



Charlotte Perkins Gilman, c. 1900. At the time of this photograph, Gilman was about forty years old. It was in 1900 that her book, *Concerning Children*, was published. Photo courtesy of Denise D. Knight.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN IN MAINE

BY DENISE D. KNIGHT

*On the eve of her twenty-second birthday in 1882, American author Charlotte Perkins Gilman visited Maine for the first time. She was immediately captivated by the rugged beauty of the Ogunquit shoreline, the therapeutic quality of the fresh air, and the primitive power of the roaring sea. Over the next forty-three years, Gilman would return to Maine on several occasions. While her early visits provided Gilman the freedom to contemplate her thorny emotional entanglement with her fiancée, Charles Walter Stetson, whom she would marry in 1884, her connection to the Pine Tree State was complex. Maine represented not only the autonomy she craved, but, conversely, it also became a symbol of domestic oppression when she accepted a position as a governess and spent ten weeks in the Maine wilderness. Away from the majestic allure of the open sea, Gilman was afforded a preview of what marriage and motherhood might portend if she surrendered her independence. When we look retrospectively at Gilman's life, it becomes clear that Maine played a significant role both biographically and therapeutically. Denise D. Knight is a Distinguished Teaching Professor of English at the State University of New York at Cortland, where she has taught since 1990. She is the author of *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Twayne, 1997), the editor of *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (University Press of Virginia, 1994), and co-editor with Jennifer S. Tuttle of *The Selected Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (University of Alabama Press, 1980). She has also edited volumes of Gilman's poetry and fiction. In 2004, Knight earned both a Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching and a Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Activities.*

AERICAN AUTHOR Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) is today best remembered for her haunting short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," a chilling tale based on the nervous breakdown she suffered at the age of twenty-six. The story is now well entrenched in the American literary canon and is commonly taught in high school and college literature courses. Over the course of her long career, Gilman, whose great-aunt was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* author Harriet Beecher Stowe,

emerged not only as an internationally acclaimed activist on behalf of women, but she also amassed an extraordinary body of work, which included some seventeen published books, two hundred short stories, five hundred poems, various plays, hundreds of essays and articles, and an autobiography. After her death in 1935, Gilman's role in our American literary history was largely forgotten. In 1966, however, Pulitzer prize-winning historian Carl N. Degler reprinted Gilman's most influential book, *Women and Economics* (1898). Since then, a revival of interest in Gilman's life and literature has been ongoing, with remarkable results. More than forty books about the author have been published in the last four decades, and hundreds of articles, essays, and doctoral dissertations continue to provide a critical reassessment of her legacy. One aspect of Gilman's life, however, that has garnered little attention, is her connection to Maine—both literally and symbolically—and the role that the Pine Tree State played not only in the development of her desire for autonomy, but also with respect to her ideas about child rearing, a philosophy that she later expounded on in the book, *Concerning Children* (1900).

It was in Maine that Gilman first savored the sweetness of freedom; it was also in Maine, conversely, that she experienced the bitter taste of subjugation, when she took a position as governess to a young boy whom she found to be both insolent and spoiled. When we look retrospectively at her life, then, we can see that Maine played a significant role, biographically, therapeutically, and even theoretically in Gilman's life and work.

It was on the eve of her twenty-second birthday in 1882, at the invitation of her friend, Kate Bucklin, that Gilman traveled for the first time from Providence, Rhode Island, to Ogunquit, Maine. A resort community even then, Ogunquit boasted majestic cliffs overlooking a rocky shoreline. Gilman was immediately captivated by its rugged beauty and spent long, lazy days relaxing, sketching, collecting wildflowers, watching sunsets, and reading works by New England writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell. Her last documented trip to Maine occurred some forty-three years later, in August 1925, when her Norwich Town, Connecticut, neighbor and another long-time friend, Alexander Abbott, invited her and second husband Houghton Gilman to join him and Mrs. Abbott while they vacationed in Ogunquit.¹ Over the years, Gilman visited or traveled through several areas of Maine: Greenville, Moosehead Lake, Bangor, Upper Wilson Pond, and Green Acre on the Piscataqua River in Eliot. For Gilman, the allure of Maine was magical. She was drawn to it, in fact, before she ever set foot on its

soil. Among the literary works that she cherished was Dr. George B. Wallis's verse, "The Lovely Rivers and Lakes of Maine." When her Providence friend, May Diman, was killed in 1881 after being thrown from a horse, Gilman attended the "beautiful services," which were held in "a house full of tears."² While some in attendance wept, Gilman "preserve[d] the appearance of composure by taking "refuge" in the 90-line poem, a work that she memorized and recited on occasion throughout her life.

