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The Shadowed Years: Mrs. Richards, Mr. Stedman, and Robinson

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IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT to overestimate the importance to Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935) of his friendship with Mrs. Laura E. Richards (1850-1943), his fellow poet and townsman from Gardiner. Daughter of Samuel Gridley Howe and Julia Ward Howe, Laura Richards grew up in Boston, and moved to Gardiner in 1876 when her husband, Henry Richards, became associated with his family’s paper mills in town. Some nineteen years Robinson’s senior, Mrs. Richards counted her brief biography, E. A. R., among her more than one hundred books. During Robinson’s youth she was Gardiner’s best-known writer, but Robinson did not meet her until late 1896. Yet, her friendship became so valuable to Robinson that when he left Gardiner in November 1897, he began to correspond with her regularly, a practice which he continued for the rest of his life.

One indication of the special importance of this correspondence to Robinson is the fact that he stipulated that Mrs. Richards destroy his letters written during the painful and difficult years before he had achieved poetic recognition. Laura Richards donated the surviving letters to Harvard, and in her letter accompanying the gift, addressed to Keyes D. Metcalf, the Harvard Librarian, she explained the course of their correspondence:

My correspondence with Mr. Robinson began when he left Gardiner in 1897. He had suffered a heavy bereavement, in the death of his mother, the year before. Successive deaths followed in his family, and during the shadowed years that followed, he directed, with insistence, that his letters should be destroyed; a direction which I carried out faithfully. When better days came and the tone of the correspondence lightened, I felt that his letters should be preserved, and told him so. He concurred —with some amusement—and from that time I kept his letters carefully.²

More is involved here than Robinson’s well-known lack of confidence in his letter-writing ability. The implication is that secure in the knowledge that his letters would not be available, Robinson—

son felt free to share his innermost and most troubling thoughts. The surviving letters will be included in the forthcoming, *The Collected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, being edited by Wallace L. Anderson for the Harvard University Press.

In the Edmund Clarence Stedman Collection at Columbia University are five unpublished letters from Mrs. Richards to Stedman (1833-1908), the New York poet, critic, anthologist, and stockbroker. They contain some basic insights into the Robinson-Richards relationship in the years immediately after Robinson left Gardiner. Mrs. Richards came to know Stedman sometime in the late 1880s, when she discussed her own poetry with him. These letters touch upon her meeting with Stedman and the inclusion of her poetry in his *American Anthology* (1900). But the central subject of the correspondence is their mutual friend, Robinson.

Immediately after receiving a letter from Robinson, describing his favorable impression of Stedman, whom he met in New York at the Authors' Club party celebrating the arrival of 1898, Mrs. Richards wrote Stedman a long letter giving him a detailed picture of Robinson. She wanted Stedman to take a special interest in Robinson and felt it necessary to supply the "key" to his difficult personality. Other letters include a recommendation that Robinson's poetry be included in the *Anthology*, a request for Stedman's assistance in finding a publisher for *Captain Craig*, and a description of her own relationship to Robinson. A review of this correspondence leads to the conclusion that having Mrs. Richards' portrait of the shy and reclusive poet was of real importance to Stedman in his successful struggle to win Robinson's friendship and help him in his adjustment to New York. These letters are important, then, for at least four separate reasons: they provide insight into Mrs. Richards' goals as a writer, Robinson's state of mind and body in leaving Gardiner in 1897, Stedman's seeming over-aggressiveness in seeking out Robinson, and the nature and depth of Laura Richards' sustaining friendship for Robinson. Taken as a whole, the letters help define a three-sided friendship, which proved to be of great importance to Robinson in making the crucial transition from Gardiner to New York City.

3 These letters are owned by Columbia University, and are published with the permission of the University. I am especially grateful to Mr. Kenneth Lohf, Librarian for Rare Books and Manuscripts, and two members of his staff, Mrs. Nancy Howser and Mr. Bernard Crystal.
Mrs. Richards' first letter to Stedman, written to thank him for his help with her poetry, is dated only November 19. However, since a letter dated January 8, 1898, refers to events mentioned here as occurring approximately ten years earlier, it is likely that the letter was written during the closing years of the 1880s.

Gardiner
Nov. 19th

My dear Mr. Stedman,
I do not know how I should thank you enough: how I could tell you all that you have done for me. It was so good of you to know just what I wanted! but I was sure you would, as soon as I saw the wise kindness of your face. Does it partly make up for all the weariness, to know that you can help people so? I hope—I think, I shall do better now. You will believe that I am very, very grateful; and that I do most heartily wish that "somehow, somewhere, somewhen," there might come within the quiet circle of my life the opportunity of doing something that might give you pleasure.

Always faithfully yours,
Laura E. Richards

It is impossible to know just what Stedman suggested to Mrs. Richards at this interview, which probably took place at his New York home. However, enough is known about the respective literary concerns of the two at this time to justify an effort at reconstruction.

