

Hollywood Comes to Falmouth

by Leonard Miele

On January 26, 1934, Fulton Oursler and his wife Grace, residents of the Cliffs in West Falmouth, traveled to Boston to meet their friend Mary Pickford at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. Known internationally as “America’s Sweetheart,” the film star, accompanied by her maid, had rented the entire 16th floor of the hotel. The Ourslers were to have dinner with Ms. Pickford at the hotel, attend a theatrical performance of “State of Grace” starring her friend Lillian Gish, and return to Falmouth with the screen actress as their houseguest. Their dinner, however, was interrupted when the hotel received suspicious phone calls about Ms. Pickford. Because she had been followed by a strange man and woman for the past few days, the Boston police believed the couple was planning to kidnap her. Fearing for her safety, she left immediately for her visit to Cape Cod. She was escorted by police to Buzzards Bay, and then by state troopers to the Oursler home in West Falmouth. During her six-day visit, she would dine at the Inn at Coonamessett in Hatchville, and make an unexpected guest appearance at the Elizabeth Theater in Falmouth, now the location of Maxwell’s Clothing Store.



Mary Pickford was one of the famous guests at Sandalwood. She enjoyed the serenity of Falmouth in contrast to the hoopla and glaring lights of Hollywood. Internet photo from Flickr Creative Commons.

This kidnapping story became national news and appeared in every major newspaper across the country. Mary Pickford’s fans had never heard of the bucolic town of Falmouth or of her host Fulton Oursler,

considered by many people in the publishing world to be the most influential editor and journalist during the ‘20s, ‘30s, and ‘40s. For 21 years, starting in 1921, he was the supervising editor of the Bernarr



Fulton Oursler was one of the most influential residents of West Falmouth during the first half of the 20th century. He was a respected author, journalist, editor, screenwriter, playwright, and radio personality. Internet photo from Flickr Creative Commons.

Macfadden publishing empire with total editorial control of the following magazines: *Physical Culture*, *True Story*, *True Romance*, *True Detective Mysteries*, *True Experiences*, *Master Detective*, *Ghost Stories*, *Dream World*, *Your Home*, *Love and Romance*, *Movie Mirror*, *Radio Mirror*, and *Photoplay*. In 1931, Bernarr Macfadden purchased *Liberty Magazine*, a five-cent weekly that became, under Oursler’s guidance, one of the top three magazines in the United States (along with *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier’s Magazine*).

Fulton Oursler was a multi-talented Renaissance man who had a keen understanding of the popular culture during the first half of the 20th century. When he was just 17 years old, he was given his first job as a

cub reporter for the *Baltimore American*. This was the beginning of a journalism career that spanned forty years until his death in 1952 at the age of 59. During the last 3 years of his life, he was still writing a newspaper column called "A Modern Parable" that was syndicated in over 100 newspapers. Oursler was a versatile writer who mastered every media outlet. Beyond editing the Macfadden publications and serving as the senior editor of *Reader's Digest* from 1944-1952, he became an influential radio personality whose weekly programs, *Stories That Should Be Told*, *Liberty's Forum of the Air*, and *Without Fear or Favor*, were broadcast from coast to coast. He was the author of 32 books, including the best-sellers *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *Father Flanagan of Boys Town*; and under the pseudonym of Anthony Abbot, he wrote 8 mystery novels. He was also the screenwriter of 12 Hollywood films and the author of 6 Broadway plays.

Early in his career he was a professional magician who befriended Harry Houdini, and throughout his life he enjoyed entertaining friends as an amateur ventriloquist with his two dummies Ambrose Glutz and Joseph Bedworthy.

