Call for Papers

The Louisa May Alcott Society will be sponsoring two panels at this year’s American Literature Association convention to be held in Boston this May 25-28, 2017. The deadline for proposals to both panels is January 20.

I. Louisa May Alcott and Concord:

Louisa May Alcott resided with her family in historic Concord, Massachusetts for several formative and eventful years during their peripatetic lives—from 1840-1844, from 1844-1848, and from 1857 until their deaths. At various times, the Alcotts’ response toward the town and fellow Concordians ranged from Louisa’s fond childhood recollections to her (as Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle) satirical portrait, from Anna’s frustration at neighbors’ provincial attitudes, to their mother’s fury at local racism in 1863, which Abigail Alcott encountered when soliciting donations of used clothing on behalf of Harriet Tubman. Louisa’s private writings and published works evidence her adult ambivalence toward the town. “Concord days,” she remembered, “were the happiest of my life,” but, as she later confided to a correspondent, the town was also “a classical humbug,” “the people slow coaches about reform of any kind,” except for “a few black sheep like the Emersons, Alcotts & Thoreaus.”

As this last comment makes clear, Louisa venerated Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, intimates with her family and fellow Transcendentalists of her father as well as mentors to her and her sisters. Although she once called Emerson “the god of my idolatry,” it was Thoreau who especially merited her lifelong affection. Louisa had been charmed by his pronouncement, while leading the girls on excursions in Walden woods, that bedeowied cobwebs were “a handkerchief dropped by a fairy,” and her elegiac poem “Thoreau’s Flute” tenderly memorializes him as “Pan,” “The Genius of the wood.” Further revealing of her regard is Alcott’s 1864 novel, Moods, whose romantic hero Adam Warwick is modeled on Thoreau.

II. Rebecca Harding Davis and Louisa May Alcott:

Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910) and Louisa May Alcott (1832 – 1888) witnessed dramatic changes in American culture throughout their lifetimes. As authors, they explored a variety of genres, including realist fiction (often oriented toward reform), gothic fiction, children’s literature, essays, and journalism. Both women viewed aspects of the Civil War firsthand, were troubled by the effects of industrialization and the factory system, critiqued the position of women in nineteenth-century culture and advocated for women’s rights. They also at times examined the tension between philosophical ideals and the pragmatic demands of daily life. Both women experienced the vicissitudes of publication, recognition, and careers in authorship.

Davis and Alcott met during a visit Davis made to Concord in 1862. About this meeting, Alcott wrote in her Journal for May 1862, “Saw Miss Rebecca Harding, author of ‘Margaret Howth,’ which has made quite a stir, and is very good. A handsome, fresh, quiet woman, who says she never has any troubles, though she writes about woes. I told her I had had lots of troubles; so I write jolly tales; and we wondered why we each did so.” The two authors encountered each other again years later, and Davis recorded their meeting in Bits of Gossip (1904):

“Years afterward she came to the city where I was living and I hurried to meet her. The lean, eager, defiant girl was gone, and instead, there came to greet me a large, portly, middle-aged woman, richly dressed. Everything about her, from her shrewd, calm eyes to the rustle of her satin gown told of assured success.

Yet I am sure fame and success counted for nothing with her except for the material aid which they enabled her to give to a few men and women whom she
loved... Louisa Alcott wrote books which were true and fine, but she never imagined a life as noble as her own."

To explore the connections between these two significant 19th-century women's voices in greater depth, the Rebecca Harding Davis Society and the Louisa May Alcott Society will offer a joint panel at the American Literature Association in May 2017. We invite papers that examine how Alcott and Davis treat or respond to any of the issues mentioned in the opening paragraph. Send brief abstracts by January 20, 2017 to Mischa Renfroe at Mischa.Renfroe@mtsu.edu and Melissa Pennell at Melissa_Pennell@uml.edu.

The True Origin of the P.C. and the P.O. from Little Women by Susan Bailey

Much of Little Women is based upon real life events in the Alcott family. Chapter Ten, “The P.C. and the P.O.”, in which the March sisters meet together for their regular meeting of The Pickwick Club, is no exception.

