## SAMUEL FLAGG BEMIS

Samuel Flagg Bemis, twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, was born in Worcester, October 20, 1891, the son of Charles Harris and Flora M. (Bemis) Bemis. When he was nine years old, his family moved out of the City of Worcester to the countryside in the Town of Sturbridge. They went to take care of Bemis's ailing grandfather, since the grandmother had recently passed away. Samuel Flagg Bemis was named for this grandfather, who in turn had been named for his father. The family was deeply rooted on the land and in that region, for its antecedents extended back a half-dozen generations or so of Massachusetts farmers. The farm, too, was in an area rich in New England history—located on the Old Bay Path over which Yankee settlers trekked westward to the Connecticut River Valley, near or part of the tract of land given by two friendly Nipmuc sachems to their 'Apostle' John Eliot, in 1655. A short distance from the farm house was Alum Pond. As Bemis put it in a reminiscence in *The New-England Galaxy* some seven decades after he had come to the site, 'Alum Pond and my boyhood years leave the most vivid and lasting impression of my lifetime.' The Pond was his own private Walden. 'It was,' he believed, 'better than Walden but it had no 'Thoreau.' On the farm and by the Pond, Bemis grew up fishing for pickerel, cutting ice, and listening for the honking of flocks of migrating geese, a sound that never failed to haunt him even years later whenever he heard a trace of it amid the bustle of New Haven. On that farm, Bemis learned of the beauties of nature in New England.

For Bemis remembering, 'What a place and time it was for boyhood years!' For his father and mother, however, the realities of life on the Sturbridge farm were far harsher. They had come to help out the grandfather. The farm's prosperity declined as he did. Dairying, the ice business, fruit-growing no longer paid. Bemis's father, having become reacquainted with

the farm life of his youth, left it again for his former job of night copy editor of the Worcester *Telegram*, in order to make ends meet. He commuted to the farm on occasional weekends. To manage the property, he hired a Vermont farm family who required the master quarters. The Bemises thereafter made do with 'a makeshift upstairs tenement.' The grandfather died in 1902. By 1905 his affairs were settled and the farm and all the belongings were sold at auction and the family returned to Worcester.

Bemis recorded his recollections of Worcester years, together with those of Sturbridge and elsewhere, in a series of pieces in *The New-England Galaxy* from 1968 to 1970. His picture of life in turn-of-the-century Worcester as lived by a young man from an old but scarcely wealthy Yankee family might profitably be compared with *The Worcester Account* of a young man of much the same age but different background, S. N. Behrman. The Bemises, for their part, lived in a $2500 house on Hamburg Street (renamed Genesee Street during the anti-German fervor of World War I) on the fringes of South Worcester. It was, Bemis admitted, on the wrong side of the tracks. Being near the city limits, however, young Bemis could enjoy some of the delights of the rural life he had left behind at Sturbridge.

Bemis attended South High School. He was not a brilliant student, by his own admission. He did well, however, and remembered his teachers and the school fondly. It was at South High that he first gazed at his future wife, Ruth Marjorie Steele. Upon graduation in 1909, Bemis was for a while uncertain of his career. Rather than work in the railroad or butter-and-egg business, he decided to attend college.

One college within Bemis's financial limitations was Clark College, an institution for male undergraduates administratively separate from the graduate school, Clark University. Clark was an urban, commuter school. Students were expected to graduate within three years. 'Expenses were small for any

young man who could room and board at home, carry his lunch, and walk back and forth—in my case two miles each way.' His father paid his first year's tuition of eighty dollars, but Bemis put himself through the rest of the way to the Ph.D. by means of scholarships and by working at odd jobs, as a bellboy at summer resorts, as a camp counselor, and as a part-time reporter for the Worcester *Telegram*.

Bemis's introduction to history and international affairs came while a student at Clark. The man most responsible was Professor George H. Blakeslee, himself a pioneer and leading authority on international relations. Important training in historical technique came from the hands of Professor Norman S. B. Gras. Bemis's relationship with the American Antiquarian Society ('the most famous intellectual monument of my native city') also began at that time. As he told Clifford K. Shipton years later, 'it was the first place I did any real historical searching.' Either during his senior year in 1912 or a fourth year in the graduate school (after which he took an M.A. in 1913), he worked among the Society's vast newspaper collections on a Civil War topic.

From Clark, Bemis went to Harvard, urged on in history by Blakeslee and Gras. And an impressive experience it was, for this was the Harvard history faculty of Channing, Hart, Turner, Haskins, McIlwain, Coolidge, and a young instructor, Samuel Eliot Morison. While taking a wide range of courses in American, English constitutional, and modern French history, Bemis's interests turned increasingly in the direction of diplomatic history. After passing his 'generals' (with one dissenting vote), Bemis settled down to finishing his thesis on Jay's Treaty, a topic suggested to him by Dr. Channing. A $750 Parker Fellowship enabled him to travel abroad to work in English archives. It was to a wartime London that Bemis went in 1915. A Zeppelin had dropped bombs the night before he arrived. No other raids occurred while he was in London, but there were plenty of alerts and blackouts.

