

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 9
Issue 11 *September*

Article 6

September 1972

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.11, September 1972, p.586-599

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BEN AMES WILLIAMS: THE APPRENTICE YEARS

By RICHARD CARY

FATE, or whatever it is that impels a man's life in one direction rather than another at crucial crossroads, was particularly whimsical on the day in January 1910 when Ben Ames Williams (1889-1953) was preparing for final examinations prior to graduation from Dartmouth College. "Through a series of circumstances of which I have no recollection, a boys' school in Connecticut, which needed someone to start in February as a teacher in English, offered me a job. I telegraphed Father: 'Have been offered a job teaching. Shall I accept?' My handwriting has always been difficult and as delivered to Father, the telegram read: 'Have been offered a job travelling. Shall I accept?' Father told me years afterward that if the telegram had read 'teaching' he would have told me to take the job, but he had no desire to see me become a travelling man."¹ Since the advent of handwriting, men have pored and cursed over cacography. For Williams it proved to be the ineluctable boon, diverting him from a purgatory of grading endless, immature English "themes" and thrusting him toward a career as one of the most popular storytellers of his time.

Williams could easily have gone the professional route. "My mother had always a devotion to the best things in literature. . . . Before I was six years old I loved the roll of words; by the time I was ten I was a voracious reader."² But the paternal factor, this time through long implantation instead of accidental distortion, drew Williams into the trajectory of his future work: "Probably the predisposing influence was that my father was an editor."³ The senior Williams owned and ran the Jackson (Ohio) *Standard Journal*, and here Ben Ames plied before and after school hours and all day Saturdays. He ran as printer's devil, swept floors, washed forms, set type, and fed the presses. As it did Franklin, Whitman, Twain, and Howells (not too long ago or far away in Ohio) "writing an occasional item that found print" infected Williams with the *virus scribendi*. In the summer of 1908 he did a stint as reporter for the Oklahoma City

1 Ben Ames Williams, *American Notes* (unpublished autobiography), 267-268.

2 "Ben Ames Williams," *Saturday Evening Post*, CXCVII (October 18, 1924), 54.

3 Ben Ames Williams, *Now I'll Tell One* (unpublished autobiography), 164.

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Times, and from February to June 1910 worked as editor "and the entire editorial staff" for the *Standard Journal* in place of his father, who had been elected to the Ohio State Senate. So it was in the nature of a psychological avoidance for him to declare, "It was more by drift than by decision that I sought a newspaper"⁴ when he grasped his diploma and trended to Boston in search of a job.

He pounded the streets vainly that summer of 1910 until, out of frustration, he faced down the managing editor of the *Boston American*: "Look here, Mr. Reardon, you've been putting me off all summer. *Do you want me, or don't you want me?* *This is your last chance!*" So surprised he could think of nothing else to say, Reardon muttered, "Come in Monday morning."⁵ Williams had his foot in the door.

Before long he was rooming on the South End with Peter Webb Elliott, a reporter for the *Boston Traveler*. The example of the drama critic on that paper, Earl Derr Biggers (*Seven Keys to Baldpate*, Charlie Chan), had infused in Elliott the desire to turn out saleable magazine fiction, a task he tackled every evening with grim zeal. As Williams tells it, he wanted to get married, so he was saving eight dollars a week out of his salary of fifteen, and eschewing the night life of Boston, even in the winter of 1910-1911 too expensive for his budget. When his efforts to inveigle Elliott into a game of cribbage to fill the hours from supper to bedtime failed, Williams adopted Elliott's expedient. "I hired a typewriter, bought a ream of paper, and wrote a short story called 'Getting a Job.' Editors who saw that manuscript unanimously agreed that it was wasted effort, but I wrote another story, and another, and another, till the total ran to dozens, and then to scores. Each story I sent to an editor, and when the manuscript was rejected, to another editor, and another, and another."⁶

Piqued rather than disheartened by this barrage of rejection slips, Williams dug in his heels — he was going to learn to write. He read assiduously essays on style and dramatic construction; he studied Stevenson's short stories, and Maupassant's and Kipling's and O. Henry's and Balzac's and Bret Harte's; he

⁴ *Ibid.* With utter guilelessness he added, "the Jackson *Standard Journal* was, during my boyhood, very much a part of my life."

