

The Multiple Pen-Names and Authorial Personalities of George Webbe Dasent

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Given of the remarkable versatility of the professional career of George Webbe Dasent (1817-1896: *ODNB*)—either at once or in turn distinguished student of Scandinavian philology and folklore, assistant editor on the most powerful newspaper of the age, professor of literature at King's College, London, senior civil servant, and popular comic novelist—it is perhaps surprising that as yet no comprehensive life has been written. An upbringing in the Caribbean on the eve of emancipation, education at Westminster and Oxford, scholarly training in Stockholm under the eye of Jacob Grimm, appointment to a senior position on *The Times*—all this before he had reached the age of thirty—would surely offer a fascinating canvas for any biographer. There are indeed two notable brief lives, both well researched and written: the original short *DNB* entry by Thomas Seccombe, revised for the *ODNB* by John D. Haigh; and the rather longer “Memoir” written by Arthur Irwin Dasent for the new 1903 edition of his father's best-remembered work, *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1859). Inevitably, though, neither provides a detailed bibliography of Dasent's wide-ranging writings, with each devoting little attention to his many periodical contributions and none at all to his frequent recourse to pseudonyms. Written from a book history perspective, the present paper aims to remedy this particular gap, at the same time offering a discussion of the varying authorial identities created along with such pen-names.

In his unsigned *Travels by “Umbra”* (1865), Sir Charles Clifford, long Lord Palmerston's private secretary, produced a humorous, fictionalized account of a recent trip to Iceland by a group of British dignitaries, notably including Dasent disguised as “Mr. Darwin” and Clifford himself as “Umbra,” who narrates the account. In introducing “Darwin,” the narrator remarks perceptively that “a continual antagonism between the past and the present, or rather, I should say, between the imaginary and the real, existed in his breast.”¹ Dasent's writing indeed does often tend to veer between realism and fantasy, the solemn and the frivolous, as exemplified to some extent by *Popular Tales from the Norse* itself. There, the extensive anthology of charming translations from the original fairy tales collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jörgen Moe, many suitable to be read to or by young children,² is preceded by a long scholarly Introduction, masterful in its analysis

¹ Clifford's description is cited in the “Memoir” of Dasent by his youngest son Arthur Irwin Dasent (pp. xxx-xxxi), where “the key to the characters ... is ... for the first time made public” (p. xxxiii).

² Early in 1862 the original publishers, Edmonston and Douglas of Edinburgh, issued nearly forty of the stories in an illustrated, expurgated *Selection from the Norse Tales for the Use of Children*. In the prefatory “Notice,” Dasent wrote: “if any little readers before whose eyes either of the earlier editions may have come, should chance to miss some of their old friends, and ask why they have been left out of this volume, it is hoped that their mothers will be better able to answer the question than the writer of these lines can ever be, for he still sees no harm at all in them.” (p. vi).

of the structure and development of folk narrative in general as well as Norse tales in particular.³ Fittingly, when Dasent came to publish a selection of his occasional reviews and essays in 1873, he did so under the title *Jest and Earnest*, suggesting in his Preface that these represented “relaxation from far more serious work ... they will be found, for the most part, to bear a merry face, and it may be, to treat grave subjects in a more playful way than is usual ... ” (p. v).

Thanks in large part to a period of intensive primary research among the editorial records of *The Times*, now held at the *Times Media Ltd Archive*, Rainham, Essex, generously funded by a Curran Fellowship from the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals, I have been able to distinguish four distinct pseudonymous identities associated with G.W. Dasent, belonging respectively to the early and later 1850s, the earlier 1870s and the later 1880s; the former pair are press reports and the latter narrative fiction; the first three are securely established through documentary proof, while the last is slightly more tentative and relies on circumstantial evidence. In turn, the pen-names in question are: 1) “Herodotus Junior”; 2) “Habitans in Sicco”; 3) “Edward Halfacre”; and 4) “Luke Lovart.”

1) “Herodotus Junior”

From the early 1850s, Dasent began to contribute on occasion to a number of monthly miscellanies and reviews in addition to *The Times* for which he had started to write while still in Stockholm,⁴ while rather later in his career he contributed scholarly articles frequently to prestigious quarterly reviews including both the stoutly Whig *Edinburgh* and the high Tory *Quarterly*. In 1873 around a dozen of his earlier contributions were reprinted in *Jest and Earnest*, where the lion’s share came from the *North British Review* during the 1860s and concerned issues of northern European language and culture. Dasent’s Preface to *Jest and Earnest* characterised the two earliest pieces as “sketches or squibs written ... after the manner of Herodotus,” where “mirth was made of some statesmen for whom the writer has always felt great respect” (p. vi). Both appearing under the pseudonym “Herodotus Junior”, these were: “The Greek and English Quarrel” in a February 1850 issue of *The Times*; and “The Story of Free Trade” in the monthly *Fraser’s Magazine* of June 1851.

