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Sarah Orne Jewett to Lillian M. Munger: Twenty-Three Letters

by MARTI HOHMANN

Sarah Orne Jewett once confessed, “I do believe that sometimes one may ‘get acquainted’ more easily through letters than by being together. So much of my ‘friendship’ with nearly all my cronies has been carried on with pen and ink.”1 As Josephine Donovan has noted, Jewett maintained an extensive correspondence with a large network of literary and artistic women. Often writing more than thirty letters at a sitting, she corresponded with Celia Thaxter (1835–1894), poet; Louise Imogen Guiney (1861–1920), poet and essayist; Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842–1904), the artist to whom Jewett dedicated Strangers and Wayfarers; Marie Therese de Blanc (1840–1907), critic, author, and the translator of Jewett’s works into French; Alice Greenwood Howe (1835–1924), a founder of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, to whom Jewett dedicated The Country of the Pointed Firs; Louisa Loring Dresel (1864–1958), artist; and Violet Paget, alias Vernon Lee (1850–1935), writer and critic. She also knew or corresponded with Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844–1911); Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896); Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930); Alice French, alias Octave Thanet (1850–1934); Mary E. Murfree, alias George Craddock (1850–1922); Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835–1921); Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–1885); Sarah Chauncey Woolsey, alias Susan Coolidge (1835–1905); Louise Chandler Moulton (1835–1908); Laura Richards (1850–1943); Julia Ward Howe (1819–1910); May Sinclair (1865–1946); Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888); and Willa Cather (1876–1947). This listing, as Donovan has noted, includes most of the important American women authors of her day.2 It is unfortunate, then, that the most commonly available edition of Jewett’s letters excludes many of her writings to her female friends in favor of her business correspondence with various editors and publishers: Horace E. Scudder, William Dean Howells, Charles E. L. Wingate, Henry Mills Alden, James R. Osgood. Indeed, this volume’s list of recipients seems disproportionately male for a woman who, as its editor admits, formed her primary ties with women.3 Jewett the author and businesswoman—the Jewett that

consulted with editors, collaborated with illustrators, and deliberated with publishers—emerges from the Cary edition of Sarah Orne Jewett Letters. Though this volume does help to reconstruct the history of her work—the various dates of the composition, completion, and submission of her sketches, essays, and books—it does little to reveal the complete woman, the woman who taught a Sunday school class full of teenagers, hated to shop in Boston, and preserved a delicious blackberry jam, the woman whom her friends playfully called “Pinny Lawson.”

One comes closer to finding Pinny Lawson in the volume of letters edited by Annie Adams Fields, Jewett’s companion for almost thirty years. Her Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett (1911) contains writings to Fields, Cather, Ellen Chase, Dresel, Howe, Rose Lamb, Norton, A. O. Huntington, Alice Meynell, Elizabeth McCracken, Spofford, Ward, and Sarah Wheelwright. Unfortunately, Fields’ edition is out of print and difficult to obtain. In addition, Fields’ Letters poses serious problems to the Jewett scholar. As Richard Cary noted in 1967, “different letters are fused together, ascribed dates are questionable or patently wrong, documentation is almost nonexistent, and the index is incomplete.” Furthermore, acting on the advice of her friend and biographer, Mark Anthony DeWolfe Howe, Fields presented Jewett’s writings only after censoring them heavily. Howe reportedly “laid a restraining hand” on Fields as she worked on the volume, suggesting that she omit Jewett’s indications of affection in her letters to Fields and other women “for the mere sake of the impression we want the book to make on readers who have no personal association with Miss Jewett. . . . I doubt . . . whether you will like to have all sorts of people reading them wrong.” Fields and Howe deleted nicknames, endearments, and intimate passages and omitted Jewett’s most ardent letters to Fields entirely.

Howe apparently hesitated to reveal the depth of Jewett’s affection for Fields to a post-Freudian world. Although such a love was “common and appropriate behavior in the cen-

Cary chose—as any editor of a volume of selected letters must do—to include some material at the expense of other pieces in Letters (1956, rev. ed. 1967). In “Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909),” American Literary Realism 1870–1910, 1 (Fall 1967), 66, he notes the deposit of Jewett letters at the University of Virginia; the Clifton Waller Barrett Library has housed all twenty-three Munger letters since 1960. He also mentions Columbia University’s Jewett holdings; evidently he knew of the Anna Laurens Dawes collection (twenty-six letters) but decided not to include them in his volume. Whether intentional or not, his selection seems to harbor a value judgment—personal letters to female friends recounting everyday matters considered less important than business correspondence with editors and publishers.

