

The Significant Hamlin Garland

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The Significant Hamlin Garland

A Collection of Essays

Donald Pizer



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For Robert Mane

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PREFACE

Over the years I have occasionally been asked about why I began my career by working on Hamlin Garland, who was then, as now, not in the forefront of American writers. The answer is simple enough. I was a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, from 1951 to 1955, doing most of my work with Leon Howard. Howard, knowing I was interested in late nineteenth-century American realism and naturalism (my first seminar paper for him was on Frank Norris), suggested that I might look over the Hamlin Garland Collection at the University of Southern California (USC) with an eye toward writing a paper (and perhaps a dissertation) on Garland. Since Howard was himself a scholar whose work always had a base in archival research, he was no doubt pointing me in a similar direction in that the Garland papers constituted one of the few archival collections of a late nineteenth-century author of any size or importance in the Southern California area.

Garland and his wife had moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1930 to be closer to their married daughters. Over the next decade, before his death in 1940, Garland became friends with Garland Greever, a professor of English at USC, who arranged for Garland to address student groups at USC and who otherwise cultivated his interest in the university. In addition, USC awarded Garland an honorary degree in 1935. It was Greever who suggested to Garland that he leave his papers to the university's newly constructed and impressive Doheny Library, and with some exceptions (his diaries were withheld) his literary estate was duly deposited there in the early 1940s. The extremely large collection consisted of Garland's notebooks, manuscripts, correspondence, library, and miscellanea over a career of some sixty years.

It was thus in the spring of 1953 that I presented a letter of introduction from Howard to Professor Bruce McElderry, who as the principal Americanist at USC had general supervision of the Garland Collection and who had indeed taken a sufficient interest in it to write several essays about Garland and to prepare editions of both *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899). McElderry was extremely affable and accommodating. He took me immediately to see Lloyd Arvidson, a librarian at the Doheny, who was

curator of the collection, and he apparently also instructed Arvidson to permit me to see anything I wished. This instruction, I soon realized, was not easily accomplished. With the exception of Garland's correspondence, which was arranged in file cabinets by recipient, the collection was a hodge-podge. It was housed in a small, unassuming room in the Doheny basement. Since much of it had never been removed from the cartons in which it had been received, and since it lacked a calendar or catalog, the user had to determine which box or series of boxes contained material he might wish to see and then rummage around in various boxes to determine what was there. Arvidson himself had other duties, and the room was therefore locked most of time. If one wanted material from it, one had to locate him, have him unlock the door, and then you and he would seek together.

One immediate problem with this arrangement was that I wasn't sure about what I wanted to examine. I had two general notions – a strong sense that I didn't want to write about Garland's work and career after his early radical period, and a much vaguer desire to write a kind of combined history of ideas and genesis study of Garland during that period; that is, a study of his early intellectual development and of how his ideas had led to the works he produced. This was the reigning scholarly method during the 1950s at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) (the New Criticism had not as yet made any inroads), and I had no quarrel with it. But as to how I was to use Garland's literary estate to achieve this goal, I was at a loss. I therefore decided that my best course was to read everything in the collection that pertained to the Garland of 1884 to 1895 (his radical years) and to see where that led me. When I explained this method to Arvidson, who had asked me what I wanted to examine in the collection, he was aghast, since he knew how much work this would entail and since he had no intention of sitting in a small stuffy room with me while I accomplished it. (It in fact took me a year.) Since Arvidson has been dead for many years, I believe I am free to reveal his method of solving the problem I presented. He gave me a key to the room in which the collection was housed and told me to pursue my research there on my own whenever I wished. This I did, principally in the late afternoon but also often at night, since it was easier to make the long trek from West to South LA during that time.

I had anticipated that the task I had set myself would be largely a slog – a tedious reading through of the detritus of a literary career – and I was gratified to discover as the weeks and months passed that I was wrong in that assumption. First, there was the gradual realization that Garland's life and work of the late 1880s and early 1890s were fascinating in their display of the range and energy of his participation in almost every radical idea and movement of that period. In philosophy and politics, he was a follower of Herbert Spencer's

evolutionary explanation of all life and a devout single taxer (that is, a believer in Henry George's radical notions about land ownership), and then, in the early 1890s, a committed Populist. He not only held ideas in these major areas of late nineteenth-century belief but acted them out both as a campaigner on their behalf and as a promulgator of them in his writing. In the field of artistic expression, he helped found the first Little Theater in America and was an early supporter of Ibsen, strongly endorsed impressionistic painting, advocated a native American literary expression based on the distinctiveness of specific locales, and was one of the earliest American writers to openly endorse feminist ideas emerging out of the New Woman movement. In short, I discovered that if I wished to immerse myself in much of what was transforming in the thinking and expression of the vital generation of writers who emerged out of the social and intellectual ferment of post-Civil War America, a study of Garland's activities and writing during his early career was a stimulating and fruitful means of achieving that end.

