



A VERMONT WRITER

BY MARGARET EDWARDS

This column is an offering of The Danforth Library in Barnard and a chance to introduce Vermont writers who deserve wider renown.

Elliott Merrick

1905 – 1997



Elliott Merrick in an undated photo

Imagine a young man, born into wealth in Montclair, New Jersey, educated at Philips Exeter Academy, then given a job in the family business upon his graduation from Yale. Elliott Merrick is all set to follow ancestral footsteps on a sure path toward more wealth. But then, hating the job from its outset, he turns his back on all that and heads for Labrador. There he signs up as an unpaid laborer with a program called the Grenfell Mission, and later finds a job as a schoolteacher while he woos the mission's nurse, an Australian named Kate Austen. The two go on a long and life-changing winter trip with a trapper covering 300 miles of unexplored Canadian wilderness. In 1930, they marry.

The stage is set for the Merricks to live happily ever after in Goose Bay. But after the birth of their first son, they leave Labrador to search out and buy for them-

selves, in 1932, a small subsistence farm in a sparsely populated area of northern Vermont. They plan to milk a single cow, shore up their derelict farmhouse against the harsh winters, and teach their two-year-old to snowshoe. They will plant and tend a serious garden. Kate will learn to churn butter as well as preserve food. And most important, after stockpiling enough wood to feed their two iron stoves, Elliott will write. To be a writer is his calling.

Elliott Merrick is now better known for his several books about Labrador, but during his small family's sojourn in Vermont, he accumulated a great wealth of impressions that became *Green Mountain Farm*, published in 1948. This book—and the segment of his life that he lived in order to write it—qualifies him to be “A Vermont Writer,” although he ceased his farming adventure at the onset of World War II. His total immersion in a farming life forms the account he gives.

It had been wonderfully built, this oblong barn, all framed with first-growth spruce beams, some of them eight inches square and forty feet long. The roof of split cedar shakes had been patched and re-patched till the patches wore out. You could see the sky through it in a hundred places. You could see, too, where the rain had been dripping for years on the old spruce timbers. They were still sound as a rock, but they couldn't stay that way forever under such treatment. Way down at the bottom of the walls the foundation stones had fallen away here and there, but the fine old sills bridged such gaps, and the barn stood square. Everywhere you looked there was something that needed doing.

Merrick sets the scene and defines the dimensions of each problem. The farmhouse itself, of “age-blackened clapboards,” needs attention. Its two attics are stuffed with a jumble of possessions left by the former owners, deceased—an elderly couple who “had a habit of never throwing anything away.”

He finds spaces “crammed with clean coffee tins, glass bottles, worn-out implements, broken flails and winnowing baskets,” as well as boxes of old hats and of all their worn-out shoes. “Even a cracked chamber pot, which they had tried to mend with cement,” he writes. The walls held India wheat hulls “packed in there by mice,” although “nobody had raised India wheat in this region for forty years.” And under some “old straw matting” he found newspapers “telling all about the Russo-Japanese War.”

The book's strength is Merrick's descriptive power, even more notable in his detailed portraits of the rural people whom he and his wife meet and get to know. The author indulges in what now seems a misplaced courtesy by applying fictive names to places. He's willing to acknowledge Lake Champlain by its true name,

Cont. next page - Merrick

Merrick - Cont. from previous page

but the tiny town they lived near is called “Horseshoe,” and he mentions the villages of “East Tottenboro” and “Bentham Bend” that sound as if they could be true Vermont places, but they’re not. Merrick also rechristened his wife Kate, calling her “Kay,” and she keeps that name throughout his narrative. A reader soon surmises that “Chester” wasn’t the real name of the carpenter with “thin shoulders and scrawny whiskers” who showed up to help.

Chester fascinated Merrick, who worked alongside him. “Days on the roof with Chester were always an education.” The two men nail down the new shakes, and Merrick is reaching into a pocket for each nail, but the old carpenter with his mouth full of nails is far faster.

