Uncle Boy

A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay: Poet

Chapter Two

[Vachel’s insert introducing his self-published Village Magazine (1910)]

by

Dennis Camp
Professor Emeritus
University of Illinois at Springfield
Springfield, Illinois

[This ongoing biography may be read online at www.VachelLindsayHome.org Choose “Biography” and then “Uncle Boy: A Biography of Nicholas Vachel Lindsay.” The biography and the website are sponsored by the Vachel Lindsay Association.]
2. ANCESTRY AND BIRTH

“I was stuffed with family history in my helpless infancy.”

Ironically, the man whom many viewed as a child in his maturity was born with the features of an old man. “He weighed 10 lbs. dressed,” his mother recalls in her 1916 memoir, and “was long, thin, with the face of an old man, and looked as if he had the experience and wisdom of age” (Catharine “Kate” Frazee Lindsay). The date was November 10, 1879; the time, according to Kate, was “Monday morning at 5 o’clock.” Dr. Vachel Thomas Lindsay, husband and already father to a daughter (Olive), was the attending physician. The baby boy with the face of an old man would be his only son.

At least on one occasion, Kate Lindsay shared her initial impression with her son himself. Writing to Nellie Vieira in 1909, Vachel groused about how he had to suffer through his 30th birthday with presents he did not want to receive and with stories he did not want to hear: “Mama told me when I was Born^ I was nothing but skin and bone and had such a wiezened^ old face that she had to laugh, and I looked like my Grandfather Lindsay, and fattened up afterward.” Vachel added (with patent exaggeration): “I never celebrate anybody else’s Birthday^ and I never give Christmas Presents^ but the Old World never gets discouraged or takes the Hint^ and insists I celebrate my own” (Fowler 276). The letter is dated “October 10, 1909” (instead of November 10), perhaps as a further indication of the writer’s purported insouciance in regard to birthdays or perhaps as just another example of his carelessness in regard to dates.

In her memoir Kate Lindsay goes on to comment that, at birth, her son’s face was covered with “what ‘old-wives fables’ have called ‘a prophet’s vail^.’” Actually the inner fetal membrane, this veil or caul is traditionally considered to be a lucky omen, as Edgar Lee Masters reminds us (26-27). Vachel himself bragged to friends, such as Sara Teasdale, that “being born with a caul I can sometimes prophecy^” (March 27, 1923, Yale 198); and he liked to give examples of his connate talent. Teasdale, though, should be excused if she chose not to take any Lindsay prophecy too seriously. Nearly four years before the above letter, Vachel had written to Ernst Filsinger, Teasdale’s husband: “incidentally let me prophecy^ Brand Whitlock as the next president of the United States. The Republicans are riding to suicide on over-hate of Wilson, and the League [of Nations]. . . . (File this prophecy away!”) (July 20, 1919, Yale 186).

Although Vachel often referred to his natal portent with amusement, the prophetic theme does play a serious role in his creative work: from the “boats of the prophets” that sail in his “Map of the Universe” to the several poems connected to the “Map,” such as “Outward Bound” and “The Empty Boats” (see Poetry 62, 65, 89). In his chant poems, part three of “The Congo” is essentially prophecy, as are the following lines from “The Kallyope Yell”:

2
Prophet-singers will arise,
Prophets coming after me,
Sing my song in softer guise
With more delicate surprise;
I am but the pioneer
Voice of the Democracy. . . . (Poetry 249-250)

(This prophecy may be more accurate, arguably, than the one Ernst Filsinger was asked to file away. In the 1920 campaign, neither Wilson nor Whitlock were candidates, let alone winners.)

Edgar Lee Masters, after commenting on the traditional values of the so-called prophet’s caul, suggests that Vachel’s omen was nothing less than an organic emblem of the man himself: “as the caul over the face would prevent objective use of the eyes, the inner vision might be sharpened, making such a child a dreamer of dreams, but not an understander of the outer world. Lindsay all his life was at a disadvantage in perceiving the exact nature and position of the facts about anything, while passionately seeking the truth, and endeavoring to extract it from facts. He was a visionary from the start like Blake or Jakob Boehme; yet with a logic at times like Swedenborg; while we feel that he performed a work of sowing similar to that of his favorite Johnny Appleseed, his seed being dreams and ideas of and for his city and his country” (27). Even Olive, Vachel’s older sister, seems to have agreed here. She filled her personal copy of Masters’ biography with her objections, but she marked the final part of this passage as a thought to remember.

As for “Vachel,” Lindsay’s unusual middle name, the poet himself informed biographer, Peter Clark Macfarlane, with tongue in cheek, that he had been “named for the man in the moon—who also belongs to the tribe of Vachells” (Macfarlane). In her 1916 memoir, however, Kate Lindsay explains matter-of-factly that her son was named for his father, Vachel Thomas; for his grandfather, Nicholas Lindsay; and for his great-grandfather, Vachel Lindsay. “Vachel,” Kate adds, “has been a family name for several generations, originally [it was] said to have been the surname of a mother. It is the name of an English family.”

On the other hand, Eudora South, Vachel’s cousin, claims “that at some far-away time there were twins born, the boy being called Vachel to accord with the girl’s name of Rachel.” According to South, the name was brought into the Lindsay family when an Anthony Lindsay married a Rachel Dorsey in Maryland in 1758. Rachel’s father was Nicholas Dorsey of Eldersburg, Maryland; her great-grandfather was the immigrant Edward Dorsey, who “left Virginia for Maryland about 1650, hoping to find religious freedom and economic gain in the newer colony.” His desire for “economic gain” finally led to ownership of “large tracts of land in Anne Arundel County upon which Annapolis was later built.” South contends that in “the annals of the Dorseys the name occurs repeatedly: a Vachel Dorsey lost his leg in the Revolution; a Rebecca Dorsey married Captain Vachel Burgess. There is a mention of a Vachel Denton Howard, a Vachel Worthington and, as early as the 1740s, a Vachel Warfield and a Rachel Warfield, all connections of the Dorseys.” South also credits the Dorseys with bringing Norman blood
to the Lindsay family veins: Dorsey (“or Darcy”) is reported to have “descended from the Norman d’Arecci who came to England with William the Conqueror” (Cousin Vachel 2).

Vachel heard all these family stories early: “I was stuffed,” he acknowledges, “with family history in my helpless infancy” (Poetry 944). [Note 1] Occasionally, he admitted to being skeptical, but more often than not he found his presumed history useful for his own purposes. In his last year at Hiram College (1899-1900), for example, he pointed out to his parents that the original Normans were artists, first and foremost. Therefore, the son’s argument continued, his father, as a descendant of Normans, ought to understand and support his son’s desire to drop out of college in order to study art. And some years later, in late summer, 1914, Vachel introduced himself to readers of the Chicago Herald with verses on how (and how not) to pronounce his middle name, verses that conclude:

My name is just the same as Rachel,
With V for R;
Please call me Vachel. (“My Middle Name,” Poetry 740)

Indeed, for the better part of his life, the family’s proverbial heritage held significance for Vachel, especially in his letters and in his work. It was part of his thinking, whether or not it was part of his genes.

In respect to the family’s surnames, Kate notes in her memoir that the Lindsays “are of Scotch origin.” Her family, “the Frazees, Austens and Doniphans,” on the other hand, “are of Scotch, and English ancestry, with a mixture of Welsh and Spanish.” In 1917, another family historian, aunt Frances Hamilton, told her nephew that she suspected a distant Lindsay family relationship to Pocahontas. The link was thought to be through the ancestry of Martha Ann Cave, who had married grandfather Nicholas Lindsay in June 1842. Vachel himself refers to his aunt’s surmise in his 1922 preface to Collected Poems, adding that, if there were “one Red Indian among my ancestors, . . . there were millions of them, of course, if one goes far enough back. I take an increasing interest in my aunt’s suspicion” (Poetry 944). This “increasing interest” led to several new poems, such as “Our Mother Pocahontas,” “Doctor Mohawk,” and “The Indian Girl—My Grandmother” (Poetry 293, 528, 644). It also caused Vachel to rethink the significance of ancestors in general:

When we are young and silly
We hate every ancestor.
We pray to God we grew on trees—
And had no kin at all—
But when we grow older—
We are snobbish and far prouder
And boast of every ancestor
And paint them on the wall. (1922 datebook, November 21-22)

Although mature Vachel was seldom, if ever, accused of snobbery, he did like to boast of his Scottish ancestors. The paternal Lindsays were said to be descendants, in Eudora South’s words, “from the Scottish clan of that name whose ancient seat, Edzell Castle near the River Esk in Forfarshire, is now a picturesque ruin.” Clan members were
thought to include sixteenth-century poet, Sir David Lindsay of the Mount, “who merited some thirty descriptive lines in Scott’s Marmion” (Cousin Vachel 2). The maternal Frazees, on the other hand, through marriage with the Austens, traced their heritage to novelist Jane Austen and, through her, to the first Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Augustine (c. 596-604, anglicized as “Austin” or “Austen”). The Frazees also claimed Spanish blood, through marriage with the Doniphans. The name “Doniphan,” family genealogist Frances Hamilton suggests (with ingenuity if not evidence), is an abbreviated form of the title and name of a hypothetical Spanish ancestor, one “Don Alphonse Jphan” (19).