As the decade of the 1880s was coming to a close, Laura Richards felt the need for criticism of her work. She was, as she recalls in her autobiography, Stepping Westward, "just beginning to emerge from the 'juvenile' stage of writing." Already a successful author of stories and verses for children, Mrs. Richards was primarily concerned with her poetry. "In those years I was writing a great deal of verse, ballads, lyrics, even essays in French form, enjoying myself immensely. I knew that my Hurdy Gurdy was not a lyre, but I found it extremely amusing and even inspiring to try for lyric tones on it." She received valuable criticism of the prose from her friend Sarah Orne Jewett, whom she visited frequently in South Berwick, but found it difficult to accept her stern admonition concerning the verse: "Don't scatter your fire! You are a prose writer: stick to your tool!" Try as she would, this was advice which Mrs. Richards...
simply could not follow: "I laid the words to heart, and have kept to them as well as I could ever since. The Hurdy Gurdy still holds out. Broken once or twice, it has been mended, and still grinds out its little tunes on occasion."4 The "Hurdy Gurdy" never seems to have been capable of approaching tones lyric enough to command the attention of adult readers. But a more difficult to please group of readers and listeners have given their approval to the songs sung by the hurdy gurdy when not attempting to mimic the lyre. Tirra Lirra, a compilation of Mrs. Richards' best songs for children, was a Junior Literary Guild Selection in 1932 and is now in its sixth printing with Little, Brown. In the realm of children's verse, Mrs. Richards had true inspiration.

It is hardly likely that Stedman would have counselled Mrs. Richards to give up poetry in favor of prose. Harriet Monroe has written that at the time of her visit to New York in 1888, Stedman was recognized as the "dean of American poets, the friend and helper of young aspirants."5 In Poets of America (1885), Stedman admitted the dominance of prose fiction and the weakness of the period's poetry with its concern for mere artifice at the expense of imaginative substance. But Stedman believed in the supremacy of poetry and he went on to predict its coming revitalization in America: "The twilight of the poets," he felt sure, would yield to "the dawn which may soon break upon us unawares."6

Despite his numerous literary and business commitments, he expended a great deal of energy in personal assistance to younger poets. He read countless manuscripts, and offered technical criticism, suggestion for publication, and perhaps most important, encouragement. In seeking out Stedman's advice, then, Laura Richards was looking to the recognized authority. It is likely that in encouraging her to continue the practice of poetry, he warned her against the use of elaborate verse forms. Since, as we will see from later letters, he recognized the value of her poetry for children, it is entirely possible that at this time he encouraged her to work in this form as well. Clearly, she came away with a new sense of purpose and a deep respect for Stedman.

4 Stepping Westward (New York, 1921), 369.
5 A Poet's Life (New York, 1938), 83-84.
6 Poets of America (Boston, 1885), 475-476.
The next stage of this relationship begins in 1896, when Robinson sent copies of his first book, *The Torrent and The Night Before*, to Stedman as one of the nation’s most prominent men of letters and Mrs. Richards as Gardiner’s most prominent writer. There is no record of a response from Stedman. Mrs. Richards saw the gift as an opportunity to meet Robinson, something she had wanted for a long time.

Mrs. Richards had heard “much” about Robinson during the preceding six years, chiefly from her son Hal and his friend James Barstow, a younger brother of Robinson’s contemporary and friend, Joe. From the boys, Mrs. Richards formed an impression of Robinson as a “very unusual person; a poet, and one of great promise . . . an omniverous reader of all good things.” She wanted to meet Robinson, but the boys warned her:

> He would not come; there was no possible use in suggesting it. He was reserved, almost a recluse in disposition. In short . . . he made his own acquaintances as he pleased, and there seemed to my young friends no likelihood of my being included in his choice. This was depressing to one who had not everyday the opportunity of meeting the literary men of the future."

So Mrs. Richards, unaware of the suffering behind Robinson’s reclusiveness, resorted to insensitive but forceful tactics in her note thanking him for *The Torrent*: “Prithee, good Hermit Thrush, come out of thy thicket!” Robinson, assuring her that he was “not a Hermit Thrush,” accepted the invitation, and so began the practice of making regular visits to the Richards family over the course of the year.⁸

Until his departure for New York in late November 1897, Robinson visited the family at least once a week, usually on Monday evenings, when the Richards’ oldest daughter, an accomplished pianist, played selections chosen mainly from the works of Bach and Beethoven. He stayed with the family at their summer camp. At other times, when the pressure of his life was particularly intense, he felt free to seek out the Richards family at their home. There he met John Hays Gardiner, Henry Richards’ cousin and an assistant professor of English at Harvard, who became Robinson’s good friend and helped him in a

⁷ *Stepping Westward*, 377-378.
⁸ *E. A. R.*, 49.
number of important ways. Mrs. Richards introduced Robinson to accomplished, intelligent, and sympathetic people who were enthusiastic about his poetry and who welcomed him into a creative household. If he felt the criticism of most of Gardiner for not working at an accepted profession, he could counterbalance this with the knowledge that he had won the acceptance and approval of the "best" of Gardiner. As Wallace L. Anderson has written, "Robinson's close association with the Richards family made his last year in Gardiner bearable and at times even pleasurable."9

An April 23rd letter to his regular correspondent, Harry DeForest Smith, suggests something of the pain of Robinson's life and the value of his relationship with the Richards as a means of overcoming that pain. After finding that he had stressed on three separate occasions that he had had a "good time," Robinson comments, "I repeat this, because it has been such a devil of a while since I had the last one. That must have been the last sawdust ride. You see I'm still a little boy, though hardly anyone suspects it here in Gardiner."10 One is reminded in this context of the lines from "Captain Craig," in which the narrator pays tribute to "the child that lives in us—/ The Child that is the Man, the Mystery,/ The Phoenix of the world."11 Laura Richards opened to Robinson an atmosphere in which it was possible for him to rediscover a vital part of himself in danger of being overwhelmed by the tremendous pressure of his life at the time.

