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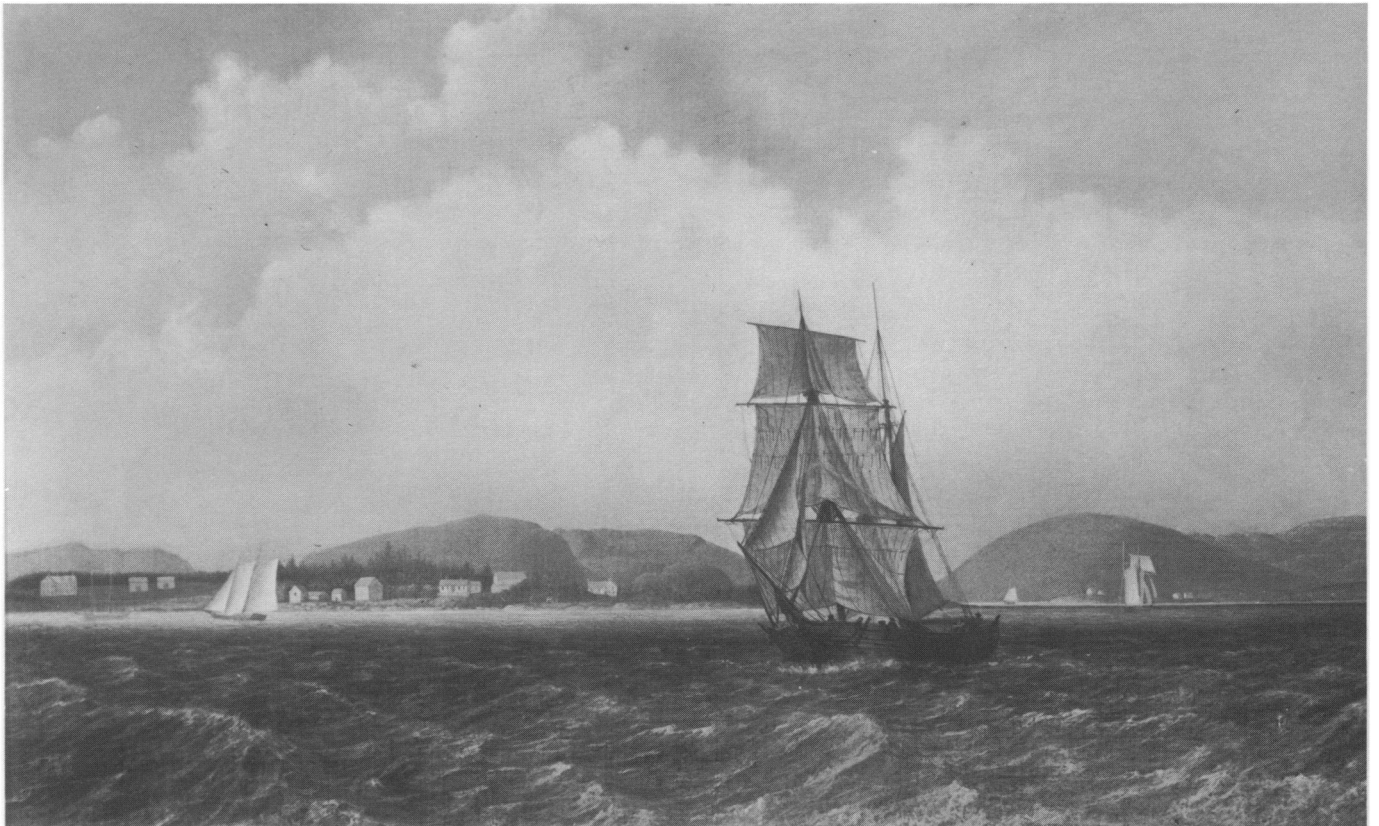


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**“THE SEA IS HIS HOME”:
Clarence Cook Visits Fitz Hugh Lane**

