

“Surprising Revelations: Intimacies in the Letters Between Charles W. Eliot, George B. Dorr & John D. Rockefeller Jr.”

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Earlier this year I proposed to Ruth Eveland several topics for a centennial presentation at the Jesup Memorial Library. The topic of intimacies in the letters of the most prominent park founders was strongly preferred.

This is not a subject I discussed in my biography of George B. Dorr. Indeed, preparation of this talk forced my reopening of research materials which proved more challenging than I expected. I needed relaxation after fifteen years of research and writing, not re-immersion in the difficult craft of writing. But the topic was rich in potential and like Mr. Dorr I embrace the notion of persistence.

So here I am in mid-August in one of four surviving island physical structures that bear the design imprint of Mr. Dorr (the others being Oldfarm’s Storm Beach Cottage, the park office at COA, and the park Abbe Museum). I am not here to talk about external manifestations of Dorr’s impact; nor will I enter here into the emphasis that other local historians have given to the differences between Dorr, Eliot, and Rockefeller. Frankly, my research has shown that their personalities were more similar than the dissimilarities promoted by Sargent Collier, R.W. Hale Jr., Judith S. Goldstein, and H. Eliot Foulds. All of us agree on one point, however, that these park founders appreciate the achievements of one another, exchanged ideas, offered

encouragement, and expressed candid feelings about a wide array of topics. Especially during the years 1917-1923, each was indispensable to the others.

instead, I want to draw your attention to selected examples of a much favored and rarely used term of an earlier era. That is, the word "intimate." Its usage in letters written by Dr. Eliot, George B. Dorr, and John D. Rockefeller Jr. at the end of the Gaslight Era provides previously unexplored biographical insights.

The concept of intimacy is historically associated with couples, more commonly with those of an opposite gender involved in a sexual relationship. An Internet search of this concept discloses tens of thousands of references that relate predominantly to couples therapy. Indeed, it is not surprising for couples to state that there is intimacy in verbal, written, and body language where the unstated is a form of innermost disclosure. That is why the intimacy language in correspondence between males a century ago caught my attention. What significance should a historian assign to it? Is it employed casually or with restraint? What does it connote? When JDR Jr. writes of his "intimate association" with Dorr, can we discover the core elements that underlie his use of a term that we might suppose he reserved for his family? Even in its explicit absence, is intimacy implied contextually and over time?

I assume here that men have no less a need for intimacy than women, regardless of the gender of the partner. Yet throughout western culture, male expression of intimacies is commonly suppressed or denied; in the Gaslight Era when intimacy language was used by males, quiet concerns about the effeminacy of the speaker usually followed. Rarely are intimacies

expressed verbally without metaphorical diversions. Even in our own day, when private feelings and convictions are given the solidity of the written word there is the tacit acknowledgement that something akin to courage has been added. Why? Because words in a document have a standing in law and history not rivaled by undocumented verbal expression. Moreover, since all three relied on secretaries to transcribe dictated or written comments, there is no extreme concern with privacy. A case in point is this specific talk, exploring the words preserved in archives across the county. In my research, I wondered if Dorr, Eliot, and Rockefeller were consciously writing for posterity, crafting letters to secure public approbation.

Let us assume that intimacy refers to close acquaintance, familiarity, or association with another involving the sharing of one's innermost character (be it mental or emotionally-based). The interpersonal term also connotes trust, friendship, love, and privacy. But as we ponder our own relationships, are we intimate with others in a comprehensive sense of the word? That is, does intimacy refer to expressions about the whole of one's inner life? Keep this question in mind as we look at how Dr. Eliot and Mr. Rockefeller expressed their beliefs about one another--and Mr. Dorr. We might be surprised to learn that in the surviving letters the expression of innermost feelings does not range far and wide—instead, they are quite subject specific. In behaving this way, they might not be all that different from the rest of us.

