

Chronicles of Brunonia

The Man Behind the Song: James Andrew DeWolf and the Unlikely “Alma Mater”

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An exploration into the creation and genesis of Brown University’s “Alma Mater” through the history of its author, James Andrew DeWolf, a patrician Rhode Islander who led a life of quiet nonconformity and great achievements through the scope of war, career, and songwriting.

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- I. *Alma Mater! we hail thee with loyal devotion,
And bring to thine altar our offering of praise...
The happiest moment of youth's fleeting hours,
We've passed, 'neath the shade of these time-honored walls,
And sorrows as transient as April's brief shower
Have clouded our life in Brunonia's halls*

On a gray, brisk autumn Saturday morning in Providence, Rhode Island, Brown Stadium is alight with noise and color: the Brown University football players huddle in formation, fans cheer from the stands, and the marching band, replete with tubas, drums, and red uniforms, stomps in place. The band naturally awaits a Brown victory, but for an unexpected reason: if Brown wins, the band members perform the celebratory first verse of the school's "Alma Mater," a longstanding custom at football games; if Brown loses, they hang their heads, unable to play "Alma Mater," an encapsulation of Brown pride and honor. In much the same way that actors call Shakespeare's *Macbeth* "The Scottish Play" before and during performances to avoid the true name's jinxing effect, the Brown band refers to the "Alma Mater" as "That Song" because reference to the "Alma Mater" will cause a Brown loss. And when someone accidentally does mention "Alma Mater," it is the Brown band's solemn duty to point, shake heads, and chant in chorus, "It's all your fault!"

"Alma Mater's" journey to this bizarre legacy in Brown musical memory did not follow a road paved with glory. One would think that "Alma Mater" — at points in history played both as a drinking song and at the bestowal of baccalaureates — would have been established with the inception of the school. It

is easy to imagine a scene in which a stately ex-president solemnly sits at a writing desk, crafting the perfect school song and then looks on contentedly as the orchestra plays the fruit of his labor at opening convocations, mid-year completion ceremonies, and commencements. This image, however, is false. The author of the “Alma Mater” was a student, James Andrew DeWolf, who may not have anticipated that “Alma Mater” would immortalize him in Brown history in the way that it has, but who, given his family’s blueblood history, may have had expected it to be preserved in Rhode Island history in one way or another.

* * *

On October 11, 1839, twenty years before “Alma Mater” was ever scripted, Dr. James John DeWolf and Annette Halsey DeWolf gave birth to their third child, James Andrew DeWolf. They raised James Andrew and his three siblings in Bristol, Rhode Island, and although the details of James Andrew’s childhood have been lost to the past, it is certain that the DeWolfs enjoyed a measure of luxury, education, and riches that, while rare in nineteenth century America at large, was commonplace for members of the DeWolf lineage.

James Andrew’s father was a doctor, a mark of special prestige in an era that trained elites to be doctors, ministers, lawyers, and not much else. He had attended Brown for a time, earned a medical degree from Harvard, and managed to find a wife whose genealogy trumped even his own: Annette Halsey DeWolf was a descendent of John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts who declared Boston to be a “citty on a hill” for the world to emulate.

The DeWolfs of the eighteenth century built their fortune in slave trading to the extent that their name was practically synonymous with that of the slave

port, Bristol. James Andrew's ancestor James DeWolf owned a company that accounted for 59.4% of Rhode Island slave trade, served as state senator, and is the subject of the vast majority of public information on the DeWolf family. By the time of James Andrew's birth, there is no record of DeWolf family slave holdings. The family had grown too large — due to numerous births to defy high child mortality rates — for proper documentation, explaining the surname's varied spellings (D'Wolf, DeWoolf, D'Woolf, DeWolfe) and the paucity of information on James Andrew. Whatever the variations in DeWolf spellings, as a whole the family was wealthy, educated, and, as was typical of antebellum Rhode Island, religious.

If one believes DeWolf descendent Alicia Horton Middleton's claim that the patrician "inhabitants of Old Bristol up to the end of the Civil War were nearly all related to each other," then James Andrew's unexceptional physical appearance at his matriculation into Brown University in the fall of 1857 suggested the looks of many in Rhode Island at the time. He had dark eyes, softly-waved dark hair, bushy eyebrows, thin lips, and a straight and prominent nose, wearing the sober dress of the 1800s — a lapelled overcoat, collared shirt, and single-breasted vest. Yet, as his classmate W. Whitman Bailey would later attest, James Andrew possessed exceptional talents that his ordinary features belied.

