

# The Howellsian

## A Message from the President

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The Howells Society welcomes all its members in its first issue of the new series of the *Howellsian*. Future issues of the newsletter will include abstracts of papers presented at conferences, short essays on recent Howells scholarship, inquiries with reference to Howells, and news of forthcoming meetings and publications of interest to Howellsians. We invite contributions to the newsletter, and hope to see many of you at the panels presented by the Howells Society at the meeting of the American Literature Association in Boston in May.

Papers on Howells presented at the ALA and elsewhere and recent books in which Howells figures prominently, such as those by Susan Goodman, Hildegard Hoeller, and Augusta Rohrbach, are compelling evidence of the importance of Howells and the richness of his work as a field of study.

The Society is dedicated to aiding and expanding the work of scholars and critics as they continue to illuminate the scope and depth of Howells' writings.

—Elsa Nettels, *President*



William Dean Howells in 1907

## A Message from the Editor

We apologize for the delay between the preceding issue of *The Howellsian* and this one, but an unanticipated change of editors necessitated it, and the executive committee of the Society will do its best to preclude a similar lapse in the future. All members who were in good standing in 2002 remain in good standing at present. We thank you for your patience

and support.

The **contents** of this issue include: 1) Greetings from Elsa Nettels, president of the William Dean Howells Society, 2) a review of Society activities associated with the American Literature Association conference of May 2004, 3) a preview of the two panels arranged for the Society at this year's ALA

conference, 4) a selection from a new biography of W. D. Howells by Vice-President and Program Chair Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, and 5) notice of a forthcoming essay by Sarah B. Daugherty on prospects for further scholarship on Howells.

—Sanford Marovitz,  
*Interim Editor*

## Howells Meetings at the American Literature Association 2004



W. D. Howells  
Picture courtesy of Mark Goodburn

On May 29, 2004, the William Dean Howells Society met on three occasions during the American Literature Association conference at the Hyatt Regency Hotel at Embarcadero, San Francisco. The preceding evening, from 5 - 7, **John Crichton, of the Brick Row Book Shop**, hosted a wine-and-cheese **reception** for Society members and other guests at the Book Club of California, Suite 510, 512 Sutter St., San Francisco.

Well displayed in several glass cases throughout the reception area was a splendid representation of the Book Club's holdings, especially a number of choice Howells items, including letters, manuscripts, and first editions. The reception was well attended, and for most of two hours one could join any of several conversations on Howells' life and works. Those present expressed their gratitude to Mr. Crichton before leaving, and we are happy to extend our thanks more officially here in *The Howellsian*.

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### *Reception at the Brick Row Book Shop and Business Meeting*

**The Brick Row Book Shop** has a long history and an excellent stock of used and rare items, some of which were on display in the book-exhibit area during the conference. Bibliophiles and collectors with special interests in American literature would do well to stop and explore the shelves at the Brick Row when in San Francisco.

#### **Business Meeting**

The Society held a business meeting from 9:30 - 10:50 A.M. and sponsored two panels in the afternoon. Attending the **business meeting** were: Elsa Nettels, President of the Society (Coll. of William and Mary), Susan Goodman, Vice-President and Program Chair (U. of Delaware), Donna Campbell, Secretary (Gonzaga U.), Sandy Marovitz, Past President (Kent State U.), Polly Howells (Indep. Scholar), and Melissa Pennell (U. Of Massachusetts, Lowell). Elsa called the meeting to order at 9:40 and announced that the 2005 ALA conference would be held in Boston.

Topics discussed included the following:

1. Achieving greater effect from Calls for Papers by distributing them via the post as well as on-line and by announcing them in newsletters of other ALA societies for authors who wrote within approximately the same time-frame as Howells.
2. Providing special benefits for active members of the Society, such as annual prizes and/or awards for outstanding papers, articles, and books.
3. Instituting graduating levels of membership for additional support to increase benefits and help fund *The Howellsian*.