The large number of letters exchanged which reflect intimacy issues cannot be catalogued tonight. It will have to suffice that I concentrate here on Mr. Rockefeller's letters to Eliot and Dorr, in part because his archive is the most comprehensive and he sent more letters to the two than he received from them.

February 1915 should be considered the nexus of the Dorr-Eliot-JDR relationship. Dr. Eliot is in the last decade of his life, JDR is rapidly expanding his carriage roads and purchasing properties that he deems worthy of preservation, and Dorr prepares a lengthy summary for Eliot of Trustee property acquisitions—and financial needs for further preparation of title and property histories for the federal government. (Harvard University. *CWE Papers*. B.95. Dorr to Eliot. 2.24.15) Their correspondence is formal but Eliot reframes Dorr's summary within the context of the history of the HCTPR and the VIA's, requesting \$15,000 for national monument expenses. Partial support is secured. The Eliot-JDR relationship deepens.

In 1919, shortly after securing national park status, Eliot again writes to JDR about the expenses of securing deeds and titles for lands west of Somes Sound. But now the letters are less formal and more familiar, Eliot expressing admiration for Dorr's extensive knowledge of island history, flora and fauna, and the status of properties being pursued; but Eliot's efforts to procure lists of Dorr's works in progress have "totally failed," which he describes as a "hopeless case," for Dorr "lives in such a preposterous way as respects the care of his health, and takes so many absurd risks in rushing about the Island that we are likely to lose him any day by disease or accident." (Rockefeller Archive Center. III.2.I. B. 59.f.441. Eliot to JDR. 9.3.19) Familiarity is again manifest when Eliot expresses concerns that he will not be able to adequately support his "children, grandchildren, and GGC, when my pension ceases."

As the months pass letters between the three become more familiar, more complementary, and more directly concerned with Dorr's well being even as Dorr repeatedly authorizes JDR "to do work along any such lines on your behalf as I may feel disposed

to do.” (Sawtelle Archives and Research Center. Acadia National park. B.45.f.1.9.18.22) JDR writes of his “genuine satisfaction and pleasure” found in cooperating with Dorr’s “splendid work.” He concludes with atypical written praise:

“I cannot close this letter without expressing my appreciation of the unselfish, untiring and devoted service which you have rendered in bringing the Park into being and are continuing to render in its upbuilding and development.”

On the other hand, letters between Eliot and Rockefeller about Dorr are few and far between. They focus on concern for Dorr’s well-being and his departures from standard administrative practices. If this be taken as criticism such comments are always balanced by praise for Dorr’s conspicuous virtues as when Eliot defends Dorr to criticism of his administrative practices by Ellen Bullard, the daughter of Eliot’s sister Elizabeth.(See R. Epp, *Creating Acadia National Park*, p. 171)

There is a series of Eliot letters just two years shy of his death to Interior Secretary Hubert Work that provide a final statement of what Dorr meant to Eliot. When certain islanders objected to continuing “intrusion” into the mountainous core of the Park, an important Washington DC hearing was held in March 1924. Eliot wrote in support of the Dorr-Rockefeller plans, describing Dorr as “a man of extraordinary public spirit...[who] expended a considerable fortune which has now all gone into public and semi-public undertakings...[yet as] a public official he has one defect against which precautions can be easily taken. He is liable to talk too long about any business which interests him.” (*Eliot Papers*. B.95. 2.1.1924)

Seven weeks later just as the hearing is to open, Eliot writes a 500-word letter on “the quality and character of George B. Dorr.” This document qualifies as an expression of intimacy because it reflects more than seven decades of Eliot-Dorr family interaction and contains Eliot’s own reference to his “intimate relations” [with Dorr] for at least thirty years. I know of no other extended private expression by Eliot that rivals its expansiveness. Suffice it to report that therein Dorr is described as “a man of the highest probity and the keenest sense of honor...incapable of any disloyalty to friend, employer, or official superior, or any disingenuousness towards critics or opponents.” (*Eliot Papers*. B. 95. 3.22.1924)

