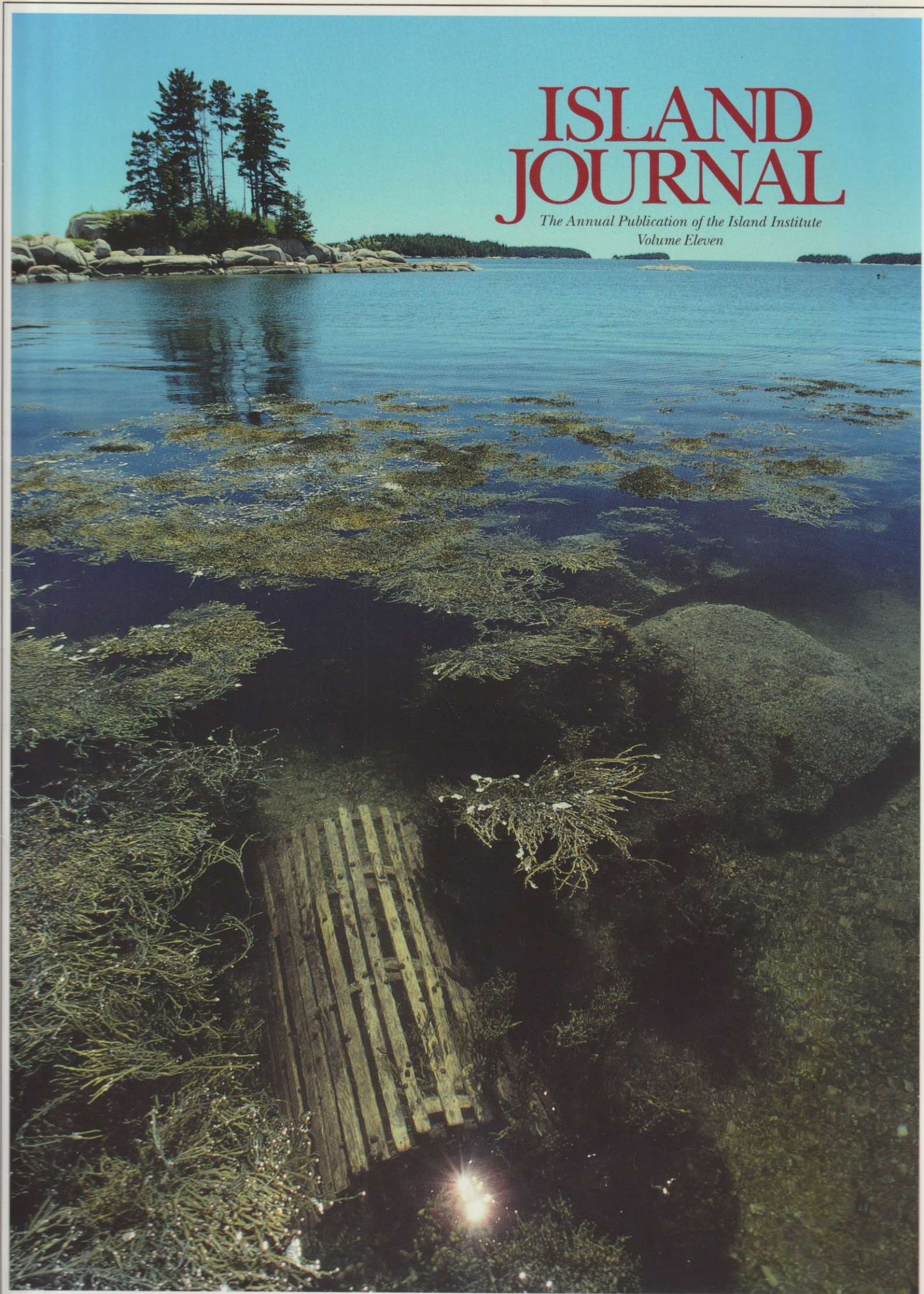


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# “A Writer of Songs & Nonsense”



Photographs courtesy of James Rockefeller

## Margaret Wise Brown & The Little Island

JAMES ROCKEFELLER

*Margaret Wise Brown summered on Vinalhaven during the 1940s where she composed dozens of her immortal children's books including The Little Island. Her biography has been charted by literary historians, but here a more intimate portrait of her Vinalhaven life emerges from a man who loved her deeply.*

ISLANDS CAN BE personal castles or prisons depending on how one views their moat of water. To Margaret Wise Brown, her place on Vinalhaven was a castle of fairy story proportions. Margaret brought me there to the head of Hurricane Sound in the summer of '52. She called it The Only House because looking out at night, more often than not, no other light was visible.