The inspiration for the Pickwick Club was Charles Dickens, a favorite of the Alcott girls; Dickens was often mentioned in Louisa’s journals. From David Copperfield to The Haunted Man and A Christmas Carol, his gritty comedic characters perfectly suited Louisa’s sense of drama and humor. Among her favorites was playing Sophia opposite fifteen-year-old Alf Whitman’s Dolphus from The Haunted Man, and Sairy Gamp from Martin Chuzzlewit, used to comfort both her sister Elizabeth during her illness, and the soldiers at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown with much needed laughter.

Like the Alcott daughters, the March sisters were poor in material goods but rich in imagination. Alcott writes, “for as secret societies were the fashion, it was thought proper to have one, and as all of the girls admired Dickens, they called themselves the Pickwick Club.”

Each sister took on a character from The Pickwick Papers. Dickens’ first, and favorite novel: “Meg, as the eldest, was Samuel Pickwick, Jo, being of a literary turn, Augustus Snodgrass, Beth, because she was round and rosy, Tracy Tupman, and Amy, who was always trying to do what she couldn’t, was Nathaniel Winkle.”

Keeping to the spirit of humor in the novel, the members of the Pickwick Club gathered to share stories of happenings around them through a hand-written newspaper, and to “good-naturedly reminded each other of their faults and short comings.” Items included “The Masked Marriage (A Tale Of Venice)” by Pickwick, “The History of a Squash” by Tubman, a letter from Winkle confessing her faults, plus poems, gossip and news within the family, and amusing advertisements and announcement such as this:

"THE DUSTPAN SOCIETY will meet on Wednesday next, and parade in the upper story of the Club House. All members to appear in uniform, and shoulder their brooms at nine precisely."

This newspaper (and the club) was based upon the real life Olive Leaf (in honor of a favorite periodical, The Olive Branch), which Louisa produced to entertain her family during the poverty-stricken Boston years. An issue dated October 19, 1848 is available for viewing on the Houghton Library website: https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:30615426

The Olive Leaf was produced when Louisa was seventeen. Thanks, however, to a little known book called Lilliputian Newspapers by James D. Henderson, we discover that, in fact, The Olive Leaf had a predecessor.
While doing research at the North Bridge Visitor Center archives in Concord, I came across a newspaper clipping that shed light upon this book:

As Lilliputian Newspapers by James D. Henderson is available from archive.org, we can read firsthand about the origins of “The P.C. and the P.O.”

Henderson reveals that Louisa created the newspaper when she was twelve in 1844 and that it was originally known by a different name: “The Pickwick was a manuscript newspaper, in size 10 and 8 inches, and comprised four pages, two columns to a page, entirely written by hand” (p. 60, Lilliputian Newspapers). Two issues were published between 1844 and 1845 when the family lived at Still River and Concord. Louisa wrote the early issues herself, but when it re-emerged as The Olive Leaf, all four sisters contributed.

Henderson revealed a poem dedicated to Marmee, published for the first time in his book and republished in the Concord Journal’s August 27, 1936 issue:

*The Pickwick* was to mark the beginning of Louisa’s many years of supplying stories for a variety of newspapers and magazines, including her infamous potboilers under the name of A. M. Barnard. Even after the immense success of *Little Women*, Alcott continued to write for periodicals.

If you are fortunate enough to obtain a printed copy of Lilliputian Newspapers, you will see a reproduction of the original copy of *The Pickwick*, found in the pocket of the inside of the back cover. The reproduction was made possible by Miss Beatrice Gunn, formerly of the *Youth’s Companion*, a magazine to which Louisa often contributed.


Newspaper clippings are from The Harriet M. Lothrop Family Papers (1831-1870) Courtesy National Park Service, Minute Man National Historical Park.
Women herself and her fictional counterpart, Meg March, in Anna, I was struck by the mark that my time at the Houghton library facilitated. the window into the wider world of the Alcott women Stern, to name but a few. However, I was fascinated by scholars as Daniel Shealy, Joel Myers is in print, thanks to ground-breaking work of such scholars as Daniel Shealy, Joel Myerson and Madeleine Stern, to name but a few. However, I was fascinated by the window into the wider world of the Alcott women that my time at the Houghton library facilitated.

