

Edmund Pearson's Introduction  
to *Autobiography of a Criminal*

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## EDMUND PEARSON'S INTRODUCTION

This is probably the first extensive American criminal biography. It leads a line of books which come down to our own time, including such works as *The Autobiography of a Thief* by Hutchins Hapgood, and the stories of bandits from Jesse James to Gerald Chapman. Like practically all of them, it is the work of a "ghost writer," and that fact is frankly admitted on the original title-page.

The first, and—so far as I know—only other edition, was printed in Dover, New Hampshire, by Samuel Bragg, Jr., in 1807. The original title was "A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels and Sufferings of Henry Tufts, Now Residing at Lemington, in the District of Maine. In substance, as Compiled from his Own Mouth."

Writers who mention Henry Tufts are few, and, for the most part, they follow his narrative and believe his assertions. One of them makes an original contribution, and it is important.

The Rev. James Hill Fitts, in his *History of Newfields, New Hampshire*, accepts Thomas Tufts, the clerical grandfather, the Bachelor of Arts of Harvard, who was born in Devonshire, and died as a preacher of the gospel in Boston, leaving a name free from reproach. He accepts, also, the son of this man, the blameless tailor, who was the father of Henry. Only in one detail does he depart from the author's description of his own family, and it is in respect to the tailor's wife. Henry Tufts speaks of both his parents with filial piety, but the Rev. Mr. Fitts says of Mrs. Tufts, Henry's mother, that she was known, later in life, "as an old witch woman."

We need go no further, nor engage in other speculation. If the mother of Henry Tufts did, in truth, enter into a compact with the Father of Evil, everything is explained. We see at once how useless were the efforts of the army of constables, sheriffs, jailers, magistrates and attorneys—constituting the forces of righteousness—who, throughout his career, tried to bring over to the

side of the angels this person who was irrevocably enlisted as a follower of the Black Man.

An elder brother of Henry Tufts, in a literary sense, might be seen in the "Notorious Stephen Burroughs." Both Tufts and Burroughs were born in New Hampshire; both had dealings in counterfeit money; both had unhappy meetings with Judge Robert Treat Paine and Attorney-General Sullivan of Massachusetts. Both had unpleasant recollections of Castle Island and Major Perkins. Burroughs studied at Dartmouth College; Tufts gave it his blessing as he passed by.

It is unnecessary, however, to think of Burroughs as the inspirer of this book. Tufts was entreated by a publisher, from Newburyport, as early as 1794,—or four years prior to the first appearance of the *Memoirs* of Burroughs. The literary success of the notorious Stephen hung fire until 1810 (three years after Tufts had gone into print) when there appeared the second edition of Burroughs,—the beginning of the popularity which has called for editions down to 1924.

Tufts has had to wait one hundred and twenty-three years for this, his second edition, but it is possible that his first appearance, in 1807, led to the numerous early reprints of Burroughs in the State of New York, where they are notoriously more godless. New Hampshire promptly shut down upon Tufts: the printing office which issued this book was burned, three or four years later, and the printer died of a broken heart. A manifest judgment. Moreover, persons of the name of Tufts bought as many copies of this book as they could find, and destroyed them.

Henry Tufts had a successor, if not imitator, in Seth Wyman (1784-1843) This man was another autobiographical burglar from New Hampshire, who wandered through some of Tufts' favorite towns, engaged in robbery and passing counterfeit money. His *Life and Adventures*, published in Manchester, N.H., in 1843, seems like a rather tame copy of the narrative of Tufts.

Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson was the discoverer of Tufts, in our time. His essay, "A New England Vagabond,"

in *Harper's Magazine* for March, 1888 (reprinted in his *Travellers and Outlaws*, 1889) is by far the best estimate of the book. Colonel Higginson chose Tufts' description of Indian life; his encounter with the dealer in Continental counterfeit money; his high-flown style, and use of odd slang; and his picture of the underworld of the Revolutionary period, as the strong points of the narrative.

"Of course," wrote Colonel Higginson, "it is easy to say that he lied; that probability must steadily be kept in view at every page: but the general atmosphere of a book is unmistakable, and here the coarse versimilitude is very great."

To the remarkable features of the book, cited by Colonel Higginson, I should add its understanding of the criminal mind. Tufts' lively self-pity is characteristic; he was indignant at the discomfort of the jails,—although he did bear, with little complaint, the brutal floggings.

Nothing is more delicious than the wrath of Tufts at Dr. Rand, for stealing his best suit of clothes, after they had escaped from the jail at Newburyport. Contrast it with Tufts' satisfaction at the much dirtier trick which he had played, when he took Smith's *only* suit, and departed, leaving his fellow prisoner, deceived and stark naked, in "that most odious of tenements," Exeter jail.

The anecdote of the dog, stolen and re-stolen, and sold three times in one day; the religious awakening brought about in Canterbury by playing upon "three pompion vines"; and the devout lady pilgrim who expected, in some mysterious fashion, to earn a needed half-dollar at a "New Light" meeting, are among the lighter charms of the story.