⁵ Florence Talpey Williams. *All About Da* (privately published, Chestnut Hill, Mass., 1962), 58.

⁶ *American Notes*, 103.

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wrote in emulation of Stevenson, of Dickens, then “ran through several authors. Nothing sold, nevertheless.”⁷ The only “literary” fruits of his extracurricular activity were “three highly inflammatory rhymes” advocating conquest of Mexico, which the *American* printed. Byblows at best, Williams remanded them to Gehenna. “These I did not preserve,” he commented dryly.⁸

In September 1912 Williams married Florence Talpey. Bolstered by the “unshakable certainty” of his young bride and “a stubborn persistence and a certain blind faith in myself,” he continued reporting by day and writing fiction by night. On his 25th birthday in 1914 his wife presented him a leather-bound account book with his name embossed in gold on the cover. Across the first page he wrote: “This book is the embodiment of Faith, Hope, and Charity. For three years I have been trying to write fiction — with little encouragement and no emoluments. Yet I have faith and hope and pray for charity. . . .”⁹ Three decades later he told an interviewer that through those arid years “I spent two or three hours trying to write short stories, and the four years were up before one of my stories sold.” If nothing else, the experience provided a wary self-assessment. “Well, a man who works that hard and doesn’t get anywhere for that long is no born writer.”¹⁰ Time and again he was to advise tyros, “I learned how to write by writing.” For the editor of *The Editor* he elaborated: “Inspiration, there’s no such animal. No, it’s not extinct — it never existed. Writing stories is not done with rolling eyes, and fiction material is not plucked in frenzy from the void. Writing stories is the result of patiently and persistently applying intelligence to a given task, like anything else. . . . You can’t practice medicine without your training — well, neither can you write stories without apprenticeship.”¹¹ Against such volition, what walls could resist for how long?

As authors go, Williams kept meticulous records of his output, work in progress, in the mail, in print; but as authors go,

⁷ John Mason Potter, “Not Worth the Effort,” *Boston Post Magazine* (February 3, 1952), 9.

⁸ *American Notes*, 273; *Now I’ll Tell One*, 211.

⁹ *All About Da*, 67.

¹⁰ Robert van Gelder, “An Interview With Mr. Ben Ames Williams,” *New York Times Book Review* (February 14, 1943), 2.

¹¹ Ben Ames Williams, “Authorial Ideals and Beliefs,” *The Editor* (October 6, 1928), 7.

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he was wont to omit, to duplicate, or to contradict. Thus, at various points he stated that his first published story was as early as the 80th and as late as the 88th in order of writing, an impressive tribute to his stamina in either case. His contemporary, thereby most reliable recollection places it as number 84. Except for a short sentence lauding his ability to render local color in "Getting a Job," the rejection slips received by Williams distressed him with their curt impersonality. In 1913 *Good Housekeeping* turned him down while admitting that his story had "some mighty good points" and that the "boy and girl are so human," and the *Metropolitan* gentled its formal repulse by suggesting in a postscript that the *Outlook* might be interested. The first real rift in the greyness did not occur until July 14, 1914, when Charles Agnew MacLean (for *Popular Magazine*) sent a critique of some 350 words in tandem with his rejection of Williams' novel-length "The Impudent Lady's Maid."

Shrewdly presuming a novice, MacLean put a sure finger on Williams' misaligned emphasis at this stage:

I don't remember to have read anything of yours before, but I am curious to know whether or not fiction is a new thing to you. You write, it seems to me, at times very well indeed, but this story is so unconvincing that I am afraid very few of our readers would be satisfied with it. There are short passages that have a good deal of charm and reality but incident seems to follow incident in a bewildering sort of a way. I would say that this story revolves very rapidly on its own axis rather than progresses. A successful narrative ought to have plenty of action and incident, but the action ought to carry one forward and there ought to be some logical reason for everything in the story. I have kept this with me for a short time wondering if I might not be able to advise you as to how to rewrite it, but I have given the idea up. The story is too bewildering and there is not enough of real meaning to the plot.