While studying the diary of Louisa’s elder sister, Anna, I was struck by the marked differences between herself and her fictional counterpart, Meg March, in Little Women. Indeed, in a letter to one of her sister’s many fans, Anna commented that, of all the Alcott sisters, she was the one who was most unlike her fictional doppelganger. Unlike the thoroughly domestic Meg, Anna’s journal is peppered with complaints about her longstanding hatred of housework, and she complacently admits that she loves to be lazy—a surprising revelation from a member of a family who prized industry and hard work above all else. In the juvenile newspapers of the Alcott sisters, one of which is aptly titled “The Portfolio,” the reader also discovers that Anna was a precocious and gifted young writer—something that was further underlined by my discovery of the “Comic Tragedies” that she co-authored with Louisa, which were introduced to me by a fellow member of the Louisa May Alcott Society. However, Anna’s journal makes it clear that she had no desire to pursue a career because she viewed her marriage as something of an escape from the emotional and financial strains of being a member of the Alcott family. The love for her husband that comes through in these pages is truly touching.

The correspondence of Louisa’s youngest sister, May, is even more candid in its depiction of Concord society as puritanical, stuffy, and repressed. Following her premature death in Paris at the age of thirty-nine, May’s mother-in-law, Sophie Nieriker, wrote that May had avowed that she would never return to Concord unless her sisters were ill. The timeline of May’s life as experienced through her letters is deeply moving, as the reader is able to trace her development from a passionate career-driven young painter and trendsetter in Paris, who believed she was too old to ever find a suitor, through to her whirlwind romance with the Swiss banker, Ernest Nieriker, who was sixteen years her junior. As a young married woman, May was determined to continue her art, and was strongly attached to the extended Nieriker family who supported her in her ambition. Her rapturous letters about her married life with Ernest only make the heartbroken letters of the Nieriker family following her death all the more poignant. In particular, the Houghton Library houses a two-stanza poem written by Ernest Nieriker, expressing his grief and hope that he will be reunited with his wife in the afterlife. Perhaps the most interesting revelation of the Alcott Nieriker papers is that the Nieriker family believed May died from a pre-existing medical condition, unrelated to the recent birth of her child—something that has been overlooked by the vast majority of Alcott family biographers.

During my time at Harvard, I was also given the opportunity to present my research on Louisa May Alcott at the Harvard American Studies’ Graduate Colloquium, the abstract of which is included following this piece. The opportunity to undertake a full semester’s research also enabled me to further explore the Alcott family’s New England, and I was particularly drawn to an exhibit on the Alcotts in the town museum of Walpole, New Hampshire, which reopens this January. The Alcotts lived in Walpole from 1855-1857 and organised many private theatricals while there, some of which make it

Susan Bailey is an independent scholar authoring the “Louisa May Alcott is My Passion” blog at www.louisamayalcottismypassion.com. She is currently working on a book on the life of Elizabeth Sewall Alcott.

Member Voices: Where LMAS Members Share Their Meanderings in Alcott Studies

By Azelina Flint

Seven years ago, in the summer of 2009, I spent a summer in Concord, Massachusetts. I was working on my undergraduate dissertation on Louisa May Alcott’s Moods and travelled to Concord in search of inspiration. As a final year undergraduate, I didn’t have much idea of what I was looking for, but I was captivated by the continuing imprint of Concord’s literary legacy in the atmosphere and landmarks of the town. As a British student who had never taken a course in nine- century American literature, I was truly enchanted by the experience of seeing Walden Pond for the first time, while the Thoreau Institute’s library nestled in the heart of the woods was something straight out of a romantic scholar’s imaginary ideal. I was particularly impressed by the words that Sophia Hawthorne carved in the window of the Old Manse with her engagement ring, describing the Concord trees in winter as “crystal chandeliers,” and, of course, the experience of touring the Alcott’s Orchard House and inhabiting the setting that inspired many of the scenes in Little Women allowed me to visualise the novel in a completely new way. Since that first experience as an undergraduate, it has been my desire to return to the US and research the Alcott family and their connection with the wider Concord community in depth.

