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Introduction: Sarah Orne Jewett and the Traffic in Words

JUNE HOWARD

SARAH Orne Jewett published her first short story when she was eighteen years old, in 1868. The acceptance of “Jenny Garrow’s Lovers” by a Boston weekly periodical was quickly followed by others; by the time Jewett turned twenty-one, she had published three more stories and two poems – including a story in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the leading literary periodical of the day (which paid her the respectable sum of fifty dollars). Although her strongest work was done later, in the 1880s and ’90s, from that first pseudonymous publication until her disabling carriage accident in 1902 not a year passed without something Jewett had written appearing in print. In thirty-five years Jewett published more than two hundred magazine and newspaper pieces, ten collections of short stories and sketches, four books for children, and five novels. And despite the occasional negative notice, her work was consistently praised by critics during her lifetime; it has been admired by at least some readers and scholars ever since. Yet estimates of her importance in American literary history have varied. A certain language of diminution – her work is characterized as “small,” “exquisite,” “minor” – appears from the first in the commentary on Jewett and becomes the keynote of professional literary critics’ assessments of her work as the twentieth century passes. Our understanding of Jewett’s work has been profoundly revised in recent years, however, and we may again be ready to take seriously Willa Cather’s often-quoted assertion: “If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once, ‘The Scarlet Letter,’ ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ and ‘The Country of the Pointed Firs.’”¹

One point that has never been disputed, however, is that *The*

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Country of the Pointed Firs is Jewett's finest book – even, perhaps, a kind of summation of what is best in her work. Her reputation had been firmly established for many years when it appeared in 1896, first as a serial in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then in book form. It was a certainty that the book would be respectfully reviewed. But the response went far beyond that; most critics recognized immediately that Jewett's seventeenth book exceeded her ordinarily high standard. It was praised for intensifying the qualities consistently found in Jewett's work: for its vivid portrait of the human and natural landscape of rural New England, for the beauty of its style, for its capacity to evoke a sense of deep significance in everyday life. These are topics that, in various formulations, continue to concern critics today. Alice Brown, herself a regional writer of distinction, wrote a review that began, "*The Country of the Pointed Firs* is the flower of a sweet, sane knowledge of life, and an art so elusive that it smiles up at you while you pull aside the petals, vainly probing its heart" and went on to say that "the pointed firs have their roots in the ground of national being; they are index fingers to the stars. A new region unrolls before you like a living map." After praising specific characters and episodes, many of them the same as those receiving attention in the pages of this volume, Brown concludes, "No such beautiful and perfect work has been done for many years; perhaps no such beautiful work has ever been done in America."²

In contrast, the anonymous reviewer in the *Bookman* comments favorably on the "picturesque delineation of character, the writer's close contact with nature, and her appreciative insight, [which] all contribute a reality and charm to the book which are very convincing," but concludes that "the little volume comes to its quiet ending, leaving the impression that, suggestive and delightful as such books are, they cannot, save in rare instances, leave any deep impression. Miss Jewett possesses the artistic power, the knowledge, and the self-control to venture more. These delicate sketches of life hold the same place in literature as do their counterparts in painting, but no artist can rest an enduring popularity on such trifles light as air."³ No other reviewer sounds so dissatisfied, but many characterize the book, and Jewett's work in general, in ways that suggest they view it as somehow inconsequential. One writes

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that this “little book is marked by good taste” and is “at times gently pathetic, at others delicately humorous” and “always free from exaggeration.” Others refer to Jewett’s “slender song” and slight material.⁴ This note is struck even by Jewett’s literary friends and acquaintances. For example, in a reminiscence written some years later, Henry James expresses intense, yet distinctly limited and even condescending admiration for her work: Jewett is “mistress of an art of fiction all her own, even though of a minor compass,” with a “beautiful little quantum of achievement” that might have lived up to her gift if not for the “premature and overdarkened close of her young course of production.”⁵ Jewett’s career was, certainly, deplorably shortened by her death at the age of fifty-nine; but even in comparison with James’s own remarkably long life as a writer, it is difficult to think of her career as unfulfilled. There is, we will see, something important to be understood in the curiously mingled tone of respect and depreciation found in so many assessments of Sarah Orne Jewett.

