

Literary Boston as I Knew It (from Literary Friends and Acquaintance) eBook

Literary Boston as I Knew It (from Literary Friends and Acquaintance) by William Dean Howells

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Contents

Literary Boston as I Knew It (from Literary Friends and Acquaintance) eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Page 1.....	4
Page 2.....	6
Page 3.....	7
Page 4.....	8
Page 5.....	9
Page 6.....	10
Page 7.....	11
Page 8.....	12
Page 9.....	14
Page 10.....	15
Page 11.....	16
Page 12.....	18
Page 13.....	19
Page 14.....	20
Page 15.....	21
Page 16.....	22
Page 17.....	23
Page 18.....	24
Page 19.....	25

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
I.		1
III.		4
IV.		6
V.		8
VII.		11
VIII.		11
IX.		12
X.		14
ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:		19

Page 1

I.

I do not think that such a fact would now move the fancy of the liveliest newspaper man, so much has the West since returned upon the East in a reflux wave of authorship. But then the West was almost an unknown quality in our literary problem; and in fact there was scarcely any literature outside of New England. Even this was of New England origin, for it was almost wholly the work of New England men and women in the "splendid exile" of New York. The Atlantic Monthly, which was distinctively literary, was distinctively a New England magazine, though from the first it had been characterized by what was more national, what was more universal, in the New England temperament. Its chief contributors for nearly twenty years were Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Whittier, Emerson, Doctor Hale, Colonel Higginson, Mrs. Stowe, Whipple, Rose Terry Cooke, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, Mrs. Prescott Spofford, Mrs. Phelps Ward, and other New England writers who still lived in New England, and largely in the region of Boston. Occasionally there came a poem from Bryant, at New York, from Mr. Stedman, from Mr. Stoddard and Mrs. Stoddard, from Mr. Aldrich, and from Bayard Taylor. But all these, except the last, were not only of New England race, but of New England birth. I think there was no contributor from the South but Mr. M. D. Conway, and as yet the West scarcely counted, though four young poets from Ohio, who were not immediately or remotely of Puritan origin, had appeared in early numbers; Alice Cary, living with her sister in New York, had written now and then from the beginning. Mr. John Hay solely represented Illinois by a single paper, and he was of Rhode Island stock. It was after my settlement at Boston that Mark Twain, of Missouri, became a figure of world-wide fame at Hartford; and longer after, that Mr. Bret Harte made that progress Eastward from California which was telegraphed almost from hour to hour, as if it were the progress of a prince. Miss Constance F. Woolson had not yet begun to write. Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, Mr. Maurice Thompson, Miss Edith Thomas, Octave Thanet, Mr. Charles Warren Stoddard, Mr. H. B. Fuller, Mrs. Catherwood, Mr. Hamlin Garland, all whom I name at random among other Western writers, were then as unknown as Mr. Cable, Miss Murfree, Mrs. Rives Chanler, Miss Grace King, Mr. Joel Chandler Harris, Mr. Thomas Nelson Page, in the South, which they by no means fully represent.

The editors of the Atlantic had been eager from the beginning to discover any outlying literature; but, as I have said, there was in those days very little good writing done beyond the borders of New England. If the case is now different, and the best known among living American writers are no longer New-Englanders, still I do not think the South and West have yet trimmed the balance; and though perhaps the news writers now more commonly appear in those quarters, I should not be so very sure that they are not still characterized by New England ideals and examples. On the other hand, I am very sure that in my early day we were characterized by them, and wished to be so; we even felt that we failed in so far as we expressed something native quite in our own way. The literary theories we accepted were New England theories, the criticism we

valued was New England criticism, or, more strictly speaking, Boston theories, Boston criticism.

Page 2

Of those more constant contributors to the Atlantic whom I have mentioned, it is of course known that Longfellow and Lowell lived in Cambridge, Emerson at Concord, and Whittier at Amesbury. Colonel Higginson was still and for many years afterwards at Newport; Mrs. Stowe was then at Andover; Miss Prescott of Newburyport had become Mrs. Spofford, and was presently in Boston, where her husband was a member of the General Court; Mrs. Phelps Ward, as Miss Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, dwelt in her father's house at Andover. The chief of the Bostonians were Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, Doctor Holmes, and Doctor Hale. Yet Boston stood for the whole Massachusetts group, and Massachusetts, in the literary impulse, meant New England. I suppose we must all allow, whether we like to do so or not, that the impulse seems now to have pretty well spent itself. Certainly the city of Boston has distinctly waned in literature, though it has waxed in wealth and population. I do not think there are in Boston to-day even so many talents with a literary coloring in law, science, theology, and journalism as there were formerly; though I have no belief that the Boston talents are fewer or feebler than before. I arrived in Boston, however, when all talents had more or less a literary coloring, and when the greatest talents were literary. These expressed with ripened fulness a civilization conceived in faith and brought forth in good works; but that moment of maturity was the beginning of a decadence which could only show itself much later. New England has ceased to be a nation in itself, and it will perhaps never again have anything like a national literature; but that was something like a national literature; and it will probably be centuries yet before the life of the whole country, the American life as distinguished from the New England life, shall have anything so like a national literature. It will be long before our larger life interprets itself in such imagination as Hawthorne's, such wisdom as Emerson's, such poetry as Longfellow's, such prophecy as Whittier's, such wit and grace as Holmes's, such humor and humanity as Lowell's.

