

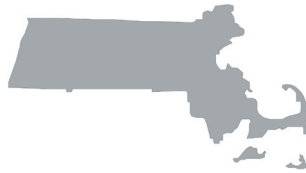


Esther Louise Forbes (1891-1967)

From the collections of the Worcester Historical Museum, Worcester, MA.

Esther Forbes' *Rainbow on the Road*: Portrait of the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Artist

KENT P. LJUNGQUIST



Abstract: *Writer Esther Forbes' work has received scant academic attention despite the fact that her historical novels became Book-of-the-Month Club selections, winning both popular and critical acclaim. She was the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in history. Her neglected novel, Rainbow on the Road, merits study as a reflection of her long-standing interest in early nineteenth-century American art and the value she places on the tradition of "plain painting." This article explores Forbes' use of American painting as a primary inspiration in her historical fiction and assesses the models she used for her portrayal of her main character, traveling artist Jude Rebough. In Rainbow on the Road, Forbes stresses the transactions — social, temporal, and economic — between sitter and portraitist along with the changing historical context in which regional artists worked. Despite the book's many humorous scenes, Forbes was committed to a non-romanticized style of historical fiction which allowed her to combine painstaking historical research with a personal investment in materials from her own family's past. Author Kent P. Ljungquist is a professor in the Department of Humanities & Arts at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (MA).*

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“I was brought up on stories of early New England,” the novelist and short story writer Esther Louise Forbes (1891-1967) proudly declared. She was as steeped in the region’s folklore “as a pickle in brine.”¹ Her parents demonstrated a strong appreciation of history, offered her access to an ample family library of regional materials, and exhibited a commitment to the importance of written expression. Born in Westboro, Massachusetts, Esther was the daughter of William Trowbridge Forbes and Harriette (Merrifield) Forbes. As a child, her mother (herself a writer, historian, and artist) encouraged her to draw, paint, and write.

When her father assumed the position of probate judge in 1898, the family moved to Worcester. Esther attended Bradford Academy and later took writing courses at Boston University. In 1919 she assumed a position on the editorial staff of the Houghton Mifflin Company. In the 1920s, Forbes began to take stock of the New England literary tradition in a series of feature articles for the *Boston Evening Transcript*. Among the figures she discussed were writers whose work was fueled by a fascination with the region’s past: Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sarah Orne Jewett.

After experimentation with short fiction in the 1920s, Esther Forbes produced historical novels that became Book-of-the-Month Club selections, winning both popular and critical acclaim. *A Mirror for Witches* (1928) is considered one of the most sophisticated treatments of New England’s witchcraft hysteria of the late 1600s. In 1942 Forbes became the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in history for her book *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In*.

Paul Revere reveals Forbes’ longstanding interest in American art. She chose John Singleton Copley’s portrait of Revere in shirtsleeves, an open collar, and tools at the ready as an introductory painting for the book.² Forbes took pains to establish Revere’s artisan status within the nascent artistic community of colonial Boston. Other paintings referenced in that biography — those of Samuel Adams and Joseph Warren — serve to chronicle the exploits of the *dramatis personae* swept up in revolutionary

¹ Ivan Sandrof, “The Fun in Writing is When You Think You Are Better Than You Are!” *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, Feature Parade Section, April 3, 1960, p. 17; Sandrof, “How a Book is Written,” *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, Feature Parade Section, July 4, 1948, p. 3.

² John Singleton Copley (1738-1815) of Boston was trained in draftsmanship and engraving before becoming a portrait painter. His portrait of Paul Revere (c. 1768-70) was painted before he left Boston in 1774 to refine his style in Europe. In *O Genteel Lady!* Forbes, who obviously preferred his early Bostonian paintings, refers to him as “the great Copley” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), 146. For discussion of Copley’s paintings within the context of Forbes’ work, see Joan Shelley Rubin, “Silver Linings: Print and Gentility in the World of Johnny Tremain,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 113 (2003): 37-52.



Portrait of Paul Revere
John Singleton Copley, c. 1768-70

Copley is widely considered the greatest and most influential painter in colonial America, producing about 350 works of art. His Boston portraits show a thorough knowledge of his New England models, and his talent as a draftsman and colorist produced pictures of aristocratic elegance and grace. With his startling likenesses of persons and things, he came to define a realist art tradition in America.

Born in Boston in 1738 to recently-arrived Irish immigrants, he began to paint as a teenager. In the mid-1700s the portrait was virtually the only art form available to the colonial painter. Portraiture was in great demand and supported a small number of artists.

Copley was virtually self-taught as a portraitist. By meticulously recording details, he created powerful characterizations of his Boston sitters. He adopted the rococo device called *portrait d'apparat*: portraying the subject with objects associated with his daily life. After he emigrated to London in 1774, he specialized in historical scenes and joined the influential Royal Academy of Art.

~ Mara Dodge, Editor

upheaval. Some of the figures covered in her Revere volume reappeared the following year in *Johnny Tremain* (1943), her award-winning portrayal of a young apprentice silversmith and his struggle toward maturity at the outbreak of the revolution. This book has become a fixture in the educational curriculum of several generations of American adolescents. *Paul Revere* and *Johnny Tremain* won Forbes a national spotlight. In subsequent years, she wrote three more novels based on New England materials, including *Rainbow on the Road* (1954), a Literary Guild selection.

To the extent that Forbes' work has received any academic attention, scholars have focused on her treatment of the Revolutionary era and her contributions to historical fiction. As the Revere biography suggests, however, she also displayed an abiding interest in American portrait painting. She dexterously wove into her work references to artists and the complex situations, often colored by gender concerns, they confronted. For example, the central character in her first novel, *O Genteel Lady!* (1926), is a young woman writer-illustrator from western Massachusetts who struggles for recognition in the male-dominated cultural setting of nineteenth-century Boston. Likewise, Jude Rebough, the itinerant limner (painter) of her final work of fiction, *Rainbow on the Road*, confronts a series of challenging encounters with his sitters, especially in his depiction of female subjects. In both historical narratives, references to the artistic milieu assist Forbes in depicting the conflicts and changes that transformed nineteenth-century New England.

Whether addressing the revolutionary era or later periods, Forbes sensed that an artist's regional roots were essential to his or her development. Despite Boston painter John Singleton Copley's long career in Europe, Forbes suggests that he was "as New England as stone walls and sumac bushes, and seemingly as hard to transplant."³ In *Rainbow on the Road* in particular, Forbes' characterization of traveling artists displays a commitment to a regional style of "plain painting" that contrasts sharply with the cosmopolitan perspective of other writers, perhaps most notably Anne Douglas Sedgwick, who also incorporated art into her work.

