

# The Evidence on "O. K."

ALLEN WALKER READ

WHEN you first look at the vast quantity of writing on the origin of "O. K.," you find a wilderness of claims and counter-claims. But when you discard the hearsay evidence, the unfounded speculation, and the misread manuscripts, you get a reasonable pattern of historical development. I am able to present here the earliest documentary evidence; first, however, it is necessary to dispose of four alleged instances that arise from misinterpreted manuscripts.

The earliest of these is dated December 8, 1565. The letters O. K. are said to occur at the end of the will of Thomas Cumberland, a lorimer of London, entered in the Archdeaconry Court registers. It is unreasonable to suppose that "O. K." as we know it could have lain dormant for nearly three hundred years. The finder of it, as he says in *Notes and Queries* for June 10, 1911, did not think that the letters were the initials of the scrivener, but some such explanation must be the case. Another alleged instance comes from the year 1757, but an examination of the manuscript shows that it is not "O. K." at all but an ill-written "Att.," standing for "Attestation" or "Attested by" at the end of a document. For many years faith has been put in an instance of 1790, from the records of Summer County, Tennessee, with this entry: "Andrew Jackson, Esq., proved a Bill of Sale from Hugh McGary to Gaspar Mansker, for a negro man, which was O.

K." But an investigator has examined this manuscript, as he writes in *American Speech* for April, 1941, and finds that the "O. K." is clearly "O. R.," standing for "Order Recorded." Finally, an alleged instance of 1815 has recently turned up in the diary of a Boston businessman, William Richardson. The marks have the appearance of a small "o k," with out periods, interlined at a blotted place in the manuscript; but they do not fit into the sense well and are out of tone with the other parts of the text. All things considered, we can consign the instances of 1565, 1757, 1790, and 1815 to the same limbo.

THE story begins, then, in the Spring of 1840, and is closely bound up with the political situation in New York City. The Democratic Party was intent on re-electing Martin Van Buren for a second term, and they kept up interest, particularly in the radical Locofoco branch, by means of a set of social clubs. On March 11, 1840, the Locofoco newspaper, the *New York New Era*, listed the clubs as follows—the Butt Enders, the Tammany Temple, the Indomitables, the Huge Paws (named for their symbol, a muscular arm grasping a hammer), the Van Buren Association, and the Simon Pures. Twelve days later a new club made its first public appearance by an announcement of a meeting to be held March 24, 1840. This was "The Democratic O. K. Club," and the name marks the first appearance of "O. K."

The meaning of the name was held a secret, in keeping with political practices of the time. The meteoric rise of the "Know-Nothing" party a few years later was based on a similar secrecy, with oaths not to reveal its mysteries. As we shall see later, this "O. K. Club" was named after "Old Kinderhook," the birthplace of Martin Van Buren, near Albany. In papers of the time Van Buren was referred to in such terms as "the magician of Kinderhook," "your cunning Kinderhook Fox," and "the Kinderhook pony." Later in the year, after Van

Buren was defeated, a Whig banner carried this inscription:

K. K. K. K. K.  
KINDERHOOK KANDIDATE KANT  
KOME IT KWITE

The Charter election in New York was to be held April 14, 1840, and the preceding weeks contained much political flurry. The Whigs arranged for a meeting at the Masonic Hall on March 27, to discuss the pending Registry Bill, which they favored. The

MEETING TO NIGHT.

**O. K.**

The British Whig papers of this city contain a call for a public meeting to be held *this evening* in MASONIC HALL, and not at National Hall, the former *sever'd* head quarters of the Seward party, as was announced in the *Courier & Enquirer* of yesterday. Amongst the signers of the call we perceive the names of P. I. Nevius, Aaron Clark, Moses H. Grinnel, and the great Don-Alonzo Cushman—who we understand has been lobbying at Albany to procure the passage of the odious Registry Law. Those "who would render the right of universal suffrage easy of exercise and convenient to all" are requested according to the call to be in attendance. To all such we say go.

