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Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the Old Soldier of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

Although Sarah Orne Jewett's Maine is remembered by most readers as a land of dark evergreen forests, deep blue bays and rocky headlands, it was also a place severely stricken by the American Civil War. The thinly populated state had sent 70,000 men into the federal army and navy during the war. One in seven of these men died in service (Dyer 11).

Nor were women unaffected. In addition to numbers who served as relief workers, as nurses and in other capacities near the front lines, women organized and sustained massive initiatives at home to support the Union war effort. As in other wars, the reduction of laboring men in places like Maine mandated new levels of female leadership (Young 2). Appomattox brought a bitter aftermath to some of these homefront survivors. Many were dismissed from jobs that reverted to returning veterans. Those who had given breadwinners to the nation found themselves straitened in their efforts to support themselves and their families. Conditions among such women provoked the *New York Herald* to editorialize that the government should create a bureau for women similar to that provided for the freedman (Massey 333, 335).

Along with economic hardships came social and political setbacks. The English and American women who contributed so much to the Allied war effort in World War I were rewarded with suffrage; but their counterparts of fifty years earlier were encouraged to return to the antebellum gender constructs which had stipulated separate roles for men and women. Within this social framework men were to dominate and control a public sphere while women supervised and inhabited a private sphere. Although this Victorian-era ideology implied parity, there was an implicit hierarchy of importance and power. Public life was the arena of political power and history; private life, where women exercised their primary influence, was the arena of domesticity and piety (Sizer 9). Though the disruptions of the American Civil War seemingly threatened this rigid gender system, the postwar years witnessed widespread efforts to reimpose the old limiting doctrines. Thus the generations of women after the war grew up amid paradox. The Civil War had revised the gender system by drawing upon their capaci-

ties for carrying on the labors of the homefront, and also allowed women broader access to professional labor in nursing and institutional charity and in clerical work. On the other hand, postwar social patterns (as represented by the stalled condition of the women's suffrage movement even as the Fifteenth Amendment secured voting rights for former male slaves) revealed the fundamental resilience and stubborn durability of the gender system (Leonard 199).

It is understandable that critics of Sarah Orne Jewett have largely ignored this particular historical background. Jewett was, after all, a teenaged girl at Berwick Academy during the Civil War. The major works of her career, climaxing with *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), seem to emerge from a period unconnected to the terrible conflict of the 1860s. Most present-day scholars have particularly appreciated the book for its sensitive depiction of women's lives and the spirit of female solidarity it celebrates. The relative unimportance of men in the novel appears to be explained by the decline of New England fishing and shipping during an era of industrialization and rapid development in other parts of the nation. Yet the Civil War's legacy at this historical moment deserves consideration. As Elizabeth Young notes, that legacy in women's literature follows no even progression from a more immediate influence to an increasingly remote one over time. The war is remote in some texts of the 1860s, Young observes, but urgent in some 1890s texts, "when its memory and symbolism become freshly energized" (21). Certainly that urgency was felt by Jewett's fellow New Englander Elizabeth Stuart Phelps—who attributed her own interest in writing to the stimulus of the war being fought when she, like Jewett, was still an academy student. In her 1897 autobiography Phelps described her region "dark with sorrowing women," aptly observing the postwar conditions of a place where virtually everyone she knew had lost some relative, friend, or acquaintance to the war (Sizer 2). It seems altogether appropriate, under such conditions, that a realist author like Jewett should produce a body of fiction colored by disappointments and broken dreams. Her strong female characters might inevitably reflect the many women in Maine who took up the stern duties of the wives of disabled veterans, or the solitary burdens of widows.

Yet the chief reason literary scholars have tended to slight the historical background of Jewett's New England fiction may have much to do with the stereotypes built into the gender politics of our own day. The same critic who praises Jewett's ability to convey the quiet heroism of female characters struggling with the hardships of domestic life has tended to reject the author's occasional literary inclination to valorize the soldierly spirit and the accomplishments of military men. Disapproval has taken several forms. Mild bewilderment seems to greet the fact that Jewett should favor "Decoration Day"—a tender tribute to aging Civil War veterans—above all her other stories. The martial themes of *The Story of the Normans* (1887), being more strongly pronounced, have

attracted far stronger denunciations. Jewett's history-book for young readers has been condemned for its "Darwinist attitude toward war," dismissed as "an inferior work that mixed history and myth," and castigated for its aberrant departure into a "historical framework, the male script" that "subscribes to the conquest of the people and their land" (Gale 264; Donovan 74; Roman 102-103).

