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"The Jug Makes the Paradise": New Light on the Eben Flood

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EBEN FLOOD first entered American literature through the pages of the Nation in the fall of 1920, thus belatedly joining the ranks of such other eccentrics of Tilbury Town as Aaron Stark the miser, John Evereldown the womanizer, the late imperial Richard Cory, and the drinker-dreamer, Miniver Cheevy. Robinson saluted the old man's arrival with a note to Louis Ledoux, pointing out that "Mr. Flood, who was turned down for alcoholic reasons by Collier's," had now "made his disreputable debut in the Nation."1

Robinson did not really regard Eben Flood as disreputable. He often later confessed to a "somewhat prejudiced liking" for the old man — and with reason, since the poem was at once accepted as a small masterpiece by a wide audience, whatever may have been their views on prohibition. It is sometimes forgotten by present-day readers that the advent of Eben Flood approximately coincided with the passage of the Volstead Act, which Robinson regarded with extreme displeasure. 2

"The whole situation is awful," he complained. The only ray of hope he could find in the non-alcoholic gloom was a recipe for hard cider. "It appears," he wrote, "that a barrel of cider, treated with a pound of sugar to the gallon, together with raisins, beefsteak, and various other fauna and flora, may be

2 EAP's liking for Flood: Letter to Witter Bynner, October 14, 1921 (Torrence, 127). The proclamation, beginning Prohibition, was effective January 16, 1920.
converted into a regular reservoir of possibilities."

Because Mr. Flood came into being so soon after this recipe was set down, it is at least possible that the jug he used in his lonely upland carousal contained hard cider, rather than whiskey, as is commonly supposed.

1.

Robinson first submitted "Mr. Flood’s Party" to Harford Powel, editor of Collier’s on October 17, 1920, with a covering letter:

Dear Mr. Powel:

I was already intending to send the enclosed to you when your letter came, and so send it now, hoping that you may find it agreeable.

I am rather doubtful about a Christmas poem, as those things (for me at any rate) have to come mostly of their own accord. I might add that "Mr. Flood" has not been submitted elsewhere.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

E. A. Robinson

The poem as sent to Powel differed in several small respects from the version printed in the Nation on November 24, 1920. Between getting it back from Powel and sending it along to Carl Van Doren, Robinson seems to have done some tinkering. The first sentence in the Collier’s typescript reads as follows:

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night
Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home, paused and observed.

The printed version was changed to "paused warily."

The fifth stanza of the typescript lacked one and a half sets of quotations marks and contained the typographical error as for of, all of which Robinson corrected in submitting the poem to Van Doren. The only other substantive change came in the sixth stanza where Robinson’s typescript, perhaps inadvertently, omitted one foot:

3 Letter to Mrs. James E. Fraser, August 6, 1920 (Torrence, 120).
4 For copies of this hitherto unprinted letter and of the poem as mailed to Powel, I am indebted to the eminent Robinson scholar, Richard Cary of Colby College, who kindly supplied the information on February 21, 1972. EAR was visiting Ledoux at Cornwall, N. Y., when he sent the letter.
For soon amid the silver loneliness
He lifted up his voice and sang—,
Secure, with only two moons listening,
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang

with the strains of “Auld Lang Syne.” In the printed version, Robinson has supplied the missing foot, so that the final reading is

For soon amid the silver loneliness
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang

Thus revised and corrected, the poem reached Van Doren late in October, and was promptly accepted. “I’m glad you like Mr. Flood, and I thank you for taking him in,” wrote Robinson. “May I see a proof — with the understanding that it will be returned immediately?” Two other notes followed, the first thanking Van Doren for the cheque and for copies of the number in which Flood had made his debut, and the second asking for five more copies of the same number. Finally, on December 12, Robinson thanked Van Buren for “the testimonials in regard to Mr. Flood.” Despite his “failings,” wrote Robinson, the old man seemed “to have made a good impression.”

2.

The circumstances surrounding the first publication of “Mr. Flood’s Party” are thus clarified by the unwitting collaboration of Messrs. Robinson, Volstead, Powel, and Van Doren. The mystery of Eben Flood’s origin is somewhat less easy to solve. One clue was provided by Robinson’s biographer, Emery Neff, who wrote that the poem arose in part from “a recollection of Harry Smith’s father’s story of a Maine eccentric who used to propose and drink toasts to himself.” Neff added that this “humorous anecdote became enriched in Robinson’s mind by association with old things, happy and unhappy, and with the frailty of human hopes.”

