

A Proposed Author for “The Vulture: An Ornithological Study,” the 1852 (not 1853) Parody of “The Raven”

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Of the many parodies of “The Raven,” one is consistently mentioned: “The Vulture: An Ornithological Study.” Although published anonymously, it was attributed to British humorist Robert B. Brough in the 1857 “Cyclopedia of Wit and Humor of America.”¹ Two earlier appearances are generally cited: the Dec. 1853 edition of “Graham’s Magazine,” and the 1853 edition of “Cruikshank’s Comic Almanack.” However, in 2016, when I obtained a microfilm copy of the 1851-53 Boston humor newspaper, the “Carpet-Bag,” I discovered that “The Vulture” had premiered in the Dec. 18, 1852 edition of that weekly.

Robert Brough’s first humorous work appeared in the “Liverpool Lion,” in 1847. The earliest of his poetry I could access was an 1852 play written in verse, “A Cracker Bon-Bon.” It is competent, but bears little stylistic similarity to “The Vulture,” and is arguably not of comparable quality.

Brough’s proposed authorship of “The Vulture” would be a moot point, given the poem’s premiere in an American publication, were it not for the illustrations. These bear a distinct resemblance to the work of British illustrator Henry George Hine. A close examination of the illustrations in the “Carpet-Bag,” “Cruikshank’s,” and “Graham’s,” respectively, reveals that they have been redrawn. Furthermore, the second illustration, which appears in both the “Carpet-Bag” and “Graham’s,” is missing in “Cruikshank’s.” So if Brough was not the author, and yet the illustrations are indeed Hine’s, *how did a British illustrator’s work get into an American publication?*

Enter Mathew Franklin Whittier, the reclusive younger brother of poet John Greenleaf Whittier. Mathew was a humorist who is historically known only for “Ethan Spike” from “Hornby.” However, I discovered that his career began as a child prodigy of 12, publishing in the “New-England Galaxy” and the “New-York National Advocate.” It was he, and not lottery shop owner George W. Arnold, who wrote the “Joe Strickland” letters—so far as I can determine, the first of this genre in America.² Below is an example of Mathew’s humorous poetry, written at age 14 for the “Galaxy,” signed “P.P.” (Mathew’s childhood nickname was “Peter Pumpkin”):

You ask me, dear Dick, what we’re doing in town?
Tho’ for ten that are *doing*, there’s seven ‘*done* brown.’
But, doing or done, we are all of us taking
A wonderful interest in *Cabinet*-making.
You have heard, I suppose, that among the odd things
Which belong to the best of Old England’s good kings,
Was a curious *Old Cabinet*, formed of the wood
That, in George the *Third*’s time was pronounced to be good;
Prime, well-seasoned stuff, and made up in the form
Prescribed by the ‘Pilot who weathered the storm;’
‘Twas *costly* enough, though ‘twas not very showy—
would you know what it cost us, ask *Aberdeen Joey*.

Here, he is lampooning recent changes to the “Cabinet Cyclopedia.” The point is that by December of 1852, Mathew—who studied British satirical poetry as a boy—had nearly a quarter-century of experience writing in this genre (as opposed to Brough’s half-decade).

My study of Mathew’s involvement in the “Carpet-Bag” indicates that he wrote as many as eight anonymous pieces for each weekly edition, including several utilizing the British system of inline illustrations. The first of these, appearing in the May 10, 1851 edition, is entitled “A Galy Day in Boston.” The next, in the June 21, 1851 edition, is “Public Edifices—No. 1. Bunker-Hill Monument.” Both are clearly set in Boston, so this cannot be a British author.

Mathew’s series (plus one piece written by imitator John C. Moore) continues until “The Vulture” appears in the Dec. 18, 1852 edition. By style it is arguably the same author, and there are several cross-correspondences. However, there is *one more piece* in the series, which *also* seems to contain illustrations by H.G. Hine. Appearing in the Jan. 22, 1853 edition, it is entitled “Mr. Spoon Meditates on California.” “Mr. Spoon” has caught “gold fever,” but feels he must toughen himself up for the rigors of the prospecting life. However, upon viewing a panorama of the actual conditions, he abandons his plans and is content to sit by his accustomed fireside!

This story, also, appears—again, with redrawn illustrations—in the 1853 edition of “Cruikshank’s.” However, it is incorporated, piecemeal, into the humorous calendar for 1853. Furthermore, the character has been renamed “Winkinson,” and instead of going to California, he is going to Australia.

I have proved that it was Mathew, not Ossian Dodge, who was writing the “Quails” travelogue for the Boston “Weekly Museum” from fall of 1849 until mid-1852.³ “Quails” enjoyed visiting authors and artists. Very likely he could have met with H.G. Hine, shared a few pieces, and commissioned him to illustrate two of them for the “Carpet-Bag.” It would simply mean that Mathew—who, since childhood, had admired the British satirists—began imitating the British style of inline illustration in the “Carpet-Bag,” and then topped it off by hiring one of Britain’s best illustrators.