At one time or another, depending upon his frame of mind, Vachel found all of his family’s traditions interesting and useful. He enjoyed the familial inclination to “stuff,” to use his word, friends and relatives with genealogical history. Writing to Sara Teasdale, for example, when he was in a facetious mood, Vachel concluded: “(Before we meet I must tell you of my family tree. St. Augustine that holy priest who converted Britian—so my mother says—was one of my remote Great Grandfathers—in a weak moment. Gradually the family name was changed to Austen. That pleasant old maid Jane Austen was my great great grandmother. It isn’t everybody has an ancestry like that)” (February 2, 1914, Yale 37). In a brusque mood, however, Vachel warned another correspondent, Harriet Moody: “Expect a dark man in the cloak of a Matador—for I have changed in every conventional respect. . . . Believe me a dark Spaniard!—I had many Spanish ancestors—the Don Ivans—on whose traditions I was reared. My mother talked of them daily, in my infancy.”

Predictably, Vachel’s bluntness led to allegations of Indian blood, so that this letter to Harriet Moody proceeds with a kind of progressive swagger: “Believe me an Aztec or a Soltec (for I have some American Indian in me via the Cave family) and one of my ancestors was the uncle of Jane Austen, so I was reared on that tradition.” On this occasion, though, Vachel was not in a Jane Austen mood, and even an experienced confidante, as Moody certainly was, must have been a little startled by her correspondent’s ensuing outburst: “I am nobody’s pink-toed Cupid and nobody’s Yokel—however I may appear that way, and I am nobody’s little Jazzer. As I say—begin with the Dark Spaniard—disguised as a blonde, and don’t be so darn sure you know all about me! and pardon the Yokel French” (December 22, 1922—in Chénetier 257, 260-261). The defiance apparent here is also apparent in many of Vachel’s late poems, such as “Doctor Mohawk” and “Billboards and Galleons.” It is a defiance characteristically expressed in accord with the author’s awareness of his colorful family history. [Note 2]

Occasionally, Vachel went so far as to explain his behavior, which at times even his friends described as eccentric, in terms of his supposed blood mixture. Writing to Nellie Vieira in 1909, for example, Vachel identified his blond hair and youthful outlook on life with his Northern roots, with “Saxon” literature, with works such as Beowulf and the Nibelungenlied (Fowler 241). But the older he grew, the more Vachel was inclined to explain his nature in terms of his darker side. In 1926, he complained to Harriet Monroe: “Because I am a Blonde, people do not even suspect I am an Indian and Spaniard inside and I was told I was of Spanish Blood on my mother’s side, far oftener than I was told to be good. But all this is mere gossip and unnecessary introspection. Ingrained from infancy I have the old southern habit of tracing every lost filament of inheritance. It is
absolutely incurable and perfect nonsense.” Nonsense or not, Vachel continued his thesis for several more pages, finally concluding with: “I have in this letter opened up a matter I have tried to keep still about for years” (Chénetier 367-69). Perhaps he had kept “still” to Harriet Monroe; generally, however, he was anything but reticent on the subject of his ancestry. In fact, one of Vachel’s favorite artistic themes is a strenuous defense of the values of racial identity and integrity. And he often illustrates his theme by means of “the old southern habit of tracing every lost filament of inheritance,” that is, by means of direct references to his own genealogical inheritance.

In 1922, Vachel was likely correct when he declared: “The last of my tribe to reach this land arrived in Baltimore in 1800” (Poetry 944). Family historians, such as South, suggest either Maryland or Virginia but agree that the first immigrant ancestor was an Anthony Lindsay, perhaps the one who married Rachel Dorsey in 1758, perhaps an earlier Anthony. The name occurs in the colony records of both Maryland and Virginia, South maintains, but “the weight of the evidence indicates that he [the original Anthony] settled in Maryland in the vicinity of Baltimore” (Cousin Vachel 2). By the mid-1920s, though, Vachel’s references to Baltimore cease, and he thundered from platforms across the country that his American ancestors were among the earliest of the Virginians who had strengthened their blood through intermarriage with Indians:

Our first Virginians were peasants’ children
But the Power of Powhatan reddened their blood,
Up from the sod came splendor and flood.
Eating their maize made them more than men;
Potomac fountains made gods of men.

(“The Virginians Are Coming Again,” Poetry 688)

He was, Vachel chanted, a great-grandson of these pioneer men-gods, “the bark-cabins / Bards of the Blue-ridge, in buckskin and boots, / Up from the proudest war-path we have known.” Moreover, the sons of the contemporary tribe of Babbitts, Vachel continued, would grow up to be neo-Virginians who would destroy the corrupt world of their Babbitt fathers by reverting to the strengths and values of their Virginian great-grandfathers:

So, Babbitt, your racket is passing away.
Your sons will be changelings, and burn down your world.
Fire-eaters, troubadours, conquistadors,
Your sons will be born, refusing your load,
Thin-skinned scholars, hard-riding men,
Poets unharnessed, the moon their abode,
With the statesman’s code, the gentleman’s code,
With Jefferson’s code, Washington’s code,
With Powhatan’s code!
From our own loins, for your fearful defeat
The Virginians are coming again. (Poetry 688)
And to anyone who would read his poem, Vachel had stern advice: “read it right. . . . This song is a war [horse], with an iron-shod use” (689).

At some point, Vachel’s Virginian “great-grandfathers” joined the westward migration, so that their great-grandson could also declaim that his fathers came from Kentucky, the Virginia of the West:

They took their axes and their Bibles,
They took their guns, they took their fiddles,
Dancing the old Virginia Reel,
They went West to the new blue grass,
When it was still Virginia.
When people say “Kentucky,” they mean Virginia. (“Virginia,” Poetry 569)

Indeed, according to Vachel, his “mother’s favorite tale was how one of her pioneer grandfathers in Kentucky taught Daniel Boone’s children to read” (Poetry 945); and he wove his mother’s story into his poem, “My Fathers Came from Kentucky”:

But my great-grandfathers came
To the west with Daniel Boone,
And taught his babes to read. . . . (Poetry 403)

In the same poem, Vachel visualizes his heart as “a kicking horse / Shod with Kentucky steel”:

No drop of my blood from north
Of Mason and Dixon’s line.
And this racer in my breast
Tears my ribs for a sign. (Poetry 403-404)

His Southern bias, which is very apparent in his later years, is likely evident even in a few early poems, such as in the following passage from “The Moon’s the North Wind’s Cooky”:

The South Wind is a baker.
He kneads clouds in his den,
And bakes a crisp new moon that . . . greedy
North . . . Wind . . . eats . . . again! (Poetry 229)

Years later, in “Doctor Mohawk,” a work that includes an impressionistic account of his own birth, Vachel places the spiritual origin of his very soul in the deep South. His Springfield life was only after emigration:

Up from Biloxi, up the great Mississippi,
Through the swamps, through the thaw, through the rains that grew raw,
On the tenth of November (the hail storm was nippy). (Poetry 528)

He was, as he liked to boast, the Southern son of a Southern father: a Kentuckian, that is to say, a Virginian. [Note 3]

It was in 1784, Eudora South reports, that Anthony Lindsay left Virginia and brought his wife Rachel to “the newly opened country south of the Ohio River,” where he purchased a tract of land in Franklin County, near Frankfort, Kentucky. Here the
Lindsays raised twelve children, their oldest son, Vachel, becoming the great-grandfather of the poet. In the year of Kentucky statehood (1792), this Vachel Lindsay married Ann Cresenberry (South) or Quisenberry (Hamilton) and established a homestead near the south fork of Elkhorn Creek, a tributary of the Kentucky River. At some point, this Vachel Lindsay did move his family to Dearborn County, Indiana; but, after his death, according to South, the “family returned to Kentucky, this time settling in Gallatin County, at Glencoe, not far from the quaint little Ohio River town, Warsaw” (Cousin Vachel 4). Vachel and Ann’s third son, Nicholas, was the father of Vachel Thomas Lindsay, who, in turn, was father of the poet.

Nicholas Lindsay (born December 15, 1802) first asked for the hand of one Eudora Gray. However, when she asked him “to wait for her answer,” he rode off to tend to business, only to return after six months and find Gray married to another. Nicholas resolved not to marry until he found Gray’s equal and set about establishing a substantial plantation, building houses and barns, and processing tobacco in a shop attached to his home. Years later Nicholas visited Daniel Cave, a prosperous farmer living in neighboring Boone County. Here he met Martha Ann, Daniel’s diminutive 15-year-old daughter, who was still child enough “to be playing with corn shuck dolls.” Within the year Nicholas carried Martha Ann on horseback to Cincinnati, where they were married on June 14, 1842. The groom was 39; Martha Ann’s 17th birthday was not until the following December 23. Together they raised eight children, Vachel Thomas, their eldest, being born August 31, 1843. Their first daughter (and fourth child), born January 31, 1852, they named Eudora Gray, after her father’s first love and “ideal” woman (Cousin Vachel 4-5). (It is to Eudora Gray Lindsay South and to her daughter, Eudora Lindsay South, author of Cousin Vachel, that we owe many of the details concerning what the Lindsay family believed about their paternal ancestors.)

