

The Howellsian



Photo: The W.D. Howells house at Kittery Point, Maine, purchased 1902. Photograph by Rob Davidson, 2003.

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Eminent Howellsians

A Conversation with Professor Thomas Wortham

University of California—Los Angeles (retired)

First in a series of interviews with past and present movers and shakers in Howells studies

Editor: My first question is chiefly biographical. How would you wish to be introduced to readers of *The Howellsian*?

TW: I chose Indiana University for my graduate studies since I intended to become a Victorianist. But since I was told upon arrival that I'd eventually have to pass a qualifying exam in American literature, I wandered quite innocently into a class on 19th-century American literature offered by Ed Cady. A couple of months later he hired me as his research assistant, and until his death a few years ago he was my mentor and great, good friend. As I mentioned above, I'm now completing an edition with rather extensive commentary of Howells' radical essays. And when that is completed, I'll move on to finish a study of Howells' two years as a legislative correspondent in Columbus in the 1850s. Unfortunately too much of the last fifteen years of my tenure at UCLA was spent in administrative work, and so a great deal had to be put on back burners. Perhaps I'll even get around eventually to writing a book on "growing old with Howells." I don't want to imagine what "the Dean" would say. But then he's dead, and only his works, that "great array," Henry James called it, "a literature in themselves" remains. And yes, I still read Victorian poetry and fiction.

Editor: What is the primary attraction of Howells' work for you?

TW: Since I've spent so much of my life with an

editorial hat on (both scholarly and journal), I suppose I must say it is his style. As Mark Twain wrote, "In the matter of verbal exactness Mr. Howells has no superior, I suppose. He seems to be almost always able to find that elusive and shifty grain of gold, the RIGHT WORD." And I would add, when those words are read together, one discovers a moral vision that in its inclusiveness and relevance still matters mightily.

Editor: What is your favorite Howells text, and why?

TW: This is rather like comparing apples and oranges, but I'll try. Certainly *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is Howells' greatest achievement in fiction. I'm old fashioned and still believe that characters and story are essential elements in the art of the novel. It's a pity that the project that was going to bring *A Hazard* to PBS's Masterpiece Theater failed because of the bad economy some decades ago. If done right (and the screenplay I read certainly seemed to suggest it would have been smashing), it would have done much to booster interest in Howells. But when I see the word "favorite," I cannot resist mentioning another novel, *The Day of Their Wedding*, a work that Henry James called "a perfect little masterpiece . . . so true, so touching, so droll, so vivid, so *juste*." (The text of James's entire letter can be found in Michael Anesko's magnificent *Letters, Fictions, Lives*.)

Editor: What Howells text do you think deserves more critical attention?

TW: Since we're talking about an author who wrote or contributed to some 200 books and published 1400 periodical pieces there are still many white spaces on the Howellsian map. I've long been an admirer of *The Son of Royal Lambirth* and am sorry more attention hasn't been paid to it. More recently I've been drawn

to Howells' late poetry, beginning with *Stops of Various Quills*. I still remember the excitement with which I brought a copy of the London *Spectator* and showed "Black Cross Farm" to Ed Cady in the late 1960s. Gibson and Arms had missed it in their pioneering bibliography, and I fear many Howellsians since have missed it. But fortunately it is available in Cady's *Pebbles, Monochromes, and Other Modern Poems, 1891-1916*.

Editor: What has been the highlight of your career as a Howellsian thus far?

TW: I believe my work on Howells' *Letters* and on his *Early Prose Writings* have been of value to others, and I am now at work to finish a volume of "radical essays" Ed Cady and I were working on at the time of his death. But I suppose what has given me the greatest pleasure in my career are those opportunities I had to accept good articles on Howells for *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (nee *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*), a little journal I edited for some twenty-five years.

Editor: What have been the biggest changes in Howells studies during your time in the field?

TW: I hope I'm correct in believing that it is no longer quite so embarrassing for a young scholar to admit to others that he or she is working on William Dean Howells as it was forty, fifty years ago. The fallout from New Historicism has certainly provided new perspectives on his work, and some good (and not so good) work has been done approaching Howells' writings from the platforms of race and gender studies.

Editor: Do you have any predictions or wishes for the future of Howells studies?

TW: I never would have predicted that after 40

years at UCLA I should retire to rural Ohio, and since I believe I know myself better than I know what makes my colleagues tick, I won't try to offer any insights into the future of Howells' studies. But I do have a wish and that is that those not possessing a deep and pervasive sense of irony not be allowed to write about Howells. They simply won't understand him.

