

Note

NEW LIGHT ON EMILY DICKINSON'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH SARAH ELIZA (CUSHING) TUCKERMAN

Both Thomas H. Johnson, in his three-volume 1958 edition of *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, and Jay Leyda, in his 1960 *Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, dated Dickinson's first letter to Sarah Eliza (Cushing) Tuckerman to 'January 1874?' and 'as early as Jan.? 1874'.¹ But having married in 1854, Tuckerman (1832–1915) and her husband Edward (1817–86) moved to Dickinson's hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts, when he was appointed professor of history at Amherst College in 1855, and documents since donated to the same institution show that she met the poet much earlier than 1874.² In a letter headed 'Amherst, May 24th 1855' from her visiting sister Anna Louisa Cushing (1834–1923) to their younger sister Martha (Mattie) Ann Cushing (1837–87), Anna mentions how 'Yesterday afternoon, the Miss Dickinson's [Emily and her sister Lavinia] called, they do not seem like country girls in their manners at all, being very much affected one of them said to me that she had been away nearly all Winter, having been in Washington'.³ In a follow-up letter to Mattie, dated 31 May 1855, again from Amherst, Anna adds that 'Miss Dickinson, sent Sister Eliza last evening, a very pretty bouquet of flowers, from her own garden they were arranged, really with a good deal of taste _____'.

These descriptions are invaluable, because they are among the few first-hand accounts of the poet's life other than her sister Lavinia's 1851

Diary, and they fill a small gap in the year in which they were written: after Dickinson and Lavinia visited Washington in February, and Philadelphia in March, of 1855, there are no extant letters until mid-October, and Anna Cushing's description shows both sisters resuming social rounds, and establishing connections with fairly recent arrivals to Amherst. They also reveal that the correspondent referred to as Sarah Tuckerman in editions of Dickinson's letters, in biographies, and in criticism, was called Eliza by her family—and signed herself as 'Eliza' in a letter of her own to Mattie headed 'Amherst 29th June/55', where she reported being:

constantly supplied with choice flowers, by the ladies here. Miss French sent me an elegant bouquet this week from her garden, and Miss Dickinson occasionally remembers me by her floral gifts. Tell Annie that the youngest one, Miss Lavinia (not with curls) called yesterday, and behaved sweetly, without any affectation at all, & that she seems to be a right pleasant girl. Perhaps the plain way that I replied to them the first afternoon they called made them see that all so called fashionable airs were lost. I really like Miss D. much [...] Sister Eliza.

These gifts of flowers, and visits, continued: at the least, Lavinia called at the Tuckermans on 8 October 1857; Lavinia and Dickinson made another call 13 May 1859; Eliza records 20 January 1860 in her Diary that 'Miss Lavinia Dickinson came with a note and two flowers from her sister', and 11 February that 'Misses Emily and Lavinia Dickinson called'.⁴ Even Edward Tuckerman writes to Eliza 3 May 1868 that 'Miss E ... D ... is coming to see me tomorrow—so you see I am receiving numerous attentions'.⁵ Given that

¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, eds. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 759. Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven, 1960), I, lxxv.

² Amherst College, Special Collections, Cushing-Tuckerman Esty Family Papers (MA.293). I am grateful to M. R. Dakin for sending PDF copies and her own notes from this collection, which is still being processed, and for her many contributions to the researching of this article, which would not have been possible without her.

³ For more on the visit, see Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York, 2001), 328–30.

⁴ Eliza and Edward kept a joint Diary January–March 1860, now at Amherst College Special Collections.

⁵ It was likely that there were many more calls: people of this group in Amherst visited a great deal, informally. The connections extend outwards, too: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, another Dickinson correspondent and, along with Mabel Loomis Todd, the first editor of her poems, wrote in 1868 to Edward Tuckerman, by then Professor of Botany at Amherst College, that he 'dreamed of coming to Amherst, to see you & my unseen correspondent Emily Dickinson'. Quoted in Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books*, 521.

