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Samuel Hopkins Adams, his Novel, Revelry, and the Reputation of Warren G. Harding

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THE
Witchcraft Delusion

IN
NEW ENGLAND:

RISE, PROGRESS, AND TERMINATION,

AS EXHIBITED BY
DR. COTTON MATHER,

IN
THE WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD;

AND BY
MR. ROBERT CALEF,

IN HIS
MORE WONDERS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD.

WITH A
Preface, Introduction, and Notes,
By SAMUEL G. DRAKE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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Samuel Hopkins Adams, his Novel, Revelry, and the Reputation of Warren G. Harding

by Robert W. Coren

In November 1926, Samuel Hopkins Adams's novel of Washington politics, *Revelry*, appeared. Since its central character is an American President easily identifiable as the late Warren G. Harding, it created a great stir. Adams's characterization of Harding was sympathetic, but also uncomplimentary, suggesting several negative personal attributes. A controversy over the appropriateness of Adams's behavior ensued. In the press, Adams was either lauded for telling the truth about Harding or condemned for his bad taste in maligning the President, who died in 1923.

Papers of Samuel Hopkins Adams¹ preserved in the Bird Library of Syracuse University, reveal that the author and his publisher made careful plans to launch the book and relished the resulting controversy. The papers illuminate the processes involved in a book's production, publication, and promotion.

Adams was an old hand at writing, with experience in both fiction and non-fiction. Born in Dunkirk, New York, in 1871, he joined the staff of the *New York Sun* after receiving his A.B. degree from Hamilton College. The *Sun*, for which Adams wrote until 1900, was at the forefront of the muckraking trend in journalism, and undoubtedly provided Adams with much of his professional education. It was the *Sun's* policy to print "whatever God permitted to happen." Adams left the *Sun* to join the staff of *McClure's* magazine where he was associated with some of the most famous muckrakers of the Progressive period, including Ida M. Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens. Adams's major contribution while writing for *McClure's* was an attack on the patent medicine business in a series of articles entitled "The Great American Fraud," published during 1905 and 1906. After his tenure at *McClure's*, Adams became a free-lance writer, producing several historical novels, short stories, and a study of public hygiene. Occasionally he wrote under the pseudonym, Warner Fabian. Lastly and importantly, Adams was a

Mr. Coren is a graduate student in the Department of History at Syracuse University.

¹The Papers of Samuel Hopkins Adams in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, Bird Library, contain much of his correspondence with literary agents and publishers for the period 1925-58. All footnote references to documents in the Arents Library will identify the source by the initials GARL.

registered Democrat. Thus Samuel Hopkins Adams was properly trained, as a writer of fiction and as an investigative reporter, and temperamentally suited, as a Democrat and Progressive, for the job of writing about a Republican president and his corrupt administration in a novel which closely resembled fact.²

It seems, in retrospect, almost a half century later, that Adams's fictional portrayal of the period may have contributed to the growth of the Harding myth. An examination of *Revelry* demonstrates its author's sentiments about Harding and his political intimates. The central character, President Willis Markham, is described by Daniel Lurcock, the unofficial head of the Justice Department for Markham, as

. . . torpid, good-humored, complacent, friendly, indulgent to himself, obliging to others, as loyal as a Samurai, full of party piety, a hater of the word 'no,' faithful to his own code of private honor, and as standardized as a Ford car.³

It was Daniel Lurcock, modeled after Harding's Attorney General Harry Daugherty, who, Adams tells us, had rescued Markham from the obscurity of a small-town Michigan pool hall. Lurcock, as an established lobbyist in the Michigan legislature and a politician in his own right until scandal cut short his career, liked Markham's stately appearance and easy-going manner. Helped by Lurcock's astute political knowledge, Markham was elected first to the state legislature, then to the governorship, the U.S. Senate, and ultimately to the Presidency. Markham's own assets were his sociability, his honesty, his loyalty to friends and Party, and sheer political luck.

Markham himself, enters *Revelry* in "The Crow's Nest," a house near the White House, where several men are drinking and playing poker. Lurcock is present, as are Andy Gandy, Markham's Secretary of the Interior, and Charlie Madrigal, the assistant to the Director of Public Health, and several minor figures.⁴ Markham, a bit drunk at the end of the game, chooses to walk back to the White House and accidentally stumbles into the back yard of a mysterious woman. She is Edith Westervelt, an urbane, oft-married, sophisticated, but cynical and unhappy woman. Edith provides the romantic interest in the novel and also allows Adams to show Markham in a sympathetic light. Markham convinces Edith, who is contemplating suicide, to give him the poison for safe-keeping.

Meanwhile Gandy and Madrigal have been looting the government, selling government oil reserves and supplies from government hospitals.

