

AT EAGLE POND FARM

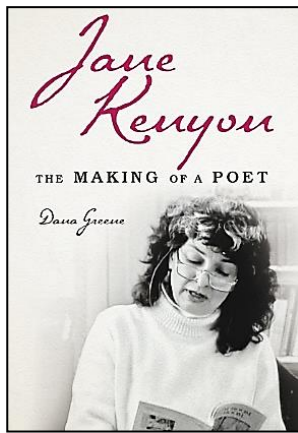
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AN OCCASIONAL LETTER

October 2023

Jane Kenyon: The Making of a Poet

In a journal Jane kept in 1970, she muses that “[w]hat I really need is an excuse for being me!” Poetry would give her that, and Dana Greene’s new biography, which is the first full biography of Jane, chronicles how poetry did and how Jane grew into the poet she became.



Published by the University of Illinois Press, the book has 201 pages that include text, photographs, excerpts from poems, notes, and index. Dana, Dean Emerita of Oxford College at Emory University, previously taught history for nearly thirty years at St. Mary’s College of Maryland. Focused on “women’s lives, specifically on the intersection of religion and women’s creativity,” she has also written biographies of poets Denise Levertov and Elizabeth Jennings.

This biography presents Jane as a person of complexity, in whose early memory a knowledge of dark, dark sorrow and suffering, bestowed by inherited depression and a grandmother’s severe religion, was “twined with” a solace found in solitude and close communion with the natural world and the revelations and pleasures that came of those. The opposition of suffering and the consolations of the physical world, and contemplation of the natural world, remained a constant of Jane’s life, and her poetry emerged from it; but what informed her life--sensual, spiritual, creative, and personal--was not, the biography shows, only that.

Because Jane said little about her lived life (beyond what turned up in poems and prose) and because she was only beginning to be interviewed widely when she died just short of turning forty-eight, her story was for the most part left to Donald Hall to frame and tell, as was the story of their marriage.



Photograph of Jane, Don, and Gus at Eagle Pond Farm, c. 1990. Source unknown: found in the house.

Dana Greene--drawing on interviews with friends and others who knew Jane, correspondence, and literary critique of Jane's work, as well as some of her unpublished writing--pieces together a more filled-out narrative and offers a new look at the marriage between Don and Jane and the writing life they made at Eagle Pond. "If marrying Donald Hall," Dana observes, "was the most consequential decision of Jane Kenyon's life [because, as Jane said, in marrying him she also married poetry], moving to his ancestral home in Wilmot, New Hampshire was the second."

At Eagle Pond, Jane began to write "in earnest." She had found a place and community she loved (and was deeply fed by) and a place for her poetry. Increasingly intent on becoming A Recognized Poet, and one deserving of the recognition, despite the eclipses of depression and her struggles with it, she adopted habits influenced by living in "a house of poetry" and began to see her work published in journals, then collected in acclaimed books carrying her name. Having learned early a contemplative life (and "the inwardness of things"), which was later enlarged by her own spiritual experience, Jane found her deepest purpose as a poet in being what she called "an advocate for the inner life."

Jane also called herself an amovist of light. So, in remembrance, some witness of that light as the year at the farm turns from summer to fall.



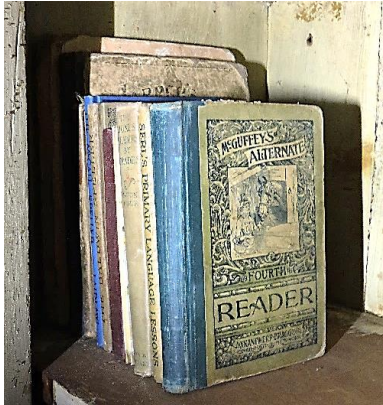
The difference between Jane's poetry and Don's, as well their different ways of approaching the world and speaking of it, is clear to readers of their work. What *preserving* that difference meant to Jane is examined in this biography.

Back-to-school revisited

Milk, potatoes, apples, firewood . . . teachers. These were, to borrow from Don's title of his prose pieces, *Principal Products of Portugal*, the principal products of Eagle Pond Farm. An education was valued there, generation to generation. And those who instilled education were, also.

