

# *Rebecca Harding Davis Society Newsletter*

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*The Society for the Study of Rebecca Harding Davis and Her World*

**President:** Robin Cadwallader

**Vice-President, Publications and Newsletter Editor:** Mischa Renfroe

**Conference Coordinator:** Aaron Rován

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

If you have any publications or presentations on Davis or her world that you would like to have recognized, please send them to Robin Cadwallader ([rcadwallader@francis.edu](mailto:rcadwallader@francis.edu)) or Mischa Renfroe ([mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu](mailto:mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu)). We're always looking for material for the newsletter and would like to highlight the work of new (as well as seasoned) scholars in the field of Davis studies.

Due to scheduling conflicts and continued covid-19 uncertainty, we have decided not to organize a session at the next meeting of the American Literature Association (May 2022), but we plan to return for the 2023 meeting of ALA, which is slated to be held in Boston.

### **CONFERENCE REPORT by Aaron Rován**

We hosted two fully virtual panels at the 2021 ALA conference.

The first panel, held on Zoom on May 21, was titled “**Economics and Gender in Rebecca Harding Davis’s Novels.**” Chaired by Alicia Mischa Renfroe, the panel included presentations about some of the ways that Davis integrated concerns of economics and gender in her longer fiction. The presentations included:

1. “Mimesis and the ‘Man Marriage’: Protesting Marital Rape in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *The Second Life*” by Arielle Zibrak, University of Wyoming
2. “Spiritualism, Christianity, and Economics in *A Law Unto Herself*” by Aaron J. Rován, West Virginia University
3. “‘Tigers in the Drawing Room’: Futurity and Queer Motherhood in Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Frances Waldeaux*” by Stephanie Vastine, University of North Texas

The recorded session can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEj21rBLavI>

The second panel was also held on Zoom on June 7. The panel was titled “**Possibility, Toxicity, and Metaphysics in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’**” and was chaired by Aaron Rován. Four panelists situated Davis’s most anthologized work within four unique contexts. The presentations included:

1. “Possibility and the Unfinished in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’” by Kacie Fodness, University of South Dakota
2. “The Rhetoric of Secrecy and the Epistemological Problem of Rights in Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Life in the Iron-Mills’” by Sean J Kelly, Wilkes University
3. “Toxic Ghosts in Davis’s and Melville’s Industrial Fiction” by Lauren S. Peterson, University of California, Davis
4. “Davis and Eliot: The Damaging Effects of Life” by Jack Weidner, Independent Scholar

The recorded session can be found at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAxJ4KvRm18>

## **From the Pen of RHD: “The Plague Spot of America”**

*Editor’s Note: Our 2020 Newsletter included Davis’s “A Story of the Plague,” a piece about a cholera epidemic. Building on last year’s selection, “The Plague Spot of America” illustrates her long-time interest in medicine and infectious diseases.*

*Endnotes by Laney Jolley Smith.*

“The Plague Spot of America.” *The Independent*, 4 July 1889, p. 1.

The Prince of Wales, it is said, is at the head of a movement to honor the memory of Father Damien, the hero priest of Molokai,<sup>1</sup> by erecting a hospital for lepers in London. There are reported to be about twenty lepers in England; and it is for their comfort and seclusion that the house in to be built as well for the opportunity it will afford to physicians for the scientific study of leprosy.

Father Damien’s life and death were appreciated as highly in this country as in any other. There is among us no lack of keen sympathy for any kind of suffering nor of money to relieve it. As we all know, there is no disease, no form of want, no condition of misery (but one) for which the kindly wealthy Christian folk of our cities have not supplied relief in asylums, hospitals or some other form of active charity.

The one exception is that of leprosy.

It is high time that this most terrible of all human calamities should be brought under the control of Christian charity and scientific skill. The difficulty so far has been that the country is so vast and the cases so scattered that very few persons know to what an extent it actually prevails among us. Now and then vague statements are made in the newspapers of its increase among the Scandinavian settlements in the Western States. The fact is that leprosy has existed in Norway for nearly a century. It is an hereditary disease and breaks out among the children of the settlers in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois. There is no attempt made to cure the wretched victims nor to isolate them. They are, as a rule, carefully and humanely treated; but they are allowed to go about scattering the germs of the disease until God in mercy suffers them to creep into the grave.

