

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
**EDWARDSVILLE**

April 25, 2013

Andrea Anderson, Acting Director  
Office of Challenge Grants  
National Endowment for the Humanities  
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20506

Dear Ms. Anderson:

The Eugene Field House is now in the process of making itself an important center for the study of humanities. It has for many years been a cherished local monument to St. Louis's past, to some not-yet-forgotten local luminaries, and to some well-remembered poems. It now has the potential to become an institution that is at the very forefront of the study of American history, literature, and culture. I urge the NEH to help the Field House Foundation realize that potential.

The Eugene Field House was preserved, to begin with, as a tribute to "the Children's Poet." That seemed, at one time, a description that made Eugene Field hardly a fit subject for serious literary study. In recent years, however, the artistry of "children's literature" has become an object of academic study. That new status is shown by many scholarly works devoted to the field and by the appearance of such works as *Little Women* and *Little House on the Prairie* in the Library of America, which is in some ways the embodiment of America's literary canon.

That revival of interest in children's literature has also been part of a redefinition of the American literary tradition. Until recent years, that tradition has had a decidedly "he-man" cast, and its central works were about men on the fringes of society, often men trying to escape the women who would "sivilize" them, as Huck Finn put it. But America's literary tradition is now rarely seen as the old Melville-Hemingway-Mailer line. Many women writers have taken their place in the tradition, as have, increasingly, the male writers who were once dismissed as the "genteel tradition." Eugene Field, in both his essays and his verse, was part of that tradition. And like many women writers, he has been too often dismissed as "sentimental." Now the writers who explored how people live in society, rather than how they can flee it, and the writers who openly dealt with emotions instead of celebrating emotional restraint are getting a fair hearing. Eugene Field's literary stock will rise as they do.

Field is also central to another part of the American literary tradition that is getting its due after years of neglect. That field is non-fiction, particularly the essay. Essays were, of course, long considered a central part of literature, and Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Addison and Steele, Samuel Johnson, Washington Irving, and Emerson made lasting reputations through their works in it. But throughout most of the 20th century, literature was largely identified with the fictional, and essayists were neglected. Recently, with the rise in the popularity of "creative non-fiction" and fresh scholarly studies of the subject, the essay and other non-fictional forms are getting their due again, and doubtless Field will be part of that revival. (Some of his books of essays are already available for the Amazon Kindle and other e-readers.)

Field himself wrote in a time when literature was being transformed by technology, so today's scholars have much to learn from his work and career. He was the first newspaper columnist.

The column may seem to be a vanishing form, but in his day it was ground-breaking to bring the essay to a truly mass audience—and for a journalist to have no set subject for his writing, but instead to write about whatever struck him. In many ways, Eugene Field is rightly called the first blogger, since he used a new technology—the printing presses and telegraphs that allowed for the rise of mass-circulation newspapers—in order to share his ideas on whatever stuck him with whoever cared to see what he was thinking. The study of Field may help us understand the transformations of writing that are taking place in our own time.

The archives to be preserved in the expanded Eugene Field House will be a boon to scholars. But the contribution of the institution to the humanities will not end there. It will become a center for the study of many subjects: the literature of childhood, the development of journalism, creative non-fiction, just to name a few. Working in collaboration with St. Louis's other academic and cultural institutions, it can become a center for many truly worthwhile developments in the humanities—conferences, publications, and basic research into the manuscripts and rare printed sources.

As I am a Professor of English, I have focused on the literary aspect of the Eugene Field House's mission. But that is only a part of a larger whole. With its collections on Roswell Field and the Dred Scott case, it is an important resource for historians, especially those dealing with the events leading to the Civil War, with the development of American law, and with African-American issues. The carefully restored house itself is a resource everyone—both historians and students of material culture in other fields—who wants to know how the professional middle classes lived in the 1850's. The collection of toys and other objects from many periods will be useful for those trying to come to a better understanding of the American experience by focusing not on courtrooms or battlefields, but on the places where people really lived their lives, including parlors and living room floors.

Finally, the house will not just be a place for scholarly study. It will continue to serve as a place where the humanities are practiced by citizens. Whether they are lovers of old poems or old houses, Civil War buffs or local historians, adults listening to a speaker or children rapt by a well-told story, people come to the Eugene Field House for the rewards the humanities offer. In assisting the Eugene Field House Foundation to continue to serve the larger public as well as the scholarly community, the National Endowment for the Humanities will be carrying out the vital mission for which it was founded.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'B. Ragen', is written over a light blue grid background.

Brian Abel Ragen  
Professor of English

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