

“FRANCIS ADAMS, WRITING HIS END.”: (BEING GLIMPSES OF A SENSATIONAL DEATH, MUCH ANTICIPATED IN THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR, AND A GREAT BOON AS WELL AS A DIFFICULT PROBLEM FOR THE BIOGRAPHER)

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The Pathetic Suicide of Mr. Francis Adams

Further Details [from our Correspondent]. London, 8th September. Mr. Francis Adams, a well known Australian *littérateur*, committed suicide at Margate on Monday last, and some extraordinary evidence was given at the inquest on his remains. On Monday his wife, according to custom, was taking him out in a Bath chair, when he had a seizure of violent coughing and hemorrhage [sic], and had to be assisted into his bedroom at his lodgings in Gordon-road. There he lost a great quantity of blood, and he said, “I’m choking; it is finished.” She, thinking he meant the bleeding had stopped, replied, “Thank God!” but he fetched a revolver and sat on the bed. She said, “Not that, dearie;” and he said, “If you love me, you’ll let me do it;” and witness said to the jury, “I let him do it;” and removed his false teeth at his request. Asked if she could not have prevented it, she replied, “Of course I could, but I should have considered myself a contemptible coward if I had done so, when things were as they were.” Evidence was given by Dr. Scatliffe that the deceased had lost so much blood that he could not have lived many minutes if he had not shot himself. It was proved that the deceased and his wife were a devoted couple. A verdict of suicide whilst in a state of temporary insanity was returned, and regret was expressed that the wife had not prevented the fatal act. (*Age* 13 October 1893:7)

Francis W. L. Adams (1862-1893), English writer, socialist, journalist, and Australian social commentator, provides an ideal focus for a discussion of several types of “endings.” First there is the preoccupation with the theme of death in his fiction and poetry, and a slightly millenarian aspect to the socialism which drove much of his non-fictional writing.¹ Further, his writings on English and Australian politics form part of a commentary concerned with the demise of colonialism at the end of the century, his work for the *Bulletin* and the *Boomerang* was an integral contribution to the radical nationalist movement recorded by Vance Palmer in “The Legend of the Nineties,” and his self-consciously avant-garde literary work has affinities with the “decadent 1890s” of English cultural history.² While his own death provides a strong

¹ For the millenarian socialism, see particularly his dialogue “A New Capitalist.”

² Adams’s contribution to the so-called Australian Legend was the subject of my conference paper at the 1996 Association for the Study of Australian Literature, University of New England (Proceedings still in

motif in the biography on which I am currently working; it is one of the things for which Adams is most famous, and it may have inspired an important element in one of George Bernard Shaw's plays, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, in which the heroine appears to be modelled on Adams's widow, Edith (Weintraub *Shaw's People* 91). This article will discuss Adams's treatment of death and endings in dialogues he published early in the 1890s before going on to deal with the problems I encountered with the ending of his life story.

"Beautiful and Beneficent Death"

When Francis Adams came to Australia in 1884 and surveyed the literary scene he came to the conclusion that there had only been two genuinely great writers in the country: Adam Lindsay Gordon and Marcus Clarke. It is no coincidence that both had died young in more or less tragic circumstances. Adams writes of Marcus Clarke in *The Australians* (1893) that "the pathos of his life, the charm of his lighter work, and the power of his solitary novel, attract one to him with a deep personal interest and affection." Adams quotes a contemporary description of Marcus Clarke "with all his genius, his delightful ways, his lovely face, hunted as you may say out of life as he was, so glad for the gift of death!" (106-07).

The gift of death, death as a blessing, is an idea that recurs throughout Adams's work. It provides one of the main themes of a dialogue published posthumously in *Essays in Modernity*. "The Hunt for Happiness" is both the title and the theme of a fictional dialogue about the meaning of life—and, indeed, the meaning of death. The two speakers, Randall and Wilson, are old friends; it is evident that they are intellectually and emotionally close despite their very different temperaments and outlooks on life. I suspect that Adams could have identified with either, in different moods. As his biographer, I have to be careful to avoid the temptation of making assumptions about which point of view he is endorsing. In this case the line "Ah, beautiful and beneficent death," which appears to be the motto of Randall, the older, more cynical man, originally came from the draft of an unfinished poem by the younger (Wilson), so to some extent the notion is a shared one.

