

Books, Maps and George Thorogood

By John Andrew Munroe

This is some autobiographical writing by my father. Some is material repeated elsewhere. However it has some interesting memories from his school days. This should give the reader a bit more insight into my father's home and school life.

My father awakened my interest in history through his story telling of his youth. He had little education; he left school through a window to escape a beating (by teachers) when he was in the sixth grade. And he came from a home where there were no books, just a daily newspaper. Still he was a tremendous teller of stories, both of those he had heard and those he made up. Sometimes the two got confused.

The "made-up" stories that he told me included a series about Little Bobby, who was always getting lost. Bobby lived with his sister, Mary, a character never given much life, and with their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Casey. Bobby's penchant for getting lost was a constant source of worry for his father and mother. Fortunately they had an unfailing resource, Detective Murphy. Murphy's record was perfect; he never failed to find Bobby.

I cannot now remember any specific escapade of the original Little Bobby. He got lost, I am sure, at amusement parks (Shellpot Park was near my home), at the circus (which set up its tents a few blocks away), on a ferry, and in the center of a city. But today my father's stories are inextricably mixed with the Little Bobby stories I told my children.

I have no idea where my father found his source for Little Bobby. Except for the daily paper, he read very little. But he had read some dime novels in his boyhood, he had seen a great many plays at the Opera House and the Academy of Music (the Avenue), and he was a great talker. One of his favorite recreations was to go in town on Saturday night and talking with "the fellows," of whom Jim Dugan is the one I remember best.

These men had come from rough beginnings in immigrant families of Wilmington. As boys they had been street-wise, of necessity. But as I recall hearing them, their talk was very innocent. Perhaps it was self-censored when a boy was around. Jim Dugan, my father's closest friend among them, took book (bets on races), but did not drink. He and my father would go in Govatos's candy shop and have a Coca Cola or a soda.

My father liked beer and after he retired he would go at least one afternoon a week, after doing errands for my mother in town, to a saloon for men only (somewhere around Sixth and Orange) where Senator John Reilly (a real state senator and a very pious man who went to church every morning) was substitute bartender and where he met with Mike Donlan, Andy Monigle, and Hap Aiken. My father had a beer or two while he and his friends regaled themselves with amusing stories of old times.

My father had been exchanging stories in this fashion all of his life, and so naturally he passed them on to me. Story telling was, I understand, highly esteemed in Ireland, and as my father was of Irish immigrant parents, it was part of his cultural heritage. I suppose it came as

much from his associates as from his own family, for my grandfather (Martin Munroe), whom I never saw (he died before I was born), seems to have been an austere man, and so were my father's brothers. Nor did his sisters tell stories in my presence, though they were warm-hearted, like my father.

My father, Michael John Munroe, was 32 when he was married, 34 when I was born, so he had decades of story swapping behind him before I came along, an only child, to be an enthralled audience for his tales.

He continued to tell me tales as long as he lived, and he lived to be ninety. I remember being a high school teacher in my twenties (I lived at home until I was married, as all of my friends did), and being at the dinner table with my father telling one of his very long stories. Perhaps I made a move toward leaving the table, restrained by a hesitance to interrupt. My mother, who was very sensitive to people's feelings, said, "Pete, let John go. Can't you see he has things he wants to do." This happened more than once.

The bulk of my father's stories, as he grew older, concerned his own boyhood and youth. But when I was young he told me tales he had heard, tales of Jesse James, of the Younger boys, of sports heroes like Gentleman Jim Corbett and especially the great John L. Sullivan, and of political figures like Grover Cleveland and William Jennings Bryan.

My father played games with me too--checkers and card games like casino and pinochle. He played catch with me, and he took me to games--baseball, football, and basketball. My enjoyment of spectator sports dates to those outings, which included trips to Philadelphia to big-league baseball games at Shibe Park--and once to Baker Bowl. My father was my chum. I often wished he were my brother and of my age.

I stood somewhat in awe of my mother when I was a boy, though it was she that I sought out in sickness or distress. She was far more business-like than my father. She did not talk much of her own adventures or tell many tales.

Born in Wilmington, like my father, she was the younger by seven and a half years. Christened Mary Frieda Dettling, she never used her middle name, and, in fact, my father could not think of it when he was buying a wedding ring and was asked her middle initial.

Her mother was a German immigrant and her father, though a native of Wilmington was the son of German immigrants. I expect to tell their story in another place, and need only to mention here that her father died when my mother was not yet eleven. As the second oldest of five children, she had to stop school (and she cried) after the eighth grade and go to work to help support the family.

It was my mother, and her sisters, who are responsible for my love of reading (as well as for my appreciation of music and my love of travel). My mother read to me when I was little, especially when I was sick. I recall her reading Treasure Island to me when I had the measles and was told not to use my eyes. When I was found to be anemic and to have a bleeding problem (I had a disease called purpura), she bought me a book every time I had to go

to the doctor for an injection in my arm.

