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Past and Present in Hope Emily Allen's Essay "Relics"

BY JOHN C. HIRSH

*Syracuse University has for many years had a strong interest in the Oneida Community. The George Arents Research Library holds the Oneida Community Collection, which includes both correspondence and writings of Hope Emily Allen. Over the years the Library Associates have sponsored a number of lectures on the history of the Community and maintained a special relationship with Oneida descendants.**

One of the most important statements the distinguished American medievalist Hope Emily Allen (1883–1960) made about her interest in the past is here printed for the first time. Hope Allen was a descendant of New York State's Oneida Community and made important scholarly contributions to the study of medieval mysticism, particularly in the works of a fourteenth-century mystic, Richard Rolle, and a fifteenth-century devout woman, Margery Kempe. She also wrote a number of essays, not all of which appeared in print during her lifetime, and the essay which follows is one of these. The drafts which the text underwent and the interest she took in its publication suggest that she valued it greatly, and indeed it seems to have sprung from a particularly trying period in her life.

Hope Allen probably began work on the essay after she returned to Oneida from Britain in 1912. That year had been very difficult for her, with ill health and a breakdown. The following year the death of her mother all but curtailed her academic work. In the subsequent period, familial obligations, health, and the advent of the First World War kept her away from the European libraries on which her work depended, and she turned to material already in hand, or

* Those interested in reading more on Hope Emily Allen are referred to Professor Hirsh's recently published *Hope Emily Allen: Medieval Scholarship and Feminism* (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1988).—Ed.

to essays based upon her Oneida home. It was in this period too that, as “an antiquary bred in the bone”, she began to record stories current among the Oneida Indians, some of whom she had known well since childhood. Of the essays she took up during this period, “Relics” was her most important effort, combining as it did both her interest in her home and in the past. She lavished upon it all that memory, imagination, and learning could provide, and the resulting essay was as much a personal and philosophical statement as a description of the past history and present memories of upstate New York.

By 1918 the essay was finished, and in that year a New York magazine, *The Unpartisan Review*, previously called *The Unpopular Review*, accepted it for publication, having rejected it the previous year as too long. But delay followed delay, and the essay did not appear in print. In 1919, probably on 11 August, Hope Allen wrote to the editor, who had earlier that year refused a second essay, asking (among other things) what had become of “Relics”. On 16 October the editor, the New York publisher Henry Holt, wrote in answer, sending a check for thirty dollars and a letter (now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Eng. misc. c. 484, fol. 127) promising attention to the matter. But five years later the essay had still not appeared, and Hope Allen now wrote again. This time she offered to return Holt’s payment (which she did: his letter of receipt dated 16 September 1924 is in the same collection, fol. 131) and requested the return of her manuscript. With the manuscript in hand, Hope reviewed the piece, had it retyped, and probably tried to place it elsewhere, though no other offer of publication has survived. The last contemporary record of the essay is to be found in another letter in the Bodleian (fol. 137), dated 14 June 1930, to a literary agent, offering the essay for sale. But it never appeared in print.

“Relics” reveals a range of cultural and historical considerations that appear only rarely in Hope Allen’s medieval scholarship. It is sensitive to the way in which present interests and present power are related to past injustices, recalling “the man who first applied the white man’s law to an Indian criminal . . . when he hanged a squaw outside the town for murdering her rival”. The essay discovers modern echoes of this harsh attitude both in the farmer who—disregarding Indian culture—had a tribal boulder “dug out because it annoyed him to have visitors come to see it”, and among those who mistook



Hope Emily Allen
(Photo through courtesy of Oneida Community Mansion House, Inc.)

a human jawbone for a “relic”. The image of a civilized white man (representing progress) hanging a woman who has kept to traditional ways serves to remind the reader of past realities over which true relics stand guard. These relics, made by human hands or adopted to human use, are bridges between present and past that require no apology and only a little explanation. They form a link that carries the past into the present, identifies its quality, and reminds the present that it too will shortly pass away.

The essay thus is concerned more with the value of the past than with the past itself. The encroachments of progress, with its destruction of sensibility, feeling, and memory, are held in check by the recollection of those who were here before, what they made and what they owned. *Things* are important because of what they communicate about their makers, their owners—not for themselves alone. “The influence of the majority here is oppressive”, Hope Allen wrote, but remarked too that the collector must never forget, in preserving the past, that “the vital element of life” is often “one’s self, placed in the real and immediate present”. The interaction between past and present is complex, and the antiquary must not turn sentimental. Things have their season; attitudes will change. Youth may attempt to escape the past, or to ignore it, but time will bring to many a consciousness of what has been lost, a desire to regain it, and with that a sympathy for those humane values that are at the heart of history.