² Elmer Davis, "History in Masquerade," *Saturday Review of Literature*, November 27, 1926, p. 355. From "Introduction" to Adams Papers, GARL.

³ Samuel Hopkins Adams, *Revelry*, New York, Boni & Liveright, 1926. p. 70

⁴ Andy Gandy is Adams's characterization of Albert B. Fall, Harding's Secretary of the Interior. Charlie Madrigal is Adams's version of Charles R. Forbes, Director of the Veterans' Bureau. Both were charged with graft in 1924.

Gandy's oil deal implicates the ignorant President by involving property owned by Markham's niece in the oil-lease transaction. The Congress resents the influence that Lurcock and "The Crow's Nest" crowd have over Markham, and begins an investigation of rumors surrounding the activities of Gandy and Madrigal.

Until the very end, Markham retains complete confidence in both his friends. When he discovers that he and his niece have been duped by those he trusted, he becomes despondent. Rumors of his impending impeachment are in the air. One night Markham accidentally takes the poison he had earlier coaxed from Edith Westervelt. When he realizes what he has done, he decides to take advantage of the escape fate has provided him.

Readers of *Revelry* realized that Adams's novel was a thinly-veiled portrayal of the Harding administration. The Congress, through the investigations of the Walsh Committee, had uncovered several instances of graft, allegedly committed by Secretary of the Interior Fall and Veterans' Bureau chief Forbes. In the alleged conspiracy, Attorney General Harry Daugherty and others close to Harding were also implicated. Fall was accused of taking a bribe to arrange the transfer of government oil reserves at Teapot Dome to oil tycoon Edward Doheny, Sr. The scandals of *Revelry* differ from fact only in minor details. Markham's romantic interest and apparent suicide seemed to give plausibility to the rumors which had been circulated about Harding.

Prior to the publication of *Revelry*, Harding's reputation among Americans had touched both extremes. When he died, the President was eulogized, of course, and within a year, four highly favorable biographies of Harding appeared. These were hopelessly sentimental and useful only as evidence of popular feeling. However, this phase was short-lived. The liberal press, led by magazines like the *New Republic* and *The Nation*, attacked the corruption of the Harding administration revealed by the senatorial investigations of Sen. Thomas J. Walsh, (D., Montana). Bruce Bliven of the *New Republic* wrote five devastating articles on the "Ohio Gang," a term which Bliven helped to popularize.⁵ But neither the Walsh investigations nor journalistic reports could arouse public indignation about Teapot Dome. The Walsh findings did not live up to the investigating committee's predictions and the resulting litigation was tediously drawn out. During 1926, the trials of Fall, Daugherty, Forbes, and Doheny were in the news, yet public concern was not great. Such was the situation when *Revelry* was published.

The reaction to *Revelry* was sensational from the start. Adams had known since the conception of his idea for the novel, in March 1926, that he had a commercial success on his hands, and he was "determined to make the most of it." Through his agents, Zelma and Carl Brandt, and his publisher, Horace Liveright, he planned a large-scale advertising campaign. He first went to Washington, D.C. to research his subject, and Harry Hansen was quite

⁵Bruce Bliven, "Ohio Gang," *New Republic*, May 7, 14, 21, 28, June 8, 1924.

correct when he said he had been told that some “passages in *Revelry* had been taken verbatim from public records of testimony in certain recent trials.”⁶

Throughout the summer of 1926, Adams, with his agents and publisher, hammered out plans for the novel. Not of least importance was choosing a title. At one time they intended to call it *Panorama*, then later, *Proud Revelry*. Adams was eager to have the book ready for sale while interest in the trial was at its height. Originally set for release in September, it was postponed, first to October 25, then to November 10. Meanwhile the Brandts were busy lining up distributors for the book in England and Germany, and trying to distribute advance copies in places where they would do the most good: Democratic newspapers, key senators and politicians, and Washington’s women of social importance who discussed literature in their “salons.” Some copies were even sent to members of Coolidge’s administration.

One of the most significant publicity efforts was made when a free-lance journalist, William Almon Wolff, was commissioned to do an article on *Revelry* shortly after its publication. To get material, Wolff interviewed two Democratic senators — Thomas J. Walsh and Burton K. Wheeler, both from Montana and both leading figures in the investigations. Wolff asked them for their impressions of *Revelry*. Walsh felt that the novel might prove useful if it aroused the country “from the apathy with which it received the facts brought forth from his investigation.”⁷ He was also highly critical of President Coolidge’s silence on the alleged graft within the Republican party. Senator Wheeler, the 1924 Progressive party vice-presidential candidate, was himself a character in *Revelry*, in the person of Senator Welling, the antagonist of Markham’s “cronies.” His only comment to Wolff on *Revelry* was it was “extremely interesting.” Wheeler like Walsh, was highly critical of Coolidge’s silence and the President’s failure to remove Daugherty from his post until public pressure forced him to do it. Wolff also interviewed the ruggedly independent Republican Senator from Idaho, William E. Borah, who said: “There is ample justification for the book in the facts.”

