

CONRAD AIKEN AND WILLIAM JAMES POTTER

A series of portrait busts lines the walls of the reading room at the renowned Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Among the notables depicted are Socrates, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and William James Potter. Potter? Rev. William James Potter of New Bedford, Massachusetts? What brought this distinguished Unitarian minister, a founder and the mainstay of the Free Religious Association to the Huntington Library? Conrad Aiken – eloquent poet, novelist, and essayist – brought him.

In his latter years, Aiken, always in modest financial circumstances, sold his papers to the library. Potter accompanied them. The bust is a plaster copy of a marble one created by the New Bedford sculptor, Walton Ricketson. The original is in a niche at the front of the sanctuary of the First Unitarian Church in New Bedford, the only church that Potter ever served. He looks across at Ralph Waldo Emerson, another Ricketson bust. Emerson was a frequent preacher at the church, another founder of the Free Religious Association, and one of Potter's great heroes.

Potter was Aiken's hero. And his grandfather. They met only once, when Aiken was only four years old. He was born in Savannah where his father was a prominent physician. During his early childhood, the boy made only one journey north. When he was twelve years old, his father murdered his mother and then committed suicide. Conrad found the bodies. William and Anna left behind four children, Conrad being the oldest. The younger children were adopted by Frederick Taylor, a wealthy Philadelphia engineer and pioneering efficiency expert, whose wife was a cousin of Conrad's mother. Conrad was passed from relative to relative until he was sent away to boarding school at Middlesex Academy in Concord, Massachusetts. He later confessed that he felt that he had never had a home.

Conrad was a thoughtful and precocious child. His parents must have instilled him with stories of the importance of his brilliant grandfather. Certainly he knew about his preaching. At the age of nine, he began writing his own sermons in emulation of his grandfather. Throughout his life, he asserted that his own life mission was to carry forward the ideas and work of his grandfather. Potter was a constant presence in Aiken's peripatetic existence. The volumes of his sermons were carried back and forth between America and the United Kingdom. For a while they were lent to Aiken's friend, T. S. Eliot. The bust also traveled from continent to continent.

Aiken's most eloquent tribute to his grandfather is contained in *Halloween*, a poem published in 1949. In it he recalls his one meeting with his grandfather, and their visit to Buttonwood Park in New Bedford. In the final section of this long poem, he fully acknowledges the importance of his early and enduring influence.

O you who made magic
under an oak-tree once in the sunlight
translating your acorns to green cups and saucers
for the grandchild mute at the tree's foot,
and died, alone, or a doorstep at midnight
your vision complete but your work undone,
with your dream of a world religion,

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a peace convention of religions, a worship
purified of myth and dogma:
dear scarecrow, dear pumpkin-head!
who masquerade now as my child, to assure
the continuing love, the continuing dream,
and the heart and the hearth and the wholeness –
it was so, it is so, and the life so lived
shines this night like the moon over Sheepfold Hill,
and he who interpreted the wonders of god,
is himself dissolved and interpreted.
Rest: be at peace. It suffices to know and rest.
For the singers, in rest, shall stand as a river
Whose source is unending forever.

In *Ushant*, his brilliant 1961 autobiography, Aiken refers frequently and fondly to his grandfather. The telegram announcing Potter's death on the evening of the day when he had performed the marriage ceremony for his son Alfred was Conrad's first experience with death. It stirred memories of Conrad's excursion with his grandfather to Buttonwood Park. There the two sat beneath the trees beside the bears in the zoo while Potter carved cups from acorns and created an imaginary tea party. And in the autobiography he segways to the memory of Grandfather's letter from San Francisco, mostly about trains, which he had kept tucked in one of the volumes of sermons which were his steady companions. (*Ushant*, p. 35)

Aiken was profoundly insecure. The tragedy of his parents deaths, and the way in which he had been passed subsequently from relative to relative left him emotionally crippled. He worked hard at his writing, received modest recognition, but struggled to achieve a sense of self-worth and personal satisfaction. Good moments were fleeting. In contrast, he looked back on his grandfather with respect and admiration.

...the heroic simplicity of grandfather's life, the essential goodness and singlemindedness, his devotion to the ultimate, as well as to the immediate, interests of all mankind, and anything else looked compromised and cowardly. That marble bust in the church in New Bedford which faced across at Emerson's, but appeared to disregard it was a reminder.
(*Ibid.*, p. 61)

More important than the small memories of the one actual encounter, was the growing sense that he had been destined to carry his grandfather's work. In his imagination, Aiken saw himself being commissioned in Buttonwood Park to carry on the mission.

Had grandfather not been saying, the white beard saying, "Thee must now – always Remember this little D. – thee must now and hereafter do *my* thinking for *me*, thee must be the continuance of me, thee will forever, even if intermittently, or even if only so often *consciously*, stand in the ghost of a pulpit, in the ghost of a church, in the ghost of our beloved New Bedford. ... Yes, this was true. Something like this had really happened –

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wordlessly, but it had happened. And this implicit and transcendental exchange, subtle as aether between them, was when one considered it justly, one of the profounder forms of the process of inheritance. (Ibid., p. 112)

He goes on to assert that Potter on that day had set his inheritance into motion. And Aiken was accepting it (and passing it on to his own children). They shared a deep commitment to seeking out the truth, no matter how difficult or controversial the journey might be. And both were rebels.

