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“Boycott!”: Louise Imogen Guiney and the American Protective Association

By

Patricia Fanning

Auburndale is a town populated with retired missionaries, and bigots of small intellectual calibre.¹

Thus writes Louise Imogen Guiney, Irish-American poet and essayist, in an attempt to explain the predicament she faced as Postmistress in Auburndale, Massachusetts, a section of Newton, in 1895. Seen as a minor literary figure today, Guiney was well known in Boston during the 1890s. The incident which inspired the above quotation is little known in Boston Irish history but one which demonstrates in a very dramatic way how ordinary people are influenced by propaganda and prejudice and it puts a human face to the clashes of ideology, religion, and culture in Boston at the end of the 19th century.

Fortunately for historians, the chronology of events can be closely traced through Guiney's *Selected Letters*, edited by her niece Grace Guiney; the more than 800 letters to Fred Holland Day, now part of the Louise Imogen Guiney Collection at the Library of Congress; and newspaper clippings found in the Louise Imogen Guiney Collection at Holy Cross College.

Louise Guiney was born in Roxbury in 1861 to Janet Doyle Guiney and Patrick Robert Guiney, an immigrant from County Tipperary. When

¹ Letter to Dora Sigerson, 5 April 1895. *Letters of Louise Imogen Guiney*, edited by Grace Guiney, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926), I, p. 66.

the Civil War broke out, Patrick Guiney enlisted as a private in the Massachusetts Volunteers, fought with distinction in over 30 battles, was severely wounded at the Wilderness and was mustered out a General. As such, he became one of the most famous Irishmen in Boston, beloved by the Irish and respected by the Yankees for his service and patriotism. He never regained his health, however, but managed to stay alive primarily through determination and the care of his wife and daughter, until 1877 when he died suddenly at the age of forty-two.

Louise, the only child of the Guineys to survive infancy, was educated at Notre Dame Convent in Boston, the Everett Grammar School, and the Sacred Heart Convent School in Providence. Thoroughly Irish and Roman Catholic, Louise managed to walk the tightrope between Boston's Irish literary coterie, which included John Boyle O'Reilly, James Jeffrey Roche, and Katherine Conway, and the established Yankee literary circle led by Oliver Wendell Holmes and Charles Eliot Norton.

On one hand, O'Reilly, as the editor of the *Boston Pilot*, published Guiney's first poems in 1880 and, in 1884, she dedicated her first volume of poetry, *Songs at the Start*, to O'Reilly. On the other, she received much encouragement and support from Holmes, to whom she dedicated her first published collection of essays, *Goose-Quill Papers*, in 1885. Then still only 24 years old, Guiney was a rising star in literary circles and seemed destined to bridge the gap and help heal the animosity between the Irish immigrant community and the existing Yankee culture in Boston.

Guiney's writing reflects the pressure she encountered from the cultural and literary traditions surrounding her. First, in the mainstream literary debate between Realism and Romance (Realists believing it was time to bring real life and sorrow into literature and the Romantics believing that literature should be morally and spiritually uplifting), Guiney's educational background pulled her toward the Romantics. This tendency was reinforced by her association with Holmes and the influence of Holmes, Longfellow, and Whittier, all clearly Romantic poets.

Second, early in 1890, Guiney had traveled to Ireland where she met several of the Irish Literary Revivalists, including William Butler Yeats, Katherine Tynan, and Dora Sigerson. They too appealed to Guiney's romantic side, as did Boston Irish Romantics O'Reilly and Conway of the *Pilot*.

Guiney's adherence to the Romantic notion of both Boston's "Good Gray Poets", coupled with her belief in Ireland's "Celt," the melancholy,

spiritually sensitive, fatalistic, but heroic loser created in large part by Yeats and Tynan, allowed her to be both Irish and Romantic in her poems, essays, and fiction. It further allowed her to avoid addressing the often unpleasant world in which she was forced to live.²

The death of her father had left Louise and her mother in a precarious financial situation. For her entire life, Louise took on various occupations, often to the detriment of her own literary work and health, to support herself and her mother. Still, she maintained buoyant high spirits and a love of mischief and adventure, even in adversity. A December, 1892, letter to her close friend and confidante, Fred Holland Day, demonstrates both her vulnerability and her resiliency: "My pocket was picked yesterday on Berkeley St.... I saw the thief, and he had every reason to see me, for I chased him hard, and very nearly clutched him...."