FORBES' EARLY LIFE AND ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Forbes derived her knowledge of art from both academic and non-academic sources. After studying at the Bancroft School in Worcester, she attended classes at the school of the Worcester Art Museum. When

³ Esther Forbes, "Americans at Worcester: 1700-1775," *Magazine of Art* 36 (March 1943): 82-89.

her sister, Katherine, matriculated at the University of Wisconsin in 1916, Esther accompanied her, and she took several literature courses and maintained her interest in the relationship between literature and painting.⁴

An immediate source of inspiration for Forbes' dual interests in art and history was her mother, Harriette Merrifield Forbes (1856-1951). Harriette attended Oread Collegiate Institute in Worcester, established in 1849 to offer women academic opportunities equivalent to male students at other colleges.⁵ After graduation, she studied at the Arts Students League in New York and later in her native town of Westboro. Harriette was a protégé of Edith Loring Getchell (1855-1940), a teacher and an accomplished figure in oil painting and American etching.⁶

Before her marriage to William Trowbridge Forbes in 1884, Harriette Forbes travelled to California to make sketches of primitive settlements.⁷ She eventually turned to the study of history, compiled a bibliography of American diaries, and published a local history of Westboro. However, she sustained her interest in art



Learning to Sew, c. 1898

Source: Holly V. Izard and Vanessa Hofstetter. *Merrifield at 23 Trowbridge Road 1856-2002* (Worcester, MA: Worcester Historical Museum, 2004), p. 25. Reproduced with permission of the Erskine family, who reserve all copyrights to the images.

⁴ Margaret Erskine, *Esther Forbes* (Worcester: Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 10; Jack Bales, *Esther Forbes: A Bio-Bibliography of the Author of 'Johnny Tremain'* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1998), 3; Esther Forbes, *Miscellaneous Essays*, Forbes Papers, Clark University Archives and Special Collections, Box 1, Folder 5. Bales' work for his bibliography, deposited as part of the Forbes collection at Clark University, has proven an invaluable resource for this study.

⁵ Oread's founder Eli Thayer claimed that it was the second college to enroll women (after Oberlin College). One track for diplomas allowed students with advanced work in Modern Languages to substitute courses in painting and drawing for those in mathematics.

⁶ The Worcester Art Museum sponsored a solo exhibition of Getchell's paintings in 1908. Many of her etchings were also locally displayed in a 1912 Exhibition of American Etchings. Getchell was married to a prominent Worcester physician.

⁷ Holly V. Izard and Vanessa J. Hofstetter, *Merrifield at 23 Trowbridge Road 1856-2002* (Worcester: Worcester Historical Museum, 2004), 14.



Esther, October 15, 1898

Here, seven-year-old Esther is shown exploring old family heirlooms kept in a bureau.

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in a book-length study of New England gravestones, still regarded as a landmark work in the field.⁸

If her mother was one important source of inspiration, another significant influence emerged early in Forbes' career when she interviewed the novelist and short story writer Anne Douglas Sedgwick (1873-1935), and asked about her youthful career as an amateur art student.⁹ While her family was living in London, Sedgwick studied European painting and sojourned to Paris to explore how the Impressionists challenged the formal artistic conventions and the "high culture" subject matter of the Academic painters of nineteenth-century France. Sedgwick eventually discovered that her abilities lay in writing rather than painting, but her exposure to the world of art, Forbes noted, was not wasted.

⁸ In *Gravestones of Early New England, and the Men Who Made Them* (1927), Harriette Merrifield Forbes surveyed the region's long-standing interest in visual imagery; she also explored Puritan attitudes toward mortality and how the substitution of human faces for death's heads or other conventional figures represented an early form of portraiture. Mortuary painting paralleled the work of gravestone cutters, and some of the pictures from which gravestones were cut were executed by painters. In one of her local studies, she expressed admiration for Copley's portrait of Lydia Henchman Hancock; her daughter, Esther, treated the same portrait at somewhat greater length in her biography of Revere, openly acknowledged as a collaborative research effort with her mother. Harriette Merrifield Forbes, "Early Portrait Sculpture in New England," *Olde Time New England* 19 (1929): 159-173; H. M. Forbes, "Daniel Henchman: The Founder of Worcester," *Publications of the Worcester Historical Society* 5 (1942): 219-238; and Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), 113. Maintaining her interest in regional history as well as visual representation, Harriette spent much of her life documenting New England's vernacular architecture via the medium of photography.

⁹ Sedgwick was an American-born writer who spent most of her career in England. Born in New Jersey, she moved at age nine to London with her family. Her novels explored the contrast between Americans and Europeans. In 1931 she was elected to the U. S. National Institute of Arts and Letters. Four of her novels became bestsellers in the U. S. for 1912, 1924, 1927, and 1929.

Painters recur in Sedgwick's fiction, and among her major influences was a reservoir of experience in composition and form drawn from art and painting. Sedgwick, Forbes notes, "has innately the power to observe, the desire to arrange what she observes into artistic form. This may be done on canvas or in a book. Or in a short story." When Forbes embarked on her own historical work, she adopted this studio-like approach to her craft; she used portraits as primary sources, assigning them equal importance alongside diaries, personal correspondence, and vital records. As Forbes' career advanced, she frequented museums, wrote essays on art, lectured on painters at galleries and historical societies, and displayed enough knowledge of art to be recognized among authorities on portraiture in surveys of American painting. In all likelihood, Sedgwick's choice of a career that combined both art and fiction suggested alternatives Forbes must have considered, a dilemma also faced by her female protagonist in *O Genteel Lady!*¹⁰

Beyond the models of Sedgwick and her mother, Forbes' interest in art, more specifically in a "plain" style of painting, was undoubtedly influenced by developments in the wider cultural world, reinforced by the emerging interest in Americana in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1930 the Harvard Society, in conjunction with the Massachusetts Tercentary Celebration, sponsored an early exhibition of American folk painting. The following year, in Greenwich Village, the American Folk Art Gallery opened the first gallery devoted exclusively to American folk art. Gravestone carvings, the subject of Harriette M. Forbes' researches, were included in the exhibition via photographs. In 1930 the Newark Museum sponsored the most comprehensive showing to date of American primitive painting and



**Esther Louise Forbes,
Age 25 in 1926**

From the collections of the
Worcester Historical Museum,
Worcester, MA.

¹⁰ Forbes, "The Shorter Catechism of Anne Douglas Sedgwick," *Anne Douglas Sedgwick: An Interview by Esther Forbes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928); Forbes, "Anne Douglas Sedgwick and Her Novels," *Bookman* 69 (1929): 571; James Thomas Flexner, *First Flowers of Our Wilderness: American Painting* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), xiii, 329.

WHAT IS “PLAIN PAINTING”?

In *Plain Painters: Making Sense of American Folk Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), John Michael Vlach uses the straightforward phrase “plain painting” to avoid the obfuscation and confusion caused by casual use of more derogatory terms such as “primitive,” “naïve,” “country,” “pioneer,” and “folk.” He also sought to avoid the suggestion that work of artisan itinerants was inherently inferior to that of academically trained painters. Interestingly, Vlach uses as a point of departure an essay by art critic James Thomas Flexner (1942), who corresponded with Forbes and wrote an appreciative review of *Rainbow*.



Left: In this portrait of Mrs. Moses Green, by Ruth Henshaw Bascom, key elements of “plain painting” are evident. Bascom inspired a character in *Rainbow on the Road*, representing the rare female artist.

