

I. *Gentle Newburyport*

1874–1889

“I was born and lived in ‘gentle Newburyport’ until five years ago, when my family came to Boston” (Ethel Reed, 1895).¹

IT was not unusual to apply adjectives like “quaint” and “gentle” to Newburyport, Ethel Reed’s hometown in northeastern Massachusetts, an historic seaport near the mouth of the Merrimac River. In the twentieth century a famous sociological study, *Yankee City* (1963), celebrated Newburyport for its supposed New England virtues of sturdy self-reliance, absence of sharp class or ethnic distinctions, and high moral tone, the latter presumably rooted in its Puritan traditions.²

The reality was, of course, more complicated: by the second half of the nineteenth century, Newburyport—its older seafaring and ship-building activities now in steep decline—was becoming heavily industrialized (Ethel Reed herself grew up in the shadow of an enormous cotton mill), was no longer, strictly speaking, “Yankee” (many of its citizens were non-English immigrants like Ethel’s mother, who had been born in Ireland), and was filled with large pockets of poverty (as illustrated by the experiences of the Reed family). Ethel’s earliest years seem to have been somber, unsettled, and a perpetual source of embarrassment to her. “. . . never look back,—” her fiancé Philip Hale wrote to her at about the time of their engagement; “let the dead past bury it’s dead— We must try to live bravely in the pres-

1. “A Chat with Miss Ethel Reed,” p. 281.

2. This study was written by W. Lloyd Warner and three collaborators and published by Yale University Press in five volumes under various titles between 1941 and 1959; in 1963 Yale published a one-volume abridgment entitled *Yankee City*. For a stinging attack on the underlying assumptions of Warner’s work, see Stephan Thernstrom, “‘Yankee City’ Revisited: The Perils of Historical Naïveté,” *American Sociological Review* 30 (April 1965): 234–42.

ent— That is all we can do—”¹ But Ethel did look back: she was always aware, as she moved gracefully in elite artistic and social circles of both Boston and London, that she was the daughter of an insolvent father and a witness to a failed marriage; she had, moreover, experienced a strange childhood of mounting family debts and life in a series of Newburyport boarding houses while her parents struggled to survive.

The result was that she became unusually evasive about her origins. In an interview published in 1895, she described herself as coming from “English, Irish, French, and New England” stock.² The alleged French ancestry is difficult to verify—did she invent it because she admired French art so enthusiastically?—but it is undeniable that on her father’s side she came from an old New England family that had lived in Newburyport for several generations. Edgar Eugene Reed was born there in 1848 and had only one sister, Emma, who, rather confusingly, married a photographer named Vivalda Reed; thus Ethel was surrounded in her childhood by various Reeds to whom she was actually related by her aunt’s marriage, including Vivalda and Emma’s two children, both somewhat older than Ethel.

Since Edgar Reed’s father, James Reed, a carpenter, died in 1851, he and Emma were raised primarily by their mother, *née* Arabella Jane Tobey, who remarried (Jacob Brown, a grocer) the following year. Arabella emerges in contemporary records as a strong, matriarchal figure, trying vainly to ward off Edgar’s many creditors at the time of his death. We know almost nothing about Edgar’s childhood, but it is possible to reconstruct some of his activities as an adult; an obituary in a Newburyport newspaper described him as a “well known and popular photographer” and reported that he had belonged to a local militia, the Newburyport Veteran Artillery Company, though he never saw combat, because he was too young to have fought in the Civil

1. PLH to ER, [January 1896?].

2. “A Chat with Miss Ethel Reed,” p. 281.