³ As I have shown in detail elsewhere (Law, “Diffusion Versus Association,” pp. 65-67), Dasent’s Introduction represented a key intervention in the debate over differing explanations for the underlying similarities across the folklore of disparate regions, that is, between diffusionist accounts of the flow of folk narrative based on the mass migration of Indo-European (Aryan) peoples, and associationist explorations pre-dating the work of Freud and Jung, that saw folklore as a reflection of unconscious mental formations common to all cultures. Two significantly different editions of *Popular Tales from the Norse* were published within less than three months, with the second exhibiting rather more sympathy towards the associationist position; the most striking evidence of the shift was the inclusion of an Appendix of folktales of West African origin, reportedly told by his sister’s Afro-Caribbean nurse at the Dasents’ family home on St. Vincent, intended to illustrate the common elements between folk materials from within and beyond Indo-European cultures.

⁴ See *History of “The Times”* II, pp. 119-20; one of his early contributions was apparently the lengthy report on the “Coronation of the King of Sweden” in mid-October 1844.

Lord Palmerston was the main butt of the satire in the former, on the British blockade of the Greek coast following the “Don Pacifico Affair”; and Lord John Russell, in particular, in the latter, which offered an overview of the history of Protectionism in the context of the conflict between landed and commercial interests over the second quarter of the century.

In both cases the humour of “Herodotus Junior” proves rather more robustly *ad hominem* than the Preface implies. He suggests that it is “hard to believe that even the Whigs could have been such blockheads as to send a fleet to the Piraeus for such silly causes,” deriding Palmerston himself as “the greatest meddler in the world” (p. 5d-e), while Russell, “whose hobby-horse was Reform, and whose dunghill was ‘Constitutional Liberty’,” is repeatedly mocked as “Finality John/Jack” (p. 717b). It seems more than likely that the mischievous personal attack in columns of *The Times*, which appeared side by side with a solemn leading article on the “Don Pacifico Affair” and indeed seemed almost to be a parody of it, must have caused intense annoyance to both editor and proprietor at Printing House Square, only a short step from St. Paul’s Cathedral. There is evidence that this was indeed the case later in the same decade, when Dasent adopted, on a rather more regular basis and over a longer period, a new classical pen-name to disguise his identity when making fun of those in positions of authority.

2) “Habitans in Sicco”

According to the official account, on 12 October 1858 there appeared in *The Times* a “somewhat venomous attack” from the pen of Dasent on Lord John Manners, a member of Cabinet in the Conservative administration under Lord Derby, which resulted in a stern “editorial rebuke”; following Walter’s instructions, Delane wrote to his assistant that the reputation of the newspaper would be “seriously damaged by an article upon a rather inoffensive individual which the world will with too much reason characterize as an outrage.” (cited in *History of “The Times,”* II p. 123). The article in question was entitled “A Lay Sermon” and berated Manners’ adherence to “traditional policy” discouraging the promotion of Christianity in British India; attributed in the editorial diary to “GWD”—thus confirming that the article was to be professionally compensated—it nevertheless took the discursive form of a reader’s letter addressed from “Broad Phylactery” and bearing the signature “Habitans in Sicco” (p. 7c-d). At that time Dasent was resident with his family at 6, Broad Sanctuary, Westminster, not far from the Abbey, while the pseudonym derives from Coleridge’s reported description of Jonathan Swift as “*anima Rabelaisii habitans in sicco*,—the soul of Rabelais dwelling in a dry place.”⁵

The offending article was in fact the penultimate, and much the longest, in a series of nine sharply witty letters appearing over that signature in the columns of *The Times* during the

⁵ See [Henry Nelson Coleridge], ed., *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Murray, 1836), p. 93, dated 14 June 1830.