Right: *Unknown Woman*, by a member of the Prior-Hamblen School, is emblematic of this unornamented style of portraiture. Portland, Me., or Boston, Mass., c. 1837-1844. Tempera on academy board.

sculpture.¹¹ Subsequent years of debate and discussion on the meaning of “folk,” when applied to American art, culminated in a special issue of the journal *Antiques* devoted to the subject in 1950.

JUDE REBOUGH AS REPRESENTATIVE ITINERANT ARTIST

With this backdrop of increasing interest in the style of plain painting, Forbes, whose fascination for popular religious and folk belief surfaced in *A Mirror for Witches* (1928), turned to a Connecticut River Valley setting in *Rainbow on the Road* (1954). John Gough, in an overview of Forbes' career, notes that *Rainbow*, although commonly overshadowed by *Johnny Tremain*, deserves to be far better known.¹²

In the character of Jude, traveling with his young nephew Eddy Creamer who narrates the story, Forbes creates an itinerant limner and his episodic adventures on the roads, in the woods, and in the villages of New England in the early 1800s. The two traveling companions, roaming free from the restrictions of town life and conventional standards of conduct, sometimes skirt the law. They witness and document a world of slick Yankee peddlers, tradesmen, and thieves: their tricks, tales, and comic predicaments. Jude's wife Mitty (short for “Submit”) wants Jude to be a respectable tradesman, not a mere pack peddler, but his habits sometimes court disaster, and he is mistaken on the road for the scalawag Ruby Lambkin, a thief whose descriptions on handbills tally with the limner's appearance. Jude paints subjects of every age and background; yet in the back of his memory is the lusciously beautiful Emma Faucett, whose aged husband owns an inn near Dartmouth College.

Jude spends his winters painting backgrounds and bodies, then in the summer fills in the heads and hands of people encountered on the road. It has been suggested that the traveling artists of this period may have engaged in this practice, but most contemporary art historians discount the possibility, as no large-scale inventory of paintings with headless bodies has ever been discovered. Forbes, however, whose research on New England history was painstaking, would have relied only on the sources available to her when drafting *Rainbow on the Road*. Richardson Wright's

¹¹ Many paintings in this exhibition were donated by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Her collection was coordinated by Holger Cahill into a landmark exhibition, “The Art of the Common Man,” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Abby Rockefeller's collection of primitive paintings ultimately became part of the permanent collections at Colonial Williamsburg.

¹² John Gough, *Twentieth-Century Romance and Historical Writers*, ed. Aruna Vasudevan (London: St. James Press, 1994), 232-33.

study of early American tinkers and vagabonds, for example, mentions the legend of itinerants preparing bust lines and backgrounds for female and male clients in the winter and filling them in for customized portraits in the spring. Similarly, Clara Endicott Sears' pioneering overview of the emerging field of American folk painting, *Some American Primitives* (1941), references the practice of itinerants painting bodies for an inventory of canvasses before filling in the faces. Furthermore, both Wright and Sears speculate about the ripe commercial potential of having a varied inventory of backgrounds: a seaman or sea captain might pose with a ship or sailing vessel behind him. Other formulaic poses might include elderly women holding Bibles, young women clutching volumes of poems, or clergymen reviewing unfinished sermons.¹³

The perceived stiff patterns and provincial style of early American portraiture led to an inference, even in academic studies in the 1930s, that Sears' and Wright's description of itinerant practice had some validity. This conviction seems to be supported by the prodigious output of some New England itinerants such as Erastus Salisbury Field, Ammi Philips, and Joseph Whiting Stock, who must have had a vast supply of canvasses with generic character types, conventional postures, and distinguishing symbols at the ready for deployment in individual circumstances. As late as 1942, no less an authority on American folk painting than Jean Lipman suggested that the habit of producing attractively dressed bodies in advance of rendering individual heads was consistent with itinerants' practice.

Whatever the precise accuracy of Forbes' handling of Jude's techniques in *Rainbow*, she stresses the transactions — social, economic, and temporal — between sitter and portraitist. She took pains to imply that Jude's practice was not universal among itinerants. Yet whatever its frequency among traveling limners, there is little doubt that artists used various shortcuts to accelerate their production of likenesses.

Forbes' most immediate "source" for Jude, of course, was her own: the old limner who appeared briefly in her previous novel *The Running of the Tide*. As Forbes explained, "I got him [Jude] from a previous book. He just came into the story in an obscure way but then he took over. I knew I'd have to do a whole book about him."¹⁴

¹³ Among the subjects Jude depicts in *Rainbow* are grandmothers, sea captains, young women, and clergymen, as well as squires, tavern keepers, and young scholars.

¹⁴ Donald R. Walters and Carolyn J. Weekley, "Introduction," *American Folk Portraits: Paintings in the Abby Rockefeller Folk Art Center*, ed. Beatrix Rumford (Boston: New York Graphic Society in Association with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1981), 35; Richardson Wright, *Hawkers and Walkers in Early America* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1927), 29, 133; Clara Endicott Sears, *Some American Primitives: A Study of New England Faces and Folk Portraits* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 2, 53-54; Alan Burroughs, *Limners and Likenesses: Three Centuries of American Painting*

Jude travels with a horse and yellow chaise, a color popular among itinerants. However, unlike the limner in *The Running of the Tide* (1948), he is younger, more vigorous, and returns home after his season on the road to his family. He receives training in interior house painting as well as his preference, a “fancier sort” of work. A more elaborate kind of work is sign painting for taverns and hotels, and true to a craftsman’s tradition, Jude does overmantels for such establishments. When a local apothecary shows Jude a stock of engravings based on works of the European masters, he informs him that such work would qualify as art on the Continent. “Fact is,” Jude stubbornly responds, “I’m a limner. I couldn’t ever do what those old fellows did.”¹⁵

MODELS FOR JUDE’S CHARACTER: GREENWOOD AND PECKHAM

Jude’s origins in Hubbardston, Massachusetts suggest that one model Forbes used for his character was Ethan Allen Greenwood (1779-1856), a native of that town. Forbes would have been familiar with Greenwood from his self-portrait at the Worcester Art Museum, his panel painting of Isaiah Thomas, founder of the American Antiquarian Society, and the artist’s memorandum books.¹⁶

(Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1936), 89; Jean Lipman, *American Primitive Painting* (New York: Dover Publications, 1942), 96; Elizabeth Watts, “Esther Forbes ‘Found’ Painter in Her New Book in Earlier Story,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, January 31, 1954, Section A, p. 65. Lipman updates and modifies her view of limners’ practice about preparing bodies in advance of summer travels in a work co-authored with Mary Black, *American Folk Painting* (New York: Bramhall House, 1966), 18. Jean Lipman’s 1941 article “American Primitive Portraiture—A Reevaluation” defended folk portraiture by chiding academic critics who measured the genre against English or Continental standards, and her *American Primitive Painting* was a landmark that stressed a style that depended on what provincial artists knew, their mental picture, rather than natural observation and technical facility.

¹⁵ Esther Forbes, *Rainbow on the Road* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 22. Subsequent quotations from the novel will be noted by page number.

