Chapter 2: Nobody and Somebody: The Loving Ways of Lone Oak

It was a warm, or fairly hot day in spring—the grass was turning green, and the budding trees sent a pleasant odor thru the evening air. The patient lowing of the cattle in the lane, was distinctly heard above the scuffling on the roosts in the chicken coop; the grunting and squeeling from the pig-pen, and the blating of the hungry calves. The sparrows churped loudly from the Tamarack in front of the house and from across the road in the woods came the song of a whip-poor-will and numerous other songsters….These sights and sounds—usually interesting to any city boy, were especially so to me.[i]

Edwin Way Teale, *Tails of Lone Oak*, 1908

On both sides I am descended from a long line of those who were not the kind of folk whose names name-droppers drop. They were not the kind to provide ammunition for excessive boasting. They were, in the main, common people. But the world was not made worse because they lived in it.[ii]

Edwin Way Teale, autobiography draft, July 27, 1974

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!
How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one’s name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog![iii]

Emily Dickinson, poem 288

The old man stood atop the open platform of the Furnessville train depot, the right side of his face lit by “station lamps gleaming on the snow,” the left by a kerosene lantern held high, as five-year-old Edwin stepped from the train with Clara and Oliver following at his heels. The Teales had arrived for a week-long Christmas visit to Lone Oak. It was the earliest such visit to remain forever etched in Edwin’s memory. The old man, “bundled in a fur coat until he resembled a great grizzly bear,”[iv] was Edwin Franklin Way, Clara Teale’s father and Edwin’s grandfather. Ed Way’s roots, like those of his bride, were eastern. His father, Hiram, a New York lumberman, had moved his family west during the pioneer days of the mid-nineteenth century, settling in Porter County, Indiana in 1855[v]—fourteen years prior to the start of the family peregrinations chronicled by Laura Ingalls Wilder. At the time, Ed Way, the second of five children, was twelve. When he turned eighteen at the outset of the American Civil War, he “enlisted as a private in the Fourth Indiana Artillery, attached to the Army of the Cumberland,”[vi] later fighting in several major battles. The first, the October 1862 Battle of Perryville, expelled the Confederate Army of General Braxton Bragg from Kentucky, forcing an overnight retreat through the Cumberland Gap into Tennessee. Three months later, the forces met again on New Year’s Eve day in the battle of Stones River, also called the Second Battle of Murfreesboro. Of the major battles of the American Civil War, the casualty percentage at Stones River was second only to that of Gettysburg.[vii] Ed Way was amongst the seriously wounded at Stones River and was discharged for disability and sent home to recuperate. In 1865 he reenlisted, this time with the ninth Illinois Cavalry, and served out the remainder of the war.[viii] Afterward, he used his Army pension to buy a homestead at the edge of the Indiana dunes.

Exiting the train platform on that bitter, Solstice-dark December night in 1904, the Teales packed themselves into the waiting bob-sled that would hurry them out to Lone Oak. Edwin later recalled how “the horses stamped and jingled their sleigh-bells and sent out clouds of silver steam into the cold night air.”[ix] At the clean, modest farmhouse, the young boy’s gaze was drawn first to the freshly-cut Christmas tree “trimmed with polished apples, strings of popcorn, paper decorations and marshmallow fish.” These fish, he recalled later, “had a flavor which haunted me for years afterwards.”[x] But his gaze and his admiration shifted quickly to the loving pair who would remain at the center of all of his later Lone Oak exploits, a pair “as remarkable as the dune country itself, as remarkable as the varied fields of the farm from which they had so long wrung a living.”[xi] That winter visit, and another during the summer that followed, preceded his
matriculation at the Woodland School in Joliet.[xii] Thus, these visits comprised an early, critical education for Edwin, an education that contrasted sharply and restoratively with that of the twig-bending kind to which he had grown accustomed at home. It was palliative and healing, an antidote both for the trials of his earliest years and for the “new, strange world” of formal schooling still to come—a sphere whose governors often showed little patience for a mind “like a butterfly flitting about in a field of flowers.”[xiii] In a “world [that] was so full of interest,” he wrote in his unpublished autobiography, “I could not concentrate on any one thing.”[xiv] “It was not that I was dull witted,” he observed elsewhere. “It seemed more that my mind was too lively.”[xv] At Lone Oak, Edwin’s lively mind could flit unfettered. At Lone Oak, he could escape the disapprobation and shame that haunted his childhood. At Lone Oak, his grandparents set him free in nature, “a liberal mother who gave me room to expand, freedom to seek my own level, time to think my own thoughts.”[xvi]

Gramp Way, Edwin remarked in *Dune Boy*, “was probably not a very efficient farmer.” He paid little attention to “proper soils or [crop] rotation.”[xvii] In farming and in life he eschewed routine; it “galled his spirit.”[xviii] For Edwin, this was an endearing quality: “Gramp was one of those unschooled men whose minds are not molded to conventional patterns. He was himself, never anyone else.”[xix] Despite a lack of formal schooling, Gramp’s was a perceptive mind that expressed itself in tenaciousness and ingenuity, in wit and compassion. He was, Edwin reflected, “a living refutation of that specious fallacy of the literate—the belief that illiteracy and ignorance are synonymous.”[xx] Though he had never read a book before marriage, he became, through his wife’s tutelage, an engaged reader by the time Edwin made his holiday pilgrimages to Lone Oak. In a journal he kept during the summer of 1911, Edwin noted, “…gramp’s deep in the mistarys of ‘The Silver Hord,’” Rex Beach’s popular 1909 novel of the Pacific fisheries. “I hear grampa exclaming from the corner couch,” Edwin continued, “so I suppose he has found an extra instering part….”[xxi] Edwin’s profound struggles with spelling as a child—at which he later poked fun both in *Dune Boy* and his unpublished autobiography—likely deepened his capacity in later reflection to fully discern Gramp’s vigorous if unschooled intellect. Despite his proclivity to “blithely ignore the dictates of Webster and the grammarians,”[xxii] Ed Way sacrificed much to send his three daughters through college. He knew the pioneer landscape was giving way to a new, more educated world in which tenacity alone might not ensure one’s future.

In Edwin’s view, Gramp’s love of subtle humor was the greatest expression of his keen mind. This humor, most conspicuous in the stream of aphorisms the older man interjected into daily conversation, was a staple of Lone Oak life. Edwin recorded many of these aphorisms both in *Dune Boy* and in his autobiography notes. Waking from an after-dinner catnap, Gramp would proclaim, “Don’t know what you folks expect to do—but I know I’m about prepared to rear and tear and mount!” After this, he would “saunter off to bed.”[xxiii] Of his daily financial plight, he’d remark, “If the whole meetin’ house was for sale fer a cent I couldn’t buy a shingle today!”[xxiv] When guests arrived, he’d quip, “Sit down boys, just as cheap as standing up!”[xxv] Growing impatient over the slow preparation of a meal, he’d say “Today, tomorrow and the next day will be three days since I had anything to eat.”[xxvi] Or, “I don’t git hungry very often. But when I do ‘ts about now.”[xxvii] Once, when a new pair of shoes had given him blisters, he declared, “I must be like a Jay bird with my longest toe behind.”[xxviii] About a jacket Gram had sewn for him, he complained, “Say mother, ye put these pockets in my jacket so high I had to git up on a stump to pull out my handkercher.”[xxix] And he reveled in the story of a young female school teacher who boarded briefly at Lone Oak. As the three ate breakfast one morning, Gram said, “Sometimes I wish you’d cut your whiskers off!” Gramp held his tongue, but the young lady responded, “I think a kiss without a mustache is like an egg without salt!” Gramp retold the story often.[xxx] “The ax and the hoe and the pitchfork,” Edwin reflected later, “the years of toil which had bowed his shoulders and enlarged the knuckles of his hands, had never dulled his sense of humor nor his love of the joke.”[xxxi] For Ed Way, humor released the injurious steam of daily struggle. It reflected his desire to ‘camp out’ at home,[xxxi] to live contentedly in the present, imprisoned neither by past regrets nor dim future prospects.
Gramp Way’s easygoing nature sometimes belied the fierceness of spirit that allowed him to eke a living from “an uncompromising tract” of land and to combat the steady stream of hucksters and thieves who plied the uneducated country folk at the edge of the dunes. Once, two men arrived at Lone Oak, a pair of “crooks [who] tried to get Civil War veterans to mortgage farms for $500 for [a] pair of glasses to keep Gramp from going ‘blind before morning.’” Gramp surreptitiously sent Edwin outside to let air out of the front tire of their car and to bring in cordwood. Gramp then “use[d] [a] stick on [the] crooks” and sent them hastily on their way.[xxxiii]

Another time, a wandering tramp offered to chop stove kindling in exchange for a meal. Gramp assented and went back to his own work, realizing shortly afterward that the tramp had “shouldered the ax and set off at a trot down the road.” This prompted Gramp to set off “in hot pursuit.” When caught and confronted, the tramp dropped the ax and fled for the woods. Later, Gram expressed her dismay that the tramp might have killed Gramp, to which he replied, ‘What d’ y’ think I’d a bin doin’ about thet time?’[xxxiv]

Gramp’s earliest experiences on the Indiana frontier and his wartime service provided rich fodder for storytelling, an act bolstered by his “gift for the colorful phrase, the humorous twist, [and] the original observation.”[xxxv] On late summer evenings, sitting by “a smudge fire which kept the mosquitoes away,” Gramp wove elaborate tales “of the early days, the Indians, the wolves, the deer, the struggles of the pioneers.” At the start of the twentieth century, the dune edges had been converted to farmland “devoted to corn and oats, melons and potatoes,” but Gramp could remember the time when forests still blanketed the landscape. For Edwin, those stories “were like windows looking back into a glorious and adventurous past.”[xxxvi] Another such window lay in the southwest corner of Lone Oak, in a small “marshland ‘island’ where Gramp’s cows stood in the shade and flicked away the flies...during the hottest hours of the August noontide.”[xxxvii]

Local lore told of this island as a former battleground of warring native tribes. From the “sand which lay beneath the sparse grass” of the island, young Edwin unearthed “a storehouse, a museum, of Indian implements...more than 100 arrowheads, spearheads and tomahawk-heads.” The plowing of the neighboring Gunders’ field yielded up similar treasures. It is no wonder that Edwin saw Lone Oak as “a sort of Never-Never-Land come true,” and no wonder that, in the confines of Joliet and under his mother’s critical eye, he would “cross off the days on the calendar and count the number remaining before the next vacation when I would return again to the green pastures of that Indiana farm.”[xxxviii]

In late August of 1852, three years before Hiram Way would move his family to the edge of the Indiana dunes, Jemima George was born in Ogdensburg, New York, spending “her early years near the banks of the St. Lawrence River.” Her father, “a prosperous masonry contractor” who
was “engaged in building large churches in the region,” was able to send her to “a select seminary for young ladies” in Ogdensburg for 1865 and 1866.[xxxix] Henry George’s health failed in 1867, however, and with it his finances, so the family headed west in search of opportunity and healing, possibly encouraged by the prospects of “the prairie cure,” the widely-held belief in the power of “the clear dry air of the Midwest to allay” tuberculosis[xi] and other ailments. By the spring of 1867, they arrived in Morgan’s Sidetrack—later renamed Furnessville—and settled on a farm several miles from Lone Oak. “For the young girl,” Edwin noted, “this swift change…was like a plunge from daylight into darkness.”[xii] Jemima “floundered about” for several months, feeling “bewildered and uncertain, shy and misunderstood.”[xiii] Then she met Ed Way, who, “at the time, possessed nine white shirts”—a potent if amusing symbol of his post-war prosperity. For “state occasions,” he still donned the brass-buttoned blue Army overcoat he had brought home from the war.[xiii] He cut an impressive and benevolent figure, and Jemima, now 16, and Ed, now 25, were married on November 12, 1867.[xiv]

In post-Civil War pioneer society at the ege of the Indiana dunes, it was “the harder qualities of mind and character that [were] at a premium,” Edwin wrote later. “Men and women, struggling desperately to make ends meet, [were] like tightrope-walkers who [could not] forget for a moment the business of preserving their lives.”[xvi] Despite her initial shock and floundering, Jemima Way adapted quickly to the rigors of her newly-entered world, a process accelerated by her father’s death in 1869. Still, the physical and emotional rigors of frontier life cut deeply. On Christmas Day 1868, just over a year into marriage, she gave birth to a daughter, Alice. Alice lived only a few hours, and “as often was the custom in those early days—a grave was dug under an apple tree, about 2 rods from the house and a little home-made wooden box containing the infant was lowered into it.”[xvii] Clara Teale later remembered how “For many years we younger children planted flowers and cut grass on that little spot of ground.”[xvii] Ed and Jemima went on to have four more children: Clara Louise, in 1870; Allan Henry, in 1874; Winnifred Margaret, in 1880; and Blanche Elizabeth, in 1885. Tragedy came again for the Ways when Allan, who had been diagnosed with an enlarged heart, died shortly after the celebration of his twenty-first birthday. At the time, he was studying law with a Judge in Valparaiso; it was a halting end to a once-bright future.[xviii] Such early deaths were common enough in a time when “it was the unusual thing for any farmer’s wife to have a doctor for childbirth”[xix] and malaria was so rampant “that a little dish of quinine was placed on the table and every member of the family had to dip out a quantity and swallow it at breakfast-time.”[l] Still, the expectation of such loss did little to temper its sting.

