



## Oliver La Farge

FROM HIS EARLIEST EXPERIENCE in the Southwest as a Harvard University anthropology major actively pursuing his practical studies in Harvard's Arizona "diggings," to his settlement in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1940 as a nationally recognized novelist and authority on southwestern Indian life and culture, Oliver La Farge's name has been intimately linked with that of his adopted region. In many ways, such a linkage was inevitable. The southwestern scene constituted the chief background of his first—and probably most important—fictional topic, the richly varied tribal life of the Navajo Indians. As a field representative of the U.S. Indian Service and president for three decades of the Association on American Indian Affairs, La Farge considered the southwestern Indians part of his larger official responsibility. And long before his choice of the Southwest as his permanent home he had come, as he tells us in his autobiography *Raw Material* to know and love the region's rugged landscape and variegated social pattern.

Born December 19, 1901, La Farge grew up on Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, and after attending Groton Academy, the Harvard college preparatory school, was duly matriculated into the university's freshman program for 1920. At Harvard, in addition to his regular studies, he competed successfully for both the presidency of *The Harvard Advocate* and the editorship of the college humor magazine, the *Lampoon*. After his graduation in 1924 with a degree in anthropology, La Farge continued his studies at Harvard, receiving his master's degree in ethnology in 1929; in the meanwhile he engaged in the more practical aspects of his profession, including a stint at Tulane University as assistant to the university's chief archeologist Frans Blom and several field trips to Central America. The publication in 1929 of *Laughing Boy*, however, which won the Pulitzer Prize for the same year, brought him instant financial success and enabled him to free himself from the tedium of a settled academic life and to undertake the more heady career of a free-lance writer.

La Farge's professional literary career falls roughly into three partly overlapping phases or periods: (1) the decades of the thirties and early forties, which were devoted primarily to his exploitation of subject matter associated with Indian life and custom; (2) the period from the late thirties until immediately after World War II: a time for La Farge of a serious rethinking of his basic literary assumptions; and (3) the period from his return

home after the war in 1946 until his death in 1963: a period of prestige and fame as a regional and national author.

During the approximately fifteen-year span of the first of the periods just outlined, La Farge continued to enjoy the popular success signaled by *Laughing Boy*, which had launched him so precipitously into the lucrative profession of writer of Indian fiction. During the next eight years he published two other Indian novels, *Sparks Fly Upward* in 1931 and *The Enemy Gods* in 1937, the first capitalizing on his experiences as an archeologist in Guatemala, the second returning to the American Southwest to probe again the social problem of modern Indian youth caught in the complexities of a changing civilization. La Farge also contributed regularly to such prestigious national mass-circulation periodicals as *Scribner's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. In 1935 he gathered his magazine production together into book form in *All the Young Men*. In addition to fiction, La Farge also published a number of non-fictional works associated with his professional interests: *The Year Bearer's People* (with Douglas Byer) in 1931, *Introduction to Indian Art* (with John Sloan) in the same year; *As Long as the Grass Shall Grow* and *An Alphabet for Writing the Navajo Language* (the latter with J. P. Harrington), both in 1940. In 1942 he edited the anthology, *The Changing Indian*, to which he was also a major contributor.

Sometime in the late thirties La Farge became increasingly dissatisfied with his performance as a writer. He was burdened by a sense of frustration that he had overworked his Indian vein, so that he was in danger of becoming stereotyped in the minds of the public and the critics solely as a popular writer of romantic Indian fiction. He sensed also that by his actions he had severely compromised his artistic integrity. In addition he was plagued by the thought that in *Laughing Boy* he had yielded far too much to a childhood predilection toward romanticizing—a tendency, he felt, that had been further heightened at Groton Academy by his frequent recourse to dreams and fantasies as a means of escaping the unpleasant realities of a harsh boarding school regime. La Farge's exploration of the personal uncertainties besetting him at this time is recounted principally in *Raw Material* (1945), which, though it does cover in some detail the larger outlines of his life and career, was initiated primarily by his need to resolve his special artistic dilemma and to reformulate his objectives as a literary artist. The final result of this soul-searching, as he records it in the volume, was a firm determination, first, to eschew Indian fiction altogether, with its familiar romantic formula, and, second, to choose only that subject matter with which he himself was personally and intimately acquainted and which would, consequently, in its final delineation, bear the stamp of authenticity and truth.