Call for 2013 Essay Competition Entrants

The Howells Society Essay Prize is awarded each year for the best paper on Howells presented at the annual ALA conference. The winning essay may have been presented in any session on the program of the conference, including but not limited to panels sponsored by the Howells Society. Papers are judged by members of the Executive Committee, who have the option of appointing additional readers as necessary.

Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, the cash award for this year's prize has been increased. The winning essay will be published (with the author's permission) in a future issue of *The Howellsian*, which is indexed in the *MLA International Bibliography*. Copyright remains with the writer of the essay, so publication here does not preclude later publication of a revised version of the essay in another journal.

2013 presenters who wish to enter their papers in this year's competition must submit them by **January 15, 2014** to the Society's President, Lance Rubin. You are welcome to revise your paper before submitting it, but please keep in mind that the essay should be a "conference length" paper and should not exceed 12-15 pages, maximum. Please send the papers as e-mail attachments, in MS Word format, to lance.rubin@arapahoe.edu.

Papers Presented

at the ALA Conference, Boston, May 2013

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS: OPEN TOPIC
Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College (Hartford)

1. **Dialectic, Interrupted: In Conversation with Howells' *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894).**

Cristina D'Amico, University of Toronto

Following Jonathon Arac's (2007) interest in utopianism and language, Cristina D'Amico's paper assessed some of the linguistic strategies at work in Howells' full-scale (and oft-ignored) utopian novel, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894). In "Howells and the Languages of American Fiction" (2007), Arac identifies aspects of utopian thinking in the use of dialects and difficult languages in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), but expresses disappointment with the aesthetic strategies at work in *Altruria*. Through a close assessment of *Altruria's* formal devices, D'Amico dispelled the notion that the novel's utopianism necessarily be "barbaric, off-scale, or even just boring" (Arac 17). She identified a productive tension between the text's endorsement of dialectical materialism (i.e. the movement from capitalism to socialism, as articulated by Marx and Engels) and the novel's presentation of stunted and unproductive conversations, which often read like "dialectics, interrupted." In other words, what the novel seems to endorse at the level of content is being contested at the level of form. Through this conflict, she suggested that the novel offers us insights into the problem of political praxis—rather than champion an idealistic socialist future, *Altruria* asks how historical conflicts work themselves out in day-to-day life. In thinking about the paper in relation to Howells studies, D'Amico hopes to revive critical interest in *Altruria*, not as an aberration in Howells' realist literary career, but as a text which is crucial to understanding how he con-

ceived of the relationship between language and politics.

2. "The American Practice of Democracy": W.D. Howells, the Enlightenment, and Social Class in *Annie Kilburn*

Scott Reznick, Boston College

This essay aims to deepen the discussion of Howells's engagement with social class by arguing that Howells was heavily influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, particularly its concern for understanding both the nature of the individual and the operations of the larger social structure. For Enlightenment thinkers such as the French physiocrats and the Scottish moral scientists, class was not just an economic phenomenon, but a political, moral, and cultural one, as well—one where inequality had numerous dimensions and implications that liberal societies must consider and work out. Writing at a time when conceptions of class were becoming more rigidly economic and unabashedly rhetorical, Howells retains an Enlightenment commitment to analyzing the relationship between the individual and society. *Annie Kilburn* (1888), written in the wake of the Haymarket affair, is his most earnest attempt to understand the nature of U.S. class relations, and, as this essay argues, should be seen as part of an Enlightenment project inquiring into the myriad dimensions of inequality. By paying particular attention to what the novel's spatial tropes indicate about the workings of American democracy, what we ultimately find is a sustained examination of the types of inequality that can exist in liberal democratic societies, and what kinds—if any—should be permissible.

3. "I'll be dogged!": Evolution and Imbrutation in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

Henry B. Wonham, University of Oregon

"Dog on it," "Dogged if I know," "I'll be dogged," repeats Fulkerson numerous times in Howells's epic novel about New York City—so

WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS & MEMORY
 Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College (Hartford)