Guiney goes on to explain that when the thief, "an undersized rough in a derby hat," saw her still close on his heels, he signaled to his fellow felons. Immediately four others, dressed exactly alike, came running to his rescue, "crossing on each other and recrossing in the cleverest way, and disappeared in a flash." She admitted that she "was no match for highwaymen of genius on ground they knew and I didn't."³

In the encounter, Guiney lost \$4 of her hard-earned money devoted to Christmas gifts, and \$5 she had saved to repay a loan from Day. He forgave that and many subsequent loans throughout the ensuing years. Once out of the clutches of pickpockets, however, Louise ran up against an even more formidable foe in her attempt to earn a living, nativist prejudice in the form of the American Protective Association.

Founded in 1887, in Clinton, Iowa, the American Protective Association was the brainchild of Henry F. Bowers, a lawyer who harbored paranoid suspicions of Catholic conspiracies. While the A.P.A. was primarily an anti-Catholic organization whose aim was to rid the country, (i.e., schools, political offices, and unions) of the Papist threat, in many areas of the country "Catholic" meant "Irish."⁴

² Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1990), pp. 153-176.

³ Louise Imogen Guiney (LIG) to Fred Holland Day (FHD), 22 December 1892. The Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, Library of Congress (LC).

⁴ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, (New York: Athenaeum, 1975), pp. 80-87.

This was especially true in Boston where the 19th century confrontation between Irish immigrants and the Yankee establishment was one of the most painful cultural collisions in history. The population of Boston increased by one-third in the decade following the Irish famine of 1845, mostly due to the immigration of poverty-stricken Irish. The result was a turbulent, unstable, overcrowded city, divided into two visibly distinct communities: native, Protestant, Anglo-Saxons and immigrant, Catholic, Celts. In Boston, then, the A.P.A. debate was very much driven by the convergence of anti-Irish *and* anti-Catholic prejudice, as fearful nativists saw the inroads being made by the Irish in the realms of politics, business, and education as a threat to their own dominance and leadership.

In 1893, the A.P.A. surged in popularity, riding the crest of economic instability. As the economic depression deepened, A.P.A. organizers cautioned frightened sympathizers, many of them unemployed, that their jobs were going to Catholic immigrants sent by the Pope to take over the United States. It was just at this time, in the fall of 1893, that Carrie L. Bourne, the postmaster of Auburndale, Massachusetts, decided to resign in anticipation of her upcoming marriage.

Louise Guiney and her mother had lived in Auburndale for eight years and she was encouraged to apply for the position by friends who understood her financial straits, knew her to be a capable, honest, young woman, and believed her father's military service would help her win the appointment. In fact, her name may have been put into nomination by Dr. William Hayes Ward, a Congregationalist minister and editor of *The Independent*. He was, at any rate, an early supporter.⁵ In any event, Louise Guiney makes clear, in a number of letters to friends, that as far as the position went she "did not seek it at all or in any sense..." but, admitted that she would "be glad of the honest work if I get it."⁶

There was an immediate response to the rumors of her candidacy. She was, after all, a fairly well known and well-respected poet. Despite the fact that most of the press was apparently positive, Guiney

⁵ Henry G. Fairbanks, *Louise Imogen Guiney: Laureate of the Lost*, (Albany, NY: MagiBooks, Inc., 1972), pp.271-272, note 1.

⁶ Letter to Richard Watson Gilder, 20 December 1893. *Letters of LIG*, I, p. 52.

characterized all of the comments and discussions as “miserable unnecessary public gabble.”⁷

Charles E. L. Wingate writing in *The Critic’s* “Boston Letter” of November 4, 1893, heartily endorsed her nomination. Calling her “one of the bright lights in Boston literature,” Wingate acknowledged that “the income would help fill out the purse which literature, however good, does not often greatly swell.”⁸ The *Boston Herald* announcement stressed the fact that Guiney was “a soldier’s daughter” and that “her appointment is cordially commended on all hands.”⁹ A third article indicated that when Guiney’s candidacy had been announced, all other applicants had withdrawn in deference to her.¹⁰ President Cleveland appointed Guiney to fill the vacancy in January of 1894.

