

HART CRANE AND HIS WESTERN RESERVE ROOTS

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On September 14, 1985, a large bronze sculpture of Ohio poet Hart Crane, created by William McVey and commissioned by Peter Putnam, was presented by the Mildred Andrews Fund to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. This event, entitled "A Homecoming" signaled a recognition not only of Crane's literary reputation but also of his Western Reserve roots.

Although the poet published only two slender volumes in his brief lifetime, *White Buildings* in 1926¹ and *The Bridge* in 1930², of such stature is he that poet-critic Robert Lowell called him "the Shelley of his age,"³ and one of America's foremost literary historians R.W.B. Lewis described Crane as "one of the finest modern poets in our language and one of the dozen odd major poets in American history."⁴ More recently Crane bibliographer Joseph Schwartz wrote, "Firmly entrenched in the academic and literary establishment, Crane ranks in the twentieth century with such poets as Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens."⁵ Further evidence of his importance is the fact that at least eighteen major libraries serve as repositories of Crane materials with the one at Columbia University being the most important since it contains the poet's own books and papers. In Ohio the libraries of Ohio State, Case Western Reserve, and Kent State Universities list Crane collections with those of Kent and Ohio State ranking among the largest in the nation.

Another important indication of a writer's reputation is the amount of scholarly research which he or his work engenders. In Crane's case, the amount is impressive. To date three major biographies of the poet have been published: *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet* by Philip Horton,⁶ *Hart Crane: A Biographical and Critical Study* by Brom Weber,⁷ and *Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane* by John Unterecker.⁸ Complementing the biographies are six separate collections of Crane letters which have been published beginning with *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916-1932* edited by Brom Weber,⁹ and ending with "The Wind Blown Flames: The Letters of Hart Crane to Wilbur Underwood" edited by Donald Parker and Warren Herendeen.¹⁰ Scheduled for future publication are Vivian Pemberton's edition of Crane letters formerly owned by Betty Crane Madden, the poet's cousin, and now owned by Kent State University.

In addition to the biographies and letters, more than a thousand separate entries of books and articles published about Crane between 1919 and 1980 are listed in the most recent Crane bibliography, *Hart Crane: A Reference Guide*.¹¹ Adding to the scholarship also is the recently completed film, *Hart Crane: The Broken Tower*, produced by the Center for Visual History in New York and due to be shown soon in its P.B.S. series, "Voices and Visions," thirteen films about American poets. Of local interest is the fact that some of the film was shot on the Western Reserve in Garrettsville, Warren, and Cleveland areas.

It was Garrettsville, Warren, and Cleveland that provided Crane's links to his Western Reserve roots. Each was filled with places and people who nourished his impulse to poetry and with constants that would furnish him images for depicting in his work. These constants were the bridges, towers, streams, and factories, the woods and farms of the Western Reserve, all of which he would appropriate and synthesize later in his poetry. And just as these physical elements would be enlarged and duplicated from Garrettsville, to Warren, to Cleveland, so too were the influences of music, art, literature, and journalism, and the people who were involved in them. All of these influences were present in Hart Crane's world, all within the circumference of a walk, a walk that would expand as his legs lengthened and as he moved from village, to town, to city.

Hart Crane was born in Garrettsville in July of 1899 to Clarence Arthur Crane and Grace Edna Hart Crane, both from families whose own roots lay deep in the Western Reserve. Within a few steps of Crane's birthplace on Freedom Street lay the arched stone bridge over Silver Creek, and next to it Hopkins' old grist mill complete with crescent mill-dam, mill-race, and water wheel. Crane recalls the scene from his childhood in "The Dance" section of *The Bridge*.

I left the village for dogwood. By the canoe
Tugging below the mill-race, I could see
Your hair's keen crescent running, and the blue
First moth of evening take wing stealthily. (17-20)

Also nearby was his grandfather Arthur Crane's maple syrup cannery. Just around the block was the Garrettsville Opera House with its lofty clock tower which dominated the village, and next to that was the office of *The Garrettsville Journal* where his uncle, Cassius Crane, served for a while as editor and his uncle, Frederic Crane, served even longer as a writer. Within a few hundred feet from his home were the tracks of the Erie Railroad which linked Garrettsville to Warren, Cleveland, and other places in the Western Reserve.

