

## Bill W. and His Critics

*“Concerning those cracks about me—you shouldn’t be too much bothered... You see, people have been trying to save A. A. from me for years.”*

—Bill W.

In the above excerpt, from a 1961 letter written to a couple of A.A. friends, Bill W. used self-deprecating wit to address the criticism that had been coming his way almost from the moment he and Dr. Bob cofounded the A.A. program in 1935. (Bob, less of a controversial character, managed to avoid the worst of it.) Even if Bill became somewhat inured to it over the years, such criticism rankled, and he could and did defend himself and Alcoholics Anonymous vigorously. But at the same time, he used it as occasion for self-inventory: “Were it not for my severe critics,” he wrote, “I might have got off track lots of times.”

### “Will there be a Grand Pooh-bah of A. A.?”

In the early decades of A.A., much of the criticism came from within the program and was directed at what some perceived as Bill’s attempts to enrich himself via the Alcoholic Foundation (now the General Service Board), which controlled royalties from the Big Book. Given the strong egos of many of the alcoholics who focused their newly sober energy on building the program, this type of clash was inevitable. Clarence S., who founded Cleveland A.A., was an early and vocal critic. Bill wrote one correspondent that Clarence “has done a lot of wonderful A.A. work and was largely instrumental in getting our Cleveland situation started.... But he has been a maverick on the subject of the Foundation and me from the very early times.”

Bill had a painful experience with another early critic, Hank P., one of the early A.A.s (after Bill) to get sober in New York. A former Standard Oil of New Jersey executive and, like Bill, a natural salesman, Hank ended up in Towns Hospital, where he was described by Dr. William Silkworth as “a case of pathological mental deterioration.” Yet, under Bill’s guidance, Hank sobered up and helped start Honor Dealers, the gasoline cooperative in Newark, New Jersey, at whose William St. offices Bill dictated much of the Big Book to Ruth Hock.

In close partnership with Bill, Hank formed Works Publishing to publish the Big Book, but when it was decided in 1939 that shares in the company (of which Hank had named himself president) should be turned over to the Foundation, Hank balked.

He started drinking again and wrote Bill a memo late in 1939, asking: “Did Jesus Christ have an office? Was there a central clearinghouse? Is work going on soundly? Are drunks being cured?... Will there be a Grand Pooh-bah of A.A.?”

Hank’s drinking increased, as did his resentment of Bill, and the two never healed their rift. To make matters worse, Hank’s stories about Bill’s supposed financial malfeasance found receptive ears in Clarence S. and others in the Midwest, leading Bill and Dr. Bob to take the extraordinary step of attending a Cleveland A.A. dinner with a certified audit of A.A. financial affairs in hand.

Rumors about Bill and A.A. finances would continue for a long time, however. Bill often heard about these criticisms second hand, from friendly correspondents. One A.A., Ray H., wrote to Bill in 1955 to say that he knew of “a guy on the west coast... who does a lot of speaking out there and around [and] has a bad attitude on ‘your getting rich’ from your writings.”

Bill replied: “Fellows like [the west coast A.A.] used to worry me some. Not that I mind being lambasted, that’s good for me. But I used to feel they could talk people out of supporting the Foundation Office. But critics such as he do us no harm. In fact... they make one ask about one’s own motives. And if some people are unreasonable, they teach us patience... But thanks for standing up to him.”

Alcoholics Anonymous at first enjoyed a honeymoon relationship with the press and public. Articles in *Liberty*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Reader’s Digest*, and scores of other magazines, as well as radio and early television commentary, were almost uniformly glowing. However, Bill was *aware*, as he wrote ruefully, that “our public reputation probably far exceeds our actual character, “ meaning that the pink cloud could not last forever. In the early 1960s, two different authors challenged A.A.’s mission and methods, prefiguring some of the criticism directed at the program in recent magazine stories.

