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Dale H. Freeman

University of Massachusetts Boston, dhfreeman321@yahoo.com

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Oliver Optic
1822-1897
Children's Author

Talk given by
Dale H. Freeman
May 18th, 2004

To the
Medway Historical Society

William Taylor Adams, known to the world as “Oliver Optic,” died shortly after nine o’clock on the morning on March 27th, 1897. His death, at his Dorchester, MA home was the result of a year and a half of failing health, and a critical illness for two weeks prior.

At Adams’ funeral service, held at his home on March 30th on Dorchester Avenue, the Boston Globe reported that: “it was attended by a large concourse of friends, many of whom are prominent in literary circles of this and other cities.” The Globe continued about the setting of the service, noting “the plain black broadcloth-covered casket rested in the center of the spacious parlor, surrounded by many beautiful floral designs emblematic of the love and esteem in which the deceased was held by the entire community.”

The character of the service was reported in the New York Times, as of the simplest nature. The Reverend Christopher R. Eliot, former pastor of the First Unitarian Church Dorchester, of which Adams had been a member, spoke of the writer’s life.

Eliot began: “Oliver Optic was through life the children’s friend. He spent many years as a Sunday school superintendent in the church; and as such, was devoted and faithful. For twenty years, he labored in the public schools; where he was also the children’s friend, and for forty years, he had been putting forth books, one after another, which have given no “little” pleasure. His motive was always pure to uplift boys and girls, and many of them will look back to him with pleasure. His whole life was spent for pleasing children. He was a loyal citizen, and loyal to his country. While for a short time in public service, as a member of the General Court, he was always ready to render true, devoted and loyal service to his city and country. He was the friend of humanity; he was

always ready to help any one in need; it was his chief motive in life to help some one. He was a loving father, husband and friend" ...and, "genial, with great simplicity of character, caring most about home, and here living and working, he has passed on."

The American impressionist, F. Childe Hassam, world-renown for his painting of a mother and two daughters on Boston Common during twilight, attended Sunday school in Dorchester under the direction of Adams. Of Adams, he remembered that the, "very entertaining and agreeable man at the head of that Sunday school was the writer of boys' stories that had a great vogue in those days, " and that, "he was a fine looking man and a most pleasant one."

With Adams' death, it was so clear at his funeral, on that March afternoon in 1897, that he had left a truly amazing literary and personal legacy.

His story begins here in Medway. If my sources are intact, William T. Adams was born to Laban Adams and Catherine Johnson-Adams in a small house on Ellis Street on July 30, 1822. (There is a small sketch of his house in Jameson's History of Medway on pg. 333 for those of you interested.) The same history details that Adams was a descendent of Henry Adams who came to America from Devonshire, England and settled in Quincy, MA in 1632. Other descendents of this English Henry Adams were Governor Samuel Adams of the Revolutionary period and Presidents John Adams, and John Quincy Adams. His more direct ancestor was Edward Adams, an early settler of Medfield.

Adam's father, Laban, was for a while, the proprietor of a public house in Medway which stood across from Sanford Hall here in town, but around 1838, Laban and his family relocated to a farm in West Roxbury, and as Jameson's History notes, "kept

the Washington Coffee House in Boston, and subsequently the Lamb Tavern.” By 1846, Laban had erected the Adams house which was named in honor of the presidents.

In the meantime, Adams (our Oliver Optic) received his schooling in Boston and West Roxbury, and in early 1840, he traveled for a year in the South. Literary success was soon to catch up with the young Adams.

While in school, Adams excelled. He was an honors student in the Boston and West Roxbury Public School systems, and also attended “Able Whitney’s private academy” for a year after he completed his secondary schooling. In 1841, at the age of nineteen, Adams had his first publication – a school composition was published in “The Social Monitor.” By the next year, 1842 he was working as teacher at the Lower Road School in Dorchester and as the historian Jameson comments, “He won the reputation of a good teacher.”