I want to stress, however, that Robinson's relationship with the Richards family was far more than a pleasant social outlet, and it was not an easy one. Only gradually did Mrs. Richards realize the pain which Robinson was living through. In the meantime Robinson's own motives were somewhat ambivalent. He sought out the Richards family as an escape from the "hell" of his Gardiner life. But he was also working out an essentially tragic vision, one which insisted on confronting, not avoiding, "the damnation" of human experience. Quite naturally, then, he questioned the depth of the family, as we see in his next letter to Smith, from May 17, 1897:

5 Edwin Arlington Robinson (Boston, 1967), 76.
I got lonesome the other evening and went down to Mrs. Richards', where I found two daughters and a dog. I tried to make myself pleasant and entertaining to the daughters and I think the dog understood my position. At any rate he came up and let me scratch his ears again, and looked at me in a way that implied, "go ahead — you're getting along first rate." . . . . The only trouble with that family is they are too abnormally happy and unconscious of the damnation that makes up nine tenths of life. This world is a grind and the sooner we make up our minds to the fact the better it will be for us. That, to my mind is the real optimism. The world is as good as it can be, but God knows that's bad enough.12

Robinson would not accept a superficial relationship, and if the friendship were to continue and grow, it would have to be large enough to include a recognition of "the damnation." Mrs. Richards' next letter to Stedman clearly shows that she made this recognition, but before quoting it, I would like to discuss one other factor which threatened the relationship, Robinson's extreme social reticence.

Indeed, so insistently does Robinson mention his feelings of unease and discomfort while at the Richards', that one must doubt Hagedorn's assertion that "he slipped naturally into the family life."13 In September, long after he had been visiting the family regularly, he wrote to Edith Brower of a visit to the Richards' summer camp, where he felt compelled to make [myself] agreeable and interesting to five females, one Episcopal Dean, one scientific Professor, one Harvard instructor and one small dog . . . I washed dishes, lugged wood, stirred porridge and made breaks — some of them pretty bad, I'm afraid. I don't know why it is, but I've done this sort of thing all my life. It is only for the innate godliness of humankind that permits people to stand me at all, and I am not altogether sure that I am not a beast. I'm not a gentleman — never can be one — don't want to be one. I've lived alone so much that I have lost all desire to conform to the ways of decent people. All I am good for is to live by myself and write. What the writing amounts to . . . I don't know.14

Robinson's social difficulties were related to his unusually severe self-doubts. Although such gatherings were difficult, his friendships with Mrs. Richards and her family were vitally important to him. The key to this is that Laura Richards understood the damnation of Robinson's life and his needs as a writer.

12 Sutcliffe, 286.
This is made clear in her letter to Stedman of January 9, 1898:

Gardiner
Maine
Jan. 9th 1898

My dear Mr. Stedman,

Some years ago—ten, I verily believe, though it does not seem so long—you did me a great service; and did it so kindly and so wisely that I have been grateful to you ever since, and shall remain so. Do you remember? but it may be that you have to advise so many would-be poets that you cannot tell “tother from which” after a time.

Now I am writing to you again; not about myself this time, but to say a good word for one who is—or so it seems to me—a poet indeed. When my friend Edwin Robinson (author of “The Children of the Night,”) wrote me of his great pleasure in meeting you at the Authors’ Club on New Year’s Eve, I was greatly pleased too, and could not help wishing that he might see something more of you, and that you might know something of him. May I tell you, and in confidence? A proud, shy, sensitive lad does not like to be talked about, even in the most friendly way.

Edwin Robinson, then, has been until lately my near neighbor; but of so shy and recluse a habit that it is only within a year that I have learned to know him. I value him very highly; he is noble and high-minded, and has, I must think, a very real gift, if no great or commanding one. He has lived too much in the shadow. His life, in the very spring of manhood, has been saddened by much physical suffering, by cruel bereavement, and by other domestic tricks of a painful nature, for none of which he has been responsible, and in which he has shown an unselfishness almost heroic. He has borne all in silence, without a word of complaint; (it is only from his physician that I know of the torture he underwent at the time he lost—completely and for life—the hearing of one ear.)

But he felt that he must get away, and make a start elsewhere; and I am sure he is right in this. What he will do I do not know, save that he feels he has more to say, and must say it.

Dear Mr. Stedman, have I been over-tedious in telling you all this? I thought that if you cared for his poems—as I hope you may, I care so much for them—you would perhaps be interested to know something of the man himself, and he, poor dear lad, being afflicted with shyness and self-consciousness, might not be able to give you the key which I here furtively proffer—I am sure you will be friendly to him if it should come in your way, first because kindness is your nature, and secondly for love of poetry and third and lastly for the lad himself when you come to know him.

And if in this I have done the thing that I should not, please forgive me—“It is a duty strictly laid upon us,” as _______ says—but believe me, with sincere regard

Always faithfully yours,
Laura E. Richards

15 Mrs. Richards cites her source for this quotation, but her writing here is illegible.
This letter is enough to make one feel the justness of Hagedorn's description of Mrs. Richards as a "person of deep feeling and perception. New England was in every fibre of her, heroic, compassionate, dutiful, devout."16

Robinson came shortly to understand the nature of Laura Richards' concern for him. In a March 2, 1898 letter he told Edith Brower of his suspicion that the real purpose of a recent letter from Mrs. Richards to Brower was not "some sort of musical business," but a request "to find out whether I eat anything and if I go down Broadway in my stocking feet — with my toes out. She is one of the best and kindest women in the world but the motherly instinct is so rampant in her nature that it is rather given to worry about everybody — young or old — who is not under her immediate care."17 Robinson was right: in a later letter to Stedman, July 8, 1900, she describes Robinson as a "kind of adopted son of mine, and a very dear one."

