

UNKNOWN FRIENDS OF H. P. LOVECRAFT: No.2, WOODBURN PRESCOTT HARRIS

by Randy Everts

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



Woodburn Prescott Harris (17th July 1888 - 20th June 1988).

Photo: collection of Randy Everts.

Today Woodburn Prescott Harris is not quite ‘unknown’ to Lovecraft scholars, but he is certainly still very little known. A letter I had from him has not been published until now. It contains his memories of H. P. Lovecraft, and has some information which may be new to scholars. When I contacted Harris in 1968 in Vergennes, Vermont,¹ he kindly wrote me back and stated:

“Yes, I knew HPL, that is to say by correspondence, I never met him in person... I knew comparatively little about his weird fiction. Frankly it

¹ Woodburn Harris, Route 1, Vergennes, Vt. was the address.

didn't interest me...² I believe some one years ago contacted a lot of his correspondents and asked for the loan of letters.³ Does seem as if he was going to publish extracts—put out a book... I sent him one letter which I had happened to keep as a sort of curiosity.⁴ 72 pages of regular type writer paper completely filled with writing (a fine hand—I mean a lot of words crowded every page). At the time he said it was the longest letter he had every written any body.⁵ Lovecraft was a sort of recluse. His whole existence out side the work he did for a living (a sort of editor-revisionist—people would send him their stories and he would write them over, polish them, and type them. He hated and despised by far the greater part of such work). [He had] indulgence in correspondence with something like a hundred individuals, I was told by this writer fellow who entered the field after Lovecraft's death.⁶ I contacted him [Lovecraft] about 1927⁷ so was a steady correspondent for about 10 years. He was practically my salvation. I am a college graduate (1911),⁸ taught in High Schools⁹ for 5 years—then World War One.¹⁰ Came out [of the war] with impaired hearing¹¹ and found myself stranded in the field of manual labor on a Vermont farm... Suddenly practically all intellectual interests and activity disappeared. A 10 minute respite at night to glance through [a] daily paper then bed to recoup tired muscles for [the] next day's struggle. Six or seven years of that. Gradually began to find things easier and my paralyzed brain began to function again. Was literally starving to death mentally. Might easily have ended up in a mental hospital. Strange to say it was the field of religion that bid fair to

² Yet Harris reveals, later in this letter, that he subscribed to *Weird Tales* circa 1936-37.

³ Most probably August Derleth or Donald Wandrei, for the so-called 'Arkham House Transcripts', which became the *Selected Letters*. Only three Lovecraft letters to Woodburn Harris are known to have survived.

⁴ This implies the other letters to W. P. Harris were thrown out or lost over time.

⁵ Dated 9th November 1929. Partly published in *Selected Letters* III.

⁶ Perhaps this was Donald Wandrei?

⁷ The contact was suggested by Walter J. Coates.

⁸ Middlebury College, Class of 1911.

⁹ Harris was an English and Drama teacher, and according to the online record he was a Shakespeare specialist. At one time he was also listed as a school principal.

¹⁰ Harris had served as an Acting Sergeant Major in the First World War.

¹¹ Randy Everts reports that... "his double hearing aids restored some of his hearing when I interviewed him".

floor me. I became a free thinker¹² in college. Now in rural Vermont I was suffocating. An acquaintance...¹³ told me to write that name [Lovecraft]. No, I didn't get a head shrinker¹⁴ and stretch out on the couch at 10 bucks an hour. But that's what it amounted to. I got it for nothing. A life saver! Lovecraft recognized immediately what I required. Just mental exercise and some one to commune with. Ten years correspondence, in which we discussed about any thing under the sun. A truly remarkable fellow! He had read practically everything, and was interested in everything. Except Marxism.¹⁵ I entered that field in the [19]30's (middle of) just about the time Lovecraft dropped out [of correspondence] so suddenly.

P. S. Here's an incident characteristic of HPL's mental serenity and philosophy of live and let live. He was a teetotaler¹⁶ all his life, hence his ideas on alcohol exactly matched those of my old lady of the W.C.T.U.¹⁷ Well, on one of his southern trips¹⁸ in pursuit of art, warmth, historical interests, he spent several days with one of his correspondence friends, an Episcopal Minister.¹⁹ He was interested and amused to find how much this Minister depended on brandy to keep his spirits up. "Swilling brandy" was the phrase he used. This clergyman undertook to teach HPL how ridiculous his ideas on alcohol were by introducing him to indulge for once, and experience what he was talking about. He [Lovecraft] quoted the good book

¹² Free thought was a variety of American secularism that accepted Enlightenment rationalism, and rejected all religious dogma as a basis for truth claims.

¹³ Walter J. Coates.

¹⁴ Meaning a psychiatrist, then often called an 'alienist'.

¹⁵ This is interesting, given his apparent conversion to Marxism in the mid 1930s and the sometimes-heard claim that 'Lovecraft became a socialist' at about the same time.

¹⁶ Teetotaler is an increasingly obsolete term, meaning someone who practices complete abstinence from alcohol. After they became acquainted, Harris took up Lovecraft's revision services for anti-liquor tracts...

"Our intelligent rustick friend Woodburn Harris has suddenly blossom'd into a prolifick professional client — being intent on saving the country [by publishing on prohibition of liquor]" (Lovecraft in *Selected Letters* III, p.130).

¹⁷ Woman's Christian Temperance Union, an anti-liquor movement.

¹⁸ Lovecraft spent several weeks in Dunedin, Florida, in May 1931.

