

American Literary Centers (from Literature and Life) eBook

American Literary Centers (from Literature and Life) by William Dean Howells

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AMERICAN LITERARY CENTRES

One of the facts which we Americans have a difficulty in making clear to a rather inattentive world outside is that, while we have apparently a literature of our own, we have no literary centre. We have so much literature that from time to time it seems even to us we must have a literary centre. We say to ourselves, with a good deal of logic, Where there is so much smoke there must be some fire, or at least a fireplace. But it is just here that, misled by tradition, and even by history, we deceive ourselves. Really, we have no fireplace for such fire as we have kindled; or, if any one is disposed to deny this, then I say, we have a dozen fireplaces; which is quite as bad, so far as the notion of a literary centre is concerned, if it is not worse.

I once proved this fact to my own satisfaction in some papers which I wrote several years ago; but it appears, from a question which has lately come to me from England, that I did not carry conviction quite so far as that island; and I still have my work all before me, if I understand the London friend who wishes "a comparative view of the centres of literary production" among us; "how and why they change; how they stand at present; and what is the relation, for instance, of Boston to other such centres."

I.

Here, if I cut my coat according to my cloth, it should have a garment which this whole volume would hardly stuff out with its form; and I have a fancy that if I begin by answering, as I have sometimes rather too succinctly done, that we have no more a single literary centre than Italy or than Germany has (or had before their unification), I shall not be taken at my word. I shall be right, all the same, and if I am told that in those countries there is now a tendency to such a centre, I can only say that there is none in this, and that, so far as I can see, we get further every day from having such a centre. The fault, if it is a fault, grows upon us, for the whole present tendency of American life is centrifugal, and just so far as literature is the language of our life, it shares this tendency. I do not attempt to say how it will be when, in order to spread ourselves over the earth, and convincingly to preach the blessings of our deeply incorporated civilization by the mouths of our eight-inch guns, the mind of the nation shall be politically centred at some capital; that is the function of prophecy, and I am only writing literary history, on a very small scale, with a somewhat crushing sense of limits.



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Once, twice, thrice there was apparently an American literary centre: at Philadelphia, from the time Franklin went to live there until the death of Charles Brockden Brown, our first romancer; then at New York, during the period which may be roughly described as that of Irving, Poe, Willis, and Bryant; then at Boston, for the thirty or forty years illumined by the presence of Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, Hawthorne, Emerson, Holmes, Prescott, Parkman, and many lesser lights. These are all still great publishing centres. If it were not that the house with the largest list of American authors was still at Boston, I should say New York was now the chief publishing centre; but in the sense that London and Paris, or even Madrid and Petersburg, are literary centres, with a controlling influence throughout England and France, Spain and Russia, neither New York nor Boston is now our literary centre, whatever they may once have been. Not to take Philadelphia too seriously, I may note that when New York seemed our literary centre Irving alone among those who gave it lustre was a New-Yorker, and he mainly lived abroad; Bryant, who was a New Englander, was alone constant to the city of his adoption; Willis, a Bostonian, and Poe, a Marylander, went and came as their poverty or their prosperity compelled or invited; neither dwelt here unbrokenly, and Poe did not even die here, though he often came near starving. One cannot then strictly speak of any early American literary centre except Boston, and Boston, strictly speaking, was the New England literary centre.

However, we had really no use for an American literary centre before the Civil War, for it was only after the Civil War that we really began to have an American literature. Up to that time we had a Colonial literature, a Knickerbocker literature, and a New England literature. But as soon as the country began to feel its life in every limb with the coming of peace, it began to speak in the varying accents of all the different sections—North, East, South, West, and Farthest West; but not before that time.

II.

Perhaps the first note of this national concord, or discord, was sounded from California, in the voices of Mr. Bret Harte, of Mark Twain, of Mr. Charles Warren Stoddard (I am sorry for those who do not know his beautiful Idyls of the South Seas), and others of the remarkable group of poets and humorists whom these names must stand for. The San Francisco school briefly flourished from 1867 till 1872 or so, and while it endured it made San Francisco the first national literary centre we ever had, for its writers were of every American origin except Californian.



