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## House United

Ben Ames Williams, Jr.

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## HOUSE UNITED

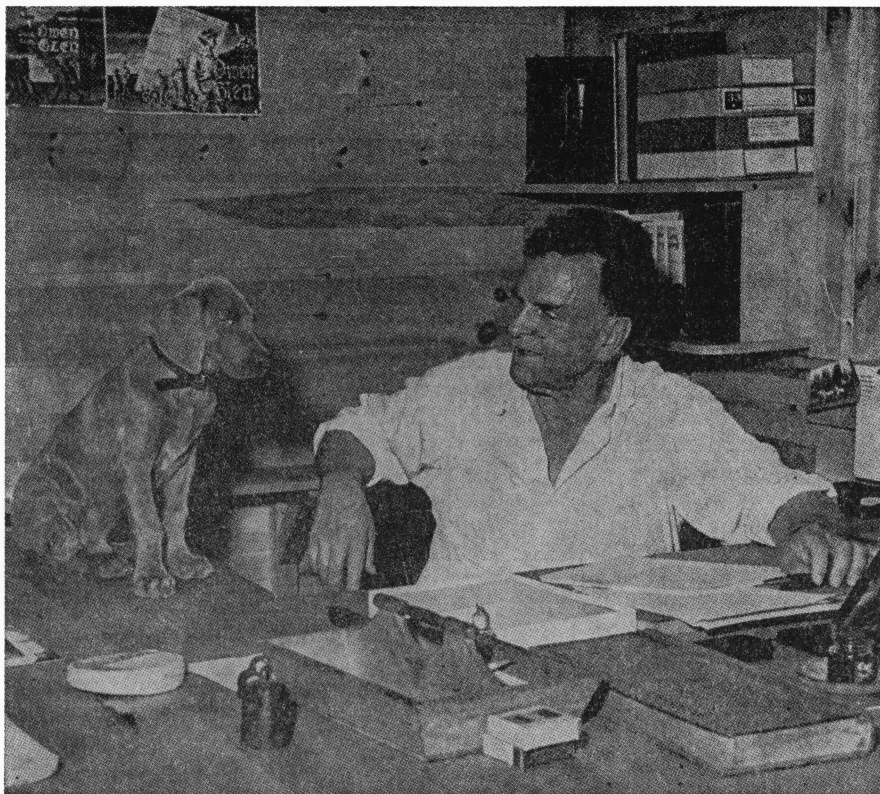
By BEN AMES WILLIAMS, JR.

Whenever my father wrote a story in which there was a disagreeable woman, he would get many letters from female readers offering him the joys of their friendship, because they assumed he was using his wife as a model. And Mother would receive an almost equal number of scolding letters. Then in one of his books a boy who was at Dartmouth got a girl "in trouble." Both my brother and I, having gone to Dartmouth, got many an askance glance from acquaintances for several weeks after publication.

Yet in answer to the often-asked question: "What is it like to be in the family of a famous author?" our answer has always been—"Wonderful." Then, if the questioner would hold still, we would happily enlarge on how fine it was to live with him, to share his exciting life, to be stimulated by his vital mind and be guided by his great spirit and wisdom. Because that's how it was—wonderful!

When Professor Cary asked me to write about my father for the *Quarterly*, I accepted the opportunity with pleasure. What to say about him becomes more difficult. Perhaps if I just start at the beginning.

My first recollection must go back to when I was four or five. We lived then in Newtonville, Massachusetts, and I remember that my bed was in a sort of alcove. I was in bed, asleep, but cold. My father came in from the hall, silhouetted large against the lighted door—he was a big man—carrying his bathrobe. It was made of a wonderfully heavy woolen material, soft but thick. He spread it over me gently and looked at me, but didn't touch me. I woke, but didn't speak—I was happy to have him there. He went out and closed the door, and I remember with a feeling of great comfort even now that the bathrobe had his



BEN AMES WILLIAMS  
CONSULTING HIS SEVEREST CRITIC

smell on it and it was all around me.

That is a fair way to express our life with my father—he was all around us. Supporting us, guiding, loving, leading, challenging—a very strong force. I'm sure my mother, older brother and younger sister all felt some different things about him than I did, but I am also sure that for all of us he was a superb source of life and strength to grow.

During the years when we were young, Dad had an office in town, with a secretary, and he worked a full day, often early morning to mid-afternoon. But his evenings were for family and friends, so I am sure we were together more than other families where "business obligations" might take some time. And we were able to spend our summers in the country—New Hampshire or Maine—and take long trips together—the Southwest, Newfoundland—because we were not tied to any scheduled vacation of his, and he could work anywhere.

