Memoirs

Boston, while at the same time making Brad very happy. As he probably would have liked, he died on 20 February 1983 as a result of a sudden stroke incurred while skiing, though on the Esplanade in Boston and not on his beloved mountains of northern New England.

ALEXANDER WHITESIDE WILLIAMS

RODNEY ARMSTRONG*

ALEXANDER Whiteside Williams was one of those rare Americans who are born, live, and die in the same family home: born on 17 July 1909 at 920 South Street, Needham, he was the son of Moses Williams and Anne Whiteside Williams, and he died there on 9 August 1983. Known to a host of friends as Alex, he had a distinguished career as music critic, editor, and author.

Alex attended St. Paul's School, Class of 1927, and then Harvard College, Class of 1931. In his 25th Harvard Anniversary Report, Alex stated, "For the two years following graduation, I continued at Harvard in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, taking my A.M. in 1932 (the requirements for this degree in this field were then absurdly easy). I really did not know what I wanted to do and was permitted to tread water in this agreeable fashion because my father was a generous man and a gloomy one, who had predicted the depression years before."

About this time Alex made the acquaintance of Philip Hale, music and drama critic and columnist of the Boston Herald. Hale gave him an opportunity to write music reviews, and by the fall of 1934 Alex had the job of music critic and assistant in the drama department at the Herald. Alex was a talented musician, playing the piano and the oboe, and at one time he thought briefly of becoming a professional musician and studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. But there was a gap, I suspect, in Alex's mind between desire and reality, and he must have felt that his talent was not sufficient for a successful career as a professional musician. In his role as music critic, he was perceptive, talented, and tart. He also wrote a number of editorials for the Herald, book reviews, and published in The Atlantic. He happily enjoyed pre-World War II bachelor life, combining talents as critic, musician,
sportsman, and clubman. Over the years he was fond of squash rackets
and was at one time captain of the Tennis & Racket Club Team C and
also took up court tennis with enthusiasm.

When World War II came, Alex went into the army as a private
in April 1942. He stated that he was the complete desk soldier, save
for basic training. Much of his enlisted life was spent in a camp near
New Orleans, which he described as "truly the life of Riley." The
reason for his enthusiasm was the immediate recognition of Alex by
the head waiters or proprietors of New Orleans' great restaurants as a
true aristocrat and true gourmet. Thus, when Private Williams and
his enlisted compatriots came to dine at one of New Orleans' out-
standing restaurants, he would be immediately shown to a reserved
table while colonels and generals, captains and admirals, waited some-
ting less than happily in line. Alex also delighted in his temporary
association with the Boston Club of New Orleans.

Alex went on to the Adjutant General's Officer Candidate School
and was later assigned to the Eleventh Armored Division, where he
worked in division headquarters. "We trailed around after the tanks
through the Louisiana maneuvers of 1943 and eventually out to the
desert where, since I was that pathetic thing, 'surplus to the T/O,' I
left for the Military Government School at Fort Custer." He was
overseas by February 1944 and spent several months of what he de-
scribed as a "singularly lovely spring cutting classes and bicycling
around the Vale of the White Horse." He then moved on to London
to the SHAEF Mission to Belgium and, when that country was liber-
ated, moved to Brussels and set up shop there. The SHAEF Mission
acted as a buffer between the United States and British armies and the
Belgian government and was about half and half British and Ameri-
can officers. Alex acquired a deep admiration for the Belgian people,
an admiration which he expressed in an article later published in The
Atlantic. Despite his modesty and his amusement at his military ex-
periences, it should be recorded that he was decorated for his efforts by
the American, Belgian, and French governments.

He arrived back in this country in December 1945 and eventually
found his way back to his post at the Boston Herald. Alex's enthusiasm
for music criticism had evaporated, and once again an older friend
helped toward a career. The late Alfred McIntyre made the sugges-
tion in the summer of 1948 that he come to Little, Brown & Company
as an editor. Alex jumped at the opportunity. He seemed to have a
hand in virtually every kind of book the firm published, which kept
the post pleasantly varied, and he found his colleagues a most con-
genial group. In particular he enjoyed his relationships with authors,
perhaps most of all John P. Marquand and Peter De Vries.

