

# THE BOOK

MARCH 2004, NUMBER 62

## Poetry and History:

### APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETS, POEMS, AND POETIC CULTURE

On Friday, February 13, a capacity crowd of close to fifty people gathered in the Society's Goddard-Daniels House to hear a group of historians and literary critics discuss some of the problems that have attended the study of poetry and history. Building on the work of scholars such as Paula Bennett, Alice Fahs, Eliza Richards, and Joan Shelley Rubin, all of whom have used the AAS collections in pioneering studies of nineteenth-century American poetry, this colloquium attempted to address the general neglect of poetry within cultural history, and the limited ways in which literary critics have thought about poetry historically. Each of the speakers used an example from his or her current research to illustrate a particular challenge posed by the interdisciplinary study of poetry and history. The primary texts on which these presentations were based were posted beforehand on a web site constructed by AAS On-line Services Librarian Caroline Stoffel ([americanantiquarian.org/seminar0304/mcgill.htm](http://americanantiquarian.org/seminar0304/mcgill.htm)), allowing both speakers and audience to contribute in an informed way to a lively discussion of new directions for scholarship.

In setting the stage for the afternoon's discussion, I outlined some of the reasons for the neglect of the study of nineteenth-century American poetry in literary and cultural history. While the intimate connections between and among poetry, political power, and national self-understanding have long been central to accounts of Elizabethan or Restoration society in England, students of nineteenth-century American culture have had to grapple

with a number of historical forces that have made these relations more difficult to plot. Some of the currents that converge in the nineteenth-century U.S. include: the emergence of the category of "Literature" as distinct from "writing-in-general"; the perceived incompatibility of the literary forms of royal courts and the institutions of a nascent democracy; the simultaneous emergence in the U.S. of a national literature and mass media, scattering the publication of poetry across print formats such as newspapers and magazines; the "lyricization" of poetry—that is, the winnowing of the genres of poetry so that the lyric comes to stand in for poetry-as-a-whole; and the gradual shift in the hierarchy of genres, whereby prose forms (and the novel in particular) begin to take on the cultural status possessed only by poetry at the beginning of the century.

Each of the afternoon's speakers addressed one of the factors that have kept poetry from being included in general accounts of American culture and discussed how his or her research might begin to span this gap. What was particularly exciting was the way in which the talks and the discussion they generated repeatedly pointed to the many kinds of insights that the study of poetry had to offer students of American culture. For instance, both Karen Sánchez-Eppler (Amherst College) and Eliza Richards (Boston University) spoke about poems that ordinarily fly beneath the radar of literary critics because they were written by poets

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*LEFT: Symposium organizer Meredith L. McGill (right) with presenter Karen Sánchez-Eppler. RIGHT: Eliza Richards (left) and Colleen Glenney Boggs (Dartmouth College) the reception following the sessions.*



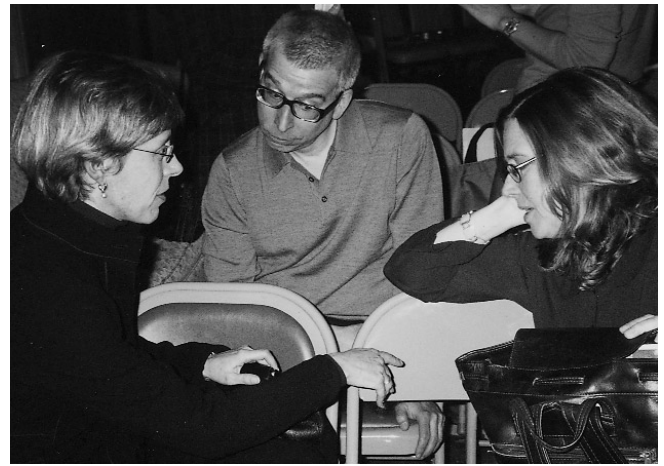
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**POETRY AND HISTORY** *continued*

