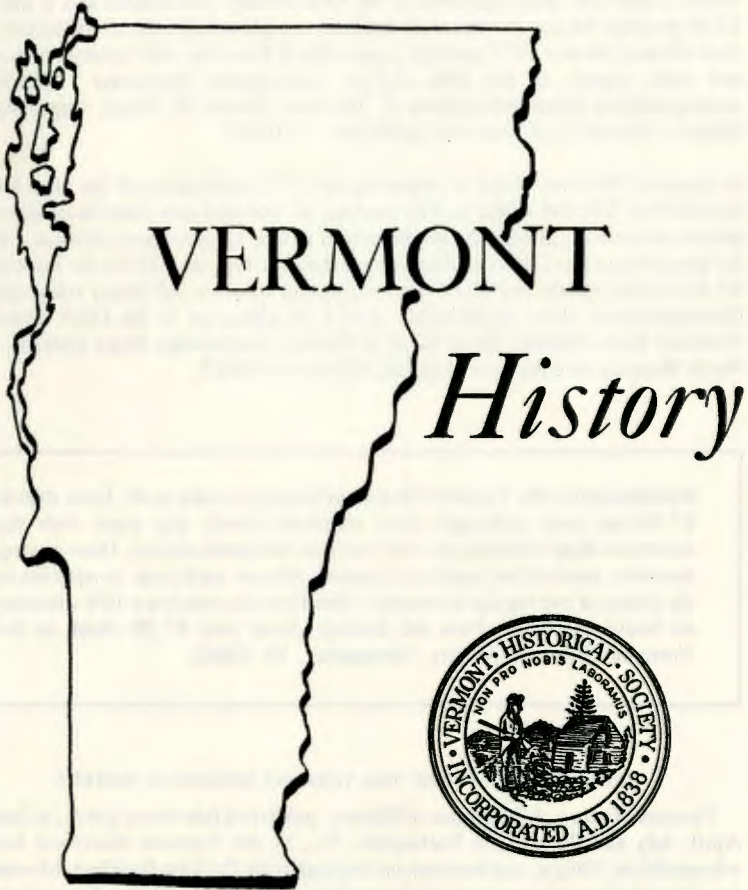


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Camel's Hump was the setting and also an important symbol in one of his novels.

The Landlord at Lion's Head: William Dean Howells' Use of the Vermont Scene

By PAUL A. ESCHHOLZ

AFTER the publication of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a novel about life in New York City during the turbulent decade of the 1880's, the seemingly ageless William Dean Howells continued to mature as a novelist and social critic. When Howells returns to the rural New England scene in *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897), he is not withdrawing from the main currents of American life. The novel contains much more than commentators have been willing to grant; for example, it is more than "a satire on the evolution of the summer resort and the summer boarder" written by a "competent historian."¹ It is more than a story, as Van Wyck Brooks says, "of Jeff's relations with three women, Cynthia, Bessie Lynde in Boston, whose world was so different from his mother's world, and the Vostrand girl who had gone back to live in Florence."² In essence, *The Landlord at Lion's Head* is, as a reviewer for *The Critic* immediately perceived, "one of [Howells'] most conscientious studies of American life and conditions"³ at the close of the nineteenth century.

Howells' novel concerns the Durgin family, rural farmers, during a period when the tide of settlement was flowing toward the activity and excitement

1. Charles Dudley Warner, "Editor's Study," *Harper's Magazine*, 95 (November 1897), 962.

2. Van Wyck Brooks, *Howells His Life and His World* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1959), p. 221. Four years earlier, Howells had written C. E. Norton stating that he had "ended an epoch of my literary life. I doubt if I shall ever write another story in which mating and marrying plays an important part" (Mildred Howells [ed.], *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* [New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1928], II, 29).

3. Anonymous, "Literature: *The Landlord at Lion's Head*," *The Critic*, 30 (June 19, 1897), 420.

of urban-industrial areas. The hard, stony soil of Vermont was unyielding in its determination to deny to the Durgins the rewards of their toil, and as year by year the farm declined, so did their fortunes and their health. They were barely able to scratch a living from the hillside. Howells early establishes that the Durgins are not sturdy yeoman farm types, but instead are wasted, save for the mother and the youngest son, by consumption. In desperation, Jeff Durgin and his mother turn to city people to survive; they must cater to the new influx of summer visitors.

Howells saw that life in Vermont was in a state of flux or transition and attempted to chronicle the conditions in his novel. What Howells saw happening in Vermont, he felt was symptomatic of what was occurring elsewhere throughout the country, and it is this situation, one of moral ambiguity, social stratification, snobbishness, and competitive individualism, that is at the core of *The Landlord at Lion's Head*.

Howells recalls in the preface for the Library Edition of the novel that during a short sojourn on the New York shore of Lake Champlain in the summer of 1891, he became intrigued by Camel's Hump, that "majestic mountain form"⁴ across the water in the State of Vermont. The strength, beauty, and mystery of the mountain's unique profile captured Howells' imagination. Ultimately, the mountain was to provide the central setting for his novel *The Landlord at Lion's Head*.

Howells was not alone in his fascination for Camel's Hump; the mountain has long been recognized as one of the most distinctive and individualistic mountains of New England. Indicative of the fascination that the ambiguous profile of Camel's Hump has held for the people of Vermont are its many and varied names. Successively, it has been called Tawabodi-e-wadso, literally "a mountain to sit upon," by the Waubanakee Indians, Le Lion Couchant, an apt term from heraldry, by French explorers and pioneers, and Camel's Hump, or facetiously Camel's Rump, by early Yankee settlers. Depending, of course, upon one's angle of vision, each seems appropriately descriptive. Howells, himself, preferred the Couching Lion, the English translation of the French Name, because he felt the mountain "really looked like a sleeping lion; the head was especially definite" (p. vii).