¹⁶ Mentioned in the memorandum books, donated to the American Antiquarian Society in 1949, are Greenwood’s paintings of Elijah and Sarah Ward Brigham, names known to Forbes from Harriette’s town history of Westboro and her edition of the diary of the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman (1703-1782). Judge Brigham (1751-1816), whose first wife was the Reverend Parkman’s daughter, took Sarah Ward Brigham as his second wife. Greenwood painted the couple’s portrait, part of the collections of the American Antiquarian Society. As the first woman member of that institution, Forbes would have been familiar with Greenwood’s multiple artistic accomplishments. See Georgia Brady Bumgardner, “The Early Career of Ethan Allan Greenwood,” *Itinerancy in New England and New York/Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Proceedings for 1984* (Boston: Boston University Scholarly Publications, 1986), 212; Harriette M. Forbes, ed. *The Diary of Rev. Ebenezer Parkman* (Westborough: Westborough Historical Society, 1899), 61ff; Harriette M. Forbes, *The Hundredth Town: Glimpses of Life in Westborough* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1889), 83; and Georgia Brady Barnhill, “Extracts from the Journals of Ethan A. Greenwood: Portrait Painter and Museum Proprietor,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 103 (1998): 91.

Like many itinerants, Greenwood measured the world of art in terms of income and expenses; he did not paint in pursuit of lofty aesthetic ideals, refined practice, or polished execution. Unlike Jude, who serves an apprenticeship in Worcester without formal education in art, Greenwood graduated from Dartmouth College (mentioned in *Rainbow*), then studied in New York City. Assuming multiple roles, he practiced law, opened a portrait studio in Boston, and became a proprietor of the New England Museum and the Boston Museum, ultimately pursuing a political career in his native Hubbardston. Greenwood's early travels also intersected with another limner, whose career Forbes also knew, Robert Peckham, who briefly studied with Greenwood in 1809.¹⁷

Deacon Robert Peckham (1785-1877) is perhaps best known for his naïve, doll-like paintings of children. He painted from 1809 to 1850, but was most active in the 1830s. In a lecture on "Peddlers and Painters" which accompanied an exhibition on primitive painting at the Worcester Art Museum, Forbes commented, "The honesty of the school appears in the treatment of children. They really are awfully homely little things. A more sophisticated painter would have idealized them." In *Rainbow*, Jude has two specialties, "It was with young women and children that he excelled."¹⁸

If Forbes' knowledge of Greenwood's work came partially from her mother's historical research, her exposure to Peckham was more direct and immediate. In calling Peckham a representative figure among itinerant painters, she noted that two works for the Worcester exhibition had been executed for her grandfather, William Trowbridge Merrifield (1807-1895). One, a picture of Merrifield's horse, had the appearance of an inn sign, and Forbes noted that many itinerants trained by painting signs for taverns.

It seems clear that Forbes' portrayal of Jude derives from a range of sources: ancestral connections, family members, visits to museums, historical research, and her own fiction. There is no uncertainty about what style characterizes Jude's portraits in *Rainbow*; Forbes was unequivocal: "I had Prior in mind. He started as an itinerant painter. His art was direct and simple, without shading. It was flat, but it has so much style to it."

William Matthew Prior (1806-1873) was eventually identified with his own school of painting, though in his early twenties Prior did ornamental work for trays and waiters, later expanding his activities to include

¹⁷ Bumgardner, "The Early Career of E. A. Greenwood," 221; Dale T. Johnson, "Deacon Robert Peckham: Delineator of the 'Human Face Divine,'" *American Art Journal* 11 (1979): 27-28.

¹⁸ Forbes, 32.

bronzing, gilding, and varnishing. He did sign painting and drawings of machinery for steam and casting mills in Maine, then began to advertise human likenesses at reasonable prices with specific appeals for side views and profiles of children. Prior resided for a time in Portland with his brother-in-law, Nathaniel Hamblen, before the Prior and Hamblen families moved to Boston in 1841. Prior's works epitomized a unique style, called the Prior-Hamblen school of painting, that "provided a passable likeness with [the] least possible expenditure of his own time." Like Jude, Prior painted landscapes, but he was best known for flat likenesses with an absence of shadow. An 1831 advertisement noted Prior's ability to do "fancy pieces," but the last sentence of the promotion established a style recognizable to an average viewer or collector: "Persons wishing for a flat picture can have a likeness without shade or shadow at one quarter price."¹⁹

JUDE'S COMEDY: THE MANY WIVES OF REV. PERCH

In one of the more grotesquely comic sequences in *Rainbow*, Jude is asked to change faces on a portrait possessed by Dr. Perch, an elderly clergyman with a notorious penchant for marrying young girls. On a previous visit to Perch, Jude had executed a portrait of the clergyman's deceased wife, Evelina, portraying her in her early twenties, though she was more than a decade older when the sitting occurred. This youthful effect — Jude's specialty was young people and children — derived from his inability to draw in facial lines associated with age: "not shading and shadowing things as school-taught painters were doing by then."²⁰ In Evelina's portrait, Jude is unable to replicate, in purely realistic terms, what he observed, but he captured what he sensed of her youthful innocence rather than stressing elaborate dress or subtle gestures.

Jude and his nephew Eddy (who narrates the book) learn that Evelina drowned in a pond, but the suspicion in the New Hampshire community is that she committed suicide, a consequence of her husband's neglect, the vast difference in their ages, and her desperation after falling for a young divinity student. Jude, initially reluctant to paint in a fresh face, refuses Perch's request, which appears to be inspired by his relish for a new young bride. Jude, moreover, "loved that picture" of Evelina: "There was sweetness in the face but a touch stern, too, like a virgin martyr. Perhaps

¹⁹ "300 Hear Esther Forbes Discuss Primitive Paintings"; Nina Fletcher Little, "William M. Prior, Traveling Artist," *Portrait Painting in America: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ellen Gross Miles (New York: Main Street/Universe Books, 1977), 121.

²⁰ Forbes, 81.

she was one of those people who never do grow up and so her face never lost its youthfulness.”²¹

Jude and Eddy hear the local rumor that Evelina’s spirit walks — a suicide who fails to rest easily in her grave. They learn, too, of Evelina’s condition when she was found, her face blackened and one eye poked out from the violent probing of poles used to discover her body in the pond. When the clergyman’s young prospective wife sits for the new portrait, the mischievous Jude produces a head, dead and blackened, and one eye missing. Jude, having terrified the sitter, wipes the surface to return the canvas to Evelina’s likeness. Not all encounters between itinerants and their clients carried this level of riotous comedy, but in the interaction between Jude and the clergyman, Forbes certainly undermines the sentimental image of the benevolent artist eagerly welcomed by families at his every stop after roaming the New England countryside.²²

In Jude’s rejection of Perch’s insistent request to “switch faces,” moreover, Forbes’ dark comedy underscores the unnatural union of an eighty-year old man and a young woman and satirizes the clergyman’s obsessive acquisition of brides, quickly objectified as pretty faces on canvasses. His habit of literally erasing former spouses and changing partners mirrors the demand for the painter’s speed in manufacturing quick likenesses, as if subjects were acquisitions in the village marketplace. The episode constitutes a defense of a plain style — in the mode of William Matthew Prior — in painting, especially in portraits of women. Eddy notes of Evelina’s portrait that it “made your average pretty woman look fussed up with cupid’s bows and spit curls, dimples and stuck-on-looking eyelashes.”²³

Giving Perch his comeuppance, Jude makes sure that Evelina’s face is not erased, that her presence abides in the New Hampshire community. Further evidence of Prior’s influence on Forbes can be seen in Eddy’s observation that Evelina “walked.” Forbes knew that Prior was an ardent advocate of prophetic Christianity in the 1830s, a proponent of Millerism. In a later speech on primitive painting, she noted that Prior was fascinated by clairvoyance and second sight, and that he believed in communication with the dead, especially with those who died young or prematurely.²⁴

²¹ Forbes, 80-81.

