

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 5
Issue 3 *September*

Article 5

September 1959

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 5, no.3, September 1959, p.45-48

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JEWETT AND THE JUVENILE CRITICS

By GEORGE P. NYE

Two letters written by Sarah Orne Jewett in May 1906 came to my attention about ten years ago at the high school in Newton, Massachusetts.¹ In them she acknowledged and commented on a sheaf of compositions which had been sent to her by the senior English class of Mr. Samuel Thurber (1879-1943). According to Robert W. Boyden, a member of that year's senior class (and now of Proctor Academy, Andover, New Hampshire), Thurber taught English in the commercial and general courses at that time. The text used by the class is listed in school files as *Short Stories*.² No copies have survived. Was the book *The Queen's Twin and Other Stories? The King of Folly Island and Other People?* It may well have been any one of half a dozen kindred collections. I have no definite information, except that it was a very old rebound text, not used in classes during the past fifteen years.

Whatever the Jewett stories were that the students read, I think we can readily infer from the two letters that Thurber's charges were not as enthusiastic as they might have been had they been reading, say, *To Have and To Hold*. Reading under compulsion is a limited joy at best, as we all know, and Miss Jewett's quiet delineation of rural character is not the type of literary fare likely to have satisfied pupils who craved more action and excitement. Years later, in *Not Under Forty* (New York, 1936), Willa Cather could address her fiercely pro-Jewett remarks to these same people, but while they were youngsters in Thurber's class it was their pleasure to write a few comments which obviously distressed the gentle invalid in South Berwick.

¹ Unfortunately, no other documents besides the letters have come to light. At least one letter must have been written to SOJ by Mr. Thurber. Most helpful, if they could be found, would be the compositions themselves, with Miss Jewett's marginal comments.

² No such title is listed in Clara C. and Carl J. Weber's *Bibliography of the Published Writings of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Waterville, Maine, 1949).

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One "young friend," for example, complained, "There are a great many words, but nothing seems to be going on." However, Miss Jewett's characteristic graciousness did not fail her. Her reply praised the class's "frankness." She suggested that her stories, being "so often concerned with the type rather than the incident of human nature . . . must be difficult for boys and girls like these." The complete text of her first letter follows:

May 9th 1906

South Berwick, Maine

My dear Mr. Thurber

I thank you for your kind and delightful letter which gives me great pleasure, and for the criticisms of the class which I find very interesting indeed. There is a very uncommon clearness and frankness in nearly every one of them—and so surprisingly little of the fumbling with words that so often, both in old and young persons!—attempts to hide a lack of thought. My heart goes out to the young friend who complains that "there are a great many words *but nothing seems to be going on*" in one of the stories! but it is pleasant to discover more praise than blame (as one should always like to do in 'criticism!') They try to find the reason why they like things and do it in a most genuine and sincere way.

I cannot help thinking that my stories must be difficult for girls and boys like these—they are so often concerned with the type rather than the incident of human nature. I should dearly like to know whether they would care as much for a story I once wrote—or stories—about a girl of fifteen—"Betty Leicester." I should like at any rate to send the two little books to you. I was thinking most affectionately as I wrote them of some of the problems that must often be in your own mind. Perhaps there is a School Library where you would give them a place?³

I could not make you understand how much pleasure you have given me without explaining that it is four years since I have been able to write at all, and even yet my old and very dear habits of life seem quite forbidden.⁴ I had a bad accident from the fall of a horse, and struck my head a blow from which it does not easily recover. To know that my stories are alive in the best sense, and going on, pleases me more than I can easily say. I always used to remind myself of that great saying of Plato:—that the best thing one could do for the people

³ The Newton High School Library has no record, at this late date, of the Betty Leicester books which Miss Jewett presumably sent.

⁴ At the time of writing these letters, SOJ had barely three years to live. Never robust, she had been very slow to recover from critical head and spinal injuries which she sustained on her birthday, 1902. On the other hand, her weakened condition is belied by the vigor of the handwriting of these two letters.

of a State was to make them acquainted with each other⁵—and now I find that these boys and girls really liked to know my story people, and are sure that they have seen others just like them! I should like to see the class—and indeed I hope that I may some day have the pleasure of seeing you.⁶ I feel a delightful sense of friendliness and understanding of what I wished to do with the stories in your letter. You have given these young people a real power of enjoying what they read—one of the best of the golden gifts a teacher can ever give. Believe me with true regard

yours sincerely

Sarah Orne Jewett

It is noteworthy that by the time Miss Jewett wrote the second letter she had altered her impression of the children's remarks somewhat. Whereas in the May 9th letter she praised the pupils' "uncommon clearness," and their ability to avoid "fumbling with words," she evinced mixed feelings twelve days later, after perusing their papers again. She wondered "just what this young friend or that means, exactly." She lost some of her initial admiration for the students' language ability, concluding sadly that "young friends" are not so different from old ones after all, in using words "without thinking exactly what they do mean."

May 21st 1906

South Berwick, Maine

My dear Mr. Thurber

I have kept these compositions longer than I meant to keep them, but I wished to read them again. I found that I had read [*sic*] pencil in hand at first, and was just meaning to rub out my comments, when I thought that they were the things I should have said if we had been speaking together about these young friends! So, when you see them please rub out with a good efficient bit of india-rubber all that should be rubbed out, for me!

The compositions are really interesting—it is delightful to find a phrase right from the young heart and brain that begins to work out its own problems. One longs to know just what this young friend or that means, *exactly*, by 'humorous' or "exciting"—but often young

⁵ For another letter quoting this "saying of Plato," see Richard Cary (ed.), *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters* (Waterville, Maine, 1956), 64. The letter to Frederick M. Hopkins formulates an important expression of her role as a writer. Part of the 1893 preface to *Deephaven* refines this statement of her mission, citing Plato again.

⁶ Mr. Boyden wrote that he did not remember that Miss Jewett ever visited the high school. Mrs. Thurber is almost sure that she did not, and that Mr. Thurber did not visit South Berwick.

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friends (like old ones!) use words without thinking exactly what they do mean. I am for a class in definitions and derivations!—then we might not use *criticize* as if it could only mean to find faults.

But I must not write longer.⁷ I thank you again for a true pleasure, and beg you to believe me

yours sincerely

S. O. Jewett

Miss Jewett's plea "for a class in definitions and derivations" may well have caused Thurber to alter some of his subsequent lesson plans. The letters and the red-penciled advice of the noted author made his little experiment a memorable experience for all concerned.

⁷ Miss Jewett's physician had advised her to curtail her extensive and burdensome correspondence.



JEWETT'S COUSINS CHARLES AND CHARLIE

By RICHARD CARY

IN the Spring of the year 1638, at the substantial age of 53, Edward Gilman of Hingham, England, set sail on the ship *Diligent* with a harried company of 133 religious zealots for the far but beckoning shores of America. On board were his wife, three sons, two daughters and three servants. After a racking voyage of fourteen weeks which claimed the lives of a core of the pilgrims, they disembarked in Boston and the Gilmans proceeded to the slight plantation of Hingham. Here, Edward the Emigrant (as he came to be called by his descendants) established the Gilman dynasty which was to pervade the economic, civic and military life of half a dozen pioneer colonies. By 1652 he had shifted to Exeter, New Hampshire, and had acquired many lucrative grants and properties.

This Exeter branch of the family is of prevailing interest to us in respect to Sarah Orne Jewett. It was prosperous and prolific, redundant with judges, governors and tycoons, prominent in every phase of community activity, especially during the period when Exeter was capital of the state. Throughout the Revolutionary ado, no committee of public safety or corps of volunteers was without a Gilman on its roster. Bulging with