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Introduction: Love Letters and Coded Clues— the Untold Story

When I described my seven-year odyssey to uncover the story behind 3,000 archived letters between Harriet E. Freeman and her longtime minister Edward Everett Hale, a married man, it is remarkable how often I was asked if I knew A. S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession*. In fact, as a dogged researcher, Byatt's novel speaks to me and I must have read it several times. The witty contemporary narrative describes the quest of Roland Michell, an obscure postdoctoral research assistant, who finds in a book at the London Library, and guiltily purloins, drafts of a letter in handwriting he recognizes as that of the famous Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash. He discovers that the letter was intended for a woman other than Ash's wife, a minor Romantic poet called Christabel LaMotte. With the help of a LaMotte scholar, Dr. Maud Bailey, Michell finds a hidden cache of the poets' letters. The author brilliantly invented letters, poems, and diaries "penned by" her fictional nineteenth-century lovers, stand-ins for Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti. So this illicit Victorian love story is told in their "own" words.

Despite some similarities, the story I have uncovered is real and is told in Hale's and Freeman's own words from their letters and other writings. In addition, they used a code to convey and conceal their most intimate feelings. Finding the Rosetta stone and translating those passages was a major breakthrough in understanding this relationship. As a celebrated author and reformer, the Reverend Hale's life and accomplishments are copiously recorded, but

who was this woman Harriet E. Freeman? The letters provided numerous important clues and finding her passport, obituary, gravestone, and a family history was just the beginning. My published article about the relationship led me to a rich collection of articles by and about Hale, photographs of him, and copies of his books. Freeman had made this collection to commemorate the older man she adored. However, that collection gives little clue to her own adventurous life and considerable accomplishments, apart from Hale's grateful inscriptions in the many books they worked on together. Following Freeman's independent tracks took several more years but many would say that discovering Harriet Freeman is the real revelation.

Edward Everett Hale (1822-1909) was considered by his contemporaries to be a great and noble man, renowned for his kindness and optimistic spirit, a role model for America during a troubled era. It has been written of him that "Probably no man in America aroused and stimulated so many minds as Hale, and his personal popularity was unbounded." He was a leading Unitarian minister and social reformer, a preacher and lecturer, a prolific and popular writer, a mentor of the future president Theodore Roosevelt at Harvard, and chaplain to the United States Senate during Roosevelt's presidency. His eightieth birthday was celebrated with an unprecedented tribute by almost three thousand friends and admirers of "the Grand Old Man of Boston" in that city's new Symphony Hall on April 4, 1902. Today, if you visit Boston's popular Public Garden, you can find the impressive statue of Hale standing just inside one of the garden's principal gates, a reminder of his national reputation and celebrity during his lifetime.

During his last twenty-five years, however, Hale lived a double life. Ironically, the theme of double lives, or alter egos, was one of his favorite literary devices. Frederick Ingham was the harassed minister of Hale's first popular story "My Double and How He Undid Me" and reappeared in his most famous story "The Man without a Country" and several others. At one point, Hale even used the name Frederick Ingham as an apt concealer of his own double life.

From the first celebratory biography of Hale by his namesake son through two later biographies, the Hale marriage was described as successful, even cloudless. Hale was married to the former Em-

ily Baldwin Perkins of Harvard, whose mother Mary Foote Perkins was born into the brilliant Beecher family. On the other hand, Hale's biographers mentioned his later life romantic partner, the much younger Harriet Freeman (1847–1930), only as his longtime literary amanuensis, assistant in his charitable works, and old friend — and, finally, not at all. And so Hale's impeccable reputation endured, with no hint of the human weaknesses that so often seem to accompany the qualities of charm, charisma, energy, and celebrity. But in 1969, eight years before publication of the last Hale biography, the Library of Congress acquired from a Freeman family descendant 3,000 of the Hale-Freeman love letters (1884–1909), partly written in code. Because interest in Hale had largely diminished, these letters remained unexamined for thirty-five years. Their significance became apparent only when the author began studying the letters in support of the restoration of the Edward Everett Hale summer house in Matunuck, Rhode Island, and succeeded in breaking the code the couple used to express their most intimate feelings.

Had this relationship been revealed at its height in the 1890s, the Reverend Hale might have experienced public disgrace similar to that faced by his wife's uncle, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, except that Hale did not have to contend with an enraged cuckolded husband who, in that notorious case, brought a civil suit against the famous minister and released the lovers' letters to the press. Charismatic leaders and celebrities seem to have a way of flying too close to temptation. In addition to Beecher, Charles Dickens was another nineteenth-century adulterous celebrity. According to his biographer Claire Tomalin, Dickens's affair with the young actress Ellen Ternan humiliated his wife, the mother of his ten children, and kept him in a state of high anxiety that the secret should not leak out to his adoring public. Emily Dickinson's brother Austin, an upstanding Amherst lawyer, carried on a torrid affair with the much younger Mabel Loomis Todd. Both were married but conducted their sexual assignations flagrantly in the Dickinson family dining room or upstairs in the Todd house. Today, one adulterous scandal seems to follow another, to the point of cliché. Some of these affairs have been extraordinarily blatant, while others have involved degrees of discretion but left trails of incriminating evidence, such as e-mails.

