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Richard VanDerBeets

James K. Bowen

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MISS JEWETT, MRS. TURNER, AND THE CHAUTAUQUA CIRCLE

By RICHARD VANDERBEETS AND JAMES K. BOWEN

A HITHERTO UNKNOWN letter of Sarah Orne Jewett, written in response to an essay of appreciation, also previously unrecorded, sheds considerable light on her state of mind during the difficult period when her creative output was severely limited by failing health and provides additional insight into her attitudes toward her fiction.

"The Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett," a paper of some 4500 words presented by Mrs. Dora H. Turner to the Chautauqua Literary Circle of Fort Dodge, Iowa, on April 26, 1905 and printed in the Fort Dodge *Messenger* for Wednesday, May 11, 1905, is a literary "appreciation" in the most unpardonable manner: an impressionistic and largely uninformed encomium padded with plot summaries and fulsomely illustrative quotations from *Country By-Ways*, *A White Heron* and *Other Stories*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. "These stories reveal the author as a lover of nature exploring all the corner cupboards in Mother Nature's old home," writes Mrs. Turner, "the interweaving of love of nature, and love of human nature, the unfailing optimism . . ." Or, "You carry these revelations over from one story to another, fit them together and the result is your conception of the real author. This personality is over Miss Jewett's stories like a blue sky . . ." And, "There is a wide outlook, backward into history, forward, outward, skyward and beyond the sky too . . ." Finally, "Miss Jewett's stories would touch the heart of nature loving, home loving folk . . . We close the book and wonder over the secret charm of it all." Further sampling is unnecessary.

Mrs. Turner took it upon herself to write Miss Jewett, enclosing a clipping of the *Messenger* printing of the Chautauqua essay. For whatever reasons, Miss Jewett appears to have been genuinely affected; her generous and informative letter of reply¹ is transcribed in full.

June 14th 1905
South Berwick.
Maine.

1 Now in the possession of Mr. Patrick Shelp. Acknowledgement and thanks are here given him for permission to publish this letter.

My dear Mrs. Turner

I am sorry that I have lost even a few days in thanking you for your most kind letter and for the sympathy and interest I felt instantly in this essay upon a certain writer's stories. Forgive me if I say, first, how deeply your own literary gifts have interested me,² your power of saying things with a beautiful simple directness — ("— These are not common people. They are people" —!)³ — There is nothing that a writer should know better than the value of what the reader herself may bring to such stories — else they may fail in their errand. As I read one column of your paper after another it touched me deeply to see that you chose almost inevitably the paragraphs that had touched my own heart as I wrote them down . . . [Miss Jewett's ellipsis] I find myself wishing very much that we were talking together — perhaps in our old garden here this June day! — instead of my trying to write. I am but slowly recovering from a severe illness that came from an accident in driving more than two years ago;⁴ I have never been able to take up my old affairs of writing, and even writing a note seems clumsy and difficult. I tell you this partly because I wish you to know that your great kindness counts double in days of much enforced idleness — it seems to me that you kept back your letter and the essay until the moment when they should mean most.

Let me thank you from my heart, and send you my best wishes: — indeed I hope that you will go on, giving and finding pleasure with your own work and way of writing, and all the 'works and ways' that are nearest your hand.

Yours most sincerely
Sarah Orne Jewett

2 Miss Jewett apparently refers only to the Chautauqua Circle essay, as there is no other evidence of Mrs. Turner's "literary gifts." Standard literary histories and biographical sources, as well as Library of Congress records, the Iowa State Archives, the catalogue of the Iowa Historical Association, the Webster county (Iowa) histories, and local records of the Fort Dodge Public Library, make no mention of Dora H. Turner.

3 An excerpt from the Chautauqua essay. The phrasing occurs in connection with Mrs. Turner's remarks on Miss Jewett's "wonderful sympathy" for her characters.

4 The carriage accident on September 3, 1902, in which Miss Jewett suffered head and spine injuries and from which she never fully recovered.