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After the Pacific Slope, the great Middle West found utterance in the dialect verse of Mr. John Hay, and after that began the exploitation of all the local parlances, which has sometimes seemed to stop, and then has begun again. It went on in the South in the fables of Mr. Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus, and in the fiction of Miss Murfree, who so long masqueraded as Charles Egbert Craddock. Louisiana found expression in the Creole stories of Mr. G. W. Cable, Indiana in the Hoosier poems of Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, and central New York in the novels of Mr. Harold Frederic; but nowhere was the new impulse so firmly and finely directed as in New England, where Miss Sarah Orne Jewett's studies of country life antedated Miss Mary Wilkins's work. To be sure, the portrayal of Yankee character began before either of these artists was known; Lowell's Bigelow Papers first reflected it; Mrs. Stowe's Old Town Stories caught it again and again; Mrs. Harriet Prescott Spofford, in her unromantic moods, was of an excellent fidelity to it; and Mrs. Rose Terry Cooke was even truer to the New England of Connecticut. With the later group Mrs. Lily Chase Wyman has pictured Rhode Island work-life with truth pitiless to the beholder, and full of that tender humanity for the material which characterizes Russian fiction.

Mr. James Lane Allen has let in the light upon Kentucky; the Red Men and White of the great plains have found their interpreter in Mr. Owen Wister, a young Philadelphian witness of their dramatic conditions and characteristics; Mr. Hamlin Garland had already expressed the sad circumstances of the rural Northwest in his pathetic idyls, colored from the experience of one who had been part of what he saw. Later came Mr. Henry B. Fuller, and gave us what was hardest and most sordid, as well as something of what was most touching and most amusing, in the burly-burly of Chicago.

III.

A survey of this sort imparts no just sense of the facts, and I own that I am impatient of merely naming authors and books that each tempt me to an expansion far beyond the limits of this essay; for, if I may be so personal, I have watched the growth of our literature in Americanism with intense sympathy. In my poor way I have always liked the truth, and in times past I am afraid that I have helped to make it odious to those who believed beauty was something different; but I hope that I shall not now be doing our decentralized literature a disservice by saying that its chief value is its honesty, its fidelity to our decentralized life. Sometimes I wish this were a little more constant; but upon the whole I have no reason to complain; and I think that as a very interested spectator of New York I have reason to be content with the veracity with which some phases of it have been rendered. The lightning—or the flash-light, to speak more accurately—has been rather late in striking this ungainly metropolis, but it has already



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got in its work with notable effect at some points. This began, I believe, with the local dramas of Mr. Edward Harrigan, a species of farces, or sketches of character, loosely hung together, with little sequence or relevancy, upon the thread of a plot which would keep the stage for two or three hours. It was very rough magic, as a whole, but in parts it was exquisite, and it held the mirror up towards politics on their social and political side, and gave us East-Side types—Irish, German, negro, and Italian—which were instantly recognizable and deliciously satisfying. I never could understand why Mr. Harrigan did not go further, but perhaps he had gone far enough; and, at any rate, he left the field open for others. The next to appear noticeably in it was Mr. Stephen Crane, whose *Red Badge of Courage* wronged the finer art which he showed in such New York studies as *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and *George's Mother*. He has been followed by Abraham Cahan, a Russian Hebrew, who has done portraits of his race and nation with uncommon power. They are the very Russian Hebrews of Hester Street translated from their native Yiddish into English, which the author mastered after coming here in his early manhood. He brought to his work the artistic qualities of both the Slav and the Jew, and in his 'Jekl: A Story of the Ghetto', he gave proof of talent which his more recent book of sketches—'The Imported Bride groom'—confirms. He sees his people humorously, and he is as unsparing of their sordidness as he is compassionate of their hard circumstance and the somewhat frowsy pathos of their lives. He is a Socialist, but his fiction is wholly without "tendentiousness."

