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In Memoriam

Ben Ames Williams
1889-1953
BAW WITH SEVERAL BRACE OF BLACK DUCKS

In Brooks, Alberta, Canada, 1947

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ABOUT BEN AMES WILLIAMS
By Florence Talpey Williams

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The following highlights from the life of Ben Ames Williams, choice portrayer of Maine scene and character, are extracted from a biography written by his wife expressly for their grandchildren. The book has been privately published in mimeographed form and distributed among the family and a few intimate friends. Mrs. Williams has made copious use of letters, notebooks, diaries, and account books which he left among his effects and which are quoted for the first time.

The editor has read this biography with considerable animation, culling here and there such passages as would afford a chronological view of Williams' growth as a personality and a writer. These are presented in Mrs. Williams' own words, except for necessary condensations and alterations of tone (she addresses herself directly to the grandchildren and calls Williams by his domestic nickname). All notes and comments in italics are the editor's.—R. C.]

[Ben-Ames—he dropped the hyphen while still a schoolboy—was born in Macon, Mississippi, on March 7, 1889, to Sarah Marshall Ames and Daniel Webster Williams.] This is what his father wrote in his diary of this event: "Ben Ames was a child of very mature grandfathers, and one very mature grandmother, while the other grandmother and his parents were no longer children. This maturity of ancestors is supposed to be one condition that produces a genius. He was born at 11:30 A.M. after we had become much alarmed. He was a large child with a very large head. He had large limbs and body and promised to be a large man, like his grandfather Ames and my Williams cousins."
Williams had a congenital handicap which few readers, allured by his detailed and vivid descriptions, would suspect. Occasionally the family took a drive out into the country in a carriage hired from a livery stable in Jackson. On one of these drives, Ben's parents saw a huge clump of fire pinks by the roadside and said to him: “Oh, see those flowers, Ben-Ames! You hop out and pick a few of them, will you?” Ben got out cheerfully enough, then stood hesitantly by the roadside. “Well, where are the flowers?” he asked. Said his father, “Don’t be so obstinate, Ben-Ames, don’t you see those bright red flowers right where you’re standing?” “What flowers?” asked Ben, and when they continued to point at them, he leaned over and gathered a few. But he picked more foliage than flowers, and it was then that they realized for the first time that he was red-green color blind.*

Williams came early to love language and insist upon proper usage. In grade school he willingly risked banishment for criticizing a provincial principal who pronounced “peonies” as “pineys.” One day his teacher said: “Now children, you can leave your pencils lay on your desks.” Ben put up his hand and corrected her grammar. He was promptly sent to the principal of the school, who sided with the teacher! [He did not easily outgrow this perfectionist zeal. Under his photo-

*Editor's note: In an unpublished autobiographical volume, “American Notes,” Williams took pains to explain this seeming anomaly. “One reader, knowing that I am color blind, asked how I could write about colors and be sure I was right. The question arose, I suppose, from the fact that most people assume a color-blind person sees no color at all. It seems to them incredible that one who finds it hard to distinguish a red flower on a green bush may nevertheless be keenly aware of other colors, and deeply moved by them. A part of the answer to that question—how could I identify colors—must be that people told me. Thus it would not have occurred to me to call the blossoms of the cholla ‘fuchsia.’ The word was that of Peter Hurd, the artist. I called those blossoms an orange-red. But with the exception of some shades of red, I can if put to it name most colors. What is perhaps more to the point, while I do not always see a difference between red and green, or between pink and gray, or between lavender and blue, I see an infinite variety of color which the normal eye does not see at all. In an article published in the Saturday Evening Post many years ago under the title ‘What Color is That?’ I explained this at some length. Many a time in our thirty-six years of marriage, I have called Mrs. Williams to see what to my eyes was an extraordinarily vivid sunset—which to her seemed dull and drab; and the converse is true. She sees beauty in skies which are all dull grays and blues to me. When I write of colors, I write of colors as I see them, except when as in the case of the blossoms on the cholla someone else puts a name to what I see.”
He knows,  
He knows that he knows.  
He knows that he knows that he knows.

