

Summer at the Beach

For 42 summers, George Howe Colt '76 repaired to the four-story, 11-bedroom ark of a summer house his great-grandfather Ned Atkinson built on a Cape Cod peninsula in 1903. Now the members of the extended family who own the romantic, run-down place have decided they must sell it. Colt goes there with his family for one last August. The sadness of impending change—but wait, may change be tempered?—pervades his charming memoir, *The Big House: A Century in the Life of an American Summer Home* (Scribner, \$25). His evocative tale will resonate with all who have loved a summer home, of whatever dimensions, as the following passage may suggest.

HOW MANY Boston Brahmins does it take to screw in a light-bulb? Ten: one to put in the new bulb, and nine to reminisce about how great the old one was. If it *used* to be done this way, it *ought* to be done this way, and, by God, it *will* be done this way. We would never tolerate the Big House's inconveniences in our winter homes, but this is different: we change in the winter, but during the summer—a season in which we regress to an innocent, Edenic state by replicating the experiences we had as children—change is heresy. We bristle when guests expect, well, something a little more *deluxe*. Were we to stop washing the dishes by hand, it would mean losing not only the opportunity to watch the boats sail into the harbor, but a precious daily chunk of WASP bonding (which is performed far more adhesively over a mildewed dish towel than over a beer). Were we to replace the hypersensitive toilets, so aged that their porcelain handles are spiderwebbed with cracks, it would mean taking down the typewritten notes my grandmother thumbtacked in each of the seven bathrooms, whose words we can recite by heart now, like an affectionate family mantra: “Nothing but toilet paper—and not wads of this—to go in toilets. Cesspool trouble possible, though not probable, if we watch.”

Like Plimoth Plantation or Colonial

Williamsburg, the Big House is to be preserved intact, uncontaminated either by throwing anything out or by willingly introducing anything new. Any change is likely the result of serendipity: a book left on a bedside table, a shell on a mantelpiece, a toy car on the kitchen floor. If no one removes them immediately, they will likely be granted tenure. Several years ago, an iron bedstead in the Little Nursery lost a caster. For two summers the resulting tilt was ignored. This summer we arrived to find that a copy of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* had been placed under the shortened leg. We haven't touched it. Recently, sweeping up after a weekend of houseguests, I came across a guitar pick. For the time



The Big House, Wings Neck, Pocasset

being, I put it in the wooden dish on the front-hall shelf where the key to the Chelsea clock is kept. I know that if the house were not being sold, that guitar pick would remain there for decades, as immovable as a barnacle. My grandchildren would assume that Ned Atkinson played the guitar, and would venerate the pick as a holy relic.

An Aristocrat's Killing

SOME HOMICIDES just won't die. The 1849 murder and dismemberment of Boston Brahmin George Parkman, A.B. 1809, a compulsive, disagreeable, and embittered landlord and moneylender (who had failed in a medical career) still roils the imaginations of historians. Simon Schama, a onetime Harvard history professor now teaching at Columbia, exercised the crafts of both history and fiction in *Dead Certainties*, his 1991 book on the Parkman case. Now, *Murder at Harvard*, an hour-long television documentary directed by Eric Stange, visiting fellow in the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, and written by Stange, Schama, and Melissa Banta, curatorial associate at the Harvard University Library, exhumes the Parkman case once again. Schama narrates the *American Experience* program, which PBS airs nationally on Monday, July 14, at 9 P.M.

Harvard Medical College professor John White Webster, A.B. 1811, M.D. 1815, was arrested and eventually hanged for the Parkman murder; his trial in 1850 attracted press from as far away as London, Paris, and Berlin. Yet some, like the late surgeon and Harvard Medical School professor Francis D. Moore '35, M.D. '39, S.D. '82, who appears on the program, believe that Webster may have been innocent. Some suspect that Ephraim Littlefield, a janitor and trafficker in dead bodies who worked “downstairs” at the Medical College and despised Webster, may have framed him. (Littlefield discovered—or planted—Parkman's dismembered corpse beneath Webster's lab.)

In the documentary, MIT historian Pauline Maier '60, Ph.D. '68, and Harvard clinical assistant in surgery Anthony Patton '54, M.D. '58, among others, chew over the *Rashomon*-like ambiguities of competing versions of what *really* happened when Parkman visited Webster in his laboratory to dun him for payment of a debt. (Parkman essentially held mortgages on all Webster's worldly goods; the latter, a Boston blueblood himself, had squandered his inheritance and had lived beyond his



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means for years.) Several scenes dramatize “possible” versions of encounters among the three protagonists.

Shot in black-and-white to evoke the period, *Murder at Harvard* also peers into the class frictions that were a backdrop to the event. Some speculation, for example, locates a homicidal rage in Littlefield, a “swamp Yankee” equally resentful of social superiors like Webster and of the

wave of Irish immigrants who fled to Boston during the potato famines of the 1840s (local aristocrats grumbled that “the Athens of America was becoming the Dublin of America”). At the end, Schama pronounces his own verdict, complete with a reenactment of the murder scene. The result is a thinking person’s whodunit, and a televised glimpse into a grisly chapter of Harvard history. ~C.L.

CHAPTER & VERSE

A correspondence corner for not-so-famous lost words

José Rigau would appreciate help in identifying the person (possibly French historian Charles Seignobos) who defined enlightened despotism as “All for the people, but without the people.”

Dinsmore Murphy seeks author, work, and date for “...led onward without will of their own by their former striving.”

Eugene Pattison asks if anyone knows a prior source for Louisa May Alcott’s “saying,” from *Jo’s Boys*, “Clay represents life; plaster, death; marble, immortality.”

“plains of hesitation” (May-June 2003). William Waterhouse found George W. Cecil’s text, for a 1928 advertisement for International Correspondence Schools, in *Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations Requested from the Congressional Research Service* (GPO, 1989): “On the Plains of Hesitation bleach the bones of count-

less millions who, at the Door of victory, sat down to wait, and waiting—died!”

“Fougère” (May-June 2003). Laurence Senelick identified Eugénie Fougère, a French singer and dancer noted for eye-catching outfits, frisky movements, suggestive demeanor, and her ragtime cakewalk “Hello, Ma Baby.” She performs, wrote Gerelyn Hollingsworth, at [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/-varstg:@field\(NUMBER\(1094\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/-varstg:@field(NUMBER(1094))).

“desire...” (May-June 2003). John Croke located Yeats’s source in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Table Talk*: “The man’s desire is for the woman; but the woman’s desire is rarely other than for the desire of the man” (July 23, 1827).

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138.

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