James Andrew joined Brown's vivacious third fraternity, Psi Upsilon, which had been controversial at its inception as a secret society fewer than two decades before. Although the doings of a secret society remain secret, its members no doubt conducted induction ceremonies and pranks around campus.

Apparently studious, James Andrew was nominated as Psi Upsilon's editor to the "Brown Paper," an annual newsletter-cum-newspaper-cum-yearbook that published humorous poetry accusing sophomores of mischief, updates on changes in faculty and athletics, and a letter from the editors.

James Andrew, like his peers, would spend free time lounging on the steps of Manning Hall, the chapel on the Main Green adjacent to Brown's oldest dormitory, Hope College. At the day's close, students leaned against pillars, sat, or lied on the steps, complaining about their workloads, exchanging stories of their favorite professors, daydreaming, boasting about girls, and bursting into spontaneous song, perhaps spitting out rivulets of tobacco juice onto stained grass. Without television, radio, or recorded music, song was as important to Manning Hall as jocular poetry was to the "Brown Paper."

A particular favorite at Manning Hall was George Killmark's "Araby's Daughter," excerpted from the third book of Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*. The spirited, upbeat tune of "Araby's Daughter" lent itself so well to recreational singing that it was later adapted to fit Samuel Woodworth's popular poem "The Old Oaken Bucket" and inspired a generation of brawny, raucous men to belt out the lyrics while still wearing dress clothing.

Sometime between Manning Hall sing-alongs, philosophy lectures, "Brown Paper" editing, and Psi Upsilon events of 1860, James Andrew's fraternity brothers decided that Brown should create its own distinctive song. Maybe the brothers congregated one night in armchairs around a fire to casually discuss the matter, or maybe it was a formal initiative by some brothers. Either

way, James Andrew, who was experienced in versifying, was a logical man for the job.

“Shouldn’t Old Brown have a distinctive song?”

Grumbles of assent.

“Why don’t you write one, James?”

Ever the modest student, perhaps he resisted initially and suggested another candidate, or maybe he agreed at once. Unsurprisingly, he chose “Araby’s Daughter” as his prototype to capture the impromptu character of “Old Brown,” the title he gave his song to express “some Brown spirit.” “Old Brown,” different from “Araby’s Daughter” in key, time, and in lyrics, does maintain an air of spontaneity, but the song lyrics are hardly impromptu. Following a neat ABAB rhyme scheme, James Andrew carefully traced the Brown student’s path from joyful undergraduate life through colorful manhood to nostalgic old age. Perhaps James Andrew’s clout on the “Brown Paper” (called “The Brunonian” that year and the next) influenced the song’s publication, but whatever the reason, *Encyclopedia Brunoniana* maintains that the song first appeared in the November 1860 edition. Brown archives’ 1860 edition, however, holds no record of the song. Whether the copy is missing a page or *Encyclopedia Brunoniana* has erred in the history of the initial publication is unclear, but what is clear is that the song’s reception at the time of publication was tepid at best, a failure despite its grand intentions. It would take almost a decade before it would be rediscovered and raised to a more reverent state.

II. *And when we depart from thy friendly protection,
And boldly launch out upon life's stormy main,
We'll oft look behind us, with grateful affection...
When from youth we have journeyed to manhood's high station*

Because James Andrew was later reluctant to speak of “Alma Mater’s” eventual success, claiming modestly that he had “half-forgotten” about the song, it is impossible to conjecture how he felt about its initial failure. It is safe to assume, however, that he didn’t dwell on the matter; more pressing matters threatened both his school and country.

At the close of James Andrew’s final year at Brown, the Union and the Confederacy were on the brink of civil war. 1861 was a year of great patriotism at Brown and in Rhode Island: Northerners believed fervently that protecting the Union was a noble cause. In James Andrew’s senior year, the college was a veritable “nursery of patriotism,” and military spirit ran “high and strong at Old Brown.” Students organized a squad, the University Cadets, which had its members assemble three times a week on the manicured Main Green to practice drills and learn military techniques and history.