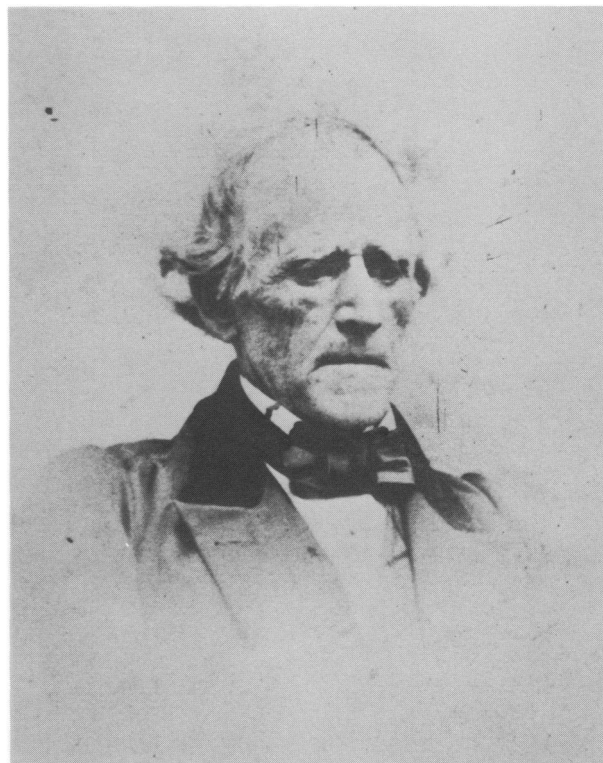
William H. Gerds



Fitz Hugh Lane. OFF MOUNT DESERT ISLAND, MAINE (ENTRANCE OF SOMES SOUND). c. 1850. Oil on canvas, 20 x 33". Collection, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.

IN THE COURSE of recent scholarship into nineteenth-century American art history, numerous artists have emerged or re-emerged to whom, in their own time, scant attention was paid, and who appear today to have been significant figures, giants, even, in the national artistic pantheon. Sometimes these artists were almost totally obscure in their own day. In other instances, however, they were fairly well recognized for their merits, but were not deemed to be as outstanding in talent as we have accorded them today, or did not seem as vital to mainstream American aesthetics as we now recognize.

Among such artists are a number of the major and lesser painters who are today grouped among the masters of the Luminist movement. Two cases in point are Martin Johnson Heade (1819 – 1904) and Fitz Hugh Lane (1804 – 1865). Neither of these men, today accepted as outstanding masters of land- and seascape painting of the mid-century in this country, was unknown in his own time, and yet the contemporary bibliography on both of them is conspicuous in its total absence. Both artists were not infrequent exhibitors, Heade particularly in New York City, although he showed elsewhere throughout the country at various times, and Lane in the annual shows at the Boston Athenaeum, to which he sent paintings from his home in the nearby town of Gloucester. Thus, Heade and Lane figure certainly in the catalogues of these various exhibitions, and in the critical reviews of the shows in which they participated. In addition, Heade, both in regard to his frequent base in New York City with a studio at the Tenth Street Studio Building and to his lively peregrinations, did not go unnoticed in the newspaper and periodical art columns, and Lane figured from time to time in reports in the local newspapers. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, neither artist has been recorded as the subject of a full-scale article, interview, or review in his own time; except for Heade's own articles which appeared in *Forest and Stream*, the public biblio-



FITZ HUGH LANE. c. 1860. Photograph. Collection, Cape Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, Massachusetts.

graphy of both painters (as opposed to private manuscript material which, in regard to these painters is also very scarce), is totally of twentieth-century origin.

It is of interest and significance, then, to locate a lengthy account of a visit to the studio of Fitz Hugh Lane in Gloucester, and all the more so since it was written and published by the first truly professional art critic to emerge in this country, Clarence Cook (1828 – 1900). One might dispute that designation, citing the writings as early as the 1820s by John Neal, and the perceptive if eccentric art columns of John Kenrick Fisher in the 1830s and after, but Neal was primarily a novelist, and Fisher a professional painter, and although their art writings are fascinating and important, they constitute only sidelines to the primary professional directions of both men. Cook, on the other hand, was to emerge as not only the earliest but debatably also the greatest American art critic of the nineteenth century, although his years of professional service in this regard are generally dated from the early 1860s onwards.¹ At that time he became the voice of moral sincerity in the arts, first as editor of the Pre-Raphaelite journal, *The New Path* and then as the art critic of *The New-York Tribune* for many years. Cook drew his inspiration,

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Anonymous, after a pen and ink or pencil drawing, now lost, by Thomas Charles Farrer. CLARENCE COOK. Reproduced from *Poems by Clarence Cook* (New York, 1902). Photograph, taken by Scott Hyde, The Brooklyn Museum.

both aesthetic and moralistic, from the English writer John Ruskin, castigating those artists whom he found wanting in their respect for truth to nature, or who were more concerned with style and formal manipulation of their medium, lacking an appreciation of the natural signs of God's beneficence.² Later, during the 1880s and '90s, Cook, as with so many other Americans who initially espoused Ruskinian principles, turned his back on Pre-Raphaelite verisimilitude, and began to champion more cosmopolitan and avant-garde aesthetic positions, French Barbizon and even Impressionist art, especially in the pages of his own magazine, *The Studio*, which he edited between 1884 and 1894.