Leprosy also exists to a large degree in New Brunswick, near the Bay of Cualeur.<sup>2</sup> It was reported in 1844, by a commission of scientific men appointed by the Canadian Parliament, to be “the true *lepra graecorum*,<sup>3</sup> or Asiatic leprosy, known in Europe during the middle ages. It is both hereditary and highly contagious. No person contracting it in these districts has ever been cured.”<sup>4</sup>

The lepers in New Brunswick were isolated in a huge inclosure at Tracadie: their food, it is said, was thrown to them as to wild beasts.<sup>5</sup> Vague rumors come to us of the horrors of that pen, of the filth, the sickening odors, the awful loneliness and the mad passions that raged within it. It was, I think, about fifteen years ago, that five sisters of some merciful order in the Roman Church in Montreal, looked their last on the outside world and voluntarily went into this place of living death.<sup>6</sup> They have brought cleanliness and order and peace into it, and hope, too—for another world.

It is to the leprosy in Louisiana, however, that I wish to call the attention of my readers. The facts concerning it were mainly given to me by Dr. Joseph Jones, of New Orleans, formerly President of the State Board of Health.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1718 the Negroes imported into Louisiana from Guinea brought with them three kindred diseases — the African yaws, the elephantiasis, and the genuine leprosy of the Bible. So rapid was the spread of the last disease and so great the terror which it inspired, that Ulloa made an ineffectual effort to herd the victims together.<sup>8</sup> In 1785 Governor Miro founded a hospital for them near the Bayou St. John.<sup>9</sup> They were confined to

a ridge of land surrounding it called *La Terre des Lepreuz*.<sup>10</sup> In consequence of this insulation, according to Gayarré, leprosy almost died out in Louisiana, the hospital was deserted, and the land now is a densely populated quarter of the city.<sup>11</sup>

In 1870 the leprosy appeared again in Vermillion parish. A woman named Ourblanc, from the South of France, in whose family it had been hereditary, suddenly developed in her old age the terrible, unmistakable symptoms. Her husband and seven children all fled and left her to the care of a young girl of the neighborhood, who took pity on her extremity and tenderly nursed her to the end. After her death the disease appeared in this heroic girl and in six of the old woman's children. They all died. Other cases in which the contagion was clearly traced to the Ourblanc family appeared. Lepers now became frequent patients in the Charity Hospital in New Orleans. The most pathetic case among them was that of Father Boglioli, a Catholic priest, a powerful, muscular man of noble presence, from the Appenine mountains,<sup>12</sup> who for fourteen years had ministered to the patients in this hospital. He was called upon to administer the last rites of his Church to some of the dying lepers, but was warned of the danger of contact. He quietly proceeded with his duty, nursing the lepers, giving them extreme unction and laying them in the grave. He was at once infected with the disease and died about two years ago.<sup>13</sup>

The chief seat of leprosy in Louisiana, however, has always been on the bayou Lafourche, below Harnrag's Canal. In 1880 the legislature was roused to action on this subject, and Dr. Joseph Jones, of the Board of Health, with his son, volunteered to examine into the condition of the infected district.

He found the cabins of the inhabitants standing in low marshes—usually rice-fields—irrigated up to the very doors: their diet consisted largely of fish and rice. They were constantly subject to low, malarial atmosphere. The leprosy, inherited in some of these families from distant ancestors in Africa or Southern Europe, was spread by contagion and nursed by the low, poverty stricken malarious conditions of their life.

The lepers fled on his arrival or were hidden by their families, as it was feared they were to be carried off to some isolated island in the sea, like that of Molokai.

Dr. Jones, however, discovered whole families in which Asiatic leprosy had existed for generations. Some of the victims with their leonine<sup>14</sup> faces and hands turned to stone were living alone in huts thatched with palmettoes, among the swamps, feeding themselves on such rice and roots as they could find, abandoned by man, and, it must have seemed to them, by God himself.

Dr. Jones on his return vehemently urged the legislature of Louisiana to do something for the relief of this most wretched community. Nothing was done then and nothing has since been done.

It is rumored that leprosy is still on the increase in this region. As far as I know, not even the devoted Roman priest has penetrated into its shades of death.

Why should not we too do something in memory of Father Damien? Catholics, Protestants and infidels alike were stirred to the heart by his death; there were tributes of praise in every church and paper through the Union.

But what shall we do for these our own lepers? They are there in the malarious swamps dying by inches and spreading their mortal ailment to their healthy neighbors.

A practical movement to relieve, isolate and nurse them would be a more fitting tribute to Father Damien than any words or tears.

Marion, Mass.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Damien of Molokai (1840-1889), Belgian priest who was known for his work with a Hawaiian leper colony and refused to leave the colony for treatment when he contracted leprosy himself.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as Chaleur Bay located between Quebec and New Brunswick in Canada.