The younger Eudora South remembered her grandfather Nicholas as “broad-shouldered” and “well over six feet tall.” He was a compassionate slave owner who taught his children strict moral behavior, even whipping two of his sons (perhaps Vachel Thomas was one) for stealing watermelon from the field of an old slave. In fact, the “vexatious slavery problem,” to quote South’s own words, caused the family to consider moving to Indiana before the Civil War, but the move was not made until many years after the war was over. A strong supporter of the Southern cause, Grandpa Nicholas detested Abraham Lincoln, “not because he freed the slaves,” South alleges, “but because he said that he was not going to do so and then did that very thing. . . . There was no place for a ‘double standard’ in Grandpa’s code of morals” (Cousin Vachel 5-6).

Nicholas’s feelings toward Lincoln were hardly mollified in the war’s aftermath. The “Military Governor of that region,” Vachel informed Elizabeth Wills in 1925, “foreclosed my grandfather’s mortgages and took his land personally for debt and kept it for his own” (Chénetier 356). In one of her manuscript memoirs, Vachel’s sister Joy noted: “Before the war they ‘paid the most taxes in the county’ [apparently quoting her father’s words from memory] and had a plantation and slaves. After the war they had nothing but a small log cabin” (Lindsay-Blair).

Reconstruction politics, however, were not the only cause of the family’s ruinous financial straits. Nicholas’s gracious but unwise generosity, Eleanor Ruggles affirms, was the primary cause: “Equally stiff-necked and open-handed, he went security over and
over for neighbors who afterward failed to pay up” (16). As he grew older and finally blind, the family remembered him tapping his way “about his neglected farmhouse [then in Aurora, Indiana] with his gold-headed cane, shouting: ‘This needs mending! Why doesn’t somebody do it?’” He apparently did not realize that no one was left to “do it” (Ruggles 16-17). It was Nicholas who encouraged his eldest son to become a doctor, exhorting Vachel Thomas to be what he himself had always wanted to be, namely, a professional. Vachel Thomas, in turn, exhorted his son in similar fashion but, as we shall see, with far less success. There is little doubt, though, that poet Vachel inherited some of grandfather Nicholas’s stiff neck, as well as his impulsive magnanimity. The injudicious use of money was a lasting point of contention between poet Vachel and his father, and generally remained a thorn in the son’s side throughout his life.

Interestingly, one of Vachel’s early memories of his paternal grandfather exemplifies the old man’s stubbornness. At age four or five, young Vachel was adorned with long golden curls; one day, rather suddenly, he received an impromptu haircut. “To silence the thunders of my Grandfather Nicholas Lindsay, who was blind, and hated effeminacy in his namesake, and reviled my long curls every time he put his hand on my head,” Vachel avers, “my mother cut off those curls and cried all over me” (Poetry 947). A small envelope tucked inside the front cover of one of Vachel’s early notebooks is inscribed: “Golden Fleece. 1884.” Inside are two, blond curls. An introductory comment (“July 28, 1924”) in the 3”-by-5” book reads: “Note book^ on my first or second visit to Trinidad Colorado with Papa to visit Grandma [Martha Ann Cave] Lindsay when I was eight or nine years old. Nicholas Vachel Lindsay” (Virginia). [Note 4]

In 1927, Vachel repeated the story of his family’s Indian ancestry in a letter to his friend, Carl Sandburg: “It is through the Cave family that the legend of Indian blood is in our house,” although this time he added “—maybe it is only a legend.” Regardless of his admission, however, we know that Vachel often boasted about his aboriginal ancestors. In fact, the above letter to Sandburg was written to announce the birth of Nicholas Cave, Vachel’s only son, born September 16, 1927. The name “Nicholas,” the new father related, “is for my old Grandfather Nicholas Lindsay and the Cave for his dear wife of beautiful memory—Martha Cave Lindsay” (Chénetier 415). Just days after this announcement, though, Vachel poured his paternal pride into a new poem, “Our Little New Cave-Man,” a work that flaunts what the author knew was “maybe . . . only a legend”:

The only son
Of the only son
May yet be hard to break,
So many Lindsays
Long ago
Fought onward
For his sake,
So many Cave-men
Long ago,
So many Indians
Long ago,
Fought onward
Through the shadow
For his sake. (Poetry 761)

Although diminutive Martha Cave may or may not have introduced Indian blood into the Lindsay veins, she did establish herself as one of the family’s most important religious forebears. An avid follower of the doctrines of Alexander Campbell (whose followers pronounced his name very much like “camel”), Martha was baptized through immersion in the Ohio River at age 16. Although she tried unsuccessfully to convert her husband, her son Vachel Thomas remained an avid Campbell follower throughout his life. And the lifelong work of Vachel Thomas’s son cannot be fully understood separate from Campbellite traditions. Would-be historians, though, must be cautious before they stamp any labels on Vachel Lindsay, as the following note from the end pages of his 1922 diary-datebook makes clear: “I am credited with being too good a Campbellite.—Read War Bulletin No. 3—and the Creed of a Beggar.” In this “Creed,” Vachel announces: “I believe the hope for the union of Christians is my special inheritance, since all my people were pupils of Alexander Campbell.” Other articles of the “Creed,” however, profess its author’s belief in “Christ the Socialist”; “all the Evangelical Protestants”; “the Mass, the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary”; “Lord Buddha”; and “St. Francis.” Obviously, Vachel carried the spirit of ecumenism into theological regions of which Campbell himself never dreamed.

Alexander Campbell was born in 1788, in County Antrim, Ireland, the Scotch-Irish son of Presbyterian minister Thomas Campbell (1763-1854). In 1807, Thomas left his family behind in Ireland and emigrated to Washington, Pennsylvania, where he formed a Christian association to promote what he termed “simple evangelical Christianity” and Christian unity. In 1809, after a break with Presbyterianism, Thomas published a Declaration and Address for his new association. At the same time, following a year of study at the University of Glasgow, Alexander and the rest of the family joined their father in Pennsylvania.

Alexander quickly assumed a leading role in his father’s efforts for religious reform. In 1810, he began preaching without salary; and, after his marriage in 1811, he settled in Bethany, West Virginia. His reading soon led him to espouse baptism by immersion; and, in 1812, Campbell and his followers merged with the Baptists, not breaking away until 1830. Meanwhile, in 1823, Campbell began a periodical, The Christian Baptist, continuing to publish it as The Millennial Harbinger after 1830. In 1832, the Campbellites, officially known as “Disciples” or “Christians,” merged with Kentucky “Christians” under Barton W. Stone and founded the Disciples of Christ or Christian Church, the name they are known by today. “We are not the only Christians,’ goes the Disciples’ soft answer to a perennial gibe about their name, ‘but we are Christians only’” (Ruggles 16). Finally, in 1840, Campbell founded Bethany College, a “Christian” college, in Bethany, West Virginia. He was an instructor in the Bible, as well as President, serving in the latter office until his death in 1866.

The congregation of Springfield’s First Christian Church, the Lindsay family church, was organized on April 23, 1833. The founding minister, Josephus Hewitt (or
Hewett), had, on occasion, assisted Barton Stone himself in various evangelistic meetings (McElroy 15, 28). For the Lindsay son, though, the salient Campbellite tradition was ecumenism, with its emphasis on primitive Christianity (although his hope for religious unity obviously went far beyond the ideas and intentions of Alexander Campbell). Indeed, Vachel never denied Campbell’s influence, and what he related to fellow poet Marguerite Wilkinson, in 1927, he related to many others: “I cannot pretend to be religious, but I know I am an utterly incurable follower of that high champion of the intellectual frontier ‘primitive’ life—Alexander Campbell. I am just a member of his tribe as a Choctaw is a member of the Choctaw tribe” (Chénetier 402). Later the same year, Vachel complained to Burris A. Jenkins, managing editor of The Christian Century: “Thirty years work has been made over into a toy for the critics who merely stare when I say I am a member of ‘The Christian Church.’” He went on to beg Jenkins to form a “Lindsay Defense Society,” in order to champion him as a follower of Alexander Campbell and rescue him from critics who wished to label his Collected Poems as a “jazz” work (Chénetier 413).

Vachel’s self-evident tribute to the Campbellite tradition is the poetic trilogy, “Alexander Campbell.” The second poem in the trilogy, “Written in a Year When Many of My People Died,” according to Vachel himself, was intended as “a memorial to all those who have passed from this life among my kin, one and all being members of the Disciples Church from the very earliest days of Campbell . . .” (Chénetier 387). Stephen Graham, on the other hand, emphasizes the influence of Disciple doctrine on Vachel himself: “The chief virtue in the sect lay doubtless in an attempted return to primitive historical Christianity in all its simplicity. Not that the poet is a narrow sectarian. How could a poet be? But he has drunk deep of the primitive spirit in Christianity, and is very near to children, negroes, Indians, and the elemental types in men and women. He loves oratory more than reason, and impulse more than thought. Hence, no doubt the well of his poetry” (66). Certainly “Campbellite” traditions provide one of the wells, if not “the well,” of Vachel’s poetry. The traditions also provide the most important link between the Lindsay and the Frazee families.

