



*Boston Authors Club*

## November 2018 Newsletter

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### Featured Author: Julie Dobrow



**Julie Dobrow** is the Director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at Tufts University and a long-standing member of the Boston Authors Club where she currently serves as vice president. Her new book, *After Emily: Two Remarkable Women and the Legacy of America's Greatest Poet* (Norton) was published at the end of October. The two women of the title are Mabel Loomis Todd and her daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, Amherst residents who played a central role in the early publication of the work of Emily Dickinson.

*In this interview, Julie talks about the links between her book and the BAC, how seven years of research led to a deep understanding of her title characters, and the surprises she found in working through hundreds of archival boxes of letters and journals.*

**Q: Congratulations on the publication of *After Emily*! My first question is probably a bit different than what you are typically asked about your new book. Could you explain the connection between Mabel Loomis Todd and the founding of the Boston Authors Club in 1899?**

Mabel was one of the founders of the BAC. In fact, the initial discussion

about starting an organization for both male and female authors and literary folks in Boston actually happened in Amherst, in Mabel's home. It was there that she, along with her friends, author May Alden Ward and Helen Winslow, one of the first female Boston newspaper reporters, discussed the idea for starting a club. Though literary-minded men like Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells and Thomas Wentworth Higginson had earlier discussed an idea for an "Authors' Club" in Boston, their heated arguments about whether such an organization should also be open to women meant that the idea didn't get traction. It wasn't until the tea at Mabel's house in 1899 that an actionable way of starting an equitable BAC was formulated.

**Q: During your research, did you find any more details about Mabel's or Millicent's involvement in the BAC in its early years?**

Mabel was quite involved with the BAC in its early years. She and Julia Ward Howe were great friends; Mabel's diaries are filled with comments such as "I had a lovely call with dear Mrs. Julia Ward Howe." Even after Mabel moved to Florida in 1917 and was no longer within the 100-mile radius that was part of the requirement for BAC membership (no coincidence – Amherst is 90 miles from Boston!), she retained what was called a non-resident membership. And she still participated during trips north. For instance, in the *BAC Bulletin* from May 1920, there's an entry reading "On the last Friday in May, Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd, a charter member of the club, who has been spending the winter in Florida, will be in Boston and has consented to tell us of her exciting months in Russia, immediately after the declaration of war. Mrs. Todd, with her husband Professor David Todd of Amherst, were in Russia on an astronomical expedition and, lingering for an important eclipse, had, Mrs. Todd writes, 'an epoch making stay.'"

**Q: Back to more general questions, it sounds like your research included extensive work with letters, diaries, and other primary sources. How much time did you spend on the research before you started writing? And what were the most enjoyable and most challenging aspects of that phase of the work?**

I had a LOT of material to go through! I began the primary source research in earnest in 2011. I don't think I really started writing the book until 2013; I kept feeling that I had to go through as much of the massive Todd/Bingham Family Papers collection at Yale (more than 700 boxes' worth of papers there, alone) as I could to better understand the trajectories of Mabel and Millicent's lives before I was ready to start telling their stories.

I loved doing the research. Every new box held surprises; every path I followed led me to new and often unexpected ones. I certainly felt I got to the point of understanding my subjects so well that I often thought I heard them whispering in my ear. There were some sections of the book, even whole chapters, which seemed to flow as I wrote them. It felt wonderful to come to understand these women as whole people – amazing, but flawed - and shape their stories.

There were lots of challenging parts of this process for me. Sometimes, in the research phase, I read things out of sequence and struggled to figure out the timeline. Sometimes I grappled with reading handwriting – Mabel's, in particular, changed dramatically after she had a stroke and needed to learn to write with her left hand. Sometimes I found out things about my subjects that were upsetting to me, and I had to reconcile how to present these women in ways that were honest and authentic. And of course, as we all know, the process of re-writing can be very challenging. We get attached to our words and to our stories and it's hard to cut things. But trimming a story often sharpens its focus.

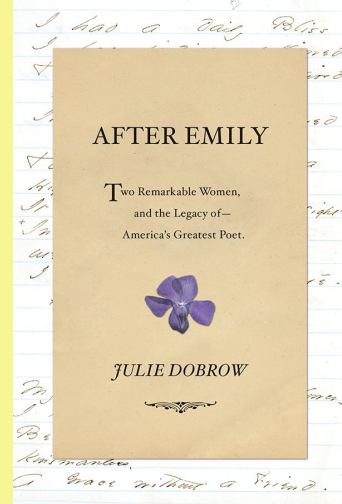
**Q: Did you discover any information about the lives of Mabel and Millicent, or about their relationship to Emily Dickinson, that really surprised you?**

Yes, quite a lot! One of the most surprising things about Mabel and Millicent was their relationship with one another, which was extremely complicated – but, like everything else about them, is extremely well documented in their own writings. To understand the nuances of this complex mother/daughter bond took some time and care. I was also surprised at the ways in which each woman developed an intimate relationship with Emily Dickinson, because these were relationships formed from deep dives into her poetry and familiarity with the Dickinson family and the circumstances of Emily's life, rather than with Emily, herself.