Suggestions that Jewett’s work is fine but slight are usually linked to her regional subject matter and often (at least by implication) to her status as a woman writing mostly about women. The sources and significance of such suggestions can be understood only against the broad canvas of American literary history. In what follows I situate Jewett’s career, and the trajectory of her reputation, in the history of American literary culture since the mid-nineteenth century. Jewett emerged as a writer through a small but very influential New England literary elite that had been consolidated during the 1850s, by an earlier generation. She worked successfully within this tradition even as it was being transformed into a broader middle-class American culture. But changes already at work during her lifetime reshaped literary institutions in ways that rendered Jewett’s distinctive version of the genteel tradition less and less readable; attitudes that developed in the professionalized study of language and literature in universities, in particular, meant that Jewett’s place in the revised American literary canon created in the 1920s was much reduced. Since the 1960s, another shift in attitudes has reversed the downward trend in Jewett’s reputation. The canon has been challenged for its exclusions, analyzed from the perspectives of race, class, gender, and sexuality,

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and has been opened up to new authors and concerns. And as has happened across the humanities, and increasingly in the social sciences, new approaches to the understanding of language, culture, and society – what is often called “theory” – have led to revised notions of the scholar’s tasks. It remains to be seen whether these are signs that yet another disciplinary order is emerging.

Feminist literary criticism, an important part of this most recent and still contested transformation, has fundamentally revised our understanding of Jewett, but what her place in American literature will be at the end of the twentieth century remains to be seen. Feminist critics have recovered information about Jewett’s role in the female literary culture of her day, articulated the distinctive formal qualities of her fiction, and insisted upon the importance of her subject matter. This introduction and the other essays in this volume build most immediately and crucially on that body of work, but they also represent a new departure. Deliberately re-visiting the familiar landscapes of Jewett criticism, we historicize in frames of reference that have emerged as important since 1985 and offer a radically revised view of Jewett’s significance. Most strikingly, this volume reveals how deeply racialized and nationalist are the categories through which Jewett constructs her local solidarities. It also shows her as a participant in the culture industry, a highly successful writer negotiating a nexus of gendered institutions for producing literary meanings and commodities. Thus the currently received ways of understanding Jewett – as a regionalist and as a woman writer – are unified in an account of her implication in the process through which, at the turn into the twentieth century, a national culture was constituted. Less celebratory than feminist criticism of Jewett has been so far, it is nevertheless deeply respectful of her craft and seriousness; the essays in this volume seem to me to constitute the most historically informed and critically appreciative readings of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* published to date.

Theodora Sarah Orne Jewett was born in 1849, in South Berwick, Maine, a town of about five thousand inhabitants some ten miles from the Atlantic Ocean along the Piscataqua River. At the time of her birth, four generations of Jewetts lived in her paternal grand-

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father's distinguished house on the village square (built in 1774 and purchased from its original owner in 1819). Not long afterward, her father, Theodore Herman Jewett, built a separate, smaller residence next door, and Sarah and her sisters, Mary and Caroline, grew up there. Her grandfather was a retired shipowner and a prosperous merchant, her father a doctor, her uncle a merchant and later a banker; her close-knit extended family included most of the town's leadership, and its connections reached into other New England communities.⁶ Jewett was deeply attached to her home in South Berwick, and biographers have, plausibly, identified it as an emblem of her family's solid social and financial standing and of her rootedness in family and community. After the deaths of her grandfather, father, and uncle, Jewett returned to live in the "great house" and made it her primary residence from the mid-1880s until the end of her life.⁷

Jewett's health during her childhood was poor, and she attended school irregularly, although she did graduate from the Berwick Academy in 1866. From Jewett's autobiographical writing, we know that the many days she spent out of the classroom, driving through the countryside with her father as he made rounds for his rural medical practice, were formative for her; they served as an important source of her intimate knowledge of and sympathy for the human and natural landscapes of Maine. She credited her father with educating her as an observer, as well as guiding her wide reading and advising her about her writing, until his sudden death in 1878. She dedicated *Country By-Ways* (1881) to him: "My dear father; my dear friend; the best and wisest man I ever knew; who taught me many lessons and showed me many things as we went together along the country by-ways."⁸ Jewett's expressions of affection for her mother, Caroline Perry Jewett, are more conventional, and what has been written about the relationship between the two is more speculative; we know, however, that her mother and grandmother introduced her early to female authors such as Austen and Eliot who were immediately congenial.⁹ She was close to her sisters, and they corresponded voluminously when apart; she dedicated a book to each of them. Affectionate references to other family members fill her letters.