No road existed. The surrounding forest was yet another barrier against the outside world. Our entry was the little house of Mildred Brewster and Maynard

Swett in that small drain behind Strauson's Point. Mildred had done the cooking in the Boarding House at Wharf's Quarry for the men back when, and Maynard, over 70 years old, lobstered out of his white peapod with the green gunwale. Here Margaret kept a gray flat-bottomed punt built by Skoog of Carver's Harbor. It comfortably held the two of us, her Kerry Blue terrier called Krispin's Krispian, groceries, a case of wine, and other household necessities. The 20-minute pull up the Sound was a pleasant interval on that warm and sparkling day of my arrival, gently pushed along by the southwest breeze.



From this roofless treehouse you entered a tiny kitchen, off of which opened an eight-by-ten room that held a love seat, a reclining couch, potbellied stove, and a long table in front of the window where Margaret did her writing. To the left of her writing station was a door that swung out onto nothing but a ten-foot drop to the ground below. It bore a brass plate saying Belle McCann. Belle was a previous owner before the house had been raised and a floor added underneath. Off the sitting room was an even smaller bedroom with a brass bed and dresser. The whole place was the size of a ship's cabin.

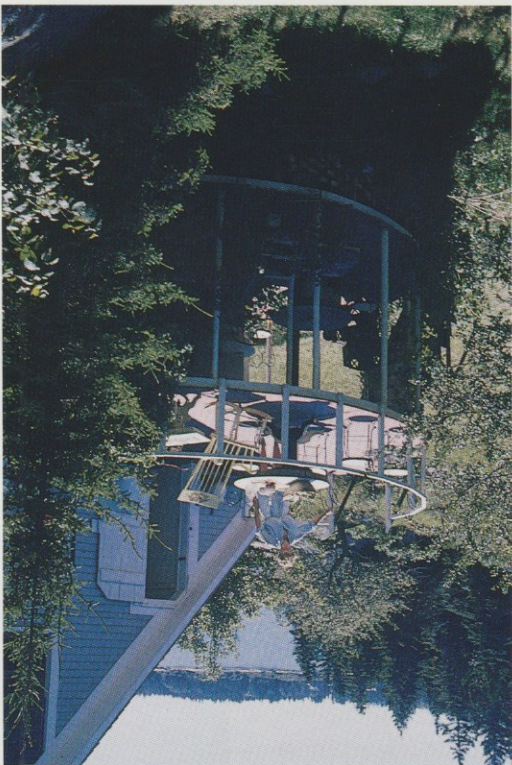
The window was an inspirational place commanding Hurricane Sound with its myriad little spruce-tipped islands. This view inspired *The Little Island*, perhaps her best known book.

Kerosene lamps were the sole illumination. A rose-colored globe hung over the tiny kitchen table on an adjustable chain. Another glass lamp, this one ruby-tinted, lit the writing table, while the companion pieces moved about as needed. A pair of exquisite small Italian rococo candelabra created a flower display on the vertical paneling between the sitting and bedroom, adding more soft ambience when darkness fell.

Of an evening, with perhaps a red spaghetti sauce laced with garlic bubbling on the kerosene stove, the red wine in goblets, Margaret would seat herself at the table that had witnessed many things, her eyes shining in the fairy story light, and was definitely the queen of this special kingdom. I say "queen," for everything in the tiny house appeared her personal subject, chosen for shape, for color, for adding catalytic quality to the overall sense of a cozy den, yet in such an unstudied way as if to be a natural extension of herself. Eggs were stored in a bowl to enjoy their shape and facilitate their use. Wildflowers winked from glasses, cups, vases, or copper pots. The sublime imbued the whimsical with a dignity that I likened to their originator.