²² Vlach, *Plain Painters*, 67.

²³ Forbes, 81.

²⁴ “300 Hear Esther Forbes Discuss Primitive Paintings.” Op.cit.

RUTH BASCOM: A WOMAN ITINERANT

The elderly Reverend Perch was away from his home as Jude perpetrated his ruse. He and Eddy did not await the old man's return; rather, they escaped to attend an Independence Day celebration. Among the peddlers and showmen at the commemoration, they encountered a new acquaintance, a traveling female silhouette artist. According to Jude, "she was the only female he knew who consistently followed the road." At the celebration Jude and Eddy consented to have their profiles cut: "her being in a semi-respectable trade had increased, rather than decreased, her respectability."²⁵

Although little information has surfaced about woman painters of the early nineteenth century, Forbes would have undoubtedly known the work of at least one female artist of that time, Ruth Henshaw Bascom (1772-1848). Silhouette drawing, or "cutting," was a popular form of portraiture in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly appropriate for the roving amateur artist since it required little formal training, nimble execution, and minimal equipment. The rudiments of paper, scissors, and pencil were its essential requirements. The expeditious cutting of Jude's and Eddy's profiles highlights an economical method with appeal to clients who could not afford either the expense or the time of a full-scale portrait in oils.

Bascom attended Leicester Academy, where she met Ethan Allen Greenwood when the latter was an instructor in 1800. It seems clear that Bascom knew Greenwood's work, since he visited the Bascom family quite frequently when he was in central Massachusetts. Out of economic necessity she developed a network of friends and families to whom she sold her silhouettes in New Hampshire, Maine, and Massachusetts. (For an example of a portrait by Bascom see page 90). More is known about Ruth Bascom than other female artists, not only because of an extensive inventory of portraits, but also because she kept a voluminous diary over a 56-year period. Extracts from these diaries appeared in Clara Endicott Sears' *Some American Primitives*, and all of her journals were donated to the American Antiquarian Society in 1948 — a time of quickening interest in plain painting for Forbes. The journals offer insight into practices of a female itinerant artist over several decades, and on several occasions she mentions visits to Stephen Salisbury's home in Worcester.

²⁵ Forbes, 88.

Likewise, in *Rainbow*, Forbes devotes a chapter to Jude's time in Worcester where he apprentices in coach and sign painting, interior painting, and stenciling. Jude does a sign for Salisbury's shop, but more important, he receives an invitation into the entrepreneur's home where he is introduced to "real pictures," to "a world of painting far beyond the world" of his apprenticeship. During one of her more active periods as an itinerant, Bascom also visited the Salisburys, and a striking feature of Bascom's career is that she became a profile artist in her mid-50s.²⁶ In *Rainbow*, Jude offers a terse but telling comment on the energetic, independent silhouette artist: "She was no spring chicken, but youngish yet. She went everywhere on foot, carrying her pack like a man."²⁷

THE SUPERIORITY OF PLAIN PAINTING

In the character of Jude and the unnamed silhouette artist, Forbes displays the strengths of committed, hard-working itinerants who lacked formal training but nevertheless made positive contributions to their craft. Distanced from sources of formal instruction, they relied on personal resourcefulness to produce ingenuous and sometimes ingenious pictures. Whatever their technical deficiencies, their work was characterized by firm outline, simplified pose and expression, and an instinctive sense of design.

In marked contrast to these provincial artists is *Rainbow's* H. H. [Henry] Hooper, whom Jude and the younger Eddy encounter on their sojourn near Concord, New Hampshire. Hooper has had the best instruction that Boston offers and plans to go abroad to refine his talent. Hooper's pictures are clearly superior in realism and in their handling of the details of bodies, as Eddy observes: "And the light fell on the faces as it does in real life . . . His painted hands looked like real hands, each belonging to one particular sitter; portraits in themselves."²⁸ Despite the verisimilitude and apparent refinement of Hooper's portrait of Sophia Estes, however, Eddy observes that the more sophisticated artist captured only the subject's superficial qualities:

²⁶ A productive period for Bascom commenced after her minister husband became a pastor in the Unitarian church in Ashby, Massachusetts. In 1828 she executed a series of profiles in Massachusetts towns. However, in 1832 the Ashby parish hired a new minister, leaving the Bascom family without a home. See Mary Eileen Fouratt, "Ruth Henshaw Bascom: Itinerant Portraitist," *Itinerancy in New England and New York*, 191-192 and Sears, *Some American Primitives*, 119-123.

²⁷ Forbes, quoted from pp. 52 and 88.

²⁸ Forbes, p. 102.

Yet this outside elegance and affectation was all Henery had got down on his canvas. The important part, the inside part... just wasn't there at all. It would have been, had Jude done it. With all his sad lack of training he'd of done something with those loving and forgiving eyes. But perhaps it was the other side of her, I mean the too fashionable, too rich-looking outside of her, Henery longed for.²⁹

The reader learns that Hooper eventually became a nationally recognized engraver, renowned for his treatments of public subjects. He is similar to the painters that Forbes knew who went on to establish public reputations as artists. But Eddy — and by extension Forbes herself — remained more impressed by Jude's primitive daubs than the work of artists who achieved celebrity.

CHILDHOOD, YOUTH, AND AGE IN PLAIN PAINTING

Forbes was strongly aware of the popularity of paintings of young children, and she admired these for their homely simplicity. Perhaps more frequently than when adults died, portrait artists were commissioned to render likenesses of dead children, as artifacts of mourning; the artists would base these pictures on previous drawings or even family resemblances. For example, in the work of Joseph Whiting Stock, approximately a fifth of his output of children's portraits was of posthumous subjects. In *Rainbow*, Jude paints a diversity of figures reflecting a range of ages and familial connections. Particularly striking to Forbes was the absence of sentimentality in children's portraits. Due to their frequency of production, in the novel she refers to them as a regional commodity. As Eddy notes:

But maybe saddest of all his [Jude's] commodities was dead babies. He usually could sell three or four of these to bereaved mothers, who would get to crying as they told him the lost child was fair or it was dark — or it favored its Great-Aunt Tabitha — and they'd get the old lady in for him to study on. He'd show the poor mites lying in their coffins with the coral dropped from tiny hands . . . It was like fairy painting and it took hours. He charged no more for such fiddling work than, say, books on a shelf that he could slap in in jig time.³⁰

²⁹ Forbes, p. 104.

