Chapter Title: Bryant's Correspondents 1809—1836

Book Title: The Letters of William Cullen Bryant

Book Subtitle: Volume I, 1809—1836

Book Author(s): William Cullen Bryant

Book Editor(s): William Cullen Bryant <suffix>II</suffix> and Thomas G. Voss

Published by: Fordham University Press

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvjnrt0t.8

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Bryant's Correspondents 1809–1836

Of 424 letters Bryant is known to have written between April 1809 and April 1836, 314 to 76 correspondents have been recovered, and are included in this volume. In addition, a brief journal entry and two contracts in his handwriting provide additional insights into Bryant's first European visit. Most of the letters to principal correspondents—his father, mother, wife, sister Sally, Richard Henry Dana, Charles Folsom, and Gulian Verplanck—survive in final form. For other, occasional letters to fellow-students and tutors, professional acquaintances, and travel companions, the editors have often depended on preliminary drafts Bryant made and then corrected, a habit gained in the careful revision of his poems.

Although their correspondence ended with Peter Bryant's early death in 1820, Cullen's letters to his father comprise a record of youthful hopes and the concerns of early manhood, showing great respect for his father's judgment in matters of literature as well as of practical living. All but one of the eighteen known letters he wrote to Dr. Bryant have been recovered.

Born in 1767 at North Bridgewater, Massachusetts, to Dr. Philip (1732–1817) and Silence Howard Bryant (1738–1777), the fifth of nine children whose mother died when Peter was nine years old, Cullen's father was raised by a dour, dominating stepmother who kept him at farm labor until he rebelled. He managed through self-study to qualify himself, at the age of twenty, for entrance to Harvard College, but, lacking means of support, he withdrew almost at once, and went home to study medicine with his father. During two years as a self-styled "drudge" in his father's office, Peter audited a few medical lectures at Harvard, and spent some time with an unusually competent French surgeon, Louis Le Prilette, at nearby Norton. In 1792 he set out to practice medicine at Cummington, a newly settled hill town in western Massachusetts. Here he married Sarah Snell (1768–1847), daughter of one of the town's founders, Deacon Ebenezer Snell (1738–1813), a prosperous farmer and a justice of the peace.

Young Dr. Bryant soon met bitter opposition from an established practitioner, James Bradish, who was determined, Peter wrote his father, "to root me out if possible." There followed three precarious years, at the end of which Peter, by now the father of two infant boys, escaped debtors' prison only by signing on as a ship's doctor on a voyage to the Indian Ocean. During nearly two years there, for a part of which time his vessel was interned at Mauritius by the French revolutionary Directory, Peter Bryant gained much practical experience in hospitals on shore.

Home again in 1797, and freed from the rancor of his competitor, Dr. Bryant took up a practice which soon made him the leading physician and surgeon of his district. He was called away from Cummington to treat patients and to operate, first in neighboring towns, then at Northampton, the Hampshire County seat, and later at Worcester and Boston. Once, he traveled by sleigh in mid-winter three hundred miles westward to Palmyra, New York, to be con-

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sulted in a difficult case. At the office he added to his father-in-law's house in 1801, the doctor trained as many as ten medical students at a time, giving them the use of the largest medical library in western Massachusetts.

Wider recognition came to Peter Bryant in 1806, with his election to the Massachusetts Medical Society in Boston, and the award of an honorary Master of Arts degree by Williams College. In 1812 he became a Councilor to the Medical Society; that year, and again in 1818, he was invited to deliver its annual discourse. In the last-named year, his friend Dr. John Collins Warren, dean of the Harvard Medical School, secured for him the honorary degree of Doctor of Physic from Harvard University.

Chronically ill with consumption, Peter Bryant nevertheless served his district in the state legislature during a period of twelve years. From 1806 to 1814 he represented Cummington in the lower house—with the exception of one year when, he told his father, his neighbors refused to send him to Boston "on account of their alarm, and apprehensions about the prevailing fever." And from 1816 to 1818, when he became seriously ill, he was a member of the state senate.