who were not considered full subjects—children and slaves. Sánchez-Eppler used child-poet Lucy Bull’s verse to argue that children’s poetry provides us with a better measure of parental and cultural expectations than of the individual voices of actual children. Nevertheless, she insisted that children’s poems give us rare access to the ways in which the development of poetic voice depends on the assimilation of conventions. Similarly, Richards argued that slave-poet Moses Horton has been neglected by scholars because, rather than to rebel against his condition, he appears to acquiesce. Richards explored how Horton found a poetic voice by ventriloquizing the college students for whom he composed courtship poems, and offered an implicit critique of slavery by using the inarticulate cries of animals as a proxy for his own voice.

Some of the speakers directly addressed the kinds of impasses scholars encounter when studying the intersection of poetry and history. Turning to William Cullen Bryant’s use of Spenserian stanzas in “The Ages,” a poem about the decline of civilizations Bryant delivered as a graduation address at Harvard, Virginia Jackson (New York University) asked how meter figures—or fails to play a role—in histories of American poetry. How might we discuss the ways in which meter carries along with it a whole host of cultural assumptions without projecting onto the past a naive belief in the equation of form and value? From the opposite end of the century and from a different disciplinary perspective, Joan Shelley Rubin (University of Rochester) asked how we might understand the perceived late-century decline of interest in poetry. Through an analysis of reader-interviews and statistics compiled by *Publisher’s Weekly*, Rubin argued that while a decline could be measured in terms of the number of volumes of poetry that were sold, this statistic did not include poems published in periodicals or poems memorized and recited by heart. Rubin provocatively



*FROM LEFT: Mary Loeffelholz, Andrew Parker (Amherst College) and Virginia Jackson.*

asked whether scholars could embrace a history of poetry that was not simply text-driven, but that also included quantitative measures of poetry’s cultural significance, and that could come to grips with the indifference of many readers to the actual content of the poems they claimed to love.

Other speakers sought to integrate of the study of poetry with the themes and concerns of social and cultural historians. Lawrence Buell and Kathleen Peterson (Harvard University) did much to counteract the popular image of Emily Dickinson’s perverse self-isolation by giving us a thumbnail social history of solitude in America, and by reading Dickinson’s remarkable poem, “The murmuring of Bees, has ceased” in the context of the nineteenth-century respect for “Christian Loneliness.” Jill Anderson (Peterson Fellow, AAS) approached the publication of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Poems on Slavery* (1843) from two angles, detailing Longfellow’s complex self-positioning in relation to the antislavery cause and asking questions about the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Association’s odd, strategic investment in Longfellow’s comparatively genteel treatment of the evils of slavery. Mary Loeffelholz (Northeastern University) chronicled the dizzying interchange of text and context in the poetic correspondence of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Emily Dickinson, arguing that far from serving as a footnote to Dickinson’s better-known poetic corpus, Higginson’s post-bellum mourning poem, “Decoration” could be read as a reflection on Dickinson’s “dauntless will” in grappling with the social constraints on women’s visibility.

While this small group of papers could not encompass or represent all possible approaches in this large and under-explored interdisciplinary field, the many insights generated by these presentations and the animated discussion they provoked suggests an extraordinary future for the study of nineteenth-century American poems, poets, and poetic culture. The website will remain in place for readers of this report to study the texts for themselves.

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## Gura to Deliver 2004 Wiggins Lecture

**P**hilip F. Gura, Newman Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill will deliver the American Antiquarian Society's twenty-first annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture. To reflect on the impact of the Society's history of the book program in the years since its inception, he has titled his remarks, "Magnalia Historiae Libri Americana; or, How the AAS Brought the History of the Book into the New Millennium." The lecture will be presented on Friday, November 19, 2004, in Antiquarian Hall and will subsequently be published in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*.