Oh! The lovely rivers and lakes of Maine!
 I am charmed with their names, as my song will explain
 Aboriginal muses inspire my strain,
 While I sing the bright rivers and lakes of Maine —
 From Cupsuptac to Cheputmaticook;
 From Sagadahock to Pohenegamook,—
 —'gamook, 'gamook,—
 Pohenegamook,
 From Sagadahock to Pohenegamook.

For light serenading the "blue Moselle,"
 "Bonnie Doon" and "Sweet Avon" will do very well;
 But the rivers of Maine, in their wild solitudes,
 Bring a thunderous sound from the depth of the woods,—
 The Aristook and the Chimmenticook;
 The Chimpasaock and Chinquassabamtook,—
 —'bamtook, 'bamtook.
 The Chinquassabamtook,
 The Chimpasaock and Chinquassabamtook.

Behold! How they sparkle and flash in the sun,
 The Mattawamkeag and the Mussungun,
 The kingly Penobscot and wild Woolastook,
 Kennebec, Kennebago and Seabasticook,
 The pretty Presumpscot and gay Tulanbic,
 The Essaquilsagook and the little Schoodic,—
 Schoodic, Schoodic,
 The little Schoodic,—
 The Essaquilsagook and the little Schoodic!

Away down South, the Cherokee
 Has named his river the Tennessee,
 The Chattahoochee and the Ocmulgee,
 The Congaree and the Ohoopee;
 But what are they, or the Frenchy Detroit,
 To the Passadumkeag or the Wassatoquoit?—
 —'toquoit, 'toquoit,
 The Wassatoquoit,—
 The Passadumkeag or the Wassatoquoit?

Yes, yes, I prefer the bright rivers of Maine,
 To the Rhine, or the Rhone, or the Soane, or the Seine.
 These may do for the cockney, but give me some nook,
 On the Ammonoosuc, or the Wyttopadlook;
 On the wild and winding Piscataquis,
 Or the Umsaskis or the Ripogenis,—
 —'genis, 'genis,
 The Ripogenis,—
 The Umasaskis or the Ripogenis.

Then turn to the beautiful lakes of Maine.
 To the sage of Auburn be given this strain,
 The statesman whose genial and bright fancy makes
 The earth's highest glories to shine in its lakes.
 What lakes, out of Maine, can we place in the book
 With Matagomon or the Pangokomook?
 —'omook, 'omook,
 The Pangokomook,—
 The Matagomon or the Pangokomook.

Lake Leman, or Como, what care I for them,
 When Maine has the Moosehead and Pongokwahem?
 And sweet as the dews in the violet's kiss,
 The Wallagosquegamook and the Telasamis;
 And when I can share in the fisherman's bunk,
 On the Moosetuckmaguntic or Molitunkamunk,—
 —'amunk, 'amunk,—
 The Molitunkamunk,—
 The Moosetuckmaguntic or Molitunkamunk.

And Maine has the Eagle lakes, Cheeappawgan;
 And the little Sepic, and the little Seapan;
 The spreading Sebago, the Cangomgomoc;
 The Milikonet and Montesenioc;
 Caribou and the fair Apmonjenegamook,
 Oquassac and rare Weetokenebacook,
 —'acook, 'acook,
 Weetokenebacook,—
 Oquassac and rare Weetokenebacook.

And there are the Pokeshine, and Patquongomis,
 And there is the pretty Coscomogonosis;
 Romantic Umbagog and Pemadumook,—
 The Pemadumook and the old Chesuncook;
 Seposis and Moosetuck; and take care not to miss
 The Umbazookscus and the Sysladobsis;—
 —'dobsis, 'dobsis,—
 The sysladobsis,—
 The Umbazookscus and the Sysladobsis.

Oh! Give me the rivers and lakes of Maine,
 In her mountains, or forests, or fields of grain;
 In the depth of the shade, or the blaze of the sun,
 The lakes of Schoodic and the Basconegun;
 And the dear Waubasoos, and the clear Aqueessuc;
 And the Cosbosecontic and Millenikikuk,—
 —'kikuk, 'kikuk,
 The Millenikikuk,—
 The Cosbosecontic and Millenikikuk!