Daniel Pierce Thompson first brought literary fame to Camel's Hump when he utilized the legend of buried treasure on the Hump in his tale *May Martin: or The Money Diggers*, first published serially by the *New England Galaxy* in 1835. Some fifty printings and numerous pirated editions attest to the novel's popularity in the nineteenth century. Unlike his predecessor

4. William Dean Howells, *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, Library Edition, 1911), p. vii. Since all subsequent references to *The Landlord at Lion's Head* will be to this edition, they will be incorporated parenthetically in the text of the paper.

Thompson, Howells utilizes Camel's Hump for more than just a setting for his story; the mountain attains symbolic significance as the novel develops.

Howells takes great pains to identify his hero Thomas Jefferson Durgin with the "primitively solitary and savage" (p. 3) mountain that keeps constant watch over the Durgin farmhouse. Like the rugged granite lion, Jeff "was hewn out and squared upward massively, [and] felt like stone to any accidental contact" (p. 78). As Howells' carefully controlled description of Durgin comes into sharper focus, one recognizes a detailed resemblance between Jeff's head and that of the lion. Jeff has "a thatch of . . . rust-gold hair" (pp. 46, 185) which hangs over his forehead "in a dense bang" (p. 185). His jaw is "square, . . . bold, . . . [and] clean-shaven" (pp. 185, 292), while his "mocking blue eyes" (p. 185) peer out from under "thick straw-colored eyebrows" (p. 292). Lion's Head, however, is more than a massive stone likeness of a lion; it is as "imperative and importunate as the Great Stone Face itself" (p. 3).

Likewise, to consider Jeff as only a handsome, brute animal is to do an injustice to his wonderfully complex personality. In essence, Jeff is an ambiguous package of ruthless power, gentle affection, and amorality. He has that magnetic, yet frightening, primitive vitality and force which, in addition to his masculine physique and handsome appearance, make him attractive. It is precisely this "anti-Puritan quality" that Howells prized most in his creation and which he, as a result of his studied observations of New England life, saw "always vexing the heart of Puritanism" (p. ix).

In direct contrast to Jeff Durgin, Howells presents the Bostonian artist Jere Westover. It is Westover, Jeff's most articulate and severe critic, who attempts to impose moral order upon the ambiguous action of the novel because he envisions a universe where evil is punished and good is rewarded. But, just as Westover cannot capture the "exquisite suggestions of violet and crimson" of the setting summer sun on Lion's Head without getting "his canvas into such a state that he alone could have found it much more intelligible than his palette" (p. 18), the artist, restricted as he is by an essentially Puritanic code, cannot fathom "the great unknown where [Jeff] has his weird being" (p. 284). Westover's rigid moral pronouncements are irrelevant either as descriptions of or principles for behavior in late nineteenth century America. Consequently, his final judgment of the rural Vermonter Jeff Durgin rings hollow.

Similarly, Westover is incapable of fully appreciating and understanding Cynthia Whitwell, the woman he plans to marry. In order to capture Cynthia's complete personality and to reveal Westover's shortcomings as an observer and critic of human nature, Howells again uses Lion's Head symbolically. While visiting the Durgin's Inn during the off-season to paint

Lion's Head in the winter, Westover discovers a noticeable change in his subject. The sunset on the mountain no longer suggests the violet or crimson that were associated with Jeff; instead, the mountain is suffused with a soft, sensuous pink, the color Howells associates with Cynthia throughout the novel. For example, when riding to Lovewell with Jeff, "she was dressed in a pale-pink color, with a hat of yet paler pink. . . . She looked bright and fresh; there was a dash of pink in her cheeks, which suggested the color of the sweetbrier, its purity and sweetness, and if there was something in Cynthia's character and temperament that suggested its thorns too, one still could not deny that she was like that flower" (p. 138). Westover, however, finds it "simply impossible" to capture "that warm color tender upon the frozen hills" (p. 269) when he tries to paint Lion's Head during his winter visit. Similarly, Westover fails to understand the tender passion under Cynthia's exterior of stern New England practicality despite Jeff's admonishment that "Cynthia's a woman — she a'n't any corpse-light" (p. 307). Westover seems charmed by the simplicity and innocence of Cynthia's spiritual presence, but he is repulsed by her sexual presence. To Westover, "she was a country girl, acquainted from childhood with the facts of life which town-bred girls would not have known without a blunting of the sensibilities, and why should she be different from other girls" (p. 277)? When Westover finally does come to paint Cynthia, the portrait reminds one "of a bird that you've come on sudden, and it stoops as if it was goin' to fly" (p. 392). This is not the real Cynthia, the restrained yet passionate woman; it is Westover's "slight and feeble representation of Cynthia" (p. 391). Interestingly, it is only after he has made Cynthia what he wants her to be on canvas that he is able to admit his love for her and ultimately propose.

By using Lion's Head as his symbolic vehicle, Howells exposes Westover's inability to appreciate human nature fully, his effete Bostonian atrophy. He can neither understand nor capture on canvas the primitive strength, vitality, and passion which Jeff, Cynthia, and Lion's Head share; they will always vex his Puritanic heart. Like Cynthia, we shall "always have to call [him] Mr. Westover" (p. 408).

Curiosity Under Control:

"There is an old gentleman of 80, named Cheney, who lives within three miles of the Coventry station and has never rode on the [railroad] cars, or even seen them, till last week. He has heard the whistle every day for years, and been about his farm as usual, but had never been down to the depot."

— from the *Manchester (Vt.) Journal*, February 20, 1873, page 2.