

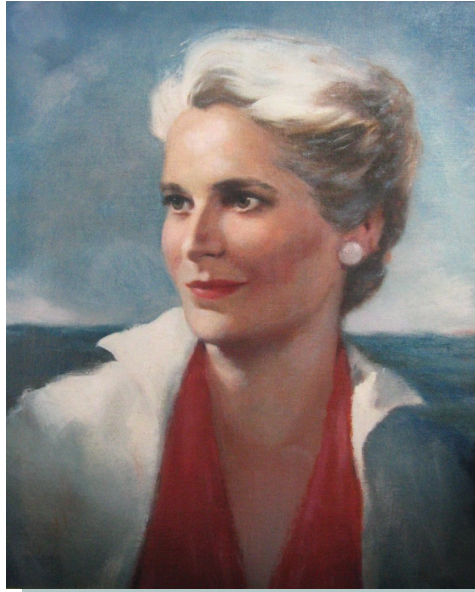
Virginia Moore: Striving for Ultimates

By Erin Parkhurst
Courtesy of *Virginia Living*

In 1929, a striking young woman with chestnut hair climbed the parched brick steps of Cliffside, a nearly 100-year-old Federal-style mansion perched atop a bluff overlooking Scottsville and the James River's Horseshoe Bend. Once the grand dame of this sleepy town of narrow, twisting lanes, Cliffside had fallen into disrepair after the previous owner had lost it in the stock market crash. The house and 14-acre estate were for sale for just \$5,000.

Poet Virginia Moore was 26 years old when she stood before Cliffside. She was newly divorced from Louis Untermeyer, whom many considered to be the master poetry critic of his time, and left alone to raise their infant son, John. Moore wrote in her memoir that despite Cliffside's "dreadful condition," it struck a chord: "I stood in the parlor amid stacks of old magazines festooned with spiders, and my heart said, 'Yes!'"

Moore found in Cliffside two things: a refuge from the maelstrom that had been her brief marriage, and the inspiration to write. She would publish 15 books and carve out a distinguished writing career that lasted more than 50 years. She was reviewed, mostly favorably, by *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* and shared friendships with many literary luminaries, including Robert Penn Warren and Allen



Virginia Moore

Tate. A poet first, she later turned her attention to biography and nonfiction, writing books on Emily Brontë, W.B. Yeats, and the Madisons of Virginia.

Moore had a penchant for precision in dress and bearing, but her writing was effusive—so much so that a *New York Times* critic chastised her in 1954 for her "rhapsodic manner, her many question marks and exclamation points." One of her books, *Scottsville on the James*, published 40 years ago in celebration of the town's 225th anniversary, is Moore's love letter to the town that knew her until her death in 1993, one month shy of her 90th birthday. To the people of Scottsville, Moore was simply "Miss Virginia."

Moore was born in 1903 in Harvard, Nebraska, to Virginians Ethel Daniel and John Fitzallen Moore. At age 16, she enrolled at what was then Hollins College in Roanoke and majored in both English and philosophy. She was spell-bound studying Aeschylus and Plato, and was the editor of *Hollins Magazine* during her three years there. When Moore graduated in 1923, she revealed her ambition when she wrote, "Why strive for anything less than ultimates?"

She completed a master's degree in English at Columbia University the next year and remained in New York to work as a freelance writer, but the pay was poor. She had traded a childhood of privilege for the ascetic life of a struggling writer, but she was determined to make it on her own and tore up the checks her father sent.

Moore got her first break in 1924 when Helen Ferris, editor of the national Girl Scout magazine, hired her to write a book of profiles about professional women. *Girls Who Did* was published in 1927. Two years before the book came out, Moore had received a scholarship for a three-week residence at the prestigious MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Some of the poetry Moore wrote while there appeared in *The Nation* and *Atlantic*

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Monthly and later in her first collection, the self-assured and urgent *Not Poppy*, published in 1926. *The Independent's* review of the work was prophetic. "The volume has a touch of the literary flapper, young, unabashed, plucky, unaware of the virtue of reticence."