He added consolingly: "I would be very interested indeed to hear from you again, and will always be extremely interested in anything you are good enough to submit to me."¹²

Williams "immediately wrote him at length about myself" and aimed a stream of stories at MacLean in the next three months, all of which he refused "almost with apologies." Such consistent negation from so sympathetic a source persuaded Williams to take a hard look at his tactics so far. "I had tried to

¹² This letter and others quoted in this essay are now part of the Williams collection in Colby College Library.

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sell stories on plot, to sell them on description, to sell them on incident, to sell them on style; and had failed. This time I set out to sell them on characterization."¹³ Having decided that his characters had been one-dimensional, he imbued those in his next story with distinctive utterance: "my hero stuttered, the heroine talked normally, an old Negro spoke broad dialect, one spinster aunt talked prunes and prisms, and the other used what I hoped was the language of an ardent horsewoman."¹⁴ With an access of new hope in his new procedure, he dispatched the story to MacLean. *Wunderbar!* On the last day of November 1914 MacLean wrote that he would buy it — on condition. "The condition was that I cut out the young man's stuttering, the suffragist's horseyness, the other aunt's primness, and temper the dialect of the darky. I *did*." The irony: "When I was through, you couldn't tell one character from another." The miracle: "But he took the story, and printed it, too."¹⁵

After Williams conformed with another specification, to cut out a thousand words, "Wings of Lias" appeared in *Smith's Magazine*, July 1915. His first emergence in print, and the concomitant cash he received, should have elicited a degree of jubilation and high celebration. The reverse was true. Morosely he calculated that in three years he had spent \$80.94 for typewriter rental, paper, pencils, envelopes, postage, and express; in rebate, the story brought only \$50. Into this equation he added the outlay of two hours per day at the writing. "So by that first appearance, and by the eventual check, I was profoundly depressed." He reconsidered his indefatigable experiments ("I had in the course of these three years tried a dozen ways to write. I had cultivated first a simple style and then a flowery one; I had been staccato and I had been wordy"). He contemplated his extraordinary industry, painfully translating Georges Polti's *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* with only the help of his college French. "So much labor," he mourned, "so many hopes; was this all?"¹⁶

One short story published seemed such minimal recompense. In his account book he had vowed "that if five years shows no real success at writing I will lock this book in my deepest drawer

¹³ "Ben Ames Williams," in Gelett Burgess, editor, *My Maiden Effort* (Garden City, N. Y., 1921), 269.

¹⁴ *American Notes*, 104.

¹⁵ *My Maiden Effort*, 270.

¹⁶ *American Notes*, 104-105; *Now I'll Tell One*, 197.

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and — forget it.” Well, when all was said, he *had* succeeded in getting printed. Not much, perhaps, but well within his self-decreed deadline. Williams “rallied from that depression sufficiently” to reassert his determination. With the New Year, he destroyed all but three of the eighty-five stories he had on hand and started afresh.

Williams finished twenty-one stories in this first year of his renaissance and sold five, four of them to the Street and Smith magazines of which MacLean was general editor. He returned “The Impudent Lady’s Maid” again in January, pleading “the opportunity of seeing more of your work . . . something that will ‘fit’”; by November he found it acceptable “in its present form.” He returned “The Little Tike” because it strained probability too much but offered to take it if Williams could “think up some malady, or accident, a little less fantastic”; within a week Williams had fixed it up to suit. MacLean also took “Marker’s Hobbies” late in November. Although *American Magazine* sent back “Deep Stuff” because “there is not enough happening,” MacLean urged Williams to “cut this 800 words and tone down the slang a little. I want it. Hurry it back.” The editor of *Short Stories* was glad to use “The Taming of Nips Blaas” though he turned down the much-traveled “Impudent Lady’s Maid” and two others. *Adventure* objected to the old plot and obtrusive point of view in “Received Payment,” yet invited Williams to “Come again.”

Looking back at 1915 Williams had considerably less cause for year-end gloom. Four of his stories had been published, with two others contracted for and on schedule. He had earned \$245 from his moonlighting, not of course munificent, but indicative of the potential. Charles MacLean was imploring material. Better still, Bob Davis was beginning to take notice.