The discussion of death takes for granted that neither of the characters believes in an orthodox Christian view of the afterlife; the question they consider is whether death constitutes the annihilation of individual consciousness, or not. The socialist, Wilson, whose approach to most of the questions they discuss is gentler and more positive than Randall's, says "if it [death] is not the extinction of the ego, then it is nothing, and that is the one—the great desideratum" (248). Randall confirms that his friend refers to the conscious ego, rather than the unconscious, and asks "but isn't it almost as hateful to think that, by the law of the conservation of energy, our entities—I mean the whole sum-total of us, body and soul—are perpetually jumbled up, created, dispersed, re-created, and re-dispersed forever?" (248). Randall clearly has some problems with the physical dispersal of his body into the great *pot-pourri* of animate and inanimate life. On the last pages of the dialogue he disclaims any Romantic fascination with death, but conveys

preparation); for a discussion of his place in the *fin-de-siècle* literary scene in England, see my entry on Adams in *The 1890s: An Encyclopedia of British Literature, Art and Culture* (5-6).

through his body-language and private murmurings that he cannot help but see it as the final escape from an intolerably empty life:

“I ought to form a fit disciple for your creed of the beauty and beneficence of Death. But I do not. I remain at heart cold and indifferent. I agree with you entirely as to the facts. I, too, feel the certainty, the need, the consolation; but death still remains to me a puzzling and disagreeable process, like the unknown manipulations of an unreliable dentist. I hate pain, and I have no confidence in the dexterity of the tooth-extractor. In a word, I am a coward; and though I have survived all those whom I loved (love in any intensive sense is more impossible to me now than ever it was, so to say)—indeed, though I have survived myself, I still live on, and have no desire to die. I have had that desire; but it passed, as most things pass, without becoming chronic. . . . I will admit that I wish at times I had been accidentally shot—by some one else or by myself. It would have been better for me. Ah, the women I have loved! the men I have loved! Ah, beautiful and beneficent Death!”

Looking at his face for a moment, Wilson saw that the eyes were full of tears. (91)

Between these two characters, at least, there is agreement that death as annihilation has its attractions. However, not all Adams's characters have this outlook. In another dialogue, “A New Capitalist,” Adams shows a progressive captain of industry being motivated in his quest for material progress and scientific advancement by a fear of death on the large scale. That is, he fears the annihilation of the human race as a result of the cooling of the sun and consequently the earth:

The ultimate crisis for humanity lies clearly in the hour when the globe shall become uninhabitable. As the moon is, so shall the earth be. Did the cities, nations, and races of the moon go on competing among themselves to the end? Did they see the beauty of Nature's delusive and fleshly smile on fecund land and sea slowly transform itself into the mocking grin of the hideous skeleton of dry, lightless, and heatless death? (102)

There are, of course, different ways of looking at death. It may be seen as an ending, or it may be seen as a transition, an opportunity for rebirth. To imagine an ABSOLUTE conclusion in which death is really succeeded by nothing requires a secular belief such as the scientific prediction that at the end of time the universe will have imploded, in a reversal of the Big Bang (rushed back into its own bellybutton, so to speak). On the level of the individual life, it is hard for human beings to imagine death as a complete ending. A secular view of death may cut off any prospect of heaven, or individual life after death, but there is a kind of continuity in the prospect of physical death, decay and reintegration with nature which may provide a satisfactory substitute.

If death, then, is not necessarily an ending, is it true that Francis Adams's death-laden existence (and his somewhat excessive experience of two forms of death at once) should make him an ideal subject for a paper related to the theme of "endings"? Well, yes, it does, but it must be conceded that an ending is also a beginning, or at least an opportunity for new forms of life to grow from the old. The emerging ambiguity of death as an ending is an issue I need to deal with when writing the story of his life. In talking about the ambiguity of Adams's death as an "ending" my question is not "did he really die?" or "what happened to him afterwards?," although these questions could be discussed in terms of posthumous publication and literary reputation. The textual problem at issue here is editorial as well as philosophical: Does the death of Francis Adams really mark the end of his story? How, in other words, do I end the biography I am writing?

There are several reasons why my work cannot take the form of the traditional ending described by Brian Kiernan in his essay "The Advancing Wave: Australian Literary Biography Since 1980." Kiernan observes that "in most cases, the biographer has the advantage of rounding off the story by attending (at least vicariously) the [subject's] final passage and last rite, and by observing posterity's regard, or not, for his or her literary remains (195). However, unlike the usual death of a subject which in some cases provides little more than a convenient point at which to conclude the narrative, Adams's death seems not only to be a scene dramatic enough to commence the book, but also to connect so closely to many of the main themes of his work and the driving forces of his life, that it must be dealt with sooner, rather than later, in the text.

Knowing When to Stop, and How

So, to return to the ending with which I would like to begin. Francis Adams was only thirty when he died what I am tempted to call an over-determined death. Strictly speaking he died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, but medical opinion given at the inquest stated that he would have died within minutes anyway of a massive haemorrhage. Even the haemorrhage may have had more than one cause. In addition to tuberculosis, a disease which had killed both his father and his younger brother Harry, Adams suffered from a growth which developed into cancer of the throat.