Margaret loved fur. "Remember, we are animals," she was wont to say. Rabbits were a special totem. She had long eyelashes and would often accent her eyes to give herself an almond bunny look when feeling mischievous. Many friends called her "The Bunny," and she often referred to herself as "The Bunny No Good" when up to some lark or saying things like "I'm going to give all the bird brains egg cosies for Christmas." There was a lot of fur around: a fur rug on the floor, fur on one of the couches, a fake leopard skin covering on the bed. She was very proud of the fact that the

Dog and Margaret occupied the sternsheets. Krispin glared at me while I eyed his mistress. Krispin was disagreeable by nature, but then, in all fairness, it was not easy for him being in the proximity of another male who also loved his mistress. Margaret wore her usual working costume of white slacks, espadrilles, and a blue blouse open at the neck. Her straw-colored hair, tumbled by the breeze, was a perfect frame for those crinkly blue eyes that looked at you, with you, through



you, while absorbing everything within 360 degrees. She trailed one hand in the water, lifting it eventually to extend a dripping finger to a passing dragon fly. To my amazement the insect landed as if it had no choice.

"Warlock," she said to me, "What must it be thinking, flying over all this bright blue water? Must be the lobster buoys are a flower garden?"

With Margaret you lived an ongoing series of mini adventures. Involved with the smallest event, she pulled her companion along into a magical world she composed on the spot. She called me her Warlock because I wore a beard back then and could look very fierce when being protective. Too soon we arrived at a tiny beach hidden behind a long chunk of rounded granite.

Entrusted with the case of wine, I walked up through the long grass of the tiny meadow dappled with hawk-weed toward the tiny house. The high-pitched roof, black attic window, black-framed windows of the lower two floors, the gray weathered clapboards, made it both intensely appealing yet mysterious. It was as diminutive as a child's playhouse, but one sensed immediately the inhabitant was neither a child nor a casual rusticator.

Access was gained by saluting an ancient pear tree and mounting steep steps, almost a ladder, that teetered upwards to a circular porch 15 feet above the ground. This platform, in turn, was guarded by a granite ledge to the west that resembled a smiling whale, and an apple tree that intruded over the railing to the north. Ice cream parlor chairs and table formed an eyrie for eating, talking, or just surveying the warblers, woodpeckers, ospreys, gulls, and terns who considered the place their own, which delighted Margaret. The long, narrow, steep steps were yet another psychological barrier against those things and beings beyond the forest and the bay. As Margaret put it, "Here I am far away from the fidget wheels of time," talking about her frenetic winters spent in New York with agents, publishers, and her host of social commitments.





*"The Only House," Vinalhaven, 1952*

English Queen Mother reputedly kept *The Little Fur Book* (it was covered in rabbit fur) on her bedside table.

After a few days with "The Bunny," you weren't sure whether people acted like animals or animals like people. As one's eyes are drawn to those of a wild animal to gauge their intent, so mine would often gravitate to hers. There was always more going on in there than the viewer could ever grasp. The look would vary from youth to venerable age to childlike wonder, mischievousness, gaiety, somberness, or the wisdom of a seer.

"No one will ever know my age," she laughingly said one day. "How could they? It keeps changing."

In earlier years—before her time—goats, chickens and a cow lived downstairs. Now there was a workshop and guestroom. The latter also served as a gallery for her paintings. She explained that from early on she knew she could either be a credible painter or a writer and had decided on the latter, so painting became a hobby. One oil was of a white dog (with rabbit-long ears) lying on the loveseat upstairs. Through the window in the painting peeped The Little Island. Another featured the horse weathervane she had whimsically mounted on the end of the stone wharf; yet another showed a white china water pitcher filled with flowers. The last conveyed a different mood. The Only House stood somber in its black trim under a lowering sky. A small drab figure huddled against the stoop. This she had done after the death of her dear friend, the poetess Michael Strange, wife of Barrymore the actor.

"When I can no longer write, paint, or read, that is the end," she once told me.

