

June 1998

Introduction: Questioning Jewett-Centennial Essays

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Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 34, no.2, June 1998, p.81-82

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Questioning Jewett: Centennial Essays Introduction

“NO SUCH BEAUTIFUL AND perfect work has been done for many years; perhaps no such beautiful work has ever been done in America.” With these words, Jewett’s contemporary Alice Brown praised her groundbreaking work, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. As Jewett lovers will recognize, the “Centennial” in the title of this special issue celebrates the publication of *Country*. With one exception, the essays included here represent expanded and revised versions of the papers given by their authors at the conference that I directed as Dorothy M. Healy Visiting Professor at Westbrook College in 1996. Entitled “Jewett and Her Contemporaries: The Centennial Conference,” this meeting brought together scholars from around the world to honor Jewett and to explore her connections with other writers.

The contributions in *Questioning Jewett* offer a glimpse into the continuing diversity of the work being done on the writer. Entering from a new angle the discussions about the writer, race, and ethnicity, Jennifer Campbell’s essay compares *A Country Doctor* to a newly rediscovered novel by African-American feminist Frances E. W. Harper, *Trial and Triumph*. By taking an historical view of the novels, Campbell illuminates for us the different perspectives of white and black women on family and professional work, in the process complicating the notion of “feminism” and its relation to “everyday life.” Joseph Church’s study of *A Country Doctor* engages psychoanalytic theory to unpack Jewett’s negotiations of gender and sexuality both in the novel and in the writer’s own life. Although a number of recent critics (most notably Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse) have highlighted Jewett’s “lesbian” perspective, Campbell extends these conversations, focusing on this still-neglected novel as a map for rereading Jewett’s aesthetic and psychological development.

Lynn Dolberg’s essay on “A White Heron” directs its attention to the relationship between Jewett and her readers, pointing out that while the intimacy the writer establishes has been noted for some time, one important unnoticed feature of this intimacy is Jewett’s practice of silence at several levels. Such silence (and its companion, secrecy) serves as an (unpredictably) “revolutionary” feminist aesthetic strategy. Working in a similar though broader vein, Melanie Kisthardt’s essay explores the “unwritable” in Jewett, focusing on Jewett’s indirect conversation with (and revision of) other writers and her de-

velopment of an “imaginative realism” that enabled her to exceed the boundaries set by the male literary tradition and its representatives, and that opened an intimate space for women characters and readers. Paralleling Dolberg’s and Kisthardt’s interests in the relationship between Jewett and her readers, Betty Powell explores the narrative coherence of Jewett’s collection, *Old Friends and New*. Powell argues that the central story, “Mr. Bruce,” provides a matrix around which the rest of the stories revolve, as the women in each struggle to escape the narrative blocking imposed by conventional, patriarchal narrative.

Sarah Wider’s contribution takes the collection in still another, but related, direction. Exploring the particular intimate relationship between Jewett and her friend Sarah Whitman, who designed many of her book covers, Wider also explores, in personal as well as literary terms, the meaning of place, of beauty, and of history. Employing a form of what has come to be called “autobiographical literary criticism,” Wider evokes Jewett’s “unwritable” “meaning” for both her contemporaries and today’s readers, indicating that the traditional bifurcation between “academic” and “popular” readers is itself a fiction. Questioning Jewett as well as exploring Jewett’s own questioning, these essays as a whole indicate the continuing richness of the conversations on her narratives and the enduring power of her “beautiful and perfect work.”

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