Mrs. Bryant remarked to Cullen that her husband rarely sat down without a book in hand, for then, he said, he was never sleepy. Buying medical books he could ill afford, he constantly added as well to a large collection of history and literature for his own enjoyment and his children's instruction. His pride in the education of his five sons and two daughters was a recurrent theme in his letters; but a special concern for the development of his second child, Cullen, reflected his faith in the boy's literary promise, and his determination to give him an education he himself had been denied. It was Cullen's application to study and composition to which he referred most often. At the age of nine Cullen was a "very distinct accurate reader." When he was thirteen, his poem "The Embargo" was "very much admired at Boston," where the doctor's literary friends credited the boy with being a "very extraordinary genius." At fourteen, Cullen was making "surprising progress" through Vergil's *Aeneid, Eclogues,* and a part of the *Georgics.* He was also showing "great proficiency in drawing," and good judges thought that "if he had suitable instruction he would make an eminent painter."

Cullen's aptitude for classical studies made him, rather than his older brother, Austin, his father's choice to receive a college education. Entering him as a sophomore at Williams College in his sixteenth year, Dr. Bryant worried lest the expense be unfair to his other children; yet, he wrote Dr. Philip Bryant, "I thought, as he had exhibited a genius, and a taste for literature, rather above the ordinary level, it would be almost criminal not to gratify him as far as I could."

Peter Bryant did not live to hear his son read the Phi Beta Kappa poem at the Harvard commencement in 1821, or to see Cullen's first slim volume of poems published that fall at Cambridge. But before his death in 1820, at the age of fifty-three, he had secured publication in the *North American Review* of Cullen's first memorable verses—"Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood," "Thanatopsis," and "To a Waterfowl"—thus setting his son on the path toward lasting fame.

Of thirteen known letters Cullen wrote his mother before 1836, eight have

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been recovered. The first of these came after Peter Bryant died, for Cullen's channel of communication with his family during early absences from home had nearly always been through his father. Sarah Snell Bryant epitomized the pioneer woman. She was, in truth, an emigrant twice within her lifetime. At six she came with her parents from Bridgewater to an uncleared hillside farm at Cummington; sixty-one years later she settled with four sons and her younger daughter on the Illinois prairie. With little formal schooling herself, she guided the secular and religious instruction of seven children in turn, meanwhile spinning, weaving, washing, ironing, and making most of the clothes for a family of nine, in addition to cooking for family, medical students, and farm laborers. Beyond these homely chores, Sarah Bryant made a distinctive imprint on family and community. She worked for the improvement of public roads and schools, as well as public morals. She persuaded her boys to plant shade trees along the highways, setting a pattern for Cummington and nearby towns, where her vision was later realized in widespread beauty. For fifty-three years she kept a daily diary, an extraordinary family-record and the witness to a remarkable life. Begun before the birth of her first child, it contains a succinct entry for November 3, 1794: "Stormy; wind N. E.; churned; unwell; seven at night a son born." This was her second son, William Cullen.

Cullen's letters to his brothers and sister other than Sally were infrequent before their migration to Illinois between 1830 and 1835. All the boys but one were too young to offer him companionship before Cullen left home at fourteen to begin college-preparatory study. Austin (1793–1866), Cullen's early companion in play and study, had only grade schooling before he was old enough to care for his father's farm. Married in 1819 to Adeline Plummer (1801–1882) of Pittsfield, Austin continued for fifteen years after his father's death to run the homestead, until in 1835 he sold it and took his family and his mother west to join three younger brothers at Princeton, Illinois. By 1836 Cullen had written Austin five known letters, of which four have been recovered.

