

HORATIO ALGER, JR.

Most Americans easily recognize a typical “Horatio Alger hero” as someone who rises from humble beginnings to success and prosperity through hard work, perseverance, and pluck. But few can identify Horatio Alger as a real person in spite of being the most widely read author of juvenile literature during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Horatio Alger, Jr. was born on January 13, 1832, in Chelsea (now Revere) Massachusetts, the oldest of five children. His father, Reverend Horatio Alger, was a Unitarian minister and his mother, Olive (Fenno) Alger, was from a prominent local business family. His early schooling was conducted at home but was constantly interrupted by his father’s other activities, which included teaching, farming and politics. Despite these interruptions, Alger was a voracious reader and was well versed in Latin and algebra by the age of ten. In December 1844, after business reversals and bankruptcy, Alger’s father moved the family to Marlborough, Massachusetts where Horatio entered Gates Academy. He finished his preparatory studies in 1847 and entered Harvard the following year. He graduated in 1852 near the top of his class and was elected to the prestigious academic society, Phi Beta Kappa.

During the next five years Alger held several positions including teacher, headmaster, editor and writer. It was during this time that Alger published his first book, *Bertha’s Christmas Vision* (1856) and a year later, *Nothing To Do*, an anonymously published volume of satirical poetry.

In 1857, Alger entered the Harvard Divinity School to prepare for the ministry. After graduating in 1860, he embarked on a nine-month tour of Europe and wrote travel narratives for the *New York Sun*. Upon his return to the United States, he continued to write short stories and poetry but found it increasingly difficult to support himself despite regularly supplying the pulpit at several churches.

Alger was drafted for service in the Army of the Potomac commanded by General George Meade in July 1863. However, two weeks later at his preinduction physical, Alger was exempted because of severe myopia and failure to meet the minimum height requirement. Unable to serve as a soldier in the Union Army, Alger wrote dozens of war ballads and poems for *Harper’s Weekly* and other magazines.

In November 1864, just as Alger published his third book, *Frank’s Campaign*, he accepted the ministerial position at the First Unitarian Church and Society of Brewster, Massachusetts. He continued to submit short stories and poetry to various publications and also completed three more books during the next two years. In **March** of 1866, Alger left the ministry and moved to New York City to write full-time.

Shortly after his arrival in New York City, Alger visited the Newsboys' Lodging House operated by Charles Loring Brace, a social worker and philanthropist, who founded the Children's Aid Society in 1853. It was here, among the vagrant street urchins – newsboys, bootblacks and homeless boys – that Alger gleaned material for his eighth book, titled *Ragged Dick; or, Street Life in New York*. Published in May 1868, it was an immediate success and propelled Alger from obscurity to literary prominence.

Alger completed the **Ragged Dick Series** with five other volumes, all depicting New York street life from the viewpoint of abandoned or orphaned runaways, beggars and messenger boys. His early training as a classical scholar and his linguistic skills gave Alger a unique perspective regarding the colloquialisms of his young heroes and his ability to manifest them was unequalled. Sales of the **Ragged Dick Series** were respectable and Alger's publisher requested more stories, which he churned out with punctual alacrity, including the **Brave and Bold**, **Luck and Pluck** and the **Tattered Tom Series**.

Alger also took a stab at several nonfiction juvenile biographies including the lives of James Garfield, Abraham Lincoln, and Daniel Webster. His boys' life of Garfield, titled *From Canal Boy to President*, was available less than three weeks after Garfield died in September 1881, and enjoyed exceptional sales. He also collaborated with his cousin, William Rounseville Alger, on the official biography of Edwin Forrest, the infamous theatrical actor.

In order to supplement his well-worn depiction of city life, Alger embarked on three trips out West, in 1877, 1878 and 1890, to gather new material. These trips produced *Joe's Luck*, *Digging for Gold* and the four-volume **Pacific Series**. Some critics argued that Alger's stories were overly didactic and formulaic, constantly rehashing the "strive and succeed" premise to inspire his young audience. Whether his works possessed literary merit is debatable – whether boys (and girls) liked them is not.

During his life, Alger wrote more than 100 books and scores of short stories and articles. In fact, his output was so prolific that he used at least six pen names since many of his serial stories appeared concurrently in the same publication. Although most of Alger's books were geared for juvenile audiences, he did make several attempts at writing for adults, albeit with less than satisfactory results.

His most notable non-juvenile book appeared in 1875, titled *Grand'ther Baldwin's Thanksgiving*, a slim volume of poetry and ballads all previously published in various periodicals. It was generally well received and proved that Alger was, on occasion, able to successfully deviate from his usual juvenile fare. Much of Alger's verse was patterned after Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, best known for his long narrative poems on historical subjects. Alger became acquainted with Longfellow during his early Harvard years when Longfellow was a professor there.

Despite declining sales during the last few years of his life, Alger was able to earn a modest living from writing and from occasional tutoring assignments from wealthy New York families. After a long illness, Alger died on July 18, 1899, at the home of his sister in Natick, Massachusetts. It wasn't until after his death, however, that his books were sold by the millions in cheap 10-cent editions and paperbacks.

Social historians have often disagreed on Horatio Alger's place in history. Some regard him simply as the author of popular children's stories while others opine that he was the prophet of business success and the embodiment of the American Dream. The concept of self-help, upward mobility and economic prosperity is, more or less, a twentieth-century interpretation of Alger's literature.

In his stories, Alger preached respectability, honesty and integrity, not material possessions or great wealth. He disdained the idle rich and was disturbed by the growing chasm between the poor and the affluent. In fact, the villains in Alger's stories were almost always rich bankers, lawyers and country squires ready to foreclose on the mortgage of the hero's widowed mother.

Today it is generally accepted that the "rags to riches" success myth has been erroneously attributed to Horatio Alger, but he still remains a cultural phenomenon because of his effect on American principles and values. Perhaps Henry Steele Commager and Samuel Eliot Morison stated it best in their book *The Growth of the American Republic* that Alger probably had exerted more influence on the national character than any other writer except perhaps Mark Twain.

More than a century after his death, Horatio Alger endures as author and metaphor, a legacy achieved by very few of his contemporaries.

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