Perhaps today's literary critics need to become more aware of what their contemporary counterparts in women's intellectual history have been realizing. Elizabeth Leonard observes that "historians of women and gender who once shunned the study of wars as the heart and soul of 'traditional history' have begun to include wars among the historical events receiving the greatest attention, because they represent the kind of social upheavals that highlight the arbitrary and changing nature of gender systems" (xxi). Lyde Cullen Sizer's examination of three northern writers—Phelps, Louisa May Alcott, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper—claims that the Civil War "suggested a wider arena of authority for women who proved their worth in the midst of its chaos and tragedy," compelling increased postwar demands for "the freedoms and rights in that sphere they had previously been denied" (278, 280). Yet as Elizabeth Young notes, feminist scholars rarely take the Civil War as a central concern: "In revaluing the privatized domestic sphere of nineteenth-century Northern women's writing, for example, scholars have ironically contributed to a neglect of women's literary relation to this central public event of the nineteenth century" (6).

This article attempts to follow such ideas, suggesting the value of reading a key scene in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* with a heightened awareness of its author's reference to the American Civil War and, particularly, the role of one Union hero from Maine.

Chapter XVIII, "The Bowden Reunion," might seem an odd place to look for such a war hero. The occasion is a grand picnic outing, planned and attended by most of the book's major female characters. If Jewett's novel is admired for its eloquent evocation of the communal solidarity of the feminine spirit, this chapter represents the triumphant highlight of this theme. Elizabeth Ammons observes that "many white feminist critics, myself included, have written fondly of this reunion and of the book as a whole as a celebratory mythologization of a rural matrifocal community in which women—Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett—have real power and status, a place outside of or, in historical metaphor, 'before' patriarchal hegemony" ("Material Culture" 91-92). Contemplating the same scene in her introductory notes to the novel, Marjorie Pryse remarks: "What is significant about the Bowden reunion is that the most important male characters in *Pointed Firs* do not attend. Without seeming to exclude the men, the narrator continues to focus on the community of women" (xv). Josephine Donovan similarly reads the reunion as a pre-eminently "matriarchal" event (109).

Yet in placing such rightful emphasis on the reunion's "community of wom-

en,” literary critics routinely overlook or derogate a male character, Santin Bowden, who literally directs the day’s triumphant ceremonies. Robert L. Gale’s *A Sarah Orne Jewett Companion* characterizes him as a “soldier manqué” who directs the reunion participants to their seats at the well-provisioned tables “in a regimented fashion” (55). Ammons expresses discomfort that “military imagery is blatant” in the key reunion chapter (“Material Culture” 95). For Margaret Roman, Sant Bowden’s effort to impart a military precision to the occasion represents his “warped male value system” (223). Susan Gillman says the “militarism” of this “pathetic” man partly undercuts the authenticity of the Bowden reunion as a transcendent experience (113-114). Even where the character’s presence is tolerated, his figure has been relegated to a background role as “another of the local eccentrics” (Blanchard 288). Sant Bowden’s gender surely inconveniences those who view the occasion as matriarchal, especially since most readers regard the reunion chapters as a fulfilling climax of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*—what Paula Blanchard aptly calls the book’s “emotional center” (287). One is tempted to join Blanchard in tolerating Sant Bowden as an odd sort who passingly graces the occasion. But given the old man’s evocative placement at the head of the crucial ceremonial events of the reunion (and the sanctioning of this placement by such an indisputable authority as the Antigone-like Almira Todd), Santin Bowden remains a factor to be reckoned with. Indeed, his true value as a point of reference will never be understood so long as we insist on criticizing the little man’s military instincts—and his creator’s evident interest in them—as somehow apart from the book’s principal focus.

Certainly the Bowden family reunion is a setting that demands almost larger-than-life performers. The narrator of *Country of the Pointed Firs* immediately reverences the occasion as one of those “primal” events “when, at long intervals, the altars to patriotism, to friendship, to the ties of kindred, are reared in our familiar fields.” “Such a day as this has transfiguring powers,” she continues, and “gives to those who are dumb their chance to speak, and lends some beauty to the plainest face” (457). Against this backdrop, Santin Bowden is first perceived in the forest grove where the reunion takes place as a “straight, soldierly little figure of a man who bore a fine resemblance to Mrs. Blackett.” With a “grand military sort of courtesy” the little man marshals the numerous Bowdens into an orderly procession ranked by fours. The deeply moved narrator inquires about the small functionary who, in her imagination, has converted the Bowdens into “a company of ancient Greeks going to celebrate a victory” (460). Was he an old soldier? she respectfully asks.

“Don’t he do well?” answered Mrs. Todd with satisfaction.

“He don’t often have such a chance to show off his

gifts," said Mrs. Caplin, a friend from the Landing who had joined us. "That's Sant Bowden; he always takes the lead, such days. Good for nothing most o' his time...."

"No, Santin never was in the war," said Mrs. Todd with lofty indifference. "It was a cause of real distress to him. He kep' enlistin', and traveled far an' wide about here, an' even took the bo't and went to Boston to volunteer; but he ain't a sound man, an' they wouldn't have him. They say he knows all their tactics, an' can tell all about the battle o' Waterloo well's he can Bunker Hill. I told him once the country'd lost a great general, an' I meant it, too."

"I expect you're near right," said Mrs. Caplin, a little crestfallen and apologetic.