The 1930s was the high-water mark of *Liberty Magazine*. During this decade, Fulton Oursler enlisted the greatest minds in the arts, entertainment, and politics to write for the weekly magazine. Among these contributors, a Who's Who of international culture, were Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Pearl Buck, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Pickford, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Of especial interest were such stories as "Did Stalin Poison

Lenin?" by Leon Trotsky, "Dictators—Let Us Have More of Them" by George Bernard Shaw, "Roosevelt Dictates Too!" by Benito Mussolini, "What Will This World Be Like in 50 Years?" by H.G. Wells, "Will Americans and the English Ever Understand Each Other?" by Winston Churchill, "Good-bye to Café Society" by Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr., "The Real Story of Cole Porter" by Elsa Maxwell, and "A Square Deal for Shirley Temple" by John Erskine.

Liberty Magazine was an immediate success in 1931 when it printed the story "Is Franklin D. Roosevelt Physically Fit to Be President?" by Earle Looker. For the first time, the true facts of Roosevelt's crippling illness were revealed to the general public. Under

"Hitler is a very ordinary person, with only a short ability to speak—a very ordinary man. He has only a certain ability to produce emotional forces in the people. He is a leader of the mob. He is an agitator...."

Albert Einstein to Fulton Oursler, in a 1933 *Liberty Magazine* interview

Oursler's leadership, Looker was given permission to observe the daily activities of New York's Governor Roosevelt over a two to three week period. Before the article was published, however, *Liberty* paid 3 doctors to examine the governor and substantiate the facts of Looker's positive story. Through the negotiations for this story, Fulton Oursler and Franklin Roosevelt became close friends socially and politically. As a trusted confidante of the governor (and future president), Oursler would publish another 17 articles about Roosevelt during the campaign year of 1932.

Fulton Oursler accomplished two journalistic coups when he interviewed Albert Einstein in 1933 and the Duke of Windsor (formerly King Edward VIII) in 1940. However, it was not until 30 years after the

Einstein interview and 50 years after the Windsor interview that what they discussed with Oursler was disclosed to the public. Both men shared revealing thoughts about the rising power of Adolph Hitler, one dismissing his political prowess and the other apologizing for the misconceptions that people had of him. Einstein, who refused to allow his comments to be printed in 1933, seemed rather naïve about

“Hitler is the right and logical leader of the German people... a great man.”

Duke of Windsor to Fulton Oursler, in a 1940 *Liberty Magazine* interview

Hitler’s ability to rally widespread political support around him. According to what Einstein said, “Hitler is a very ordinary person, with only a short ability to speak—a very ordinary man. He has only a certain ability to produce emotional forces in the people. He is a leader of the mob. He is an agitator....He is capitalizing on prejudice.” Einstein also believed that “Mussolini is more intelligent and he has certain ideas of organization for his people.”

The Duke of Windsor, however, was considered by many people to be a Nazi sympathizer when he visited Hitler in 1937 after his abdication. Fulton Oursler recalled in his notes that the Duke believed “that there would be no revolution in Germany and it would be a tragic thing for the world if Hitler were overthrown. Hitler, he said, was the right and logical leader of the German people. He said it was unfor-

tunate that I had never met Hitler just as he was sorry he had never met Mussolini. He regarded Hitler as a great man.”

During this interview, the Duke of Windsor hoped Oursler would ask President Roosevelt if he “would consider intervening as a mediator” between Germany and Great Britain. The following comments explain his simplistic rationale for such a request: “It sounds very silly to put it this way, but the time is coming when somebody has got to say, you two boys have fought long enough and now you have to kiss and make up.”

Brother Bill Fitzgerald sits in the room that was Fulton Oursler’s 1100 square-foot library at Sandalwood.
Photo by Leonard Miele.