It seemed, at first, that the appointment elicited only approval. One newspaper notice stated in part:

The appointment of Miss Louise Imogen Guiney to the charge of the post office at Auburndale is a very graceful recognition of services, which can in no way be stigmatized as political.... A poet in a post office may not be symbolized by Pegasus hitched to the plough; that would be an injustice to the poet. But a post office in the hands of a poet is an association that looks toward the millennium.¹¹

Guiney herself retained her unique perspective in the face of impending civil service as Wingate quotes her:

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Charles E. L. Wingate, *The Critic*, XX, p. 290.

⁹ *Boston Herald*, 6 January 1894, no page, Louise Imogen Guiney Collection, Holy Cross College (HC).

¹⁰ *St. Louis Church Progress*, 10 November 1894, no page, HC.

¹¹ HC, no date, periodical identification or page.

Like all rational folk, I had much rather loaf. Postmistressing, luckily, is a thing I can do; that is, until the fatal day when the Public shall command me to hand through the grating sixteen five-cent stamps, eighty-seven fours, twenty twos, and nine ones, and make change for them out of a ten-dollar bill. When that hour strikes, pray for me.¹²

Louise was, in actuality, enormously pleased. As she wrote gleefully to an English friend, "The salary, exclusive of clerk's pay, is some two hundred and fifty or sixty pounds per annum. Heigho!"¹³ (that would be about \$1,200). In addition to the obvious advantages of a steady income, she also believed that her new position would be compatible with her writing career. In an interview with the *Boston Herald*, printed on February 2, 1894, Louise stated that being postmistress would "give her such an opportunity of studying human nature as cannot fail to be of benefit to her literary work."¹⁴

In reality, while the conviviality which seemed to greet her appointment did not last, in a climate of nativist jingoism fueled by economic depression, Louise Guiney observed and learned a great deal about human nature during the next three years. Whether the experience would be beneficial to her literary work was yet to be determined.

Sometime after Guiney took office, the Auburndale community, apparently in an organized fashion, began to boycott the post office. They still mailed their letters and received deliveries there, but the townspeople refused to purchase their stamps from the new postmistress. At first glance, this may not seem to be a real problem, but the salary of the postmaster was based in part on the receipts received from the sale of stamps. Therefore, such an organized action could be a very real threat to one's livelihood and position. For a time, the boycott succeeded.

In late October, 1894, Louise Guiney was notified that although the volume of business being done by the post office had not diminished, the revenue received from stamp sales had decreased considerably. As a

¹² Wingate, *The Critic*, op. cit., p.290.

¹³ Letter to Herbert E. Clarke, 18 January 1894, *Letters of LIG*, I, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Boston Herald*, 2 February 1894, HC.

result, her salary would be reduced. There was speculation that the lack of business was due to the disgruntled supporters of other disappointed candidates for the position, or due to the fact that townspeople were afraid of Guiney's two St. Bernard dogs. When asked by the press about a report that the A.P.A. had organized the boycott against her, Guiney was "loath to accept any such explanation"¹⁵ yet, in private correspondence, she acknowledged the truth.

In a letter to Dora Sigerson, an Irish friend, she admitted her situation and its affect on her:

The fuss about my office, I regret to say, absurd as it seems, was no myth, and gave me great worry. Auburndale is a town populated with retired missionaries, and bigots of small intellectual calibre.... [W]hen I was proposed for Postmaster by an old friend of my father's... I had some rather rough sailing, thanks purely to my being a Catholic: i.e., one likely at any moment to give over the government mail, and the safe keys, to the Pope!.... I am somewhat broken in, now, and somewhat broken up, too!¹⁶

Still retaining as much of her sense of humor as she could, Guiney often referred to herself as "The Boycotted One" in correspondence with close friends and, in an October, 1894, letter, she elaborated on the situation to Fred Day:

The fun of it [the boycott] is 1st, that I have no definite knowledge of any conspiracy, except the general sense that folk at large hereabouts are not especially friendly, and do not buy as many stamps as they did, else my receipts would not have been cut down; and 2nd, that outside the Haskells, [friends of both Day and Guiney] I don't care a dam (you understand that a 'dam' is only a

¹⁵ *St. Louis Church Progress*, 10 November 1894, HC

¹⁶ Letter to Dora Sigerson, 5 April 1895. *Letters of LIG*, I, pp. 66-7.

