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Winslow Homer and His Cullercoats Paintings: An American Artist in England's Northeast

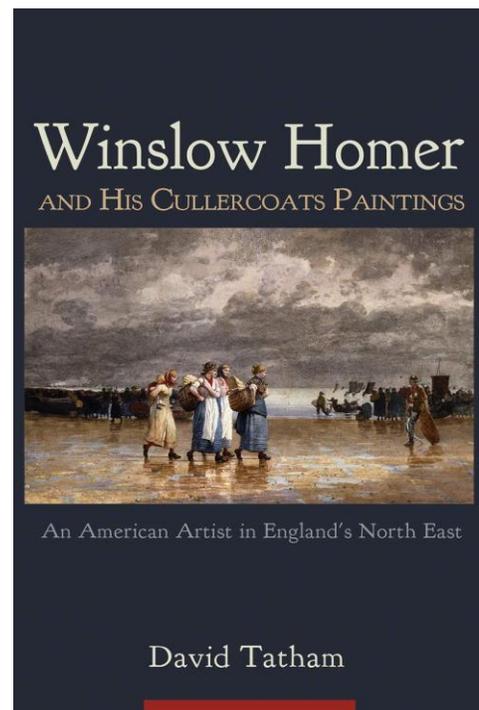
by David Tatham

Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021. 110 pp.; 20 color illus.; 1 b/w illus.; 2 maps. Hardcover \$60.00 (ISBN: 9780815637004); paper \$24.95 (ISBN: 9780815611301)

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It may seem odd that Winslow Homer, a painter long deemed quintessentially American, painted some of his most daring and intimate compositions not on his native soil but rather in the small English village of Cullercoats. In 1881, the artist set sail for England and spent eighteen months on the northeast coast observing the work of local fishermen and women. Homer's infatuation with the town and its residents yielded an impressive output of works in multiple media, including drawings, watercolors, and oils on canvas. His English material received rave reviews in New York and catapulted him into the pantheon of the country's most revered artists. Marianna Van Rensselaer deemed one group of Cullercoats watercolors "the most complete and beautiful things he has yet produced," calling it "among the most interesting American art has yet created."¹

David Tatham's new book, the result of the author's own sustained time on the English coast and his many years as a keen observer of Homer's oeuvre, yields new insights into the artist's technical advances during his time in Cullercoats. Tatham offers this slim volume as a corrective: art historians have often characterized Homer's period abroad as the decisive break between his early and late career without examining the precise nature of his maturation. Tatham's well-supported contention is that the artist's evolution was not a straight trajectory. He argues, instead, that we must account for the English paintings on their own terms rather than merely glossing over Cullercoats as the scene change necessary for Homer's later creative epiphanies.



In his sweeping retrospective catalogue, Franklin Kelly takes the view of many art historians who situate the Cullercoats paintings as steppingstones toward Homer's late marine masterpieces: "There is danger in seeing the English trip too much in isolation, for it was part of a larger process of change in his art."² Tatham disagrees. Instead, he offers up these works—some fifty exhibition drawings, one hundred watercolors, and a handful of oil paintings—as a distinct body, one largely untouched by the cultural forces of the moment and largely unrelated to the artist's later triumphs.³ He writes, "Scarcely any aspect of what he had painted in Cullercoats contributed to what he would accomplish in the years that followed. The Cullercoats paintings are best seen as an independent body of work of significant though idiosyncratic strengths" (4). Indeed, though he dedicates a chapter to the *Life Line*, Homer's major oil completed just after his return from England, Tatham does so expressly to counter the assumption that such a powerful maritime rescue scene relied on views and experiences from the artist's stay in England. As Tatham reminds us, the Atlantic Ocean that Homer observed in Cullercoats was not prone to the violent swells that he would picture upon his return to the United States. Even though Tatham persuasively argues that we see Homer's Cullercoats works decoupled from the narrative of an inexorable rise to greatness, he is not immune to perpetuating some frustratingly sticky mythologies about Homer's singular achievements.

A rich set of introductory chapters situates readers within the region's unique history, geography, and meteorology. Though Tatham rehashes material from Tony Harrison's 2004 *Winslow Homer in England*, he also provides additional details and updated research that paint the village as much more cosmopolitan and connected to the region's various industries than many authors have previously assumed. Cullercoats in the 1880s was not an isolated fishing enclave but rather a bustling area well connected by rail to larger and more prosperous urban centers, such as Newcastle. The village was also a popular destination for artists who found inspiration in the fishing community's unique dress and their deep connection to the sea. Thanks to his own time getting to know the town, Tatham can map Homer's stomping grounds in detail and introduce readers to the Watch House and the Royal National Lifeboat Institute's Cullercoats Station, two buildings that link town and ocean and that feature prominently in Homer's works. Tatham also presents local personalities, such as Thomas Carrick, an artist whose studio Homer may have rented, and the lawyer and amateur watercolorist William Adamson, whose son would provide the most complete firsthand account of the artist's time in the area.⁴ Tatham makes brief mention of the Cullercoats Art Colony and painters such as Robert Jobling, though he dismisses their efforts at creating compelling Cullercoats views because "Homer offered a broader and more knowing comprehension of the community, one amounting almost to a feeling of affiliation" (24).

The author also provides the richest description to date of Homer's model Maggie Jefferson, whom Tatham identifies as the basis for several of the women pictured in Homer's works. Tatham gives new insights into the pivotal role that Jefferson and her compatriots played in their families' livelihoods as they "prepared cobbles for sailing, baited fishing lines, sold the catch, prepared the cobbles for their next sailing, and raised families" (18). While art historians have long noted the monumental stature of Homer's female figures in these images, Tatham underscores how these women came to loom so large in the artist's imagination. Tatham's methodology—close looking across a distinct body work—also allows us to observe the artist's growing appreciation for Jefferson and the

other Cullercoats women despite his relatively brief time with them. Late in his English sojourn, for instance, Homer opted to separate Jefferson from both family and colleagues and to present her within the realm of the creator rather than the subject. The late watercolor *Bridlington Quay*, painted just before Homer's return to the United States, "has her [Jefferson] step into the open space of the foreground—the painter's space" (63). Despite his stated intention to leave Homer's pre- and post-Cullercoats materials untouched, Tatham connects images of Jefferson and her friends and family to figures in Homer's Virginia paintings that also center female skilled labor, such as *Dressing for the Carnival*.

Chapters 5 through 9 shift gears to offer brief musings on selected works arranged by subject. Each short chapter begins with a list of key works that bolster Tatham's effort to maintain his concise narrative by relying on a fixed set of terms. Close looking can yield telling insights that deepen our readings of seemingly placid views. Describing *The Breakwater, Cullercoats* (1882), for instance, Tatham notes the ruins of the Tynemouth priory emerging from the mist but also the hint of smoke from faraway trawlers, vessels that would overtake the region's small-scale fishing industry. That tiny spectral presence of large-scale extraction haunts several of Homer's views. *Breakwater* also suggests subtle class tensions between the two women pictured, a difference Homer would continue to evoke in later paintings, such as *Watching the Breakers* (1891). Though he resists a fuller discussion of Homer and the intricacies of class, Tatham describes an artist unusually attuned to the subtle markers that differentiate local from tourist, villager from urbanite.

At times, the author's admiration for his subject precludes generative comparisons to other painters of the period. Tatham perpetuates Homer's own efforts to position himself as a self-taught marvel of singular achievement by declaring early in his book that he will not discuss other artists because "this mode of inquiry accomplishes little when an artist is by instinct and practice so strongly and distinctly individualistic as was Homer" (6). The author's reverence for Homer also means that he occasionally neglects to account for poor or mixed responses to Homer's paintings. His discussion of the *Four Fishwives*, for instance, mentions the painting's tepid US reception without quoting critics who disliked the apparent coarseness of the figures. Instead, Tatham insists that "Homer gave his group of four a sense of organization, determination, and communal vitality, qualities quite absent from virtually all paintings of fishwives in Cullercoats other than his own" (30–31). Though his praise for Homer's considerable talents is valid, such pronouncements undermine the author's more nuanced observations.

Throughout his career, Tatham has been an acute and sensitive student of Homer's relationship to particular localities. At a moment when a new crop of wide-angle biographies and exhibitions describe the artist's lifelong arc, such bounded yet deep explorations offer welcome precision and brevity.⁵ What Tatham manages—and what so many accounts of Homer's various travels and artistic transformations lack—is an invitation to revel in the rewards of sustained and patient looking.

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Notes

¹ Marianna Griswold Van Rensselaer, "An American Artist in England," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 27 (November 1883): 17.

² Franklin Kelly, in Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. et al., *Winslow Homer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 179.

³ A bevy of studies has also taken the Cullercoats material and contextualized it alongside everything from French painting to contemporaneous travel literature. William H. Gerdts, "Winslow Homer in Cullercoats," *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (1977): 18–35; Elizabeth Athens, Brandon K. Ruud, and Martha Tedeschi, *Coming Away: Winslow Homer and England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴ Adamson's son Alan would go on to write a remembrance of Homer in England in 1922. Adamson's recollections are reproduced in full in Tony Harrison, *Winslow Homer in England* (Ocean Park, ME: Hornby, 2004).

⁵ Stephanie L. Herdrich et al., *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022); William R. Cross, *Winslow Homer: American Passage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022).