"I be right," insisted Mrs. Todd with much amiability. "'Twas most too bad to cramp him down to his peaceful trade, but he's a most excellent shoemaker at his best, an' he always says it's a trade that gives him time to think an' plan his maneuvers. Over to the Port they always invite him to march Decoration Day, same as the rest, an' he does look noble...." (461-62)

Such a figure might well have inspired a writer of different artistic temperament (such as Mark Twain, for instance) to light comedy or satire. But I think Michael Davitt Bell is mistaken when he focuses on the remark "He ain't a sound man" to suggest that Sant's "dreams of military glory are only an empty parody of manhood" (67-68). Careless readers, misconstruing cause for effect, have maintained that Santin Bowden's incapacity for military service stems from a problem with alcohol. Roman and Gale dismiss the old man with an unwarranted supposition that his unsoundness is mental (Roman 223; Gale 55). Yet in contrast to such harsh, Caplin-like disdain for the processional ceremonies or their capable leader, Jewett's narrator, never apparently far from the author's sensibility, clearly approves what she perceives under those venerable trees. The reader is hardly invited to see this august event diminished by any revelation about its organizer's amateur standing. Rather, the Bowdens (and those surrounding communities that invite Sant Bowden to participate in their holiday parades) have, in effect, granted idealism a brief triumph over realism. The lack of genuine military credentials, in this post-Civil War era when many an old soldier possessed authentic claims to military distinction, simply concentrates Jewett's fiction on the pathos of the human condition. Although Mrs. Todd may speculate about there having possibly been some "great general in some o' the old wars" in the family background, she concedes the mystery of Santin Bowden's abilities:

“Taint nothin’ he’s ever acquired; ‘twas born in him. I don’t know’s he ever saw a fine parade, or met with those that studied up such things. He’s figured it all out an’ got his papers so he knows how to aim a cannon right for William’s fish-house five miles out on Green Island, or up there on Burnt Island where the signal is. He had it all over to me one day, an’ I tried hard to appear interested. His life’s all in it, but he will have those poor gloomy spells come over him now an’ then, an’ then he has to drink.”

Mrs. Caplin gave a heavy sigh.

“There’s a great many such strayaway folks, just as there is plants,” continued Mrs. Todd, who was nothing if not botanical. “I know of just one sprig of laurel that grows over back here in a wild spot, an’ I never could hear of no other on this coast. I had a large bunch brought me once from Massachusetts way, so I know it. This piece grows in an open spot where you’d think ‘twould do well, but it’s sort of poor-lookin’. I’ve visited it time an’ again, just to notice its poor blooms. ‘Tis a real Sant Bowden, out of its own place.” (462-63)

As readers of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* discover, Jewett’s frequent textual references to plants and herbs regularly draw upon associations to various strains of folklore and traditional plant symbolism. Mrs. Todd’s invocation of the laurel here certainly seems to fit the pattern. There is ironic value in associating the untested Sant Bowden with the laurel of heroic fame and victory. But the irony is not intended for comic purposes. One can clarify this point by reflecting on the degree to which certain references to the would-be soldier evoke parallels with the most laureled contemporary figure in Jewett’s Maine.

It is difficult today to study anything about the American Civil War without encountering the name of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. Thanks in part to this figure’s prominence in John Pullen’s best-selling regimental history *The Twentieth Maine* (1957), his key role in Michael Shaara’s 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novel *The Killer Angels*, and his “leading man” status in Ronald F. Maxwell’s films *Gettysburg* (1993) and *Gods and Generals* (2002), the native of Brewster, Maine has reacquired considerable renown. One of several recent Chamberlain biographers unabashedly idealizes him as “one of the most remarkable officers in the history of the United States” (Trulock 333). And in fact Chamberlain seems almost without peer in having combined qualities of intelligence and thought-

fulness with coolness and bravery in battle. Gerald F. Linderman's study of courage as a factor in Civil War combat leadership makes repeated references to this sterling Union commander (see, for instance, 163-164 and 301n). His story even finds a prominent telling in a current U.S. Army Field Manual (*FM 22-100*) devoted to the topic of "Military Leadership" (Pullen 175, 183). Notwithstanding Chamberlain's steady conduct at the battle of Fredericksburg and his demonstrations of utmost valor during the siege of Petersburg and the Five Forks campaign, he will probably remain always best known to history as Maine's "Hero of Little Round Top." For, as the colonel commanding the Twentieth Maine Regiment on July 2, 1863, Chamberlain legendarily affected the course of the battle of Gettysburg. Ordered to preserve the crucial left flank of the Federal army and hold its ground "at all hazards" on that day, the relatively untested Twentieth Maine withstood charge after charge of Confederate troops determined to turn its position. When the regiment had expended nearly all of its ammunition and braced for another assault that promised to be irresistible, Colonel Chamberlain led his severely depleted unit in an unsupported bayonet charge against the enemy. Taking the Confederates by surprise, the Union troops captured prisoners from several rebel regiments; some of the Maine soldiers wound up escorting their prisoners back from the desperate attack carrying unloaded weapons.

