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W. D. Howells at Kittery Point

David J. Nordloh

A recent gift to Harvard, from the heirs of William Dean Howells, is the house at Kittery Point, Maine, which Howells bought in 1902 and in which he spent many summers thereafter. On 14 October 1979, when it was dedicated as the William Dean Howells Memorial, the speakers included Professor David J. Nordloh, whose talk is printed here, and Professor Daniel Aaron, whose talk also appears in this issue of the BULLETIN.

—Eds.

W. D. HOWELLS was sixty-one years old when he and his wife first visited Kittery Point, Maine, in 1898 and rented a house in the area. Kittery, just across the Piscataqua River from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, was one of a number of places he tried in a continuing search, which had really lasted most of his adult life, to find a suitable summering spot. In recent years past Howells had tried New Jersey resorts, and York Harbor, and coastal places in Massachusetts. The summer after that first one in Kittery Point he tried Annisquam, and the following year he spent spring in Bermuda and summer in New York. Kittery Point might have become just another unsatisfactory attempt at the ideal. But something in Howells' first response to the place hinted he would be back. Essays he wrote and published in 1898 and 1899, just after that single summer visit, essays entitled "From New York into New England," "Staccato Notes of a Vanished Summer" (which was printed in the English and American editions of the journal *Literature* and in a Portsmouth newspaper), and "Confessions of a Summer Colonist," suggested his heart was settled before he returned. "Confessions of a Summer Colonist," for example, strikes the idyllic tone:

From the deep-bosomed, well-sheltered little harbor the tides swim inland, half a score of winding miles, up the channel of a river which without them would be a trickling rivulet. An irregular line of cottages follows the shore a little way, and then leaves the river to the schooners and barges which navigate it as far as the oldest pile-built wooden bridge in New England, and these in their turn abandon it to the fleets of row-boats and canoes in which summer youth of both sexes explore it to its source over depths as clear as glass, past

wooded headlands and low, rush-bordered meadows, through reaches and openings of pastoral fields, and under the shadow of dreaming groves.

If there is anything lovelier than the scenery of this gentle river I do not know it; and I doubt if the sky is purer and bluer in paradise.¹

These essays record that everything about life at Kittery Point pleased Howells: the ocean and the rugged coast, the other summer colonists, the philosophical, hard-working, independent, friendly natives, even the trolley cars where summer people and natives became community.

So in 1902, at age 65, W. D. Howells returned to Kittery Point, first renting for the summer the house which has now been made a memorial to him and then in the fall buying it outright. Though most of the major novels of his career — *A Modern Instance*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and others — had been written, Howells was not retiring from literature in making that move. (Indeed, he didn't ever retire: the story has often been rehearsed that on his deathbed in 1920 he was writing a review of the recently published Percy Lubbock edition of Henry James's letters.) He worked at Kittery on novels like *The Kentons* and *The Son of Royal Langbrith* and *New Leaf Mills* and *The Leatherwood God*; he wrote scores of reviews and literary and social essays; he wrote the prefaces to the "Library Edition" of his works that Harper and Brothers began to publish in 1909 but did not complete; he wrote poetry, like "Black Cross Farm," which, he told an English friend, was based on "this sad, lonely New England coast country";² he wrote travel books about England and Spain and Rome, from all of which places he returned to his New England house to be comfortable. In 1903, preparing to attend a farewell dinner to Mark Twain, who was departing to take up residence in Florence, Howells wrote to his sister Aurelia in Ohio: "If it could be managed I should like to spend the rest of my winters at Florence or Rome, and my summers at Kittery Point."³ And after a tour of the Great Lakes in 1907 he commented to Bliss Perry, one of his successors as editor of the *Atlantic*: "The great lakes are great, but Kittery Harbor is big enough for me."⁴

¹ "Confessions of a Summer Colonist," *Literature and Life: Studies* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1902), pp. 48-49.

² WDH to John St. Loe Strachey, 2 November 1903. This and all other letters cited are in the Howells Collection, Houghton Library. Used by permission of W. W. Howells for the heirs of W. D. Howells, and of the Harvard College Library.

³ WDH to Aurelia Howells, 18 October 1903.

⁴ WDH to Perry, 23 August 1907.

The house seemed to meet all of Howells' needs more completely than any other in which he lived in a long and incredibly mobile life. (Who can compile an accurate list of all the apartments and hotels he occupied in New York City alone?) He lived in it over a longer period of time — 1902–1911 — than in any other residence of any kind. Though it was a summer house, it had a furnace, and he made summer the longer part of the year: he came as early as April if he could, and sometimes managed to stay until the beginning of November. He did move out and into another house in York Harbor just to the north in 1912 — not because he didn't still love Kittery Point (he continued through his remaining years to visit with his son John and his wife Abby White Howells and their sons "Billy" and "Jack," who moved into the house when he moved out), but because the sad associations of the place with his wife, Elinor Mead Howells, who died in 1910, overshadowed all his pleasure.