### A “First Aid Station?”

One article, written by Dr. Arthur H. Cain, appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* early in 1963. Entitled “Alcoholics Anonymous: Cult or Cure?” the piece would form the basis of Cain’s book *The Cured Alcoholic*. While admitting that A.A. was deserving of “universal respect” as a form of “group therapy,” Cain wrote that A.A. had become too dogmatic: “Any suggestion to members that The Program is less than divine revelation evokes an irrational outcry.” More harshly, he spoke of the serene smile of some A.A.’s as “the A.A. Smirk,” referred to Al-Anon members

as “the ladies auxiliary,” and accused A.A. of having become a cult-like organization whose goal was not to reintegrate members into society but to keep them virtually enslaved to Alcoholics Anonymous.

The role of A.A., Cain suggested, should be to act as a “much-needed first aid station” to arrest uncontrolled drinking, after which the “trained specialists” (physicians and psychologists like Cain himself) should be allowed to take over.

A.A.s were quick to write Bill W. about Cain and Bill was quick to reply that while they were certainly free to respond as they wished, he and the General Service Office would be publicly silent in keeping with A.A.’s Tenth Tradition. Privately, he suggested in letters that Cain’s article, “petulant and biased” as it was, “probably...kept some people away from A.A. Maybe some will stay sicker longer, and maybe a few will die because of it.”

However, he also admitted in a letter to an Ohio physician that “some of the things said about us in *Harper’s* were true as to some A.A.s, in some places and at some times.” In the April 1963 Grapevine, Bill published an article entitled “Our Critics Can Be Our Benefactors,” in which he pointedly reprinted a section from *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*: “We must be friendly and, above all, open-minded toward every new development in the medical or psychiatric art that promises to be helpful to sick people.” And the theme of the 1963 General Service Conference was changed to “A.A. Takes Its Inventory.”

A 1964 article in *The Nation* by Jerome Ellison entitled “Alcoholics Anonymous: Dangers of Success” was a bit harder for Bill to swallow. Ellison was an experienced magazine writer with a long familiarity with A.A.; indeed, Bill had hired him as a consultant on A. A. publications. While praising ordinary A. A. members for their “prodigies of selfless service,” Ellison claimed that A.A.’s national headquarters was a place full of “committee politics” and “venomous gossip” run by “an ultraconservative clique” grown affluent on the profits spawned by Alcoholics Anonymous and its thousands of members.

Bill took umbrage with Ellison’s comments about A.A.’s affluence and what Ellison apparently thought was G.S.O.’s bloated staff. “Perhaps you still feel the office is an over-sized bureaucracy,” he wrote to Ellison in a private letter of rebuttal. “I did explain the economy of the operation, money-wise per capita. But I did not take care of this point: In 1940, G.S.O. had one paid worker per 1,000 A.A.s. In 1950, there was one paid worker for each 3,000 A.A.s, and in 1965, we have one paid worker for each 9,000 A.A. recoveries. This is refreshingly contrary to modern-day trends—a very good point to make if you will. The point could also be made that we have only twelve alcoholics on the entire world payroll, scarcely an overburden of ‘professionalism.’”

While Bill was always polite to Ellison in his communications with him, he referred to him in other letters as “poor Jerry Ellison.” As human as any other A.A., he did not like inviting a man for dinner, figuratively speaking, only to get his hand bitten.

## “I Am Responsible”

While Bill naturally did not enjoy the criticism directed his way, he used it as a teaching experience, both for himself and for Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole. It was all about responsibility, he wrote one A.A. correspondent in 1963. It was Bill’s responsibility to learn if his critics “were right about me, or partly so.” At the same time, if A.A. needed defending, then “I face my critics and oppose them, if that happens to be my responsibility.”

It is no coincidence that the theme of the 1965 Toronto Convention was “I Am Responsible.” In his talk there to over 10,000 alcoholics, Bill stressed the need for A.A.s to look outward, to cooperate with all the agencies that worked on the problem of alcoholism, alcoholism education and rehabilitation. “Too often we have deprecated and even derided these projects of our friends just because we do not always see eye to eye with them,” Bill said. “We should very seriously ask ourselves how many alcoholics have gone on drinking simply because we have failed to cooperate in good spirit with these many agencies. No alcoholic should go mad or die simply because he did not come straight to A.A. in the beginning.”

