

10-2009

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Recommended Citation

Bratcher, James T. (2009) "Tom Ochiltree and Henry Adam's Hit at Texas Congressmen," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 47 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol47/iss2/7>

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TOM OCHILTREE AND HENRY ADAMS'S HIT AT TEXAS CONGRESSMEN

*By James T. Bratcher**

“Only Texas Congressmen imagined that the President needed their services in some remote consulate after worrying him for months to find one.”

This isolated sentence, unflattering to Texas and Texas congressmen—and with nothing further to identify the congressmen by name—appears in chapter 21 of the august and difficult book *The Education of Henry Adams*,¹ the only reference to Texas in Adams's book. It has the look of a casual remark merely “thrown out” by Adams, as if it echoes a Washington insider's joke, which probably it was at the time Adams wrote the sentence.

Who *were* the Texas congressmen who, according to Adams, sought appointment to cushy jobs in remote foreign settings, jobs with few demanding duties to interrupt an enjoyable lifestyle while on the government's payroll — and possibly on private payrolls as well?

This note makes a case for identifying the flamboyant Tom Ochiltree as the target of Adams's remark. In fact Ochiltree, a frequent butt of political jokes (in 1857 he became a lawyer at age eighteen through a special act of the Texas Legislature), appears to be the outstanding candidate, and possibly Adams wrote “Texas Congressmen,” in the plural, to avoid being too obvious in a jab at Ochiltree specifically.

Chapter 21 of the *Education* describes the Washington political scene as Adams found it on his return to Washington after a long absence spent traveling in the South Seas, the Indian Ocean, and Europe. He returned in 1892, which is the time-span covered by Chapter 21 of the *Education*. By year's end, Grover Cleveland was once more the President-elect, and it is clear that Adams's sentence relates to the cronyism that marked Gilded Age politics.

A former congressman from the Seventh District in Texas, Ochiltree had twice helped Cleveland get elected, in 1884 and again in 1892. Cleveland “owed” him, he could say, and it is easily plausible that Ochiltree wheedled the President to reward him with a consulate somewhere. After all, part of a consul's job was wining and dining American business interests in foreign locales, an activity in which Ochiltree excelled.

A lobbyist since 1886, he was reputed to be “tight” with Cleveland. A newspaper skit written by O. Henry and published in 1894 in his Austin, Texas, weekly, *The Rolling Stone*, confirms this, or at least the “reputed to be.” The skit makes the assumption that the two were cronies. Published as a mock editorial, the lampoon has an imaginary *Rolling Stone* reporter go to Washington to gain an interview with Cleveland. As a way of advertising *The Rolling Stone* while in Washington, the reporter absurdly carries with him a ball-like object painted a dark color to make it resemble—what else?—a rolling stone. He brings it into the White House, blithely unaware that the “stone” also resembles a terrorist's bomb. Nobody stops him as he makes his

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way to the President's office. Everyone runs for safety. "He was alone," O. Henry writes of Cleveland when the reporter finds him in his office. "He was conversing with Tom Ochiltree. Mr. Ochiltree saw my little sphere, and with a loud scream rushed out of the little room."²

Part of the humor lies in O. Henry's saying that the President was *alone* although talking with Tom Ochiltree. That does not say much for Ochiltree's stature among Austin readers. O. Henry knew that his readers would grasp the implication—that Ochiltree was a nothing—and smile. By 1894 Ochiltree, a political maverick, was recognized as an opportunist with a checkered past, one whose epitaph, when the time came, might well be: Here *lies* Tom Ochiltree.

A former U.S. congressman living in New York, he was known to be an influence peddler in the service of those who paid him; a hobnobber with the rich on both sides of the Atlantic; a heavy drinker and a lavish diner; a poker addict and a reckless race-track and stock-market gambler; a petty swindler and a moocher on occasion; and yet, for all that, a colorful and histrionic speaker and raconteur, reliably entertaining. He "knew people," maintaining an acquaintance with Victoria's son Edward, Prince of Wales, and other British notables, for example. He often caused laughter in others by telling stories on himself. He was a publicity hound, and for newspaper reporters an unflinching subject of humor during the days of "the Great Barbecue," as the political corruption in Washington was called. Ochiltree fit the image of the political player of the "Col. Claghorn" type. To quote Miss Ima Hogg (1882-1975), the wealthy Houston philanthropist and plainspoken Texan who met him when she was a girl, Ochiltree was a "blowhard"³

