"A Boy's Recollections of William James"

Harvard Philosopher Applauded Youth's Choice of Yale

SUCCESSOR TO THE HORSE CAR—This Beacon St., Brookline, trolley was probably one of those used by Rev. Sidney Lovett to commute to school in Cambridge. The round trip consumed two hours.

Boston-born Rev. Sidney Lovett, D.D., chaplain of Yale University since 1932 and former pastor of Mt. Vernon Church, Boston, writes of "A Boy's Recollections of William James" in the current issue of The Yale Review. Permission to reprint the boyhood experiences Dr. Lovett shared with the great American philosopher and the James family in Cambridge has been granted by the Yale University Press.

By REV. SIDNEY LOVETT, D.D.

Sometime in the Spring of 1904, my parents determined that I should take up college preparation at the Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge, Mass. It was a strictly unilateral decision, undertaken by two strong
domestic powers acting in concert, and without consultation with the weaker party. I had overheard some mention of An- dover and Exeter, but without the least sense of interest or appreciation.

In those days one expected to have no more voice in the selection of the school he should attend than in the choice of the home into which he was born. Why the local high school in Brookline was by-passed, in this strictly parental decision, I cannot imagine, since I was a dubious scholastic risk, on the basis of previous showing in grammar school, and hardly worth a tuition payment when good educational provender was to be had for free charge.

Perhaps it was hoped by my elders that the proximity of Browne and Nichols School to Harvard College would provide some miraculous incentive to my mental capacities, hitherto tried and found wanting.

In September, 1894, I presented myself at the door of a very sturdy brick building located at 20 Garden St., Cambridge.

The journey from my home in Brookline was by trolley, and the round trip consumed about two hours.

The Boston Elevated System provided, in those days, no shelter for its passengers at transfer points. The corner of Beacon St. and Massachusetts Ave., hard by the Harvard Bridge, resembled that of other cities, especially during the long winter months.

By a strange coincidence, I took refuge almost daily in the doorway of Mt. Vernon Church, all unsuspecting of the fact that I would one day be its minister.

Harvard sq. was the terminus of my morning progress, a place where William Dean Howells once described as the ugliest spot in the universe of God. Over its cobblestones rattled wagons bringing produce into Boston from farms roundabout Cambridge. An occasional Stanley steamer might chug through the square at the reckless rate of 15 miles an hour, more subject to amusement than wonder on the part of pedestrians. Few there were who believed that such contrivances were to come to stay.

The short walk from the square to the school led past the First Parish Church, Unitarian, with its well populated burying ground; Christ Church, Episcopal, with its granite marker testifying that contractions were to come to stay.

As one could wish to see. He carried also the imposing name of Francis Alexander Robertson James, and was the father of the four children of professor and Mrs. William James. It was my four years of close association with Alec, subsequently an artist of wide repute, that led to my association with the James family, and in turn, with the subject of these stray reminiscences.

In my books William James was for a long time written down simply as Alec's father, who was professor of something or other in Harvard College. Only by degrees was it disclosed to me that he possessed other and more universal claims to distinction.

During my four years at Browne and Nichols School, it was my good fortune to be a frequent luncheon guest at the James home, located at 56 Irving St., Cambridge. The house with its exterior of brown shingles and dark green trim stood behind a hedge and close to the street, and near the residence of William James's friend and colleague, Josiah Royce.

There was nothing unusual about the interior of the house and fact that I had never seen so many books outside a public library as were housed in this study. Arranged upon shelves, tier upon tier, they lined the four walls from floor to ceiling.

A huge flat-topped desk, piled high with papers and periodicals, occupied the center of the room, and a very spacious couch faced a generous fireplace. There was no aura of ponderous academic workshop, Alec and I would settle ourselves on the couch, before or after lunch, and denote our conversation to two of our mates, and plan some new deviation from the rules and regulations of the school.

I well remember, after a concerted outburst of disparagement, at the expense of our French teacher, a voice boomed out from behind the desk. "Don't forget, boys, Christ died for him, too!"

Now I had hitherto associated such a pious sentiment with Oppenheimer's Sunday School on the waterfront. This matter-of-fact reference to a sacred theme, this sudden intrusion of a holy adoration into the midst of one's daily conduct came as a shock to my unregenerate sensibilities.

It is a fact, some kind of a preacher, as professor of a recluse subject called philosophy? But that particular incident has etched itself deep in the grain of my consciousness, for though I have never fully expounded it, I have never forgotten it from that day to this, and its proper intention grows upon me with the years.

Luncheon at 53 was very informal. He was attended by his children and wife at the table. No other children or other guests. Then, and only then, would the midday meal be served. Alec and myself, our two eldest sons, and a very close friend of the household, would sit at the round wooden table and we would eat our meal, to the music of our host's conversation.

