

Our Visit to 104 Irving Street and Norton's Woods

Michael Webster

On Thursday, May 23, members of the E. E. Cummings Society strolled over to 104 Irving Street, walking from Harvard Yard and on the way peeking in on what they could see of the Sanders Theatre, where Cummings delivered his six nonlectures. Two or three blocks down Kirkland Street and one short block to the left up Irving (passing by William James' house), we arrived at the Y formed by Irving and Scott streets. On the ten-foot board fence that surrounds the house, a historical marker proclaims the poet's name in unfortunate lower case before announcing in all capitals that behind the fence is the "birthplace of the poet and painter who wrote of 'the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls'."

Nowadays (and at least since the 1960s), the house is divided into two residences, a smaller one in the northeast corner on the Scott Street side, and the larger one we visited, on the garden and Irving Street side. The house is now owned by Lee Halprin, a retired English professor. We were



Figure 1: The garden area at 104 Irving Street today
(photo: Bernard F. Stehle)

met on the Scott Street side of the house by Lee's daughter Julia Halprin. (When her father was suddenly called away, she kindly agreed to meet us and show us around.) Entering via the wooden gate, we turned left to the garden that occupies the triangle bordered by the house and Scott and Irving Streets. The house is now divided into two, with identical pillared entrances on the Scott and Irving sides. In between, facing the garden, is the "front" of the house seen in the photo in *Dreams in the Mirror* (119), now much altered. Two bay windows still flank the door, but now the "verandah" (16) that Bethany Dumas described in *Remembrance of Miracles* (1974) has been replaced by a strikingly modern enclosed-glass porch that extends out to a deck.

Much else has changed, no doubt, in the 100 years since Cummings lived at the house. Though we saw rose bushes in the garden, they were not in bloom, so we couldn't tell whether they might be descendants of the "black-red" Jack roses so lovingly tended by Cummings' father (cf. Kennedy 20). Of course, the tree-house that Cummings' father made for him has disappeared, along with "the strange octagonal garage that Edward built out of a series of discarded doors" (Kennedy 21).¹

Bethany Dumas describes Estlin's tree-house as a real retreat, "complete with two doors, one at the ladder entrance, the other to the balcony overlooking Scott Street, and a shingled roof." It also had a wood-burning stove "in which he was allowed to have fires without supervision (when he was thirteen or fourteen)" (Dumas 18). Kennedy adds that the tree-house was a something of a hang-out for the neighborhood children—Esther Lanman's "diary for 1908 (she was ten years old) mentions 'Estlin's [tree] house' twenty-two times" (24).²

On the Irving Street porch we paused for a photo. Just inside this door is the incredible staircase depicted on our cover. At the top of the staircase on the third floor is a skylight that Kennedy says was there in Cummings' day (21). Inside, on the second floor, the disposition of the four bedrooms (three overlooking the garden and one facing Irving Street) is no doubt the same as it had been 100 years ago. The large, high-ceilinged rooms with wide windows (many with fireplaces) give a sense of comfort and security all at once. Downstairs on the first floor, the "three large rooms . . . all looking out on the garden" (Kennedy 21) have been opened up into one space that includes an open kitchen. On a table in the middle of this open space, the Halprins had placed a framed relic of the old days. When Lee Halprin bought the house in 1983, there was little or no evidence of Cum-



Figure 2: Scholars on the Irving Street porch. From left to right: Aaron Moe, Michael Webster, Gillian Huang-Tiller, Bernard Stehle, and Etienne Terblanche. (photo: Julia Halprin)



Figure 3: Second floor bedroom at 104 Irving Street. (photo: Bernard F. Stehle)

mings or his family there, beyond the structure of the house. But during a renovation, workmen discovered hidden in the walls a visiting card (probably thrown there during an earlier renovation). The card reads: “Miss Elizabeth Frances Cummings / 104 Irving Street / Cambridge.”