AAS Vice President for Collections and Programs John B. Hench notes that this lecture is the last to be given in the fall. Beginning in 2005, the lecture will be the keynote to an annual spring conference in the history of the book. "To mark the transition, the Society has invited Gura to consider the effects of the AAS program as a whole including the scholarship it has stimulated. Gura will take David D. Hall's 1983 'manifesto' as



the benchmark against which he will measure our progress." Beginning with Hall's Wiggins Lecture, *On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book*, each has been published by the Society. Richard Brodhead's 2001 presentation, "Prophets, Publics, and Publication: The Case of John Brown," is now available. Details about this and other Wiggins Lecture publications may be found on the Society's website.

Gura, who has been on the faculty at the University of North Carolina since 1987, is the author of many books on a variety of subjects including *C. F. Martin and His Guitars, 1796-1873* (University of North

Carolina Press, 2003) and *Jonathan Edwards, America's Evangelical*, forthcoming from Hill and Wang. In addition to his professorship in the department of English, he holds appointments in religious studies and the curriculum in American studies. During his long association with the American Antiquarian Society, he has been a fellow, lecturer, and, in June 2004, will be the leader of the Summer Seminar in the History of the Book.

## Charles Brockden Brown Papers at Bowdoin College

**B**owdoin College, established in 1794, had a library before it had a campus—books accumulated for the new school well before Massachusetts Hall opened its doors to eight students for the first time in 1802. Within the decade, due mainly to a bequest of books from James Bowdoin (son of Massachusetts governor James Bowdoin), the college could boast that it had the third largest library in New England.<sup>1</sup> Significant additions in the following decade kept the collections strong, exceeding six thousand volumes in the years before Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Class of 1825) accepted the joint appointment of librarian and professor of modern languages in 1829.

College librarians composed manuscript and printed catalogues describing the collection throughout the nineteenth century. The first published catalogue appeared in 1821, and Charles Brockden Brown's works find no mention there (not surprisingly, several of Brown's novels—*Wieland*, *Edgar Huntly*, *Jane Talbot*, *Ormond*, *Arthur Mervyn*, and *Clara Howard*—did appear among the substantial lending libraries of the college's competing literary societies, the Athenaeum and the Peucinian Societies, but only from the mid-1830s onward).<sup>2</sup> As late as 1863, when Bowdoin issued a new college library catalogue, the only mention of Brown comes in the listing of "William H. Prescott's Life of Charles Brockden Brown," which is no longer part of the library's holdings. Even

Brown's *American Register, or, General Repository of History, Politics and Science*, the eclectic digest that he edited from 1807 until his death in 1810, was wanting from what by all accounts was a more-than-respectable, early-nineteenth-century academic library.

Whatever conclusions we can draw from this lacuna in the nineteenth century for works by Brown (and other "popular novelists"), that posture of disregard stands in awkward counterpoint to the library's enthusiastic reception one hundred years later of an important cache of manuscript letters and poems by Brown, his unrequited love, Deborah (Debby) Ferris, and Brown's friend and rival suitor, Joseph Bringhurst, Jr. This bundle of letters and poems had long remained in the Bringhurst family until a descendant, Mrs. Gordon S. Hargraves, and her husband, a member of the Class of 1919, determined in 1969 to donate the materials to Mr. Hargraves's *alma mater*.

The letters reflect Brown's association with Bringhurst and their literary circle, Brown's unsuccessful courtship of Debby Ferris, and Bringhurst's own success in winning her hand in marriage. Many of Brown's letters to Bringhurst (fifty-four items dated between 1792 and 1797) show his attempts to perfect epistolary style and journal writing as narrative form. As a whole, this correspondence demonstrates the intimate and abiding friendship between Brown and Bringhurst, illuminates social life



10 minutes of 2 o'clock P.M. - The 25<sup>th</sup> of 9<sup>th</sup> mo - 1800  
 William was born fifth day - the 4<sup>th</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> mo - 1806  
 Mary - about 5 o'clock - Sixth day - the 6<sup>th</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> mo - 1806  
 Joseph - near 6 o'clock - on Seventh day - the 26<sup>th</sup> of 9<sup>th</sup> mo - 1807  
 Edward - 2 minutes past 7 o'clock - on Second day - the 22<sup>d</sup> of 5<sup>th</sup> mo - 1809  
 Leiba Ferris, on Seventh day - the 19<sup>th</sup> of 9<sup>th</sup> mo - 1812  
 My dear Husband the 6<sup>th</sup> of 10<sup>th</sup> mo - 1767  
 Myself the 2<sup>d</sup> of the 3<sup>rd</sup> mo (on third day) - 1773

Genealogy drafted by Debby Ferris Bringhurst, [n.d.].