Cook's critical writings of the 1860s and later are well known, but his earliest professional affiliation as the art critic of the weekly New York paper, *The Independent*, has received much less attention.³ Cook's weekly columns there are fascinating, in part because he already gives evidence of the superior perception and a sense of the moral imperative which will so strongly inform his critical writings a decade later, but also

because he often deals with many of the same artists and issues that will occupy his attention in the pages of *The New Path* and the *Tribune*. But the pre-Ruskinian articles in *The Independent* reveal a Clarence Cook much more amenable to the current artistic scene, and many of the painters and sculptors whom he castigated without pity in the 1860s, such as Emanuel Leutze and Harriet Hosmer, are championed by him a decade earlier.⁴ Similarly, in the mid-1850s, Cook is extremely sympathetic and laudatory about those contemporary European masters such as Ary Scheffer, Paul Delaroche, and Horace Vernet whose works were beginning to appear on the New York art market, thanks to the efforts of the Paris-based firm of Goupil.⁵

Thus, Cook's columns in *The Independent* are fascinating on a variety of levels. They bring to bear upon the contemporary art world in this country one of the finest critical minds of the period and at the same time they reveal the early stage of his aesthetic development. Occasionally, too, Cook confronts issues, such as the development of public art collections, which will only see fruition decades later. But perhaps no single column in *The Independent* is as rewarding, as it is unexpected, as his report on a visit to Gloucester to visit Fitz Hugh Lane, thus providing us with what is the only lengthy contemporary report on our greatest marine painter before Winslow Homer. It is a testimonial to Cook's perceptivity, and to his willingness to go relatively far afield to bring to light superior achievements in the fine arts, an inquiring spirit which will remain with Cook throughout his career. Yet, one wonders if Cook's appreciation of Lane's abilities would have continued had not Lane died in 1865, just prior to Cook's conversion to Ruskinian aesthetic standards. Rather, it is likely that Cook would have called upon Lane for either greater application of the literal recording of nature, or the infusion of Turnerian imaginative concepts of Nature's ultimate truths. Or more likely, Cook would merely have bypassed in the 1860s the seascapes he had so admired during the previous decade, when, as his review suggests, he seems to have become aware of Lane as early as about 1850 and followed his progress, culminating in his article published in *The Independent* on September 7, 1854.⁶ Given the uniqueness of such material during Lane's lifetime, and its importance in an understanding and evaluation of Clarence Cook's writing, it deserves to be reproduced in full:

LETTERS ON ART. — NO. IV.

MESSRS. EDITORS: This letter will come to you from the sea-side; from the old sea-port town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, in which I am renewing my youth after an absence of four long years.

Gerdts/Lane

In that space the town has grown greatly: new shops and good ones, have stepped into the shoes of those wherein I used to be prodigal of “four-pences” and “nine-pences;” gas flares ungraciously in the low rooms that in old times were pretty and cheerful with candles, and a great, ugly, yellow “Pavilion” suns itself on the rocks where I used to sit hour by hour watching the lapsing waves upon the beach below. The Pavilion aforesaid is the ugliest house I ever saw, *I think*; though that is a sweeping assertion for a man to make who has seen what I have seen; but it probably seems uglier than it otherwise would, because it stands by the sea, defacing that loveliest of God’s creations, with its “abhorred leanness” thrust constantly into sight. When will men learn that *it is an offense to society to build an ugly building*? When will they learn that the difference between soap-boiling and bone-boiling establishments and ugly, ill-proportioned, falsely-constructed houses, shutting out of view their acres of sky and sea, and even their roods of street lined with happy human faces, is altogether inappreciable; is, in truth, nothing? I fear that men will not soon learn this truth; every day shows ignorance or forgetfulness of it; every walk in this little town, with its large, ample, handsome houses, built eighty years ago, standing side by side with the small, starved, tasteless, gew-gawky erections of the past three years, is to me a sad conviction that the times are changed; better in many things they may be, doubtless are, but the fatal doctrines of expediency and degrees in sin have not failed to show equally bad effects in art and morals.