The paternal role was all abundantly clear to me and would never have been felt by William James was to deliver him to a heart ailment.

Mrs. James was an almost perfect model of loving, doting, wifely affection, her husband would not have known her end of the band with her kindness, her quietness, her patience and her kinship in the home, complete prosperity.

Two luncheons on the table was a custom generally observed in our family. One was at noon of the first day of the month, and the other was on the last day. The latter was in February, of which occasion to wish our stay at the table the silver was not the silver that was the gift of his grand nephew.

The subdued dinner was evident to which he was at the mark of attention of his students.

The other manner was a noonday meal, table with a heavy main and wearing a dark vest, I was known among Alexander as Alix's friend and thought to no purpose but the words of the master at home that he would recount the day to his mother, I imagine, and then provide a \(\text{...} \)
Luncheons at 95 Irving st. were very informal. Between William James at one end of the table and his wife at the other ranged Alec and myself, and occasionally other children or guests. Of the oldest son, Henry, I have no clear remembrance. William Jr. was at that time a student in Harvard and a varity ooraraman and later captain of the crew. I got associate him with the family board, but I can still recall my excitement when he would occa-

sionally turn up at the school gymnasium and direct our prac-
tice on the rowing machine.

Margaret, the only daughter, was as I recall, engaged to marry someone connected with the Pullman Company base. On one occasion at lunch Alec and I provided her with names for inscription on par-
or and sleeping cars, some quite proper like our own, and others not so decent.

The paternal end of the table was all animation. From his abundant energy and zest one would never have guessed that William James was then subject to a heart ailment, incurred in the Adirondacks in 1889. He was an inevituble questioner, and none of our juvenile interests was beyond his range of inquiry.

Mrs. James was an amiable, white-haired matron, as I remember her, whose presence was the perfect foil to her husband's vivacity. Among other viands she would dispense bread from her end of the table, cutting generous portions with a huge knife from the loaf reposing on a round wooden platter. I had associated with the kitchen, until travel on the Conti-

nent in later years revealed its complete propriety.

Two luncheon occasions stand out clearly in my memory. One was a day when William James had taught his last class in Harvard College. This was in February, 1907, and he was exasperated and inclined to have his undergraduate students, and a host inkwell, the gift of his graduate students and assistants.

The subdued demeanor of the man was evidence of the decree to which he had moved by these marks of affection on the part of his students.

The other memorable instance was a hooray meal when there appeared at table a large man, with a heavy florid countenance and wearing a decidedly loud waistcoat. I was introduced to him as to Alec's "Uncle Henry," and thought no more about anything but the waistcoat until din-

ner at home that evening. In recounting the day's happenings to my mother, I mentioned that I had lunched at the James's and added casually that there was present an uncle of Alec's whom I had never seen before about the premises.

It was my great pleasure to spend a June week with the Jameses at their summer home in Chocorua, X. H. In 1887 William James purchased and re-modeled an old house on the lake, and commanding a glorious view of the "Mountain": this ancient elevation is similarly known to those who winter or summer within sight of its rocky crest.

Climbing Chocorua and Whiteface was left to Alec and me, but Prof. James would include us in his tramps about the woods which surround the lake. His constant companion was a big, benevolent airedale named Reilly, who was a respected and privi-

leged member of the James household whether in the city or in the country.

During my visit at Chocorua I developed the one pastime I had ever entertained.

To this day, there is a slight de-

press on the base of my left forefinger reminiscent of William James' successful pasting and treatment of a particular af-

fliction. This he did with full confi-

dence, for he had even studied medicine as well as art, before devoting himself to philos-

ophy.

I feel myself in his debt both as herder and writer, as these two vocations were happily blended in his amically vivid and ver-

satile personality.

William James loved to re-

count anecdotes of a type that can be called earthy but not dirty. The obscene joke or the salacious story, with its double entendre, was not in his books. My observations on this matter are for the most part second-hand and derive from Alec, who would regale me in private with his most recent acquisition from the paternal store.

No Sunday School items, these, to be sure, but neither were they morally subversive, celebrating as they usually did the common bio-

tical transactions of the bath-

room or the barnyard.

In retrospect, I should judge that William James' sense of humor had been shaped by his lively association with his crony, "Wendell" Holmes.

Certainly it was not fashioned by his discourses with his par-


turian colleagues, Josiah Royce or George Herbert Palmer. But enough of this somewhat banal digression. There are two or important items of boyish memory to be set forth.

I have referred to William James' great curiosity; it did not exclude the glad identification of himself with a boyish home-


crafting, including sports. I have no record of the professor's per-

sonal participation in such games as tennis and golf. My acquaint-

ance with him was subsequent to

WILLIAM JAMES

portraits. Only in due time did I reveal the true dimensions of our verbal commerce.

