IV. The Lane-Mellen Association

We have known about Mary Mellen's paintings and their closeness to Lane's work for some time, certainly beginning with some of the early studies of Lane from the 1960s and '70s. Since then, many more documented works by her have appeared on the market, in part prompted by the dramatic rises in pricing for Lane's canvases and their increasing scarceness. We can now clearly attribute pictures that were once thought to be by Lane (because knowledge of Mellen was so sparse) to her hand. In recent years, her exacting copies of Lane have come to light—on occasion suggesting that they painted some views side by side. A couple of canvases have appeared that have been jointly signed. This raises the issue of who might have painted which part of a composition. It also opens up the possibility that he could have delegated subsequent versions of a subject, like *Owl's Head*, the *Camden Hills*, or *Brace's Rock*, in part to her.

We have Professor Michael Moses of Stern Business School, New York University, to thank for a fuller account of Mellen's life and attempt to catalogue her work comprehensively. His lengthy article on Mellen, published in 1991, provides the first thorough research on her family and relationship to Lane in Gloucester.[57] Since that publication we have learned further clarifications and corrections to her biography. Mary Blood was born in 1819, making her fifteen years younger than Lane. Her place of birth has not yet been ascertained, but may have been in Vermont. The 1820 census shows Reuben Blood and family in that state, and the 1860 census gives her place of birth as Vermont.[58] She attended the Quaker's Fryville Seminary in Bolton, Massachusetts, where she would have learned various artistic crafts, including theorem painting and still lifes. In 1840, she married the Reverend Charles W. Mellen. They lived in southern Massachusetts in the 1840s, in upstate New York in the 1850s, and Dorchester, Massachusetts, in the 1860s. In April 1855 her husband's brother W. R. G. Mellen, then of Auburn, New York, was invited to become pastor of the Universalist Church in Gloucester.[59] (For more details of Mellen's chronology, see this catalogue, pages 105–107.) As an aspiring artist, Mary Mellen may have already been attracted to Lane's artistic orbit, but this family connection to the city certainly offered her access from the mid-fifties on. Moses believes from stylistic evidence that she could have been working in Lane's studio soon after his move back from Boston in 1848. Part of her apprenticeship was copying his works, which she did with increasing competence. One observer wrote in the newspaper that "Her copy of Lane's 'On the Lee Shore' has elicited the warm encomiums of the press.... Mrs. Mellen is so faithful in the copies of her master, that even an expert might take them for originals." He went on to report that on one occasion Lane himself appeared uncertain as to which was his when both were shown side by side.[60] Among the few signatures and inscriptions that are known so far—in her case always signed on the canvas reverse—are "Painted by M. B. Mellen after F. H. Lane" and "Painted by Fitz H. Lane and Mary B. Mellen."

One of her earliest copies was a watercolor after a rare 1849 oil by Lane of a bouquet of flowers arranged on a wall.[61] Her efforts continued throughout the rest of Lane's career and after his lifetime. One of her nicest homages was a copy of *Gloucester Harbor and Dolliver's Neck* (Cat. 11) painted in 1870. She outlived Lane by more than twenty years, and her later years of painting moved towards a softer, more painterly manner. Their association must have been a close one, for in 1859 Lane visited Mellen's family homestead in Sterling, Massachusetts, and painted alongside her a matching version, as his inscription described of the "Residence of Reuben Blood, Esq., Town of Stirling [*sic*], Mass., Painted from a sketch, taken August 1859, by Fitz H. Lane" (Cats. 19–20). For many years Lane's canvas was thought to depict the Stevens home in Castine, Maine, until this documented version in a private collection came to light. Mellen's painting is also privately

owned, having descended in the Blood family to the present. Clearly, the association was close and ongoing.[62]

At her best, Mary Mellen could paint a picture that, when seen in isolation on its own, might well be taken for a Lane. Only when placed next to the Lane version, as in her paintings of *Gloucester Harbor* (Cats. 7–8 and Fig. 40), can the eye compare details passage by passage and begin to see differences in their handling. There are several clues to the character of her painting technique, coloration, and draftsmanship. Her reflections in ripples of water are not as subtle or nuanced; often her vessels seem to sit on the water surface, rather than in the water. She preferred a greater use of yellows and pinks in her sunsets than did Lane. Her rigging seldom has the tensile drawing and utter confidence and clarity of his, and her sails sometimes look flat. Mellen's waves usually have a more mechanical and repetitive quality, and her rocks are noticeably softer and more doughy. Empty space for Mellen looks just that, whereas Lane could make it look poetic and suggestive. For him light was not just an optical detail but an emotionally charged expressive element. It is tricky to distinguish their two styles, but possible. Trickier still is attempting to separate their hands when we have evidence or—toughest of all—the appearance of collaborative work.

