

S. Weir Mitchell and the Ghosts

William K. Beatty

S. Weir Mitchell was born into an old and respected Philadelphia family on Feb 15, 1829. In such well-ordered surroundings ghosts should have had no place, but during Mitchell's long and active life they kept turning up frequently and in many different guises. A religious ghost gave him such a fright when he was a child that he could recall it vividly over half a century later and turn it into a dramatic incident in one of his best novels. Ghost stories occurred in several of his literary efforts, and one of his short stories, "A Ghost of Glory," combines the supernatural with Mitchell's patriotism and his abiding interest in ships. His most unusual ghosts were undoubtedly those of "phantom limbs," the sensations of lost arms and legs that come back to haunt the amputees years after the amputation.

S. Weir Mitchell had been given the name "Silas" but disliked it so intensely that he used the initial "S" most of his life. Weir, as he was known in his youth, was quiet and introspective, and read voraciously (Fig 1). His imagination was acute, and he later stated that "there is a tradition in the Mitchell family of psychic qualities."

Several physicians were numbered among his ancestors, and his father was not only a practicing physician but a professor as well. Although no profession attracted Weir, he finally decided to go into medicine. His fa-

ther opposed this decision because he felt Weir did not have the ability to stick it out through medical school. Nevertheless, Weir entered Jefferson Medical School, obtained his MD degree in 1850, and then traveled to Europe for a year of sightseeing and postgraduate work.

Returning to the United States, Mitchell practiced medicine in Philadelphia until 1862 when he accepted an appointment as an army surgeon. During the war Mitchell had ample opportunity to observe and treat soldiers who had lost an arm or leg. These amputations generally left a portion of the limb intact, and this portion was often referred to as a "stump." A hospital where many amputations took place was accordingly known as a "stump hospital." Much of Mitchell's service was at the Turner Lane Military Hospital in Philadelphia (the local stump hospital) where he worked closely with W. W. Keen and George Morehouse. Mitchell became interested in war wounds, especially in their neurological side effects, and he made major contributions in this area. He wrote a standard treatise on the subject, *Injuries of Nerves and Their Consequences*, published in 1872. In this book he devoted a chapter to the sensory hallucinations of phantom limbs. These "sensory ghosts" became widely known to both medical men and the general public, and in 1911 a two-page excerpt from Mitchell's work was included as a practice piece in Robert Kidd's *New Elocution and Vocal Culture*. Professor Kidd's work was popular in schools and colleges. Since recitations, orations, and sim-

ilar dramatic pieces formed a large part of the general entertainment prior to radio and television, a place in an "elocution" book was of some significance.

After the war Mitchell continued his practice in Philadelphia and soon became extremely busy. His literary bent provided a counterbalance to the pressures of his practice and he wrote poems, short stories, and novels in his spare time. He had been advised not to publish any of these, since this would not be in good taste for a physician, especially a physician from an old Philadelphia family. His literary career under his own name, therefore, did not start until he was 50, although it lasted to his death 35 years later.

The first publication of one of his short stories was the result of an accident. He had sent a manuscript to a friend for comment. The friend submitted it to the *Atlantic*, where it was published anonymously in 1866. Mitchell first knew of this when he received the page proof and a check for \$80. George Dedlow, the hero of this story, had been injured in the war and through a series of misfortunes had lost both arms and both legs. Dedlow became intrigued by his own reactions to this condition, and studied other amputees during his long stays in hospitals. Mitchell used Dedlow's reactions and observations to make some of his own scientific points.

At the end of the story Dedlow was talked into attending a seance. While the ex-soldier did not believe in spiritualism, this was his first seance and he became carried away by the charged atmosphere. When the me-

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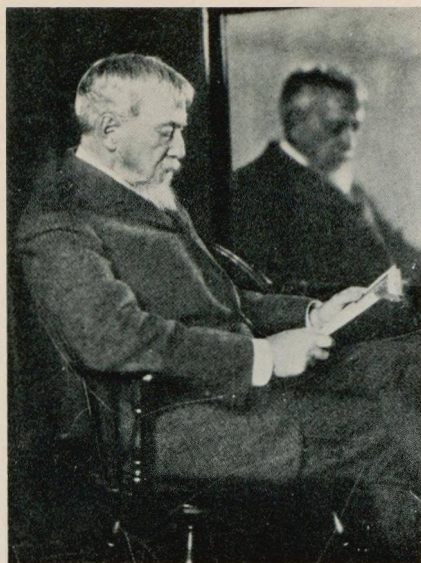