Because Jesse Crisler asked to be replaced as editor of *The Howellsian* and treasurer of the Society, current executive committee members agreed to accept these responsibilities on an interim basis with Elsa as interim treasurer and Sandy as interim editor. The committee unanimously agreed to continue bringing out *The Howellsian* and possibly expand it as the membership grows.

The executive committee voted by acclamation to thank Jesse Crisler for his invaluable service to the Society as its founder and principal officer, combining the duties of president, vice-president, treasurer, editor, and program chair in its first and second years, and for his continuing service as treasurer and editor until now. We recognize that had it not been for his sustained efforts at the beginning, the Society may not exist today; we shall always be grateful for his early initiative and support.

Also discussed was the possibility of holding another seminar at Kittery Point in conjunction with the ALA, and Polly expressed her doubt (which the passage of time has justified.) Polly and Elsa serve as liaisons between the W. D. Howells Memorial Committee at Harvard and the Society. Polly also explained the history of the relation of the Memorial Committee to the Howells family home at Kittery Point and indicated its availability to support scholarly research on matters related to W. D. Howells. This needs to be better publicized.

## Book Excerpt: Preface from *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life*

Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life*. Berkeley: U of California P., scheduled for publ. May 11, 2005.

**From the Preface**, with permission from the authors and publisher:

What would you think of my writing my autobiography? My published reminiscences have made a beginning, and it would forestall a biography, always a false and mistaken thing.

W. D. Howells to his sister Aurelia, 1909

Born in a hardscrabble Ohio village in 1837, William Dean Howells lived through and beyond what Twain called "the greatest and worthiest of all the centuries the world has seen." As a young man, he faced America's cataclysm, the Civil War, and its aftermath, the years of Reconstruction. In the period that Twain and Charles D. Warner dubbed "the Gilded Age," he dined with "robber barons" like Andrew Carnegie. He protested the social injustices of the 1880s and 90s, condemned American imperialism that climaxed in the Spanish-American War, and died, in 1920, soon after World War I destroyed the hopes of his and the next generation.

At the opening of the twentieth century, Howells looked back forty years to measure his life in writing. If there was any one in the world who had his being more wholly in literature than I had in 1860, he wrote, I am sure I would not have known where to find him. That year, with a handful of poems and a campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln to his credit, the twenty-three-year-old made a pilgrimage to New England, the mecca of his literary dreams. In Concord and Boston he managed to meet America's leading writers: James Russell Lowell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. During a dinner at the Parker House, Holmes joked about an apostolic succession, and in retrospect he proved to be clairvoyant.

"Howells was, as Mark Twain liked to call him, 'The Boss.'"

Howells' career is itself the stuff of fiction. The Lincoln biography, written in a week, earned him a consulship to Venice during the Civil War. The city served as the young man's university and introduced him to a world far removed from small-town Ohio. Venice furnished enough material about books and art to convince the powers of literary Boston to promote his career. The time came when Howells could return these favors, when he helped his own mentors, and aspiring writers made their treks to Boston and New York to visit him.

As editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and later as a columnist for *Harper's Monthly*, Howells swayed the tastes and values of a growing middle-class readership, leaving his stamp on American culture. He himself published well over a hundred books. Although he lived as a self-conscious American, Howells' sense of that word varies throughout his works, which is to say that its defining lies at the heart of all he wrote. Anyone who wants to "trace American `society' in its formative process," advised his friend and rival, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "must go to Howells . . . he alone shows you the essential forces in action." Howells wanted American literature to be less provincial, a national phenomenon rather than the property of New Englanders, yet he began his campaign in the *Atlantic*, New England's (and the nation's) premier magazine. More paradoxically, his vision of American literature led him to introduce readers to the works of Thomas Hardy, Ivan Turgenev, Emile Zola, and Leo Tolstoy, whom he held up as models to his compatriots. At the same time, Howells championed Henry James as an American writer when others dismissed him as unreadable or un-American for living abroad.

