

# ***Rebecca Harding Davis Society Newsletter***



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## **PRESIDENT'S REMARKS**

Greetings!

I am happy to report that our membership continues to grow, and we will continue to offer the special membership deal of a free copy of *Bits of Gossip* with a two-year membership, which is just \$10. Please help us to recruit new members by spreading the word about this great offer.

I'd also like to once again thank all of our founding members and new members for continuing to support the society and Davis scholarship. To this end, we have a great line-up for the SSAWW in November and hope to see you all there. Additionally, please consider submitting a proposal for our panel at the ALA, which is in San Francisco in 2016.

I am currently working to move the society's website from my school's server to a more user friendly format in Google. If anyone has any knowledge of website construction and would be willing to help me with this, I would greatly appreciate the assistance. If you would like to help, please contact me at [RCadwallader@francis.edu](mailto:RCadwallader@francis.edu) or 814-472-3342.

Finally, I'd like to remind you that, as members, this is your newsletter. We want you to be a part of its publication. If you have any items you would like us to include in the newsletter or any publications or new research on Davis you would like us to recognize, please send that information to our newsletter editor Sherry Harris at [sharon.harris@uconn.edu](mailto:sharon.harris@uconn.edu) any time during the year.

Warm regards—

Robin L. Cadwallader, President

## **RHD: HER WORLD – Dr. Julius Le Moyne and The Cremation Movement – Sharon M. Harris**



*A typical late-nineteenth-century American cremation chamber.*

Dr. F. Julius Le Moyne (1798-1879) was an influential figure in Rebecca Harding's life. He was a physician in Washington, Pennsylvania, who became an ardent abolitionist in the 1830s and imparted his beliefs to the teenage Rebecca. Le Moyne was one of the founders of the Washington Female Seminary that Rebecca attended from 1845 to 1848. Le Moyne was a family friend as well as a trustee of the Seminary; he recognized the exceptional abilities of the young Rebecca, who graduated valedictorian. In addition to discussing his political views with her, Dr. Le Moyne allowed Rebecca to wander through his medical office and study the medicines he had prepared. This initial introduction to medicine undoubtedly helped to shape her lifelong interest in the subject, and the physician is one of the most common among the characters who populate her fiction. In the 1870s, as cremation became a renewed subject of interest internationally, Le Moyne built the first crematory in the United States and performed the first cremation in December 1876. When he died in 1879, Le Moyne became the third person to be cremated in his crematory on Gallow's Hill in Washington, Pennsylvania.

### **FROM THE PEN OF REBECCA HARDING DAVIS – Sharon M. Harris**

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Davis wrote occasional pieces for *Lippincott's Magazine's* "Our Monthly Gossip" column, which focused on contemporary cultural issues. Her first contribution "Among the Cremationists" engaged a controversy that was raging transnationally—the new practice of cremation in the United States and the response of Christians. In 1874 Queen Victoria's surgeon, Sir Henry Thompson published a pro-cremation text, "The Treatment of the Body after Death," igniting the cremation movement in the US. Davis's longtime friend, Dr. F. Julius Le Moyne of Washington, Pennsylvania, was among the earliest advocates of cremation in the nation. His belief was that decaying bodies in cemeteries were contaminating water supplies, and that cremation was a cleaner, more sanitary process. On February 15, 1878, Mrs. Jane Pitman of Cincinnati became the first woman to be cremated in nineteenth-century America in what became known as "Le Moyne's oven." Three months later, Davis published the following commentary in *Lippincott's*.

## OUR MONTHLY GOSSIP.

## AMONG THE CREMATIONISTS.

I happened to be in Washington, a little town among the hills of Western Pennsylvania, the day after the cremation there of Mrs. Pitman. The drowsy village was kept in a ferment by noisy reporters, who were telegraphing columns about a matter which might have been dated to a white heat, and described in two lines. The shoving of a body into an egg-shaped clay retort<sup>1</sup> heated to a white heat, and shutting it up until only three or four pounds of white lime remained, was as simple and quiet a business, after all, as the lowering of a coffin into its last resting-place and shoveling the earth down on to it.

