

Edward Everett Hale

Brief life of a science-minded writer and reformer: 1822-1909

by JEFFREY MIFFLIN

HARVARD WITNESSED a wave of enthusiasm for photography in the spring of 1839, inspired by the restlessly inquiring mind of senior Edward Everett Hale. That January, in France and England, Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot had announced their independently discovered means of preserving the images visible in a camera obscura. Daguerre withheld important details until granted a government pension, but Talbot, eager to bolster his claim to have invented photography, described his materials and methods fully. Instructions soon crossed the Atlantic in his privately printed pamphlet and in scientific journals, prompting undergraduates to “photogenise” with scraps of smooth-surfaced writing paper brushed with nitrate of silver. The “photogenic drawing” Ned Hale successfully produced that spring, now lost, is considered the first photograph made in America.

Hale matriculated at 13. Encouraged early to make things, he had built model train engines, set up a printing press (his father owned and edited the influential *Boston Daily Advertiser*), and tried simple experiments in chemistry and botany. Bursting with energy, he deplored the paucity of lessons based on observation and hands-on experimentation at Harvard. His lively memoir, *A New England Boyhood*, tells of dispelling boredom by reading novels and joining scientific clubs; he and friends founded both the “Octagon Club” for astronomical observations and a Natural History Society. (The College made them pay for the construction of exhibit cases.)

He and his friend Samuel Longfellow commenced playing with Talbot’s process as soon as the details were available. Their first successful picture dates from March 1839 or soon thereafter. In the 1890s, Hale recalled that he “took from my window in Massachusetts Hall a picture of the college library—Harvard Hall—opposite me...[with] a little camera made for...draughtsmen, with a common lens of an inch and a quarter. We were delighted, because, in a window of the building which ‘sat for us,’ a bust of Apollo ‘came out’...distinctly...all the lights and shades being marked....”

Those negative images exposed in Harvard Yard are more properly “photogenic drawings” than Talbotypes, the more advanced technology that soon evolved from them. (The earliest extant photograph of Harvard, taken in 1844 by freshman Josiah Parsons Cooke, is a Talbotype of Gore Hall, the impressive new College library.) By 1840, when Talbot discovered how to convert negatives to positive images, Hale, while studying theology, had enrolled in the first Boston-area course on the daguerreotype technique. His 1840 journals are packed with references to bulbs, shutters, and various photographic experiments, including the usefulness of “photogeny” for printing maps; he claimed that a self-portrait he took that year on the steps of South Congregational Church in