Throughout the essay there is an implicit sympathy for the values of those who stand outside the American mainstream. Women and Indians share a concern with values that humanize and do not dominate, that inform rather than rule. Throughout, Hope Allen’s concern for the values of these two groups is exemplary, not confrontational. The historian understands better than most the way important influences often lie hidden, and how the apparently weak speak to values that lie at the center of the society all live in.

Thus the essay is also about the present, about the importance of not forgetting those, good and bad, who were here before us. Sustained by memory, the community of the past will touch our living present. It is an historian’s defence of her profession.

I have presented the text exactly as Hope Allen submitted it, and have not specified persons or places which she knew, but intentionally left abstract, though references to certain of the places con-

cerned appear in the Bodleian Library collection. The hill village that she alludes to is Peterboro, N.Y. (fol. 128), and the barge, on which she had also written a poem, was by Chappawa Creek: "it burned soon after the Niagara Power Development", she recalled in 1930 (fol. 138). The focus is clearly on the countryside around her native Oneida County, and the piece as a whole responds to the pleasure she took in her New York State surroundings. The essay is also one of her clearest and earliest statements about her love for the past, her concern for those—women and Indians in particular—who are often forgotten, but whose values, both as an historian and as a woman living in time, she deeply shared.

RELICS

"Relics" seems to be the generic word for antiquities developed in indigenous America. I knew it in my childhood, when I lived beyond the reach of cosmopolitan influences, and I lately came to an old-fashioned hill-village, where I found it still in use. I have found here in connection with "relics," a state of things as obsolete as the technical use (so to speak) of the word. I have found an environment where love of "relics" is still accounted an eccentricity, since here the antiquarian fashion has not yet come in. Housewives here, I believe, generally still pride themselves on house-furnishings consistently new—as proof, in part, of their means of providing such—and I have been sometimes for a moment aghast, when, in the home where I am staying, which is probably one of the most envied interiors of the village, I have suddenly realized that not a stick of furniture antedated the last fifteen years. It seemed a comfortless life, to live altogether divested of the material things that are enriched by memories, and it made me wonder if the humanity that lived with the furniture was itself faithless to memory, and careless of the sentiment and idealism that memory brings. The impiety seemed the greater, since the house is an historic one, though now made over so that its original features are almost lost. The fireplaces are gone, the fanlight over the front door is gone, and the delicate tracery that used to join it on either side, is gone,—the space being filled in on the inside by convenient cupboards, and clapboarded over on the outside, (facing the new porch,) as if nothing else had ever been. The neat ornamentation that used to run under the eaves was a

matter of so much indifference to the orderly modern owner that he has evidently relied on its not being seen, for he has left gaps in the rows of little rectangles by which it was constructed. Yet this was the house of the man who first applied the white man's law to an Indian criminal, and when he hanged a squaw outside the town for murdering her rival, he all but raised an insurrection of the tribe.

Now, even the woodshed of Captain Petrie's house is void of "relics," for its owners are as neat as they are progressive. In some village homes the roomy woodsheds still contain pretty "stands," and quaint chairs, and in the woodshed next door a high old secretary is used for a tool-chest. The master of this house is a man who, above all, has his utensils satisfactory, and he would tolerate no such makeshift. He has a solid workbench, and his wife's pantry equipment is of the best and newest. I see that when the mistress of the house does all her own work, (as is the case throughout this village,) convenient and handsome kitchens and pantries are the result. There is a sincerity about the effect that I find pleasing.

I myself am, I believe, an antiquary bred in the bone, and I would have been sorely tried if I had been born into a race of nomads, collecting their paraphernalia anew at each camping ground. My inclination for "relics" is something inscrutable and inevitable in my composition, which forms a chain of connection with my most distant borderland of infancy. In my childhood I felt my heart swell with emotion at the sight of any material thing with which I could connect a long past, and before my teens I lay on the floor, drawing out genealogical charts, because I always instinctively sought to trace the past of every person, thing, and place in my experience, myself among the rest. I early acquired a local reputation as a "relic-lover," of which the results sometimes abashed me. I have had men excavating for a house send for me to receive some shreds of human thigh-bones and rusty nails which they had turned up,—the latter vouched for as ancient because "handmade." I have even been presented with the jaw-bone of an Indian as a "relic." On my side I have had times of carrying my antiquarianism to grotesque extremes, for I have had moments of wishing to communicate with parrots and tortoises, domestic companions of man whose span of life exceeds his, and, even in childhood, I sought the conversation of the "oldest living inhabitant." I seem to have always a craving to touch the great human mystery of Time, and a sensitiveness of emotion when

