



Elinor Wylie (1885-1928), studio portrait, ca. 1914, by Debenham and Gould Studio, Bournemouth, England. *Courtesy of the Berg Collection, New York Public Library*

Elinor Wylie's Mount Desert Island Retreat

Carl Little

The Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) once voiced a desire to withdraw from the world with two young girls, four or five years old, whom he would watch over as if he were their father. In some sequestered spot, he would direct their education and observe the “impressions of the world . . . upon the mind when it has been veiled from human prejudice.”¹

It was Elinor Wylie (1885-1928), acclaimed writer and an authority on Shelley's life and writings, who conducted the poet's unusual social experiment in a short story published in the September 1927 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*.² The “sequestered spot” she chose for the poet and his pupils? Bar Island in the mouth of Somes Harbor. Wylie's fanciful tale, titled “A Birthday Cake for Lionel,” opens this way: “It was the fourth of August in the year 1832, and upon the round piney islet which lies at the head of Somes' Sound two little girls were engaged in icing a birthday cake.”³ Artemis and Jezebel are making the cake for forty-year-old Lionel Anon, aka Percy Bysshe Shelley, who is away that day “fishing the deep waters past Little Cranberry”—a long row even for the most hale of Romantic poets.⁴

How did Wylie come to choose Bar Island as the setting for her story? The writer was intimately familiar with Mount Desert Island and, more specifically, Somesville.

Born Elinor Morton Hoyt in Somerville, New Jersey, on September 7, 1885, Wylie spent every summer with her family on Mount Desert Island from age four until well into her teens. “The American summer is at its best there,” her mother, Anne Morton Hoyt, wrote.⁵

On the family's first Maine sojourn, in 1889, they sailed overnight from Boston to Bar Harbor, where they stayed in a small cottage called the Birch Tree Inn “presided over by Captain Rodick and his red setter.”⁶ It was a pleasant visit marred only by a rough voyage home, which led the Hoyt family to take the train to the Mount Desert Ferry every summer thereafter.

The Hoyts eventually moved to Asticou in Northeast Harbor, spending ten summers there. As Nancy Hoyt recalled in her biography of her sister, the family “usually occupied a number of rooms in a very simple wooden hotel at the end of North-East Harbor on that isle of the Hesperides, Mount Desert.”

During this “idyllic girlhood,” the budding writer “usually carried a book or painting things and sought out her favorite trails and mountain tops.” The laundry bills of that era, Hoyt noted, “must have been terrific, for Elinor and her . . . friends wore long white linen sport skirts which swept the grassy paths and mud trails and were considered quite short because they were cut a half-inch off the ground.”⁷

Wylie’s other biographer Stanley Olson adds to this picture of peaceful respite: “Summer was passed in the standard occupations—walking, reading, sailing, rowing, and bathing.” He cites the first poem Wylie ever wrote, penned during a stay at Asticou. Already under the influence of Shelley, whose poem “To a Skylark” she had read in her Third Reader at age seven, the youthful poet painted a romantic image of her surroundings, perhaps looking out on Northeast Harbor:

*Slowly the silver crescent rose
O'er meadow, hill & dale,
It lit the ocean's broad expanse
And shone upon a sail.*⁸

At twenty, Wylie became involved with a “tall, fair young man.” The romance, Hoyt recounted, was “conducted on technically classic lines from the rowboat above the cold emerald eel grass of North-East Harbor, to the . . . conservatory with pink and striped curtains in Washington, D.C.”⁹ When the affair ended, Elinor, on the rebound, married Philip Simmons Hichborn II, a sportsman and a socialite, in December 1906. She gave birth to her only child, Philip Hichborn III, in September of the following year. The young family spent summers in Maine, but the marriage was not a happy one. Hichborn was prone to outbursts, and motherhood did not particularly suit Elinor. Casting about for a way out, she found comfort in Horace Wylie, a Washington, D.C. acquaintance, a lawyer, a millionaire—and a married man sixteen years Elinor’s senior.

