

# CELIA THAXTER'S

*Celia Thaxter may have thought she would be remembered for her writing, but her small garden, with its old-fashioned flowers, is her true legacy.*

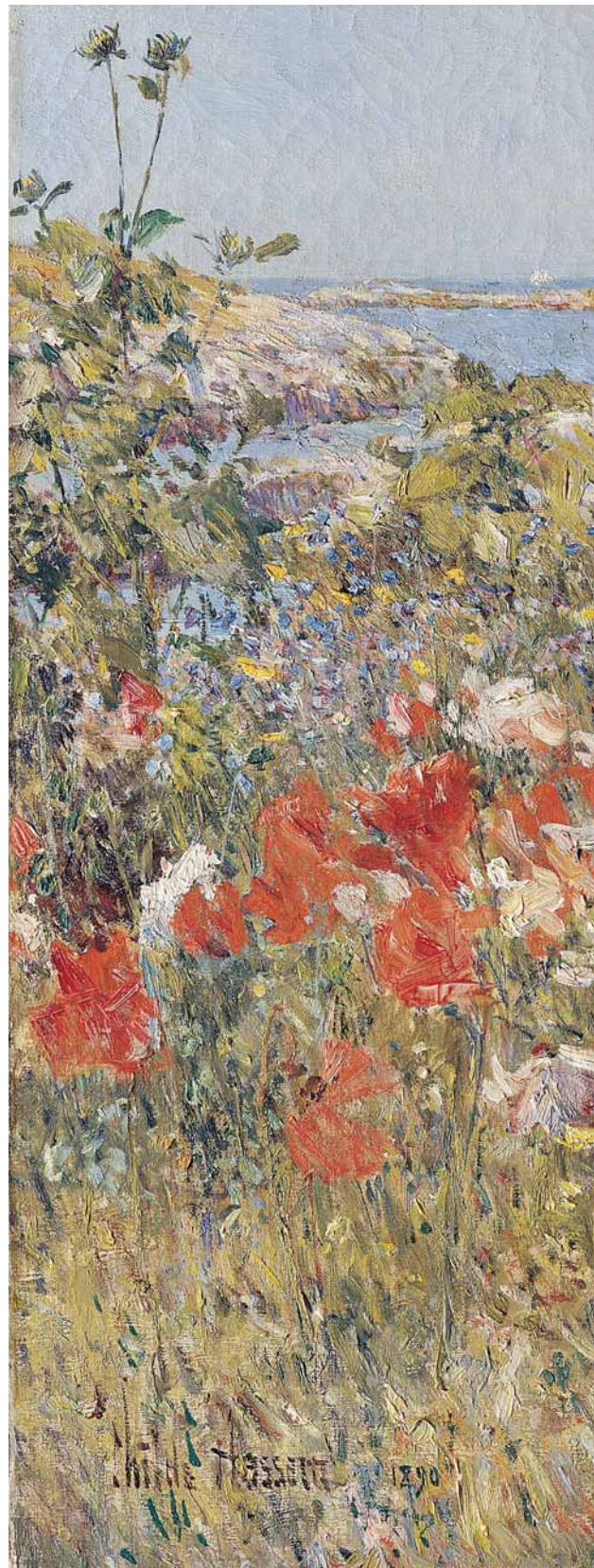
BY JANET MENDELSON



courtesy Portsmouth Athenaeum, photo by Marden

*Celia Thaxter (1835-1894) in her garden on the island of Appledore.*

FROM OUTSIDE THE HAND-TIED WOODEN FENCE that surrounds her garden, I imagine Celia glaring at the slimy trails of slugs she can't contain. Not actually Celia Thaxter, of course, but her spirit, which often feels alive on the southern coast of Maine. I see her just as she appears in century-old photographs, a white-haired Victorian woman with excellent posture in a white, ankle-length, high-collared dress, elegant, but looking older than her actual age. The photos show her here on Appledore Island among the Isles of Shoals. Long before this morning when I boarded the ferry to Appledore, I commiserated with Celia, who



# ISLAND GARDEN



Celia Thaxter's Gardens, Isle of Shoals, Maine, Childe Hassam, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Anonymous Gift, 1994. Photograph © 2003 the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



# Restoring the Garden

Shortly after World War I, scientists discovered the biological diversity of the Isles of Shoals. In 1928, the University of New Hampshire Marine Zoological Laboratory was established, thriving until the military came to Appledore during World War II.