I remember once we went to Newfoundland salmon fishing, by train and boat. On the way home on the train Dad wrote a story and he later told me that he sold it for enough to pay for that not inexpensive trip for four of us. Perhaps that is one reason I always thought I would be a writer when I grew up.

One of the last times I was with Dad before he died in February of 1953, we had a long talk about my livelihood—banking—and I remember that in that penultimate talk he finally conceded a point that we had many times discussed in good humor, that it did sound as though it might be interesting.

To fill in the canvas a little, I would tell you where Dad came from. His mother was Sarah Marshall Ames, of Macon, Mississippi. (Many years later, I acquired a beloved mother-in-law: Jessie Ames Marshall, and there were probably remote ties through the two families.) Sarah must have been a very early co-ed, going from Macon to college at Ohio University (Athens, Ohio) in about 1880. There she met Daniel Webster Williams, my grandfather, who learned Welsh as early as he learned the alien English in the southern Ohio Welsh community of Oak Hill.

Like so many of those early towns, Oak Hill started out as a cooperative, and my great-grandfather is alleged to have suggested at the first full town meeting that since their iron mine operated at a loss, while the town's bull showed a profit, they

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should liquidate the mine and buy another bull.

Sarah Ames Marshall and Daniel married, and in due course my father was born, 1889, in Macon, Mississippi. They lived then in Jackson, Ohio, but of course Grandmother went home to Macon where it would be “safer to have the baby.”

Dad grew up in Jackson, but always had close ties with his mother’s home and a certain loyalty to the South was always a strong part of him. My grandfather was many things—historian, schoolteacher, editor, and finally owner-publisher of the Jackson *Sun Journal*. So Dad early-on was in the fourth estate, and naturally enough his first job after college was on a newspaper, in Boston. (As was mine, and my brother was in the newspaper business for twelve years.)

But most of all, my grandfather was an observer of the world around him, the people, flora and fauna, foibles and follies, and beauties of the world. Dad often told me that a walk with him was like a week in a good school.

To begin to close the circle, Mother and Dad met when she was 14 and he 15 at the school in West Newton, Massachusetts, where he was preparing for Dartmouth and she was visiting a step-relation who taught arithmetic. Mother arrived in West Newton by way of her birthplace in Tientsin, China, where she was born of an American father and an English mother: Clipper ship captain Henry Talpey and his lovely wife, Constance Mary Beatrice (Fryer). My grandfather died when my mother was thirteen, and my grandmother brought her small family, including my mother, to Dorchester, Mass.

After a proper interval and proper courtship, my grandmother married Josiah Chase of York, Maine, and travelers up the Maine Turnpike now pass under the bridge of Chase Pond Road. (Josiah was always frustrated that it was known as Chase *Pond*, when to his proprietary eye it was clearly a *Lake*. To this day, Chase Pond provides the water supply for much of the coastal area of York County, and is the lake on whose furthest shore my father built a lean-to to which he took my mother by canoe after their wedding.)

Dad was graduated from Dartmouth in 1910, Mother from Wellesley in 1912, and they were married on September 4, 1912. I sometimes wonder at people who refer to our great mobility today when within my next two older generations

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people from England, Wales, China, Mississippi, and Ohio somehow contrived to produce a young newspaperman and his wife living in Newton Highlands, Massachusetts!

Dad worked at night as a reporter on the old Boston *American* for six years, and during the day he began writing fiction at home.

The transition from part-time writing to full-time was aided by my grandmother who prompted Dad to quit the paper and write by pledging to pay him any difference between his newspaper salary and his story sales. The first year she paid him \$200, and that was all. There was not much money, enough, but no extra as my brother and I came along. Dad wrote over eighty stories before he sold the first one, a fact he sometimes used to quiet the young gushing student writers who would say to him, "Of course, with your natural genius, Mr. Williams, you wouldn't understand how hard it is to *learn* to write."

He learned, with no teachers except observation and the occasional editor who would take the trouble to say *why* they were rejecting a submission. Robert H. Davis, editor of the old *Munsey's Magazine*, was one of these and they became great friends. Bob Davis helped Dad in major ways. Once he rejected a story and told Dad the characters were not clearly delineated, so Dad rewrote the story with no change except to give every character an accent—Southern, French, or State-of-Maine—and the story sold.