What kept the Hale affair out of the public eye was the couple's determination from the outset that they would avoid hurting or embarrassing their families or damaging Hale's position and reputation. As he had learned much from his uncle's scandal, Hale led Freeman, who had adored him since her teenage years, into a web of deception, including teaching her a forgotten shorthand and providing her with printed envelopes to conceal her letters from his family and colleagues. When suspicion and gossip occasionally arose, Hale and Freeman would cool speculation with lengthy separations made bearable by the long and frequent letters they wrote each other. After conducting this illicit affair for twenty years, Hale would not have been appointed chaplain to the United States Senate without the cover he received from his complicit family and his discreet and protective lover.

But can or should the Hale-Freeman relationship be compared to the sexually charged and generally short-term affairs that have brought down so many men, and not just in recent memory? Harriet Freeman was a remarkable woman in her own right, a woman of independent means and complex personality, with her own interests in botany, geology, the rights of American Indians, philanthropy, and travel. Her passion for nature and outdoor life led to her pioneering efforts in forest and wildlife conservation. She shared most of these interests with Hale, and it was he who encouraged her to study botany and geology. They became intellectual and temperamental soul mates at a time when his wife, who was not her husband's intellectual equal and shared few of his interests, had taken refuge in poor health and hypochondria, becoming too fragile and self-absorbed to keep up with her vigorous husband. Already working closely together, Hale and Freeman's emotional connection grew following the deaths of close family members.

Beyond the illicit affair, the Hale-Freeman letters provide an argument for a reexamination and reassessment of Hale's life and career, reminding this generation of readers of his deep moral leadership in issues such as immigration, religious tolerance, education, and world peace, issues that resonate even more urgently today. The letters provide insights into the couple's thoughts on religion, science, politics, and contemporary life, as well as a detailed chronology of Hale's activities, both private and public,

after 1884, a period less examined by his biographers. They make it clear that his relationship with Harriet (Hattie) Freeman gave him the courage that seemed to have temporarily failed him in the face of grief and personal setbacks, reinvigorating his reformist energies and renewing his literary inspiration.

Meanwhile, Freeman's participation in efforts to establish or support scientific institutions that would open their classes or programs to women, her own scientific studies and participation in geological field trips, her financial support of impecunious geology students and teachers, and her activist role in bird and forest conservation made her a pioneer in overcoming prejudice against women in the sciences. Just as interesting were the backlashes against many of these progressive initiatives and Freeman's less admirable veer to the right in the face of uncontrolled immigration in the early twentieth century.

Hale's letters to Harriet Freeman began in earnest from his summer house in Matunuck, Rhode Island, during the months following their declaration of love for each other. Several years ago, that house was undergoing restoration, to be reopened as the Edward Everett Hale House, when I remembered a reference to Hale love letters in a resource guide I had edited for the Library of Congress. I agreed to take a look at the letters to see if any were written from Matunuck, and, if so, might they be informative about the house's history and original layout and furnishings, as well as the Hale family's summer life there. They proved valuable on all these counts, in fact the early letters fairly dance with Hale's love of the region's unspoiled beauty and his love for his children. But looking ahead to letters written in subsequent years, I noticed that parts were written in code. By now, I was intrigued but realized I could only understand the full nature of Hale and Freeman's relationship if I could break that code, which I recognized as an arcane shorthand.

Although Hale's letters dated from 1884, Freeman's letters do not appear in the correspondence until 1889. More cautious than Hale, she had instructed him to burn her letters, which he did, reluctantly, for the first five years of their correspondence. The special coded passages from them both grew longer as their relationship developed, reflecting periods of intense emotion

and increased efforts to conceal the real content of the letters. With the help of Hale's instructions to Freeman and my "needle in the haystack" discovery at the Library of Congress of the 1832 shorthand manual referenced in one of his letters, I was able to translate the code—"Towndrow's terrible shorthand," as Hale called it. Their translated shorthand is given in this book in italics within angled brackets. By transcribing both the longhand and shorthand portions of the letters, arranging Harriet Freeman's many undated letters chronologically with the rest, and filling in the biographical details of this previously unknown woman, I was able to place their story in the context of their experiences and period and complete the essential parts of the puzzle of their relationship.