Dickinson's name was already known to Mattie, it seems likely that she too would have received a message after marrying Amherst College professor of mathematics and astronomy William Cole Esty (1838–1916) at Amherst in July 1867, though the single extant draft addressed (but not sent) to her dates to about 1885, when Dickinson writes 'I bring my Mrs Estey not Treasures, nor Temptation, but just this little Vat of Numidian Wine'.⁶

Anna Cushing's remarks provide rare insights into Dickinson's life and networks, and especially into her friendship with Eliza, who received twenty-eight known messages over a twelve-year period, and who was among a group of women living in Amherst during the 1870s who were important to Dickinson, including Adelaide Hills (thirty-eight letters over fourteen years) and Abigail Cooper (twenty-seven letters over eleven years: her daughter, Alice, married Eliza's nephew Frederick May Tuckerman, and received several notes after the birth of their daughter in June 1884). But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of these connections emerges in a letter to Mattie from her friend Julia Goddard, headed 'Newbury [Vermont], June 12–1884', in which Goddard comments on a Dickinson poem that *Mattie* had sent her: 'I am so sorry to say so, but I have a strong conviction that I have read that poetry of Miss Emily Dickinson's, somewhere; she may have thought she made it up herself but I have my doubts; not that it matters particularly.'⁷

It has not been previously known that Dickinson sent Mattie any poems—though she is known to have sent sixteen to Eliza, and it may be that the text passed on to Goddard came from her (either in its original form or as a transcription). The larger and more important point is that Dickinson's correspondents sometimes shared her remarkable poems with each other during her lifetime: Susan Gilbert Dickinson did so with Samuel Bowles, Helen Hunt Jackson with Thomas

Wentworth Higginson and Thomas Niles (the Boston publisher), while the poet's cousins, Louisa and Frances Norcross, read some of her poems at a literary salon in Boston.⁸ That Mattie Esty and Julia Goddard also read Dickinson shows how people other than the fifty to whom she sent poems directly knew about her writings.⁹

Exactly why the extant correspondence with Eliza Tuckerman begins so late is hinted at in a letter she received from Edward two days after he told her that he expected a visit from Dickinson: 'Miss Dickinson has not kept her promise to bring me flowers, whereat I rejoice (in confidence, I suppose I should add).'¹⁰ By June of 1869 Dickinson was telling Higginson that she did 'not cross my Father's ground to any House or town', and it is perhaps not accidental then that the correspondence with Cooper, Hills, and Tuckerman coincides with a drop in Dickinson's personal calls.¹¹ It had become more important to preserve those documents, not least because of their quality: Eudocia Converse Flynt, another recipient of flowers and a poem, wrote 'Had a letter from Emily Dickinson!!!!' to record the event.¹²

Given that Dickinson's correspondence more generally was often prompted by anniversaries, births and birthdays, deaths, illnesses, marriages, and public holidays like Easter and Christmas—or by seasonal opportunities to gift fruit and flowers—it would appear unthinkable that she did not write notes to Eliza Tuckerman from the mid-1850s onwards, especially when we now know that she was sending flowers. Anna Cushing's letters to her sister Mattie therefore allow us to expand the duration and significance of Dickinson's

⁸ Melissa White, 'Letter to the Light: Discoveries in Dickinson's Correspondence', *The Emily Dickinson Journal* (2007), 16 (1), 1–26.

⁹ Franklin, Ralph W. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, 1998), III, 1547–57.

¹⁰ It was common for letters to be destroyed after a person's death, as Frances and Louisa Norcross did with their materials from Dickinson, and this is probably what happened to Mattie Esty's communications from Dickinson (the only one that survives is an unsent draft to her that Dickinson retained). But Tuckerman's collection was divided among Mattie's sons after her death, and though most of these found their way to Amherst College, some may have ended up in private hands, or been lost.

¹¹ Boston Public Library, Rare Books Department, Ms. Am. 1093 (32). My transcript.

¹² Leyda, *Years and Hours*, II, 64. Flynt had married into Dickinson's mother's side of the family.

⁶ Amherst College, Special Collections, AC 178: my transcription. That Dickinson signed the letter 'Emily' is a clear indication of familiarity: she used a more formal signature in the early phase of a new correspondence.

⁷ There is an outside possibility that the poem might have been familiar to Goddard because it was one of the eleven that had been published, anonymously, during Dickinson's lifetime, most recently in 1878 as 'Success' in the (no Name) series, *A Masque of Poets* (Boston, 1878), 174.

relationship with Eliza Tuckerman, from a fairly late, and largely epistolary, one, to a longer and more intimate friendship of some thirty years.

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