



HER PRIDE AND JOY

CELIA THAXTER'S CLASSIC BOOK INSPIRES A VISIT TO HER GARDEN BY
THE SEA, NOW LOVINGLY RESTORED

By Irene Virag

I DISCOVERED a slim volume of prose called "An Island Garden" three years ago when I started writing about gardens and worried that I was just sprinkling words on the wind. I was knocked out by the 19th-Century author who wrote about her garden with the wonder of a newly sprouted seed and the poetry of a poppy in bloom.

Her name was Celia Thaxter and she was a poet who in her day was better known than Emily Dickinson. Her poetry has faded with time but it doesn't matter. Her claim to immortality lies in the story of a small garden on a rocky island 10 miles off the Maine-New Hampshire coast in a chain known as the Isles of Shoals. It is a 95-acre island called Appledore, where her family ran a summer hotel for the Boston upper crust and Celia tended a garden and turned her flower-strewn drawing room into a salon for artists and writers and musicians. They filled the piazza of her cottage with poetry and her parlor with the sounds of music and the paths of her garden with admiration. One of them, an American impressionist named Childe Hassam, illustrated her book with paintings that captured her flowers and matched the romance of her prose.

"The very act of planting a seed in the earth has in it to me something beautiful," she wrote. "Often I wake in the night and think how the rains and the dews have reached to the dry shell and softened it; how the spirit of life begins to stir within." She described a July drought when all things "pine and suffer for the healing touch of the rain . . . The patient flowers seem to be standing in hot ashes, with the air full of fire above them." She cherished the most mundane tasks. "I like to take the hoe in my hands and break to pieces the clods of earth left by the overturning spade, to work into the soil the dark, velvet-smooth, scentless barn manure which is to furnish the best of food for my flowers." And she stole from her bed in the dead of night to exterminate slugs - "these arch enemies of mine . . . a slimy shapeless creature that devours every fair and exquisite thing in the garden."

It is impossible to separate Celia Thaxter from her garden – they are entwined like the wisteria and clematis and honeysuckle and hops that wandered over her porch and turned her piazza into what she called "a bower of beauty." Her book is not only the story of her garden but in its own quiet way it is a journal of the heart and soul of a resolute and sensitive woman who was just 16 when she married her Harvard-educated tutor – an older man with intellectual pretensions but not much interest in earning a living.

The young bride burned with the need to evoke her world in words and discovered to her amazement that she could earn \$ 10 for a poem. Her work was published in the Atlantic Monthly and her collections of poetry were so popular that she became something of a celebrity – with her picture gracing cigar boxes and soap advertisements. As the story goes, when Emily Dickinson submitted poems to a Boston publisher, the editors told her they already had a "female poet" – Celia Thaxter.

Celia took over the job of breadwinner but never left the role of wife and mother – nurturing a family that included a brain-damaged son she cared for throughout her life. There were seasons when she wintered elsewhere but Appledore was always her home. And she was ever the island gardener.

Appledore Island stands windswept in the sea as it did centuries ago when it was first mapped by Capt. John Smith. Today, it is the site of Shoals Marine Laboratory, a residential research center sponsored by Cornell University and the University of New Hampshire. It is a place where snowy egrets and glossy ibis and little blue herons nest. And where migrating black-backed and herring gulls screech as they fly through delphinium blue skies and bob in the choppy gray sea and sit on the rockbound shore. The gulls pose on one leg on the rooftops of cedar-shingled dormitories and labs where students study the sea-girt world. Tiny yellow blossoms of wild mustard undulate in the breeze and color the hillsides. Rosa rugosa and yarrow and goldenrod and St. John's Wort carpet the slopes. The sun beats down like a kleig light.

Celia's house and her family's hotel are long gone – they burned down in 1914. But her garden has been restored in the very spot where it once blossomed. When I learned that a garden grows in front of the moss-covered ruin of a poet's cottage, I knew that one day I'd make the journey to Appledore. Reading the 126-page book of prose that would outlast Celia Thaxter's poetry made me wish that I could have known her. I thought that I'd like nothing so much as to see her garden and imagine her standing there as Childe Hassam painted her for the frontispiece of the book – a stately, white-haired woman in a long-sleeved ankle-length dress serene among her wind-waved and beloved poppies, framed by red hollyhocks with the blue sea in the background and a white sail in the distance.

And so I went on a pilgrimage.

The garden is only 15 feet wide and 50 feet long – the same as it was in Celia's time. It overlooks the rugged granite coastline and the steely sea on what seems to be the only level strip of land on Appledore, a rugged, almost treeless outpost where sumac and poison ivy and deadly nightshade run wild. There are nine rectangular beds arranged in groups of three and a narrow border that colors the periphery of the garden – all of it enclosed by a weathered wooden fence with a latched gate and an arbor.

Red, white and purple sweet peas scramble up a trellis. Japanese hops climbs the arbor and orange daylilies guard the gate. Red and purple and pink verbena mingle with lavender-colored love-in-a-mist and blue larkspur. Cornflowers as soft as the clear blue sky mix with bright orange calliopsis – an annual that is cousin to the coreopsis that dances in a corner with dame's rocket and cosmos.

Cut-and-come-again zinnias spread a carpet at the feet of mahogany hollyhocks and black helianthus. White nicotiana and red nasturtiums socialize with bronze marigolds and yellow marguerite. Crimson flax and white phlox and purple stock and lilies the color of cotton candy join the carnival. Sometimes visitors who don't know any better and expect a botanical panorama lean on the wooden gate and ask Virginia Chisholm, the curator of the garden, "Is that it?"