As Jewett grew up, others joined her family at the center of her

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emotional life. The historical record includes detailed information about the ever-widening circle of Jewett's friendships – with, to name only a few representative figures, Edith Haven Doe, a married woman living a mile away who spent time with all of the Jewett girls; Kate Birkhead of Newport, Rhode Island, one of several early “crushes” and the model for Kate Lancaster in *Deephaven*; Lily Munger, daughter of a Maine clergyman, younger than Jewett and recipient of a number of rather didactic letters during the late 1870s; and, most important, Annie Fields, who was her close companion from the early 1880s on. Even before she began spending a considerable portion of her time at Fields's homes in Boston and Manchester and journeying to Europe with her every few years, Jewett was scarcely secluded in South Berwick but traveled widely, visiting family and friends. She went frequently to Boston and Newport, stayed for some months during 1868 and 1869 with her mother's brother and his wife in Cincinnati, visited other sites in the Midwest, and saw the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia while visiting her mother's relatives there. Jewett enjoyed both her particular friends and sociability in general; on one busy day during an 1878 visit to Washington, D.C., where a friend's husband was sitting in Congress, Jewett reported that she “assisted in receiving ninety callers in the afternoon, then attended a reception given by President Lincoln's son where she saw ‘ever so many people we knew,’ entertained dinner guests, and went to a White House reception in the evening.”¹⁰ As a young woman Jewett formed connections that would continue to the end of her life, and she constantly added to their number.

Neither the institution of visiting – Jewett spent two months with her friend in Washington – nor such intense, durable bonds of female friendship are familiar to us in the late twentieth century. But historians enable us to make the leap of understanding necessary to see how fundamental they were in the fabric of Jewett's life. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg broke the ground for the study of nineteenth-century female friendship in a 1975 essay titled “The Female World of Love and Ritual.” Depicting a social world characterized by sharply differentiated gender roles in the family and in society as a whole, producing an “emotional segregation of women and men,” she finds a correspondingly strong, “unself-

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conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial networks." The diaries and letters Smith-Rosenberg examines show relatives and friends supporting one another in domestic work and in the rituals with which they surrounded marriage, childbirth, illness, and death, creating a female world of "mutual dependency and deep affection." Women wrote of "the joy and contentment they felt in one another's company, their sense of isolation and despair when apart. The regularity of their correspondence underlines the sincerity of such words." Smith-Rosenberg describes relationships ranging "from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women," sometimes between women of similar ages and sometimes across generations. She notes that these intimate, long-lasting friendships "did not form isolated dyads but were normally part of highly integrated networks. Knowing one another, perhaps related to one another, they played a central role in holding communities and kin systems together."¹¹

Subsequent historical research has suggested that Smith-Rosenberg overestimated the degree of gender segregation among middle-class Americans in the nineteenth century; certainly Jewett, whose life in any case extended well beyond the period Smith-Rosenberg examines, included men in her friendship networks.¹² But Jewett's biography confirms the existence and importance of these powerful bonds among women. Willa Cather wrote that "her friendships occupied perhaps the first place in her life."¹³ Such connections both shaped daily life and carried deep spiritual significance. Jewett's sense of communion with friends and her religious faith were linked in her mind; in an often-quoted letter, with explicit allusion to the New Testament, she wrote, "There is something transfiguring in the best of friendship."¹⁴ She believed that powerful bonds might even enable communication between the living and the dead; as Elizabeth Ammons has detailed in an essay titled "Jewett's Witches," Jewett, like others of her period, took spiritualism, and the possibility that a supernatural order left its traces within the natural, quite seriously.¹⁵ The wide-ranging significance of these female bonds is a necessary context for understanding both the texture of Jewett's life and the centrality of relations among women in her fiction, including *The Country of the*

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Pointed Firs. Reciprocally, her fiction provides a rich resource for recapturing the depth of meaning with which themes of hospitality and friendship can be imbued.

Women were at the center of Jewett's emotional life; whether we therefore think of her as a lesbian writer depends on how we define that category. In some sense the characterization is anachronistic. It was toward the end of the nineteenth century that the concept of lesbianism, in medical literature and individual consciousness, emerged in the United States and Great Britain; Jewett, her attitudes already formed, never defined her loving female friendships in that way. Sharon O'Brien has shown what a profound difference the single generation that divides Jewett from her protégé Willa Cather (born in 1873) makes. As O'Brien points out, in Jewett's 1897 story "Martha's Lady," for example, she "felt no need to cast one character as male when she presented a friendship marked by sensuality as well as spiritual and emotional intensity."¹⁶ When Cather made a different choice and used a male narrator in a love story, Jewett thought of it simply as a mistake in craft rather than in terms of social acceptability. She wrote in a 1908 letter: "The lover is as well done as he could be when a woman writes in the man's character, – it must always, I believe, be something of a masquerade. I think it is safer to write about him as you did about the others, and not try to be he! And you could almost have done it as yourself – a woman could love her in the same protecting way."¹⁷ Only three years later, when Annie Fields edited Jewett's letters, she was persuaded that it would be safer to delete affectionate nicknames and omit some letters – for fear people would "read them wrong."¹⁸ Clearly, Jewett's relation to modern sexual identities is oblique; just as clearly, she has a place among writers who portray intimacies and devotions that do not follow heterosexual scripts.