It was, perhaps, a lack of reticence that led her into a hasty marriage to Untermeyer in 1926. He was 18 years Moore's senior and recently separated from his first wife, poet Jean Starr. They met at MacDowell, and, though Moore rebuffed him, Untermeyer was unrelenting in his pursuit. He found her in New York in the fall of 1925, and Moore wrote in her memoir, "Louis and I were soon squeezing pleasure out of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Eliot. And I made a mistake. I began to see my periods of happiness on the poetic level as rooted in Louis when of course they were rooted in poetry itself. Never before had I shared poetry so extensively, so abundantly, and it was heady."

The pair traveled to Mexico, where Untermeyer got a quick divorce. They married immediately. The return to New York was rough, and Untermeyer was unsympathetic toward an ill Moore. When they docked, she fled to her parents. Untermeyer appealed to her for months to try again, and when she capitulated, they traveled to Europe on an extended honeymoon. In Switzerland, Moore learned she was pregnant.

The couple remained abroad during the pregnancy, and their son, John, was born in London in 1928. Moore suffered complications

from the birth, and while she was recovering Untermeyer announced that he was leaving her to return to Starr, who had been surreptitiously following the couple through Europe.

Though Moore emerged from her tempestuous marriage more circumspect, she was not defeated and expressed this in her poem, "In Dejection Near Naples." She wrote,

*The waves of the sea are troubled
but never spent,*

And cruelty in elemental form

*Sustains the rock that strengthens
with the storm.*

When the divorce was final and Moore considered where to live with John, she thought of Virginia. She told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1945, "One of my earliest memories is of being told 'You're a Virginian and don't ever forget it.' And I never did."

At someone's suggestion, Moore looked for a home in Scottsville. When she first saw Cliffside's giant sheltering oaks, she knew it would give her the peace she craved. "When Miss Virginia was writing, she liked it very quiet—she wouldn't tolerate interruptions," recalls her friend Robert Spencer, of Scottsville. For the first time in a few years, Moore felt secure. She wrote 11 of her books from the seclusion of Cliffside, the rhythmic click of cicadas or John's voice her only distractions.



Cliffside, 2010 (now a private residence).

Moore had another reason to settle at Cliffside in 1929. A childhood friend had come back into her life. Lancelot Dent—Lonny—had given her violets and sworn he'd marry her when they were children. He had danced with her at the University of Virginia in 1923, when she was a student at Hollins. He was teaching philosophy in Charlottesville and wanted to see her. "We were well matched, not just in our mutual love of poetry and philosophy, but on every level," she wrote of Dent.

They were soon engaged, and it seemed that she would find in Dent her soul's companion. But soon after, Moore discovered that he had tuberculosis. Fearful for John, she told Dent that when he was declared completely free from the disease she would marry him. That day never came. In 1936 she dedicated her third and final published volume of poetry, *Homer's Golden Chain*, to Dent. Her dedication portends her subsequent decision to stop writing poetry and focus solely on prose: "There is too great a discrepancy between what I admire and what I accomplish."

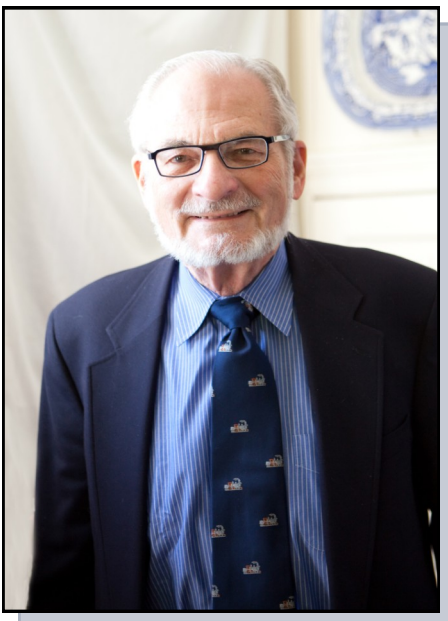
Throughout the 1930s and early

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1940s, Moore often traveled abroad with John. On one voyage to Italy, around 1936, Moore was introduced to anthroposophy—a spiritual movement founded in the early 1900s by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner. She described anthroposophy as “a pathway from the spiritual in man to the spiritual in the universe”—something she’d sought to achieve with her poetry.

