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The Westcotts and David Harum

Richard G. Case

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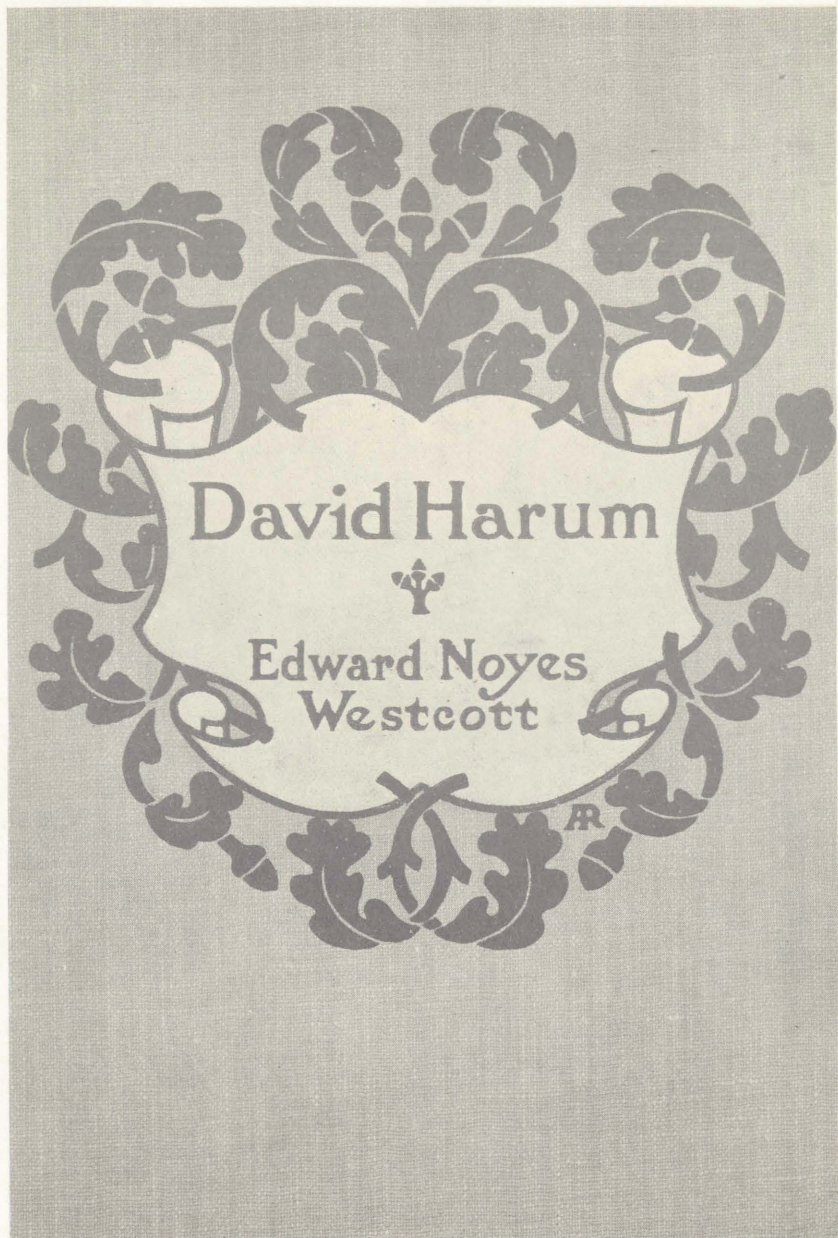


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The original cover of *David Harum* – familiar to two generations of American readers. First edition, New York, D. Appleton & Company, 1898. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.

THE COURIER

WINTER 1973

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E. Westcott

Edward Westcott, from a portrait in the limited edition of *David Harum* published by Appleton in 1900, with illustrations by B. West Clinedinst and C. D. Farrand. The author's signature has been pasted in beneath the portrait. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.

The Westcotts and David Harum

by Richard G. Case

The semi-mansion at 909 James Street, Syracuse, was razed without a noticed complaint in the fall of 1962. Few Syracusans remembered that the prosaic, mustard-colored house had a small place in the history of American literature.

In the 1890's, when the house was number 826, the Westcotts lived there. The man of the house was an occasional clerk, banker, and stock broker who worked for the Syracuse Water Commission. When he died, the obituary writer of a Syracuse newspaper described Edward Noyes Westcott as a "clerk," and added, "Mr Westcott was facile with a pen but never indulged himself in writing to any great extent."