Now, I have made the case that Mathew was the real and original author of “The Raven” in a separate paper.⁴ Suffice it to say that if I am correct, he had ample talent and reason to write this parody. Note that “The Vulture” is *not* actually a parody *of the poem*—it is, rather, a humorous treatment of “bores” written in the style of “The Raven.”

“The Vulture” was not Mathew’s first parody of that poem. For the November, 1846⁵ edition of the New York humor magazine, “Yankee Doodle,” he wrote “The B—d B—g and No Other Poems,” signing it “E.A. Poh.” This, also, is not a parody of “The Raven,” per se—it is, rather, a scathing parody of Poe himself, comparing him to a bed-bug. It opens:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, lolling weary
Over several curious books of sure-to-be-forgotten lore,
While I nodded nearly sleeping, suddenly there came a creeping,
As of some grimalkin peeping at an open pantry door.

So, I said, "'Tis some musquito, or some fly was here before.
Only this, and nothing more."

Mathew lived for many years in boarding houses in New York City, and certainly would have been familiar with his subject. But when we come to the subject of "The Vulture," i.e., bores, I have abundant evidence that this was one of his pet peeves. One may compare "A Chapter on Bores" in the Aug. 12, 1848 edition of the Portland "Transcript," signed with Mathew's recurring signature, a "star" or single asterisk; and "Treatment of Bore—Acute and Chronic," in the May 8, 1852 "Carpet-Bag," written as his character, "Dr. E. Goethe Digg."⁶ Mathew's dislike of bores even shows up in the Yorkshire "Evening Post" of Sept. 26, 1892, concerning the recently-deceased John Greenleaf Whittier. Despite numerous factual errors, it clearly indicates that Mathew's dislike of bores was common knowledge:

The latest dead among the American poets had a brother Matthew who wrote verses. Matthew Whittier was asked if he was any relation of John. "The only relationship existing between John Greenleaf Whittier and myself," said he, "is we each had the same father and the same mother." He had a sense of fun, too. He detested bores, but he could not be uncivil to them. His plan was to lead them out and lose them in the streets. Sometimes, his sister says, he would go home and say, "Well, sister, I had hard work to lose him; but I have lost him. But I can never lose a *her*," he added, "the women are more pertinacious than men; don't thee find them so, Maria?"

However, it is in the Dec. 7, 1850 edition of the "Weekly Museum"—roughly two years before the first appearance of "The Vulture"—that we see the clearest connection to that poem. Writing as "Quails," Mathew visits the editor of the Portland "Eclectic," Edwin Plummer, and together they visit Mathew's own character, "Ethan Spike." But the remainder of the piece is dedicated to an unfortunate experience—a *bore*, who cannot be induced to leave, has intruded on Mathew's peace and quiet! It appears that in writing "The Vulture," Mathew had, in fact, re-told this event in verse. Compare the relevant portion of both works:

"Leave the room, sir!—leave the room instantly, or the consequences be upon your own head. Not another word!—not a word! Do n't you open your mouth, but leave the room instantly!"

Snatching up his hat and looking as if he had received an unexpected shock from a galvanic battery, or been nearly skinned alive by a flash of lightning, Mr. Diggetts slide out of the room at a pace that would have put Morse's new telegraph to the blush.

"Smith!" I shriek'd--the accent humbler dropping, as another tumbler
I beheld him mix, "be off! you drive me mad--it's striking four.
Leave the house and something in it; if you go on at the gin it
Won't hold out another minute. Leave the house and shut the door--
Take your beak from out my gin, and take your body through the door!"
Quoth the Vulture, "Never more!"

There are a great many more indicators and comparisons I could provide, if space permitted. Given Mathew Franklin Whittier's long track record in humorous poetry, his obvious competence in this genre, his series utilizing in-line illustrations in the "Carpet-Bag" (of which "The Vulture" was the next-to-last), and his life-long dislike of "bores," he is clearly the obvious candidate as the anonymous author of "The Vulture."

Footnotes:

- 1) Burton, William H., "Cyclopedia of Wit and Humor of America, Ireland, Scotland, and England," Div. II, 1857, pp. 516-519.
- 2) The opinion that "Joe Strickland" was written by George W. Arnold can be found in Read, Walker Allen, "The World of Joe Strickland," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 76, No. 302 (Oct.-Dec., 1963), pp. 277-308, published by the American Folklore Society.
- 3) The opinion that "Quails" was written by Ossian Dodge can be found in Jordan, Philip D., "Ossian Euclid Dodge: Eccentric Troubadour," *The Historian*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Feb. 1969), pp. 194-210.
- 4) Sakellarios, Stephen, "Evidence that Edgar Allan Poe Stole 'The Raven' from Mathew Franklin Whittier," unpublished paper dated 2021, available on Academia.edu.
- 5) I can only access the Google.com copy of this publication, where the title pages have been omitted for 1846. Thus, November is my best guess for the publication date of this poem.
- 6) I have given my arguments that the "star" and the "Dr. Digg" series were Mathew Franklin Whittier's work elsewhere. See "Mathew Franklin Whittier in his own words," and its sequel, "Mathew Franklin Whittier in his own world."