Like the poem, Maine appealed to Gilman because it was therapeutic. Maine's fresh air and the primitive power of the roaring sea were both calming and liberating. In her early visits in the summers of 1882 and 1883, Gilman embraced the freedom that Maine offered—in this case, freedom from the over-watchful eye of her mother, Mary Perkins; freedom to pass lazy hours relaxing in a hammock; freedom to sleep outdoors, if she were so inclined; and the freedom to have time away from Charles Walter Stetson, a young suitor whom she would marry in 1884. Stetson stayed behind in Providence, allowing Gilman the space to contemplate the thorny emotional entanglement in which she found herself ensnared.

Gilman's connection to Maine, however, was complex. It represented an opportunity for autonomy in the months prior to her marriage to Stetson, but it also became an emblem of domestic oppression when she spent ten weeks—much of it in the Maine wilderness—working as a governess for the Jackson family of Providence. Those ten weeks, in fact, afforded a preview of what marriage and motherhood might portend if Gilman were forced to surrender her independence in exchange for the shackles she feared would come with domesticity. Gilman's first trip to Maine, in July 1882, came just six months after she met Stetson. The early months of their courtship were generally pleasant, and Gilman was powerfully attracted to the handsome young artist, but she was reluctant to enter a long-term relationship, expressing doubts about marriage both in her diaries and in various letters. To Stetson she wrote: "[A]s much as I love you I love WORK better, & I cannot make the two compatible. . . . It is no use, dear, no use. I am meant to be useful & strong, to help many and do my share in the world's work, but not to be loved."³ The harder Stetson pushed, the more Gilman withdrew. In her mind, the physical escape to Maine could not have come at a better time.

When Bucklin extended the original one-week invitation to Ogunquit to two weeks, and then to three and a half, Gilman was overjoyed. A Native American word that means "Beautiful Place by the Sea," Ogunquit



Elsie Jane Weare, proprietor of the Cliff House in Ogunquit, c. 1885. A mother of seven, Weare purchased the land at Bald Head Cliff and planned construction of the Cliff House, which opened to the public in 1872. Gilman first visited the Cliff House in 1882. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Weare, current owner of the Cliff House.

offered Gilman the fresh air and exercise that she would later tout in her promotion of physical culture. Throughout her life, Gilman argued that there was a correlation between physical fitness and mental health. This sentiment was common among America's urban elite during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it represented a reaction to the transformation industrialization had wrought on the nation's landscapes. As historian David Richards notes, Maine's "scenery conveyed powerful images and metaphors that appealed to urban elites. The various overlays of meaning suggest the evocative appeal of Maine's countryside for urban travelers escaping the perils and frustrations of urban, industrial life."⁴ One of those "overlays of meaning" was a vision of Maine's landscape as Arcadian. This Arcadian ideal valued the "spiritual qualities and recreational offerings" of the Maine landscape. "Urban travelers attributed rejuvenating values of purity, simplicity, serenity, and strenuousness to the natural landscape."⁵ For Gilman and her peers, Maine offered renewal and rejuvenation—both physically and mentally.

The Providence vacationers, comprised of Gilman, Bucklin, and several other friends, stayed at the Cliff House, built in 1872, and run by Elsie Jane Weare, an energetic mother of seven with a head for business. When Weare learned that the Boston and Maine Railroad would be building a line to York, Maine, she invested capital to purchase Bald Head Cliff and began planning the boarding house, while simultaneously caring for her husband, Captain Theodore Weare, who was suffering from tuberculosis. Elsie Weare's recipe for success included offering her guests "clean rooms, fine food . . . fresh air, [and] personal hospital-

ity.” When the resort opened its doors in 1872, the cost of a one-week stay, which included three meals a day, was \$6.00 per person.⁶

After arriving in Wells, Gilman and her party engaged a “Black Maria,” a type of paddy wagon, to take them the final nine miles to Ogunquit, where she found a “big bare boarding house, close to the rocks and surf,” that would be her home for the next twenty-four days. One of the first orders of business for Gilman after her arrival was the celebration of her twenty-second birthday. She spent the day fishing, sketching, sleeping for “two hours on the rocks” overlooking the ocean, and watching “a dull moon rise.”⁷ The physical and psychological space Maine provided enabled Gilman to assert her independence—a crucial aspect of the identity that she had been consciously cultivating since her youth. On the Fourth of July, Gilman wrote an untitled poem—a reflective piece—which seemed to mirror her ambivalence about marriage:

I sit at my ease & gaze on the seas
Three things before me lie;
The rock where I sit, the sea under it,
And the overarching sky.
The rock’s iron brow is the life I have now;
Too hard for peaceful rest;
Too warm in the sun, too cold when there’s none
Uncomfortable at best.
The wide ocean comes next; now quiet, now vex;
It wants me, to hold & to keep;
It looks pleasant & warm—but there might come a storm—
And the ocean is pathless & deep.
And above hangs the dome of our dear future home
To be ours if we work through the day:
But these rocks hide the sun, the azure is gone—
Even Heaven looks misty & grey.

The poem is, in fact, the only written document we have, aside from some personal letters and diary entries, that provides information about her state of mind while she was in Ogunquit. Invoking a trio of metaphors— the rocks, the ocean, and the sky— Gilman explored the tension between her life as an independent woman and her fears that while marriage did, at times, seem inviting, the prospect of marital happiness, and the surrender of her carefully crafted work ethic, would come at a terrible cost. The image of the rock represented her current life, which she described in the poem as both as “uncomfortable” and “hard.” The



Bald Head Cliff, Ogunquit, n.d. Gilman was moved by this scenic Maine landscape, and it was her experience in Ogunquit in 1882 that prompted her to repeatedly return to the state throughout her lifetime. Many of her poems were inspired by this coastal scenery. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Weare.



Cliff House in Ogunquit, Maine, c. 1880. Gilman returned to the Cliff House for a second trip in July 1883 to enjoy the scenery and relaxing atmosphere. During this second visit, Gilman offered a hand to the proprietor, Elsie Weare, by painting signs for the boarding house. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Weare.

ocean, alternately “quiet” and “vext,” represented the paradox of tranquility and storminess, further reflecting her fears about marriage; and the sky, like the ocean, was emblematic both of the promise of marriage, represented by the clear azure “dome” and, conversely, the potential for misery, as suggested by the elusiveness of blue skies. The allusion to the sky, however, also represents the literal heaven. Significantly, and consistent with Gilman’s work ethic, the Ogunquit poem suggests that one’s entrance to heaven is contingent upon the “work” one does on earth, a principle she feared she would compromise if she married. Gilman

writes, "Above hangs the dome of our dear future home / To be ours *if* we work through the day." The last line of the poem, "Even Heaven looks misty & grey," is notable for its ominous depiction of "Heaven"—what marriage might portend—its "misty" greyness reflects Gilman's pre-scientific sense that marriage would bring not only despair but also a forfeiture of the independent identity to which she so tenaciously clung.

Her struggle seemed to be reflected in the extremes of nature she witnessed on the Maine coast. On July 5, she went out in a fierce nor'easter, which she described as "the worst storm for July [in] years & years," simply to see the ocean "rage & foam." By the next evening, however, the storm had passed, and Gilman and Bucklin found a haystack behind a deserted house where they watched a "gorgeous sunset."⁸ Clearly, Gilman was attuned to the vagaries and dualities in nature that visited the Maine coast that summer. The extremes—stormy one moment and calm the next—served as an emotional barometer as she worked through her ambivalence about the prospect of marriage, which she found both enticing and frightening.

Although she experienced occasional and usually brief periods of despondency during her first summer in Ogunquit, the trip was nevertheless therapeutic. No longer bound by the predictable schedule that life in Providence demanded, and free from Mary's prying eyes, Gilman embraced her freedom. Many mornings she arose before sunrise, sometimes as early as 3:30 or 4:00 A.M. On those occasions, she took long, solitary walks against the backdrop of the rising sun to gather bouquets of flowers—roses, orchids, and daisies among her favorites. She also took the opportunity to sleep outside "on a juniper bush," simply because she could. But perhaps Gilman's attachment to Maine is best reflected by her account of what her friends dubbed "Charlotte Perkins' Leap"—a deep, narrow chasm near Ogunquit across which she would jump. Gilman includes reference to the Leap in her memoirs, underscoring its importance in the construction of her life's story. She writes that "one deep, narrow chasm they named Charlotte Perkins's Leap, because I jumped across it. It was not really very wide, but looked dangerous enough if one was not clear-headed and sure-footed."⁹ The "leap," in fact, becomes metaphorically significant when we consider the literal meaning of the word—a "springing free"—and the particular appeal that Maine held for Gilman. In fact, she was so captivated by the Ogunquit chasm that she created a watercolor painting of it, which is now owned by her grandson, Walter Stetson Chamberlin. When her vacation ended on July 24, Gilman noted in her diary that the party departed Ogunquit around 8:00 A.M. "amidst general bewailment," for the day-