The literature of those great men was, if I may suffer myself the figure, the Socinian graft of a Calvinist stock. Their faith, in its varied shades, was Unitarian, but their art was Puritan. So far as it was imperfect—and great and beautiful as it was, I think it had its imperfections—it was marred by the intense ethicism that pervaded the New England mind for two hundred years, and that still characterizes it. They or their fathers had broken away from orthodoxy in the great schism at the beginning of the century, but, as if their heterodoxy were conscience-stricken, they still helplessly pointed the moral in all they did; some pointed it more directly, some less directly; but they all pointed it. I should be far from blaming them for their ethical intention, though I think they felt their vocation as prophets too much

Page 3

for their good as poets. Sometimes they sacrificed the song to the sermon, though not always, nor nearly always. It was in poetry and in romance that they excelled; in the novel, so far as they attempted it, they failed. I say this with the names of all the Bostonian group, and those they influenced, in mind, and with a full sense of their greatness. It may be ungracious to say that they have left no heirs to their peculiar greatness; but it would be foolish to say that they left an estate where they had none to bequeath. One cannot take account of such a fantasy as Judd's Margaret. The only New-Englander who has attempted the novel on a scale proportioned to the work of the New-Englanders in philosophy, in poetry, in romance, is Mr. De Forest, who is of New Haven, and not of Boston. I do not forget the fictions of Doctor Holmes, or the vivid inventions of Doctor Hale, but I do not call them novels; and I do not forget the exquisitely realistic art of Miss Jewett or Miss Wilkins, which is free from the ethicism of the great New England group, but which has hardly the novelists's scope. New England, in Hawthorne's work, achieved supremacy in romance; but the romance is always an allegory, and the novel is a picture in which the truth to life is suffered to do its unsermonized office for conduct; and New England yet lacks her novelist, because it was her instinct and her conscience in fiction to be true to an ideal of life rather than to life itself.

Even when we come to the exception that proves the rule, even to such a signal exception as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', I think that what I say holds true. That is almost the greatest work of imagination that we have produced in prose, and it is the work of a New England woman, writing from all the inspirations and traditions of New England. It is like begging the question to say that I do not call it a novel, however; but really, is it a novel, in the sense that 'War and Peace' is a novel, or 'Madame Flaubert', or 'L'Assommoir', or 'Phineas Finn', or 'Dona Perfecta', or 'Esther Waters', or 'Marta y Maria', or 'The Return of the Native', or 'Virgin Soil', or 'David Grieve'? In a certain way it is greater than any of these except the first; but its chief virtue, or its prime virtue, is in its address to the conscience, and not its address to the taste; to the ethical sense, not the aesthetical sense.

This does not quite say the thing, but it suggests it, and I should be sorry if it conveyed to any reader a sense of slight; for I believe no one has felt more deeply than myself the value of New England in literature. The comparison of the literary situation at Boston to the literary situation at Edinburgh in the times of the reviewers has never seemed to me accurate or adequate, and it holds chiefly in the fact that both seem to be of the past. Certainly New York is yet no London in literature, and I think Boston was once vastly more than Edinburgh ever was, at least in quality. The Scotch literature of the palmy

Page 4

days was not wholly Scotch, and even when it was rooted in Scotch soil it flowered in the air of an alien speech. But the New England literature of the great day was the blossom of a New England root; and the language which the Bostonians wrote was the native English of scholars fitly the heirs of those who had brought the learning of the universities to Massachusetts Bay two hundred years before, and was of as pure a lineage as the English of the mother-country.

III.

The literary situation which confronted me when I came to Boston was, then, as native as could well be; and whatever value I may be able to give a personal study of it will be from the effect it made upon me as one strange in everything but sympathy. I will not pretend that I saw it in its entirety, and I have no hope of presenting anything like a kinetoscopic impression of it. What I can do is to give here and there a glimpse of it; and I shall wish the reader to keep in mind the fact that it was in a "state of transition," as everything is always and everywhere. It was no sooner recognizably native than it ceased to be fully so; and I became a witness of it after the change had begun. The publishing house which so long embodied New England literature was already attempting enterprises out of the line of its traditions, and one of these had brought Mr. T. B. Aldrich from New York, a few weeks before I arrived upon the scene in that dramatic quality which I think never impressed any one but Mr. Bowles. Mr. Aldrich was the editor of 'Every Saturday' when I came to be assistant editor of the Atlantic Monthly. We were of nearly the same age, but he had a distinct and distinguished priority of reputation, insomuch that in my Western remoteness I had always ranged him with such elders and betters of mine as Holmes and Lowell, and never imagined him the blond, slight youth I found him, with every imaginable charm of contemporaneity. It is no part of the office which I have intended for these slight and sufficiently wandering glimpses of the past to show any writer in his final place; and above all I do not presume to assign any living man his rank or station. But I should be false to my own grateful sense of beauty in the work of this poet if I did not at all times recognize his constancy to an ideal which his name stands for. He is known in several kinds, but to my thinking he is best in a certain nobler kind of poetry; a serious sort in which the thought holds him above the scrupulosities of the art he loves and honors so much. Sometimes the file slips in his hold, as the file must and will; it is but an instrument at the best; but there is no mistouch in the hand that lays itself upon the reader's heart with the pulse of the poet's heart quick and true in it. There are sonnets of his, grave, and simple, and lofty, which I think of with the glow and thrill possible only from very beautiful poetry, and which impart such an emotion as we can feel only

Page 5

“When a great thought strikes along the brain
And flushes all the cheek.”

When I had the fortune to meet him first, I suppose that in the employ of the kindly house we were both so eager to serve, our dignities were about the same; for if the ‘Atlantic Monthly’ was a somewhat prouder affair than an eclectic weekly like ‘Every Saturday’, he was supreme in his place, and I was subordinate in mine. The house was careful, in the attitude of its senior partner, not to distinguish between us, and we were not slow to perceive the tact used in managing us; we had our own joke of it; we compared notes to find whether we were equally used in this thing or that; and we promptly shared the fun of our discovery with Fields himself.