Fig 1.—Throughout his life Mitchell read widely and reflected thoughtfully on his reading.

dium asked if any one wished to contact a spirit, Dedlow volunteered, and the call was put through. The other end of the line was apparently crowded, and it soon became evident that two spirits wanted to speak to Dedlow. They identified themselves as "Army Medical Museum Numbers 3486 and 3487," which puzzled the medium. Dedlow reacted immediately, "Good gracious, they are *my legs—my legs!*," and rose shakily to his feet and walked across the room. He was not surprised at this shakiness because "my legs had been nine months in the strongest alcohol."

Mitchell had taken the name of George Dedlow from a jeweller's shop in Germantown, feeling that it was a fitting one for a man deprived of his lower limbs. Although Dedlow was a fictional character, Army Medical Museum Numbers 3486 and 3487 do in fact exist. The first is a segment of cranium from a private in Company G, 48th Illinois Volunteers, who was wounded near Atlanta on July 21, 1864. The second is a section from the left humerus of another private, this time from Michigan, who was also wounded near Atlanta, Aug 19, 1864, but survived for many years after the war.

The story created a sensation, and many readers sent in money for Dedlow. Several spiritualists seized on the story as proof that Mitchell believed in spiritualism. This both annoyed

A ghost of glory —

— It was. Had just struck
bells a. the ward room
was at its best — as I was — not
a navy man but only a
quasi ~~was~~ — all the old sea
vales were let loose on me —
They had been well salted
thro many voyages — but
were always accepted as
fresh — B — Certainly they were
passed in improbability even
the colonial novel —
~~At last~~ At last there was a ^{long} game
and the third humerus —
ceased to punctuate the back
with — twang of the — bango —
The doctor — said — I am it
your turn now Mr East —
I said yes — I would tell them
a short sea story — none
of them had ever heard —

Fig 2.—Mitchell once wrote, "Alas! I regret I am the prince of kakographists."

and amused him since he had written the story in part as a satire against their cult.

After the accidental appearance of the Dedlow story in the *Atlantic* magazine, Mitchell's former colleague at the "stump hospital," W. W. Keen, learned that the author was really S. Weir Mitchell. He then wittily remarked that while he had known that Mitchell had sailed across the Atlantic, he had not been aware that Mitchell had fallen into it.

Mitchell could appreciate this remark because he himself enjoyed plays on words. He had written in his work on phantom limbs about an amputee who later went into politics. According to Mitchell this man, who had lost a major portion of one arm, had only to bare his mutilated arm to

"make the greatest kind of a stump speech, and to carry with him the sympathies of the audience."

A naval ghost appeared several times in one of Mitchell's short stories, "A Ghost of Glory." A holographic manuscript of this story is in the Historical Collection of the Northwestern University Medical School Library. The manuscript was written on the plain backs of 11 pages of lined paper. These sheets have been folded over into thirds, which suggests that Mitchell sent it, as he often did with his literary efforts, to one of his friends for comments. The writing shows signs of Mitchell's tremor on top of his non-too-legible hand (Fig 2). This manuscript had been purchased early in



Fig 3.—The famous battle between the Bon Homme Richard (Captain, John Paul Jones) and the Serapis took place on Sept 23, 1779, off Scarborough on the northeast coast of England. The Bon Homme Richard's stern shows to the left with the Serapis in the foreground.

1935 from William Targ's bookstore in Chicago. "A Ghost of Glory" was first published in the *Century Magazine* of June 1902, as the fifth in a series entitled "Little Stories." In 1903 a somewhat different collection of "Little Stories" was published in a small volume by Century, and "A Ghost of Glory" was now the seventh in a series of 13.

"A Ghost of Glory" is told by a Mr. East while visiting on a ship (he does not specify which ship or where located). The ward room was "at its best," and the occupants (mostly naval men) had been telling stories in turn. When it became his turn, Mr. East had volunteered to tell "a short sea-story—no one of them had ever heard." This rash statement naturally stimulated some discussion, and this ultimately led to "wild bets of segars." Mr. East related that in 1864 he had been sent to England by the US government to straighten out a legal problem. After accomplishing this task Mr. East traveled up through England to Scotland. While in Glasgow he visited an inn frequented by sailors and, after suitable preparations of tobacco and ale, he was able to stimulate "a hairy old sea dog" into telling a sea story.