In December 1910, Elinor left her husband and three-year-old son to elope with Horace to England—one of the most scandalous affairs in the history of American letters. Hoyt turned to astronomical events to describe its impact: “Hailey’s comet, arriving once every eighty years, could not have aroused more dumfounded amazement and utterly shocked horror . . . than Elinor’s elopement with Horace Wylie when she was twenty-four.” This brash

act, which “tremendously . . . disturbed three or four families and, temporarily, several cities,” shook “the little world” in which the family lived and “frightened [them] by the courage and decision of such clear-cut defiance.”¹⁰ Literary scholar Judith Farr wrote, “Their obsession with each other was deplored by their families and even by President William Howard Taft, who attempted to find and separate them.”¹¹

The couple’s life abroad, as Wylie’s sister recalled, was “as inviolate as if it had been inside a crystal ball.”¹² Indeed, the Wylies assumed the fictitious name Waring while in England and did not officially marry until 1916, after Elinor’s first husband had committed suicide and Horace’s divorce from his wife Katherine was finalized. They were married by a Justice of the Peace on August 7 in Boston.¹³

With World War I looming, the Wylies had returned stateside that year. They first rented an apartment in the Fenway in Boston, “far from the center of things,” then traveled to New York City (where they stayed with Helen de Selding Melcher, a friend from Asticou), Washington, D.C., and finally Augusta, Georgia, where they spent the winter.¹⁴

When summer rolled around again, the couple, still avoiding society, retreated to Mount Desert Island. At first they lodged with Wylie’s mother in Bar Harbor, but then moved to Somesville where they rented Captain Somes’s cottage.¹⁵ Here is Hoyt’s portrait of the village: “Somesville is a sprinkling of Neo-Greek cottages, very Palladian, with a small classic church along a road which wanders beside the fjord-like Somes Sound.” She offered a summary history: “A band of settlers from Massachusetts, equipped with a Bible and a book of Greek architecture, had settled there more than a hundred years ago.” And she resorted to hyperbole to describe its charms:

The ridiculous, mature beauty of the spot, paralleled only by Como, Maggiore, Capri or Tahoe, with the purple-blue mountains rising straight out of the blue sea, has a classic precision.¹⁶

The cottage they settled in featured “reddish-brown inlays of mahogany paneled in the walls, made from wood the [sea] captain had brought back from the West Indies in his clipper ship.” A long “butter-colored” dining room had an enormous fireplace with a “little oven at the side built into the bricks,

the kind . . . one still sees in places like Mount Vernon.” Wylie used it to store books, handkerchiefs “or manuscript poems.”¹⁷

According to Hoyt, Somesville had been among the poet’s favorite resorts as a girl. She had made excursions to the Somes House, “one of those wooden, ramshackle buildings which in northern New England pretend to be hotels.”¹⁸ The establishment was renowned for its popovers and crab-apple jelly.

Hoyt surmised that Elinor chose Somesville because of her familiarity with it; she felt comfortable wandering along with a book in her arm or taking a picnic with her husband “on some upland pasture overlooking the sea.” Wylie also reunited with her son, Philip, who was eleven.¹⁹ Olson described young Philip as a “walking disaster area.” The day he arrived at Elinor’s mother’s house he broke the player piano. “He later went on to dislocate a water pump in the forest and nearly ruin the car.”²⁰

Instead of returning to Boston in the fall, the Wylies chose to stay on the island. They closed the cottage in Somesville and rented a “warm little apartment over a grocery store in Bar Harbor” where they stayed until January.²¹ The couple would return the next several summers; in 1919 they once more stayed into the winter “again for reasons of economy.”²²

Wylie’s time on Mount Desert Island corresponded with her flowering as a writer. The verse that came out of her Maine experiences would help establish her as one of the most important poets of her generation. Hoyt identified four lyrics written in Bar Harbor: “Velvet Shoes,” “Sea Lullaby,” “Winter Sleep,” and “Fire and Sleet and Candlelight.” All four poems evoke the off-season. “Winter Sleep” opens with images of intense chill:

*When against earth a wooden heel
Clicks as loud as stone and steel,
When snow turns flour instead of flakes,
And frost bakes clay as fire bakes.*

The poet goes on to express ambivalence about the season. While longing “to be quit of the cruel cold,” she also does not wish to join the birds migrating to warmer climes: “It’s not with them that I’d love to be,/ But under the roots of the balsam tree.”²³ Some observers have tied the “cool aloofness” of this and other verse of that period to Wylie’s suffering her third miscarriage. Paradoxically, writes Evelyn Helmick Hively in her *A Private Madness: The Genius of Elinor Wylie*, this “emotional blow brought a sustained bout of creativity.”²⁴



Elinor Wylie, portrait photograph, 1922. *Carl Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.* Wylie inscribed this photo to her friend the critic, novelist, and photographer Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964): "Carl from Elinor, For God's sake, look at the hands!"