We had another impartial friend (no less a friend of joy in the life which seems to have been pretty nearly all joy, as I look back upon it) in the partner who became afterwards the head of the house, and who forecast in his bold enterprises the change from a New England to an American literary situation. In the end James R. Osgood failed, though all his enterprises succeeded. The anomaly is sad, but it is not infrequent. They were greater than his powers and his means, and before they could reach their full fruition, they had to be enlarged to men of longer purse and longer patience. He was singularly fitted both by instinct and by education to become a great publisher; and he early perceived that if a leading American house were to continue at Boston, it must be hospitable to the talents of the whole country. He founded his future upon those generous lines; but he wanted the qualities as well as the resources for rearing the superstructure. Changes began to follow each other rapidly after he came into control of the house. Misfortune reduced the size and number of its periodicals. ‘The Young Folks’ was sold outright, and the ‘North American Review’ (long before Mr. Rice bought it and carried it to New York) was cut down one-half, so that Aldrich said, it looked as if Destiny had sat upon it. His own periodical, ‘Every Saturday’, was first enlarged to a stately quarto and illustrated; and then, under stress of the calamities following the great Boston fire, it collapsed to its former size. Then both the ‘Atlantic Monthly’ and ‘Every Saturday’ were sold away from their old ownership, and ‘Every Saturday’ was suppressed altogether, and we two ceased to be of the same employ. There was some sort of evening rite (more funereal than festive) the day after they were sold, and we followed Osgood away from it, under the lamps. We all knew that it was his necessity that had caused him to part with the periodicals; but he professed that it was his pleasure, and he said he had not felt so light-hearted since he was a boy. We asked him, How could he feel gay when he was no longer paying us our salaries, and how could he justify it to his conscience? He liked our mocking, and limped away from us with a rheumatic easing of his weight from one foot to another: a figure pathetic now that it has gone the way to dusty death, and dear to memory through benefactions unalloyed by one unkindness.

Page 6

IV.

But when I came to Boston early in 1866, the 'Atlantic Monthly' and 'Harper's' then divided our magazine world between them; the 'North American Review', in the control of Lowell and Professor Norton, had entered upon a new life; 'Every Saturday' was an instant success in the charge of Mr. Aldrich, who was by taste and training one of the best editors; and 'Our Young Folks' had the field of juvenile periodical literature to itself.

It was under the direction of Miss Lucy Larcom and of Mr. J. T. Trowbridge, who had come from western New York, where he was born, and must be noted as one of the first returners from the setting to the rising sun. He naturalized himself in Boston in his later boyhood, and he still breathes Boston air, where he dwells in the street called Pleasant, on the shore of Spy Pond, at Arlington, and still weaves the magic web of his satisfying stories for boys. He merges in their popularity the fame of a poet which I do not think will always suffer that eclipse, for his poems show him to have looked deeply into the heart of common humanity, with a true and tender sense of it.

Miss Larcom scarcely seemed to change from date to date in the generation that elapsed between the time I first saw her and the time I saw her last, a year or two before her death. A goodness looked out of her comely face, which made me think of the Madonna's in Titian's "Assumption," and her whole aspect expressed a mild and friendly spirit which I find it hard to put in words. She was never of the fine world of literature; she dwelt where she was born, in that unfashionable Beverly which is not Beverly Farms, and was of a simple, sea-faring, God-fearing race, as she has told in one of the loveliest autobiographies I know, "A New England Girlhood." She was the author of many poems, whose number she constantly enlarged, but she was chiefly, and will be most lastingly, famed for the one poem, 'Hannah Binding Shoes', which years before my days in Boston had made her so widely known. She never again struck so deep or so true a note; but if one has lodged such a note in the ear of time, it is enough; and if we are to speak of eternity, one might very well hold up one's head in the fields of asphodel, if one could say to the great others there, "I wrote Hannah Binding Shoes." Her poem is very, very sad, as all who have read it will remember; but Miss Larcom herself was above everything cheerful, and she had a laugh of mellow richness which willingly made itself heard. She was not only of true New England stock, and a Boston author by right of race, but she came up to that city every winter from her native town.

Page 7

By the same right and on the same terms, another New England poetess, whom I met those first days in Boston, was a Boston author. When I saw Celia Thaxter she was just beginning to make her effect with those poems and sketches which the sea sings and flashes through as it sings and flashes around the Isles of Shoals, her summer home, where her girlhood had been passed in a freedom as wild as the curlew's. She was a most beautiful creature, still very young, with a slender figure, and an exquisite perfection of feature; she was in presence what her work was: fine, frank, finished. I do not know whether other witnesses of our literary history feel that the public has failed to keep her as fully in mind as her work merited; but I do not think there can be any doubt but our literature would be sensibly the poorer without her work. It is interesting to remember how closely she kept to her native field, and it is wonderful to consider how richly she made those sea-beaten rocks to blossom. Something strangely full and bright came to her verse from the mystical environment of the ocean, like the luxury of leaf and tint that it gave the narrower flower-plots of her native isles. Her gift, indeed, could not satisfy itself with the terms of one art alone, however varied, and she learned to express in color the thoughts and feelings impatient of the pallor of words.

