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## THE HISTORY OF THEIR BOOKS

X. OWEN JOHNSON

by *Arthur Bartlett Maurice*

WHEN the century was in its infancy, before the deliberate exploitation of the pseudo and professional Bohemianism of Greenwich Village, there was a studio on the south side of Washington Square that was a pleasant haven on the coast of Bohemia. The studio was shared by the painter-man Gilbert White and the writer-man George Barr Baker. Today there is a somewhat austere Mr. Baker associated with the semi-official *entourage* of President Hoover. There is also a Gilbert White who figures in every new book written about Paris, and who occasionally visits his native land for the purpose of carrying out some exalted commission for the decoration of a state capitol.

Once in the studio there was "thrown" a famous party. Among the invited guests there was one uninvited guest; a strikingly self-confident, self-contained young woman from the Far West who calmly announced that she had just arrived in New York, that she had heard that there was to be an artists' party in the studio, that she had never attended such a party, and had decided that she would find out what such a party was like. The first guest to arrive, she was the last to leave. She was the definite model from whom Owen Johnson drew his Doré Baxter, the heroine of *The Salamander*, the story of the then ultra-modern young woman who walked serenely through the flame that never even singed her.

Relatively 1914, when *The Salamander* appeared, was an age of innocence. Strange as it seems today, the book then startled by its boldness, its daring presentation of a type that was just beginning to throw off the Victorian shackles. Its publication marked a radical departure in the author's work. It was the beginning of the fourth stage. The first stage was represented by the stories *Arrows of the Almighty* and *In the Name of Liberty*, begun at least when Owen Johnson was still an undergraduate at Yale. They were relatively negligible, the work of a boy who had read and digested much romantic fiction, and who was going through the inevitable "sedulous ape" period.

A few years later came *Max Fergus*, a long step forward in the point of workmanship, a grim tale of the shady side of the New York law courts, involving chicanery and *chantage*. But the "sedulous ape" period had not entirely passed. *Max Fergus* was written under the shadow of Balzac, according to the Balzacian method. As Balzac had searched Paris frantically until he had found the name "Z. Marcas", Owen Johnson prowled doggedly about New York until he had established a definite setting of the scene for every episode of *Max Fergus*. A mere street or neighborhood was not enough. In the street or neighborhood there had to be the right house. That house had to have the right age and architecture.

To illustrate. The tale opened in the

"House of the Tin Sailor" on one of the side streets east of Second Avenue near Stuyvesant Square. Once the house existed. A third of the way down the block, on the north side, there projected from it the figure of a tin sailor, balancing two paddles which the wind caused to revolve. Out of that curious figure, long since gone, grew the story. Another landmark contributed much to its development. As an amateur reporter, in company with friends employed by the New York *Sun*, Owen Johnson frequented the Jefferson Market Police Court for the purpose of studying the seamy side of life. Near the Court, on West Tenth Street, was a row of dingy, undersized buildings, used by the lawyers. The most pretentious offices in the row were those of the Alonzo Bofinger and Hyman Groll of the story, the latter drawn directly from a lawyer then known to every New York newspaper reader.

The third stage was the "Lawrenceville stories", which included *The Eternal Boy*, *The Varmint*, *The Tennessee Shad*, *The Humming Bird*, *Skippy Bedelle*, and carried on with *Stover at Yale*. The first stories to appear were five written in Paris in the winter of 1907-08, but for the germ of the idea one has to go back to the middle 1890's, when Owen Johnson, from his lofty pinnacle as editor of the school publication, issued to the members of his staff, among them incidentally Stephen French Whitman and George Agnew Chamberlain, his historic ukase: "Don't invent; interpret!"

Twenty years ago those riotous stories of schoolboy life sent the youth of the land into a gale of laughter, and their popularity still persists. They were "stories with a key", and not a very intricate key. Under the flimsiest of disguises is a roster of Lawrenceville and Andover, Yale and Princeton football heroes of the "golden 'nineties". "Cap" Kiefer was "Cap" Kafer; Charlie De Soto was Charlie De Saulles; "King" Lentz was "King" Wentz; "Turkey" Reiter was "Bozey" Reiter; Cockerill of "The Varmint" was Garry Coch-

ran; the football captain of "Stover at Yale" was James Gamble Rogers; and the revolutionary Brockhurts of the same book was drawn from Henry Hunt, later the reform mayor of Cincinnati.

There is extant an old group picture of the 1896 editorial board of the *Olla Podrida* with Owen Johnson as editor-in-chief, and gathered about him "Flash Condit", "Old Ironsides", "Ladders", "Snorkey Green", "The Duke of Bilgewater", and "The Great Big Man". The wily "Doc" McNoder was "Doc" McNider. John Humperdink Stover was a composite character. So was "Brian de Boru" Finnegan, one of his attributes having been drawn from a harmless eccentricity of the writer of this paper. To this day appear new claimants to the distinction of having been the original of "Hungry" Smeed, who established the "great pancake record".

In his books dealing with a wider world than the world of schoolboy and college life Owen Johnson has been more guarded in drawing from the living model, yet a little shrewd guessing will establish the identity of many of the characters. The novel, *The Sixty-First Second*, grew out of a short story "One Hundred in the Dark". In the shorter tale first appeared "Quinney, tall and gaunt as a friar of the Middle Ages", in reality Edward Simmons the painter; De Gollyer, in reality Christian Brinton, the art critic; and Steingalt, in reality Albert Sterner, the portrait painter. In the same book Gunther was undoubtedly J. P. Morgan the Elder, and Majendie of the Atlantic Trust Company, Barney of the Knickerbocker Trust Company.

Dangerfield of *The Woman Gives* was drawn from the late Willard Metcalf, the painter. That book was originally written with the title "Teagan's Arcade". Fifteen years ago there was a strange Bohemia in a building that stood at the intersection of Broadway and Columbus Avenue. The building covered a block, bisected by an arcade, and rose six stories in the form of an enor-

mous H. It was a house of mystery with its dim passageways, and countless exits which led through tunnels or over roof-top bridges to adjoining structures. It was the setting of the scene for *The Woman Gives*, and the author called it "Teagan's Arcade". Similarly Westover Court, a strange oasis of quiet within a stone's throw of Longacre Square, was, under the name of "Ali Baba Court" a protagonist of *Making Money*.

Other books than *The Woman Gives* have eventually appeared under titles different from those in the original design. *The Salamander*, written in Florence, was planned as

"The Precipice". One day, reading Benvenuto Cellini, Mr. Johnson came upon the passage alluding to the salamander, and it seemed to fit his story. *The Wasted Generation*, written in Paris, in war days when Owen Johnson was doing the work that won him the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, was in first draft "The Tragic Generation". The description of the transatlantic journey under war conditions in the story was an exact description of a crossing made together by Mr. Johnson and the writer on the *Chicago* in May, 1917. Mr. Johnson's latest novel, *Sacrifice*, was begun as "Polyandry", and carried on as "The Storm".

## NATIVITY

*by Willa Muir*

Since unto us a son is given,  
How infinite is grown my worth!  
For the round of my breast is all his heaven,  
And the spread of my knee his share of earth.

And since our love engendered him,  
How infinite his worth is grown,  
Who now can stir each separate limb,  
And sleep and wake and laugh alone.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS  
OF FIFTEEN AMERICAN AUTHORS

*by Doris Ulmann*