Every year more than 125 species of pelagic (ocean-feeding) and inland birds migrate through the Isles of Shoals. Herring gulls are more abundant here than anywhere else in the United States; harbor seals raise their young around Duck Island; lobstermen annually report sightings of several varieties of whales. Appledore Island now is a Registered Historic Site and a State of Maine Critical Nature Area, so designated to protect both its heron rookery and the subtidal and rocky intertidal community. Black-crowned night herons, little blue herons, glossy ibis, and snowy egrets nest within its 95 acres.

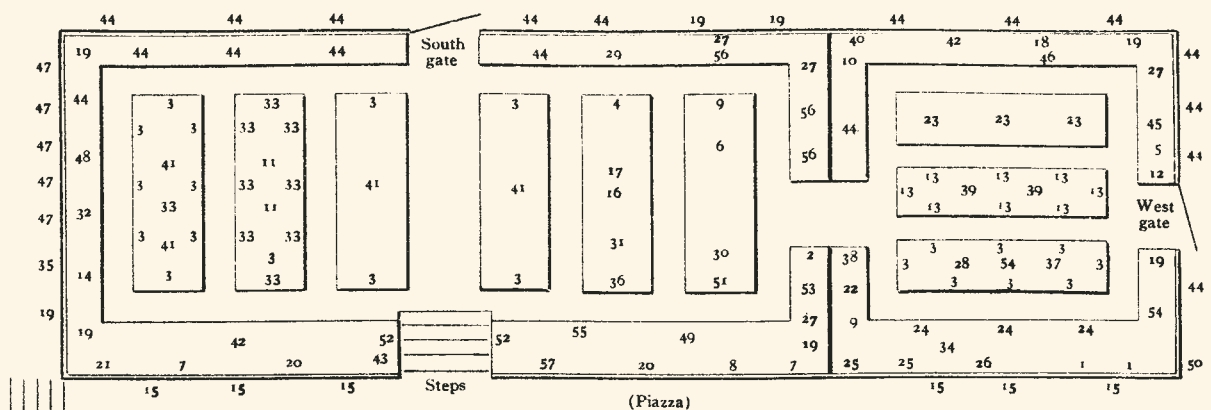
"Appledore was magnetic, a magic place, back in 1946 when just out of high school I first set foot on the island," says Dr. John (Jack) Kingsbury, Cornell University Professor Emeritus of Botany. "I felt if I ever went back, I wouldn't be able to leave, that it would attach itself to my soul."

As a young professor, he brought an undergraduate class to Star Island for a two-week program in 1966. Its success led faculty at Cornell and UNH to collaborate on the establishment of a permanent site. The Shoals Marine Laboratory, based on Appledore, opened in 1973, in part thanks to a grant from Rosamond Thaxter, who wrote *Sandpiper*, an acclaimed biography of her grandmother, Celia Thaxter. Today SML, nationally recognized, is North America's largest marine field station focusing on undergraduate study.

"We had plenty of challenges," Kingsbury says. "Only derelict military buildings remained on the island. Aristotle Onassis wanted to build a supertanker facility out there and had the support of the governor of New Hampshire. It took an old-fashioned town meeting to stop it. We just kept going. The impossible just takes longer, and we had the enthusiastic support of the island people who have strength and spirit you don't find on the mainland."

"In a sense, Celia was my academic great-grandmother," Kingsbury adds, explaining that Celia's son Roland, a prominent professor of botany, was succeeded by Kingsbury's own