For his first novel following his period of artistic introspection, La Farge turned to the French Quarter of New Orleans, with which he was well

acquainted from his earlier sojourn in the southern city during his Tulane University days. *The Copper Pot*, which came out in 1942, depicts a struggle very much like that which had engaged La Farge's own artistic conscience: that of a young painter living in the Quarter who is forced by adverse circumstances to work out a new artistic destiny for himself by rejecting his earlier, more mundane ambitions and devoting himself to developing a painting style distinctively and uniquely his own. *The Copper Pot* was followed by a series of stories based on the day-to-day life of the working anthropologist, toiling in the dusty museum of the university anthropological laboratory or engaged in the more exciting pursuits of archeological exploration in steaming Central American jungles. Certainly, La Farge's own practical experience as an anthropologist laboring under similar circumstances admirably qualified him for the exact rendering of technical details necessary to give such tales authenticity and to recognize story potentials hidden beneath the surface of the routine activities of the professional anthropologist. And certainly such tales would fulfill his strongly felt need for subjects evolving ultimately out of his own personal life and career.

In 1946, following his service in World War II as head of the historical section of the Air-Transport Service Command, La Farge returned home to Santa Fe, where during the remainder of his life his writings were to be marked by both versatility and a strongly indigenous flavor. One of his first efforts in the latter respect was a series of biographical essays published as *Behind the Mountains* in 1956—a beautiful and charming account of his wife Consuelo Baca La Farge, growing up with her two sisters and brother on the ancestral Baca ranch in the pleasant mountain valley of Rociada, New Mexico. Also of this period, in a more popular vein, was a thinly fictionalized biography of the famous Apache chief Cochise, *Cochise of Arizona* (1953); two historical and interpretive studies based on the region: *The Mother Ditch* (1954), recounting the development of irrigation farming in the area, and *Santa Fe: The Autobiography of a Southwestern Town* (with Arthur N. Morgan, 1959), a chatty handbook on Santa Fe's colorful past and present; and, finally, *A Pictorial History of the American Indian* (1956), to which he contributed the descriptive text.

It is interesting to note from the preceding listing that La Farge's longer works of this period are represented chiefly by non-fiction. As a matter of fact, he discontinued writing novels altogether after *The Copper Pot* in 1942, his fictional output thereafter consisting solely of short magazine fiction. Sixteen of the magazine stories were later republished in book form in 1957 in *A Pause in the Desert* and twelve (posthumously) in 1965 in *The Door in the Wall*. The contents of each of these volumes show La Farge continuing to be guided by his earlier decision to write only of that which could be put to the test of personal experience and observation: the selections in

the first range from stories based on remembered episodes of his boyhood to stories set in the streets and byways of New York City, where La Farge lived for a while prior to the second World War; those in the second deal with incidents and settings drawn from the life of the professional anthropologist.

Perhaps La Farge's chief claim to local fame in his adopted Santa Fe was a weekly column in the Santa Fe *New Mexican* which he had been asked to write shortly after returning from the war. Though begun ostensibly as a literary column, it quickly developed into a gossipy, genial springboard for a whole gamut of sprightly—sometimes controversial—topics dealing with community and city affairs, and ranging even further afield on occasion with discussions of state and regional as well as local problems. A representative selection of the columns was published in 1966, after La Farge's death, as *The Man with the Calabash Pipe*—the title being derived from the epithet given by La Farge in his columns to a mythical, amiable, and somewhat crotchety gentleman (not improbably La Farge's own alter ego) who appears from time to time to speak his mind as a genial but astute observer of life.