She remains in my memories of that far Boston a distinct and vivid personality; as the authoress of 'Amber Gods', and 'In a Cellar', and 'Circumstance', and those other wild romantic tales, remains the gentle and somewhat evanescent presence I found her. Miss Prescott was now Mrs. Spofford, and her husband was a rising young politician of the day. It was his duties as member of the General Court that had brought them up from Newburyport to Boston for that first winter; and I remember that the evening when we met he was talking of their some time going to Italy that she might study for imaginative literature certain Italian cities he named. I have long since ceased to own those cities, but at the moment I felt a pang of expropriation which I concealed as well as I could; and now I heartily wish she could have fulfilled that purpose if it was a purpose, or realized that dream if it was only a dream. Perhaps, however, that sumptuous and glowing fancy of hers, which had taken the fancy of the young readers of that day, needed the cold New England background to bring out all its intensities of tint, all its splendors of light. Its effects were such as could not last, or could not be farther evolved; they were the expression of youth musing away from its environment and smitten with the glories of a world afar and beyond, the great world, the fine world, the impurpled world of romantic motives and passions. But for what they were, I can never think them other than what they appeared: the emanations of a rarely gifted and singularly poetic mind. I feel better than I can say how necessarily they were the emanations of a New England mind, and how to the subtler sense they must impart the pathos of revolt from the colorless rigidities which are the long result of puritanism in the physiognomy of New England life.

Page 8

Their author afterwards gave herself to the stricter study of this life in many tales and sketches which showed an increasing mastery; but they could not have the flush, the surprise, the delight of a young talent trying itself in a kind native and, so far as I know, peculiar to it. From time to time I still come upon a poem of hers which recalls that earlier strain of music, of color, and I am content to trust it for my abiding faith in the charm of things I have not read for thirty years.

V.

I speak of this one and that, as it happens, and with no thought of giving a complete prospect of literary Boston thirty years ago. I am aware that it will seem sparsely peopled in the effect I impart, and I would have the reader always keep in mind the great fames at Cambridge and at Concord, which formed so large a part of the celebrity of Boston. I would also like him to think of it as still a great town, merely, where every one knew every one else, and whose metropolitan liberation from neighborhood was just begun.

Most distinctly of that yet uncitified Boston was the critic Edwin P. Whipple, whose sympathies were indefinitely wider than his traditions. He was a most generous lover of all that was excellent in literature; and though I suppose we should call him an old-fashioned critic now, I suspect it would be with no distinct sense of what is newer fashioned. He was certainly as friendly to what promised well in the younger men as he was to what was done well in their elders; and there was no one writing in his day whose virtues failed of his recognition, though it might happen that his foibles would escape Whipple's censure. He wrote strenuously and of course conscientiously; his point of view was solely and always that which enabled him best to discern qualities. I doubt if he had any theory of criticism except to find out what was good in an author and praise it; and he rather blamed what was ethically bad than what was aesthetically bad. In this he was strictly of New England, and he was of New England in a certain general intelligence, which constantly grew with an interrogative habit of mind.

He liked to talk to you of what he had found characteristic in your work, to analyze you to yourself; and the very modesty of the man, which made such a study impersonal as far as he was concerned, sometimes rendered him insensible to the sufferings of his subject. He had a keen perception of humor in others, but he had very little humor; he had a love of the beautiful in literature which was perhaps sometimes greater than his sense of it.

I write from a cursory acquaintance with his work, not recently renewed. Of the presence of the man I have a vivid remembrance: a slight, short, ecclesiasticized figure in black; with a white neckcloth and a silk hat of strict decorum, and between the two a square face with square features, intensified in their regard by a pair of very large glasses, and the prominent, myopic eyes staring through them. He was a type of out-

dated New England scholarship in these aspects, but in the hospitable qualities of his mind and heart, the sort of man to be kept fondly in the memory of all who ever knew him.

Page 9

Out of the vague of that far-off time another face and figure, as essentially New England as this, and yet so different, relieve themselves. Charles F. Browne, whose drollery wafted his pseudonym as far as the English speech could carry laughter, was a Westernized Yankee. He added an Ohio way of talking to the Maine way of thinking, and he so became a literary product of a rarer and stranger sort than our literature had otherwise known. He had gone from Cleveland to London, with intervals of New York and the lecture platform, four or five years before I saw him in Boston, shortly after I went there. We had met in Ohio, and he had personally explained to me the ducal well-meaning of Vanity Fair in New York; but many men had since shaken the weary hand of Artemus Ward when I grasped it one day in front of the Tremont Temple. He did not recognize me, but he gave me at once a greeting of great impersonal cordiality, with "How do you do? When did you come?" and other questions that had no concern in them, till I began to dawn upon him through a cloud of other half remembered faces. Then he seized my hand and wrung it all over again, and repeated his friendly demands with an intonation that was now "Why, how are you; how are you?" for me alone. It was a bit of comedy, which had the fit pathetic relief of his impending doom: this was already stamped upon his wasted face, and his gay eyes had the death-look. His large, loose mouth was drawn, for all its laughter at the fact which he owned; his profile, which burlesqued an eagle's, was the profile of a drooping eagle; his lank length of limb trembled away with him when we parted. I did not see him again; I scarcely heard of him till I heard of his death, and this sad image remains with me of the humorist who first gave the world a taste of the humor which characterizes the whole American people.

I was meeting all kinds of distinguished persons, in my relation to the magazine, and early that winter I met one who remains in my mind above all others a person of distinction. He was scarcely a celebrity, but he embodied certain social traits which were so characteristic of literary Boston that it could not be approached without their recognition. The Muses have often been acknowledged to be very nice young persons, but in Boston they were really ladies; in Boston literature was of good family and good society in a measure it has never been elsewhere. It might be said even that reform was of good family in Boston; and literature and reform equally shared the regard of Edmund Quincy, whose race was one of the most aristocratic in New England. I had known him by his novel of 'Wensley' (it came so near being a first-rate novel), and by his Life of Josiah Quincy, then a new book, but still better by his Boston letters to the New York Tribune. These dealt frankly, in the old anti-slavery days between 1850 and 1860, with other persons of distinction in Boston, who did not see the right so clearly as Quincy did, or who at least

Page 10

let their interests darken them to the ugliness of slavery. Their fault was all the more comical because it was the error of men otherwise so correct, of characters so stainless, of natures so upright; and the Quincy letters got out of it all the fun there was in it. Quincy himself affected me as the finest patrician type I had ever met. He was charmingly handsome, with a nose of most fit aquilinity, smooth-shaven lips, "educated whiskers," and perfect glasses; his manner was beautiful, his voice delightful, when at our first meeting he made me his reproaches in terms of lovely kindness for having used in my 'Venetian Life' the Britishism 'directly' for 'as soon as.'