Freeman's emotional dependence on and devotion to Hale both brightened and darkened her life. In the late 1890s she succumbed to severe depression when, in the face of financial reversals, she felt forced to give up her comfortable Boston house, the "home away from home" she had made for him. Her letters to Hale during the year of her breakdown are heart-wrenching and emotionally revealing. Although she recovered both her equilibrium and her income to pursue an even more active and productive life, Hale's decision to accept nomination to become chaplain of the United States Senate at the age of eighty-one meant they saw far less of each other. Understandably, Freeman felt excluded from his life in Washington, where he wintered with his wife and artist daughter Nelly. The long letters written during Hale's last years (he died in 1909) are even richer in content and of broader historical significance as they discussed their joint efforts on behalf of forest preservation in New Hampshire's White Mountains, her other conservation efforts, their increasingly different reactions to the problems of unrestricted immigration, and his efforts on behalf of his long-term interests in international peace and arbitration and the education of African Americans. Hale was a people person, a man who knew just about everyone of interest during his long life and he liked to write Freeman vignettes and commentaries of his frequent encounters.

Following Hale's death, his secretary returned Freeman's letters to her at her request. She lived for another twenty-one years, busying herself with world travel, philanthropy, her study of botany and geology, and conservation, and continuing her talent

for correspondence with others who shared her interests, especially with naturalists and scientists. And, judging by the notations on the envelopes and comments in letters to her nieces, she kept her true love alive by reading and rereading Hale's letters.

The Hale-Freeman letters, the principal evidence of their relationship, remained in the possession of members of the Freeman family until forty years ago. They sat in a white trunk that had passed quietly to Hattie's loyal, unmarried nieces after her death. In the early 1960s, following the death of Hattie's niece Ethel Hale Freeman (who was Edward Hale's goddaughter), Ethel's nephew and his wife found Hattie's and Edward's letters in that trunk in Ethel's West Newton house. Through a dealer, they first, unsuccessfully, offered the letters to the Houghton Library at Harvard and then to the Library of Congress, where they were accepted, arranged, and added as a special collection to its existing Hale Family Papers.

Apparently, Edward's granddaughter, writer Nancy Hale, was also unaware of the existence of the large collection of letters when she wrote to Hattie's great-niece in 1974, after meeting her at the memorial service for her mother Helen Hunt Arnold. Nancy explained that she had advised Helen to donate to Smith College some letters she had kept written by her grandfather Edward Hale to Harriet Freeman. She explained the "enormously compatible" friendship between their ancestors but had not thought that the shorthand in the letters might indicate more than that, even though some thought otherwise. In any case, she was certain that no one would be able to translate the "private, made up" shorthand, even if they wanted to. Hence, the full story of Harriet Freeman's and Edward Hale's love for one another remained concealed within the letters at the Library of Congress and Smith College Archives for three decades after being cataloged and made available for study.

Did Hattie and Edward ever wish their relationship known? On more than one occasion, Edward joked that they would need to catalog and index the letters in case anyone wanted to read them in future. And there is one suggestive sentence in Hattie Freeman's impressive obituary in the *Boston Evening Transcript* of December 30, 1930: "She was a prominent member of the South Congregational Church, popularly known as 'Dr. Hale's Church,' and she was

closely associated with that widely known divine." At the time, however, few of the deceased's contemporaries were alive or able to notice or comprehend the clue to the secret affair buried within the details of her life of "enormous activity."

What is disturbing to contemporary eyes about the Hale-Freeman relationship is that Hale never publicly credited Freeman, his muse of twenty years and more, for all the assistance she gave him with his writing. In contrast, he gave his sisters Lucretia and Susan and his son and namesake, Edward E. Hale Jr., equal billing in their collaborations. In many letters and in shorthand inscriptions in books that he gave Hattie (which he often dedicated to "my co-author" or "from one of the authors to the other"), he did, however, acknowledge that he drew heavily on descriptive passages from her travel letters and collaborated with her on a variety of books, stories, articles, and sermons. The inscribed books now reside in the collections of the Andover-Harvard Theological Library at the Harvard Divinity School along with Freeman's collected articles by and about Hale and photographs of him.

It is difficult to ascertain how many of Freeman's stories or articles Hale published in his various magazines during the 1890s, since most appeared anonymously or under her initials. Beginning with the turn of the twentieth century, when fellow naturalist Emma Cummings accompanied her on botanical and geological field trips and foreign travels, Freeman published at least two accounts of their discoveries and adventures under her own name. More than likely, it was the illicit nature of Freeman's relationship with her famous soul mate and his family's discomfort with that fact that precluded his sharing credit with her.

An undeservedly forgotten figure, Harriet Freeman was a woman of intelligence, adventurous spirit, complex character, and strong views. Freed by her independent income, she might have achieved even more than she did had she not subsumed so much of her time and talent and expended so much emotional energy in supporting her "great man" as if he were her husband. But, despite suffering the inevitable indignities, loneliness, and miseries of being "the other woman," particularly in Hale's final years, Freeman's achievements and activities were extraordinary for a woman brought up in a time of circumscribed opportunities for women.

Hale and Freeman's hidden love story is a sharp reminder that little has changed in the realm of extramarital duplicity and its accompanying hypocrisy—except possibly in the degree of discretion they practiced and the web of family complicity that kept the affair from public knowledge. But their letters make an invaluable and fascinating contribution to our understanding of the social mores as well as the religious, intellectual, political, and scientific issues of the time. It is in this spirit that this book is written.