It was a common thing around the town to see Chester poking around some big old barn, prying here and there in a faintly uncertain, ineffectual-looking way, always talking about something else, always with time to talk to the passing mailman or anybody. He hadn’t many tools, his overalls were in rags, he hadn’t had a shave for two weeks, he charged four dollars a day and apologized for charging that much. And what happens? Deep under the old 40 x 80 barn, Chester is crawling around in the dark. Chester is full of hayseed and cobwebs, Chester is hewing off braces, going here and there with his jacks and axe and crowbars, a stump-puller he’s very fond of, and his saws. In about eight days some old lopsided ark of a barn has a new sill. Chester has laid up a new stone wall under it, propped up the cow stable with cedar logs for posts, set the whole thing straight and level...

There was also Zack, “a mite frail,” who helped with haying. On hot sunny days, the pitching of hay onto the wagon and then, at the barn, pitching it off, with “the barn full of chaff and devil’s paint brush seed to make you sneeze,” Zack would get “blue around the gills sometimes” for the work “bothered his heart.” That’s when the old man would get down off the wagon, stretch out flat and gasp. Merrick and the ten-year-old boy helping them would fetch cool water from the spring and place cold, wet pads on Zack’s forehead and wrists. “Then he’d sit up and blink, hang a smile on his cheery old face, wipe off his glasses and say, ‘Well, boys, here we go. What’re we waitin’ for?’”

Merrick makes no secret of his deep admiration for the seasoned farmers, all of whom are heroic in their labors and stoical in their tolerance of pain and discomfort. He does not put himself in their category and confesses having to sneak off to his house to warm his hands and feet.

The origin of Merrick’s urge to live a simplified life was Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Throughout Merrick’s life, he acknowledged how Thoreau’s works were an important influence. But another and perhaps deeper source of Merrick’s passion for rugged terrain and a life lived outdoors came from his family’s summer trips to

Maine when he was a boy. During the school year he led “a highly suburbanized existence”—but at Perkins Cove, he met the fishermen and witnessed their seafaring lives as a dramatic battles with the elements.

In *Green Mountain Farm*, a refugee from city wealth lets himself speculate about the poverty he sees all around him:

It has often seemed to me that men who are most exposed to cold have, as a general rule, the poorest clothing, that men who most need fine, strong modern tools...cannot have them, that men who do the most work have least food. Who has the best wagon? It is usually a man who dallies in horse shows. The farmer has an old half-rotten thing that was worn out years ago. Which woman’s kitchen has all the labor-saving devices? Is it the woman who most cook for twelve threshers? No sir, it is a spinster dame who has three maids and a cat.

But such revelations do not suggest to Merrick any sort of political solution. He concludes, “Oh well, it has always been so and it will always be so.” And when he goes further in his thinking about the contrast of rich and poor, he declares that he and Kay are perhaps the most privileged:

As summer came on, one of our greatest joys was to hop out of bed in the morning and run down to the lake for a swim. There it lay, fresh, cool, unrippled, waiting for us, dark and magic, all surrounded with green grass fields and woods. Our high hill and a band of shore trees cut us off beautifully from the road, and we could throw off our pajamas and wade in without suits...How many folk were as rich as we, with an estate where they could swim naked in the clear northern water, morning, noon, or night, and nobody knew and nobody saw and nobody was going to. I used to feel as the wild ducks must feel when I was swimming in the morning-cool water on those crisp mornings. The system was to light the kitchen wood range on the way to the swim. Then we’d run up the hill and dress by the roaring blaze, the coffee just beginning to perk and scent the kitchen.

Hard physical work becomes part of Merrick’s writing regimen in an interesting way. He describes hoeing corn on a hot day with the hoe handle chafing his hands and sweat dripping from his shoulder blades. While doing so, he thinks of his “cool, shaded room” and his “nice dark smooth desk” with its “beautiful white paper” spread before him.

How pleasant it would be to sit there in a chair with the pen traveling over the paper as blithely as a squirrel running from tree limb to tree limb. Soon I am [actually] there, filling up the pages most happily hour after hour, and the happiest part of it is a secret joy, shared only by me, that I can throw all this in the basket and nobody will see it because I don’t care about them.

Cont. next page - Merrick

Merrick - Cont. from previous page

Then after a few hours of writing he would go back to the cornfield to work and sweat with “no thinking,” just appreciating “the bite of the hoe blade into the earth!” and “the fine simplicity of the hoe handle and the automatic bodily movement after long hours cramped in a chair!” Merrick likes to “bounce blissfully” from one occupation to the other, “wanting whatever I do not have, doing whatever I am not doing, and profiting and being happy thereby.” “All this,” he concludes, “makes my farming a bit strange to the passerby, no doubt.”