Dad was fond of telling young writers, with whom he would always visit (and often talked at Boulder and other schools of writing) that what was needed for a successful writing career was paper, pencil, desk, chair, strong glue and strong trousers, plus a desire to write. In his lifetime, Dad sold approximately 435 short stories and thirty-five novels, some of which were first published as serials. How many more stories were unfinished or abandoned we don't know, but in the thirty-seven years he devoted wholly to writing after he quit the newspaper, he produced prodigiously, yet with ever-improving quality. He never ceased being a student of his own craft.

We have notebooks containing plots, characters, sketches, floor plans, battlefield maps, physical descriptions, and endless pieces of ideas all put down for future use. When he was doing research for what I consider his greatest book, *House*

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*Divided*, Dad went to Gettysburg before doing the battle chapters, and sat on stone walls, and leaned against trees his characters later used. One of the reasons that Dad and Kenneth Roberts were such friends was that they shared a reverence for reality and accuracy.

Many of his earlier stories were about whaling, and while Dad had never sailed on a whaler, he had read the books, the journals, *Moby-Dick*; and crawled all over the retired ships in Mystic and other ports. And he *had* been on the ocean. His father was American consul to Wales the year before Dad went to college, so he spent the summer there. Dad and his father took a walking trip in the summer of 1906 over Snowden from the Royal Goat hotel in Beddgaelert. In the summer of 1937 I took the same trip and was able to see my father's handwriting in the hotel register of 1906. I slept in the same room, and, along toward morning, I began to suspect, the same bed. In 1951, my mother and my sister also visited Beddgaelert and saw both our names in the register!

Having grown children of my own now, and a grandchild, I can appreciate my father as a *father* even more than I did when I lived in his house. He was great. I never felt any lack of love and support from him, but I always felt a gentle urging. He wanted us above all to be honest with ourselves. He used to say that you cannot successfully fool yourself. He wanted us to achieve, not for money or acclaim, but because any slob could be a non-achiever. He wanted us to think independently and always urged us to read the whole story, not just the headlines. Having sat on the city desk of a newspaper, he knew the limitations of headlines. And I remember when World War II started he told us to watch the battle lines on the maps, not just read the communiqués. (World War II was tough to watch on the maps for a long time!)

Perhaps a key day in my full awareness of my father was when I first realized he could be wrong in a matter of factual reasoning. I was twenty-three. Thus he was a foundation for me to build myself upon. I finally learned that he had the odd shortcoming, thank goodness, because no one could be as right and true as I saw him when I was a boy.

When I would ask a question, he would always answer, but not until he had made me try to figure it out for myself. He

would explain new things, and then ask us to go back over them to be sure we had understood, and that he had said it right.

I remember once he and my brother and I had been out in a marsh while Dad tried for a black duck. Driving home after dark, we three in the front seat, I in the middle—eight or nine years old I suppose—he decided the time had come to tell us the facts of life. Dad was a good man, shy and I am sure steadfast in the Puritan ethic, so it was not easy for him to tell all to us. But he did, and he used to love to recount the sequence of events later.

After laboring his way through, with some fear and trembling but in keeping with his practice, he said, “Now do you understand? Do you have any questions?”

Apparently, I replied somewhat aggressively, “Yes, I do.”

“What is it?” hesitantly.

“I want to know what makes all those black spots inside street light reflectors?”—proving the wisdom of the modern child psychologists who advise against premature disclosure of the mysteries.

But Dad was always there. I remember on more than one occasion when I did wrong, clearly, palpably wrong, he would do nothing just then. Often later when I might see the error of my ways and perhaps even admit to it, he would say something like, “Yes, I wasn’t sure that what you did was the right way, but I thought you might figure it out.”

Punishment, when deserved, was delivered strongly, not harshly, and immediately. But then no grudges, no long periods of being in disgrace.

Once in Newtonville, when I was eight or nine, I was fully clothed in a blue serge suit, knickers. My brother was deep in the bath tub. I did something calling for immediate reaction on my father’s part—I have no recollection of it—so he picked me up and lowered me into my brother’s bath. I remember no particular feeling of having been chastised, but a great and lasting impression of how skinny my brother looked, naked, as I landed on top of him. In retrospect, it was my mother who got the “punishment.”