Soon, more publications followed, as Adam’s life began moving in a new direction. By 1845, two temperance tales were published in the *Washingtonian*, and by the next year, he would leave teaching briefly, to assist his father and brother in the management of the Adams House in Boston. The reason for this career shift may coincide with the fact that Adams had married Sarah Jenkins October 7, 1846, daughter of Edward and Martha Reed-Jenkins of Dorchester. The couple would eventually have two daughters: Alice Marie and Emma Louise, both of whom would appear in his dedications.

Two years later, Adams could no longer stay away from the academic and literary world and left working for his father and brother’s business. Of this, Jameson writes,

“This business was not suited to his taste, and was soon abandoned as the concern failed for the remarkable reason as given in court” - Because they kept “too good a house.”

So by 1848, Adams was again at teaching at the Boylston School in Boston, where he would later become head-master by 1860. During the 1850s, Adams continued to pursue his literary efforts with much success. In 1851, a poem he wrote for the Boston Young Men’s Total Abstinence Society was published in the “Flag of Our Union,” titled simply “1951, A Poem.” This work was the first time that Adams signed as, “Delivered before the Mutual Admiration Society, by Oliver Optic, M.D.” As to the history of this nom de plume – we turn to Jameson’s History of Medway again. Jameson wrote, “The name Optic was suggested by a character in a drama at the Boston Museum, called Dr. Optic. To this, Adams prefixed “Oliver,” with no thought of ever using it again. But not long after, two essays appeared in the “Waverley Magazine,” by “Oliver Optic,” which were so well received, that he would eventually continue to write under this pseudonym, as it clearly became impracticable to abandon it.” Adams had used others names as well, but they never succeeded like “optic.” Some such names used in his adult fiction were: Irving Brown, Clingham Hunter, M.D., Gale Winterton, Brooks McCormick, and Old Stager, and one story, titled the Whaleman’s Daughter,” appeared in the “Yankee Privateer” in September of 1857 under simply “William T. Adams.”

In the meantime, before this new fame began to spread rapidly, Adam’s first full-length novel was published in 1853, under another pseudonym - Warren T. Ashton. “Hatchie, the Guardian Slave; or, The Heiress of Bellevue: A tale of the Mississippi and the South-West,” was written for an adult audience, and based on Adam’s southern

travels. The story's main character was a slave, but the book really didn't either condemn or bless slavery. It was written before Uncle Tom's Cabin, but was fairly void of any political statement – however – it was relatively successful, earning Adams a surprising \$37.50 for his first adult story. This was followed up in 1854, with “In Doors and Out: or, Views from the Chimney Corner – a collection of short stories for adults. A review in the Vermont Record read, “It contains about thirty interesting stories of domestic order...we recommend the book heartily.” And the Boston Home Journal wrote, “The stories are written in a spirited style, impart valuable practical lessons, and are of the most-lively interest.”

Here we gain keen insight on Adams' modus operandi for his children's books: the moral lesson, the schoolmaster telling the tale with emphasis on the right and wrong thing to do, with a bit of adventure added. The stories also echoed Adam's motto that would appear time and time again of “First God, then country, then friends.” His formula for writing such a story would not fail over the rest of his life.

In 1854, the same year that “In and Out of Doors” was published, he acted on a suggestion that he try to write for children and following the advice - Adams penned another “Oliver Optic,” tale: this time for children - “The Boat Club; or The Bunkers of Rippleton,” was the title. With this series, he had become an instant success. Reviews were excellent and sales were even better for the schoolmaster. One review read, “The author has endeavored to combine healthy moral lessons with a sufficient amount of exciting interest to render the story attractive to the young.”

The story pitted three young teenaged friends, Frank Sedley, Charles Hardy, and Tony Weston, against a gang of local hoodlums – the book featured all those things for which Adams soon became famous for: an emphasis on the melodramatic within an always exciting and dangerous adventure, a battle of good versus evil and the victory of morality over sin (clear evidence of his religious basis and as noted before – the schoolmaster morally guiding his students). Another concept Adams relied on throughout his stories was that of the “big break.” Where upon the heroes were assured through their own good deeds, of permanent riches and success. I briefly quote from Adam’s “Poor and Proud,” from 1854, “...Mrs. Redburn, before poor and proud, was now rich, and humility never sat more gracefully on the brow of a woman than on hers. Katy and her mother had entered upon a new life, and in the midst of luxury and splendors, they could not forget the past, nor cease to thank God for his past and present mercies.”