In 1861, responding to President Abraham Lincoln’s call for troops, Rhode Island Governor William Sprague urged twenty-one undergraduates, four of them seniors, to enlist in the Union Army. James Andrew was one of the four to enlist in the First Rhode Island Volunteers regiment, a ninety-day battle unit, on April 17, 1861, prioritizing a fight for his country over final exams and nominations for graduation speakers.

Even though Rhode Island was the only state in the Union that never needed to institute a draft to fill its regiments, the question still remains why James Andrew, son of prominent parents with the political sway necessary to avoid war if need be, willingly elected to enlist. Was he enlisting against the wishes of his family, or were they enthusiastic? Did he want to prove his valor to himself, or did he truly believe in the cause? James Andrew's life before 1861 was typical, but his voluntary enlistment offers a glimpse into how James Andrew would subsequently differ from his peers.

Although there isn't any information on the specifics of his service in the army, accounts from soldiers in comparable situations help to illustrate his wartime experience. James Andrew's regiment, the First Rhode Island Volunteers, also known as the Rhode Island Detached Militia, joined the Second New Hampshire, Second Rhode Island, First Rhode Island Light Artillery, and Seventy-First New York under Colonel Ambrose E. Burnside's command.

Because James Andrew fought at the beginning of the war, his conditions would not have been as dire as those of later years, but war was nevertheless a filthy, terrible ordeal. Corporal Elisha Hunt Rhodes of Rhode Island's First Light Infantry Company recorded eating rations of stale bread, probably-rotting salt beef, and plum pudding on his travels from Providence, Rhode Island to the site of formal training in Washington, D.C. Many of the soldiers sported moustaches and beards in the style of the times, and without proper barbers or baths, they would have been tormented by body lice. Without any spare time to boil water to kill the vermin, they would have cursed and scratched, leaving angry red welts on their skin. Their clothing, which they couldn't change often, chafed against their

skin in the heat, especially during the five day march to Virginia near the Manassas railway junction, which on July 21, 1861 became the site of the Battle of First Bull Run, the first major battle of the Civil War.

Although James Andrew detailed nothing of the Battle of First Bull Run, other records relay pure pandemonium. It is unknown whether James Andrew was brave or timid, but because First Bull Run was a strategic mayhem, it is safe to assume the confusion, fear, and exhaustion he felt. If he were carrying a heavy pack, his back would have ached; if he were thinking of his family at the time, his ache would have been of a different kind. He was parched, sweating profusely under the steaming July sun, flies buzzing around his head, bodies maimed and dropping around him. The disembowelment, bayonet-wielding, and cries of horror within the battlefield, however, sharply contrasted the reactions on the sidelines: families picnicked at Manassas to watch the battle, which must have felt like it were a story coming alive in much the same way as modern movies. The battle, unlike movies, happened in real time, and killed and injured some 3,500 soldiers. It was a debacle for the North, which had reacted too slowly to the Confederate attack on its right flank. Yet, of the some 35,000 troops at Manassas, only 18,000 were engaged in the battle. Whether James Andrew saw combat is impossible to tell: he was neither injured nor listed in the veterans' record of the Civil War, but such omissions during chaotic wartime were not necessarily uncommon.

The war raged as James Andrew was safely mustered out of service with his regiment on August 2, 1861. He graduated from Brown with Phi Beta Kappa honors, yet he re-enlisted in 1863 as the acting assistant surgeon of the U.S. Army

at Fortress Monroe, Virginia. There are no accessible records on his service in 1863, the nadir of troop participation and corruption. In 1863, when profiteers sold the armies shoddy materials to run high earnings and the country's elite paid their way out of duty, it was a mark of James Andrew fulfillment of his duty as a man, Christian, and American that he chose to re-enlist.

III. *And when life's golden autumn with winter is blending...
When the blightings of age on our heads are descending...
On the scenes of our student life often we'll ponder,
And smile as we murmur the name of Old Brown*

In 1865, James Andrew received his medical degree from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons with a thesis on "Bronchocele." By that time, he was a war veteran, college and medical school graduate, and well-regarded twenty-six-year-old. 1865 would have been the optimal point for James Andrew to marry. Instead, he worked at a slew of jobs, among them as acting medical cadet at New York's McDougall General Hospital and doctor in Providence, Rhode Island. He didn't marry. Whatever the reason — whether he had sexual tendencies he wished to hide, couldn't find a suitable wife, had had his heart broken, or was romantically reclusive or uninterested — James Andrew's break, whether deliberate or not, from the societal norm of marriage suggests a continued, quiet nonconformity.