Also within a short walking distance were the homes of his Crane relatives, his grandparents, Arthur and Ella Crane, and his two aunts, Alice and Elizabeth (Bess) lived next door in the large Victorian house which now serves as the rectory for St. Ambrose Church. His grandfather's brothers, Elton, Cassius, and Frederic, lived in close proximity and were associated with his grandfather in Crane Brothers, the largest store in Garrettsville. On the whole the Crane family was a large and cultured group, so the youngster's literary, musical, and artistic interests were well served within the family itself. His mother Grace possessed a trained soprano voice and participated in musicales with the Crane family "Jubilee Singers." His grandfather played the flute, his Aunt Alice the piano, his Aunt Bess the violin. His grandmother and Aunt Bess were also accomplished painters who tutored the young boy in his first attempts at art. Finally, some if not most of the Cranes wrote poetry and shared their efforts at family gatherings or circulated them among family members. The most prolific poet was Frederic Crane whose work was often published locally, works frankly imitative of his favorite writers to whom he introduced his grandnephew. Hart Crane would continue to be influenced by his Crane relatives long after Clarence Crane established a maple syrup cannery in Warren in 1901 and moved his family there. With the Erie Railroad so close, the Cranes' ties to Garrettsville remained secure.

Warren, one time capital of the Western Reserve, was a place where Hart Crane already had roots. It was the birthplace of his mother Grace whose father Clinton Hart had been the Trumbull County Treasurer and a merchant before moving himself, his wife Elizabeth, and his children to Chicago. In Warren the Crane family lived very briefly on North Park Avenue and then moved to the heart of town to 249 High Street into a large twin-towered house. In Warren, as in Garrettsville, there were constants in the boy's environment which would later inform his poetry. A short walk on High Street would take him to the Mahoning River into which the waters of Garrettsville's Silver Creek flowed by way of the Grand River, and over which the high girdered Market Street Bridge rose. Along the way to the river he would have passed the Dana Musical Institute where his Aunt Bess studied violin with Professor Schmitt. Next to the music school was the Warren Opera House where he would attend frequent concerts and at the rear of which were the offices and plant of *The Tribune* where his Aunt Zell published the Warren paper. This same walk would take him past the towered Trumbull County Court House with its parklike setting, past the First Presbyterian Church with its soaring spire, on to the historic Kinsman house, a place he was to mention years later in a letter to his mother, "That was a happy thought -- sending me the picture of the Kinsman House. It is particularly beautiful . . . every once in a while I have a dream with Warren scenes in it."¹² A few blocks out of the center of town in any direction took Crane back to the Western Reserve countryside which he also remembered, but only three blocks away, at the corner of Franklin and Pine lay

his father's cannery. And just beyond was South Street with its Erie Railroad tracks down the center and more memories for depicting in the lines from "The River" in *The Bridge*:

Behind

My father's cannery works I used to see
Rail-squatters ranged in nomad raiillery,
The ancient men -- wifeless or runaway
Hobo-trekkers that forever search
An empire wilderness of freight and rails.
Each seemed a child, like me, on a loose perch,
Holding to childhood like some formless play (52-59).

As young Hart grew older and as he left his Warren childhood behind, his most important ties to Warren were to remain his aunt, Zell Hart Deming, and his cousin, Helen Douglas Hart (later Mrs. Griswold Hurlbert) who lived right around the corner from him on Elm Street. Zell had been married to Grace Crane's brother, Frank Hart, and then widowed when Helen was only three months old. But she remained especially close to her former sister-in-law and served as Hart Crane's godmother. Helen and Hart were also close, finding their sister-brother relationship in each other. Zell made her reputation later as a brilliant newspaper publisher, the first woman member of Associated Press¹³. She had many other interests as well, and among them were literature and art. It was through his Aunt Zell that Crane met one of the persons most influential in his poetic development, artist Carl Schmitt of Warren, son of music professor Jacob Schmitt. After Hart Crane had left both Warren and Cleveland behind and moved to New York, it was Carl Schmitt who served as his tutor and friend and who introduced him to the Greenwich Village circle of writers and artists who would become so important in Crane's life and career. With the death of Zell's daughter Helen Hart Hurlbert January 25, 1987, Warren's last family tie to Hart Crane was severed, and that was almost eighty years after Hart Crane himself had left the town.

In 1909 because of business interests, Clarence Crane took his family to Cleveland to live, even before Hart had completed his elementary school studies at Warren's Central Grammar School. In Cleveland the elder Crane founded the Crane Candy Company to manufacture high quality chocolates and a specialty candy he invented, Lifesavers. The boy's Hart grandparents had already settled in Cleveland and purchased a house on East 115th Street. It was into the Hart home that Clarence Crane moved his family, a home in which his son would have his own tower room, a room where he would lock himself away to read his books, listen to his phonograph, and write his poetry.