Lowell once told me that Quincy had never had any calling or profession, because when he found himself in the enjoyment of a moderate income on leaving college, he decided to be simply a gentleman. He was too much of a man to be merely that, and he was an abolitionist, a journalist, and for conscience' sake a satirist. Of that political mood of society which he satirized was an eminent man whom it was also my good fortune to meet in my early days in Boston; and if his great sweetness and kindness had not instantly won my liking, I should still have been glad of the glimpse of the older and statelier Boston which my slight acquaintance with George Ticknor gave me. The historian of Spanish literature, the friend and biographer of Prescott, and a leading figure of the intellectual society of an epoch already closed, dwelt in the fine old square brick mansion which yet stands at the corner of Park Street and Beacon, though sunk now to a variety of business uses, and lamentably changed in aspect. The interior was noble, and there was an air of scholarly quiet and of lettered elegance in the library, where the host received his guests, which seemed to pervade the whole house, and which made its appeal to the imagination of one of them most potently. It seemed to me that to be master of such circumstance and keeping would be enough of life in a certain way; and it all lingers in my memory yet, as if it were one with the gentle courtesy which welcomed me.

Among my fellow-guests one night was George S. Hillard, now a faded reputation, and even then a life defeated of the high expectation of its youth. I do not know whether his 'Six Months in Italy' still keeps itself in print; but it was a book once very well known; and he was perhaps the more gracious to me, as our host was, because of our common Italian background. He was of the old Silver-gray Whig society too, and I suppose that order of things imparted its tone to what I felt and saw in that place. The civil war had come and gone, and that order accepted the result if not with faith, then with patience. There were two young English noblemen there that night, who had been travelling in the South, and whose stories of the wretched conditions they had seen moved our host to some open misgiving. But the Englishmen had no question; in spite of all, they defended the accomplished fact, and when I ventured to say that now at least there could be a hope of better things, while the old order was only the perpetuation of despair, he mildly assented, with a gesture of the hand that waived the point, and a deeply sighed, "Perhaps; perhaps."

Page 11

He was a presence of great dignity, which seemed to recall the past with a steadfast allegiance, and yet to relax itself towards the present in the wisdom of the accumulated years. His whole life had been passed in devotion to polite literature and in the society of the polite world; and he was a type of scholar such as only the circumstances of Boston could form. Those circumstances could alone form such another type as Quincy; and I wish I could have felt then as I do now the advantage of meeting them so contemporaneously.

VII.

The historian of Spanish literature was an old man nearer eighty than seventy when I saw him, and I recall of him personally his dark tint, and the scholarly refinement of his clean-shaven face, which seemed to me rather English than American in character. He was quite exterior to the Atlantic group of writers, and had no interest in me as one of it. Literary Boston of that day was not a solidarity, as I soon perceived; and I understood that it was only in my quality of stranger that I saw the different phases of it. I should not be just to a vivid phase if I failed to speak of Mrs. Julia Ward Howe and the impulse of reform which she personified. I did not sympathize with this then so much as I do now, but I could appreciate it on the intellectual side. Once, many years later, I heard Mrs. Howe speak in public, and it seemed to me that she made one of the best speeches I had ever heard. It gave me for the first time a notion of what women might do in that sort if they entered public life; but when we met in those earlier days I was interested in her as perhaps our chief poetess. I believe she did not care much to speak of literature; she was alert for other meanings in life, and I remember how she once brought to book a youthful matron who had perhaps unduly lamented the hardships of housekeeping, with the sharp demand, "Child, where is your religion?" After the many years of an acquaintance which had not nearly so many meetings as years, it was pleasant to find her, at the latest, as strenuous as ever for the faith of works, and as eager to aid Stepniak as John Brown. In her beautiful old age she survives a certain literary impulse of Boston, but a still higher impulse of Boston she will not survive, for that will last while the city endures.

VIII.

The Cambridge men were curiously apart from others that formed the great New England group, and with whom in my earlier ignorance I had always fancied them mingling. Now and then I met Doctor Holmes at Longfellow's table, but not oftener than now and then, and I never saw Emerson in Cambridge at all except at Longfellow's funeral. In my first years on the Atlantic I sometimes saw him, when he would address me some grave, rather retrorsive civilities, after I had been newly introduced to him, as I had always to be on these occasions. I formed the belief that he did not care for me,

either in my being or doing, and I am far from blaming him for that: on such points there might easily be two opinions, and I was myself often of the mind I imagined in him.

Page 12

If Emerson forgot me, it was perhaps because I was not of those qualities of things which even then, it was said, he could remember so much better than things themselves. In his later years I sometimes saw him in the Boston streets with his beautiful face dreamily set, as he moved like one to whose vision

“Heaven opens inward, chasms yawn,
Vast images in glimmering dawn,
Half shown, are broken and withdrawn.”

It is known how before the end the eclipse became total and from moment to moment the record inscribed upon his mind was erased. Some years before he died I sat between him and Mrs. Rose Terry Cooke, at an ‘Atlantic Breakfast’ where it was part of my editorial function to preside. When he was not asking me who she was, I could hear him asking her who I was. His great soul worked so independently of memory as we conceive it, and so powerfully and essentially, that one could not help wondering if; after all, our personal continuity, our identity hereafter, was necessarily trammled up with our enduring knowledge of what happens here. His remembrance absolutely ceased with an event, and yet his character, his personality, his identity fully persisted.