Sales of *Revelry* lived up to the expectations of all involved. By the end of November 1926, it had sold 25,000 copies. Eventually, it topped 100,000 in sales. It was even adapted for Hollywood screen and the New York stage. *Revelry* received unsolicited publicity from the defense attorney for Edward Doheny, Frank J. Hogan, who specifically asked prospective jurors whether or not they had read *Revelry* or had read newspaper reports stating that

⁶Harry Hansen, *New York World*, November 10, 1926. Adams Papers, GARL. Harry Hansen was literary editor of the *World*, New York City’s leading Democratic newspaper.

⁷The comments in this paragraph were taken from the text of an interview by William Almon Wolff which was sent to Democratic newspapers throughout the country. Adams Papers, GARL.

prospective jurors “were staying up nights reading *Revelry*.”⁸None of the jurors questioned by Hogan admitted reading it, but the jury was ultimately sequestered, in part because of possible exposure to the book.

According to Mark Sullivan, *Revelry* was banned in the nation’s capital. Raymond Clapper, Washington correspondent for United News, reported that President Coolidge had referred to the allegations in *Revelry* as “scandalous.” Adams happily noted that the President’s comment “ought to be worth several thousand copies.”⁹ Carl Brandt’s contact in the Department of Labor, Special Assistant to the Secretary of Labor, Burton Kline, wrote in amusement that Secretary of Labor James J. Davis had complained that much of *Revelry* “wasn’t so.” Kline felt that Davis had fallen into the same trap that most of Washington had. By sticking closely to the “fax,” Adams convinced his readers that the fictional elements were also facts. Unfortunately, Kline did not say what he considered to be true or untrue.¹⁰

From New York came the reaction of the noted liberal clergyman John Haynes Holmes, head of the non-denominational Community Church and editor of *Unity* magazine. He expressed gratitude to Adams for his “ruthless and therefore wholesome portrayal of the spirit . . . if not the precise facts, of the most corrupt administration this country has ever known.” He asked rhetorically:

Why should not every honest citizen rejoice that a trained novelist has had the insight and courage to seize upon these events of recent history and use them for his own purposes? . . . [And] How old does such material have to be before it can legitimately be employed? How many books would have to be suppressed if the judgement suggested in this case were made universal?¹¹

Holmes went on to heap praise on Adams. His letter was shortly thereafter incorporated into the book’s publicity campaign. Holmes provided a reply to many critics who felt that *Revelry* was a wicked book because Harding had been dead only three years and some of the characters involved treated fictionally by Adams were not only alive but awaiting trial. Like Bliven’s articles in 1924, Adams’s *Revelry* had enough truth in it to upset many who believed that the President should be kept on a pedestal. They resented the attempts of the Progressives to knock the pedestal to the ground. The anti-*Revelry* campaign of the *Washington Post* was natural enough, since its owner, Edward “Ned” McLean, was involved in the Teapot Dome scandal and was, himself, the original of a character in *Revelry*. More surprising is the condemnation of the novel by the *New York Times*. Its anonymous reviewer

⁸*New York Times*, November 23, 1926. From the “Introduction” to the Adams Papers, GARL.

⁹Samuel Hopkins Adams to Leila (?), November 14, 1926, Adams Papers, GARL.

¹⁰Burton Kline to Carl Brandt, November 23, 1926. Adams Papers, GARL. Kline was a former journalist himself.

¹¹John Haynes Holmes to Boni & Liveright, Publishers, undated. Adams Papers, GARL.

called the novel pernicious and unethical and concluded that “it was hardly necessary . . . to subject the characters of men still living – to say nothing of the dead – to the unfair confusion of damning fact with damning fiction.”¹²

Adams’s own reaction to such criticism is on a scrap of paper found among his letters. It could not be determined whether it was ever published. He wrote:

I have been attacked from ocean to ocean for bad taste in digging up graves and unfair methods for using a fiction form. I ans. the 1st count on the score that an issue not dead [sic] and cannot be buried because certain of its main actors are dead. – I ans. the second by saying there is only one way to get to the hearts of the people [and] that is by ridicule or pathos – I have chosen the latter. Had I taken the facts and put them in a correct, clear forceful statement – about 2000 people would have read it at most [...] Had I taken straight fiction without any facts I should have had to make an allegory which many people would have failed to interpret. I wanted to make people feel and think there are only 2 ways of doing this¹³