## William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life, continued

Howells was, as Mark Twain liked to call him, "The Boss." As a magazine editor he brokered reputations, promoted the careers of regional writers (many of them women), and introduced the reading public to the writings of African Americans like Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar. He was at once a diplomatic "boss," a shrewd businessman, a political radical, and a writer whose imagination changed the standards of American fiction. Howells delighted in a story told by the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, a personal friend, who captured his mix of visionary and practical qualities in an extraordinary dream. As Howells retold it, "We were on ship-board together, and a dialogue rose between the passengers as to the distance of a certain brilliant planet in the sky. Some said it was millions of miles away, but I held that it was very near; and he [Saint-Gaudens] related that I went down to my stateroom and came up with a shotgun, which I fired at the star. It came fluttering down, and I said `There! You see?'" Howells, who wrote about his own dreams and saw the dreamworld as both revealing and amoral, would not have blamed Saint-Gaudens for imagining him a bigamist or criminal. It delighted him to be seen reaching higher and shooting bigger game than Theodore Roosevelt.

No one wields such power without considering what to leave behind for later generations, or for the untrustworthy biographers. As a writer of memoirs, autobiographical novels, and biographies, Howells understood the strategies--and the pitfalls--of writing lives as only a fellow conspirator can. When barely out of his teens, he urged one of his sisters not to throw away his letters. He intended to be famous and anticipated a biographer would eventually find his papers useful. Toward the end of his life, he carefully selected and edited hundreds of letters and arranged for them to be typed. He did not want to stop books about himself so much as control the stories they told. The sheer volume of his gathered materials--records of royalty payments, engagements, and addresses, as well as journals, notebooks, and newspaper clippings--

"For any biographer, Howells proves a wily subject."

creates the misleading impression of an open legacy. Rather, Howells worked to keep posterity honest, or at least in check, by setting limits to our knowing. He was well aware that his own accounts--"reminiscences" of Venice or frontier Ohio, his meetings with Longfellow and Emerson, and the long friendships with James and Twain--would provide the grist for future writers.

The orchestrated record he left behind reflects the quirks and paradoxes of his temperament. At once proud of his work and ashamed of his egotism, he cultivated a trait he admired in his father, William Cooper Howells. "The unfriendly eye always loses what is best in a prospect," the son explains in homage, "and his . . . eye was never unfriendly. He did not deceive himself concerning the past. He found it was often rude, and hard, and coarse; but, under the rough and sordid aspect, he was aware of the warm heart of humanity in which, quite as much as in the brain, all civility lies." As civil as his father, though more cynical, he reveled in Mark Twain's iconoclasm. Howells chose to emphasize moments of joy or healing, not because he shied away from the suffering around him, but because he found no alternative to living with his conscience and facing the inevitable. Few writers have been more aware of human failings or more courageous. Almost alone among America's writers, he spoke out against the infamous Haymarket trials of 1886, which reflected widespread disquiet and brought about the hanging of innocent men. Years after Haymarket he chose to believe, perhaps pretend, that in the best of all possible worlds, people could be good and happy. That they were rarely either went without saying.

For any biographer, Howells proves a wily subject. In this book, we have tried to go beyond the fictions he himself created about his life and the fictions that have grown up since: the boy of his memoirs (a boy like any boy, only better); the sophisticated editor in his easy chair; the timid and emotionally scarred writer; the benevolent "dean" of letters. These characters have obscured Howells from his public and occasionally from himself. Mark Twain knew a more complex man. In a letter to their mutual friend, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, he sent a photograph of Howells with his own description: *(continued on page 6)*

## Howells Sessions at ALA 2004

The **first panel**, “Howells and ‘The Great American Novel,’” chaired by Elsa Nettels, was held from 2 - 3:20; and the **second panel**, “Howells’ Autobiographical Writings,” chaired by Susan Goodman, was held from 3:30 - 4:50. Both sessions drew sizable audiences; most of those present showed great satisfaction and commented favorably on the presentations. A glance at the two programs makes that satisfaction easy to understand:

### 1. “Howells and ‘The Great American Novel’”

Elsa Nettels, College of William and Mary, Chair

- Michael Anesko (Penn State U.): “Implied Readers/Inferred Judgments: Constructing Class in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*”
- Carl Dawson (U. of Delaware): “What Kind of Novelist Was He?”
- Christopher E. Garrett (Texas A&M U.): “Images of the Prodigal: The Moral Dialectics and Philosophy of William Dean Howells in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*”

### 2. “Howells’ Autobiographical Writings”

Susan Goodman, University of Delaware, Chair

- Polly Howells (Indep. Scholar): “A Great-Grandfather’s Legacy: Reading My Life through His Works”
- Clare E. Colquitt (San Diego State U.): “The Art of Remembering: James, Wharton, and Howells”
- Thomas Wortham (UCLA): “The Radical Howells”



W. D. Howells in his study

## Howells Sessions at ALA 2005

Last fall Susan announced in a Call for Papers (by 1/1/05) that the topics for the two Howells panels to be scheduled for the **2005 ALA conference** are: **1)** “Howells and Others” and **2)** “Howells and Representations of Masculinity.” The two programs are as follows:

### 1. “Howells and Others”

Susan Goodman, University of Delaware, Chair

- Jerome Loving (Texas A&M U.): “Twain’s Whittier Birthday Speech and Howells”
- Katherine Joslin (Western Michigan U.): “Charming Comrades: Jane Addams and W. D. Howells”
- Renaldo Silva (U. de Aveiro): “The Portuguese Among Other Ethnic Minorities in Some of Howells’ Fiction”
- Claudia Stokes (Trinity Coll., TX): “Is There a Place for Genius in Literary History? Howells and the Editing of *An American Anthology*”

### 2. “Representations of Masculinity in Howells’ Writings”

Donald Vanouse, SUNY Oswego, Chair

- Lynn Jennings (U. of Wisconsin-Madison): “Who’s Your Daddy? Paternity, Paternalism, and Patriotism in *An Imperative Duty*”
- Robert Klevay (U. of Delaware): “The Literary Heroine and the Epistolary Hero in *Indian Summer*”
- Alex Nissen (U. of Oslo): “Howells and Heterosexuality”
- Paul Petrie (Southern Connecticut State U.): Respondent

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*W. D. Howells  
Panels at the  
American  
Literature  
Association*

## *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life, continued*

"Howells [is] looking--but I enclose his newest photo; it will tell you his condition. He thinks it a libel, I think it flatters. The thing that gravels him is, that the camera caught his private aspect, not giving him time to arrange his public one. I have never seen such a difference between the real man & the artificial. Compare this one with the imposter which he works into book-advertisements. They say, Notice this smile; observe this benignity; God be with you Dear People, come to your Howells when you are in trouble, Howells is your friend. This one says, Bile! give me more bile; fry me an optimist for breakfast." Despite this shrewd unmasking--Twain was an intimate friend--the simplified portrayals persist, as do the grudging estimates of Howells' novels, essays, and his books on places, beginning with *Venetian Life*. A few of his comments about the American temperament or the workings of fiction have defined this many-sided writer who, as Mark Twain recognized, published works that rivaled, and at times surpassed, his own. *Indian Summer*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and at least a dozen others deserve a closer look by a new generation. These and his autobiographies, *Years of My Youth* and *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, fry the simple optimist for breakfast.

We take comfort in another Twain comment, that whatever anyone's deceptions, "the remorseless truth is there, between the lines," while remembering Howells' warning to Twain, that no one can speak "the black heart's truth." Howells liked to believe himself devoted to the truth, knowing very well that any historical account selects, stretches, and misses the truth. Biographers enter the spaces between the lines, make words into deeds, and reach for the nuances of a vanished world, in the hope--as Joseph Conrad once wrote--of shedding a little light. We have reimagined Howells where he lived and worked, in places as distant as Venice, Italy, and Kittery Point, Maine, and in Boston and New York, the centers of his professional life. We talk about the men and women he called "literary friends and acquaintance"; about the culture of publishing houses and magazines; about topics from political radicalism to Spanish novelists to moving pictures; and about Howells' later years, rich with new companions and causes and, as always, rich in books. We begin the story with his ancestors, the Welsh grandparents who came in search of a new life, making their way through the Cumberland Gap to the frontier of Ohio. But first a word about the making of this book.

