

“Per ardua ad Astor: the vicissitudes of Henry James’s Covering”

Henry James had two names for the country house which in his imagination he constructed on the plan of Osterley Park. The earlier of the two names was Summersoft, and the second one was Covering. Under both of those names, it enjoyed a strangely amphibious existence. After its initial appearance in a story, “The Lesson of the Master” (1888), James introduced Summersoft into the medium of drama with a short play, named for the house, which he began to plan in 1892 and completed in 1895. Covering was similarly transplanted, featuring first in the tale entitled “Covering End” (1898) and subsequently receiving a fresh lease of dramatic life in *The High Bid* (composed 1907, staged 1908).

As the setting which James started to shape in 1888 was three times set down in fresh literary soil, thanks to his oscillation between fiction and drama, so the original template admitted of more and more extensions. James can first be seen superimposing Knoles upon Osterley Park, and then crossing both with Hever Castle. William Waldorf Astor’s purchase of Hever in 1903 pitched American money against English heritage in just the way that James was using Covering and the characters drawn there to do. However, the plot which James had fashioned collapses one apparent antithesis between the values of the trusted veteran and those of the vulgar moneyspinning incomer; and, in 1907, the reversion of this material from fiction to drama would collapse another.