



Eleanor Mayo and Ruth Moore on the deck of the *Mauretania*, undated. Courtesy of Sven Davisson

A Literary Refuge: Ruth Moore and Eleanor Mayo

Sven Davisson

Just about anyone who has heard of Ruth Moore knows she was a fisherman's daughter. Publishers, publicists, and feature writers rarely let one forget it. "The media get stuck," Ruth explained, "stuck in place. I'd just as soon be a fisherman's daughter as not, but . . ." Not desiring to buck tradition, I will begin where one would expect—with Gotts Island, the granite outcrop two miles off Maine's Down East coast. Ruth was born in 1903, a direct descendent of the island's original eighteenth-century settlers. In addition to fishing, her father ran the island post office and store and with her brother Harve maintained a fishing weir.

The first Moore to come to this particular section of coast was Samuel, a descendent of William Moore who made the crossing from England early in the seventeenth century and settled in southern New Hampshire. Samuel moved from North Yarmouth in what is now York County, Maine in the early 1760s and was lost at sea in 1790. A testament to the dangers of earning a living from the open ocean, in 1805 Samuel's oldest son Welch also died at sea. Welch's son and Samuel's grandson, Philip Moore, married Asenath Gott, the junior Daniel Gott's granddaughter, and by the census of 1840, the two had established a home on Gotts Island. Philip's son Enoch remained on the island, as did, in turn, his son Philip, Ruth's father.

Ruth was born into and grew up during a time of great transition. Like most island communities along the Maine coast, life had gone virtually unchanged for the century or more of settlement. With the development of public transportation in the form of coastal steamers that traveled routes along the New England coast during the latter part of the nineteenth century, well-off families from the cities began to explore what they saw as untouched nature. By the turn of the century, these "rusticators" had made their way to Bar Harbor and established there a thriving enclave of summer "cottages" and grand hotels. A few of these summer people ventured into areas outlying the established Mount Desert Island communities of Bar Harbor, Seal Harbor, and Northeast Harbor.

Gotts Island was not isolated from the influx of select families. Enoch Moore, Ruth's grandfather, was the first on the island to take in boarders, as in turn did Ruth's parents. By the first years of the twentieth century, summer

people were building cottages along the island's shore. Among this first wave of visitors were Charles and Elizabeth Ovington, owners of the successful stores bearing their name, and Elizabeth Peterson, whose father had been the publisher of the popular women's magazine *Peterson's*. As described in Ruth's story "The Ladies from Philadelphia," which originally appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1945, this first influx of visitors, always a little apart due to economic and cultural disparity, yet still a part of a now heterogenous village, brought a new facet to island life. The "regulars"—Ruth's word—became familiar in their regularity and did not disrupt village life the way later arrivals would. They maintained a permanent presence on the island through their cottages and interacted regularly with other island residents. This was especially true of the Moore family, as Philip Moore ran the local post office and provisioners, and took in borders.

The established summer families developed a symbiotic relationship with the island villagers, and there can be little doubt that Ruth's exposure to these people from away had a lasting influence on her. The Ovingtons donated more than a hundred books to form the island library, housed in the basement of the Methodist church. Ruth admitted to tearing through all fifteen volumes of the complete works of Robert Louis Stevenson in a week. In "The Lonely of Heart" Ruth recalled how Miss Peterson showed visiting children her *Nature Encyclopedia* and "tried to get us interested in knowing the names of birds and grasses and mushrooms." The shelves that wallpaper Ruth's house still contain numerous field guides to every conceivable plant and creature.

Ruth's friendship with the Ovingtons continued even after she moved away. She visited them in New York in 1924 and 1925 and the following year went to work for Charles' sister Mary as a private secretary, moving into her apartment in New York City. Mary White Ovington, along with William English Walling, Charles Edward Russell, Henry Moskowitz, and Oswald Villard, founded the NAACP in 1909. The year Ruth worked for her, Ovington was writing her important book *Portraits in Color* and caring for her elderly mother. At the time, Miss Ovington wrote to a friend, "I have an old friend helping me with my mother, and I am putting up a prayer that she may stay. She is old in friendship, but young in years."¹ After spending a year working for Ovington, Ruth accepted a position in the publicity department of the YMCA, where she remained until 1929. In that year she took a six-month position as Assistant Campaign Manager for the NAACP—working directly for James Weldon Johnson, author of *God's Trombones* and head of the organization until he took a leave of absence at the end of September 1929.