PLAN OF GARDEN WITH LIST OF FLOWERS



- |  |  |                                  |                    |
|--|--|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. <i>Akebia quinata</i>               | 15. <i>Echinocystus lobata</i>               | 29. Lilies                       | 44. Sweet peas     |
| 2. Asa Gry nasturtiums                 | 16. Foxgloves                                | 30. Love-in-a-mist               | 45. Sweet rocket   |
| 3. Asters                              | 17. Golden banner coreopsis                  | 31. Margaret pinks               | 46. Sweet William  |
| 4. Asters and lavatera                 | 18. Helianthus                               | 32. Marigolds                    | 47. Sunflowers     |
| 5. Bachelors' buttons                  | 19. Hollyhocks                               | 33. Mignonette                   | 48. Tall phlox     |
| 6. Bride poppies                       | 20. Honeysuckles                             | 34. Oriental poppy               | 49. Tea roses      |
| 7. Clematis, white                     | 21. Hop                                      | 35. Peonies                      | 50. Travelers' Joy |
| 8. Clematis, blue                      | 22. Hugelia                                  | 36. Picotee pinks                | 51. Verbenas       |
| 9. Cleome, Pungens                     | 23. Iceland poppies                          | 37. Poppies                      | 52. Vines          |
| 10. Columbine                          | 24. Jacqueminot, damask, and la France roses | 38. Rose-colored Iceland poppies | 53. Violets        |
| 11. Coreopsis coronata and cornflowers | 25. Japan honeysuckles                       | 39. Rose campion                 | 54. Wallflowers    |
| 12. Coreopsis lanceolata               | 26. Japan hop                                | 40. Scotch roses                 | 55. Water lilies   |
| 13. Crimson phlox                      | 27. Larkspur                                 | 41. Shirley poppies              | 56. White lilies   |
| 14. Damask rose                        | 28. Lavender                                 | 42. Single dahlias               | 57. Wistaria       |
|  |  | 43. Snowdrops, etc.              |                    |

Note: the garden is 50 ft. long by 15 ft. wide, and is surrounded by a border of all sorts of mixed flowers. A bank of flowers at the southwest corner slopes from the garden fence.

from An Island Garden by Celia Thaxter

graduate doctoral adviser at Harvard.

Once the academic program was established, Kingsbury was determined to restore Celia's garden, doing much of the hard labor himself while his daughter, Joanna, researched heirloom seeds, and many other volunteers pitched in to help.

When Kingsbury left the laboratory 13 years later, he worried who would take over as caretaker, but he needn't have. Word of mouth brought Virginia Chisholm, an experienced garden preservationist. For the next 20 years, Chisholm dedicated herself to the garden's historically accurate restoration. She found more seed sources, recruited members of the Rye (NH) Driftwood Garden Club, and worked with the late Dr. Robert Tuttle, island historian. She saw to it that specialized commercial growers would supply seeds that now are raised in greenhouses of the Thompson School of Applied Science at UNH whose director, Chris Robarge, has also installed a much-needed watering system in the garden.

Meanwhile, Celia Thaxter's garden developed an almost mythical appeal. Visitors to it began to interfere with the lab's academic activities; something had to be done about that. Weekly guided garden tours were the answer, with admission fees that to date have raised more than \$100,000 for undergraduate scholarships to study marine science.

Four years ago, when Virginia Chisholm, in her eighties, decided to retire, Pam and Mark Boutilier arrived for SML's summer workshop, "A Garden is a Sea of Flowers." There they met Chisholm and Kingsbury, who recognized kindred spirits in the couple, whose North Hampton, New Hampshire, shop, Appledore Arbor, was inspired by Celia Thaxter. For Mark, who explored the shoals as a young boy in a small boat, and Pam, who first read *An Island Garden* 20 years ago, entering the garden was like meeting an old friend. They are now custodians of Celia Thaxter's Garden.



Photo, opposite page: Old-fashioned single-stem hollyhocks.  
Above: Mixed flowers in the recreation of Celia Thaxter's garden include daisies, mallow, sunflowers, and more.

all spring regularly rose before dawn to spade lime around her beds of annuals, determined to protect their new green growth from the wretched slugs that love to dine by moonlight.

Last winter I read *An Island Garden*, in which Celia Thaxter, author and poet, described her final season as a gardener. The book was published months before her death in 1894. Celia chronicled her failures and successes for my fellow fledgling gardeners, but it was her lyrical passages that enthralled:

*I never forget my planted seeds. Often I wake in the night and think how the rains and the dews have reached to the dry shell and softened it; how the spirit of life begins to stir within, and the individuality of the plant to assert itself; how it is thrusting two hands forth from the imprisoning husk, one, the root, to grasp the earth, to hold itself firm and absorb its food, the other stretching above to find the light, that it may drink in the breeze and sunshine and so climb to its full perfection of beauty. It is curious that the leaf should so love the light and the root so hate it.\**

The Isles of Shoals were Celia's muse for poems, prose, and artwork that earned her widespread acclaim. While I read the book beside my wood stove, I was by her side in the garden.

