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Announcements and Comments

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Announcements and Comments

THIS IS the first issue of *CLQ* which I have prepared for the press though the essays for this and the next two issues have been selected by John Sutherland and the Editorial Board. I am happy (and relieved) that the board has agreed to continue, as have Donald Sanborn and Martha Shattuck, our excellent design and production staff, and P. A. Lenk, our subscriptions manager. The board will consider some changes in editorial policy and we will report in the first issue of 1987. On behalf of the board and the College, and with a real sense of personal gratitude, I would like to thank John Sutherland for eleven years of distinguished service as editor.

The pictures on the front and back covers are of watercolor paintings by John Marin (American artist, 1870–1953): “Stonington, Maine” and “Brooklyn Bridge.” Both are part of the permanent collection of the Colby Museum of Art, gifts of Mr. and Mrs. John Marin, Jr.

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NOTES FROM SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS has been fortunate in being able to obtain a significant archive of 39 letters written by Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909) to Theophilus Parsons from 1872 to 1881. Parsons (1797–1882) was a professor of law at Harvard University and a leading member of the Swedenborgian New Church. He wrote and lectured widely on behalf of the new theology. Jewett met Professor Parsons in August 1872 at Wells, Maine. He loaned her his books on New Church beliefs and she began to write frequently to him. The letters, some nearly confessional in tone, chart Jewett's growth from a girlish 23-year-old who frets that she is "a very useless girl, very careless about pleasing God" (Nov. 14, 1872) to a mature professional writer who, commenting on the popularity of *Deephaven*, points out that "it was a book written by a girl . . . a rarer thing than seems possible at first thought. I am beginning to like it myself in a curious sort of way, for I am not the one who wrote it any longer" (Feb. 13, 1880).

The letters of the first four or five years, often signed "with ever so much love," are long catalogues of her travels, activities, concerns and achievements: wondering at the Indians at an Episcopal Church service in Green Bay, Wisconsin; scouring the Berwick woods for wildflowers; studying Chambers' *Cyclopedia*; taking language and music lessons; worrying whether she was too much a tom-boy (she did like to gallop a horse, she admitted); wishing for a close girl-friend in Berwick; and always thanking Parsons for his help in her efforts to perceive the meaning of life. However, in the midst of these jumbled impressions occurs a sudden, clear perception of self, linked with close natural observation, that is characteristic of her best writing. "I amused Mary very much this morning while we were driving together by saying a certain apple-tree in a field was just like me. It hadn't been pruned and was a wilderness of 'suckers' and unprofitable little branches—I said; 'I wish I grew in three or four smooth useful branches instead of starting out here, there and everywhere, and doing nothing of any account at any point'" (Oct. 25, 1874).

That concentration of energies she wished for came in the experience of revising for publication the stories that comprise *Deephaven*. Beginning early in 1876 through January 1877, she "had to work very hard all the time" and it bothered her considerably because she was "not used to it" (Dec. 22, 1876). That she was greatly fatigued and often ill during this period is not surprising. She experienced enormous strain as she evolved

from a dilettante with unusual powers of observation and a felicitous writing style into a professional writer committed to the new “realist” mode of writing and concerned for the quality of her craft.

For five years she had worried with Professor Parsons about doing good with her stories. Now in 1877, while admitting that Parsons was probably right in wanting to see more “moralizing” in *Deephaven*, she countered his suggestions with her own aesthetic creed, drawn in part from her discussions with William Dean Howells about the stories in the book. “For myself, I like best to have the moral in the story—to make the character as apparent as I can . . . I always feel as if when I say anything directly as if it were awkward and that if the story itself doesn’t say it, it is no use to put it in afterward.” The important thing, she went on, is “to help people to look at ‘commonplace’ lives from the inside instead of the outside . . .” to see that such life “is so much pleasanter and more real, than what one calls ‘society life’ ” (June 8, 1877).

Doing good and pleasing Parsons was no longer her prime concern. “I never wished to work so hard over my writing or saw the need of it so clearly as I do now. It seems to me that I never felt so entirely that I am just beginning and have no end of things to learn and to do. And I see that I must try harder than ever to better myself if I want my stories to be really good” (July 28, 1877). As she took up her new role, she wrote far less often to Parsons. In her last letter to him just before he died, she said of her new book, *Country By-Ways*, that with its composition she had “found out some bits of truth for myself—and I know one other thing—that nobody has helped me to think more than you have” (June 12, 1881).

This collection of letters illuminates an important step in Jewett’s maturation. The items stand well by themselves, but they are also an important addition to, and are themselves enhanced by inclusion into, the larger Jewett collection of 205 letters already held by Colby’s Special Collections. Jewett’s letters to Parsons join the substantial sets of letters she wrote to Louisa Loring Dresel, 1888–1898, Horace Elisha Scudder, 1869–1901, John Thaxter, 1899–1901, and Sarah Cabot Wheelwright, n.d., which, among letters she wrote to others, are preserved and available for research in Special Collections. The Parsons letters were referred to by Francis Otto Matthiessen in his 1929 essay, “Sarah Orne Jewett.”

J. FRASER COCKS III
Curator, Special Collections