4. “Pinny” because she was “so straight and thin and her head no bigger than a pin” and “Lawson” after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Sam Lawson of Oldtown Folks (1869), Cary, Letters, p. 97. I agree with Josephine Donovan that “an understanding of the emotional life of a writer gives a critic a better sense of the author’s motivations and intentions. And while these insights should not be controlling in a critical assessment of an author’s work, they should at least prevent patently erroneous judgments.” “The Unpublished Love Poems of Sarah Orne Jewett,” Frontiers, IV, 3 (1979), 30.


7. Donovan asserts that “there were several letters, most of them intimate, written from Jewett to Fields between 1877 and 1882” and thinks Howe’s worry the reason that “these letters were not included in the Fields edition of the Jewett letters” and that “Fields claims . . . that there exist no extant letters between 1880 and 1882.” “Unpublished Love Poems,” Frontiers, p. 27.
tury in which the two women had spent most of their lives,”*Howe feared that twentieth-century readers might misinterpret Jewett's effusions and think she and Fields lovers.

The Jewett reader interested in her correspondence will find the going tough for several other reasons. Groups of uncollected letters are scattered throughout a number of sometimes hard-to-find texts. Collecting this diffuse body of correspondence can turn into a frustrating full-time job. Other problems arise from this confusing state of affairs. Jewett's letters appear without the structure of one consistent set of editorial guidelines: some editors have silently "corrected" punctuation and spelling; some have reproduced the text as best as typescript will allow; some have evolved bibliographic methods all their own. Some have identified people, places, literary allusions, and biographical events more carefully than others. Furthermore, the sensitive Jewett critic will probably find the commentary accompanying some groups of letters disturbing. All too often even the most careful bibliographic work is diminished by the implicit chauvinism of the critical efforts that accompany it. One introduction, for example, applauds the "portrait of a lady" that emerges from the Jewett correspondence and wonders:

Who can measure the ultimate force of her physician-father, whose gentle perseverance plucked at so many responsive strings? And how is one to appraise reliably the effect of companionship with her redoubtable grandfather William Perry, "The Old Doctor" of Exeter, who seemed to combine felicitously the qualities of seer and spur? But for that rare, irascible gentleman, the falling girl might never have left off dreaming.

Whatever the chemistry, and to some degree in spite of herself, Sarah Orne Jewett came to possess an impeccable sense of time and place and people.9

Behind this sort of commentary lurks the implication that the woman writer is somehow unnatural, an enigma; that the phenomenon of her work must somehow be explained as a result of extraordinary circumstances, of encouragement from fathers and brothers and male mentors, of environment developing and nurturing talent in spite of the girl's simpler inclinations.10 Other editors' labors are reduced by related biases. One scholar confesses, for example, that the letters he has discovered "show a simplicity of mind and outlook that present something of a problem to the literary critic," or at least, one can only translate, to him. "Specifically," he continues, "what concerns me here is that I cannot imagine the author of these letters as the author of The Country of the Pointed Firs. . . . I find here nothing of the dignity, restraint, profundity of insight, large acceptance, enveloping charity of her classic work."11

Though he uses these comments as a means by which he can talk about Jewett's development as a writer and as a woman, it is disturbing to see  

11. Hollis, p. 98.
an editor of her letters criticize her because the content of her correspondence does not live up to his expectations. It is also provoking that he spends the greater part of his analysis reconciling what he identifies as emotional immaturity with the inescapable sophistication of her fiction. For all these reasons, a comprehensive edition of Sarah Orne Jewett letters is clearly in order. We still await that volume—carefully edited, sensitively introduced—that will "divulge her various facets as adolescent, member of family and society, as reader, traveler, friend, and author" 12 almost twenty years after scholar and historian Cary identified the need for one.

