February 1950

Three More Jewett Letters

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.13, February 1950, p.216-221

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
216 Colby Library Quarterly

11. *Angry Dust* (LP IX) by Dorothy Stockbridge, 1946.

I would be grateful for additions to this list, if other readers would kindly send them to me at the Ohio State University, Columbus 10, Ohio.

---

**THREE MORE JEWETT LETTERS**

Received too late for inclusion among the Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett which we printed shortly after the centenary of her birth are three which we here transcribe, in order to continue our sharing of these letters with the many admirers of Miss Jewett's work who have made themselves known to us since the first mention of her name in one Colby publication or another. The little volume of *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett Now in the Colby College Library* contained the text of thirty-three letters. Six more were included in the issue of this quarterly for November, 1949. The three here transcribed bring the Colby total to forty-two letters.

**Letter No. 40**

South Berwick Maine

Dana Estes, Esq[ui]re
301 Washington St.
Boston

My dear Mr. Estes,

Will you give my best thanks to your committee and say that I regret very much that I cannot accept their po-

---

1 Dana Estes (1840-1909) was born in Gorham, Maine. At the age of nineteen he went to Boston, entered the book business, and after being associated with various bookselling and publishing houses, he went into partnership with Charles E. Lauriat. Estes & Lauriat pub-
Yours sincerely
SARAH ORNE JEWETT

Letter No. 41
South Berwick, 22 January [1891]

Dana Estes Esq
301 Washington Street
Boston
Dear Mr. Estes

After writing my note of this morning I have remembered that Mrs. Richards of Gardiner [Maine] is probably in town at 241 Beacon Street, and that you will undoubtedly like to have her asked to your dinner. I am very sorry that I was compelled to decline, but I am kept here this winter by the serious illness of a member of our family, and it is impossible for me to count upon going to town even for a day. If all the Maine-born people are as proud of Mrs. Richards—the child of Maine's adoption—as I am, then they are very proud indeed! I hope that I am right in thinking that she is available for your dinner company on the 28th—but you are likely to know, since she is of your publishing household.

Believe me with best regards
Yours sincerely
SARAH O. JEWETT

Published books and also ran a retail store on Washington Street, opposite the Old South Meeting House. Estes became a member of the famous Boston Browning Society, and he was a leader in the movement for international copyright.

2 Miss Jewett's mother, Mrs. Caroline F. Perry Jewett, died in 1891. On January 9 Miss Jewett had written to Mrs. George D. Howe: "My mother has been very ill again and I am staying at home almost constantly..." (See Letters... Now in the Colby College Library, 1947, page 24.)
Dear Mr. Estes

I cannot refuse to let my name stand on such a committee, but I am afraid that I cannot promise to do much service. I am still very far from well, and find it most difficult to take up my affairs again. You give me great pleasure by what you tell me of Miss Hersey's interest and kindness in speaking of my work and for reading "Decoration Day." In fact the newspaper reports, brief as they were, gave me much pleasure. I do not stand exactly in the position of most of the members of the projected society of Daughters of Maine as I count myself entirely a Maine person and not a (transplanted) Boston citizen, even though I may spend many weeks of the winter within the limits of Ward Nine!

I thank you for your kindness and interest and I congratulate you on the success of the Maine Dinner.

Yours very truly

S. O. Jewett

On May 27, 1895, Miss Jewett wrote to F. M. Hopkins to say that she had been "seriously ill the greater part of the winter (after an attack of the nature of pneumonia) and had been forced to lay aside her writing affairs." (See Letters, Colby, page 42.)

This story had appeared in Harper's Magazine for June, 1892. A copy of A Native of Winby in the possession of Mrs. Frank J. Sprague contains, above the title "Decoration Day," a handwritten record of the fact that Sarah Orne Jewett once "told Mrs. Laura Richards that, if she were remembered by any of her stories, she should be glad if it might be this one," i.e., "Decoration Day." Mrs. Sprague herself is remembered by all Walt Whitman enthusiasts for her List of MSS., Books, ... and Memorabilia in Commemoration of the 120th Anniversary of the birth of Walt Whitman ... exhibited at the Library of Congress, 1939.
ALSO received too late to get into the centennial Bibliography of Sarah Orne Jewett, published by the Colby College Press, is a copy of Alice M. Jordan's From Rollo to Tom Sawyer and Other Papers (Boston, The Horn Book, Inc., 1948). Miss Jordan writes so charmingly about Sarah Orne Jewett that we are unwilling to allow the fact that the centennial anniversary has now passed to deprive our readers of the opportunity of looking over our shoulder at these words on page 159:

"Looking back at the animated procession of American girls moving through the books of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the figure of Betty Leicester stands out in the front rank. Sarah Orne Jewett, to whom we owe her, wrote no other full-length book for girls, but her short stories had been printed in young people's magazines constantly after their appearance in the Riverside, and older girls had become acquainted with her exquisite cameos in published collections and in the pages of The Atlantic Monthly. Some of them knew the delicate touch with which the lovely story of Sylvia, in A White Heron, had been etched.

"Betty Leicester begins and ends with a journey. Tideshead, where Betty Leicester visited with her great-aunts, becomes a real place before the summer is over. So do the new friends she made there, and the old ones who grew dearer seem real under Miss Jewett's skillful hand. Without excitement, without the accessories of modern invention, she weaves interest and charm into the story of an uneventful summer when a fifteen-year-old girl learned to live with other people and to know herself."

CHARM woven into the story of an uneventful summer! Of how much fiction written in mid-twentieth century can that be said? True, there are those who have said that Miss Jewett's charm is directly dependent upon
her ignorance of the harsher side of the world. Ludwig Lewisohn is among those who blindly ignore the evidence to the contrary. Says he: “Sarah Orne Jewett’s field of observation was excessively limited; the society she had before her to depict was the least fruitful that human artists ever sought to treat.” Miss Jewett herself did not think so. In “A Landless Farmer,” published in the *Atlantic* in June, 1883, she remarked:

“Heaven only knows the story of the lives that the gray old New England farmhouses have sheltered and hidden away from curious eyes as best they might. Stranger dramas than have ever been written belong to the dull-looking, quiet homes, that have seen generation after generation live and die. On the well-worn boards of these provincial theatres the great plays of life, the comedies and tragedies, with their lovers and conspirators and clowns; their Juliets and Ophelias, Shylocks and King Lear, are acted over and over and over again.”

In the light of these remarks it is safe to conclude that Miss Jewett found charm in the world, or created it in her pages, not because her field of observation was excessively limited, but because of the restraint she imposed upon her art. Even at the age of “perhaps fifteen,” she had “determined to teach the world” that life in rural New England was not what Ludwig Lewisohn and others have thought it to be; that country people have their “comedies and tragedies,” as well as people in big cities. “I wanted the world to know their grand simple lives; and,” so Miss Jewett declared, “so far as I had a mission, when I first began to write, I think that was it.”

Her vision of the grandeur of simple lives was spread far beyond the confines of New England, and it is possible that, through the instrumentality of *The Atlantic Monthly*, her quiet influence came to be exerted even in England. Miss Jewett’s “The Mate of the Daylight” and “An Afternoon in Holland” appeared in the July and December issues of the *Atlantic* in 1882, while Thomas Hardy’s novel, *Two on a
Colby Library Quarterly

Tower, was having its serial run in the same magazine. Hardy used the printed pages of the Boston periodical for the setting up of type for the first edition of his novel in bookform in London, an edition that appeared only a few months before the publication of Miss Jewett’s “Landless Farmer,” from which we have already quoted her words about strange dramas in quiet homes. Two years later Hardy moved into his new home, Max Gate. The first novel written there was The Woodlanders, in the very first chapter of which he speaks of “those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world . . . where, from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein.”

Is not this Miss Jewett’s idea exactly? The master of Max Gate may, of course, have come to it quite independently; but the fact remains that he may have read Miss Jewett’s words in the pages of The Atlantic Monthly. Stranger things have happened.

A decade later another Maine writer, Edwin Arlington Robinson, composed a sonnet “For a Book by Thomas Hardy” in which he declared:

I caught the world’s first murmur, large and clear,  
Flung from a singing river’s endless race.  
Then, through a magic twilight from below,  
I heard its grand sad song as in a dream: . . .  
Across the music of its onward flow,  
I saw the cottage lights of Wessex beam.

Without wishing to press the analogy too far, one may at least contemplate the possibility that Thomas Hardy of Wessex picked up an idea, if not a phrase or two, from Sarah Orne Jewett of Maine, and that through her quiet pages he saw the farmhouse lights of Berwick beam.