
Two things should be said at the outset about this excellent biography. First, it fills a gap. Second, it is (to quote another literary biographer, Jerome Loving) “eminently readable.”

The first book-length biographical treatment of Garland in 40 years, it is practically the only full-scale biography of Garland the man and writer available. I say “practically” because there are two other books in English that are similar in scope, which is to say that they combine biography and criticism, though neither covers Garland’s early life: Jean Holloway’s Hamlin Garland: A Biography (1960) and Joseph B. McCullough’s Hamlin Garland (1978). (Robert Mane’s Hamlin Garland, l’homme et l’œuvre (1860-1940) (1968) may have done so; I did not have access to Mane’s book in preparing this review, and Newlin does not cite it.) Another important work, Donald Pizer’s Hamlin Garland’s Early Work and Career (1960), which concludes with the publication of Garland’s novel Rose of Dutcher’s Cooly in 1895, is not so much a biography as a critical study of Garland’s sources and development as a writer, as is McCullough’s book. Newlin acknowledges his indebtedness to Pizer’s study, and has in fact cited it often. McCullough’s monograph on Garland is considerably shorter than the present work, in conformity with the format of Twayne’s United States Authors Series, for which it was written. Holloway’s biography is an excellent and still very valuable work which complements Newlin’s nicely, but Newlin’s work seems more complete, biographically speaking, and it draws on new sources, such as an unpublished memoir by Garland’s daughter Isabel Garland Lord, which had not yet been penned when Holloway’s book was published. The memoir has just been edited by Newlin and published under the title A Summer to Be, A Memoir by the Daughter of Hamlin Garland. Holloway also did not have access to Garland’s diaries.

Newlin’s biography is so well written and seamlessly constructed that the reader tends not to notice the biographer’s presence. Jerome Loving says it best on the back cover: “The story flows as if it were a novel.” Newlin himself articulates—in assessing Garland’s difficulties in writing A Daughter of the Middle Border—a “pitfall facing every biographer: allowing chronology, and not the story, to dominate.” It is a trap that Newlin has avoided.

Garland presents a challenge to the biographer because the life he lived, while by no means dissolute, involved such a profusion of friends
and activities: his midwestern farm childhood; an early career as a public
lecturer, adjunct professor, and critic; an intense early interest in the
theater; associations with literary figures, intellectuals, and prominent
men such as Theodore Roosevelt; involvement in a variety of artistic and
cultural organizations in which he played a very active role; traveling to
the Klondike in search of raw experience and literary material; the Indi-
ans of the Southwest whom he visited and wrote about and for whom he
was a tireless advocate; and, of course, a prolific output including plays,
poems, novels, stories, autobiographical works, and books on the occult
and spiritualism, in which he took an active interest throughout
his adult life.

Newlin’s critical insights, while they do not necessarily supersede
those of his predecessors, are excellent. Like Holloway, he has a
“writerly” type of insight that enables him to intuit the challenges faced
by Garland both career-wise—as an author trying to establish himself,
achieve recognition, and maintain commercial viability—and at the writ-
ing desk. Newlin is particularly good and informative on a critical aspect
of Garland’s development: the theater, an area in which he has scholarly
expertise. (Newlin’s dissertation was on the theater in London, Garland,
and Dreiser.) Discussing Garland’s short-lived career as a playwright, he
observes that his “retreat from realism to romance is more closely linked
to his failure in the theater than is generally acknowledged.”

In assessing Garland’s writings, Newlin calls attention to such faults
and obstacles as his early difficulty in rendering dialect, a weakness he
later managed (as evidenced by his short stories) to overcome; “too-
hurried composition that often led to premature publication”; a ten-
dency to pontificate; lack of attention to nuances of style; a weakness of
plotting in his fiction; a tendency to focus on externals rather than inter-
nal life or what we would today call feelings; “tepid characterization”; his
general inability to write convincing love plots and romantic scenes; his
fear of being considered egotistical in his autobiographical works, leading
to awkward shifts between third and first person narration; the problem
in writing *Trail-Makers of the Middle Border* of linking his father’s mostly
fictional Civil War service with the facts of his father’s homesteading life.
There is balanced coverage of virtues, too, such as the exemplary blend of
factual detail and fictional techniques in Garland’s biography of Ulysses
S. Grant; the psychological complexity of characterization in his now
forgotten novel *Money Magic*; and an excellent discussion of how, in
writing *Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly*, Garland overcame difficulties in the
book’s conception, namely, “how to introduce the almost obligatory love
plot without trapping his New Woman in a conventional marriage,” benefiting from the ideas and influence of the editor Benjamin O. Flower.