Robert Hobart Davis (1869-1942) came out of the West to become editor in chief of the Munsey chain of magazines, a cut above the Street and Smith line.¹⁷ During his regime he introduced or developed a scintillating host of tale-tellers: Edgar Rice Burroughs, Zane Grey, O. Henry, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Max Brand, Rex Beach, Israel Zangwill, Fannie Hurst, to name only the most popular. It took Williams more than fourteen

¹⁷ For a detailed account of the Williams-Davis relationship, see Richard Cary, “Ben Ames Williams and Robert H. Davis: The Seedling in the Sun,” *Colby Library Quarterly*, VI (September 1963), 302-325.

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months to get a story past Davis' basilisk eye. At the time it constituted a hazard fraught with disappointments for Williams, but in retrospect he cited Davis as the most salutary force in his life as a professional writer.

On the 10th of December 1914 Davis discounted "Cell Number 6" as "a much-ado-about-nothing story"; on the 28th he decried the "offensive" elements in "A Police Petruchio." Although he declined both stories, he softened the blow by bantering Williams as "Colonel" in the first instance and expecting "to be forgiven for sending this story back" in the second. Davis' evident qualities of honesty, broad humor, and spontaneous humanity matched precisely those of Ben Ames Williams and explains why they became cordial friends and remained so until Davis died. But affinity is one thing, editorial judgment another. The whole of 1915 rolled by without a single acceptance by Davis. "Very unpleasant," he labeled one story; "too sordid and repellent," he said of another which *Collier's* less fastidiously bought and brought out shortly after. "Puzzling and unconvincing," "pretty obvious," he damned two more. Not until Lincoln's Birthday in 1916 did Davis descry something to his taste. He blustered about the title, "Glissez, M'Sieu Kellee, Glissez," — "which is a dead giveaway" — was bound he would change it, but didn't. It ran in *All-Story Weekly* for July 1. In quick succession Davis acquired "The Whale Buster," "Worth a Leg," "The Sure Thing," "In the Red-brush," and "Once Aboard the Whaler." In the first half of his third productive year Williams' income vaulted to an unprecedented \$910. The barrier that had so effectively confounded him seemed ready to be breached now.

The \$400 check Williams received for "Once Aboard the Whaler" in June 1916 churned to the surface a notion that had lurked deep in his mind for five years. Early in July he journeyed to New York City for a conference with Davis, the theme being: "Do you think I can make a living writing fiction?" Davis' answer was a vociferous yes. With a wife, two small sons, and a large house to sustain, Williams was understandably hesitant about leaving a steady job. His mother's offer to make up the difference between what his salary had been and what he earned by writing stories clinched his decision. On December 23 he resigned from the *American*. He had, as he wrote then, "passed a sort of landmark."

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The second half of 1916 was auspicious. Williams sold five more stories, three to the Munsey magazines, one each to *American Boy* and *St. Nicholas*. While still dominated by Davis, his market was starting to spread. But all was not roses in this climactic year. Davis spurned "Eastward to Eden" as having "all the characteristics of a wood pile"; over "Lese Majesty of the Law" he exploded, "My Gawd man! This isn't a story." Other editors were no less blunt. The *Metropolitan* turned back one story because it already had "on hand an overdose of the gruesome." *Pictorial Review* found "The Eccentric Miss X" overly long. Two stories eventually sold were originally passed up as not "worth the space it covers" and "too juvenile." These point up a trait which becomes more manifest as Williams proceeds into a wider field of competition: his willingness and astonishing agility to revise and revise and revise a story until it satisfies him and, not incidentally, the implicated editor.

From the vantage of eight years' hindsight Williams pondered his productivity during the period 1910 through 1916. "In the course of that time I not infrequently wrote eight to ten thousand words a day. This deadly facility has always since been a handicap to me."¹⁸ As 1916 came to a close and Williams began to attract notice from Hollywood, Davis laid down an amiable caveat in parallel vein. "Don't let your mind dwell on the motion picture end of the business of writing or your work will suffer. It will become a series of dramatic incidents more or less unrelated and quite impossible to follow. Do one thing or the other — a moving picture king or a literary guy — one of the two. Don't try to be both at the same time." Williams wisely did not succumb to the call of pelf.