A good many years ago—ten or twelve, at least—Mr. Harry Harland had shown us some politer New York Jews, with a romantic coloring, though with genuine feeling for the novelty and picturesqueness of his material; but I do not think of any one who has adequately dealt with our Gentile society. Mr. James has treated it historically in *Washington Square*, and more modernly in some passages of *The Bostonians*, as well as in some of his shorter stories; Mr. Edgar Fawcett has dealt with it intelligently and authoritatively in a novel or two; and Mr. Brander Matthews has sketched it, in this aspect, and that with his Gallic cleverness, neatness, and point. In the novel, 'His Father's Son', he in fact faces it squarely and renders certain forms of it with masterly skill. He has done something more distinctive still in 'The Action and the Word', one of the best American stories I know. But except for these writers, our literature has hardly taken to New York society.

IV.

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It is an even thing: New York society has not taken to our literature. New York publishes it, criticises it, and circulates it, but I doubt if New York society much reads it or cares for it, and New York is therefore by no means the literary centre that Boston once was, though a large number of our literary men live in or about New York. Boston, in my time at least, had distinctly a literary atmosphere, which more or less pervaded society; but New York has distinctly nothing of the kind, in any pervasive sense. It is a vast mart, and literature is one of the things marketed here; but our good society cares no more for it than for some other products bought and sold here; it does not care nearly so much for books as for horses or for stocks, and I suppose it is not unlike the good society of any other metropolis in this. To the general, here, journalism is a far more appreciable thing than literature, and has greater recognition, for some very good reasons; but in Boston literature had vastly more honor, and even more popular recognition, than journalism. There journalism desired to be literary, and here literature has to try hard not to be journalistic. If New York is a literary centre on the business side, as London is, Boston was a literary centre, as Weimar was, and as Edinburgh was. It felt literature, as those capitals felt it, and if it did not love it quite so much as might seem, it always respected it.

To be quite clear in what I wish to say of the present relation of Boston to our other literary centres, I must repeat that we have now no such literary centre as Boston was. Boston itself has perhaps outgrown the literary consciousness which formerly distinguished it from all our other large towns. In a place of nearly a million people (I count in the outlying places) newspapers must be more than books; and that alone says everything.

Mr. Aldrich once noticed that whenever an author died in Boston, the New-Yorkers thought they had a literary centre; and it is by some such means that the primacy has passed from Boston, even if it has not passed to New York. But still there is enough literature left in the body at Boston to keep her first among equals in some things, if not easily first in all.

Mr. Aldrich himself lives in Boston, and he is, with Mr. Stedman, the foremost of our poets. At Cambridge live Colonel T. W. Higginson, an essayist in a certain sort without rival among us; and Mr. William James, the most interesting and the most literary of psychologists, whose repute is European as well as American. Mr. Charles Eliot Norton alone survives of the earlier Cambridge group—Longfellow, Lowell, Richard Henry Dana, Louis Agassiz, Francis J. Child, and Henry James, the father of the novelist and the psychologist.



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To Boston Mr. James Ford Rhodes, the latest of our abler historians, has gone from Ohio; and there Mr. Henry Cabot Lodge, the Massachusetts Senator, whose work in literature is making itself more and more known, was born and belongs, politically, socially, and intellectually. Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, a poet of wide fame in an elder generation, lives there; Mr. T. B. Aldrich lives there; and thereabouts live Mrs. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward and Mrs. Harriet Prescott Spofford, the first of a fame beyond the last, who was known to us so long before her. Then at Boston, or near Boston, live those artists supreme in the kind of short story which we have carried so far: Miss Jewett, Miss Wilkins, Miss Alice Brown, Mrs. Chase-Wyman, and Miss Gertrude Smith, who comes from Kansas, and writes of the prairie farm-life, though she leaves Mr. E. W. Howe (of 'The Story of a Country Town' and presently of the Atchison Daily Globe) to constitute, with the humorous poet Ironquill, a frontier literary centre at Topeka. Of Boston, too, though she is of western Pennsylvania origin, is Mrs. Margaret Deland, one of our most successful novelists. Miss Wilkins has married out of Massachusetts into New Jersey, and is the neighbor of Mr. H. M. Alden at Metuchen.

