

# DISPATCHES FROM MAINE

1942-1992

# JOHN GOULD

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# DISPATCHES FROM MAINE

## Books by John Gould (so far)

New England Town Meeting **Pre-natal Care for Fathers** Farmer Takes a Wife The House That Jacob Built And One to Grow On Neither Hay Nor Grass Monstrous Depravity The Parables of Peter Partout You Should Start Sooner Last One In Europe on Saturday Night The Jonesport Raffle **Twelve Grindstones** The Shag Bag Glass Eyes by the Bottle . This Trifling Distinction Next Time Around No Other Place Stitch in Time The Wines of Pentagoët Old Hundredth There Goes Maine! Funny About That It Is Not Now Dispatches from Maine

With Lillian Ross
Maine Lingo

With F. Wenderoth Saunders
The Fastest Hound Dog in the State of Maine

# Erwin Dain Canham 1904–1982

My father and Vincent Canham were schoolday chums, and Vincent grew up to be farm editor of the Lewiston, Maine, newspapers—as well as the father of Erwin Dain Canham. Erwin's mother was one of the Gowell girls, of whom Aunt Cora was my neighbor at Lisbon Falls. Erwin had been editor of the Christian Science Monitor about a year when I, a hopeful young man, mailed him a bundle of light essays with the notion they might accentuate the otherwise high quality journalism of his illustrious newspaper. His reply was favorable, and on October 21, 1942, the first of fifty years of consecutive weekly dispatches was printed. I think in all I saw Erwin Canham four times; the United States Postal Service made it unnecessary to visit the publishing house. In forty years I had but four letters from him. Now that I'm rounding out my fifty years with the paper he served so long so well, I write his name on this page because it belongs here.

J. G.

Friendship, Maine, 1992

## Peter Partout's Page

Dear Mr. Editor: I've lived pretty-much next-door to this Gould boy a long time and I didn't realize that he's been at it all these years. Makes me feel proud to know him, and I'm going to read this book just as soon as the library gets a copy.

(Signed) Peter Partout—Peppermint Corner, Maine

## Readers Write

6 June 1971

To the Christian Science Monitor:

While spending a year stationed in remote Alaska I have discovered one more outstanding feature of the *Monitor* which I consider not only a journalistic gem but also a great public service—John Gould's "Dispatch from the Farm." Besides providing ever-needed humor, the column should serve as a reminder to us all that civilization and progress should never be taken at face value. I think it is high time that either the Monitor or Mr. Gould himself made available a volume of selected dispatches, and I will be happy to purchase the first copy! Won't you please share this letter with Mr. Gould?

Lt. Ethan Hirsch

### Foreword

"We don't write books in Maine," John Gould once wrote, "We live books. We go hunting and fishing, we tend out on Grange meetings, we socialize as time permits, and after we've done enough living in Maine the pile is big enough and we send it to a publisher."

John Gould has been living his way onto the pages of *The Christian Science Monitor* for more than half a century. This book is a selection of his columns from 1942 to 1992: his weekly "Dispatch from the Farm" that appeared for many years on the Editorial Page and his Friday essays that now are published on the Home Forum Page.

The Gould family homes in Freeport, Lisbon Falls, and Friendship, Maine, have been the backdrop for many a column. Readers arrived late to school with young John (he had been feeding his hens), visited the sugar house and learned carpentry with John's small daughter and son, and picnicked with his grandchildren when they appeared on the scene. John's "favorite wife," Dorothy, has been a constant through the years, as has a colorful parade of lobstermen, loggers, country school-teachers, and hardworking farm wives.

The characters of Gould's world live with a laconic humor that is typical of Maine. Sometimes, a reader may know his leg is being tugged at, but at others he may wonder with a smile whether a tall tale is being spun around him. "I don't think there's any such thing as fiction," Gould once said in a *Monitor* 

interview. "Writing's got to come from something that's happened to you or somebody else. . . . There's got to be a smack of realism and factualism to back me up and make the writing plausible. There has to be enough there to make the reader relate to it."

And for decades, readers have related. They have written him letters by the droves, and many have even found their way to his home in hopes of shaking his hand. They have told him that his stories remind them of their grandmothers' kitchens in Missouri or South Carolina—that his columns speak of the comfort and warmth of home.

In the summer of 1992, as the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of John Gould's first *Monitor* column approached, the paper invited readers to send congratulations and to share their thoughts about his writing. By October 21, the anniversary, more than 1,400 letters and postcards had arrived from all over the world. One in particular, from Surrey, England, spoke for many and also related an experience that captures the essence of a Gould column:

Dear Mr. Gould,

How remarkable that we should be about to congratulate you on your 50th anniversary with The Christian Science Monitor.

To put it as simply and briefly as possible my Fridays would not be complete without your special message from Friendship, Maine. It brings humour and interest to my day, and I often share your contribution with my whole office.

Do you remember I wrote to you about a young soldier [serving in Vietnam whom] I met when he was on R and R in Bangkok? I met him one morning by the hotel pool, and he was clearly sad and homesick. I asked where he came from, and he said Maine. I asked him if he knew Lisbon Falls, and he said [it] was just a few miles down the road from his own

#### FOREWORD

town. He wouldn't believe me when I told him that I read a weekly article in a daily newspaper from there. It just so happened that there was a Friday Monitor in the paper rack in that hotel's lobby, and I went in and got it and gave it to him.

