

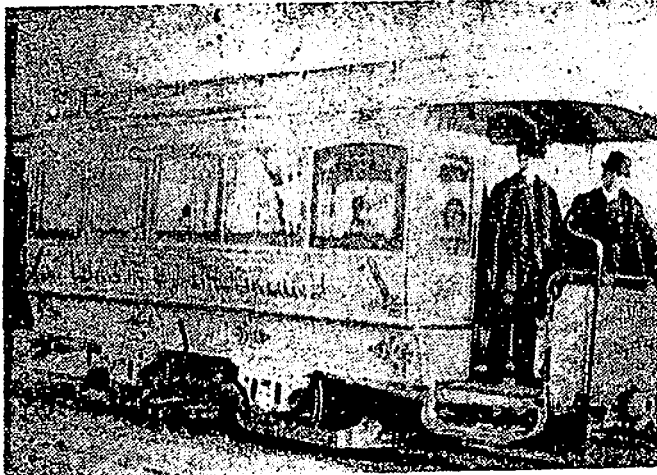
James, William

M. S. 1867

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY CLIPPING SHEET

*"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



DR. LOVETT

domestic powers acting in concert, and without consultation with the weaker party. I had overheard some mention of Andover and Exeter, but without the least sense of interest or anticipation.

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 free of 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, 1904, I presented myself at the door of a very austere 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 av., hard by the Harvard Bridge, resembled the Arctic regions, 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 which 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 contraptions were 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 George Washington once worshipped (not slept) there, and the First Congregational Church, adjacent to the wooden buildings that then composed Radcliffe Col-

lege. A ghostly colloquy among the bells of these three churches would pretty well have rung the changes on New England theology since its inception.

The Washington Elm still occupied its sacred delta at the conjunction of Mason and Garden sts., though its shadow was lessened with the passage of each Winter's storms. Tourists could be seen in the Fall, picking up bright colored maple leaves of unhistoric origin, as souvenirs of their patriotic pilgrimage.

President Charles W. Eliot might be counted upon with clocklike certainty, to ride past on his bicycle, on his way to University Hall in the Yard, propelling himself with something of "deliberate speed, majestic instance." Dean Le Baron Russell Briggs, at some distance, could be identified by his peculiar gait and on nearer approach by his battered brown felt hat, of a style and vintage widely affected by Cantabrigians, then and for some years thereafter. He always had a friendly "Good morning" for anyone, boy or man, who had a green baize bag of books slung over his shoulder, the sure badge of association with school or college. With each year there came to be something more precious about the morning blessing of this good man, "who wist not that his face shone."

Well, more than apples mel-  
lowed in that New England Au-  
tumn season of 1904. Almost from  
my first day at school, friend-  
ship formed and ripened between  
myself and a young lad whose  
freckled face bore as clear blue  
eyes and finely wrought features

as one could wish to see. He carried also the imposing name of Francis Alexander Robertson James, and was the youngest 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 particular 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 95 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 its appointments, save the fact that I had never seen so many books outside a public library as reposed in the professor's ample 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 capacious couch faced a generous fireplace. There was no aura of privacy about this academic workshop. Alec and I would settle ourselves on the couch, before or after lunch, and denounce our teachers, criticize certain 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 Sunday School or church. This matter-of-fact reference to a sacred theme, this sudden intrusion of a holy admonition into the midst of one's daily conduct came as a shock to my unregenerate sensibilities. Could Alec's father be some kind of a preacher, as well as professor of a recondite subject called philosophy? But that particular ejaculation must have etched itself deep in the grain of my consciousness, for though I have never fulfilled its commandment, I have never forgotten it from that day to this, and its proper intention grows upon me with the years.

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 varsity oarsman and later captain of the crew. I do not associate him with the family board, but I can still recall my excitement when he would occasionally turn up at the school gymnasium and direct our practice on the rowing machines. Margaret, the only daughter, was as I recall, engaged to marry someone connected with the Pullman Company. On one occasion at lunch Alec and I provided her with names for inscription on parlor 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 1899. He was an inveterate questioner, and none of our juvenile interests was beyond his range of inquiry.

Mrs. James was an ample, white-haired matron, as I remember her, whose calmness was the perfect counterfoil 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 base, a procedure I had associated with the kitchen, until travel on the Continent in later years revealed its complete propriety.

Two luncheon occasions stand out clearly in my memory. One was at noon of the day when William James had taught his last class in Harvard College. This was in February, 1907, and he was coaxed to fetch and place on the table the silver loving cup presented him by his undergraduate students, and a huge inkwell, the gift of his graduate students and assistants.