Cyrus (1798–1865) shared some of Cullen's scholarly interests. After early schooling and several years of summer farming and winter teaching, Cyrus spent four years in South Carolina as a store clerk. Returning to Cummington, he organized its lyceum and agricultural association, attended Rensselaer Polytechnic School, and was for two years an itinerant lecturer on chemistry and mineralogy, teaching one winter at George Bancroft's and Joseph Cogswell's Round Hill School at Northampton. In 1832 he emigrated by way of Michigan to Illinois, homesteaded there with his brother John, and in 1834 married Julia Everett (1808–1875) of Worthington, Massachusetts. A farmer with one of the finest orchards in the area, he organized the first library, printing press, and agricultural exhibition at Princeton, Illinois; served as county clerk and master in chancery; and lectured on botany and chemistry. Of Cullen's ten known letters to Cyrus during this period, four have been recovered.

John Howard Bryant (1807–1902), youngest and longest-lived of the five boys, was not yet a year old when Cullen's "The Embargo" was published at Boston. There are no surviving letters to John before he went west in 1831. Thereafter he was Cullen's agent in Illinois land investment and his close confidant, the recipient of at least one hundred letters. With his older brothers,

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John learned farming at home. He attended the Cummington Academy, taught district school, and passed brief periods in college at Rensselaer and Williams, before leaving for Illinois. There, in 1833, he married Harriett Wiswall (*c*1803–1883), once of Cummington. He developed a six-hundred-acre farm, helped organize Bureau County, and as a legislator and a founder of the state's Republican Party knew Owen Lovejoy, Stephen A. Douglas, and Abraham Lincoln. His older brother's example led him to write his own verses, printed at first in newspapers and magazines, then in Rufus Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America*, and ultimately in a volume from the press of Cullen's newspaper, the New York *Evening Post*. During the period covered by this volume, John was the recipient of ten known letters, of which six have been recovered.

A number of Cullen's early letters went to his sister Sally, a slender, auburn-haired girl with whom he shared their father's susceptibility to lung trouble. Sarah Snell Bryant (1802–1824) was the favorite of all her brothers. With a sweet soprano voice which they recalled in old age, and prone to tease, without tormenting, those she loved, Sally responded eagerly when Cullen offered her, soon after her fifteenth birthday, the guidance of "a friend whose affections even misconduct can hardly alienate," and begged for a "transcript" of her "sentiments and feelings." Though Sally's letters to Cullen have not survived, those to others reflect her affection for him. Thwarted in her hope to enter Emma Willard's school at Middlebury, Vermont, Sally passed two terms at Miss Bancroft's school in Northampton and taught briefly at Plainfield, near home, before marrying in 1821 her father's former pupil and successor to his practice, Dr. Samuel Shaw (1790–1870), who had been treating her for the lung infection of which she died three years later. Her death inspired one of Cullen's most poignant poems, "The Death of the Flowers," in which he mourned "The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side." Eight of the nine known letters he wrote to Sally have been recovered.

There are only two known letters to Cullen's fourth brother during this period, neither of which is recovered, and none to the younger of his two sisters, but both left insights into their older brother's life. Peter Rush Bryant (1803–1883), later known as "Arthur," was, until he went west in 1830, the most restless of the brothers. After failing to get Peter a scholarship at Harvard, Cullen prevailed upon friends in Congress to appoint him to the United States Military Academy at West Point. But Peter was miserable there, and persuaded his mother to allow his resignation after only six months as a cadet. Then he audited classes at Williams, and taught school briefly in New York, before finally settling in Illinois. Married in 1832 to Henrietta Plummer (1812–1895) of Richmond, Massachusetts, Arthur Bryant later became a skillful nursery gardener and the author of a manual on the cultivation of forest trees. Charity Louisa (1805–1868), small, homely, and overshadowed by her pretty older sister, had a shrewd and at times caustic wit which enlivened her reports of visits to Cullen and Frances. In 1835 she went to Illinois with her mother and Austin's family. There, in 1837, she married Justin H. Olds (1806–1879) and provided a home for Sarah Bryant.

