

S. Foster Damon



SAMUEL NOMAD, a glimpse of S. Foster Damon

by P.D. Littlefield

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This paper was written by PD Littlefield. It was presented as a talk by PD Littlefield with help from Jill Carter at a meeting of the Annisquam History Discussion Group on Friday, October 28, 2016, It was presented at the Annisquam Village Library.

**SAMUEL NOMAD, a glimpse of S Foster Damon
a talk by P.D. Littlefield with help from Jill Carter**



Professor Damon in his kitchen, age 75

It's a pleasure to speak to you about my Great Uncle Foster Damon, who had a tremendous influence on me.

There's a kind of person that made an impression on me growing up in Annisquam. Eccentric, individualistic, artistic. People whose insight held clues for a child about this strange thing - life - that lies in front of him. Because children think about these things. I could make a list and I imagine each of you has one too. And foremost among these for me was Foster Damon.

Jill Carter made the observation to me that Foster was something of a hidden figure in Annisquam. He was best known to the children - because of his Punch and Judy show. He was difficult to plumb, involved as he was in all kinds of mysterious matters - intellectual and poetic. So I have set out here, simply to provide a picture of him. It's an opportunity for me to reflect on his life. Perhaps we can get to know him better.

I've asked Jill - who had the idea that I give this talk - to read a few of Foster's poems as we go along.

As I mention one of his books, we'll pass them around.

I should explain to those of you who don't know, that 'Samuel Nomad' - was the nom de plume that Foster Damon used when he published his last book of poetry, *Nightmare Cemetery*. The "S" in his name stands for Samuel. 'Nomad' is, of course, Damon spelled backwards. Nomad or wanderer. Perhaps we can use it as a guiding metaphor.

Part 1. MY TIME WITH FOSTER

I work in the theater. I'd like to stage a short theater piece out of my memory of the time I spent with Foster. I might portray myself as a LITTLE BOY DOLL that sits in a chair - like Howdy Doody - while FOSTER DAMON pads around his house, cooking, muttering to himself, taking a nap, making himself a drink. Or even better, FOSTER could be the doll - PAUNCHY, DRESSED IN OVER-ALLS. MUSTACHIOED. He would sit on a couch, grasping a "Manhattan" - his favorite drink, while a LITTLE BOY bombards him with questions.

Either way would get at the feeling that I hold in my memory for what it was like to spend time with him. A man richly present and a bit far away.

I would turn up at his house uninvited. I liked to listen to him talk. I remember once he came upon me sitting in the living room, reading a comic book from the collection he kept in a cardboard box. He said "Oh, good, you're here. Time for a drink." And mixed himself one. One thing about Foster, he loved a drink...

I was fascinated by the things he touched - whether the food he cooked - sausage pudding, for example - or the beer he made. And the mustiness of his 200 year old house - its creaky floors and Indian shutters. It belongs to Anne Meyers now. Here's how it looked before Foster added a front porch.



This a drawing by George Wainwright Harvey, 1895

It had been a revolutionary war era tavern, called The Madam Goss house. The walls were illuminated by art nouveau decorations painted by my Aunt Louise. There were old prints by Honore Daumier, the 19th century political cartoonist. And one by Albrecht Durer that haunted me.



"Melencolia."

Foster seemed to be an expert on everything - from Square Dancing to Yankee Doodle. He had this great way of playing "Orpheus in the Under World" on the piano. Very percussive. His was a world that resounded with story - whether verbal, visual, musical or something more elusive - old and smelly, ghostly and profound.

I was in his Punch and Judy show. I played Punch. A bit of nepotism, I suppose.



This is from an article written by Tim Crouse for the Gloucester Times, 1964.

That's me, Clark Ross and Danny Crane. Daniel Lyman was also in it.

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(Put on Punch puppet.)

Hello, folks, I'm Punch. This is my house. This where I live with Judy and the baby. Would you like to see our lovely home?...



Painting, Punch and Judy by Margaret Fitzhugh Browne

(courtesy Annisquam Historical Hall)

I remember worrying about my predecessors. How would we ever live up to their legendary work? The published script is dedicated to all the boys who had appeared up to that time. Tom Babson is on the list. Steve Harris had been in the show. Dave Pearce, Peter Bent, John Cunningham. Anybody here in the Punch and Judy show?

It all started with a puppet theater and a set of puppets that - as a boy - Foster got for Christmas. He based his script on a degree of scholarship, taking into account sources that go back to Charles 11 in England - and, of course, Italian Commedia Dell'arte before that. He suspected the influence of Shakespeare's Richard the Third, another trickster hunchback. But Foster's version had the unmistakable feeling of Foster.