Today, few of us recognize the name Edward Noyes Westcott, although we probably know the book he wrote, *David Harum, A Story of American Life*, which is, by almost any standard, fairly called an American classic. It is one of the best-sellers of all time.

Westcott died in March 1898, six months before the publication of his book. *David Harum* was in the bookstores that fall with a first printing of 1500 copies. It went through six printings in twelve weeks; in two years, the book sold more than 400,000 copies, a record at that time broken only by *In His Steps* and *Trilby*. It continued to sell for the next thirty-five years, passing the million and a half sales mark in 1911. Paperback editions have appeared in recent years, including a version by Dover. *Books in Print*, 1968, also lists a hard-cover edition published by Peter Smith.

I am indebted to fellow Library Associate Henry S. Bannister, distinguished book collector of Riverview Farm, Phoenix, New York, for the information that the first edition of *David Harum* was published in two states. In the first, the "J" in the name of Julius appears on page 40 as a perfectly formed letter. In the second, the bottom of the stem of the capital "J" is broken. Both states of the first edition carry the copyright date of 1898. The Rare Book Department of the University Library has two copies of the first

Mr. Case is a feature writer for the *Syracuse Herald Journal and Herald American*, and a trustee and chairman of the *Publicity Committee of Library Associates*. He is the author of "*Geddes, New York, 1829-1835: Letters of George Owens*," which appeared in *The Courier*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, July, 1971.

edition, first state, a very difficult edition to find, and also a London printing of the book, published by C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., dated 1899 and carrying the imperfect “J,” the latter in its original brown cloth binding.

In addition, the Rare Book Department has Number 164 of a limited edition of 750 copies of *David Harum* published by Appleton in 1900, with a portrait of Westcott and illustrations by B. West Clinedinst and C. D. Farrand. The binding appears to be the publisher's, in white paper, gilt-stamped. The author's autograph has been mounted below the portrait. This edition included Forbes Heermans' introduction to the first edition and his "Introduction to the Illustrated Edition." Mr. Bannister's copy of this edition is number 195, and has been handbound in red calf with gold-tooled spine and dentelles, French endpapers, and gilt edges.

Numerous spin-offs followed the success of *David Harum*. Editions flowed into other countries. The Germans tried a translation in the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect. William H. Crane moved to "star" stature in a play (first produced in 1900) and silent film (1915), both of which make David, rather than John Lenox, the central character. Will Rogers played David in the "talkie" (1934), and "The True Tales of David Harum" was a radio serial for many years. Forbes Heermans said:

It has been the theme of many poems and parodies; the text for homilies; the inspiration for cartoonists; the source of the orator's wit; and an astrologer has asked in all seriousness for full details of the history of the book and its author, so that he may cast the horoscopes of novels yet unpublished, and thereby foretell success or failure.

In all of this, an odd sequel came from William Allen White, the Kansas editor. He claimed that Rudyard Kipling wrote *David*, using a pen name. When newspaper reports asked him to elaborate, he referred them to Lydia Pinkham.

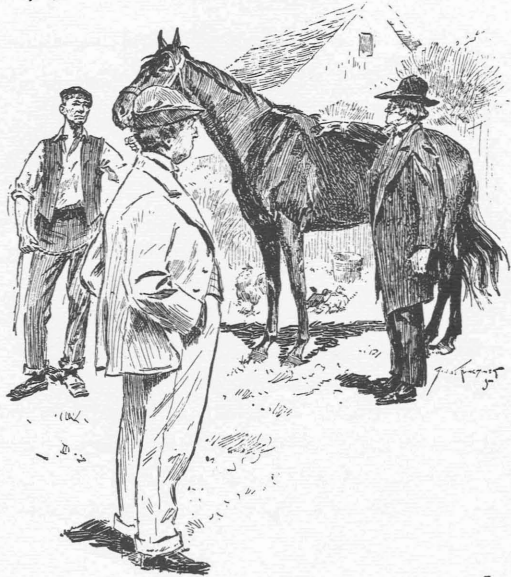
David Harum was meant to be funny; it hardly reflects the tragic life of the man who wrote it. Westcott died at the age of fifty-two without knowing he had written a successful book. He was dead of pulmonary consumption on March 31, 1898.

The family tree was being pruned long before that, however. In 1800 a farmer named Gorton Wescott (a "t" was added later) immigrated from New England to the Herkimer County, New York, village of Newport. Gorton had fourteen children, and two came to sensational ends. One was George Nelson Westcott, of whom little is recorded except that he lived in Troy and began a family tradition by committing suicide. The other son was Amos, who became something of a legend in upstate New York.

