



## Celia Loughton Thaxter (1835-1894)

*"I am fully and intensely aware that plants  
are conscious of love  
and respond to it as they do to nothing else."*

*"He who is born with a silver spoon in his mouth  
is generally considered a fortunate person,  
but his good fortune is small compared to that  
of the happy mortal who enters this world  
with a passion for flowers in his soul."*

*"There shall be eternal summer in the grateful heart."*

The woman who wrote these words was one of the most famous gardeners during her lifetime. She was also one of the most admired and respected patrons of the arts, hosting dozens of the best thinkers, writers, artists, and musicians at her family's resort hotel every summer. All this would be unusual enough until you learn that the resort was on an island 11 miles out to sea, and that the hostess grew up isolated and lonely on a nearby island.

Born in Portsmouth, NH in 1835, Celia Loughton was four years old when her father moved his family to White Island off the coast of Portsmouth where he had been appointed as lighthouse keeper. His three children—Celia, Oscar and Cedric—were terribly lonely, having only each other for playmates. But Celia soon learned to love her island playground, roaming freely on the small island, loving the wild, rocky terrain and the rugged vegetation that grew there. Meanwhile, Celia's father was branching out, building a hotel on nearby Appledore Island (there are nine islands grouped together and called the Isles of Shoals).



The hotel brought civilization to the Islands and with it, a tutor for the Loughton children. Levi Thaxter was a Harvard graduate eleven years older than Celia. Celia



immediately fell in love with him. Having had limited contact with young people her age, this older well-educated man was quite attractive to her, even more so because he was interested in her as well. Celia's father would not give his permission for them to marry until she was of age, so when she turned sixteen, Celia and Levi married. Levi grew weary of life on the islands and convinced Celia to move to Newtonville, MA

Life on the mainland was frustrating to the young wife. She was not used to being confined and returned to Appledore in the summer where her first son, Karl, was born. Celia did not have an easy delivery and Karl's leg was injured in the process. He was never able to live independently from his mother, having a nervous and difficult temperament. As two more boys were added to the family, Celia and Levi grew apart. Celia was devoted to Karl; and Levi, to the other two boys. He would take them off on long trips to gather birds and animals for museums. Celia didn't appreciate these trips—neither the time they took from the family nor the fact that Levi and the boys were using guns to kill wildlife all over the country. "My heart is broken into shreds," she wrote to a friend.



When Celia's father died in 1866, Celia started spending more time on Appledore with her mother and Karl. She hated housework, calling her home in Newtonville a "household jail." Whenever she was not on the island, she spent hours dreaming about it. She wrote a poem about her longing for the island life, calling it "Land-locked." She kept it a secret from her husband, but he later found it and took it to a friend of his, James Russell Lowell, who was editor of the prestigious literary magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*. Lowell printed the poem in the next issue of the magazine to great acclaim. Thus encouraged, Celia began to write and publish more. She wrote both poems and essays and soon became known as a writer about nature

and the sea. Her poem "The Sandpiper" was memorized in schoolrooms all over the



country. It remains her most famous poem. Celia often talked about how she identified with this little bird that roamed so freely along the narrow beach that lined her rocky island home. She even signed her letters "Sandpiper" sometimes.

Soon the cultural icons of Boston were flocking to the resort on Appledore, eager to meet the island writer. John Greenleaf Whittier (writer and abolitionist), Nathaniel Hawthorne (writer), James and Annie Fields (publisher and mentor). Ole Bull (violinist), Appleton Brown (artist), Childe Hassam (artist), and William Morris Hunt (artist) were among those Celia Thaxter entertained in her home on the island. She would give poetry readings, tell stories, and listen with relish to the music her guests provided.

When her mother got sick, Celia and Karl spent many months on the island taking care of her and the hotel business. She loved flowers and created a legendary flower garden that was immortalized by Childe Hassam and that is reproduced every year, thanks to the meticulous notes and sketches she kept of the garden as it evolved through the years. It was "just an old-fashioned garden," she said. But in truth it was a colorful reminder of the creator-God Celia loved. The garden was not just for looking at where it grew. It is said that in her home were two hundred vases which were always filled with flowers from her garden, and that there was never a faded bloom to be seen amongst them.



Her confidence in God was known to others. She wrote and talked about how He helped her bear the burdens of life. She once said that the "griefs God sends, if one only stops to think, after all are easy to bear, because God sends them. It

is only the pain one brings on one's self that cannot so patiently be borne." She considered herself one of God's children, just like the sandpiper and all of nature.



Celia was also an expert on the birds and other island wild-life. She captured the nature she loved with both words and pictures, painting china and tiles with life-like images of birds and flowers.

Celia didn't just paint for pleasure, though. Finances were tight for the family, so she capitalized on her popularity and began selling her china. Money from this and her poetry helped support her, her boys, and her parents when they were alive. She could make far more money with her painting than her writing

Celia's mother died in 1877. Three years later, the Thaxters moved to a farm in Kittery Point, Maine. "Champernowne" had a view of Celia's beloved islands, but she still spent time there every summer until her death in 1894. She was the most widely read and published woman poet during the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She served as an inspiration to many women who saw her rise above a difficult childhood and marriage to live a fulfilled life of culture and beauty. She showed that women didn't have to be dependent on others, that they could use the gifts and talents to not only beautify the world but support themselves in the process. Her legacy is alive today in the garden that still blooms on Appledore each summer and in the poetry that still resonates with those who love nature and the sea.



**All photographs were taken by Rondi Aastrup and are used by permission.**

**For more information about Celia Thaxter's life and works, check out the following resources:**

Culpepper, Lessie Lee and Mildred McClary Tymeson. *American Authors*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1942.



Mandel, Norma. *Beyond the Garden Gate: the Life of Celia Loughton Thaxter*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004.

Older, Julia, editor. *Celia Thaxter: Selected Writings*. Hancock, NH: Appledore Books,

Stephan, Sharon Paiva. *One Woman's Work: The Visual Art of Celia Loughton Thaxter*. Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2001.

Thaxter, Rosamund. *Sandpiper: The Life and Letters of Celia Thaxter*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1963.

Vallier, Jane E. *Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters and Works of Celia Thaxter*. Camden, ME: Down East Books, 1982.

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/thaxter/garden/garden.html>

<http://www.perpublisher.com/per9.html>

<http://www.seacoastnh.com/women/thaxter.html>

[http://www.sml.cornell.edu/sml\\_public/aboutthegarden.html](http://www.sml.cornell.edu/sml_public/aboutthegarden.html)



Photo above is of Celia's writing desk now located in the Celia Thaxter Museum on Star Island, Isles of Shoals. Photo on the left side of the desk shows her at work at this desk.