

English, Thomas Dunn (29 June 1819-1 Apr. 1902), writer and politician, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, probably the son of Robert English, a carpenter. His mother's name is not known. Of Irish Quaker heritage, English attended the Friends' Academy in Burlington, New Jersey, before graduating from the University of Pennsylvania's medical school in 1839. After also studying law, he was admitted to the bar in 1842.

Although he worked as a doctor, a lawyer, and a politician, it was in the field of literature that English primarily distinguished himself. He began contributing to *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* around 1837 and later edited *Metcalfe's Miscellany*. In 1843 the *New York Mirror* published what would become his most memorable work, "Ben Bolt." In this popular song, a speaker notes the passing of "sweet Alice," a schoolhouse, and other elements of a faded past, then proclaims,

There is change in the things I loved, Ben Bolt.
They have changed from old to the new;
But I feel in the core of my spirit the truth.
There never was change in you.

Sentimental and stylistically plain, "Ben Bolt" never attracted serious critical interest. In its day, however, it was among the most popular of popular songs, perhaps because of what Edgar Allan Poe called its "simplicity of diction and touching truthfulness of narrative." By Poe's account, five editions of the song had appeared by 1845. The *New York Times* reported that, during English's 1890 bid for a seat in the House of Representatives, the song "was sung nightly by all the singers the Democrats could muster, and the author was literally sung into Congress." The song achieved greater fame when George du Maurier featured it in his 1894 novel *Trilby*.

Neither of the two publications English edited in 1844 and 1845, the *Aurora* and the *Aristidean*, lasted long. During this early stage of his career, however, he achieved another, more enduring form of distinction. In 1839 he began to associate with Poe, then assistant editor of *Burton's*. Although Poe ridiculed English at a party in 1843 and English responded that year with an unflattering portrait of Poe in his temperance novel *The Doom of the Drinker*, they remained for the most part civil until January 1846. At that time English accused Poe of lying, and the two came to blows. Later that year, in a series called "The Literati of New York City," Poe described English as a plagiarist and "a man without the commonest school education busying himself in attempts to instruct mankind on topics of polite literature." Once again English retaliated, publishing, among other things, someone else's charges that Poe had committed forgery. The war of words, which continued in subsequent articles, drew extensive coverage in the *Public Ledger*, *National Press*, *Spirit of the Times*, and other periodicals inside and outside New York. Joseph C. Neal wrote in the *Saturday Gazette*, "Their friends will probably watch the progress of affairs with some interest, and the public, if it reads them, will enjoy a laugh." Not laughing, Poe took the dispute to the New York Superior Court and, in February 1847, won a libel suit against the owners of the *Evening Mirror*, which had published English's initial article. The relationship with Poe stamps much of English's work from this period. His 1846 novel *1844, or, The Power of the "S.F."* features a character named Marmaduke Hammerhead, a dishonest and alcoholic critic who has written a poem called "The Black Crow." In 1848, as editor of the *John-Donkey*, English published a parody of Poe's "Ulalume" called "Sophia Maria" and frequently satirized the poet.

In 1849 English married Annie Maxwell Meade. They had four children, naming one of them Edgar. In 1852 English moved to a small Virginia town, where he worked as a doctor, lawyer, and mayor. In

1858, after a short stint in New York, he moved to New Jersey, where he lived the rest of his life. During these remaining years he balanced literature and politics.

His 1858 play *The Mormons, or, Life at Salt Lake City*, which he reportedly wrote in seventy-two hours, was produced by Junius Brutus Booth and achieved some popularity. After serving in the New Jersey legislature from 1863 to 1864, he published the novel *Ambrose Fecit, or, The Peer and the Printer* in 1867, *The Boy's Book of Battle Lyrics* in 1885, and the novel *Jacob Schuyler's Millions* in 1886. He reached the pinnacle of his political career between 1891 and 1895, when he represented New Jersey as a Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Before dying in Newark, New Jersey, he saw the publication of *The Select Poems of Dr. Thomas Dunn English* in 1894 and *Fairy Stories and Wonder Tales* around 1897. In 1896 *The Independent* published his "Reminiscences of Poe," a series of essays featuring a backhanded defense of his "bitter enemy": "[Poe] had little sense of right and wrong whenever need or resentment provoked him, and could no more be held responsible for many things that he did, than could a lunatic or an idiot."

This association with Poe remains the chief source of scholarly interest in English. Their war figures as a major event in biographies of Poe, and English's accounts of the poet have provided valuable information about Poe's sensitivity to alcohol and the possibility of his drug use.

As an author in his own right, English has attracted little attention from critics, even in his own time. Contemporary anthologies and literary histories mention him briefly, if at all. In his 1890 volume *The Poets of America*, Edmund Clarence Stedman lumped him with other minor mid-century figures who "betokened a taste, however crude and ill-regulated, for the pursuit of letters." Later critics also have neglected English as a writer worthy of individual study. However, as scholars continue to recover literature with important cultural associations, English may invite study as a representative of nineteenth-century magazinists and popular poets.

- Biographical information about English is in sketches in reference books such as Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., *American Authors, 1600-1900: A Biographical Dictionary of American Literature* (1938), and brief comments in guides to American periodicals, including Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (1930). Unpublished materials include William Gravely, Jr., "The Early Political and Literary Career of Thomas Dunn English" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Virginia, 1953). English published much of his work in periodicals such as the *Weekly Mirror* and the *Saturday Museum*. "Ben Bolt" appears in Rufus Griswold's 1854 edition of *The Poets and Poetry of America*, and "Reminiscences of Poe" appears in four consecutive issues of *The Independent*, beginning 15 Oct. 1896. For English's relationship with Poe, see James Ingram, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life, Letters, and Opinions* (1886); Poe, "The Literati of New York City," reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews* (1984); and the biographical sketch and appropriate entries from 1839 to 1848 in Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson, *The Poe Log* (1987). Assessments of English's work and popularity appear in Poe's note on "Ben Bolt," reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*; in the obituary published in the *New York Times*, 2 Apr. 1902; and in literary reference books, including William Cairns, *A History of American Literature* (1930).

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