**Q: Were there any sections of *After Emily* that you particularly enjoyed writing?**

I had a great time writing the chapter about Millicent's work in France during World War I, where she had a disastrous romantic relationship with a wounded American soldier. I had some marvelous material to work with here, including Millicent's letters home to her parents that, suffice to say, didn't exactly tell the full story. I also had her journals, which gave more of the real story, and also some unmarked papers in her files from France. Putting these together with information I gleaned from the US Census and from secondary sources felt like making a jigsaw puzzle whole.

I also really enjoyed writing the chapter about a trial in 1897-98 in which Lavinia Dickinson (Emily's one



surviving sibling) sued the Todds. It was ostensibly a trial about ownership of a strip of land, but it was really a trial about so much more. I pieced this chapter together using Mabel's diaries and journals, transcripts of the trial and contemporaneous newspaper accounts of it. And I particularly liked writing the afterword, which was essentially about my process in sorting through the clutter of two highly collected lives and writing the book.

**Q: Are you thinking about any follow up works?**

Yes! I am already working on what I'm thinking of as an interdisciplinary biography of David Peck Todd, a brilliant but tragic figure who played a secondary role in **After Emily** but is worthy of his own book. For this one I have recruited some collaborators who are astronomers and physicists; they can write about the scientific aspects of David's career in a way that I can't.

I've also started looking at another collection of papers of a different 19<sup>th</sup> century family that I think might yield some great stories, and another book.

*Interview by Mary Cronin*



## News About BAC Authors



Julie Dobrow has scheduled a number of book talks and appearances to promote **After Emily**. Here's where she will be speaking in November:

11/5 – Reading, Harvard Bookstore, 7 p.m., 1256 Mass. Ave., Cambridge, MA

11/13 – Book talk, 7 p.m., Tewksbury Public Library, 300 Chandler Street, Tewksbury, MA

11/14 – Book talk, 3 p.m., Tisch Library, Tufts University

11/17 – Book talk/reading, Whitelam Books, 610 Main Street, Reading, MA

11/29 – Book talk, MA Historical Society, 5:30 reception, 6 p.m. talk, 1154 Boylston Street, Boston, MA

*For events next month and in 2019, and more background on her research findings, visit <http://www.juliedobrow.com/>*

***The BAC newsletter is published the first week of every month.. Please send news about your activities, speaking, and new books (along with related pictures) to [bostonauthorsclub@gmail.com](mailto:bostonauthorsclub@gmail.com) by November 28 for publication in the December 2018 newsletter.***

## Yesteryear at the BAC by Scott Guthery *Billy the Boy Artist Meets Dickens*

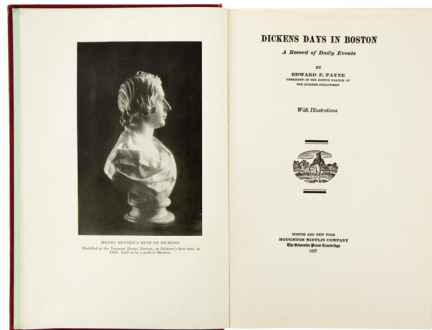
**Edward Franklin Payne (1870--1955) was the fourteenth president of the Boston Authors Club.** Known in hushed, scholarly salons as an authority on Charles Dickens, outside on the street he was the originator and artist of the comic strip *Billy the Boy Artist*.

The first comic strip in the United States was Richard Felton Outcault's "The Yellow Kid," which appeared in the *Hearst New York American* on

February 16, 1896. Payne wasn't far behind. When the Boston Globe started a Sunday comic supplement, the Sunday editor, James Morgan, asked Payne to create a strip. *Billy the Boy Artist* made his first appearance on November 5, 1899, and appeared every Sunday thereafter until March 6, 1955. That's an impressive total output of 2,887 strips spanning 55 years and four months.



When asked in 1951 how a strip can run so long without exhausting all possible comic situations, Payne replied "The answer is that jokes, gags, and situations are very elastic and can be twisted, stretched, and worked over and over to conform to our ever-changing manners and customs. And it is a fact that people do enjoy seeing the same funny gags again and again."