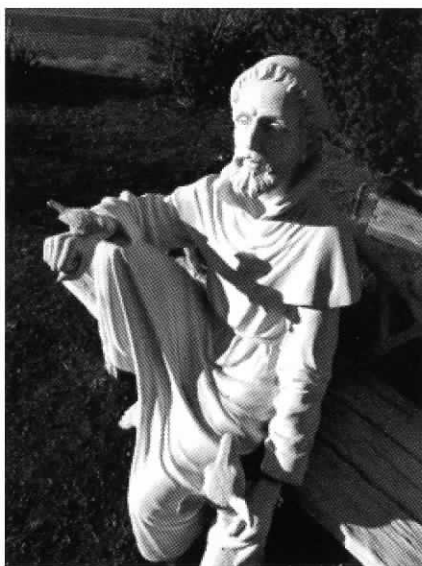


Cape Cod became a refuge for Fulton Oursler and his family in 1931. To escape his hectic New York lifestyle, he purchased a home at 2 Uncatena North in West Falmouth on the cliffs above Buzzards Bay. As Oursler noted, "We used to boast that we were born in Baltimore, crucified in New York, and raised from the dead in Cape Cod." For a decade, this home was not only a safe haven for Oursler, but also the center of power of the Macfadden publications. Without having to travel to New York City on a weekly basis, he was able to correspond with his assistant editors and make long-distance editorial decisions by using a teletype machine that was installed in his library in Falmouth.

To the Oursler's neighbors in Falmouth, they were known as the "all-year-round summer people." Their home, known as Sandalwood, was unlike the other quaint cottages in the neighborhood. The house had almost 30 rooms with 7 bathrooms, a two-car garage with apartments above it for the cook, maid, and butler, 3 fireplaces, 4 porches, a two-room playhouse, a pump house supplying fresh water from an underwater ocean spring, and a third floor suite in the attic with a kitchenette for April and Will, the two Oursler children. Fulton's wife Grace (Perkins), a well-known author of 12 novels, was proud of the hydrangeas, azaleas, and roses that surrounded Sandalwood, as well as the vegetable garden and grape arbor that she cultivated to make Sandalwood wine. In a macabre way, Oursler was also proud of his "poison garden"

in which he grew a variety of poisonous plants that he read about in his favorite detective stories.

For the Ourslers, however, the heart of Sandalwood was Fulton's library, an 1100 square-foot room on the southwest corner of the house. This two-story oasis had two enormous picture windows with spectacular ocean views. Next to a fireplace that was 8 feet wide and 5 feet high was a staircase that led to a book-lined balcony with 5,000 volumes. Adjoining



This statue of St. Francis adorns the lawn at Sandalwood, now maintained by the Franciscan Friars of Boston's St. Anthony Shrine. Photo by Leonard Miele.

this balcony was a small west-facing room that seemed to float above the ocean waves below. It was here that Oursler began to write *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, his most famous historical novel about the life of Jesus Christ. Before the book was completed, the manuscript served as the basis of a weekly radio program on ABC in 1947. When *The Greatest Story Ever Told* was finally published in 1949, it became an immediate best-seller and was syndicated in over 100 newspapers. *The Chicago Daily News*, for example, featured the book on its front page and kept it there for 40 days. With the success of his life of Christ, Oursler then wrote *The Greatest Book Ever Written* and *The Greatest Faith Ever Known* (completed by his daughter April after his death). Oursler was a religious skeptic most of his life, declaring that "When I was 15, I

thought religion was a hoax and called myself a contented agnostic." In 1935, however, Oursler traveled to the Holy Land with his family and wrote the book *A Skeptic in the Holy Land*. This led to his conversion to Catholicism in 1943 and to his reputation as the most preeminent religious writer of the decade.



Sandalwood was Fulton Oursler's home on The Cliffs in West Falmouth. The spectacular views of Buzzards Bay attracted many prominent visitors from New York, Washington, and Hollywood. Photo by Leonard Miele.

The most interesting feature of the library at Sandalwood was the stage on the east side of the room with its autographed curtain. All the guests who visited the Ourslers were requested to sign the curtain, after which Grace would stitch their signatures with needle and thread. This performance area was the

political adviser of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Victor Moore, the character actor who made 71 films between 1915-1955; General Billy Mitchell, the most heroic combat airman of World War I; and Fredric March, the stage and screen actor who won two Tonys and two Academy Awards for Best Actor.