Adams had been ill for years. He not only expected to die young, but seems at times to have desired death; certainly he had long anticipated the way in which he should die. When his younger brother Harry died of tuberculosis in 1892, Adams declared that it was his own death-blow. Harry's wife was to testify at Francis Adams's inquest that she had seen the revolver five years earlier when they were all living in Brisbane, and that Francis had said then that he would kill himself rather than endure the final stages of consumption. An explanation is given in the obituary published by the *Bulletin*:

To those who knew Francis Adams well, the news of his death by his own hand, and with the connivance of his pitying, devoted wife, will come with no shock of surprise. He was a man to whom the idea of suicide was familiar. For years he carried with him the means of calling Death to do his bidding. It was his Aladdin's lamp. It was the

weapon he kept in reserve for the last desperate moment of the fight he was daily waging against want and mortal disease. So it is no matter for wonder that in the torture of the final death-struggle—the same torture that only last year in Queensland made the closing days of his younger brother one long agony—his mind should have turned to the way of making an end of it all. (16 September 1893: 7)

This literary suicide attracted quite a bit of attention at the time, not least from George Bernard Shaw who met the widow Edith through their mutual friends Henry and Kate Salt (Weintraub *Diaries* 919). Stanley Weintraub has an essay on Edith in his recent book, *Shaw's People*, in which he argues that Francis and Edith Adams provided at least part of the inspiration for Louis and Jennifer Dudebat, an artist who dies (on stage) of consumption and his wife, who nurses him to the end and strikes heroic attitudes afterwards (91).

Both Shaw and Weintraub are, I suggest, over confidently mistaken in their characterisation of Edith as “a vulgar liar and rascalion,” although it is true that her relationship with the truth could at times be tenuous. Weintraub’s view that she opportunistically made a career out of being Adams’s widow is unduly critical, I would suggest, since she had spent so many years being his nurse and putting his writing ahead of her own domestic comfort. Edith intensely admired her husband as a writer, and was occupied after his death in helping to prepare unfinished projects for publication. Within a year or two, she had started to work in other fields: a a governess in Egypt, and working in England (and later South Africa) as a nurse, travelling companion and journalist.

According to Weintraub, the heart of Shaw’s distaste for Edith’s stance was his belief that she had lied about helping her husband to shoot himself. Weintraub argues that Shaw drew on his impressions of Edith in creating the character of Jennifer Dudebat in his play *The Doctor's Dilemma*, first staged in 1906, quoting Shaw’s description of the character in a letter to an actress who was playing Jennifer:

Jennifer is a sort of woman whom, I, personally, cannot stand, enormously conceited, morally patronizing to everyone, setting herself always in some noble, devoted, beautiful attitude, never looking facts in the face or telling herself or anyone else the truth about them for a moment, and making even her husband’s death a splendid opportunity for taking the centre of the stage. (qtd Weintraub 823-24)

Much later Shaw wrote about Edith again in his Preface to Stephen Winsten’s *Salt and His Circle*, published in 1951 the year after his own death.

She claimed to have helped her husband to kill himself, not knowing that if she had really done so she would have been indicted for manslaughter, if not for murder. Kate [Salt] swallowed her stories greedily and adoringly. When I, on being introduced to her in Tilford, treated her not as a heroine but as a vulgar liar and a rascalion she

did not deny it. She laughed and took me as one of her own kidney.
Kate was amazed, staggered and disillusioned. (10)

Edith stayed with the Salts after Francis's death and met Shaw at their cottage in Surrey. Shaw's argument is rebutted by the evidence of the inquest report (quoted at the beginning of this article) which shows that her conduct in not preventing her husband from shooting himself was not condoned but neither was it made an occasion for prosecution. Edith's ruefully amused attitude to Shaw, on the other hand, comes through in a note she wrote to him only three months after the death of her husband and her meeting with Shaw at the home of the Salts:

Delightful wind bag of a genius, your card has just come!
So you don't believe I've been to Egypt, or in fact anything! Now my dearie, who ever asked you to?! No it wasn't my handkerchief I forgot: it was simply the buckle of my garter! But you must remember I never told you I was going to Egypt again.

I am glad, O cynic that you do not take me seriously, all the men I know do and to tell the truth (for once!) it's a paralyzing nuisance. So you thought I was a good study for you?!

Beloved of my soul you haven't got to the bottom of your study by any means. Sometimes I fancy (only fancy) you're a bit of a liar yourself. Yours tenderly,

E.H.A.