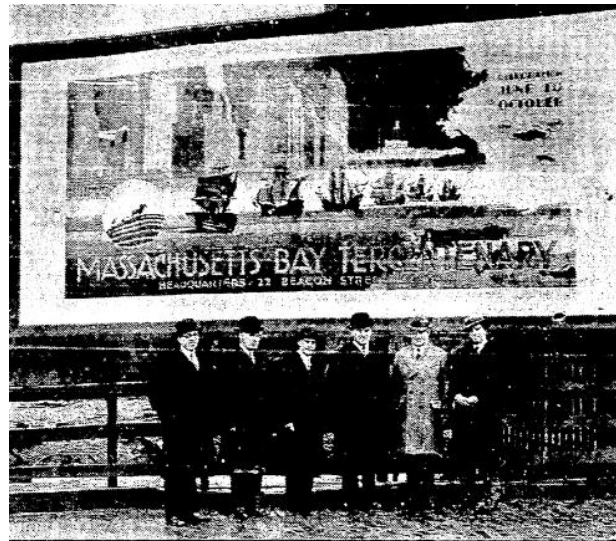
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Payne also authored two books on Dickens, *Dickens Days in Boston: A Record of Daily Events* published in 1927 by Mifflin and *The Charity of Charles Dickens* printed for members of the Bibliophile Society in 1929. Of the book one reviewer wrote " Mr. Payne deserves the warmest congratulations on having accomplished a piece of research which any of us in academic circles would have been proud to do if the idea had occurred to us. ... He has recaptured the happy, brilliant hours of social life in both the early 40's and the late 60's, and thus

has written a tale of two eras.

Payne's day job was with the Forbes Lithograph Company where, according to the Sunday Advertiser, he worked for over 25 years as an artist, writer, and general purpose idea man. In 1930 the company printed a celebratory book by Payne (celebrating the tercentennial of Boston) entitled *68 of Those 300 Years*.

That's Payne on the far left standing along with some of his friends at Forbes in front of the giant poster the company did for the celebration.



Not content to confine Billy to the Sunday comic section, Payne wrote a musical comedy called (what else?) *Billy, the Boy Artist*. It opened at Boston's Grand Opera House in March of 1910. Payne was no stranger to acting. He was known to enliven his lectures on Charles Dickens by making "rapid sketches in crayon" of Dickens characters and then give "dramatic impersonations" of the characters he drew. According to his thumbnail biography in *Notable Boston Authors*, he could also be called upon to do sketches and impersonations from the work of James Whitcomb Riley and *Little Women*.

The biography *Notable Boston Authors* ends with on a whimsical note:

"... we like to think of him in the presence of another who also wanted to be an actor, the two of them greeting each other, and Ed Payne saying in the slow gently amused tone we remember so well, 'I brought my chalks with me, Mr. Dickens, and also my book, *Dickens Days in Boston*, just in case you never heard of it.'"

## Writers' Room of Boston by Shirley Moscow

In 1929, the British author Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) published an extended essay based on lectures she had delivered the previous year at Cambridge University. "A Room of One's Own" famously noted that for access to the literary establishment, women first needed a





space in which to write.

It is the basic requirement for all writers, a place to work, a quiet space without interruptions. In our contemporary world – bustling, noisy, crammed with personal obligations and digital distractions -- it may seem like a fantasy, but there is such a place.

Since 1988, the Writers' Room, actually a suite of offices in Boston's financial district, is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the Boston Cultural Council, private donations, and nominal membership fees, it provides writers with an office. It also offers four full-tuition fellowships.

Writers often find that having an office to go to, and a place for being with people who are engaged in similar work, lends their writing a focus and legitimacy that working at home does not. An encouraging sign posted near the entrance to The Writers' Room sets that agenda: *Everyone is talented. The trick is to stay in the room.*

Although some well-known authors use the Writers' Room, a writer does not have to be published to apply, only to show serious intent and to provide references. The applications are reviewed by the other writers who are understanding colleagues. "I've never voted against anyone," says Medford memoirist and short story writer Alisa Wolf.

**For more information go to <http://www.writersroomofboston.org/about-wrob/> or call (617) 523-8566.**

## One More 2019 Membership Reminder!

***Full membership dues are \$50 annually and Associate memberships are \$25 annually for the calendar year. If you renew or join any time after October 1, you will be a paid up member through December 2019. You can join and renew online by [clicking here](#). If you would rather pay by check, please make your check out to Boston Authors Club and mail it to the following address:***

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