Frances Fairchild (1797–1866), who became Cullen's wife in 1821, was the daughter of Zachariah (*c*1749–1814) and Hannah Pope Fairchild (*c*1757–1814). Orphaned at seventeen, she was living with a married sister when she met

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Cullen at a village "ball" soon after he came to Great Barrington in October 1816 to practice law. Within a few months Frances left for a long visit with relatives in western New York, leaving with Cullen the image, he later recalled, of a "pretty blonde with light brown hair, . . . gray eyes of a remarkably frank expression, an agreeable figure, a dainty foot, and pretty hands, and the sweetest smile I had ever seen." His letters to her during this separation, and those to his mother and Sally just after his marriage, mirror the growth of his love and respect for this unassuming farmer's-daughter, and his estimate of her high qualities which grew steadily thereafter. With no evident artistic talent, Frances soon became, nevertheless, her husband's closest literary confidante. In a private reminiscence after her death forty-five years later Cullen said, "I never wrote a poem that I did not repeat it to her, and take her judgment upon it. I found its success with the public to be precisely in proportion to the impression it made upon her."

Correspondence between husband and wife was necessarily infrequent until they moved to New York City in 1825, and Frances began to make summer visits to Cummington and Great Barrington, and to resorts nearer New York where Cullen could join her only on weekends. In 1843 they bought a home at Hempstead Harbor, Long Island, where Frances usually spent all but the winter months, while her husband boarded in the city during the week and wrote her almost daily. And Cullen was a tireless traveler. Though Frances went with him to Europe for two long visits, and to Canada, South Carolina, and Illinois, he visited Europe three times with other companions, and traveled to Cuba and the West without her. As a result, Cullen's letters to his wife are more numerous than those to anyone else. Of over 200 letters he is known to have sent Frances, 191 have been recovered. Thirty-four are included in this volume.

Of Bryant's friendships outside his family, the longest was with Richard Henry Dana (1787–1879, Harvard 1808). For fifty-seven years, from the publication of Bryant's 1821 *Poems* under Dana's eye, the friends exchanged frank and constructive comments on each other's writings. At the Dana homes in 1821 Bryant met Edmund Dana, the Channings, Washington Allston, and other members of the Cambridge literary group who had published his first magazine verses. In turn, Bryant's appreciative criticism of Dana's essays and stories in *The Idle Man,* publication of his verses in the *New-York Review,* and defense of Dana's first volume of poetry, literally established his friend's literary reputation. On the surface, these two poets would seem to have had little else in common; Dana was a monarchist, an Anglophile, a Trinitarian, and an anti-reformer, while Bryant was a radical democrat, a frequent critic of British manners and institutions, an avowed Unitarian, and a vigorous advocate of social and political reforms. Yet they maintained a lifelong correspondence in which they found much to stimulate and little to strain their friendship. All but one of the 108 known letters to Dana have been recovered. Twenty-eight appear herein.

Among unrelated correspondents Bryant's earliest acquaintance was Willard Phillips (1784–1873, Harvard 1810), Dana's friend and associate on the *North American Review.* Phillips lived as a boy in Cummington, and later prepared for Harvard at the Bryant home with one of Dr. Bryant's pupils. Publishing Cullen's early verses in 1817–1818, Phillips wrote him, "I recollect the

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epitome of your present self, and with pleasure renew the acquaintance." After Peter Bryant's death Phillips took his place for a time as literary mentor, coaching Cullen on the delivery of his Phi Beta Kappa poem at Cambridge in 1821, arranging publication of his first volume and reviewing it in the *North American Review,* and acting as agent for its sale. Although their correspondence was thereafter only occasional, they remained friends and infrequent companions for over half a century. Of Bryant's eight known letters to Phillips in the early period, five have been recovered.