In the summer of 1930 Ruth worked as a special investigator for the NAACP—a job that entailed extensive traveling through the southern states. During her investigation, Ruth unearthed information to free two black youths wrongly accused of murdering a white boy. Reflecting back in a 1947 interview, she commented, “I was anything but a trained detective, and I suppose I didn’t keep my investigations very secret. People were nasty and I was finally ordered to leave town.”² That same summer, she conducted a second murder investigation in Catskill, New York, but under “private auspices,” not the NAACP.³

Ruth returned to Maine in the fall of 1930 to enroll in the Master’s program at the University of Maine but returned to New York in 1932, moving into an apartment at 23 Waverly Place in Greenwich Village. She quickly found a job as personal secretary to Dr. John Haynes Holmes, an important liberal Unitarian minister, playwright, and orator. He was also a friend of Mary White Ovington and an early supporter of the NAACP. Ruth remained with Dr. Holmes until 1935 when the novelist Alice Tisdale Hobart hired her as a personal assistant. She moved with the Hobarts first to their home outside of Washington, D.C. and then to their house near Berkeley, California. In addition to editing manuscripts and assisting in publicity for Mrs. Hobart’s work, Ruth took over management of a farm the Hobarts purchased in Martinez, California. The farm consisted of a half-acre of gardens and eighteen acres of fruit and nut trees, as well as a large vineyard. One can readily see from Ruth’s letters of that time how difficult the work was and how much she enjoyed it.

During a rare visit home to Maine in the summer of 1940, her sister Esther, a local schoolteacher, introduced Ruth to one of her former students, Eleanor Mayo. Eleanor displayed an interest in writing and had just returned from an admittedly unsuccessful year at business school. “The last time I went to California—I used to come home a month in the summer—Esther, my sister, who was teaching school told me about this youngster there,” Ruth recalled in 1988. “So when Eleanor was 19, she went with me to California to go to the University of California, because her family couldn’t afford to send her to the University of Maine or around here. So I asked her if she wanted to and she said ‘Yes she did.’ So we became great friends. We lived in California for a while and then she came back with me. We lived together for something like forty years. Yes, she was a wonderful companion, a wonderful friend.”⁴

Mrs. Hobart’s health had been declining for years; Ruth described how the woman was often confined to lying flat on her bed and writing on a pad

suspended over her. Ruth realized that she did not want to become trapped in California if her employer should die or become further incapacitated. This, coupled with the illness of her own mother back East, helped Ruth make the decision to leave California in 1941. Ruth and Eleanor spent time with Ruth's mother until her health improved, and then embarked on a Thoreau-inspired "year in the woods" at the then vacant family home on Gotts Island. Ruth often recounted later on that her journal of the retreat had only one entry on the first page: "Damn that Thoreau!"

The two women returned soon after to New York, where Ruth answered a blind ad in *The New York Times*. The job turned out to be with *The Reader's Digest* and she began work there answering letters. Within a couple of years, she became an associate editor assisting in the condensing of books—the fastest such promotion in the magazine's history. She credited the condensing process of "getting the inside out of a book" as being a "great deal of help with my writing." During this time Ruth and Eleanor were both writing; Ruth described it as "pick-up work," fitting it into evenings and weekends. Ruth's first novel *The Weir* was published by William Morrow & Co. in 1943 and Eleanor's debut *Turn Home* was published by Morrow in 1945. In its review, *The New York Times* called *The Weir* "a notable first novel" and commented that "Miss Moore builds up her story with a capable hand." The reviewer concluded, "It has atmosphere, it has characterization and it tells a rugged, sea-swept tale."⁵ Two years later the *Times'* review of *Turn Home* described that novel as having "a punch and cocksureness that command respect and interest."⁶ Ruth published numerous stories in the late 1930s and early '40s. Her work appeared in such journals as *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The New Yorker*, and *Harper's Bazaar*.

