs 1923–1938* (Rockland, ME: Maine Authors Publishing, 2015).

¹³ The author spoke to, and corresponded with, Betsy Pfeiffer about her uncle in the fall of 1993. Pfeiffer died in May 1999. In the October 1999 newsletter of the Bullseye Association, she is remembered as an avid sailor, “a teacher all her life, and an active member, treasurer, then secretary, then commodore of the Southwest Harbor Fleet.”

¹⁴ “We saw his Friendship fishing sloop, the ‘Wanderer,’ and he declared that catching cod, mackerel, haddock, etc. was not a sport.” Bird, “The Literary Coast of Maine.”

¹⁵ Henry van Dyke, *Days Off and Other Digressions*, 252–253.

¹⁶ The poem carries the legend “Seal Harbour, August 12, 1911.” Henry van Dyke, *Songs out of Doors* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922).

¹⁷ Henry van Dyke, *Days Off and Other Digressions*, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Tertius van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke: A Biography*, 299.

²² My grandfather, Carl Otto Kretzschmar von Kienbusch (1884–1976), was a renowned angler and collector of angling literature. His collection, now at Princeton University, includes letters from van Dyke as well as many of his writings related to fishing and the outdoors.

²³ Henry van Dyke, *Days Off and Other Digressions*, 250.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁶ “The compound identified from the dogfish . . . helps control part of the body’s immune response, and has already been shown to have twice the growth and cell activity of current regeneration,” Lori Valigra, “Healing Thyself,” *Mainebiz*, March 4, 2013, <http://www.mainebiz.biz/article/20130304/currentedition/302289998>.

²⁷ One assumes this female figure was the author’s wife, Ellen, who was a lifelong fishing and camping companion. He often referred to her “my Lady Greygown.” Tertius van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke: A Biography*, 92.

²⁸ Henry van Dyke, *Days Off and Other Digressions*, 264.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 265.

³¹ Ibid., 270. See also Paul Schullery, “Hopes for the Hooks and Bullet Press,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1985. Van Dyke’s contributions to angling literature are duly noted in this eloquent overview of the subject.

³² Ibid., 267–268.