As a young law student Bryant was most fortunate in his tutors, both men of legal acumen and integrity as well as cultural breadth. The first of these was Samuel Howe (1785–1828, Williams 1804), Dr. Bryant's close friend and near neighbor at Worthington, only four miles away. Howe had attended the pioneering law school of Judge Tapping Reeve at Litchfield, Connecticut, then studied with Judge Theodore Sedgwick at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, before taking his own pupils into his home. Made an associate justice of the new Court of Common Pleas in 1821 at the age of thirty-six, Howe was the principal founder two years later of the Northampton Law School which, before his early death in 1828, introduced significant innovations in legal instruction, notably the moot court. The high regard for Howe outside his home district was evidenced in tributes to his memory by George Bancroft, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Chief Justice Isaac Parker of Massachusetts.

After Bryant left Worthington to continue law study at West Bridgewater near his father's home town, Howe sent him advice designed to quiet his fear of arguing cases in open court. Though only two of Cullen's letters to his first law tutor have reappeared, they met during the young attorney's visits at home and later at the Berkshire County courthouse in Lenox, where they were sometimes associated or opposed in the same cases.

Bryant wrote more frequently to his second tutor, Congressman William Baylies (1776–1865, Brown 1795), who was in Washington during nearly half the time Cullen was reading law in his West Bridgewater office. Like Howe and Peter Bryant a veteran of the Massachusetts legislature and a Federalist opponent of the War of 1812, Baylies was nevertheless instrumental in liberalizing his student's inherited political conservatism. To Cullen's complaints about the bigoted farmers who were his first clients in the little village of Plainfield adjoining Cummington, Baylies replied, "Experience will teach you that it is from that class of society sometimes denominated—previously denominated—the lower—as *much*—probably *more* than from any other, you are to expect zealous support, & disinterested friendship." Half a century later Bryant wrote, "For Mr. Baylies's character I have always entertained the profoundest respect; . . . few lawyers ever exercised their profession so exempt from complaint and criticism." Ten of the thirteen letters he wrote Baylies before 1836 have been recovered.

Of the friendships Bryant made during his Massachusetts years, those with the Sedgwick family of Stockbridge most influenced his later career. Meeting Charles (1791–1856) in court soon after moving to Great Barrington, he became acquainted in turn with Theodore II (1781–1839, Yale 1798), Henry Dwight (1785–1831) and Robert (1787–1841), both 1804 classmates of Samuel Howe's at Williams, and Catharine Maria (1789–1867). All four brothers, like

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their father, Judge Theodore Sedgwick (1746–1813, Yale 1765), were attorneys; Catharine was starting a career as a novelist. She led Cullen in 1820 to compose several hymns for a Unitarian collection to be published in New York. Bryant's most intimate associations were with Charles, a warm and lively companion during court sessions at Lenox, where he was clerk of the court for many years, and with Henry, a New York lawyer active in humanitarian causes. Henry and Robert were largely instrumental in bringing Bryant to New York City in 1825 and establishing him as editor and critic. But it was Theodore who most influenced the future journalist's political and economic thought. A state legislator who quit the dominant conservatism of his district to support Andrew Jackson, he was a student of economics who wrote popular books in support of free trade, and opposed slavery even as he deplored both coercive reform and reaction. Bryant called him a "politician without party vices." During the period covered by this volume Bryant wrote fifteen known letters to members of the Sedgwick family, ten of which are included here.

A close collaborator of Bryant's during his early years in New York was the essayist, satirist, historian, and legislator Gulian Crommelin Verplanck (1786–1870, Columbia 1801). Verplanck's notice of Bryant's 1821 *Poems* in the New York *American* was, except for Willard Phillips' in the *North American Review*, the only notable criticism of that work in the year of its publication. Bryant's wry acknowledgment of the blank pages the critic sent him, thinking they contained his notice, was the first of fifty known letters to Verplanck during a long friendship. The grandson of one Columbia College president and great-grandson of another, Verplanck gained notoriety as a young lawyer by heading a raucous protest at the 1811 college commencement in Trinity Church against the "oppressive" acts of his alma mater's administrators. Convicted of inciting to riot, and charged by the presiding judge at his trial, Mayor DeWitt Clinton, with "obtuseness of moral perception," Verplanck led a long pamphlet-war of verse satire, joined at times by the Irvings, Paulding, Halleck, and Drake, against the political faction led by Clinton. Later, after three years in the legislature, Verplanck served from 1825 to 1833 as a leading Jackson-congressman. For several years during that period he joined Bryant and Robert Sands in writing an annual gift book, *The Talisman*, and in organizing the Sketch Club, composed of artists and writers, which succeeded Fenimore Cooper's earlier Bread and Cheese. While in Washington Verplanck sent Bryant confidential information for the *Evening Post*, and passed on to con gressional committees the journalist's private views on proposed legislation. Their most active correspondence came between 1827 and 1833, when Bryant wrote Verplanck forty-four known letters, of which thirty-nine appear herein.