My mother's own choice of reading matter for herself was largely religious. She had been a Lutheran Sunday school teacher and so were two of her sisters. One sister became a minister's wife, while another was in charge of an elementary department in the Sunday school at Zion Lutheran Church.

This second sister had worked for the Delmarva Sunday Star, a Wilmington weekly, and still in my boyhood retained some connection, as nominal secretary or treasurer with the Star Publishing Company, which was largely a one-man operation of Joe Martin. She had a children's store on King Street, the Jack and Jill Tog Shop, until she gave that up out of infatuation with radio broadcasting. For a local station, WILM, she originated and conducted a children's program called "Aunt Ellen's Candlelight Hour." I was probably ten by this time and lived in fear that my aunt would mention my name on her program, which was far too young for me.

This aunt and a third sister, my Aunt Pauline, were members of the Business and Professional Women's Club, and through them I became acquainted with Florence Bayard Hilles, who became the group's national president--a friendship that really developed when I was in my thirties and a young professor. These two aunts seemed to me to be prototypes of the emancipated woman of the twenties. They smoked (to my mother's disapproval), they seemed quite sophisticated, they spent money freely (not treating it carefully as was the practice in my home), and they almost fit the idea of the flapper that I got from John Held, Jr.'s cartoons.

The elder of these sisters, I realize now, was just putting up a front. She didn't read much, though she liked to play prima donna and did have a real ability to direct or lead social affairs (as well as in creating her business, which was a great success as long as she was interested in it). After her marriage, which was when she was past forty, she seemed to lose much of the assurance and ambition that had made her a success in her active career.

Yet I remember the comment of friends of my age, after I had taken them along to visit this aunt and her husband at their home in Ardentown. "They are truly sophisticated people," one of my friends said, a simple soul. I knew this was not the truth at all.

On the other hand Aunt Pauline, who never married, remained a strong and independent character to the end. Nearest me in age (she was sixteen years my senior), she took a special interest in my education. When I was still in elementary school she gave me good editions of classics for my birthday and Christmas. Some of her educational efforts failed. Notably, her gift of Alice in Orchestralia, a book that was supposed to teach me about the instruments in the orchestra, was just a bore to me. But I prized the editions she gave me of Treasure Island, The Black Arrow, and especially King Arthur and His Knights. No one else in my class at school had such fine looking books, illustrated by the likes of N. C. Wyeth and Maxfield Parrish. I took them to school on a day appointed for an exhibit intended to stimulate reading.

My elementary school had no cafeteria, no auditorium, no indoor lavatory (at first), and

no library, but it had a splendid yard for play at recess and in at least one classroom there was a shelf of books, probably from the New Castle County Library, that we children could borrow. I remember two of these books that I enjoyed a lot--Swiss Family Robinson and a book of stories from Norse mythology (tales of Wodin and Freya, of Loki and Thor).

My parents and relatives encouraged me to do well in school. One of our first readers was The Little Dutch Twins, and because I was not allowed to bring it home, my mother bought me a copy of my own. I had already begun my lifelong fascination with maps, and I recall my amazement and scorn when my teacher (in second grade or third) pointed out Holland incorrectly on the map. She thought it lay on the Baltic Sea and that ships had to pass through the Skagerrak and the Kattegat (I learned those names then) to get there.

In fourth or fifth grade, our teacher, better educated than the one just mentioned, would send children to a large wall map that hung on a side wall of the room to locate places she would assign to them. I loved such a contest--a chance to show off my special knowledge. When it was my turn, she said, "Well, John, we'll have to give you a hard one." And as I started to the wall map she said, "Puget Sound."

My heart sank. The name was familiar, but for the moment I could not place it. I continued boldly to the map, however, and just as I arrived there, inspiration struck. I looked up at the map and found myself looking right exactly at the place where the name was spelled out. I pointed to it without hesitation. It was a triumphant moment.

In about the sixth grade we used to have geography bees that were like spelling bees. I had plenty of rivals in the spelling bees, (I remember once losing my place for not spelling "lose" correctly--or was it "loose"?), but in geography bees I had only one rival.

This was Harry Thoroughgood, a recent immigrant from England whom I have heard of recently as the father of the Newark band leader, George Thoroughgood. Harry had crossed the ocean--a great and exciting adventure to us who had for the most part been across nothing larger than the Delaware River or the Susquehanna--and had been called on to describe his trip in class. Either in his English school or on his travels he had picked up a lot of geographical knowledge.

As an only child I often had to amuse myself, and one of the ways I did it was by playing with maps. When I started school in 1920 there were many maps around from before the World War, and the contrast between the maps of 1914 and those of 1920 was very exciting. Some of the atlases I saw even predated the Balkan Wars.

I waged imaginary wars with paper soldiers and pen points (I had acquired a large box of them from a defunct plumbing firm where my mother had been secretary). I waged wars between countries that were not necessarily chronologically compatible (as between Parthia and Algeria), and I still have an old atlas that is marked up with the boundary changes I made after each of my wars. In the early twenties I was rather saddened by the thought that permanent peace had descended on the earth and there would be no more wars to provide interesting changes in the maps.