

Wellesley College  
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WELLESLEY COLLEGE  
WELLESLEY ST., MASSACHUSETTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

3 April, 1947

*Thank*

My dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

One of my freshman students has written such a charming essay about Mr. Roosevelt and Hyde Park that I am taking the liberty of sending it to you for her, in remembrance.

Very sincerely yours,

*Eleanor Prentiss*  
*Associate Professor of English*

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Hyde Park, New York

HYDE PARK

I can not recall what I expected to discover beyond the white-columned entrance portico of Roosevelt's Hyde Park estate. Would I be dramatizing the situation to state that I believe I was searching for that ephemeral yet eternal quality which we like to think of as the spirit of a man's greatness? If so, let me simply say I think that I found it.

My mid-August journey up the Hudson to this stone and stucco mansion had certainly been undertaken as a quest, and yet how unaware are the searching but unseeing eyes of a young pilgrim. In my superficial pursuit of "significant" clues and symbols, I almost failed to realize that the spirit of a man's greatness is to be found in the simple places that he has known and loved.

Perhaps it was the unconscious recognition of this fact that caused my strange dissatisfaction with the exhibits in the Roosevelt Memorial Library. The biographer or the ordinary tourist must have found much of interest in the state papers, schoolboy themes, and presidential mementos which were exhibited in the library's display cases. But my mind would not believe that a man's life could be dissevered and placed on display in a glass case. Greatness, I thought, could not be itemized.

I followed next the gravel path parallel to a magnificent hundred-year-old hemlock hedge which seemed to interpose its bulk and height against the intrusion of my curious inspection. Then with sharp-edged suddenness I came upon an entrance which cleft the screening foliage and revealed the secret serenity of a rose garden

*W. B. D. C. C.*

within. In the center of the garden, set like a perfect diamond in a simple mounting, stood the unadorned, rectangular whiteness of a monument. I suspect that many others have found the spirit of Hyde Park and of Franklin Roosevelt in the silent majesty of that monument, yet to my mind there is something vital and eternal about the spirit of place and of man that refuses to be expressed in the finality of the grave.

Somewhat confused and angry at my own apparent lack of perception, I turned my last hopes toward the rambling, H-shaped colonial house set a short distance back in a grove of maples and evergreen. I still remember thinking then with sinking disappointment that Hyde Park could not even make any claims to physical splendor. On the contrary, the house was a hodgepodge of architecture and furniture which had achieved unity only through the indulgent love of the people who had once lived there. But after all, is there not a quiet sanctity about common things which have been loved?

I suppose that sanctification through love is especially evident in the rooms we have known in childhood. At least that was true of Franklin Roosevelt's boyhood room. It was a simple little room--simple to the point of severity. I can safely surmise that brass bedsteads exactly like the one in that room are now collecting the dust of disuse in thousands of American attics. There was that same air of outdated charm about the room's flowered wallpaper and its plain wooden washstand. And oh yes, shall I ever forget the framed mementos and diplomas on the wall--souvenirs of a heart unwilling to relinquish the savor of youth!

Walking down the corridor, past the room where Roosevelt was born and across to the other end of the hall, I came to the one room which is Hyde Park to me. Everything in Roosevelt's bedroom, the sign on the door informed me, had been kept just as it was when he left it. Maybe that is why the spirit of place seemed to linger in the air like the last note of a symphony.

I was struck at that moment with the uncanny feeling that the room was waiting--waiting with certainty for the eventual return of its occupant. The fireplace was still piled with wood, and Fala's basket in the corner still quietly proclaimed the little dog's triumphant possession of a man's heart and home. Roosevelt's dressing gown was thrown casually across the high carved bed, and his jaunty navy cape still hung in its accustomed place in the closet. The little table lamp beside the bed was still lighted, and across the room on a shelf beneath the window lay news magazines and mystery books waiting to be read. And through the bedroom window above, I caught a glimpse of the rolling green hills of a Hudson river landscape which seemed painted on the glass itself.

The final realization of my quest came to me with an almost physical impact as I caught sight of Franklin Roosevelt's wheelchair in the corner. It was true that I had seen the four-postered bed where Roosevelt was born and the serene rose garden where he is buried, but I was certain at that moment that it was actually in his wheel-chair that the thirty-second President of the United States was born, and that the spirit of his courage will never lie dead in that rose garden so long as it lives in the rooms of Hyde Park.

I came then as a pilgrim to the white-columned entrance portico of Hyde Park; I came in search of the spirit of Franklin Roosevelt. I left the rolling green estate doubly rewarded, having found not only the spirit of the man, but also the spirit of the place--having found that they are one.

Joris Nien, 1950  
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