Time and distance give me a vantage point; I know what Celia could not foresee. Two decades after her death, a 1914 fire ravaged her garden, home, and the family's adjoining hotel; the colorful profusion now reborn was once overwhelmed by sumac, wild cherry, and witch grass even before World War II, when the military erected barracks here, barring the public until victory was achieved. Nor could she know, as I do, that a stream of volunteers would rely on *An Island Garden* as their blueprint for restoring her garden 50 years past its demise, tending it with a devotion that equals her own.

Celia Thaxter probably expected to be remembered for her writing, but her garden has become her unexpected legacy.

The garden is smaller than I had envisioned, just 15' by 50', but splashed with colors intensified by the island light. There are flowers that even in the 1890s Celia called "old-fashioned"—soft, pink, sweet peas that climb a trellis, tendrils drifting in the breeze; orange-blooming calendulas, with daisy-like petals tinged with rust; nasturtiums spilling along the ground, their blooms the shade of apricots. Daylight bounces off the low cloud cover, off the ocean water licking at the shore, off the many shades of gray granite underfoot as I walk up from the cove where the R/V *John M. Kingsbury* is tied at the dock.

On my journey to the island with dozens of day-trippers from across New England and as far away as Colorado, some of whom have their own copies of

\*This and all other excerpts are from *An Island Garden*, Houghton Mifflin, 1894.

# Visiting Celia Thaxter's Garden

## Guided Tours

Guided tours are by reservation only. For 2005, the cost is \$60 per person, which includes the guided tour, parking, and round-trip transportation between Seabrook, New Hampshire, and Appledore Island. Lunch is not included; visitors are encouraged to bring a picnic. Rest rooms and water are available at the Shoals Marine Laboratory (SML); snacks and beverages may be purchased on board the boat. The schedule is subject to weather and sea conditions. Appledore Island, ten miles off the Maine coast, has a rugged landscape. The terrain is rocky and uneven. Visitors should be reasonably agile and in good physical condition for walking. All proceeds from the guided tours are used solely to support undergraduate student scholarships at the Shoals Marine Laboratory.

Tours are on Wednesdays only from June 22 to August 31, 2005. The vessel is scheduled to depart from Seabrook, New Hampshire, at 9:00 a.m., returning by 4:30 p.m.

For information call the SML at 607-254-2900; [www.sml.cornell.edu](http://www.sml.cornell.edu). For reservations call 607-255-3717.

## Private Vessels

On weekends, private vessels may anchor in Gosport Harbor or off Appledore Island. Do not use the moorings assigned to the Shoals Marine Laboratory. Visitors are welcome to come ashore, but please remember that Appledore is primarily the home of an academic program. The dock is for program use, and faculty and students are not available to act as guides. If you plan to visit, please call the main office of the Shoals Marine Laboratory at Cornell University in advance at 607-255-3717.

## SML 2005 Adult and Family Programs *(advance registration required)*

Shoals Marine Laboratory is a cooperative venture of the University of New Hampshire and Cornell University. Part of SML's mission as a teaching field station is to offer programs to the public. This summer, two- and three-day programs for adults include: "Island Bird Study," "Marine Mammals of the Gulf of Maine," nature photography, painting the Isles of Shoals, and sea kayaking. "Kids Ahoy! Discovering Marine Science for the Whole Family" is designed for children 5-18 accompanied by an adult. Request a program brochure or see the SML web site ([www.sml.cornell.edu](http://www.sml.cornell.edu)).

## Of Special Interest

"Appledore House Weekend." August 26-28. Join staff for a weekend of cultural history and relaxation. Approximate cost: \$350 per person/double. Among highlights will be a live performance of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* performed by University of New Hampshire students on August 27. Details and reservations: [www.sml.cornell.edu](http://www.sml.cornell.edu).



Visitors to Appledore House, a popular summer resort, wait for the boat, ca. 1866.