Dad’s insistence on the doctrine of “think for yourself” guided his own life as well as ours, and was responsible for many in-



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teresting variables in our lives. When I was ten and my brother twelve. Dad found absurdity in some of the things we were taught at school, so he hired an MIT graduate student to tutor us at home. For three years we got what turned out to be a good lesson in how to learn, and enough raw material to stay even with our contemporaries. But we also forewent some of the social education that goes with school, and when my brother went to boarding school at fifteen and I to day school, we had some catching up to do on how to get along with a group. However, we had been to more different parts of our country, learned more about certain important things like partridge, and perhaps spent more time in adult company than many of our classmates. On balance, I believe it was a good experience for us, and Dad no longer fretted under what he deemed to be pointless pedagogy.

During the years when we were away at boarding school and college, and my sister was controllably quiet around the house, Dad began to write at home, and to write novels of greater scope. *The Strumpet Sea* in 1938, *Thread of Scarlet* in 1939, *Come Spring* in 1940, *The Strange Woman* in 1941, *Time of Peace* 1942, *Amateurs at War* 1943, *Leave Her to Heaven* 1944, *It's a Free Country* 1945, and finally, but not the last, *House Divided* in 1947.

Each of those a major, serious book. Most with an attention to the American civilian during America's wars which was in some ways a basic concept of the majority of Dad's late books. But observe the volume. One a year, if you count the 2-volume *House Divided* as two.

Dad had his first bad heart attack in 1938 and we often felt, in his books after that, he was trying to get all of himself and his philosophy into the record before trouble came again. *Come Spring* particularly is full of my father as a man, a husband, and a father. It is a great book, and a great personal legacy for all of us. One would get a clear picture of my father only by reading *Come Spring*. This is a book about good people doing what they thought was right. They had their weaknesses and their failures, but they did found a town in Maine (Union) and clear the wilderness and reproduce themselves. I have often thought that Dad wished he could have lived back then, and been Joel of *Come Spring*.

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In Dad's workroom in the Barn at our farm in Searsmont, Maine—inherited from Bert McCorrison who was the model for "Chet McAusland" in a hundred-odd "Fraternity Village" stories—there is a large desk. Behind the desk a photograph on the wall shows four piles of manuscript, ranged in front of an old, high-silhouette typewriter. The piles are medium, smaller, larger, and medium. And they are labelled, successively:

- 1) First draft, Longhand, 895 Pages
- 2) New material added, 401 Pages
- 3) Copied after Revision, 1564 Pages
- 4) Final typed manuscript, 1185 pages.

In the third pile are many tortured pages, with dozens of revisions, each one seeking the right way to say it. My father was a craftsman—and if that is different from being an artist, so be it—and he was interested in his craft. He left us many examples of his plans for stories. And he left many records of his care.

On the wall of the loft in the Barn in Searsmont there is a tide table showing the ebb and flow of the tide through Robinson's Hole, between Buzzard's Bay and Vineyard Sound, between Naushon Island and Pasque, in the year 1811. This had to do with research for *Thread of Scarlet* and Dad was not content to have the tide come and go. If his characters were to be in those waters at four a.m., he wanted the current forces to be authentic. He was not a stickler, he just knew that to make things real they had best be realistic.

I was writing a book once and asked my father to read a passage describing a night-time stalk down a trail to a river's edge. I described the action well enough, but when Dad finished reading he handed it back and said, to this effect, "Have him smell something? Did his feet feel something through his moccasins? Did a cobweb cling stickily to his face? Could he hear anything, his own heart, or night sounds? Involve his senses, and your reader's senses—don't just tell what happened."

That is as good a way as I know to describe Dad's approach to writing. Care, industry, craftsmanship. He always said the story was the easy part. Polti's *Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations* (in which all possible plots are outlined and subdivided) was on his shelves, and he gave copies to his children as we majored in English. The story part is easy; the hard part is to involve

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the senses and emotions of your reader and make it real.

I once saw Dad perform as the “speaker” at a family night at our country club. He was to be unrehearsed and “tell a story” about some object picked by a lady in the audience. So one dear person shyly named her own, vintage black hat. Dad told one of Polti’s stories—perhaps, “A man betrayed by his brother (mother, father, sister, friend)” about the black hat. It could have been told about anything picked by anyone in the audience.

This may not be what you wanted, Dick Cary, but I had better stop because I could go on forever with great pleasure. To remember my father and reflect upon his life and way of life is for me a privilege. He did it very well.

Perhaps readers of the *Quarterly* would like to share one of our Lares and Penates.