many times, in fact, that one is tempted to wonder what it might mean, literally, to be "dogged" in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Would the process of "dogging" another human being entail something like the brutality with which Mr. Dryfoos wishes he could treat the strikers, those "lazy hounds," whom he regards as "a pack of dirty, worthless whelps"? Does Dryfoos "dog" his own son when he strikes him across the face and insults him as an "impudent puppy"? Under the pressure of such insistent imagery, Dryfoos's political and economic vision of a "dog eat dog" world—a phrase that appears twice in *Hazard*—becomes the novel's figurative reality (447). And yet, there is another dog story in the novel. Reversion to an animal state may have worried Howells in his darker moods—and his moods certainly tended toward darkness through much of the novel's composition—but such a sober account of *Hazard*'s riffing on man's best friend seems tone deaf to the possibilities suggested by Fulkerson's breezy slang. In fact, "dog," according to Fulkerson's idiom, is an essential component of *Every Other Week*'s success, something the novel loosely associates with modernity, visual panache, an aura of refinement, and even sex appeal. It is significantly Beaton's art work, rather than March's edited text, that lends this quality to the first issue, as Fulkerson's enthusiastic critique makes clear: "I tell you, March, . . . Beaton has given us the greatest start! He's caught on like a mice. He's made the whole thing awfully chic; it's jimmy; there's lots of dog about it." The novel's many canine references unquestionably gesture backward, toward an evolutionary narrative in which human animality remains a persistent concern, while Howells's slang use of "dog" points just as certainly forward, in the direction of an indefinable modern aesthetic. These two senses of the novel's canine imagery, which we might think of as embodied in Dryfoos's and Fulkerson's very different breeds of dog, correspond roughly to two quite different dimensions of Howells's art.

1. A Charge That Staggers: Howells's Standards for Reviewing the Civil War

Aaron Shackelford, UNC Chapel Hill

William Dean Howells's famous observation of the failings of American Civil War literature appeared in his 1867 review of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*. Penned by John W. De Forest, whom Howells would later call "the only American novelist," the review marks Howells's first effort to outline his continually frustrated vision for war literature through his criticism. As Amanda Claybaugh has noted, Howells seems to at once appreciate the impossibilities of describing the violent trauma of war and continually call for literature that nonetheless succeeds in this representational challenge.

This paper continues the engagement with Howells's criticism of Civil War literature in his reviews of Melville, De Forest, Crane, and Bierce in an effort to more fully define the criteria by which Howells evaluates representations of the war. In this way I position his series of short reviews as a vital contribution to our conception of post-bellum struggles with what it means to meet the charge the Civil War has placed upon the country. By doing so Howells's reviews provide important insight into our own institutional wariness of Civil War literature and mark his short writings as vital contributions to how our profession continues to evaluate these texts. I close by arguing that from these insights Howells unwittingly endorsed a representation of the Civil War that has gained tremendous critical attention in the last few decades: the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

2. Ambivalent Amnesia and Dubious Memory in Howells's "A Sleep and a Forgetting"

Lance Rubin, Arapahoe CC

Abstract unavailable.

3. Civil War Bodies and the Sacrificial Enterprise: Negotiating Mutilation in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

Joseph Darda, University of Connecticut

What, at the end of the nineteenth century, did it mean to reclaim the Civil War? It is a question that, I suggested, forms the foundation of William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889). In her influential work on *Hazard*, Amy Kaplan suggests that the text negotiates New York City through the production of a manageable foreground and an "unreal" background, a distinction meant to control social conflict and produce common ground amidst difference. More recent criticism takes up Kaplan's claim to consider what the construction of this "line" might suggest about the text's political undercurrents. There is a general sense of agreement that *Hazard* is as radical as it is conformist, as idealistic as it is pragmatic. But this tension is not just a product of Howells's conflicting political commitments; rather, it arises from the incompatible claims to the meaning of the Civil War that he stages around Berthold Lindau's missing hand. Susan Mizruchi notes that it is the act of sacrifice, "what is *given up*," that makes the social possible. The coherence of the foreground depends on the erasure of the background. In *Hazard*, the disremembering of Lindau's mutilation is the principal sacrifice through which the social is constructed. Yet his "empty sleeve" also represents the most real threat to this order. In reorienting *A Hazard of New Fortunes* around Lindau's missing hand, I first discussed the importance of soldiers' bodies to Gilded Age culture in general and to realist fiction in particular. I then considered Lindau's mutilation as a target of sacrificial rites, rites that he himself complicates and contests.

S U B S C R I B E !

to the

HOWELLS-L DISCUSSION LIST

Easy instructions on the Howells Society website:

howellsociety.wordpress.com

NEW ADDRESS!

Full-text of works by Howells, web resource links, reviews, scholarship, back issues of *The Howellsian*, and more . . .

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MINUTES

of the

William Dean Howells Society Business Meeting

ALA Boston—May 24, 2013

Submitted by Mischa Renfroe, Secretary-Treasurer of the William Dean Howells Society

The WDHS Business Meeting was held on May 24, 2013 at the American Literature Association Conference, which took place May 23-26, 2013 at the Westin Copley Place in Boston, MA. President Lance Rubin called the meeting to order. Other members present were Sally Daugherty, Daniel Mrozowski, Paul Petrie, Mischa Renfroe, and Thomas Wortham.