As Jewett became established as an author, her friendships increasingly drew her into the literary world. Those connections followed the initial success of her work; Jewett submitted her earliest stories and poems through the mail, to strangers. But she quickly enlisted editors as professional advisers and friends, offering them in her letters unstinted admiration and deference. In the early years of Jewett's career, the most important of these mentors

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was Horace Scudder, whom Richard Brodhead characterizes as “one of those nineteenth-century literary figures who seem to have belonged simultaneously to the management of every literary and cultural institution, and who integrated their workings in practical terms; as Houghton Mifflin’s chief editor, he was also a manager of children’s magazines, an eventual editor of the *Atlantic*, and a longtime member of the Massachusetts Board of Education.”¹⁹ Jewett was also close to William Dean Howells, who was for decades a central figure in the literary life of his time. While associate editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he rejected Jewett’s first two submissions and accepted the third; he went on to serve as editor from 1871 to 1881 and later broadened his influence from a base in New York with the extensive Harper’s publishing enterprise. Howells took the lead, supported by Scudder, in encouraging Jewett to produce her first novel, *Deephaven*, published in 1877. It is likely that it was Howells who introduced her to James and Annie Fields.

The significance of that introduction may not be apparent to all readers, for the Fieldses have been among the casualties of the twentieth-century revisions of the canon; but they were key figures in the genteel literary culture Jewett was joining. There was no publisher in nineteenth-century America more respected than James T. Fields. He built Ticknor and Fields into a strong house during the 1840s and ‘50s; Henry James wrote (long afterward, in the same reminiscence quoted earlier) that Fields “had a conception of possibilities of relation with his authors and contributors that I judge no other member of his body in all the land to have had. . . . Few were our native authors, and the friendly Boston house had gathered them in almost all.”²⁰ Richard Brodhead describes Fields’s contribution in equally striking, if less reverent, terms, writing that he “in effect pioneered the art of book promotion. He began the practice of advertising beyond local markets, thereafter making advertising into a central part of book production. . . . He converted reviewing into a form of advertising too, using his friendly relations with editors he advertised with to get them to give favorable notice to books he published.”²¹ The constitution of an American literary public depended both on the consolidation of cultural authority and on the creation of a market.

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Fields's innovative ingenuity was thus devoted to the task of promoting fine American literature, a category whose existence could not be taken for granted in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a period in which, as Brodhead puts it, "the paying audience for imaginative writing was expanding."

Fields found a way to identify a certain portion of that writing as distinguished – as of elevated quality, as of premium cultural value; then to build a market for that writing on the basis of that distinction. Fields solidified this differentiated category of the literary not only by printing the contemporary works that *were* the most distinguished, or that *were* the most highly literary (though his eye for such works is impressive); he established it too by devising ways to identify and confirm the literary as a difference before the market. His inventions in this regard include the production features he found to stamp on his books, features that both mark them off as separate from other books and confer on them an air of distinction – features like the Ticknor and Fields format of conspicuously good paper and handsome brown boards, promising that what is inside is serious and well-made.

Fields was also the second editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, succeeding James Russell Lowell in 1861, not long after his publishing house had purchased the journal, and remaining as owner after he passed the editorship on to Howells in 1871. The journal, too, worked to confirm the authority of this elite literary establishment.

The literary salon over which Annie Fields presided in their home was an important part of the system. It continued even after her husband's retirement in 1871 and after his death in 1881. Willa Cather was introduced to Mrs. Fields and Miss Jewett in 1908; this is how she evokes the atmosphere of this unofficial institution:

For a period of sixty years Mrs. Fields' Boston house, at 148 Charles Street, extended its hospitality to the aristocracy of letters and art. During that long stretch of time there was scarcely an American of distinction in art or public life who was not a guest in that house; scarcely a visiting foreigner of renown who did not pay his tribute there.

It was not only men of letters, Dickens, Thackeray, and Matthew Arnold, who met Mrs. Fields' friends there; Salvini and Modjeska and Edwin Booth and Christine Nilsson and Joseph Jefferson and Ole Bull, Winslow Homer and Sargent, came and went, against