And as for the riches, Adams had clearly arrived. From 1856 – 1860, the Boat Club was followed by six other volumes in a series revolving around the original characters. Each book seemed to sell better than its predecessor. It would eventually be issued in more than sixty different editions and remained one of the most famous Optic titles. More titles would follow through his life, such as the Young America Abroad Series, which contained twelve volumes, as well as, All Over the World, Army and Navy, Blue and Gray, Great Western, Lake Shore, Onward and Upward, Riverdale, Starry Flag, Woodville, and the very popular Yacht Club.”

Stepping back a bit, in 1858, Adams had assumed the editorship of a journal called The Student and Schoolmate where many of his serialized works appeared. By 1865, Adams found it difficult to juggle his duties as principal of the Bowditch school in Boston, the editorship of The Student and Schoolmate and still have time for his writing. In July of 1865, Adams resigned from his position as principal and soon departed on the first of twenty trips to Europe. The information and insight gained through his first trip is displayed in the aforementioned “Young America Abroad,” series.

To note how successful Adams was, the next year 1866, Adams decided to leave the position as lead writer for The Student and Schoolmate to concentrate more on his writing. At this point, another promising young writer had come along and was helped by Adams: Horatio Alger had become a household word from his work titled “Ragged Dick,” appearing first serialized in Adam’s The Student and Schoolmate. The journal was now in good hands.

In 1867, Adams embarked on one of his most ambitious projects: his own weekly magazine for boys and girls. Oliver Optic’s Magazine: Our Boys and Girls, edited by Oliver Optic and published weekly by Lee & Shepard, was to contain a serialized story by the editor, as well as puzzles, articles, stories, poetry, and anecdotes. Each “elegantly illustrated” issue would cost five cents and a yearly subscription was \$2.25. Other contemporary authors, such as Ike Parkington, George Baker, Sophie May, and Julia Ward Howe, contributed pieces as well. The magazine was extremely successful and circulation remained high, even after it became necessary to switch to a once-a-month

format in 1871. The publication continued with increasing readership until 1875, when Lee & Shepard experienced financial difficulties and discontinued its publication.

In addition to his literary successes, 1867 saw Adams unanimously elected a member of the school committee of Dorchester. He served until the town was annexed to Boston in 1878, and was elected a member of the Boston school committee and would serve for the next ten years. In 1869, he was elected a member of the House of Representatives and served one year, but declined a re-nomination.

Although much financial success had come his way, Adams was quite upset in 1867, over criticism among literary circles about his style of writing: he was criticized in one review for being a “sensational” writer. In a review of Adams’ work Seek and Find, the publication The Nation wrote: “The facility with which ‘Oliver Optic’ turns out books for boys would be something wonderful and commendable if the books were at all hard to make or good when made; but they are all very poor...If we could have our way, the sale of them should stop immediately and entirely...Such books, whatever Mr. Adams and the poor children may think, are worse than worthless. They encourage youthful impudence and smartness and do nothing at all to take the average New England boy away from the Boston Herald.” This was the first of many attacks on him. He spent much time addressing his critics by introducing a long series of editorials in his Oliver Optic’s Magazine in which he defended himself and his writing.

It was not until 1875, in a famous dispute with Louisa May Alcott, that Adams’ rebuttals reached their peak. Alcott’s “Eight Cousins” was serialized in St. Nicholas during 1875 and in the August installment she covertly attacked sensational stories in

general and Oliver Optic specifically. Within her novel, Alcott accused Adams of using too much slang in his books and of presenting “too many scenes of criminal life.” She also went after Horatio Alger by charging that “their fictional characters achieved overnight improvements in fortune by resorting to far-fetched devices as grateful millionaires and get-rich-quick investments.” For a specific example, Mrs. Jessie, the mother in Alcott’s “Eight Cousins,” disapproves of the books that her sons have chosen to read. She tells them that she has read at least a dozen such stories and, as a result, feels “the writers of these popular stories intend to do good, I have no doubt, but it seems to me they fail because their motto is ‘Be smart, and you will be rich,’ instead of ‘Be honest, and you will be happy.’” In response to her son Geordie’s contention that “some of them are about first-rate boys...that go to sea and study, and sail around the world,” Mrs. Jessie says, “I have read about them, Geordie, and though they are better than others, I am not satisfied with these optical delusions, as I call them.”