If this strikes one as lacking specificity, compare it with Rockefeller’s “somewhat belated” note to Eliot on his 90th birthday for “you have been an example and an inspiration to me in many ways. The uniform dignity and courtliness of your bearing your unfailing courtesy, your splendid self control, your enormous capacity for work, the painstaking exactness with which you study the details of every problem upon which you pass judgment, your magnificent breadth of view, your clear insight and your keen vision have long commanded my profound admiration. I have counted it a high privilege to have the more intimate association with you which life on the Maine coast has made possible.”

In hindsight, we might regard these expressions as lacking emotional force. Rockefeller understands the matter differently, for he states that this “personal tribute...[reflects] the deep feeling of regard and esteem” in which he has held Eliot for many years. (RAC. B. 59. f.441. 4.8.24) I know of no document in the massive Rockefeller Archive Center that is comparable—as a personal tribute—to the aforementioned quote!

No less an authority on the Harvard's president than philosopher Ralph Barton Perry described Eliot as "a man of exquisite tenderness of feeling towards those of his own family circle. A quality of homeliness and simplicity was deeper in him than that awful aspect of dignity which he wore in his public appearances." Paraphrasing Perry, it is fair to judge a man by what he admires as well as by what he is. ("Charles William Eliot," *New England Quarterly*, 1931) Eliot's 1903 essay on a "New Definition of the Cultivated Man," contained an unconscious statement of his personal ideal that comes remarkably close to the Eliot that Dorr and Rockefeller had known intimately: "He is not to be a weak, critical, fastidious creature...[but] a man of quick perception, broad sympathies and wide affinities; responsive, but independent; self-reliant, but deferential; loving truth and candor, but also moderation and proportion; courageous, but gentle; not finished, but perfecting." (*Present College Questions [New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1903]*).

While we have no way to know whether Eliot here is deliberately self-referential, we might well infer that these are qualities in other men that attracted him, that cultivated intimacy over time. But bear in mind, this essay is a public pronouncement. Eliot well recognized the differences between public and private statements. Between face-to-face utterances and the more deliberative drafting in solitude of one's innermost thoughts.

Mr. Rockefeller makes a similar point about the inflated value of the written word when he writes to Dorr that "I am committed to nothing [regarding park development] except as such commitments have been or may be made in writing." (RAC. B. 85.f. 839. 8.14.22) While Rockefeller's biographers note his economy with verbal expression, there is little economy in his

official and personal correspondence with Dr. Eliot and Mr. Dorr. To the contrary, he provides information, analysis, and statements of significance that convinced me that Rockefeller placed great stock in the worth of the recipient; otherwise, he would have opted for brevity or delegated this responsibility to someone in the Rockefeller organization rather than committing personal time and energy to enlarging the understanding of one of his intimates.

David Rockefeller's 2002 autobiography explains that "the procedure Father preferred whenever we had something important to deal with, especially an issue with significant emotional content, was an exchange of letters...even when we were living under the same roof." (*Memoirs*, p. 18) This method was applied to other Rockefeller intimates, perhaps in part because unlike the spontaneity of the spoken word, the written word—even when dictated—can be refined, clarified, and more deeply reflect conscious intent.

Frankly, in my research I was routinely overwhelmed by the magnitude of Rockefeller's attentiveness to all manner of issues relating to the development of the park and to those most closely responsible. Like Rockefeller's biographer—Raymond B. Fosdick—I too wondered where Rockefeller found the time amid all his projects for such narrative productivity?