Bill, along with Lois, then led the attendees in the Responsibility Declaration: “I am Responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am Responsible.”

The Responsibility Declaration was about reminding A.A. members not to be complacent in the face of thirty years of unparalleled success. But it was also about Bill W. learning when his critics “were right about me, or partly so.”

## A.A. Archives Workshop

The 19<sup>th</sup> National (US and Canada) A.A. Archives Workshop will be held this year in Independence (Cleveland/Akron), Ohio. The program of meetings, workshops, displays and much more will take place at the Double Tree Hotel Cleveland Independence, September 24-27, 2015.

Registration is \$35. For more information email [Bob@NAAAW.org](mailto:Bob@NAAAW.org) or [Kevin@NAAAW.org](mailto:Kevin@NAAAW.org).

## Construction at G.S.O.

The General Service Board has authorized that the AA Grapevine office be moved from the 12th to the 11th floor. As part of the Grapevine relocation, a larger-scale renovation of the entire General Service Office space will be undertaken.

During this period, August 10 to November 30, 2015, the General Service Office will be closed to tours. The Archives will also be closed to visitors and researchers, although business will continue as usual.

# Happy, Joyous and Free in Atlanta “You Are Their Legacy”

The International Convention, held July 2-5 in Atlanta, Georgia, drew approximately 57,000 alcoholics to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. International Conventions, steadily growing in size, have been held every five years since 1950, when 3,000 alcoholics gathered in Cleveland to hear speakers ranging from Warden Clinton Duffy of San Quentin to Bill W. and Dr. Bob—the latter, ill with the cancer that would take his life the following November, gave a brief but now-famous address placing “love” and “service” at the heart of A.A.

Love and service were in ample display in Atlanta. The flags of 94 countries were paraded through the Georgia Dome at the Convention’s official opening on Friday night; there followed a three-speaker meeting simultaneously translated into seven languages. Marathon meetings were held continuously from midnight on Thursday to 7:00 am, Sunday; there were 250 meetings in all, in a host of languages.

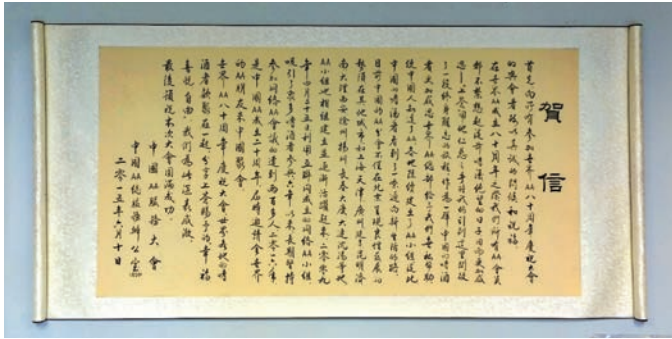
In this truly international Convention, messages of gratitude and support were sent to the staff of the General Service Office from countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and China.

A highlight Saturday night: the 35 millionth copy of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was presented by A.A. General

Service Board chair Terry Bedient (nonalcoholic) to Sister Judith Ann Karam of the Sisters of Charity of Augustine, the religious order to which Sister Ignatia, one of those nonalcoholics so important to the development of A.A., belonged. Sr. Ignatia worked closely with Dr. Bob at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron (and after Bob’s death, at St. Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland) to help sober up thousands of alcoholics. In her remarks, Sr. Karan spoke movingly of Sr. Ignatia as “one of the many strong and courageous women who devoted their lives to serving others.” She went on to say: “Can you imagine Bill W., Dr. Bob and Sr. Ignatia standing here now and seeing so many in the Fellowship they started—this community of caring, their friends? You are their legacy, present here and in spirit, living and deceased, who have struggled with your demons and are sober. Sister Ignatia belongs to each of you in a special way.”