(Put on Judy puppet.)

I love Judy's reply when Punch invites her to **"Come up and meet the folks."** She says, **"I can't I'm cleaning the furnace."**

It was a coming of age event for boys in the community. Involvement included skinny dipping at Walker Hancock's quarry, a Turkey dinner and banana splits.

I can't argue with my sisters' feeling that Foster was less receptive to girls. "Punch" is a misogynist. One by one he murders everyone until he's completely alone. Foster points to the absurdity of this tendency, but you can't help noticing the pleasure he took in this boy's fantasy of freedom.

It's evidence of Foster's influence on me that when I was a young man living in New York City, the first theater piece that I wrote was a reboot of "Punch and Judy" called "Punch for Boys," performed in an East Village club.



Punch for Boys

That's the 'sausage machine' - in the form of Punch's profile. You can lift the hat and throw in whatever you want.

As I got older, I discovered Foster's deeper interests, especially the poetry and art of William Blake.



The Ancient of Days

This is one of Blake's most famous paintings, portraying Urizen - the god of reason - measuring the universe. Not a good thing, in Blakeview. Urizen or YOUR REASON is seen as constricting, a limiter of vision, which is divine. For a long time Foster Damon and William Blake were inextricable to me. Together they suggested a way of seeing the world and a spirit for living in it.



Foster and Sally, Foster and Mary, 1910

Here are the three Damon siblings. The photo on the left shows Foster with my grandmother, Sally. Photo on the right, my great aunt Mary Damon Nelles with Foster. My grandmother died before I was born. A beautiful, sensitive soul by all accounts. Bunny Andrews was her best friend.

Some of you knew Mary, who lived in the house next to the Brynmere now owned by the Wares. Her husband, Walter Nelles, was a law professor and founder of the ACLU. After he died in the 1930's, Mary became a bit of a recluse. She went to bed at sunset and arose with the dawn. Chain smoked with a long cigarette holder. Spoke with a gentle wit. Kept company with tiny dogs named Seaweed or Periwinkle. Could write a novel on the back of a postcard. She was a painter. The paintings that I've seen are haunting and dreamy. I thought she was wonderful. Tom Babson - who lived across the street - has told me that she helped nurture his creativity.

There's a lot I could tell you about these three. About their mother - Sarah Pastorius Damon - who encouraged their artistic inclinations. Or their Germantown, Pennsylvania Quaker origins. One thing you could say about them is that they were sensitive. And interesting.



Damons 1930's

This is a photo of the DAMON family in front of their house in Newton, where Foster and his sisters grew up. Some time in the early

1930's. There's Foster Damon, front row, second from the right. To his left is his nephew, Paul Damon Littlefield.

Part 2. YOUNG DAMON

When you dig into the literature about Foster Damon in the first quarter of the 20th century, he seems to be everywhere. He was truly a cultural entrepreneur, pursuing interests ranging from literature, music and art to the occult. There are so many stories about Foster that regaled my childhood.

Plowboy Poet

When he was at Harvard, he perpetrated a literary hoax, with his friend Malcolm Cowley - confabulating a country poet named Earl Roppel, known as the "plowboy poet of Tioga County." Together Damon and Cowley wrote parodies of a kind of rural verse popular at the time. They sent them to many leading literary figures, including Amy Lowell - who got them published in *POETRY MAGAZINE* - and Witter Bynner, who compared them to Robert Burns.

Jill, would you read us a sample?

JILL: *Last night when I was in our surrey,
Driving home with my best girl,
I saw the moon run down the fence-row
Like a fat squirrel.*

One of these verses was set to music and performed by a chorus of 3,000 in San Francisco. After WW1, an article appeared in the *San Francisco Bulletin*.

(quote) "Ever since I read... the work of Witter Bynner's lost poet, I've been wondering about the lad... [Did] the war [take] that fresh fine almost-girlish sweetness out of him and [make] him bitter as it has so many of our youths?" (unquote)

(Cowley, Essays for S. Foster Damon.)

Spiritualism and Harry Houdini

And then there was Foster's interest in the Occult.



Harry Houdini

He wrote extensively about Spiritualism, which drew the attention of Harry Houdini, a leading debunker. He brought Foster into what became a controversial investigation of "Margery the Medium." Her most famous client was Arthur Conan Doyle - and his late wife.