Another of Bryant's lifelong friends, George Bancroft (1800–1891, Harvard 1817), is represented in this volume by only three letters. These concern his contribution to the *New-York Review* of translations from Goethe and Schiller, and a notice of Edward Everett's *Orations*. An early acquaintance grew gradually into the intimacy reflected in Bancroft's characterization of Bryant in 1868 as "the oldest friend I have now alive."

About a fifth of the letters Bryant wrote during the first period concern his own contributions to magazines, or his editorial work on the *New-York Review* and its successor, the *United States Review and Literary Gazette*. Prin-

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cipal recipients were Edward Tyrell Channing (1790–1856, M.A. Harvard 1819), editor of the *North American Review*, three letters; Jared Sparks (1789–1866, Harvard 1815), a later editor of the same review, nine letters; Theophilus Parsons (1797–1882, Harvard 1815), conductor of the *United States Literary Gazette*, thirteen letters, one of which is unrecovered; James G. Carter (1795–1849), briefly Parsons' successor, eight letters (all apparently lost); Charles Folsom (1794–1872, Harvard 1813), Carter's successor, and Bryant's co-editor of the *United States Review and Literary Gazette* in 1826–1827, twenty-five letters, all recovered; and Edward Wigglesworth (1804–1876, Harvard 1822), Folsom's and Bryant's assistant, two letters. Biographical information about these correspondents will be provided as they are first addressed in the letters.

About a score of letters and notes about legal matters of the period 1816–1825 have been preserved, but only a handful are included in this volume as bearing upon Bryant's life apart from routine law practice. Most important of these is the one concerning the case of *Bloss vs. Tobey*, Letter 92, which was the crucial factor in alienating Bryant from the law. Three others are printed because they represent the kind of legal business conducted by a village lawyer at that period, and provide insight into Bryant's practice of the profession which gave him a living for nearly a decade.

Three-quarters of the addressees in this volume received at most two or three letters, and will be identified as they are introduced. Some were early companions and fellow-students, such as John Avery, George Downes, John Howard, Elisha Hubbard, and Jacob Porter. Others were editors or publishers who asked contributions from Bryant, or to whose journals he sent unsolicited literary or political articles. A few were statesmen and politicians of whom he asked favors, for himself or others: Andrew Jackson, Lewis Cass, Azariah Flagg, Caleb Strong, and Campbell White. Some had paid him some sort of honor—Amos Eaton, Maria Edgeworth, Philip Hone and David Hosack, Sarah Howe, Cornelius Lawrence, John Pierpont, and William Spooner. A related group, which included several distinguished Unitarians—Andrews Norton, Nathaniel Preston, Henry Sewall, Henry Ware, Sr., and William Ware—drew from Bryant observations on the condition of religion in American and European society, and revelations of his own religious beliefs. A few of his letters went to casual business or travel acquaintances, and his experiences abroad and insights into foreign cultures are recounted in the first five of more than one hundred letters he sent to the *Evening Post* over a period of forty years. Finally, other recipients, such as Thomas Cole, Horatio Greenough, Washington Irving, William Leggett, George Pope Morris, Thatcher Payne, John Rand, and Julia Sands, were friends with whom Bryant enjoyed a degree of intimacy, then or later, not reflected in the few letters he wrote them during this early period.

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