Six years later, I was elated to finally achieve this dream as the 2016 UK Fulbright US Embassy American Studies’ Award Holder. As a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University, I was able to spend a full semester exploring the Alcott archives at the Houghton Library, in order to conduct vital research for my PhD. I was unsure of what I would find there, as the vast majority of work by Alcott was in print, thanks to ground-breaking work of such scholars as Daniel Shealy, Joel Myerson and Madeleine Stern, to name but a few. However, I was fascinated by the window into the wider world of the Alcott women that my time at the Houghton library facilitated.

While studying the diary of Louisa’s elder sister, Anna, I was struck by the marked differences between herself and her fictional counterpart, Meg March, in Little Women. Indeed, in a letter to one of her sister’s many
into the pages of *Little Women*. Walpole was also the site of Alcott’s younger sister, Elizabeth’s, fatal contraction of scarlet fever, which weakened her constitution and led to her eventual death. Among the exhibits in Walpole is a piano loaned to Elizabeth Alcott by a family friend, Dr. Henry Bellows—the possible inspiration for Grandfather Lawrence, who gifts the character of Beth March with a piano in *Little Women*. Exploring the Fruitlands Museum and archives in Harvard and Sharon, MA respectively, also enabled me to visualise the Alcott sisters’ lives on their father’s Fruitlands commune, while the impressive Native American Museum, which is housed on the same site, seemed a fitting location to celebrate the national holiday of “Columbus Day,” which many Americans are now petitioning to rename “Indigenous peoples day.”

My rich experience as a Visiting Researcher at the Houghton Library has left me feeling that I have only scratched the surface of all New England has to offer to an Alcott scholar. The Houghton archive is an incredible resource that is open to the general public, and the library staff are extremely friendly and helpful. The community of the Louisa May Alcott Society also provides an incredible network of support and resource of knowledge for any scholar undertaking research into the Alcott family. Just as my first trip to Concord in 2009 left me longing to return, so has my second trip left me with the desire to come back and continue my exploration into the lives of the Alcotts.

Azelina Flint is a PhD Candidate and AHRC CHASE Scholar at the University of East Anglia. She is currently a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University.

Recent Presentation

LMAS member Azelina Flint of the University of East Anglia presented a talk as part of Harvard University’s American Colloquium titled “No drop of black blood marred him in my sight”: Re-evaluating the Marginalised Status of Louisa May Alcott’s Mixed-Race Heroes in Her Portrayals of Interracial Relationships.” In her talk, Flint argued that Louisa May Alcott’s abolitionist short-stories, “M.L.” and “My Contraband” have been judged by critics as reinforcing the marginalisation of the black identity in their portrayal of interracial relationships because the heroes of these stories are mixed-race (McWilliam, 2015). This has led to the widespread assumption that Alcott only endorses interracial relationships between black men and white women when the African-American man has white blood (Paulin, 2002). However, such readings overlook Alcott’s identification with the mixed-race identity as a woman of Jewish heritage, as well as her feelings of marginalisation due to her “mixed” identity as a “gender-invert.” Flint’s paper examined how Alcott’s portrayal of interracial relationships reflects her revolutionary re-evaluation of contemporary categories of race and gender.

She explored how Alcott exposes the contested nature of mixed-race identity through focusing on how her father, Bronson Alcott’s, “complexion theory” marginalised her within the family as a mixed-race child. Bronson Alcott believed that dark-complexioned Caucasians were more prone to criminal behaviour and affiliated Alcott’s temperament with her mother’s Jewish heritage. Flint examined how Alcott rebelled against her father’s “complexion theory” through valorising the character-traits of her mixed-race heroes. She considered how Alcott’s claim that she possessed a “man’s soul” in a “woman’s body” (Young, 1996) led her to combine different gender and racial characteristics in both of her interracial protagonists. The “fluid” identities that Alcott created for these protagonists allowed her to interrogate the racial and gender stereotypes that surrounded her.