The film rights to Ruth's second novel, *Spoonhandle*, were sold to Twentieth Century Fox, which turned the novel into the film *Deep Waters*, released in 1948. The sale of *Spoonhandle* to Hollywood gave the couple the financial means to realize their dream of moving back to Maine, and in 1947 Ruth and Eleanor purchased twenty-three acres of shorefront property in Tremont, the town of which Bass Harbor and Gotts Island are a part. With the help of Eleanor's father Fred Mayo, a cabinetmaker, they set about building their home. Ruth remarked that when one is an author the last thing anyone wants to ask you about is writing. In line with this observation, after their return to Maine, the press, both local and national, took a particular interest in the authors' building project. The coverage, complete with photographs of the two

looking at plans and hammering shingles, reached such proportions that Ruth remarked, amusedly, in the piece included here, that she feared they would go down in history not as writers, but as “lady carpenters.”

The *New York Herald Tribune* included in its “Turns With a Bookworm” column a humorous story related by Ruth involving the building of their home:

Miss Moore spent the summer hoping for electric power to arrive. . . . Several men came and dug a posthole one day and went away. . . . Many days later they returned with a pole and laid it down beside the hole and went away. . . . Meantime Miss Moore’s cat killed a sizable snake, and she thoughtfully draped the remains around the pole. . . . Thereafter five large, able-bodied men came to set the pole in the hole; when they saw the snake they fell back to a strategic position, uttering yells of alarm. . . . Miss Moore explained to them gently that the snake had intended to attack them, but had starved to death waiting. . . . Rural electrification was completed with unwonted speed. . . .⁷

Ruth and Eleanor built their house despite the scarcity of wood and the looming potential doom of the Bar Harbor fire of 1947 coloring the sky to the east. “There were afternoons, through that dry, sparkling October when building a house seemed a gesture of futility. The sound of the hammers would stop, one by one, and we would stand looking at the sky in the east, where the big, black column of smoke each day grew blacker and bigger,” Ruth recalled. For lumber they “scoured the countryside. Part of it was new. Part of it came from an old CCC camp, torn down near Eagle Lake. Some of it we beachcombed, around the shores. The uprights over our front windows are made of a tapered spar, a sloop’s boom. Somewhere in the planking is the seat of a lifeboat. We almost cried the day we found cast up on one of the offshore islands, a brand-new two-by-eight, 20 feet long, of Oregon spruce, lost from some ship’s deckload. We dragged it a mile and a half across the island, through blowdowns, and boated it home to make thresholds for our doors.”⁸

There was, however, a degree of tension surrounding Ruth and Eleanor's return to Maine. The uneasiness did not stem from the fact that they were two women building a home together. Companion marriages, after all, were not limited to Boston; the Maine coast had a quiet tradition of "spinster sisters" living together: Sarah Orne Jewett and Anne Fields in South Berwick; Jane Addams and Elizabeth Burke, Edith Hamilton and Doris Fielding Reid, both couples maintaining summer homes on Mount Desert Island. The undercurrent of tension that existed following their return rather stemmed from the fact that they had gone away. Locals have always had a natural suspicion of outsiders. The suspicion was compounded when the outsiders were also local. Ruth and Eleanor had gone away and got themselves an education, which by local standards meant they were "putting on airs." Ruth poignantly describes this mutual apprehension in her story "A Soldier Shows His Medal." She points to the local admonition, "born in the flesh and bred in the bone": *Don't put yourself forward. It's kind of cheap.* Even as she placed herself within the story, she maintained the reticence, the first-person narrator reflecting how she had "published a poem in a little magazine, dead now these many years, both poem and magazine forgotten. It wasn't much—not like the things of war—but I remember how I wanted people to know." The story's narrator never does mention her poem to anyone; the voices of her neighbors speak in her head, always staying her: "Guess she thinks she's something, bragging about her writing being printed, somewheres to the west-ard."

The Maine Ruth and Eleanor returned to in 1947 was drastically different from the one that Ruth had left in 1921 to attend New York State Teachers College (now SUNY, Albany). Since the turn of the century, the fishing industry and the communities with which it was intertwined had undergone dramatic changes. Island villages had all but disappeared by the end of the 1920s. The gas engine eroded the significant advantage of living close to the fishing grounds. The young, who boarded on the mainland so that they could attend high school, felt little pull to return to the islands upon which they grew up. Charles B. McLane, author of *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast*, notes "The Great Gott community held together longer than similar island communities in the area."⁹ But after several important houses and community buildings burned in successive fires of 1927 and 1930, the exodus from Gott's began. When Ruth's parents, Philip and Lavina Moore, left in the early 1930s, closing the post office and store, the island's fate was sealed.