[The positive side of Williams' nature had another early outcropping. In the era when Lord Fauntleroy suits and long golden curls were de rigueur for all proper little boys, Ben's mother tricked him out regally and sent him off to the birthday party of a neighborhood girl.] When Ben came home his mother asked him about the party: had he remembered to say “How do you do” politely; had he said “Happy Birthday” to his little hostess and given her the birthday present? Oh, yes. “And what did she say?” asked his mother. “Oh, she took the present and told me to go home because she didn’t want me at her party.” “Oh, dear!” exclaimed his horrified mother. “What did you do then?” “Oh, nothing much. I just slapped her face and stayed.”

[Keats was inspired to verse upon first looking into Chapman's Homer. Ben's initial literary effort came after first looking at an electric automobile, when he was eleven. Poetic license is subjected to severe strain at several points, to say nothing of the fact that the Williamses had no cow.]

Oh, what would I give for an automobile  
Instead of wild horses that run.  
For to ride in one makes me happy feel.  
Everyone thinks it is fun.  
For in it, I could go for the cow,  
I'm sure it would go too slow.  
When Mother says, “You'd better go now,”  
I won't say a word but just go.  
Whenever I want it to stop  
All I have to do is to check  
The current and then out I drop  
But suppose there should happen a wreck?

[Ben attributed his insatiable appetite for books to his parents' habit of reading to him from his very youngest days.] One day he came into the room where his mother was reading to herself, and he said, “Read to me?” His mother replied
that she would as soon as she finished the chapter she was reading. "Oh, read me what you are reading now," he urged. "You wouldn't be interested in this. It's a novel by Dickens and it's grown-up reading." "Well, I want you to read it to me just the same," he persisted, so his mother started to read aloud. Ben sat quietly for a while, then got restless. His mother continued to read. Presently he got up and walked slowly to the door. "Well, I guess I'll go out and play. I never did like Dickens," he said, as he walked out of the room.

[It is an amusing corollary that, when asked to name his list of ten favorite books many years later, he listed A Tale of Two Cities as alternate to Fielding's Tom Jones.]

[Williams the boy was as determined an achiever as Williams the man. He was the tallest and heaviest boy at prep school and made up his mind to play center on the football team.] He wrote home jubilantly of this prospect, only to receive a shattering reply—absolutely no football! His mother had heard all about the terrible injuries inflicted on football players, especially centers, and he must promise not to play. Eventually, a compromise was reached. Reluctantly his mother wrote that she still forbade Ben to be on the team, but she did not object to his practicing with the boys. Result: he often practiced all afternoon as virtually a one-man opposition to the team. He received quite a battering on the field, but if he was hurt his mother had no cause to worry, because he wasn't playing football, just practicing!

[Call it drive or tenacity or perversity, Williams knew what he wanted and let nothing bar his way to it.] When he finished freshman year at Dartmouth his English professor told Ben that he hadn't the slightest idea how to write the English language. Ben continued to elect a lot of English courses, and at the end of senior year the same professor told him he was one of the few men in his class capable of writing literary English. In telling this Ben used to say: "One sure way to make me do a thing was to tell me I was incapable of it."

[God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. It seems probable, from hindsight, that Williams would have become a writer of fiction no matter what job he had taken.
after leaving college. But when one considers that practically every other teacher or professor of English is an author manqué who surrendered ambition in favor of a regular salary, the following verbal lapse assumes portentous weight.] Through the college office, Ben was recommended as a teacher of English at a top-ranking school for boys in Connecticut—Hotchkiss. He immediately sent a wire to his father: "I have been offered a job teaching shall I accept?" When the telegram was delivered to his father it read: "I have been offered a job traveling shall I accept?" The idea of their son's being a traveling salesman was definitely abhorrent to his parents, and the prompt reply was "No!" Ben used to say that the telegraph company unwittingly changed the whole course of his life with one word.

[Deciding upon a career as newspaper reporter, Williams made a discouraging circuit of the Boston offices, garnering only a flimsy "Come around in two or three weeks" from Jim Reardon, managing editor of the American. In the interim, Ben acquired a nasty gash on his forehead from diving into shallow water, and sported a "cocoon dressing" over the several required stitches. At the expiration of the waiting period he presented himself again at the American.] "You told me to come back in two or three weeks, Mr. Reardon, and said you might have a job for me." Well, Mr. Reardon wasn't quite sure, and talked vaguely of a possible opening in two or three weeks and kept looking at the cocoon dressing on Ben's forehead. That seems to have irritated Ben beyond endurance, and he looked Mr. Reardon in the eye and barked: "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!" "Come in Monday morning," said Mr. Reardon quietly. He told Ben later that he was so surprised he couldn't think of anything else to say. Ben had landed his first job.