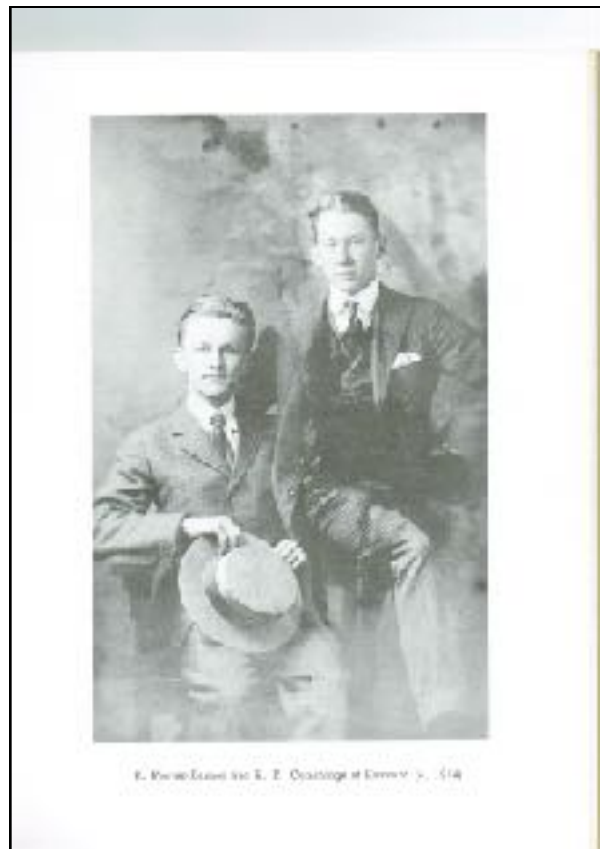
Margery the Medium

Damon and Houdini exposed her as a fraud. Doyle and other supporters struck back. It was a disillusioning experience for Foster, who described the occult world to Houdini as "treacherous and even nasty."

As for Houdini, Foster was proud of their friendship. It was a little like knowing Elvis. He kept a signed photo of him next to his chair the rest of his life.

Part 3. AT HARVARD

You could say that for Foster, life began at Harvard. It was a time of cultural change. In his book, *The Crimson Letter*, Douglass Shand-Tucci describes Harvard as a birthplace of Modernism in American. And he gives a vivid picture of Foster and his friends.



SFD/Cummings

Here is Foster with his roommate, e. e. cummings, Class of 1914. cummings came to Annisquam with him many times.

In his *six non-lectures*, cummings wrote, "At Harvard I met ... S. Foster Damon who opened my eyes and ears not merely to El Greco and

William Blake, but to all ultra modern music and poetry and painting..."

This is a consistent theme among those who knew Foster. Virgil Thomson called him "an opener of doors."

Also around were John Dos Passos, Malcolm Cowley, Conrad Aiken, Robert Hillyer and, perhaps, Foster's greatest friend, John Brooks Wheelwright. Not long after graduation, they collected their poetry together in *Eight Harvard Poets*.

Here's one from Foster. It has no title.

JILL:

*You thought I had forgotten. Well, I had!
(Although I never guessed I could forget
Those few great moments when we both went mad.)*

*The other day at someone's tea we met, smiling gayly, bowed, and went
our several ways.*

Complacent with successful coldness - Yet

*Suddenly I was back in the old days
Before you felt we ought to drift apart.
It was some trick - the way your eyebrows raise,*

*Your hands - some vivid trifle. With a start
Then I remembered how I lived alone,
Writing bad poems and eating out my heart*

All for your beauty. - How the time has flown!

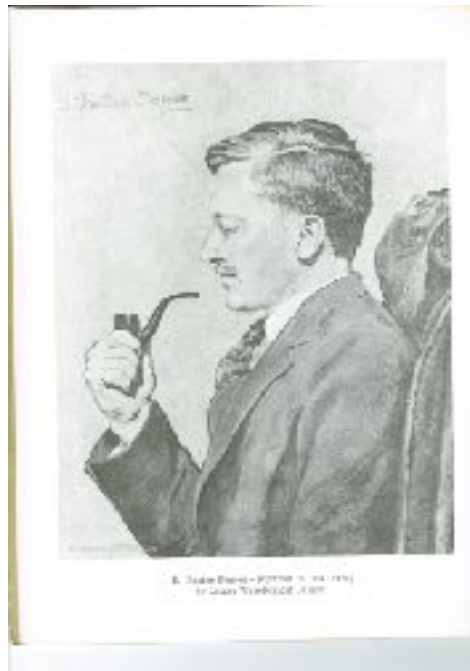
The poem captures something of Foster's sensitivity - and how easily slighted he was. It's a theme that shadows his life - disappointments that hurt him.