Amos Westcott was a product of rural New York who moved to the city. In 1836, he taught natural philosophy, chemistry and mathematics in a



B. West Clinedinst drawings from pages 20, 224 and 254 of the limited edition of *David Harum*, Appleton, 1900. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.



small academy at Pompey, while he studied medicine with a doctor in the community. Later he attended medical school at Albany, graduated and began to practice dentistry. He came to Syracuse in 1841.

In time, Amos would be known as the country's "first dentist," apparently an honorific rather than a chronological title. He is reputed to have helped to move dentistry out of the "barber chair" era. He improved then-unsatisfactory dental tools, wrote books on oral surgery, and was a founder of the New York College of Dental Science in Syracuse, the fifth institution of its kind in the United States. Dr. Westcott used chloroform, improved false teeth, and invented a new kind of butter churn and a burglar-proof key fastener. Syracuse elected him mayor in 1860. He was Edward Noyes Westcott's father.

In 1869, when his son was twenty-three years old, Amos made probably the most unusual investment of his life. With six others, he purchased the "Cardiff Giant," the great Onondaga Hoax that had just been dug from a bog south of the city. One of his partners was his old friend, David Hannum, the horse-trading banker of Homer in Cortland County. Later it would be claimed that Westcott used a split father-friend image as a model for his own "David."

"He seems very pleasant," said Mrs. Carling,
meekly ignoring her sister's reproach.

"Oh, yes," she replied indifferently, "he's
pleasant enough. Let us go up and have a walk on
deck. I want you to be sound asleep when Julius
comes in."

The broken "J" on page 40 of the London edition of *David Harum*, published by C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., in 1899. The broken "J" also appears in the first edition, second state. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.

One morning after breakfast in 1873, Amos Westcott went upstairs, put a pistol to his head and killed himself. There was no public explanation of the act.

The father of the author of *David Harum* had married twice. His first wife was Clara Babcock of Newport. Two children, Watts and Clara, died as infants; only Edward lived to maturity. There were two children in the second family, Margaret and Frank Westcott, born to the dentist and Harriet Nash Westcott. Margaret became Mrs. Austin K. Muzzy of New York City and died there in 1911; historian Franklin Chase recorded her death as a suicide.

Edward's half-brother, Frank Nash Westcott, who was an Episcopal

minister and rector of St. James Church in Skaneateles, also was an author. After several minor successes with religious writing, Frank completed a novel, *Hepsey Burke*.¹ It was in press when he hanged himself with a bathrobe cord in a Wisconsin hotel in 1915.

Edward Westcott was born in Syracuse in 1846. "Ned," as the family called him, grew to be a tall, slender blond with what a friend called an "intellectual face." He left high school at sixteen to become a junior clerk in a Syracuse bank, spent two years with a life insurance firm in New York City, then returned to Syracuse as a teller and cashier in another bank. In later years he founded Westcott and Abbott, Bankers and Brokers, but when the company floundered, he dissolved it and joined the Syracuse Water Commission as register.

Westcott enjoyed music. He had a good baritone voice and even wrote some songs; one composition, for which his James Street neighbor, Forbes Heermans, provided the lyric, was called "Morning, Noon and Night." Fragments of an operetta were found in his papers after his death. A frustration of his later years was that illness prevented him from singing.

Two poems by Westcott, "Sonnet" and "Chacun a son bon Gout," were published in *Harper's Magazine* in January 1900, after his death. He also wrote several pamphlets which were issued by the Reform Club of New York, of which he was a member, and local letters to the editor signed "Q."

Once in a while a streak of color flared in Westcott's character. There is a story that he used to turn up in a local pub and finish a glass of milk, two jiggers of whiskey, and a piece of blood-red beef, explaining that it was for his lung trouble.

There is no record of exactly when Westcott's off-hours writing took a serious turn. It probably came with the death of his wife and the steady decline of his own health. Forced to give up working for a living because of the worsening of his "lung trouble," he retired from his city job in June 1895. That summer he took his ideas and a stack of copy paper with him when he visited the Adirondacks at Lake Meacham, near Saranac. Westcott apparently had been thinking about a character like David Harum for some time and believed that one incident he was tinkering with (later Chapters XIX-XXIV) would make a magazine story. He did not tell anyone until later, but at Meacham he did the first work on what was to become his only full-length book.

