

**JUSTIN WINSOR:
A MEMOIR**

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Justin Winsor: A Memoir by Horace E. Scudder

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HORACE E. SCUDDER

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JUSTIN WINSOR

A *Memoir*

PREPARED FOR THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY

HORACE E. SCUDDER

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Gift of
Mrs. N. S. Shaler

JUSTIN WINSOR.

JUSTIN, son of Nathaniel, Jr., and Ann Thomas (Howland) Winsor, was born January 2, 1831, in Boston, and spent his life in that city and its neighborhood ; but he was equally at home in the town of Duxbury, Massachusetts, the birthplace of both his father and mother. So deeply planted were the Winsors and Howlands in the soil of the Old Colony, and so much additional stock came with his own marriage that Justin Winsor, who had a strong sense of ancestry and kinship, used to say of his daughter Constance, that no one living had more Pilgrim blood than she.¹ He was the second son of the name, the first Justin dying in infancy ; he had a brother and sister in his childhood, both of whom died early, and one sister, eleven years his junior, who lived to womanhood.²

Mr. Nathaniel Winsor, Jr., was a prosperous merchant of Boston, and lived, when Justin was a boy, in Allen Street, at that time in a substantial neighborhood at the West End of the city. He was a ship-broker with large connections, and at one time controlled a line of packets to New Orleans ; he was one of the first also to establish a regular line of sailing packets between the Atlantic coast and San Francisco, and abandoned the enterprise only when the Union Pacific Railroad was opened. During twenty-three years he loaded over three

¹ If any one could have disputed this statement a little later, it would have been his granddaughter, Penelope Barker Noyes.

² Cordelia Arthur, widow of Alden L. Drake, died at West Roxbury, December 15, 1889.

hundred and fifty ships for San Francisco. In politics Mr. Winsor was a Whig, and his religious affiliations are indicated by the fact that he was one of the founders of the (Unitarian) Church of the Unity.

He was in the midst of these activities when his son was a student at Harvard, and like many merchants was deeply engrossed in his business; yet those who saw him in his serene old age when after some severe reverses he had wholly retired from business, think of him as a strikingly handsome man, a lover of books and simple pleasures. Such he undoubtedly was all his life, even if he chose to forego much of this sort of intellectual gratification in the time of his closest application to business. There is a picture of him drawn by his solicitous son when a sophomore at college which has a double interest from the likeness to the original and the glimpse it gives of the portrait-painter's own mind:—

“I have hopes to get father into better ways. He generally comes home at night, gets a cigar, sits and thinks, thinks and thinks of his business without relaxation, and allows it oven to disturb his nights; 't is business, business, business. The human mind cannot endure without a change; relaxation is necessary. The late Ezra Weston of Duxbury, at the same time he was amassing a large fortune, lost in a measure his mind, which was worn out by a constant exercise in the same way. I ought to feel thankful to a parent who must thus sacrifice a great portion of this world's pleasure for obtaining that for his children which will enable them to live in ease,—and perhaps kill themselves by too close application to books.”¹

Justin Winsor's introduction to the knowledge of literature was early. He had occasion once to quote Byron's saying that the “trunk-maker was the sexton of authorship,” and it recalled his own experience as a child not yet seven sent for punishment into an ante-chamber in the school-room, where in

¹ Mr. Winsor died at his home in West Roxbury, April 7, 1893. Mrs. Winsor survived him in the same home until January 7, 1899.

petulance he kicked and hauled at an old trunk, which sprang open and proved to be lined with printed sheets. "I remember plainly," he wrote, "the large caption at the top of the page, and how I read it out: 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.' For amusement I began to read the pages and soon became most intensely interested. The pages in sight happened to contain that gorgeous description of Bagdad. How I still remember those magnificent palaces of the Caliphs. Time passed quickly, and I was almost unconscious of its fleeing, until the door opened, and in rushed the whole school for their hats, caps, and outward apparel."