John and Louise Wheelwright

Foster's best friend, John Wheelwright, was also the brother of the artist, Louise Wheelwright, who became Foster's wife.

Did anyone here know Louise? To me she was a great lady, who survived a troubled life.

Here's a drawing she made of Foster.



Louise' drawing of young Foster

We'll talk about her more later. I want to say something about her brother, John, who was a fascinating figure. Here he is in a raccoon coat.



John Wheelwright

As a poet, he was - unlike Foster - a true modernist, in the vein of T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. He influenced many important poets of the next generation, including John Ashbury and Frank O'Hara. Shand-Tucci calls him - quote - "an authentic Puritan, combining extremes of High Episcopal liturgy, proto-Trotskyite metaphysic and post-Ruskinian

taste... both monk and dandy..." He was, in other words, an old Boston, high church marxist.

There's a story about him showing up at a communist rally in Roxbury - where he gave a speech - dressed in black tie and tails because he was on his way to a debutante party.

His friendship with Foster seems telling to me - these two difficult/illuminating men. Foster adored him, and it broke his heart when, one night in the 1940's, Wheelwright walked into traffic in the middle of the Massachusetts Avenue Bridge and killed himself.

It was one of the great satisfactions of Foster and Louise' old age that - in the 1960's - they got his *Collected Poems* published.

Part 4. POST-GRADUATE

Foster stayed at Harvard to pursue a graduate degree, becoming an instructor in the English department. This period, from 1914 to 27 was in many ways Foster's most fruitful. He befriended the great imagist poet and Boston eccentric, Amy Lowell, during this time. She became his mentor and eventually, he wrote her definitive biography.

He wrote his ground-breaking book, *William Blake, his Philosophy and Symbols*.

And he published a small book of poems, *Astrolabe, Infinitudes and Hypocrisies*. *The Saturday Review* called it "fitfully brilliant, glittering with individuality."

JILL:

Conversation

*Last night, ghosts of flowers floated
colorless, yet still perfect of frail form,
sea-jellies in night waters;
and with invisible voices they wailed:
"Pray for us! Pray for us!"
Alas! Lost flowers, why should ye ask
for the prayers of a man?
"That we may rise to be men, fool!" They answered.
But I prayed instead the impossible prayer
that men should become flowers.*

In the image of the jelly-fish/flowers - there is a sense of the struggle to come into being. I think it holds a key to understanding Foster. He was clever, searching, fun-loving, inward, intuitive, sensitive, penetrating, self-conscious. Ephemeral. An aesthete who spoke in a voice influenced by Oscar Wilde, Amy Lowell and William Blake. But who was he? What was his authentic voice? What ground did he grow out of? It's an important question for a poet. I'd say he struggled to know. And the answer unfolded through a combination of creative exploration, experience and, frankly, suffering.

Virgil Thomson

There are a number of recorded recollections of those who who crossed Foster's path at this time. One was Virgil Thomson, the American composer and music critic: (quote)

... I came to know S. Foster Damon, slender, pale poet with a blond mustache, at that time instructing in English A while preparing privately - since Harvard would have none of it - the book that was to open the language of William Blake... I remember long walks and talks, and I remember his bringing me music and books he thought I ought to know. [One]... changed my life: a thin, small volume called Tender Buttons by Gertrude Stein. (Birthday Garland for SFD)



Gertrude Stein/Thomson

That Foster introduced Thomson to the poetry of Gertrude Stein was typical of his ability to find things. Thomson would have his single most important creative collaboration with her. Together they wrote two ground-breaking works of modern American music-theater - "Four

Saints in Three Acts" - about the devotional lives of artists - and "The Mother of Us All," about Susan B Anthony and the women's right to vote.

I had the opportunity to co-direct "The Mother of Us All" three times - at Glimmerglass Opera, New York City Opera and San Francisco Opera - which made me feel, in a way, that I had finally reached into Foster's world and made something of it for myself.

Here are two production shots.



Mother of Us All: Susan B Anthony as Statue

At the end of the opera, Susan B Anthony has become a statue, petrified into a monument while her political ideas are forgotten.



Full shot of the stage

We set the opera in a 19th century school room. Anthony is portrayed as the teacher. All the students are figures from different eras of American history.



