

A Man's Life and a Woman's Death: Arthur H. Adams's Female Writer of Genius

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Poet, novelist, playwright, librettist, journalist, and one-time literary editor of Sydney's *Bulletin*, New Zealander Arthur H. Adams (1872-1936) had a career as writer that earned him some considerable reputation in his time. His enduring monument has been the fine late-Romantic elegiac poem 'The Dwellings of our Dead', which has appeared in Oxford and Penguin anthologies and carries a strong emotional charge, mainly by way of its plangent music. It was probably written in a semi-trance while Adams was convalescing in Chefoo (or Chi-fu) in China from an almost fatal bout of enteric fever. He himself considered it his best – if, as I believe, this is the poem that in his novel *A Man's Life* he refers to as composed in such circumstances.

Published in London in 1929, that novel seems almost entirely autobiographical, reflecting many details that we know, or can reasonably conjecture from his other works, about Adams's life. But it begins and ends with its hero's death. A man in his sixties is lying on a London hospital bed, with his skull cracked from a traffic accident. To the nurse he appears dead, but excerpts from his life present themselves to his mind in vivid flashbacks ranging swiftly and erratically over the full span, until death is pronounced. The movement back and forth in time is governed by chance association, and the whole is organized around recurring themes or types of incident expressive of the man, his aspirations and character. He is a romantic and an agnostic, with the sensibility of a 'nineties aesthete, a morbid fancy, an overactive superego, and a hankering for fame.

But my present concern is not with Adams or his fictional counterpart but with a young New Zealand woman writer whom he asserts to have been 'a genius'. As a reluctant Law student at university – obviously Otago – the protagonist of *A Man's Life* published several satirical skits, including some against the 'Meds', who bullied him into apologizing. He also formed a Literary Club, the sole members being himself and two others. The first was the 'dour son of a Scottish professor', who specialized in clever arguments and blank verse on philosophical themes, and himself became a professor, producing 'five children, but no poems'. The second was a gaunt, angular, charmless young woman of poor background but endowed with 'a finer brain than the other two'; she became 'the most brilliant chemical student at the university'

and chief assistant to the professor of the subject, and also (according to Adams's narrator) wrote 'short stories and verse ... marked with a humour quite unfeminine, and a profound and penetrating psychology that shocked him. She was no prude', he remarks. The three used to meet in a little cottage to discuss 'tremendous themes' far into the night.

Adams's hero moved to another city, where shortly later he learned that the young woman author had committed suicide, for no evident reason but with meticulous planning. She held a farewell lunch for her girlfriends 'on the pretext of going away for a holiday', sent letters to those for whom she cared, including her fellow litterateur, and ensured that her body would be promptly discovered by writing to a medical man and to the police and posting the information on the morning of her death. She used her expertise as a chemist to avail herself of a poison that left no clear trace and was never identified. And she wrote a letter to the press, which was not disclosed to the public, but which analysed her mental state 'with extreme precision' and added scribbled sentences recording her last moments. She also left a diary for her professor, clearly written without tremors; and among her papers was a report of a 'brilliant discovery' made in the course of her research. When found, her body was lying on a bed and decked with white roses.

Did this Chattertonian young woman exist in fact, and, if so, who was she, does any of her writing survive, and is it worthy of Adams's protagonist's high praise? Was an historical counterpart to Adams's fictional Dunedin contemporary a forerunner to Iris Wilkinson, alias Robin Hyde, but one who took her own life before, rather than after, she had realized something of her full creative potential as a writer? Since virtually everything else in *A Man's Life* has a basis in fact, and personages are readily identifiable, it seems likely that this vivid episode, decked in such circumstantial detail, also contains at least a germ of truth, despite its echoes of Gothic novel, Hawthorne-like romance, and Victorian painting.

The present paper is offered as a combination of note and query, in the hope that somebody with readier access to Otago University records, copies of the earliest issues of the University of Otago Students' Association's Review and of 1890s Dunedin newspapers, and so on, may pursue the matter further. There are a few clues. Adams graduated BA in 1894, so his formation of the novel's Literary Club would have been in the immediately preceding years. The retrospective anthology, *Review: 1888-1971*, edited by Kevin Jones and Brent Southgate, includes a section of prose sketches of 'Varsity Types': the first, dated 1892, is on 'The Arts Student' and is attributed to 'Semicolon Bijjj', and the second, dated 1893, lightly mocks 'The Medical Student', nicknamed 'the Med.' This must be one of the skits that got Adams's autobiographically-based hero into trouble.

In their entry on Adams in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, Stephen Hamilton and Nelson Wattie mention the presence, 'among many undistinguished poems', of one by Adams in an early issue of *Review*. Presumably this is 'Faith', included in the Jones-Southgate anthology and dated 1891. Consisting of eight five-line stanzas (abbab) in truncated trochaic tetrameters, it is an elegant threnody in the style of the fin de siècle members of the London Rhymers' Club, such as Arthur Symonds, Ernest Dowson, and Victor Plarr. It contemplates a dead woman who is without beauty of face, sweetness of nature, moral courage, or nobility of soul, but who is thought of as transformed and redeemed by death: the speaker's sweetheart encourages the strewing of lilies, roses, and jasmine upon her. The novel's suicide episode may seem to be partially foreshadowed, but the poem's dead woman is very different from the budding writer and brilliant chemist described in *A Man's Life* and there is no hint that she has taken her own life.

The Professor of Chemistry who appointed our mystery woman as his assistant and to whom she left her diary may be identified as James Gow Black, who held that position at Otago from 1871 to 1914. A Highland crofter's son who 'came to Otago surrounded by a halo of romance', he was, according to the university's historian G.E. Thompson, a charismatic figure, who 'solely by his own industry and determination, had risen from the poorest surroundings to be one of the ... foremost scientists of his day' and became 'widely known throughout the Dominion' (pp. 190-91). And in the British Library copy of *A Man's Life* some reader long ago pencilled against the mention of the least literary member of the Literary Club—the Scottish professor's son who himself became a professor—barely legible initials which look like 'G Os L' but might be 'G ds L', 'G O'L' 'G d' L', or even 'G OSh' (but I think we can discount the possibility that the annotator is merely exclaiming 'Gosh!'). It is unclear whether the marginal annotation relates to father or son.

The novel's Adams figure learned of the suicide after he had moved to 'another city'. This was probably Wellington, where in 1895 he began work as a journalist on the *Evening Post*, in preference to completing his LLB. If the multi-talented woman was real, and Adams's account of events is accurate, her suicide probably took place in the mid 1890s, and she would have been writing from about 1890 till that time. One imagines that some of her work would have been published—in *Review* or in local newspapers or journals. In 1889 there were only 184 students attending lectures at the University of Otago, so a woman who excelled at Chemistry should be fairly conspicuous in any surviving records. As eventual editor in Australia of the *Bulletin's* 'Red Page', Adams had a shrewd sense of literary value. Does verse and fiction of

merit by his Otago University fellow student and Literary Club member remain to be recovered?

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