To Debby Ferris  
 Most respected friend  
 Under what pretence, can I expect the perusal  
 -sal of the enclosed Verses! No one can be more conscious of his  
 unworthiness, how little he merits that regard and return to  
 which however he so ardently aspires. With those concessions  
 as much as not to be displeas'd at the boldness of this Draft  
 That it requires the most earnest apologies, I am very cer-  
 tainly that any apologies will be sufficient I cannot but  
 doubt, yet what may not be expected from the candour of the  
 person whom I am now addressing.  
 My principal Motive for composing this  
 poem, if it deserves that name, was the belief that it was  
 calculated to afford the innocent amusement. Will this motive  
 excuse in thy eyes, the temerity of thy  
 most sincere and respectful friend  
 Charles B. Brown  
 October 10<sup>th</sup> mo 4<sup>th</sup> 1794  
 Author of *Nature's Allegiance* &c.

Dedication letter, Charles B. Brown to Debby Ferris, preliminary to a love poem he composed for her [transcribed by Debby Ferris], October 4, 1794.

**BROWN PAPERS** continued from page 3

(especially intellectual life) in the Philadelphia area, reveals Brown's interest in the theme of suicide and the technique of sentimental composition, and documents a preoccupation with self-improvement, religiosity, and philosophical speculation.

Seven of these letters, written by Brown from Connecticut in 1793 while he was in the company of a literary clique that included Elihu Hubbard Smith and Richard Alsop, provide further insights into Brown and the *literati* of the early Republic. Of special interest through these letters is Brown's coincidental association with Smith, whose *American Poems, Selected and Original*, was published as America's first poetry anthology in that same year and included reprints of some of Brown's verse.

Brown's desire for Debby Ferris is documented in a twenty-three-page love poem that he sent to her in 1794, subsequently copied secretly by Ferris before she returned the original to the rejected suitor at his dejected request. In complement, 105 letters between Ferris and Bringhurst survive. Writing as "Petrarch" (a pseudonym that Brown himself had used<sup>3</sup>) and "Laura," the correspondents recorded the secrets of their courtship during 1795; scattered verse by Bringhurst, composed for Ferris, augments the letters.

Noted Americanist Herbert Ross Brown, then on the faculty at Bowdoin, was central to the Hargraves's decision to place their collection of Charles Brockden Brown and Bringhurst family manuscripts at Bowdoin College in 1969. The donors were impressed and motivated by the prospect of Professor Brown's applying scholarly rigor to these texts, although his intentions were never fully realized. The collection has found both a constant research audience and scattered publication of some of its items, and general scholarly interest in Charles Brockden Brown thrives. Editorial intentions such as Herbert Ross Brown's, to subject the collected letters to the scrutiny and analysis that they deserve, have ebbed and flowed in the intervening years, while academia eagerly awaits a published edition of the letters long in preparation, projected to appear both in paper and electronic formats. At the same time, the manuscript sources themselves will continue to offer uniquely essential opportunities for reading and examination, and Bowdoin College welcomes the opportunity of inviting scholars to make use of this valuable resource.