Fosdick says that even in his youth Rockefeller "was a master of detail. And it must be admitted that he loved it. He was a perfectionist, with an abhorrence of anything that was shoddy or second-rate...[And Acadia was] the kind of project which appealed to him strongly. It was a virgin enterprise, and to a perfectionist ...this meant that the work would not be hampered by the

precedent of inferior standards nor would the scope of the project be limited by a preconceived plan...More than any other park to which Mr. Rockefeller has contributed, Acadia bears the marks of his own persistent care and effort." (R. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller Jr. A Portrait* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956, pp. 304-305)

This care dovetailed with the establishment of the NPS and as we have seen the new Interior Department organization has always been in "a relatively weak position in securing congressional authorizations and appropriations, it very much needed private sector support, and Junior became by far the leader in providing it..[That is, his] devotion to conservation...[was] in consonance with the Progressive era...[and] in aiding the development of tourist facilities and carriage roads at Acadia, his purpose was to bring the public in to enjoy the park under proper conditions that would preserve its beauty, not to create a protected haven for the exclusive use of wealthy summer residents." (John Harr & Peter J. Johnson, *The Rockefeller Century* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988, pp. 199-200)

That heightened degree of engagement is evident a decade earlier (1900-1910) when Fosdick recalls that "the mass of...duties and functions is almost unbelievable...business and philanthropic problems on a gigantic scale...[and] the gradual assumption of leadership in family matters...as both his father and mother seemed to lean on him increasingly for advice and counsel in intimate questions relating to the domestic circle." (*John D. Rockefeller Jr., p. 106*) Notice Fosdick's implication that the concept of "intimacy" ranges beyond domesticity.

In 1929—three years after Eliot’s death, it is noteworthy that Rockefeller uses the expression “intimately” in a non-emotional context when he writes to an Olmsted architect (H.V. Hubbard) a 2,000 word letter and therein describes Dorr as “a man of great personal magnetism, extraordinary culture, splendid background, and my warm personal friend.” The comment that follows is most germane: that is, that “Dorr’s projects and my projects...are very intimately inter-related and inter-dependent. Neither of us can develop our ideas most fully or most satisfactorily without the complete cooperation of the other. For many years I have enjoyed a close friendship, with Mr. Dorr, and we have cooperated most fully, cordially, and harmoniously in developing these common plans..[for] Acadia National Park.” (RAC. B.110.f. 1097. JDRJr. to Henry V. Hubbard. 9.18.29)

But surely prefacing “inter-related and inter-dependent” with the term “very” and “intimately” adds something. What? All that we can logically infer is that Rockefeller was consciously trying to convey the depth and breadth of their freely chosen co-dependency, especially since the remaining paragraphs stress road development sites where he and Dorr are not of one mind. He clearly wants Olmsted architect Henry Hubbard to realize that these issues are subordinate to the relationship between Dorr and Rockefeller.

Shortly after the death of Stephen Mather, as Dorr approached his 80th birthday, Rockefeller reiterates his concerns to attorney Harry Lynam about Dorr’s reluctance to prepare an inventory of his “personal real estate holdings as well as property owned by the Wild Gardens, the Park, and JDR Jr. He urges Lynam to “work together...to help Mr. Dorr so arrange his affairs that what he really desires to have done with this property after he passes on will be done.” And then Rockefeller adds, “His lack of experience

in matters of this kind may result in his not knowing how best to accomplish that end." Now, this can be taken as paternalistic, administratively presumptive, or even intrusive. But taken within the context of all relevant correspondence, it is rightly understood as an expression of intimacy.(RAC.B. 85.f.840. 5.4.33)

As a counterpoint, following a summer illness, Junior writes Dorr two months (August 2, 1933) later that he should take care to "not do any more imprudent things like sliding down Green Mountain in the snow drifts, as I saw you do some years ago. [For] You are greatly needed in this world and particularly on this island. I would not know what to do without you here and you and I must live at least to see the projected automobile [loop] road completed and then for a long time thereafter to plan other worthwhile development of the island."