Jemima Way spent her days “bending over her scrub-board or laboring at the churn,” often “wracked by chills and fever.” When farm help was scant, “she hoed in the blistering sun”[lii] and took on nearly any other work that needed doing, often singing “old folksongs and ballads from England” to help pass the long hours.[lii] She rarely complained, but there were times during Edwin’s boyhood visits when Gramp would pull the boy aside and say, “Mother’s got alum on ‘er tongue this mornin’. Better steer clear o’ the kitchen.”[liii] Of these moments, Edwin wrote
poignantly, “Fatigue is Life’s great poison.”[iv] Still, he noted further, “This hard labor which was her lot never broke her spirit.”[iv] A chance event that occurred when her children were young helped nurture and sustain that spirit; the effects of that event would ripple over decades, shaping the lives of a host of passers-through at Lone Oak, none more than the boy who “whirled like a satellite” around Ed and Jemima Way “from June to September in the golden days of summer and youth.”[ivi]

Lone Oak was located in the center of Pine Township, in Porter County. Sometime during the 1880s, “The Township trustees purchased a set of 140 of the world’s classic books of history and literature.” The books, “bound in leather and housed in a special bookcase,” were to serve as a public library.[vii] Despite her constant toil at Lone Oak, Gram never forsook her educated roots. She had carried the intellectual flame kindled at Ogdensburg to the Indiana frontier, and there she had banked it beneath the ash of daily struggle, refusing to let it die. The Township library provided fuel for her inward fire, and the trustees’ selection of Jemima Way as its custodian, and Lone Oak as the site where it would be housed, yielded a cascade of effects they could never have anticipated. Throughout the decades that followed, Gram Way “read aloud every one of the millions of words” entrusted to her, over and over again, not just to her own family but to anyone who would listen. Long before young Edwin’s arrival at Lone Oak, “neighbors and hired men from near-by farms used to stroll over after the chores were done…stretching out on the front porch, puffing silently at their pipes” as Gram sat beside a kerosene lamp “inside the screen door…[and] read on and on, her expressive voice rising with the exciting passages.”[viii] It was one of a host of Gram’s “nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love”—love for her family and for neighbors, and love for the power of the written word, a power that could both validate and transcend daily human struggle.

Gram’s love of knowledge and the extraordinary value she placed upon the written word were not bound by her custodianship of the Pine Township library. “Possibly the greatest pleasure she had while living at Lone Oak,” Clara Teale recalled in the 1940s, “was her connection with the Grange…She wrote both prose and poetry for their programs.”[ix] She also wrote and published numerous articles for The Rural New Yorker, some of which were “reprinted in New York [City] papers.” Edwin recalled later how “she would write, by the light of an oil lamp,” despite her exhaustion of the day.[x] These articles, reflective of the time, were printed unsigned, rendering her a nameless voice from the country, at once somebody and nobody—a paradox driven home to her by events surrounding a particular article of which she was especially proud. After publication, she recopied its text, sent it to her only brother, and waited “anxiously for his reply.” When it came, he had written not with praise but doubt of her authorship: “Why did you tell me [that] you wrote that article? I read it some weeks ago in a New York City paper.” The slight “hurt her deeply,” as “she had thought above all people—he would be the one who would see its worth,”[xii] and likewise recognize hers.
While her brother could not see the deep well of her talents, Edwin could; and for her beloved grandson, Jemima Way dipped that well even more deeply. During one of his earliest summer visits to Lone Oak, Edwin recalled, “She put me to sleep each night with a new installment of a continued story about the River Pixies,” a complex, extempore creation sprung from her imagination. Accompanied by the “chorus of the katydids and crickets swelling outside the bedroom window,” Gram sat nightly on the edge of Edwin’s bed and conjured “faint, long-ago images of little people, with peaked caps, running about the banks of a dark stream.” Those images “remain with me still,” he wrote nearly four decades later.

Amidst the life-preserving desperations of frontier life, he reflected, “A sensitiveness to the color and poetry of Nature” was “unessential, excess baggage.” In that world, the majority, Thoreau’s “mass of men…so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life,” spent their lives “stifling the desire for luxury.” Jemima George Way was an exception, and thus was she exceptional in her grandson’s memory. “It is only the rare and superlative character,” Edwin wrote, “who is able to retain the softer qualities, beneath his armor, in a world of constant struggle. This Gram did and she stands out in my mind as one of the indomitable, great women of my meeting.”

Jemima Way not only retained such qualities but shared them freely: with family and neighbors, with farm hands and strangers, and with her beloved grandson, for whom her influence endured to his last days. She nourished Edwin’s acute sensitivities when it mattered most, when much of the world seemed bent on smothering them. She helped his emotional and intellectual waters find their level.

Reflecting on his childhood, Edwin understood fully how erratic the spotlight of memory could be, but he likewise understood how it was inevitably drawn to fixed points, to anchors, to holdfasts in the flood and ebb of life’s waters. Such were the memories of Gram and Gramp Way. Later, he came to associate these benevolent centers of his childhood orbits with three lines from Irish poet William Butler Yeats:

For life moves out of a red flare of dreams
Into a common light of common hours
Until old age brings the red flare again.

Reflecting on these lines decades later, Edwin wrote, “Thus it was that my grandparents seemed to understand best of all, the world of dreams, of fantastic plans, of make-believe in which I spent so many hours.” “When we are young,” he continued, “we know least of all how different we are, or how different from the norm are those around us. It takes perspective to see ourselves in relation to the world at large. It was only after many years had passed that I understood how strange a boy I must have been or how unusual were the two who were my closest summer companions.” Long after Gram and Gramp Way had returned to the earth they had spent their lives tending, Edwin took comfort in the fact that he had memorialized them through his writing. “Thinking of those golden duneland days,” he wrote in the spring of 1962, “I realize, with something of a start, that I am the only person in all the world who remembers them. Who remembers Lone Oak now? I alone. But in a way there are thousands more—all who have lived those days with Gramp and Gran in the pages of ‘Dune Boy.’ To the broader world, Ed and Jemima Way were nobody; to their friends and neighbors, they were somebody; to a strange, self-conscious, highly sensitive satellite of a boy, they were everybody.
References


Notes:


[vi] Ibid. 398


[x] Ibid. 8

[xi] Ibid. 12


[xiv] Ibid. 5


[xviii] Ibid. 17

[xix] Ibid. 16

[xx] Ibid. 16


[xxiv] Ibid.
[xxv] Ibid.
[xxvi] Ibid.


[xxix] Ibid.

[xxx] Ibid.


[xxxii] Ibid. 17


[xxxv] Ibid. 14

[xxxvi] Ibid. 11

[xxxvii] Ibid. 29

[xxxviii] Ibid. 10

[xxxix] Ibid. 20


[xlii] Ibid. 21

[xliii] Ibid. 21


[xlvii] Ibid.

[xlviii] Ibid.

[xlix] Ibid.


[lii] Ibid. 21


[liv] Ibid. 22

[lv] Ibid. 22

[lvi] Ibid. 26
Chasing the Erratic Spotlight of Memory: Reexamining the Life and Writing of Edwin Way Teale

Posted on June 29, 2017 by Melissa Watterworth Batt

by Richard Telford

Author’s Note: Though the product of many hours of research, writing, and revision, this chapter is nevertheless a draft; it will be subject to revision as the larger book in which it will appear takes shape. This chapter follows the book’s prologue, posted last month. It is the fifth to be published on this site. The first three, published this past winter, were later chapters of the book, chronicling the Teales’ loss of their son David during wartime service in 1945. Those chapters can be accessed here. I welcome critical response to this work, either in the comment section below or through direct e-mail. I am grateful to the Archives and Special Collections staff for providing me the opportunity to share this work, and to the Woodstock Academy Board of Trustees for awarding me a sabbatical for the 2016-2017 school year. Contextual information about the project and manuscript can be found here.

Chapter 1: Chasing the Erratic Spotlight of Memory

Thinking of memory, it occurs to me what an erratic spotlight memory is, playing across the
landscape of our past, picking out small areas, illuminating fragments of our experience. Out of a
shrouded, shapeless limbo of forgotten things one experience suddenly comes to life.[i]


November 15, 1961

What did I know, what did I know
of love’s austere and lonely offices? [ii]

Robert Hayden, from “Those Winter Sundays”

O sons of men,
You add the future to the future
But your sum is spoiled
By the grey cipher of death.

There is a Master
Who breathes upon armies,

Building a narrow and dark house for kings.[iii]

*From The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*

On June 2, 1899, Clara Louise Way Teale gave birth to a son, her only child, Edwin Alfred Teale. The preceding winter had unleashed the Great Arctic Outbreak of 1899. The Mississippi river had frozen solid from St. Louis to New Orleans, and Arthur T. Wayne, writing for the American Ornithological Society, documented the deaths by starvation and exposure to blizzard conditions of tens of thousands of birds: fox sparrows and juncos, woodcock and killdeer, pine warblers and meadowlarks.[iv] Across the globe, Danish schoolteacher Christian Mortensen introduced the first systematic method of bird-banding, offering a new window to life’s beautiful, abundant complexity.[v] Edwin himself would reflect upon these events seventy-five years later as he commenced reconstructing his earliest days to tell his life’s story.[vi] Endings juxtaposed with beginnings, death juxtaposed with life. Edwin Teale, too, entered a childhood defined by such seeming contradictions: confinement and freedom, loathing and admiration, hatred and love. The delivery, which took place in a modest Iowa Avenue frame house beside Hickory Creek in Joliet, Illinois, was “a hard [one] that almost took” Clara Teale’s life.[vii] Several days later, Clara contracted typhoid fever, from which she would not fully recover until September. While his mother recovered, and his father, Oliver Cromwell Teale, labored long hours as a skilled locomotive mechanic in the Michigan City Railroad roundhouse, Edwin was cared for by Oliver’s sister Annie Brummitt and her husband George. The Brummitts had recently lost their only child at birth. Many years later, Clara Teale reflected, “I don’t think any of us quite realized what it meant to them to give up that baby,” and how these earliest days of Edwin’s life filled that void, if only briefly.[viii]
Clara Teale recovered from typhoid in September of 1899, and she, Oliver, and four-month-old Edwin moved into a home that had been under construction on June 2. The East Washington Street home, just outside the Joliet city limits, “faced a wide expanse of wasteland,” hundreds of acres of “weed-covered hillocks and hollows” that “remained from the digging of gravel that had been deposited by the glaciers.” This scarred and desolate landscape later afforded Edwin a site for his earliest peregrinations in nature, and these offered a reprieve from his mother’s relentless dedication to her only child’s “improvement,” a dedication that left him, “much of the time, desperately unhappy.”

