Writer Jeanne Robert Foster spoke these words late in life to her friend and future biographer, Richard Londraville. For a child born into poverty in a remote corner of the nineteenth-century Adirondacks, this may seem an incongruous—or even generous—statement. The cycle of poverty held a tenacious grip on the hard-working mountain people. An economy of scarcity meant that money and food were in short supply while survival meant plenty of back-breaking work. Forests stood as sentinels that challenged axes and muscles. To prepare farmland, trees had to be cut, cleared, and stumps removed. The thin Adirondack soil was a veritable rock garden needing hand harvesting to make the soil tillable; the bounty of rocks became stone walls that marked boundaries and kept livestock in. The short growing season was under threat of frost that could arrive as early as August. Getting wood, doing laundry by hand, and preserving food for winter weighed heavily on daily life, a “hardscrabble life where there were two stones for every dirt,” as Jeanne described it.

Jeanne, nee Julia Elizabeth Oliver, was born on a bitterly cold March day in 1879. Dr. Wallace Aldrich was in attendance. This was his first delivery, and it was with a young first-time mother whose labor was long and complicated. Upon the baby’s arrival, he swaddled the girl child’s still form and set her in a box near the window. Survival seemed unlikely. He cared for the new mother, Mrs. Lucia Newell Oliver, and when he turned his attention back to the baby, he was surprised to find the infant still alive. The blowing mountain air that seeped through windows and walls threaded a life-giving breath into the tiny sleeping form.
At age seven, Julie had not yet seen a town or any kind of settlement. But now her family was making the trek of fifteen miles from a remote farm to the village of Chestertown. Instead of riding with her mother and siblings in the relative comfort of a buggy, she chose to be jostled and jounced on the back of the wagon her father drove. Frank Oliver planted the little girl among the load of furniture so she could take in the sights and sounds of the forest, fields, and farms. When she spied some red flowers at the river’s ford, she begged him to pick them. Frank refused, realizing the water was too deep, and the wagon creaked on. She watched the flowers fade from view. As she recalled many years later, “Never in all my life had I wanted anything more than I wanted those crimson flowers.” The little girl was already blessed by the gift of awareness of what the universe had to offer. Frank and Lizzie Oliver had found ‘fertile soil’ in their eldest child. They encouraged her to engage fully in the available riches of the mountain world and within her very heart and mind.

Young Julie learned everything she could about the flora and fauna of her neighborhood. She knew where the ladyslippers grew – the yellow ones and the pink ones. She could always find the secretive jack-in-the-pulpit. She knew where outcrops of amethyst and garnet peeked out from the ancient mountains. A neighbor shared knowledge of the best cache of berries and taught her how to layer the fruit with leaves so the delicate morsels would not get crushed on the long walk home. With Crane Mountain as her playground, she led tourists past the lake in the lower summit to the mountain’s peak. The mountain belonged to her and she to the mountain, but she was always willing to share.

She came to know the mountain people as well as she knew the mountains. Because money was tight, she was sent at the age of eight to live with family members in other Adirondack counties. She pulled her own weight and learned to adapt to a variety of circumstances and personalities. Her mother, a former school teacher, encouraged her to write letters and stories for the family from which she was absent, creating opportunities for learning even under difficult conditions.

At the age of twelve, Julie returned home, but by fifteen, she once again was living away from her family, boarding with strangers, people willing to house the new young traveling school marm who came to provide a few weeks of schooling. One morning while staying with an elderly pastor and his wife, Julie came to the table for breakfast. The old minister served the meal, but she received more than hospitality.

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He set half of a boiled egg beside the toast. “Teacher,” he said, “I hope you don’t mind Having only half an egg for breakfast. We’re only one hen; she does lay an egg Most everyday, my wife is so weakly I give her that egg to keep up her strength.

I gave her that egg to keep up her strength. My wife is so weakly We’ve only one hen; she does lay an egg Having only half an egg for breakfast. “Teacher,” he said, “I hope you don’t mind Having only half of a boiled egg beside the toast. He set half of a boiled egg beside the toast. Eggs for my breakfast, and he carried in A whole egg to his wife. He prayed with me Before I left; I don’t forget that prayer.”