later 1850s. There had been three headed “Dust, Oh!” (March-April, 1856, lamenting the lack of street-watering to lay the dust around Broad Sanctuary) and four addressed from “Broad Phylactery” on “Preaching and Preaching” (March 1857-January 1858, decrying the poor quality of sermons in the Anglican Church), with a final one from the same address headed “Classical or Gothic?” (in February 1859, mocking the current debate concerning the architectural style of new public buildings). This “Habitans” correspondence not only provoked many responses from readers in *The Times* itself, but also attracted a good deal of attention elsewhere in the London press. To take the most notable example: during the the debate on preaching style Dasent was drawn into a heated exchange with one “Cantab.”, eventually descending to derision of his opponent’s supposedly incompetent use of foreign tongues before exposing him—presumably via information available only to the editorial staff—as the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University. This provoked the critical *Saturday Review*, only recently founded but already a fierce opponent of Delane’s newspaper, to respond angrily in an article entitled “The Smasher” at the end of March 1858. This cleverly detected that the letters in question must have been penned by a member not of the public but of the newspaper staff and thus concluded with righteous indignation: “Is it possible that the *Times* is in the habit of betraying the anonymous which it professes to protect? Does it throw the veil of secrecy over one of the parties in a discussion, and strip the mask from the other, in order the better to expose him to his antagonist? Is this the fair play and honour of the English Press? Is this the legitimate use of anonymous writing?” As I have argued in detail elsewhere,⁶ the correspondence appearing over Dasent’s second pseudonym thus drew him into the vortex of the argument raging over the issue of press anonymity during the period when the mid-Victorian media landscape was being rapidly transformed by the elimination of the various fiscal constraints on newspaper publication, that is, during the contentious transition from “old” to “new journalism.”

3) “Edward Halfacre”

Dasent’s first efforts at writing fiction were closely related to the task of rendering Scandinavian myths and folktales into English. After *Popular Tales from the Norse*, major projects were his adaptations of two celebrated Icelandic sagas as *The Story of Burnt Njal* (1861) and *Gisli the Outlaw* (1866). Towards the end of that decade, he embarked on a second series of tales from the Norse which were initially serialised between April 1868 and January 1869 in *Once a Week*, the illustrated miscellany then edited by E.S. Dallas, before being reprinted in expanded form in a volume entitled *Tales from the Fjeld* from Chapman and Hall at the beginning of 1874. Here the translator acknowledged that he had not only adopted a rather freer style of rendition but also

⁶ See Law, “Commissioned Letters to *The Times*.”

constructed his own frame narrative recounting “the imaginary adventures of English sportsmen on the Fjeld or Fells of Norway” (*Tales from the Fjeld*, Preface, p. vii). Around the same time, Dasent began to devote a good deal of time and effort to the composition of a trilogy of comic novels, narrating “imaginary adventures” based loosely on his own early experiences.

In the sequence of hand-written annual Editorial Diaries beginning in 1857 and preserved in the archives of *The Times*, throughout the earlier volumes—when G.W. Dasent was still acting as assistant editor and thus frequently responsible for maintaining the daily record—his own contributions, whether book reviews or other miscellaneous articles, are regularly listed under his initials or family name. However, from the spring of 1870, after he had resigned to take up a position on the Civil Service Commission, his still frequent commissions for *The Times* are typically attributed to “Edward Halfacre” or an abbreviated form of that name. The official history of the newspaper reports carelessly that Dasent “occasionally disguised himself in the Editor’s diary, for no reason now known” under this *nom de plume* (*History of “The Times”* II, p. 473). The origin of the name is in fact not hard to discover. At the beginning of 1870, when Dasent was already in his early fifties, his first concerted attempt at original contemporary fiction was published in the form of an anonymous three-volume novel under the title *Annals of an Eventful Life*. This was a semi-autobiographical comic narrative written in the first person concerning the youthful romance of the man raised in the West Indies and educated at Westminster School then Oxford University, who introduces himself in the middle of the opening chapter as “I, Edward Halfacre.” The work proved very popular and, before the end of the same year, had appeared in a revised Fifth Edition in a single volume under the author’s own name.

This was soon followed by two further signed triple-deckers in similar comic vein, *Three to One* (1872) and *Half a Life* (1874), although the latter, with its narrative setting and contents closely echoing those of *Annals of an Eventful Life*, was rather more successful. The name “Edward Halfacre” thus seems never to have been formally employed as a pseudonym by Dasent himself. Nevertheless, its widespread adoption among the editorial staff of *The Times*—whether to indicate the reviewer of novels like Trollope’s *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* or the obituarist of celebrities such as Charles Dickens—suggests that it served as a convenient image of his newly established identity as popular comic novelist. But when Dasent, approaching the age of seventy in the middle of the following decade, again apparently turned his hand to humorous fiction—this time in the form of the short story—he seems to have adopted a different disguise.