³⁰ Forbes, p. 32.

In early nineteenth-century New England pictures of older children or of young people on the threshold of adulthood were a far scarcer commodity.³¹

From Eddy's perspective, Jude paints such an ample representation of New England villages and towns that he imagines that every regional inhabitant — from child to adult — merits a unique rendering. A single image in this vast population, a complement to Jude's fixation on the beautiful Emma Faucett, fascinates Eddy perhaps because of its rarity — Jude's incomplete rendering of youthful, fleeting feminine beauty:

Some I thought of more than others. One in particular. It was a young girl and you knew (although he rarely painted below the waist) that she was sitting on the ground, and she had turned her head to admire a bush full of birds.³²

As Eddy's adolescent mind strains to capture this partial rendering that Jude strives to complete, the young apprentice imagines that this girl belongs to him. The picture with no face suggests something unattainable beyond his grasp, a sign of his youthful innocence at the time.

This image shimmers in the young Eddy's imagination — a canvas without precise referent and a figure without human or familial connections. Forbes implies that an artist cannot easily replicate his mental image of each subject, especially in an unfinished style like Jude's, a theme reinforced in a subsequent chapter. In this chapter Jude encounters Mrs. Dolliver, who requests a flattering artistic treatment of her deceased husband. From his extensive inventory, Jude searches for appropriate backgrounds for this former Boston shipmaster.

However, an alternative emerges when Mrs. Dolliver instead requests portraits of husband and wife mirroring each other, their mutual poses reflecting the stability of the marriage bond. In this episode and others in *Rainbow*, Forbes probes fragile family relationships masked by conventional postures as Eddy learns that the wife and the deceased captain fell far short of marital bliss. Mrs. Dolliver, in fact, was temperamentally unsuited to marriage: "Nature had formed her to be a single woman, of the sort most New England towns have one of." Like Miss Asphyxia in

³¹ Jack Larkin, "The Faces of Change: Images of Self and Society in New England 1790-1850," *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters, and Society*, ed. Caroline F. Sloat (Sturbridge, MA: Old Sturbridge Village, Distributed by Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 16-17.

³² Forbes, p. 32.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* (1869), she was a dynamo of physical activity, a dominant figure in nearly all her town's social and religious institutions. Her husband, meanwhile, was a tyrant who broached no disagreement, and as Eddy notes, this mean codger's rock-hard New England constitution ossified with time. Of this marriage, Eddy noted, "So the irresistible body met the immovable force."³³

Jude commences a male portrait as Mrs. Dolliver offers advice so that her husband's expression would be appropriately severe, then requests a profile of herself befitting her image of a happily married couple. As a background, however, she chooses from Jude's collection the partial portrait of the young girl who had been the object of Eddy's obsessive imaginative musings. Jude strives to add girth to the girlish figure, and introduces other accessories into the painting to transform Eddy's youthful ideal into a sober New England matron. In this pairing, targeted for the mantel of the Dolliver household, the proud captain and his homely wife might appear to represent the strength of the marriage bond. Yet the ever-perceptive young Eddy concluded that the wife's manufactured profile was false; she, in fact, turns to view birds that had never been seen, nor has her heart ever been opened to their song.

In these episodes in *Rainbow*, Forbes probes the conventional poses of New England portraiture to examine the roles of husbands and wives in apparently stable but tension-filled relationships. Although the fluid mismatching of faces and personalities is richly comic, Eddy infers wider meanings from this encounter, especially with regard to his imaginary vision of delicate young womanhood:

It was as if actually a girl who had existed, and had been waiting for me, had been obliterated. Worst of it was, maybe if I had found her time would of done to her just what Jude had done to the little young thing I had fancied up in my mind's eye. I guess it was the first time I was aware how pretty, delicate-looking young girls do become commonplace, workaday old women. There was a horrible truth revealed to me at the time I have never forgotten.³⁴

In short, the illusion of ideal womanhood is erased along with the figure on the canvas, and Forbes reinforces her preference for plainness in style over renderings "fancied up" for the mind's eye of a viewer.

³³ Forbes, p. 72.

³⁴ Forbes p. 76.

FORBES AND THE FOLKLORE OF THE ROAD

If Forbes' knowledge of the social dynamics between painters and sitters in nineteenth-century America was extensive, she derived much of her material from more immediate sources, including members of her own family. In *Rainbow*, Jude and his nephew absorb stories of the exploits of Ruby Lambkin from a roving ballad peddler, who so smoothly weaves together fact and fiction that one is uncertain of the authentic circumstances of the criminal's encounters with the law. Hearing tales of Ruby's origins, Jude recalls a similar tale about an earlier thief who traveled the roads of New England, Tom Cook.

Speaking of her own childhood, Forbes recalled, "My mother [Harriette] had a wonderful fund of stories about early New England times." Among these were the various legends about thieves and tricksters who traveled the roads of New England. When Esther was eight or nine, she, her siblings, and two other children began a neighborhood newspaper, *The Chronopax*, which covered the people and landmarks of central New England. Among the newspaper's early features was a series on "Historic Houses," among which was Tom Cook's house in Westboro. A brief article described the notorious Tom Cook as "the honest thief," and noted how this Robin Hood figure escaped hanging.

As Forbes noted in an interview, "Ruby Lambkin isn't based on anyone in particular, although there's a folk figure of Tom Cook of Westboro. He was a robber Robin Hood — stole from the rich to give to the poor." Forbes clearly derives the story about the sick baby Tom Cook, who is spared when his mother promises to devote his life to the Devil, from her mother's version of this folktale in her history of Westboro. In Harriette's rendering of Cook's exploits, the honest thief escapes hanging, as does Ruby Lambkin in *Rainbow*.³⁵

³⁵ Quoted in Lewis Nichols, "Talk with Esther Forbes," *New York Times Book Review*, January 31 1954, p. 14; Gail T. Randall, ed., *Fun with the Chronopax* (Worcester: Worcester Historical Museum, 1991); Erskine, *Esther Forbes*, 6; Bales, *Esther Forbes*, 1-2; A. W. Forbes, "Historic Houses. No. 4. Tom Cook House," *Chronopax* 3 (June 1900): 2-3; H. M. Forbes, *The Hundredth Town*, 139-40; Alice Dixon Bond, "A Yankee Novelist and How She Grew," *Boston Herald* June 21 1942: Section B, p. 2 and Ivan Sandrof, "The Fun in Writing is When You Think You Are Better than You Are," *Worcester Sunday Telegram* Feature Section April 3 1960, p. 16. Harriette Forbes' knowledge of Tom Cook derived from local town sources, but she and Esther were no doubt familiar with Alice Morse Earle's discussion of the eighteenth-century confidence man Tom Bell as well as Tom Cook of Westboro in *Stage-Coach and Tavern Days* (Boston: Macmillan, 1900), 380-84. For brief comments on Forbes' interest in folklore, see Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 410, 428.