I do not know, whether the things that we printed for Emerson after his memory began to fail so utterly were the work of earlier years or not, but I know that they were of his best. There were certain poems which could not have been more electly, more exquisitely his, or fashioned with a keener and juster self-criticism. His vision transcended his time so far that some who have tired themselves out in trying to catch up with him have now begun to say that he was no seer at all; but I doubt if these form the last court of appeal in his case. In manner, he was very gentle, like all those great New England men, but he was cold, like many of them, to the new-comer, or to the old-comer who came newly. As I have elsewhere recorded, I once heard him speak critically of Hawthorne, and once he expressed his surprise at the late flowering brilliancy of Holmes’s gift in the Autocrat papers after all his friends supposed it had borne its best fruit. But I recall no mention of Longfellow, or Lowell, or Whittier from him. At a dinner where the talk glanced upon Walt Whitman he turned to me as perhaps representing the interest posterity might take in the matter, and referred to Whitman’s public use of his privately written praise as something altogether unexpected. He did not disown it or withdraw it, but seemed to feel (not indignantly) that there had been an abuse of it.

IX.

Page 13

The first time I saw Whittier was in Fields's room at the publishing office, where I had come upon some editorial errand to my chief. He introduced me to the poet: a tall, spare figure in black of Quaker cut, with a keen, clean-shaven face, black hair, and vivid black eyes. It was just after his poem, 'Snow Bound', had made its great success, in the modest fashion of those days, and had sold not two hundred thousand but twenty thousand, and I tried to make him my compliment. I contrived to say that I could not tell him how much I liked it; and he received the inadequate expression of my feeling with doubtless as much effusion as he would have met something more explicit and abundant. If he had judged fit to take my contract off my hands in any way, I think he would have been less able to do so than any of his New England contemporaries. In him, as I have suggested, the Quaker calm was bound by the frosty Puritanic air, and he was doubly cold to the touch of the stranger, though he would thaw out to old friends, and sparkle in laugh and joke. I myself never got so far with him as to experience this geniality, though afterwards we became such friends as an old man and a young man could be who rarely met. Our better acquaintance began with some talk, at a second meeting, about Bayard Taylor's 'Story of Kennett', which had then lately appeared, and which he praised for its fidelity to Quaker character in its less amiable aspects. No doubt I had made much of my own Quaker descent (which I felt was one of the few things I had to be proud of), and he therefore spoke the more frankly of those traits of brutality into which the primitive sincerity of the sect sometimes degenerated. He thought the habit of plain-speaking had to be jealously guarded to keep it from becoming rude-speaking, and he matched with stories of his own some things I had heard my father tell of Friends in the backwoods who were Foes to good manners.

Whittier was one of the most generous of men towards the work of others, especially the work of a new man, and if I did anything that he liked, I could count upon him for cordial recognition. In the quiet of his country home at Danvers he apparently read all the magazines, and kept himself fully abreast of the literary movement, but I doubt if he so fully appreciated the importance of the social movement. Like some others of the great anti-slavery men, he seemed to imagine that mankind had won itself a clear field by destroying chattel slavery, and he had. no sympathy with those who think that the man who may any moment be out of work is industrially a slave. This is not strange; so few men last over from one reform to another that the wonder is that any should, not that one should not. Whittier was prophet for one great need of the divine to man, and he spoke his message with a fervor that at times was like the trembling of a flame, or the quivering of midsummer sunshine. It was hard to associate with the man

Page 14

as one saw him, still, shy, stiff, the passion of his verse. This imbued not only his antislavery utterances, but equally his ballads of the old witch and Quaker persecution, and flashed a far light into the dimness where his interrogations of Mystery pierced. Whatever doubt there can be of the fate of other New England poets in the great and final account, it seems to me that certain of these pieces make his place secure.

There is great inequality in his work, and I felt this so strongly that when I came to have full charge of the Magazine, I ventured once to distinguish. He sent me a poem, and I had the temerity to return it, and beg him for something else. He magnanimously refrained from all show of offence, and after a while, when he had printed the poem elsewhere, he gave me another. By this time, I perceived that I had been wrong, not as to the poem returned, but as to my function regarding him and such as he. I had made my reflections, and never again did I venture to pass upon what contributors of his quality sent me. I took it and printed it, and praised the gods; and even now I think that with such men it was not my duty to play the censor in the periodical which they had made what it was. They had set it in authority over American literature, and it was not for me to put myself in authority over them. Their fame was in their own keeping, and it was not my part to guard it against them.

After that experience I not only practised an eager acquiescence in their wish to reach the public through the Atlantic, but I used all the delicacy I was master of in bowing the way to them. Sometimes my utmost did not avail, or more strictly speaking it did not avail in one instance with Emerson. He had given me upon much entreaty a poem which was one of his greatest and best, but the proof-reader found a nominative at odds with its verb. We had some trouble in reconciling them, and some other delays, and meanwhile Doctor Holmes offered me a poem for the same number. I now doubted whether I should get Emerson's poem back in time for it, but unluckily the proof did come back in time, and then I had to choose between my poets, or acquaint them with the state of the case, and let them choose what I should do. I really felt that Doctor Holmes had the right to precedence, since Emerson had withheld his proof so long that I could not count upon it; but I wrote to Emerson, and asked (as nearly as I can remember) whether he would consent to let me put his poem over to the next number, or would prefer to have it appear in the same number with Doctor Holmes's; the subjects were cognate, and I had my misgivings. He wrote me back to "return the proofs and break up the forms." I could not go to this iconoclastic extreme with the electrotypes of the magazine, but I could return the proofs. I did so, feeling that I had done my possible, and silently grieving that there could be such ire in heavenly minds.

X.