“Velvet Shoes,” among Wylie’s most anthologized poems, brings to mind Bar Harbor in mid-winter: “We shall walk through the still town/ In a windless peace.” The image of “velvet shoes” heightens the sense of a fresh snowfall, but its “deeper theme,” as Judith Farr has noted, “is whiteness itself with its synaesthetic correlative, silence.”²⁵

The poem “Sea Lullaby” employs anthropomorphism to describe its subject, that “treacherous smiler” that takes one unawares: “The sea creeps to pillage,/ She leaps on her prey;/ A child of the village/ Was murdered today.” Wylie paints a vivid scene of a mad sea that chokes the boy and beats him “to death, for a joke.” With its lullaby-like language, the final stanza has an eerie cast:

*Now in silence she lingers
Beside him all night
To wash her long fingers
In silvery light.*²⁶

“Fire and Sleet and Candlelight” borrows its title from the Lyke-Wake Dirge, an early English song that tells of the soul’s travel after death. With its clipped, compact stanzas, the lyric offers a grim vision of the end of days where the wind “scatters/ Tears upon dust” and “Your soul’s in tatters/ Where the spears thrust.”

The verse brings to mind a “disturbing” element of Wylie’s life in Bar Harbor as reported by biographer Olson: during their first winter there “the islanders took against her.” Responding to what the newspapers had said about Elinor’s scandalous elopement, “Shopkeepers boycotted her, and she could buy no food. People began to turn away from her in the street. [The Wylies] were ignored in the worst way possible.”²⁷

The only Wylie poem to make direct mention of Maine is the remarkable “Atavism,” which opens with the admission:

*I always was afraid of Some’s Pond:
Not the little pond, by which the willow stands,
Where laughing boys catch alewives in their hands
In brown, bright shallows; but the one beyond.*

The speaker’s fear derives from imagining the experiences of the early New England colonists, when settlers “endured this dread” of being stalked by

“[s]ome strange thing [that] tracks us, turning where we turn.” Reverting to her Puritan forebears, Wylie channels their apprehension of the wild. The poem ends with a macabre vision:

*Look! Where the lily-stems are showing red
A silent paddle moves below the water,
A sliding shape has stirred them like a breath;
Tall plumes surmount a painted mask of death.*²⁸

Hively notes that Wylie expressed her pride in her New England background in other poems. In “Wild Peaches,” she writes, Wylie’s “preference of the northern landscape becomes more than mere caprice and rises to recognition of mortality in the seasons and in human life.” Hively cites these lines:

*There’s something in my very blood that owns
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,
A thread of water, churned to milky spate
Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.*²⁹

“Atavism,” “Velvet Shoes” and “Fire and Sleet and Candlelight” were among a group of Wylie’s poems accepted for publication in *Poetry* magazine by its renowned editor Harriet Monroe in 1920. They later appeared in Wylie’s first full-length collection of verse, *Nets to Catch the Wind*, published by Harcourt Brace in 1921. When Edna St. Vincent Millay reviewed the book, she picked out “Atavism” and “Wild Peaches” as among the best verses.³⁰ In some ways “Atavism” has a similar feel to Millay’s best-known Maine poem, the so-called “Matinicus Sonnet.” *Nets to Catch the Wind* won the Julia Ellsworth Ford prize for the best collection of poems published in 1921.³¹

The marriage to Horace Wylie came to an end in 1921. By then, Elinor had begun a relationship with William Rose Benét (1886-1950), critic, poet, editor, and a central figure in the New York literary scene who helped further her career. They married in 1923, but separated later on. Benét founded *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1924 and won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1942.

After *Nets to Catch the Wind*, Wylie published three more verse collections and four novels—two of them, *The Orphan Angel* (1926) and *Mr. Hodge and Mr. Hazard* (1928), inspired by her passion for Shelley.³² On Sunday, December

16, 1928, while staying at Benét's home on West 9th Street in New York City, she suffered a stroke and died. As her husband recounted, she came walking toward him, stopped suddenly, said quietly "Is that all it is?" and toppled to the floor. She was forty-three.

Wylie composed the four-line "Sea-Blue Eyes" in Somesville in 1919. The poem evokes the writer's love of Shelley, who named one of his daughters Ianthe after a beautiful girl in Greek mythology, and also seems to suggest a connection between Maine and the old world:

*I stare at you, Ianthe, since you ask,
Because your eyes look, brimmed with fervid blue,
Like disks of crystal in a tinted mask
Which the intense Aegean gazes through.*³³

The poet's sister wrote that Wylie always loved Mount Desert Island, that she thought of it "when she wrote her loveliest lyrics, and [that it] remained a living memory to her always."³⁴ The island also inspired some of Wylie's darkest and most memorable poetry, which continues to speak to us today.

Notes

¹ Cited in epigraph to Elinor Wylie's "A Birthday Cake for Lionel," 1927, with the note, "A Newspaper Editor's Reminiscences in Fraser's Magazine for June, 1841."

