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REVIEW

Letters from Red Farm: The untold story of the friendship between Helen Keller and journalist Joseph Edgar Chamberlin by Elizabeth Emerson. Bright Leaf, 2021. Xiv + 288 pp. USD 24.95. Paperback ISBN-13: 978-1625346179.

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Published by Bright Leaf, an imprint of University of Massachusetts Press, and impeccably documented, *Letters from Red Farm* appears to be a scholarly book of local interest. The title refers to a specific place that played the role – at least for a while – of an idyllic haven where friendship could flourish and odds could be braved. Red is simply red-brick and not a symbol of political sympathies. The kind of friendship to which this book pays homage would be difficult to imagine today for various reasons that have as their common denominator, the inescapably skewed power relations in terms of age, gender, and social status. The ties of friendship that lasted four decades (p. 8) connected an eight-year-old deafblind girl from the South and a Boston journalist who was some thirty years her senior. The girl was to become the world-famous Helen Keller (1880–1968) and the man was the then much-respected Joseph Edgar Chamberlin (1851–1935). From 1889 to 1901 Red Farm – the Chamberlins' home in Wrentham, Massachusetts – was Helen's weekend and holiday destination.

Elizabeth Emerson explains her stakes in the story at once; Chamberlin was her great-great-grandfather. The discovery of his connection with Helen Keller inspired the book but did not impact scholarly curiosity and conclusions. Emerson admits in the preface that in the letters Keller and Chamberlin exchanged with each other and in other relevant correspondence, she had expected to find pleasant family anecdotes. Instead, she saw "a complex and multilayered story that told of joys and talents but also of controversy, tragedy, and personal and systemic failings" (p. xii). In other words, she found much more than she bargained for and thus a story of local and family interest grew to a much larger panorama of the United States at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The Chamberlins were not part of the Boston Brahmin, but they could "claim a legitimate American colonial pedigree" (p. 8). They were well connected, especially Ed Chamberlin, a famous

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journalist, was able to help Helen, a girl from Alabama, in her struggle to overcome the limitations of disability.

The title of Emerson's book suggests the reliance on letters and the focus on friendship but in fact, it is a riveting narrative that juxtaposes letters by various people around Helen and Ed and pieces together evidence from letters and other sources to reconstruct events and their contexts. Ed had his own family that grew and mourned the loss of children, and Helen – apart from her parents and siblings in Alabama – had a lifelong closest companion in Annie Sullivan (1866–1936). In her letters and publications, Helen referred to Annie respectfully as "Teacher". Born perfectly healthy, Helen lost eyesight and hearing at nineteen months. In 1886, Helen's mother read about the Perkins School for the Blind at Watertown, Massachusetts, in Charles Dickens's *American Notes* and resolved to seek help (p. 27). The girl's father solicited advice from the famous inventor Alexander Graham Bell, who suggested contacting Perkins (p. 28). Annie, a recent graduate of that school, was sent down south to Helen to teach her the manual alphabet which gradually opened up the world to the young girl (p. 29). There was friction (and slapping) to control the unruly girl, but when Annie arrived with Helen in Boston, the girl became an attraction to journalists, social activists, and philanthropists. Annie was skeptical about the voracious new media (p. 39) and this attitude of vying with others for control over Helen's success seemed to mark her whole career.

The reader of Emerson's book learns quite soon that the story of Annie's childhood was marked by tragedy and despair. Born to Irish immigrants who had fled the Great Famine, she was abandoned by her widowed father. She escaped the squalor of an almshouse by beseeching the visiting state inspector of charities to release her and send her to school (p. 26). She had already lost her younger brother Jimmie, who died soon after they arrived at the Tewksbury Almshouse (p. 31). Her young charge from Alabama thus became the center of her life, though she could also be difficult and temperamental (p. 68). Annie stood by Helen in each crisis: when she was accused of plagiarizing someone else's story (p. 47), and when she struggled to be admitted to the Cambridge School with seeing and hearing girls (p. 99), and that too at times of economic crisis of 1893–1894 when raising money for tuition was particularly difficult (p. 77). And in her turn, Helen stood by Annie when she was accused of exploiting the girl and attempts were made to separate them (pp. 102–103, 109, 112, 124). Annie's health was overtaxed, and so were Annie's eyes, and yet both sought to prove against all odds that a deafblind girl was able with the help of a dedicated teacher to achieve the highest academic success. In 1904 at twenty-four Helen Keller graduated from Radcliffe (p. 207). Only in 1933, when her biography was about to appear, did Annie finally tell Helen about her miserable childhood (p. 238).

Emerson proves the point that underlines the whole book about Ed's friendship with Helen despite the challenges they both faced. When others

accused Helen of plagiarism, Ed encouraged her to write about her own experience (p. 54). He did not take sides when Helen battled the Perkins Institute. His position was particularly tenuous when his wife Ida also developed an idea of setting up a school for disabled children on the Red Farm property with Helen as a teacher (pp. 161, 169). Emerson quotes several letters that went back and forth between Ida and other parties she sought to conscript. Emerson uses letters, rather than quoting them in extenso, which is the right decision in a narrative that makes a point. The reader can tell that Emerson left no stone unturned to find letters and responses, but in many cases, a response is missing or there is a response and no initial letter (for example, pp. 161, 163). It is indeed a circumstantial case, but Emerson does her best to explain Ida's sudden ambition and attempt to exploit Helen's fame for her own benefit; she was getting old and ill. Within twenty-seven years of marriage, at forty-five she had had at least eight pregnancies and was again very ill (p. 189). Ed and Ida's marriage crumbled (p. 195), but his friendship with Helen survived. Emerson quotes letters written by friends and enemies alike who commented on the scandal of the famous newspaperman leaving Boston and suddenly resurfacing in New York to begin a new journalistic career there. In commenting on those letters, Emerson notes that some lines were blacked out (p. 196), which exposes the attempts to modify the original statement.

One could conclude that Ed and Helen, both writers and social activists, inspired each other to go against the tide and challenge societal expectations. When the United States entered WWI in April 1917, Helen – an avid reader of German literature – courageously voiced her pro-German opinion (pp. 227, 232). Her standpoint is juxtaposed with the story of Ed's son Raymond, who fought and died in the war. The young man's letters from the front, which Emerson quotes, suddenly ceased (p. 229); a clear sign long before the official message reached the family. Emerson does not judge personal sympathies; she respects different attitudes and notes that Helen went on writing. When Hitler rose to power, her book *How I Became a Socialist* (1933) was banned in Germany (p. 241). In Helen's case, red eventually became a symbol of political sympathies. Helen outlived Ed, Ida, Annie, and many others. Her fame outshined them, too. Although Emerson's book began as a family saga and a labor of love, in addition to unearthing the family story, it offers a refreshingly new perspective on Helen Keller and the United States she lived in.