WILLIAM TYLER OLCOTT, 1873–1936

Elizabeth O. Waagen
AAVSO
25 Birch Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Presented at the AAVSO 84th Spring Meeting, May 13, 1995

Abstract

The reader is introduced to William Tyler Olcott, co-founder of the AAVSO, through his own words and the words of his contemporaries. A very brief biography is also presented.

1. Introduction

As plans progressed for the 84th Spring Meeting of the AAVSO, to be held in Stamford, CT, in May of 1995, it was decided to include after the Banquet a tribute to some of the AAVSO members from Connecticut who had significantly influenced the path of the AAVSO. I was offered the privilege of speaking about William Tyler Olcott, co-founder of the AAVSO and lifetime Connecticut resident.

What to say about this figure so significant in the AAVSO's history? I could present a biography (his life was an interesting one), or a discussion of his contributions to the AAVSO and to astronomy (they were many), or even an analysis of his scientific and creative writings (they were copious), but *I* would be talking about *him*, and Olcott was so eloquent a speaker that it seemed more appropriate for *him* to talk about *himself.*

2. A brief biography

William Tyler Olcott was born January 11, 1873, and lived most of his life in Norwich, CT. He was always physically frail. Educated at Trinity College in Hartford, CT, he took an astronomy course in college which had little effect on him. Olcott attended New York School of Law, and was admitted to the bars of New York and Connecticut, although he never practiced law as a career.

Olcott married Clara Hyde of Yantic, CT, in 1902. Their marriage was a most happy one; they were a devoted couple. They did not have children.

In the summer of 1905, on vacation on Block Island, RI, a friend of Mrs. Olcott's showed Olcott the night sky with its constellations. He was instantly and utterly captivated by astronomy! Two years later he had written *A Field Book of the Stars*, the first of six astronomical books he would author (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Astronomical Books of William Tyler Olcott

Date of Publication	Title
1907	*A Field Book of the Stars*
1909	*In Starland with a 3-Inch Telescope*
1911	*Star Lore of All Ages*
1914	*Sun Lore of All Ages*
1923	*A Book of the Stars for Young People*
1929	*Field Book of the Skies* (with E. W. Putnam)

In 1910, Olcott visited Harvard College Observatory (HCO) and met Prof. Edward C. Pickering, an astronomer who was particularly interested in variable stars. Olcott was looking for a useful focus for his observing; Pickering needed observers to monitor long period variables. The result: the AAVSO! In January 1911, Olcott wrote the first of many articles expounding the value of observing variable stars and inviting observers to join in the work (Olcott 1911a). Later in the year, Olcott announced the formation of the American Association of Variable Star Observers (Olcott 1911b).

In 1911, Pickering went to Harvard's southern observatory station in Peru, and Olcott carried out AAVSO operations at HCO, recording observations, handling correspondence, orienting new observers, making and distributing charts, etc.—wearing as many hats as necessary until Pickering's return in 1915. Olcott continued his AAVSO activities, and became Life Secretary when the AAVSO was incorporated in 1917.

By 1929, Olcott had written the sixth of his astronomical books, had mentored over a hundred AAVSO observers, given countless talks, and written countless letters.

In the spring of 1936, the AAVSO Council voted to award Olcott the 3rd AAVSO Merit Award, the association's highest honor, as "the Founder and Life Secretary of our Association whose words and writing and patient guidance have led many to know and love the stars," and to present the award in October 1936 at the 25th anniversary meeting of the association. Sadly, however, on July 6, 1936, while Olcott was giving a star talk to vacationers in New Hampshire—something he truly loved to do—he suffered a heart attack and died. Thus, in October, 1936, the 3rd AAVSO Merit Award was presented posthumously to William Tyler Olcott, and was accepted by his widow, Clara Olcott (Pickering 1936; Fortier 1990).

3. Olcott seen through himself and his contemporaries

Above, then, are the facts. What do Olcott's own words and the words of his contemporaries tell us of him? What were among the things important to William Tyler Olcott?

3.1. The sharing of the beauty, excitement, and value of astronomy with the public

In the Introduction to his *A Book of the Stars for Young People* (1923), Olcott wrote:

> ...In introducing you, so to speak, to the stars, I propose to tell you their story and show you how to find the bright ones in order that you may enjoy their friendship and learn to love them.
>
> You who love the flowers will find the stars equally beautiful and lovable, for they, too, are many colored, and although they lack the fragrance of the flowers they bloom for us in the winter when all the fields and woods have lost their loveliness. In wandering through the starry fields you see a garden of perpetual blooms that never cease to charm and delight you.
>
> It is my wish in this book to blaze a trail for you among the stars in order that you may know your way about in the night sky and easily come to know the many objects of beauty and interest that darkness reveals to us...