In his first month of emancipation from the *American* Williams completed and sold to Davis a four-part serial, "Three in a Thousand." He also decided to hire an agent, although later he wrote: "I do not recommend an agent for a beginner, because the best agents cannot bother with the work of beginners; it is not sufficiently sure of its market. But as soon as you can show an agent that your work sells, and if you don't like the bother of marketing it yourself, why, then employ one by all means."¹⁹ The man he took on was Paul R. Reynolds. At first Reynolds simply sent Williams' stories on to Davis. Soon he

¹⁸ *Saturday Evening Post*, 54.

¹⁹ *The Editor*, 8.

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varied his program. On March 9, 1917 he notified Williams that the *Saturday Evening Post* had bought "The Mate of the Susie Oakes." Breaking into the *Post*, "the goal of most of the aspiring young authors of the day, was another milestone on the road to learning how to write."²⁰ Joy in the Williams' home was unconfined. The news came as a slightly belated gift for Williams, whose 28th birthday had occurred on the 7th. "We celebrated two birthdays."

Davis was one of the first to commend Williams on his accession to the *Post*. "Yes, I do congratulate you with all my heart. . . . I am not surprised at your success. I guess it is good-bye so far as I am concerned. I lose them all sooner or later. Well, old sport, you have my blessing." No other event in 1917 could conceivably outshine this entry. Meanwhile the ordinary vicissitudes of authorship persisted. Davis accepted two more of Williams' stories and, this time, made good his threat to change their titles. A third story he liked but complained that "the first 67 pages don't develop very much except gas." Additionally, he rode Williams for his self-acknowledged excess: "Permit me to intimate, my fat Welsh friend, that 85,000 words a month is too much for any man to write."

Then, the second thunderclap of the year — on September 27 the *Post* purchased "Steve Scaevola." On being apprised, Davis countered jocularly: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to throw the *Saturday Evening Post* in my face. They take a story occasionally; I take everything you write. . . . Regards to your wife. *She's* a lady, anyhow." A week later, seriously: "I will bet money that Ben Ames Williams will be as well known as any writer in this country in three years." There was a touch of rue in his tone, as when a maestro perceives a fond protégé rising inexorably out of his ken.²¹ John M. Siddall, editor of the *American Magazine*, wrote what may stand as a model of many letters Williams now began to receive: "I want to congratulate you on your last *Saturday Evening Post* story 'Steve Scaevola.' It is a splendid piece of work and makes me wish very much you would give us a chance at something of yours when you can."

All told, Williams published ten titles during 1917: *All-Story*

²⁰ *All About Da*, 74.

²¹ Nevertheless, at one point Davis did release a shaft of editorial irascibility. On November 24, 1917 he said to Williams: "I will be honest with you, Ben — I am not going to read 'Steve Scaevola.' I haven't the time. I lost the lobster originally, and now he can go to hell."

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(7), *Post* (2), *Collier's* (1). In his account book he set down this register of his first year as a free lance:

Wrote during year	25 short stories 10 novelettes 1 essay parts of two novels
Wrote during year	586,000 words
Sold during year	388,000 words
Sold during year	5 short stories 8 novelettes

These figures may strike less hardy practitioners as formidable, or even incredible, but Williams was to supersede every one of them in sequent years. There was no need to apply for his mother's subsidy.

The writing of fiction for popular consumption was now sturdily established as both a means of expression and a source of livelihood. Williams reviewed his situation, took steps to systematize his approach to the problem of viable materials. He initiated a scrapbook in which he pasted newspaper items suggestive of plots, characters, or themes. He ruminated about process and technique.

Some of my stories grow out of incidents observed or imagined; some are transcribed almost literally from experiences related to me; some grow up around a character, or an apt title, or a trait of character; some are built up as a play is built up, to put forward a definite dramatic situation; some put in the form of fiction a philosophic or religious idea which has appealed to me; some are merely whimsical studies in contrast

Save in one or two rare cases, I have always outlined my stories in advance. The exceptions were novelettes in which I knew in a general way what I wanted to do — a trend of character — and let this trend develop as I went along. I write from the beginning to the end. The end is usually as clearly in mind as though it were already written, before I begin to write. I revise until I can no longer discover ways to improve the story

The most important single element of technique seems to me to be the introduction at every opportunity of commonplace details of daily life

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. . . . These things lend, I think, a similitude of life²²

He would suffer several changes of heart in his prescriptions for writing superior fiction, but these remained salient guides in his methodology for the balance of his career.