4) “Luke Lovart”

While there seems to be no conclusive proof that this fourth pseudonym was a cloak worn by Dasent in the final stage of his career, there is a good deal of circumstantial evidence to suggest that this is indeed the case. Four short works of fiction of various genres appeared with this

signature in the later 1880s: a comic novella in a cheap soft-cover volume from J.W. Arrowsmith of Bristol in late 1885; two sensational short stories in the monthly *Gentleman's Magazine* of July 1886 and August 1888; and a romantic Christmas tale in *Household Harmony*, the extra 1888 holiday issue of the Religious Tract Society's illustrated weekly *Girl's Own Paper*. Of these, the earliest is much the most revealing. First of all, though, we should note that "Lovart" is by no means a common family name in Britain—no hits are currently returned on Ancestry.co.uk—but can represent the nautical term "windward" in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian alike, while "Luke" can obviously be read punningly as "Look". Dasent was of course a specialist in Scandinavian languages who had been born in the Caribbean on St. Vincent, one of the outer chain of the Lesser Antilles known as the Windward Islands.

The 1885 Arrowsmith volume was entitled *Too Fat: A Domestic Difficulty*, a farcical account loaded with puns and narrated by the husband of an "angel" who is deserted after putting on a good deal of weight, but finally wins back his love by rescuing him when he is arrested and charged with his own murder. Before opening the narrative the author offers a brief prefatory Note referring to "former works", stating that these were both "published under another name" and exhibited "the faculty of humour". More specifically he acknowledges the critics "representing the *Times*, the *Spectator*, the *Athenaeum*, and the *Academy*" whose positive responses encouraged him to attempt more comic writing. This not only suggests that "Luke Luvart" must be a pen-name, but also can be taken as a reference to the trilogy of triple-decker humorous novels of the early 1870s, all (eventually) appearing under the signature "George Webbe Dasent", which were indeed reviewed enthusiastically in the journals listed. For example, *Annals of an Eventful Life* (1870), the first in the series, was reviewed early that year over more than two columns in *The Times* by Arthur Locker, who must have been aware that the author had long been on the editorial staff of the paper. He concluded fulsomely: "For a long while we have not met a professed work of fiction containing such a fund of varied entertainment within its three volumes." (p. 6c-e; 6e).

There is also within the narrative itself at least a couple of knowing hints that might reveal the identity of the author to those familiar with his career. In contrast to the periodical appearances of "Luke Luvart", the Arrowsmith volume carried on both cover and title-page the added letters, "M.A.", while on pages 70-71 it is revealed that the narrator's "*Alma Mater*" was Oxford, in a brief anecdote about his performance at "the Schools" which recalls one of the many college reminiscences of "Edward Halfacre" in *Annals of an Eventful Life*. More tellingly, earlier on page 12, among the amusing descriptions of the effects of his partner's unavailing attempts to shed weight

on the narrator's own intake of food and drink, he confesses: "My life grew all at once very dry; and it was at this period of my career that I wrote my celebrated letters to *The Times*, with the signature *Habitans in Sicco*." It is difficult to interpret this gratuitous reference as anything other than a covert confession of Dasent's responsibility for the novella.

As already suggested, the other three "Luke Lovart" short stories seem to offer little by way of hint at their real authorship. The two tales with a Gothic flavour in *The Gentleman's Magazine* are set respectively: in the London medical world ("A Hazardous Experiment", narrated by a house-surgeon who carries out a blood transfusion with tragic mental consequences); and at the isolated dwelling of the public executioner of Cologne ("The Hundredth Victim", told by a young German-speaking Englishman). "The Wrong Colour," the Christmas romance for *The Girl's Own Paper*, is perhaps slightly more revealing in its references to life in the Caribbean: the tale is told in the third person about an Oxford law student intended by his guardian to marry a wealthy niece from the West Indies, who herself tests the young man by making him believe mistakenly that his fiancée must be a "mulatto," or "[a] sort of female Christy minstrel" in his own derisive term (p. 24a). Perhaps Dasent felt the need to disguise his authorial identity with a new and more opaque pen-name because of the sensitivity of such social topics as female obesity and interracial union, particularly when viewed in a such a frivolous light.