Persian coin of small value) whether they love me or not,
or I them....¹⁷

Upon hearing of her predicament, Day and other friends began to purchase their stamps from Auburndale. Soon, they were requesting others to do the same. These acquaintances then began to tell more people of Guiney's plight. Fred Day's mother, Anna Smith Day, wrote to Nana Grimke, daughter of civil rights advocate and NAACP vice president, Archibald Grimke, that Louise's salary had been cut and that "people from all over are sending to her for stamps to make it up."¹⁸ MIT professor, Arlo Bates, wrote movingly in Guiney's defense:

There has never before come to my personal knowledge any instance of persecution so intolerant, so outrageous, so utterly without a shadow of justification.... A lady of highest character, of rich and unusual gifts, of perfect official rectitude, -- the daughter of a brave and patriotic officer in the Union Army, -- is being hounded out of her means of livelihood by a company of narrow-minded and violent fanatics, simply on account of her faith. The thing would be incredible were it not actual.¹⁹

Catholic periodicals as well as mainstream newspapers picked up Bates' words across the country. Articles entitled, "Miss Guiney and the Bigots" and "A Story of Persecution" began to appear.²⁰

The result was staggering. Orders for stamps arrived in Auburndale from Boston, Springfield, and other Massachusetts cities, from New York, Chicago, and elsewhere. They came from businesses as well as individuals. Eventually, letters came from all over America with orders

¹⁷ LIG to FHD, 16 October 1894, LC.

¹⁸ Anna Smith Day to Nana Grimke, 1 November 1894. Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

¹⁹ E.M. Tenison, *Louise Imogen Guiney: Her Life and Works*. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1923), p.60.

²⁰ HC, scrapbook, no identifying information.

for stamps. Soon, as one newspaper reported, “although the A.P.A. of Auburndale buy their stamps elsewhere, the sale of stamps in that office has increased so much that when the official year ends again, the old salary or a larger one will prevail.”²¹

In fact, the mail order department became so successful that Guiney enthused over “a perfect downpour of orders from outside”²² and could afford to chastise Fred Day for not identifying his correspondence as an order for stamps rather than a personal letter:

If you feel inclined to keep up your benevolent practise of raising my salary (or rather, keeping it raised, for it's bound to go up in July) will you, henceforth, send to 'Postmaster' without my or anyone's name? For in that case the letter will be immediately opened and attended to....²³

In the summer of 1895, Louise Guiney was able to take a vacation. With a friend, Alice Brown, she took a walking tour of England and Wales. The post office was difficult to leave behind, however, as her response to Day's inquiry about her state of mind indicated:

Why do you think I am not all right? I really am.... If I sound dull on paper, don't mind that. I have gone through some pretty sober work a day experiences, dear boy, and I suppose it hasn't all shaken off my wings.²⁴

Fortunately for Louise, she began her tour before the A.P.A. riot in Boston on July 4, 1895, an incident which may easily have added to her woes.

²¹ HC, scrapbook, no identifying information.

²² LIG to FHD, 16 October 1894, LC.

²³ LIG to FHD, 31 March 1895, LC.

²⁴ LIG to FHD, 14 August 1895, LC.

The months in England and Wales rejuvenated Guiney's spirits and provided a much-needed rest. She returned to her post refreshed but still not enamoured of the position, which she had found to be time consuming, unrelenting, and tiresome: "I am dead tired. The work at that P.O. is something inconceivable for so small a place, on so small an income."²⁵

What is more, she felt she was unable to find the time or energy to keep up with her own literary work, which, at this point in time, included being a reader, editor, and author for Copeland & Day, a publishing firm owned by two of her closest friends, Herbert Copeland and Fred Holland Day. On one occasion she wrote,

As to the Works, I haven't cast an eye on 'em since I came home, or on anything else, so are my days devoured with Uncle Sam's concerns, from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. with a hiatus in the middle; else I wouldn't be here to tell the tale.²⁶

Despite the unrelenting schedule, during her tenure at the post office Guiney did manage to publish two of her most well-known works, *Lovers' Saint Ruth's and Three Other Tales*, a book of short stories, and *Patrins*, a collection of essays, both for Copeland & Day. She also published several smaller pieces including several translations and introductions and *Nine Sonnets Written at Oxford*, a private Christmas gift edition distributed by Copeland & Day. Her output as a reader of manuscripts and editor of texts for the publisher was also considerable.