III

When Stedman received Mrs. Richards' letter, however, he was hardly in a position to act upon her entreaty. He was seriously ill with what he termed "neuralgia," which afflicted him for much of the next two years. In the summer of 1899 he had a serious heart attack.18 He simply acknowledged Mrs. Richards' letter, and was unable to see Robinson before May, when a lack of funds forced Robinson to leave New York.

Mrs. Richards remained hopeful that Stedman would be able to help Robinson. In the summer of 1899 she received from Stedman's son Arthur a request that she select some of her verses for possible inclusion in Stedman's Anthology. Her response indicates that she was thinking as much about Robinson as about herself:

Gardiner
July 16/99

Dear Mr. Stedman,

I will surely send the verses; does time press, or can I have a little of it to look over my scrap-books and see what is best worth preserving? I am truly grieved to hear that your father is so far from well; I had

16 Hagedorn, 120.
17 Cary, 74-75.
18 For an interesting discussion of Stedman's many illnesses, see Laura Stedman and George M. Gould, Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman (New York, 1910), II, 503-511.
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hoped that by this time he might be quite restored to health. Will you give him my very kindest regards, please, and tell him how sorry I am; tell him, too, that I always think of him as my kind and helpful friend, and that if none of the verses I send seem good enough for such a collection, I shall accept his verdict in all cheerfulness; of course I am greatly pleased at his having remembered me and my hurdy-gurdy. — I wrote your father a year or more ago, about a young poet in whose work I am much interested, Edwin Arlington Robinson, but he was too ill to do more than send me a most kind note. May I say that I hope very much that something of Mr. Robinson’s may be in the Anthology? His little volume, “The Children of the Night,” seems to me of real and permanent value. I should be so glad to send your father a copy, if he has not seen it!

Faithfully yours,
Laura E. Richards

This letter served, no doubt, to remind Stedman of Robinson. The next letter from Mrs. Richards to Stedman, dated August 14, 1899, indicates that she had sent only “adult” poetry for possible inclusion in the Anthology. Stedman himself replied, requesting that she send selections from her poetry for children. His letter touched a responsive chord:

Gardiner
Aug. 14/99

But oh, most kind and lovely Sir, I never supposed you wanted children’s verses; I didn’t believe that this kind of heaven admitted little children, somehow. Stupid of me? yes, but I am stupid. Now I send you this very day two books, hoping that you may have a grandchild (are you old enough for that? I don’t know!) or a niece or nephew who may like the jingles. And if there should be anything in either one of them that fits one of your pigeon-holes, well; and if not, no harm done. But will you please be a little amused with my study of Ichthyology, in the Five Minute Stories?19 It was good of you to shake hands with me, dear Mr. Stedman, and I like every word you say, though it is sad that I “creak”. I might make a rhyme about that, don’t you think? But you don’t enclose the slip about age — it’s so consoling when other people leave out things! I shall be fifty years old the 27th of next February, and I care not who knows it.

I do hope you are gaining strength; I know something of the misery of weakness. I wish I might see you again some time; but always I am

Yours with sincere regard,
Laura E. Richards

I think I’ll copy a rhyme for you; it has never been printed, probably never will be, but you will understand. Pity the last verse is so bad, but I couldn’t seem to make it any better. I am much pleased that you like

19 Laura Richards’ Five Minute Stories was published in 1891 by the Boston firm, Estes and Lauriat.
the ballads. I wonder if you would think them good enough to print, a dozen of them, some day; I may do it, but I don't know. When I see what poor stuff the children have in their School Speakers, etc., I am sometimes tempted to try. — Please understand that I am not expecting you to use anything from these volumes; it may be too late for that even if anything should be suitable, but I just wanted you to have them, because I thought they might possibly amuse you. This note doesn't have to be answered. I know what it is to have to answer notes that need not have been written. One wishes the people had never been born, and I can't have you wishing that about me!

Unfortunately, the sentimental poems Stedman actually selected, "A Song of Two Angels," "Where Helen Sits," and "A Valentine" do not do justice to the light and playful quality of Mrs. Richards' verse at its best.20 However, by printing "A Valentine" he publicly recognized the value of her children's poetry. And he asked an assistant, Miss Ella M. Boult, to send Mrs. Richards a letter spelling out his suggestions. The following statement is taken from a letter dated September 30, 1899, transcribed from a letter-press copy from Stedman's Letterbook for July 1899 - January 1900. The Letterbooks are included in the Columbia Stedman collection.

The "Hurdy Gurdy" he says is splendid and would make a fine proem to a book of children's verse; and he added that you have a fine idea there. If you would write a book, he further said, for children, and not just a thing in it that isn't poetry you would distinguish yourself among women who write for children.

Certainly Mrs. Richards vindicated Stedman's prediction.

IV

In considering the difficulties Stedman faced in getting to know Robinson, we can see the particular value to him of Laura Richards' January 9, 1898 letter. Robinson moved to New York from Cambridge in late October 1899, and "throughout the winter," in Hagedorn's version of the story, Stedman had been trying ineffectually to establish contact with Robinson. . . . his letter to the author received no reply . . . and when, through Badger, he secured Robinson's New York address, he eschewed formality and called on him.