At Kittery Point Howells had quiet and privacy, away from city noise and constant social demands; but he also had proximity and acquaintance: he was close enough by train, trolley, and boat to both Boston and New York, he was near the summer residences of his friends Samuel L. Clemens and Thomas Sargeant Perry and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. He could easily invite and entertain friends, and have them to himself: Perry and Aldrich visited, Clemens often came down from York Harbor on the trolley — Clemens would give up the idea if the trolley was too crowded; Howells called upon Sarah Orne Jewett in South Berwick; Brad Whitlock, the politician-novelist, came here; Henry James stopped over for a memorable Sunday in June 1905 during one of his infrequent returns to America, and Howells blamed himself for the uncomfortable heat which he thought ruined James's day.

W. D. Howells was so disciplined a writer, had become so accustomed to demanding of himself the work he felt was his responsibility, that he could write anywhere. But Kittery Point was someplace special, a place he made entirely to his own image. "My ideal has always been a study outside of the dwelling house, and now I am to have it," he wrote shortly after moving in in 1902.⁶ The library, which his son John later turned and attached to the house, was originally a stable which stood at a far corner of the property, toward the road. Howells moved it. He described its progress in a letter to Henry

⁶ WDH to Aurelia Howells, October 1902.

James in October 1902: "Just now the stable has rested on its journey from the street corner to the east of the house, where I am going to turn it into a study, and is trying to look into our bay window; to move a building was about all that remained for me to do; and it is such an American experience." ⁶ He had tongue-and-groove paneling installed on the inside walls (it is still visible, inside the bookcases) and on the ceiling, and the square-patterned molding work done. The library faced out across the mouth of Portsmouth Harbor to the southeast, just as the house does. Howells wrote in one letter, "I look up from my paper and see two lighthouses, one on each side of a foamy reef; three sails are sliding across the smooth water within the reef, and far beyond it lie the Isles of Shoals in full sight. Could you ask more?" ⁷ He called the barn become a library the "Barnbry," and installed "book shelves all round, and plaster busts of authors on top; I shall fairly cover the walls with pictures." ⁸

The present contents of the library constitute a partial history of Howells' reputation as author and friend of authors.⁹ It contains copies of his own books, some of them inscribed to his wife and daughters and son and daughter-in-law; books by friends and inscribed to him — books autographed by Clemens, Charles Eliot Norton, Horace Scudder, John Hay, Robert Herrick, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, James Whitcomb Riley, Abraham Cahan, George Ade, Helen Keller; a copy of *Leaves of Grass* sent by Horace Traubel at the request of the dying Walt Whitman; a fine leatherbound set of some of Howells' own works presented to him as a gift by President Rutherford B. Hayes — Hayes's letter transmitting the gift is tipped into one of them.

⁶ WDH to Henry James, 7 October 1902.

⁷ WDH to Aurelia Howells, 22 July 1902.

⁸ WDH to Aurelia Howells, 12 October 1902.

⁹ The books and other items in the library and living quarters of the W. D. Howells Memorial, interesting in themselves, are enhanced by their relationship to the Howells Collection in the Houghton Library. The Houghton materials, the most extensive single collection of Howells materials in the world and assembled as the result of gifts from members of the Howells family and purchases by the Library, contain thousands of pieces of correspondence between Howells and his family and other relatives and the major and minor public and literary figures mentioned in the course of this essay, as well as significant sets of other correspondence; manuscripts of reviews, social, critical, and biographical essays, poetry, and several novels, including the only extant portion of *A Modern Instance* and the whole of *The Undiscovered Country* and *The Quality of Mercy*; some books by other authors in inscribed copies or copies annotated by Howells; and a significant set of Howells' own works in original editions, many of them also gifts from the Howells family's collections.

Howells especially appreciated Hayes's act of thoughtfulness: finally his books in copies he could not give away.

More emphatically, the library in its books and other objects and the house with many more of Howells' possessions suggest significant facets of his life, not somewhat superficially as an author, but more deeply as a man who was an author. To survey briefly some of the store of riches by mentioning items in the order of Howells' life:

The 1660 edition of the *Lexicon Tetraglotten* of James Howell, given by Professor Garvey of Harvard, who knew, as did many of Howells' friends and readers, of his delight and pride in his Welsh heritage.

A print of the town of Hay, Herefordshire, Wales, from which the Howells family came. Howells visited Hay, and learned family history, and annotated the print, thus making the family's history in Hay his own.

A copy of Coggeshall's *Poets and Poetry of the West* (1860) which Howells originally gave to his father. It contains in his hand revisions and corrections of his own poems in the first book acknowledging him as a literary figure of merit.