Don's grandmother Kate, his mother Lucy, her two sisters, and his grandfather Wesley's sister (who boarded for a while at the farm) were teachers. Don's great-uncle Luther (older brother of Kate, who in his later years was minister of the So. Danbury church) taught at Colby Academy, now Colby-Sawyer College, in New London. Luther's sister Nannie (whose room over the kitchen

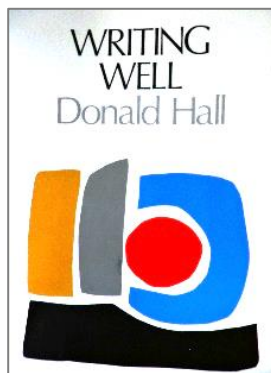
would become Jane's writing room) taught the one-room school that Lucy and her sisters went to. And Don's father taught history and English at Cushing Academy before he had to join the Hall family dairy in Connecticut.



Three shelves of schoolbooks from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain in a cupboard in the attic (which the family called the back chamber): primers, graded readers and spelling books, instruction in elementary arithmetic and advanced math, and a variety of texts for learning grammar and composition. Here, too, are teacher's editions with all the answers.

Appropriate to be found in the Eagle Pond house, *The Study of the Paragraph* (1912) fills an entire book. It opens with “the importance of the paragraph,” identified as “the most vital unit of prose, . . . an essay complete and perfect in itself, embracing all the structural qualities of the entire composition.” Students, to their probable dismay, are warned that, because of this, “too much drill cannot be laid upon it.” Having learned such paragraphs by pages 106 and 107, they then arrive at topics for a composition: “12. Raising Pigeons. 14. Honor. 15. Success. 19. The Good and Bad of the Theater. 21. Why Baseball is so Popular. 23. The Character of Samuel Johnson. 26. The House in which you Live. 27. The Most Picturesque House you Know. 31. A Camp in the Woods. 35. An Old Farmhouse Kitchen. 36. A Sea-Beach at Noon. 39. The Stadium during a Great Game.” *Write on.*

After eight years as the first poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, Don in 1957 joined the faculty of the University of Michigan where, Dana Greene notes in her biography of Jane, “he helped make the study of poetry a major draw for the institution.”



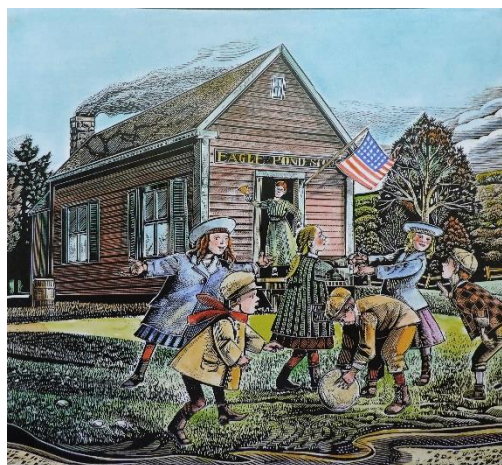
More about paragraphs, etc. *Writing Well* is the book that bought the farm at Eagle Pond, after the death of Kate, and provided income that allowed Don to leave Ann Arbor in 1975 and, with Jane, move to New Hampshire and demonstrate, along with Jane, what writing well sounded like.

The text is classic Don, a tutorial in clarity, style, good sense, and general comeliness of language and form, delivered with characteristic directness, attitude, humor, and erudition. Its popularity proved itself in nine editions. By page 2 of the first (1973) edition, Don is fully enjoying himself as he recommends revision of a “pretentious and wordy” passage in a student paper: “swaddled in seven sweaters and three pairs of pants, it can hardly walk.”

Before actually attending school, young scholars at Eagle Pond began their learning at home. A pair of alphabet plates were won by Lucy and Caroline Wells for perfect attendance at Sunday School, where, of course, they never missed a Sunday because their mother, Kate, played the organ. The building depicted on one is the Post Office in Concord, N.H., which had a certain gravitas, right behind the Statehouse with its gold dome. But the building was not as amusing as the chickens--familiar to any farm child--on the companion plate. These have long had a place of prestige on the top shelf of the china cabinet in the dining room.

