A conversation with John Gould

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ABSTRACT

The difference is that in Mr. Gould's world there are no dark secrets, no malice in the acts of those who stumble, ensnare others, and are themselves ensnared by life's foibles. The following interview by David Holmstrom took place in the downstairs room of the Gould house on a September evening after a lobster dinner and a piece of Mrs. Gould's unforgettable blueberry pie.

FULL TEXT

HE sports a puff of white whiskers about an inch wide, forming a straight line from his lip to the point of his chin. It's a beard of brevity and wit, befitting the nature of the man. "I used to have a full beard, but now I'm down to this," he says, with gray eyes dancing. The man is John Gould, a favorite son of Maine who has written steadily and warmly for the Monitor since Oct. 28, 1942. That's an amazing 45 years of irresistible writing about hundreds of wonderfully nonchalant human beings in Maine who dare to tread where John Gould takes them. "Monitor readers are very possessive," Mr. Gould says, laughing in a high-pitched voice. He says that one reader dropped by the Gould household and actually stayed two weeks. "I get dozens of letters a week from readers, and the people that come by just want to shake hands and say hello." He obliges.

Mr. Gould is a short, sprightly man who almost always wears a broad-billed cap outdoors while gardening or tinkering. He loves trees, early mornings, his wife, his glass of milk at night, and any gardens that produce and teach. And most of all, he loves to tell stories that pitch and roll with Maine rhythms. Dorothy, his wife of 55 years, says, "There's never a dull moment with John." He smiles and says, "I like to call Dorothy my first wife." Mr. Gould writes in a small, windowed room tucked into a corner of a workshop in front of the modest house he built 15 years ago in Friendship (pop., 1,000). Above the door is a sign proclaiming, "Dr. Gould's Wardrobe By Economy Clothing." A total of 23 books - selling in the millions - have been written by him about life among the laconic people of Maine. He has created a world no less "real" than Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. The difference is that in Mr. Gould's world there are no dark secrets, no malice in the acts of those who stumble, ensnare others, and are themselves ensnared by life's foibles. The following interview by David Holmstrom took place in the downstairs room of the Gould house on a September evening after a lobster dinner and a piece of Mrs. Gould's unforgettable blueberry pie. Mr. Gould laughed often. How did you get started as a writer? When I was in high school, 1922 it was, the Brunswick Record had a Freeport page. The lady that wrote the news for Freeport had a macabre disposition. She was always writing about funerals and she loved obituaries. The editor said, "She saddens the whole paper." I heard the older folks commenting on this, so I wrote the editor a letter and suggested that perhaps he needed a new Freeport correspondent, whereupon I became the new Freeport correspondent. The editor didn't know me by sight. So when I finally went into the office, he was surprised at a young kid walking in. He said, "I thought you were an old man." That's how I got started. It was fun. I got paid 10 cents an inch. It was the names that were important: "Mr. and Mrs. Harry Smith spent Tuesday in Portland. She did some shopping and he fell asleep." I also covered news. I discovered that a lot of things that came up for the Brunswick Record would be used by the big-city papers,