Here is part of an article printed in the *New York Times* on March 8, 1894. It describes Ochiltree's testimony in a New York courtroom on the preceding day, in a suit he had brought to recover damages for an alleged theft by a male nurse. Considered in its context, the writer's placing the noun "crook" near Ochiltree's name undoubtedly had satirical intent, no less than O. Henry's burlesque printed in Austin the same year:

Col. Tom Ochiltree, carrying a ponderous cane with a sweeping crook, was complainant in the Court of General Sessions yesterday against James F. Lynch, his former nurse, whom he charged with appropriating a lot of property, including a gold watch, a betting book, a roll of bills, an overcoat, and an umbrella that cost 5 pounds in London.

Lynch had been hired by the Colonel some weeks ago when he was ill at 8 West Thirty-third Street.

When Col. Ochiltree was cross-examined by the accused man's counsel, he was asked a number of questions that greatly excited him.

First, the lawyer inquired whether the Colonel's reputation for truth and veracity was good.

"That's an infamous question," shouted the witness, as he brought his big cane down with a crash.

Next the lawyer asked the Colonel whether he had not been turned out of the Hoffman House for not paying his board.

"That's an infamous lie," said the Colonel, again whacking the stand with his big cane....

"Now, isn't it true that when you were sick you were suffering from too much drink, instead of the pneumonia?"

Col. Ochiltree blustered for a time, and answered the question in the negative. Then he admitted that he had been taking powders and just a little whiskey...

Stephen Pearl, a colored bell boy, who appeared as a witness for the Colonel, created considerable merriment. He said he had known Col. Ochiltree in Texas. "He used to wear long hair then," said the boy.⁴

In December 1903, a year following Ochiltree's death in Hot Springs, Virginia, in November 1902, the *Times* carried this short notice, which suggests a case of out-and-out bamboozlement, whether proven or not. Evidently the judge was satisfied:

Ex-Sheriff James O'Brien yesterday in the Supreme Court obtained a jury verdict for \$1,245 against Mrs. Virginia M. Morris, as administratrix of the estate of Thomas P. Ochiltree. Mr. O'Brien on Nov. 13, 1899, advanced \$1,000 to Col. Ochiltree on the latter's statement that he had a good tip on National Steel and wanted a thousand to invest in the stock.

Ochiltree's reputation and character remained in doubt even into the grave. To counter the prevailing picture left to posterity, a Kentucky newspaper publisher and longtime U.S. congressman, Henry Watterson, furnished a more sympathetic estimate. Watterson knew both Ochiltree and Henry Adams, the latter always a figure of interest and respect among Washingtonians although he never held public or appointed office. Watterson's 1919 autobiography, "*Marse Henry*," presents capsule sketches of both men.⁵ Over the years he had known and observed each when they were in London or Paris as well as when back in the States. Of a strain of nobility in Ochiltree's character, such as it was, he wrote (dubiously) that he would never "take money except for service rendered," also that Ochiltree "had a widowed sister in Texas to whom he regularly sent an income sufficient for herself and her family." Of Henry Adams, on the other hand, he opined that Adams was a repressed Bostonian Brahmin for all his cosmopolitan *savoir faire*, his erudition and his culture, his liberal aims, believing him to be a "provincial" at the core.

Whatever the truth of these assessments might be, Ochiltree and Adams were different kinds of men, the one a seize-the-day opportunist and the other a reflective thinker and high-minded moralist and theorist. As the present writer's friend Lonny Taylor, a historian, put it: "Tom Ochiltree would have offended every pore in Henry Adams's New England soul."

NOTES

¹Adam's book was privately printed in fewer than one hundred copies in 1907 and did not see commercial publication until 1918.

²"A Snapshot at the President," collected and republished in *The Rolling Stone* (1911 and later printings), conveniently available in a Project Gutenberg text online.

³Private conversation with Lonny Taylor of Fort Davis, Texas, who in the early 1970s worked for Miss Hogg in developing the Winedale Museum and Conference Center in Fayette County.

⁴This and the following *Times* quotation are from the *New York Times Archives Collection*.

⁵*Marse Henry*, 2 vols. (New York, 1919), chps. 14 (comments on Adams) and 26 (Ochiltree). On Ochiltree, see the full account of his life and career by Claude H. Hall, "The Fabulous Tom Ochiltree," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 71 (January 1968), 362-91.