Fishing near Cliff House, c. 1910. During both of her visits to the Cliff House, Gilman spent much of her time fishing and enjoying the outdoors. Photo courtesy of Kathryn Weare.

long trip back to Providence, which, not surprisingly, she found enormously oppressive after experiencing the “seawinds” in Maine.¹⁰

The following summer, in July 1883, Gilman returned to Ogunquit, again at the invitation of Kate Bucklin, for a two-week vacation. She passed her time playing chess, reading, sketching, painting, napping on the rocks, painting two “Private Room” signs for Elsie Weare, and spending time with her friend, Conway Brown, a “handsome Harvard boy,” who arrived in Ogunquit with his parents on the third of July, Gilman’s twenty-third birthday.¹¹

As she had the previous summer, Gilman welcomed the liberties that Ogunquit offered. Always the rebel, she engaged in activities upon which Mary Perkins would undoubtedly frown. On the Fourth of July, for example, she deliberately braved a thunderstorm, simply for the experience of getting drenched. She also napped on the rocks and climbed on the boulders, adorned herself with wild roses, kicked up her heels and danced with friends, and again slept outside. But the behavior that her mother would have found most objectionable occurred when Gilman took a walk with Brown on July 9, during which he allowed her to “try [out] his [loaded] revolver.” She also took time to comfort and counsel Brown, a bright but troubled youth, after he confided to her that he had often contemplated suicide, an act that just six months later he carried out with a gunshot to the head.

Gilman left Ogunquit this time on July 14 and returned to Providence. Two days later, she began her ten-week stint as a private governess to Eddie Jackson. She proudly remarked on her new arrangement in her diary. “[I] Bec[a]me a hireling as I phrase it for the admiration of my friends, at 5.35 [P.M.],” she wrote.¹² While historically, the governess is



Map of Moosehead Lake and the Headwaters of the Penobscot and St. John Rivers, 1874, created by John M. Way, Jr. In the fall of 1883, Gilman spent ten weeks working as a governess for the Jackson family. While Gilman was enthralled by Moosehead Lake and its environs, her experience as a governess was not a positive one. Courtesy of the Maine Historical Society.

more associated with Old England than with New, it was, in fact, one of the few vocations open to young middle-class women, presumably because it was considered both safe and “feminine,” and Gilman relished the opportunity for steady employment. She and Eddie seemed to hit it off immediately, spending hours playing billiards, baseball, and battle-dore. Gilman also taught him reading, math, and drawing, and she seemed pleased with the relationship that she and Eddie shared. She entered the arrangement, however, with high hopes. During the early part of her stay, Gilman rejoiced at the opportunity to return to the Maine wilderness, even being uncharacteristically good-natured in her description to her long-time friend Martha Luther Lane about the gender-based division of labor. She wrote, “the men folks fish and hunt, the women folks knit and crochet and chatter, and I (neuter you observe!) Write & Draw & Read & Paint and make myself generally usefull.”¹³ She even enjoyed the bumpy two-hour journey in a wagon over log-covered roads to reach Upper Wilson Pond, where she and the Jacksons stayed in a rustic log cabin in an area that was frequented by moose, loons, deer, eagles, and other wildlife. Within two weeks, however, when she returned to Maine with the vacationing Jackson family, this time staying at Moosehead Lake, her patience with Eddie was wearing thin. She complained in her diary that Eddie’s “mother says he must go to bed at 8, but lets him play come-as-you-come & sit up till almost nine!”¹⁴ Two days later she commented disparagingly, “Can’t say I love these folks.”¹⁵ By September 9, Gilman wanted out of the arrangement, reporting in her journal that “Eddie [was] rather ruder than usual to me,” and wondering whether she could “stand it all winter.”¹⁶

While Gilman had come to associate trips to Maine with pleasure and autonomy, the liberties she had enjoyed in Ogunquit were supplanted by a sense of oppression and even dread. The dichotomy could not be more striking. When she was removed from the cult of domesticity, Gilman felt unfettered and free; when she was immersed in the domestic sphere, and particularly when she was engaged in child care, she felt shackled and suffocated. It was only to Martha that Gilman confided she planned to leave her job as governess as soon as possible.