Richard Lindemann

George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library

- 1 William Jenks, *An Eulogy, Illustrative of the Life, and Commemorative of the Beneficence of the Late Hon. James Bowdoin, Esquire, with the Notices of his Family . . . on the Annual Commencement, Sept. 2d, 1812* (Boston: John Eliot, 1812). For accounts of the early history of James Bowdoin's library and that of the college, see Kenneth Carpenter, "James Bowdoin III as Library Builder," *The Legacy of James Bowdoin III* (Brunswick: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1994), 85-125; Roger Michener, "The Bowdoin College Library: From Its Beginnings to the Present Day" (M.A. Thesis, Graduate Library School, University of Chicago, 1972); Charles Calhoun, *A Small College in Maine: Two Hundred Years of Bowdoin* (Brunswick: Bowdoin College, 1993), passim.
- 2 For manuscript and published catalogues, see Library Records (Series: Historical Records) [5.1.1]; Athenaeum Society Records [4.37]; Peucinian Society Records [4.36], Bowdoin College Archives.
- 3 Many of these letters are noted in Charles E. Bennett's "The Letters of Charles Brockden Brown: An Annotated Census," *Resources for American Literary Study* (Autumn 1976). However, Bennett attributes a number of the Joseph Bringhurst "Petrarch" letters to Brown. Bennett's census provides précis of the letters and their locations—other major manuscript repositories of Charles Brockden Brown materials exist at the University of Virginia and the University of Texas.

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## Book Note

Harold T. Miller, *Publishing: A Leap from Mind to Mind* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 316 + xvi pp; cloth \$27.95; ISBN 1-55591-407-1.

Most scholars delve into publishers' archives to write literary history or criticism, an author's biography, or cultural history narrowly defined. Their interests naturally lead them to the trade side of the house, which publishes best-selling fiction, prestigious poetry, and popular nonfiction. Correspondence between author and editor sheds light on authorial intention, the process of composition, and editorial influence, which may reflect publishers' views of public tolerance for controversial content. Discussions between author and editor of financial arrangements and advances help the biographer figure out how a writer was paying the rent. Memoranda between the editorial and marketing departments inform researchers about what publishers thought readers wanted and how they could be influenced to buy new books.

Emphasis on the literary side of publishing leaves yards of archival material untouched. Large publishing houses derive most of their revenue—and much of their cultural influence—from their textbook divisions. Since World War II, textbooks for elementary and high schools and for colleges have been the most profitable publishers' products. From the beginning of the American republic, as schools welcomed an ever-expanding portion of our citizens, the cultural and economic role of publishing for young people has grown. Scholars of reading and literacy have analyzed books designed to teach the children of colonial and early national America to read, but historians have devoted little time to textbook publishing in modern America.

Harold T. Miller's *Publishing: A Leap from Mind to Mind* demonstrates why this neglected side of publishing deserves our attention. From 1973 to 1990, Miller was president and chairman of Houghton Mifflin, where he began his career in 1950 as a textbook salesman. Drawing on his own experience and on oral history interviews with Houghton Mifflin employees and authors, deposited at the American Antiquarian Society, he describes the intricate process of developing, fine-tuning, promoting, and revising the books that shape our children's understanding of mathematics, literature, and history. His book reveals the workings of an enterprise that wields enormous influence yet is virtually unknown to cultural historians.

Miller describes Houghton Mifflin as an "author-centered publishing house," but he means something quite different from what literary historians might assume. We imagine the close, nurturing relationships of an editor such as Maxwell Perkins with his authors, relationships that are generally exclusive in that the editor provides a connection (and sometimes a buffer) between the author and the rest of the publishing house. Ruth Hapgood, a trade editor, described her work with authors in the way that we are used to seeing it: "If I had strength as an editor, it was to empathize with the sources of that book within their hearts. The thing that kept them working five years to make that book, or whatever" [12]. But Houghton Mifflin's author-centered publishing included "authors working directly with a team of individuals within the publishing house" [9]. The process

described in chapters 5 and 7, which recount the development of Houghton Mifflin's reading and mathematics series, is nothing like what a novelist or poet experiences. Rather, it is a model of the social construction of texts.