Merrick’s narrative is often sharpened by his tendency to describe doing something and then, at the same moment, to visualize himself doing it—or rather, to imagine someone else observing him as he speculates about that observer’s opinion.

Neither our neighbors, relatives, nor our former friends understood the simplicity of our simple lives. [Kay and I] believed in simplicity. We loved our spring full of water in the hollow, and our woods full of trees and our blue lake and our green grass field. To see our own cow cropping our own grass—it was something very fine to us. For a stranger I suppose it would be nothing much, just a black shack and one lame cow in a thin field. They might have said to themselves, “How can people live like that?”

Yet, like most Vermonters, Merrick and his wife had to get used to people from elsewhere coming to visit them in the idyllic months of the summer. “We were proud of our little place,” he lets himself admit, “and it bucked us up to have people admire it.”

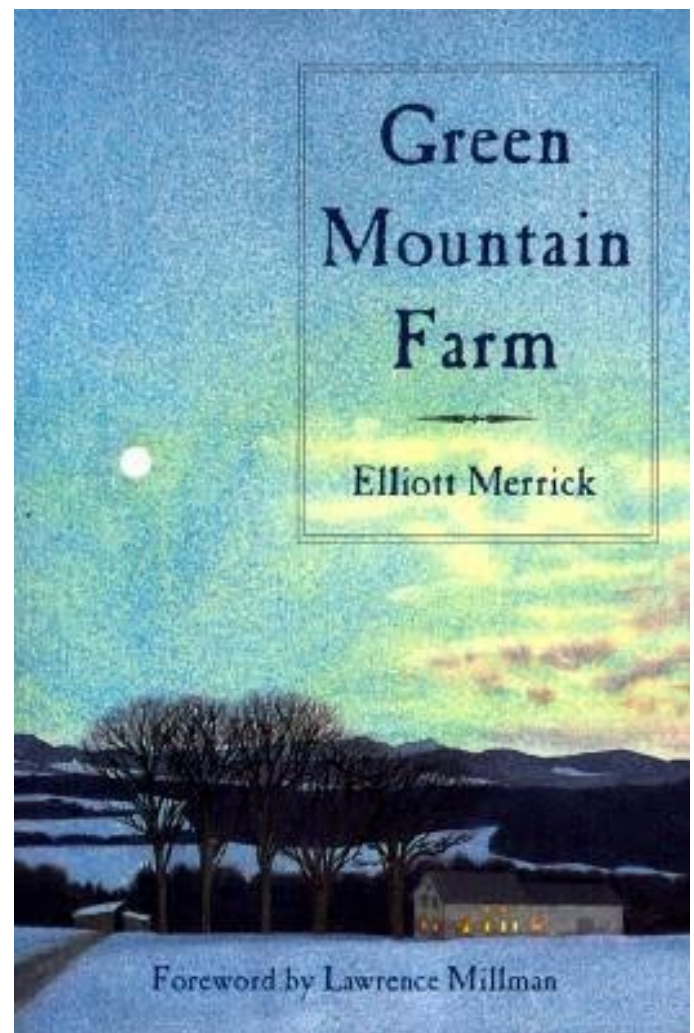
Merrick also gives accounts of lives that he’s heard about in town gossip. Some are possibly tall tales, and they can be comical. A fellow named Ethan, walking in the woods with Merrick tells him that a particular clearing used to be the site of the Shute place. Ethan explains:

“Old Jacob Shute married a girl seventeen years old down to Albany and brought her back up here. She never went to town for eleven years, and in that time she had ten children. Along toward the end of the eleventh year she calculated she’d go down to Albany for a visit. She walked down to town and she stayed there. Old Jacob never got ‘er back.”