it strikes me by concrete example. This instinct is, I believe, an effort on my part to transcend the narrow limitations of the individual, but it must be my idiosyncrasy to regard it so philosophically, or it would be an experience which the rest of humanity would share,—as they do not. Though to me my antiquarian impulse is the mortal's inevitable groping after a vision beyond mortality, to the majority of my brothers and sisters it is only an individual peculiarity. Yet I have lived to see my habit of mind, which is the instinctive habit only of the minority, become a fashion. Persons who were in my memory most careless of ancient things and their memories, have become great lovers of "the antique," and seekers of antiquities. Persons who sold, lost, neglected, destroyed, all sorts of memory-laden belongings in their youth, now fill their houses with treasures that some one of another instinct has tenderly preserved. It is a wonder to me sometimes that the new housemates do not rise in reproach for their brothers, whose destruction their present guardians allowed. I own that I have, in this connection, moments of wonder extending to vexation. Altogether, therefore, when I come to an environment like that of my hill-village, where the integrity of type in these matters is preserved, I find something refreshing in the spectacle, even though this is a civilization that makes no provision for my own type.

Here, where the natural divisions of humanity in the matter of antiquarianism is undisturbed, it is still visible how distinct is the variation which the human race naturally presents in this regard. There is always a farmer or two in the neighborhood who is making a collection of Indian relics—which his children usually neglect; and I am told that Indian "skinning knives" are preserved by the butchers for actual use in their trade—this is, of course, an entirely utilitarian matter. The family that gave their name to the most interesting Indian site of the region—where Champlain fought a battle,—lived there a generation or more with no interest in the stone and bone curiosities which the site afforded. Only once, I am told, the son procured an Indian pipe—which fell from a woodchuck's hole. These people were, however, public benefactors in a passive capacity, since they refused to allow the huge boulder, that had made the tribal symbol, to be removed; and in this they were unfortunately not imitated by the farmer who owned the oldest Indian site in the neighborhood. He had his boulder dug out because it annoyed him to have

visitors come to see it. The owner of another scene of Indian habitation—where a furrow still marks the line of the palisade, though the corn-pits are gone, such as still remain on Champlain's battle-field,—this farmer could not remember whether he had any Indian relics or not; but he finally brought some forth—from his screw box, and his wife's button-box! I said to this wife, "I am very fond of all old things," and she replied in a puzzled way, "How very queer that is!" Her specialty is "fancy-work," in which, I am told, she "always keeps right up to the fashion." She represents the majority, and their influence would be oppressive to one of the minority, permanently caught in the meshes of this environment.

That the influence of the majority here is oppressive, I can see by the way in which the instinctive antiquarians deport themselves. There is one relic-lover who for years went buggy-riding everywhere over the hills to collect relics,—and she inherited twenty-five homespun blankets and coverlets. Yet she houses her collections for the most part in the lumber-room and attic, and only sometimes, for the pleasure of a visiting kindred spirit, she brings down and hangs over the "comfortable modern furniture" with which she lives, some of her homespuns—blue, red, brown, or green, woven with plaids, roses, and "birds of paradise." I am hoping to stay here till she does her "fall cleaning," for I am told that then all her relics sun themselves. I should feel better about the gloomy existence of her coverlets all the year, if I could feel that they lay in beautiful chests, like Homeric weavings of old,—the best laid tenderly lowest of all, so that all were turned over lovingly to find the favorite. For such things a "hoard" is a fitting resting-place, if reverently prepared; but beautiful chests were no part of the pioneer inheritance of this region, and there is no knowledge how ignobly the beautiful weavings that did abound here may now be lying.

I feel that the case of the relic-lover just cited,—who stores her treasures and lives among modern objects of indifference,—is an example of the triumph of environment over the individual. An almost symbolical instance, in which the same battle was fought and won, was told me by another woman. "When my uncle came back from the Civil War," she said, "my mother took his army blanket for the ironing board, and when I was a girl I used to iron on it. But as I ironed, and ironed, it didn't seem right, and the older I grew and the more I got to know, the worse I felt about it. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer, and I took that blanket off the board, and I have

it now, with the "U. S. A." all scorched by the ironing. I've always been glad that I took it off, and I think a heap of that old thing."

