

# REFLECTIONS ON EDIS—PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

By Jonnie Guerra

The following remarks provided the finale to EDIS's tenth-anniversary gathering in Boulder, Colorado, this past July.

—Ed.

In an 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson made a prophetic observation—and one you have heard quoted frequently this weekend: “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her.” This gathering in Boulder, Colorado, to celebrate the tenth birthday of the author society devoted to Dickinson and her work and established with the express purpose of “Disseminating / [her] Circumference” is wonderful testimony to Dickinson's astute self-confidence in her own immortality.

As the current vice president of EDIS, I am pleased to fill in for President Cristanne Miller to offer some reflections on the beginnings of the Society, on its accomplishments to date, and on the future we envision. My remarks this afternoon illustrate the collaborative spirit that has sustained this Society from the very start, for the memories, accomplishments, and future vision belong to many besides myself. I ask that you think of me, not as me, but as a “supposed person,” the representative of others, more influential than myself, who launched EDIS a decade ago and continue to nurture its success.

It is worth noting that just about everyone who sent me their recollections remembers good food and even better camaraderie as hallmarks of the early days of planning for the Emily Dickinson International Society. According to Jane Eberwein, Margaret Freeman first broached “the idea of a society while a bunch of [ED enthusiasts] were standing in line at a Dayton, Ohio, restaurant toward the end of an October 1986 conference (having given ‘Dickinson’ as the name of the party).”

Rivaling the Chicago Five, this group—our own Dayton Five—included not only Jane and Margaret but also Suzanne Juhasz, Barbara Mossberg, and Gary Lee Stonum. Jane remembers thinking that the Society “seemed like an exciting idea but probably

one of those things nobody follows up on [and thus] I was happily surprised to be included in a social gathering [at the New York MLA that same year] where plans were further developed.”

A few months later the expanded group met again, this time at the District of Columbia Historical Society. On this occasion, the conversation included talk of a constitution and legal incorporation and bold plans for an international conference, two publications, MLA affiliation, an Amherst center for Dickinson study, and a secure future for the Dickinson houses. In addition, Cristanne Miller recalls “the wonderful catering served by Barbara [Mossberg]’s son [Nicolino], who recited ‘I’m Nobody’ for the group.”

Just as memorable, says Cris, was “the nearly hour-long discussion about what level of dues would be appropriate for Martha Nell Smith’s cleaning woman, who became the representative for all nonacademic, nonprofessional ED fans.” Likewise, founding president Margaret Freeman remembers that a primary goal for EDIS from its start was “to reach out to all who love Dickinson, and not just academics.” I am proud to say that our current membership represents a broad spectrum of professions and that the Society will continue to aim for this kind of inclusiveness as we move into our second decade.

Even with the ardent commitment of the founders, the actual process of incorporation took two years. Margaret insists that “No Pain, no Gain” was the motto of that period. Indeed, it was only after much hard work and many sessions of debate and decision-making that the inauguration and incorporation meetings were held on May 24, 1988. On this day, in the Special Collections Room at the Jones Library in Amherst, a firm legal foundation for the Society’s work was finally in place.

As the concept of a Dickinson Society progressed to the implementation stage, the founders were grateful for Christer Mossberg’s work as legal counsel, Don

Freeman’s assistance in retaining Barry White of Foley, Hoag, & Eliot in Boston as the Society’s registered agent in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and Special Collections Curator Dan Lombardo’s gracious hospitality at the Jones.

Margaret Freeman also points out that, because the founders “knew Dickinson had a following all over the world,” the Society’s mission was international from the outset. Jane Eberwein, the first EDIS membership chair, shared some special memories of her efforts to recruit international members: “One person to whom I wrote was Takao Furukawa, whom I had met at the Folger Conference and who had given me his business card. I asked him to spread the word to the Emily Dickinson Society of Japan but never expected the generosity of Japanese response. Not long afterward I received a letter from him with a long list of Japanese members for EDIS and a check for all those memberships (many for up to five years and several as contributing members). For a while, we had more Japanese members than American ones. It was an amazing display of confidence in a fledgling organization and one we all appreciated.” Today the Society boasts international members from eighteen countries.

It was during Margaret’s presidency that both EDIS publications were successfully launched. In Margaret’s words, “It was the Society’s greatest fortune to discover Georgie [Strickland],” who answered an announcement in one of the early *Bulletins* that the Society was in search of someone to assume the editorship of the *Bulletin*, a post that Margaret and Cris Miller had been juggling back and forth. Georgie’s creativity and dedication to quality have produced a publication that is not only of compelling interest to all our members—academic and nonacademic alike—but also unmatched by the peer publications of other author societies. And surely the *EDIS Bulletin* is one of the few publications to receive its own (nearly) winning numbers from Publishers Clearing House.