Amongst the overgrown hollows, he often unearthed “small cylinders of stone…the fossil remains of prehistoric crinoids,” which he at first mistook for “Indian beads.” Wandering in nature, even in a place that others saw as weed-choked and disfigured, Edwin felt “a sense of coming home” that eluded him elsewhere in Joliet. Later he would praise with equal feeling the aerial prowess of invasive European starling flocks “turning corners like soldiers on parade” and the “snow-white shimmer” of wheeling seaside flocks of delicate sanderlings. Where others saw ugliness in nature, Edwin saw beauty and purpose, undiluted by arbitrary human judgments.

The interior of the East Washington Street home contrasted sharply with the wasteland framed by its windows. Its contents painted a portrait of Clara Teale as a cultured, thoughtful, and deliberate woman. An oil on canvas of Niagara Falls, painted by Clara and mounted in a wide gilt frame, adorned the parlor wall. Below it, against a corner of the room, leaned an alpenstock, the antecedent to the modern ice axe, trailing a ribbon of “narrow horizontal bands of brilliant colors.” Edwin would later recall that the alpenstock, among all other curiosities of the house, “especially fascinated me.” Clara Teale’s decor likewise reflected the heightened popularity of nature study at the advent of the twentieth century. A small stand housed an ostrich egg, a peacock feather, and other natural specimens. Seashells “brought from Newport” adorned the room, including a large conch shell that served as a door stop. Putting the conch to his ear, young Edwin “could hear the sea.”
There were also numerous pictures of sunsets scattered amongst the house’s contents, clipped from popular magazines by Oliver Teale. In his few spare moments of leisure, Edwin’s beleaguered father “wrote descriptions” of these scenes, his only foray into art in a draining, workaday life.\[xvii\] Edwin later attributed his own “passionate love of beautiful scenes” in part to his father’s early influence.\[xviii\] In 1942, fourteen years after Oliver’s death, Edwin would dedicate his sixth book, Byways to Adventure: A Guide to Nature Hobbies to his father—a tacit acknowledgment that his father earned but never got the luxury of such pursuits. At the other end of the parlor, an upright piano, “the first thing purchased after the house was built,” occupied a wall of its own. What Edwin later remembered most of this piano was not his mother’s playing but “the successive generations of baby mice its interior harbored,” an apt preview of his future leanings.\[xix\]

Despite its rich décor and the intellectual sensitivities it represented, Edwin’s childhood home was more a prison than a sanctuary, transmuting the barren wasteland of the gravel bank to a refuge, a place of retreat into nature and into himself.

Edwin’s relationship with his mother was deeply complicated, and he struggled for the remainder of his life to reconcile its polar contradictions. In 1974, shortly after his 75th birthday, Edwin wrote a full chapter on the complexities of their relationship for The Long Way Home, the autobiography he would not complete. He titled the chapter “Memories of a Bent Twig,” alluding to Alexander Pope’s 1732 observation that “Tis education forms the common mind,/Just as the twig is bent the tree’s inclin’d.”\[xx\] The choice of this allusion reflected the profound influence of Clara’s unstinting efforts to render every experience of Edwin’s boyhood “a lesson, a training in character.” In Clara’s view, “Life was a preparation for some other end, not an end in itself.”\[xxi\]

She thought only in the future tense. “When I was young,” Edwin reflected in 1974, “little was done just for the fun of it…it seems to me I was one of the most bent twigs the world has ever known.”\[xxii\] He struggled for the rest of his life to understand the choices his mother had made, to check his extraordinary bitterness about the “schizophrenic world”\[xxiii\] she created for him, and to render the experiences of his earliest years in honest, fair prose.

Prior to her marriage, Clara Way had been a school teacher in “various country schools near Furnessville, at Boone Grove and elsewhere in northern Indiana.”\[xxiv\] It was, for her, a period of great personal fulfillment, defined especially by the memory of a particular end-of-school picnic, “a memory that she cherished as long as she lived.”\[xxv\]

She and the children rode on a hayrack to the picnic site and the pupils had put a chair, decorated with flowers, in the middle of the wagon. She sat on it with the children grouped around her….It symbolized her dream: to be surrounded by small children looking up to her for advice and counsel. For her great passion was molding the minds and characters of the young.\[xxvi\]

Here was the culmination of her efforts, and, as importantly to her, the adulation that could accompany such efforts.

By the fall of 1899, the East Washington Street home had become her classroom, Edwin her star and only pupil. “In this, her lifelong goal of bending tender twigs,” Edwin wrote, “she found I was the closest, the one around the most.”\[xxvii\] But Clara’s was a doomed effort crippled by self-absorption. Any adoration, any veneration that Edwin openly offered his mother, despite its sincerity, only veiled deep resentment that grew with time and came to define his recollections of her. But Clara could not, or would not, see this. She clung to the image of admiring children surrounding her on the hayrack. When Edwin was in high school, Clara arranged to have a studio portrait taken of the family. In it, Clara is seated at center, her right hand holding an open volume that she peruses. Oliver stands to her left, one hand steadying the book, as Edwin, standing directly behind his mother, looks on. Clara looks blissful, her son and husband rapt with admiration. The pastoral image, preserved for the annals of time, belies the turbulent waters that roiled beneath.

Clara Teale’s pedagogical methods haunted Edwin’s childhood. “In her desire to train me as I should be trained,” he wrote later, “my mother wanted to be with me every hour, to know what was going on in my mind and heart all the time. She wanted to be inside me. She wanted to have no secrets…she wanted me to be transparent glass that she could look through.”\[xxviii\] Once,
returning home from grade school, Edwin found that his mother had left “a note on the kitchen
table saying she would be away for two or three hours.” Later, however, he discovered her “sitting
quietly in another room apparently waiting to see what I would say and do when I thought I was
unobserved and alone.”[xxix] Later, when he befriended a girl he had met during a stay at Lone
Oak, Clara steamed open the girl’s subsequent letters to Edwin for first inspection.[xxx] Such
extremes, she argued, were necessary to make Edwin “the kind of person she wanted me to be,”
a result that “meant more to her than anything else in the world.”[xxxx] But such measures served
only to fog the transparent glass Clara sought. They rendered Edwin “slightly secretive, throwing
up barriers beyond which people [could] not go.” Under his mother’s unrelenting gaze, Edwin
found himself “continually retreating within myself to some secret room that should, for
everyone[,] be inviolable.”[xxxi] Formed early, Edwin struggled in adulthood to shed the
defenses of a childhood that “was largely an ordeal at a time when it should have been fun.”[xxxii]

Though Edwin found his mother’s training painfully oppressive, he did not question her motives,
at least not publicly. In his 1943 Dune Boy, he wrote of his parents as “sincere, hard-working,
religious people,” offering only one muted complaint: “At home I was trained for Heaven rather
than for the world as it is.”[xxxiv] In 1974, in the most revised draft of The Long Way Home, he
wrote:

As I look back, nobody I have ever known ever tried harder to do what she thought was right than my
mother. Nobody ever wanted more to help make the world a finer, better place for all. She was
sincere. She was honest—so far as she understood her own motivations—in her striving to be a force
for good in the world.[xxxv]

His assessment was extraordinarily tempered when viewed in light of his private notes. “Probably
nobody ever born…understood less what made her[self] tick,” he noted privately. She was “an
interesting case for a psychologist,” he added. “By fooling her mind [she] got so her mind fooled
her.”[xxxvi] His understanding of her terribly skewed self-knowledge did little to mitigate his
deeply-rooted anger. In undated autobiography notes, he considered titling a section of the book
“Lies My Mother Told Me.” Below the notation, he enumerated a full page of these.[xxxvii]
Elsewhere he reflected, “Not all people who do good deeds deserve credit for good motives.”
This he followed with an assessment of his mother’s increased involvement in church work as
Edwin grew older: “Do a good deed and get away from house-work and children by doing
it!”[xxxviii] Clara’s chronic absence during Edwin’s adolescence hurt him deeply, especially
because she had labored so intently in his early years to create in him an absolute dependence
upon her.[xxix] On New Year’s Day, 1911, six months shy of his twelfth birthday, Edwin
enumerated a set of resolutions for the coming year, the first of which is especially heart-rending:
“I hope that mama will stay home and I will do all that is in my power to help and please her.”[xli]
He had just spent the Christmas holiday at Lone Oak, about which he had noted two days earlier,
“This is the greatest vacation I ever had.”[xlii] He was sorry to leave Lone Oak, he added below
his list of resolutions, but “I am glad to come to mamma if sheel only stay home.”[xliii] But Clara
would not stay home, driven less by her desire to escape domesticity and more by “the limelight”
church work afforded her, “the sense of being somebody,” the affirmation that accompanied
highly public righteous acts.[xlii]

Elsewhere, Edwin lamented the times his mother “cried because I used a more pleasant tone of
voice to the telephone operator” than to her. “Neurotic atmosphere—” he added, “wonder not
breakdown or suicide.” Of this latter wonder, he did not specify Clara or himself.[xlv] Of her
wedding vow to be faithful unto death,” Edwin questioned, “Faithful to whom?” and answered
succinctly: “Herself.”[xlvi] Still, he was reticent to share with his reading public the full depth of his
bitterness. In a paragraph later struck from the most complete autobiography draft, he wrote:

I am well aware of the awesome power that lies in the hand of anyone writing of his own life, the
power to emphasize one aspect, to tip the scales in favor of himself, to color events almost
unconsciously. The writer can state his story; the one written about cannot correct the impression. So
I hope the reader will give every benefit of the doubt to my mother in reading this chapter of my
recollections for my first years.[xlvi]
While Edwin later cut this qualification, he nonetheless exercised great restraint in wielding his power to shape the reader’s view of his mother. In the last revision completed before *The Long Way Home* was put aside in the fall of 1974, Edwin offered the following view of Clara:

*My mother not only read to me, she encouraged me to try to write and she taught me that ever-valuable lesson—to get up and try again when I failed. She appreciated wildflowers and, as I noted in the dedication of my first nature book, *Grassroot Jungles*, saw beauty in humble things. I loved my mother. There was no one I revered more. I recognized she was completely dedicated to my improvement.*[xlvii]

It is impossible to know how much the decision to include this praise was born of obligation and how much from authentic feeling. Its substance was certainly true. Still, even in the public venue of autobiography, Edwin could not leave it unqualified. It was his “difficult aim,” he told the reader, “to tell as exactly as I can what life has been like for me.” And so, to the passage above, he added, “And yet—all I know is that as a child I was, much of the time, desperately unhappy.”[xlviii]

*          *          *          *          *          *          *          *          *

If Clara Teale was the righteous and dominant force of the home with whom to reckon, her husband, Oliver Cromwell Teale, was her foil. A soft-spoken, kind-hearted man of integrity, Oliver spent few waking hours in the home he shared with his wife and only child. Employed as a skilled locomotive mechanic in the Michigan Central Railroad roundhouse, he worked twelve-hour shifts, six days per week, to bring home weekly pay of fifteen dollars. In winter, he departed for work in the dark and returned thus. “In my memories of him,” Edwin wrote of his father, “he always seemed tired. There was little play in him. But it must be remembered that I saw him mainly in the evenings at the end of a long day’s work.”[xlix] At fourteen, living in his native Yorkshire, England, Oliver began work in a textile mill, and his life thereafter would be that of the laborer. As a young man, he emigrated to the United States with his younger brother, Haigh, and his older brother, William.[I] Several years later, their parents, Jeptha and Ellen Teale, followed, settling on a modest farm at the edge of the Indiana dunes—a farm adjacent to that of Edwin and Jemimah Way. There, Oliver met Clara Louise Way, his future bride. Ellen Teale died in 1895, four years before Edwin’s birth. Of Jeptha, Edwin had “but the vaguest memory of him, a sturdy upright man with an immaculate white beard which he washed with soap and water every morning.”[li] In 1901, Jeptha, now a widower, sold the 19-acre fruit farm and moved into the home of George and Annie Brummit. He died in January of 1904, six months shy of Edwin’s fifth birthday.[lii]

Oliver had grown up one of ten children, and his early life in Yorkshire had been defined by scarcity. As an adult, he stood at five feet, seven inches tall and weighed 145 pounds, his slight build making him ideally suited to enter the bellies of steam locomotives to hammer-test their iron flues. He was five inches shorter than Edwin by the time the latter graduated high school. “It may well be,” Edwin wrote later, “that he would have been taller if he had had ample food in childhood.”[liii] As a father, Oliver “retained the orderly habits of his boyhood” and remained governed by the schooling of early poverty. “My father mended his own shoes,” Edwin recalled later, “and my mother cut his hair.”[liv] During Edwin’s boyhood, the family was “never in need”—they owned their home and carried no debt—but, he qualified, “We were always on thin ice. There was rarely a surplus. Living close to the edge of the precipice you must walk carefully lest a pebble roll under your feet.”[lv] Oliver labored Monday through Saturday. On Saturday night he polished the family’s shoes for Sunday church. “On Sundays,” Edwin wrote, “he was urged on by that most popular of songs at the Methodist church we attended: ‘Work for the night is coming, when man works no more.’”[lvi] On Monday the cycle began again, and one is reminded of Robert Hayden’s oft-anthologized poem “Those Winter Sundays,” which begins:

*Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached*
It was the common pattern for the laboring family man of the early twentieth century. A long day’s labor provided sustenance and stability but little more. For the Teales, there were few luxuries.