You can't imagine the joy that article gave to that young soldier so many miles from home. Not just the content, but the fact that it came from Lisbon Falls. You cured him of homesickness, and it was a privilege for me to be a small part of that little episode.

Just a small example of the goodness and joy your articles have spread around the world.

John L. Miller

An old friend, a faithful companion, a purveyor of soft chuckles. These were the words readers used to describe John Gould. As this book is published, the staff and readers of the *Monitor* join in saluting John's enduring humor and wit, the mastery of his craft, and the immense contribution he has made to our newspaper over the last 51 years.

> Alice M. Hummer Editor, The Home Forum Page The Christian Science Monitor Boston October 1993

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## 1942 Buck-Saws and Christmas Trees

here is reason to believe that, if the sun came up with a derby hat on some morning, most of my neighbors would not look twice, and would hardly mention it to their wives when they came up from the barns to breakfast. Our rural community has been conditioned by several generations of whimsical folk who seem to have had a lot of fun doing things that were not a bit different from putting a bowler on Old Sol.

This facet of life on the Ridge has never been satisfactorily explained beyond our borders, possibly because we are now accustomed to it and seldom feel the need of explaining. It is true that our explanations are always as queer to strangers as the original deed, and that naturally complicates matters.

I remember when someone looked up at Wadell's one morning and discovered that Chris Wadell had painted his silo with red, white, and blue stripes, making the structure look something like a huge barber pole. The silo sat on top of the hill, and could be seen to the limits of the horizon when it was merely a subdued weather color, but now it could be heard as well as seen. Not a man in the neighborhood commented on this improvement, and it is likely Chris never expected them to. It is said that a man from Worcester, who was driving through on business, once drove in and asked Chris why he painted his silo that way.

Chris said it was to preserve the wood.

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I suppose I was guilty of some such foolishness when I made my buck-saw out of black walnut. Odd jobs that had been saved for a rainy day were being disposed of, and I came to the task of making a buck-saw frame. I stood up on a barrel and poked around 'mid the bits of scrap lumber that were being seasoned over the beams. I had some ash, but thought it would cut to waste, and hesitated to use oak because buck-saws sometimes get left out in the rain, and oak will soak water like a lobster trap. I turned over a board, and found a lovely piece of black walnut. I probably originally intended to use it for a silver chest, a stand, or some similar bit of beauty. But it was quickly fashioned into a buck-saw frame, and it was a grand piece of wood to work. When I had it strung together, and filed the saw, it was still raining; so I inlaid the handle with some cherry and basswood, and carved rosettes at the top. How far I might have gone, had supper not interfered, is anyone's guess.

I was sawing wood with it a few nights later when Charlie Little wandered in to see if I wanted to buy a shoat. I laid the saw down to put another stick on the saw-horse, and Charlie picked up my buck-saw and scrutinized it. He ran his leathery thumb over the inlay, rubbed the walnut against the back of his hand, plucked a thumb-nail across a saw-tooth to test the filing, and then reached over and sawed off a stick. He handed the saw to me without comment, which indicated that the matter had his approval, if not his understanding.

But I think it did have his complete understanding, for they tell me about the time Charlie set up a Christmas tree in August. He was swamping out a road back in the woods, and came across a young fir that had a perfect shape. The limbs were evenly spaced, each had an identical amount of needles, and the top tapered off with rare beauty. Charlie had to slice it down, because it was right in the middle of his road, but he thought it was a shame to let it go to waste simply because it wasn't December.

So he brought it to the house, fashioned a standard for it, and

put it up on the front piazza ablaze with lights, festooned with strings of popcorn, and adorned with a number of gaily wrapped bundles that his wife fixed. It was a vision, and the family would sit out on the piazza in the cool of the evening and enjoy it. Neighbors who dropped in to sit would greet the Littles with, "Merry Christmas!" but that's about all the comment there was. . . .

My grandfather used to plant his flower garden along with his vegetables. Gladioli mingled with carrots; dahlias were hung with pole beans; asters were revealed when the frost wilted pumpkins and squash; and nasturtiums entwined with the cucumbers. I doubt if anyone in town ever asked him why he, as if he couldn't tell the difference, thus mixed up his seed. It isn't usual, certainly. Had you asked him, he would have said he spent most of the summer among his garden sass, and that was where he had to have his flowers if he were to enjoy them. But nobody on the Ridge ever gave the hodgepodge second thought. Time and again there has been evidence that our neighbors are willing to indulge each other in whimsey.

I have really wondered, lately, if this tolerance isn't a remote desideratum among other people. Are we peculiar in our private belief that a man's own inclination is to be indulged? Haven't other people taken too much stock in the belief that all activity must be rationalized—and that the reasons ought to be sensible? I mean, apparently sensible to others? Hasn't conformity to rules of behavior taken a lot of snap out of life? Who dares to paint his steps yellow, simply because he likes yellow? What housewife dares to hang the wash on the front lawn? It just simply isn't done—is it?

Well, I suppose I've got the only inlaid black walnut buck-saw in the world.