A biography is much more than criticism, of course, and vignettes bring this one to life. The opening scene—the biography starts ingeniously with Garland’s burial in 1940 in Wisconsin—is masterfully done and relies for details on a local newspaper article that Newlin unearthed. And the account of Garland’s speaking at a political convention that his father, Richard Garland, was attending as a delegate, which draws on the unpublished memoirs of the journalist Elia Peattie, describes Dick Garland breaking into sobs as the audience cheered his son, saying: “I never thought Hamlin would make at success at writing.” Then there is the very difficult and emotionally wrenching (for Garland) birth of his first child and the affair of his wife, Zulime, the source for which is Isabel Garland Lord’s memoir, which was supplied to Newlin by Garland’s granddaughter.

Interesting period details—such as Garland’s experiences with a new invention, the graphophone, his first radio, and his learning to drive at age fifty-nine—and the sketches of personalities such as Henry B. Fuller and the composer Edward MacDowell also help to bring the book to life.

The only place where this biography tends to drag a bit is in the descriptions of Garland’s involvement and activities in organizations such as the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It would seem that this is unavoidable in giving a full account of Garland’s life. He was often, as Newlin observes, drawn by reformist zeal and a talent for organization into social and artistic improvement schemes that taxed his creative energies.

Upon finishing the book, I felt a desire to immerse myself in Garland’s writings and to take their measure for myself. I couldn’t help but compare Garland to Dreiser. In some broad respects, the two writers’ early lives seem similar. Both were from the Midwest; both were raised in humble circumstances; neither would have seemed destined by any stretch of the imagination to become a famous writer. The life stories and careers of both seem quite remarkable and particularly American—Horatio Alger-like. Yet the two were completely different in personality and beliefs. One thing that occurred to me is that the approximately ten-year age difference between Garland and the younger Dreiser is significant (aside from other factors). Think of the difference, say, in the typical experiences of someone whose adolescence and young adulthood occurred in the 1950s rather than the 1960s. And, of course, the two men’s family circumstances and upbringings were different in significant respects.
Similar musings led me to speculate about Garland’s sex life. He was exceedingly handsome (as a photograph of him taken in 1887 and reproduced by Newlin shows). Garland married at thirty-nine. It was an age of circumspection, and Garland, who kept a diary, was notably circumspect. He did note in his diary having observed prostitutes during his travels.

Newlin’s contributions to Garland scholarship over the past decade are indeed noteworthy. He coedited (with Joseph B. McCullough) the first and only published edition of Garland’s letters; was author of the companion volume, Hamlin Garland: A Bibliography, with a Checklist of Unpublished Letters; saw to it that Garland’s The Book of the American Indian found its way back into print; recently shepherded three of Garland’s best works—Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly, A Son of the Middle Border and A Daughter of the Middle Border—into print in handsome trade paperback editions with introductions that are well worth reading; and has just published an invaluable source, Garland’s daughter’s memoir, along with this impressive biography. As a biography of Garland it is unsurpassed, and it is also an invaluable work of scholarship in enriching our knowledge of American literary history from William Dean Howells to Garland and Stephen Crane, and from Garland to Eugene O’Neill and Sinclair Lewis.

—Roger W. Smith


Armed with a passion for all things London, Daniel J. Wichlan has spent over two decades exploring library archives, special collections, and databases in search of what he considers the final “frontier” of research into London scholarship. Wichlan is confident that these “rare” essays and poems represent a previously unexplored Jack London and that these collections will create new paths of critical inquiry.