Decades later, Edwin reflected thoughtfully, and perhaps a little ruefully, on the trajectory of his father’s life:

Looking back over the span of years, I recognize that my father was a man who lived a life without surpluses—without a surplus of energy, without a surplus of money, without a surplus of time. He never got enough—soon enough…He was not the kind for whom scrolls are inscribed and public dinners held…He was quiet and hard-working. He was well-liked and respected. He could be depended upon…The life he led did not embitter him. It did not break his spirit. Life did not overwhelm or conquer or crush him. Life tired him out.[lvii]

Despite the genuine praise of the passage above, Oliver did not escape the bitterness of Edwin’s private reflections on the unhappiness of his childhood. “My father was dependable, old reliable—faithful Oliver,” Edwin wrote in undated autobiography notes.[lviii] He elaborated no more, but the duality of his meaning, taken in the context of other notes, is clear. Edwin appreciated deeply his father’s steadfast, uncomplaining fulfillment of his duties—an authentic act of love that robbed him of his health and led him, at fifty-two, to a grave fittingly inscribed, “Faithful Unto Death.”[lix] Still, he was embittered just as deeply by his father’s malleability when confronted with his domineering wife’s will as she “turned the screws of psychology” on the two of them.[lx] Oliver was an “inarticulate father,” Edwin complained elsewhere, “always subordinate,” manipulated by Clara to believe he had won a “great prize” in marriage.[lx] He was “sensitive—but he could not express his emotions” while “others seemed more” able to do so.[lxii] Exhausted by back-breaking labor and Clara’s relentless pursuit of “her great thrill [of] ‘moulding’ others,” Oliver Teale “left the job of bending the twig” to Clara, and by doing so left Edwin disillusioned and resentful.[lxiii]

Vivid amongst the scattering of Edwin’s early memories of his father were a handful of visits to the Michigan City roundhouse. At these times, Oliver lifted “the veil of that mysterious world into which he disappeared” each day. For a young boy, such visits were magical, and for Edwin, many years later, they “merged into one dreamlike memory.”[lxiv]

I remember when I was five or six or so and climbing with him to the engineer’s seat in the cab of a huge freight engine. Slowly he eased back a lever. With a long hiss of steam, the locomotive moved ponderously forward until we were swallowed up in the cavernous gloom of the roundhouse. There I was greeted with strange smells—the odor of hot oil and metal and steam—unfamiliar sounds—the clang and reverberation of pounded metal—new sights—men moving about among the dim shapes of towering locomotives lighting their way with smoking flares formed of burning oil-soaked waste. I watched my father, carrying his flare, squeeze his way through a firebox door to inspect the boiler of one engine and heard the ring of his hammer as he tested the flues.[lxv]

In these ephemeral hours, his father “seemed like some knight on a charger, a romantic figure.”[lxvi] Later, Edwin found the composite memory of these visits “strange [and] haunting.”[lxvii] The ringing of his father’s hammer was the tolling of a bell for a life absent luxury, a life foreshortened by little-noticed sacrifice. It heralded the coming night when the man, the father, would work no more. It was the peal of love’s labors, of the “austere and lonely offices” for which thanks were neither sought nor expected, and rarely gotten.

* * * * * * *

As an industrial center with “railroads converging from all directions,” Joliet, Illinois was likewise “a tramp center” at a time when thousands of itinerant men rode the rails hunting work or escape,
Less than a mile east of the Teales’ home, in an undeveloped tract named Davidson’s Woods, there was “an extensive hobo jungle…” where “wanderers cooked their food over little campfires and heated their coffee in tin cans.” Clara Teale, despite her rigidness in the running of her own home, felt great empathy for the cavalcade of road-worn men who passed through Joliet. Such solicitude for the unwanted likely drew the ire of some neighbors. Such acts cast little limelight. Still, when these men appeared “from time to time…at our back door asking for a bite to eat,” Clara fed them without hesitation. Edwin wrote of these unremembered acts of kindness in the last revision of his autobiography, perhaps to further soften his already-muted critique of his mother’s twig-bending efforts: “Times were hard, and my mother was kind-hearted and our house no doubt was widely known as an oasis for tramps in their travels.” He even quipped, “We began to notice cabalistic markings in chalk on the cement wall in front of the house…probably notices to other tramps that easy pickings lay within.”

Despite his lighthearted autobiography treatment of the hobos who plied his mother’s kindness, an incident involving one of these nameless men haunted Edwin’s memory. In undated notes, he recalled a tramp lying on a stretcher beside the tracks of the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern railway, his severed leg beside him. It was one of many tragedies Edwin witnessed firsthand in his early years. Later, as he compiled voluminous notes for his autobiography over a thirty-year period, the erratic spotlight of his memory returned with striking frequency to these tragic events. Year after year, he enumerated these events on redundant lists, sometimes adding a newly-recalled detail or event. The earliest of these, his “first glimpse of the terror that lies just beneath the bright surface of life,” was the death in winter of a cart-horse that slipped on ice directly in front of the Teales’ East Washington Street home:

I saw my father disappear out the front door. I saw my mother following with an armload of blankets. I had no idea what had occurred. Peeking under the drawn curtain at the parlor window, I saw dark figures huddled around the prostrate animal. Lanterns threw shifting shadows over the scene…Then I heard the crack of a rifle…In the morning the horse was gone but a large red pool of blood had frozen on the ice.

The scene remained “alive[,] buried in the far recesses of my mind,” he wrote nearly seventy years later.

In stacks of undated autobiography notes, Edwin documented event after event that, as he reflected later, illustrated “how often death has swept close to me.” Once, for example, while he stood at the edge of a water-filled quarry, a favored swimming hole, a boy beside him dove in headfirst, struck a submerged rock, and died from a broken back. Then there was Cube Brooks, a playmate of Lone Oak summers, who was kicked in the head by a horse and died from the blow. Another time, swimming in Lake Michigan on the Indiana dunes side, Edwin watched as a drowned girl was pulled from the water. Decades later he recalled clearly the strands of hair that hung flaccid down her waxen face. Later, working a summer job at the Starr Lumberyard while attending Earlham College, he watched in horror as a deaf co-worker, “unable to hear the warning bell of a backing switch engine, was run over and killed hardly more than a hundred feet from where several of us stood helpless.” On two occasions, Edwin rode trains that collided with automobiles at crossings, killing their occupants. These experiences and others made Edwin feel as though “lightning was striking all around” him. He became acutely aware of the tenuous and unforgiving universe we inhabit, and that awareness haunted him for the rest of his life. “I seemed skating over a deep, dark stream,” he wrote later. “The ice held but I could never forget for long the water that flowed below.”

While these tragedies haunted Edwin, the “sense of uncertainty” they fostered likewise heightened his “intense delight…in the beauty of the passing minute.” It was analogous, he wrote later, to the way in which “some landscapes take on a magical atmosphere when touched briefly by sunshine while black clouds are piling up in the sky behind them.” In
life’s frailty, beauty resided, in its impermanence, meaning that transcended time. To his lists of “black cloud” events, Edwin often added the title “The Gray Cipher.” In doing so, he alluded to a short poem from “The Extraordinary City of Brass,” a story from The Thousand Nights and the One Night, more commonly known in the English-speaking world as The Arabian Nights. In the story, a traveling party enters the ruins of a great city, now “buried in silence as in a tomb.”[lxxxvi]

An inscription on a battlement warns the travelers that “the grey cipher of death” is always near, “building a narrow and dark house for kings” and commoners alike, waiting to spoil the sum of our imagined futures.[lxxxvii] Edwin titled the final chapter of his autobiography “The Gray Cipher.” In it, he wrote only one sentence, stating his intent to offer “reflections of various kinds, especially on life and death…..”,[lxxxviii] but his sum, too, was spoiled, the pages left unfilled, a reminder of the dark, narrow house that awaited him and awaits us all.

Richard Telford has taught literature and composition at The Woodstock Academy since 1997. In 2011, he helped found the Edwin Way Teale Artists in Residence at Trail Wood program, which he now directs. He was a long-time contributing writer for The Ecotone Exchange. He was recently awarded a Rose and Sigmund Strochlitz Travel Grant by the University of Connecticut to support his work on a book about naturalist, writer, and photographer Edwin Way Teale. The Woodstock Academy Board of Trustees likewise granted him a sabbatical for the 2016-2017 academic year to support this work.

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Notes:


[vii] Ibid. 2
Prologue: Into the Beautiful, Free Country; Reexamining the Life and Writing of Edwin Way Teale

Posted on May 25, 2017 by Melissa Watterworth Batt

By Richard Telford

Author’s Note: Though the product of many hours of research, writing, and revision, this chapter is nevertheless a draft; it will be subject to revision as the larger book in which it will appear takes shape. In this chapter, the very first of the book, I have departed from the time period I wrote about in the previous three chapters published on the Archives and Special Collections site, during which the Teales lost their only son, David, in wartime service. Those chapters can be
accessed here. I welcome critical response, either in the comment section below or through
direct e-mail. I am grateful to the Archives and Special Collections staff for providing me the
opportunity to share this work, and to the Woodstock Academy Board of Trustees for awarding
me a sabbatical for the 2016-2017 school year so that this work could be undertaken. Contextual
information about the project and manuscript can be found here.

Prologue: Into the Beautiful, Free Country

Not only have you made us both very happy indeed; but you have also enabled us to get away from
the heat and fatigue of the city into the beautiful, free country earlier than we could otherwise have
done; and you know, I delight in nothing more than in being close to Nature's heart.[1]

Helen Keller, from a letter to Alexander Graham Bell, June 2, 1899

Down the slopes of the wooded hills there came a long sighing breath that set the leaves a wavering,
down the long dancing corridors of the woodland.

It told a tale of the piles of drifting snow, of fluttering grouse, and wind swept ice, of strife and
hardships; yet [the] trees sang on with a glad heart, for it told more to them than hardships and
struggle, it told of gorgeous costume[s] of colored woods and fleecy sky; and so the leaves sang on,
with the joy of childhood.[ii]

Edwin Way Teale, from “The Moon of Falling Leaves,” typed manuscript, ca. 1909-1910
In 1943, amidst unprecedented slaughter that would add the word “genocide” to the common lexicon, author Edwin Way Teale introduced to the world a boy who sat perched atop the roof of his grandparents’ Indiana farmhouse, watching at once the divergent aerial paths of a bald eagle soaring on high and a gray sandhill crane hugging the earth in low, loping flight. The boy imagined what he might see through the eyes of each bird. He wondered how each might see the dune landscape, the “shining, mysterious land of gold beyond the treetops at the horizon’s edge.” Less than two miles from the roof he straddled lay a “fragment of untamed wilderness” where the boy had heard that “wolves still howled among the snow-clad dunes on winter nights.” Such wilderness stirred the boy’s imagination, and so, too, did the north woods at the edge of his grandparents’ 90-acre farm, “a mysterious realm of little trails and piles of yellow sand dug from burrows.” In 1943, the world needed this boy, and the boy, now grown and suffering the trials of war, still needed that childhood world of wilderness, of unfettered exploration, of natural order, of simple beauty.