Another significant factor in the changing coastal economy of the first half of the twentieth century was the increasing trade in shoreline property. Choice waterfront lots became more valuable as salable parcels than as bases for fishing. The disparity between those buying and those selling the land meant that the local people were, more often than not, taken advantage of. Ruth often told how her grandfather had warned against this process: “If you sell your land for money, what do you have when you’ve spent the money? Nothing.” Ruth, who minored in economics at Albany, had a better comprehension of what was going on than most. Her work with the NAACP, no doubt, contributed significantly to broadening her understanding of the process of economic pillage directed against a disadvantaged people. It’s no coincidence that she included a black family among those taken advantage of in *Spoonhandle*. Casting their lot for the quick dollar meant that the local fishing community had sold *en masse* their connection to their livelihood—the coastal meeting of land and sea. This process occurred all along the New England coast. It is an issue the Maine legislature is grappling with to this day.



Ruth Moore and Eleanor Mayo, Bass Harbor, 1947. *Courtesy of Sven Davison*

Ruth and Eleanor's Tremont house remained the center of their activities for forty years. Ruth wrote twelve more novels and three books of poetry there. Eleanor completed six books, four published and two still in manuscript. The house and its outlying buildings are a testament to the two's diverse interests: antique glass bottles, Native American artifacts, old maps, fossils, and geologic specimens clutter every available inch. Whole rooms are dedicated to displays of collections organized and labeled, forming a home museum. The house was also the focus of social gatherings with their literary friends. They maintained close friendships with other female couples along the Maine coast and literary, publishing-world friends would visit from New York in the summers. Artist Chenoweth Hall and her partner Miriam Coldwell, herself an author, visited often. Reminiscing years later, Coldwell recalled:

We visited back and forth between Prospect Harbor and Bass Harbor (McKinley then) very often, getting splendidly oiled and argumentative on before dinner drinks, and gradually sobering with a big dinner before the fifty mile drive home. Those were years when we were all writing, Chenoweth was painting and carving wood and stone, and middle and old age were as far removed as the next century.¹⁰

The two gardened extensively—the skills Ruth learned while managing the Hobarts' Martinez ranch showing through in an eclectic apple orchard outside her bedroom window and an arbor of grapes outside Eleanor's. They treasured their privacy—even resorting to having their guesthouse towed away in an attempt to discourage visitors. They constructed a secluded shore-side camp that Ruth could escape to and write undisturbed. Soon enough they settled back, once again becoming enduring fixtures in the fabric of village life. At the annual town meeting held in March of 1950, Eleanor was elected “second selectman, assessor and overseer of the poor.” She was the first woman ever elected to serve on Tremont's Board of Selectmen.¹¹ She continued to serve the town in one capacity or another until the late 1970s.

Ruth credited the longevity of their relationship to adhering to a strict policy by which “nobody meddled.” Eleanor was a skilled editor and read Ruth's manuscripts before anyone else; their creativity was mutually intertwined. When Eleanor succumbed to a brain tumor in 1981, the event devastated

Ruth. Her voice still broke, years later, describing it: “My friend who lived with me for some forty years, she was a great deal younger than I, died in 1981 and she had cancer and for the last three years of her life I took care of her here, without sending her away to the hospital until she had to go. When she died I was exhausted. I didn’t feel like writing or doing anything for a very long time.”¹² In letters written after Eleanor’s death, Ruth described herself as having “lost her guts.” She expressly credited the poet Gary Lawless with reenergizing her to begin writing again. After unsuccessful attempts to interest other Maine publishers in reissuing Ruth’s work, Lawless contacted her about doing the job himself through his Blackberry Books imprint. She said sure, and so began a continuing project of republishing her works. Without Lawless’s intervention, it is likely that much of the poetry in the posthumously released collection *The Tired Apple Tree* would never have been written.

