

Henry James's Boston · *Alexander Theroux*

IN SEPTEMBER 1862 Henry James journeyed from Newport to Cambridge and registered as a student at the Harvard Law School. He was nineteen years old. He took lodgings in Winthrop Square, an old market area between Winthrop and Mt. Auburn Sts., near what is now Grendel's Den. Boston, the famous old Puritan capitol, was new to him. It was not only the center of culture, "the concentrated Boston of history, the Boston of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, Ticknor, Motley, Prescott, and Parkman," but at the time the focus of American industrial fortunes in the nineteenth century—overseas trade, banking and investments, railroads, real estate, and textiles. It was also, in spite of its refinements, narrow and provincial. According to his biographer, Leon Edel, James could never "reconcile himself to the gentility of the Brahmins, or the manner in which New England considered culture to be an arduous duty rather than a joy of life and civilization."

His brother, William, studying medicine at the Lawrence Scientific School, was living at Miss Upham's boarding house at the corner of Kirkland and Oxford Sts. Cambridge was small, a village of leafy elms, solitary houses on long slopes, cows grazing on the commons. Harvard itself was a college of only 1000 students and thirty teachers. James considered himself a "singularly alien member" of the law school. The subject bored him. Lowell's literary lectures were of much greater interest.

For the next six years he stayed on, becoming fully acquainted with life in Back Bay and Cambridge. The Civil War was raging, and Boston was at the height of Abolition fever, fueled by local firebrands like Thoreau, Lydia Maria Child, and Wendell Phillips. Harriet Beecher Stowe's father, Lyman Beecher, was minister of the Park St. Church where Sen. Charles Sumner earlier had given his great oration, "The War Systems of Nations." On New Year's Day James joined a multitude at the Boston Music Hall celebrating Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. On the crowded platform reading his "Boston Hymn" was Ralph Waldo Emerson, held in esteem by young James, who'd once met him in New York, as "the first, and the one really rare, American spirit in letters."

At 22, Henry James moved to 13 Ashburton Place—behind the State House—where his parents now lived, having themselves traveled to Bos-

ton by way of Albany, Europe, and Newport. It was here in a house of red brick that he began his writing apprenticeship, setting up “the small ink-pot,” he later wrote, “in which I seemed at last destined to dip.” His first signed tale, “The Story of a Year,” appeared in the March 1865 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, whose editor was the illustrious James T. Fields. But part of 1863 must have been given to writing “A Tragedy of Error,” his first story, which was published anonymously in *The Continental Monthly*, for February 1864. In any case, the young writer soon found himself in the company of distinguished literary lions, most of them middle aged, such as Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, and Julia Ward Howe, the “Boston Muse,” who in a house at 241 Beacon St. wrote “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the official song of the fighting Union troops.

Young James, incidentally, never fought in the Civil War because of an “obscure hurt” — some think a sexually crippling one — which he suffered at eighteen helping some volunteer firemen fight a fire.

In 1866 the James family made a final move to 20 Quincy St. in Cambridge, a large comfortable house facing the Harvard Yard, just about where the Harvard faculty club now stands. And here for the next three years he worked, writing book reviews, travel sketches, and art notices for the *Atlantic*, since taken over by William Dean Howells, and the *North American Review*, edited by Charles Eliot Norton who lived at Shady Hill. It was a restless period for James. He describes life on Quincy St. as being “about as lively as the inner sepulchre.” Friends had gone away. New friends were hard to find. And Minny Temple, a close cousin he adored, had moved away to Pelham, New York for her health.

Cambridge to James seemed tiny and pinched. It hadn’t the magnitude he would have liked. It was by no means destitute of culture or institutions or a sense of civilization. There could be found then the identifiable Victorian ramparts we know today — the Harvard Yard, the Avon Hill section off Linnaea St., the Public Library at 449 Broadway, and the Old Cambridge City Hall in Central Sq., and so forth — but feeling hemmed in he yearned for wider contacts.

At the time Boston was a busy and venerable old city. James could write admiringly of its “famous old-world crookedness.” There were hotels with marble-paved lobbies and the glare of white gaslight. There were museums. Trinity Church. The Public Library, completed in 1895, James didn’t like and described as “neither exquisite nor on the way to become

so." It was a fairly cosmopolitan city. And of course there were to be seen everywhere vast irregular buildings, brownstones, for the most part, with bays, turrets, and towers of elaborate decorations, imposing facades, and slate roofs with all sorts of turns and effects.

But there were new and rather undefined outreaches, especially facing west. In James's youth about the only building visible, looking in that direction from the Common, was the Arlington St. Church. The steam engine had been invented, we mustn't forget, and excavations were being made in the Back Bay. What was later to become Dartmouth St. and Copley Sq., that whole area, in fact, was one vast construction site, a landscape gutted like a moonscape with fill being carted in day and night and emptied into the mephitic tidal flats. James would often walk to Boston from Cambridge. He describes crossing "the long mean bridge that spans the mouth of the Charles—a mile of wooden piles supporting a brick pavement, a roadway deep in mire, and a rough timber fence, over which the pedestrian enjoys a view of the frozen bay, the backs of many new houses, and a big brown marsh."