20 An American Anthology (Boston, 1900), 524-525.
21 Richard G. Badger published The Children of the Night (Boston, 1897).
Robinson received him, with visor down. Stedman was in his middle sixties, and ebullient as eighteen, a small slender man of enormous vitality, with a florid face, and wide, almost terrifying whiskers. His vocative personality struck upon Robinson’s New England reserve, and fell back, abashed but not discouraged. 22

Mrs. Richards had made Stedman aware of Robinson’s “shyness and selfconsciousness,” and if Robinson had actually greeted Stedman in this way, he would not take it as a personal insult. On the other hand there is evidence that the friendship between the two poets developed more rapidly and smoothly than the relationship described by Hagedorn. The Letterbook for July 1899 - January 1900 contains the copy of a letter, dated December 18, 1899, from Miss Boult to Mrs. Richards requesting “the further favor of directing the enclosed letter to Mr. Robinson. I sent a letter recently to him at a New York address that I thought was correct, but receiving no answer, I fear it never reached him.” Mrs. Richards forwarded Stedman’s letter to Robinson, who then replied directly to Stedman. Evidence for this is found in the Letterbook for January - October 1900, which contains a copy of a letter sent by Stedman’s granddaughter Laura Stedman to Mrs. Richards on July 11, 1900. There she reports that Stedman had been “amused on receiving an answer from Mr. Robinson to find the latter was living only two doors away. Grandpa called very shortly, and as both the young celibates (as he calls them) were lonely and miserable they became good friends.” At the time both men were living on Irving Place.

On a Sunday in May Robinson accepted Stedman’s invitation to visit his suburban home in Bronxville. Further indication that he understood what Robinson was going through may be found in his method of introducing him to the other guest of the afternoon, Ridgely Torrence: “Torrence — and the Night after. He’s a sad dog and so are you.” Torrence, who from that time became a close friend of Robinson’s, was himself deeply indebted to Stedman. In coming to New York in 1897, Torrence had immediately sought out Stedman, and through him was able to find a publisher and make his way in New York literary society. Stedman was a playful man, and his good-natured kidding caused Robinson “unutterable wriggles.” But

22 Hagedorn, 163.
he did not want the younger man to doubt his acceptance. Stedman "frankly" told him that he "liked him," something which caused Robinson "perturbation."23 With the hindsight of Mrs. Richards' January 9, 1898 letter, we can see why he risked that perturbation.

The major differences in age, social standing, and literary position would seem to preclude a close relationship between Stedman and Robinson. Actually, Stedman was going through an experience not terribly different from Robinson's at the time: he was starting a new life in New York and the future was not promising. On January 29, 1900, Stedman left the brokerage business, noting in his diary:

Sold my "Seat" in the New York Stock Exchange for $39,500 . . . .
This ends a membership of thirty and one-half years . . . and is like tearing up a tree by the roots . . . . It is the first chance, in seventeen years, for retiring with honor, though half the money goes to liquidate my dear comrade Baker who has carried me through evil times. And I am at best leaving the raft which has given me support since my ship was scuttled in 1883. Here at sixty-six, I don't know whether I have strength to live by writing, and I have no other means of support. It is a jump into the big sea — and to swim or sink.24

The "scuttling" to which Stedman refers was the embezzlement of his entire capital by his older son, Frederick, whom he had taken into his firm as a partner. Only by accepting loans from a number of friends was Stedman able to avoid bankruptcy and continue his business. On retiring seventeen years later, he was forced to use half the proceeds from the sale of his seat to repay these loans. Although not poor, he had neither the wealth nor the leisure for which he was envied.

Like Robinson, Stedman knew the frequent discrepancy between appearance and reality. While bringing his business affairs to a conclusion, he observed the public reaction and noted in his diary for February 23:

Am quite a sufferer in the cardiac region from the necessary work. Am almost humiliated in my own feelings by the eulogies lavished upon me by the press. I suppose I am honest in many matters — but such adjectives as "stainless" make me feel almost a hypocrite. Then, too, they speak of my "fortune." I would it existed. They think I am to have perfect leisure to write fineworks — whereas I am frightened at the prospect. — What do we know of one another anyhow? But I am

23 Ibid., 164.
24 Stedman and Gould, 1, 588.
out of debt for the moment: and I am glad to be liked — whether I deserve it or not. Still, on reflection, it seems to me a big “Stedman myth.”

The firm ground of shared experience served as a basis for the Robinson-Stedman relationship.

Their friendship developed rapidly and it brought some concrete results for Robinson. In his letter of May 18, 1900, Robinson was able to describe for Mason another visit to Bronxville:

Mr. Stedman is very much wound up by Moody's Ode. We talked about the man for nearly an hour the other evening and I was mighty glad to know that the greater part of the poem is to go into the Anthology which Mr. Stedman has been solidifying for the past three years — I say three, but it may be six. I believe my uncomfortable abstraction called Luke Havergal is also to be soused in anthological pickle — along with two or three others of the forlornly joyous breed.


Robinson's letters to Edith Brower during this period show that he communicated with Stedman freely on a wide variety of matters. A letter of May 16 lists Stedman as one of those whom he had asked to read “Captain Craig” in manuscript. Another letter from this time includes Stedman as one of those helping Robinson with a particularly troublesome word choice for “Erasmus.” Robinson respected Stedman's opinion on non-literary matters as well, as a letter of August 5 shows. He asks Miss Brower if she doubts that he has purchased the most resplendently subdued pair [of trousers] in New York? And how do you know that I did not start out the following Sunday on a triumphal tour to Bronxville, that I might show them to Mr. Stedman and Mr. Tudor Jenks? Mr. Stedman, by the way, is the most long-suffering of men and one to whom I am indebted in more ways than one — though none of these ways are of the material sort, as the trousers may have led you to suspect.