From the Introduction to Olcott's *Field Book of the Skies* (Olcott and Putnam 1929) comes the following:

> "Why should I study astronomy? What use is it to me?"
> These two questions are, unfortunately, asked so often that it seems fitting

to begin this book with answers to both.

Taking them in reverse order, the reply to the second question is: It is of no use! It is of no more *use* than a knowledge of music, a friendship with the birds and flowers, or a conversance with real literature or art. It surely may be doubted that the ability to call a wild-flower by its correct name; to recognize a Beethoven theme, a harmony of Brahms, or a Schubert melody; or the knowledge that La Gioconda was painted by Leonardo da Vinci; and that by far the most admirable character created by Milton was the devil himself, has ever turned an honest penny for, or proved of practical use to, that much cited individual—the average man. The value of such knowledge is, of course, another matter but, if you are looking for *use*, put down this book and turn back to your study of market, business and social problems.

The first question may be answered even more briefly: Don't! unless you enjoy it. Without a special bent, study is trying work, and our friend the average man has, these days, enough work that must be done without adding to it unnecessarily...

"But," you ask, "why should I bother my head about astronomy at all?" There are many good reasons; two should suffice: education and recreation.

Without discussing the fact that knowledge for itself alone is worth while, it must be stressed at once that no one can rightly consider himself educated without having a grasp on the fundamentals of astronomy... Fortunately...these [non-mathematical] fundamentals are simple to grasp... The history of astronomy is the history of the development of reasoning thought in man, and it contains as well a wealth of romance and human interest.

Recreation..is used in the widest sense of the word, covering intellectual pleasure, enjoyment of sheer beauty, mental relaxation in valuable work that is fascinating to do, and the fun of sight-seeing... If the sight of the first robin or the first crocus in Spring brings you delight, be assured that *recognizing* the return to our night skies of the beautiful Spica will bring you as much....

3.2. The beauty and elegance of language and the natural world

All of Olcott's writing—whether a formal paper or a brief note—was done with loving regard for the language in which he was writing, and his appreciation of the natural world is everywhere evident in his words. The following excerpts from a poem he wrote (Olcott 1928) and presented at the 1928 AAVSO spring meeting blend these two aspects of himself:

The Prism of Thought

Words are the pigments of the Muses.
The writer uses
To paint on the canvas of his pages,
For ages and ages,
Thoughts.
His pen is his brush,
His palette the images of his mind
Around perceptions twined.

Combining colors form his phrases,
And the thought expressed
Attests
His picture.

If he thinks of roses,
There is the pink and the vermilion,
The scarlet, and cerise,
The perfumed tints,
And hints
Of lovely gardens worshiping the sun,
Soft petals,
And exhalations of fragrance,
The living tones of beauty.

For stars, he has his tubes of argent, and his gold
That unfold
Radiance and glory,
Colors omniscient and sublime,
That stun the thought and numb the senses.

For Night there is the blue-black,
The ebon and the jet
That beget
Thoughts of yawning caverns of mystery,
Deeps, and vast abysses of the Universe,
Rising and sinking,
Beyond thinking,
Into nothingness....

The sea and sky call for the greens and blues,
Cerulean hues,
The purple, turquoise, amethyst,
And dreams of mist,
Lapis lazuli, opalescence,
And iridescence.

But for Sunset and Dawn,
The writer gazes on his palette of every thought of color.
He reaches for the rainbow,
The aureate, the orpiment,
A firmament
Of flaming fluctuating shades,
Suggestions of marvelous tapestries,
And seas

Of Elysium, and the shrine of unutterable beauty.

To depict Spring,
There are the emeralds and chromes,
And hues of buds and rills,
And waking hills,
The color of the lark's song
At dawn,
The thought of Altair
Trembling on the threshold of Twilight....

For Winter, drifting white,
Steel-blue, and cobalt hues,
The spectral blushes of the Northern lights,
That play,
With coruscating ray
Upon the face of darkness,
And the starkness
Of forgotten prairies
Entombed in frigid and utter desolation.
Thought tints of wan woods, and sleeping streams,
And dreams
Of glaciers.
Orion rising o'er the eastern hills,
The color thrills
That dart
From the heart
Of Sirius, the Star of Stars....