Henry James was to use Cambridge and Boston as the setting for several of his short stories—"Europe" (1899), "Four Meetings" (1877), "The Point of View" (1882), to name a few. "The Ghostly Rental" (1876) deals with a haunted house in Medford—the Hillside area, I believe—where a demented man having cursed his daughter now receives rent from her ghost. And his first short novel, *Watch and Ward* (1878), is the story of an effete Bostonian who wears lavender gloves and consoles himself for failure in love by adopting a 12-year-old girl. The title of the novel, which makes reference to the well-known reform society, alludes by doing so to Boston's stuffiness and rectitude.

Boston, in many ways, amused James. It was a city of blue-nosed provincials—"cold roast Boston," as T. G. Appleton once described his birthplace. It was a place with one foot in Europe, big snows, and everyone mum on the sentiment of sex. People reputedly married only their cousins. It was a tight little world of old ways and regimen and formality. Behind lofty windows, where even rich velvet drapes hung tight with funereal gloom, unimaginative men every day got up and ate their oatmeal, although they hated it. Its citizens were fierce sectionalists and often suffered from acute over-refinement, what James usually meant by the word "genteel." There was social arrogance and intellectual snobbery.

“At Boston, you know,” says Mrs. Westgate in the story, “An International Episode,” “you have to pass an examination at the city limits.”

Much of what he found in Boston embodied for James — who had lived for periods in Paris and London by then — the parochialism of America. He was bitterly attacked in Boston for emphasis in his book on Hawthorne on the provincial quality of New England life. In his stories he gave characters names like Roger Lawrence, Louis Leverett, and Harvard Tremont! And of course there’s Mrs. Nettlepoint in the story, “The Patagonia.” She lives in an elegant house on Beacon St., “looking out on the little arm of the sea which is so pretty at night reflecting the lights of Cambridgeport and Charlestown.” She has opinions and condescends to tell the narrator of the story of her willingness to travel, striking a note “more specifically Bostonian,” however, as she points her fan to the Back Bay and adds, “I shall see nothing more charming than that over there, you know” — a remark echoing the Boston lady of legend who once said, “Why should I travel? I am already here.”

Jamesian Boston is located in, but not limited to, the area around Back Bay, Beacon Hill, and the “recreative expanse” of the Common and Public Garden. Winslow Homer’s evocative painting, *The Boston Common* (1858), with its girls-with-hoops and fountains and Victorian families holding parasols, captures the way it must have looked. Mrs. Lucretia Daintry, a wonderful old stick in the story, “A New England Winter,” lives on Newbury Street — what James would have called “a picturesque address” — and has to an eminent degree “the physiognomy, the accent, the costume, the conscience, and the little eyeglass of her native place.” She can’t imagine how her son, the priggish painter Florimund, could ever prefer the continent to Boston. “The upper part of Beacon St. seemed to Florimund charming — the long, wide, sunny slope, the uneven line of the older houses, the contrasted, differing, bulging fronts, the painted bricks, the tidy facings, the immaculate doors, and burnished silver plates.” Eventually he decides to leave and return to Europe, however, and, it turns out, delights everyone by doing so.

In 1869 James himself left for Europe and, but for a short spell living in New York in 1875, wouldn’t return to America for twelve long years. The house on Quincy St. remained the family seat. He did come back to Boston in October 1881 for a month, but left almost immediately to travel to New York and Washington. His mother died in January, unfortunately before

he could get back to Cambridge. He proceeded to sail for England and then in 1882 was once more called home by the illness of his father, who died within eleven months of his wife in December 1882—again, strangely enough, just before James could reach home. He left for England again in 1883.

The Europeans (1878), a second novel set in Boston of the 1840s, addresses the taboos and sociabilities of the city, portraying it again as a spare, straight-backed “little Puritan metropolis.” But it was in *The Bostonians* (1885) that James dealt firsthand with the somewhat ambivalent feelings he had for Boston and the complicated, often dedicated, but meddlesome character of too many of its reformers. The novel was regarded not only as a satire on Boston culture but as a libel on certain recognizable figures (James vigorously denied it) and in the end received a cold response in Boston, where it was not so much attacked as ignored.

The focus of the story is a struggle for possession, the battle for young Verena Tarrant between Basil Ransom, a young southern lawyer, and the hysterical spinster and women’s-rights advocate, Olive Chancellor—a caricature, it was said, of Katharine Loring, Alice James’s friend and nursemaid—who tries desperately to bring the hapless girl into the ranks of her feminist crusade. Much of the kind of unnatural passion and morbidity of temperament that James loved can be found here. It’s a novel that seems to consist of nothing but hands, reproving, pushing, pulling, exploiting. There is a great deal of hysteria in it. There is also much of Boston. And Cambridge. Verena at one point takes Basil on a tour of Harvard’s Memorial Hall, “a kind of temple to youth, manhood, generosity.” And there are memorable scenes on Cape Cod.