Already they have become good friends, relaxed in one an-

25 Ibid., 588-589.
other's company.

The best picture of this friendship is contained in a letter from Robinson to Mason, from August 27:

My chief recreation is riding to Bronxville on Sundays and consuming Mr. Stedman's tobacco. His doctor will not allow him to consume it himself, therefore my work in that line is a kind of profitable charity. Sometimes we go to the back lot behind his house, where we sit on ant hills and talk about farming and what is Art. He likes me because I wrote a thing called The Clerks and because I represent so many distinct varieties of imperturbable asininity. I am always pretty much the same, and I fancy my influence is rather restful. The man is not at all well, but he keeps up a show of cheerfulness and really likes to have all sorts of damned things come to see him. He has a world of good stories to tell of New York forty years ago and he quotes one golden saying by R. H. Stoddard which all of us should paste in our hats. "The public," says R. H. S., "will never know how much of your stuff you strike out."28

That Robinson looked to Stedman for his "chief recreation" gives some indication of the warmth of their relationship at this time, and of the sort of support the older man could give. But clearly, it was a two-sided friendship, one which was satisfying to both.

The knowledge that Stedman and Robinson had worked out a meaningful relationship was a source of "unspeakable pleasure" to Laura Richards, as she explains in her last letter to Stedman. Mrs. Richards was extraordinarily sensitive to the pain which Scribner's recent rejection of "Captain Craig" had brought to Robinson. The real purpose of this letter was to enlist Stedman's help in finding a publisher for the long poem.

North Belgrade.
July 8th 1900

Dear Mr. Stedman,

Edwin Robinson writes me that the Scribners have returned his manuscript, and I am so grieved and disappointed that I write to you for comfort. He is a kind of adopted son of mine, and a very dear one; it has been an unspeakable pleasure to me to know that he has won your friendship, and that it means so much to him.

Well! of course he takes this disappointment quietly and philosophically, as he takes everything, but — equally of course — it is a heavy one, all the same. What can be done? I hope he will try another publisher at once. Will you urge him to this? a word from you would have more weight than a hundred from me. I somehow feel as if he belonged with Houghton & Mifflin, but you may advise some other house.

28 Mason, 67-68.
I wonder — if you are feeling pretty well, and are not too busy — if you could find time to write me a line about the book itself. “Win,” as we call him, has always told me that I should not like it, yet he says you spoke well of it. I should so like to know what you think of it, and to know if you like the lad as much as he likes you. — I hope to have him here for a visit next month. — Happy thought! won’t you come too? This is a most beautiful place, a camp-cottage on the shore of a great lake, woods and hills all about, coolness and peace and beauty. You two poets could paddle about in a canoe, or sit under the trees, and talk about all the Nine Gods at once. Think about it, will you? no need of saying yes or no at once; turn the idea over, and see how you like it. I think Win will give our camp-life a good character.

You see I mean to get a letter at any price, either from your own hand or that of a kind secretary; and you know that I am always, dear Mr. Stedman,

Faithfully yours,

Laura E. Richards

Even before reading “Captain Craig” Mrs. Richards was determined to see it published. Neither Robinson nor Stedman accepted her invitation to vacation in Maine.

Stedman, however, was not able to “write . . . about the book itself” nor did he think Houghton Mifflin an appropriate publisher. He asked his granddaughter Laura Stedman to respond to Mrs. Richards, and I quote her letter from Stedman’s Letter-book of January - October 1900:

11 July 1900

Dear Mrs. Richards,

My grandfather sends you his love, and wishes most earnestly that he were able to write you himself. Some four weeks ago he had a slight set-back, owing to the hot weather and temporary anxieties. At present he is struggling to finish off his book, which has been delayed so long. He ought to have gone away long ago but as he has not got his book off his hands he may not; and as his doctors allow him only a meager pm allowance he cannot do any extra writing. I am now the sole secretary, and answer all his letters in his stead.

Yes! he was amused on receiving an answer from Mr. Robinson to find out the latter was living only two doors away. Grandpa called very shortly, and as both the young celibates (as he calls them) were lonely and miserable they became good friends. Grandpa read “Captain Craig,” and found it a very original production in choice and treatment of subject — if Browningesque in method. It is a poem which an old time New Engander like himself thoroughly understood. Learning that Mr. Robinson had confided it to Scribner’s reader Grandpa did what he could to secure it careful attention, though he believes it had already been presented by a friendly hand: still he shared Mr. Robinson’s fear that there was not much chance for it at Scribner’s. He says that in these days of historical novels and English books, with poetry looked upon as a survival of primitive literature, there seems no chance at all...
for work in verse: it is a condition and not a theory. As to Houghton, Mifflin & Co. Grandpa says they are at present the worst publishers in America for a new poet; although making great sales of standard literature and novels. If they had not had all his other works he would not have permitted them to publish his own last book of poetry. As it is they sensibly decline all new poetry offered them in favor of the younger houses—three of which latter have recently failed owing to their publication.

Grandpa says he thinks Mr. Robinson understands, as well as himself, the situation, and that the only thing for him to do is to adapt himself, as a man of letters, exactly to the current market until he gets such foothold as to enable him to print anything he chooses. Grandpa doesn't see how he can get Captain Craig printed but if his life is spared until next winter will assist Mr. Robinson in any direction that the latter man thinks feasible. He will be glad to do so for the affection he bears the young poet, and also because he is your friend.