Professional critics, whose opinions appeared in Appleton’s Journal and Scribner’s Monthly, felt her attack was unwarranted. Adam’s own lengthy reply appeared in the September 1875 issue of his own Oliver Optic’s Magazine. He wrote, “Miss Louise Alcott is publishing a story in a magazine. It is called “Eight Cousins.” The title was doubtless suggested by Miss Douglas’s highly successful story “Seven Daughters,” published in our magazine.” He noted Alcott’s attacks, yet claimed her accusations were “not found in his books,” or “greatly exaggerated.” He then cited passages from Alcott’s own story demonstrating that “Eight Cousins” displayed a fair amount of slang and improbability itself. Adams ended the dispute with a final thrust – “we must ask you to adopt the motto you recommend for others – ‘Be honest and you

will be happy,' instead of the one you seem to have chosen, 'Be smart and you will be rich.'”

More slings and arrows were hurled at Adam's works. His condensed versions of Robinson Crusoe and other classics were extensively panned. Emily Huntington Miller, a Chautauqua speaker and writer, said his books were a bad influence on young people, where upon Adams returned that “Miller was just angry because his books outsold hers.”

The Catholic World, a magazine founded by the Paulist Fathers, which startled Alcott by assailing her “Shawl-straps,” published in 1872, for anti-Catholic “ignorance and prejudices,” gave Adams a welcome pat on the back for “Shamrock and Thistle,” because it treated Ireland fairly.

At the 1879 Boston Conference of the American Library Association, Adams was both criticized and defended. S.S. Green and other speakers said the Optic books were worthy of inclusion in public library collections and were certainly better than dime novels. Even so, many libraries wanted no part of the “melodramatic, hastily-written, pun-laden” Oliver Optic books.

Author Thomas Wentworth Higginson told the same library conference that Adams “ought not to be censored for appealing to a boy's natural love of adventure;” and that “even a neglected Irish boy might benefit from discovering the Optic books in a library.” He continued that the Optic books “could not harm a bright lad, but that duller juveniles might be tempted into reading worse books.”

Adam's opponents were well-known at the time: Kate Gannett Wells, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., and William P. Atkinson – all - not only opponents of Adams, but of the style he represented. Atkinson could not agree with Higginson's, "rather rose-colored view of the influence of the Oliver Optics of the day." He did not believe the "really clever boys were much addicted to Oliver Op-tis-em, and thought it had a mischievous influence on the limp mind of the ordinary boy." In the mid 1980s, the scholar and author Dolores Blythe Jones writes of Adams that, "by the early 1880s, Adam's books were not allowed on the shelves of many public libraries." One library, the Fletcher Free Library of Burlington, VT, actually did just what the opponents felt necessary: they publicly discarded all of their Oliver Optic titles on their shelves.

Adams continued to remain above the fray while he remained very successful. It is interesting to note, that regardless of the critics, the same books were receiving "quite acceptable reviews in leading literary magazines and maintaining high sales figures." The Fitchburg Reveille wrote in 1891, "There is much in Optic's books which is calculated to inspire a generous, healthy ambition, and to make distasteful all reading tending to stimulate base desires."

Of his own writing, Adams once said: "I have a fixed standard before me in writing all my books, from which I have never deviated. My aim has been to construct a tale interesting and exciting enough to catch and hold the attention of young people, and yet never to entrap them into sympathy with evil-doers or to encourage in them admiration for bold and lawless acts. I have never made a hero whose moral character or

whose lack of high aims could mislead the young reader.” Regardless of varied criticism, Adams continued to write and as noted previously, was very successful.