The boy, born on June 2, 1899, had entered the world as two of his future heroes, John Muir and John Burroughs, occupied adjacent state rooms on the steamer SS George W Elder en route to Alaska during the Harriman Alaska Expedition. The expedition, funded by American railroad magnate Edward Harriman, assembled the nation’s most accomplished scientists, natural historians, and artists to conduct a comprehensive two-month survey of the Alaskan coast all the way to Siberia. Of that day, when the expedition rounded the coast of British Columbia, Burroughs later wrote, “I had often seen as much color and brilliancy in the sky, but never before such depth and richness of blue and purple upon the mountains and upon the water.” On that same day, a hemisphere away, the Malolos Congress, the National Assembly of the Philippines, declared war against the United States, a war it would take the American military three years to win, at a cost of more than 4200 troops. The boy, too, would later suffer the losses of successive world wars. One of these would haunt him for the remainder of his life, would inhabit his dreams decade after decade, a perpetual “nightmare at dawn.” But that loss, on the day of his birth, was a generation removed. Finally, on the day the boy entered the world, Helen Keller wrote to her lifelong benefactor Alexander Graham Bell, to whom she would later dedicate her 1903 autobiography *The Story of My Life*. To Bell, she confided, “I delight in nothing more than in being close to Nature’s heart,” and few statements could more aptly reflect the future trajectory of the boy clad in blue overalls, for whom the natural world would be at once a playground and a sanctuary, a nourisher and a balm. While the boy would undergo countless evolutions during the 81 years to follow, the hold of the natural world upon him would remain a constant, a holdfast in a relentless sea of waxing change.

Edwin Way Teale, on the fourth page of his 1943 book *Dune Boy: The Early Years of a Naturalist*, revealed the identity of the overall-clad boy, who through so many trips up the shingled roof of his grandparents’ farm had left a visible trail to the ridge like “the thin trail of a
“It was thus,” he wrote, “as the boy in the blue overalls, that I spent many hours during the long summer days of my earliest boyhood.” These summers and numerous Christmas and Easter holidays spent at Lone Oak, the 90-acre farm of his maternal grandparents Edwin and Jemima Way, formed “the most memorable months” of his childhood. Decades later, in the darkest hours of adult life, “in nights of strain and days of trouble,” Edwin would return often in memory to “the sounds of the dune country night”: the alternate refrains of katydids and crickets, the shadow-calls of nighthawks and owls, the susurrations of poultry and nesting storks.

Through the lens of time, Lone Oak became for Edwin what Tintern Abbey had been to English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, a sustaining sanctuary of memory. Amidst copious notes for his never-published autobiography, Edwin, reflecting on memories of Lone Oak, copied out the following lines from Wordsworth:

But oft in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet...

Amidst “the tensions, the pressures, the constraints, [and] the strain” of a “desperately unhappy” childhood, Lone Oak was, and in recollection always would be, a sanctuary. “I never was free from the bridle and the bit,” Edwin wrote later, “except at Lone Oak—Dear, lifesaving Lone Oak!”

For Edwin, the school year spent in the industrial city of Joliet, Illinois and holidays spent at his grandparents’ dune country farm near Furnessville, Indiana divided life “into a kind of mental Arctic night and day.” The metaphor was well chosen. The Arctic night represented a spirit-choking home life; school days teeming with bullies and marked by the chronic shadow of personal failure; an oppressive, soot-stained, limestone landscape. Sprawling along the United States Steel company’s outer rail belt around Chicago, Joliet attracted “Wire mills, coke plants, stove companies, horseshoe factories, brick companies, foundries, boiler and tank companies, machine manufacturers, can companies, bridge builders, plating factories, [and] steel car shops.” “Everything in our vicinity,” Edwin recalled later, “was begrimed and gray..., the air always scented with coal smoke.” Soot from the locomotive stacks of the Michigan Central Railroad to the north and the Elgin, Joliet, and Eastern line to the east often forced a second
washing of his mother's sheets drying on the line. [xxi] The Teales' Washington Street home was little better. "When winter came," Edwin wrote, "...storm windows and doors virtually sealed us in. From December to March we seemed to breathe the same dead air scented with coal gas and cooking." [xxii] And there was the specter of Edwin's mother, Clara Louise Teale, whose "rigid training," "unending inspection," and "continual consideration of every act" he committed constrained him more than any physical landscape, interior or exterior, could have done. Her pedagogical tyranny, he reflected later, "made me turn to nature. Here was freedom, here was liberty. Here my tether was lengthened or left behind."[xxiii]

The contrast between Joliet and Lone Oak could not have been more stark. In Joliet, inmates from the Illinois State Penitentiary carved limestone from the earth with forced labor.[xxiv] Smokestacks lined the horizon in all directions, spewing from industrial furnaces a dark cloud that blanketed the city. Images of the time, intended to extol the advanced industry of the city, instead illustrate the dual toll of corporate greed on human health and the human spirit.[xxv] At Lone Oak, clean, crisp air revealed "hills of gold shining in the sun" and "the blue hills of the Valparaiso moraine against the lighter blue of the summer sky."[xxvi] In this land of boyhood freedom, "prevailing winds...carried quartz grains to the southeastern tip" of Lake Michigan, forming "the dunes themselves as well as the great blowouts and the small ribbed patterns on the beach sand...."[xxvii] While Joliet offered only "a haunted place beneath the smoke,[xxviii] Lone Oak offered a place of deliverance beneath the "great clamor of the geese and waterfowl circling in the [late-day] light."[xxix] For a boy liberated from the confines of city life, Lone Oak was as worthy a site for exploration as the Alaskan coastline was for Burroughs and Muir. At his grandparents' farm, Edwin fixed his eyes with equal acuity on the sweep of the vast dune landscape and that of the long, emerald leg of the night-calling cicada. No titan of industry funded his expeditions. His stateroom was an attic, his steamer a rambling farmhouse, his benefactors wise and loving grandparents. The influence of Gram and Gramp Way upon him would ultimately exceed that of his own parents, and no single factor would shape more profoundly the trajectory of his life than the glorious days he spent in the beautiful, free country of Lone Oak, the childhood landscape he recalled, nearly three-quarters of a century later, as "that home of my heart."[xxx]

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Notes


[iv] Ibid. 2.

[v] Ibid. 5.


[xiii] Ibid. 6.


[xx] Ibid. 2

[xxi] Ibid. 6

[xxii] Ibid. 6


[xxiv] Ibid.


[xxvii] Ibid. 3.


Losing the Remembrance of Former Things: 
Reexamining the Life and Writing of Edwin Way Teale

Posted on March 16, 2017 by Melissa Watterworth Batt

By Richard Telford

Author’s Note: Though the product of many hours of research, writing, and revision, this chapter is nevertheless a draft; it will be subject to revision as the larger book in which it will appear takes shape. The chapter published below, “Losing the Remembrance of Former Things,” follows two preceding chapters, published in January and February on this site: “The Lonely Suffering of the Fallible Heart,” which can be viewed here, and “Throwing Bricks at the Temple,” which can be viewed here. For greatest clarity, these chapters should be read in order. This present chapter is being published on the 72nd anniversary of the combat death of David Allen Teale near the end of World War II. David figures prominently in this and the preceding chapters. The timing of this publication is an apt reminder of the oft-forgotten sacrifices of previous wars. I welcome critical response, either in the comment section below or through direct e-mail. I am grateful to the Archives and Special Collections staff for providing me the opportunity to share this work, and to the Woodstock Academy Board of Trustees for awarding me a sabbatical for the 2016-2017 school year so that this work could be undertaken. Contextual information about the project and manuscript can be found here.

Chapter 11: Losing the Remembrance of Former Things

Is there a thing of which is said,
“See, this is new”? 
It has been already,
In the ages before us.
There is no remembrance of former things,
Nor will there be any remembrance
Of later things yet to happen
Among those who come after.[i]

Ecclesiastes 1: 9-13

Of course, there are at present, and no doubt will continue to be for many generations yet, a number of fire-eating war-mongers and dashing blades who will always bounce about the delights of battle and the salubrious qualities of slaughter. But these, when genuine, are atavisms, and must gradually become as extinct as dodos, as the world advances in sense and experience…[T]he New Army…has seen and felt a very great deal too much of the reality of war to be under any illusion as to its loveliness or enjoyability. Unredeemed horror is the whole thing, a horror that breaks up the soul of man into a gibbering wreckage.[ii]

Reginald Farrer, The Void of War: Letters from Three Fronts, 1918

To be killed in war is an event beyond our yes and no. It is a great sorrow but not a tragedy. The collapse of character alone is tragedy; not the events that test it from without. A single day of life with courage and character towers above the years of a centenarian if lived as a plaything of fate.[iii]

Edwin Way Teale, January 3, 1945
On the back side of the Norman Rockwell April Fool cover of The Saturday Evening Post that Edwin sent to David on Easter Sunday of 1945 is a full-page advertisement for the Parker "51" Aeromatic fountain pen. A strong, sure hand, its palm towards the viewer, holds the pen delicately between extended thumb and middle finger. The index finger steadies it from behind, the nib pointed upward. The hand is positioned just as the ad's viewer might position his or her own, not just to inspect "this 'most wanted' pen in the world" but to appreciate the faux sapphire appointments on its engraved golden cap, to examine the understated black barrel with concealed nib, to feel the heft in hand. In the text below, The Parker Pen Company of Janesville, Wisconsin reminds the viewer that its production of "rocket fuzes and other war materiel" has stopped pen production. However, with the war's end near, the ad continues, "More Parker '51s' are on the way." The ad's large script headline, bisected by the pen and hand, assures the reader, "Sooner than you think...a Parker '51' may be yours."[iv]

In two letters sent in the fall of 1944, one from England to his mother on November[v] and the other from France to his father on November 16,[vi] David Teale asked his parents to buy him a Parker "51" fountain pen. "If [the] cost is too great for your purse," he wrote Edwin, "take the required amount from my nest egg."[vii] On June 18, 1945, however, the Teales realized it was a purchase they would never make, at least not on David's behalf. On that day, when Edwin Stroh's father had called to report that the War Department had declared his son killed in action, the Teales lost all hope that David would return to them. Nearly two months later, on August 8, Edwin would write, "It was that afternoon in June that the bottom collapsed and let us drop into darkness. It could have happened. We saw finally it must have happened to David.[viii] That day of cascading hopes brought "a violent thunderstorm in late afternoon," and Edwin continued "working in a daze on another chapter."[ix] The writing was torturous, but it was necessary torture, an act of survival, just as it had been in the preceding months. It was more so now. "Will I ever be able to finish it or go on?" he questioned. "Every line seems the last I can possibly write."[x] Nonetheless, he persevered, and in the coming days he would work to exhaustion to keep The Lost Woods on schedule, not in spite of David's fate but in answer to it. "It is worthwhile work, work I would want to do up to my final hour," Edwin continued on June 18. "I hope I can meet this worst blow life can give with my head up without cringing or giving in. I think I can; but it is the weeks and months and years beyond I dread. How wonderful our whole family is and has always been, so close together."[xi]
Two days later, on June 20, another of the packages they had sent David was returned, and their response to it, which Edwin recorded in the Guild diary, illustrates his and Nellie’s complete loss of hope: “A package comes back—This one marked ‘missing’ by Lt. Hawkins. But that means nothing. Our despair is complete.”[xii] Now, they simply waited for the inevitable. On that same day, the Teales received a letter from Walter F. Gould, the grandfather of Harold F. Gould Jr., explaining that his grandson was coming home on furlough from Europe before shipping out for the Pacific, and it might be possible for the Teales to see him or at least speak by telephone. Walter Gould could fully understand the Teales’ suffering. He informed Edwin both by telephone and letter that he had “had one son (31 years old, single) killed in that heavy drive in Belgium” the day after Christmas of 1944, roughly a week after David had witnessed and survived the pummeling of his regiment by German 88s. “I don’t think we will ever get over it,” the elder Gould told Edwin.[xiii] Just as the Teales were doing now, Walter Gould had reached out to a fellow soldier in his deceased son’s unit to understand more fully the circumstances of his death. In reply, he had gotten “a very nice answer telling one a good deal more about his death than the Army had told me.”[xiv] Though David’s fate now seemed certain, Edwin and Nellie, too, wanted to understand the events that had led to David’s death, events on which the younger Gould could, and later would, shed light.