And, showing their love of A.A. and its legacy, Convention attendees flocked to the G.S.O. Archives Exhibit Room, where the films *Markings on the Journey* and *Bill’s Own Story* were shown. (The latter so popular that people sat on the floor to view it.) Volunteers—among the 5,000 who generously donated their time at the Convention—provided service that was gratefully accepted by the Archives staff.





China presented the General Service Office with a beautiful Chinese language-scroll with a message from the Chinese General Service Office, which read, in part: "As Chinese alcoholics, we are grateful that A.A. headquarters has given us so much selfless assistance, and now more and more Chinese people have known A.A. Many A.A. groups have been established in the country; since then, alcoholics in China have seen a new way to our life."

### International Messages of Gratitude

Since the Convention many notes of gratitude and appreciation have poured into the General Service Office. Here are two examples.

"On the occasion of the 80th Anniversary of the founding of the A.A. Fellowship I am pleased to send you this email on behalf of the Polish Trustees' Board and myself. This is a special day when A.A. members all over the world express their appreciation and gratitude to two fathers of the Twelfth Step recovery program that has helped millions of people recover from alcoholism. We wish you to enjoy with us happiness, joy and freedom.

"In fellowship, Dariusz P., Chair of the Board of Trustees in Poland"

and

"Please allow me to wish you a very Happy Birthday of our wonderful Fellowship and thank you for all your help and support. This day means a lot to me, I feel so grateful and privileged that I can be part of all this. There are no words to describe it but I have a feeling that you understand what I mean. Please extend mine (our) thanks to all the staff in GSO. All the best.

"In Service, Michal S., ESM & WSM delegate, International Contact Person for Alcoholics Anonymous in Czech Republic"

### 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of A.A. in Los Angeles

Saturday, March 28, 2015, a host of A.A.'s celebrated the beginning of A.A. in Southern California. The event took place at the Cecil Hotel, Noon to 10:00 p.m.

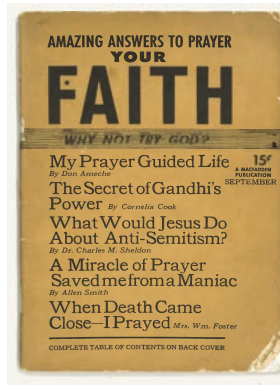
"I chose this location," Mort J. recalls, "because the price was right and there was a good psychological reason for holding a meeting down there because I knew it would be where we were headed unless we did something about it — that was our destination. Skid Row, the drunk tank, sleeping in alleys and under the bridge, winos, dead men..."

— "How A.A. Came to Los Angeles"

### Recent Acquisitions to G.S.O.'s Archives

- History of A.A. in Moore County, North Carolina
- Beginning of A.A. in Iowa, 1943–1949
- Second Edition, first printing, of the Australian Big Book, published in 2015
- *The Liquor Problem in All Ages* by Daniel Dorchester D.D., published 1884

### An Interview With Dr. X



After the Big Book was published in April of 1939, A.A. began to slowly receive publicity in the press. Well-known in A.A. history are the *Liberty Magazine* article of September 1939 and the five-part series in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, published in October-November of the same year. And, of course, the famous Jack Alexander piece in the March 1, 1941 *Saturday Evening Post*, which would catapult A.A.

into the national consciousness.

Much lesser known is an interview with a certain "Dr. X." conducted by a writer named D.J. Defoe and published in *Your Faith* magazine in September of 1939. The headline to the article read: "Through liquor, this physician lost his practice, his reputation and his self-respect. Then one night at a gathering in a private home, he found the way of escape."

Sound familiar? That's because Dr. X was in reality Dr. Bob and the article, entitled "I Saw Religion Remake A Drunkard," was about Bob's achieving sobriety through the help of God. A.A.'s Archives is in possession of what may be the only known copy of this issue of *Your Faith*, generously donated by Brad I. in September 2010.