ITINERANTS CONFRONT SOCIAL CHANGE

Like portraits, folktales depend for their meanings on the circumstances of their genesis and composition as fragments of personal recollection. This was certainly the case for Forbes, whose study of New England history was augmented by her eagerness to absorb materials from multiple historical and personal sources. Besides the outlaws Tom Cook and Ruby Lambkin, Jude and Eddy are part of the gallery of itinerant hawkers and walkers, joined by clock peddlers, essence peddlers, packmen, wagon men, patent medicine salesmen, ballad salesmen, tinkers, printers, dancing masters, fiddlers, caravan men, thieves, housebreakers, and even body snatchers. Her Whitman-esque catalogue of journeymen portrayed in Chapter 10 of *Rainbow*, as extensive as an itinerant's inventory, constitutes a tribute to the early nineteenth-century figures with an itch for the road who were never content to settle down.

Forbes' rendering amounts to more than a dreamy-eyed recollection of bygone days of adventure, since she develops this catalogue from Eddy's own complex perspective on an earlier time period. Eddy's mature vision contrasts with that of his uncle Jude, the habitual vagabond who specialized in renderings of children and young people. In Eddy's eyes, Jude is someone who never grows up and remains eternally youthful. Eddy, however, anticipates the imminent advance of the railroads and factories that challenge people, including Jude, who had gotten used to "trotting down the same road."³⁶

However colorful her portrayal of the peddlers and packmen, they were a vanishing breed, carrying the wares of an agricultural regime superseded by a new consumer-oriented merchandise economy. Noting that traveling painters and other journeymen were falling out of fashion, Eddy quickly discovers that many of the economic and social changes sweeping the region were hardly benign. He observes the flatboats on the apparently peaceful Connecticut River carrying their recently produced, manufactured goods to their markets. Pushing at the muddy bottom with their poles, the rivermen seem to be barely able to move the huge boats forward before their momentum was retarded or reversed. In an image of exhausted energy and ceaseless repetition, they seem "like oxen in a treadmill. Seemed unfitting to use men like that."³⁷

Such passages clearly qualify whatever nostalgia may color Forbes' narrative. In Eddy's eyes, the efforts of the men at work seem "more like

³⁶ Forbes, p. 68.

³⁷ Forbes, p. 133.

slaves than men.” Her roving ballad peddler, moreover, draws parallels between this dehumanizing brand of labor and that of Southern slaves in the fields where “work goes beyond all human decency, you might say, tedious, hard and terrible.”³⁸ At other points Forbes implies that modern industry — initially in the form of dams on small streams — might not only harness but also pollute the region’s rivers.

FORBES’ EXPLICIT VISION: NOSTALGIA AND THE “JUST PAST”

Forbes was explicit about the kind of historical fiction to which she aspired. She cites in particular works set not in the remote past but in “the just-past,” the era of one’s grandparents. She argued that when a mature author looked back to the time when one’s parents and grandparents were advancing in the world, a historical novelist was likely to find the greatest stimulation. Forbes’ image of the just-past is of “country roads,” formerly the domain of horses and chaises, paved over to make way for new forms of transportation.³⁹ She clearly subscribes to this category of historical fiction rather than to a genre of color and romance as was found in the artificial pageantry of Alexander Dumas (1802-1870) or the sweeping panoramas of Rafael Sabatini (1875-1950).

In Forbes’ view, these writers employed historical narrative for escapist reasons. Instead, she sought a more nuanced balancing act. On the one hand, she maintained her posture of a writer with sufficient removal from the period she recreates; on the other hand, she remained close enough to the generations preceding her — in effect, adopting the perspective of a child or granddaughter extending a hand backwards to touch a just-vanished era.

In depicting the horse-drawn chaise and the itinerant of *Rainbow*, which underwent painstaking revisions, she sought and eventually found her requisite “frame,” a term which held for Forbes both painterly and narrative implications. In the older Eddy’s retrospective narration, the orphan from Waltham taken in by Reboughs, recounts his youthful adventures decades after the fact. A New Englander recalling a just vanished world, he is a transplanted member of a new commercial class, the proprietor of his

³⁸ Forbes, p. 134.

³⁹ Esther Forbes, “Why the Past?” *What is a Book? Thoughts on Writing*, ed. Dale Warren (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), 229-30. Forbes groped toward her objectives as a historical novelist in an essay in the 1920s, “Rafael Sabatini and His Conquest of Fiction,” *Boston Evening Transcript Book Section*, June 28 1924, p. 1.

own harness-making firm in Kansas. Impatient with a mode of historical fiction that relied on literal attention to every mundane detail and to every individual artifact, Forbes found in Eddy's narrative frame the latitude that she desired.

Although Forbes' research into the practices of itinerant limners was thorough, she transformed this genre of plain painting from its circumstantial basis in early nineteenth-century American life into a metaphor for artistic and imaginative endeavor. In regaling audiences with legends about Ruby Lambkin, roving storytellers were "making facts into art — something pretty." Similarly, when Jude does his finest portrait, one of two (along with that of Evelina) he ever signed, he announces to those who react with wonder and awe at his rendering, "This isn't exactly a portrait of a real person. Something I've had in my head to do for some years."⁴⁰

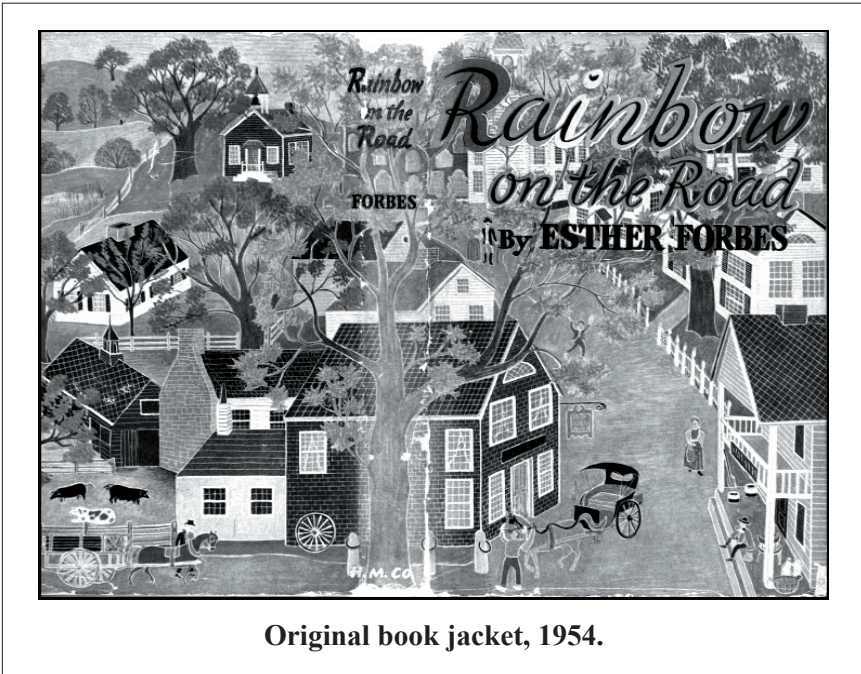
Jude does not depict Emma Faucett with the exactitude of a professional painter; rather, in his provincial or plain style he has been faithful to an authentic response and vision of Emma. In producing this portrait he relies, to be sure, on drawings of Emma, but he draws more significantly on reserves of imagination and memory that had not been expended in the more workmanlike pictures he previously produced. He fulfills the twice-repeated dictum that "the dream of a thing is more important than the substance of it." Emma's name will not even be attached to the picture, as Forbes' ballad peddler, the "last of his trade," and Jude, among the "last of the traveling limners," fade from view as the road vanishes before Eddy's eyes.⁴¹