The book-in-progress traveled with the ailing writer to Italy the next January when Westcott stayed with Alexander Henry Davis at the latter's

¹My copy of *Hepsey Burke* is the edition copyrighted by H. K. Fly in 1915, and in 1914 and 1915 by the Red Book Corporation, illustrated by Frederick R. Gruger and published by Grosset & Dunlap. The character of Hepsey is sometimes called a "female David Harum." One newspaper account claimed the author drew on people and events in Skaneateles for this novel.

home overlooking the Bay of Naples. (The former Davis estate in Syracuse is now Thornden Park.) After several months abroad, Westcott returned to Syracuse, and completed a first draft of his novel in the late summer of 1896.

That August he wrote his daughter Violet that “it isn’t a book yet, and I have not the smallest expectation that it ever will be.” When the manuscript was on its way to the first of six publishers who rejected it, he wrote, “You mustn’t have any expectation about the book. I have none.” Once his sister, Mrs. Muzzy, asked her brother what he had done with the manuscript. “I have thrown it up on the shelf of my closet and there I mean to leave it,” he said. He told a friend, “When I am gone perhaps some of my affairs will turn up trumps but as long as I live luck is dead against everything I undertake.”

The seventh publisher, D. Appleton & Co., sent Westcott an acceptance a few days before Christmas 1897. His friend Heermans, the Syracuse bachelor who wrote “Westerns,” did the painful job of cutting the book to the size Appleton wanted and revising the first two chapters. Heermans also wrote an introduction.

Westcott did his last work on *David Harum* in the house on James Street. He was very ill and spent most of his time in an upstairs bedroom. His fingers twisted by cramps, he could not hold a pencil and sometimes used an old typewriter. On good days, he worked on a neighbor’s sunporch. According to one anecdote, the writer sometimes passed completed pages to a messenger named Patsy Clary, who peddled his bicycle down James Street and handed the manuscript to a professional typist.

Another story came from Albert Schweizer, who said he was Westcott’s valet during the last hours of rewriting. This version has the author propped up in bed, writing into the early hours of the morning across the counterpane, coughing and calling for cigarettes and shots of whiskey. Said Schweizer:

He didn’t do much talking. He was just like a man at his desk with a job to do and he kept at it hour after hour. He could write and write and write, sometimes laying almost face down on the quilts with the paper in front of him, sprawled out as one sprawls on the grass.

Westcott wrote his daughter that by the time he had typewritten the book for the second time, “I was so sick of the stuff that I could smell it when I opened the front door.”

The final manuscript used by Appleton survives in a small collection of Westcott material at the Syracuse Public Library. The typescript, with ink corrections, is tied with string, by chapters, with cover pages of printed sermon forms.

The people of the village of Homer like to think that Westcott’s character really was their David Hannum, Amos Westcott’s friend, who died in January 1892 at the age of sixty-eight. Harum’s village in the book was



WM. H. CRANE AS DAVID HARUM

WM. H. CRANE EDITION

THE
CHRISTMAS STORY FROM
DAVID HARUM

By
Edward Noyes Westcott

ILLUSTRATED FROM MR. CHARLES FROH-
MAN'S PRODUCTION OF DAVID HARUM.
A COMEDY DRAMATIZED FROM THE NOVEL



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

1900

Frontispiece and title page of the William H. Crane edition of *The Christmas Story from David Harum*, published by Appleton in 1900. Crane played David in a comedy-drama based on the Christmas episode, as well as in a film produced by the Famous Players Film Company. Will Rogers also portrayed David in a film of the 1930s. From the Rare Book unit of the Arents Library.

“Homeville.” The most that can be said is that *David Harum* is a work of fiction; each reader is left to his own conclusions about the originals, if any, of the characters. (Claims were staked on others, including Lenox.) The author’s uncle, Owen Westcott, did live in Homer. His mother, Clara Babcock, was a first cousin of the real-life David Hannum’s second wife. Prior to publication, Westcott remarked in a letter, “I have lived with and among the people I have written about. . . . A great many of David’s peculiar figures and sayings were constantly cropping out in my father’s diction.”

Heermans said he thought any claims by readers that they were “originals” of characters in the book were “absolutely without foundation. The characters are all from life, it is true, in the sense that they are lifelike, but not from individuals. Each one is entirely the creation of the author’s imagination and this fact he asserted with much earnestness over and over again.” According to his friend, Westcott didn’t dare put real people into his book: “They’d spoil it.”