All these are more or less embodied and represented in the Atlantic Monthly, still the most literary, and in many things still the first of our magazines. Finally, after the chief publishing house in New York, the greatest American publishing house is in Boston, with by far the largest list of the best American books. Recently several firms of younger vigor and valor have recruited the wasted ranks of the Boston publishers, and are especially to be noted for the number of rather nice new poets they give to the light.

V.

Dealing with the question geographically, in the right American way, we descend to Hartford obliquely by way of Springfield, Massachusetts, where, in a little city of fifty thousand, a newspaper of metropolitan influence and of distinctly literary tone is published. At Hartford while Charles Dudley Warner lived, there was an indisputable literary centre; Mark Twain lives there no longer, and now we can scarcely count Hartford among our literary centres, though it is a publishing centre of much activity in subscription books.

At New Haven, Yale University has latterly attracted Mr. William H. Bishop, whose novels I always liked for the best reasons, and has long held Professor J. T. Lounsbury, who is, since Professor Child's death at Cambridge, our best Chaucer scholar. Mr. Donald G. Mitchell, once endeared to the whole fickle American public by his Reveries of a Bachelor and his Dream Life, dwells on the borders of the pleasant town, which is also the home of Mr. J. W. De Forest, the earliest real American novelist, and for certain gifts in seeing and telling our life also one of the greatest.



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As to New York (where the imagination may arrive daily from New Haven, either by a Sound boat or by eight or ten of the swiftest express trains in the world), I confess I am more and more puzzled. Here abide the poets, Mr. R. H. Stoddard, Mr. E. C. Stedman, Mr. R. W. Gilder, and many whom an envious etcetera must hide from view; the fictionists, Mr. R. H. Davis, Mrs. Kate Douglas Wiggin, Mr. Brander Matthews, Mr. Frank Hopkinson Smith, Mr. Abraham Cahan, Mr. Frank Norris, and Mr. James Lane Allen, who has left Kentucky to join the large Southern contingent, which includes Mrs. Burton Harrison and Mrs. McEnery Stuart; the historians, Professor William M. Sloane and Dr. Eggleston (reformed from a novelist); the literary and religious and economic essayists, Mr. Hamilton W. Mabie, Mr. H. M. Alden, Mr. J. J. Chapman, and Mr. E. L. Godkin, with critics, dramatists, satirists, magazinists, and journalists of literary stamp in number to convince the wavering reason against itself that here beyond all question is the great literary centre of these States. There is an Authors' Club, which alone includes a hundred and fifty authors, and, if you come to editors, there is simply no end. Magazines are published here and circulated hence throughout the land by millions; and books by the ton are the daily output of our publishers, who are the largest in the country.

If these things do not mean a great literary centre, it would be hard to say what does; and I am not going to try for a reason against such facts. It is not quality that is wanting, but perhaps it is the quantity of the quality; there is leaven, but not for so large a lump. It may be that New York is going to be our literary centre, as London is the literary centre of England, by gathering into itself all our writing talent, but it has by no means done this yet. What we can say is that more authors come here from the West and South than go elsewhere; but they often stay at home, and I fancy very wisely. Mr. Joel Chandler Harris stays at Atlanta, in Georgia; Mr. James Whitcomb Riley stays at Indianapolis; Mr. Maurice Thompson spent his whole literary life, and General Lew. Wallace still lives at Crawfordsville, Indiana; Mr. Madison Cawein stays at Louisville, Kentucky; Miss Murfree stays at St. Louis, Missouri; Francis R. Stockton spent the greater part of the year at his place in West Virginia, and came only for the winter months to New York; Mr. Edward Bellamy, until his failing health exiled him to the Far West, remained at Chicopee, Massachusetts; and I cannot think of one of these writers whom it would have advantaged in any literary wise to dwell in New York. He would not have found greater incentive than at home; and in society he would not have found that literary tone which all society had, or wished to have, in Boston when Boston was a great town and not yet a big town.