A year later on his 81st birthday, Dorr receives from Rockefeller a letter which disparages "milestone" letters and yet affirms that "Mrs. Rockefeller and I count our friendship with you as one of the happiest of the many delightful things that have come into our lives as a result of our having made MDI our summer residence...[I cannot think] of any other person with sufficient patience, kindness and tact to have accomplished so difficult an undertaking [as the establishment of ANP]...During these many years [contact with you] has been a constant pleasure and happiness to me."

Dorr surely was more reserved in the written expression of intimacies. While the scope of this talk limits references to these expressions, there is an indication that unlike Mr. Rockefeller, the spoken word conveyed momentary intimacy. In a September 1940 letter to JDR Jr. he remarks philosophically that he "...has

been living, of late especially, in the great tragic drama of the world whose every passing stage comes to us so wonderfully through the radio, which gives it an immediate reality no printed word can do." (RAC. B. 85.f.840. 9.28.1940)

Yet as I've shown in my biography, Dorr embodied the FDR maxim of "Action, and action now!" A telling little known example of this is revealed in a September 1939 letter typed on Oldfarm stationary, a follow up to a conversation a day or two earlier when Rockefeller offered the name of one of his sons in response to Dorr's question about which son would "most likely...take permanent interest in the work that we have done [here on Mount Desert]."

Thirty-one year old Nelson was the father's response. Dorr then gives Nelson a cherished eight-foot high Sheraton-style Mahogany clock that Dorr received several decades earlier from Mrs. John Innes Kane (he was a great grandson of John Jacob Astor), who--with her husband--had given Dorr for the future national park Dry (later Dorr) mountain, the Tarn below, and the Gorge beyond. Dorr recalls the personal importance of time-keeping throughout his life and concludes that "as my journey ends that this gift of Mrs. Kane's shall find place with the on-coming generation and carry on to it, and others still, the memory of the Park's formation." Other than a few gifts demarcated in the Dorr's will, this gift appears to have had singular importance; since no gift could possibly rival the possessions of the father, Dorr enlists JDR Jr. in selecting Nelson as the conservation torch-bearer.

More so, Dorr thinks that Nelson's membership in the Dorr Foundation would be one way to accomplish ongoing conservation

goals. Rockefeller again complements Dorr for preserving the island “for the enjoyment of all the people...[for] no one knows better than I do how important it is and how unselfishly you have given of your time, your thought, your strength and your means to the accomplishment of the desired end. I rejoice in what you have done and am proud to have been your silent partner in some phases of the work....I shall think of you often, and always with admiration and affection.” (RAC. B. 85. f. 840. 9.9.39 & 9.15.39)

In the end, Dorr exhausted his fortune to assemble the properties that became Acadia National Park. It is no small irony that in Mr. Rockefeller, he found a partner for over three decades who was charmed as well by the beauty of the Mount Desert Island. As with Eliot, in their collaboration important choices were made and paths followed that would not have been pursued had each followed a solitary course. Rockefeller’s “actions are curiously symbolic—writes their contemporary conservationist, Fairfield Osborn—for much of the wealth that has made his munificent contributions for the purposes of conservation has been derived from the [oil extracted] from the depths of the earth. This wealth has, in turn, been distributed for the preservation of resources...on the surface of the earth [by his son]. He is part of a self-created epic that expresses the completion of a cycle.”

Friends of Acadia former president W. Kent Olson seized upon the the financial backing that Mr. Rockefeller provided, the vision of Dr. Eliot, and the “tireless” benefaction of George Dorr. Many others have stressed other character traits that contributed to their joint success. What I’ve tried to show here is that there is sound evidence in their letters that above and beyond singular attributes was the implicit acceptance by each of a personal ideal that Eliot described in his 1911 “Cultivated Man” essay: “broad

sympathies and wide affinities; responsive, but independent; self-reliant, but deferential; loving truth and candor, but also moderation and proportion...not finished, but perfecting." These were the core character traits that framed their success in developing Acadia National Park. As intimate friends, these attributes could be expressed-- but more often than not, were not. In this lies their humanity.

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