There are one or two houses in this town that please me more than any I have seen elsewhere. The origin of the early settlers is clearly seen to be English, in the general style and feeling of the houses they built. Scarcely a house so poor as to be without wainscoting, and in three or four of the larger buildings this wood-work is very handsome. I might live in — fifty years, and never see a bit of detail that is worth the trouble of sketching; but there is plenty of material here, and many an architectural idea worthy enlarging upon elsewhere. There is one curious point which is worth mentioning, namely, that in a town where there is such a bountiful supply of good granite — half the crops raised here are boulders, and all the fruit is stone-fruit — there are only two buildings built of this material. Walls, foundations, posts, steps, all are granite, good in color and close in grain, but the houses are all wooden, and this in a place where timber is almost as gold. There is a



FITZ HUGH LANE’S HOUSE, *Duncan’s Point, Gloucester, Massachusetts*. The house is now owned by the city of Gloucester and is used by the Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce as an information center. Photograph, Gloucester Daily Times.

prejudice in this region against stone as a building material. Men say that stone houses are damp, but there is no reason why they should be so, and it seems a pity that some good houses could not be built in this excellent native granite, to show people the way. So easily do good examples win followers, that if one well-planned, well-proportioned house were to be built in this town by a competent architect, in ten years no man would think of building with timber.

I said there are only two stone buildings in this town of Gloucester: one is “the Bank,” the other belongs to Mr. F. H. Lane, whose name ought to be known from Maine to Georgia as the best marine painter in the country.⁷

If Mr. Lane is not as well known as he ought to be, he has at least no reason to complain of neglect or want of appreciation. He has been painting only fifteen years, and his pictures are in great demand; hitherto chiefly among sea-faring men, but now winning way in other circles. In former times I used to be often in Mr. Lane’s painting-room, and it was with real pleasure that I found my way to his new house, built from his own design, of native granite, as I mentioned, handsome, peculiar, stable, and commanding a



Fitz Hugh Lane. OFF MOUNT DESERT ISLAND. 1856. Oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 36 $\frac{7}{16}$ ". Collection, The Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund.

wide sweep of land and ocean from its ample windows. The house is the best that has been built in Gloucester for fifty years, and, with some few defects, the principal of which is a want of depth in the eaves, sets plainly in view the superiority of stone over wood for building, and can not fail to do good in the community. The color of this granite is excellent, and the American Ivy has in three years nearly covered the sides of Mr. Lane's house with its abundant verdure, increasing the beauty of the building four fold. Indeed, the people of Gloucester are lovers of vine-drapery, and many a house, otherwise not very beautiful nor striking, has been made lovely with the woodbine, honey-suckle, and the common five-leaved ivy, which grows here with great luxuriance.

Mr. Lane has put few pictures in his studio at present; for he is very industrious, and sends his canvases off as fast as they are filled. If you were to meet him in the street, you would hardly take him for an artist. A man apparently of forty years, walking with difficulty, supported by crutches, hard-handed, browned by the sun and exposure, with a nose indicating less the artist sensibility

than the artist resolution, and an eye that shines clear as a hawk's, under over-hanging brows. This is the bodily portraiture of a man who is a master in his art. Conscious of his ability, conscious of the ability of others, studious, patient, eager to learn, relying on himself, and with all the modesty of reliance; a man, who in knowledge, feeling, and skill, has had no rival, certainly in America, and I doubt if more than two abroad.

With my recollections of four years ago, I was doubtful if I should find in Mr. Lane the poetical element that must be a constituent in the artist's mind. His early pictures had something in them too hard and practical to permit enthusiastic admiration; the water was salt, the ships sailed, the waves moved, but it was the sea before the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the deep.

His pictures early delighted sailors by their perfect truth. Lane knows the name and place of every rope on a vessel; he knows the construction, the anatomy, the expression — and to a seaman every thing that sails has expression and individuality — he knows how she will stand under this rig, before this wind; how she looks seen

stern foremost, bows foremost, to windward, to leeward, in all changes and guises; and, master of his detail, he has earned his money thus far mostly by painting "portraits" of vessels for sailors and ship-owners. It is owing to this necessity, perhaps, that he has fallen into the fault of too great literalness of treatment, which I have mentioned as characterizing some of his earlier works; but with the rapid advance he has made in the past four years, there is no longer any fear that he is incapable of treating a subject with genuine imagination.