Lincoln Kirstein

I guess you could say that I was one of Foster's students. Another - at Harvard - was Lincoln Kirstein - who founded New York City Ballet with George Balanchine. He wrote something about Foster that I think gets to the heart of his approach not just to teaching but to life. Kirstein wrote:

His teaching... was by seduction and suggestion; little was explained... But he offered the mind-expanding notion that if one searched, one

found... I've been high on the notion ever since. (Damon Birthday Garland)

Kirstein puts his finger on Foster's particular genius. He teased out the hidden. I think it put him in a difficult position in relation to society - which tends to favor the pre-established. And this became a source of considerable conflict for him.

Part 5. WILLIAM BLAKE



William Blake

Foster played a role in restoring Herman Melville - forgotten at the time of his death - to serious critical attention. He was a proponent of James Joyce and wrote penetratingly about his work (though he had a problem with *Finnegan's Wake*.)

And then there was his book, *William Blake, His Philosophy and Symbols*, which began as his Harvard Phd dissertation. The copy I have

is signed to his mother. "This wild attempt to impress my parents for once. 1924."

The English critic, F.W. Bateson, wrote, "Damon's . . . *Philosophy and Symbols* has been the foundation stone on which all modern interpretations of Blake have built."

Anyone who has tried to plow through Blake's prophetic books -



Jerusalem

- such as his great work *Jerusalem* - will understand what a task lay before Foster Damon, when, in the 1920's, he set out to make sense of Blake's vision, which combined word and image in a complex symbolic language.

This is one of his illuminated manuscripts.

Though Blake's lyrics - *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* - were loved, his major works were considered by most to be the ramblings of a madman. Even in the early 20th Century, as visionary a poet as William Butler Yeats was a bit befuddled by them.

Foster saw in Blake's poetry and art an allegorical language based in the visionary tradition of the Gnostics, Alchemists and more immediately, Emanuel Swedenborg. He set out to make sense of it in a surprisingly methodical fashion for so sprawling an imaginary world. He amassed an extraordinary body of knowledge and associations in

order to uncover an underlying order. He basically translated Blake's symbols. He was later criticized for being too methodical, but - then - at the beginning - his approach opened a rich vein of understanding. Personally, I worked hard to understand Blake's poetic world, and I couldn't have done it without Foster's books.

His work on Blake was not supported by Harvard, however. They rejected his PhD thesis, calling Blake a minor poet. And they denied him tenure. Foster's time at Harvard was over.

Part 6. LIFE AFTER HARVARD



Foster 1936

I go by the theory that you can live a life without Harvard, but I'm not sure that Foster felt that way. Leaving Harvard was a blow, and you have the sense that it knocked the wind out of his sails.

In my family, there was always this sense of Foster's disappointment at not being recognized in the way that some of his more celebrated friends were. There's little doubt that he felt slighted by Harvard's rejection, and yet, I can't help suspecting that Brown University, where he ended up, gave him a freedom to pursue his scholarly interests that he wouldn't otherwise have had.

This is his paradox: he wanted space to explore, to engage the world on his own terms. He embraced the mantle of the outsider, and yet he wanted to be acknowledged.

His next book of poems, "Tilted Moons" was called a disappointment by critics, and he didn't publish another until the end of his life, though he never stopped struggling with the form.

A former student, Lawrence Goldstein, wrote about the turn that Foster's life took:

By 1929, ... Damon was a literary presence of substantial... importance.. [He] then established residence on the dark side of the moon, where he would shortly be joined by Fitzgerald, Dreiser, Mencken and others who had given the Twenties a voice only to subside with its glorious echoes... Damon remained busy at projects uncongenial to public taste. He began a long poem about the American Revolution, The Moulton Tragedy... He issued a biography of Amy Lowell, whose passe devotion to the Keatsian ideal of beauty he shared. And, as Malcolm Cowley has plaintively documented,... [he] expended his abundant intellectual energy upon unworthy scholarship, the most wasteful... being a definitive edition of the 19th century hack, Thomas Holley Chivers.

Goldstein's comment about the Chivers book seems harsh. It has one of my favorite titles of all time: *Thomas Holley Chivers, Friend of Poe*. Damon explores Chiver's claim that Poe plagiarized "The Raven" from him. And clearly feels that Chiver's work was under-appreciated - with a certain sense of identification, I suspect.