With the Lindsays, the Frazees shared a Kentucky heritage, as well as the Disciples faith and a colorful collection of family stories. “Great-grandfather Brown,” Catharine Lindsay wrote to her daughter Joy, was “a poet,” and “Grand-father Austen, a philosopher” (August 27, 1918, Blair). Joy herself, in a late memoir, cites a Frazee family tradition that Grandfather Austen “was continually writing dramas which his Quakeress wife immediately burned up because she said ‘such frivolity is wicked!’” (Lindsay-Blair). Meanwhile, Frances Hamilton, as we have noted, claimed there was Spanish blood in the Frazee veins, as she thought she had traced the Doniphan name to a hypothetical Spanish ancestor, one “Don Alphonse Jphan.” And Eudora South, echoing her poet cousin, recalls his mother’s delight “in telling her children that her great-grandfather, Joseph Doniphan, had been the first school teacher in Boonesborough Fort and had taught Boone’s children to read” (Cousin Vachel 14). In 1926, Vachel apprised Harriet Moody: “I was taught above all I was a Doniphan”; and he noted that the Frazees, like the Lindsays, boasted a rich family history. It was another family history that he heard early in life, and he referred to the Frazee stories in much the same way that he
referred to the Lindsay stories: “I was stuffed with such stories when I was six years old—till I could hold no more” (Chénetier 367). [Note 5]

For our purposes, the Frazee history begins with Susan Doniphan, daughter of Joseph and Ann Smith Doniphan. Susan married Dr. Ephraim Frazee on July 21, 1816, almost certainly at her girlhood home in Mason County, Kentucky. Their fourth son, Ephraim Samuel (born October 4, 1824), became Vachel’s maternal grandfather. Just three days after Ephraim’s birth, however, Dr. Frazee died; and Susan was left with four sons to raise. At first, she ran a small store in Germantown, Kentucky. But after a few years, she left her two younger sons with her husband’s brother and moved to Rush County, Indiana, near Fayetteville and Rushville, where she had inherited a farm from her late husband’s estate. When circumstances improved, she sent for her third son, William, and finally, in 1838, for Ephraim.

On his way by horseback to his mother’s Indiana farm, 14-year-old Ephraim lost his way near Laurel, Indiana. When he stopped to ask for a night’s lodging, he was directed to “Deacon Austen,” where he received a warm welcome and lodging (Hamilton 405). He also met Frances Elizabeth Austen, the Deacon’s 11-year-old daughter. Nine years later, on March 9, 1847, Frances and Ephraim were married, after Ephraim was graduated from Bethany College (July 4, 1846), where he studied the Bible with none other than Alexander Campbell himself. Ephraim and Frances’s first child, Esther Catharine (born February 20, 1848), called “Katie” in her youthful years, “Kate” in her maturity, was to be Uncle Boy’s mother.

At the time of Grandfather Frazee’s death (on June 14, 1896), Vachel cut out two newspaper obituaries and later pasted them in a notebook (dated, in his hand, “November 10, 1890”). From these clippings we learn that, after his marriage, Ephraim was made elder of the Fayetteville Christian Church and preached at that church and at others in the vicinity from 1850 until his death (one clipping is entitled “Aged Minister Dead”). In the tradition of his mentor, Alexander Campbell, Ephraim received no salary. Both in 1882 and in 1884, he was elected to the Indiana legislature, and his lifelong emphasis on education is reflected in his successful effort to establish the “Fayetteville Academy.” He was also, according to one of his obituaries, “an original stockholder in Northwestern Christian University (now Butler University [Indianapolis])”; and he served on the University Board of Directors for 20 years. In private life, he was a highly successful farmer and stock raiser, the breeder of a prize-winning herd of shorthorn cattle. “Not many country places in the state had so good a general purpose man as Mr. Frazee was,” one reporter concludes, “and it will be a long time before it will have another.”

Neither of Ephraim Samuel’s obituaries mentions a favorite family story. It seems that, when Ephraim learned of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, he stood and rang his dinner bell for three full hours (Hamilton 407). Unlike Grandfather Lindsay, Grandfather Frazee was a strong supporter of Lincoln and emancipation; and the Lindsay and Frazee children, including the poet’s father and mother, both inherited and advocated their fathers’ views. As late as 1922, grandson and son Vachel exclaimed: “Mason and Dixon’s line runs straight through our house in Springfield still, and straight through my heart” (Poetry 952). A few years later, he declared: “My political infancy was one of mixed emotions. I might say I have emerged an Abraham Lincoln Democrat, with some Virginia prejudices” (“What It Means to Be a Poet in America” 12).
Sadly, Ephraim Frazee’s death came only after great suffering. While serving as a state legislator in Indianapolis, one of his obituaries relates, Ephraim and five of his colleagues wiped their faces on a public-restroom towel, after it had been used by a man “with a bad looking face.” All six legislators died of cancer a few years later, according to one reporter, who, of course, implies that the towel was the cause. Anyway, Grandfather Frazee’s fatal illness is said to have been a painful “cancer of the eye.”

It was a little more than a decade following Grandfather Frazee’s death that his admiring grandson paid tribute in the relatively well-known poem, “The Proud Farmer”:

He read by night, he built his world by day.
The farm and house of God to him were one.
For forty years he preached and plowed and wrought—
A statesman in the fields, who bent to none. (Poetry 166)

One may wonder, though, what “the proud farmer” would have thought of his grandson’s effort, especially since Vachel himself concedes: “My Grandfather Frazee had spoken rather contemptuously of poets in my self-important infant presence. He said they were clever men, and we like to memorize long passages from their works, and it was eminently desirable we should do so. But almost all of them had a screw loose somewhere.” Vachel then added that it was respect for his grandfather’s views that first led him to choose art rather than poetry (Poetry 948).

Among Grandfather Frazee’s views was a stern belief in daily family worship. Weekday mornings before breakfast, with his wife Frances, he ushered their children into the living room, where all who were old enough read two chapters: one from the Old Testament and one from the New. Afterwards, they knelt for prayers. Many years later their daughter Kate would conduct a similar ceremony for her family, although the children were required to memorize verses in lieu of reading chapters. Daughter Olive recalls: “That Bible lesson before breakfast was the one unescapable part of the day’s program. As children we never tired or wished to escape it.” However, Olive also admits: “after Vachel and I grew older often we were ‘learning our verses’ on the way downstairs to the library, and consequently in great danger of forgetting them because of lack of thoroughness in preparation. We had to make up for that before the week was over, though, for as a review we were obliged to recite half the text of the Sunday School lesson on Friday morning and the remaining half on Saturday” (Lindsay-Wakefield 91).

[Note 6] Meanwhile, Olive’s brother recorded his own version of the family matins: “all we children were drilled in memorizing choice verses from King James’ Bible. We had to recite three verses apiece before we could have our breakfast. Thus we memorized every Sunday School lesson, having it letter-perfect by the end of the week, for fourteen years” (Poetry 949). The ritual continued, Vachel remarked to Harriet Moody in 1914, until he “was about fifteen years old” (Chénetier 118).

While they were young, there were few summers that Kate’s children did not visit the Rush County farm; and several of Vachel’s earliest letters are postmarked from the local post office: “Orange, Indiana” [Note 7]. Moreover, reminiscences of the “proud farmer” and his wife may be found in several of their grandson’s works, such as in the following lines from the “Alexander Campbell” trilogy:

As I built cob-houses with small cousins on the floor:
(The talk was not meant for me).
Daguerreotypes shone. The black log sizzled
And my grandmother traced the family tree.
Then she swept to the proverbs of Campbell again.
And we glanced at the portrait of that most benign of men
Looking down through the evening gleam
With a bit of Andrew Jackson’s air,
More of Henry Clay
And the statesmen of Thomas Jefferson’s day:
With the face of age,
And the flush of youth,
And that air of going on, forever free. (Poetry 405)

With one of the “small cousins” referred to here, Bruce Campbell, Vachel read
*Tom Sawyer,* at some early time when both boys were staying at the farm. Many years
later, in 1919, Vachel recorded his impressions in “When the Mississippi Flowed in
Indiana,” a poem in which Grandmother Frazee’s “old front hall” is visualized as a place
of wonders:

The Pavement of Verona,
Where stands young Juliet
The roof of Blue-beard’s palace,
And Kubla Khan’s wild ground,
The cave of young Aladdin,
Where the jewel-flowers were found,
And the garden of old Sparta
Where little Helen played,
The grotto of Miranda
That Prospero arrayed.
And the cave, by the Mississippi,
Where Becky Thatcher strayed. (Poetry 398-99) [Note 8]

Bruce and his younger sister, Helen, likely appreciated the personal touch in these
lines. However, anyone who reads Vachel’s work carefully will recognize his partiality
for the cave of memory, whether it is in regard to Aladdin’s cave or Becky Thatcher’s
cave or, in another sense, Grandmother Martha Ann Cave. Time and again, Vachel turned
to his “Cave-Man” past, to his roots; and the following lines, also from “Alexander
Campbell,” provide yet another example:

Like Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, the memories of childhood
Go in and in forever underground
To river and fountain of whispering mystery
And many a haunted hall without a sound.
To Indian hoards and carvings and graveyards unexplored.
To pits so deep a torch turns to a star
Whirling ’round and going down to the deepest rocks of earth,
To the fiery roots of forests brave and far. (Poetry 405)
For Vachel, as for many other Western writers of the 19th and the 20th centuries, the quest for perfection could be depicted as a “Journey to the Center of the Earth” (Poetry 636-639): “Round and down,” into “a very deep and quite extinct volcano. . . . / In and down . . . / Past many jeweled wonders. . . / Down and down . . . / To the wild earth’s center,” a journey into the profound. The idea of perfection persisted in Vachel’s mind (as it did and does in the minds of most people we label “romantics”) as the memory of an ideal buried in a cave or an “extinct volcano.” The ideal will be found only by people who are willing to travel “in and down,” people who dress themselves, symbolically, in appropriate primitive clothing, that is, “in feathers, leaves, and fur” (636). Alexander Campbell identified religious perfection with primitive Christianity, but Campbell was not unique in his belief that adopting past ideals was the only corrective medicine for present imperfections. Campbell’s primitive Christianity, however, is steeped in anomaly; and, as we may suspect, Disciple Vachel’s quest for perfection suggests similar, paradoxical thought. “The Journey to the Center of the Earth,” for example, the journey into the primitive past, soon becomes, in Vachel’s terminology, “Going-to-Tomorrow,” going to the future, singing “The love song of tomorrow and adventure and new day” (639). After all, past ideals are not sought for themselves but as models for future excellence. Both Campbell and Vachel reflect the general frame of reference of their era and, perhaps, ours as well: the present is an imperfect existence, an Egyptian or a Babylonian captivity, with an Eden in its past and an expected City of God in its future. A journey into the past, therefore, and an understanding of past ideals, is paradoxically the first step toward future utopia. It is a step toward what all Christians, but especially Campbellite Christians, anticipate: The Millennium. [Note 9]

5

Vachel’s reverence for the past went hand in hand with the family fondness for recounting their colorful history. In particular, he seemed unable to resist any opportunity to relate the history of his parents, so that few of his regular correspondents escaped his sometimes lengthy efforts to narrate their characters and backgrounds. As late as 1931, his final year of life, Vachel tried once more to capture the essence of his father, this time for Sidney Dix Strong’s book, What I Owe to My Father. Originally entitled “The Buggy-Breaking Doctor,” Vachel’s essay recapitulates and expands on a story that he told many times. Along with other family accounts, the essay serves as the basis for the following brief summary of the doctor’s life.

Born near Napoleon in Gallatin County, Kentucky (August 31, 1843), Vachel Thomas Lindsay was educated in the local district schools. His niece, Eudora South, explains that these were pay schools, not public schools, and they were normally “conducted three or four months each year. They were held in log school houses with the most primitive equipment. The nearest was a mile and a half away.” The instructors were generally “Yankees,” that is, men from north of the Ohio River: “transient instructors of little scholarship.” At some point, however, Vachel Thomas was privileged to fall under the tutelage of James Sayre, a native New Yorker who opened a school at Glencoe, a village some miles from the Lindsay home. Sayre’s school, in South’s estimation, “was a milestone in the educational progress of that part of Kentucky”; and the family credited “Uncle Jimmy”—Sayre later married into the Lindsay family—with providing the
intellectual background that enabled Dr. Vachel Thomas Lindsay to pursue his medical studies (Cousin Vachel 9).

After graduating from the Glencoe school, Vachel Thomas was too poor to go directly into professional training. He taught school one winter and worked on a neighbor’s farm, in his son’s words, “digging potatoes, for day wages” (Chénetier 356). Indeed, Vachel could wax dramatic when discussing his father’s early life, at one point claiming that the young doctor-to-be used some of his earnings to buy medical books to study at night, like Abraham Lincoln—“by a solitary candle” (Poetry 952). The tutor for these volunteer studies, according to Dr. Lindsay’s son, was a kindly local doctor who did much to encourage Vachel Thomas in his intent to attend medical school.

By the end of the Civil War, Vachel Thomas had saved enough money to enroll for one semester at Miami Medical College in Cincinnati. When he returned home at the end of term, his former tutor looked through his class notes and advised him that he already knew more medicine than several doctors practicing in the region. Since he was out of money and since he had to assist in caring for five brothers and two sisters, Vachel Thomas accepted the offer of a partnership with an old family friend who was practicing in Pawnee, Illinois, just south of the capital city of Springfield. Once he arrived in Pawnee, however, according to South, “the partnership did not materialize” (Cousin Vachel 12). He decided to stay in the area anyway, and he hung out his shingle in the nearby township of Cotton Hill (Sangamon County), about ten miles south-southeast of Springfield. Three doctors were already practicing nearby, but by the end of Vachel Thomas’s second year, two of the three had left. He then returned to Miami College, this time earning his medical degree (1869). His thesis concerned the proper care for patients suffering from typhoid fever (personal letter, Catharine Wakefield Ward, May 12, 1987).

After returning to Cotton Hill, Dr. Lindsay (the title now official) continued to assist his family. Within a year or two, though, he also had saved enough money to build a modest house for himself and for his Kentucky sweetheart (and former schoolmate), dark-complexioned, dark-haired Olive Crouch. When he returned to marry her in June 1871, however, he found her grievously ill with tuberculosis, her mind failing. With characteristic courage, he went through with the wedding, hoping against hope that he could save his bride through proper medical attention—but to no avail. After the young couple took up residence in Illinois, Olive’s condition quickly deteriorated: “after consulting the best physicians available,” Ruggles relates, “Lindsay took his young wife, whose chief fear in her mania was that he would abandon her, to the asylum in Lexington, Kentucky. The moment when he walked out and left her alone in such a place was the severest trial he experienced in life, then or ever” (18).

Apparently, Olive did not eat or take medicine for one full week, after which Dr. Lindsay insisted on her release, overruling the protests of the asylum superintendent. He is reported to have said: “The look she gave me when I told her I had come to take her home was sufficient reward for all I had done for her up to this time” (Ruggles 18). At her father’s home, attended by her husband, Olive Crouch Lindsay died: three weeks after leaving the asylum, two and one-half months after her marriage. Following the funeral, her young husband returned to Illinois in mourning but determined, nonetheless, to assist his patients in and around Cotton Hill. He continued to serve them, except for
periodic vacation and professional travel, until shortly before his own death, in September 1918.

Through the years Dr. Lindsay’s practice grew, and he became the mainstay of his impoverished family. A relatively short, compactly built man, he sported a full black beard and strong features. Friends often suggested that he looked like General Ulysses S. Grant. Niece Eudora South comments: “His brisk movements betokened the energy that kept him a practicing physician almost to the last of his seventy-five years. He had a keen mind and a ready sense of humor. His quick temper, at times violent, was offset by his kindly soul. His heart was rooted in family ties” (Cousin Vachel 29).

His son’s heart was also “rooted in family ties,” as Vachel loved to recount his father’s herculean efforts. In a 1925 letter to Elizabeth Wills, for example, Vachel itemized the doctor’s accomplishments. He purchased a small farm for his parents and brothers and sisters in Aurora, Indiana. He put his eldest sister Eudora through school, after which she took a teaching job and later opened her own school, Excelsior Institute (in Jett, near Frankfort, Kentucky). With Eudora’s assistance, Dr. Lindsay sent two of his brothers to medical school; one of the two, Johnson Lindsay, joined his brother in his Springfield practice during our poet’s childhood years. Yet another brother took a degree from the University of Michigan law school. Three remaining brothers and sisters were educated at Excelsior, with one of the brothers also going on to take a law degree. All in all, for Elizabeth Wills’ edification, Vachel estimated that he was 12 years old before his father’s parents no longer required their son’s financial support (Chénetier 356).

Meanwhile, by 1875, Dr. Lindsay had earned the means to fulfill a long-time dream: he wished to study medicine, especially obstetrics, in Vienna. He had planned to leave in the summer of 1876, but he learned that his sister Eudora, then a teacher in Lexington at Hocker College (later Hamilton College, now part of the University of Kentucky), was planning a European trip, beginning June 1875. He asked to accompany her. The time was a year after Eudora’s graduation from Hocker as valedictorian of her class, a year in which she had filled a one-year vacancy on the Hocker faculty as a mathematics teacher. She and her colleague and friend, Kate Frazee, had saved enough money to study art and foreign languages in Europe, and both were determined to spend the summer of 1875 through the summer of 1876 abroad. “Neither,” according to Eudora’s daughter, “wanted to add the masculine element to their trip” (South, Cousin Vachel 21). However, Dr. Lindsay had helped to pay for Eudora’s education and Kate Frazee’s parents, after checking on the doctor’s character, gave their approval. There was no gracious way to exclude “the masculine element,” and the three young people set sail on the steamship Elysia of the Anchor Line at 3:00 p.m. on June 5, 1875, headed first for Glasgow, Scotland.

Diminutive, light-haired Kate Frazee, born February 20, 1848, was a study in courage in her own right. As a young girl of 12, she had suffered sunstroke while “blackberrying” on a hot Indiana summer day. The result was severely injured eyesight and a tendency toward extreme nervous exhaustion, especially when she was injudicious in her work and eating habits. “For seven years her eyes burned so she couldn’t use them,” her daughter Joy related: “She had been considered talented in music but at this time her piano was taken from her as the doctor forbade her playing” (Lindsay-Blair). Unfortunately, fatigue was hardly avoidable for young Catharine. She was the eldest of
12 children, and she was expected to do much of the housework on the Rush County farm. Her mother Frances was not only a busy farm wife but also her farmer-preacher-husband’s talented research assistant. Kate’s keen intellect, the Frazee family believed, was a gift from both of her parents.

Initially, Kate’s eye problems forced her to attend “a Seminary located just across the public highway from her home, where she obtained enough education to admit her to Glendale Female College (Glendale, Ohio) as a Junior” (Hamilton 438). With two of her sisters, Susan (“Sue” or “Sudie,” born November 17, 1851) and Isabelle (“Belle,” born March 13, 1854), Kate matriculated at Glendale in April 1868: “from the ‘country’—‘green as possible’ to be associated with Cincinnati girls, snobs—well dressed—full of superior-airs,” Kate herself advised her daughter Joy (January 24, 1922, Blair). Sue and Belle were to read the lessons aloud for Katie, but when Belle’s eyes also caused problems, “the burden of reading fell on Sudie” (South, Cousin Vachel 20). Despite the extenuating circumstances, the Frazee girls graduated together, on June 24, 1869, with “highest honors.” In her senior year, her grades were perfect. As class valedictorian, she was required to recite her “Graduating Essay”; and with characteristic creativity and independence, she wrote an extended poem instead of a traditional thesis (Hamilton 439).

After graduation, Kate joined the Glendale faculty as a teacher of mathematics. The president, Dr. L. D. Potter, “said of her that she had the quickest and clearest mind for mathematics of any woman he ever knew” (Hamilton 439). Later, she accepted a position at Hocker Female College (later named Hamilton College), Lexington, Kentucky, where she was assistant to the president and a teacher of painting and mathematics. She also wrote and staged two dramas that she would later call “Colloquies,” dramas that were to have a significant effect on her son’s future work. Both at Glendale and at Hocker she continued her passion for drawing and painting, and she was determined to save enough money to travel abroad in order to study the European art masters. By the summer of 1875, two thousand dollars in hand, she was ready to fulfill her dream (details from a Frances Hamilton letter to Joy Lindsay-Blair, no date, in the Blair papers).

At first, Kate’s plans were simply to travel with her friend, Eudora (“Dora”) Lindsay. She had no way of knowing that her dream would bring her close to another dreamer: the young doctor from Illinois who wished to go to Vienna in order to learn the latest procedures in delivering babies. Neither dreamer, of course, knew that what the doctor would learn in Vienna would be used in Springfield, Illinois, to deliver six of their own children. Once on board the Elysia, though, the courtship began early, due in part to the fact that Kate suffered severe seasickness and needed her male companion’s medical attention. In fact, much of Kate’s travel time was spent sick in bed, and when she did venture on deck, “she wouldn’t wear her veil . . . ,” Eudora wrote, “and as consequence her face has reddened and bloated into the appearance of a scarlet pincushion”:

The skin of her forehead is puffed out till not even the wonted expression of intellect is left. To further enhance her charms, she has to envelop her head in a scarlet nubia [scarf], the only one the summer season enabled her to find in New York. It hurts me to look at her, but brother stands it admirably. They are sitting now on the leeward side, reading together Mrs. Browning’s “Aurora Leigh.” It is too comical to see her, as he comes upon some fine sentiment, raise her swollen lids in
the attempt to look appreciation. I should be just coward enough to hide myself away in my state-room; but, in her good-natured way, she says:—“I had no great amount of beauty to lose, not enough to be worth fretting over.” (South, Wayside Notes 24)

Diplomatic Dr. Lindsay told his new friend that “in twenty years you’ll be as good-looking as Dora” (South, Cousin Vachel 23). He later explained that he “found much that was to be admired in my sister’s friend, Miss Kate” (Ruggles 22). He had boarded ship with a black crepe ribbon on his hat in memory of his lost wife, but he suggested marriage to Kate “before the ship had reached port” (Cousin Vachel 23). Then, a few days later, on an idyllic afternoon at the side of a Scottish lake, Doctor Lindsay proposed a second time, and this time he was accepted (Ward). The crepe ribbon was removed but not, as we shall see, the memories it signified.

In Dresden, Vachel Thomas Lindsay and Esther Catharine Frazee formally announced their engagement. In Prague, they separated, the doctor leaving for Vienna and his two traveling companions going to Italy. During the winter of 1875-76, Kate and Eudora studied French and German and painting. Kate working in oils. From Florence, December 26, Eudora wrote to her sister Flora: “Kate has almost finished a beautiful painting copied from one of Salvator Rosa’s noted landscapes. . . . Kate’s health has not been good enough to admit of her studying as I have done; but this exquisite souvenir of Italy will largely compensate her for patiently restraining her desire to prosecute some regular study. Hoping you may some day see this picture” (Wayside Notes 299). Kate’s paintings were to remain with her, decorating the walls of her home. Several works, including her version of a Rosa landscape in oils, are currently (2010) on display in the Lindsay Home, Springfield. Kate was a superb copyist, working both in oils and in charcoal, and there can be little doubt as to which parent influenced Vachel in his artistic interests, Norman blood or no Norman blood.

In February 1876, Dr. Lindsay rejoined his companions in Naples, where, on horseback, the three journeyed to the top of Vesuvius. (In later years, Vachel remarked on his parents’ courage: the mountain was expected to erupt at any time and, in fact, a major eruption did begin on the night of March 17, just a few weeks after their visit.) After additional side trips to Pompeii and Sorrento, the three traveled to Paris via Rome, Florence, and Venice. In Paris, Dr. Lindsay again attended Kate through illness, this time an unnamed fever. He also took time to review French medical procedures in the local hospitals, while Kate was measured for her trousseau at Bon Marché. In London, the next stop, the prospective bridegroom purchased his wedding clothes. Finally, on May 27, 1876, the three companions sailed from Glasgow on the steamship Anchoria, bound for America and a brief visit to the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia. By late June, each was back in his and her respective homes, Kate in Lexington, Kentucky, the doctor in central Illinois. Directly upon returning home, however, Dr. Lindsay moved his now-flourishing practice from rural Cotton Hill to the nearby city of Springfield.

On a snowy Thanksgiving day, November 30, 1876, Esther Catharine Frazee and Vachel Thomas Lindsay were married at the bride’s Indiana farm: “The big old house was in gay attire for the occasion, profusely decorated with bittersweet and decorated
seeds and pods of many varieties, and tiny cones from fir trees from [the] yard, which the bride had all colored and waxed with her own busy hands” (Hamilton 441). Dr. Otis A. Burgess, President of Butler University, was the presiding minister; and the demure bride was radiant in her Parisian silk gown with traditional “veil and orange blossoms.” After the ceremony, all sat down to “Thanksgiving turkey, oysters, and sweetmeats” (South, Wayside Notes 469-470). In later years, Kate told her children of her profound respect for the Reverend Dr. Burgess: “several times, when it fitted into the [Sunday school] lesson,” her daughter Olive recalls, her mother “told of the greatest sermon she ever heard O.A. Burgess preach, on ‘What Think Ye of Christ: Whose Son Is He?’” (Lindsay-Wakefield 92).

United in the Disciples tradition, as well as in matrimony, Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay left Indiana a day or so after the wedding, in order to visit the groom’s family in Glencoe, Kentucky. Then, on the morning of December 11, 1876, they traveled north to a rented cottage at the corner of Ninth and Edwards streets, in Springfield, Illinois. On October 10 of the following year, their first child was born, a girl, with dark hair and dark eyes. The father and attending physician purportedly exclaimed: “Why, she looks like Ollie!”—an involuntary reference to his ill-starred first wife. His brave second wife responded: “Her name is Olive. I hope she will be a comfort to you” (Ruggles 24).

During her early years, Olive’s name was written “Olive C. Lindsay”; and family members, such as Frances Hamilton, assumed the “C” was for Catharine. Indeed, the name frequently appears as “Olive Catharine.” [Note 10] Unfortunately, the Springfield County Clerk’s office has no record of the birth, but one local newspaper, the Sangamo Daily Monitor, reported: “Dr. Lindsay is among the happiest of the happy. Little ‘Olive Crouch,’ a charming tiny little Miss, who will date her advent into this world of de-fic-ul-ties and facts from yesterday morning, and who has put him and his companion in this frame of mental joy, has put in an appearance” (October 11, 1877). Olive herself discloses that on her sixth birthday her father gave her “Hans Christian Andersen in four small green volumes inscribed ‘To Olive Crouch Lindsay, six years old, from Papa, October tenth, eighteen eighty-three’” (Lindsay-Wakefield 90). And Eudora South maintains that for many years Dr. Lindsay brought his daughter to Kentucky “for the sake of an elderly couple who were neighbors of Grandpa Lindsay”:

Olive called them Grandma and Grandpa Crouch, although there were no blood ties between them. They were the parents of Uncle Vachel’s first wife. The old couple loved the little girl with the big dark eyes who reminded them of their own lost daughter. Olive had been named for her—if Aunt Kate ever felt jealousy of her predecessor, she exorcised the demon by bestowing her name on the adored first child. (Cousin Vachel 29-30)

Grandfather Nicholas, it seems, set something of a family precedent when he named Vachel Thomas’s sister Eudora Gray, in memory of his lost sweetheart.

In 1879, Dr. Lindsay purchased his permanent residence at 603 South Fifth, just four blocks west from his rented cottage. Standing at the corner of Fifth and Edwards Streets, the home was and still is just south of the Illinois governor’s mansion. In the
1920s, Vachel claimed that among his “very earliest memories are those of seeing old Governor Oglesby leaning on his cane, marching about, calling his children about him” (“What It Means to Be a Poet in America” 12). (Republican Richard J. Oglesby’s term of office was 1885-89.) Dr. Lindsay’s house was built before the Civil War and had once been owned by Clark Moulton Smith, whose wife Ann was the younger sister of Mary Todd Lincoln. “As I knew from my earliest days,” Vachel asserts, “our front parlor was a place of distinction. Parties had been given to Abraham Lincoln there by his sister-in-law, especially one grand party, before he started for Washington” (Poetry 944). [Note 11] Across the hall from that parlor, on November 10, 1879, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay was born, in a bedroom that had once been used, according to family legend, by Abraham Lincoln (Ruggles 24).

Vachel’s sister Olive contends that the Illinois State Journal announced the birth the next morning: “I read it over many times in Mama’s big black scrapbook: ‘Dr. Vachel Thomas Lindsay now has a son to help him in his profession. The young Nicholas Vachel arrived last night’” (Lindsay-Wakefield 90). The fact is, however, that neither the Journal nor its counterpart, the Illinois State Register, reported the birth. In all probability, Olive remembered the following announcement from the same Springfield paper that had reported her own birth, the Sangamo Daily Monitor (a copy of the article is among the family papers in the Ward collection): “Dr. V.T. Lindsay was ‘chuck’ full of happiness yesterday. He couldn’t help it, and he wouldn’t if he could. He looked into the future and erected big, towering hopes. Coming up town from his residence, his first speech upon meeting his friends was, ‘I’ve got a successor!’ Interviewing him upon the subject, the MONITOR man ascertained that it was a boy; that it came in the early morning; that it weighed ten pounds, and had been named Nicholas Vachel. He has been declared an M.D., having already commenced practicing.” The baby “with the face of an old man” had achieved his intended maturity—one day after his birth.

**Historical Postscript**

Just ten years before Vachel’s birth, the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific companies finished the nation’s first transcontinental rail line. Three years earlier (1866), the Atlantic Cable was completed, bringing Europe and America closer together, at least in communications. The following year (1867) Milwaukee printer Christopher Latham Sholes demonstrated a machine that he called a “typewriter.”

When Vachel was less than eight weeks old, Thomas Alva Edison demonstrated his incandescent bulb for the first time in public (December 31, 1879). Three and one-half years earlier, Alexander Graham Bell asked, “Mr. Watson, come here. I want you,” using a device he referred to as a “telephone” (March 10, 1876). On January 28, 1878, the first commercial telephone switchboard went into operation in New Haven, Connecticut. And in 1878, the telephone was introduced to Vachel’s Springfield: a single line connected the Illinois governor’s office to the local telegraph office. Soon afterward, the city’s embryonic telephone exchange, located above a saloon on South 5th Street, boasted 25 customers (Veach 34). Three months after Bell’s message to Watson, General George A. Custer’s troops set out to massacre the followers of Chiefs Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull at the battle of Little Bighorn Mountain, Montana (June 25-26, 1876). Events did not unfold as Custer had planned. In April of the following year (1877), federal troops
withdrew from the South, officially ending Reconstruction. Meanwhile, in 1877, Edison introduced his phonograph (he received a patent on his machine February 19, 1878), so that in the summer, 1931, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay could record several of his poems and later generations are now able to hear the poet’s voice and gain a sense of his famous delivery manner. On February 28, 1877, Congress passed the Bland-Allison Act over President Rutherford B. Hayes’s veto: gold and silver (at a ratio of 16 to 1) became the bases of the American monetary system. In less than 20 years, Populist hero William Jennings Bryan would roll, in Vachel’s words, “these glacial boulders across the prairie”:

“The people have a right to make their own mistakes . . .
You shall not crucify mankind
Upon a cross of gold.” (Poetry 347)

By 1879, across the Atlantic, chemist-microbiologist Louis Pasteur had successfully established his theory of germs and had demonstrated the effectiveness of “pasteurization”; he was at work on developing cures for chicken cholera and for anthrax. In 1881, Pasteur proved a bacterial vaccine effective against anthrax, and the modern sciences of bacteriology and immunology were born. The same year, simultaneous with George Miller Sternberg, Pasteur announced discovery of the pneumonia bacterium. The previous year, Germans Robert Koch and Karl Joseph Eberth identified the typhoid fever bacillus. (The bacillus was successfully isolated by Georg Theodor August Gaffky in 1884.) Then, in 1882, Koch identified the tuberculosis germ, following in 1883 with the discovery of the cholera bacillus.

Meanwhile, the use of ether as a surgical anesthetic began as early as March 30, 1842, when American physician Williamson Crawford Long (1815-78) painlessly removed a tumor from the neck of James Venable. (Oliver Wendell Holmes named the new process “anaesthesia.”) The all-important surgical clamp, however, was not introduced until 1879—by Dr. Spencer Wells. Surgical gloves were not used until 1890, when William Stewart Halsted of Johns Hopkins made them routine in his practice. In obstetrics, Oliver Wendell Holmes in Boston, Alexander Gordon in Aberdeen, and Ignaz Semmelweiss in Vienna demonstrated the importance of antiseptic conditions. The legacy of Semmelweiss’s work was, in part, the likely reason Dr. Lindsay wished to study in the Vienna hospitals. What the doctor learned was significant, and Vachel loved to boast that his father had not lost a single mother in more than 40 years of obstetrical practice. (Dr. Lindsay may also have been interested in the work of University of Vienna professor, Theodor Billroth, who generally is referred to as the founder of modern stomach surgery.)

In 1879, Mary Baker Eddy took formal steps to establish the First Church of Christ, Scientist. On November 10, 1879, the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts was six months old. It was renamed the Art Institute of Chicago in 1882; and, in 1901, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay began his art career as an Institute student. In November 1879, the United States of America was a nation of just 38 states.

On November 10, 1890, eleven-year-old Nicholas Vachel Lindsay pasted a newspaper clipping into his new birthday notebook. The article is entitled, “This Date in History—Nov. 10,” and a childish hand has pencilled in “1879—Birth of Vachel Lindsay.” One generation earlier, Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed: “All that we call
sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology” (“The Poet,” 1844).

**Notes for Chapter Two**

[Note 1] See the following family studies in the bibliography: Hamilton, Frances Frazee; Lindsay, Catharine; Lindsay-Blair, Joy; Lindsay-Wakefield, Olive; South, Eudora Lindsay; and South, Eudora [Gray] Lindsay. In my account of the family ancestry, I have made no attempt to check the accuracy of family claims. The important aspect is what the family, and consequently Vachel himself, believed to be true or, from Vachel’s perspective anyway, useful. In 1927, when Hamilton was working on her genealogy book, Vachel wrote to her: “I have always had the greatest curiosity about all the family ancestral matters that are going into your book. . . . I will study it from cover to cover, your book. You have not the dimmest notion of the hundreds of notes on poems in my forty undeveloped notebooks, so many of them childhood and Indiana family memories. I talk to Elizabeth [his wife] of these things constantly and I did not know how much; for certainly I was completely surprised when she insisted on naming Susan [their daughter],—‘Susan Doniphan.’ I had done like all the rest of the tribe—talked family till she was dizzy” (August 12, 1927). See also Margaret Isabella Lindsay, *The Lindsays of America: A Genealogical Narrative and Family Record* (Joel Munsell’s Sons, Publishers: Albany, NY, 1889), available online at Google Books.

[Note 2] In March 1928, when John M. Weatherwax wrote that he had met Vachel’s mother’s brother, Ephraim Frazee, Vachel responded: “Get Eph started on the Doniphans if you want the cork clear out. They claimed to be Spaniards. They certainly had Satan’s pride, and bragged more than Gascons. But there is a Spanish and Indian War in me, and my Indian pride and my Spanish pride in deadly war have made me, more than all the dialects of the Frazee clan. Why should I be so eloquent? You have the one recluse in the whole tribe near you who has heard all these matters debated a whole lifetime. I heard that word ‘We’ as he uses it, used incessantly till I went to Art School. They rang it like a church-bell in my ears” (March 21, 1928). Also see Massa, pp. 155-157.

[Note 3] Compare Stephen Graham’s remarks on Vachel: “My companion’s secret thought is that he is a Virginian. But how, since he was born in Illinois and his parents in Kentucky? ‘I am a follower of Poe and Jefferson,’ he answers. Kentucky was largely colonized from Virginia, and the poet is ready to claim allegiance to the chivalric, leisurely and flamboyant genius of the South. ‘If only as a protest against the drab, square-toed, dull, unimaginative America which is gaining on us all,’ he adds” (40). Also see Massa, pp. 183-187.

[Note 4] Martha Ann Cave Lindsay moved to her son Eugene’s home in Trinidad, Colorado, directly after her husband’s death (on April 30, 1889). Grandfather Nicholas Lindsay is buried in the family plot at Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield. A second envelope containing Vachel’s blond curls is enclosed in one of the Hamilton scrapbooks (Blair—currently in the Sangamon Valley Collection in Springfield’s Lincoln Library).

[Note 5] Frances Hamilton asserts: “Mr. Lindsay inherited talent from both sides of the house, although the talents inherited from one side differ greatly from those of the other, the same being true of his physical appearance. His father was of medium height and a
real brunette and the music of his voice was the same that is transmitted to the son. His mother was a fair blonde and of strong intellect. Both parents had poetry in their natures.” She adds (with obvious family pride): “The brilliant luster in Mr. Lindsay’s eyes during the time he is reciting his poems comes down from his Doniphan ancestry” (454-455).