The ladies of Falmouth actually complained to Grace Oursler, stating that they were “shocked by such brazen apparel” as the slacks she wore in public, à la Katherine Hepburn; and the men in town were discomfited by Fulton’s double-entendres when he would refer to the boarding house on route 28 where his secretaries lived as “my secs’ house.”

social center of the home where the Ourslers would entertain a panoply of movie stars, governors, political figures, and military heroes. Fulton loved to do magic tricks for his guests and amuse them with his skills as a ventriloquist. When Mary Pickford made her famous visit to Sandalwood, she performed a one-act play in French. Even Thomas Dewey, the New York prosecutor (and future governor of New York and two-time presidential candidate), sang an aria on the Sandalwood stage. Other famous guests included Louis Howe, the secretary and intimate

The worlds of New York, Washington, and Hollywood converged upon the quiet town of Falmouth to partake of the Oursler hospitality. To many of the more prudent citizens of the town, Sandalwood became known as Scandalwood because the Ourslers and their cosmopolitan guests seemed to be living excessive, indiscreet lifestyles during the Depression. The ladies of Falmouth actually complained to Grace Oursler, stating that they were “shocked by such brazen apparel” as the slacks she wore in public, à la Katherine Hepburn; and the men in town were

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Living on Cape Cod came to a surprising end for Fulton and Grace when they moved to New York City in 1942 and took up residence at the Hotel Navarro on Central Park South. Sandalwood was immediately closed and remained empty to visitors until it was sold a decade later. According to Fulton Oursler's 1964 autobiography *Behold This Dreamer!*, he was enlisted by his friend J. Edgar Hoover in 1941 to work with the Special Intelligence Service. For three years, he provided cover for FBI agents who acted as journalists in Central and South America to fight Nazi espionage. This covert endeavor may have precipitated his leaving Falmouth in 1942, as well as his having been replaced as the editor of *Liberty Magazine* that same year. His final ten years of life, however, were prolific ones for him, writing his religious books and editing the popular *Reader's Digest*. Over a seven-year period, he wrote seventy-five articles for the magazine about religion, crime, and the evils of communism.

It was recorded that Grace Perkins Oursler sold Sandalwood on January 1, 1954 for \$27,000 to the Franciscan Friars of Boston's St. Anthony Shrine. Today, Brother Bill Fitzgerald is the guardian/curator of this vacation home for his fellow brothers of the Holy Name Province. Brother Bill is a well-respected member of the Falmouth community and is president of his neighborhood association on the cliffs. A sign with the phrase "Quam Bonum" now

adorns an outside wall of the home formerly known as Sandalwood. Although these Latin words mean "How Good," Brother Bill explains that they are the beginning of St. Francis' adage "How good it is for the brothers to come together to pray."

Fulton Oursler has left a lasting memory of how good life can be on Cape Cod. His philosophic homage, unlike his own lifestyle, is reminiscent of the simplicity that Henry David Thoreau espoused in his daily life. Oursler wrote:

"Here one is close to birth and death, the growing soil, sleep, and nature with her hair down. One is looking deeper into life—not being so swirled by it, jerked and shaken and admonished and persuaded by it. So there is no time left for hurried things. One is too busy with the deeper realities. I have seen a great deal of the world but nowhere have I seen a place so beautiful as these shores of ours."

Leonard Miele was an English major at college, obtaining a Bachelor's degree from Northeastern University. Before retiring to Cape Cod he taught English in the Brockton, MA school system for thirty years. Along with writing articles about Cape Cod history in local newspapers and journals, he gives historical walks and lectures for the Falmouth Historical Society and other regional organizations. He is the past president of the Friends of the Falmouth Public Library and of his neighborhood civic association. Leonard resides in Falmouth with his wife Stephanie, a vocalist and piano technician.

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