There are a number of interesting things about "I Saw Religion Remake A Drunkard" and a few puzzles as well. As related in *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* (pages 175-176), Dr. Bob wrote to Ruth Hock, A.A. Headquarters nonalcoholic secretary, on August 8, 1939, asking if she had seen the article in *Your Faith*. Ruth Hock's reply reads, "I rushed right out and bought a copy of this month's "Faith" and it was quite a thrill. If my opinion is worth anything — bravo! That's the way I like to see it set out — clear cut, honest, straightforward and unembroidered."

"I Saw Religion Remake A Drunkard" is all these things, but, as the title and the magazine's focus would indicate, it is heavily slanted to the spiritual aspect of Dr. Bob's recovery. D.J. Defoe, a magazine writer of the twenties and thirties whose specialty was business and financial topics, seems to have known Dr. Bob before he got sober, had lost touch with him, but had heard "ugly rumors" about his drinking and his failing sur-

gical practice. However, Defoe ran into Bob in 1938 and was impressed by his firm handshake and the “honest I-can-lick-the-world look in his face.” Talking with Dr. Bob, he learned about Bob’s solitary drinking—“a deadly sopping up of poison”—and steady downfall.

But then Bob told him this story. One day, “a friend [Dr. Bob] trusted got him to attend a little meeting in a living room one evening.” Interestingly, what follows is not the story of Bob’s encounter with Bill W. in the spring of 1935, but a tale of his meeting a factory foreman who “told how he had been cured of drunkenness by prayer.” Could this have been at an Oxford Group meeting, pre-Bill?

The rest of the article focuses on the familiar way Dr. Bob worked with alcoholics—get a drunk a bed in the hospital, dry him out, and then talk to him frankly about this new program for sobriety. “I have been there myself,” Dr. Bob would say. “I know where you hide your bottles. I know every sneaky little thing you do to get liquor.”

After the man joined him in Bible reading and in prayer, he would generally be allowed to leave the hospital. If the alcoholic stayed sober, he would then begin to help other alcoholics.

*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* mischaracterizes “I Saw Religion Remake A Drunkard” as having been written by Dr. Bob, when in fact he had simply allowed himself to be interviewed by D.J. Defoe. *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* also speculates that Dr. Bob may have signed the article, meaning “that he may have been the first to break his anonymity on the public level. When queried in 1978, Ruth vaguely remembered the article and thought Dr. Bob did sign it.” (*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, page 176).

This confusion may arise from two sources. It does not appear

that the writers of *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* had access to “I Saw Religion Remake A Drunkard.” It was for a number of years a “lost” story—not easily discoverable by interested A.A.s until the advent of the digital era. (Copies of the text may now be found online, although the actual magazine is quite scarce.)

Secondly, during the course of the story, D.J. Defoe does urge “Dr. X” to give him a “signed interview,” but Dr. Bob refuses, saying: “We can’t publicize these cures. These men are outside the realm of everyday medicine. We don’t succeed every time ourselves. We can’t brag.”

This statement reflects the conflict within the program at the time between those who sought publicity to grow A.A. and those who were afraid it would harm the new movement. It’s also instructive to remember that the *Your Faith* piece appeared prior to the *Liberty* and *Cleveland Plain Dealer* articles; it was really a first, cautious stab at explaining the program to a print journalist. Finally, the article reflects Dr. Bob’s personality, to a T. At one point Dr. Bob, discussing his fear that publicity would bring a “trainload” of drunks to his door, tells Defoe: “We couldn’t handle a dozen [alcoholics]. Two is a lot. One at a time is plenty. I can’t talk to one of these fellows for more than an hour or two without feeling spent and tired, unless I talk like a parrot, and talking like a parrot wouldn’t do them any good.”

With D.J. Defoe possibly conflating events and almost certainly slanting the piece to fit the readership of *Your Faith*, “I Saw Religion Remake A Drunkard” is not quite A.A. history (although, it must be said, Dr. Bob and Ruth Hock seemed pleased with the piece). However, in the above quote, one can hear the real and unadulterated voice of Dr. Bob ringing clear as a bell. He knew “talking like a parrot” would not change the minds of any alcoholic. You had to speak from the heart.