[In the fall of 1911 Williams was sharing a room in the South End with Peter Webb Elliott, a reporter on the Boston Traveler. At that time the drama critic on that paper was Earl Derr Biggers, who was later to create Charlie Chan. Williams describes by what a roundabout route he came to write his first short story.] "Through Earl's influence Pete was trying to write
fiction. Since I was diligently engaged in saving money—to get married—I could not afford to waste my substance in riotous living; and since Pete spent his evenings pounding out short stories on a rented typewriter, I could not entice him into a game of cribbage or into any other pastime to kill the hours before we went to bed. His industry infected me, and I rented a typewriter and set it up at the other end of the room, and wrote my first fiction story. It was called "Getting a Job." This story, like the four score which followed it, completely failed to interest anyone except myself. Yet I continued to write, and by the time of our marriage I had settled down to a steady routine."

[The Williamses were married on September 4, 1912, after which Ben returned to writing for the newspaper during the day and at fiction in the evening. His record for non-sales remained intact.] On the seventh of March, 1914, Ben's 25th birthday, he records that I gave him a leather-bound account book with "Ben Ames Williams" embossed in gold on the cover. I still have this account book, and you can all read what he wrote on the first page: "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 and so on this seventh day of March, 1914, my twenty-fifth birthday—open an account of expenses and possible receipts from freelance writing. The book itself is Florence's answer to my request for an account book: it is worthy of Shakespeare. But I have vowed that if five years shows no real success at writing, I will lock this book in my deepest drawer and forget it. B. A. Williams."

[For three years rejection slips had been a major fact of Williams' life. Little daunted, he said]: "I wrote and wrote, encouraged by Florence's unshakeable certainty that the stories I wrote were good ones, and were better all the time, and that the editors who rejected them were a lot of idiots! I don't recall that the possibility of earning a large sum of money by my writing entered into my thoughts at all. I wrote because I had set out to learn to write; and a stubborn persistence and a certain blind faith in myself, have always been part of my
With the inception of his five-year plan, however, his fortune took a sharp turn. After rejecting several of Ben's stories, Charles Agnew McLean, editor of the Street and Smith magazines, bought for $50 a tale based on Williams' Mississippi background, "Wings of 'Lias." It was published in Smith's Magazine for July 1915.

This was the opening wedge. Thereafter Ben appeared with fair regularity in the periodicals, largely through the interest of Robert H. Davis, editor for the Munsey string of magazines. But all was not unadulterated attar. We had two sons, aged three and one, and had moved to a larger house. There Ben set up his typewriter and kept on writing, and it was six months before he definitely decided to resign from the paper. With a wife and two sons to support, it was only natural that Ben should hesitate to take such a momentous step. His mother made it possible by offering to make up the difference between what his salary had been and what he earned by writing stories. Ben wrote at this time: "I recognized the fact that a lifetime of dashing off short stories to meet bills would be sheer drudgery, and that there must be somewhere in the back of my mind, a clear idea of what my aim was to be."

In his record book appears this passage, dated October 26, 1916: "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 my children and 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 worth while. In the third place, to hold some post in public life where I can help to right some wrongs. Whether that post be official or unofficial 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." The order of emphasis in this credo is revelatory of Williams' values. First and foremost, despite the drain that writing and subsequent popularity put on his time, he remained the family man enormously devoted to his wife and children.
[By 1919 Williams was well launched in the short story field but reacted ecstatically when informed by Macmillan that they would publish All the Brothers Were Valiant in book form: “I walked on air! This was to be a book, and there was for me a magic in the words!” His second book of record is The Sea Bride, also published by Macmillan in 1919. As a matter of fact, however, his third book was really his first in point of conception: “The Great Accident was the first thing I had written which was planned and executed with book publication primarily in mind; All the Brothers Were Valiant and The Sea Bride were written after The Great Accident was begun, and before it was finished.” [Nevertheless, all three appeared first as magazine serials.]