The successful defense of Little Round Top provided a spectacular example of military leadership on that memorable day—one turning point in the battle that was the turning point of the American Civil War. Chamberlain's key role was recognized both immediately and long thereafter. Union officers up to the highest levels praised Chamberlain's resourcefulness, courage, command of tactics, and military judgment. Congress eventually awarded the Twentieth Maine's colonel the Medal of Honor for his conduct at Gettysburg. As a result of later actions Chamberlain received one of only two battlefield promotions Ulysses S. Grant would confer during the entire course of the American Civil War. By fighting's end the six times-wounded Chamberlain had been promoted to the rank of full major general. Grant eventually appointed Chamberlain to supervise the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia to the Army of the Potomac at Appomattox Court House—an important ceremonial role Chamberlain performed with grace and distinction.

Yet what prompts a degree of fascination about Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain to this day is the stark perception that the man from Brewster had virtually no reason to have played the instrumental role he did on Little Round Top and in later American military history. Chamberlain—always "Lawrence" to those who knew him—had been a somewhat sickly but devout boy who proved to be a fine scholar. Upon graduating from Bowdoin College in 1852, he was invited to stay on as a professor of rhetoric and modern languages. Chamberlain was the epitome of the New England intellectual of his day, well spoken and well read.

He saw the Civil War as a struggle to preserve democratic institutions, and he was immediately eager to join in this sacred cause. But Bowdoin administrators, who highly prized their young humanities teacher, discouraged his efforts to volunteer. Chamberlain then secured a leave of absence presumably allowing him to travel and research abroad. As college officials soon learned, their idealistic faculty member had instead used his sabbatical to volunteer for army service. Maine's governor, Israel Washburn, immediately received letters from colleagues and acquaintances of Chamberlain who emphasized the professor's military inexperience and general unfitness for command. Although the mail campaign seems primarily motivated by an effort to safeguard a prized member of the Bowdoin faculty, simple jealousy may have also played some role. One colleague told the governor that, far from being adequate officer material, Chamberlain was "a mild-mannered common student" (Longacre 54). Maine's attorney general counseled Governor Washburn to avoid making use of Chamberlain's services: "His old classmates here say you have been deceived: that C. is a *nothing* at all: that is the universal expression of those who know him" (Nesbitt 207-208). Somehow Washburn resisted the chorus of complaints and trusted to an intuitive faith in the young man whose letter of self-introduction had asserted emphatically, "I have always been interested in military matters, and what I do not know in that line *I know how to learn*" (Nesbitt 9). In 1862 Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain found himself assigned as second-ranking officer in the newly organized Twentieth Maine regiment.

The army this regiment joined was notoriously suspicious of its nonprofessional officer corps and the volunteers they commanded (Jones 2-3, 5). Though West Pointers made a small percentage of all officers serving, they bore an influence far beyond their numbers. Every one of the principal Union army's commanders (and most of the corps and departmental commanders) would be a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy: "From first to last, the Army of the Potomac was under professionals," Bruce Catton has noted (40). Nor was the bias toward such prewar training limited to the Northern side. Though the excellence of Robert E. Lee's military judgment is legend, as one staff officer wrote, "General Lee never went outside...the regular grades to find officers..." (Jones 22). On both sides of the conflict, relative incompetents with the right credentials seemed to find advancement easy under the preferential system. Indeed, Chamberlain himself rose to command of his regiment only when its first colonel, the youthful West Pointer Adelbert Ames, was promoted to higher command after Fredericksburg. Thus an unusual chain of circumstances had led the young college professor from his Bowdoin classroom one year before to regimental command at Gettysburg. And on that field the Army of the Potomac's chief engineering officer, General Gouverneur Warren, happened to notice the critical importance of the rocky hill called Little Round Top just as a massive Confederate assault threatened to roll

up the Union flank. Warren hastily ordered the brigade containing the Twentieth Maine to hold the ground at all costs. This moment on July 2, 1863, has ever after haunted historians as a peculiar instance of what is most usually described as destiny. As historian Thomas Desjardins demonstrates in *Stand Firm, Ye Boys from Maine* (1995), the Twentieth was a relatively untested combat unit at that time, its ranks largely composed of woodsmen and fishermen. Few officers of any grade or training might have maneuvered and directed these men, as it turned out, better than Colonel Chamberlain did on that day. Shaara's novel about Gettysburg summed up the general response to Chamberlain's wonderfully skilled performance in the battle through the words of a tough Irish sergeant declaring he'd "[n]ever served under a better man": "The army was blessed," he fitly declares, in recognition of this almost accidental officer (245).