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Strangely the second volume of the *History of "The Times"* makes no mention of Dasent's employment in the columns of the newspaper of either of his two earlier pen-names ("Herodotus Junior" and "Habitans in Sicco"), just as it claims ignorance of the origins of the third ("Edward Hardacre"), while the fourth ("Luke Ovar") is obviously beyond its remit in both institutional and chronological terms. When we look in isolation at the writings that Dasent saw fit to issue under these various pen-names, it is difficult to fathom how he held for so long such a responsible editorial position on the leading daily newspaper with its intimate links to the clerical and political establishment. However, despite its official status, thanks in large part to its reliance on the extensive business records and correspondence preserved in the archives, *History of "The Times": The Tradition Established* does offer a good deal of insight into the increasing tensions at play, over the quarter of a century up to the Assistant Editor's resignation in 1870, between him and both the Chief Proprietor John Walter and the Chief Editor John Delane in particular. All three were of course old acquaintances and of an age, while Delane and Dasent were also brothers-in-law.

Dasent was regularly left in nominal editorial control when Delane was on his annual vacation, typically from the September, when there often seem to have been conflicts not only with Walter—who attended the office more regularly and oversaw the contents of the newspaper more strictly when the Chief Editor was absent—but also with the elder senior editor Henry Reeve (dubbed “Il Pomposo” by Dasent and other staff) who saw himself as in charge of foreign correspondence. The problem became acute in the autumn of 1855 while Delane was on the Continent, leading to Reeve’s exasperated resignation after fifteen years at the paper. The official history concludes simply: “The clash came when Delane was absent. Reeve’s relations with Dasent were notoriously bad. Both were given to rashness of judgment.” (see pp. 228-35). Walter offered some support to Dasent in his conflict with Reeve, but this was far from enthusiastic, and when Delane became seriously ill the following year the proprietor made it clear that the assistant editor would be unsuitable as a permanent replacement. He penned a forthright letter to Dasent that was shown to the Chief Editor but never sent, where he stated that he “long ago came to the conclusion ... that you do not possess the requisite qualifications for succeeding Delane ...” (p. 122). While he was undoubtedly very close to his old school friend, even Delane did not see fit to advocate on Dasent’s behalf on that occasion. As we have already seen, the editor was to rebuke Dasent sternly in autumn 1858 on the occasion of his *ad hominem* assault on Lord John Manners, while he did not argue when Walter recommended unsuccessfully that Dasent accept the editorship of the *Cornhill Magazine* offered to him following the death of Thackeray in later 1861, since his “genius and temperament” were clearly “more suited to literature than to politics” (p. 122). And here seems to have been little or no resistance in early 1870 when the assistant editor withdrew from his position to occupy a vacancy on the Civil Service Commission on the recommendation of Robert Lowe, then Chancellor under Gladstone and formerly a regular leader writer for *The Times*.

To delve deeper into Dasent’s complex authorial personalities, his regular veering between analysis and comedy, discursive sobriety and intoxication, it is helpful to return to the characterization of Dasent as “Darwin” in Clifford’s *Travels by “Umbra”*, which goes on to explain in revealing detail:

He was two gentlemen at once. Though a sincerely religious man, still I cannot help suspecting that in his heart of hearts he looked on Christianity as a somewhat *parvenu* creed, and deemed that Thor, Odin, Freya, etc., were the proper objects of worship. In dull fact he was an excellent citizen, a householder, paying rates and taxes, an affectionate husband, and the good father of a family; but in

the dream ... he was a Berserker, a Norse pirate, ploughing the seas in his dragon-shaped barque, ... slaying, pillaging, burning, ravishing, and thus gratifying a laudable taste for adventure. I fear he preferred the glorious dream to the sober reality. I think he inwardly pined at his own respectability, that he considered himself misplaced in the narrow sphere of duties. But he was a most agreeable comrade. ⁷

To obtain a more convincing portrait than this—curiously suggestive concerning the anarchic tendencies often exposed in the various pseudonymous writings of George Webbe Dasent—it will probably be necessary to wait for the completion of a full-length, definitive biography.

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⁷ Cited in Arthur Irwin Dasent, "Mémorial", p. xxxiii. Curiously, Dasent himself was assigned to write the review of *Travels by "Umbra"* for *The Times*, where, after praising its "exquisite humour," he went on to cite in full the description of himself as "Mr. Darwin" (p. 12b).

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