Page 15

Emerson, as I say, I had once met in Cambridge, but Whittier never; and I have a feeling that poet as Cambridge felt him to be, she had her reservations concerning him. I cannot put these into words which would not oversay them, but they were akin to those she might have refined upon in regard to Mrs. Stowe. Neither of these great writers would have appeared to Cambridge of the last literary quality; their fame was with a world too vast to be the test that her own

“One entire and perfect crysolite”

would have formed. Whittier in fact had not arrived at the clear splendor of his later work without some earlier turbidity; he was still from time to time capable of a false rhyme, like morn and dawn. As for the author of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ her syntax was such a snare to her that it sometimes needed the combined skill of all the proof-readers and the assistant editor to extricate her. Of course, nothing was ever written into her work, but in changes of diction, in correction of solecisms, in transposition of phrases, the text was largely rewritten on the margin of her proofs. The soul of her art was present, but the form was so often absent, that when it was clothed on anew, it would have been hard to say whose cut the garment was of in many places. In fact, the proof-reading of the ‘Atlantic Monthly’ was something almost fearfully scrupulous and perfect. The proofs were first read by the under proof-reader in the printing-office; then the head reader passed them to me perfectly clean as to typography, with his own abundant and most intelligent comments on the literature; and then I read them, making what changes I chose, and verifying every quotation, every date, every geographical and biographical name, every foreign word to the last accent, every technical and scientific term. Where it was possible or at all desirable the proof was next submitted to the author. When it came back to me, I revised it, accepting or rejecting the author’s judgment according as he was entitled by his ability and knowledge or not to have them. The proof now went to the printers for correction; they sent it again to the head reader, who carefully revised it and returned it again to me. I read it a second time, and it was again corrected. After this it was revised in the office and sent to the stereotyper, from whom it came to the head reader for a last revision in the plates.

It would not do to say how many of the first American writers owed their correctness in print to the zeal of our proof-reading, but I may say that there were very few who did not owe something. The wisest and ablest were the most patient and grateful, like Mrs. Stowe, under correction; it was only the beginners and the more ignorant who were angry; and almost always the proof-reading editor had his way on disputed points. I look back now, with respectful amazement at my proficiency in detecting the errors of the great as well as the little. I was able to discover mistakes even in the classical quotations of the deeply lettered Sumner, and I remember, in the earliest years of my service on the Atlantic, waiting in this statesman’s study amidst the prints and engravings that attested his personal resemblance to Edmund Burke, with his proofs in my hand and my heart in my mouth, to submit my doubts of his Latinity. I forget how he received them; but he was not a very gracious person.

Page 16

Mrs. Stowe was a gracious person, and carried into age the inalienable charm of a woman who must have been very, charming earlier. I met her only at the Fieldses' in Boston, where one night I witnessed a controversy between her and Doctor Holmes concerning homoeopathy and allopathy which lasted well through dinner. After this lapse of time, I cannot tell how the affair ended, but I feel sure of the liking with which Mrs. Stowe inspired me. There was something very simple, very motherly in her, and something divinely sincere. She was quite the person to take 'au grand sérieux' the monstrous imaginations of Lady Byron's jealousy and to feel it on her conscience to make public report of them when she conceived that the time had come to do so.

In Francis Parkman I knew much later than in some others a differentiation of the New England type which was not less characteristic. He, like so many other Boston men of letters, was of patrician family, and of those easy fortunes which Clio prefers her sons to be of; but he paid for these advantages by the suffering in which he wrought at what is, I suppose, our greatest history. He wrought at it piecemeal, and sometimes only by moments, when the terrible head aches which tormented him, and the disorder of the heart which threatened his life, allowed him a brief respite for the task which was dear to him. He must have been more than a quarter of a century in completing it, and in this time, as he once told me, it had given him a day-laborer's wages; but of course money was the least return he wished from it. I read the regularly successive volumes of 'The Jesuits in North America, The Old Regime in Canada', the 'Wolfe and Montcalm', and the others that went to make up the whole history with a sufficiently noisy enthusiasm, and our acquaintance began by his expressing his gratification with the praises of them that I had put in print. We entered into relations as contributor and editor, and I know that he was pleased with my eagerness to get as many detachable chapters from the book in hand as he could give me for the magazine, but he was of too fine a politeness to make this the occasion of his first coming to see me. He had walked out to Cambridge, where I then lived, in pursuance of a regimen which, I believe, finally built up his health; that it was unsparing, I can testify from my own share in one of his constitutionals in Boston, many years later.

His experience in laying the groundwork for his history, and his researches in making it thorough, were such as to have liberated him to the knowledge of other manners and ideals, but he remained strictly a Bostonian, and as immutably of the Boston social and literary faith as any I knew in that capital of accomplished facts. He had lived like an Indian among the wild Western tribes; he consorted with the Canadian archaeologists in their mousings among the colonial archives of their fallen state; every year he went to Quebec or Paris to study the history of New France

Page 17

in the original documents; European society was open to him everywhere; but he had those limitations which I nearly always found in the Boston men, I remember his talking to me of 'The Rise of Silas Lapham', in a somewhat troubled and uncertain strain, and interpreting his rise as the achievement of social recognition, without much or at all liking it or me for it. I did not think it my part to point out that I had supposed the rise to be a moral one; and later I fell under his condemnation for certain high crimes and misdemeanors I had been guilty of against a well-known ideal in fiction. These in fact constituted lese-majesty of romanticism, which seemed to be disproportionately dear to a man who was in his own way trying to tell the truth of human nature as I was in mine. His displeasures passed, however, and my last meeting with our greatest historian, as I think him, was of unalloyed friendliness. He came to me during my final year in Boston for nothing apparently but to tell me of his liking for a book of mine describing boy-life in Southern Ohio a half-century ago. He wished to talk about many points of this, which he found the same as his own boylife in the neighborhood of Boston; and we could agree that the life of the Anglo-Saxon boy was pretty much the same everywhere. He had helped himself into my apartment with a crutch, but I do not remember how he had fallen lame. It was the end of his long walks, I believe, and not long afterwards I had the grief to read of his death. I noticed that perhaps through his enforced quiet, he had put on weight; his fine face was full; whereas when I first knew him he was almost delicately thin of figure and feature. He was always of a distinguished presence, and his face had a great distinction.