This woman owned that she had always "loved nothing better than a relic," but she also has made a compromise with her environment; for she lives with modern furnishings, and she has gilded the old brass-candle-sticks, snuffers, and so forth—which she has preserved so carefully as relics. As a general thing, if there is any old-fashioned article still in use in the village, it is either gilded or painted white, and old bedsteads have furnished benches very generally to the farm lawns hereabout. There is no house in the village which has preserved an old-fashioned interior, though many of the houses are beautifully old-fashioned from without, and they have many of them now even gone back to the green and white paint, for which they were built. But you will find that the old brass knocker has been painted over with the door.

Thus the collective strength of the instinct of the majority influences even the habit of the minority, in this scene of the unhampered working out of the antiquarian and iconoclastic impulses of man. And here, sometimes even I can glimpse the point of view of the majority; for antiquarianism is not what it is in the world at large. In a town left behind for a generation, only the material details of life can be progressive, and those only imperfectly so. Where you still have to communicate with the outside world by a slow daily stage, and run your household by hewing wood and drawing water, perhaps the inconvenience and sense of backwardness is mitigated if you have no material monuments of the antique living in your home. Perhaps to cling to material antiquities in a world of institutions so ancient would stifle the last breath of life stirring in your organism. I knew an ancient town where, on a stream once used for commerce, and now abandoned, a barge with graceful mast, pointed hulk, and chains that clanked in the wind, rotted at the rotting dock for twenty years. I delighted in it as the perfect symbol for the town, pointing up above the landscape for many miles; children delighted in it as a playground. But I remember that when it was destroyed by fire, an old resident of the town rejoiced in my hearing, and when I remonstrated with her because it was a picturesque landmark gone, she said to me: "Oh, it is all very well for you to like it as the symbol of the decay of the town, but if you were a part of the town, you would be glad to see such a symbol go."

Thus, though my own place is pre-ordained, I have learned in old

towns something of the other side of the quarrel of antiquarian and iconoclast. Antiquarianism as a reality to be lived, is very different from antiquarianism as an aesthetic pleasure in the midst of a progressive environment. I even see that it is for the good of the whole that the antiquarians are in the minority in the human race, and I desire more and more, as I grow older, to keep my own antiquarian impulse within bounds. I have seen homes where the present generation was crowded out by the accumulations of their forebears. I have a friend who has a wealth of family jewelry, yet always wears modern pieces, because she says that only thus can she feel herself. The old pieces are surcharged with the personalities of the past. I can now conceive how life in an environment solidly filled in with memorials from the past might in certain moods and circumstances, be a torment haunted by incessant ghosts.

Upon reflection, I am not sorry that the people of this village, for the most part, lack the indiscriminate piety of the antiquarian, for if unchecked this would reach the cluttering ancestor-worship of the Chinese. There is here a refreshing sincerity and freedom from false sentiment, in the attitude generally manifested towards the past. Since the people here lack a developed sense of beauty, therefore, even in this age of ugly manufactures, they naturally prefer the new to the old. If I lived in an age which made beautiful houses and furnishings, I decide that I also might prefer new homes to old; and I understand the iconoclasm of the Gothic builders who built always according to the latest fashion, however incongruous that was with what had been built before. Their iconoclasm was the natural effect—and perhaps the cause—of the creative age of art in which they lived. There is, after all, something wholesome and forward-looking in “keeping up to the fashion.” The vital impulse of life at the most important moments is, after all, to be one’s self, placed in the real immediate present. Anything that cramps or deadens that impulse is malign and intolerable. Life is most fruitful when seen simple and directly challenging. I, or any other antiquarian, could work myself into frenzies of sophisticated regret,—grieving over old houses torn down or made comfortable, old landmarks removed, old treasures lost. I remember that as a child I went into agonies of regret over realizing by what a narrow margin I missed the possibility of seeing “Old London Bridge”—for which, perhaps, the game, “London Bridge is falling down,” had given me specially romantic associations. At times I have wished

passionately that material things—for example, fine highboys hidden in farm-house attics, when I was passing, or carved Indian pipes buried in the earth, over which I was walking,—had methods of signalling those who were seeking them. After some experience of this waste of emotion, I have realized that “this way madness lies,” and I have even come to have moments of oppression at the very thought of the leavings of past generations. I have seen that there may have been profound insight, even from the point of view of the living, in the custom among primitive people of burying their belongings with the dead. It was a way to lay all ghosts.