For its darker side, there is his tale of cannibalism, as practiced at the Stone Tavern, near Poughkeepsie.

We have one description of the physical appearance of Henry Tufts. On August 26, 1793, at Dover, Theophilus Dame, Sheriff, gave notice that "the noted Henry Tufts broke out of gaol on the night of the 25th." He had been "confined for his old offence, that

is teft" [sic] and is "about six feet high, and forty years of age, wears his own hair, short and dark colored, had on a long blue coat." Five dollars reward was offered for his arrest.<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Higginson's statement about the death of Tufts is this:

"He died, it is said, at Limington, Maine, January 31, 1831, in the eighty-third year of an uncommonly misspent life."

Mr. Wadleigh, in the book just quoted, writes that he "died in Maine, about the year 1825, under an assumed name."

Limington has almost completely forgotten Henry Tufts. It is a pretty village, although its many scattered and deserted farms make it seem a melancholy one. A few of the older residents, especially those of the name of Tufts, recall that they have heard their fathers speak of the author. They remember him as "the Doctor." They have heard of a book (the first edition of this book) and may have heard of a man, "over in Gorham," or somewhere, who once owned a copy. But that is all.

For a few moments I thought that perhaps I was standing at the grave of the Doctor, himself, and in the presence of one of his direct descendants. But when the moss and mold were rubbed off the headstone, the Christian name was another's, and the descendant, as I had been told he was, made no claim to a literary ancestry. I did not venture to accuse him, directly.

Sheriff Dame's notice; the mention of Tufts in the New Hampshire *Provincial Papers* at the time of his military service (see note, p. 97) and one other entry, in the same records, are nearly all the contemporary references which I have found. In the *Provincial Papers* (30:82) Henry Tufts, and "henry Tufts junr" (our man) sign the "association paper" as of the town of Lee. This was an adherence to the Declaration of Independence.

His trial for burglary at Ipswich earned him three short notices in the *Salem Gazette*: June 24, July 1, and September 16, 1794. The Court, and other, records of this case are quoted in an

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<sup>1</sup>George Wadleigh. *Notable Events in the history of Dover, N. H.* (Dover, 1913)

extended note at the end of this edition. (Page 347.)

Tufts' book was strongly disapproved by one of Dover's historians: Miss Mary P. Thompson, in her *Landmarks in Ancient Dover*. It was Miss Thompson who wrote (in 1892) that, within her recollection, it was common, by way of expressing superlative wickedness, to say "as big a liar (or thief, etc., etc.) as old Hen Turf." She added that the cellar of the house where Tufts had lived, between Durham and Lee, was still to be traced.

Miss Thompson doubted if Colonel Higginson's praise of the work was deserved, and uttered her condemnation, in vigorous language, of any who could enjoy it. She was careful to indicate that she had never even looked at it.

Such disapproval, from a lady who had been, I am told, a member of a sisterhood of the Church of Rome, left me somewhat abashed. It is not through any wish to hide behind the coats of clerical gentlemen, but simply to make proper acknowledgments, that I say it was through two of the ministers of the First Religious Society (Unitarian), of Newburyport, that I was first introduced to Henry Tufts. My friend, Laurence Hayward, it was, who first showed me the essay by Colonel Higginson. And the Colonel, the fighting parson of the Civil War, was Mr. Hayward's predecessor in the same pulpit, in my grandfather's time.

As to the actual author of the book, the "ghost writer," who is indicated on the title-page, one name and one anonymous person have been suggested. Mr. Wadleigh ascribes the writing to Major Thomas Tash of New Durham. A penciled note in the copy of the book in The New York Public Library, quotes "David Murray in the News Letter" as saying that it was written "by — Tash of New Durham." Miss Thompson rejects the claims of Tash, and suggests "a clever young lawyer of Dover. This sounds like the first line of a limerick, but is not otherwise helpful.

Allibone's *Critical Dictionary of English Literature* and Williamson's *Bibliography of Maine* mention the narrative; other bibliographies know it not. Even Professor F. W. Chandler's *Literature of Roquery* missed it. The copy in the Boston Public Library

contains an inscription on a fly-leaf, which pretends to quote a notice from *The Critical Review* (London) for March, 1808. I shall be glad if some one can find that the *Review* did mention the book. I could not.

I have either seen or heard of nine copies, in various public or semi-public libraries. *American Book Prices Current* records the sale of a copy, in 1916 for \$8, but the price has advanced, and last year copies were quoted at from \$25 to \$35.

In this edition, titles for the chapters have been inserted, and the text has been cut to the extent of about forty pages. The original edition runs to 366 pages, with a preface. The preface, which adds nothing to our knowledge of Tufts or his book, has been omitted altogether. The other omissions are wholly in the interest of brevity. The book has not been bowdlerized in any place: Tufts is allowed to recite his crimes, and smugly describe his lechery without interference.

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The early woodcuts appearing on the half-title pages are reproduced through the courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

*Edmund Pearson*  
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