Mellen made direct copies of more than half a dozen of Lane's favorite subjects: *Gloucester Harbor*, *Norman's Woe* (Cats. 9–10, 16–17), *A Storm Breaking Away: Vessel Slipping her Cable* (Cat. 29 and Fig. 44), *Entrance of Somes Sound* (Cat. 44 and Fig. 20), *Two Ships in Rough Water* (Cat. 32), and as noted above, the *Blood Family Homestead* (Cats. 19–20). Lane's original of *Two Ships* (location unknown) was purchased by James H. Mansfield, whose sister described it as "one of the most beautiful Lanes I have ever seen—a picture of a barque dismasted, and rolling in a heavy sea. The touch was very soft and beautiful." Another Lane follower and copyist, the Gloucester artist D. Jerome Elwell, said, "that sky was painted con amore."[63] When Lane died, Mellen's copy (Cat. 32) was said to have been on his easel at Duncan's Point. In addition, there were other subjects Mellen painted multiple times, most notably *A Smart Blow* (Cat. 25 and Fig. 43), *Ten Pound Island at Sunset* (Cat. 22 and Fig. 41), and *Owl's Head* (Cats. 40–41). These vary in quality from refined to stiffer and weaker interpretations. It makes one pause over Stevens's frequent phrase written on a number of Lane's drawings, "Paintings made from this drawing" for several listed clients.

The questions about the *Ten Pound Island* series are further compounded by at least one version that was reworked by Elwell. An inscription on the reverse presumably in Lane's hand on his *Ten Pound Island at Sunset* (Cat. 21) reads, "Composition, F. H. Lane to J. L. Stevens." Beneath Elwell wrote: "D. Jerome Elwell touched upon, March 13, '91." Elwell had overpainted some of Lane's sky with even more intense and hotter cadmium reds and pinks, presumably more in keeping with later Victorian taste. The Mellen copies also tend toward a lighter and paler palette, but her versions are distinguishable ultimately for their softer rendering of rock formations and boat rigging in particular. Seen in isolation, the best of them seem very close to Lane's own hand.

Then there are the images that appear to be more generally Lane inspired. Typical are *Three Master at Sunset* (Cat. 28) and *Ship in Calm Sea* (Cat. 30). Mellen had little of the compositional imagination evident in Lane's evocative distribution of forms within a design, his poetic use of open space, or delicate balancing of geometric massings. Although *Ship in Calm Sea* is an unfinished painting, it bears all the hallmarks of her style. The vessel itself could have come from any number of Lane's ship portraits, and given the solidity and clarity of the dark solid hull, that part could possibly have been laid out by Lane. But the repetitive, flat sail configuration and their limp, pasty treatment are from Mellen's hand, as are the relatively weak rigging lines and pale yellow-pink palette.

A different complication arises in pictures with condition problems, such as the small copy of *Entrance of Somes Sound*

from Southwest Harbor (Cat. 44). The original dates from 1852 (Fig. 20), when Lane did several drawings of this prospect. He returned to the area three years later and executed another drawing of the scene, which may have led to the smaller canvas. Some details seem lacking in Lane's subtlety: the smooth brown wall of hills in the background, the awkward small boats at the left, hesitant (or overcleaned) lines of rigging, and the uniformly soft, unarticulated foreground. Is this an indifferent and badly preserved Lane, a Mellen variation, or some combination of both hands? Perhaps further direct physical comparison with works by both artists or insights from the Cleveland conservation project will shed more decisive light on its identity.

The moonlight pictures by both artists provide their own interesting comparisons and questions. So far, we have no exact correlations of views—originals and copies—that match up. Mentioned above is Lane's *Fishing Party* (Cat. 33) and his *Moonlight, Owl's Head, Northeast View* (Cat. 35), clearly based on drawings Lane made of the view in the mid-1850s and documented as descending in the Stevens family. Most of Mellen's moonlight paintings are views across Gloucester Harbor, with the lighthouse on Ten Pound Island in the far left distance. Another moonlight scene (private collection) is thought to depict Castine Harbor, and *Moonlight Fishing Scene, Half Way Rock* (Cat. 38), once called a Lane, is now attributed to Mellen. This painting is a reworking of one of Lane's similar daylight versions (George Lewis Collection, Boston, and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). Two uncertainties arise: the *Moonlight, Gloucester Harbor* (Cat. 34) in the Shelburne Museum has a flatness and hardness that does not naturally match with either artist. Mellen's other versions of the same view have warmer tonalities, more amorphous rocks, and more painterly cloud formations. In turn, these very clouds around the moon are strikingly similar to the analogous passage in Lane's *Moonlight, Owl's Head, Northeast View* (Cat. 35), raising the possibility of a joint execution there.