[Early in the game Williams became disillusioned about the authenticity of professional criticism. He released this wry observation following reviews of The Great Accident (1920), which unfolds around Jackson, Ohio, where he had spent his boyhood]: “One American critic, superlatively wise, wrote that after making a real success with All the Brothers Were Valiant I had rushed into print with The Sea Bride, another whaling story. Now, he said, I had abandoned the field with which I was familiar and had attempted to write a novel of life in a small midwestern town where I was completely at a loss. Since I had spent a dozen years or more in that small midwestern town, while on the other hand I had never seen a whaling vessel, this review awoke in me a doubt of the infallibility of critics from which I have not yet recovered.”

[Before long Williams became an outstanding contributor to the Saturday Evening Post, Collier’s, Country Gentleman, Maclean’s, and other periodicals of large circulation. And he learned, the hard way, that readers could be as caustic as critics.] In choosing names for unattractive characters, I have usually tried to select a name so commonplace that it was unlikely to be found in life. One such instance brought me some amusing correspondence. In a Fraternity story there were to be three ruffians. I thought of one of them as a foreigner, which suggested Polack, but since racial nicknames seem to me in poor taste, I changed the name to Pollock. But I remem-
bered Clem Pollock (an older reporter on the Boston American) so I changed the initial consonant to K, quite sure there were no Kollocks in the world. When the story appeared I had irate letters from two sisters in New Jersey who assured me that there was a General Kollock on Washington’s staff, that another had served on the Supreme Court bench, and that, in short, I had slandered an old and honored family. Another member of the family wrote in a more humorous vein that all the Kollocks must be turning in their graves at my profanation.”

[The female of the species proved more virulent than the male.] “Since I wrote The Strange Woman and Leave Her to Heaven,” grumbled Williams, “Florence has suffered much from the asininity of readers. The vocal minority are convinced that I have learned to know women by living a life of debauchery or that Florence was at least to some degree the model for the vicious characters I drew. Florence and I fell in love with each other over forty years ago and we have been married thirty-four years and neither of us has ever regretted it.” [Mrs. Williams chose to accent the lighter side.] Ben was so exasperated by some of the letters that he turned them over to me to answer. I recall with amusement one letter from a woman who wrote to say that she could tell him the story of her life that far transcended the lives of his two heroines, and suggested that she come to live with him a little while, so that she could tell him all about it!

[Williams’ integrity and his pride of craftsmanship always outranked the almighty dollar in his estimation. After Evered (1921) was published, he was offered “dizzingly high prices” for his stories by motion picture studios. At a conference with Samuel Goldwyn he agreed to sign a contract to deliver four stories a year. Then he returned to Boston and started to write a serial.] “I found myself thinking constantly of the moving picture possibility of the story I was writing. The experience was sufficient to convince me that in agreeing to sign the contract I had made a mistake. I wrote Mr. Goldwyn, told him my feeling and said I was sure the contract, if signed, would hurt my work. I said I was willing to sign it, if he
wished me to do so, but that if he would call off the whole ar-
rangement I would appreciate it. He very generously agreed
to do so. I have always been grateful for the understanding at-
titude he took at that time.”

[Not all aspects of Hollywood appeared as sane, however. In 1929 Williams was brought out to the movie metropolis to write a story for Will Rogers, who had made a great success in Jubilo. Williams ran into “the institution called ‘a story conference,’” usually fatal to a writer’s sense of humor, but he managed to escape with some of his feathers.] “The ex-
perience was a trying one. After six weeks, the original story
had been torn to shreds, patched, mended, darned, and torn
to shreds again until it lost not only all resemblance to its origi-
nal form, but also all vitality and usefulness. My weeks in the
studio were from the studio’s point of view completely unprofit-
able. Except for a few scenes which I wrote and which were
used in retakes on one picture, nothing I did for them has, as
far as I know, ever seen the light.” [One of his assignments
during this period was to write a sequel for the O. Henry story
which had been filmed as In Old Arizona.] “The story was
to deal with the building of the first transcontinental railway.
There must be a part in the picture for a Swedish-dialect come-
dian. There must be another part for a boy who had done well
in another picture, and also for an ingenue. There was to be
a herd of buffalo which stampeded and almost killed the heroine.
There was to be an attack by Indians and a rescue by the
United States Cavalry. And just about the time I was ready
to begin work, a cablegram came from Mr. Sheehan saying
that he had seen a ‘grandeur’ short subject of Niagara Falls,
and that water photographed beautifully on the new film, and
that I must accordingly put into the picture some rapids, and
if possible some waterfalls!” [Despite this mad mishmash of
effects, Williams wrote the scenario and—maddest of all—“the
‘grandeur’ film and the stock market collapsed together, and the
picture has never been made.”]