Treasurer Mischa Renfroe reported that, as of May 2013, the account balance was \$14496.32 (including Paypal), and the society collected \$540.00 in dues. Expenses for the year included \$384.54 for one mailing of the newsletter and \$96.42 for postcard membership dues reminders to all members with current mailing addresses. Based on the response to the postcard reminders, the membership list was updated to sixty-seven members who had paid dues within the last five years.

Editor Paul Petrie provided an update on *The Howellsian*. The society published one print issue of the newsletter. Members discussed returning to a biannual publication schedule, with both issues distributed electronically.

Members discussed possible topics for next year's ALA conference, including a teaching roundtable, an open-topic session, and a

history or political topic to engage the Washington, DC location. Members also agreed to extend the CFP deadline to January 15, 2014 to encourage more submissions. Vice-President Daniel Mrozowski will write the CFP and select proposals for the society's panels.

Other business: Members discussed the need for affordable scholarly editions of Howells's work for classroom use. Suggestions included a Norton Critical Edition of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Broadview editions of lesser-known texts, and another Library of America edition to complement the existing two volumes. Members also discussed ways to increase membership and to raise funds for a larger Howells Essay Prize (currently \$100) and a graduate student travel fund. Members decided to provide a complimentary two-year membership for graduate students working on Howells.

Thomas Wortham made a motion (seconded by Paul Petrie) to hold the society's bylaws in abeyance for one year and revisit the bylaws at the next business meeting.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

CALL FOR 2013-14 MEMBERSHIP DUES

Annual membership in the William Dean Howells Society remains a bargain at \$15 / year.

New memberships and renewals are payable . . .

Online via PayPal under the “Membership” link on the Society’s website (<http://howellssociety.wordpress.com/>),

By check payable to The William Dean Howells Society, mailed with the form below to:
Mischa Renfroe, Middle Tennessee State University, English Department, Box 70, 1301 E. Main
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Graduate students working on Howells may join the Society for free for two years. Apply now.

Name:
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Thank you for your continued support of the William Dean Howells Society.

The Howellsian is published twice yearly (with occasional lapses) by the William Dean Howells Society for the information of the Society’s members and others interested in the life and work of W.D. Howells.

This issue marks the first electronic-only publication of the newsletter. It was distributed originally via email to all Howells Society members for whom an email address was known at the time of publication.

If you did not receive your copy via this email distribution, please update your email address by sending it to the Society’s secretary, Professor Mischa Renfroe, at this address:
mischa.renfroe @ mtsu.edu



H.P.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

I.

I LOOKED and saw a splendid pageantry
 Of beautiful women and of lordly men,
 Taking their pleasure in a flowery plain,
 Where poppies and the red anemone,
 And many another leaf of cramoisy,
 Flickered about their feet, and gave their stain
 To heels of iron or satin, and the grain
 Of silken garments floating far and free,
 As in the dance they wove themselves, or strayed
 By twos together, or lightly smiled and bowed,
 Or curtsied to each other, or else played
 At games of mirth and pastime, unafraid
 In their delight; and all so high and proud,
 They seemed scarce of the earth whereon they trod.

II.

I looked again and saw that flowery space
 Stirring, as if alive, beneath the tread
 That rested now upon an old man's head,
 And now upon a baby's gasping face,
 Or mother's bosom, or the rounded grace
 Of a girl's throat; and what had seemed the red
 Of flowers was blood, in gouts and gushes shed
 From hearts that broke under that frolic pace.
 And now and then from out the dreadful floor
 An arm or brow was lifted from the rest,
 As if to strike in madness, or implore
 For mercy; and anon some suffering breast
 Heaved from the mass and sank; and as before
 The revellers above them thronged and prest.



CALL FOR PAPERS

William Dean Howells Society Panels for ALA 2014

The William Dean Howells Society welcomes submissions for two panels at the 2014 American Literature Association conference in Washington D.C. on May 22 – 25.

Panel 1: New Approaches to Teaching William Dean Howells

We are seeking panelists for a potential roundtable on teaching the works of William Dean Howells. We hope to introduce new voices and techniques to the discussion of his most popular works, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, while also considering fresh strategies for the inclusion of Howells in survey of American literature courses. We are especially interested in accounts of the teaching of his lesser-known works. Other areas may include Howells in his cultural context, from marriage to real estate to anti-imperialism; Howells and American literary realism; Howells and ethics; Howells as editor; or Howells and literary criticism, including critical race studies, cultural Marxism, queer theory, etc.

Panel 2: Open Topic

We are looking for insightful, original papers that address any aspect of Howells's work.

Please submit your 200-250 word abstract and a current CV (or any questions) to Dan Mrozowski at Daniel.mrozowski@trincoll.edu by January 31, 2014