The effect upon the townsfolk of this return to heathenism, as they called it, was a much more curious study than the details of the burning. Among the families in these western counties there is a clean strain of Scotch-Irish blood. We,<sup>2</sup> the good folk who have it, usually wear our sharp, unpleasant virtues as porcupines their quills: people of easier, flabbier temperament are forced, I am afraid, to the other side of the road, to see if Vice is not more agreeable. Our faces are all set heavenward, travelling along that well-worn cast-iron track once laid for us through the quagmires of the world by stout old John Knox.<sup>3</sup> We confess we have a grim satisfaction in knowing that the rest of mankind, who are not on our track, will be damned. We have, too, the intense antipathy of our race to novelty. The Chinaman sets up the bones of his ancestors in his house and prays to them: the Scotch-Irishman sets up the ideas of his over his religion, his manners, his politics, even his kitchen, and worships them, his own brain in the dust. Propose to him a new path to the stable which will save him time and labor, and he will quarrel with you for days before he will walk in it, raising a dozen lions in the road; and propose to him a new creed, a change in his ancient formula, and he holds you accursed—Anathema maranatha! The whole universe was knitted for him by John Knox into an inexorable machine. Disturb a detail, sing a hymn instead of a psalm, and all creation trembles.

This mere fact that he and his “forbears” have lived in any given town makes of it sacred property. It is the table-land of the world. Strangers are eyed askance. No birth, wealth or talent can make them the peers of the “old settlers:” because they are strangers they are necessarily of inferior clay, most probably swindlers or infidels. Not that the old settlers claim for their village any especial beauty or comfort. It is theirs: that is enough. They have the calm complacency of dwellers on a mountain-peak. Without are dogs, uncircumcised, idolaters.

It is easy to picture the reception which cremation, a practice undoubtedly borrowed from paganism, met from this class of orthodox Washington county people, particularly when introduced, as it was, with the accompaniments of female Magians from the East, mummied barons, the Theosophic Society, and Colonel Olcott as high priest.<sup>4</sup>

At first, they contemptuously ignored the whole affair: the fact that their hitherto obscure village had attained a momentary worldwide notoriety did not move them. They went calmly on their usual way to prayer-meeting or to the sewing-circle, scarcely glancing up to the hill from whence rose the black wisp of smoke from Doctor Le Moyne’s furnace. Now that the second cremation has taken place, and others are threatened, they think it worth while to interfere, and have introduced a bill into the legislature to make the

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<sup>1</sup> The cremation chamber.

<sup>2</sup> RHD did have some Scotch-Irish heritage; however, she was raised in the Episcopal church in spite of her use of “we” hereafter. Although deeply religious, she identified with no sect as an adult. For more by RHD on the Scotch-Irish, see her autobiography, *Bits of Gossip*.

<sup>3</sup> Know (c. 1513-1572), leader of the Protestant Reformation and founder of Presbyterianism in his native Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), first president of the Theosophical Society and an outspoken proponent of cremation.

burning of the dead an indictable offense, punishable with fines and imprisonment. "All right-minded people," they say, "regard it as inhuman, wicked and unchristian."

Familiarity, however, is the surest foe to prejudice; and outside of this bigoted class there is a large body of cultured and enlightened people in Washington county who look upon the new method with patience, interest and, in some cases, even with approval. Doctor Le Moyne did much to commend it to decent people when he shut out the reporters. He has received many applications, which he was compelled to refuse, for the use of his crematory from men and women belonging to the gentler, more reserved classes, provided the burning of their dead could be performed in absolute secrecy. The public, indeed, seem to have an insufficient idea of the extent to which a preference for this swift, clean mode of disposal of the dead has gained ground in this country.

When we look the matter straight in the face—which we are all loath to do, of course—there is, after all, much more to appeal to our poetic sensibilities in this pure, fiery return of the body back to Nature than in the slow corruption of the wormy bed. But then poets and mourners for ages have been hiding the real grave under fair sad fancies: it is not easy to give them all up and take a few pounds of lime in a paper box, ready for expressage, instead.