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In fact, I doubt if anywhere in the world there was ever so much taste and feeling for literature as there was in that Boston. At Edinburgh (as I imagine it) there was a large and distinguished literary class, and at Weimar there was a cultivated court circle; but in Boston there was not only such a group of authors as we shall hardly see here again for hundreds of years, but there was such regard for them and their calling, not only in good society, but among the extremely well-read people of the whole intelligent city, as hardly another community has shown. New York, I am quite sure, never was such a centre, and I see no signs that it ever will be. It does not influence the literature of the whole country as Boston once did through writers whom all the young writers wished to resemble; it does not give the law, and it does not inspire the love that literary Boston inspired. There is no ideal that it represents.

A glance at the map of the Union will show how very widely our smaller literary centres are scattered; and perhaps it will be useful in following me to other more populous literary centres. Dropping southward from New York, now, we find ourselves in a literary centre of importance at Philadelphia, since that is the home of Mr. J. B. McMasters, the historian of the American people; of Mr. Owen Wister, whose fresh and vigorous work I have mentioned; and of Dr. Weir Mitchell, a novelist of power long known to the better public, and now recognized by the larger in the immense success of his historical romance, Hugh Wynne.

If I skip Baltimore, I may ignore a literary centre of great promise, but while I do not forget the excellent work of Johns Hopkins University in training men for the solid literature of the future, no Baltimore names to conjure with occur to me at the moment; and we must really get on to Washington. This, till he became ambassador at the Court of St. James, was the home of Mr. John Hay, a poet whose biography of Lincoln must rank him with the historians, and whose public service as Secretary of State classes him high among statesmen. He blotted out one literary centre at Cleveland, Ohio, when he removed to Washington, and Mr. Thomas Nelson Page another at Richmond, Virginia, when he came to the national capital. Mr. Paul Dunbar, the first negro poet to divine and utter his race, carried with him the literary centre of Dayton, Ohio, when he came to be an employee in the Congressional Library; and Mr. Charles Warren Stoddard, in settling at Washington as Professor of Literature in the Catholic University, brought somewhat indirectly away with him the last traces of the old literary centre at San Francisco.

A more recent literary centre in the Californian metropolis went to pieces when Mr. Gelett Burgess came to New York and silenced the 'Lark', a bird of as new and rare a note as ever made itself heard in this air; but since he has returned to California, there is hope that the literary centre may form itself there again. I do not know whether Mrs. Charlotte Perkins Stetson wrecked a literary centre in leaving Los Angeles or not. I am sure only that she has enriched the literary centre of New York by the addition of a talent in sociological satire which would be extraordinary even if it were not altogether unrivalled among us.



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Could one say too much of the literary centre at Chicago? I fancy, yes; or too much, at least, for the taste of the notable people who constitute it. In Mr. Henry B. Fuller we have reason to hope, from what he has already done, an American novelist of such greatness that he may well leave being the great American novelist to any one who likes taking that role. Mr. Hamlin Garland is another writer of genuine and original gift who centres at Chicago; and Mrs. Mary Catherwood has made her name well known in romantic fiction. Miss Edith Wyatt is a talent, newly known, of the finest quality in minor fiction; Mr. Robert Herrick, Mr. Will Payne in their novels, and Mr. George Ade and Mr. Peter Dump in their satires form with those named a group not to be matched elsewhere in the country. It would be hard to match among our critical journals the 'Dial' of Chicago; and with a fair amount of publishing in a sort of books often as good within as they are uncommonly pretty without, Chicago has a claim to rank with our first literary centres.

It is certainly to be reckoned not so very far below London, which, with Mr. Henry James, Mr. Harry Harland, and Mr. Bret Harte, seems to me an American literary centre worthy to be named with contemporary Boston. Which is our chief literary centre, however, I am not, after all, ready to say. When I remember Mr. G. W. Cable, at Northampton, Massachusetts, I am shaken in all my preoccupations; when I think of Mark Twain, it seems to me that our greatest literary centre is just now at Riverdale-on-the-Hudson.

PG EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Leaven, but not for so large a lump
Mark Twain
Not lack of quality but quantity of the quality
Our deeply incorporated civilization