It is a well-known fact that Robinson sometimes began his portrayals of fictional characters by using actual acquaintances as rough models. Another of his biographers, Chard Powers
Smith, includes Eben Flood among the “partial portraits” whose “respective dramas” were in certain respects authentic, though the poet himself once maintained that they were “precipitated” in his imagination. Both statements are doubtless true, for as all writers know, the imagination works best when fired by empirical data. Robinson was very forthright about John Evereldown, whom he identified as “merely John Tarbox plus a superannuated projection of [blank] . . . .” This is a clear admission that he sometimes consciously elaborated on what he knew or could guess about the outer and inner qualities of living men and women, a process that enabled him to evolve composite characters like John Evereldown.

The identity of the man who served as immediate model for Mr. Flood was long known to members of the Robinson family, but the secret was kept to avoid hurting anyone’s feelings. The late Ruth Robinson Nivison, the poet’s niece, prepared a holograph notebook, with a preface dated March 1, 1939. Here she recorded her own annotations on her uncle’s poems. Her comment on “Mr. Flood’s Party” reads as follows: “The incident of Mr. Flood was witnessed by the boys one night on Church Hill. He was old John Esmond who lived out on the Brunswick Road in the cottage now owned by Chas. Skehan.” Although one might suppose from the text of the poem that Eben Flood’s “party” took place at some distance from the chief thoroughfares of Gardiner, Maine, Professor David S. Nivison, Ruth’s son, points out that Church Hill “is not at all a remote part of town: it rises steeply from Water St. near the bridge across the Kennebec up to the Common,” and derives its name from the fact that “several churches are located on it.” Nivison adds that “the boys” in his mother’s annotation could be Robinson and his two brothers, or just his brothers, or any of them together with their friends, and suggests that it would have been extraordinary indeed if “the boys” had merely observed the incident.

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8 Letter to Laura E. Richards, March 9, 1902 (Torrence, 50-51). In the same letter, however, EAR denies that that miser Aaron Stark has anything “whatever to do with the late N. M. Whitmore, or with anyone else.” In short, his use of real-life prototypes was not an irrevocable habit. In a letter to Smith, December 14, 1895 (Denham Sutcliffe, editor, Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry DeForest Smith 1890-1905 [Cambridge, Mass., 1947], 238), EAR mentions “old John Evereldown who had all the women of Tilbury Town under his wing, or thought he had.”
instead of participating in some fashion—perhaps, though he
does not say so, to the extent of accepting a drink or two from
John Esmond's jug. 9

Mrs. Nivison's information has the advantage over Neff's
story in that it supplies both a name and an exact locale to the
background of the poem. The Maine eccentric of Harry Smith's
father's story could have been John Esmond, or someone else
entirely. Robinson the poet was under no obligation to adhere
strictly to biographical or geographical facts. Neff is surely
correct in saying that the original event "became enriched in
Robinson's mind" by various associations, not least his hard-
won knowledge of "the frailty of human hopes."

3.

Three literary associations seem, in fact, to have combined
to enrich the portrait of Eben Flood. One appears in the second
stanza when the old man first addresses his alter ego:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird."

The poet he means is Omar Khayyam in Fitzgerald's version.
"Come fill the cup," writes Omar,

"The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter—and the Bird is on the wing." (St. VII)

Although it is considerably more capacious, Eben's jug is the
equivalent of Omar's filled cup, and he drinks to the Bird of
Time, which at his age is fast homing. Robinson had discov-
ered the Rubaiyat in 1890. Omar's oriental fatalism struck him
then as "grim" but "rather attractive," and reading Fitzgerald's
quatrain's gave him "a sort of satisfaction," even if he found it
hard to "imagine a man of the nineteenth century striking for

9 Professor David S. Nivison to author, April 8, 1972. He quotes from his
mother's notebook, page 42. According to Richard Cary, editor, Edwin
Arlington Robinson's Letters to Edith Brower (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 215,
n. 18, Mrs. Nivison believed that Captain Craig was "an aggregate portrait of
the poet's brother Horace Dean, of Alfred H. Louis, and others; that Killigrew
was more probably Seth Ellis Pope; and that Miniver Cheever is the
poet himself, exaggerated.
the woods with a damsel, a book of verses, a loaf of bread, and a two-quart jug.” If this combination, as Omar said, was “paradise enow,” Robinson thought that the jug was mainly responsible. Realistically speaking, as both poets knew, all things pass and “most things break.” Any other view of the human predicament is an illusion, like supposing that an earthly paradise is actually possible. A two-quart jug can help to maintain the illusion. “Perhaps,” as Robinson said, “the jug makes the paradise.”

From the ancient Persian hedonism of stanza two, Robinson turns in stanza three to the ancient martial imagery of *The Song of Roland*:

> Alone, as if enduring to the end
> A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn
> He stood there in the middle of the road
> Like Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn.