[Adirondack Portraits: A Piece of Time, 1986]

By age fifteen, she was teaching school, and Julie knew how to perform all the essential tasks of running a household in rural America. Like most Adirondack women, she also knew how to carry out the men’s work as well, for fathers and sons were away working in logging camps for months at a time. She continued her education in the world of work by following her father to the woods to help with his logging operation. With her horse Billy, she skidded logs and dealt with all the hardships the shanty boys endured. That hardy breed of men – with their power, strength, maleness, and rough and rugged ways – could not intimidate her. They were on the same team, and she had a job to do. Her family’s survival depended on it. Later as a student in discussions with Harvard professors, as a writer answering to demanding editors, or as an art agent negotiating an art purchase for her New York buyer, that same Adirondack survival work ethic, the courage to be strong and carry on would see her through. As a professional working woman, she was immersed in a mostly man’s world, but she had worked with tough men before, and she would not be diminished. Being Adirondack born and raised, she was

founded in hard hammered granite, from the quarry of noble traditions, based on character, based on worthiness.

[Neighbors of Yesterday, 1916]

When at eighteen she left the mountains to marry Matlack Foster, a businessman more than twenty-five years her senior, she took with her more than memories of meadows and streams, wildflowers and birdsongs. The gift was from Crane Mountain, her mountain.

You come to a stretch of the mountain where it rises straight as a wall from the terrain so that one may stand straight and lean against it...I would secretly lean against the mountain, sometimes facing it, and putting my hands out either side. There seemed to be a strong force passing through me, so untamed, wild and beautiful that there are no words for it. But I know this force remained with me, helped me manage my difficult life, sent me to the “five seas” if not the “seven,” flowed as courage in my blood...and never left me...
Julie, who eventually took the pen name Jeanne Robert Foster, would become a fashion model—a Gibson Girl and the Harrison Fisher Girl, a reporter, writer, editor, and art agent. As rural and secluded as her childhood had been, her life as a young woman was far flung, spanning the globe. From a home base in New York City, she lived in an exciting time in the world of arts and literature, and she was at its hub. Among the artists and writers she counted as friends were Ford Maddox Ford, William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, and Constantin Brancusi. Erik Satie dedicated a piece of music to her. She dined with John Butler Yeats, the Irish portrait painter and father of the famous poet. She worked for the magazine editor Albert Shaw, and she helped John Quinn amass his modern art collection. She used her knowledge and influence to help fellow writers and to promote artists such as Philip Sawyer who said:

...she was a person “always thinking of the good and comfort of others

[Dear Yeats, Dear Pound, Dear Ford, 2001]

And at her center was her own passion for poetry and writing.

In 1916, with support from John Butler Yeats, she published Neighbors of Yesterday, a volume of poetry in which she found her voice—her Adirondack voice. In its pages the reader meets nineteenth-century mountain neighbors, and in the most succinct ways we come to know the neighbors and their extraordinary stories. In 1986, sixteen years after Jeanne’s death, her friend Noel Reidinger-Johnson published Adirondack Portraits: A Piece of Time in which the Adirondack voice again rings true. These writings illustrate the writer’s understanding and appreciation for a place and its inhabitants. Portraits, painted in reality and without judgment, yet with a sense of what honor and fairness mean, bring us back in time and remind us how universal and timeless our human emotions and motivations are. Her poem “State Land” could have been written at any point in the past or in the present. It reflects conflict between generations and reveals differing points of view on the preservation of wild places, but the author’s position is clear. In this piece, the sons chastise their father for selling off a portion of the family holdings to New York State. The father tells his sons:

I have watched the spoilers come and take away
So much I hardly know my township here
I gave the mountainside to keep it wild,
Free for the life that it has had so long
As I walked on I prayed this land might be
A sanctuary of our wilderness
That keeps the human soul close to its God

[“State Land,” Adirondack Portraits: A Piece of Time, 1986]

Jeanne had continued to live in New York City, but time and circumstances compelled her to make a change. Writing jobs were drying up, and the Great Depression had hit.