Looking back on his life, Howells decided that autobiography could scarcely be kept from becoming biography--so much is human personality a reflection of family, friends, and historic conditions. He considered any life a kind of palimpsest, a layering of lives and labor, and the same might be said about this biography. . . .

*We thank Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson for the this preview of their forthcoming biography.*

*You really are my only author; I am restricted to you; I wouldn't give a damn for the rest.*

—Mark Twain, letter to W. D. Howells, July 21, 1885

## Recent Criticism on Howells

### 2004

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- Evans, Brad. "Howellsian Chic: The Local Color of Cosmopolitanism." *ELH* 71.3 (2004): 775-812.
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- Goodman, Susan. *Civil Wars: American Novelists and Manners, 1880-1940*. Baltimore, MD : Johns Hopkins UP, 2003.
- Love, Glen A. *Practical Ecocriticism : Literature, Biology, and the Environment*. Under the Sign of Nature. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003.
- McMurray, Price. "'Take the Thing at Its Worst!': Realism and the Construction of Masculinity in Howells's *The Shadow of a Dream*." *Conference of College Teachers of English Studies* 68 (2003): 21-30.
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- Prettyman, Gib. "The Next Best Thing: Business and Commercial Inspiration in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*." *American Literary Realism* 35.2 (Winter 2003): 95-119.
- Renfroe, Alicia Mischa. "Life, Leases on the Future: Legal Discourse in Selected Works of Louisa May Alcott, William Dean Howells, Henry James and Edith Wharton." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences 63.12 (2003): 4316.
- Rennick, Andrew. "'A Good War Story': The Civil War, Substitution, and the Labor Crisis in Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*." *American Literary Realism* 35.3 (2003): 247-.
- Stretch, Cynthia. "Illusions of a Public, Locations of Conflict: Feeling Like Populace in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*." *American Literary Realism* 35.3 (2003): 233-.
- Susina, Jan. "The Center of Centerburg: Robert McCloskey's Regionalist Image of Boyhood." *The Image of the Child*. Ed. Sylvia Patterson Iskander. Battle Creek, MI:Children's Lit. Assn.,1991, 279-86.
- Yang, Seokwon. "Howells's Realism Reconsidered: Representing the Unrepresentable in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*." *Journal of English Language and Literature/Yongong Yonmunhak* 49.4 (2003): 845-70.
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## Essay on Howells in *Prospects for the Study of American Literature*

When *Prospects for the Study of American Literature: A Guide for Scholars and Students*, edited by Richard Kopley, was published in 1997, it did not include a chapter on Howells among the sixteen nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors it covered. That lapse has been corrected in the forthcoming issue, which will include **Sarah B. Daugherty's essay, "Prospects for the Study of William Dean Howells."**

Daugherty presents Howells as "an almost ideal subject for further study [because] he is a major writer whose potential has

not yet been exhausted by academic professionals." Not only are he and his works deserving of additional scholarship, but "Howells is also an instructive presence in the classroom." Students of Howells on all levels will find this essay valuable as a source of both useful information and ideas on further topics of research about the author and his voluminous writings. We do not yet have a scheduled publication date, but the book is expected to be out "soon," so please watch for it.

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The next issue (Vol 8, No. 2 N.S.) of *The Howellsian* will be published in the fall. Among other items, it will include an account of the Society's business meeting with the results of the forthcoming election of officers, a review of our ALA panels on this year's program, an announcement of the topics selected for our two sessions at the 2006 ALA conference (probably to be held in San Francisco), and a Call for Papers.

SEM., *Int. Ed.*