

Classic Poetry Series

Ernest Lawrence Thayer

- poems -

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Ernest Lawrence Thayer (1863 - 1940)

Ernest Lawrence Thayer was an American writer and poet who wrote "Casey at the Bat".

Biography

Born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and raised in Worcester, Thayer graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in philosophy in 1885 after editing the Harvard Lampoon. Its business manager, William Randolph Hearst, hired Thayer as humour columnist for the San Francisco Examiner 1896-88. His last piece, dated June 3, 1888, was a ballad entitled Casey. Thayer's last piece, dated June 3, 1888, was a ballad entitled "Casey" ("Casey at the Bat").

It took several months after its publication for the poem to make Thayer famous, since he was hardly the boastful type and had signed the June 3 poem with the nickname "Phin". Two mysteries remain about the poem: whether anyone or anyplace was the real-life Casey and Mudville, and, if so, their actual identities. On March 31, 2004, Katie Zezima of The New York Times penned an article called "In 'Casey' Rhubarb, 2 Cities Cry 'Foul!'" on the competing claims of two towns to such renown: Stockton, California, and Holliston, Massachusetts.

On the possible model for Casey, Thayer dismissed the notion that any single living baseball player was an influence. However, late 1880s Boston star Mike "King" Kelly is odds-on the most likely model for Casey's baseball situations.

Besides being a native of a town close to Boston, Thayer, as a San Francisco Examiner baseball reporter in the offseason of 1887-88, covered exhibition games featuring Kelly. In November 1887, some of his reportage about a Kelly at-bat has the same ring as Casey's famous at-bat in the poem. A 2004 book by Howard W. Rosenberg, *Cap Anson 2: The Theatrical and Kingly Mike Kelly: U.S. Team Sport's First Media Sensation and Baseball's Original Casey at the Bat*, reprints a 1905 Thayer letter to a Baltimore scribe who was asking about the poem's roots.

In the letter, Thayer singled out Kelly (d. 1894), as having shown "impudence" in claiming to have written it. Rosenberg argues that if Thayer still felt offended, Thayer may have steered later comments away from connecting Kelly to it. Kelly had also performed in vaudeville, and recited the poem dozens of times, possibly, to Thayer's dismay, butchering it. Incidentally, the first public performance of the poem was on August 14, 1888, by actor De Wolf Hopper, on Thayer's 25th birthday.

Although it made him famous, and Thayer recited it at a Harvard class

reunion in 1895 and contributed several other comic poems for Hearst's New York Journal a year later, Thayer had a low opinion of the worth of his verse and turned to make his livelihood by overseeing his family's mills in Worcester. He moved to Santa Barbara in 1912, where he married Rosalind Buel Hammett and retired.

Casey at the Bat

The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day;
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play,
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
A pall-like silence fell upon the patrons of the game.

A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;
They thought, "If only Casey could but get a whack at that--
We'd put up even money now, with Casey at the bat."

But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,
And the former was a hoodoo, while the latter was a cake;
So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,
For there seemed but little chance of Casey getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,
And Blake, the much despised, tore the cover off the ball;
And when the dust had lifted, and men saw what had occurred,
There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.

Then from five thousand throats and more there rose a lusty yell;
It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;
It pounded on the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,
For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;
There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile lit Casey's face.
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.

Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt;
Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
Defiance flashed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,
And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped--
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one!" the umpire said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore;
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted some one on the stand;
And it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the dun sphere flew;
But Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two!"

"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered "Fraud!"
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.

They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,
And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.

The sneer has fled from Casey's lip, his teeth are clenched in hate;
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go.
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and little children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville--great Casey has struck out.

Ernest Lawrence Thayer