During the rear-guard action at Roncesvalles, Roland was at first too proud to blow the horn that would summon back the Emperor Charlemagne to check the onslaught of the heathen hordes. Eben Flood, the jug at his lips silhouetted in the moonlight like the horn of Roland, is also too proud to call for aid, although time’s fanatical legions are moving in upon him, and he wears still, albeit invisibly, a “valiant armor of scarred hopes.” When Robinson first became acquainted with this oldest of the *chansons de geste* does not appear, unless it took place during the 1890s when he was reading so much French poetry and fiction. But the allusion to the heroic Roland in his

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10 Louise Dauner first printed the *Rubaiyat* quotation in “Two Robinson Revisions: ‘Mr. Flood’s Party’ and ‘The Dark Hills’,” *Colby Library Quarterly*, VIII (June 1969), 309-316. She concentrates on the final stanza of the poem, showing how inept was EAR’s early version of it. EAR’s first enthusiasm for Omar is recorded in a letter to Harry Smith (October 12, 1890; Sutcliffe, 4), where he alludes to stanza XII of Fitzgerald’s translation (“A book of verses,” etc.). Other mentions of Omar appear on March 19, 1891 (Sutcliffe, 15), where he approvingly quotes stanza LXXXVIII, about the “luckless pots,” and on October 1, 1893, where he thinks he will “always stand in the shadow as one of Omar’s broken pots” (Sutcliffe, 167). On September 23, 1891, he quotes Omar’s line about “the master of the show,” (Sutcliffe, 24) ; and on December 8, 1891 mentions a case of blues that would have put Omar’s pessimism in the shade (Sutcliffe, 45). On February 5, 1893 he listened to Mowry Sabin’s drunken reading from Omar during a visit to Cambridge (Sutcliffe, 84). Finally, on October 5, 1893, thinking back to the “jolly symposiums” he had enjoyed with Smith in September, he parodies stanza XII: “A roaring blaze, an Ear of Corn, and thou / Beside me smoking in the Wilderness” (Sutcliffe, 110).
own upland setting of the Pyrenees does help to raise the poetical stature of Mr. Flood by several cubits.

For the third of the literary associations, and admittedly the least certain of the three, it is necessary to go back to the year 1900 when Robinson, still little known, was first befriended and then anthologized by Edmund Clarence Stedman, Yale man, Wall Streeter, Unitarian, sometime war correspondent, poet, critic, essayist, and editor. Robinson at this time was living in shy penury in New York. One Sunday early in May he agreed to pay a visit to Stedman’s Victorian house in Bronxville. Stedman was then nearing the end of an enormous task, the compilation of *An American Anthology, 1787-1900: Selections Illustrating the Editor’s Critical Review of American Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*. The firm of Houghton Mifflin published it in the fall of 1900, a thick and handsome volume containing samples of the work of 571 poets on 773 double-columned pages, with another hundred pages of biographical notes and indexes. The upshot of the meetings with Stedman was that five of the early poems, including “Luke Havergal” and “The House on the Hill,” were chosen for the volume, “soused,” as Robinson said, “in anthological pickle.”

By October, when the book appeared, Robinson’s association with Stedman had slowed down considerably. He now described the editor as “small, white-haired, wide-whiskered, and very kind,” with “features almost unnaturally fine” and a rubicund face that showed “signs [of] suffering and discouragement.” He was nevertheless “jolly and lively and extremely sympathetic towards all the new movements in art and life.” But while Robinson called him “one of the best men on earth,” he felt that Stedman had “a faculty for not finding a writer’s best work that amounts to positive genius.” Still later in the month he said that he had lately seen little of the Stedman family because he himself had been keeping pretty much in his “hole” at 71 Irving Place. “Sometimes I sit on the edge of it, like a Maine woodchuck,” said he, “and wait for a while for someone to shoot, but I crawl back presently.”

Stedman’s friends among the leading literati sent him a steady

11 Letter to Daniel Gregory Mason, May 18, 1900 (Torrence, 30).
12 Letters to Josephine Preston Peabody, October 8 and 23, 1900; to Ridgeley Torrence, October 28, 1900. Copies of these letters are in Princeton University Library, and have not been printed previously.
stream of congratulatory messages after the anthology appeared. Despite the fact that Robinson was among the living contributors, there is no indication that he received an advance copy. The gap was soon filled by his friend Wood, who sent him the book with an inscription: "To E. A. Robinson, with the sincere regard of an appreciative, if eccentric friend, H. A. Wise Wood, 1900." On October 18 Robinson wrote Edith Brower about Wood's gift of "a copy of Stedman's anthology which I happened to want." The ambiguity of the final infinitive leaves us in doubt as to whether Robinson meant wished to have or simply lacked. It was the first anthology in which his work had ever been "pickled," and the lack of it probably meant that Stedman and his publisher thought it too expensive a tome to send out to contemporaneous contributors, while Robinson may have had too little money to buy one for himself.13