The sea dog just the week before had been on a collier off Scarborough, on the northeast coast of England.

The weather was terrible, foggy and a gale, when suddenly the fog fell away and a half-wrecked ship appeared about a quarter of a mile off the port bow. He called the mate and master to have a look and the mate made use of his "glass." He described her as "a kind of old time looking war ship" with guns on deck and a queer flag "at her mizen." The flag, which even the sea dog saw clearly, was "like that damned Yankee rag but didn't have so many stars." The fog then began to close in, the ghost ship let loose with 13 guns, and then disappeared. All three observers of the ship heard the guns and the narrator asserted, "I wasn't in liquor nor the mate neither." (This statement left the master in a somewhat ambiguous condition, although perhaps unintentionally.) Three people on shore—one was a preacher—also heard the guns. So much for the sea dog's narrative.

Mr. East's audience was duly appreciative but somewhat confused. The first officer couldn't understand the pertinence of the 13 guns. The third officer, who was more perceptive because he wrote "sea songs & sonnets," said, "I don't think one of you got on to it—Why that ship was the Bon Homme Richard" (Fig 3). Mr. East then put the climax on his story by saying, "Yes, & log this too you

unimaginative sea dogs. The Kearsarge sunk the Alabama off Cherbourg that Sunday morning at what you fellows call—6—bells."

The hearers acknowledged that this was a "first class sea story," and two other ghost ship stories were then told. At this point the old engineer who had been quietly puffing away on his pipe said, "Its good & its true but its only half new. Mr. East has lost his segars." When Mr. East questioned him the engineer recounted a story he had been told in 1850.

Tom Bushby, the engineer's informant, had been a boy in the privateer *Rattlesnake* in 1815. On Aug 19 the *Rattlesnake* was also off Scarborough but the weather was clear. The ghost of the *Bon Homme Richard* appeared, about a mile off, fired her 13 guns, and then sank. The skeptical first officer complained, "Well, what then?" The engineer had the climax ready, "What then—why just at that hour & day the Constitution disposed of the *Guerriere*." This did not satisfy the first officer who wanted to know if "there was any time allowance for difference in longitude." His objection was immediately torn to shreds by the sonnet-writer.

In the manuscript Mitchell's scientific training and care for details is evident in the timing of the different events. The opening sentence left the time blank, "It had just struck bells," and this correctly appeared in the printed version as, "It was after dinner, and had just struck three bells." The time of the *Kearsarge-Alabama* fight was also originally left blank, and later filled in in the manuscript as "6" bells which was finally corrected in the printed versions to "seven." The date of the incident itself was originally given as June 18 in the manuscript, but Mitchell later corrected this to the 19th. In addition to the changes between the manuscript and the printed versions (the texts in the *Century Magazine* and the book are almost the same) there are several others which are worth comment. In the printed text the ship is specified as the *Oregon*. The "sea tales" that the sailors let loose on Mr. East (the only land lubber present) had, in the manuscript, "been well salted thru many voyages," but in the printed text the

"aging" process was lengthened to include "and perhaps through many centuries." Mitchell remarked in the manuscript that some of these tales "passed in improbability even the colonial novel." Probably because he had himself written more than one colonial novel, he deleted this phrase in the printed text.

Another noteworthy change is in the name of the narrator. This is given in the manuscript as "Mr. East" up until its final appearance where, just before the end, the Doctor said "Bet's lost—Mr. West." Mitchell later corrected this in the manuscript to "East." However, in the printed versions the narrator is made even more anonymous by being given the name of "Smith."

The "segars" of the wild bets were in the printed text turned into proper Philadelphia "cigars." The "3rd officer" in the manuscript was changed into "third-watch" officer for nautical correctness. The date of the *Rattlesnake's* meeting with the *Bon Homme Richard* was changed in the manuscript from 1815 to 1812 and the second date was correctly used in the printed versions.

Mitchell had had good reason to have the *Kearsarge-Alabama* struggle in mind for "A Ghost of Glory." He had been in England at the time the two ships were searching each other out. One of Mitchell's poems, "Kearsarge," deals with this same naval battle and was written shortly after the event. In his notes following the poem, Mitchell wrote that the noise of the battle was heard in several English churches near the Channel.