A week after receiving Walter Gould’s letter, there was still no word from his grandson. The implications of Edwin Stroh’s confirmed death weighed heavily upon the Teales. Edwin noted, “Nellie and I plan to spend 2 weeks at Concord for our vacation in September.”[xv] There is no inclusion of the possibility that David might join them if he returned, for they now knew that he would not. One year earlier, on July 18, 1944, Edwin had written to David during a vacation with Nellie at Crocker Lake in Maine while David was at Fort Jackson: “We will have a good time for you at the camp. I hope another year, you can be along…if you aren’t walking down the coast!”[xvi] He referenced this walk down the coast a second time in a letter sent eleven days later: ‘When you take your long walk all by yourself, after the war, you ought to read John Muir’s ‘A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf.’ It is very good and would be right up your alley.”[xvii] But for David, there would not be “another year,” and Muir’s book would go unread. One year later, as the Teales planned their September Concord trip, they knew that David would not join them, and the timing of their departure from Baldwin was deliberate. On September 8, 1945, David would have turned twenty. Where better to find solace and shelter from their grief on that day than in Thoreau’s country. The following night, Edwin began reading Van Wyck Brooks’ The Flowering of New England, which had won the Pulitzer the year Edwin published Grassroot Jungles —“at least the chapter on Thoreau at Walden,”[xviii] Edwin qualified.

On June 28, Edwin once again found his footing, if tenuously, in his work on The Lost Woods. “On this evening,” he wrote, “I print ‘The Lost Woods’ on the top of the final manuscript box and stamp…my home address at top and bottom. This regular rite—engaged in since ‘Grassroot Jungles’ days—makes me feel a little nearer the completion of my long labors.”[xix] Such small, symbolic acts mattered. Each was an act of control, even as his life with David and their life as a family, “always…so close together,”[xx] had been rended by a complex, fickle chain of events over which he could have no influence. “In spite of everything,” he would later write, “there is nothing in the world I would rather be doing than working on my book. That, with all its complexities and pains, is the thing I want most to do.”[xxi]

In the days that followed, Edwin worked steadily in The Lost Woods, besieged by reminders of David’s absence. “So much to do!” he declared.[xxii] On Sunday, June 24, he taught the last Victors Sunday School class of the year, having a “fine talk” with two brothers, Warren and Edgar Fong. “So ends the Victors year,” he wrote that evening, “the last year when Davy was linked to it. Twelve years I’ve had the class. Can I keep on if David is gone?”[xxiii] On the following day, Mrs. Selby, a neighbor, brought Lieutenant Henry Loud to see the Teales, ostensibly to give them some insight on what might have happened to David, but, Edwin noted, he had “little to tell us of help on David. Depressed.”[xxiv] Two days later, on June 27, Forrest Dayton paid a visit to the Teales. Forrest, in Edwin’s estimation “David’s closest friend,” had likewise been deployed to
catching up on entering my Nature Notes, taking pictures, juggling around the order of the
garden, sitting at a wooden table I found under the wagon shed and
Garden: “Today was as perfect a Fourth as the cloud that hangs over our spirits would permit. All
day was bittersweet at best. Not surprisingly, they spent the entire day in the shelter of the Insect
Day. For most Americans, it was a day to celebrate a long-sought victory, but for the Teales the
Independence Day, July 4. The Fourth of July had special significance only two months after VE-
after the completion of
1941, October 15 had for the Teales, with Edwin’s departure from Popular Science Monthly,
become their personal Independence Day, a holiday they would celebrate yearly for the
remainder of their life together. On July 3, 1945, Edwin’s visit with his former colleagues, one day
after the completion of The Lost Woods, was followed a day later by the American holiday of
Independence Day, July 4. The Fourth of July had special significance only two months after VE-
Day. For most Americans, it was a day to celebrate a long-sought victory, but for the Teales the
day was bittersweet at best. Not surprisingly, they spent the entire day in the shelter of the Insect
Garden: “Today was as perfect a Fourth as the cloud that hangs over our spirits would permit. All
day long in the open at the garden, sitting at a wooden table I found under the wagon shed and
catching up on entering my Nature Notes, taking pictures, juggling around the order of the
chapters and so forth." It was, Edwin added, "A ‘Thoreau Day’—unhurried and out-of-doors."[xxxiii] Nellie, who was and always would be Edwin’s working partner in his writing life, read and offered comment on ten of the new chapters in The Lost Woods. Such an unhurried day was a rarity. "Tomorrow," Edwin wrote, "I begin the grind—revision and copying—that must get the book in before the end of this month!"[xxxiv] Were David returning, this Fourth of July might have been near-perfect. Edwin knew, however, that he would not, and this fact was driven home the following day when several more of their letters to David were returned. These too were marked “Deceased” but lacked the previous change to “Missing.” On each letter, to the hand-written word “Deceased” was added a jarring one-word postal stamp: “Verified.”[xxxv]

Burying himself still deeper in his labors on the book, Edwin set for himself a schedule that would bring The Lost Woods to its final form by July 26. It required the revision and retyping of thirty chapters in twenty-one days. With the mass of assistive computer technology available to us in the twenty-first century, along with the unprecedented access to information provided by the Internet, we are largely ignorant of the sheer physical labors that an author undertook in 1945 to bring a book to publication. We can do a great deal more, now, with less labor, but one wonders if the ease of publication has largely contributed to us doing considerably less with the more we have been given. For Edwin to remain on schedule, he would have to type an average of two revised chapters per day. On July 5, despite the emotional drain of the return of their letters to David, Edwin finished two chapters.[xxxvi] On the following day, he completed “The Striking Serpent” and “On the Trail of Thoreau,” bringing the total to four and keeping him on schedule. It was a good start, and Edwin, realizing that speed and efficiency were critical if he was to maintain this pace, devised “with paper clips and an empty velour Black box […] a ms. holder that holds the sheet I am copying upright and aids me greatly.”[xxxvii]

The following day, July 7, Edwin managed to type three additional chapters. “Laboremus!” he declared at the opening of his Guild diary entry for that day, a Latin word meaning “Let us do our work!” Later in the century, the phrase “Laboremus! Let's get to work!” was widely attributed to twentieth-century historian Arnold J. Toynbee as a favored motto.[xxxviii] For Edwin, however, at the end of the first week of July in 1945, it was less a life philosophy and more a pragmatic necessity. His completion of three chapters on the previous day allowed him, on July 8, to embark on a 7 a.m. “fishing trip on the bay with the Verity’s,” Baldwin neighbors. It was, Edwin noted, a much-needed “good time and good rest.” Returning home by 2:00 in the afternoon, Edwin slept for several hours, rising at 4:30, “half asleep,” and began typing “The Mystery of the Vanishing Flies,” finishing it by 8:00 that evening.[xxxix] This kept up the needed rate of two retyped chapters completed per day, a pace he managed to maintain on July 9 and 10 as well.

“No word of David—expected July 2 letter from Government,” Edwin noted on July 9[xl] In the April 3 confirmation letter that followed the telegram notifying the Teales of David’s MIA status, Major General James Alexander Ulio of the War Department had written, “If no information is received in the meantime, I will communicate with you again three months from the date of this letter.”[xli] Those three months had elapsed, with one week added. Though certain of its contents, Edwin likely feared that the arrival of this letter—certain to mirror the official communications received by the Strohs and the Alvears—might cripple his ability to keep to the demanding schedule of the days ahead. It would be a staggering, final blow. Edwin’s feverish work during this time to bring The Lost Woods to completion was in part a race against the arrival of that blow, especially now that the book was nearly done. Just as he had worked diligently throughout the day before V-E Day—"...in case there is bad news I will have that much done and that will help”—he did so again on July 9.

On July 10, CBS Radio called to invite Edwin to be a guest “on the ‘Invitation to Learning’ program…on Maeterlinck’s ‘Life of the Bee.’” The Nobel Prize-winning Maeterlinck had written to Edwin after the latter’s 1940 publication of The Golden Throng: A Book About Bees, declaring, “This will be the Bible of the Bees!” The praise, Edwin noted, “lifted my feet off the ground for a moment….”[xlii] With authentic regret, Edwin declined the CBS Radio invitation, knowing he would “need every minute for my own book!”[xliii] Having completed two more chapters, he retired to bed at 6:00 that evening with a sore throat and fever—the strain of his working pace taking its toll—and spent some time “going over chapters in bed.”[xliv] Twelve chapters were
Edwin awoke on July 15, a Sunday, to what would be daylong rain. He stayed in bed until after 9 a.m. following “a sleepless night with dreams of David.” On the previous day, he had begun the final retyping of “The Lost Woods,” the book’s opening chapter. In it, he recalled simpler days spent with Gram and Gramp Way at Lone Oak. He retold the story of a trip by horse-drawn bobsled with Gramp Way “to a distant woods” to gather stored stove wood. Growing weary of loading the sled, Edwin, then six, had “wandered about, small as an atom, among the great trees—oak and beech, hickory and ash and sycamore.” He had been “at once enchanted and fearful,” and the experience made “a profound impression” on the six-year-old boy, filling him with “an endless curiosity about this lonely tract and all of its inhabitants.” Edwin had searched in vain for these woods with his childhood friend Dewey Gunder on March 16, 1945 during his Midwestern lecture tour—forty years after his only visit to them, and the same day David was declared missing. It is hardly surprising that Edwin’s dreams the previous night were occupied by David, to whom, like the lost woods of childhood, Edwin could not return except in memory—the inadequate, longing-filled shell of former joys.

Edwin spent time that day revising only the “first page and a half of ‘The Lost Woods’” before shifting his attention—perhaps because of his deep emotional connections to the chapter—to “Boundaries of the Night,” on which he spent time “revising and inserting more natural history.” Edward H. Dodd Jr. had suggested in March that the book as a whole, while representing Edwin’s finest work to date, was in need of “more natural-history facts.” By early afternoon, the eighteenth retyped chapter was done, and he read for several hours in Volume II of Thoreau’s journals, a shelter from the emotional rigors of a difficult day.

By July 19, Edwin had revised and retyped twenty-one chapters in fourteen days, 223 pages in total. He was up at 5:20 a.m. after a “wakeful night.” He reviewed some of Nellie’s corrections and set about preparing the first two-thirds of the final manuscript for submission to Dodd, Mead for the production of galley proofs. He ordered and numbered the pages and by noon had “the whole thing wrapped up in its Keeboard ‘The Lost Woods’ box to deliver.” He took the 12:45 train into the city and arrived in a downpour, taking “muggy, stifling subways by round-about way” to Dodd, Mead’s 28th Street office, probably to keep the manuscript—not himself—out of the rain as much as possible. During a “good meeting” with Edward H. Dodd, Jr., the latter suggested a possible reissue of a revised version of Edwin’s 1942 *Byways to Adventure*. He also asked Edwin to “supply photos and [an] introduction” for a forthcoming reissue from Dodd, Mead of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*—a project which, for Edwin, was especially meaningful in light of recent events. Dodd certainly knew this, and the offering of this project—or at least its timing—may have been intended in part as a modest balm for Edwin’s great suffering, an occupier for a troubled mind and heart. Back in Baldwin by 4:30 that afternoon, Edwin and Nellie went to the theater to celebrate the accomplishments and the future prospects of the day, both of which gave further shelter from, or perhaps tolerable passage through, the present darkness.
“Snowflake chapter…in sweltering heat” and quit for the day. That night, he garnered his optimism as best he could. “Rested now,” he wrote, “and ready to go!” On the following day, however, his fatigue set fully in. With great exasperation, he wrote, “Copy page 1 of ‘Wildlife at Walden’ over 10 times—making typing mistakes over and over. Ready to go through the roof!” Here again we are reminded of the absence of a delete key in 1945. “My head like a rock,” he lamented, “with heat and fatigue—residue.” Residue. The residue of longing; the residue of trampled hopes; the residue of time’s indifferent forward march. Still, by evening he had finished the chapter and even took time to mull over plans for “a new book on the injurious insects.” Of necessity, he kept his gaze forward.