Weintraub makes much of this letter—it shows both that Shaw did, indeed, make his opinion of Edith quite plain, and also that they were nonetheless on friendly terms. What Weintraub misses, however, is the fact that Edith is playing a game with Shaw. “But you must remember I never told you I was going to Egypt again”—the crucial word is clearly “again,” but the emphasis could also be placed on “I never told you.” Francis Adams went to Egypt for the winter of 1892-3, several months before he died. Weintraub states, incorrectly, that Edith and Francis had lived together in Egypt; in fact, Adams went alone, and wrote to Edith from Helouan and Cairo. Edith did go to Egypt later, after his death and also after the note to Shaw. She worked as a governess in a harem, and met her future husband, the painter Frank Dean, there. Someone who did not know the Adams well enough to know that they usually lived separately, but knew that Francis had been to Egypt and published several articles about its politics, might have assumed that Edith's journey to Egypt would be a return trip—but she says “I never told you.” She does not bother to contradict him in earnest, but clearly enjoys the freedom to be a bit bohemian and ratty with him. While Weintraub evidently shares Shaw's view of Edith as a “splendid poseur,” it seems clear to me that both are leaping to conclusions on insufficient evidence—Shaw, in the case of the suicide and Egypt, Weintraub in his

exaggerated estimates of Shaw's infatuation with Edith and the latter's propensity for self-dramatisation.

Edith herself gave an account of her role in her husband's death in a letter some years later to William Michael Rossetti. She had become very friendly with Rossetti and his three daughters, particularly Mary, and when her second marriage failed, she seems to have been a part of their extended family, nursing the invalid daughter Mary, minding the granddaughter Imogen, and accompanying them on holidays. When Rossetti sent her a copy of his *Reminiscences* in 1906, she felt she needed to correct his summary account of Adams's death:

What you say about Will [Francis] is quite true, but as regards "Calling for a pistol etc" that is not a fact— No, I must always regret I did not help him that far . . . [gives blow-by-blow account of the death] . . . I have often wanted to say this to you because you seemed to have an erroneous idea of what I had done but this isn't a subject I am fond of discussing, & I think you, Mary and my husband are the only persons I have felt able to speak to about it—I hope this doesn't sound very ghastly to you, but I thought it might be of some little interest to you—of course I am well aware that I have been very much misjudged by many people as regards my action, but I should like to put any one of them in my place on that occasion willingly & see what they would have done—& now let us dismiss it. I know I helped him live his true life, if I didn't do all I might have done at his death.
(Edith Dean to WMR, 24 October [1906])

Given that Weintraub has published an essay which perpetuates George Bernard Shaw's accusation that Edith had dramatised herself as a romantic heroine for assisting her husband's suicide, it is clear to me that her own account of the event should be included and discussed in the biography of Francis Adams, even though the letter was written thirteen years after his death.

The correspondence with Rossetti, who had known Adams and edited his play *Tiberius*, is not the only factor that makes it seem like a good idea to extend the span of the book beyond the death of its chief subject. Edith Adams outlived Francis by twenty years; her subsequent story is worth telling well past the inquest and widowhood. I am particularly intrigued by an episode in which she tried to establish herself as a journalist in South Africa, but fled Cape Town as a result of a court case involving politicians and a newspaper in which her scandalous past was, apparently, being thrown up against her.

This raises a problem, but a problem of excess, the sort of problem it is quite good to have—should I turn the biography into a dual biography or should I simply add a long chapter on Edith at the end? Is there enough material for a separate book about her? At this stage, I don't think there is. I don't even know, for instance, when she died. I have clues, but she doesn't appear in the usual genealogical records, so I'd probably have to locate the records of a lunatic asylum in Devon to establish a date and cause of death. There are many gaps, and her story is in any case so tied up with Francis Adams's that they belong together.

So the problem remains: how to write the ending of a biography in which the death of the main subject has already taken place at the beginning and then again two or three chapters before the last page, and in which the death of the second subject is shrouded in mystery? That problem is soluble, I know (I can feel it dissolving even as I articulate it!), but it does raise an interesting question about biography in general, namely the relationship between physical death and narrative closure.

In the case of a literary biography there are at least two bodies left after the death of the subject/author: the physical corpse, and the textual *corpus*, the body of written work left behind. The nineteenth-century expression, "the literary remains," indicates the posthumous textual existence of a writer which must be taken into account, or accounted for, by the biographer.

The biography itself, however, constitutes yet another form of textual incarnation. Usually, it is one of several. A published biography is only a more visible (sometimes more authoritative because more encyclopaedic) instance of the re-making, re-telling and re-creation of the life that goes on in the letters, memoirs and other accounts of the life provided by family, friends, colleagues, and readers of the deceased.

Just as death in "real life" doesn't necessarily have to be seen as an ending, so in the textual life of a dead writer it would seem that death, or the cessation of production, is an ending by convention rather than necessity. The breath may have left the body, the pen may have ceased to move, but the corpse, or corpus, remains, feeding into an ongoing cycle of textual decay and reincarnation. The trope of the literary biographer as bookworm takes on a whole new meaning, and the casting of the biography into an appropriate shape is something that has to be carefully worked out.

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