My second discovery about the archival research I was undertaking was that the work consisted not of dry-as-dust plodding but of frequently intriguing and even exhilarating problem solving. Here before me, in the form of countless documents of all kinds, were the clues to what could be found, in other forms, in Garland's creative work. The hint of the source of a story in a diary entry, the strong argument against the evils of land speculation made in a lecture transformed into dramatic action, the comment in a notebook about a worn-out farm woman of 25 whom he had known as a youth made the basis for a plot line – all these fed into my gradual understanding of a sensibility taking shape and then finding means of expression in relation to that shape. And out of this realization there began to emerge my own sympathetic identification with Garland during this phase of his career and thus, I believe, my ability to communicate something of its vitality and significance in the book I was to write about him.

I completed my dissertation in the summer of 1955, and it was published in 1960 by the University of California Press under the title *Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career*. Over the next half-century, my interests shifted to other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors – Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and John Dos Passos – but I also continued to publish regularly on Garland, often in the form of introductions to his major works. My emphasis throughout this later research remained on the writing of his early radical years, with the exception of *A Son of the Middle Border*, which, though not published until 1917, attracted my attention because of Garland's successful effort to recover the texture and meaning of his early life through autobiography. My belief in the interest and worth of Garland's early writing reached an apogee of sorts with my *Hamlin Garland, Prairie Radical: Writings from*

the 1890s (2010), an edition devoted to the republication of the often obscure documents by him bearing on his beliefs during the late 1880s and early 1890s. I hoped by this means to make a contribution toward the re-establishment of the significance of Garland's early career as a literary radical.

The present volume has a similar mission, though it employs a different method. On this occasion, the documents reprinted are my own writings that deal both with the history of Garland's early radical phase and with the fiction and autobiography that best reflect his state of mind during that period. The book has two parts. In the essays of the first part, "The Radical Years," I seek both to describe the nature of Garland's beliefs and activities during his early career and to provide a general outline of how these found their way into his writing. This section provides a detailed account of the fullness and strength of Garland's commitment to such radical causes as Henry George's land reforms, the rights of women, and the need for fiction and drama to reflect the actualities of the American condition. The second section, "The Major Works," is more narrowly focused on Garland's writing that constitute his claim to permanence as an American author of this period – *Main-Travelled Roads*, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895), and *A Son of the Middle Border*. The discussions of the two works of fiction in this latter section profit, I believe, from the lengthy hiatus between my initial and much later examination of these works. With the passage of time, I came to realize that both *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* contain powerful thematic strains – Edenic in the first, sexual in the second – that I had neglected to pursue in my earlier studies. If one of the tests of a major work is that it has the capacity to respond over time to changing critical perspectives, then my own experience with these two Garland works should aid in supporting their significance.

In addition, the essays of this second portion of the book demonstrate that the radical beliefs underlying Garland's best work were closely related to his deeply felt personal emotions of anger, guilt, and possible redemption arising from his having left his parents and siblings struggling to survive on bleak western farms while he went east to Boston to pursue a literary career. In each of the books I discuss in detail, this theme of desertion and guilt has an important presence. It plays out most specifically in the relationship between the two brothers, Howard and Grant McLane, in "Up the Coolly" in *Main-Travelled Road*, in the relationship between Rose and her father in *Rose*, and in Garland's "rescue" of his parents from further hardship in *A Son*, but it also permeates all of these works in many other ways. This intertwining of abstract concept and personal experience also helps to explain Garland's move away from radical activity and expression after 1895. With his 1893 "rescue" of his parents from their Dakota farm (he purchased a comfortable house for them in West Salem, Wisconsin), he resolved to a large extent the tension and

strain of his guilt at his earlier “desertion” and could go on to other kinds of activities and expression, as indeed he did.

The book as a whole thus not only collects much of my scholarly and critical work on Garland but also takes advantage of its gathering of this material in one place to highlight the bases for the permanent significance of Garland in American literary history. He was a writer, in brief, who for a relatively short period within a long career brought into sharp focus both his radical inclinations and his powerful sense of family loyalty, and out of their mutual reinforcement of each other produced a number of valuable literary works that should continue to hold our attention.