and in those days Boston had three good morning newspapers. I got tangled up with the Post, which had the largest circulation then. Eventually (after college) I got a regular feature spot in the Sunday paper to write wild and woolly stories about Down East characters. When you were starting out, did you find yourself emulating other writers? There was a guy named Bill Nye who was born in Maine in the town of Shirley, up toward Moosehead Lake. His family took him to Ohio and eventually on to Wyoming. He became the publisher and editor of the Laramie Boomerang, and he began writing crazy pieces for his own paper. It wasn't very long until he went to New York and was hired by the old New York World to do a daily column. He wrote any number of books and had an exaggerated way of presenting something funny. I've always said that Bill Nye was a far greater craftsman with humor than Mark Twain. And I got acquainted with Nye's writings in the Freeport Library when I was in grammar school. I came across a couple of his books and I could see what he did to make something funny. I won't say I imitated him, but I paid attention to what he did to make something funny. How would you define humor? I don't know. Well, wait a minute. What you're talking about is a contrived way of making somebody laugh. Moliere said, "It's a strange business making a gentleman laugh." And of course he was as good at it as anybody. You see, I don't think there's any such thing as fiction. Writing's got to come from something that's happened to you or somebody else. It's got to have enough fact to it, enough realism to carry it. And this is one of the things I criticize about the jokers who run around claiming to be what are called "Maine humorists." They are making the stories up and not relating them to people. The Monitor readers who come here and want to shake my hand say the stories remind them of their grandmother's pantry in Indiana or something like that. The writing has to be real enough to back up those feelings. But if I call a man Joe Small in a piece when he has another name, that doesn't mean I'm doing something fictional. What are you doing? Well, there's got to be a smack of realism and factualism to back me up and make the writing seem plausible. There has to be enough there to make the reader relate to it. Everybody has to relate to something, and it's just a question of degree. The closest person to you is yourself, and then your interests radiate out. One of the first lessons I ever had in journalism was when I called the Boston Post to report an accident. I gave the names and said the driver had a broken leg. The rewrite man says, "Which leg?" I said, "It's a fifty-fifty bet." He said, "Don't try to be funny now because somebody's going to relate to it." So I found out which leg it was and called him back. "Left," I says. "Thanks," he says. When you write do you create a world that you would like to live in? No, I don't think so. I like this one. I don't write from indignation. I think perhaps I could do that as more time goes by. There are more things to be indignant about these days, but I'm not trying to correct anything. Things look foolish to me, but I don't think it's my job to get considerate about it. What satisfies you the most about your writing? Writing is hard work. It's something that takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of preparation. Sometimes I ask people, "Why is it that you invite me to speak at the Saturday afternoon library tea, but you never have an electrician come and show you how to wire a two-way switch?" That's his job, and writing is my job. You've gotto know your tools, have a background in reading, in language, and you've got to appreciate the vagaries of the language. I had four years of Latin in high school and you don't come out of that without knowing something about how words are put together. There is such a consistent inner rhythm in your writing. Is it the product of a lot of work? Yes, it does reflect a lot of work and it never does get easier. I spend a lot of time on a Monitor piece. First, I mull it over in my mind while I'm going about my business. I'll go into my room and write, and if it comes out as a three- or four-page piece I may not do more than a page and a half of it. And then I stick it under the roll of the typewriter and go back to picking potatoes or something. I'll mull it over some more. Once in a great while there will be one that unravels itself and keeps on going, but not very often. Then I'll let it sit overnight and the next morning, after I've had breakfast, I'll go back and make the final draft. I read everything aloud to see how it sounds. I can tell if it's ready by the way it sounds. I'll pick up dissonance. If something doesn't sound right, the flow of the words, or too many double "o's," then of course that's what I'm looking for. It should sound right to me when read aloud. Are you the kind of writer who stores away names and places? Yeah, that goes on all the time, but I don't think I do that consciously. It's like running a grocery store. You put everything up on a shelf when it comes in. And it may be a long time before a customer comes in and says, "I want one of those." And then you take it down. There isn't anything that relates to humanity that doesn't relate to writing. You've referred to writing as a

job. What do you mean? It's true, writing is a job. It always bothers me when I get invited to talk to a group and they say, "Tell us how you wrote your book?" I tell 'em, "I don't write books. I live 'em." I go to Grange meetings, I go hunting and fishing, I fool around and all at once I've got a book. I don't write them. 'Course nobody will believe that. Just about anything I publish is written before it's put on paper. It's pretty well thought out before I ever touch the typewriter. The rest is making sure it's done in good style, in something of an art form. This isn't born in you, I believe. It comes from what source, then? Now, wait a minute. Maybe the philosophy is mine, the mental activity that goes on, the dreaming up of an idea is mine, but the putting it down on a piece of paper is something you learn, is something you study. You've got to know right from wrong in the traditions of literature. It comes from practice. I don't like the word instinct. I think writing comes from practice. Can you see yourself living anywhere else but Maine? No, although when Dorothy and I were in Europe we saw a lot of places that were bucolic. I like my little garden. I wouldn't want to live anywhere in a city. A man named George Burnham Morrill used to come down here and sleep in a sleeping bag at a place down on the shore. He would look up at the sky at night and say, "Think of the millions of people that don't even know we're here."

Illustration

Caption: Picture, John Gould, PETER MAINENGLISH WRITERS &WRITING; DEATHS &OBITUARIES; INTERVIEWS; JOHN GOULD; BILL NYE; UNITED STATES; MAINE, USA; MASSACHUSETTS, USA; BOSTON, MA, USA; The Christian Science Monitor, October 28, 1987

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