While toiling away on the first full draft of The Lost Woods, Edwin had put off writing “The Calm of the Stars”—what the reader might reasonably call the David chapter—until the end. On July 22, however, after a quick trip to the wagon shed at the Insect Garden “to photograph baby swallows,” he set to work on revising it ahead of the other six chapters that remained to finalize. He wrote only one sentence on this effort in the Guild diary: “Fall to on ‘The Calm of the Stars’ and finish it before lunch.” With the looming likelihood of receiving confirmation of David’s death—both from the War Department and an expected letter from PFC Harold F. Gould Jr.—Edwin likely strove to complete the chapter as quickly as he could. On the previous day he had expressed his “hope to go faster after today,” and he did so. After completing “The Calm of the Stars,” he went on to revise and retype another chapter. “Five chapters to do in four days,” he noted, “then all will be done!”

The next day, following the pattern of recent weeks—an alternating rhythm of productivity and debilitation—Edwin fell prey to the latter:

Up feeling dead-headed. The successive days of rain; the high-pressure work; the strain of David; the suspense of waiting for a call from Harold Gould—the returning member of Davy’s patrol—and the call from Dodd on how he liked the first 21 chapters—all combined to stall my engine completely.

In total, Edwin completed “less than 2 pages on ‘World of the Wild Bee,’” disheartening output in light of the revision timeline for the final chapters. Edwin was likely forthright about his struggles with Edward H. Dodd, Jr. during a telephone call later that day. He noted afterward, “I get a reprieve; don’t have to hand the final chapters in until next Monday.” Feeling relieved, he and Nellie went out to see a movie and were in “bed and asleep by 9” with the “hope to do better tomorrow!” That hope would not, however, come to fruition.

On July 24, 1945, the storm cloud that had loomed since April 2 finally and fully broke open. There would be no word from David, not now, not ever. There would be only word of David, and it would come first from Harold F. Gould, Jr., of Plymouth, Massachusetts, in a letter written on small stationary whose only letterhead was the figure of a running G.I. clad in drab fatigues and clasp an M1 Garand rifle, bayonet mounted, a field bag trailing from his ammunition belt. The soldier grins at the letter’s reader—a mask muting the “unredeemed horrors” of war—and that grin must have made the Teales shudder.
Gould began by apologizing for not calling, as camp prohibitions had forbidden doing so.

“Anyway,” he wrote, “I thought it would be better if I wrote you a letter. I figured that I could explain it to you better.”[lxvii] He wrote of how he and David “used to chum around together quite often,” and how the Tiger Patrol “did mostly night work.” In that capacity, Gould added, David “was very courageous,” and “all the boys liked Dave very much.”[lxviii] These formalities aside—and one imagines the Teales having the impulse to skip over them while, at the same time, dreading to do so—he came “down to the point” and detailed the events that led to David’s death on the Moselle River:

We had received our orders from commander that we were to cross the Mosel[le] River and get some important information that we needed for the attack. We had twelve men in the patrol and four rubber boats. Three men were assigned to each rubber boat. We had been broken up into two six man patrols. We all started in our rubber boats across the river, just as the boats were nearing the enemy side we were opened up on by machine guns. The boys shot back at them until they ran out of ammunition. Then they withdrew so that they could get more ammunition. They came back again and started in their boats across. They met heavy opposition and the boats were sprayed with bullets. Some of the compartments in the rubber boats were shot to pieces so I guess the boys got a little excited when they saw this so they started jumping over. That was their gravest mistake…Especially for Dave because before he went on this patrol he told us he couldn’t swim. He still volunteered to go on the patrol and I’ve always admired him for that.
The last time they ever saw Dave he was in the water calling for help but none of the boys could reach him because he went under this time and never came up. It’s very strange that the army couldn’t find his body.[lxix]

To this account, Harold Gould added a second reference to David’s inability to swim:

*If David could swim he would have had a good chance of coming out alive. I still remember what he said before we went on patrol. He said “I don't know how to swim but I’ll volunteer to go on patrol.* [*]

This must have confused the Teales greatly. David was, by Edwin’s account, a strong swimmer, a fact supported by a Boy Scouts of America patrol record book among David’s personal belongings. In it, David, as Patrol Leader, had tracked the rank advancements of all of the boys in the Flying Eagle patrol, including himself. On the merit badge roster, beside David’s name, the requisite boxes are checked off for the swimming and lifesaving merit badges.

Harold Gould closed:

*I liked your son very much Mr. Teale and I was very proud of him. I know you will always be too.[lxx]*

Such a statement, though well-intentioned and certainly appreciated, was nonetheless an arrow to the heart. In mid-April, when hope still lived, Edwin had written of David, “He is one of which we are proud in so many ways. And, viewed from the most distant star—remote from our emotions and longings—that is all that counts.”[lxxi] But David’s return, alive, had also counted; so too had the bright future before him—the long walk down the Pacific coast, the possibility of future matriculation at Earlham, the return to Weller Pond, and so much more. All of these would never be. No pride could mitigate the staggering loss of David’s future. “This is it!” Edwin wrote after reading Harold Gould’s letter, “How terrible we feel.”[lxxii] The news was not official, but it was confirmed days later by a letter from PFC Lester Snider, the last Tiger Patrol member to see David alive. There is no record of Edwin having completed any work on *The Lost Woods* on July 24; even that labor of his heart could offer no refuge. As if an insult to their grief, the afternoon brought the return by special delivery of the package in which Edwin had sent David the Grenfell parka in March, eight days before the latter’s death. It was one more manifestation of a future that would not be. Boxed in thick lines of black ink, Edwin wrote the following in the Guild diary:

*On this day hear definitely, but unofficially, that David was killed on the Moselle River near Coblenz, Germany, on the night of March 15-16, 1945—*

To this he added a bracketed postscript:

*How long and how devoutly I hoped this entry would not have to be made!* [lxxiii]

No tears stain this page. Harold Gould’s letter offered not a revelation but a confirmation of what, in their hearts, Edwin and Nellie already knew. Edwin Stroh’s death had confirmed David’s, and both had been foretold by the death of Antonio Alvear. Harold Gould’s account, though vitally important to the Teales, could serve only as a coda. They certainly cried on July 24, 1945, but they did so in the privacy of their own collapsing world. Edwin left no trace of those tears to revisit later, neither through the narrative of his words nor through their partial dissolution by tears on the page. It is an apt analogy for the turning inward that would follow, both from the greater world and, despite their mutual devotion, often from each other.

* * * * * * * *

The day after receiving Harold Gould’s letter, Edwin reached him by telephone. Gould shared that *“only 4 out of 12—only 1 out of 6 with David’s 2 boats—returned alive after crossing the*
Moselle."[lxxiv] One of those four, PFC Lester Snider, of Hennessey, Oklahoma, had been in charge of David's boat and was "the last one to see David alive."[lxxv] Snider had returned home, and Edwin wrote to him that afternoon. "Our son, David Teale, was reported missing in action on March 16th," Edwin began, "and we have had no word from the government since….I have learned that you went across at the same time David did and that you were the last person to see him alive. If you can give us any information about what happened, we will be most deeply grateful."[lxxvi] Snider received Edwin's inquiry on July 30 and replied the following day, offering his account:

Six of the boys including your son David volunteered for reconnaissance patrol. We crossed to the east of the Moselle River in two boats. Your son David + another boy were with me in the one boat. We made a successful reconnaissance of enemy positions + possible landing places.

While making the return trip across the river we encountered heavy enemy machine gun + sniper fire. Our boat was hit + sank. And one of the boys was hit but don't know exactly which one. The last I saw of either of the boys was when they went over the side of the boat into the water.[lxxvii]

Just as Gould had done, Lester Snider praised David's selflessness: “I didn’t know your son very long Mr. Teale. But he was well liked by all the boys. And he was a son to be proud of. He didn’t have to go on this mission, but realizing the danger, volunteered to do so.”[lxxviii] David had volunteered; for this he had died. Although Edwin, half a year earlier, had written of war death that “the collapse of character alone was tragedy,”[lxxix] this abstract philosophy abruptly withered with David’s death. David’s character had not collapsed on the night of March 15, 1945; his courage and his character had towered above those of others. For this David had died, and his death was a tragedy. His life, no matter how its worth had been elevated by his actions, was no less “a plaything of fate,”[lxxx] and this embittered Edwin terribly. “All hope gone,” he wrote. “Life goes on no matter how heavy the heart! Life outlives the joy of life; the spring is wound up and, normally, has to run down. And it can’t be rewound.”[lxxxi] David’s spring had not run down. It never would. It had been cracked by the violent folly of war, and with that fracture had gone all the youthful tension of future possibility.

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Chapter 10: Throwing Bricks at the Temple

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all. [1]

Ecclesiastes 9: 11

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. [2]

Stephen Crane, “The Open Boat,” 1897

Box 219 of the Teale Papers in Archives and Special Collections at the University of Connecticut houses only one object, a Nazi flag measuring roughly 88 inches by 46 inches. Its folds through 71 years of storage have become deeply ingrained, and the viewer is hesitant to pull and flatten it too much. The remaining half of its red field, torn along a diagonal axis, is still bold. It is a monument to a long-dead empire—a Reich, in its own anachronistic parlance—and it is a monument to the fifteen young men who signed their names in the four quadrants formed by the perpendicular bars of the angled cross that forms the center of the black swastika sewn to the circular white central field. Laying the flag down horizontally, as its signers clearly did 72 years ago.
ago, the viewer’s eyes are drawn first to bold green script: “Tiger Patrol 346th Infantry.” The four components of this inscription, staggered across the white field, step down the dark lines of the debased Hindu symbol, the second and the third occupying the horizontal pockets formed by the swastika’s angled tails. The capital letters T, P, and I are drawn in rough, oversized calligraphy, and the infantry numbers are drawn with like flourish. Pride, hope, just action for a just cause—all are expressed by the added insignia of this captured flag.

Just as the swastika divides the patrol and regiment designations, so too does it roughly divide the names of the signers. In the north quadrant of the white central field we see the signatures of Antonio J. Alvear, John A. Thompson, Eugene B. Pings, Frank Minnis; along the north-facing tail of the swastika are the signatures of George W. Muschinske, Roy Salame, and Edwin A. Stroh. In the west quadrant are the signatures of Lester L. Snider and Merle H. Patison; adjacent to them and to the right of the scripted “346th” are those of Mahlon Angstead, Billy Richardson, and Ernest Sachau. In the south quadrant, there is only one signature, that of John Steele. Finally, in the east quadrant, moving south to north, are the signatures of Irving J. Greenfield, Harold F. Gould, Jr., Bill Cummins, and, finally, David A. Teale. One can readily imagine Edwin and Nellie Teale intently searching for David’s signature—for any evidence of their only child, declared Missing in Action “somewhere in Germany” five weeks earlier—when the flag arrived to their Baldwin, Long Island home on May 9, 1945. Noting the flag’s arrival in his Guild diary for 1945, Edwin expressed the hope that he and Nellie might “get in touch with those near here” to learn more of the events leading up to David’s disappearance.[3]

Five weeks earlier, on April 3, the day after receiving the first War Department telegram, Edwin wrote, “For so many days, since [leaving Popular Science Monthly in] 1941, I have been awakening to happy dreams in the work I love—Now we wake to the reality of a nightmare we have dreaded—we are hoping and believing that Davy is ‘safe’ as a prisoner.”[4] Both Edwin and Nellie clung tenuously to such hope and belief as bulwarks against waves of grief that now defined “one of the great crises of our lives.”[5] Three days later, on April 6, Edwin wrote, “Little by little, like an island eroding and disappearing in the flood, our standing-space has decreased—our hopes are now basing themselves on other hopes. Grief comes in waves.”[6] Still, the Teales armored themselves with “thoughts of hope: that patrols are likely to be captured; that the wars may end soon and all prisoners will be released.”[7] David’s work in the Tiger Patrol, conducted mostly near and behind enemy lines, justified this hope, but it likewise placed him in
greater danger, and Edwin wrote on April 6 that such hopes were “only small, shining stars in the universal darkness.”[8] Expressing the despair that was the constant counterpoint of such hopes, he wrote, “The sun is gone from the sky.”[9]

Nearly thirty years later, in 1974, coming to terms with his newly received prostate cancer diagnosis, Edwin would reflect back on the agonizing uncertainty of the 132 days during which David was declared missing and his fate unknown to them: “Remembering the year David was missing in action and contemplating my current condition, it occurs to me that, in some ways, it is easier to face the inevitable than the uncertain.”[10] In the early days of April 1945, however, uncertainty was exceedingly more palatable than relinquishing hope to the certainty of David’s death.