The pattern of one acceptance to every four or five rejections set in 1917 prevailed through the following year. The *Post* printed nothing at all by Williams. Davis carried over as the paramount power, but Williams' presence overflowed into broader territory. *All-Story* featured five of his twelve publications in 1918, *Country Gentleman* two, and each of the other five found separate haven in *Farmer's Wife*, *Bellman*, *Detective Story Magazine*, *Railroad Man's Magazine*, and—ah—*Snappy Stories* with a rather unrepresentative piece, "The Pacifist." Davis gave Williams a particularly hard time over his title "The Perfect Ways," snubbing such variants as "Deep Waters," "Spindrift," "Sea Wrack," "Salt of the Sea," "The Harsh Salt," preferring his own invention, "The Sea Bride." He won his point, ran the story under that name in *Munsey's* (March-August 1919), and it was issued in book form later that year by Macmillan. Astute as ever, MacLean announced to Paul Reynolds in October 1918 regarding "Storming John": "It is not as good as I expected from Mr. Williams. I am buying the stuff now for the stuff he is going to write in the future." Alas for grand strategy, he, like Davis, was scheduled to slide into eclipse before very long. That year Williams wrote 608,000 words, sold 336,000.

Insofar as Williams stories are concerned, the death knell of the pulps sounded on June 7, 1919. Starting on that date, the *Saturday Evening Post* presented its readers three of his short stories and two serials within the space of six months. Prior to and following this period, Williams published fifteen other titles during the year, mostly to magazines of lower station. With this new ingress, however, the direction of his efforts shifted perceptibly toward altitudes previously inaccessible. The *American Magazine*, *Pictorial Review*, and *People's Home Journal* clamored for his byline, the latter abject over some small misunderstanding in the past. *Everybody's*, which had published *All the Brothers Were Valiant* (Williams' first serial to reappear as a

²² Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, *Fiction Writers on Fiction Writing* (Indianapolis, 1923), 41, 83-84, 310.

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book) and two shorter narratives early in the year, regretted his refusal to let them “order” stories, declaring they would rather have them from him than “almost anyone” they knew. The editor of *Leslie's*, attracted by Williams' work in *Everybody's*, asked for stories of modern setting, “genuine heart interest . . . virile . . . clean and wholesome,” but there is no evidence that Williams tried to accommodate him. Moffatt, Yard & Company, book publishers, invited him to drop by and talk over a prospect. Ditto Small, Maynard & Company, Brentano's, and Marshall Jones Company, a young, enterprising firm. Little, Brown & Company, exceedingly desirous of publishing *The Sea Bride*, was edged out by Macmillan, who also opened negotiations for *The Great Accident* (Williams' third book). The American Play Company inquired about the dramatic rights to that story. Half a dozen motion picture producers sent heroic propositions. And to cap all, Edward J. O'Brien pinned three stars on “The Right Whale's Flukes” and included a biographical sketch of Williams in *The Best Short Stories of 1918*.

Davis was of course privy to all this and bowed to the inevitable with becoming grace. “I am glad other people are beginning to realize that you can write, but don't forget that your wife and I 'knew you when.'” By his own audit, Williams sold approximately 75,000 words more than he wrote in 1919, demand outstripping yield for the first time. In this heady year he marketed eight short stories, seven novelettes, one novel, and three titles to the movies. The *Post*, as might be expected, paid him the largest sum to date (excepting movie rights) for the three-part “Jubilo” — \$1500. Undeniably, Ben Ames was out of the woods in terms of professional repute and remuneration.