My mother, who died in November 1970, seventeen years after Dad, wrote a book about him for the family, called *All About Da*. Dadcu (“Dah-kee”) is Welsh for Grandfather, and that’s what I called my grandfather. Our children and my brother’s and sister’s worked out the easier “Da.” It is a delightful thing for us to have and after she tells about his death, on the Curling Rink at The Country Club in Brookline, she wrote:

### EPILOGUE

The knoll, two hundred or so yards behind the barn at Hardscrabble, with Levenseller Mountain beyond, was in many ways Da’s favorite earth spot. Whenever we were at the farm we never missed walking out there after our early evening meal, to watch the sunset. The view to the west was often spectacular—all crimson and gold—but the afterglow on Levenseller to the east and the clouds above it thrilled him even more. There was always a birdsong around us, and we spoke sparingly. The ring of hills was forever changing in color as the sun sank lower, and Da often quoted from his favorite psalm: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.”

The knoll came to be the focal point of Hardscrabble life. Before its rough stone fireplace at the picnic table we had our family parties, and sat far into the evening in the firelight telling stories and singing.

Da had expressed the wish to have his ashes at the farm, and the knoll was there to welcome them. We rolled a big boulder from across the road, placed it on the knoll facing Levenseller, and had his name carved on it. You grandchildren know it as “Da’s rock.” We love to

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go for a picnic on the knoll with the rock only a few yards away. Da seems very near us.

Here is part of a letter I received from Bob Bradley last summer. He and I always exchange letters on our birthdays in August and this is what Bob wrote:

My memory returns to an evening when we were discussing Hamlet. I had mentioned some lines that especially appealed to me. Uncle Ben said in turn that he liked best of all Hamlet's words just before death to Horatio:

"If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story."

He especially relished the phrase "absent thee from felicity." And you remember how he could relish a phrase, as well as a view, a game, laughter, Old Fashioneds, roast woodcock and grouse, and fiddleheads. No one enjoyed his enjoyment more than he. Of course my thoughts are rich in memories of him, for he did much to shape my outlook and my thinking.

Da said many wise things and here are two I think you will want to remember.

Freedom is worthy of the name only when the mind is free, and the mind which permits its thinking to be done for it, which takes its opinions in predigested forms, is a mind enslaved.

And he said this:

Life is the acceptance of responsibilities or their evasion; it is a business of meeting obligations or avoiding them. To every man the choice is continually being offered, and by the manner of his choosing you may fairly measure him.

And this is what Da said about himself:

I have liked many people, disliked few. It is true that many people bore me. Mediocrity coupled with complacent self-assurance always repels me; but on the other hand, to feel that a person is unhappy has always attracted me to that person. I have been most profoundly moved by the deep bravery in man which enables him to endure the many petty torments that are apt to be so much more harassing than the great crises in our lives. It is easy enough to face death, but it is not easy to face a wretched life with a high head. I have found men almost unbelievably honest, slow to take an unfair advantage, and stout to fulfill their obligations. It seems to me that honesty and an enduring courage are the most nearly universal human attributes.

When I was beginning to consider leaving the Boston *American*,

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I wrote in one of my notebooks this paragraph:

“Here is what I want to do with my life. In the first place to love and to be loved, worthily, not alone by my wife and by my mother and father and sister, but by the world, or so much of it as I encounter. In the second place to build myself into a writer not only with a popular appeal but with a claim to real rank among those who were worthwhile. In the third place, to hold some post in the public life where I can help to right some wrongs. Whether that post be official does not matter, and perhaps the eye and the pen can do more than public office. In the fourth place, to lift those who are mine to so much of wealth as is necessary to allow us all to get the most—and the best—from ourselves.

Not all the things I sought have been achieved; but the thing I wanted most—the love and trust of my family—is mine. In that certainty today I am strong.”

The love and trust of his family grow with the years, and in them Da is stronger than ever. The rock on the knoll, looking out to the hills, is a symbol of our love. I am glad I have been able to absent me from felicity awhile to tell his story.



### BEN AMES WILLIAMS AND THE *SATURDAY* *EVENING POST*

By RICHARD CARY

**B**en Ames Williams (1889-1953) wrote eighty-four stories before he sold one. For five years, while working full time as a reporter for the Boston *American*, he applied two or three of his off hours daily to turning out narratives which he hoped would appeal to editors of popular fiction magazines. The steady downpour of rejection slips, which dampened his spirits not one whit, was finally stayed by Charles Agnew MacLean, who printed “The Wings of Lias” in *Smith’s Magazine* of July 1915. In that year Williams published three more stories in the so-called pulps, and seemed well launched toward a career as purveyor of gratifying adventure and romance. When in the following year Robert H. Davis, editor in chief of the Munsey magazines, embraced him as both friend and frequent contributor to *All-Story Weekly*, Williams’ level and direction as a