The Teales straddled a thin, ever-shifting line between despair and hope, and the fragmental evidence of David’s fate that came to them throughout that dark spring was alternately palliative and jarring. David’s final letter, written March 14, arrived on April 5, thirty-three days before the delivery of the Nazi flag. “How precious and how hard to read,” Edwin wrote of the March 14 letter in the Guild diary, adding, “The date on the outside was March 19th and the postboy thought that meant he was all right”[11]—a thin ray of hope. Edwin found “relief from the pain in my heart reading Thoreau’s journals all afternoon,”[12] a practice he would continue in the coming weeks. In Thoreau’s writings and those of W.H. Hudson, he found sanctuary. On April 5, Edwin noted, “Newsday” as well as ‘Review-Star’” had “long announcement[s]” on David’s MIA status. “What a joyous day it would be,” he added, “to see the write-ups changed for the better! I alternate between confidence of hope and the depth of black despair.” Still, he was determined to “hope to the end!”[13]

On the following day, April 6, Edwin finished reading the first volume of Thoreau’s journals.

The Lonely Suffering of the Fallible Heart: Reexamining the Life and Writing of Edwin Way Teale

Author’s note: Though the product of many hours of research, writing, and revision, this chapter is nevertheless a draft; it will be subject to revision as the larger book in which it will appear takes shape. Still, I believe it begins an important process of bringing renewed attention to natural history writer and photographer Edwin Way Teale. Teale himself frequently published chapters of his books first in the popular journals of his day, such as Natural History, Audubon, Nature, and Coronet. I welcome critical response, either in the comment section here or through direct e-mail. I am grateful to the Archives and Special Collections staff for providing me the opportunity to share this work, and to the Woodstock Academy Board of Trustees for awarding me a sabbatical for the 2016-2017 school year so that this work could be undertaken. Contextual information about the project and manuscript can be found here.

Chapter 9: The Lonely Suffering of the Fallible Heart

A man said to the universe:
“Sir, I exist!”
“However,” replied the universe,
“The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.”[i]
Again and again, reason refutes the claims of worry; again and again, the rational mind points out the mathematical odds and the laws of averages—but again and again, the fallible heart returns to its lonely suffering.[ii]

Edwin Way Teale, March 22, 1945

The evening of April 2, 1945 began joyfully for Edwin Way Teale. It was an evening that affirmed his rising stature among the natural history writers of his day and perhaps, too, amongst the former-age titans he revered—Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, W.H. Hudson, and others. Two years earlier, he had accepted the John Burroughs Medal for distinguished natural history writing for his 1942 publication of Near Horizons: The Story of an Insect Garden. Now, two years later, he had returned to the American Museum of Natural History in Central Park West, New York, to look on as Rutherford Hayes Platt, a fellow Dodd, Mead natural history writer and photographer, received the Burroughs Medal. Platt’s 1943 This Green World was a book that in spirit, intent, structure, and design closely paralleled Grassroot Jungles (1937) and Near Horizons. Just as Edwin had suggested in 1937 that the amateur student of the insect world could be “like the explorer who sets out for faraway jungles” but do so in “the grassroot jungle at our feet,”[iii] Platt argued in 1943 that such wonders in the botanical world “were not rare nor discovered in a remote place, but were here all the time in the immediate surroundings of the everyday world.”[iv] That evening, Edwin noted later, “Platt pays tribute to my help in his acceptance speech.” He also celebrated his own election as “a Director in the John Burroughs Association” and expressed appreciation for the tenor of the evening, which “from beginning to end was in just the right key. I felt happy, enjoying every minute with no sense of impending doom.” It was “perfectly memorable.”[v]

The brief interlude of unrestrained pleasure that unfolded in “the Hall of the Roosevelt Wing[vi] on that early April evening offered much-needed reprieve. It was a time marked largely by deep foreboding for Edwin and Nellie Teale as their beloved Davy, their only child, fought near the Siegfried Line during the final collapse of Hitler’s Third Reich. This fear had taken root in the elder Teales’ shared consciousness long before David’s August 1943 enlistment in the Army Specialist Training Program at Syracuse University, long before his transfers to Forts Benning and Jackson after the ASTP was disbanded, and long before his deployment as a Private First Class to the European Theater of Operations in the fall of 1944.[vii] Edwin would later characterize this fear as “the dread of seven years—from 1938 to 1945,”[viii] and it was a dread that consumed the collective consciousness of a generation of parents watching their children come of age during the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany—the future course of which became fully evident with the September 1, 1939 German invasion of Poland—and the
apogee of Japanese Imperialism, made plain to the American public by the December 7, 1941
Japanese attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Teales' dread is evident in
a brief but poignant anecdote near the end of the eighth chapter of Edwin’s 1945 book The Lost
Woods, a book that, for Edwin, would become inextricably linked to David’s wartime service and
to his death.

In the aforementioned chapter, “On the Trail of Thoreau,” Edwin chronicles the final leg of a 1939
car trip during which he traced the famous river journey undertaken by Henry and John Thoreau
exactly 100 years earlier. Henry Thoreau, in his 1849 A Week on the Concord and Merrimack
Rivers, wrote in great part to memorialize John, who had died in excruciating pain in his brother’s
arms three years after the trip, succumbing to tetanus. Edwin too, in The Lost Woods, would later
recount a trip he and David took by canoe on Middle Saranac Lake in upstate New York. “The
Calm of the Stars” would be the last chapter completed for the book’s first draft, written while
David was declared Missing in Action in Germany. It, too, would later serve as a memorial. In
“On the Trail of Thoreau,” Edwin noted how, one century after the Thoreaus’ journey, on
September 2, 1939, “the Merrimack flowed as placidly as before around the great bend of
Horseshoe Interval.”[ix] The world’s waters, however, were turbulent and troubled: “Thoreau’s
September day had been one of comparative peace in the world,” while, “a century later, it was a
time of fateful decisions, of onrushing war, of the breaking of nations.”[x] The conclusion of
Edwin’s 1939 journey came one day after Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland, one day before
declarations by France and Britain of war on Germany, and six days shy of David’s fourteenth
birthday.

Pulling into a filling station that evening, Edwin noticed the attendant, “a young man in his early
twenties,” who appeared “silent and preoccupied” as he listened to a “radio […] shattering the
Sabbath quiet, raucous with direful news.”[xi] Edwin’s description of this young man is telling. It
stands in stark contrast with most of the book’s content, which largely lives up to its subtitle,
“Adventures of a Naturalist,” and strays only rarely into social commentary or overt emotionality.
Edwin wrote:

*We spoke but a few sentences that morning. I have never seen him again. I don’t know his name. Yet,
often he has been in mind and his face, like a stirring countenance seen under a streetlamp, has
returned many times in memory. Under the blare of the radio, that late-summer Sunday, we were
drawn together by a common uncertainty, by a common experience. Although we were strangers
before and strangers we have remained since, we were, for that tragic moment, standing unforgettable
ly together. I have often wondered about his fate in the years that followed.*[xii]

Great Years, Great Crises, Great Impact:
Reexamining the Life and Writing of Edwin
Way Teale

Posted on November 30, 2016 by Melissa Watterworth Batt

by Richard Telford
Shortly before American natural history writer Edwin Way Teale died in 1980, he agreed, with his beloved wife and working partner, Nellie Donovan Teale, to donate all of his literary and personal papers and related materials to the University of Connecticut. It was an extraordinary gift. Teale documented his working life and his personal life to an astonishing degree, often keeping several journals concurrently, each with a distinct purpose. For example, from 1938 until 1980, Teale kept an annual daily diary. In 1945, of these diaries he wrote, “These books record the days of the great years of our lives.”[i] These were short but highly detailed records. During the same period he kept these diaries, Teale likewise wrote more elaborated journal entries in *Adventures in Making a Living*, an unpublished, ongoing narrative of his life. This he called the “book of my heart.”[ii] While here, too, he recorded daily events, frequently overlapping those recorded in the diaries, he also reflected on them in deeper ways. Here, he celebrated the triumphs of his life and reconciled the tragedies. Here, he tried to confer order and sensibility on the world of human affairs, a world that often bewildered him. The ninth and final volume of this 43-year journal was dedicated solely to the final days of his life, beginning with his prostate cancer diagnosis in 1974. Even this most personal and final journey he documented in detail and left as a record. And, these two records of a meaningfully-spent life, as rich as they are, represent only a very small fraction of the materials housed in his voluminous papers.

This year, through the generosity of the Administration and the Board of Trustees of Woodstock Academy, where I have taught for two decades, I have been granted a year-long sabbatical to complete research at the Dodd Research Center, research that will enable me to write a book-length work on Edwin Way Teale. This builds upon three years of generous support of my work by the Archives and Special Collections Department at the University of Connecticut, which has provided me financial assistance through the Rose and Sigmund Strochlitz Travel Grant program. I am very grateful for this support, and for the extensive on-site help of the Archives staff, particularly Melissa Watterworth Batt.

John Burroughs, whom Edwin Way Teale admired greatly, wrote in 1902, “The day inevitably comes to every writer when he must take his place amid the silent throngs of the past.”[iii] While this has come to be the case for Edwin Way Teale—and John Burroughs too—I am not convinced it has to be. Teale has much to offer us now, especially as we face an environmental crisis in which our resource exploitation and waste production cannot continue at current rates without grave consequences for the Earth and, ultimately, for ourselves. Now, as I continue my
research within the vast holdings of the Teale Papers and begin the book in earnest, I am both awed by the enormity of the task and excited by the opportunity. Teale’s significant body of published work and his profound impact on the modern conservation movement—particularly through his support of and influence upon many of its principle figures, including Rachel Carson and Edward Abbey—merits reexamination.

The generosity of the Archives and Special Collections staff has extended so far as to allow me to publish a series of representative chapter drafts in this forum as the research and writing processes unfold. These will inevitably evolve as I make new discoveries in the collection. Still, even in draft form, I believe that these chapters can play a meaningful part in bringing the contents of the Teale Papers out into the light of public view, perhaps prompting thoughtful reflection on their importance. I am deeply grateful to the Archives and Special Collections staff for this opportunity, and I welcome public comment and insight on my work here, either through the comment forum on the blog or through direct communication (contact information below).

On a practical note, the first three chapters to be featured in this forum document events in roughly the middle period of Edwin Way Teale’s life. Though I plan to address Teale’s early life in the book as well, my intuition told me to start where I did, during the period when Edwin and Nellie's beloved son David, their only child, was serving in Europe late in the Second World War, a period that Edwin called “one of the great crises of our lives.”

Richard Telford teaches literature and composition at Woodstock Academy in Connecticut. He has a BA in English from the University of New Hampshire, an MS in English Education from the University of Bridgeport, and an MS in Environmental Studies from Green Mountain College. Working with the Connecticut Audubon Society, he helped design and found the Edwin Way Teale Artists in Residence at Trail Wood program, which he directs. He was recently awarded a Rose and Sigmund Strochlitiz Travel Grant by the University of Connecticut to support his manuscript for a book-length work on naturalist, writer and photographer Edwin Way Teale.

References


Footnotes:


[iii] Burroughs, John. Literary Values and Other Papers. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Prison and its Past</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources in the Archives to Find an Obscure Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources in the Archives about Women at UConn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litchfield County Writers Project Presentations, 1993-2014, Now Available Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources in the Archives on Artistic Responses to the U.S. Participation in the Vietnam War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Thinking with my hands” in the Archive: Second Generation New York School Gems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources in the Archives of Connecticut’s Captains of Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivien Kellems, Political Firebrand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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