He had asked me to "Please pass the butter," and on learning that I commuted daily to Cambridge by trolley, had promptly made some disparaging remark about the subway to Park St., then a source of great local pride, in that it was the first underground transit in this country.

Just as I was long in learning about William James' repulse as a philosophe, so there was a con-

siderable delay in my apprecia-

tion of Henry James as a man of letters. But his waistcoat was really something to behold.

(Photograph courtesy of National En
cyclopedia of American Biography)
the heart affliction, which must have necessarily precluded bodily exercise of a strenuous nature.

But I can testify to his satisfaction in his son William's prov- en ability as a player, and also to his somewhat more surprising interest in the fortunes of the Brownie and Nichols baseball club, of which Alec James was manager and I a member.

We used to practice on the Cambridge Common under the tutelage of a Harvard Law School student named Eddie Grant, who broke into major league baseball with the New York Giants. "Harvard Eddie" he was dubbed by the sports writers of that earlier day, and there is a bronze plaque to be seen in the ball grounds under Coogan's Bluff, commemo- rating his gallant death in the first World War.

Prof. James and the faithful Reilly would often include our practice sessions in an afternoon walk. The "book-side" had not come into vogue at that time. A stolen base was purchased by a head-first belly-slide, with arms extended to grasp the bag. Eddie Grant taught us in the same no- tation to save one's body out of the base path and the down reach of the baseman bent on tagging one out.

This refinement of the "slide" was not lost upon William James's natural sense for novelty, and I can remember Eddie's explaining it to him and my demonstrat- ing the same for his benefit, at some cost to my epidermis in this particular instance.

We played one or two important games at the old Locust-st. grounds of the Boston Nationals, and from my vantage point at second base, I could see the solitary figure of William James, sit- ting in the cavernous grandstand and the trencherous east wind in his enthusiastic support of his favorite school team.

William James was a birthright member of what Fr. George Ty- rell once called "the great soci- ety of encouragers." There are many who will rise up and call him blessed at the remembrance of his rare ability to rally the fainting student and the dispirit- ed colleague.

He it was who came to my sup- port in my decision to apply for admission to Yale rather than to Harvard.

Messrs. Browne and Nichols re- ceived the announcement of my intentions in this matter with increduity and then with ill- concealed disapproval. Up to that time, no boy under their tutelage had gone elsewhere than to Har- vard. My determination to break this educational lockstep was an affront to their pride as schoolmasters, in excellent stand- ing with the dean's office at Har- vard. Their immediate reaction was to waste as little further ef- fort as possible upon my prepara- tion. To be sure, when Mr. Nichols died very suddenly in the Spring of my senior year at school, there was no attempt to associate his untimely passing with my decision, and I'm bound to say that time greatly mollified George Browne's disappointment in my choice of a college.

Yale men at that time were all "muckers" in the opinion of Harvard students and alumni. Even in my home circle in Brookline this view was generally held. Hadn't Deacon Wightington's son, Edgar, had his leg broken deliberately by the wicked Frank Hinkey, in a notorious football match between Harvard and Yale at Springfield, Mass.?

Now it was at this juncture that William James came to aid of my intentions to him, with reference to all the factors involved such as school disapprobation and social ostrac- icism. He was ever minded to side with the heretic and the out- cast. Few men had so completely met and taken the measure of "the pain of change" in his own chosen field of philo- sophy.

"Good for you, There's nothing so exciting as breaking out new paths," was his exuberant ver- dict, which did more than he ever knew to confirm me in my choice of a college which I have never had the least occasion to regret.

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During the Christmas vacation of my freshman year, 1909, I went over to Cambridge to see William James, and to give him an ac- count of my recent introduction and brief experience in New Haven. It was the last time I was to see him in the flesh.

He presented the same animated concern with my welfare. His "irascible blue eyes," as a portrait painter called them, still flashed from beneath their heavy brows, with dome-shaped fore- head above and the bushy beard below. His dress was informal, topped off as usual by the Nor- folk jacket and a festive necktie.

I think it was on that occasion that I told him of my desire in due course to enter the Christian ministry. Again his approval was immediate and reassuring. "You must take some philosophy as soon as you can, with my pupil, Bakewell," to whom he promised to write a word of introduction. In the course of our conversa- tion, I spoke of my interest in the Yale Hope Mission and its ministry of reclamation to down- and-out men. From his absorp- tion in my story you would never have dreamed he knew anything about the psychology of conversion.

Before I left he gave me a copy of a book, whose author- ship he modestly professed, and which he thought might be of interest to me. It was the volume containing his famous Gifford Lectures of 1901-1902, "The Va- rieties of Religious Experience."