[The absurdities of Hollywood tickled Williams’ risibility but
they also struck him hard enough to spin him around. He
had been contemplating, not without glee, the heady size of his
“But of that 1920 income about seventy per cent came from the moving picture studios; and that definitely alarmed me. I deliberately changed my style and the structure of my tales, deliberately sought to write stories that would move at a more leisurely pace, and that would depend more on character and less on action. I tried to appraise my situation. In a book from the Sunday School library which I read as a boy, a mother, dying, gave her son as his inheritance one piece of advice. ‘Every day of your life,’ she said, ‘I want you to go away quietly by yourself and think for an hour.’ That advice has always seemed to me sound; and I remembered it. I began to write less and think more. The first beginning of an understanding of myself had an immediate and tangible result. I decided to write a novel that should be simply the life of an ordinary man. I knew I was not yet competent to do what I had in mind to do, but I began to prepare for it. In my weekly record of work done, there appears this notation: ‘Week ending March 20, 1921, Thoughts on Splendor.’” [Splendor was published in November 1927.]

[Williams' library of background and reference books, now at Colby College, attests to his sincerity and indefatigability when in pursuit of authoritative data or atmosphere for his stories. Entries in his diary and notebooks reveal that for Splendor he "must read the Boston papers from 1877 to date" (1922), and that before he was through he "had read the newspaper history of Boston over a period of forty years." In further preparation for Splendor, Ben began a program of novel reading. Thomas Hardy's novels interested him and he noted: "Hardy has a singular capacity for inventing interesting—though often outlandish—incident. The appeal of his books for me lies largely in this mosaic of incident with which he develops his characters." He began to reread Dickens' novels. . . Ben turned to Knut Hansen's Growth of the Soil, and said of it, "A wonderful book, of the sort I would like Splendor to be." Ben continued his reading with Balzac's Eugenie Grandet; he read Samuel Pepys' diaries "with keen pleasure." Then he plunged into War and Peace, finding "pages enough of this that need never have been written." Years later he was to write: "House Divided runs to almost three thousand typed
pages, but will not equal *War and Peace* and its two thousand
in print. I may add that in later readings my opinion of *War and Peace* changed decidedly!" After *War and Peace* he turned to *Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, The Brothers Karamazov, Crime and Punishment*, half a dozen novels by Balzac, *Tom Jones*, and *Vanity Fair*. He read American biography, such as Albert Bigelow Paine's *Life of Mark Twain*, Ida Tarbell's *Lincoln*, and Grant's *Memoirs*. And he was also reading Cellini and Boswell.

[Williams' quest combined curiosity, synthesis, and esthetic morality. His appetite for improvement was unappeasable.] "I was seeking to discover, in these novels admitted to be great, a common denominator toward which I might strive. It seemed to me that they had gusto. I thought I could work for that. But they had another point in common. They dealt in each case with vice; with vicious men or women, with vicious society, or with vicious aspects of society. I did not want to write about vice and degradation. Probably I was a prude."

"Since the above was written, two of my novels have dealt with vicious women; and at least one of them, *The Strange Woman*, has been considered by some people to be an 'immoral' book. I do not agree. It seems to me not only a sound psychological study but also 'moral' in the highest sense; for certainly, though vice is portrayed in its pages, that portrayal is not calculated to inspire emulation. It explores the vicious aspects of a woman's character; but the reader abhors the woman herself and feels pity rather than esteem."

[When one asks a writer what his principal aim is or which of his own works he likes best, the answer is likely to contain lofty circumlocution or unconscious rationalization. The following anecdote by Mrs. Williams is both frolic and revelatory.] To Ben it was a never-failing source of satisfaction to discover someone crying over something he had written. I used to try to control my weeping, sometimes with difficulty, I admit, just to avoid his interrupting me to ask with a certain relish: "What are you reading—what part are you reading now?" [Was Williams more concerned with the undertones of human pathos and tragedy than he was with his major melody of broad good humor?]
[How scrupulously Williams implemented even his slightest short story is revealed by these remarks in one of his notebooks]: “In fact it is seldom possible to write even a short story without some investigation of the factual background of the subject with which the author wishes to deal. It has been necessary for me at various times to study a wide range of subjects; I have to know something about detective methods, about surgery, about law and its practices, about navigation, about the training of race horses, and of baseball players and fighting dogs and hunting dogs and boxers, about architecture, about the physical geography of cities and regions which I never saw and never expect to see, and about a thousand other subjects. Research is a routine part of a professional writer's job, and it includes everything from asking a blacksmith to show how he makes a horseshoe to a study of the tribal customs of the aboriginal Indians in Florida.” [Williams' publication of over four hundred titles required knowledge in all of these areas, and more. In his introduction to The Happy End Kenneth Roberts, a remarkably fastidious researcher himself, records his profound respect “for Mr. Williams' accuracy as a chronicler of fact.”]