The theory that David Hannum was the prototype of Westcott’s David has persisted, however, even to the extent of being taken for granted in some circles. A newspaper story of March 2, 1934, announcing the coming to a Cortland theater of the film, “David Harum” in which Will Rogers played David, begins,

David Harum is coming back! The film version of Westcott’s great story in which Homer is Homeville and David Hannum is David Harum, opens at the State Theater next Sunday. The coming of David Harum is going to be an event. The original David was a popular character in these parts. Will Rogers, who plays the part of David on the screen, is popular, too, and everyone is looking forward to seeing his portrayal of the shrewd horse trader.²

The article points out the physical similarity of Will Rogers to David Hannum and devotes the remainder of its two columns to Hannum rather than Harum. Also, a ten-page article of 1898 by William Hoge, titled “The Real David Harum,” has a subtitle reading, “The wise ways and droll sayings of ‘Dave’ Hannum, of Homer, N.Y., the original of the most popular book of the year — how he made and lost a fortune — his many deeds of charity — amusing anecdotes about him.”²

At a little more distance from Homer, Cortland, and Syracuse, however, resemblances of Harum and Homeville to Hannum and Homer are ignored, if

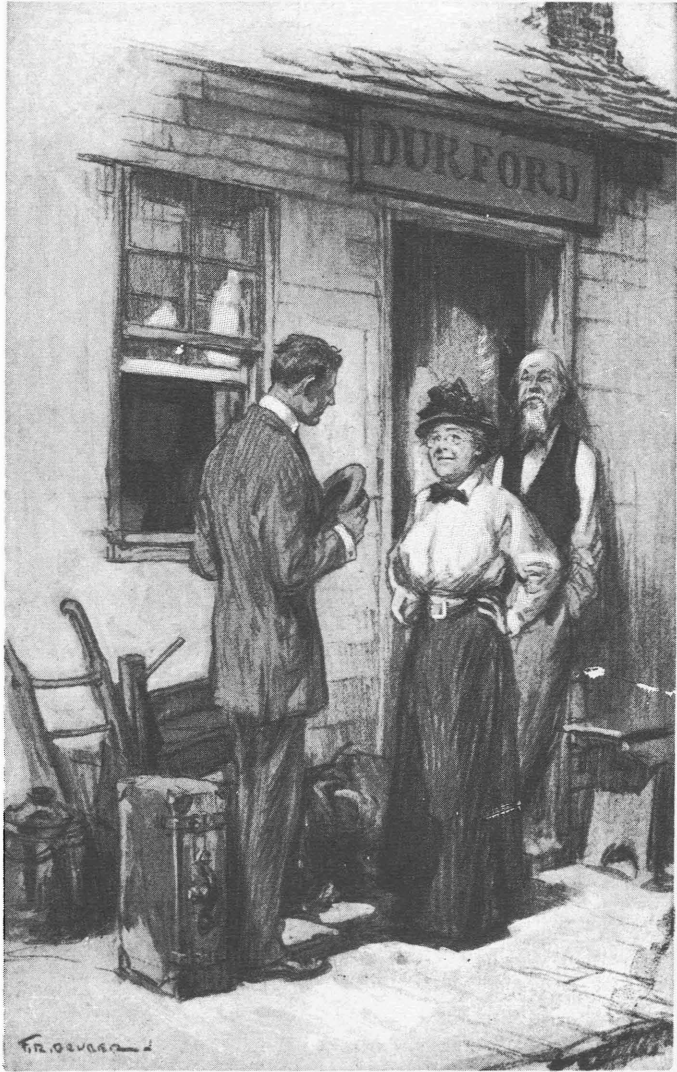
² Sources of these quotations were provided by Mrs. Shirley G. Heppell, Librarian of the Cortland County Historical Society.

recognized at all. Under “Reviews of Books” in the October 15, 1898, issue of the *New York Times - Saturday Review*, a review titled “A Type Created in David Harum” reads

Mr. Westcott has in *David Harum* succeeded in doing what all authors do not accomplish. He has created a new and interesting type that obtains something more than mere temporary interest from the realism with which it is encompassed. We are led, without violence, into a bright and sunny, although quaint, atmosphere, and those of us who are at all familiar with country people and the lives they live will recognize old friends



The Westcott home on James Street in Syracuse,
where most of *David Harum* was written.
Courtesy of the *Syracuse Herald Journal*.