From the *N. Y. New Era*, March 27, 1840. p. 2/2. Here the letters O. K. are used as a cabalistic symbol, to mystify political opponents.

Locofocos were angered by the announcement, addressed to "citizens of New York, without distinction of party," for it was obviously a Whig affair. The *New Era*, therefore, on the morning of the day of the meeting published a paragraph that was a veiled incitement to riot and disturbance. The heading (see reproduction) contained the letters "O. K." in large type, and as the meaning was a secret, they were a cabalistic device to mystify the opposition.

At this meeting on March 27 the Locofocos used "O. K." as a watchword. According to the *New York Times* of March 28, p. 2c: "The war cry of the Locofocos, was O. K., the two letters paraded at the head of the article in the *Era*, to which we have referred. 'Down with the Whigs,

BY THE DEMOCRATIC O. K. CLUB, here  
heroby ordered to meet at the House of Jacob  
Colvin, 245 Grand street, on Tuesday evening,  
24th inst. at 7 o'clock.  
Punctual attendance is requested,  
By order,  
WILLIAM STOKELY, President.  
John H. Low, Secretary. m29 21

From the *N. Y. New Era*, March 23, 1840, p. 3/2 showing the first authentic appearance of O.K. As the name of a Democratic club, it signified "Old Kinderhook," after the birthplace of Martin Van Buren, whose re-election the club favored.

boys, O. K.', was the shout of these poor, deluded men. We have not words to express our abhorrence of the charlatans who fomented the disturbance." The New York *Morning Herald*, March 28, was more restrained in writing: "About 500 stout strapping men, many of them with sticks, . . . marched three and three, noiselessly and orderly. The word, O. K. was passed from mouth to mouth, a cheer was given, and they rushed into the Hall and upstairs, like a torrent." The New York *Daily Express* in its report, March 28, p. 2b, also mentioned the slogan: "The gang of rioters headed by Custom House officers, and a Locofoco Street Inspector, rushed through the lower hall, shouting the watchword of the New Era, 'O K,' and attacked the persons on the stairs." It will be noted that the expression "O. K." is here definitely attributed to the *New Era*, and by finding the first instance in that paper we are very near the beginning. The New York *Times* on April 10, p. 2c, referred to the *New Era* as "the brazen organ of the O K boys." The newness of "O. K." is further supported by a sentence from the New York *American*, March 28, p. 2c: "This band of the 'Old Butt-Enders,' reorganized under the new cognomen of the O. K. club, seemed to consider the invitation of the New Era as sufficient authority for violence and outrage."

The Whigs would not long put up with this secret Locofoco slogan, and in the next few weeks they satirically attributed many meanings to it. First in the field was the *Morning Herald*, March 30, p. 2a, with this paragraph:

THE O. K. CLUB—O. K. LITERATURE.—This gang of loafers and litterateurs, who broke in upon the Whigs at Masonic Hall on Friday evening last, and kicked up the row there, are said to number 1,000 bravos, being the picked men of the old "huge paws"—"butt enders"—"roarers," and "ball rollers." The origin of their name, O. K., is curious and characteristic. A few years ago, some person accused Amos Kendall to General Jackson, of being no better than he should be. "Let me examine the papers," said the old hero, "I'll soon tell whether Mr. Kendall is right or wrong." The General did so and found every thing right. "Tie up them papers," said the General. They were tied up. "Mark on them, 'O. K.," continued the General. O. K. was marked upon them. "By the eternal," said the good old General, taking his pipe from his mouth, "Amos is *Ole Kur-rek* (all correct) and no mistake," blowing the smoke up the chimney's cheek. After this the character of Amos was established on the rock of Gibraltar. Harvard College, on hearing of this event, was thrown into extacies, and made the General an LL. D., which he is to this day. The O. K.'s are now the most original and learned Locofoco club

# THIS WEEK

## Articles

	PAGE
THE EVIDENCE ON "O. K."	
By Allen Walker Read.....	3
DOUBLE-TALK TALES	
<i>My Heart's in the By-lines:</i>	
<i>The Word of Harpoot Keoft</i>	
By Otis Ferguson.....	11

## Reviews

GOOD NEIGHBORS	
By Hubert Herring	
Reviewed by Dexter Perkins.....	5
POEMS	
By Ridgeley Torrence	
COCK ON THE RIDGE	
By Mary Wrinn	
SOUTH STAR	
By John Gould Fletcher	
Reviewed by Louis Untermeyer.....	6
THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM	
By A. J. Cronin	
Reviewed by Basil Davenport.....	7
CHRISTOPHER STRANGE	
By Ruth Eleanor McKee	
Reviewed by James D. Hart.....	7
FATHER OF THE BLUES	
By W. C. Handy	
Reviewed by Charles Edward Smith.....	10
TWO SURVIVED	
By Guy Pearce Jones	
Reviewed by Eric Devine.....	12
SHELTER	
By Jane Nicholson	
Reviewed by Frances Smyth.....	12
SEA POWER IN THE MACHINE AGE	
By Bernard Brodie	
Reviewed by W. D. Puleston.....	13
FOR THE HEATHEN ARE WRONG	
By Eugene Bagger	
Reviewed by Joseph Hilton Smyth.....	14
THE SHADOW OF THE ARROW	
By Margaret Long, M.D.	
Reviewed by Edwin L. Sabin.....	14
WOLF CHILD AND HUMAN CHILD	
By Arnold Gesell	
Reviewed by Goodwin Watson.....	15

## Departments

YOUR LITERARY I.Q.....	6
EDITORIAL.....	8
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.....	9
TRADE WINDS.....	16
THE CRIMINAL RECORD.....	17
BOOKS IN BRIEF.....	17
DOUBLE-CROSTICS: No. 382.....	19

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of the day. Their arguments are the most convincing test logicians ever invented.

AS this has more spice than is usual among newspapers of the time, it may be from the pen of James Gordon Bennett himself. Without question it is purely satirical, pouring scorn on the "grand old man" of the Democratic party, then in retirement at the Hermitage; and thus the connection of Jackson with "O. K." is a fabrication out of whole cloth.

This same explanation appeared in the N. Y. *Commercial Advertiser* three days later, April 2, p. 2b: "'O. K.'—The meaning of these mysterious letters, the power of which, when exerted, is so fatal to the peace and harmony of the city, is a question of grave deliberation in certain quarters. We are not proficient in cabalistic puzzles; but it is asserted that these constituted the endorsement of General Jackson upon papers that he had examined and found right—thus, O. K.—*Oll Korreect*." This paragraph appeared also in the N. Y. *Spectator*, April 6, p. 1b, and was reprinted in the *Albany Advertiser* and thence taken into the N. Y. *Daily Express*, April 7, p. 2a. Thus it gained wide publicity.

Other papers made sportive explanations, such as that of the *Daily Express* on April 2, p. 2c: "'O. K.'—Many are puzzled to know the definition of these mysterious letters. It is Arabic, reads backwards, and means *kicked out*—of Masonic Hall." When the Democrats were soundly defeated in an election in Connecticut, the same paper reported (April 11, p. 2c): "'O. K.'—The wicked Whigs have put a new definition to these strange initials. They translate them now *Old Connecticut*." The *Times* of April 13, p. 2a, echoed: "Last and most approved version.—O. K. OLD CONNECTICUT!!!" Another Whig version soon current was "Out of 'Kash,' Out of 'Kredit,' Out of 'Karacter,' and Out of 'Klothes.'" Some months later a Congressman from Illinois on the floor of the House of Representatives offered the interpretation "Orful Kal-amity."