Your invitation sounds all too alluring and Grandpa would paddle in your canoe, and sup beneath your cabin roof—but his troubles will force him to remain here this summer. It is seven years since he has had a vacation, and at present a change is needed greatly to affect his case. I know of no man so utterly tied up as he is, and of no one who needs rest and quiet the more. He desires to express his thanks and appreciation of your thought of him; and with my grandmother's love,

Sincerely yours,
Laura Stedman

There are no further letters from Mrs. Richards to Stedman in the Columbia Library, and the reason for the apparent break in the correspondence may well be Stedman's confessed inability to "get Captain Craig printed." Mrs. Richards, of course, was determined, and she worked hard with John Hays Gardiner to find a publisher for the poem. The two were forced to become financial guarantors before Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish the poem in 1902. Mrs. Richards kept her financial involvement in the project secret; after the failure of the family paper mills, the Richards family opened a summer camp for boys in 1900, and they were going through a period of financial difficulty.

Further, there is evidence that Stedman had serious doubts about "Captain Craig." In a letter of September 14, 1900, Robinson told Josephine Preston Peabody, that the poem "is very amusing and sometimes hilarious; and, as a whole, it is elevating—so Mr. Stedman says, though he doesn't care much for it."29 But in a December letter to Miss Brower, this ambi-

guity is gone: "Even Mr. Stedman, who is given to look kindly on all sorts of so-called innovations, fought rather shy of him."{30} Apparently, Stedman did not appreciate the humor which is basic to the poem. Robinson asked Miss Brower's opinion on this point in a July 12, 1901 letter. "Tell me if you find C. C. tedious in the opening. Stedman did; and if he did I suppose others will. I was cherishing a fond notion that it was rather frisky — for me."{31} Mrs. Richards may well have felt that Stedman was not an entirely reliable ally in the battle to win acceptance for Robinson's poetry.{32} She wrote to Gardiner of her "fear" that Stedman, if asked to write a review of Captain Craig, "would damn with faint praise, for he likes Win, but not (so W. says) his poetry."

Mrs. Richards had succeeded in her original purpose of eliciting Stedman's personal interest in Robinson, and she may well have felt that further letters to Stedman would serve no useful purpose.

Stedman's personal commitment to Robinson did not diminish. Despite his own financial straits, he loaned Robinson money and had his own ideas for Robinson's future. As Hagedorn has written, he "persuaded him to try his hand at journalism, giving him letters to the editors of the New York Evening Post and the New York Tribune."{33} During his mercifully brief career as a journalist, Robinson, working under Stedman's direction, succeeded in placing "The Balm of Custom," an editorial on the Presidential election, in the New York Tribune for Sunday, October 7, 1900. Robinson was paid $4.25 for his first, and last, venture into journalism.

It was not at all out of character for the genteel Mr. Stedman to urge such a divided career on Robinson: he had justified spending his working days on the floor of the Stock Exchange in the knowledge that he had been able to devote "all my better life" to poetry.{34} It is doubtful if Stedman ever fully understood the demands which Robinson had to make upon himself for his art. In a letter of April 12, 1901, Robinson told Miss Peabody that "Mr. Stedman was in amazingly good humor last evening and even went so far as not to disagree with me when I told him

{30} Cary, 132-133.
{31} Ibid., 144.
{32} Hagedorn, 180.
{33} Ibid., 172. The full story of this is told by Alice Meacham Williams, "Edwin Arlington Robinson, Journalist." New England Quarterly, XV (December 1942), 713-724.
{34} Stedman and Gould, II, 149.
for the fortieth time that I have not the journalistic faculty. He appears to have given me up for good — as far as any practical brain power goes, and hereafter I trust that he will not be annoyed or disappointed at anything I do.  

Robinson’s experience in journalism was not, however, without its benefits. For one thing, at least in the beginning, it brought him a certain pleasure. He explained to Mason: “You ought to see some of my prose. I am annoying all the gray-headed editors in New York with it, and I’m having lots of fun.” More important was the satisfaction which he derived from his success in the enterprise. Even his letter telling Stedman of his success reflects just how deeply beset he was by self-doubts:

Dear Mr. Stedman,

I enclose an article from today’s Tribune [enclosure missing] which may interest you as an illustration of what may happen to an hitherto dignified newspaper when you choose to say the word. If this should lead to anything, you may be sure that I have no false notions in regard to my own part in the matter.

If there were more men like you in the world, fewer men who can do the things I cannot do — or at any rate have never done — would be starving and shooting themselves.

Most sincerely yours,

E. A. Robinson

The very fact that Robinson downgrades his accomplishment at every turn indicates just how seriously he took the entire matter. At least in this, he gained the satisfaction of knowing he could do some of the world’s work.

The mention of starvation and suicide in the last line of the letter to Stedman reflects the tenor of Robinson’s life during the next three years. He sought to end many of his old friendships, but both Stedman and Laura Richards insisted on maintaining their relationships with him.

In a moment of black depression, he wrote Mrs. Richards that he wished to terminate even his correspondence with her. They had nothing in common, he insisted. They would presumably not meet again. Why then keep up a farce? She refused to accept her dismissal. With bold

37 Williams, 719-720.
Colby Library Quarterly

peremptoriness she reminded him of the importance of maintaining some regular touch with his own town and his old friends. He did not repeat his suggestion, and wrote once every two or three weeks as before. But he told her nothing of his external circumstances, and she had no suspicion how close to the wind he was sailing.38

Mrs. Richards saw that their relationship was more than a personal one: through her, as the representative of Gardiner, he was able to maintain contact with his own past.

