

May 22, 1944

Dear Sumner:

In the fleeting note which I added to Mother's letter of late yesterday afternoon I told you that I had spent the entire day reading *Yankee from Olympus*, written by Catherine Drinker Bowen, daughter of the former head of Lehigh University. She had written two earlier biographies, *Beloved Friend*, the story of Tcharkowsky and Najedua, and *Free Artist*, the story of the Rubenstein's. Now this book on Oliver Wendell Holmes, the great jurist. It is more than a biography of the Justice; it really is three biographies in one, for it begins with a detailed story of the grandfather, Reverend Abiel Holmes, and then goes on to sketch the life of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table and Professor of anatomy at Harvard Medical School, before delving into the life of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Junior. Really there are six biographies, and not three, for the reader gets a fair insight into the lives of grandmother Holmes, nee Sarah (Sally), Mother Holmes, nee Amelia Jackson, and his wife, nee Fannie Bowditch Dixwell. Each one of these women was more than a wife and Mother; each was a personality in her own right, and an interesting one. Their influences shaped much of the character of their husbands. From the recital of their maiden names you gather correctly that they belonged to the Brahmins of Boston and were related to many of those deep rooted families who were responsible for Van Wyck Brooks calls the flowering of New England. Abiel and his wife Sally were related to every one: The Wendells, Jacksons, Olivers, Dudleys, Cabots, Elliotts and Quineys. All of them had their portraits painted by Copley and Stuart. They had been patriots, Governors of Massachusetts, delegates to the Congress in Philadelphia, Judges and spiritual leaders. Grandfather Abiel was the Congregational minister, a Calvinist, and minister of the First Parish Church of Cambridge, which later became the Unitarian Church when the influence of Ellery Channing was powerful enough to oust Abiel, who was a fundamentalist and immovable from his church. If you add to this august list the subsequent family inter-marriages with the Bowditches and the Wigglesworths you get some idea of Boston wealth and culture in the 19th century. There was always a Wigglesworth at Harvard. "Look out on the Common any time of the day and what do you see?", Fannie once demanded bitterly. "A squirrel and a Wigglesworth."

Naturally, then, the book teems with Harvard. In fact it is a footnote on the history of Harvard during the entire nineteenth century. All three, grandfather, father and son, were graduates of Harvard and had married into Harvard families. The one blot on the Holmes escutcheon was Abiel's first wife, Mary Stiles, the daughter of Reverend Ezra Stiles, President of Yale. Since, however, Mary died five years after her marriage and left no children, there was happily no Eli influence.

Harvard and Boston are not always portrayed glamorously. Harvard was not always liberal. Her graduates bitterly opposed Thomas Jefferson. They were such furious Federalists. You could not say the name of Thomas Jefferson without their changing color and pounding their fists on the table or their canes on the floor. Jefferson believed in the common man, a phrase always on his lips. Any educated man, any man of property was aware



the common man was not to be trusted with governmental affairs. Liberty, quality, fraternity; these were words to be used by men of discretion, men of property who understood the meaning of stewardship. Men like the Fellows of the Harvard Corporation, members of good sound churches. And the Holmes tribe contained many Fellows, as well as overseers of Harvard. They helped to shape its destiny.

Nor was Boston, and that of course means Harvard, kindly receptive to the admission of the western states. When Holmes senior was two years old, it was proposed to bring Louisiana in as a state. Josiah Quincy rose to his feet and thundered. "The bonds of the union said he, must be dissolved rather than admit these Westerners! . . . "as it will be the right of all, so will it be the duty of some, to prepare definitely for a separation; amicably if they can, violently if they must." Keep the West out reared New England! New England was federalized and jealous; and at Hartford to the Disunion Convention went the brains and breeding of Boston.

Nor was Harvard liberal in its education until Elliott assumed his duties as President in the Spring of '69. Heretofore the curriculum was narrow and confined. Though Boston referred to itself as "the Athens of the Union" and lecture forums hummed, it was not until Eliot's ascendancy that science, chemistry and "practical" education began to take up a large part of the curriculum. Heretofore a classical education was the important distinction between a man who had been to college and a man who had not; anything that diminishes the importance of this distinction was essentially revolutionary and tended to anarchy. Wendell Holmes wrote to a friend that Elliott had turned the university over like a flapjack.

"How is it", an elderly Professor demanded in Medical Faculty Meeting, "that we have been going on so well in the same ordinary path for eighty years, and now within three or four months it is proposed to change all our modes of carrying on the school?"

"I can answer . . . very easily," Elliott replied. "There is a new President."

One of the first appointments Eliot made was that of Holmes as Professor at the Law School; but he remained only three months when he accepted the appointment, at 41, of associate Justice for the Massachusetts Supreme Court, where he served until 1901, the last two years as Chief Justice, when he went to Washington as associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

Dr. Holmes, the father, ruled the literary roost in Boston for nearly sixty years. He was a wit, poet, author, autocrat of the breakfast table, and a egomaniac. He loved the bon mot and prided himself on his ability as a wit. He was not averse to patting himself on the back and this seemed to be a constant avocation of his for he was always talking and chuckling over his quotable observations. His fame spread beyond the Atlantic, and Oxford gave him an honorary degree the same year that his son received one at Yale. Incidentally it was a long time before Justice Holmes was honored by his own Alma-Mater with a degree and that was due to the fact that Eliot resented his leaving the Law School within three months of being appointed a Professor. Eliot felt that Holmes should have remained. Between father and son there was not the comradeship and companionship that you would expect from such two extraordinarily fine persons. Not that there was a clash of interest but that Holmes junior did not care much for his father's self praise and constant chatter. The son was much more introspective and much



more sound in his pursuits. This is not to discredit the father, who was Professor of anatomy and who wrote a recognized work on puerperal fever. The old man was certainly unique and for years the Justice was known as Dr. Holmes' son.

(I am leaving for Boston on business to be gone for two days and when I return I will resume).

Till then.

Affectionately,