Perhaps there was also something of the instinct of self preservation in another act of my friend who owned the jewelry. She inherited also a chest of homespun linen, brought over by an English ancestor, all of which she sent at the beginning of the Great War to the English Red Cross, because the original owner, as she said, would so have loved to have it go there. This cutting up of ancient linen shocked my antiquarian instinct, and the use for mean purposes of what was of considerable value shocked my practical sense. But I have the suspicion that my friend,—owner of a large hereditary accumulation,—felt herself freed for a moment, when, as it were, she put some of her ancient goods at the disposal of their original owner quite as truly as if she had buried them in the owner’s grave.

Thus, as a reality in human experience, it is as “dead men’s goods” that the treasures of the antiquarian often appear to the average man; and this implication seems conveyed by the old indigenous American term “relics.” This word seems to suggest more the departed owner than the object, and it makes connection with the old use of the word “relict” for widow, once also common in indigenous America. Some peoples, as we know, included the widow with the goods of the dead man which were sent after him at his death, and our indigenous American inclusion of both under the same word might, in some imaginative moments, seem the vaguest possible stirring of the same instinct. Seriously, however, the indifference, half-repugnance, of the average man for “relics” does perhaps, in the depths of its subconsciousness, touch a foundation of the same primitive psychology as the primitive burial or funeral pyre. We have an expression of the same instincts in the custom formerly followed by the Indians of this vicinity, of abandoning a dwelling,—which would be a bark house in this case,—in which a death had occurred. My gentle Indian

char-woman tells me a terrible ghost story told her by her grandmother, which was founded on this custom. It relates the ghastly experiences of some travellers who, when ready to drop on the trail, took refuge in an abandoned hut. A folk-lorist tells me that the story is a famous one among the tribes of this region. And they went even farther in their shrinking from the dead and the memories of the past. At a certain interval after death, a feast was held, at which a place was laid for the dead and furnished with everything on the board. Some ritual was recited, and after this time the ghost, which up to then had remained near the scene of its earthly life, took its departure, and from this hour mourning was to cease. The original date at which the feast was held was a year from the date of death, but the period of mourning was later shortened to ten days. Nothing could better illustrate the instinct of self preservation inherent in primitive peoples. When last year the Indian laundress of my next door neighbor fell dead, it was a "ten days' feast" that was celebrated in her honor, after the newer Iroquois custom.

In any modern environment there is doubtless too much sensibility to allow the curtailment of mourning, though—perhaps for reasons of economy in part—the outward badges of mourning are rarely seen in this village. But because of the strength of sensibility existing here, I feel sure that nowhere is the essential of the piety involved in antiquarianism better observed. Indiscriminate collecting is "queer," indiscriminate preservation is oppressive, but the preservation of ancient objects of special personal interest is always understood. I am reminded of the saying of a naturally iconoclastic friend who, since the age of forty, has become a delightful teller of tales of a generation ago. "We all become, to a certain degree, antiquarians as we grow older," he says, "for we all become sentimental about our own past." In the same sense, the people here are one and all interested in their own past, and reverent of the forebears whom they have known. They probably feel as much sentiment as the exigencies of human life can afford. Though they shrink from subjecting themselves to the whole environment of their ancestors, yet they cherish objects of personal use by departed parents, with a tenderness that proves, without theology, the immortality assured to those of the human race that are parents. In the house in which I am staying there is one ancient object,—the favorite chair of the owner's mother. A village woman of the iconoclastic type (who preserves her mother's

“camphor bottle”) was speaking to me of the house of a childless couple which she once dismantled. “So sad!” she said, “Everything was just as they left it, and there was nobody to care. We packed up everything in boxes. There was his tobacco-box on the table, and her thimble in the sewing basket. That hurt me more than anything. Nobody to care for her thimble! Why, my mother’s thimble is a thin little old thing, but when she was through with it, I just loved it, and now it’s gone to my daughter, and her little girl is going to have it.”

I don’t believe that this thimble would have been called a “relic.” I believe that it would have been called a “keepsake.” The world now-a-days talks impersonally of “antiquities”—thus speaking aesthetically, from the point of view of the object. The old American world speaks of “relics,” inclining to emphasize the relation to the dead owner, but they have another term. In “keepsake” they put a delicate emphasis on the living rather than the dead, and it is in relation to “keepsakes” that this village shows its understanding of the essential piety of antiquarianism. Perhaps we have in its attitude to the whole subject an example of the fundamental tact in dealing with life, which the human race can generally be trusted to exhibit when it acts naturally.