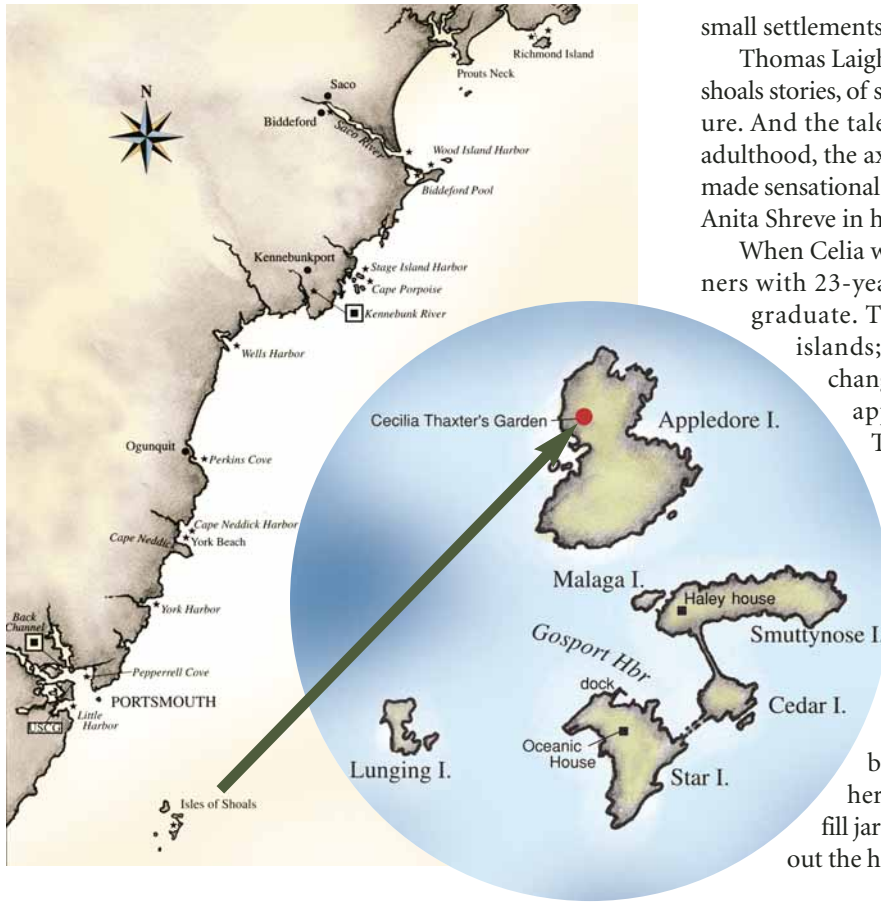
*An Island Garden* stowed in their daypacks, I enter a world of gardeners, historians, and travelers drawn here by Celia's words. I, too, am drawn back in time.

In 1839, Thomas Lighton accepted a two-year stint as keeper of Shoals Light, on the Isles of Shoals. He moved his wife, children, and a cow from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to White Island, barely two acres of rock and sparse soil. His four-year-old daughter Celia and her younger brothers, Cedric and Oscar, were schooled at home there for the next six years. The children grew to love the treeless island's solitude. Later, Celia wrote:

*Ever since I could remember anything, flowers have been like dear friends to me, comforters, inspirers, powers to uplift and to cheer. A lonely child, living on the lighthouse island ten miles away from the mainland, every blade of grass that sprang out of the ground, every humblest weed, was precious in my sight, and I began a little garden when not more than five years old.*

Lighton was more than a light keeper; he was an entrepreneur. Seeing opportunity in the altered demeanor of city dwellers as they discovered the Shoals's haunting beauty, he could also see that the nine islands of the group—Hog, Smuttynose, Star, White, Seavey, Duck, Malaga, Cedar, and Lunging—were easy to get to, not far from Boston and a short, pleasant trip down the Piscataqua River from Portsmouth Harbor. Before long, he managed a small summer hotel on the island. Although most folks today think the entire group is in New Hampshire, in truth the border between Maine and New Hampshire splits the islands; the Maine Shoals archipelago is the only part of the state of Maine south of 43 degrees north latitude, and is visible from Kittery. Several of the islands technically lie within the town of Kittery's borders.

Long before 1614, when Captain John Smith landed on Hog Island, the seaweed- and nutrient-rich waters surrounding the Isles of Shoals attracted commercial fishermen. It is said that the name Shoals itself refers to the abundant schools, or shoals, of fish, not the shallow water. Slowly word about the islands spread across the Atlantic. During a span of 350 years, the islands hosted French and English explorers, trading posts, and



small settlements that served the dried-fish industry.

Thomas Laighton probably told his guests his share of shoals stories, of shipwrecks and Blackbeard’s buried treasure. And the tales to tell continued to come. In Celia’s adulthood, the ax murder of two women on Smuttynose made sensational headlines, fictionalized more recently by Anita Shreve in her novel, *The Weight of Water*.