Williams published twenty times in 1919, only eleven in 1920. The qualitative rise amply compensated for the quantitative slump. Besides the *Post* (3 appearances) and *Collier's* (4), *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, the *Red Book*, and *Munsey's* (1 each) welcomed him to their pages. The *American Magazine*, as well as *Harper's* and *Century*, pressed him for publishable new fictions. The International Press Bureau offered to syndicate some of his earlier unsold items, either short or serial, “nothing of the sophisticated type.” Page Company, Penn Publishing Company, and Harcourt, Brace joined the ranks of book producers eager to admit his name to their lists; Mills & Boon, Ltd. expressed delight with its arrangement to issue his

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first three novels in England. "They Grind Exceedingly Small" was included in the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1919*. In January 1920 Blanche Colton Williams, chairman of the Award Committee, notified him that "The Field of Honor" had also been selected to appear as one of the thirty best stories in the forthcoming volume. In March she had to retract because "no publishing house could be found which would print in book form more than a part of them." Williams had made his way into singularly good company. Others on this élite list were James Branch Cabell, Edna Ferber, Ben Hecht, Joseph Hergesheimer, Rupert Hughes, Fannie Hurst, Melville D. Post, and Wilbur Daniel Steele — only Steele, Anne D. Sedgwick, and Williams winning multiple mention. The prefatory text stated unequivocally that *all* the titles recorded were "worthy of preservation under covers." As if in instant reparation, "Sheener" was chosen by O'Brien for his 1920 best-of-the-year anthology.

Williams wound up eight short stories and three novelettes (by which he meant serials) in 1920 and sold ten of them, not exceptional statistics for him any longer. The prime characteristic of his success was the climb to periodicals of higher editorial standards, with some pretensions to literary quality. Popular, yes, but not vulgar in the best Latin sense of the words. It was as much as Williams aspired to at this juncture. He had set out to learn to write, and he had learned to write sufficient unto his purpose. "I don't believe either Mrs. Williams or myself had in this connection any dream of fame and/or fortune. The fact was simply that I liked to write — and that she liked to see me enjoy myself."²³ The *Saturday Evening Post* represented an Olympus of a sort to him and his contemporaries. To be gathered into its pantheon of authors, to be accepted three or five or eight (and eventually twenty-one) times in a year constituted a seal of approval and a personal vindication. In the forties and early fifties Williams elevated himself beyond the *Post* but remained staunchly loyal to its memory as it foundered and faded. It had been the rope he grasped to pull himself upward. It had, by its severer demands, compelled him to beget a better product. It had put an end to his apprentice years.

Williams' awareness of his own deficiencies and his attention to the strictures of editors and critics served him well, for they

²³ *American Notes*, 275.

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enabled him before he was through to create such authentic mirror-worlds as *Owen Glen*, *Come Spring*, and *House Divided*. From the beginning he applied himself with relentless dedication. "I read," he said, "and thought and studied and tried."²⁴ Even when the advisories were starkly diametric — one chiding him for too much plot, another for not enough; one, too gruesome, another, too bland — he strove unsparingly to reconcile, reaching all the while for a style and idiom entirely his own. He had not attained the mark by 1920, but he was well on his way.

Any overview of Williams' first phase as author would be wanting if it did not embody — would in fact be tangential if it did not *conclude* with Robert Davis' two ebullient cheers as Williams broke out of his pulp cocoon. The first: "The pore fellow wrote more than eighty stories and three novelettes and didn't get no encouragement a tall. But by gosh he had intestines, that fellow had! — and he, now, *stayed*; and dod-gast my eyes, danged if he didn't ketch on." The second: "I'm not a prophet; but I do know a writing guy when I see him and when I announce that a new star is rising in the east, by the jumpin' gods of war, a new star *is* rising in the east."

Selah.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.



BEN AMES WILLIAMS IN
PERIODICALS AND NEWSPAPERS

By RICHARD CARY

CARLYLE DAMNED political economy as the dismal science; he had obviously never dabbled in bibliography. Comparative to most authors, Ben Ames Williams (1889-1953) kept exceptional records of his literary output and his appearances in print. For four decades he maintained a weekly journal in which he noted work accomplished and items sold, typed a chronological roster of his published titles from the first in July 1915 to the last (actually the antepenultimate) in May 1949, compiled more than twenty scrapbooks of his published stories and articles, and an alphabetical index of titles and locations. Zealous though he was, he failed to include better than three-