Part 7. THE BROWN YEARS

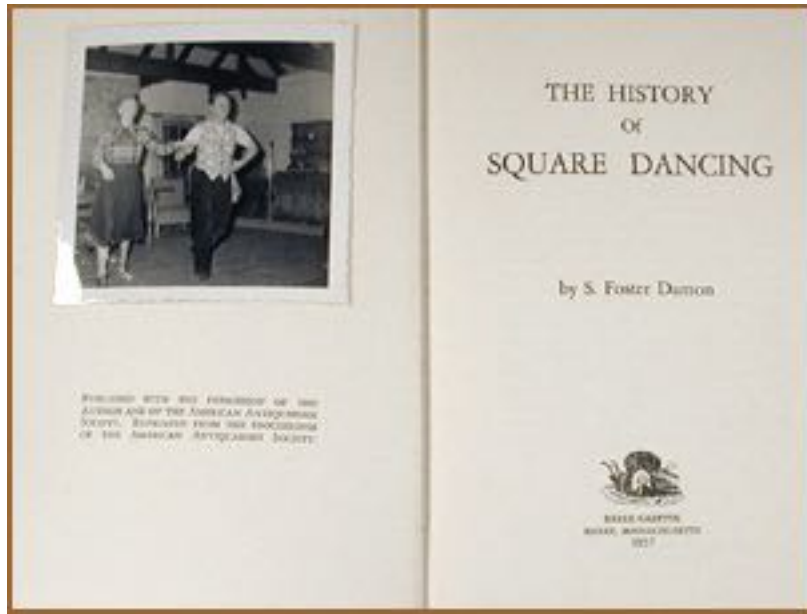
Foster's life at Brown, nonetheless, was rich with teaching and scholarly pursuits.

Harris Collection

In 1930 he was appointed Curator of the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays. Under Foster's direction, The Collection ranged from important editions of Walt Whitman and other leading writers to early American song, popular literature and even comic books. He was among the first to establish a new way to look at our world - through the common, the popular, the collective.

And he published a series of histories - which I've mentioned - from Punch and Judy to Yankee Doodle and Square Dancing.

Here he is cutting a rug.



Foster square dancing

And it was during this time, that Foster wrote my father's favorite book, a children's story called *The Day After Christmas*, in which a 'Tree Fairy' takes a little girl into a strange world hidden in the stalk of a Christmas Tree. It is dedicated to Dad and Joe Littlefield, as well as their cousins. Let's have a look at those two boys around that time.



Paul and Joe Littlefield as boys

And here is Foster with Santa Claus.



Foster Damon and Santa Claus

Part 8. CHILDREN & ANNISQUAM

Foster and Louise didn't have children of their own, though Foster helped raise my cousin Lars Pederson. But I think one of the compensations of his later life was his friendships with children and his ability to evoke their world in his writing. He was something of a child himself, and he loved to engage young people in a sense of play and wonder.

When the neighborhood kids in Providence trashed his house, he invited them in and set up a clubhouse for them in the basement. Here's an article about it from the early 50's. He helped many of them in their education and finding their way in the world.



Foster and neighbor kids around the piano

Annisquam

And then there was Foster's life in Annisquam. My great grand parents were part of the first wave of summer visitors who came here at the end of the 19th century. They found a house on Cambridge Avenue, and Foster, my grandmother Sally and my great aunt Mary grew up here in the summer.



Damons on Cambridge Ave

That's the house on Cambridge Avenue in the middle. Foster's on front porch steps. Sally's sitting on the rock next to Squam Rock. Their mother, Sarah, in the Pasture. And Mary Nelles is with her husband, Walter and children. This must be in the 1920's



Here's a collage from the 1930's, when Dad was growing into his teens. There *he is* sailing his fish boat. That's Foster at Squam Rock. A house party. Mary in front of her house. Anyone who knew Mary knew that she lived for the beach. My Mother, Emmy, and Dad, age 18, in front of the house.



Foster on front steps of his house

And here's Foster on the front porch of his house sometime in the 1940's. It was literally an antique. As I mentioned, the Madam Goss house had been a Revolutionary War era tavern. I think it was kind of a gateway for him to the Old America that fired his imagination. If you look in the file on Foster at the Annisquam Historical Society, you'll find a pile of notes he gathered on its history - including the owner at that time, Captain Gideon Lane, an ancestor - according to the notes - of the Babsons. (Thank you, Rita Teele.)

He added a kitchen, for cooking was one of his passions. He wrote the introduction to the Annisquam Village Cookbook and provided several recipes in the section "Men's Cookery."