Unforgettable is the portrait of Miss Birdseye—a character supposedly based on Elizabeth Peabody, sister-in-law of Hawthorne and Horace Mann, William Ellery Channing’s literary assistant, Bronson Alcott’s aide at the Temple School, and founder of the first American kindergarten—one of those eternal radical and superannuated fire-eaters who carried Bibles to slaves and statute-books to women. She is the kind of woman made only in Boston, the type who lived “during the heroic age of New England life,” an age, James wrote, “of plain living and high thinking, of pure ideals and earnest effort, of moral passion and noble experiment.” He speaks of the “unquenched flame of her transcendentalism” and the elevation of people whose crusading zeal could be fired “by the reading of

Emerson and the frequentation of Tremont Temple.”

Henry James returned to America in 1904 after an absence of twenty-one years. He was sixty, bald, and corpulent. He spent the autumn in New England, and would stay in the States for a year. He landed at Hoboken, N.J., took a train to South Station, and rode by buggy on a warm September night through Boston to Cambridge. Neither city was the same. There was more lamplight. Different streets. And more buildings. And newer and even stranger architecture. He spent his first night home at 95 Irving St., the large shingled house his brother William had built ten years before.

The next day he visited Chocorua in the White Mountains. James was anxious to look around. Returning after three days, he took the train to Cape Cod where he wandered about admiring “the little white houses, the feathery elms, the band of ocean blue, the strip of sandy yellow, the tufted pines in angular silhouette, the cranberry swamps, stringed across for the picking, like the ruled pages of ledgers.” He took time to visit “Mrs. Jack” Gardner, a good friend, at Green Hill in Brookline and made a special trip to see the widely discussed, all-but-completed Florentine *palazzo* she was having built on the marshes of the Fenway.

He took time to reacquaint himself with various places in Boston. He strolled at a leisurely pace around that part of the city where he had first begun to write. He makes mention in *The American Scene* of stopping to admire Saint-Gaudens’s “noble and exquisite monument” to Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the 54th Mass. Infantry (a black contingent) who was slain leading the attack on Fort Wayne, South Carolina in 1863. The monument, which is opposite the State House, still stands. He paused at the Atheneum, the “honoured haunt of all the most civilized—library, gallery, temple of culture, the place that was to Boston at large as Boston at large was to the rest of New England.”

Continuing along he came again to “the perfectly felicitous” Park St. Church on “Brimstone Corner,” probably the best remaining example of Boston’s early nineteenth century architecture. James called it “the most interesting mass of brick and mortar in America.” Here “America the Beautiful” was first sung in public, and William Lloyd Garrison gave his first public address in Boston against slavery. “It is admirably placed,” James said, “quite peculiarly *present*, on the Boston scene, and thus, for one reason and another, points its moral as not even the State House does.”

But he turned to look back. And seeing the State House he described the gilded dome perfectly as “fresh as a Christmas toy seen across the floor of a large salubrious nursery.”

But Henry James, rather like one of his own characters in some dilemma or other, wasn't exactly sure what he felt after being away so long. Only a few years later, H. G. Wells, visiting in Boston, would find the city serene but as barren as the Common when the dawn rose and filtered the light of day over the deserted area, and he might have been speaking for James when he wrote,

There broods over the real Boston an immense effect of finality. The capacity of Boston, it would seem, was just sufficient but no more than sufficient, to comprehend the whole achievement of the human intellect up, let us say, to the year 1875 A.D. Then an equilibrium was established. At or about that year Boston filled up.

James perhaps felt stasis as a condition virtually defined Boston. But now he was dissatisfied with the new manners, or lack of them—and the absence of form. He was appalled by slovenly dress everywhere. Lack of civic pride. Overpaid servants. Too many roads being built. There had been so many changes. Streets gone. Houses razed. The mayor of the city was an Irishman. Old ways had disappeared. New wealth sought expression in unbridled ostentation in architecture. And visiting Harvard he commented on the “pampered state” of the students, the “multiplied resources, facilities, museums . . . and pompous little club-houses.”

Beacon St. was full of memories. There was Mt. Vernon St. where his father had died and where he had stayed, in the house of mourning, through the spring of 1883 with his invalid sister, Alice. In Charles St. he passed the house of James T. Fields—Sarah Orne Jewett now lived there—where once Dickens and Thackeray had been entertained. And he saw again the home of Oliver Wendell Holmes. That autumn most of what he saw was the long past. Old secrets, old stories, “a saturation of life,” he wrote, “as closed together and preserved in it as the scent lingering in a folded pocket handkerchief.”

And finally he built up enough courage to visit the Cambridge—now Mt. Auburn—Cemetery. On a little ridge stood the family plot, the graves of his mother, father, his sister, and one of William's children who

had died young. The place, he later wrote, “bristled with merciless memories.” Henry James paid his last respects, tearfully, looking off toward the Charles River. He lingered some time. Then he returned once more to England, where he was to live another twelve years, dying a few weeks before his seventy-third birthday. The body was cremated, and the ashes brought back for burial with his family, in Cambridge, a part of the world he knew well.