After the war such a unique figure could hardly retire from the public eye. Maine's "Hero of Little Round Top" was elected governor of his home state four times. Chamberlain would also serve as Bowdoin College's president from 1871-1883 and remained actively involved with the college for the rest of his life. Although he played a forceful role in modernizing and liberalizing the college's curriculum, Chamberlain's most noteworthy action there involved an administrative failure. Fearing the prospect of ever entering another war with the dearth of trained soldiers and officers which confronted it in 1861, the federal government encouraged military training programs at the nation's colleges and universities. Perhaps influenced by his personal history, Chamberlain required gymnastic work for all students, and then instituted a military drill for Bowdoin undergrads. A generation of young men who had not been touched by the Civil War's fire rebelled against these new rules, and the Bowdoin "drill revolt" made nationwide headlines. Editors condemned Chamberlain's role in the affair, citing his "craze for epaulets and gold" and his "sickly longing for the exercise of autocratic power" (Longacre 272). Bowdoin trustees ultimately responded to the criticism by forcing their reluctant college president to give up his plans.

Chamberlain no doubt felt this rebuff on a personal level as well as an official one, for, according to his biographers, the retired general was instilled with a lifelong love of military pageantry (Wallace 311; see also Trulock 363-364). Because Chamberlain was forever willing to grace G.A.R. functions and veterans' committees and soldiers' reunions and public ceremonies with his presence, few citizens of southern Maine in the decades after the Civil War lacked some opportunity to see the old soldier, stiff from old wounds but resplendent in his much-decorated uniform and stiffly handsome even in old age with his flowing white hair and mustache. He was, in every modern sense of the word, a celebrity (Longacre 260). Chamberlain's sense of pride could hardly be untouched by the bands that saluted him by striking up "See the Conquering Hero Comes" whenever he traveled throughout his home state. Indeed, due to his national fame,

he often lectured even outside Maine before packed houses. When he spoke at the Boston Music Hall in November 1868, reporters noted that the audience was entranced by his “glowing eloquence” and “graphic power.” As one account expanded, “The Governor’s voice is full, rich and sonorous; his manner bright and interesting, and his gestures free, graceful and impressive”; another report from the 1880s noted, “The interest was positively painful at times, so real did the lecturer make it by his eloquent speech” (LaFantasie 31, 41).

Over these years of public performance, whether before great audiences or little crowds celebrating holidays in the Maine communities where Chamberlain was frequently honored, the old general had developed something of a set-speech that lifted his own experience beyond the realm of individual personality. In recounting the story of Little Round Top and of his own role there, destiny became his pointed theme. Thus at a ceremony dedicating a monument to the Twentieth Maine Regiment on the Gettysburg battlefield in 1889, Chamberlain reminded his friends and comrades of their unique historical role. “We know not of the future and cannot plan for it much,” he remarked. “But [...] we may cherish such thought and such ideals, and dream such dreams of lofty purpose, that we can determine and know what matter of men we will be whenever and wherever the hour strikes that calls to noble action” (Wallace 284). It was a philosophy doubtlessly shaped by years of self-reflection about the mystery that had made his own past as a frail, bookish youth from rural New England and his years as a college professor somehow a qualifying background to lead 386 men on the most critical day of their lives. But the fact that they were able to act their parts so well together was the second great theme of his “Gettysburg lecture,” a 90-minute oration which he characteristically delivered without notes (LaFantasie 41). For Chamberlain had also developed some thoughts about the duality of human potential. “Our personality,” he asserted, “exists in two identities—the sphere of self, and the sphere of soul.”

One is circumscribed; the other moving out on boundless trajectories; one is near, and therefore dear; the other far and high, and therefore great. We live in both, and but most in the greatest. Men reach their greatest development, not in isolation nor working within narrow bounds, but through membership and participation in life of largest scope and fullness. (Wallace 283)

By the late 1880s and early 1890s he regularly invoked this idea of what he came to call the “two souls” in many of his public talks. When a person was severely tested, as he had seen soldiers tested in battle, Chamberlain concluded that the “better soul” looks to a “life associated with others,” renounces the

self and “moves and acts in the communion of a larger life” (LaFantasie 35). This was the message Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain had extracted from the crucible of Gettysburg, repeating it over and over through the years in moving speeches that combined what one historian characterizes as combining “poetical idealism” with “a spirituality almost mystical”: “There are too many testimonials from contemporary individuals and newspapers for one not to realize that between this man[...], with his sweeping mustache and his hair worn long in the fashion of his day, [...]and his audience there passed a kind of magnetic sympathy” (Wallace 282).

When this famed speaker and writer, former general, governor, and college president died in 1914, representatives from other states joined the governor and thousands of Maine citizens to bid their hero farewell. “In all probability, Chamberlain, with his love of military pageantry,” wrote the general’s first major biographer, “would have keenly enjoyed observing his own funeral” (Wallace 311).