Books Howells bought in Venice during his residence there as U.S. consul during Lincoln's administration, books indicative of his growth from romantic poet to critic of literature and culture, the shift that made his first reputation and led to his appointment as editor of the *Atlantic* in the late 1860s: the *Vita di Vittorio Alfieri* (1823), used as background in Howells' studies of Italian poets; an edition of Machiavelli's *Il Principe*; a copy of the Tauchnitz edition of Longfellow's *Poetical Works*; a copy of the *Origine delle feste veneziane*, annotated by Howells for his use in the writing of his own *Venetian Life* (1866); the copy of the *Book of Common Prayer* which Elinor Mead Howells used in Venice; Müller's *Wegweiser durch Venedig* with notes in Howells' hand — the guidebook which with his wife's help he translated from German into English (with the publisher's payment he bought a gold watch and the picture of Saint Barbara which also hangs in the library); a copy of the English translation of Müller, entitled *Venice, Her Art Treasures*.

Objects reminiscent of Howells' early association with Cambridge, where from the first he was acknowledged by the older generation as a worthy successor: the Parsons translation of Dante's *Inferno*, given to Howells by Charles Eliot Norton in 1867; a copy of his own *Poems* (1873), revised and corrected in hand; a copy of *The Cambridge of 1776* given to Howells by Mrs. Longfellow in thanks for his participation in the volume prepared to raise funds for a charity.

His dictionaries — every picture of Howells at work features an unabridged dictionary looming at his elbow.

The table at which he worked and the desk he had made for his use after a Venetian design.

The guidebooks to English and European places he visited and wrote about in later years.

The Hammond typewriter he employed so constantly the last thirty years

of his life to relieve his writing hand and overcome the increasing inability of typesetters to read manuscript. He bragged about the script typeface — still on the machine — the only one in use on any typewriter of its time and named for him "The W. D. Howells Special."¹⁰

The bust done by his Uncle Joseph of his father, William Cooper Howells, the focus of the strong family and Midwestern influence on W. D. Howells' life.

"I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake": I begin to sound like a bibliographer and an archivist. Books and pictures and statuary and typewriters don't make the man, and can't fully suggest him. What is most important about Kittery Point, what makes it most appropriate as a memorial to W. D. Howells, is that he was truly alive in the place and that it was alive in him. His words then and the house now both repeat that refrain. It's not just that he was a participant in public events in the place — giving a lecture in Portsmouth for a benefit for the Home for Aged Women; meeting the parties to the negotiations that led finally to the Treaty of Portsmouth between Japan and Russia in 1905 — he much preferred the Russians he met to the Japanese; taking the place of the absent minister at the Congregational Church in April 1909 and reading from his description of a Christian Utopia, *A Traveler from Altruria*; introducing his grandson to a President of the United States as William Howard Taft campaigned his way through New England. Rather, Howells was completely a part of the place and its people. He became at Kittery Point, for example, the complete gardener he had longed to be; letters list all the fruit trees and shrubs and flowers and vegetables with which he greened the grounds. He would even send plants and instructions ahead in the spring, so that they would get a start on his arrival. He sent a postcard to his daughter Mildred, who was vacationing in Bermuda at the time in June 1907:

Bleeding Hearts, Anemones, Violas, and other flowers all in bloom; Irises almost. Apples budding, and Lilies of the Valley *up and budding*; not a peach in bud; ash trees bare as winter; other trees very skimpily clad. High bush blueberry in full bloom . . . Magnolia dead. The place is charming.¹¹

He divided his time equally between writing and hoeing, and he expressed more often his satisfaction with the latter. He said he enjoyed nothing more than talking with Albert Gunnison and Matty Clarkson,

¹⁰ WDH to William Cooper Howells, 6 April 1890.

¹¹ WDIJ to Mildred Howells, 6 June 1907.

help who were also friends. He felt the full life of the Kittery Point community, "the fisher-folk life quaint and old as the 17th century,"¹² and enjoyed walking to its three groceries, butcher shop, variety store, and post office. The post office was the real center of public and in some senses even private events: because of it, Howells noted, "The days, whatever their length, are divided, not into hours, but into mails."¹³ So thoroughly domesticated was he that his description of his world at Kittery Point in the essay "Staccato Notes of a Vanished Summer" ends not with some spectacular scene or clever generalization but with an affectionate sketch of Jim, a cat who just dropped in one day: "He had on a silver collar, engraved with his name and surname, which offered itself for introduction like a visiting-card. He was too polite to ask himself to the table at once, but after he had been welcomed to the family circle, he formed the habit of finding himself with us at breakfast and supper, when he sauntered in like one who should say, 'Did I smell *fish*?' but would not go further in the way of hinting."¹⁴

That quiet joy in everything about Kittery Point, a joy his family continue to share, made it finally the best and fullest *home* of Howells' life. It brought into his heart and his voice an enthusiasm few other things in his life besides his family could stir.

"Who could ask more?"

¹² WDH to Henry James, 10 September 1899.

¹³ "Staccato Notes of a Vanished Summer," *Literature and Life*, p. 255.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

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