Ruth noted the irony that the revival of her books came at the time of, and was due in no small part to, the upsurge in interest in Maine regional writing in general—known as the Maine Renaissance. Driven by the national attention focused on Carolyn Chute and her novel *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, there was a marked increase of interest in Maine writing during the 1980s. Amidst all the attention swirling around Ms. Chute, a few voices spoke up reminding everyone that there was a writer who had “outdone the beans” and done it almost a half-century before. It was with this that Ruth Moore was elevated to her rightful place as the “grandmother” of Maine letters.



Ruth Moore, Bass Harbor, undated. *Photo by Eleanor Mayo, Courtesy of Sven Davisson*

Throughout her career, Ruth

resisted the “regional” label. In conversation, she recalled how she would go after Thayer Hobson, her publisher, for casting her as a regional author. It was certainly good marketing at the time—lending authenticity and novelty, in no small part, in an attempt to increase sales. But with good reason, she aggressively resisted the label. In a letter to Sandy Phippen from August 1980, she said that “regional” was one of only two words she considered obscene, the other being “interview.” Maine, she argued, “is a microcosm of everywhere else.”¹³ Maine is in its way a chimera—an affluent suburb of Boston in the south, Appalachian poverty in the north, and an uncomfortable mix of resort and commercial fishery along the coast. Ruth was adept at capturing the incongruities and tensions of Maine in a way that rings as true today as it did when she wrote of them. Being known as a regional writer comes with its own particular costs. Lost in all this talk of Maine writing is the fact that Ruth was a significant player on the national literary stage. *Spoonhandle* sold over a million copies in its day, was a national bestseller, and was one of the books the whole nation was reading in 1946.¹⁴

The New York Times accurately described Ruth as “New England’s only answer to Faulkner.” She was a regional writer only in the sense that one could call Faulkner regional, in that he wrote of his “postage stamp of soil.” Both writers had the gift of capturing the universal in the local. John Gould, in his *Times* review of *Candlemas Bay*, observed, “To deal in human universals, making the individual everybody, yet keeping him a sacred self is a gift most writers lack.”¹⁵ A novel about New York City or Chicago is ever and always about New York City or Chicago, respectively, while a novel set on a Maine island or in Jefferson, Mississippi, in adept hands, could be about any place in the world. *The New York Times* said of Ruth: “It is doubtful if any American writer has ever done a better job of communicating a people, their talk, their thoughts, their geography, and their way of life.” The secret that underlies her success at capturing a people and their locale was her solid, steadfast adherence to a basic philosophy: “The only thing I really try to do is not to tell a lie about a place,” she stated. “If I’m describing something, I know what I’m describing. I just tell the truth about what there is.”¹⁶

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in email to the author from Carolyn Wedin, March 29, 2004.
- ² Richard Hallet, "Spoonhandle Comes Back to Maine: Ruth Moore to Watch Filming of Story," *Portland Sunday Telegram*, October 5, 1947.
- ³ Resume (undated, c. 1942), Maine Women Writers Archive, University of New England.
- ⁴ Interview by Betsy Graves, 1988 (audiotape, private collection).
- ⁵ Rose Feld, "A Sea-Swept Tale," *The New York Times*, February 28, 1943.
- ⁶ Beatrice Sherman, "Other Items On the Fiction List," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1945.
- ⁷ Isabel M. Peterson, "Turns With a Bookworm," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 21, 1948.
- ⁸ Ruth Moore, "First Christmas In Our New House," *Boston Sunday Post*, December 1963.
- ⁹ Charles B. McLane, *Islands of the Mid-Maine Coast, Volume II: Mount Desert to Machias Bay* (Woolwich: Kennebec River Press, 1984), 423.
- ¹⁰ *High Clouds Soaring Storms Driving Low: The Letters of Ruth Moore*, ed. Sanford Phippen (Nobleboro: Blackberry Books, 1993), 452.
- ¹¹ Eleanor Newman, "Successful Tremont Woman Novelist Combines Her Writing Career with Carpentry and Selectman Position," *Bangor Daily News*, February 23, 1951.
- ¹² Interview by Betsy Graves.
- ¹³ *High Clouds Soaring Storms*, ed. Sanford Phippen, 371.
- ¹⁴ "What America Is Reading," *New York Herald Tribune*, 1946.
- ¹⁵ John Gould, "Salty Down-Easters," review of *Candlemas Bay*, by Ruth Moore, *The New York Times*, April 1, 1951.
- ¹⁶ Interview by Betsy Graves.