Had that other keen observer from Maine, Sarah Orne Jewett, ever shared the “magnetic sympathy” of one of Chamberlain’s many audiences over the years? Though her published correspondence never mentions the general by name, it would strain probability that Maine’s most illustrious fiction writer of the post-Civil War era was not conversant with the Chamberlain legend. Apart from her characteristic alertness to affairs in the home state where Chamberlain served four terms as governor, Jewett would undoubtedly have taken some particular interest in the activities of a man who taught and presided at the college where her own beloved father—a Bowdoin alumnus—had served as professor of obstetrics for a number of years.

Biographers of Sarah Orne Jewett attest that she had shared with her classmates at Berwick Academy an avid interest in the battles and events of the American Civil War, closely tracking the involvement of Maine citizens in the historic struggle (see Blanchard 48 and Silverthorne 42-43). In later years she seems to have regarded Decoration Day as a particularly important public event celebrated in the little towns of coastal Maine (Blanchard 287, 304, 306). In the unlikely event she never saw the resplendently memorable figure of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain—who was in much demand on these ceremonial occasions—she certainly witnessed the scores of aging veterans like him who instilled her with a sense of poignant respect. In 1892 she commemorated such men in a sentimental sketch, “Decoration Day,” which she always valued above her other stories (Blanchard 304). Several months after the publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett traveled to Boston to attend the dedication of the Saint-Gaudens monument to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the heroic 54th Massachusetts Regiment (Blanchard 306).

Before or after researching her *Story of the Normans, Told Chiefly in Relation*

to *Their Conquest of England* (1887), the author may have learned how proudly Chamberlain claimed a Norman ancestry connecting him to William the Conqueror. Biographer John Pullen notes that this heritage was important to the war hero who self-consciously “looked and acted the part of a knight-errant” (10-11). In any event Chamberlain, a devoted member of the American Huguenot Society (Longacre 285), certainly seemed to embody every standard of chivalrous honor and courage that Jewett had celebrated in her much-maligned history book.

Other ties of mutual interest also link the two. For example, Chamberlain had been invited to deliver the “Maine Day” speech at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition on November 4, 1876, and his lengthy remarks were published subsequently in book form. In the text he stated that “Maine has many things yet to take hold of human interests, and to stir life and love.” He evoked visionary connections between the state’s inhabitant and their landscape:

[F]ar-stretching woods in a net-work of countless silver-threaded streams and blue waters—and this great and wide sea—this wonderful shore—these beaches and bays and harbors, and bold headlands sun-steeped in loveliness or storm-swept in grandeur,—these things invite the brave, the noble, the cultured; those who love nature’s simplicity, and are partakers of her sacraments. (Quoted from Longacre 276)

Certainly the man who spoke of the Maine coast so poetically had much in common with the woman who eventually composed *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Chamberlain’s love for the sea and the shore were well publicized. In the postwar decades of his great celebrity, Maine newspapers frequently mentioned the five oceanfront acres the old soldier had acquired for a summer home, or his sailing about the coastal waters near Brunswick on his yachts *Wildflower* and *Pinafore* (Trulock 347). Intriguingly, an 1899 letter from Jewett to Mary Mulholland places the locale of Dunnet’s Landing “between the region of Tenant’s Harbor and Boothbay (*Sarah Orne Jewett Letters* 116). This area happens to coincide not with Jewett’s own South Berwick vicinity, but with Chamberlain’s stretch of home waters. Jewett’s geography specifically places her fictional country, in any event, firmly astride Lincoln and Knox Counties. This means that, if the fictional Santin Bowden *had* been permitted to enlist by his local recruiting board, he would have mustered in with fellow volunteers from two of the four counties (Androscoggin and Penobscot being the others) from which the Twentieth Maine drew its complement of officers and men (Raus 28).

Interestingly, Jewett may have had a close encounter with Chamberlain on

one of the great days of her life, when their respective roles as celebrity and admired observer would have been quite reversed. In 1901 she was awarded an honorary doctorate from Bowdoin College. Jewett wrote Annie Fields of how moved she was to sit on the platform with the College trustees as “the single sister of so many brothers at Bowdoin”: “And your S.O.J. Applauded twice by so great an audience!” (*Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* 177-178). A pair of clapping hands likely belonged to General Chamberlain, whom biographer Alice Rains Trulock describes as regularly attending the Bowdoin commencements, even after resigning the college presidency, as the college’s most distinguished trustee (363, 379). In 1869 when Bowdoin had honored the retired general with an honorary doctorate, he had marked the occasion by presenting the college chapel with its first stained glass commemorative window. Jewett duplicated the action in 1901 by donating another window to the chapel. One is left to wonder whether the sincerest form of flattery may have been at work in the gesture.

If in no other fashion, the military figure and the Maine author certainly shared a sympathetic understanding of the value of communal feeling over the dangers of a perilous isolation. Fear of personal injury or even of losing one’s life in battle led to a debilitating form of individualism, according to Chamberlain; this idea seems strongly analogous to the condition Jewett outlined in the experiences of her lonely sea captains and other loners of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Mrs. Fosdick refers to the odd local types who “used to hive away in their own houses with some strange notion or other” (429). Most spectacularly, of course, the syndrome is evidenced by the plight of love-crossed Joanna Todd who retreated to Shell-heap Island, “a dreadful small place to make a world of” (430). On a human level there is a great deal of compassion extended to this lonely hermit: “All she wanted was to get away from folks” (429). But if her understanding friends won’t convict her for committing the “unpardonable sin” Joanna condemns herself for committing, it is nonetheless plain that the truly complete human beings of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* possess what Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain styled the “better soul.” Good soldiers performed so well because their lives were “not merely in their own experiences,” the former college professor declared, “but in larger sympathies” (Hess 99). Like the venerable Mrs. Blackett they have responded to the Joanna-like crises of their own lives by learning to act in a greater communion: “Mrs. Blackett was one of those who do not live to themselves, and who have long since passed the line that divides mere self-concern from a valued share in whatever Society can give and take” (409). Strikingly, Jewett’s formula for living a heroic life on Green Island is identical with that which Chamberlain had found conducive to heroic endeavor on the slopes of Little Round Top.

As already noted, prior to writing *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett is most likely to have seen Chamberlain, either in person or through newspaper images, leading the parades and ceremonies on various Maine civic occasions.

The general was a remarkably trim and striking man. “Even in his old age Joshua Chamberlain was a figure suggestive of gallantry,” Pullen observes (photo caption opposite Pullen 89). He had a full head of snow-white hair and great side-whiskers, and “his personal dignity [was] made doubly impressive by his soldierly bearing,” according to one observer (Trulock 372). The crowds who watched him must have had a hard time conceiving that, but for chance and circumstance, the illustrious figure atop his aging war-horse Charlemagne might have gone to his grave a little-known professor of rhetoric and philosophy at a small-town college in the farthest corner of his country.

Jewett, of course, had precisely the sort of mind to ponder life in the subjunctive mode. Her description of Santin Bowden as an unfulfilled military commander fits the impulse. By itself, the portrayal perfectly captures Jewett’s idealism; her artistic mission would always be to give a voice and a splendid humanity to the mute, inglorious figures of her weather-beaten coastal landscape.

But the vivid presence in Jewett’s contemporary Maine of another quiet and scholarly man—the once sickly-looking college professor from Bowdoin turned into the unlikely, magnificent hero by the crucible of Gettysburg—suggests an attitude beyond simple pathos in Jewett’s choice of Sant Bowden to lead the Bowden family reunion. Her decision can best be defined in terms of what Marilyn Sanders Mobley calls the “mythic” tendency of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Mobley’s revealing comparison of folk tendencies in the works of Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison leads her to the conclusion that both of these writers artistically committed themselves to endowing everyday people, places and things with a larger-than-life quality (18). The use of myth orients its audiences “between their ‘natural world’ and the ‘preternatural’ world of possibility.” What fundamentally unites Morrison with Jewett, in Mobley’s view, is their common use of narrative as a cultural means “to validate people and places that have been devalued and to offer cultural affirmation of these people and places as a prescription for healing and transforming American culture” (13). A comment by Morrison about her own fiction in this regard can shed light on *The Country of the Pointed Firs*: “These are the kinds of characters who never had center stage in anybody else’s book” (quoted in Mobley 2).

Sant Bowden, whose natural gifts have been adjusted to being drillmaster at parades and director of the Bowden processional pageant, is one of life’s bit-players. One critic, noting that Sant is reputed a fine shoemaker, can only express dismay at his “military posturing”: “The portraits of the minister Dimmick and Sant Bowden reveal an amused scorn for men with such needs” (Bell 69, 75). Another dismisses such “inept, stunted” figures as the cautionary “Paralyzed Men” of Jewett’s fictional world (Roman 65, 67). Such readings are hardly unique in Jewett criticism, where schemes emphasizing gender divisions are quite frequent. Most of these analyze the men as misdirected and ineffectual, clinging

obsolescently to faded cultural standards and institutions, with “a long way to go before they become full human beings,” as Roman puts it (223-224). On the other hand the women of Dunnet’s Landing affirm their strength through a vital contact with their environment, with their community, and with their special ways of nurturing and knowing. Interpretations of this sort encourage critics, in turn, to overlook the presence of men in a scene such as the Bowden family reunion as incidental and insignificant; thus Sarah Way Sherman can confidently label the occasion a climax of the “feminine mysteries” (224).

These bifurcations overlook, however, Jewett’s repeated blurring of gender concerns throughout her text. Thus the male doctor of the town and the practitioner of herbal medicine Mrs. Todd “were on the best of terms”, and Mrs. Todd considers that they are less rivals than “kind of partners” (379, 452). William Blackett is “son and daughter both” to his mother (409). Captain Elijah Tilley apparently takes as much pride in his housekeeping and knitting as he does in any of his stereotypically male skills as a fisherman. The peculiar Captain Littlepage has been represented by Ammons as an “obvious parody of erudite masculine learning gone berserk” (“Material Culture” 65), and elsewhere she warns readers that his kind of story—“learned, male-focused, aggression-based”—demonstrates what must be transcended (*Conflicting Stories* 48). Yet the Milton-quoting Littlepage modestly accepts the “lower place of a scholar” in the schoolroom where the female narrator converses with him. Significantly, wise Mrs. Todd speaks of the meek Littlepage as a “beautiful man” (400). The unusual adjective here, together with the ambivalent details that accumulate around Elijah Tilley and William, suggest that Jewett was less interested in dividing men and women into opposing camps than in suggesting the ground where they might become “kinds of partners.” Indeed, one is inclined to conclude on the evidence of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* that Jewett is making a fictional case for the kind of androgynous human spirit of mutual support Virginia Woolf would favorably envision more than three decades later in *A Room of One’s Own*.

Ammons has written candidly about her own predilection for viewing *The Country of the Pointed Firs*’ central Green Island chapters rather than the later reunion chapters as the book’s rightful culmination. “But now I have to ask how much my argument has reflected Jewett’s design, which I do think is there” she remarks, “and how much it has been the result of my resisting another design, which is also there: the subtle but clear protofascist implications of all those white people marching around in military formation ritualistically affirming their racial purity, global dominance, and white ethnic superiority and solidarity” (“Material Culture” 96-97).

Ammons’ hyperbolic language seems clearly instigated by an equation that links the military manner to repression and reactionary politics. But as numerous details from her life testify, Jewett’s sense of the military tradition owes little

to any politically correct pacifism of today. As Blanchard has noted, Jewett saw some positive side to war not merely because of Social Darwinist tenets or the contemporary wave of Anglo-American jingoism, but because of “personal associations with three ‘just’ and necessary wars fought by her own ancestors and neighbors in the past century” (163). The Civil War veterans she observed in her adult life—particularly the imposing reincarnation of Norman knighthood in the renowned Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain—would have hardly disabused her confidence in the achievement of which some fine soldiers were capable.

Ironically, the anti-military prejudices of many Jewett scholars have blinded them to the great use to which Jewett was able to put her “design” of military references at the climax of her greatest work of fiction. Here one of Chamberlain’s biographers offers a helpful and most relevant consideration. “In trying to get inside Joshua Chamberlain’s handsome head it seems important to recognize that he hungered for an epic life,” John Pullen observes (14). The biographer also notes why, for all of Chamberlain’s military accomplishments, it proved difficult to satisfy this hunger during his peacetime career. “In the bloody business of war, although it may take a while, incompetent people must eventually be thrown off and meritorious ones raised up—otherwise goals will not be reached and destruction may ensue,” Pullen writes. “In civilian pursuits courage, intelligence, and character do not necessarily bring success” (133).

The thoughtful reader of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* does well to juxtapose Pullen’s above generalizations with Sant Bowden’s apparently small role in the “Bowden Reunion” chapter of the book. Just a page or so after contemplating the limitations that had prevented Sant Bowden’s finding his rightful place in the soldiers’ world, the narrator also notes how the festive occasion of the reunion has transformed her friend and tenant, the wonderful herbalist Almira Todd. Removed from the village where she frequently seems “limited and heavily domestic,” Mrs. Todd now beams with competence, stature, and a fullness of existence. “It was not the first time that I was full of wonder at the waste of human ability in this world,” the narrator remarks, “as a botanist wonders at the wastefulness of nature, the thousand seeds that die, the unused provision of every sort” (465-66). Such a declaration should, of course, be read thematically on behalf of all those Bowden women who populate Jewett’s world with their special talents and capabilities, some exercised fully and others unfortunately unused. I believe it also fully illuminates the important function Santin Bowden plays in the author’s purposes. To make the little man’s military dreams stillborn was an acutely deft touch at a historic moment when many Americans still vividly recollected the debt owed to gifted amateurs such as Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain who had proven themselves when given a chance. Giving such “Sant Bowdens” of the world their due is no matter of sentimental benevolence or benign social justice, it would furthermore appear—if one mentally juxtaposed, for a moment,

the mythic figure of a one-time Bowdoin (“Bowden”?) professor of rhetoric behind such an assertion. For the significance of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain’s story is not the tragedy of personal frustration if the stolid U.S. Army of 1861-65 had not discovered his military skills. The implication was palpable in the last decades of the nineteenth century, while the public vividly remembered the heroic legacy of Maine’s Chamberlain, Massachusetts’s Shaw, Pennsylvania’s Colonel Strong Vincent, New York’s General James Wadsworth, and all the other gifted military amateurs who had emerged in the meritocracy of battle. A nation willing to squander such natural human talent might not have survived. An overlooked man—a never-to-be old soldier—would have been a tragically lost resource, a resource lost with the direst political and social consequences. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* reminded its readers of this truth through a quietly embedded contemporary reference—even while its author made her telling point that the “overlooked man” often happened to be a woman.

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