War. There is also some contemporary evidence to suggest that he was friendly, personable, and well-liked.¹

On Christmas Day, 1872, Edgar Reed, 24 years old, married Mary Elizabeth Mahoney, 19, of County Cork, Ireland, the daughter of Patrick and Catherine Mahoney,² in a Protestant ceremony in Newburyport. Ethel's mother is unfortunately an even more elusive figure than her father: the only reliable information about her appearance is that in later years she was blonde and plump; we briefly hear her own voice at the inquest after Ethel's death;³ and, in Boston during the 1890s, she comes across in Philip Hale's letters as charmingly feckless. One picks up an echo of her daughter's personality in his comments, but Ethel, though she lived with her mother for many years, rarely mentions her and then only with apparent distaste. It is possible to feel some sympathy for Ethel's mother, but there are unmistakable hints that throughout her life, Elizabeth Reed, as she called herself, allowed herself to be manipulated by an erratic, strong-willed daughter.

There were several photographers in Newburyport named Reed, all related to Edgar through his sister's husband. Of them, the most notable was Selwyn Reed, Vivalda's cousin, and his highly successful career provides an instructive contrast to Edgar's.⁴ For decades, Selwyn Reed took pictures of the leading

1. "Edgar Reed Dead. Well Known and Popular Photographer Succumbs to Long Illness," *The Daily News* (Newburyport), August 8, 1892, p. 4; "Edgar E. Reed," *Franklin Sentinel*, 12 August 1892, p. 1 (which also quotes a tribute in the *Newbury Herald*).

2. I have been unable to identify her family to my complete satisfaction, but the most promising clue is in the parish register (Roman Catholic) of Caheragh, Cork and Ross, which records the baptism of Mary Mahony [*sic*], daughter of Patrick Mahony and Catherine Hayes, on January 14, 1854.

3. See Appendix B, below. There are also hints that she may have had a drinking problem.

4. In 1874, the year that Ethel was born, Edgar and Selwyn Reed are listed in the Newburyport directory as being employed at the same address, 4 Pleasant Street; it seems reasonable to assume that Edgar was working with, or probably under, Selwyn.

local citizens, the town's buildings, and the major Newburyport public events, and his work is today well represented in historical books about Newburyport and in various Massachusetts libraries and archives; Edgar's photographs, on the other hand, appear to have evaporated without a trace. The explanation probably lies in the fact that Edgar had a small studio in Salisbury Beach, a seaside resort just a few miles away from Newburyport—John Greenleaf Whittier, in his poem "The Tent on the Beach," had described its emergence as a seasonal playground—and his business consisted of photographing summer visitors as an amusing memento of their holiday on the sand. At least one other photographer, W. C. Thompson, practiced his trade in Salisbury Beach during this period, but it is important to notice that he had a larger studio in nearby Amesbury to sustain his more ambitious, off-season work. There is no completely unambiguous evidence that Edgar ever had a second studio in Newburyport, though he had some sort of business address there at times. The surviving records imply that he was trying to support himself and his family primarily by the precarious, seasonal business of



3 A map of Newburyport by E.H. Bigelow, published in 1880. The very large building on the right is part of Ocean Mills.



4 Ocean Mills as seen in a stereoscopic view, published in the nineteenth century by W. C. Thompson, one of Edgar Reed's professional rivals.

snapping pictures of tourists spending a few sunny days at the ocean's edge; he must have been frequently unemployed, conceivably as much as three-fourths of each year.

Edgar Reed died in 1892 "after a long illness," according to his obituary, and we know that the cause of death was tuberculosis; how far back that extended into his married years is unclear. His probate records also give an unflinching picture of profligate spending and recklessness in handling money, qualities that he seems to have transmitted to his daughter. No doubt for a variety of reasons, Edgar was a desperately poor man throughout Ethel's childhood.

Ethel Reed was born in Newburyport on March 13, 1874, fifteen months after her parents' marriage. She was an only child, and there is ample evidence that Edgar and Elizabeth were subsequently estranged, probably by the late 1880s; that—and dire poverty—may account for the absence of any siblings.

Edgar Reed, and presumably his wife and daughter, lived at several Newburyport addresses during the 1870s and 1880s, always as boarders, clearly another symptom of an unstable and