If Mr. Lane would on some fine morning turn the key of his studio door, and leave his pretty stone-cottage to take care of itself for a year or two, while he went to Europe to see what the great painters have done, Turner and Vernet, and what God has done far out in the awful ocean where he has never been, I believe, with his new experiences and the new inspiration with which this enlarged field of study would fill his open mind, he would come back a great master in marine painting. The man who can comparatively late in life take up a new art, and without masters, without models, without great encouragement from without, can reach in fifteen years the point to which Lane has attained, has true genius, and will make men acknowledge it. He has reached that point by patient, conscientious study of nature, by hard labor, by the simple but severe method which genius always uses, and always has used.

He has indulged in no tricks and no vagaries; he has slighted nothing, despised nothing. If I appear to think less of his early pictures than they deserve, it is not because they are carefully even painfully studied, and because no detail has escaped his eye or brush; it is not that he has too much conscience; but simply because I missed in them the creative imagination of the artist. But it may well be a question whether at this day, when slight and untruthful work prevails, when artists will not paint with conscience, and the public does not strenuously demand it, conscience and love are not higher needs than imagination, and whether Mr. Lane's early pictures, the landmarks on his toilsome, earnest journey to his present place, have not a great value of their own. There is no one of them that I have seen, without some valuable passage, showing acute observation and careful, studious execution.

A sea-piece, "Off the coast of Maine, with Desert-Island in the distance," is the finest picture that Mr. Lane has yet painted.⁸ The time is sunset after a storm. The dun and purple clouds roll

away to the south-west, the sun sinks in a glory of yellow light, flooding the sea with transparent splendor. Far away in the offing, hiding the sun, sails a brig fully rigged, a transfigured vision between the glories of the sky and sea. The clearness of execution and the poetical treatment of this portion of the picture are admirable. They are the work of a man who not only *knows* but has *felt* the sea. In the foreground of the composition is an old lumber-schooner, plowing her way in the face of the wind; the waves are rough but subsiding; dark-green swells of water, crowned with light and pierced with light. The truth and beauty of the water in this picture I do not believe have ever been excelled. I do not believe deeper, clearer water, or waves that swing with more real power, were ever translated in oil.

I urged Mr. Lane to send this picture to New-York for exhibition. It could not fail to make an impression, and to call forth criticism. A finer picture of its class was never in the Academy, and it must be many years before another man can arise among us who can be a rival for so close a student and so learned an artist in his department.

Mr. Lane has painted landscapes and figures, but has done nothing worthy his efforts in this branch. The sea is his home; there he truly lives, and it is there, in that inexhaustible field, that his victories will be won.

C.C.

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1. The basic study on Clarence Cook, extremely perceptive though unfortunately unpublished, is contained in John P. Simoni, "Art Critics and Criticism in Nineteenth Century America," Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1952.
 2. Cook and the impact of his Ruskinian philosophy figure throughout the essays in *The New Path. Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites*, exhibition catalogue, The Brooklyn Museum, 1984.
 3. Cook's early writings for *The Independent* are analyzed in Jo Ann W. Weiss, "Clarence Cook: His Critical Writings," Ph.D. dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1977, pp. 8–36. Weiss offers a valuable list of Cook's columns for that journal on pp. 302–305.
 4. Cook's column on Emanuel Leutze appeared in *The Independent* on November 9, 1854, p. 353; on Harriet Hosmer, on December 21, 1854, p. 401.
 5. Cook dealt with Ary Scheffer in *The Independent* on December 7, 1854, p. 385 and again on October 11, 1855; his column on Delaroche appeared on May 29, 1856, p. 169; on Horace Vernet on March 22, 1855, p. 90.
 6. Cook's column on Fitz Hugh Lane appeared on September 7, 1854, p. 281.
 7. The Fitz Hugh Lane house is discussed in Alfred Mansfield Brooks, "The Fitz Hugh Lane House in Gloucester," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, vol. 78 (July, 1942), pp. 281–283.
 8. It is not known, for sure, which painting Cook is describing, or if it still survives. Two versions of the subject painted by Lane are illustrated in this article.