It quickly became clear to Gilman that the Jacksons—exemplars of the *nouveau riche*—were not members of the cultural elite of New England, with whom Gilman identified as a consequence of her Beecher lineage. Shortly after their arrival at Upper Wilson Pond, Gilman spent the day “reading, sketching and writing” while Eddie and his father fished. The next day, she took a boat and rowed some “5 or 6 miles,” passing “a

very happy day, thanks to wood & water, sky & wind." A few days later, too, while Eddie and his father again went fishing, Gilman was allowed to take the boat and "row[ed] out to a pretty little island," where she spent the day writing and drawing. "[I was] alone and happy," she noted in her diary.¹⁷ Indeed, Gilman's most enjoyable moments were those spent in quiet contemplation, when she rowed out to Birch Island and spent her time reading or walking in the woods. Within ten days after her arrival, however, she confided to Martha that she found the family to have grown "highly obnoxious," and that Eddie, in particular, was "Selfish. Rude. Lazy. Dishonorable. [and] Weak." As she explained to Martha, "The hard part of it is having to bend my will and do what he likes all the time, wholly regardless of my own feelings." The letter continues, "I . . . want to get away from him; to [spend] all day and every day with a youth who has neither respect nor love for me is hard."¹⁸

Gilman's dislike of Eddie Jackson, however, may well have been amplified by the fact that Gilman had been particularly fond of Eddie's sister, Isabel, who had died after a brief illness just five months earlier. Gilman had been engaged to give Isabel painting lessons, and although she was usually dispassionate about death, she was uncharacteristically emotional about Isabel's passing, noting in her diary that she was "grieved to lose her."¹⁹ Gilman seemed, in fact, to despise Eddie as much as she enjoyed Isabel. Chief among Gilman's complaints was that she had "very little time by [and for her]self," which, significantly, was one of the same objections she would later voice in her marriage. Caring for Eddie, she argued, compromised the few opportunities for solitude that she did have. To Martha, she wrote,

We had chartered one of these little steamers for the day and were fishing. At least the men were, and Eddie. . . . I was loafing about aboard, reading I believe, when Mrs. J[ackson] thoughtfully asked me if I wouldn't like to take the boat and go off by myself [for] a little while. There was a shady island close by; and I joyfully acquiesced. You know how I love to be alone, especially when my companions are unpleasant But Master E[ddie] beheld [me], and wanted to go. His mother demurred, but I smothered my selfishness and let him go. Off I set, meaning to row around the island. . . . I was so glad to stretch my arms. Then he didn't want to go around the island so I came back. Then he proposed that I should row him over to the fishing place and he'd fish! Now firstly I hate fishing. Secondly it was so hot that he and his father had but a short while since come in because E[ddie] was unable to bear it. Thirdly, there was no need of my going at all, for he had his father who did like fishing. To give up not only my promised aloneness

and shady trees, but the quiet haven of the steamboat where was shade and cleanliness, and row out there in that still heat, and sit, (which is hotter) in a dirty boat while he slaughtered fish under my eyes and expected me to sympathize, and all without need—I could not. I would not. I told him so, saying it was too hot, and that he could go with his father just as well. . . .

Said he, “Weren’t you coming out here to row?” “Yes” said I. “Well then”! said he, and in words I do not just remember gave it as his opinion that a person who would go out to row in the heat and not be willing to sit still in it, was a fool! To which I said nothing. (He went back to the boat & I had nearly an hour on the island. And was happy there.) Now isn’t that a lovely boy?

As she drolly remarked in her autobiography over forty years later, Eddie Jackson was an “atrocious little boy” upon whom she had “wasted ten weeks of governessing” and that she had “learned more about the servant question in that time than most of us” learn in a lifetime.²⁰ Clearly, Gilman’s early experience with the Jacksons laid the foundation on which Gilman later built her theory of child rearing, not only with respect to her own daughter, Katharine, who was born in 1885, but also in terms of the larger philosophy that she proposed in *Concerning Children*, in which she advocated teaching by example, day-care centers, and social motherhood.