Instead of following conventional life scripts, James Andrew immigrated to Trinidad in 1870. A roughly rectangular island in the West Indies first discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1498, Trinidad had passed through Spanish, French, and finally British hands so that by the time DeWolf arrived in bustling, sunny Port of Spain he became a British subject. Although primitive by U.S. standards in 1870, Trinidad was enjoying the boost of its recently discovered lifeblood of oil and gas deposits, which had salvaged the island's economy after the collapse of its sugar industry in the late eighteenth century.

The reason behind James Andrew's emigration is unknown; he had family in Bristol and a budding career. Perhaps, though, Trinidad's temperate climate felt like a respite from the rough weather of the Northeastern U.S. (even though DeWolf would return periodically, both to visit family and to enjoy the brisk autumn Rhode Island air). Not only did Trinidad offer a tropical climate without the need to master a foreign language, but life there was a welcome break from war-ravaged America, where, unlike Britain's rigid yet "paternal" rule, Jim Crow laws and botched Reconstruction were dividing the nation. Trinidad provided opportunities in a burgeoning economy without the haunting specter of the Civil War, or as perhaps was true in James Andrew's case, without the guilty conscience of a slaveholding legacy: slavery had been abolished in 1834, even though most of the population was of black slave origin. As was typical in the Caribbean, social hierarchy securely placed whites at the top, leading James Andrew directly to the Trinidadian elite. He joined the established Creole class, which, according to a Trinidadian historian, was "augmented by people coming from Europe or North America after 1838, who settled in the island" and entrenched themselves in civil service.

As a doctor, James Andrew had charge of thirty doctors and fifteen hospitals. He was entitled to precede his name with the title "Honourable," but his humbleness would not allow for a display of such prestige, even when he ascended in the Trinidadian ranks under the Governor's Council of the Crown Colony of Trinidad hierarchy to become Surgeon General in 1901.

Meanwhile, James Andrew's father sent him clippings from Rhode Island newspapers to alert him to "Alma Mater's" slow metamorphosis into something

of a mythic song at Brown, news James Andrew received with bemused surprise and pleasure. In 1869, the president of the newly-formed Brown glee club had discovered the song, perhaps by perusing old copies of “Brown Paper,” and performed it at a June 14 concert in Providence’s Horse Guards Armory. The *Providence Evening Press* reviewed the concert and acclaimed the glee club for a tremendous performance, but the song that would become to Brown “what the Star Spangled Banner is to the Army and Navy” according to W. Whitman Bailey, was not mentioned in the article. Interestingly enough, the program at the concert replaced James Andrew’s chosen title of “Old Brown” with “Alma Mater,” and its adopted title has remained intact ever since.

Although James Andrew had written “Alma Mater” for occasions such as the glee club’s performance, it had to rise out of “the limbo of oblivion” to finally become “the college song.” Commencement programs did not list “Alma Mater” until 1874, and since then recorded its inclusion in graduation ceremonies only spottily until 1964. This is not to say, however, that “Alma Mater” was not sung at both official and unofficial occasions; the national anthem, also often unlisted, was still undoubtedly sung at major events.

James Andrew’s generation’s legacy of song continued for many years, even when it migrated from the steps of Manning Hall. Although spontaneous eruption into song lost popularity with the onslaught of electric guitars, snare drums, and deejays, song continues to play a role in university life, especially in ever-popular a cappella concerts. 2006, however, marks an important milestone in the evolution of music at Brown and the end of an era of sing-alongs: it is the first time in forty-one years that commencement weekend will not include a Pops

concert, an event for alumni that features light musical renditions by the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Popular artists today, such as the modern, louder musicians of Spring Weekend, have ousted older art forms, but the “Alma Mater” remarkably remains entrenched in Brown tradition, at least in the brass-heavy pomp of home football games and the uncertain singing at commencement ceremonies, with faculty, students, and parents all scrambling for “Alma Mater’s” lyrics.

By the time James Andrew died in 1909 of an unidentifiable tropical disease, he was a white-bearded and saggy-cheeked, yet dapper, man. After he died, the university faced a century of turmoil: devastating wars, the roaring twenties, McCarthyism, curricular changes, the Cold War, and atomic warfare. Through this, however, “Alma Mater” has remained intact, a vestige of what life was like at “Old Brown.”

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