¹⁹ Henry St. Clair McMillin Whitehead, 1882-1932. "Though rector of the local Church of the Good Shepherd, he has nothing of the musty cleric about him; but dresses in sport clothes, swears like a he-man on occasion, & is an utter stranger to bigotry or priggish-ness of any sort." (Lovecraft in *Selected Letters* III, p.375).

“Woe unto him who putteth the bottle to his neighbor’s lips.”²⁰ But he said the picture was rather out of focus in this case.

“Here was the Man of God trying to bring the wicked atheist down into the gutter. But praise be to Allah²¹ the wicked atheist remained true to his principles so emerged from the ordeal unburnt.”
[Attributed to Lovecraft].

I won’t swear that is an exact quotation but I think it’s pretty close. Lovecraft was interested in every form of art. Loved to browse in museums. Art, not politics of economics, was his life. In fact it wasn’t until the rise of Hitler in the 30’s²² that I began to sense that we were drawing apart. The thirties were an eye opener. The great depression!²³ Every concept we had cherished proved false before one’s very eyes. I’m one of the millions who in that period were induced to examine Marxist thought. I read a book *The Nature of Capitalist Crisis*²⁴ by John Strachey, an Englishman, not a communist²⁵ but

²⁰ Temperance motto, a reworking of *Habakkuk* 2:15 in the Bible. That Lovecraft knew the phrase does not indicate he knew the Bible by heart, but more likely that he remembered the old Temperance slogans from his teenage years.

²¹ Lovecraft might have been more likely to use something like “Pegana” or “Azathoth”.

²² Hitler was elected January 1933.

²³ The prolonged worldwide economic slump of 1929-1939.

²⁴ John Strachey, *The Nature of Capitalist Crisis*, Gollanz, 1935. A typical but seductive Communist Party fellow-traveller book of the time, the basic message of which was: ‘capitalism is doomed, only socialist economics can save us, Russia is a wonderful new type of democracy, and Stalin is the great leader there’. Harris was possibly inadvertently introduced to communism by Lovecraft...

“As for our young communist [Weiss] — I have just set Farmer Woodburn Harris of Vermont on to him, and expect some brilliant fireworks. Harris is a political conservative of the traditional Yankee mould, and his keen wit and horse-sense will form a delightful foil to young Weiss’s bolshevism...” (*Selected Letters* III, p.187).

It appears the cunning plan backfired, and Harris had a total political conversion from being what Lovecraft called a “political conservative”, to being a communist fellow-traveller in the mid 1930s.

²⁵ Harris was mistaken. Strachey had been a socialist Labour Party M.P., then a member of Oswald Mosley’s New Party, then became a very close fellow traveller of the Communist Party of Great Britain — under whose control he established the Writers’ International, “an association of revolutionary socialist writers who are working for the end of the capitalist order”. He was most certainly a communist, though he could not join the Party since at that time they distrusted all intellectuals, and especially someone who had recently been closely associated with the Oswald Mosley, whose New Party

one who on his own had examined Marx's *Capital*.²⁶ I wrote Lovecraft about it. Told him he must examine that book as a key to contemporary events. He finally agreed to read it and I sent it to him. He wrote "It looks pretty damned stiff!" but said he would get to it before long... A couple of weeks later the book came back in the mail without a word. No letter explaining it. I was deeply hurt. I had read dozens of books at his behest. This was the very first time I had urged anything on him. And to quit cold without a word. It seemed so wholly uncharacteristic. I didn't see any handle for resuming our correspondence. As it happened in those years I subscribed to a magazine devoted to weird fiction, which published HPL's [Lovecraft's] occasional stories.²⁷ A couple of months after the book came back this mag carried an editorial saying that in the next number they would carry the last completed story by the late H.P. Lovecraft.²⁸ Very simple once you know the facts. He died suddenly and his aunt mailed the book back to me."

Subsequently, Woodburn Harris wrote in response to my further queries:

"It was Walter J. Coates²⁹ who told me I might do well to write HPL [Lovecraft] and Vrest Orton.³⁰ Coates, as you doubtless know, died of a heart attack many years ago.³¹ He once brought Paul Cook³² to see me but I never seemed to hear of him (PC) again. Also Vrest Orton, who wrote me a

had merged with the British Union of Fascists in 1932. His career trajectory demonstrates the way in which early fascism was a heresy of socialism.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867). A dense multi volume work on Marxist economic theory.

²⁷ Most probably *Weird Tales*. It seems strange that Harris should have subscribed to this, while also professing that Lovecraft's fiction "didn't interest me". Perhaps he was one of those *Weird Tales* readers who preferred the Seabury Quinn style of story?

²⁸ Lovecraft had died 15th March 1937. Possibly Harris was thinking of "The Shunned House", first published in the October 1937 issue of *Weird Tales*. Hence the editorial he was thinking of would have been in the September issue.

²⁹ Walter John Coates (1880-1941). Universalist minister, poet, publisher of the amateur journal *Driftwind* and the operator of the Driftwind Press.

³⁰ Kenneth Vrest Orton (1897-1986). Editor of the *Sunday Review*, and later the famous founder of the Vermont Country Store chain.

³¹ On 29th July 1941.

³² Paul William Cook (1881-1948). Editor of a number of amateur journals including *The Recluse*, *The Vagrant* and others.

very kind letter at that time, and again at the time of HPL's death,³³ never seemed to advance in my acquaintance.”



Woodburn Harris circa 1917.

My thanks to Randy Everts for allowing his letter to be published for the first time on my Tentaclii blog. Published 10th July 2014, on the Tentaclii blog at www.tentaclii.wordpress.com

³³ Presumably this was after September 1937. See Note 28.