

Article

A REFERENCE TO EMILY DICKINSON IN A LETTER FROM MARTHA ANN (CUSHING) ESTY TO HER SISTER ANNA LOUISA CUSHING

As early as 2007, Margaret R. Dakin and Daria D'Arienzo of Special Collections at the Frost Library, Amherst College, drew attention to a 20 January 1860, entry in a joint diary kept by (Sarah) Eliza and Edward Tuckerman which recorded a visit from Lavinia Dickinson as well as 'a note & two flowers from her sister [Emily]'.¹ That note, which does not survive, was considerably earlier than the first extant letter to Eliza, dated to late December 1873 in the most recent edition of Dickinson's correspondence.² Dakin and D'Arienzo also recorded two other visits during the same period—at the end of January, and in early February 1860, when 'Misses Emily and Lavinia Dickinson called this afternoon'—establishing without doubt that social interactions between the poet and her future correspondent had begun long before had previously been surmised.³

Eliza (Cushman) Tuckerman (1832–1915) and her husband moved to Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1855, after he had received an appointment to the College. In addition to calls from the Dickinson sisters, their 'Memoranda' records a series of visits to, and from, people mentioned in Dickinson's own correspondence—including the seamstress Miss Cooly, Judge John Dickinson, as well as the families of Dr Hitchcock, Professor Seelye and Professor Tyler of Amherst College. Eliza's sister Martha (Mattie) Cushing (1837–87) began to visit the Tuckermans at Amherst in 1855, and moved there herself in 1867, after her July marriage to Amherst College professor of mathematics and

astronomy William Cole Esty (1838–1916). But, again, the single extant draft note addressed (but not sent) to Mattie dates much later, to about 1885, when Dickinson writes 'I bring my Mrs Estey not Treasures, nor Temptation, but just this little Vat of Numidian Wine'.⁴

Among the Cushing-Tuckerman-Esty Family Papers at Amherst College, and first discovered by Margaret Dakin, is a letter from Mattie to her sister Anna dated 'Amherst, [Friday] July 11 1873', and written just at the end of the Commencement week activities, in which she mentions that 'Yesterday morning we all went to the Alumni meeting, in the afternoon to hear Mr Whitelaw Reed's (editor of the Tribune) address before the Social Union, which was very fine, and in the evening to the Dickinson tea-party'.⁵

We had a nice time at the tea-party. It was the pleasantest that I have ever attended there. I talked with a good many people, was introduced to some of the more distinguished guests like Mr Reed, and Dr Storrs, had a charming seat out of doors at tea time with Mr Allen (Fred) Mr Jenkins, and one or two young ladies, and ended the evening with a little chat with Miss Emily. Miss Lavinia asked for you.

The tea-party itself was an annual civic event, anticipated in its issue of Wednesday 9 July by the special correspondent of the *Springfield Republican* as the 'social tea-gathering at the residence of Treasurer Edward Dickinson, one of the most ancient and most agreeable of the social festivities of the week at Amherst'.⁶ The 'distinguished guests' mentioned were Whitelaw Reid, editor of the *New-York Tribune*, one of the most important newspapers of the day, and theologian Richard Salter Storrs, who was a graduate of Amherst College and a Trustee (1863–98): Judge Otis Lord, later of the

¹ 'An Even Better Home at Amherst', *Amherst Magazine*, Spring 2007. <https://www.amherst.edu/news/magazine/issues/2007_spring/better_home>.

² L606, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, 2024), 503.

³ The Diary is at Amherst College, Special Collections. But a letter from Eliza's sister Anna Cushing (1834–1923) to Martha Cushing in Boston shows that calls—and probably correspondence—began even earlier, in May 1855, when, after a previous visit in person, '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'.

⁴ Amherst College, Special Collections, AC 178: my transcription.

⁵ Amherst College, Special Collections, Cushing-Tuckerman-Esty Family Papers, MA 293. I am grateful to M. R. Dakin for drawing my attention to this letter, 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.

⁶ From the special correspondent of the *Springfield Republican*, usually thought to have been the editor Samuel Bowles, quoted in Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson* (New Haven, 1960), II, 203.

Massachusetts Supreme Court, was also in attendance that week, as were Dickinson's cousins Louisa and Frances Norcross. It's a useful reminder that Dickinson's family was at the centre of social events, and that she herself was part of a community of women living in, or from Amherst, who 'chat[ted]', corresponded and exchanged social calls and gifts: in the next month, Dickinson was also visited by author Helen Hunt (later Jackson) and by former school-friend Abby (Wood) Bliss, briefly home from her mission at the Syrian Protestant college in Beirut which later became the American University.

Mattie Esty's letter is interesting for a number of reasons: like her sister Eliza, she refers to Dickinson and Lavinia as 'Miss Emily' and 'Miss Lavinia' (the address was an expected honorific, and the first name a sign of familiarity), and it is also clear that this is not the first time that she and Dickinson have spoken together (and a chat, again, is more casual than a conversation). The letter

offers an intriguing, and fairly late, glimpse of Dickinson herself, if not at the centre of the activities, not fully disengaged from them either. Perhaps most concretely, it establishes that Dickinson and Mattie were on informal speaking terms by 1873 at the very latest. Although little of Mattie's incoming correspondence from this period survives, it is safe to assume that Dickinson would have sent her notes with flowers from the summer of 1867 onwards, just as she had done with her sister Eliza from May of 1855. Mattie Esty's note is therefore a welcome addition to the small number of contemporaneous sightings of Emily Dickinson, and further confirmation of a long and important personal relationship between the poet and the Cushing sisters.

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