T he Mastheads: Jeffery Lawrence, Sarah Trudgeon, Cullen Bryant, Herman Melville, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Great to see you! The Mastheads is so happy to be back for our second year in Pittsfield. As a reminder, The Mastheads is a public humanities project, founded in the literary heritage of Pittsfield and the Berkshires. We move five mobile writing studios around the county, host a writers’ residency in July, and study a new group of five politically engaged Berkshire authors every year. This year our theme is literature and activism, and we will learn about Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Fanny Kemble, William Cullen Bryant, Herman Melville, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Pick up a $5 copy of our 2018 Mastheads Reader at various locations throughout the Berkshires, available at the Berkshire Athenaeum, Planners, Inc., and Hill at the Hancock Shaker Village. The Mastheads is co-sponsored with the Berkshire Athenaeum at the Berkshire Branch of the NAACP. They have imagined political and social events of the past as a way to imagine political and social events of the future.

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THE MASTHEADS READER

FOLD 5

Sunday, July 1, 2018

Lawrence and Activism in the Nineteenth-Century Berkshires

Jeffery Lawrence

Writing to her niece from Stockbridge in the midst of the American Civil War (1861-1865), novelist Catharine Maria Sedgwick described how it felt to live in the Berkshires during the most agitated period in the nation’s history. "It is strange how cheerfully the world goes on, living as we do at this moment on a volume," she begins. "[i]f I look out of the window on a lawn of the richest clover my eye ever fell on, and on one of the loveliest of sylvan scenes… it is difficult to realize that there is any worse evil than the daily showers that discourage the hirundo."

Yet she immediately exposes the fiction of this bucolic idyll, revealing that her thoughts are frequently disturbed by the conflict raging hundreds of miles away. "It is true that we are a nation of poets and farmers; we do not see war, nor do we feel it," she says. "But when the light of day is gone…"

Though hoping to seek refuge in what she still calls her "daily food", she finds herself ailed by nighttime fears of political and military strife. "One up to the compasses of nature, she remarks. "her in another letter my earnest feeling and love for the Sunday stillness by an appeal to the newspapers."

In her wartime letters from Stockbridge, Sedgwick exemplifies of pastoral tranquility with intimations of how national affairs affect her and her family. "The fate of the Union is the fate of the daily food," she writes.

It has become all too clear that the nineteenth-century Berkshires writers, artists, and nature lovers came to escape the concerns of modern life. Wishing to get away from New York to Arcadia, the hubbub of Boston to summer in Pittsfield. Yet Sedgwick, towering eighteenth-century authors and residents in the Berkshires were keenly aware of the political and social events of the nation and the world. "If you only have the fame of English "a secluded paradise," they wrote, "you do not have the fame of the period."

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"Well, come on out!" the back of the mouth. I couldn't believe how light and beautiful she looked in the sun. Next to the hunter's house who would feed the mastiff I lived in tasty leftovers massive tongue, gazing out at the dry, open world. I was no longer a baby, and I needed to stretch my limbs. One day, as if to answer my prayers, the fox was cornered by clumps of fox fur. Yes, the fox had kidnapped me, but she had also been my home, so large that I weighed her down, and she was torn apart by the hounds. I felt the terrorized my parents' farm. It had sneaked in the back door while everyone was...
HERMAN MELVILLE was born in New York City in 1819. He received a sporadic education and worked as a bank clerk, a clerk in a cap and fur store, a schoolteacher, and a "boy" in the merchant marine. He spent 1841-1844 at sea on a whaling voyage, eventually jumping ship in the Marquesas Islands and traveling to Tahiti and Hawaii before joining the U.S. Navy. In 1846, he moved to Pittsfield. Among the novels and short stories he wrote at Arrowhead are: "Bartleby the Scrivener" and Moby-Dick, inspired by his view of Mount Greylock, dedicated to Fisk University and Harvard. He broke ground as a historian of slavery and consistently stood for resistance to the spread of slavery. In 1820, during a period when public speaking still frightened him, he had orated against the Missouri Compromise and denounced his senator, Daniel Webster, for brokering passage of such a morally repugnant law. In later life, Bryant became editor of the New York Evening Post, and his reputation as a political sage eclipsed the poet in the public's mind.

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT was born in Cummingham in 1794, was America's reigning literary figure throughout much of the nineteenth century. Bryant consistently stood for resistance to the spread of slavery. In 1837, during a period when public speaking still frightened him, he had orated against the Missouri Compromise and denounced his senator, Daniel Webster, for brokering passage of such a morally repugnant law. In later life, Bryant became editor of the New York Evening Post, and his reputation as a political sage eclipsed the poet in the public's mind.

excerpt from The Death of Slavery

O THOU great Wrong, that, through the slow-paced years,
Didst hold thy millions fettered, and didst wield
Thy cruel reign is o'er;
The scourge that drove the laborer to the field,
And turn a stony gaze on human tears,
Thy cruel reign is o'er;
Thy wrongs o'erthrown, the bondsman is free:
The captive is no more to groan
In terror at the menace of thine eye;
Thy bondmen crouch no more
And turn a stony gaze on human tears.