A year or two earlier, Alex had purchased a small house in Boston
at 9 Byron Street at the foot of Beacon Hill which he found a distinct
boon in the winter months and where a multitude of friends often
gathered for such events as celebrating Mozart's birthday. He con-
tinued with squash and court tennis and doing some mild hiking, usu-
ally in the White Mountains, and occasionally cruising down east. But
Alex found the overly solemn dedication of the devoted amateur
sportsman ridiculous. He inspired a cheerful and convivial group
known as the Anti-Skiing Club and would address the meetings of this
organization to the delight of those assembled.

Then, in his 35th Harvard Anniversary Report, Alex stated, "At
the moment I am doing no salaried work at all, since I quit in 1965
Little, Brown & Company, the book publishers with whom I had
worked since 1948. This was not, I may as well add, an agreeable
separation. I am not sorry about it, aside from certain regrets, since
the publishing business has changed greatly in recent years and not, in
my opinion, for the better." It was at this low point in Alex's life,
1966, that Stephen T. Riley, then Director of the Massachusetts His-
torical Society, had the inspiration to offer Alex the opportunity to ex-
plor some unpublished correspondence in the Society's collections.
(Alex had been elected a Resident Member on 10 May 1962.) This
offer led to a microfilm edition of this collection and Alex to give a
paper on "The Letters and Friends of John T. Morse, Jr.," which
was printed in Proceedings, 79:97-108 (1967). Alex never forgot the
interest and kindness of the Society and its Director.

In a way, this scholarly work for the Society was Alex's inspiration
for a series of publications of his own. He compiled and edited The
Somerset Club Cookbook (Boston, 1963) and wrote A Social History
the imprint of Barre Publishers, came A Social History of the Greater
Boston Clubs. As George C. Homans stated in the memorial minute on
Alex he composed for the Boston Athenæum, Alex had "a lover's
quarrel with his church." Though a devout Episcopalian, he published
two highly readable and mildly satirical pamphlets about the changing text of prayer books, the alteration of words of hymns and new translations of the Bible enjoined upon the faithful by the Episcopal hierarchy: The Lay Reader (Boston, 1974) and The Lay Reader Rides Again (Boston, 1977).

In later years Alex sold his Byron Street house and returned to live full-time in Needham. But this did not mean that he enjoyed any less his social life in the city. He was a devoted member of the Somerston Club, serving as a member of its Executive Committee for a long number of years, and he was similarly devoted to the Club of Odd Volumes, which he served as Clerk for a considerable time. Equal was his devotion to his Harvard undergraduate club, to whose members he was unfailingly generous and hospitable. Those who heard Alex give his minutes on the monthly meetings of the Club of Odd Volumes will never forget the spirited and witty reports on speakers who often lacked the talent for brevity. Alex served a number of institutions. Elected a Trustee of the Boston Athenæum in May 1958, he served as its Secretary from 1969 until 1981. He was also a Director of the Old South Association and a member of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts. He kept mind and limb flexible by travel and the study of foreign languages. He was proficient in French, Italian, and Spanish, though he bemoaned his neglect of German, in which he was a prize scholar in school.

In his last Harvard Class Report, Alex stated, "I did nothing of importance—even to myself—after involuntary but happy retirement from a business which is growing ever more corrupt and vulgar." He also stated in the same Report, "I have never married, but otherwise have lived a reasonably peaceful and agreeable life. On the other hand of not much use to anyone." His multitude of friends and the institutions with which he was associated would firmly contradict the last sentence of that statement. Alex Williams led a good and useful life and one which gave kindness, pleasure, and amusement to those around him. His will revealed his appreciation and generosity. This Society, the Boston Athenæum, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New England Conservatory, his school and college, his church, his clubs, and charities received a substantial portion of his estate. His curmudgeonly appearance, his distinct personality, his kindness, wit, and hospitality will be long remembered.