The following year the boy's Crane grandparents also purchased a house on East 115th Street directly across from the Crane-Hart dwelling. Thus with the Harts originally from Warren and the Cranes originally from Garrettsville, those places and people in them would continue to play an important role in Hart Crane's life. Arthur Crane, who called himself "Sachem of the Tribe of Cranes," was one of the organizers of the Cleveland-Garrettsville Reunion held annually at Euclid Beach. An excerpt from his speech delivered at the August 1914 reunion at which his grandson was present reveals the kind of Western Reserve history and geography to which the youth was exposed, echoes of which can be found in "The Dance" section of *The Bridge*:

[The] society is founded upon our love of Garrettsville, our realization of what it meant to us to have sprung from that New England Community . . . Look down upon Silver Creek, its destiny the Mahoning, the Ohio, the Mississippi, the Gulf of Mexico. To the right upon the hilltop stands the hamlet of Hiram, but the valley penetrates beyond to the Wyandot Indian village of Harrison Rapids, now Hiram Rapids. Here in the early history of Ohio, the messengers from Ft. Wayne in Detroit crossed the Cuyahoga, carrying orders to Ft. DuQuesne in Pittsburgh, and

here they must run the gauntlet of the Redman who was ever on the alert. And here it is also said that in one night 100 men and 100 teams could divert the waters of the Cuyahoga into the valley of Silver Creek, thus diverting its entrance to the Atlantic from the St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico.¹⁴

In Cleveland, Crane's world expanded beyond the traverse of a few short blocks. Yet even here, his home was still within a short walking distance of the city's cultural center: its museums, its Art Institute, its Cleveland Orchestra, its Western Reserve University where he briefly studied advertising. And while the bridges, towers, factories, railroads, and outlying farms were more widely spaced, they were still easily accessible by streetcar if not by foot. And instead of creeks and rivers to supply his need for water imagery in his poetry, there was Lake Erie perhaps recalled in "The Bridge of Estador":

Walk high on the bridge of Estador,
No one has ever walked there before.
There is a lake, perhaps with the sun
Lapped under it, -or the dun
Bellies of estuaries of warehouses,
Tied bundle-wise with cords of smoke.¹⁵

In Cleveland too were people who would continue to nourish his need for poetry and music. The most important among these was probably his father's sister, Alice, an accomplished pianist who had studied music in Europe and now maintained a studio near University Circle where her nephew went for his music lessons. Alice was not only a musician, she was also a published poet who furthermore encouraged Hart in his own literary aspirations.

Other Clevelanders involved in art, literature, and music would become increasingly important in Crane's life after he had reached adulthood and moved to New York. Because he returned from New York to live from time to time, once in Akron, several times in Cleveland, and once in Chagrin Falls, he depended upon his Cleveland area friends for artistic sustenance. Such people as Painter William Sommer, poet Sam Loveman, architect Will Lescaze, bookdealer Richard Laukhuff, engineer Charles Harris, Richard and Charlotte Rychtarik of the Cleveland Playhouse were all important to him.

But his Western Reserve roots lay less with these people than with the people of his childhood and youth in Garrettsville, Warren and Cleveland. His roots lay primarily with the Harts and Cranes who were the kind of people described by his Aunt Zell in his Grandfather Hart's obituary as "those old fashioned families of numerous boys and girls who came from the rock-bound coast of New England and settled in Ohio on the Western Reserve."¹⁶ And his name "Hart Crane," in which both family names are linked, affirms his Western Reserve roots.

NOTES

Relevant details about the Crane and Hart families as well as many relevant details about Hart Crane have been supplied by family members through interviews, correspondence, telephone conversations, and journals over a period of more than twenty years. I am grateful for their assistance.

¹ New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926.

² New York: Horace Liveright, 1930.

- ³ "Words for Hart Crane." *Nation* 186 (22 March 1958): 186.
- ⁴ *The Poetry of Hart Crane: A Critical Study*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967, vii.
- ⁵ *Hart Crane: A Reference Guide*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983. xiii.
- ⁶ New York: W. W. Norton, 1937.
- ⁷ New York: Bodley Press, 1948.
- ⁸ New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.
- ⁹ New York: Hermitage House, 1952.
- ¹⁰ *Southern Review* 16 (April 1980): 339-76.
- ¹¹ Schwartz, *passim*.
- ¹² Weber, *Letters*, 292.
- ¹³ "Mrs. Zell Hart Deming Dies in N. Y." *Warren Tribune Chronicle*. 27 April 1936.
- ¹⁴ "Cleveland Garrettsville Reunion." *The Garrettsville Journal*. 27 August 1914.
- ¹⁵ *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*. Ed. Brom Weber. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1966.
- ¹⁶ "Clinton O. Hart Died Today: Former Well Known Warren Man Succumbs to a Year's Illness at His Home in Cleveland -- Burial in This City." *The Warren Tribune*. 23 January 1913.