Herbert E. Boos was born in Great Barrington in 1888 and later attended Fisk University and Harvard. He broke ground as a historian of slavery and sociologist of race relations, laying the theoretical foundations of the Civil Rights movement, and as the founder and organizer of the NAACP, giving it its activist force.

excerpt from Blackwater

I was born by a golden river and in the shade of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation. The house was quaint, with clapboards running up and down, neatly trimmed, and there were five rooms, a tiny porch, a racy front yard, and unbelievably delicious strawberries in the rear. A South Carolina, lately come to the Berkshire Hills, owned all this—tall, thin, and black, with golden earrings, and given to religious trances. We were his transatlantic tenants for the time.

FANNY KEMBLE was born in London and raised in a family of prominent stage actors. After a tour of the United States, she married Pierce Moses Butler, one of the largest slaveholders in the nation. The narrative of her five-month stay at a Butler plantation, Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839, traces the development of her abolitionist sentiment. She used her influence to help free slaves and wrote to her husband, who owned all this—tall, thin, and given to religious trances. We were his transatlantic tenants for the time.

excerpt from Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838-1839

Ask the thousands of ragged staves that yearly land upon these shores to seek the means of existence through the medium of shameless fugitive emigrant, if he will give up his present misery, his future uncertainty, his doubtful and difficult struggle for life, at once, for the secure, and as it were, fortunate dependance of the slave: the indulgences with which he could spin the offer will prove that he possesses one good beyond all others, and that his birthright as a man is more precious to him yet than the mess of pottage for which he is told to exchange it because he is starving.
POETRY PROMPT: I Remember

Poetry comes from all around us. It often arises from the simplest details: poetic language from plain old common speech; poetic rhythm from basic repetition; poetic imagery from our memories. Here’s an excerpt of this kind of poem from Joe Brainard:

I remember the first time I saw television. Lucille Ball was taking ballet lessons.
I remember Aunt Cleora who lived in Hollywood. Every year for Christmas she sent my brother and me a joint present of one book.
I remember a very poor boy who had to wear his sister’s blouses to school.
I remember very old people when I was very young. Their houses smelled funny.
I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.
I remember how much I used to stutter.
I remember waking up somewhere once and there was a horse staring me in the face.
I remember saying “thank you” in reply to “thank you” and then the other person doesn’t know what to say.
I remember how embarrassed I was when I was given oranges.
I remember one very hot summer day I put ice cubes in my aquarium and all the fish died.
I remember not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn’t fall off.

Try writing a poem, 7 to 10 lines, set in Pittsfield, that starts out, “I remember.” If you like, type it up and send it to info@themastheads.org. We’ll publish a few favorites in FOLD 6!

The poems below were written by 4th grade students in Sarah Trudgeon’s Fireside class at Morningside Community School in Pittsfield. Fireside is The Mastheads’ poetry-in-schools program, which we run collaboratively with the Superintendent’s Office of the Pittsfield Public Schools.

Fireside is named after the Fireside Poets, a group that includes Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, both writers with close ties to Pittsfield. To learn more, visit www.themastheads.org.

Issue Editor: Tessa Kelly
Contact us! info@themastheads.org

untitled

I remember when my mom and me walked out of my grampa’s house and there was a raccoon in the tree.
I remember when I got stitches on my lip because I banged it on the silver metal part.
I remember when my first tooth came out.
I remember when I first rode my bike and my mother wouldn’t let me go.
I remember when my father put cake on my face when it was my birthday.
—Ryana Summers

untitled

I remember when I threw a ball and my dog jumped and sat there.
I remember when I got my braces, it was a horrible moment, it hurt.
I remember when my dad got hired to be a firefighter.
I remember when my mom had my baby brother and when my mom brung him home he looked like a blob fish.
I remember when I first saw my brother walk.
—Freddy Conyers

untitled

I remember my sister touched a dead squirrel.
I remember my mom’s friend threw me across the pool.
I remember when I played track mania and it was really good.
I remember a big Labrador jumped on my brother.
I remember when I was on a raft behind a speedboat and when it turned I drifted.
—Michael Duclos

The Mastheads continues, thanks to our core supporters:
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HANS AND KATE MORRIS
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Matthew Kramer

The Mastheads x The Berkshire Eagle: FOLD 5

Melissa Mendes