When Celia was 12, her father became business partners with 23-year-old Levi Thaxter, a recent Harvard graduate. The two men purchased several of the islands; on Hog, the name of which was changed to Appledore in a nod to marketing appeal, they built a hotel for 300 guests. Thaxter soon left most business decisions to his partner, instead taking on the role of the children’s tutor. Apparently a mutual love of learning kindled a flame: Celia, then age 16, and Levi were married. Before long, they had three sons.

To her duties as wife and mother Celia added the role of hostess at Appledore House, which was quickly becoming a popular resort colony. From her garden refuge, she collected flowers to fill jars and colored bottles she placed throughout the hotel. And as she had since childhood, she

# Readings

## **An Island Garden**

by Celia Thaxter, with pictures and illuminations by Childe Hassam, re-release with introduction by Tasha Tudor (2001). Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1894.

## **An Island Garden**

by Celia Thaxter, illustrated by Childe Hassam, with additional photographs, introduction by John M. Kingsbury. Bullbrier Press, Ithaca, New York, 1985

**Here's How We'll Do It:** *An Informal History of the Construction of the Shoals Marine Laboratory*, by John M. Kingsbury. Bullbrier Press, Ithaca, New York, 1991.

**One Woman's Work:** *The Visual Art of Celia Laighton Thaxter*, by Sharon Paiva Stephan. Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 2001.

filled the pages of her journals with poetry and essays that sprang from her garden's soil.

*As I work among my flowers, I find myself talking to them, reasoning and remonstrating with them, and adoring them as if they were human beings.*

Levi Thaxter was friends with many of the era's intellectuals and, during winters off-island, often invited them to dinner. Celia's sharp mind and lack of pretense seem to have captivated the crowd, for she soon became the center of a literary salon. Come summer her closest friends—writers John Greenleaf Whittier, Sarah Orne Jewett, Annie and James Fields—came to Appledore House, as did other notables of the day, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Horace Greeley, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

I wonder which of them was the anonymous friend who sent a copy of Celia's poem, "Land-Locked," a yearning for the shoals, to James Fields, editor of *Atlantic Monthly*. Its publication in 1861 launched her literary career. She dined with Charles Dickens. Her writing was favorably compared with Mark Twain's. She became friends with the American Impressionist painter Childe Hassam, which proved fortuitous for them both. Hassam's watercolor illustrations are a famous complement to Houghton Mifflin's first edition of *An Island Garden* (reissued in 2001). They are considered among the finest of his career.

Levi and Celia, however, were mismatched. He was sickly

and never took to island life, while she was homesick for the shoals every winter, when they lived on the mainland. Within ten years they mostly lived apart; when Levi nearly died in a boating accident, he swore off travel by water completely.

If Celia were still alive in 2001, she no doubt would have delighted in “One Woman’s Work: The Visual Art of Celia Loughton Thaxter” an exhibition held that year at the Athenaeum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Perhaps under-appreciated as an artist, she surely would have relished the showing of china teacups, plates, and vases on which she painted Iceland poppies, violets, and the craggy Maine shoreline, often including her hand-painted poems. Her framed watercolors of the Isles of Shoals reveal a delicate brush, a talent for fine detail.

Celia Thaxter also had a head for business. Some have even speculated that she wrote her popular book, *Among the Isles of Shoals*, as a thinly disguised marketing tool for the hotel. Contributors to the Athenaeum exhibition catalog noted that at the hotel her painted china and

watercolors sold like souvenirs. She endorsed her own likeness in advertising for products that ranged from cigar boxes to typewriters, using her celebrity to promote Appledore House.

But *An Island Garden* remains fresh and poetic. As a reader, I shared her dis-

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may in the aftermath of a thunderstorm that knocked a hummingbird unconscious. As March became May, I joined her as she watched for house martins,

then sandpipers; together we listened to the chorus of barn swallows. I considered whether I, too, should carry a magnifying glass in my pocket to study the delicacy of flower petals and stamens, the patterns of seeds.

Here on Appledore Island, from outside Celia’s garden, I almost expect to see her inside the gate beside her favorite flowers, salmon poppies, which she called painted glass. But steps from where she is buried in the Loughton family plot, there are only bright yellow marigolds, pink wild roses, multicolored hollyhocks. As in Childe Hassam’s illustrations, feathery pale yellow coreopsis, blue cornflowers, and bold sunflowers dance in the breeze, surrounded by a fence like the one she built to protect her garden from the ocean winds.

The fence perfectly frames Celia’s creation. This is my first real visit to the island but already I know something of the contentment she found here. ✨

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