Other stories Merrick learns are darker, more like cautionary tales. The Tanners’ hired man named Ted Norris was “a grizzled, short-thick man who seldom spoke, even to children. He was a Harvard graduate who had once been wealthy enough to travel through Europe with a Japanese valet.” This man in earlier times had inherited a fine farm not far from the Merricks’ place, but instead of farming it, he had “drunk himself almost to death.” He drove his fine team of black horses each evening to the nearest town’s inn with a bar. When he was in a stupor and senseless, the bartender would haul him back to his wagon, wrap him in fur robes, and set

the team toward home. The team would take him there. Ted Norris eventually lost his farm and team and, at the end, “hardly made enough to keep himself in tobacco and overalls.” Merrick concludes: “I myself am a Yale man, and so reluctant to record this tragic history.”

The only character Elliott Merrick describes with whom he seems to identify is Ted Norris—it appears the “Yale man” hopes not to stumble in life as badly as the Harvard man. This points up the fact that Merrick, throughout his book, is not aspiring to become one of the working men he admires—such as Chester or Zack. He feels the deepest respect for them and honors them in the way he portrays them, but he is not of their sort. His identity as a writer keeps him in a world apart.



Merrick enjoys setting down his memories in polished anecdotes. Sometimes his writing is pleasantly exuberant, as when he writes a long sequence about the purchase of a used car to replace the unreliable Model A Ford that drove him and his wife to despair. The couple almost worship their secondhand Master Six Sport Touring car, a Buick. “It was long and huge...it was the joy of our hearts.” They used it like a truck—it hauled everything—and like a tractor. They bragged about its prowess in the worst weather.

Cont. next page - Merrick

Merrick - Cont. from previous page

The love of a rustic life permeates the book so thoroughly that it is a surprise to the reader at the book's end when the idyll ends quite abruptly. World War II intrudes:

During the war we could not stay on the farm. The war dislocated us, like everybody else. We had not desire to stay at the farm, and our own private battle seemed temporarily on the shelf... We wanted to be useful, and so we tried, but whether we succeeded or not, I wouldn't know. We bounced around here and there like a good many other millions... grateful to have any roof that wasn't being perforated by bombs...

When the Merricks returned to the farm in 1945, it is just for a visit, because they are not yet sure that "the needs of a family" will allow them to stay. But the author feels a triumphal sense that a lesson has been well learned. "In me and my children," he writes, "I hope, will be a consciousness that that natural things are as powerful and all-pervading as they ever were in the time of the pagan Greeks..."

The springtimes come when the maple leaves unroll...the roses bloom; the blackberries ripen, and these things will go on, as the old New England land deeds phrase it, "as long as the grass grows and water runs." It is good to know all this, for there is really nothing else.

Merrick had spent the years of the war as an editor for the Office of War Information and had joined the Merchant Marines. He wrote for magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *Reader's Digest*. By the time the war was over, his books and other publications had qualified him to teach English at the University of Vermont. The academic life was not work he enjoyed, because it confined him indoors. He was much more comfortable apprenticing himself to skilled craftsmen and experienced woodsmen, than being the professor in charge

TWIN RIVER BASEBALL REGISTRATION

If you have a player who's 13 to 15, as of May 1st, and is interested in playing baseball this Summer, you still have time left to sign up!

Twin River Baseball was created in an effort to help organize and promote baseball in a number of towns along the Ottauquechee and Black Rivers. Players from towns as far away as Mendon, Lyme NH, Plymouth, and Weathersfield are eligible to play for Twin River located, centrally, in Woodstock.

This year we'll have new custom jerseys, new equipment, new coaches, semi-pro games to attend, a home run derby, and a number of State and Regional tournaments to play. For more information and/or to sign up, visit our website <https://www.twinriverbaseball.org/>.

Bryce Sammel, President, Twin River Baseball

When Merrick later joined the United States Forest Service in Asheville, North Carolina, he spent twenty-two years as a science editor and publications officer at a station responsible for experimental forests in five states. His retirement allowed him to spend much of his time cruising with his wife on their twenty-foot oceangoing sloop. Kate Austen Merrick died in 1994; and her husband, whose health rapidly declined, died three years later.



Lawrence Millman with Elliott "Bud" Merrick in the early 1990s

While in North Carolina, Merrick met and befriended an aspiring adventurer and author by the name of Lawrence Millman. This younger man wrote about the inspiration Merrick had been to him in an essay that was published a few years after Merrick's death at 91. Millman is quick to praise *Green Mountain Farm* and says of it, "This is not a book that will teach you how to become a successful farmer, for success was not a word that was part of Bud's vocabulary. Indeed, [the book] is not so much about renovating a hardscrabble farm as it is about renovating one's soul by contact with the natural world."