He loved Annisquam. It inspired his creativity. He was deeply engaged with its lore. I like to imagine him - as a child - wandering around the same shadowy corners and waterside haunts as I have. He wrote a beautiful poem in his book, *Astrolabe*.

JILL:

SQUAM ROCK: September
(for O.L.)

Here on the summit of the hill
The day is warm; the world is still
But for the crickets' drowsy trill.

The rock, like the horn of a saddle-bow,
Tops the hill, then to roads below
Plunges a hundred feet or so.

A shadow of a dragon-fly
Across the stone flits gauzily,
Hovers a moment, then goes by.

A grasshopper crawls up the ledge
Painfully seeking pasturage.
- Immediately, over the edge

He leaps, straight out as far as he can;
As part of the Eternal Plan
He trusts the Void but not the Man.

Nature sings on: that was nothing odd.
Meanwhile asters and golden rod
Enact their own ideas of God.

There you have our special world of Annisquam through his eyes -
something we can all share with him.



Foster and cast, 1905

This is Foster - age 13, if the date, 1905, is correct - in a cast photo supplied by the Annisquam Historical Society. For those of you who attended Anna Crouse's reminiscences of Annisquam, that's Olga Lingaard in the first row, second from the left. Her family owned the house on Washington St that the Crouses bought. In old age, she lived alone in the woods above the Crouse' with a pack of collies. As Anna Crouse described it, Olga had a sad life, rocked by a family scandal and the death of her beloved brother - a pilot in World War 1. How young and hopeful she looks here.

It's haunting to realize that the "O.L." in the dedication to Foster's Squam Rock poem, is, indeed Olga Lingaard. They were close their entire lives. She and Louise Damon had their 'coming out' together.

To me, that's an aspect of Annisquam that is so precious - to be entangled in a place so intimately - and so long - that the other souls, the granite, the sea and sun become impossible to separate.

Melodramatics

Foster was literally a life-long participant in Annisquam's tradition of amateur performances. In the late 1940's he was music director of the Annisquam International Company, which - under the direction of Joe Batcheller - presented melodramas. One of these shows, *Rags to Riches*, included a young Duncan Nelson in the cast. In the early 1950's, Foster wrote a play - "The Witch of Dogtown." It won a contest, sponsored by his friend Russel Crouse, for best play about Cape Ann. The prize was a gala production directed by Batcheller and performed at City Hall during the 1954 Cape Ann Festival of the Arts.



(This information comes from the Annisquam Village Player's Cookbook.)

I noticed reading through the program that Jack Babson, Grace Murray and Barbara Russ were in the cast.

My sense is that Foster's life in Annisquam, his activities with young people, his cooking and other pleasures gave him solace in a struggle that more and more came to dominate the life of his wife, Louise, and him.

Part 9. THE SADNESS

From the time they were married, Louise Wheelwright Damon suffered from symptoms of schizophrenia. After a long struggle, she had to enter a facility, where she lived for many years. It was a terrible shadow over their lives, but one from which I think they eventually emerged together. In the mid-sixties, thanks to advances in psychopharmacology, Louise returned home. This was when my sisters and I got to know her. She had a genuineness and way of expressing herself that drew me to her.

It was a beautiful thing to see Foster and Louise in their dotage, sitting together on the couch and holding hands.



Foster and Louise

I have this one particular memory at their house in Annisquam around Christmas. Louise made Foster some egg nog. She broke an egg into a tall glass of rum, stirred it a couple of times so the yolk streaked against the glass, shook some nutmeg on top and handed it to Foster,

who drank it down in one gulp. "Delightful" he smiled in deep satisfaction - yolk dripping from his mustache.

Foster's journal

Here's an entry from his journal.

1966, Feb. 22. "My 73rd birthday, and very content am I. My dear Louise is back - for good I expect. I still teach (Wm. Blake) and work at the Harris Collection. My hearing does not improve, of course... I am hopeless at the movies... Also - now I have false teeth - that is a nuisance. Beef I simply cannot chew up... Content of mind: all passion spent. (Books at Brown v.28. p40.)

Blake's Job

When I think of the lives of Foster and Louise Damon, my mind goes to William Blake's great final work, his engravings to the Old Testament *Book of Job*, published by Foster in an annotated edition in the 1950's.

It takes up the mystery of suffering - and the process by which suffering opens the way to renewal. Job is a righteous man who finds himself overcome by calamity. Here he is being savaged by Satan. His wife weeps at his feet.



