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A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SARAH ORNE JEWETT

Reviewed by F. O. MATTHIESSEN

THIS handsomely printed bibliography,* coming right out of the heart of the country of the pointed firs, makes a most appropriate birthday offering to the memory of Miss Jewett in her centennial year. It will be of great service to all future biographers and critics; and this biographer can only wish that he might have had it at hand when he wrote his own sketch of her twenty years ago.

Clara and Carl Weber point out that much of Miss Jewett's work still remains uncollected, since the seven-volume edition brought out by Houghton Mifflin in 1910—the year after her death—contains something less than half of her total production. Yet there is a fitness in that fact. Her standards were so exacting that she would prefer to be represented only by her best. And her best is in her short stories, produced sparingly, not many more than a hundred spaced over more than thirty years. Nearly three-quarters of these are in the collected edition, along with one of her three novels, *A Country Doctor*.

In addition to providing a complete list of Miss Jewett's books and of all her contributions to magazines and newspapers, the Webers have included the steadily growing list of her appearances in anthologies. Their section dealing with translations reveals the odd accident that whereas *A Country Doctor* and several stories have been done into French, and *A Tory Lover* into both French and Italian, her masterpiece still remains untranslated. *The Country of*

* *A Bibliography of the Published Writings of Sarah Orne Jewett*, compiled by Clara Carter Weber and Carl J. Weber. Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1949; 107 pages.

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the Pointed Firs would be a text that UNESCO might well undertake among its proposed translations into various tongues. It would represent American regionalism at its best. One might also recommend the inclusion of the excellent photographs of the Maine coast taken by Charles S. Olcott for the so-called Visitors Edition of the book in 1919.

Still another feature of this bibliography is its winnowing of illustrative samples from the critical commentary. Some of this was furnished by Miss Jewett herself. When asked once which of her own books she preferred, her answer was: "I don't think I have a favorite. In some ways I like *A Country Doctor* best." Probably no other reader would agree with that choice. Miss Jewett's special skill in organizing a book was through a thematic arrangement of sketches which would finally embrace a milieu. When she strove for the plot of a novel, she became more extravagant, even stilted. But the reason for her choice was strongly personal. The subject for *A Country Doctor* was the man who had had the deepest effect upon her life, to whom she penned her most heartfelt dedication: "To T. H. J., my dear father; my dear friend; the best and wisest man I ever knew; who taught me many lessons and showed me many things as we went together along the Country By-Ways."

Among the other comments quoted here are the two immense sentences which Henry James put as a parenthesis into his essay on "Mr. and Mrs. Fields," as a regretful substitute for the appreciative introduction he had once hoped to furnish for Mrs. Fields' selection of Miss Jewett's *Letters*.

Miss Jewett's most notable disciple, Willa Cather, once phrased her debt thus: "One of the few really helpful words I ever heard from an older writer, I had from Sarah Orne Jewett when she said to me: 'Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world *so well* before one can know the parish.'" In the hurried decades following

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Miss Jewett's death the fact that a parish could symbolize the world was often overlooked. She seemed too quiet, too reserved, too restricted to a generation accustomed to the naturalists. Yet, as Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant observed in *The New Republic* in 1915: "There are chapters in Miss Jewett's works . . . which show her full knowledge of the shadow even though she did not often linger there." But by the time amateur Freudianism had reached its full swing restrictions had become frustrations, and Ludwig Lewisohn was declaring that the field of observation of both Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman "was excessively limited; the society they had before them to depict was the least fruitful that human artists ever sought to treat."

The Webers have dutifully preserved that pronouncement, though its value is as a curiosity. We are now sufficiently removed from Miss Jewett's world to perceive its contours more accurately. Reflecting, in 1945, on the extraordinarily varied backgrounds that have produced Americans and America, Merritt Perkins described the older rural New England as "a life reserved in its social contacts but keenly alive with human sympathy. . . . I like to think of the service done . . . by Sarah Orne Jewett in her stories of the fishing villages of Maine. . . . I think she really sought to write history in her lives of common people."

She seems to be having an increasing appeal to readers everywhere. At least some of her admirers whom I have encountered in the last few years include a financial adviser to the Hungarian government, an Italian scholar of history, and the Irish actor Barry Fitzgerald who spoke lovingly of her "good, slow-paced prose." But she really has the last word about her own achievement. She gave as her reason for writing about the common people nearest at hand that she "wanted the world to know their grand simple lives." Grand, as she uses it so accurately, recalls grandeur. The lives which she etched with such delicacy also

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possessed an elemental dignity in their proportions. It was quite natural for her to describe the Bowden family reunion in its procession across the field to the picnic grove as though it were "a company of ancient Greeks going . . . to worship the god of harvests. . . . We were no more a New England family celebrating its own existence and simple progress; we carried the tokens and inheritance of all such households from which this had descended, and were only the latest of our line."



MORE LETTERS FROM SARAH ORNE JEWETT

TWO years ago the Colby College Press published a little volume of *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett Now in the Colby College Library*—a book so attractively gotten up by The Anthoensen Press that it was chosen by the American Institute of Graphic Arts as one of the Fifty Books of the Year. It is perhaps due to the advertising that this selection gave the book that it is already out of print.

The Colby Library has now come into possession of some additional letters from Miss Jewett, and in order to make them available, in this the centennial year of her birth, to her admirers elsewhere, we here transcribe the text of the letters and append brief annotations.

The numbers here assigned to the letters follow those in the volume referred to above.

Letter No. 34

South Berwick, Maine.

21 December [1891]

My dear friend¹

I thank you over and over again for the great pleasure I have had in your lovely book of poems,² and I thank you most for your kind remembrance. I cannot tell you with what feeling I read again the

¹ Robert U. Johnson, at this time associate editor of *The Century Magazine*.

² *The Winter Hour, and Other Poems*. New York, Century Co., 1892.