Moore’s son, whose name she legally changed to John Fitzallen Moore II, after her father, is now 81 years old and living in Libertyville, Illinois. He says his mother’s adherence to anthroposophy and interest in mysticism was a source of friction between them as he grew up. His passion was science; he would go on to earn a B.S. in physics at M.I.T., an M.S. at Harvard, and a Ph.D. in optical physics at Columbia. He later founded the Bio-Imaging Research Corp. in Illinois—a firm



Dr. John F. Moore, only child of Virginia Moore

that designs and builds imaging systems.

“She had a very strong sense of what was right and wrong,” says John Moore, “and she hated anything she felt was unfair or harmful to people.” This sense of fairness shows in the biographies Moore published: *The Life and Eager Death of Emily Brontë* (1936), *The Unicorn: William Butler Yeats’ Search for Reality* (1954) and *The Madisons*, on the lives of James and Dolley Madison (1979). She believed biography should do more than report facts. It should, she wrote, “differentiate, as it were, a soul.”

While her Yeats biography, published shortly after she earned her Ph.D. in philosophy at Columbia in 1952, is recognized as one of her best pieces of scholarship, *Virginia Is a State of Mind* (1942) is probably her most well known work. Unabashedly sentimental, Moore wrote in the preface that the book was her attempt to capture the “quintessence of Virginia.” Though *The New York Times* reviewed the work favorably in 1942, citing its “crackling exuberance and one-hundred-watt Southern charm,” Virginius Dabney, editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, did not like the book. In the *Saturday Review of Books* in 1943, he roundly criticized it, writing, “The Commonwealth she examines is primarily the Virginia of history and legend.” Despite Dabney’s scorn, the book, whose eclectic topics included Virginia’s topography, literature and food, was well received and went into multiple editions.

Moore’s work resisted simple categorization. Her writing drew praise for being openly sentimental without being mawkish and scholarly without being abstruse. Her skillful blending of genre and the “rhapsodic manner” she was censured for in 1954 make even her most complex work—including *The Whole World, Stranger* (1957), an exploration of the idea of a universal human spirit; and her final published work, *The Liberty Bell Papers: An Inquiry into American Values* (1980)—read like intimate conversation.

Moore had spent the 1930s, after Dent’s death, focused on her work and her son. In 1943, when John was in boarding school and Moore was 40 and “miserably lonely,” she met a submariner with piercing blue eyes. His name was John Jefferson Hudgins, and Moore wrote that “if he survived [the war] I would marry him.” Their marriage would last 42 years, until Hudgins’ death in 1992. Her own death from cancer followed the next year.

Despite her extensive travels, Cliffside and Scottsville remained Moore’s touchstone. In the late ’60s, as Scottsville’s 225th anniversary drew near, she helped to create the Scottsville Museum. Around the same time, Moore’s friend Raymon Thacker, mayor of the town, says he “begged and begged for Miss Virginia to write a book about our history.” She agreed. In her prologue to *Scottsville on the James*, Moore used the words of English Renaissance poet Christopher Marlowe to

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describe the town she loved: “Infinite riches in a little room.” Statuesque, with a halo of early white-gray hair, Moore remained a remarkable beauty throughout her life. The “Queen of Scottsville,” as she was called by her friend Charles Fry, never ceased striving for ultimates.



Above, Virginia Moore posed with Robert Spencer at the Museum, 4 July 1980.

At left, Virginia Moore presented a service award to Robert Walls, curator of Scottsville Museum in 1974.



Moore’s beloved Scottsville Museum, formerly a Disciples of Christ Church built in 1846.

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