And smote Job with soar boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head

As Foster Damon writes in his introduction,

In fact, the whole drama is enacted in Job's soul. His wife is... his inspiration... His children are his creations... The Devil is the Accuser within him, and even God is... made in his own image... The finding of the true God is also the finding of one's own individuality... Job must recognize and humble his secret pride in being the greatest man in the East before his humanity can awaken...

Through being broken down, Job restores his relationship, not just with God but with existence.



***I have heard you with the hearing
of the ear but now my EYE seeth thee***

And that is the meaning of the last line in the biblical book:



So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than the beginning

Part 10. TOWARDS THE END



The World of S Foster Damon by Burgess Green

And I'd say the end of Foster's life had an autumnal glow. He finished his **Blake Dictionary**, which summed up his work on Blake. The paperback edition is still in print and used - after 50 years - in most every Blake course in every college in the country.

75th Birthday Celebration

And Brown University gave him a 75th Birthday celebration that brought literary luminaries from all over the world to honor his work as the "father of Blake studies." They published two books, one of recollections from some of his friends and the other a collection of scholarly essays on Blake. It is a compendium of the greatest Blake scholars in the world.

And Brown awarded him an honorary Doctorate - along with Bob Hope. And so finally, Foster stepped into the old rhyme,

Doctor Foster went to Gloucester/ In a shower of rain/ He stepped in a puddle/ Right up to his middle/ And never went there again.

The Old Professor



Foster in class

Lawrence Goldstein gives a vivid late-age picture of Doctor Damon in the classroom - from his Blake seminar.

Damon never uttered a tentative syllable in 6 weeks, but always discoursed on the intentions, meanings and effects of Blake's verse as if the Master's ghost were in his ear. He sited chapter and verse without having to consult the ...[texts]... Students... were driven to despair - and sometimes through it to mastery - by his authority...

It seems a far cry from Lincoln Kirstein's picture of the teacher who used "seduction and suggestion". But Goldstein adds:

Damon was a stern instructor but a generous mentor. He might return seminar papers marked only with the word "NO!", in large letters,... but in private he would also encourage the most unconventional research and speculation. He earnestly promoted the kind of creative writing one might expect him, from his own verse, to most dislike. (Goldstein, Michigan.)

And now, finally, we come to Samuel Nomad. Just to remind you, Samuel Nomad was the name Foster used - in his last collection of poems, *Nightmare Cemetery*. It's appropriate that we are so close to Hallowe'en, because it is a book of phantoms and earthly shadows.

The preface reads:

"All the characters in this book are entirely imaginary including the Author."

It's my favorite of his poetry books for the directness of its feeling. Here is Lawrence Goldstein's insightful assessment:

Damon... raged against the... genteel romanticism of his early practice. He would finally be himself, a flawed mortal and a bit of a mage. His verse... acquired a compelling edge. More than anything,... [he] wanted at the end to haunt his fellows, to be a Halloween presence in their lives... {His} true voice, hectoring and pungent, [was] not to be silenced again...

Jill:

Hallowe'en Part 1

This eve is Hallowe'en, feast of the souls.

*Here they come, pushing and staring, out of the fog
into the dimmed room: nameless horrors, ghouls, crones, idiots, to
enjoy Life's epilogue.*

*Ho for the dance! The witch pursues the devil,
the lone ghost hugs its emptied skeleton;
all the old cruelties, fears, all forms of evil
revive and revel again, fearless of dawn.*

Now for supper!

Instantly they unmask.

*Look! They are children gleeful with innocence.
Popcorn, apples, ice cream are what they ask;
all the terrors were exquisite pretense.*

*And thus humanity's ancient sins and shames
dissolve into children's innocent games.*

(Pass book around.)

The copy of the book that you're looking at happens to be the first copy of a limited edition that Foster gave to Louise Damon. It is inscribed, "This first copy for her who is always the first - Louise Nomad." How beautifully he acknowledges the sense he had of the way they wandered together.

Part 11. THE END

He had a series of strokes. He came to the conclusion that he couldn't do "Punch and Judy" anymore. He informed the Sea Fair committee and then forgot. He spent the rest of the summer grumbling that the ladies of the village had conspired to cancel the show because it was "too wicked."

I came upon an envelope of various photographs of Foster. Among them was one that seems apt for an ending.



Damon as fairy

(Attributed to Annisquam amateur theatrical, "The Last Ghost," by Annisquam Historical Society.)

Thanks for coming.

Note. The books by S. Foster Damon mentioned in this talk are available for perusal in the Annisquam Village Library.