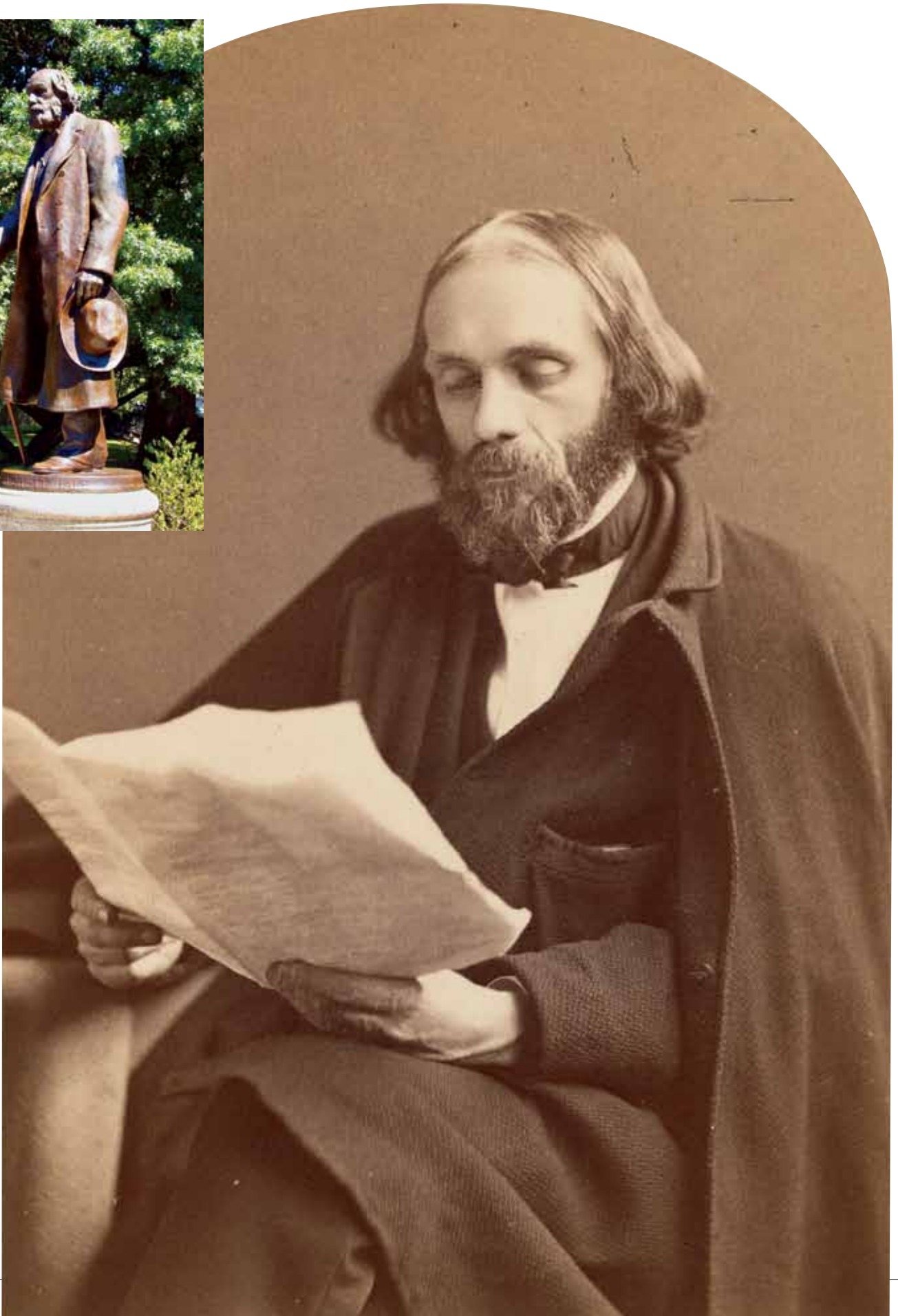
Boston was “the first likeness of a human being...taken in Massachusetts.” That venue seems to foreshadow his future role as the church’s Unitarian minister (1856-1899); the congregation he led for 43 years strongly supported his activism.

Hale was a wide-ranging social reformer, shaped perhaps by the political discussions overheard at home as he grew up. A lifelong aversion to rote learning prompted his repeated criticism of the formal education of his day; he encouraged his friends to let their sons learn “by overhearing, by looking on, by trying experiments, and by example.” His own writings for children, such as *How to Do It* (1895), encouraged young minds to be optimistic about what they could accomplish, and to cultivate “vital power” in readiness for facing life’s problems. He supported Irish famine relief by finding opportunities for refugees; co-founded the New England Emigrant Aid Society to encourage antislavery supporters to settle in Kansas; and advocated for fairness to Native Americans and educational opportunities for freed slaves. A story he published in 1870 inspired the creation of altruistic “Lend a Hand” clubs and the Lend a Hand Society. Without losing sight of the nation’s shortcomings, he possessed a patriotic sensibility memorably expressed in his 1863 story, “The Man Without a Country,” wherein a court-martialed traitor is sentenced to never again set foot in his native land or hear its name spoken—a fate, the narrative implies, far worse than death.

Hale also reserved creative energy for lighter literary activities, often showcasing his interest in scientific developments and fascination with inventions. His most engaging works, including “The Brick Moon” (an 1869 serial for *Atlantic Monthly*), are full of clever devices and scientific adventure and anticipate modern science fiction. That fictional “moon” was a huge, man-made satellite where accelerated evolution transpired. Message 17 from its orbiting colonists (transmitted by visual Morse code read through high-powered telescopes) stated, “Write to Darwin that he is all right. We began with lichens and have come as far as palms and hemlocks.”

A bronze statue of Hale, erected by public subscription in 1913, still stands at the edge of the Boston Public Garden. The granite base proclaims, “Man of Letters, Preacher of the Gospel, Prophet of Peace, Patriot”—traits that endeared him deeply to friends and those affected by his writings and humanitarian endeavors. The sculpture presents an elderly man poised to enter a planned landscape replete with exotic plants and an even greater variety of people. It is easy to imagine that he gazes with benevolence as well as curiosity at the tourists who pause to snap his picture. ♡

Jeffrey Mifflin, A.B.E. ’80, is the archivist of Massachusetts General Hospital. His articles on historical topics have appeared in a variety of books and journals.



HUP HALE, E.E. '14, HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES