

UNKNOWN FRIENDS OF H. P. LOVECRAFT: No.4, JAMES TOBEY PIKE

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*annotated, slightly revised, and with additional pictures,
by David Haden*

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TO THE REV. JAMES PYKE

ON HIS UNPUBLISHED VERSE

Accept, exalted Pyke, the honest praise
Of one who sits enraptur'd by your lays.
Scorn not applause from him you taught to know
The lyric strain, the true poetic glow.
Majestic bard! With what celestial skill
Your Muse can Nature in your verse instil!
Each sacred thought, each phase of joy or pain,
Flows forth in numbers from your fertile brain.
Vague, noble dreams, that slip the common grasp,
Your lofty lines in metric fetters clasp,
Singer sublime, your transcendental mind
Soars far above the realm of base mankind.
'Twas never meant you should so closely hide
The talents vast that in your soul reside,
To feel your power is every human's due;
Hoard not the wealth the gods have lent to you.
With lib'ral pen revive the poets' art;
Exalt the spirit and arouse the heart.

—H. P. LOVECRAFT
(Critic)

NOTE.—Rev. Mr. Pyke is an elderly retired Congregational minister who possesses poetical talent of the very highest order, but who, from native modesty, declines absolutely to have his works published. He has written verse since early boyhood, and has in manuscript enough lyrics, dramas, epics, sacred poems and the like to fill about ten good-sized volumes.—H. P. L.



Rev. James Tobey Pike. Collection of Randy Everts.

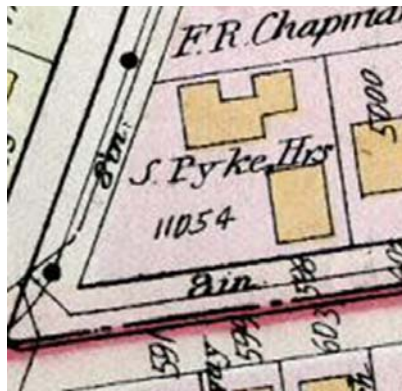
Howard Phillips Lovecraft considered his membership in the amateur press associations to be the paramount social outlet in his life. This was reflected in the astounding output of correspondence¹ he engaged in during the period 1915-1937, much of it linked in some way to the movement. Lovecraft recruited many a promising author to amateur journalism. The most interesting or ambitious of these he would tend to put on his correspondence list, and he often visited them on his summer travels. Some writers he attempted to recruit in and around Providence. By 1915 for instance, he had found enough success with a local group of predominantly Irish-American youths² to form them into an

¹ Lovecraft felt that not all personal thoughts and incidental observations of the world needed public expression in the amateur journals, and he encouraged members to confine such expression to letter writing, leaving only their verse and essays for their journals. How we might wish, today, that it had often been the other way around!

² For details see Kenneth W. Faig, *The Providence Amateur Press Club, 1914-1916*, (2008), issue 11 of Moshassuck monograph series.

evening class, and in the summer of 1915 he aided the group in the production of a one-off amateur paper called the *Providence Amateur*.

One of his “most prominent”³ local recruits came at about the same time, the Rev. James Tobey Pyke (1858-1935). At the 1910 Census Pyke was living (on his “own income”) at 237 Butler, with the teenage Lovecraft and his mother at the next house enumerated in the Census, that house being 598 Angell. T. Pyke had been residing at 237 Butler since at least 1900. This close proximity means that it seems likely that the young Lovecraft had known Pyke since early 1904, when he was aged thirteen,⁴ long before he recruited him circa 1915.⁵



Plat Book of the City of Providence, 1918, showing 237 Butler and 598 Angell located on the same plot at the corner of Butler and Angell.

³ Lovecraft wrote... “The most prominent recruit so far secured by this Committee is Rev. James T. Pyke...”

⁴ Donald Clarke claims that Pyke was a family friend, and implies that Pyke advised Lovecraft on his poetry at that time. Sadly these facts are not footnoted or referenced, and so I am unsure how Clarke knew them. Donald Clarke wrote...

“That July [1906], Lovecraft turned again to his archaic poetry, working on a magnum opus entitled “De Triumpho Naturae.” Next door to the Lovecrafts’ new residence lived the Reverend James Pyke and his aged mother. They were both poets. And, though they had known Susie Lovecraft and her son when they lived down the street, they now began to see more of each other. Unfortunately, Reverend Pyke didn’t care much for Lovecraft’s antiquated poetic style. Lovecraft set his quill aside again and did not pick it up to write another poem for seven years.” — from Donald Clarke, *A Life of Fantasy and Horror: H.P. Lovecraft*, an extract of which appeared in *The Arkham Advertiser*, Volume 1, Issue 3 (circa 1993).

⁵ There is one postcard from Pyke to Lovecraft, dated March 1915, listed in the John Hay Library collection at Brown University. My guess would be that it was kept as a remembrance of the “prize” — Pyke confirming that he would become a member.

Lovecraft introduced Pyke to readers of his journal *The Conservative* in January 1916...

INTRODUCING MR JAMES PYKE

“Of the many gifted poets entering the United Amateur Press Association during the present period of improved literary standards, few can bear comparison with the one who now makes his first appearance in these pages, Mr. James T. Pyke of Riverside, East Providence, R. I. Mr. Pyke is a gentleman blessed equally with the advantages of highest culture and of highest intellectual endowments. He is graduate both of Brown University and of Andover Theological Seminary, having been Class Poet at the latter institution. Upon his graduation from Andover, Mr. Pyke was ordained to the Congregational ministry, to which profession he lent all the remarkable genius with which favouring fortune has invested him; but the tremendous strain of pastoral activity on a delicate constitution at last proved excessive, and he has now retired to a quiet life of letters, cultivating the Muses in his cottage at Riverside, overlooking the sparkling reaches of Narragansett Bay.

The unusual modesty of Mr. Pyke has veiled a poetical genius which will now blaze out all the more resplendently because of its previous concealment.⁶ His first efforts were made in boyhood, and specimens written at the age of seventeen show all the inspiration and polish to be expected from a man of mature years. But these were no more than the faint promise of future excellence. His poems of manhood are infinitely moving and beautiful. Nature, viewed through the medium of his sonnets, takes on new and lovelier aspects, whilst his longer poems cover every phase of human life and aspiration. *The Conservative's* lines in the “United Official Quarterly” for November, 1914,⁷ were an endeavor to convey some idea of their grace and loftiness. Mr. Pyke's particular models in

⁶ He appears to have had the ‘gentleman poet’ outlook, of those who wrote for their own pleasure and for the refinement of their own sensibilities, rather than publication.

⁷ A reproduction of which fronts this essay.

verse have ever been the New England poets, and to the classic coterie of the preceding century he may be justly deemed a legitimate successor. It is not often that an organisation of amateurs can boast the membership of a genius of Mr. Pyke's type and *The Conservative* has scant need to say that he is vastly proud to have been the means of bringing Mr. Pyke into his beloved United Amateur Press Association."

As a Brown graduate and local poet Pyke had obvious attributes that would have attracted Lovecraft. But there were others: he had suffered from ill health, as Lovecraft did as a youth; his father was born in England; he graduated from Brown University with a firm Classical background in English, Latin and Greek. And he was a clergyman, like Lovecraft's ancestors in England. Of the Rev. Pyke Lovecraft further noted...

"The most prominent recruit so far secured by this Committee is Rev. James T. Pyke, of Riverside, R. I., a poet who probably stands unique amongst us in his excellence. His enrolment in the ranks is perhaps our most considerable achievement up to date." — from "Report of First Vice-President", November 1915.

"James Tobey Pyke, a lyrical and philosophical poet of high scholastic attainments, contributes two poems; "Maia", and "The Poet". The latter is a stately sonnet, rich in material for reflection. Such is the quality of Mr. Pyke's work, that his occasional contributions are ever to be acclaimed with the keenest interest and appreciation." — Lovecraft in *The United Amateur*, April 1916. Reprinted in *Writings in the United Amateur, 1915-1922*.

James Tobey Pyke was born on 2nd December 1858 in Providence, the only son of British-born Samuel Pyke (1830-1904) and his wife Eleanor Fish Pyke (1834-1912). Samuel Pyke became a well-known shoe and boot shop owner and sent his son to Brown University. James Tobey Pyke entered Brown on a scholarship in 1876: *The President's Premium for Excellence in Classical Studies for Greek*, with the... "second premium to James T. Pyke... in the University Grammar School". In 1879, James Pyke won the State

Scholarship to Brown University and graduated in the B.A. degree class of 1880. Standing alongside him at the graduation was his future brother-in-law, the Rev. Gibbs Braislin — who was to marry James's sister Jennie Collins Pyke, the only other surviving child of Samuel and Eleanor. Another classmate from 1880 was Zechariah Chafee, Jr. (1859-1943) who would champion the poetry of James T. Pyke after the latter's demise. Three years later, James T. Pyke obtained his M.A. degree from Brown University.

Pyke enrolled at the Andover Theological Seminary on 1st October 1883 in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. On 17th October 1884, he accepted his call as Pastor and was ordained a Minister of the Gospel and sent to Concord, NH. There he was pastor of Congregational Churches in East Concord, NH from 1883 to 1885. He was then sent to Lawrence, Massachusetts from 1887 to 1889. There his health broke down and this forced him to resign his position at the East Congregational Church.

He left the active ministry to try to take up teaching, and in 1889/1890 was an Assistant Instructor in the Preparatory Department for English and Latin at Pennsylvania State College. But in 1890 he returned to Providence and worked at his father's shoe business⁸ until his retirement.

After his father died in 1904, Pyke retired and by 1915 was residing in Riverside, a section of East Providence, when Lovecraft solicited his poetry for *The Conservative*. James Tobey Pyke was listed in the Census as a "roomer" in 1930⁹ and he died in Providence nearly exactly two years before Lovecraft. The notice of his death appeared in the *Providence Journal* on 18th March 1935:¹⁰

"Rev. James Tobey Pyke, former Congregational minister, died at the Rhode Island Hospital, Providence, March 16, 1935, after a short illness."

⁸ At 81 South Main St., Providence.

⁹ There is also an address from around this time. *The General Catalogue of Andover Theological Seminary* 1927 listed: James Tobey Pyke. Address 308 Benefit St., Providence, R.I.

¹⁰ *The Brown Alumni monthly* printed the same notice.

Some weeks before he died, Pyke wrote to his classmate Zechariah Chafee:

Mr. Z. Chafee.

Dear Friend--

I was somewhat taken by surprise and did not respond as I should have done to your cheery wishes for a happy New Year. I now take the opportunity to correct my gaucherie and to wish you the same in full measure.

How variously are we compensated! I am free virtually from all business concern which my condition in any event would scarcely suffer me to undergo, while you who keep up with the times with comparatively so much of continuing youthful vigor have plenty of business care and pressure; for Coddling Street would hardly be itself without The Builders Iron Foundry, and I often recall how Pres. Paunce at one of the class reunions referred at the time in some reference to your class services to the exacting conditions of such a big plant, and you were young then to have such care come upon you; but it must be a great satisfaction to you to think how you were able to adapt yourself to the load and to maintain such measures of health and strength through all these years.

But the lot of life with all its restrictions on all human powers and prospects never lets us go unscathed but with all the benevolence of compensations shapes us on many a potter's wheel of trial.

But with each New Year we think upon our mercies and lift up our hearts with renewed cheer. We like to think of all our friends as in a conspiracy of beautiful silence, as to a sort of Jobean storm that so often beats upon our human hearts that perchance may not aggravate the mists of sorrow, so Heaven itself seems divinely silent in the respect of any outward expression, and the more we reconcile ourselves to the Divine order the more we feel the Divine consistency of that intimate and inwardly experienced silence which breathes of the fullness of immortality. That is a great ideal for finite deliverance but in the reaching towards it there is peace!

Sincerely yours

J. T. Pyke '80

Jan. 4, 1935
Prov. R.I.

After Pyke's death, Zechariah Chafee sent the following two letters to Gibbs Braislin concerning his friend's poetry:¹¹

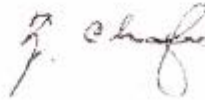
My dear Gibbs:

I was with your son and your daughter-in-law, Lane, Perry and Angell, Judge Gorham and one or two others at Pyke's funeral yesterday, and after the service your son and your daughter-in-law came to our office and later to supper with me.

We had a good talk, and I enjoyed hearing about you; and learning through them some things I had not known about Pyke, including his continued interest in writing poetry. I am sure the library would like to have some of these poems for the Harris Collection, and I would like to have one or two that you think typical for our Class records.

I showed your son the last letter I received from Pyke and he felt that it would be of interest to you, so I am enclosing a copy herewith. He also said that he would ask you to write for the Class the notice about Pyke which can be sent to the Class. You are often in my thoughts and always to my happiness.

Sincerely yours,



March 18th 1935

¹¹ The second and third letters imply that Pyke's unpublished work may just have found its way into what by the 1970s was called the "Harris collection of American poetry and plays, Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island", for which a thirteen volume catalog was made in 1972.

Z. CHAFFEE
5 COOKE STREET
PROVIDENCE, R.I.

Dear Gibbs:

You will be interested to know that I have had quite a long talk with the librarian at our college about Pyke's poetry, and he expresses the desire to have for the Harris Collection all of the originals that you have or the copies of such as you do not care to part with.

Keepman, too, you will be pleased to know, expressed a very great admiration for the poems which I sent him and desires to see more of those written by Pyke.

It is a curious thing that I never suspected he was giving so much thought and time to poetry. I knew he had written some verses for some of our class reunions, but as that is not very uncommon throughout the class I had not thought further about Pyke's interest in poetry. You can look over what you have at your convenience and will use your judgment about the Harris Collection.

There are a good many things I want to write about, but just these weeks I seem to feel a little short of time. So, with my very best wishes, I am

Affectionately yours,

April 9th 1935.



My thanks to Randy Everts for allowing his essay to be published for the first time on my Tentacii blog. Published 16th July 2014, on the Tentacii blog at www.tentacii.wordpress.com