It had not the appealing charm I found in the face of James Parton, another historian I knew earlier in my Boston days. I cannot say how much his books, once so worthily popular, are now known but I have an abiding sense of their excellence. I have not read the 'Life of Voltaire', which was the last, but all the rest, from the first, I have read, and if there are better American biographies than those of Franklin or of Jefferson, I could not say where to find them. The Greeley and the Burr were younger books, and so was the Jackson, and they were not nearly so good; but to all the author had imparted the valuable humanity in which he abounded. He was never of the fine world of literature, the world that sniffs and sneers, and abashes the simpler-hearted reader. But he was a true artist, and English born as he was, he divined American character as few Americans have done. He was a man of eminent courage, and in the days when to be an agnostic was to be almost an outcast, he had the heart to say of the Mysteries, that he did not know. He outlived the condemnation that this brought, and I think that no man ever came near him without in some measure loving him. To me he was of a most winning personality, which his

Page 18

strong, gentle face expressed, and a cast in the eye which he could not bring to bear directly upon his vis-a-vis, endeared. I never met him without wishing more of his company, for he seldom failed to say something to whatever was most humane and most modern in me. Our last meeting was at Newburyport, whither he had long before removed from New York, and where in the serene atmosphere of the ancient Puritan town he found leisure and inspiration for his work. He was not then engaged upon any considerable task, and he had aged and broken somewhat. But the old geniality, the old warmth glowed in him, and made a summer amidst the storm of snow that blinded the wintry air without. A new light had then lately come into my life, by which I saw all things that did not somehow tell for human brotherhood dwarfish and ugly, and he listened, as I imagined, to what I had to say with the tolerant sympathy of a man who has been a long time thinking those things, and views with a certain amusement the zeal of the fresh discoverer.

There was yet another historian in Boston, whose acquaintance I made later than either Parkman's or Parton's, and whose very recent death leaves me with the grief of a friend. No one indeed, could meet John Codman Ropes without wishing to be his friend, or without finding a friend in him. He had his likes and his dislikes, but he could have had no enmities except for evil and meanness. I never knew a man of higher soul, of sweeter nature, and his whole life was a monument of character. It cannot wound him now to speak of the cruel deformity which came upon him in his boyhood, and haunted all his after days with suffering. His gentle face showed the pain which is always the part of the hunchback, but nothing else in him confessed a sense of his affliction, and the resolute activity of his mind denied it in every way. He was, as is well known, a very able lawyer, in full practice, while he was making his studies of military history, and winning recognition for almost unique insight and thoroughness in that direction, though I believe that when he came to embody the results in those extraordinary volumes recording the battles of our civil war, he retired from the law in some measure. He knew these battles more accurately than the generals who fought them, and he was of a like proficiency in the European wars from the time of Napoleon down to our own time. I have heard a story, which I cannot vouch for, that when foreknowledge of his affliction, at the outbreak of our civil war, forbade him to be a soldier, he became a student of soldiership, and wreaked in that sort the passion of his most gallant spirit. But whether this was true or not, it is certain that he pursued the study with a devotion which never blinded him to the atrocity of war. Some wars he could excuse and even justify, but for any war that seemed wanton or aggressive, he had only abhorrence.

Page 19

The last summer of a score that I had known him, we sat on the veranda of his cottage at York Harbor, and looked out over the moonlit sea, and he talked of the high and true things, with the inextinguishable zest for the inquiry which I always found in him, though he was then feeling the approaches of the malady which was so soon to end all groping in these shadows for him. He must have faced the fact with the same courage and the same trust with which he faced all facts. From the first I found him a deeply religious man, not only in the ecclesiastical sense, but in the more mystical meanings of the word, and he kept his faith as he kept his youth to the last. Every one who knew him, knows how young he was in heart, and how he liked to have those that were young in years about him. He wished to have his house in Boston, as well as his cottage at York, full of young men and young girls, whose joy of life he made his own, and whose society he preferred to his contemporaries'. One could not blame him for that, or for seeking the sun, wherever he could, but it would be a false notion of him to suppose that his sympathies were solely or chiefly with the happy. In every sort, as I knew him, he was fine and good. The word is not worthy of him, after some of its uses and associations, but if it were unsmutched by these, and whitened to its primitive significance, I should say he was one of the most perfect gentlemen I ever knew.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Celia Thaxter
Charles F. Browne
Dawn upon him through a cloud of other half remembered faces
Edmund Quincy
Ethical sense, not the aesthetical sense
Few men last over from one reform to another
Francis Parkman
Generous lover of all that was excellent in literature
Got out of it all the fun there was in it
Greeting of great impersonal cordiality
Grieving that there could be such ire in heavenly minds
His remembrance absolutely ceased with an event
Julia Ward Howe
Looked as if Destiny had sat upon it
Man who may any moment be out of work is industrially a slave
Pathos of revolt from the colorless rigidities
Plain-speaking or Rude Speaking
Pointed the moral in all they did
Sometimes they sacrificed the song to the sermon
Tired themselves out in trying to catch up with him
True to an ideal of life rather than to life itself
Wasted face, and his gay eyes had the death-look

When to be an agnostic was to be almost an outcast
Whitman's public use of his privately written praise