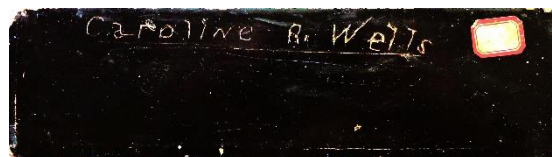


School, then, began in late August and “was out at Christmas,” Lucy said. “Then, a long winter vacation, usually until around the first of April, when the ‘mud season’ was over. It ended around the 4th of July.”



Illustrator Michael McCurdy’s depiction of the Pond School in Don’s picture book, *Lucy’s Christmas* (David Godine).

Pencilbox belonging to Caroline, Don’s mother’s next-younger sister.



Lucy remembered that “we were always excited about starting back to school and every year we would celebrate with new wooden pencilboxes.” This one has a hinged lid and retains the c. 1910 price sticker: 25¢, which was no small expense in those years. Others “had a sliding top and came with new pencils, a pen, a 6 inch ruler, eraser and, sometimes, a pencil sharpener.”

The Wells girls went to high school in Franklin, N.H. There, they had classes in Greek, Latin, and all the usual subjects of the day. Like neighbors who took the train to Andover or Canaan, N.H., for school, they probably rode the train, also. With their birthdays only two years apart and Lucy’s completion of high school delayed a year by health issues, they graduated together in 1920, then set off to college together in 1921.



Caroline and Lucy at graduation from high school, 1920.

All three sisters--Lucy, Caroline, and the younger Nan (named for their Aunt Nannie)--went to Bates. Lucy and Caroline were in the class of 1925, Nan in the class of 1935. In 1920 Wesley had conducted a large sale of timber that brought \$8,000. “An awful lot of money in those days,” as Lucy observed later, it was, she said, “used to put us through college.”



The college trunk, retired to the back chamber.

In “those days,” it was not common for three sisters from a New Hampshire hill farm to be going off to college. Though education had always mattered at Eagle Pond, it may be that their mother, Kate, especially understood that. When she graduated from high school in 1899, with straight A’s in all her classes (including those in Latin and Greek), she was planning to be a medical

missionary and had been accepted at the Baltimore Women's Medical College. Then her mother, Lucy Keneston, died suddenly and Kate was needed to keep house and help manage the farm for her father, Ben. As abruptly, her future changed.

Though Don had his own Harvard education, there were other ways to one.

A fixture of many American households in the first half of the 20th century, *The Harvard Classics*, first published in 1909-10, were a set of fifty volumes containing "classic works of world literature, important speeches, and historical documents," with notes and a reader's guide, that promised--for the investment of fifteen minutes a day--"the benefits of a liberal education, entertainment, and counsel of history's greatest minds." Here were Benjamin Franklin, Plato, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Plutarch, Milton, Emerson, Virgil, Cicero, Darwin, Robert Burns, Aesop, Grimm, Goethe, Dante, Homer--for a start.



The Harvard Classics, upstairs at Eagle Pond. This Harvard-branded library that fit on a five-foot shelf had appeal to a nation where the acquisition of "learning," as it was often called, was highly valued for both the education itself and a civic sense of responsibility for being "cultivated." The house in Hamden, Connecticut, where Don grew up, had its set; Jane's house in Ann Arbor had its. "The main function of the collection," wrote the originator Charles W. Eliot (then the retiring president of Harvard), "should be to develop and foster in many thousands of people a taste for serious reading of the highest quality, outside of *The Harvard Classics* as well as within them." It would seem it did.

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At Eagle Pond, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit established to preserve the farm where poets Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon shared a writing life, as well as to honor their work, open the house to the public, invite reflection on poetry and place, and provide residencies where poets and others can take up their own work.

Donations can be made at www.ateaglepond.org or sent to the post office box below.

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