Doctor Le Moyne, who is a man of culture and exceptional original force, has shown no knowledge of policy whatever, nor paid the slightest deference to the needs of human nature, in introducing his reform to the public. He pointed out, with hard logic, the absurdity of costly funerals, the contemptible trappings of sham woe, the disease and death entailed upon the living by close-crowded cemeteries: then he offered his retort as a speedy, innoxious, cheap substitute for the coffin and the grave. Now, the disposal of our dead is not, with most of us, a matter of drainage or cost or public health: it is a matter of feeling.

The cremationists might surely burn as scientifically and hygienically, and at the same time satisfy the requirements of ordinary feeling, and thereby show their wisdom; just as the Roman Church does when she permits her religious women to wear a costume and give themselves a fantastic name. What the Church wants is work, and she knows the world will be more hearty and effective for the drapery of romance in name and costume. The shrewd man is not he who despises the weaknesses of human nature, but he who uses them.

This cremation-furnace at Washington is apparently purposely designed to take from the bestowal of the dead all solemnity or sacredness. The week after Mrs. Pitman's incineration I visited the fire below; hence the o building. It was a dark, drizzly day, and the wheels of the carriage sank up to the hub in yellow clay as we drove up the hill at the end of the village. On the top is the crematory, a square little brick building surrounded by trees, which in summer would have given some pretence of softness and calm to the scene, but now waved black and bare in the raw wind. A little yard enclosed by a paling; then a square waiting-room, the floor bare, a stove, one or two chairs, on the floor the lid of a coffin; instead of the ancient dusky columbarium, with the urns in niches on the lofty walls, a modern bookcase intended for the same purpose, its glass doors lined with gilt wall-paper. The inside apartment looked like a corner out of an iron-factory: there were the brick furnace, the coke-bin, iron scrapers, etc. piled against the wall, the floor covered with ashes and plaster. The furnace is apparently perfectly adapted to its purpose. The retort is heated by flues which encircle it; the escaping gases are returned to the fire below; hence the operation is totally odorless if the body is completely enveloped in linen soaked in alum, which answers for the "salamander's wool" recommended by old Sir Thomas Browne.<sup>5</sup>

It is Doctor Le Moyne's theory that these furnaces should be built as cheaply as possible, to bring them within the reach of the poorer classes. Nothing could be sound than this reasoning: nothing can be surer than that the poorer classes will be the last to avail themselves of it. Death is horrible *per se*, and weak human nature to the end of time will try to drape and mask and make beautiful the eternal waiting skeleton. Why should the cremationists obstinately make it more hideous? They propose, I hear, to build furnaces at

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<sup>5</sup> Browne (1605-1682), author in various fields, including science and medicine; he references the use of salamander's wool in "Hydriotaphia" (urn burial; published in 1658).

Cincinnati and other points. They must be made attractive. Prejudice is the enemy they must overcome, and prejudice never will be taken by the throat in this rough fashion.

The strongest hold which the grave has upon us is the vague, unchristian belief that each of us hides, in spite of reason or religion, that our dead are there. While the willows wave and the "crickets chirp for them an evening mass,"<sup>6</sup> they wait for us there in some intangible shape: they sleep, and some day will awake from that sleep to meet us in the likeness that we know.

If, when we committed them to the flames, they could utterly vanish, we would build up some subtle fancy that they had returned invisibly to Nature. But these four pounds of fluttering, solid bones above ground! Who can fancy that they sleep or wait for us? Good, rational Christians ought to separate the soul from the body which was so familiar and dear to us. But who does it?

R.H.D.

## **RECENT and UPCOMING EVENTS SPONSORED BY THE DAVIS SOCIETY – Mischa Renfroe**

### **Recent Events:**

The Society organized one session, "Rebecca Harding Davis: Materialism, Tourism, and Children's Literature," for the annual meeting of the **American Literature Association**, which met May 21-24, 2015, in Boston, MA. Papers included "Delicate souvenirs de la guerre: Material Traces of the Civil War in Rebecca Harding Davis's 'David Gaunt,'" by Vanessa Steinroetter of Washburn University; "'By-Paths in the Mountains': Rebecca Harding Davis and the Politics of Postwar Tourism in Southern Appalachia," by Melanie Scriptunas of the University of Delaware; "Rebecca Harding Davis and Children's Literature," by Robin Cadwallader of St. Francis University, Pennsylvania; and "The Power of Vulnerability: Moral Suasion in Rebecca Harding Davis's Children's Stories," by Marcie Panutsos Rovon of Duquesne University. Mischa Renfroe of Middle Tennessee State University chaired the panel.