Ships, particularly ships in fogs, appear (distinctly or indistinctly) throughout Mitchell's writings. In the fourth of the "Little Stories," in its book form, one of the characters in "The Waters of Oblivion" remarks, "I was like a ship in a fog which now clears, and leaves only a thin mist, and then isolates the ship in gray aloofness." In the novel, *Ronald Blake*, the cheerful Phil Francis complains to the philosophically inclined Roland Blake, "When you begin to be metaphysical I always feel like a steamer in a fog, and as if the only thing left for me was to anchor and blow a fog-horn." Indeed, the villain of *Roland Blake*, Richard Darnell, atoned for his sins near the end

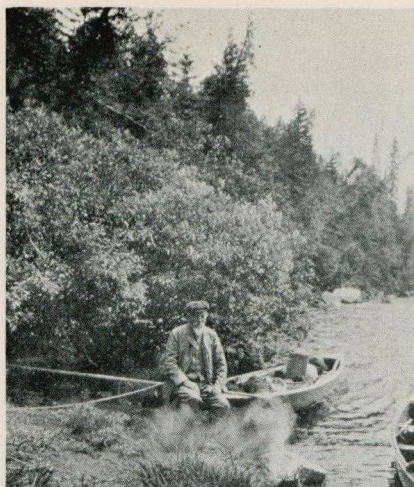


Fig 4.—Mitchell was not only interested in boats but was also an ardent fisherman. He is seen here pausing during a search for salmon on the Restigouche.

of the story by rowing off into the twilight to his death.

Several first-rate ghost stories appear in Mitchell's novels. Two of the best are found in Mitchell's "conversation novels," *Characteristics*, published in 1891, and *Dr. North and His Friends*, which came out in 1900. Mitchell carried this style of writing to a high point. These leisurely novels revolved around two couples, Dr. Owen North and his wife Alice, and Fred Vincent, a lawyer, and his wife Anne. Two unattached men, the scholar Clayborne, and Victor St. Clair, a mercurial poet, rounded out the group that regularly dined at each other's homes and engaged in witty, charming, and at times profound conversation. Dr. North was the mouthpiece for many of the author's viewpoints and, indeed, had some of Mitchell's traits.

In *Characteristics* Dr. Owen North told the story about a physician who was talked into giving a dose of strychnine to a ghost by the ghost himself. The object of this odd request was, naturally, to bring the ghost back to life. As a result of this story, and several others of a similar type, Mitchell was sent many curious ghost stories by readers who were following the novel in its serial form.

Dr. Afton, who appears in the latter part of *Dr. North and His Friends*, tells what his audience cor-

rectly called "a capital ghost story." Afton's father, Harry, and uncle, Thaddeus, had loved the same girl, but Harry won out. Thaddeus immediately declared his lifelong hatred and cut off all relations with his brother. Some years later Thaddeus called Harry to his bedside, and there was some confused talk about his will. Unfortunately Thaddeus died during the discussion. That night Harry locked the unsigned will in a desk, locked the only door to the room on his way out, and took both keys with him. The next morning when he entered the room, a newly drawn holograph will leaving the whole estate to him was resting on a table and the desk was lying in pieces on the floor. The unsigned will had disappeared. The new will was undeniably in Thaddeus' hand, and showed evidence of having been sanded—Thaddeus had used this old custom all of his life.

One of the queerest twists Mitchell gave to a ghost story was based on fact. A London doctor named Chovet was called in to frustrate justice in 1733 when a criminal was about to be hanged. Chovet performed a tracheotomy just before the hanging so the criminal could breathe until his friends could cut him down. Mitchell used this incident in *The Autobiography of a Quack*. The quack, afraid for his life, told the story to one of his criminal colleagues who insisted on the method being used on a third conspirator doomed to be hanged for murder. The quack in drumming up enthusiasm for this approach embroidered on the Chovet story by saying that the man whom Chovet had saved dressed himself up all in white and continued his career as a successful highwayman in the guise of an effective "ghost." The vision of a return to a remunerative business career naturally appealed to both of the quack's colleagues.

Mitchell's interest in ghosts lasted many years. One aspect of ghosts was that of spiritualism, and he corresponded with several people on the subject, including James Russell Lowell and William James. It was on this topic that the great psychologist quarrelled with Mitchell. Of the work Mitchell did with James on spiritualism he later wrote, "We did find the Spirits

costly and I said they broke us at last."