² The story, dated 1927, was reprinted in the "Fugitive Prose" section of *Collected Prose of Elinor Wylie*, ed. William Rose Benét (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933), 815-38.

³ *Collected Prose*, 815. Wylie imagines that Shelley did not, in fact, drown in 1822 while sailing from Leghorn (Livorno) to Lerici, Italy, in his schooner *Don Juan*. Her passion for the poet led her to create similar scenarios in other writings, including her novel *The Orphan Angel*, in which Shelley is rescued by an American ship and goes on to enjoy "divers picaresque adventures in the New World." Sylva Norman, *Flight of the Skylark*, 1954, cited in Judith Farr, *The Life and Art of Elinor Wylie* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 114.

⁴ *Collected Prose*, 833. Wylie makes other local references: "Mrs. Fernald's wild-strawberry jam," a widow living in "Prettypmarsh," "Captain Pray's slip," "the schooner from Bangor," etc.

⁵ Stanley Olson, *Elinor Wylie: A Life Apart* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 21. Prone to ailments all her life, Mrs. Hoyt considered Maine island summers "insurance against illness, lasting through the winters. . . ." Ibid.

⁶ "The menu was limited but hearty, and included blueberry pies and doughnuts that were 'the best ever,' Mama [Mrs. Hoyt] confessed." Ibid.

⁷ Nancy Hoyt, *Elinor Wylie: The Portrait of an Unknown Lady* (New York & Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935), 19.

⁸ Olson, *A Life Apart*, 25.

⁹ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 24.

¹⁰ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 25. A well-known romantic novelist, Nancy Hoyt (Curtis) had her own marital adventures: in the summer of 1937 she tried to elope with Bar Harbor taxi driver and hairdresser James Baker, but was stopped at the Canadian border. *Reading Eagle*, July 14, 1937, 8. The incident made *Life Magazine*.

¹¹ Farr, *The Life and Art of Elinor Wylie*, 24.

¹² Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 26.

¹³ Olson, *A Life Apart*, 133.

¹⁴ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 51.

¹⁵ In a footnote Olson noted that Captain Somes' Cottage had once been known as The Olde Cottage and Willowbrook, the latter for "the avenue of weeping willows that shielded the house from the wind that blew off the Sound" (though by the time the Wylies took residence, "the willows had gone"). Olson, *A Life Apart*, 138. Today, the house is again for rent: "Classic New England Greek revival home in the center of historic Somesville. 'Willowbrook,' the Abraham Somes III house, is listed on the National Register of Historic Homes. . . . It was once rented to the poet Elinor Wylie and Thomas Berger, author of *Little Man, Big Man* [sic]."

¹⁶ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 52.

¹⁷ Ibid. Olson referred to this feature as a "smugglers' cupboard." Olson, *A Life Apart*, 138.

¹⁸ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 52.

¹⁹ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 54.

²⁰ Olson, *A Life Apart*, 138.

²¹ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 55.

²² Olson, *A Life Apart*, 143.

²³ *Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie* (New York: Random House, 1986), 20.

²⁴ Evelyn Helmick Hively, *A Private Madness: The Genius of Elinor Wylie* (Kent, OH & London: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 54.

²⁵ *Collected Poems*, 40. Farr calls "Velvet Shoes" one of Wylie's "virtuoso pieces, uniting that rapt, nearly hermetic elegance of vision and subtlety of technique for which she is known." Farr, *Life and Art*, 75-76.

²⁶ *Collected Poems*, 30.

²⁷ *Collected Poems*, 27; Olson, *A Life Apart*, 139. Whether this behavior continued on later visits is not known.

²⁸ *Collected Poems*, 10.

²⁹ Hively, *Private Madness*, 56; *Collected Poems*, 12.

³⁰ Hively, *Private Madness*, 58.

³¹ Farr, *Life and Art*, 64.

³² Wylie's fixation with Shelley led the poet Sara Teasdale to pen the following "malicious jingle": "Elinor Wylie, Elinor Wylie, What do I hear you say?! 'I wish it were Shelley astride my belly instead of poor Bill Benét.'" Farr, *Life and Art*, 30.

³³ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 203. Other writers have found echoes of the Aegean and its archipelago in Maine, including August Heckscher, Marguerite Yourcenar and Edith Hamilton.

³⁴ Hoyt, *Unknown Lady*, 12. This thought is echoed by Benét in his preface to the "Fugitive Prose" section of *Collected Prose of Elinor Wylie*: "Maine, I think, remained Elinor's favorite among the New England States, as many of the summers of her childhood and young girlhood were identified with it." *Collected Prose*, 779.