Like most of his other books now on deposit in the Colby College Library, Robinson's copy of An American Anthology is "innocent of annotation." But if he read it at all, he could hardly have missed a poem by James Kirke Paulding, "The Old Man's Carousel," and the point to be made about it is that it may well have provided Robinson with the germ of the idea that blossomed twenty years later in "Mr. Flood's Party." Paulding (1779-1860) is the twelfth poet in the volume, and his single contribution appears face to face with Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner."14 Stedman's brief note in the back of the book describes him as an "early novelist" who was associated with Washington and William Irving in the publication of Salmagundi. He had also done a biography of George Washington, and served as Secretary of the Navy under Martin Van Buren.

It would be misleading to say that the poems closely resemble each other. Both use stanza forms, six in Paulding's and seven in Robinson's. Paulding's stanzas consist of three anapestic trimeter couplets, and the galloping rhythms counteract the elegiac substance to some degree, making the total effect somewhat less

sentimental than it might otherwise seem. Robinson’s iambic pentameters are divided into eight-line stanzas, each consisting of two quatrains with the rhyme scheme abcb. Robinson likewise to some degree undercuts his elegiac substance, but more by humor and irony than by any prosodic devices.  

Paulding's old man drinks bumpers of wine to his dead: a boyhood sweetheart, a drowned friend of his youth, a pair of his children who died young, and finally his parents. Eben Flood drinks what might be hard cider from a jug rather than wine from a cup, but he too is recalling, as he drinks, the “friends of other days,” and he seems to hear “a phantom salutation of the dead” ringing up from the nocturnal streets of the town where only strangers live now. “Drink! drink! to whom shall we drink?” asks Paulding’s ancient of days, as if he had just opened a bottle and set out two glasses for a series of toasts. Eben, too, addresses a companion in the first person plural, having as it were pluralized himself for the purposes of conversation. Paulding’s protagonist is about to drink a final toast when he finds that his bottle is empty. The good wine is gone: “like them we have toasted, its spirit is fled.” Eben sings a snatch of “Auld Lang Syne” and thinks to soothe his weary throat with one last libation from the jug. But having already reached a condition in which he sees two moons rather than one, whether because his eyes are blurred with tears or his brain with alcohol, and knowing that the liquor can no longer give him the illusion of companionship (the “party” state of mind), he raises the jug one last time “regretfully,” and shakes his hoary head at finding that he is “again alone.” Whether or not Robinson actually recalled Paulding’s poem when he wrote his own, “The Old Man’s Carousal” might have served as a title for Eben Flood’s bibulous moonlight stroll.  

First collected in Avon’s Harvest (1921) and anthologized many times since, “Mr. Flood’s Party” richly deserves the admiration it has earned. Robinson himself shared in the general approbation, remarking to his biographer Chard Powers Smith that “I suppose Mr. Flood is the best thing I have done.” The power of endurance, buoyed up with what Yvor Winters once

15 John E. Parish, “The Rehabilitation of Eben Flood,” English Journal, LV (September 1966), 696-699, argues that it was not drunkenness but tears that made Flood see two moons. He also thinks that the jug contained whiskey.
called “a kind of compassionate humor” in the face of “irremediable tragedy,”16 makes Eben Flood far more attractive than that other old man in T. S. Eliot’s equally brilliant poem, “Gerontion.” It is worth noting, for purposes of comparison that both these senior citizens entered American literature in the year 1920.

16 Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Conn., 1946), 36.

THE SOURCES OF ROBINSON’S ARTHURIAN POEMS AND HIS OPINIONS OF OTHER TREATMENTS

By Laurence Perrine

THE SOURCES OF Robinson’s Arthurian poems have been discussed in two recently published essays.1 The notes that follow are an attempt to complete the record. They do not duplicate the previous discussions, but neither do they omit any previously mentioned sources. They furnish a compact summary of Robinson’s indebtedness or possible indebtedness to other works. They also give Robinson’s recorded opinions of other treatments of the legend.

Malory

Robinson’s principal source for all three Arthurian poems is Malory’s Morte Darthur. Letters in the Robinson collection at Houghton Library, Harvard, showed that Robinson borrowed the two-volume Temple edition of Malory from his friend Louis V. Ledoux in April 1916 and did not return it until July 1924. Robinson did much of his reading in Ledoux’s library at Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, and often borrowed books from Ledoux. According to the Hagedorn biography, Robinson first became acquainted with Malory as a youth in his father’s library in Gardiner, Maine. Robinson’s Harvard