Potter had renounced the theological and personal rigidity of his Quaker heritage. He had no use for dogmas of any sort, instead committing himself to using his free will to explore broadly and deeply. He led the Free Religious Association. He stopped calling himself a Christian, and explored and affirmed other religious traditions. He was an early disciple of Darwin. He moved beyond the idea of a personal deity, affirming instead the experience of a divine presence within all of existence.

Aiken was also an explorer – most significantly of his own consciousness. A disciple of Freud, much of his writing is an exercise in delving into the mysteries and contradictions within his own being. Infused with a great restlessness, his life was spent seeking, exploring, questioning, doubting, and, occasionally, celebrating. As a literary disciple of Sigmund Freud, he was deeply concerned for exploring the depths of human consciousness. He experienced therapy himself. In his poetry, he was much concerned for catching the contrapuntal rhythms of music. Beyond the rhythms there was a fascination in exploring the burlesque or vaudeville of the seemingly ordinary -- the amazing everyday, the exotic commonplace, the explosively casual.

Both Potter and Aiken were very shy. Potter was very self-assured intellectually, but socially he never could leave behind his poor, rural Quaker roots – a serious handicap with his patrician New Bedford congregation. He seems to have had almost no personal friends beyond his fellow Free Religionist, Francis Ellingwood Abbot. Aiken, probably because of the tragic circumstances of his youth, had a life long terror of public occasions. He resigned from Harvard before graduation because he dared not accept the nomination as class poet with the requirement deliver his poem at commencement. He never joined a church. Throughout his life, he rejected all invitations for public readings and lectures. However, unlike Potter, he had a circle of warm friends who found him a delightful, often uproarious companion. Perhaps the most enduring, if troubled friendship was with his fellow Harvard student, T. S. Eliot.

Both the grandsons of Unitarian clergymen, Aiken was deeply upset when Eliot converted to the Anglican church. In response, he clearly defined himself as a Unitarian. Indeed, when his wife, Mary Hoover Aiken jokingly listed him as Episcopalian on a hospital admission slip, he was furious and insisted that he was a Unitarian.

About his religious views, he once said:

Yes, I suppose I'm a naturalistic humanist if I'm anything -- that and an evolutionist. I am

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against all forms of supernaturalism, dogma, myth, church -- primarily, I believe in the evolution of consciousness as something we're embarked on willy-nilly, the evolution of mind, and that devotion to this is all the devotion we need.

For Aiken, the universe is chaos, a tumultuous maelstrom of fragments of bouncing bits and pieces. As humans we create experiences of meaning and unity out of the formless chaos - if we are sensitive enough to observe and experience. We can never find assured order, nor a creating, caring and sustaining God. The nearest we can come to a god is in the process of discovering and creating a self. While he was tough – minded and often disillusioned with humanity and the chaos that it had created, there was also a strong streak of hope.

Potter's sermons had found their mark. He, also, was very much aware of evil and injustice, and struggled to overcome it. But there was always profound optimism that a just and inclusive society could be achieved. While there was no evidence that he created many poems, the eloquence of the language of his journals and sermons is extraordinary. Much of his prose reads like poetry. In both men there is a strong mystic strain that flows out of the New England Transcendentalist ethos.

Both men undertook their own heroic journeys. Out of their inner struggles each created a self able to offer profound insights and an affirming vision.

Aiken's sense of inheritance was prescient. His three children all became published authors. Joan Aiken and Jane Aiken Hodge published many books – novels and children's stories.

In "Preludes for Memmon," XIV and XIX, Conrad Aiken shares a vision:

You understood it? Tell me, then, its meaning.
It was an all, a nothing, or a something?
Chaos, or divine love, or emptiness?

Water and Earth and air and the sun's fire?
Or else, a question, simply? --

-- Water and fire were there,
And air and earth; there too was emptiness;
All, and nothing, and something too, and love.
But these poor words, these squeaks of ours, in which
We strive to mimic, with strained throats and tongues,
The spawning and outrageous elements --
Alas, how paltry are they! For I saw --

-- What did you see?

-- I saw myself and God.

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I saw the ruin in which godhead lives:
Shapeless and vast: the strewn wreck of the world
Sadness unplumbed: misery without bound.
Wailing I heard, but also I heard joy.
Wreckage I saw, but also I saw flowers.
Hatred I saw, but also I saw love. . .
And thus I saw myself.

-- And this alone?

-- And this alone awaits you, when you dare
To that sheer verge where horror hangs, and tremble
Against the falling rock: and, looking down,
Search the dark kingdom. It is to self you come --
And that is God. It is the seed of seeds:
Seed for disastrous and immortal worlds.

It is the answer that no question asked.

Rev. Richard A. Kellaway

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