[Williams and Roberts became acquainted when, as young reporters, they were covering the same murder trial for different Boston newspapers. Peeved at the “extremely large” person “who sat mountainously between me and the witness stand, moving restlessly,” Roberts leaned over and asked Williams to shift position. A brawny friendship developed between them over the years: they hunted, fished, and trekked together, they sought each other out when depressed, they took gay junkets in the Caribbean islands with their wives, they labored over each other's manuscripts in disregard of their own current projects, and they signalized each other's successes fittingly. At the end of January 1953 Williams had completed work on The Unconquered and Roberts on The Seventh Sense. This called for commemoration and they naturally selected each other for company. Mrs. Williams describes their last memorable weekend.] Ben picked me up at Symphony Hall after the concert on Friday and we headed for Maine. It wasn’t long before Ben asked me to drive, as he hated to
drive in the dark, and he also admitted he felt tired. The letdown after a long period of work was always depressing and I was glad that the warm hospitality at Rocky Pasture lay ahead.

What a weekend that was! Never had Anna [Mrs. Roberts] and I seen our two writing men in a gayer mood. They were like two youngsters suddenly released from their school books, and never had they laughed more together.

[After more than three decades of unparalleled success as a writer and of undeviating robust health, Williams noted: “Heart turning somersaults at bedtime.” He confessed to unaccustomed fatigue and devised some ideas for a new novel “with no conviction.” What he buoyantly dismissed as “the heart stuff” persisted, without incapacitating him, for some three years. A tone of dire premonition invests his diary entry for November 14, 1952: “Woke at four, profoundly depressed. I had been up at 1:20, a curious feeling as I left my bed that I was saying good-by to it.” Williams was avid about the sport of curling, and with his physician's permission was participating in a tournament at The Country Club in Brookline on February 4, 1953.] The match went well, and Ben prepared to make his last shot. He leaned over to deliver his curling stone, looked up to see it make the winning shot, and then suddenly fell on the ice. There were two doctors on Ben’s rink within ten steps of where he lay. They could feel no pulse. His great heart had stopped beating.

[Williams chose to be buried in Maine rather than in Mississippi, where he was born; in Ohio, where he grew up; or in Massachusetts, where he spent much of his adulthood. Like many a writer before and after him, Williams fell in love with Maine and adopted it as his own. When he was fifteen his parents sent him to a lakeside summer boys' camp in the Pine Tree State. Mrs. Williams' family was old-line Maine; Ben frequently hunted and fished in its woods; they honeymooned on one of its islands; and they both enjoyed to the hilt their numerous visits with the Robertses at Kennebunkport. And then there was Bert McCrorison, the Chet McAusland of the Fraternity stories. Ben came to know Bert in 1918; day by
day thereafter their mutual affection and respect deepened. When Bert died in 1931 he bequeathed his farm, Hardscrabble, in Searsmont, Maine, to Ben. For better than two decades Williams used Hardscrabble as his writing base all summer and part of the spring and fall.] The knoll, two hundred or so yards behind the barn at Hardscrabble, with Levenseller Mountain beyond, was in many ways Ben'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 birdsong around us, and we spoke sparingly. The ring of hills was forever changing in color as the sun sank lower, and Ben 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.

Ben 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. We love to go for a picnic on the knoll with the rock only a few yards away. Ben seems very near to us.

[Ben Ames Williams was a man of direct motivation. He made up his mind to learn to write—and for a quarter-century was as popular as anyone writing in his time. Of this he was manifestly proud, but he drew more intense satisfaction from another accomplishment. The comment he made while reviewing his credo of 1916 is the measure of a man.] “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.” [Fit epitaph for a consummate human being.]