"YOU HAVEN'T SEEN ANYTHING THAT LOOKED LIKE A PARSON, HAVE YOU? YOU CAN GENERALLY SPOT 'EM EVERY TIME."

An illustration from *Hepsey Burke*, by Edward Westcott's half-brother, the Reverend Frank Nash Westcott. Courtesy of Richard G. Case.

and their doings somewhere in the book. David Harum is a character entirely unlike those we have had from Dickens, Thackeray, Charles Reade, or any of the English school. He is distinctively American, and yet his portrayal has awaited the hands of Mr. Westcott in spite of the activity of Miss Wilkins, Miss Jewett, and others, who have so delightfully drawn for us many pictures that deal with life in country towns. . . . The character sketching and building, so far as David Harum is concerned, is well nigh perfect, and many an established author might well envy the achievement thus obtained, but when the romance itself is considered, as a whole, it limps. . . . The book is wonderfully bright, readable, and graphic, but it would yet seem too early and too violent to rank Mr. Westcott, whose untimely death we all lament, with such veterans as Mark Twain, James Russell Lowell, and Bret Harte.

The same publication reported on April 1, 1899, that

According to the current number of *The Bookman*, the best selling book for last month was "David Harum," by the late Edward Noyes Westcott, published by D. Appleton & Co. We have heard much about "David Harum" of late, and how from local fame it has steadily made its way beyond the limits of New York — west, east, south, and north — for soon, there is to be a special Canadian edition. Possibly all has been said by the many admiring critics concerning the book itself; and the author's simple, genial life and peaceful end — almost with the last proofsheets in his hands — has been related in many forms.

Posthumous success provided a boon for Westcott's three children, Harold, Violet and Philip. They were set for life — as long as they lived. Harold, the eldest, died of natural causes at Loon Lake in 1904 at the age of twenty-nine. Comely, Camille-like Violet, her father's favorite, married the New York lawyer Victor Morawetz, who was about twenty years her senior. He supposedly fell in love with Violet when he saw a portrait of her by the society artist, Mrs. Albert Herter, painted during Violet's travels in Europe. They were married in London in 1911. Seven years later, she died of acute arthritis.

Philip Noyes Westcott, the last surviving child, ended the family line with an exclamation point. Philip left Syracuse for San Francisco, where newspapers called him "widely known in club and society life" and mentioned his "carefree and well-ordered life." He often appeared in the company of Alexander Rutherford and his beautiful wife, Helen. The handsome, Williams College-educated son of the writer was forty-two when

he went to his room at the University Club one afternoon in 1926, took an Army pistol from a drawer, and shot himself through the temple. A note giving all of his \$100,000 estate to Helen Rutherford, described in news accounts as recently divorced from her husband, was found, as were several versions of a will. One left a few thousand dollars to Charley Marsh, the club valet.

Philip's hugger-mugger dispersal of his father's thousands finally went to court, and after a year of litigation, San Francisco Superior Judge Fitzpatrick ordered final distribution of the royalties to relatives in the East.³

The Westcott corpus actually contains two books. At his death, a manuscript of about eight thousand words was found in the author's effects. He called it *The Teller*; like Westcott, the main character worked in a bank. The fragment was published in 1901 as part of a small book which included sections of Westcott letters, excerpts from which have been used above, and a biographical sketch by Forbes Heermans. An English edition was published in 1913 by C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd. My copy indicates that Pearson also published cloth and paper editions with Clinedinst and Farrand illustrations. The Rare Book Department has a first edition of *The Teller* in addition to the first, limited, and English editions of *David Harum* cited above.

Note on Sources

Sources of research for this article include the extensive files on the Westcotts and David Harum at the Onondaga Historical Association, the Syracuse Public Library's Local History Room collection, and the research for Mrs. Ann Ward's thesis on *David Harum* for the Cooperstown Graduate Program. The author also located a typescript of an article on the Westcott Family by Franklin Chase, Syracuse historian, in the *Herald Journal* library, and found information about Philip Westcott and the estate heirs in the *San Francisco Chronicle* library and the county clerk's files in San Francisco. A study on "The Use of Folklore in David Harum" by Henry Glassie appeared in the September 1967 issue of the *New York Folklore Quarterly*.



³According to court records, these were Mrs. Gilbert Frazer, Emily J. Westcott Keller, The Rev. John Dow Hills, the Rev. George Heathcote Hills, and Reginald Hills. The Hillses were Edward Westcott's nephews, the children of his wife's sister, Sarah Dow Hills.