A basic textbook series—the books that teach children to read or do math over the course of several years—begins with an idea that may come from an author or a publisher, or from a conversation between them. By the time it becomes a product, it involves the work of research scholars (often in colleges of education), editors, classroom teachers, publishers' sales representatives, marketing research-ers, and designers. In addition, because textbooks are chosen by committees of teachers, parents, administrators, and community representatives, the development of a textbook series has a political dimension—especially in the twenty-some states that conduct the adoption process on the state level. Miller describes and assesses this highly political engagement with insight and balance.

Understanding textbook development and adoption forestalls simplistic explanations of controversies about how to teach reading, various "new" maths, and socially explosive topics such as evolution. Miller's account of these processes presents no villains and no black-and-white assessments. This evenhandedness is especially valuable in his account of Houghton Mifflin's standardized testing program—a topic much in the news and little understood. His openness about the potential conflict of interest for a publisher creating both texts and tests is reassuring and, more important, contributes to understanding the complex relationships among curriculum, testing, textbooks, and teaching.

Miller's chapter on college texts invites reflection on changes in enrollment and curriculum since World War II. Two conflicting phenomena met head-on in the college classroom, and in the pages of college texts. While knowledge was expanding at unprecedented rates, and the material to be taught and learned increased commensurately, the student body was expanding with the admission of students less well prepared than the smaller, elite classes that populated prewar classrooms. It fell to textbook publishers to help faculty members present complex material to students with fewer study skills, without being accused of "dumbing down." The modern college textbook is not the product of a single author's mind, but the outcome of complex interactions among author, editors, peer reviewers, sales representatives, and marketing staff.

Miller also provides an insider's view of the importance of independent publishing houses, and the difficulties of maintaining their independence. His account of the support of loyal and influential authors in preventing a hostile takeover is heartwarming; the end of the story is less so. The jury is still out on the impact of corporate ownership on the quality and variety of trade books, but perhaps that should not be the focus of our attention. In presenting his concerns about foreign purchases of textbook

publishers, Miller offers compelling reasons why scholars should spend time in their neglected archives: "In this age of globalization, no one claims that only publishers native to a nation should publish in that nation... . The telling concern is textbooks. As demonstrated throughout this book, our public schools are called upon to educate millions of kids to be productive participants in our society, who arrive on our shores from around the world. No other nation's educational system has faced a task of this proportion... . Yet we as a nation have shown a marked lack of concern over the off-shore ownership of our textbook publishing entities" [299-300].

Textbooks have been central to defining citizenship, establishing life skills, and developing tastes in literature and the habit of reading. Understanding textbook publishing is essential to understanding the development of American culture. Harold Miller's book, and the oral histories on which it is based, are valuable resources for those who wish to understand postwar America.

A bibliographical note: The Houghton Mifflin archives are housed at Harvard University's Houghton Library. Two recent histories of the company are: Ellen B. Ballou, *The Building of the House: Houghton Mifflin's Formative Years* (1970), and Paul Brooks, *Two Park Street: A Publishing Memoir* (1986).

Beth Luey

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Beth Luey is the founding director of the Scholarly Publishing Program at Arizona State University and a contributor to volume 5 of *A History of the Book in America*.

## Hall Named Society's 2004-2005 Mellon Distinguished Scholar

As the 2004-2005 Mellon Distinguished Scholar, David D. Hall, professor of American religious history at Harvard Divinity School, will spend the year at AAS completing the research and writing of a book that bears the working title, "A New History of Puritan America."

Hall is one of the leading scholars of both American religious history and the history of print culture in America. Among his many publications are *The Faithful Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century* (University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1972), *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), and, with co-editor with Hugh Amory a principal contributor to *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, Volume 1 of *A History of the Book in America* (Cambridge University Press and American Antiquarian Society, 2000). Hall also serves as general editor of this five-volume series.

Hall will be the sixth Mellon Distinguished Scholar at AAS. His predecessors are Jay Fliegelman (Stanford University), Alan Taylor (University of California at Davis), Karen Halttunen (University of California at Davis), Robert A. Gross (University of Connecticut), and Karen O. Kupperman (New York University).

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