The Society is equally proud of the *Emily Dickinson Journal* and indebted to Suzanne Juhasz, its founding editor. Margaret Freeman recalls that "Suzanne's goal, from the beginning, was to create a forum whereby Dickinson scholarship could be read in one place, where the interaction of ideas [about the poet and her work] could take place between the covers" of a single journal. That goal certainly was achieved during its five years of sponsorship by the University Press of Colorado, which ended in the spring of 1997. It is a tribute to Editor-in-Chief Juhasz, Managing Editor Lynne Spears, the editorial board, and all of the journal's many contributors that Johns Hopkins University Press, the premier publisher of humanities journals, has assumed sponsorship of the *Journal*. Now that's a birthday gift worthy of Dickinson!

The culminating event of Margaret's presidency was the Society's first international conference, "Translating Emily Dickinson in Language, Culture, and the Arts," in October 1992. Well over two hundred participants traveled to Washington, D.C., arriving from fifteen foreign countries and twenty-eight states. Richard Sewall, in absentia, received the first Distinguished Service award, and we heard Dickinson performed by a viol da gamba and the world premier of the Robert Chauls song cycle the Society had commissioned.

As the conference director, I remember even better than the occasion the serendipity of the planning: the letter from Roland Hagenbüchle introducing Gudrun Grabher as a potential speaker; another from David Porter recommending Italian translator Marisa Bulgheroni and Portuguese translator Maria de Paiva Correia for the translation workshops; the assistance from the American embassy in locating the Thai translator and scholar Chanthana Chaichit; the steady stream of registrations from our Japanese members; my many calls to distinguished scholars to extol the benefits of paying their own expenses to participate, and my subsequent sighs of relief when they were persuaded.

At the conference itself, the serendipity continued. In attendance were six actresses who had portrayed Dickinson, several in original pieces. It also was at the '92 conference that EDIS made its first acquaintance with Lesley Dill, our keynote speaker

at last summer's annual meeting. During the opening reception, Susanna Rich showed me some slides of Dill's early poem sculptures incorporating Dickinson words, and I quickly added her presentation on Dill to one of the art panels.

I think of Margaret's successor, Vivian Pollak, as the President for Three A's: Amherst, Austria, and Affiliation. First, it was during Vivian's presidency that the Society initiated the tradition of holding some of its annual meetings in Amherst and of planning a program in conjunction with the business meeting. You may recall that, thanks to the arrangements made by Polly Longworth, Vivian presided over the first annual meeting ever held in the Dickinson garden, in the summer of 1993.

It was on that same occasion that she announced plans for the second international conference, "Emily Dickinson Abroad," in Innsbruck, Austria. What a planning trio we had in Vivian, Gudrun, and Margaret Dickie, and what a magical conference in 1995 in Austria, complete with dinner in a Renaissance castle! Again the geographical representation was spectacular—more than a hundred participants from sixteen European, Asian, and North American countries. Among the highlights—and there were many—was Martha Nell Smith's report on the possibility of a hypermedia archive of ED materials on the World Wide Web. Suddenly, in this ancient city, the future seemed very much upon us! Those of you in attendance no doubt also will recall that the Dickinson impersonations continued, and we discovered the theatrical talents of Gudrun, Suzanne, and Cristanne.

Vivian's presidency also was marked by dedication to the Society's goal of winning MLA affiliation. Thanks to the work of both Vivian and Jane Eberwein, formal approval of our status as an allied organization of the Modern Language Association came shortly after Vivian passed the presidential gavel to Cristanne Miller. Beginning in December 1996, the Society has been able to present two Dickinson sessions at each annual convention, which means that our academic membership can count on sessions of interest at both the winter MLA and the late spring ALA meeting.

When Cris succeeded Vivian as the

Society's president, she says, "our publications were strong, our intellectual leadership in the field of Dickinson studies was clear, and our membership was substantial," and she rightly credits "the work of the first two presidents and all the early members of the Board" for a Society that, like Dickinson's house in Poem J1142, was now "adequate, erect." As Cris's presidency has evolved over the last three years, her primary role "has been to direct Society thought and energy to contemplating how to move forward toward other ambitious goals without losing the momentum we have gained in intellectual leadership or the sense of scholarly and celebratory community." It has been a challenge to achieve a balance, to maintain our reputation for strong publications, annual meetings, and conferences and to launch new initiatives.

Next summer's third international conference is an ambitious project. Aply led by Martha Ackmann, Gary Stonum, and Cris, this conference will have participants traveling between three sites important to understanding "Emily Dickinson at Home" and will represent an elaborate collaboration of EDIS with Mount Holyoke College, various Amherst institutions, and the Houghton Library at Harvard. In addition, as many of you know, Domhnall Mitchell has invited us to hold a conference in Trondheim, Norway, and we already are in the planning stages for that event in 2001.

Under Cris's leadership, the Society has sought ways to support the Dickinson houses, both of which are on much firmer financial and organizational grounds than they were ten years ago, thanks to Cindy Dickinson and the Homestead's new board, and to Gregory Farmer and the Martha Dickinson Bianchi Trust.

Cris also has moved along the Society's dream to initiate a program—to be called the EDIS Scholar in Amherst Program—that will annually bring a scholar to Amherst to study Dickinson's poetry, life, manuscripts, and culture. This is the first step toward the Society's goal to develop and support a center for Dickinson studies in Amherst. And, as you can imagine, these days the Board has both strategic planning for the future and fund raising very much on its mind.