**Have you presented work on Alcott at a conference, symposium, colloquium, or other forum? We’d love to include an abstract, a description of your work, or an announcement about the project in the next issue of The Portfolio.**

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In Memoriam: Elsa Nettels

Scholar, Teacher, Mentor, Friend

On December 30, 2016, Elsa Nettels, Professor Emerita at the College of William and Mary, passed away. After completing her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin and teaching briefly at Mount Holyoke, Elsa joined the faculty in English at William and Mary in 1967, where she was recognized with numerous teaching awards and built a reputation as a helpful and generous mentor to her students and to junior colleagues. When she retired from teaching in 1997, she remained active as a scholar, continuing to publish and to deliver conference papers. Each of her three books, *James and Conrad* (1977), *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells’s America* (1988) and *Language and Gender in American Fiction* (1997) offered substantial contributions to the study of American Literature. An active member of numerous author societies, Elsa joined the Louisa May Alcott Society at its founding in 2005; she had become interested in LMA’s fiction and in 2005 published “The Mysterious Picture: A ‘Sentimental Story’ by Louisa May Alcott” in *Resources for American Literary Study*. She regularly attended LMA Society sessions at ALA. Her many friends, colleagues, and former students mourn her passing.

Melissa McFarland Pennell
Recent Highlights from the Listserv & Announcements from LMAS Members

Jeannine Atkins published an article called “Saving Sisters: Little Women, The Hunger Games, and Frozen” in The Horn Book that can be seen at this link: http://www.hbook.com/2016/12/using-books/saving-sisters-little-women-the-hunger-games-and-frozen/#

Thanks to Susan Bailey for sharing news with the listserv of a series being offered at Fruitlands this month. The series will focus on Bronson Alcott through a variety of lenses. On January 11, the conversation focused on “Bronson the Man.” On January 18, participants will address “Headmaster Alcott,” and on January 25 the focus will be “Bronson Alcott, Transcendentalist.” For more information, see http://www.thetrustees.org/things-to-do/central-ma/event-29957.html.


The NEH has again awarded support to the Community College Humanities Association for a two-week Summer Institute for college teachers on “Transcendentalism and Reform in the Age of Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller.” Founded by Sterling Delano and now directed by Sandy Petruelionis, this popular program will return to Concord, Massachusetts on June 18 and run through July 1, 2017. Several Alcott Society members participate in this program as project faculty or guides, including Phyllis Cole, John Matteson, Wesley Mott, Joel Myers, Melissa Pennell, Laura Dassow Walls, and Leslie Wilson. For details, including eligibility and application instructions, please visit ConcordNEHCCA.org.

In September, Barnes and Noble did a piece on Little Women that features Eve La Plante, John Matteson, Anne Boyd Rioux, and Gabrielle Donnelly: http://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/her-mother-daughter.

Leslie Wilson shared some very exciting news with the listserv last month: The Concord Free Public Library has acquired 500 pages of Alcott manuscripts through a private sale. These pages are working manuscript chapters, or “printer’s copies” from Alcott’s Eight Cousins (1875) and Under the Lilacs (1878). To read more about the manuscripts, the acquisition, and the Concord Free Public Library, see http://www.maineantiquedigest.com/stories/louisa-may-alcott-manuscripts-go-to-concord-free-public-library-in-private-sale/6076.

Now in its twelfth year, The Louisa May Alcott Society is an organization dedicated to providing an “opportunity for Alcott scholars and other interested persons to share in the study and appreciation of the life and works of a major American author.”

Current Officers:  
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Mary Shelden (2012-2014)  
Daniel Shealy (2010-2012)  
Larry Carlson (2008-2010)  
Joel Myers (2005-2008)

Our Website: www.louismayalcottsociety.org

The Louisa May Alcott Society newsletter, The Portfolio, is published in January and July. Please send Alcott-related news to LMAS Secretary and Portfolio Editor, Marlowe Daly-Galeano: hmdalygaleano@lcsc.edu.

Image of the Ricketson bust of Louisa May Alcott used in this issue are stock images.