Bennett continued his chaffing in the *Morning Herald* of April 1, p. 2c:

### O. K.

NEW YORK, Mar. 27, 1840

MR. BENNETT:

SIR: You have taken the leborly (*sic passim*) to Slander us most publicly in this mornings paper. the O. K. Institute which you hav so falsley repented was established for our own pleasure and enjoyment and was never intended for sich a d - - d Rascale as your self

A MEMBER

which you was mean enought to pursenate

(Continued on page 10)

# Geographical Companions

*GOOD NEIGHBORS. Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Seventeen Other Countries. By Hubert Herring. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1941. 381 pp. \$3.*

Reviewed by DEXTER PERKINS

THE shadow of the war in Europe hangs heavy over the New World today. On the one side of the Atlantic a grim and ruthless despotism prepares ever new projects of conquest; on the other, this country of ours girds itself in more and more far-reaching opposition to the totalitarian ideal. It seeks to practise a policy of friendship and understanding with the twenty other republics of the New World; it seeks to preserve and enlarge the democratic spirit in the diplomacy of the Western hemisphere. What are its chances of success? How stands the reckoning, as of 1941.

Mr. Hubert Herring is well equipped to answer this question, both by the breadth of his knowledge of Latin America, and by the candor of his spirit. The book which he has written deals only cursorily—perhaps too cursorily—with all but the ABC powers. It is written for the vague person known as the “general reader,” rather than for scholars. Its distinctive merit lies in the mingled realism and sympathy of its approach to the Latin-American scene, in the practical good sense and clear-eyed awareness of future perils which the author repeatedly demonstrates.

Ignorance and sentimentality are alike hostile to the forging of an effective policy with regard to Latin America. We like to speak of them as democracies; but they deserve such a name, of course, only in varying degrees. Applied to Paraguay or Bolivia, or the Dominican Republic, or the smaller states of Central America, the word has little content. It has little content in Haiti, or in Ecuador. The corporative state of General Getulio Vargas in Brazil, as Mr. Herring makes clear, is a mockery of democratic forms. But, in contrast, democratic processes have a considerable vitality in Argentina, in Uruguay, in Chile, in present-day Colombia; the Aprista movement in Peru is inspired by democratic ideals; to the rigid dictatorship of Gomez in Venezuela has succeeded a regime more nearly inspired with the democratic spirit; in Mexico democratic forces have been bravely at work since the revolution of 1910. But the fight for democracy is being fought—it has not been won; this Mr. Herring makes clear again and again.

And the perils are real. There can

be no question of the fact that Hitlerian Germany is paying great attention to many of the Latin-American states; it has large diplomatic representation in the more important ones; and its work is abetted by some sections of the German population, especially in the three great states of South America, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. Mr. Herring fears, also, the attitude of a great land-owning upper class, all too authoritarian in its sympathies, all too ready to oppose social reform and the progress of the masses with “strong” government.

The easy answer to this would be a German defeat in the present war. But is that answer a complete one? Mr. Herring calls attention to a real danger in the vast increase of the material power of our own country, an increase not always viewed with enthusiasm by those who live below the Rio Grande. Will the policy of Washington always be patient and forbearing? Will the open hand of economic assistance never be withdrawn? Will we be content to persuade, or will we in due course seek to coerce the states of Latin America, and shape them to our will and purposes by the power of the sword? Latin Americans ask this question, if our own people do not; they are not so sure as we are that they are threatened from abroad; and they evaluate

our own policy in the light of a past that has not always been happy for them. Americans should realize all this; they will do so if they read “Good Neighbors.”

They will get, too, much useful information on the politics and economy of the three great states already mentioned, and a suggestive summary of the principal factors in the political and economic life of the rest.

*Dexter Perkins is the author of “Hands Off: A History of the Monroe Doctrine.”*



—Map from “South American Primer,” by Katherine Rodell.

## Tour de Force

*Lines to a Horse Riding in a Motor Truck*

By Arthur W. Bell

WAS life in harness but a passing phase?  
 In mystified bewilderment he rides,  
 Nor can he reconcile the part he plays  
 With changed perspective which the mode provides.  
 He has his feet no longer on the ground;  
 His doom appears foreshadowed by his stance,  
 In looking backward with a wistful glance  
 As well aware of being outward bound.  
 The right to ride was never better earned;  
 A heritage of drudgery and toil  
 Has met relief with gasoline and oil,  
 And here we see the tables neatly turned:—  
 By dint of third dimensional resource  
 Now progress puts the cart beneath the horse.