In 1933, she was living in Schenectady, NY in the home she had purchased for her family but now Frank and Lucia Oliver, husband Matlack, and brother Elwyn had passed. Widowed sister Cara Oliver Smith still needed care. Editorial work was not enough to sustain the sisters, but Roosevelt’s New Deal gave Jeanne the chance to work as a tenants relations counselor for Schenectady’s Municipal Housing Authority, where she advocated for low-income housing for all people in need. Working as a tenants’ relations counselor for the Municipal Housing Authority in Schenectady, she relinquished the past and did not speak of her renaissance life. She tucked it away, but over time scholars and researchers found their way to her elder woman. They were eager to tap this primary source of information on so many artistic and literary figures. As chance would have it, she made the acquaintance of a Union College professor, William Murphy. His doctoral dissertation and later his book, The Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats, were possible because of the information and connections Jeanne was able to share with the professor. Thus, through those she sought to help, her accomplishments came to light. In 1970, an honorary doctorate was bestowed upon her by Union College in acknowledgment of her contributions to the artistic and literary world of the early twentieth century and beyond.

Her face appeared on magazine covers, but her roots were in the Adirondack Mountains. She was comfortable with poets and politicians, but the neighbors of yesterday were her beloved ones. She traveled the world and witnessed many glorious sites and vistas, but her none could compare with her Adirondack Mountains. Were she alive today, Jeanne Robert Foster would celebrate the many people and organizations devoted to preserving a “sanctuary of our wilderness” and the enduring web of life supported within the six million acres of the Adirondack Park. She would be pleased with the opportunities created for people to experience the nature she loved. She supported the work of environmental activist Paul Schaefer, who in 1945, organized Friends of the Forest Preserve. His work lives on in the organizations currently known as Adirondack WILD: Friends of the Forest Preserve and Protect the Adirondacks! Jeanne might be amazed at the list of ‘defenders of the wilderness’ which includes: the Darrin Freshwater Institute; the Lake George Land Conservancy; the Adirondack Council; the Adirondack Mountain Club; the ADK 46-R Conservation Trust; the Adirondack Nature Conservancy; the Kelly Adirondack Center at Union College; the Adirondack Research Consortium; Paul Smith’s Visitor Interpretation Center; The Wild Center; the Adirondack Experience, the Museum at Blue Mountain Lake; the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry; the Adirondack Interpretive Center at Newcomb, along with other advocacy and research efforts in the region. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation began its efforts shortly before Jeanne’s death on September 22, 1970.
A woman of many achievements, Jeanne suffered many personal losses and struggles during her ninety-one years, yet in her writings, as in her life, she was mindful of the marvelous. By not underestimating the privilege of awareness, she indeed lived a life of privilege, fueled by awareness of the wonders of nature and the wonders of the human soul.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After living in the North Country for many years, Eileen Egan Mack is a resident of Latham, New York. She received her BA and MA from SUNY Plattsburgh. She portrays Jeanne Robert Foster in a performance piece, “Voice of the Mountains: Jeanne Robert Foster, an Adirondack Legacy.” Eileen has shared the program throughout New York state at colleges, libraries, town halls, schools, and museums, and at Trinity College, Dublin for the John Butler Yeats Society seminar. A former educator and speech/language therapist, she is a singer and storyteller.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

To learn more about Jeanne Robert Foster and her writings:


Dear Yeats, Dear Pound, Dear Ford: Jeanne Robert Foster and Her Circle of Friends by Richard Londraville and Janis Londraville with a foreword by Professor William M. Murphy, Syracuse University Press, 2001.

The Man from New York: John Quinn and His Friends, by Benjamin L. Reid, Oxford University Press, 1968.


Wild Apples, originally published in 1916; recently republished through Scholarly Editions.


“Sometimes I sit in my log cabin as in a cocoon, sheltered by swaying spruces from the outside world. From traffic, and noise, and liquor, and triangles, and pollution. Life seems to have no beginning and no ending. Only the steady expansion of trunk and root, the slow pileup of duff and debris, the lap of water before it becomes ice, the patter of raindrops before they turn to snowflakes.

Then the chirp of a swallow winging over the lake reminds me that...there is always a new beginning.”

EPILOGUE TO WOODSWOMAN BY ANNE LABASTILLE, 1976