One of Mitchell's major attacks against spiritualism is found in *Dr. North and His Friends*. The group had been discussing the subject at some length, and, when the opportunity arose for attending a seance, they decided, some with considerable reluctance, to take part. The medium, a man with the wonderful name of Weevils, was approached by the poet St. Clair, who wanted to masquerade as the medium. Weevils agreed and allowed the poet to substitute for him. The stage was thus set for an effective satire on the whole subject. When Dr. and Mrs. North later learned that the medium had been St. Clair, they were able to appreciate Weevil's comment, when he was being paid, that he was entirely without recollection of what had passed.

The best description of Mitchell's attitude toward spiritualism was put in the mouth of Dr. North in the same book: "There is much that is probably forever unknowable, but let us not add needlessly to the inexplicable." Mitchell was successful in unmasking several psychic frauds, and always took considerable pleasure in describing these events.

One of these incidents was the exposing of a thought-transference demonstration at which he was an invited spectator. Jean Martin Charcot had been called upon to test a young girl who, when hypnotized, could engage in thought transference. Not only was Mitchell able to see Charcot's gestures accompanying his thoughts, but he also perceived that the girl could see Charcot's movements reflected in a glass door nearby. When Mitchell pointed this out at the end of the test, Charcot was unable to appreciate the solution and became quite angry.

Mitchell occasionally indulged in a little "ghost writing," which took the form of writing bogus documents.

Once when he showed the results to Harrison S. Morris, the Franklin scholar. Morris was astonished that he had been unaware of this "Franklin Letter," and wondered if it had ever been printed. Fortunately Morris had a good sense of humor, and laughed uproariously when Mitchell told him the source of the letter.

Among Mitchell's practical jokes (he always enjoyed planning these on other people but could seldom see the humorous side of those played on him) was a group of bogus Shakespeare quotations he manufactured for his friend the Shakespearean scholar Horace Furness. Furness finally became so upset that Mitchell ceased this activity. Furness, however, got his own back by sending Mitchell a "case history" for his comments. The case history was straight out of *A Winter's Tale*, and Mitchell swallowed it hook, line, and sinker (Fig 4).

The most popular novel Mitchell wrote was *Hugh Wynne*, first published in 1896 and still in print. The book concerns a Quaker in Philadelphia before and during the American Revolution. Wynnes abounded in that area then, and are still numerous. Hugh, however, was a fictional character. Much of the book, particularly those parts that deal with emotional incidents involving Hugh, comes from the "diary" of Hugh's close friend, Jack Warder, who was dead at the time Hugh supposedly "wrote" the book.

On a trip to Wales some years later Mitchell visited some of the Wynne tombs in an old churchyard. The elderly sexton made the tour a long and instructive one for his unknown visitor. He concluded by informing Mitchell that the present head of the family lived in America and was named Hugh.

When Weir was a youngster his mother often read aloud to him. Much of this mate-

rial was from the Bible, and years later Mitchell recalled that he was badly upset by the Holy Ghost. This incident from Mitchell's own experience later appeared in *Constance Trescott*, where Constance comforts the dying Wilson by reading to him from the Bible. When the text mentioned the Holy Ghost Wilson started and cried out, "What's that about the Holy Ghost? That's what bothered me when I was a young fellow. I took religion bad once; but that about the Holy Ghost used to kind of scare me of nights."

Mitchell had learned to make full use of his time, and he never appeared to be in a hurry. This he accomplished by switching from one activity to another before he became mentally or physically tired. Mitchell, as physician and writer, was alert and receptive throughout his long and productive life. Every moment seemed to provide material for his acute powers of observation.

His inquiring mind showed itself in his literary work and also led him to a wide variety of experiments, many of which he performed on himself. His account, in the *British Medical Journal* (1896), of his experience with mescaline is vivid writing and illustrates his acute perception of things and people. After ingesting the mescaline he described his visual and mental reactions in considerable detail, and then wrote,

I predict a perilous reign of the mescal habit when this agent becomes attainable. The temptations to call again the enchanting magic of my experience will, I am sure, be too much for some men to resist after they have once set foot in this land of fairy colours, where there seems to be so much charm and so little to excite horror or disgust.

Mitchell took mescal when he was 67, and his article was printed just over 75 years ago. He was not only understanding of ghosts but also knowledgeable about men.

