

Joseph A. Altsheler and American History

by Anne Carroll Moore, 1871-1961

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Illustration:

Joseph Alexander Altsheler

He looks young in that picture but he could have lived all through American history—he makes it so true. You couldn't do better than to read his books. You can even answer some of the Regent's questions out of Altsheler's books. I read every one of them and I got an a-1 mark for history." The speaker, a boy of seventeen, stood with a group of younger boys before a table in the central children's room of The New York Public Library—the library built by the City—which stands at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street.

It was the morning of June 7th, 1919. Many boys brought clippings from the newspapers; others had been told the sad news by their friends. "Altsheler is dead" they said. "Let's go round to the Library." All day long they came, and knowing that it would be so, we had asked Mr. Altsheler's publishers to send to the children's room a complete set of his books for boys and a photograph of the author to hang above his books. The Trailers series, The Texan series, the French and Indian War series, the Civil War series, the Great West series—all were there to bear silent testimony to a man whose work had been his life. As I read my own morning paper, memory gave back two vivid pictures of Mr. Altsheler—the first, as he stood one evening, the night before Lincoln's birthday, 1914, in front of a blazing wood fire in the children's room of the 115th Street Branch of The New York Public Library—the second, as he sat alone in his office in the tower of the World Building on an afternoon in October, 1918.

On the first occasion he had come to tell the History boys of one of the Library Reading Clubs about his Texan series. "I have made only three or four speeches in my life," he said in a letter to the club advisor, "but I don't feel I can disappoint a group of boys." With great simplicity he spoke that night of his own boyhood and its dreams; telling how he would lie on his back by the hour out there in the woods of Daniel Boone's country, letting his mind dwell on the pioneer tales of America until they came to have for him the fascination that tales of Greece have had for other minds.

"The Young Trailers" represented, he said, the realization of some of these dreams, kept alive by his constant reading and study of the best sources of American history. The boys of the club were impressed by Mr. Altsheler's sincerity and his modesty. "He doesn't praise himself or the characters in his books," said one of them.

Last October I went by appointment to talk with Mr. Altsheler in his office in the tower of the World Building. The hour of the appointment had been thus set in a note written and addressed by his own hand: "any time between 2.30 and 4.30." Mr. Altsheler also gave exact directions for reaching his office by a special elevator leading to the tower. I have spent so many hours waiting in offices that I carried a book with me, as usual. But Mr. Altsheler, although a busy editor of a newspaper, did not keep me waiting. He received me with the same courteous consideration he had shown to the boys of the reading club.

Joseph A. Altsheler and I had several questions to ask and he answered American every one of them graciously and illuminatingly. History Parkman was the author who had meant most to him, he said. When I asked what books he had read as a boy, he replied that books had not been plentiful in the part of Kentucky where he had spent his boyhood and they were eagerly passed about from one family to another. The best of the English classics—Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, mingled with tales of the pioneers and Indians. Many of the latter he heard at first hand, for he was descended on his mother's side from the Kentucky and Virginia borderers, and in his boyhood continually heard the legends of Boone, Kenton, Harned, Logan and the other great woodsmen and fighters. As a boy, also, he knew many of the veterans of the Civil War, including both Union and Confederate generals.

Reading had been very early an absolute necessity with him and in all his work his instinct was to get back to first sources to verify the information and the stories which had been passed on to him by word of mouth. He began to write for a newspaper as soon as he left college and served first in an editorial capacity on the Louisville Courier-Journal; later, and until his death, on the New York World, as editor of the Tri-Weekly World. He had written several books before he began to write for boys. His own son was eleven or twelve years old when he wrote the first and perhaps the best of his books for boys—"The Young Trailers" was published in 1906. Mr. Altsheler told me that he allowed no thought of the age of his readers to affect his treatment of a subject and he never forgot that he was telling his stories against a background of reality. This accounts, I think, for the number of fathers and older brothers who enjoy reading Altsheler.

It was no surprise to Mr. Altsheler to be told that his books about the War in Europe were less popular than the other series. Although he had been "over there," he felt that it was too soon to write stories of the War.

At four o'clock I rose to leave Mr. Alsheler's office. We had talked for an hour about American History and its meaning, of the value of American tradition gathered at first hand from living people, as well as from books, and of story writing. "I want to thank you for the boys as well as for myself," I said. "The boys who wait in line for 'an Altsheler.' While you and I have been talking on top of the World Building, long lines of big boys have been forming in libraries all over Manhattan and the Bronx. Just as the younger children line up for fairy tales to be returned to the always empty shelves, so do older boys line up for your books to be returned by other boys who have been reading them. For no other author do big boys wait in long lines in our libraries, refusing to be put off with other titles when bent upon securing 'an Altsheler.' " This was news to Mr. Altsheler and he seemed deeply impressed by the picture presented TO his imagination of the waiting lines of boys in New York libraries. "I would like to see them with my own eyes," he said. "And so you shall, but meanwhile what shall we say to the boys?" I asked. "If they like my books tell them to read the history behind them, above all, to read Parkman; he has been my great inspiration."

Mr. Altsheler then walked with me to the elevator of the tower, still maintaining that air of leisure and regard for the other person's time and convenience so characteristic of him in business and personal relations alike. He was an indefatigable worker and always had one or more manuscripts ready for publication; but he was trained for his task, he wasted no time in impatience, he raised no barriers to free intercourse and he knew his subject. I never saw Mr. Altsheler again. Some weeks later I received a letter from him thanking me for an appreciation of his work which I had written before the interview just described took place. This tribute I am now glad to feel was paid in his lifetime.

When Mrs. Altsheler returned from her sad journey to Kentucky last June, I called upon her in order to verify some points touched upon in this sketch and to assure her of the deep sympathy many New York boys were feeling for her and her son. As we talked, I knew that I had really met Joseph Altsheler, that I had been in touch with his Kentucky boyhood as well as with his New York manhood. The strong impressions he received as a boy remained fresh with him always. "There is one review of my husband's work that expresses more nearly my own thought of

him, in connection with it, than any other. I do not know who wrote it, but you shall read it for yourself," said Mrs. Altsheler. The review had been clipped from an article and no name was attached to it, but I recognized it at once as a part of the article I have just mentioned as my own, and since it seemed a true appraisal to Mrs. Altsheler, who so well understood her husband's work, it shall have place here in conclusion.

"It is very significant that the most popular author of boy's books in our public libraries today—Joseph Altsheler—should be writing over again, with a fresh sense of their reality, the tales of our pioneer life and struggle.

"Why don't the boys read Cooper? Some of them do usually after they have read *The Young Trailers* and *The Forest Runners* by Altsheler. But Altsheler is doing what neither Cooper nor any other author has been able to do—he is taking the average American boy into the wilderness that he may realize his heritage in the history of his country and take his place there more intelligently. Boys who clamor for Altsheler read history and biography as a natural and necessary accompaniment. Nor do they neglect *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, or *The Boys' Life* of Mark Twain.'

"First ever in the history of writing for boys has an author attained universal popularity on so broad a foundation of allied interests in reading. I believe the secret of Mr. Altsheler's appeal lies in a deep love of nature; the ability to select from historical sources subjects of strong human interest, a natural gift for story-telling, and great modesty."

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