For all its comedy, Eddy's narrative frame insures that *Rainbow* offers a complex view of early nineteenth-century New England. It is noteworthy that the two most positive contemporaneous assessments of *Rainbow* came from reviewers who were not identified as literary critics. The first, distinguished historian Henry Steele Commager, sensed that Forbes had vividly captured the changes, including the growing commercialization of the countryside as it transformed New England in the 1830s and 1840s. The other, a respected scholar of American art, praised Forbes for resisting imposition of a theory of folk art on the concrete practices and unique interactions of her itinerant artists.⁴²

⁴⁰ Forbes, pp. 141 and 216.

⁴¹ Forbes, pp. 218 and 208.

⁴² Henry Steele Commager, "A Picaresque Tale Laid among New England's Hills and Streams," *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* January 31 1954, p. 3; Flexner, "New England Traveler," *Saturday Review* 37 (30 January 1954): 19. A recent appreciation of Forbes comes from the humorist and satirist George Saunders, a devotee of the vernacular tradition in American prose fiction. Saunders praises her "beautiful compression," and connects style to vision: "By honing sentences you used to



Original book jacket, 1954.

As the novel concludes, Forbes illustrates how changes in transportation were transforming the region, as the railroad began to replace the canal boat and the riverboat. Noting as well how the daguerreotype would soon replace the portrait and the tintype — thus offering new challenges to artisan-entrepreneurs — she sensed that few itinerants would replicate the pattern of her central character and spend an entire career on the road.

Forbes' models for traveling artists also suggested possibilities beyond the road. One of these, Ethan Allen Greenwood (previously discussed as one of her major models for Jude's character), used itinerancy as a stepping stone to other pursuits: law, politics, and museumship. Similarly, Robert Peckham (the other model for Jude's character) began as a rural portraitist but met the challenge of new visual technologies by doing family pictures and individual portraits of members of the emerging industrial elite of Worcester County. One painting, *The Doty Family*, presents a rural family that acquires all the possessions of newfound affluence, with the head of the household exemplifying the values of the successful merchant class.

describe the world, you changed the inflection of your mind, which changed your perceptions." See Saunders's "Thank You, Esther Forbes," *The Braindead Megaphone: Essays* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 57-64.

Likewise, Peckham's portrait of Rosa Heywood retains the simple, naive treatment of children's faces and hands in the provincial style, but the young subject is presented in the dress and background of an affluent childhood. Neither portrait directly addresses the rural past of a merchant nor that of a manufacturer.⁴³

Forbes, whose family possessed a portrait by Peckham of her successful entrepreneur grandfather, must have sensed parallels between the changes recorded by these painters and the storied accomplishments of her ancestors. Peckham's portrait of her grandfather, the youthful, neatly groomed William T. Merrifield, presents the subject in sober, respectable black and white attire with the high collar on his jacket and his formal tie drawing the viewer to the flesh tones of his face. The steely gaze and firm mouth accent a face of reserved determination. One would not assume from the portrait that the subject was the son of a farmer who had apprenticed for seven years as a carpenter.

When Merrifield reached adulthood, he left home to build his fortune. His Merrifield shops, begun in Worcester in the 1830s, offered space and much-needed steam power to individual entrepreneurs in Worcester's early industrial growth. After success in Clinton, he lived for a time within Worcester's urban district, but according to Harriette Forbes, his longing for a more countrified setting led him to buy thirty acres on which to build a house that became known first as Highland Place, then as Merrifield. Although the name "Merrifield" became synonymous with Worcester's commercial development, William maintained connections to his rural heritage through participation in agricultural and horticultural societies and his delight in gardens, plants, and animals.⁴⁴

Peckham's portrait became part of the Forbes' family collection in the home where Forbes grew up. Forbes, in all likelihood, pondered the links among New England's rural past, its changing towns and villages, and more advanced commercial developments, some of which derived from her ancestors' efforts. Just as she used portraits as signs of meaning in her Revere biography, the paintings by Peckham and others informed *Rainbow* by offering faces of change that were literally close to home.

Rainbow on the Road was Forbes' last work of fiction.⁴⁵ Although overshadowed by award-winning works on the American Revolution,

⁴³ David Jaffee, "The Age of Democratic Portraiture: Artisan-Entrepreneurs and the Rise of Consumer Goods," *Meet Your Neighbors*, 44.

⁴⁴ Harriette M. Forbes, "William Trowbridge Merrifield," *Worcester Magazine* 2 (October 1901): 107, 110-11.

⁴⁵ At her death in 1967, Forbes left unfinished in manuscript a nonfiction study of New England witchcraft and a history of the state of Massachusetts.

Rainbow merits renewed attention for its reflection of her interest in American art and painting, a culmination of a career-long fascination with working artists: the writer-illustrator of *O Genteel Lady!*, the silversmith's apprentice in *Johnny Tremain*, the artisan Paul Revere, the painter Copley, and the old limner in *The Running of the Tide*.

Rainbow also reflects her investment in a rich array of themes and motifs found throughout her historical writings: work, travel, humor, folklore, popular religion, natural beauty, familial bonds, regional customs, social conventions, gender roles, passion, gentility, and cultural change. Jude, like all portrait painters, attempts to produce fixed images amid the fluidity and flux of human experience, and by definition, his attempts prove to be unpredictable, uncertain, and imperfect. For this reason Forbes may have chosen as her protagonist an obscure itinerant rather than a celebrated or more successful artist. Within the context of her knowledge of regional artistic practices, *Rainbow* may be Forbes' consummate achievement in historical writing. It fulfills her objective of creating a narrative of the past that approximates recollected experience, developed through the colorful renderings of her itinerant and framed by the complex perspective of her narrator.



Forbes at Merrifield Family Homestead, c. 1920s

Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA

As Worcester Historical Museum curator Holly V. Izard perceptively noted, the five Forbes children “lived with the past in the present. Their parents were historians, and ancient family stories were part of every day life. They all, especially Esther whose frail heart kept her imagination more charged than her body, experienced an elasticity of time.... There was an ancestor named Esther who was accused of witchcraft and died in jail awaiting trial. They were related to Samuel Adams of Revolutionary fame, and owned a quilt made by his mother and grandmother. There were also Indians captives on the Forbes side.... The ties to early New England were palpable in this household.”

Source: Holly V. Izard and Vanessa Hofstetter. *Merrifield at 23 Trowbridge Road 1856-2002* (Worcester MA: Worcester Historical Museum, 2004), p. 25.