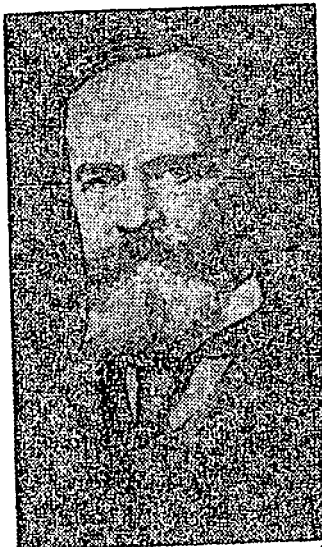
The subdued demeanor of the man was evidence of the degree to which he was moved by these marks of affection on the part of his students.

The other memorable instance was a noonday 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 dinner at home that evening. In recounting the day's happenings to my mother, I mentioned that

I had lunched at the James' and added casually that there was present an uncle of Alec's whom I had never seen before about the premises.

This admission had the effect of an electric shock upon my older sister and some friends of hers who were dining with us, all of them not long removed from their English majors at Radcliffe. I became at once the cynosure of several pairs of eyes and the center of a barrage of questions. "What did he say?" "How was he dressed?" "Did you sit next him?"

Quite unaccustomed to being a focal point of interest on the part of such highbrows, I made the most of the situation, and was very extravagant in my replies, intending to give, and for a few moments almost succeeding in giving, the impression that Henry James, who manifestly was somebody to them but nobody save Alec's uncle to me, had taken a great shine to me, had added another to his collection of personal



(Photo by courtesy of National Encyclopedia of American Biography)

#### 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' repute as a philosopher, so there was a considerable delay in my appreciation of Henry James as a man of letters. But his waistcoat was really something to behold.

It was my great pleasure to spend a June week with the Jameses at their Summer home in Chocorua, N. H. In 1887 William James purchased and remodeled an old house near the lake, and commanding a glorious view of "the Mountain" as this ancient elevation is familiarly known to those who Winter or

Summer within sight of its rocky cone.

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

During my visit at Chocorua I developed the one and only boill I have ever entertained.

To this day, there is a slight depression at the base of my left forefinger reminiscent of William James' successful lancing and treatment of this particular affliction. This he did with full confidence, for he had earlier studied medicine as well as art, before devoting himself to philosophy.

I feel myself in his debt both as healer and writer, as these two vocations were happily blended in this amazingly vivid and versatile personality.

William James loved to recount 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 biological transactions of the bathroom 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 more puritan colleagues, Josiah Royce or George Herbert Palmer. But enough of this somewhat banal digression. There are still one or two 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 boy's momentary concerns, including sports. I have no record of the professor's personal participation in such games as tennis and golf. My acquaintance with him was subsequent to

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 prowess on the river, and also to his somewhat more surprising interest in the fortunes of the Browne 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, commemorating 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 "hook-slide" 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 motion to swing 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 scent for novelty, and I can remember Eddie's explaining it to him and my demonstrating 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, sitting in the cavernous grandstand and braving the treacherous east wind in his enthusiastic support of his favorite school team.

William James was a birthright member of what Fr. George Tyrrell once called "the great society 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 dispirited colleague.

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

Messrs Browne and Nichols received the announcement of my intentions in this matter first with incredulity and then with ill-concealed disapproval. Up to that time, no boy under their tutelage had gone elsewhere than to Harvard. 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 Harvard. Their immediate reaction was to waste as little further effort as possible upon my preparation. 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 mellowed 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 Wrightington'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 my aid. I confided my intentions to him, with reference to all the factors involved, such as school disapprobation and social ostracism. He was ever minded to side with the heretic and the outcast. Few men had more completely met and taken the measure of "the pain of change" in his own chosen field of philosophy.

"Good for you. There's nothing so exciting as breaking out new paths," was his exuberant verdict, 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.

During the Christmas vacation of my freshman year, 1909, I went over to Cambridge to see William James, and to give him an account 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 forehead above and the bushy beard below. His dress was informal, topped off as usual by the Norfolk 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 conversation, I spoke of my interest in the Yale Hope Mission and its ministry of reclamation to down-and-out men. From his absorption 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 authorship 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 Varieties of Religious Experience."

Needless to say, I have treasured this book ever since, as a kind of final testament of William James's friendship for a young boy who had nothing to give in return, save a measure of devotion which has increased with the years, and to which these recollections bear true though inadequate witness.

(From The Yale Review, a National Quarterly. Copyright, 1954. Yale University Press.)