Going to the outhouse was more rewarding than just an outing for personal relief. First encountered was an apple tree that shaded a wash stand with white ewer, pitcher, and soap dish. The classic mirror was nailed above it to the trunk. Next you passed the icebox—a covered well with floating containers housing butter,

milk, cheese, and other perishables. The white wine floated alone. Only then did you enter a short section of woods, rush up an incline, throw open the Dutch doors, and choose one of two holes. As Billy Brown, her caretaker, put it, "Darn thing is so far away, you're pressin' your luck."

But enthroned, it was worth the journey. The view took in the back cove with the large grout pile of Wharf's Quarry rising behind. Across to the left was a rock with a fissure that from half-tide down cast the silhouette of an Indian maiden demurely bending forward at the edge of the limpid tidal pool.

I asked Billy what he thought of The Maiden. "Haven't told my wife," he said. "Might get jealous."

The rest of her dominion held other landmarks. Along the path heading to the east was the well where you hauled drinking water up in a pail. Then at the edge of the spruce forest dwelled the magic mouse in his magic mousehole. From there a trail wove between the spruces around several corners until bursting forth upon a small cabin Margaret had built for Michael Strange. On entering it, the eye met a large, ornate, gilt frame set with glass that revealed the striking picture outside, which was the backyard. The front of the cabin

**"No one will ever know my age," she laughingly said one day. "How could they? It keeps changing."**

was at the edge of a large smooth ledge that sloped down to the sea. The roof, as if to emulate the ledge, swooped downward forming two points, pagoda like, which in turn were supported by wood columns from her favorite antique shop in Rockland. Convention to Margaret was like red to a bull.

Walking up the granite escarpment behind the cabin, one came to a flat circular expanse of stone some 60 feet in diameter. As we approached, she would press fingers to lips for silence, for here was the Fairy Ballroom where the "little people" danced at midnight overlooking Hurricane Sound. It was always just possible, even in broad daylight, there might be one peeping from behind a bayberry bush.

I loved to go up there of an evening, for we would stand on a rock outcropping and watch dusk enfold the Sound. Dawn and dusk were important times for The Bunny, as was the languor of noon, the rising of the moon, storms, and calms. Standing on the promontory, outlined against the darkening bay, she radiated the elemental dignity of a wild animal free in its native habitat. Often those eyes of hers would go far away where no one could ever reach, and one evening she turned suddenly and said, "We are born alone. We go through life alone. And we go out alone." I never have forgotten that moment, painful as were the words, for what she said was true. She saw herself in a frame where human beings were but one component of a larger tapestry.

In the woods and fields Margaret moved like a deer. She told of going beagling and running with the hounds for hours on end. During berrying excursions



she could wriggle through the most impossible of tangles at incredible speed and eat berries off the bush like a bear I once had. A herring fisherman who set his nets out front once said to me, "That Margaret! If you saw her in the woods come November and she was wearing horns it would take a steady mind not to shoot." Then he added with a wistful grin, "I'd rather take her home alive, myself."

For venturing on The Bay, Margaret had a treacherous North Haven Dinghy. One day we had a wonderful sail down to Hurricane, trailing the bottle of white wine behind on a string with Margaret puffing on her pipe, reciting one of her many lyrics, "The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile." The ballad begins:

*They fished and they fished  
Way down in the sea  
down in the sea a mile.  
They fished among all the fish in the sea  
For the fish with the deep sea smile.*

On the way home the southwest breeze turned into a small gale. We rushed along faster and faster until at the end of Leadbetter Island the dinghy sailed her bow right under. There we were with the sail up, going nowhere, paddling around in the cockpit. I was mortified, considering myself something of a sailor. But Margaret puffed away on her still lit pipe, asked if there was any wine left in the bottle, and giggled with glee. Just then Goldie McDonald, the guardian of Dogfish Island, happened by and pulled us, dripping, into his boat. Goldie was one of Margaret's favorites. She even used him as a pen name.

Goldie took one look at The Bunny with her wet clothes clinging to her athletic frame and said with feeling, "Gawd Margaret, you look better wet than dry!"