The Danforth Library of Barnard, Vermont, owns a hardcover copy of Elliott Merrick's *Green Mountain Farm*, published by The Macmillan Company in 1948.

BOAT RACK RESERVATIONS

With George having taken his annual spring swim in the lake, it is once again time to reserve your space on the boat racks at the Barnard General Store.

Boat rack reservations at the BGS will start at 7am on May 1st. Reservations are on a first come, first served basis and will take place outside of the store...rain, snow, or shine. The racks are \$60 each. 2 racks maximum per person

All reservations must be made in person. Only one boat allowed per rack. Payment to be in cash or check only, at the time of reservation.

Please be advised that these racks are in very high demand. People line up outside of the store very early in order to reserve a spot. They will be sold out as soon as the store opens.

BARNARTS EVENTS SCHEDULE



RACE AROUND THE LAKE

10 K RUN, 5K RUN/WALK, VIRTUAL 10K/5K
MAY 21

10K Race begins at 10:30am. 5K Race begins at 11am.
At the Silver Lake State Park, North Road Barnard, VT.
Early Registration Fees:

- 10K Run: Adults \$45, 12 & under \$25;
- 5K Run/Walk: Adults \$35, 12 & under \$25;
- Virtual: \$25 & \$15 for 12 and under.

Sign up by April 30 to receive our free Race Around the Lake T-shirt!

After-Race activities include Chef's Table lunch, live music and awards ceremony along the lake front.

For more information and/or to register visit:
<https://barnarts.org/mainstage/race-around-the-lake/>.

ARCADIA
JUNE 16-25

A play by Tom Stoppard, directed by Christopher Peirce.
Visit <https://barnarts.org/mainstage/arcadia/> for more information.

BARNARTS 12TH ANNUAL
SUMMER YOUTH THEATER: NEWSIES

Camp Dates: July 17-Aug 6.
Performance Weekend: Aug 4-6.
Hours: Monday-Friday, 9:30am-3:30pm (possibly ending at 4/4:30 final week).
Camp Location: Barnard Academy.
Performance Location: Barnard Town Hall.
More information at:
<https://barnarts.org/mainstage/newsies/>.

BarnArts Center for the Arts info@barnarts.org
PO Box 41 802-234-1645
Barnard, VT 05031 (BarnArts voice mail)
www.barnarts.org

APRIL IS NATIONAL POETRY MONTH

April 1, 2023, marked the beginning of the twenty-seventh annual National Poetry Month, an occasion established by the Academy of American Poets in 1996 to celebrate the integral role that poets and poetry have in our culture.

Barnard's Danforth Library is celebrating the month with a selection of poems drawn largely from anthologies and poetry books in its collection. Stop by the Book Room and see the Poetry Month display on the fireplace mantel. Perhaps you'll want to check out a book of poetry?

To celebrate National Poetry Month the Danforth Library is sponsoring this event:

POETRY READING!!

Sunday, April 23 at 4 p.m.

Please join us at the Barnard Danforth Library for a celebration of Poetry Month with four local poets:

Geza Tatrallyay, Pam Ahlen, Danny Dover, and Anne Shafmaster

Enjoy an hour or so of poetry read by the poets themselves – and stay afterwards for light refreshments.

The Barnard Bulletin is published around the twentieth of each month. On the web at BarnardBulletin.news. Send mail to PO Box 161, Barnard VT 05031-0161, email Info@BarnardBulletin.Info or call 802-457-1792.

LOCAL CRYPTOGRAM

A cryptogram is a code in which one letter is substituted for another. For example, the word "Church" could be written BWMSBW. The letter B would be the letter C and would be so throughout the entire message. In this message I = L. The solution is found by trial and error. The CRYPTOGRAM answer is on the last page.

"V G A K F J Q B I M R A J M
F M B X A E Z Q S F O,
I B U A X B F S Z K X M F I I R G A
Q F B K - X Q Z J M C I B M R A K;
E Q A M G W B Z I A R M
Z J A K A W A Q O X F O:
R Z M Z S A K A V T B Q X
A F H G G Z N Q V A I B M R A K."
- I N H O I F Q H Z

THE PLANNING COMMISSION meets on the Monday prior to the first Wednesday of every month at 7 PM in the Town Office.