Once again Stedman was forced to seek out Robinson. On one occasion he came to Robinson’s apartment with “a hundred dollars which I don’t seem to need. I wonder if you could make use of it?”39 But it is clear that their friendship cooled. Robinson resisted Stedman’s efforts to bring him into literary society. The communication between them was less than perfect: Stedman refused Robinson’s request to ask the editor of the New York Sunday World to stop publication of a very embarrassing “feature:” “A Poet in the Subway: Hailed as a genius by men of letters, Edwin Arlington Robinson has to earn his living as a timekeeper.” The request was carried to Stedman by the story’s author, Joseph Lewis French, but since Stedman felt such publicity “can’t possibly harm Robinson. It can only help him,” the story appeared in mid May 1904.40 Obviously the two had differing conceptions of the demands the poet should make on himself as well as the relationship of the poet to his audience. However, there is no evidence that Stedman’s role in the Sunday World affair, any more than his coolness to “Captain Craig” or his journalistic ambitions for Robinson, destroyed their relationship.

Robinson did not escape the poverty of these years until he accepted President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1905 offer of a position in the New York Custom House, and here the Richards’ older son, Hal, who with his friend Jimmie Barstow41 had warned his mother that Robinson would not accept an invita-

38 Hagedorn, 199.
39 Ibid., 193.
40 Ibid., 207.
41 Jimmie Barstow became a close friend and correspondent of Robinson’s. See Hagedorn, passim, and Robert Liddell Lowe, “A Letter of Edwin Arlington Robinson to James Barstow,” New England Quarterly, XXXVII (September 1964), 390-392. Incidentally, Lowe in footnote 7 identifies Camp Merryweather with the Richards family “summer retreat on Cobbossee Pond, Maine.” Actually, Camp Merryweather was the name given to their commercial summer camp for boys, which was built on “a strip of forest bordering on Belgrade Great Pond, one of a chain of lakes dropped down like a Titan’s necklace among the foothills of the Appalachian Range” (Stepping Westward, 301). The camp opened in 1900.
tion to visit, played a crucial role. As an instructor at the Groton School, he was so successful in introducing his pupil Kermit Roosevelt to Robinson’s poetry, that the boy shared his enthusiasm with his father. During the four years of the President’s term, Robinson, as a “Special Agent” of the U. S. Treasury, had a chance to regain his strength.

The last picture we have of Robinson with Stedman is from this period. On October 21, 1907, Percy MacKaye’s Sappho and Phaon opened at the Lyric Theater in New York, and the author recalled attending with William Vaughn Moody and my wife, Robinson, Torrence, George Grey Barnard, W. D. Howells and Stedman. The last brilliant old veteran, in full dress, nudged his young poet friends and spoke glowingly again of his ‘long-ago prediction of the dramatic renaissance of poetry.’

Before his death in January 1908, Stedman was confident that the “interregnum,” the “twilight of the poets” was, at last, over. He had high hopes that such writers as Moody, Torrence, MacKaye, Peabody and Robinson, would be successful in their struggle to found a “Poets’ Theater in America.” Under the stimulus of this movement, Robinson wrote Van Zorn and The Porcupine. His “The White Lights” is the finest expression of the spirit of these writers who hoped that

Here, where the white lights have begun
To seethe a way for something fair,
No prophet knew, from what was done,
That there was triumph in the air.

Today we recognize that contemporary expectations for the movement exceeded both its popular and artistic achievement. Robinson did not realize his own hopes of winning popular success as playwright or novelist. And with the failure of The Town Down the River (1910) to win critical recognition for his poetry, he experienced his last period of special difficulty. This time it was the 1914 bequest of Mr. Richards’ nephew, John Hays Gardiner, which enabled him to get through “the one time in my life when there seemed to be nothing ahead.... Somehow, I was always able to keep going after that. It almost

43 Collected Poems, 340.
makes a man feel that maybe there is somebody somewhere who makes it a business of looking out for people." In this review of the Richards, Stedman, Robinson interrelationship we have seen that Laura Richards and members of her family played crucial roles in helping Robinson survive the other periods of great difficulty: in coming through the "hell" of his Gardiner life in 1897, in finally publishing Captain Craig in 1902, and then escaping from its harmful aftermath in 1905. Laura Richards made it her business to look out for Robinson. Her letters to Stedman on Robinson’s behalf were but one aspect of this basic commitment. Perhaps the best description of her own motivation is her accurate prediction that Stedman would be of assistance to Robinson “first because kindness is your nature, and secondly for the love of poetry, and third and lastly for the lad himself when you come to know him.”


CHAUVER’S PILGRIMS AND CATHER’S PRIESTS

By Mary-Ann Stouck

In an article discussing the artistic and literary analogues which influenced Willa Cather in writing Death Comes for the Archbishop, D. H. Stewart argues that the organization and characterization of the book are derived more from the scheme of Dante’s Divine Comedy than Miss Cather admits, both works being based upon an exposition of the seven virtues and the seven vices, crowned by a Beatific Vision at the end. Stewart’s article is helpful in that it points to the logical period (the medieval) to have influenced Miss Cather in writing her American saint’s legend, and she may indeed have recalled the complex scheme by which the Italian poet organized his account of another spiritual journey. However, the fact that her general style of writing is more restrained and allusive than the somewhat strict equations of medieval allegory would allow makes

1 D. H. Stewart, “Cather’s Mortal Comedy,” Queen’s Quarterly, LXXIII (Summer 1966), 244-258.
2 For the case for Death Comes for the Archbishop as a saint’s legend, see D. H. and M. A. Stouck, “Hagiographical Style in Death Comes for the Archbishop,” forthcoming in University of Toronto Quarterly.