Then there are color utterances unseen
Behind the screen
Of our perception,
That would depict the thoughts unknown
In hue and tone,
Perfection, and ultimate completeness.

There are words that lurk beyond
The ultra violet,
And a triolet
That we might paint in infra red
Perhaps in unknown tints,
So rich in color
Is the Universe of Imagery....

3.3. A sense of humor

Volumes I, II, and III of *Variable Comments* (AAVSO 1924, 1929, 1936) are filled with instances of Olcott's subtle and witty sense of humor. Witness the following bit of doggerel he composed (Olcott 1926) in tribute to surgeon and fellow AAVSO member Charles Godfrey and his celebrated fishing camp:

Pisces

The Doc. has a camp that no others surpass,
It sure has the class, but alack and alas,
There are three meals a day, and it's bass and it's bass,
It's bass, and it's bass, and it's bass.

The Doctor he figures the expenses are nil.
He ne'er gets a bill, the guests eat their fill,
They fish early and late, and they fish with a will
And the Doctor keeps praising their skill.

3.4. The scientific value of the AAVSO and its success and healthy continuity

HCO Director E. C. Pickering (1911) wrote, in connection with the growth of the amateur variable star observer program at Harvard:

> ...I shall be glad to do anything I can to secure a greater amount of useful work from amateurs. I think Mr. Olcott would be a very good man to have oversight of the work... There is a large amount of useful work which might be done in correspondence with the members [of the group that would become the AAVSO], providing for neglected stars, distributing photographs, etc...

Olcott (1911a) wrote in his article, "Variable Star Work for the Amateur with a Small Telescope":

> ...Every owner of a small telescope, who uses it to any extent, must have felt at some time or other that, aside from the personal gratification of seeing the wonders that the glass reveals, and affording his friends a like opportunity, there was little to be accomplished with such an equipment, that would be worth while; and it is a fact that only by the observation of variable stars can the amateur turn his modest equipment to practical use, and further to any great extent the pursuit of knowledge in its application to the noblest of the sciences.
>
> It is only right that a valuable instrument should be used, yet many telescopes owe their disuse to the fact that their owners are unaware that even a small glass may render science a valuable service.
>
> ...The only requisite for the work [of observing variable stars], aside from a glass of three-inch aperture or larger, and good eyesight, is a reasonable amount of perseverance and patience, but the pleasure of the find after laborious search is ample compensation....
>
> ...In conclusion the observation of variable stars is heartily commended

> to all amateur astronomers as a means of putting the telescope to a practical use, and as a source of unlimited pleasure and intellectual profit. The study of these stars stimulates observation, a delight in itself and well worth while. It also calls for the keeping of a careful record of what is observed, a habit which all amateurs should cultivate.
>
> It is only by the collection of an enormous amount of data relative to these mysterious stars that the laws which govern their changes in magnitude can be revealed, and this end can best be accomplished by the cooperation of observers in all parts of the country, so that the weather will in no wise interfere with a continuous set of observation....

David Pickering (1923), writing on the charter members of the AAVSO, introduced Olcott to AAVSO members as:

> William Tyler Olcott, our beloved Secretary...We have all...called upon this interesting person for "first aid"...and always he has come to the rescue and saved us from discouragement. We must always remember that it was upon the shoulders of this man that Prof. E. C. Pickering placed the mantle of responsibility for creating an amateur Association for the study of variable stars....

Olcott expressed his great pride in and satisfaction with the fruit of his and his colleagues' labor in a poem he wrote (1930) for the spring meeting of the AAVSO. As he was was unable to attend the meeting because of poor health, he telegraphed the poem, to be read by David Pickering at the meeting's concluding banquet:

> *Fait Accompli*
>
> *As husbandmen watch tenderly the soil,*
> *With dreams of happy reaping days to be,*
> *And count the hours of labor and of toil*
> *A harvest gleaned through dint of industry;*
> *As they rejoice, when, fructified by showers,*
> *The seeds reach up their fingers to the sun,*
> *And strengthened by a wealth of kindly powers*
> *Proclaim a service rendered and well done;*
>
> *So we, who almost twenty years ago,*
> *Sowed goodly seed far better than we knew,*
> *Behold the fruit,—the A-A-V-S-O,*
> *That now with pride and happiness we view.*
>
> *To you who have been faithful to the cause,*
> *I send to all my greetings and applause.*

4. Coda

If the measure of a successful life is to leave the world enriched for one's presence, then surely William Tyler Olcott was a most successful man.

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Figure 1. William Tyler Olcott, 1873 - 1936 (Pickering 1936).