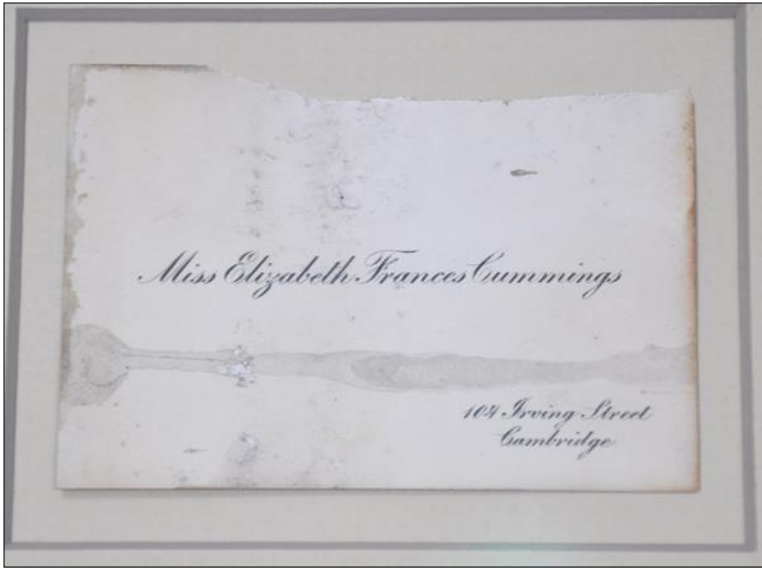


Figure 4: Elizabeth Cummings’ visiting card, found during renovation. (photo Bernard F. Stehle)

Cummings’ sister’s visiting card conjures up a lost world of proper young ladies making house calls and taking tea in decorous drawing rooms. Cummings’ neighborhood, known as the Shady Hill Community, “was originally part of the Charles Eliot Norton Estate” (Dumas 16). Aside from the Norton “palace,” the Cummings “mansion” is probably the largest house in the neighborhood (*six* 32, 24). The Norton estate was known locally as Norton’s Woods, a grove of trees that Cummings describes in the *six nonlectures* as “a mythical domain of semiwilderness” (32). Picture a small boy leaving his “mansion” to find what he later termed the “illimitable being” of nature—and then pushing further into the woods to discover a “palace.” Norton’s Woods is no doubt more domesticated now than it was then (currently it is the grounds of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences), and as we walked to the woods, which is only a “butterfly’s glide” away from 104 Irving (*six* 32), I thought about what it must have meant to Cummings to grow up in such a house surrounded by a

warm, caring extended family and by a neighborhood of Harvard professors and their children. For me at least, what was most revealing about the visit was to see how safe and stable and comfortable Cummings' childhood must have been. He was very much a part of a privileged community that allowed him many outlets and opportunities for individual growth.

—Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI
websterm@gvsu.edu

Notes

1. On a plan of the house available at the City of Cambridge Property Database, an octagonal patio is indicated, probably echoing the shape of the vanished garage. Bethany Dumas says the garage “was built to serve as the ‘auto house’ for the Cummings’ first automobile, an ‘Orient’ acquired in 1907.” When Bethany visited in the 1960s, this garage was “still in use” (Dumas 18).
2. Kennedy adds that at Joy Farm, “Estlin had a small house, this time on the ground, for his times of retreat” (26).
3. The City of Cambridge Property Database says that the house currently has 22 total rooms, 13 bedrooms, 3 kitchens, 6 full baths, 1 half bath, and 8 fireplaces.

Works Cited

- The City of Cambridge Property Database*. The City of Cambridge, MA. Web. 29 Sept. 2012.
- Cummings, E. E. *i: six nonlectures*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953.
- Dumas, Bethany K. *E. E. Cummings: A Remembrance of Miracles*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974.
- Kennedy, Richard S. *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*. New York: Liveright, 1980.



who are you, little i
(five or six years old)
peering from some high
window; at the gold

of november sunset

(and feeling: that if day
has to become night

this is a beautiful way)

(CP 824)