I’ve been editing the University of Virginia’s deposit of one hundred and eight unpublished Jewett letters. The Clifton Waller Barrett Library includes letters to Sarah Wheelwright, W. Morton Fullerton, Louisa Loring Dresel, A. O. Huntington, and Sara and Arthur Holland, but the most exciting part of my work thus far has been editing a sheaf of twenty-three letters Jewett wrote from 1876 to 1882 to a woman thirteen years her junior, Lillian M. Munger. Like the previously published collections of letters Jewett wrote to Anna Dawes and Louisa Loring Dresel, these letters seem of especial interest to Jewett scholars in light of the critical time and attention spent thus far reappraising the significance of her connections with other women. Unfortunately, as has so often proved the case in reconstructing little-known women’s lives, I’ve discovered more about Munger’s father thus far than of Jewett’s young friend herself. An 1852 graduate of the Medical School of Maine, Charles Munger (1818–1898) served as a Methodist clergyman in South Berwick from 1874–76 and in more than twenty other parishes over the course of his career. He wrote The Chronology of Bible History and How to Remember It (1876) and an appendix to Daniel Steele’s A Substitute for Holiness; or Antinomianism Revived; or Theology of the So-Called Plymouth Brethren Examined and Refuted (1899). His daughter Lillian was born c. 1862. As a young woman, she lived in Bath, Alfred, Kent’s Hill, and Farmington. She probably met Jewett just after her fourteenth birthday, when her father assumed his duties as pastor in South Berwick. She graduated from high school in 1878, and taught school briefly at the Tileston Normal School, Wilmington, North Carolina. She and Jewett corresponded for at least six years; the two women exchanged photographs, gave each other gifts and remembrances of their friendship, and spent extended periods of time in each other’s company. Though the characteristic sentimentality of Jewett’s epistolary prose makes it difficult to judge the depth of her feeling for Munger, these evidences of affection argue for a connection meaningful to both women.

The two women began corresponding shortly after Munger moved with her family from South Berwick, Jewett’s home, to Farmington, Maine. In

her first letter to Munger, Jewett confesses that she has missed her young friend “very much indeed” and urges her to “write just when you feel like it and not wait for me . . . [and] to tell me what pleases you, and write just as if we were out walking and you were talking to me” (9 May 1876). Spiritual matters have apparently been the subject for discussion on these walks: “Thinking of our walk makes me think of the talk we had and my dear little girl, I can’t tell you how much I want your life to be a helpful and a blessed life, and how much I want you to have the best things in the world. I know you are in earnest about trying to be good and to do good, and I wish I could help you more” (9 May 1876). This excerpt captures what seems most striking about the Jewett-Munger relation. Munger, the daughter of a minister, sought spiritual counsel in time of doubt from another woman—a woman thirteen years her senior—and not from her father. Furthermore, Jewett evidently passed on information gleaned from a friend older than she who had once performed the same service for her. Early in their correspondence, for example, she writes:

I know you are in earnest about trying to be good and to do good, and I wish I could help you more . . . . I am going to send you part of a letter which one of my friends sent me long ago at a time when I felt exactly as you do now, and as everybody does sometimes. I think you will like it—for it was and still is a great comfort . . . .

The words she copied for Munger urge her to “keep straight on in the narrow path,” to “let nothing turn you aside,” to remember that “God knows how weak we are—and that having himself suffered being tempted He is able to succour those who are tempted” (9 May 1876). Jewett and Munger maintained this sort of relation for the duration of their six-year correspondence—Munger acting the erring disciple, Jewett the patient but firm spiritual guide. This connection seems to support the notion that the transmission of religious knowledge during this period was as much the province of a network of Christian women as of a select body of male ministers. ¹³

Excerpts from the letters reveal that fairly conventional advice lay at the heart of Jewett’s guidance. For example, one can control one’s temper when a neighbor’s behavior seems unbearable by deciding “solemnly that I will get on well with her, and will be kind to her whenever I can. . . . God is always sending us these things to help us to learn to keep our tempers and to control ourselves” (6 September 1876). One grows nearer to God through a regime of work and leisure; one improves not only by “doing our everyday work faithfully the pleasant days and the hard days, one by one” (12 July 1876), but also by remembering “not to neglect one’s hour of idleness” (9 August 1880). One should “put down sin,” “conquer temptation,” and “be brave in spite of disappointment and mistakes,” for “if one follows the wrong path it leads to sorrow, the lower rules, and the

soul is lost” (8 December 1878). One shall eventually reap the blessings of a life of service and sacrifice since “God is so great and so beautiful and such a friend that through all eternity we shall go on loving him and knowing him more and more” (8 January 1879). When troubled, one should turn first to the Bible, where one can “often find a verse which comes with a strange sweet power” (9 June 1878). One can also turn to fiction heavy-laden with moral instruction, such as Thomas Hughes’ Tom Brown at Rugby (1857) or Adeline Whitney’s A Summer in Leslie Goldthwaite’s Life (1867) if one begins to doubt or question the virtues of a Christian life.