In August of 1896, the Auburndale Post Office was renovated, including plumbing, carpentry, and painting, and, while Louise agreed it would leave the office much improved, the upheaval it caused only added to her frustrations. She was working fourteen hours a day behind the window. In addition, her dual nemeses, poor health and the A.P.A., combined to create a crisis. Louise had suffered from an acute ear infection while in Ireland in 1890, which had left her hearing seriously impaired. As years passed, she had progressively lost her hearing until she was nearly deaf. By September of 1895, she was using an ear

²⁵ LIG to FHD, 26 October 1894, LC.

²⁶ LIG to FHD, 23 October 1894, LC.

trumpet. Now, in early 1897, she was in constant pain from a new infection. At the same time, the American Protective Association was spearheading a campaign to remove her from her post.

In March of 1897, a concerned Guiney wrote to Day,

...I am sunk in letter-writing of the nasty official sort to ex-Gov. Long, Mr. Roosevelt, and such 'guns' as I know, to keep me in this cussed old U.S.P.O. at least till my term is up; as a few malcontents (the very same old A.P.A. lot) are trying to get President McK[inley] to bounce me at once; which he, a sojer-man, won't do, I fancy.²⁷

A week later, she wrote that she had been "laid up with a horrible cold, still alive and kicking" but that "There have been nasty P.O. scares, an ex-Mayor grabbing for my place now, etc. 'tis a weary world."²⁸ She also admitted that she was forced to visit the doctor twice a week to tend to her "off-ear."

On March 29, still, as she put it, "ear-crazy, with a balloon for a head," she wrote, "I suppose we can hang on here, as there are all manner of P.O. rumors, besides, to help unsettle one."²⁹ and on April 1st, "again, this P.O. is in a terribly uncertain state. It keeps me on the nervous jump all the time."³⁰ In the same letter, she acknowledged that her ear distress was chronic and not likely to get better at all.

Eventually, the stress and illness culminated in her hospitalization, which she reported to Day on April 14:

Please don't be alarmed; but I am laid up at a private nurse's place in Brookline, recovering from an operation on my ear, and can't be with you tomorrow. Most of the

²⁷ LIG to FHD, 14 March 1897, LC.

²⁸ LIG to FHD, 20 March 1897, LC.

²⁹ LIG to FHD, 29 March 1897, LC.

³⁰ LIG to FHD, 1 April 1897, LC.

pain is gone, but I don't know when they will let me get on my legs. Last night I slept some (thanks to hypodermic morphine): my first sleep in seven nights. So I am on the mend.³¹

She was later to admit the diagnosis had been a sharp attack of meningitis due "to overwork, or rather, to prolonged lack of relaxation...."³² Despite the A.P.A.'s efforts, Guiney was reappointed postmistress in April of 1897.

A little over a month later, however, "bursting with the joy of a decision," she announced to Day: "I'm going to quit the U.S.P.O. and be a penniless free-lance again. I suppose I can cut clear about July 5...."³³

Louise Imogen Guiney did, in fact, resign from the position of postmaster of the Auburndale Post Office on July 5, 1897, and shared her relief with a number of friends. To W. H. van Allen, she disclosed, "I am so pleased, I cannot refrain from dancing: though dancing was never in my line. Which clearly proves that dancing is a motion born of the primitive instinct of human joy."³⁴

A cloud remained however. In August of 1897, she acknowledged to Dr. Richard Garnett that she was "ex-P.M." but also worried that, while the discipline of the position had improved her character, "I suspect that it has, with equal obviousness, ruined my intellect! I have not uttered a line of verse for just a year."³⁵

Guiney spent the next twelve months attempting to regain her creative energies but was still haunted by financial need and, in 1898, she took a job at the Boston Public Library as a cataloguer. There, in 1899, she catalogued the books of Copeland & Day, donated by Fred Holland Day upon the demise of the publishing firm.

³¹ LIG to FHD, 14 April 1897, LC.