When scarcely more than a child he was sent to a boarding-school in Sandwich, but his preparation for college was at the Boston Latin School. He always hated school, and its tasks, not because he was indolent, but for the opposite reason. He was so absorbed in his own intellectual pursuits that he was impatient of the restrictions of school and class work. The Mexican war was going on at this time; his father held the exclusive right to charter vessels and transport troops and supplies from Boston and some other ports to the Gulf, and the boy's diary, which he began early, is crowded with accounts of actions and movements of troops. But the Mexican war was only one of his interests. There are all sorts of tables; lists of governors of the State; comparisons of speed; railroad statistics; analyses of membership in the House and Senate; scraps of verse and pithy sayings which have struck him in his reading; indignant championship of General Taylor, who was his hero; and most noticeable of all, as presaging his historical pursuits, a series of anniversary parallels. He drew one between 1631, when the "Blessing of the Bay" was launched, and 1847; between July 4, 1776, and the same date in 1847. When the anniversary of the battle of Bunker Hill occurred in 1847, he made a vivacious entry, and the next day he noted the fact that sixty-nine years before, the British evacuated Philadelphia, and again that on the 18th

of June, 1812, war was declared against Great Britain in consequence of her treatment of American shipping, which he details at length, ending with a boy's energetic flourish: "Thus was a war declared which was justifiable if ever a war was. It was not as the war of the United States with Mexico, of England in Hindostan, of Russia in Circassia and Georgia, of France in Algeria is, — a bull-dog fighting a poodle, but a poodle fighting a bull-dog; and the poodle proved a bull-dog, and the bull-dog proved a poodle." When he was in Duxbury he would seize upon the latest package of newspapers sent down from Boston, and set about extracting the most important items of news for his note-book.

These early journals are absolutely free from any subjective comment, but they emphasize the fact of the writer's comparative social isolation, his dislike of school, and his absorption, even as a boy, in pursuits which made him find a journal more companionable than a schoolmate. He formed friendships at the time which endured, but his friends remember him then as silent and reserved.

It is not altogether surprising to find him, while still a school-boy, attending meetings of the New England Historic-Genealogical Society, and even, as he records under date of November 1, 1848, making "a few remarks about the state of the Duxbury Records and the old graveyard." For he had already, in the year before he entered college, set about compiling the history of his father's and mother's native town; and the first entry in his college journal, August 29, 1849, is a bit of self-gratulation at having a room by himself, as he is hard at work on the proofs of his "History of the Town of Duxbury." On October 27 of the same year he notes: "Got some of my books [bound] for the first time. . . . I received my first proof Saturday, July 14, 1849, just fifteen weeks ago."

He at once had an interleaved copy bound, and from that day till near the end of his life, extended the work with all manner of printed and written memorabilia of the town and

its people. That he had occasion to make some corrections was natural enough, but he had the instinct of an antiquarian, and a superficial view of the work would never betray the youth of the author. The interleaved copy is a curious museum of Duxbury antiquities.

A reputation as the author of an antiquarian work was a singular introduction to Harvard College, and it set at once a sort of stamp upon him in his own regard of himself as well as in that of his fellows. It gave him a masonic grip of the otherwise somewhat tightly closed hand of Mr. Sibley, his long-time predecessor in Gore Hall, who was himself at this time busy with his own "History of Union," and must have looked with mingled respect and concern at a freshman in the same field. Mr. Sibley welcomed him in the library, and introduced him to visitors, and at the young man's request gave him a note of introduction to Professor Longfellow.

The ostensible reason for the introduction was the student's desire to make some inquiries respecting the Wadsworth family, and it is an amusing anticipation of his later occupation to find him asking the poet how he could get access to the Wadsworth papers. But though the visit seemed prompted by genealogical zeal, it is clear, from the evidence which his journals and scribblings of the time afford, that Winsor was now and for a long time to come most deeply interested in pure literature. The set of his mind before he had become well established in college was toward history and genealogical research; he was to resume these interests in a very positive manner in his maturity; but while he was a collegian, and afterward when studying abroad, as well as in the first years of his return, the goal of his ambition was to be a writer, a poet he even dreamed at times, but at all events distinctly a man of letters.

In common with other students from Boston, he was wont to spend his Sundays at home, where he divided his time between reading and church-going with an increasing disinclina-