Such people are clearly Philistines when it comes to what Celia called her "little old-fashioned garden." She would go there each day at "bird peep" after doing laundry and ironing and writing a few letters and luxuriate in "the matchless, delicate, sweet charm of the newly wakened world." As the sun rose above the sea-line, she would rake and hoe and stretch out on wooden planks in the narrow paths to pull dodder and chickweed and shepherd's purse. She wrote of her garden, "What it lacks in area is more than compensated by the large joy that grows out of it and its uplifting and refreshment of 'the Spirit of Man. "

Pilgrims in search of Celia's large joy make reservations as much as two months in advance to see the recreated garden. They take an early morning hour-long ferry ride from Portsmouth to Star Island and a 10-minute voyage on a smaller research vessel from there to Appledore. Much of the trip is in the open ocean.

On a sunny, wind-tossed Wednesday, I am among the pilgrims – a member of the faithful in a flowered T-shirt clutching a well-thumbed copy of the book.

It is a fine day for fancies and I imagine the famous friends coming to Celia's salons – Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Greenleaf Whittier and James Russell Lowell and Sarah Orne Jewett and Harriet Beecher Stowe. And, of course, Frederick Childe Hassam. It was Celia who persuaded the artist who has been called the American Monet to drop Frederick in favor of his more interesting middle name. On the ferry, as the tossing sea sprayed across the deck, I thought that they must have been hardy folk. Certainly, Celia was – she sometimes braved the waves in a small dory to bring her plants to friends on neighboring islands. At that, Childe Hassam was a big, burly fellow who would later live and paint in East Hampton and make a daily ritual of walking on the beach toward Montauk and then pulling on his black bathing cap and swimming back in the ocean.

The tour ends just before noon. My fellow pilgrims tuck their books into their knapsacks and follow the footpath that skirts the gull-dotted coastline back to the dock. Virginia Chisholm has given me permission to stay. Virginia is a sturdy woman in blue shorts and a sleeveless blouse who remembers that as a schoolgirl she had to memorize Celia Thaxter's poems. The garden, which is funded by donations, was reconstructed in 1976 by Dr. John M. Kingsbury, a Cornell biology professor and the founder of Shoals Marine Laboratory. Virginia, who lives in Rye Beach, N.H., and took over 16 years ago, keeps Celia Thaxter's legacy growing with the help of her friend Mary Smith and other members of the Rye Driftwood Garden Club.

I linger inside the fence and it is easy to believe that I am indeed in a poet-gardener's "minute domain." For the most part, the garden follows the plan that Celia herself diagramed in her book. She was a gardener, not a designer, and she grouped her plants according to height but let the colors fall where they may. Nor did she worry about spacing. "I always leave two plants where one would be enough," she wrote. Her book comes to life as I watch bees "go blundering into the Bachelor's Buttons" and "the stars and suns of Marigolds bloom with a matchless glory." And I'm especially happy to see cleome rising "all over the garden in rosy purple clouds." I have cleome in my own garden and that is exactly what it does and I feel the bond of sisterhood between me and Celia Thaxter grow stronger.

Most of all I admire the poppies and smile at Celia's mad passion for them. She started the tiny seeds in eggshells and set them out in the first days of spring and thrilled as they unfolded. "As I hold the flower in my hand and think of trying to describe it, I realize how poor a creature I am, how impotent are words in the presence of such perfection," she wrote. "The Poppy is painted glass; it never glows so brightly as when the sun shines through it. Wherever it is seen, against the light or with the light, always it is a flame, and warms the wind like a blown ruby . . . "

I breathe in the scents on the salt air and revel in the colors and remember once wishing that I could live forever so my garden could live forever. How lucky Celia Thaxter is to have her garden live on! She would be happy that so many of the old-fashioned flowers grow from seeds Virginia Chisholm has searched out with love. And I think Celia would be pleased to know that friends still come to Appledore to fill the paths of her island garden with admiration.

She was suffering from angina when she wrote "An Island Garden" in 1893. The first edition was published a year later just five months before she died at the age of 59. She is buried on the island in a faded family plot a short walk from the garden. Lilac bushes have cracked the lichen-mottled stone walls that surround the old cemetery, and time and weather have blurred the gravestones.

I leave the island in a Boston whaler as the wind stirs the sea and catch a ferry at Star Island for the mainland. I settle into my seat and tuck the seed-heads of love-in-a-mist that Virginia gave me into my bag. They're from Celia's garden. Then I open my copy of "An Island Garden." Only 2,000 copies were printed the year it was published and the book was out of print by 1902.

Later, a nonillustrated edition was published. It was not until 1988 that Houghton Mifflin reissued a boxed version containing chromolithographs of Childe Hassam's paintings. Since then, the cloth edition has sold 48,648 copies and a paperback version has sold 23,975 copies.

I reread the last passage of Celia Thaxter's book, lamenting the end of a season in an island garden. "And so the ripe year wanes . . . Soon will set in the fitful weather, with fierce gales and sullen skies and frosty air, and it will be time to tuck up safely my Roses and Lilies and the rest for their long winter sleep beneath the snow, where I never forget them, but ever dream of their wakening in happy summers yet to be."

My pilgrimage is complete. I look up from the book and watch as Appledore fades in the mist.