Despite her painful history with the Jackson family at Moosehead Lake, Gilman nevertheless still acknowledged the therapeutic appeal that Maine held for her. In 1887, Gilman, who had married Stetson in 1884, underwent Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell’s “rest cure” for neurasthenia—a term then used commonly to characterize a breakdown of the nervous system. Dr. Mitchell’s “rest cure” was based on his belief that the patient had reached a state of “cerebral exhaustion,— a condition in which the mental organs bec[o]me more or less completely incapacitated for labor.”²¹ The remedy, he argued, was enforced bed rest where the patient was spared from physical exertion and deprived of intellectual stimulation. Just months after undergoing the “cure” and contemplating a separation from Stetson, Gilman wrote to long-time friend Grace Channing, who would later become Stetson’s second wife, about their plans to write and market plays. In a letter written in November 1887, Gilman suggested Maine as a possible location for their collaboration. “Were you ever on the Maine coast?” she asked. “There are glorious places there for air and water and scenery . . . way up in the northeast corner.” She ultimately decided, however, that it would be more productive to collaborate in a place that would allow them “occasional intercourse with other brilliant minds.”²²

After she left her position as governess, it would be another fourteen years before Gilman would visit Maine again. By this time, Gilman, who had divorced Stetson in 1894, was a rising star on the American literary landscape, having published a volume of poems, *In This Our World* (1893), her most famous story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" (1892), and more than 350 newspaper and magazine articles. In August 1897, at the age of thirty-seven, Gilman departed for Green Acre, in Eliot, Maine, which earned its name from the American poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who found inspiration in its beautiful setting overlooking the Piscataqua River. With the backing of Sarah Jane Farmer, the daughter of a prominent transcendentalist and philanthropist, Green Acre opened in 1890 as a center for the study of religions. Still in existence today, Green Acre focuses on the establishment of world peace, gender equality, racial unity, and spiritual transformation.

During Gilman's 1897 visit, Dharmapala, a Buddhist from present-day Sri Lanka, was also in residence, where he participated in a forum devoted to a comparative study of religions. Gilman notes in her autobiography that she "remember[ed] him enthroned in a rocking-chair, surrounded by admiring women." But her most vivid memory was that she "had been invited to [Green Acre] by Miss Farmer . . . to speak on the 'New Motherhood.'" Upon her arrival, however, Gilman learned that Ida Hultin, a Unitarian minister from Illinois, objected to the topic, arguing that Gilman was unfit to lecture on motherhood, since she had willingly relinquished custody of her daughter Katharine to her ex-husband, Walter Stetson. Gilman explained to Sarah Farmer that the arrangement was a temporary one, and while she agreed to change her topic to "The Social Organism," the brouhaha that ensued generated enough publicity that several people demanded a discussion of "The New Motherhood," as originally planned. Gilman granted the request, beginning her talk at 10:30 A.M. and finishing at 8:00 P.M. Rather than feeling exhausted at the end of the day, she reported experiencing "a triumphant feeling of having at last had a chance to say all I wish to on that topic for once."²³ Indeed, Gilman was energized by the opportunity to engage an audience on an issue about which she felt strongly. If her early sojourns to Maine had unshackled Gilman from the restraints imposed by the Cult of Domesticity and offered her a taste of independence that she rarely experienced, the 1897 trip offered a measure of freedom as well. After being unmuzzled by those who came to her defense, Gilman found her voice, if not her bark, doing what she did best: preaching, educating, and engaging others in public discourse. Three days after her talk at Green Acre, in fact, she began to draft *Women and Economics*, the magnum opus of her



Green Acre, Eliot, Maine, c. 1895. Overlooking the Piscataqua River, Green Acre first opened in 1890 as a center for the study of religions. Gilman was invited there in August 1897 to lecture on “New Motherhood.” She was inspired by her visit, and three days after her departure, she began to draft the book that would become her magnum opus, *Women and Economics*, published in 1898. Courtesy of the Eliot Baha’i Archives, Eliot, Maine.

long career. We also know that in 1907 and 1908, Gilman corresponded with Elizabeth Lanier and Sidney Lanier Jr., son of American poet Sidney Lanier (1842-1881), about the possibility of giving some lectures in or around Eliot, Maine. The Laniers had opened a camp in Eliot in 1908 that focused on the “art of living,” including nature study, crafts, and music. It appears that in late July 1907 Gilman traveled to Eliot; in an extant letter to Sidney Lanier, Gilman wrote that “It was a big pleasure to be with you, and did me good, people working toward the light.”²⁴ Unfortunately, we do not have any further details about that particular trip.

