



William Drysdale

by Robert Fridlington

Time has effaced the memory of William Drysdale, but one hundred years ago he was one of Cranford's best-known citizens. Hardly an attractive figure, he was a large heavy-set man with darkly sallow features and protuberant eyes who must have presented a menacing mien to strangers. Those who knew him, however, saw a man enveloped by an aura of romanticism and adventure, a resident intellectual and world traveler. A glowing biographical sketch written about him sometime after his death said he "had a nature kindly and gentle as a child's."

William Drysdale was born in Lancaster, PA, on July 11, 1852, the son of the Rev. Scott Drysdale, a Presbyterian minister, and Mary Catherine Thompson Drysdale. He received his early education from his father and later attended Columbia College, where he was a classmate of John Kean, a future U.S. Senator from Union, New Jersey. Unhappy in college, Drysdale dropped out to pursue a career in journalism. After getting a job as a reporter for the *New York Sun*, he was assigned to cover the trial of the well-known Brooklyn minister, Henry Ward Beecher, who had been accused of seducing the wife of a member of his congregation.

Scandalizing and titillating the entire nation, this was the greatest trial of the nineteenth century, capturing more newspaper space than any event since the Civil War. His reporting of the trial established Drysdale's reputation as a journalist and, rather curiously, he and Beecher became close friends. Thirteen years after the trial, in 1888, at the minister's request, Drysdale published *Proverbs from the Plymouth Pulpit*, consisting of extracts from the writings and sayings of the noted clergyman.

In 1876, Drysdale became city editor of the *Philadelphia Times*, but he remained only until the following year when he returned to New York and joined the staff of the *New York Times*, an association that was to last more than twenty years. On assignment for the *Times*, he traveled extensively throughout Mexico and the Caribbean, in Europe, and in the American South and Southwest.

On August 25, 1885, in Cranford, Drysdale married Adelaide Louise Bigelow, daughter of Alden B. and Olivia M. Bigelow. Alden Bigelow (whose first name was given to Alden Street) was a businessman and real estate developer, who was one of Cranford's town fathers. William and Adelaide had one son, William Bigelow Drysdale, who died in 1915.

In the period following the Civil War, books written for young people had become a distinct literary genre, and Drysdale, who continued to do some work for the *New York Times*, began to devote most of his time to writing novels for boys. He had drawn on his knowledge of the Caribbean for an earlier work, *In Sunny Lands: Outdoor Life in Nassau and Cuba* (1885), and now that region provided color and material for several new stories, including *The Princess of Montserrat* (1890) and *The Mystery of Abel Forefinger* (1894).

Drysdale's stories were rousing, masculine tales whose common theme was that every boy could achieve success through the traditional virtues of hard work, perseverance, integrity and benevolence. One group of books that Drysdale called, without embarrassment, *The Brain and Brawn Series* carried such titles as *The Young Reporter* (1895), in which the author drew on his own experiences as a fledgling newspaperman, *The Fast Mail* (1896), *The Beach Patrol* (1897), and *The Young Supercargo* (1898).

After a decade of preaching self-help and success through his fiction, Drysdale spelled out the details of his doctrine in *Helps for Ambitious Boys* (1899). This work was so successful that he followed it up the next year with *Helps for Ambitious Girls*. Drysdale had not lost the narrative touch, as shown by the receptions given *Cadet Standish of the St. Louis* (1899) and *Pine Ridge Plantation* (1901), but he had developed a new focus of interest, dedication to public service. In 1900, he launched *The United States Government Series* with the publication of *The Treasury Club*. This series saw only one other volume, *The Young Consul* (1901), which made the New York Public Library's list of most popular books.

Although Drysdale had worked for metropolitan newspapers for most of his adult life, he had an aversion to cities and never really lived in New York. He loved open spaces and spent as much time as possible at his Cranford home. Following a lingering illness, he died on September 20, 1901.