This issue came to the fore with the discovery of documented collaborations, such as the small tondo canvas, *Coast of Maine* (Cat. 45), which is signed by both artists on the reverse. This raises the question of which parts were painted by each of them. Lane, who consistently loved to paint foregrounds, often with solid boulders and bursts of flowering shrubs or wildflowers, most likely painted the whole curving foreground here, from the pine trees around to the rising cliffs. The lighter drawing and paler sky coloring of the center view into the distance seems more characteristic of Mellen's touch. Similarly, the painting of *Dana Beach, Manchester* (once titled *Salt Island from Good Harbor Beach*) (Cat. 18), also appears to be a joint effort, with Lane having executed the strong foreground edge, while Mellen depicted the beach itself and entire background.

Because of the multiple versions of the *Brace's Rock* group, that series has already invited speculation as to Mellen's participation. One small painting called *Coming Ashore near Brace's Rock, Gloucester, Massachusetts* (Cat. 46) has a mix of details handled both strongly and weakly, hinting of joint execution. A large related canvas from Lane's last years is his *Near West Beach, Beverly, Massachusetts* (Fig. 7), painted with intense deep reds but again with drawing that ranges in strength and quality across the foreground. Mellen may well have assisted in completing this work. The painting known as *Brace's Rock, Brace's Cove* (Fig. 36 and Cat. 50), prompts the same speculation. Although signed unmistakably in Lane's hand, the entire composition is improbable and contrived, while parts of the rock formations in the background recall Mellen more than Lane. As photographs of the site from the ocean side show (Fig. 37), it is a much more dramatically rough area than the quiet, flat beach familiar in other versions. No such curving cove exists on this side of Brace's Rock, let alone any place where a hull might be resting ashore. Moreover, the profile of the rock itself simply looks as if Lane turned his preparatory drawing over and invented the fore-

ground we see here as a mirror of the other side. Whatever his degree of lameness, walking from the cart track to that side of the rock ledges would have been demanding, and it seems unlikely that Lane ever physically reached this vantage point—hence the contrived reinterpretation of the promontory. Frail in his last year, he plausibly relied on the talents of his follower to a degree we can sense but still not precisely isolate. The unknowns in Lane's life and art haunt and taunt us from beginning to end.

John Wilmerding

1. William Dunlap, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States* (New York, 1834; Dover Publications reprint, 1969), II: 251–53. Thanks to Lisa N. Peters, Spanierman Gallery, LLC, New York, for pointing out this information.

2. Quoted in Ruth L. Bohan, *Looking into Walt Whitman, American Art, 1850–1920* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 149. Bohan cites the similar name modification by Marsden Hartley in the early twentieth century at the outset of his career, and suggests that for both Whitman and Hartley these were also acts of sexual self-definition. To these personal name changes, we can also add Mark Twain, Robert Henri, Arshile Gorky, and Mark Rothko.

3. See Sarah Dunlap and Stephanie Buck, "Fitz Who? The Artist Latterly Known as Fitz Hugh Lane," appendix, n.p., in the reprint editions of John Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane* (Gloucester, Mass.: Cape Ann Historical Museum, 2005).

4. John J. Babson, *History of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Including the Town of Rockport* (Gloucester, Mass.: Proctor Brothers, 1860), 258.

5. For background on this period, see Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane*, Chapter One, 17–23; and John Wilmerding, et al., *Paintings by Fitz Hugh Lane*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988), "Chronology," 9–14.

6. Andrew Wilton and Tim Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820–1880* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 25–27.

7. This is fully discussed in John Wilmerding, *The Artist's Mount Desert: American Painters on the Maine Coast* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 46, 71.

8. Phebe Hanaford, *Daughters of America* (Augusta, Maine: True and Co., 1882), 309. Is it conceivable that sometime after his father's death (1816), Lane might have learned the possibility that he was illegitimate, the son of someone named Henry? While there is no suggestion of this anywhere, it is known in the English tradition the use of Fitz as a prefix for a name is common in cases of illegitimacy. It was also a common Gloucester name at that time, as is indicated in "Births,"in *Vital Records of Gloucester, Massachusetts to the End of the Year 1849* (Topsfield, Mass.: Topsfield Historical Society, 1917, vol I. This reference is credited to Stephanie Buck, Archives, Cape Ann Historical Museum.

9. Information courtesy of Margaret Stocker, former curator of the Marine Collection at India House, and trustee, India House Foundation. Stocker has since found newspaper notices for paintings by Fitz Hugh Lane as early as January 1913.

10. Edward Lane, "Early Recollections of Fitz H. Lane," *Gloucester Daily Times*, March 23, 1946; quoted in Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane*, reprint, 17.

11. Susan Babson, "C. A. S. & L. A. Weekly Column on Matters of Local History," *Authors and Artists of Cape Ann* (album of miscellaneous clippings, Cape Ann Historical Museum); quoted in Wilmerding, *Fitz Henry Lane*, reprint, 18.

12. Joseph. L. Stevens, Jr., in the *Gloucester Daily Telegraph*, September 11, 1850, clipping in *Authors and Artists of Cape,* quoted in *Fitz Henry Lane*, 53–54.