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148 Colby Library Quarterly

SARAH ORNE JEWETT LETTERS

Reviewed by ERNEST C. MARRINER

IN the televised, jet-plane bustle of the mid-twentieth century the art of leisurely letter writing is all but lost. Today even the literary fraternity is addicted to telephone calls and tape recordings. But back in the nineteenth century, when every literate person was writing letters, the professional writers of books sometimes turned out a mass of correspondence that rivaled in volume their published works. Such a letter-writer was Sarah Orne Jewett, the maiden lady of South Berwick, Maine, who is best known as the author of that outstanding description of Maine, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

During recent years the already extensive collection of writings by and about Sarah Orne Jewett in the Colby College Library has been generously augmented by gifts and purchases until this collection is one of the two most comprehensive Jewett Collections to be found anywhere in the world. With this impressive mass of Jewett material at hand, Professor Richard Cary, of the Department of English at Colby, has now edited the present volume of Miss Jewett's letters.* It is a noteworthy publication. The letters are ninety-four in number, more than half of them here printed for the first time. No less than twenty-seven are addressed to Horace Scudder, to whom Miss Jewett owed her start as a professional writer, for Scudder was the sympathetic, encouraging editor successively of the *Riverside Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Especially illuminating is the correspondence with Henry Green, head of the Shaker colony at Alfred, Maine. Contemporary authors with whom Miss Jewett corresponded included F. Hopkinson Smith, Harriet Prescott Spofford, Lyman Ab-

* *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Richard Cary. Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1956. Illustrated; indexed. \$7.50.

Colby Library Quarterly 149

bott, and Violet Paget. For readers more interested in Miss Jewett as a person than as a writer the letters to members of her family will be rewarding.

Professor Cary belongs to the school of criticism which is not content to let the text speak for itself. In the case of Miss Jewett's letters he is certainly right. Speaking for themselves those letters say altogether too little. Sensing the reader's need for historical, genealogical, and geographical background, Cary supplies it lavishly. At first blush one would say the supply is too lavish, the footnotes too detailed. But more mature consideration convinces one that Cary has provided not merely a volume of delightful reading, but truly a source book of accurate information bound to be permanently useful to all future students of the Berwick writer on the pointed firs. Therefore his informative introduction, at once appreciative and witty, as well as his thoroughly documented notes, deserve high commendation.

A literary friend recently asked this reviewer, "Why does nobody read collected letters today?" Perhaps the answer is that we live in a time when nobody writes letters worth collecting. Anyone, however, who starts reading Richard Cary's ninety-four letters of Sarah Orne Jewett is almost certain to read all of them, and especially to read the editor's introduction and notes, which bring those letters so vividly to life.

Professor Cary remarks that in these letters there are "several paragraphs which Miss Jewett strongly paraphrased and used as bases for subsequent stories or articles." Although she seldom put her letters to ulterior service, she was, as Cary notes, "not totally opposed to seeking good notices through influential friends or through her uncle, a newspaper editor." The editor's own reaction to his work upon these letters is indicated by two or three sentences at the end of his introduction. "So," he says, "in mosaic fashion, out of a welter of matching facets, evolves

150 Colby Library Quarterly

the portrait of a lady. Miss Jewett's catalogue of attributes, perceptible in her public writings, becomes manifest in these private disclosures. The luminous heart, the discriminating ideals, the profound compassion, and the uncomplicated vision tremble closer to the surface in these unguarded, unaffected personal testaments." That is what makes the book worth reading.

Beautifully printed by the well-known Anthoensen Press of Portland, this volume is a companion-piece to Professor Weber's edition of *Hardy Letters* published two years ago. Like its predecessor, *Jewett Letters* is an expert piece of bookmaking, and Professor Cary is fortunate in having had, in printer, bookbinder, and publisher, collaborators whose skill and excellence are equal to his own.

This reviewer has found nothing in the book itself to indicate the size of the edition (i.e., the number of copies printed), but he is privately informed that it distinctly falls into the class known as a Limited Edition. This means that the supply may soon be exhausted, and those admirers of Sarah Orne Jewett who wish to obtain a copy will be well advised to act promptly.



AMONG NOTABLE RECENT ACQUISITIONS

MR. AND MRS. CURTIS M. HUTCHINS of Bangor have presented to the Library a nicely preserved set (two volumes) of the first edition (1759) of an anonymous work entitled *The Prince of Abissinia. A Tale* (London, R. & J. Dodsley), bound in the original calf. The initiated among bibliophiles will of course recognize this "tale" as *Rasselas* by Dr. Samuel Johnson.

In the November, 1950, issue of this quarterly, we announced the gift of two French books from the Max Gate library of Thomas Hardy, the gift of "Dr. Rachel Salis-