<sup>3</sup> One of the Latin terms for leprosy (now typically referred to as Hansen's disease). *Lepra* meaning scaly and *graecorum* meaning Greek, as the Romans separated types of "scaly" diseases by region/people.

<sup>4</sup> Possible reference to "An Act to Prevent the Spread of a Disorder now existing in certain parts of the Counties of Gloucester and Northumberland," legislation passed in New Brunswick in 1844 that established quarantine sites.

<sup>5</sup> When leprosy was discovered in 1844 in the village of Tracadie in New Brunswick, Canada, the sick were quarantined on an island and left in poor conditions with limited medical care.

<sup>6</sup> The Religious Hospitallers of Saint Joseph from Montreal arrived in 1868 and maintained the ministry until the 1960s when the hospital closed.

<sup>7</sup> Noted for research on leprosy, malaria, yellow fever, and similar diseases in the south, Dr. Joseph Jones (1839-1919) served as President of the Louisiana State Board of Health from 1880-1884.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio de Ulloa (1716-1795) was governor of the Spanish province of Louisiana from 1766 to 1768.

<sup>9</sup> Estaban Rodriguez Miño (1744-1795) was the acting governor and then governor of the Spanish province of Louisiana from 1785 to 1791.

<sup>10</sup> Leper's Land

<sup>11</sup> Charles Gayarré (1805-1895) wrote *A History of Louisiana* (1867), a possible source for Davis's account of leprosy in Louisiana. See Chapter IV for an account of Miño's administration.

<sup>12</sup> Mountain range in Italy

<sup>13</sup> Father Charles Boglioli (1814-1882) was born in Italy and immigrated to America in 1840 where he joined the priesthood.

<sup>14</sup> Resembling a lion

## **RHD COMPLETE WORKS- Alicia Mischa Renfroe (Site Director)**

The digitalization of Davis's complete works (<http://rebeccahardingdaviscompleteworks.com>) is ongoing.

Recent additions include:

"An American Family." *The Independent*, 15 March 1906, pp. 602-604. (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

"The Lesson of Decoration Day" *Saturday Evening Post*, 30 May 1903, p. 12. (Contributed by Mischa Renfroe)

"A Middle Aged Woman." *The Independent*, 1 September 1904, pp. 489-94. (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

"One or Two Plain Questions." *The Independent*, 22 October 1908, pp. 944-46. (Contributed by Jency Wilson)

"One Woman's Question." *The Independent*, 18 July 1907, pp. 132-33. (Contributed by Jency Wilson)

"The Pot of Gold," *Youth's Companion*, 4 Jan 1872, pp 1-2. (Contributed by Mischa Renfroe)

"Two Methods with the Negro." *The Independent*, 31 March 1898, pp. 401-2. (Contributed by Laney Jolley Smith)

We welcome contact from anyone who wishes to input a text (please use Word or a compatible program; the site administrator will code and upload the texts) or write a Cultural Context Essay (a short 500 word piece about an issue relevant to Davis's work). Just send an email to Mischa Renfroe ([mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu](mailto:mischa.renfroe@mtsu.edu)) if you are interested in contributing to RHD Complete Works. We would like to thank the English Department at Middle Tennessee State University for its support of this important project by providing a Research Assistant, PhD candidate Laney Jolley Smith, to assist with research and transcription.

### **About the Newsletter**

The Society is no longer maintaining the website at <http://scotus.francis.edu/rebeccahardingdavis/>. Some past issues of the newsletter are available on that website; new issues of the newsletter will be available when we have a new up-and-running website.

**Society for the Study of Rebecca Harding Davis and Her World**  
**Membership Information**

For membership, please complete the membership form below and mail it along with your membership dues to:

Robin L. Cadwallader  
 Dept. of Literature & Languages  
 Saint Francis University  
 Loretto, PA 15940

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**Membership Form**

**Name:**

**Address:**

**Email:**

**Telephone:**

**This information may \_\_\_\_\_ / may not \_\_\_\_\_ be included in the Society's secure online Members' Directory.**

Membership dues are \$5.00 annually. With a two-year membership or a gift of \$10 or more to the Society, you will receive a free copy of *Writing Cultural Autobiography*, a reprint of Davis's *Bits of Gossip* with additional material, edited by Janice Milner Lasseter and Sharon M. Harris. A lifetime membership is only \$75 and choosing that option now means you won't have to remember to pay your yearly dues, which come with the benefit of our current newsletter!