BARNARD CONSERVATION COMMISSION meets the second Monday of the month, 7:00pm, Town Hall.

BEES MEETINGS are held at 6:30pm on the 2nd Thursday of each month in the library at the school.

DANFORTH LIBRARY HOURS: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 3:00 - 5:00 pm, Saturdays 10:00 am to Noon. ECFiber Wi-Fi. Contact us: phone: 802-234-9408. Email: charlesdanforthlibrary@gmail.com.

SELECTBOARD meets the first and third Wednesday of the month at the Town offices at 7:00pm.

TOWN ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, selectboard@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

ZONING ADMINISTRATOR, Rob Ramrath, zoning@barnardvt.us, 234-2911 x 2, Cell 603-762-5280. By phone at any time, in person by appointment.

TOWN CLERK office hours are Monday—Wednesday, 8:00am—3:30pm. Public access is restricted. Call 234-9211 for an appointment.

THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW BOARD meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:00pm at the Barnard Town Hall as necessary.

THE BARNARD ENERGY COMMITTEE meets on the 2nd Tuesday of the month, 7:00pm at the Town Hall

BARNARD GENERAL STORE, Monday-Saturday: 7am-7pm, Sundays: 8am-6pm.
<https://www.facebook.com/barnardgeneralstore>

BARNARD LISTSERV: to subscribe please send an email to: barnard-subscribe@lists.vitalcommunities.org

RECYCLING Click [here](#) for Hours and Regulations

THE BARNARD INN is running a "Feeding Neighbors & Sustaining Community" campaign. Purchase an e-Gift Card and in turn the chefs will feed neighbors. Whole chicken dinners (serves 4-6) and individual sized meals to help feed Vermonters in need. Thank you and please stay safe. E-Gift Cards are available at www.barnardinn.com.

ECFIBER Governing Board meets the 2nd Tuesday of the month at 7pm via. Zoom. Contact the clerk of the District. secretary@ecfiber.net, for meeting information or visit <https://www.ecfiber.net/virtual-meetings/>

HISTORICAL SOCIETY Programs to be announced. Questions? Email: historicalbarnard1761@gmail.com

DELECTABLE MOUNTAIN QUILTERS (DMQ) meet the 1st Tuesday of every month at the Bethel Library from 1-3pm. Contact: Mary Croft 802-763-7074

HOME ENERGY UPGRADE

INFORMATION NOW AVAILABLE ON-LINE

The Energy Committee kicked off the Home Energy Upgrade campaign on March 1. If you missed that event, you read the handout on the energy page of the town website. Click [here](#) to view the PDF.

How do you take action? The first step is to schedule a home energy audit. An audit report will give you a roadmap of changes that will make your home more energy efficient.

You can use any auditor who is on the Efficiency Excellence Network; full details are in the handout. The Barnard Bonus offers a \$500 rebate to any resident on this cost.

Earthshare, an auditor with whom we've had a good experience, is now scheduling audits in June.

We anticipate that Efficiency Vermont's incentives will go up in mid-summer. In addition, the Barnard Bonus offers up to \$2,000 to middle income residents when you make upgrades recommended in the audit report.

All of these funds are available on a first-come, first-serve funds.

Now is a great time to act.

You can pick up a print copy of the handout at the Town Clerk's office (open M-W) or contact us and we'll mail one to you: BarnardBonus@icloud.com.

Thanks for your interest! — Barnard Energy Committee

GLAD RAGS SPRING SALE 2023

The Glad Rags Spring Sale will be held on Friday - Sunday, April 21 - 23 at the Masonic Lodge in Woodstock.

The hours are: Friday April 21 2 PM - 6 PM
Saturday April 22 9 AM - 2 PM
Sunday April 23 10 AM - 1 PM
(Everything is half-price on Sunday)

The Fall Sale will be held on Friday - Sunday, September 22 - 24

For more information visit <https://www.gladrags.org> or <https://www.facebook.com/groups/145529065206>

CRYPTOGRAM ANSWER

"When April steps aside for May,
Like diamonds all the rain-drops glisten;
Fresh violets open every day:
To some new bird each hour we listen."

- Lucy Larcom