As to this successful writing technique, Adams once described it in simple terms in an article in the Ladies’ Home Journal: “...if I have a story to write, I write it. I have no inflexible rules; I use no machinery but a type-writer; and have no patent apparatus of any kind for laying the foundation of the story.” He continued, “I consider it necessary to begin with a stirring incident in order to catch the interest of a reader, and give him a ‘fellow-feeling’ for the hero.” I have before me the plot-book and a schedule in which appears each chapter and the page on which it begins and ends. I know where I am all the time, and my difficulty is not to stuff out these chapters, but to condense within the space allowed to each, I work in the forenoon only, four or five hours, writing three chapters, making a total of 5400 words.”

The key to this success was that Adams’ works were easy and enjoyable to read - which clearly added to their popularity. And they were filled with action! Adams’ “Blue and Gray” series (one of his best selling) pulls us in. One passage reads, “You are not going to sea for the fun of it, my son. You are not setting out on a yachting excursion, but on the most serious business in the world. You are the commander of this fine little steamer. Here you are in your own cabin, and you are still nothing but a boy, hardly eighteen years old. Don’t be sure of anything, Christy!”

Of this “Blue and Gray” series, the “Boston Budget” praised it as, “bright and entertaining as any work that Mr. Adams has yet put forth, and will be as eagerly perused as any that has borne his name.”

The “New Englander and the Yale Review,” paid Adams the ultimate compliment on his “Young America Abroad” series in 1872, by writing of him, “he appears to be the true successor of Peter Parley, who, in our boyish days, was the most interesting character then living,” and, “Optic, in the series before us, describes foreign countries in a style to captivate the minds of little folks.”

Many of Adams’ stories were not without witty humor as well – one such example from The Young Fisherman of Cape Ann published in 1867: The father says: “young man, you have saved my daughter’s life and I am grateful to you.” Whereas the hero responds: “O that’s nothing, Sir. I always pick up anything I find adrift.”

Adams continually progressed with his writing: serial after serial, but on March 7, 1885, he was devastated by the loss of his wife Sarah. She had been ill for three months, and died at their large Field’s Corner home in Dorchester. She was fifty-nine years old and the Boston Herald wrote, “...she was a very estimable woman” (meaning worthy of esteem) and “known to be very benevolent among the poor of Dorchester.”

The following year, Adams continued to write more and more. “Raymond L. Kilgore, in Lee & Shepard: Publishers for the People, credits Adams with creating the mass production method in children’s books.” Adam’s works remained a large part of their list until the early 1900s, and at Adam’s death in 1897, it was estimated that two million copies of his books had been sold - more than that of any other author living at the time. At the height of his popularity, records show that Adam’s titles sold more than 100,000 copies per year.

Adams had definitely become rich and famous during his lifetime. He was one of the highest-paid writers in late nineteenth-century America, once receiving \$5,000 in 1873 for two stories in the "Fireside Companion." At his death, his writings accumulated to more than 125 novels and 1,000 articles and short stories. Years afterward, publishers continued to reissue editions of some of his most popular writings. "The Boat Club," for example, went through sixty different editions and as late as the 1930s, Optic volumes were still in circulation and being read by young boys across America. The publishing house of Lee & Shepard even commissioned the soon-to-be-famous Edward Stratemeyer to complete Adam's last work, "An Undivided Union," which he had left unfinished on his desk upon his death in 1897.

Adams (known to millions as Oliver Optic) was buried next to his wife Sarah at the Cedar Grove Cemetery in Dorchester in March of 1897, on a sloping green hill, in view of many large and ancient trees.

In the introduction to "Poor and Proud," Adams thanks his young friends for the "pleasant reception given his former books and hopes that his current work will "prove to be a worthy and agreeable companion for their leisure hours." Given his enormous popularity during his lifetime, it seems fitting tonight that we extend that pleasant reception to his memory, and for his many worthy and wonderfully agreeable contributions to children's literature from 1853-1897.

THANK YOU...

Sources

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