Liberal journals came to Adams’s defense. Long-time Harding foe Bruce Bliven reviewed *Revelry* in the *New Republic*. Though dismissing the novel as a “negligible” work of fiction, Bliven defended Adams’s right to deny immunity to public figures “for the period they care about most – that of their own lives.”¹⁴ Bliven believed that more novels like *Revelry* would increase honesty in government, and hoped it would arouse the public. In *The Nation*, an anonymous reviewer also agreed the novel was without literary merit but commended Adams for “unveiling political conditions which can as yet not be handled directly without silly cries of ‘besmirching dead men’ and ‘slandering a President who can no longer defend himself.’” The reviewer cited other examples of novels which had stirred men to action.¹⁵

The most significant review of *Revelry* appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Critic Elmer Davis’s article is, in part, a defense of the novel. He defends Adams by stating that “he has taken no more liberties with the facts, and the rumors, than historical novelists are constantly taking in writing about periods more remote.” Sarcastically, he answers those who accuse Adams of bad taste: “It is not bad taste to steal everything loose around Washington, but it is bad taste . . . to call attention to it.” Davis commends Adams for refraining from the temptation the material provided for satire and letting the story speak for itself. He accepts Adams’s sympathetic characterization of Harding as a President “too small for his job,” and adds

¹²“A Matter of Ethics,” *New York Times Book Review*, November 28, 1926. p. 27

¹³Undated sheet of paper written in Adams’s own hand. Adams Papers, GARL.

¹⁴Bruce Bliven, “Revelry and Ethics,” *New Republic*, December 15, 1926. p. 118-19

¹⁵“Revelry and Whispers,” *The Nation*, December 15, 1926, p. 628

his voice to those of other journalists who condemn the public for its inaction.¹⁶

English literary publication reacted to *Revelry* in their unique way. The *Spectator* believed that Adams's novel was "no work of literary art" — a conclusion nearly all critics reached — and added that it was "too full of slang for the average English reader."¹⁷ The *Times Literary Supplement* felt that, while *Revelry* could not be accepted as an attempt to write a serious political novel, Adams's work was "quite entertaining" as an example of "the peculiarly American talent for caricature."¹⁸

After *Revelry*, several other books of varying credibility were published which furthered the negative image of the Harding era. Harding's morals were attacked by Nan Britton, who claimed to be the mother of Harding's illegitimate daughter. Harry Daugherty claimed to be the man who "made" Harding. In a book he wrote in 1932, the ex-Attorney General described how he molded and manipulated the late President. Ex-Daugherty henchman Gaston B. Means published his diary, which allegedly substantiated rumors of a Harding suicide. Means was however reputed to be a "notorious liar." In addition to these memoirs, responsible journalists like Frederick Lewis Allen and Mark Sullivan also contributed to the historians' unfavorable judgment of Harding.¹⁹

Samuel Hopkins Adams also attempted the first history of the Harding era. In 1939 he wrote *Incredible Era*,²⁰ an account which received wide circulation. (He was assisted in his research by Professor H. F. Alderfer of Pennsylvania State College, who had written his doctoral dissertation on Harding under the auspices of the Syracuse University political science department.)²¹

Recent scholarship has produced a more balanced view of Warren Harding showing that he was a strong, ambitious politician and not the pawn of Daugherty. The opening of the Harding Papers by the Ohio Historical Society in 1963 made this reevaluation possible. Like Robert K. Murray's *The Harding Era*, Andrew Sinclair's *The Available Man*,²² portrays a Harding much stronger politically and less feeble administratively. Francis Russell's recent Harding biography, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*²³ is mainly

¹⁶Elmer Davis, "History in Masquerade," *Saturday Review of Literature*, November 27, 1926, p. 335

¹⁷*Spectator*, January 22, 1927, April 16, 1927.

¹⁸*Times Literary Supplement*, April 14, 1927.

¹⁹Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1969.

²⁰Samuel Hopkins Adams, *Incredible Era; the Life and Times of Warren Gamaliel Harding*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1939.

²¹H. F. Alderfer, "The Personality and Politics of Warren G. Harding," (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1928)

²²Andrew Sinclair, *The Available Man; the Life Behind the Mask of Warren Gamaliel Harding*, New York, Macmillan, 1965.

²³Francis Russell, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove, Warren G. Harding in His Times*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1969.

concerned with describing Harding's extra-marital behavior. None has attempted to prove allegations of Harding's suicide.

On the whole, Samuel Hopkins Adams must be credited with contributing not only to the Harding myth, but also to the Harding truth. Harding was not the weak, Daugherty-dominated individual Adams portrays in *Revelry*. He did not commit suicide. But Adams was correct to a considerable degree about the extent of graft and corruption he saw among Harding's political intimates. He was accurate in portraying Harding as a kind, sensitive, human being. Adams's estimate of Harding is in many ways typical of today's prevailing public view, and perhaps even a bit more perceptive in its basically sympathetic approach.