La Farge's final reputation as a literary artist will probably rest upon his Indian fiction: the two novels, *Laughing Boy* and *The Enemy Gods*, plus certain of the short stories in *All the Young Men*. The dominating theme of all three of these volumes is basically the decline and ultimate disintegration of the ancient tribal structure of the Navajo nation beneath the eroding force of a materialistic Anglo-American civilization. "All the Young Men," the title story of the short story collection, offers an excellent example of this theme at work. Old Mountain Singer, once a great singer and medicine man, has in his latter days lost status and prestige in the tribal council and wanders off the reservation searching for the Navajo country of his youth, where he might die in peace and with some degree of dignity. After numerous degrading adventures, he is arrested for drunkenness and thrown into an American jail, where he dies in shame. Both Mountain Singer's son-in-law (who has caused Mountain Singer to become a drunkard to keep him from revealing the secret that he is bootlegging liquor into the reservation) and Mountain Singer's daughter speak educated English and wear American clothes and espouse the American way of life generally—including lip service to the white man's religious teachings. The two are typical, the story implies, of the state to which the dignity and the glory of the older Navajo civilization have fallen in the modern world.

Of the two novels, *Laughing Boy* and *The Enemy Gods*, the latter offers the more powerful and sustained examination of the modern Indian in transition. *The Enemy Gods* recounts the return of Myron Begay to the Navajo reservation after ten years at the American Indian school, where he has been thoroughly Americanized and is preparing to attend a religious college

for further training as a Christian Indian preacher. But his plans are abruptly terminated when in a fight with a Mexican he leaves the latter, as he thinks, for dead and flees to the reservation as a fugitive. There, after many months, he is gradually rehabilitated into the ancient tribal ways and brought to acceptance once again of his native gods. Although by the end of the novel Myron has undergone a long and severe ordeal, he has nonetheless become possessed of a hard-won wisdom, a wisdom which he now wishes to share with his people when they have come to accept and trust him again: the knowledge that the Navajos can neither continue to follow the old Navajo ways nor walk in the white man's road, but must, in order to survive, obligate themselves to learn to use all that is valuable in the white man's culture—his knowledge, his weapons, his machines—and yet still remain Navajos.

For the setting of *Laughing Boy*, La Farge deliberately returned, as he himself declares in the Foreword to the Sentry Edition of the novel (1963), to an earlier period in Navajo history, that of the Navajo Age of Innocence of around 1915—a time when the evil of Anglo-American encroachment upon Navajo life had only just begun its erosion of the ancient Navajo culture. As a matter of fact, *Laughing Boy*, as a typical Navajo youth of the isolated northern tribes, knows little if anything of Americans and American ways, though in his own tribe he has some position as a singer and accomplished artisan in silver. It is Slim Girl, the heroine, whom the mission school system and American influences have truly ruined. Hers is indeed a sad plight, being forced as she is to live on the outer fringes not only of the Navajo world of her birth but of the American world as well, no satisfactory life in either being possible to her since she is a real part of neither. It is an index to her character and self-sufficiency, however, that she audaciously determines through marriage to *Laughing Boy* and relearning of Navajo arts and customs to return with him to his people and thus to be once again part of the Navajo culture. It is only by a quirk of fate, a bullet not meant for her that takes her life in the very moment of her triumph, that she does not ultimately attain her objectives.

As the foregoing pages testify, La Farge was equally at home in each of the principal prose genres: fiction, biography, and essay—the latter perhaps represented most fully by his book-length ethnological and regional studies, though the miscellany constituted by his weekly newspaper column, with its personal slant and lively style, should perhaps rightly be classified as a series of personal essays. And although La Farge's three major *novels*—*The Copper Pot*, *Laughing Boy*, and *The Enemy Gods*—may be said to lack structural complexity, they are superb in those other techniques necessary to the evocation of a vivid sense of the human environment: characterization, narrative and descriptive detail, and graphic language. The same is true of

his short stories and non-fictional works as well. Indeed, sound craftsmanship is a hallmark everywhere in La Farge's writing, evident throughout his literary career, whether one is perusing the idyllic yet tragic love story of Slim Girl and Laughing Boy that initiated his career or listening to the tobacco-fragrant discourses of the man with the calabash pipe that concluded it.

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Of the four sources listed, Pearce's biography of La Farge, a thoroughly researched book-length study of his life, offers the fullest introduction of the group to La Farge's life and career. Gillis's study, though it touches on the salient features of La Farge's life, is devoted primarily to a critical appraisal of his major writings and an evaluation of his literary art. Allen's article on La Farge's fiction provides brief critiques of each of La Farge's novels and volumes of short stories up to 1945, the date of its publication. Butler's article traces what he feels to be a close parallel between La Farge's personal maturation and that of several of his major fictional characters.