Additional uncollected letters of Jewett’s to her female friends indicate that she developed relationships with young women such as Lily Munger because she wanted to influence their lives for good. In a letter to Anna Laurens Dawes, she admits that “it is my great ambition to have younger girlfriends as I grow older, and to do them good and help them.”14 A Sunday school teacher of a class full of young women for several years at St. John’s Episcopal Church, New Hampshire, Jewett urged Dawes to assume similar duties for “it would help them and it would help you—as a younger class cannot.”15 One can effect change in one’s community if one teaches older women, she asserts, as they “have and will always have a good deal of influence among their different sets of friends.”16 Later she writes that she feels it “a great thing to be used in helping somebody, and to have people associate you with their pleasures and blessings” and tells Dawes that they must “try to be good tools and to keep ourselves ready for God’s use.”17 For Sarah Orne Jewett, cultivating a friendship with a younger woman often meant sharing her “understanding of the better life in Christ” with her and “watching with joy” as she grew “stronger and happier in every way.”18 Twice in her letters to Munger, Jewett urges her young friend to read Hughes’ Tom Brown at Rugby, and even copies out its final words for her on a separate sheet of stationery for her to mull over. Hughes’ lines seem an apt presentation of (and perhaps one of the sources of) Jewett’s intentions:

Stages have to be gone through... by all young brave souls, who must win their way through hero-worship to the worship of Him who is the King and Lord of heroes. For it is only through our mysterious human relationships... that we can come to the knowledge of Him, in whom alone the love, and the tenderness, and the purity, and the strength, and the courage, and the wisdom of all these dwell for ever and ever in perfect fulness.19

Much suggests that Jewett thought of her fiction as a means by which she could gain a wider sphere of moral influence and benefit a larger circle

of untutored women. She seems to have understood literature on at least one level as a means by which one could inculcate adolescent women with conventional notions of morality. In a letter to young Louisa Loring Dresel, she urges her friend to “look up the June—no May—Ladies’ Home Journal, and read “An Every-day Girl?” because “there are good things in it, and . . . it will make two or three things a little plainer to some girls who will read it.”20 She elaborates in a letter to Mary E. Mulholland, who had written her thankfully after reading Betty Leicester, explaining that “the people in books are apt to make us understand ‘real’ people better, and to know why they do things, and so we learn sympathy and patience and enthusiasm for those we live with, and can try to help them in what they are doing instead of being half suspicious and finding fault.”21 In an early diary entry, she conjectures that a young woman “a hundred years from now” might find the volume and read its contents and decide: “I guess I will write my journal with a view to your getting some improving information, young woman!”22 In a letter to Horace Scudder concerning Therese de Blanc’s Causeries de Morale Pratique, Jewett notes: “I like the chapter on ‘Friendship’ especially . . . [but] while the other chapters give good statements of the virtues somehow they do not make many suggestions or link themselves to the development of modern life.”23 She seems to speak here for a useful art, an art that improves and instructs, as vehemently as she had also spoken for an art that reflects real life, for stories that “just tell the thing!”24

As critics eager to restore Jewett to more syllabi and reading lists, eager for her to transcend the limits of the label “local colorist” or “regionalist writer” in the minds of our colleagues, we’d like to overlook Betty Leicester and the philosophy of writing that lies behind the Munger letters. There is a tendency in modern criticism to sneer at the efforts of the nineteenth-century artist who would use her fiction to improve and instruct. When William Dean Howells insists that “people now call a spade an agricultural implement,” and that “a faithful record of life . . . could be made to the exclusion of guilty love and all its circumstances and consequences,” we can’t help but smile a little at the distance between our respective critical theories. Reading the Munger letters with the balance of Jewett’s correspondence, though, has made me think about how seriously we fail to serve her with that smile. I cannot argue strongly enough for an edition of collected letters that will draw on the resources available to us in Charlottesville, in Boston, in Cambridge, in Waterville, in Portland, in St. Louis, and in other libraries across the country. Until we present this Jewett—the author of Betty Leicester, the patient guide to women such as

MARTI HOHMANN

Lillian Munger, the woman of a fairly conventional Victorian morality bent on passing it on to others—we struggle with an incomplete understanding of her critical method and enjoy only a fragmented glimpse of the artist we celebrate today as “a writer for our time.”

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