After finishing his research in London, Bemis made plans to do a bit of work in the French Foreign Office archives. Before booking steamship passage, he inquired of the ticket agent, 'Any trouble lately with submarines?' 'Not on this line,' was the reply. The ship he chose, however, was the French Channel Steamer, the *Sussex*, and indeed there came to be trouble. While on board the afternoon of March 24, 1916, a torpedo launched by a German U-Boat struck the ship. Bemis saw it coming, but there was no time to shout a warning. There was trouble with some lifeboats, but Bemis managed to jump overboard with an imperfect lifejacket. An explosion blew part of the ship away but the steamer managed to stay afloat. After four hours floating in the English Channel in frigid March, Bemis and others were taken back aboard the *Sussex*, later to be rescued by a British minesweeper. Once in Paris, Bemis reported to the American Embassy. An affidavit in which he swore he had seen the wake of a torpedo 'played some part in the *cause célèbre* of the *Sussex*, for the Germans at first claimed that the vessel had hit a mine, only much later to admit, after the report of the submarine commander himself, that he had torpedoed the ship thinking it a different vessel.' Thus did the budding diplomatic historian himself become a witness of and participant in a bit of diplomatic history. The experience left him, however, with a lingering illness and a certain edginess.

Bemis finished up his business in Paris and returned to the United States. He defended his dissertation and received his Ph.D. in June 1916. He still did not feel entirely well. When a doctor diagnosed incipient tuberculosis, he went out West to recover his health. His first academic position was as an Instructor in History at Colorado College in the shadow of Pike's Peak. He was quickly appointed Associate Professor. While there, the girl from South High, Ruth Steele, came to join him and they were married June 20, 1919. From Colorado, Bemis went to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, as Professor of History from 1920 to 1923. The next year he was

a research associate at the Carnegie Institute of Washington, D.C. A ten-year association with George Washington University began in 1924. He spent a year at Harvard in 1934-35. His long tenure at Yale then followed: as Farnam Professor of Diplomatic History from 1935 to 1945, as Sterling Professor of Diplomatic History and International Relations from 1945 to 1961, and thereafter as Sterling Professor Emeritus. Other posts also occupied him during this career. From 1927 to 1929 he supervised the European Mission of the Library of Congress, a project which resulted in the photoduplication of nearly half a million papers and documents relating to American history in the possession of foreign archives and libraries. He was a Carnegie visiting professor to Latin American universities in 1937-38 and in Cuba in 1945 and 1956. He was a member of numerous historical and other learned societies, serving as President of the American Historical Association in 1961.

Bemis's career was unusually distinguished when he was elected to membership in the American Antiquarian Society at the annual meeting in Worcester in October 1932. Already he had published two of his more important books: *Jay's Treaty, A Study in Commerce and Diplomacy* (1923), based on his doctoral dissertation, which won a Knights of Columbus prize, and *Pinckney's Treaty; A Study of America's Advantage from Europe's Distress, 1783-1800* (1926), which won a Pulitzer. Bemis presented two papers on diplomatic history, later expanded for publication in the *Proceedings*, at Society meetings within five years of his election. The two were 'The Rayneval Memoranda of 1782' and 'Early Diplomatic Missions from Buenos Aires to the United States 1811-1824.' Both were something of a bestseller in offprint form, the latter especially. Shipton expressed delight when he heard the two pieces were to be included in a Bemis anthology, *American Foreign Policy and the Blessings of Liberty* (1962): 'Goodness knows we have been swamped with demands for them ever since they went out of print years ago.'

Some of Bemis's researches were done in the Society's library, either in person, through queries of the Director or Librarian, or by local researchers he hired for the purpose. Bemis drove the staff hard, but no harder than he drove himself. Before coming to work in the Society's library, he would write to ask if volume after volume of bound newspapers in which he was interested could be made 'ready for me on a table in the reading room so that I can get at them . . . without delay? If this can be done it will be a great saving of precious time for me.' From his correspondence with the Society, one gets a sense of a man of consummate ability, thoroughness, and attention to detail, a man ever rushing from one point to another, the leader of a busy and productive academic life. Another of the fruits of Bemis's hard work, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (1949), which won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1949, was in part the result of research done by or for him at AAS. Although teaching schedules or other conflicts often prevented him from attending meetings of the Society, he was very 'proud' of his membership in it. He did what he felt he could in the giving of gifts of money or books to the Society and, like others, regretted that he could not do more.

Bemis's long academic career included authorship of numerous articles and books, mostly in diplomatic history. Besides those referred to above, they include *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (1935), *Guide to the Diplomatic History of the United States, 1775-1921* (with Grace Gardner Griffin, 1935), *A Diplomatic History of the United States* (1936), *The Latin American Policy of the United States* (1943), and *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (1956). In his spare time, he was editor and part-author of the ten-volume series, *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy* (1927-29). His interpretation of the conduct of foreign policy by his fellow citizens was scarcely of the 'de-bunking sort.' Ever the patriot, Bemis was often called 'American Flagg.' As retort, he said, 'I wouldn't

want to be called by any other flag.' As a teacher, the Yale student newspaper found him 'warm and concerned,' even though he considered himself 'cold as potato salad.'

Samuel Flagg Bemis died at the age of eighty-one, September 27, 1973, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he had lived in a residence for the elderly for some three years. His wife of forty-eight years had died in 1967. Of her Bemis wrote in his reminiscences, 'she now lies in the Bemis family lot in Sturbridge north cemetery, waiting for me.' A daughter, two brothers, and three grandchildren survive him.

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