### **Upcoming Events:**

The Society will sponsored one session, chaired by President Robin Cadwallader, at the triennial meeting of the **Society for the Study of American Women Writers** to be held in Philadelphia on November 4-8. See Session 7-I FR Rebecca Harding Davis, Marriage Reform, and U.S. Policies on "Indian" Reform in the conference program; this session is currently scheduled for Friday, November 7, 8:55-10:10 a.m. Jane E. Rose of Purdue University North Central will present "Transgressing the Sanctity of a Marriage in Rebecca Harding Davis's Between Man and Wife," Sarah Gray of Middle Tennessee State University will present "'I am a hard man': Rebecca Harding Davis' Male Narrator in 'The Second Life,'" and Sharon M. Harris of the University of Connecticut will present "Davis and U.S. 'Indian Reform' Policies."

Several Society members will present their work in other sessions. See Session 14-A, scheduled for Saturday, November 7, 9:30-10:50. Sharon M. Harris will be chairing this session on "Issues in Recovery and Editing: A Roundtable with Editors in the Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers Book Series." Mischa Renfroe will discuss her experience editing Davis's *A Law Unto Herself* in this roundtable session.

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<sup>6</sup> Possibly from the poem "Waiting" by May Riley Smith (1842?-1927).

Davis Society Members at SSAWW: Melanie Scriptunas will chair Session 2-C, “American Women Writers and Their Travels,” to be held on Thursday, 10:00-11:20. Aaron J. Rovin of West Virginia University will present “Escaping Slavery and Liminality in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*” on Saturday in Session 17-D, 1:40-3:00 p.m. Brianne Jaquette of the College of the Bahamas will present “The Work of Writing War: Mary Roberts Rinehart’s Dispatches from the Front Lines” on Saturday in Session 17-B, 1:40-3:00 pm. Arielle Zibrak of the University of Wyoming helped to organize Session 10-C, “Lives Welded and Woven: Women Writers and American Arts & Crafts,” scheduled for Friday, 1:20-2:40. We hope you’ll join us in supporting their work.

## **CALLS FOR PAPERS**

The Society will organize one or two sessions at the **next meeting of the American Literature Association** to be held in San Francisco in May 2016. Please save the date and see the upcoming CFP for more information. We are particularly interested in submissions that explore Davis’s lesser known texts.

## **A NEW COLUMN FOR THE NEWSLETTER**

Beginning with the next issue of the *Newsletter*, we will include a new column that identifies all recent publications relating to Rebecca Harding Davis. If any of our members are interested in joining the cast of contributors to the *Newsletter* by preparing this column, please contact Sharon Harris ([sharon.harris@uconn.edu](mailto:sharon.harris@uconn.edu)) for more information.

## **About the Newsletter**

The Society thanks Michael Sell for maintaining the website. Past issues of the *Newsletter* are posted on the website at <http://scotus.francis.edu/rebeccahardingdavis/>.

If you wish to contribute items to the newsletter, please contact its editor:

[Sharon.Harris@uconn.edu](mailto:Sharon.Harris@uconn.edu)

For membership, please complete the membership form below and mail it along with your membership dues to:

Robin L. Cadwallader  
Dept. of English  
Saint Francis University  
Loretto, PA 15940

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**Membership Form**

**Name:**

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**This information may \_\_\_\_ / may not \_\_\_\_ be included in the Society's secure online Members' Directory.**

**Membership dues are \$5.00 annually. With a two-year membership or a gift of \$10 or more to the Society, you will receive a free copy of *Writing Cultural Autobiography*, a reprint of Davis's *Bits of Gossip* with additional material, edited by Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris.**