³² Letter to Dr. Richard Garnett, 23 August 1897, *Letters of LIG*, I, p. 198.

³³ LIG to FHD, 21 June 1897, LC.

³⁴ Letter to Rev. W. H. van Allen, 5 July 1897, *Letters of LIG*, I, p. 188.

³⁵ Letter to Dr. Richard Garnett, 23 August 1897, *Letters of LIG*, I, p. 199.

Finances remained a factor when, in 1901, she moved to England where she lived frugally and continued to write. She turned from poetry, however, to research, history, and translation, where her subjects were primarily 17th century British poets, historical lost causes, and medieval knights errant. Seemingly the Muse had abandoned Louise as she wrote few poems after her tenure at the Post Office. Sadly, what she had learned of human nature had not, as she had hoped, been of benefit to her literary work.

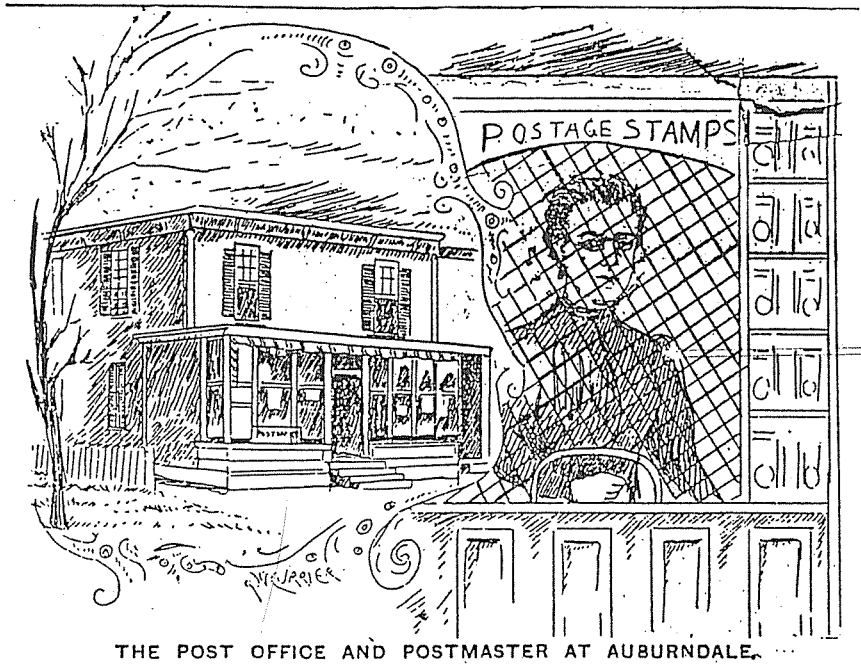
Guiney returned to the United States only twice before her death in Oxford in 1920 at the age of 59. She is buried in Wolvercote Cemetery beneath a monument of her own design, a stylized Celtic cross made in Dublin from Galway marble.³⁶ She left behind a considerable body of work -- some 20 books, countless journal articles and poems, and a treasure trove of delightful letters. Tragically, however, she left no record of her own experiences being Irish in Boston and walking the divide between the Irish and the Brahmins during the 1890s. She did not tell us what it felt like to stand behind the window at the Auburndale Post Office and endure nativist prejudice for fourteen hours a day. She did not explain how an intelligent, perceptive, witty, and sensitive young woman coped with the persecution of her neighbors, who had pledged self-righteously to keep "America for Americans." That would have been a meaningful contribution to American letters, instead of the dreamy Celt, the romantic New England landscape, or the morally uplifting tales of heroism and lost causes. That, as one critic notes, "would have been an Irish American story worth telling."³⁷ But, it is one we will sadly never hear.

³⁶ Letter to Gwenllian E. F. Morgan, December 1903, *Letters of LIG*, II, p. 98.

³⁷ Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America*, op. cit., p. 173.



Figure 1.
Imogen Guiney, c. 1894. Courtesy Special Collections, College of the Holy Cross



THE POST OFFICE AND POSTMASTER AT AUBURNDALE.

Figure 2.

Illustration from an article entitled, "Day With the Postmistress Louise Imogen Guiney," 4 February 1894, no periodical identification. Courtesy Special Collections, College of the Holy Cross.