[Note 6] Jessie Rittenhouse visited the Lindsays on two separate occasions. She relates: “The Lindsay home in Springfield was run, spiritually speaking, upon the old traditional lines of the Campbellite religion. After breakfast, however pressing the Doctor’s calls might be or the daily demands upon the executive powers of Mrs. Lindsay, the family Bible was produced, a chapter read by the Doctor, whereupon the family, including the maidservant, knelt by their chairs while Mrs. Lindsay offered prayer” (295). For Vachel on “the old traditional lines of the Campbellite religion,” see The Golden Book of Springfield, pp. 3-6. Also see Massa, pp. 6-7, 50-52.

[Note 7] An amused Vachel pasted an untitled newspaper announcement in his 1890 notebook. Clipped from a local Indiana paper, it reports an early visit with his sister Olive to the Indiana Frazees: “Oliver^ Lindsey^ and sister, Miss Rachel, of Springfield, Ill., are visiting John Frazee and family.”

[Note 8] There are less imaginative descriptions of the Frazee home. In 1927, Vachel wrote that his mother “when she was a girl had established for years under a beautiful glass globe in my grandfather’s parlor a wax flower masterpiece. If I remember, it was a harp twined with tube roses” (letter to Calvin Dill Wilson of Glendale Academy, Catharine Lindsay’s alma mater, February 7, 1927). William F[rederic] Rothenburger, who was a student at Hiram College with Vachel and pastor of the Lindsay family church (1918-27), visited the farm and recalled: “Beside the large fireplace one sees the spacious built-in bookcases, bearing evidence of the grandsire’s love of books” (146). See also Vachel’s “Alexander Campbell” (Poetry 405) and The Golden Book of Springfield, p. 5.

[Note 9] “The Journey to the Center of the Earth” is only one of several memory poems in Vachel’s honeymoon book, The Candle in the Cabin (1926). The title poem itself is, in part, a reverie in which Vachel places himself and his young wife in pioneering days long past. For a full study of Vachel and “The American Past,” see Massa, pp. 153-175. Nearly all of Vachel’s major poems reflect a basic pattern, either explicitly or implicitly: (1) the memory of a glorious past (an ancient China, an ancient Congo, pioneering days, Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, Edenic prairie gardens, youthfulness); (2) an unfortunate current existence (day labor such as ironing, gutters, slums, bars, Babbittry, spondulix, railroads, war, Republican presidents like William McKinley, old age); and (3) finally the hope and expectation of a glorious future (visions of Chinese ladies, eternal springtime, meeting Christ in heaven, Springfield made golden, Abraham Lincoln reborn, prairies restored to gardens, world peace, Democratic presidents who would share the values of William Jennings Bryan, eternal life). The pattern is the U: and the present is the pits, the bottom of the U, with an Eden above left and a City of God above right.

[Note 10] Olive’s daughter, Catharine Wakefield Ward, informs me that Olive likely changed her middle name to “Catharine . . . with parental acquiescence since her baptismal record in July 1890 is simply as ‘Olive Lindsay,’ though on the line above NVL is recorded with both his Christian names. She admired deeply all her life long
Esther Catharine Frazee Lindsay, so it is not surprising that she adopted the ‘Catharine’ in due course . . . our family has a distinct penchant for changing middle names” (letter, May 12, 1987).

[Note 11] Vachel also claims: “I can very well remember Mrs. Smith’s calls upon my mother when I was a child in long curls, and her telling my mother of the parties given to Abraham Lincoln in our parlor before he started for the White House. . . . These calls of Mrs. C.M. Smith were made upon the Lindsays around 1886. She was making them welcome as newcomers of ten years’ standing in the city of Springfield. I was six years old at the time, but I did not miss that point” (“What It Means to Be a Poet in America” 12). See also Lindsay letters in Chénetier, pp. 33, 187; and Massa, pp. 160-162.

**Photographs for Chapter Two**

Martha Ann Cave (b. December 23, 1825) and Nicholas Lindsay (b. December 15, 1802), paternal grandparents of Uncle Boy. Nicholas and Martha married June 14, 1842; she is credited with introducing Indian blood into the Lindsay family veins. More importantly, her devotion to Alexander Campbell’s teachings insured that her son, Uncle Boy’s father, and his family would be lifelong Disciples of Christ or “Campbellites.” Nicholas, who was blind in his final years, nevertheless demanded that his curly-headed grandson be given a haircut. Nicholas died April 30, 1889; after her husband’s death, Martha moved to Trinidad, Colorado, where Uncle Boy visited her on several occasions. Martha died January 4, 1904. Martha and Nicholas were parents of eight children, six sons and two daughters. Their first born, Vachel Thomas, was Uncle Boy’s father. These pictures are reproduced from *Cousin Vachel*. 
Susan Doniphan Frazee (b. November 12, 1794) and her son, Ephraim Samuel Frazee (b. October 4, 1824), the father of Uncle Boy’s mother, Esther Catharine, and his favorite aunt, Frances Hamilton. Susan is credited with introducing Spanish blood into the Frazee-Lindsay family veins. Susan’s husband, Dr. Ephraim Frazee, died at age 32, just a few days after son Ephraim Samuel was born. After the death of her husband, Susan took up residence at a farm she inherited in Rush County, Indiana, a farm that Uncle Boy visited on numerous occasions. Uncle Boy named his daughter Susan Doniphan in honor of his maternal great grandmother, who liked to brag that her father, Joseph Doniphan, taught Daniel Boone’s children how to read. Grandmother Susan died December 27, 1884, at her son’s home in Rush County. The picture is reproduced from Frances Hamilton’s genealogy, Ancestral Lines, where one can read much more about Susan (pp. 109-120). For the record, genealogist Hamilton thought that “Doniphan” was an anglicized version of a Spanish ancestor’s name, “Don Alphonse Jphan” (pp. 19-21).
Ephraim Samuel Frazee (b. October 4, 1824) and Frances Elizabeth Austen (b. January 20, 1827), Uncle Boy’s maternal grandparents. Ephraim and Frances were married March 9, 1847, and were parents of twelve children, eight of whom lived to adulthood. Uncle Boy’s mother, Esther Catharine (b. February 20, 1848) was their firstborn. Ephraim lived on his farm in Rush County, Indiana, and is the subject of Uncle Boy’s poem, “The Proud Farmer.” Frances was thought to be a descendant of Jane Austen and, further back in time, St. Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury. Ephraim died June 14, 1896, and Frances died May 1, 1910. The photographs are copies of pictures published in Hamilton’s *Ancestral Lines*, pp. 394-395.

Ephraim Samuel Frazee at a later age. His daughter, Frances Frazee Hamilton, reports that, when General Lee surrendered, her father rang his Rush County dinner bell for three hours in celebration. The Frazees were ecstatic about the North’s victory, but the Lindsays were chagrined. Thus, Uncle Boy reports that the Mason-Dixon Line ran through the middle of his boyhood home. Ephraim was a legislator and a preacher, as well as a proud farmer. His herd of shorthorn cattle won numerous prizes at state and local fairs. For additional information on Ephraim, see Hamilton’s *Ancestral Lines*, pp. 404-417. For more information on his wife Frances, see pp. 418-435. The photo was a gift to the Vachel Lindsay Association from Catharine Blair.
The Rush County, Indiana, farm house, where Uncle Boy visited on numerous occasions. The proud farmer, Ephraim Samuel Frazee, and his wife, Frances Austen, are out front, along with several of their children. The photo is from daughter Frances Frazee Hamilton’s *Ancestral Lines*, p. 417. A picture of Alexander Campbell hung above the fireplace in this home, as mentioned in Uncle Boy’s poem, “Alexander Campbell,” Part III, “A Rhymed Address to All Renegade Campbellites, Exhorting Them to Return” (ll. 29-36). It was Grandfather Ephraim, according to Uncle Boy, who thought poets “were clever men, and we like to memorize long passages from their works . . . but almost all of them had a screw loose somewhere” (*Poetry* 948).

Daughters of Ephraim Samuel and Frances Austen: Esther Catharine “Kate” (b. February 20, 1848); Susan “Sudie” (b. November 17, 1851); and Isabelle “Belle” (b. March 13, 1854). Kate, of course, would be Uncle Boy’s mother. Belle, whose married name was Campbell, died very young (October 11, 1896); and her daughter Helen (b. March 7, 1887) lived with the Lindsays in Springfield until she was of college age. Helen and Joy, Uncle Boy’s younger sister (b. August 29, 1889) were approximately the same age. This picture is from South’s *Cousin Vachel*. 
Esther Catharine “Kate” Frazee and Vachel Thomas Lindsay, parents of Uncle Boy, about the time of their marriage (November 28, 1876). To judge Kate’s skill as an artist, compare the photograph of her husband above with her charcoal copy below. (The copy currently hangs in the dining room of the Vachel Lindsay Home State Historic Site.)
The Lindsay Home at 603 South Fifth Street, Springfield, likely in late fall-winter, 1929-30. Purchased by Dr. and Mrs. Lindsay in 1879. Uncle Boy and his family stand directly in front of the bedroom in which he was born, on November 10, 1879.

Another example of Kate’s work, this one in oils, signed “E. K. Frazee” and dated “1871.” This work currently hangs in the bedroom in which Uncle Boy was born.