She laughed all the way home. In her eyes it couldn't have been a more perfect day.

Aside from sitting in the evening bathed in that ruby light, going up to Wharf's Quarry was my fondest memory. Carrying a hamper, towels, and soap we would take the path around the back cove, plough through an overgrown meadow and tangle of brambles, then walk under a canopy of huge spruces until coming to a granite ledge lying in the gloom like a forgotten Stonehenge. Over this we pushed and pulled ourselves, emerging on a gently sloping expanse of stone which we followed upward until standing atop the quarry. There we would gaze down 50 feet of sheer rock wall to the pool of water with the pyramid of grout on the far side. To the left stretched Hurricane Sound and straight ahead to the west was Leadbetter's Narrows with a backdrop of the Camden Hills. The entry to our destination was at the far end where the granite sloped down to cattails, with stone and vegetation arranged as

if by an artist's brush to form a hidden water garden. Here on a flat rock by the water's edge we would spread our things and have our biweekly ablutions. Afterwards, drying on the sun-warmed granite, we would eat lunch in almost mystical serenity.

Margaret would talk about her writing, and I, our future life together. She had published 72 books to date, "with nothing serious to say," as she put it. Little did I comprehend at the time what a pioneer she had become, and how revered in the writing of children's books.

"Warlock," she would muse, "Someday I would like to write something serious when I have something to say. But I am stuck in my childhood. That raises the devil when one wishes to move on."

"What do you want to put on your tombstone then, if not recognition for childrens' works?" I said facetiously—little knowing that only a few months hence she would lie dead in France of a blood clot.

She thought a bit, watching the white clouds pass overhead before turning and saying in all seriousness, "You will put 'A writer of songs and nonsense.'"

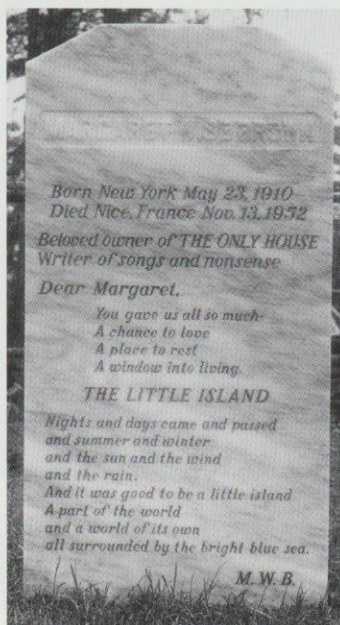
I quickly turned the conversation to a more cheerful bent and asked how she had arrived at the title for her forthcoming book, *The Noon Balloon*.

"I was looking out my New York window at noon when this blimp came sailing by. It had to be the noon balloon to LaGuardia."

"And the writing," I asked. "How do you go about it?"

She took my hand and gave it a squeeze. "Sometimes it is easy, sometimes hard, to bring your feelings, your heart, and your interest together."

More than 40 years have passed since that day in the quarry. Her tombstone, a few steps from The Only House, does read "A writer of songs & nonsense." And my grandchildren still stop by the 'magic mousehole' to whisper "Hi." They know by heart *The Little Island*, *The Runaway Bunny*, *Goodnight Moon*, and a dozen others. As to The Fairy Ballroom, I am convinced it is Margaret peeping from behind the bayberry bush, while the Indian Maiden holds Billy's hand across the eternal deep divide. And forever, ever, there will be the fish with the deep sea smile, down in the sea a mile, just a swish of his tail from The Little Island in a world of its own, all a part of the enchanted kingdom that is Margaret's.



*After sailing the South Pacific aboard a Friendship sloop, Jim Rockefeller settled in Camden, raised a family, built boats and airplanes, and founded the Owls Head Transportation Museum, of which he is still Chairman. Jim considers The Only House on Vinahaven his spiritual home.*





Nights and days came and passed  
And summer and winter  
and the sun and the wind  
and the rain.

And it was good to be a little Island.  
A part of the world and a world of its own  
all surrounded by the bright blue sea.

— *The Little Island* by Margaret Wise Brown (Golden MacDonald), 1946