Gilman’s final documented trip to Maine occurred in 1925, when she and her second husband, Houghton, accepted the invitation of their Norwich Town neighbors, the Abbotts, to vacation with them in Ogunquit. Gilman later reported to Katharine that she and Houghton “were most warmly received,” that they felt “honored to be invited,” and that they were chauffeured to Ogunquit in style in the Abbotts’ “big Cadillac.”²⁵ Her autobiographical depiction of the trip, however, documents not only her pride in her New England heritage, but also, regrettably, her growing xenophobia, a sentiment common amongst old stock Yankees

in this period. Industrialization had proved a mixed blessing for New England's elite. Ethnic immigrants flocked to the nation's urban areas in response to the abundance of industrial jobs. These new arrivals "threatened the social purity of this elite world," prompting many elite to seek refuge in Maine's new resort areas.²⁶ As she lamented in her autobiography, "[N]o one with a sense of historical perspective can live in a New England town and not suffer to see its gradual extinction," as the result of the invasion by "foreigners."²⁷ Gilman seemed to believe that Maine was the least compromised of the New England states. "I could have hugged the gaunt New England farmers and fishermen [in Maine]," she wrote, because they exemplified what "my people looked like," before the influx of immigrants "outnumbered and swallowed" the "native stock."²⁸ Over the course of her long career, Gilman made other similar remarks in her letters and in various essays, always pitting those people whom she referred to as the "aliens" against the "native stock," and against New Englanders in particular, whom she felt were superior both to immigrants and even to other American-born inhabitants, a conviction that she would take to her grave. But seeing the New England farmers and fishermen was not Gilman's only motive in returning to the Pine Tree State. Rather, in a letter to daughter Katharine, Gilman, then sixty-five, wrote that Mrs. Abbott "knows [about] 'Charlotte Perkins' Leap' up there, and I am curious to see if I can leap it now!"²⁹ Unfortunately, we do not know whether she took the literal leap one last time. But we do know that from her first visit to Ogunquit back in 1882, one of the places where she first tested her wings, Maine had left an indelible imprint on Gilman's imagination. And if she was no longer able to make the leap, we can at least imagine that she was nevertheless pleased and much amused by Mrs. Abbott's challenge.

NOTES

1. Letter to Katharine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin, Gilman Papers, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 17, 1925.
2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1935, p. 49; Gilman, *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, 2 vols, edited by Denise D. Knight (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 52.
3. Charles Walter Stetson, *Endure: The Diaries of Charles Walter Stetson*, edited by Mary A. Hill (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 63.
4. David Richards, "An Eden out of a Country Farm: Purity and Progress in the Landscapes of the Poland Spring Resort," *Maine History* 34, no. 2 (Fall, 1994), p. 136.

5. Richards, 145.
6. Cliff House Resort and Spa. History. 7 June 2006. [Http://www.Cliffhousemaine.com/about/history.cfm](http://www.Cliffhousemaine.com/about/history.cfm), 1.
7. Gilman, *Diaries*, 131.
8. Gilman, *Diaries*, 131.
9. Gilman, *Living*, 49-50.
10. Gilman, *Diaries*, 134.
11. Gilman, *Living*, 50.
12. Gilman, *Diaries*, 209.
13. Letter from Gilman to Martha Luther Lane. Rhode Island Historical Society, September 6, 1883.
14. Gilman, *Diaries*, 214.
15. Gilman, *Diaries*, 215.
16. Gilman, *Diaries*, 220.
17. Gilman, *Diaries*, 219-220.
18. Letter from Gilman to Martha Luther Lane, Rhode Island Historical Society, September 6, 1883.
19. Gilman *Diaries*, 186.
20. Gilman, *Living*, 153, 69.
21. Silas Weir Mitchell. *Wear and Tear: Or, Hints for the Overworked*. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1871); Also referenced at [Http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13197/13197-h/13197-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13197/13197-h/13197-h.htm).
22. Letter from Gilman to Grace Ellery Channing. Gilman Papers, Schlesinger Library, November 21, 1887.
23. Gilman, *Living*, 232-233.
24. Letter from Gilman to Sidney Lanier, Maine Historical Society, June 25, 1907.
25. Letter from Gilman to Katharine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin, Gilman Papers, Schlesinger Library, August 20, 1925.
26. Richards, 137.
27. Gilman, *Living*, 326, 330.
28. Gilman, *Living*, 316, 324.
29. Letter from Gilman to Katharine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin, Gilman Papers, Schlesinger Library, June 17, 1925.