Margaret Freeman has suggested that other challenges that lie ahead for the Board include defining a clear role for local chapters and developing stronger connections between these groups and EDIS, providing more opportunities for the membership to play an active role in the Society, and establishing a greater presence on the Internet listserves. We appreciate that Margaret will direct her energy to these issues as our new Membership Chair.

Although EDIS cannot take credit for the incredible quantity of scholarship on Dickinson that has enriched study of the poet over the last decade, we do take parental pride in several recent projects that represent significant contributions to the reference works available in the field. We are delighted that members of EDIS played a key role as researchers and writers for Jane Eberwein's newly published *Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*. We also look forward to the publication in December 1998 of *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, edited by board members Gudrun Grabher and Cris Miller and our good friend Roland Hagenbüchle, and hailed in advance for its "original and exemplary" scholarship.

No review of the Society's first decade of accomplishments would be complete without public acknowledgment of the contributions to its success of many not with us today. First, I would like to acknowledge former members of the Board who were unable to join us this weekend: Margaret Dickie, Joanne Dobson, Rev. Niels Kjær of Denmark, Polly Longworth, Barbara and Christer Mossberg, Martha O'Keefe, Marc Pachter, and Walt Powell. Next, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the work of the current Board members and officers of the Society [whose names are listed on the back page of the *Bulletin*]. For the beautiful calligraphy recreating Dickinson's handwriting that has become emblematic of EDIS and that can be found on the front page of the *Bulletin* as well as on the covers of the *Journal* and our conference programs, we are indebted to artist Glenda King.

The Society is also grateful to its many friends in Amherst. In addition to Dan Lombardo and Cindy Dickinson, who are here today, and Gregory Farmer whom I have already mentioned, the Society would

like to express special thanks to Betty and Win Bernhard for the festive occasions at their home that enabled the EDIS Board to network with Amherst lovers of Dickinson; to Howard and Joy Gersten of the Jeffery Amherst Book Shop, who have hosted several Dickinson-related book signings; to Fred Marks and Bob Lucas, who can be counted on to arrange special hours for EDIS members to peruse their rare books during our Amherst annual meetings; to Susan Danly, whose collaboration with us last summer and work on the 1997 Mead Museum exhibition resulted in a most memorable annual meeting on Dickinson and the arts; and to the many docents at the Homestead who have indulged our lingering ways during our house tours.

The Board also extends a special thanks to Dan Lombardo and his staff for the hospitality we have enjoyed at the Jones Library from the beginning. In fact, EDIS is so at home at the Jones that we have designated it as our own final resting place—the home of our archives.

Of course, most of the credit for our success belongs to our membership, as of today four hundred strong, many of whom have joined the Society as contributing members and made generous donations in addition to paying dues. If you saw the film *Field of Dreams*, you will remember the words that became a haunting refrain: "Build it, and they will come." At the end of its first decade, the Emily Dickinson International Society has demonstrated a similar charisma in drawing together Dickinson scholars, readers, and fans from around the world.

In closing, it seems fitting to recall Dickinson's opening to Poem J1176:

We never know how high we are  
Till we are asked to rise  
And then if we are true to plan  
Our statures touch the skies —

Please join me in a round of applause for our first ten years!

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*Currently Jonnie Guerra is "on leave" from academic administration. She is working on a study of dramas about Dickinson and doing volunteer work at an adult reading academy. She has been a member of the EDIS Board since 1992.*

## TENTH-ANNIVERSARY GREETINGS

*From Cristanne Miller*

Cristanne Miller, current president of EDIS, was unable to attend the Society's tenth-anniversary celebration in Boulder but sent the following message from her home in Berlin. She has since returned to Pomona College. —Ed.

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On July 19, I will have returned from a visit to the "immortal Alps" that Dickinson imagined, and will myself be imagining all of you in the immortal Rockies. Fortunately the links of the imagination are in this instance more powerful than the restrictions of geography: Although you cannot see me, I am indeed celebrating EDIS's tenth birthday with you even while remaining in Berlin.

In its ten years of existence, EDIS has, I think, been extraordinarily successful in encouraging new scholarship on Dickinson, in publishing the ongoing "news" of activities, events, and thought relating to her life and poetry, and in bringing together people from around the world who are provoked and inspired by Dickinson's verse.

EDIS has been able to step in at early stages both to support the changing management and programs of the Dickinson houses and to establish a firm basis for ongoing conversation about how to continue such cooperative support in the future. And it has established itself nationally (if not internationally) as one of the key U.S. author societies through its association with institutions like the MLA, the ALA, and Johns Hopkins University Press.

I feel very proud to be the president of such a thriving, intellectually and socially constructive Society. To borrow Dickinson's words again, to me it feels "alive." I hope that in the next ten years we will together build from this vital base an even more welcoming, stimulating, supportive Society for the celebration and encouragement of Dickinson studies.

Happy Birthday, EDIS, and may there be many more birthdays to come!