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The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett: A Review

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THE YEAR 1949 will be the centenary of two contrasting events—the California gold rush and the birth of Sarah Orne Jewett. That the days of the gold rush will be brought again into the consciousness of the multitudes goes without saying. That Miss Jewett's birth will be remembered in more limited circles is as inevitable because of "the permanent value of her quiet pages." Critics will assert, as Willa Cather did over two decades ago, that they can "think of no other books that confront time and change so serenely" as The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, and The Country of the Pointed Firs.

In this commemoration Miss Jewett's native state will doubtless join. Colby College now anticipates it. In recent years this college has, without benefit of very ample resources, won the gratitude of scholars by assembling first-hand literary materials in special fields and making them available through publication. Thus the college library has gradually brought together, not only the printed works of Miss Jewett, but a collection of her letters as well. As a contribution to the approaching centenary the Colby College Press now issues a small volume of the correspondence.* Forethought and taste have arranged that the pages "harmonize, in size and style," with those of Miss Jewett's first book, Deephaven, which came from the press seventy years ago.

Dr. Weber has ably performed his duties as editor. His three-page Foreword supplies all the data needed for introduction and orientation. His charts of the Jewett and Ward families enable us to determine relationships at a
glance. His index of correspondents and general index facilitate reference. Perhaps most serviceable of all are his footnotes: they are concise, they are never obtrusive, they convey exactly the information we require.

The letters themselves, if not startling or revolutionary in what they tell us, are genuinely revealing for all that. The first of them was written in 1879, when Miss Jewett, nearly thirty years of age, had already published two books. The last was written in 1904, when her authorship and her life were nearing their end. In short, they cover the twenty-five most mature years of her productive career. As we should expect, they not infrequently show her plying her profession. Especially interesting are her somewhat clumsy early efforts to gain admission to Harper's Magazine, her comments to the young writer who hoped to become a man of letters, and her sentence "My father used to give me this excellent advice: ‘Don’t try to write about things: write the things themselves just as they are!’" The letters bear out the impression we obtain from the stories and sketches that this slightly nostalgic woman of "quality" has, along with extremely honest observation and judgment, genuine interest in human beings and all that concerns them. Moreover the letters prove that her understanding and her solicitude are by no means confined to New England but can cross the Great Lakes, the Potomac, the Atlantic. She is eager for the Columbian Exposition in Chicago to improve our architectural trends; rightly she prophesies that it will. She importunes Francis Hopkinson Smith to protect that impecunious Virginia gentleman, Colonel Carter of Cartersville, from too dire indignities and misfortunes. She visits the Shaker colony in Alfred, Maine, and there strikes up friendship with a woman related to Stonewall Jackson. She maintains a fairly close acquaintance with French literature, shepherds visiting Frenchwomen about, and assists them in their literary projects. All in all, she causes even the doubters to acknowledge her as a wholesome, alert, and likable woman.
WILLA CATHER'S CALL ON HOUSMAN

By CARL J. WEBER

WILLA CATHER'S death on April 24, 1947, reminded a friend of the Colby College Library of the brief correspondence he had once had with her, and as a result all the communications that Miss Cather addressed to him were deposited a few weeks ago in the Library's file of Letters from Famous Authors. In one letter Miss Cather wrote reminiscently of her early friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett of South Berwick, Maine, and mentioned her own interest in Flaubert. The most valuable part of the correspondence, however, deals with Miss Cather's admiration for the poetry of A. E. Housman and with her call upon the poet many years ago. Since these letters authoritatively discredit a number of statements that have appeared in print at one time or another, it may be well to place Miss Cather's testimony on record here.

Shortly after Housman's death in 1936, one of his American admirers contributed a brief article to The Forum, in which he said:

I had written . . . to Mr. Housman . . . after an evening spent in . . . reading his poems to a few fellow enthusiasts. . . . Housman was a friend . . . but . . . I never tried to see him . . . I knew he had once fled when a group of admiring ladies from Pittsburgh headed by Willa Cather called on him in his rooms in Trinity College to present him with a golden laurel wreath.¹

When this passage was called to Miss Cather's attention, she replied under date of January 10, 1945: "If you are able to find where the writer . . . got his information, I would be obliged if you would let me know. The statement