

To ~~Walter Dyer~~
" Fred Ellis

To be returned to Library.

83 Washington Place, New York
November 3, 1934.

Dear Mr. Fletcher:-

In answering your letter I think I may as well try to answer also the questions people sometimes ask me about the when and where and how and why of the writing of "Lord Jeffery Amherst". Probably it will run into words and include highly unimportant details, but it will cover all that I can recall.

I was in Farmington, Connecticut, in the summer of 1905 before the start of my Senior year, trying to plan a Glee Club program for the fall. I wanted something to open the concerts with, as a balance for "Cheer for Old Amherst" that always came at the end - rather vaguely I wanted something a bit gay, like "Here's to Johnny Harvard" and the song about Eph Williams "who founded a school in Billville". No such thing existed for Amherst. Lord Amherst wasn't a particularly familiar figure to us then except as a picture we saw every day in chapel; we certainly didn't make light of his name by calling him "Lord Jeffery". More or less subconsciously, I suppose, was working a recollection of some verses which appeared in the Amherst Literary Monthly for February, 1903, during my Freshman year. I didn't definitely remember them but they must have suggested to me that here was a personality and a name on which a cheerful ditty might be hung. I haven't seen those verses since I first read them so I have no notion how much I may have imitated them. I know that the first idea I had was something like "Oh Lord! Jeffery Amherst, look at what you've done!" The first four words, with an exclamatory pause after the second, set themselves immediately to a tune. The rest of the tune followed naturally enough, with doggerel to go with it - which shifted from an apostrophe to a narrative. It came to a stop at the last line of the chorus; a line I somehow couldn't manage at the time and which as a matter of fact I never did write. All of this was put down in a musical notebook I kept - those particular pages were in the Chi Phi House at Amherst the last I knew of them.

After that much was done it seemed too trifling to use - it was really a burlesque of Alma Mater songs - and I gave it up and forgot about it. But the thing was in that notebook, and sometime after college opened Charles A. Vinal, a classmate who was manager of the Musical Clubs, came upon it and had me play it for him.

There was a little group of Musical Club men who used to do some beer-drinking and singing together - what afterwards came to be called the Senior Song was their special gang-tune - and Vinal had them over to the house with some other Glee Club singers to see how this new piece sounded when it was sung. They thought it should be tried out in a concert. It still had no last line, but George Harris produced one in something less than a minute. Norman Foster got to work arranging the music for the instrumental clubs and we hurriedly rehearsed it. The second verse was a last-minute throwing together of rhymes between supper up at Nel Waite's and the final rehearsal. The song was sung a night or so later in the High School at Springfield - date unknown. The next concert after that was a joint one with Williams in Northampton, which was the first time the song got a home hearing. The whole thing had been frivolously conceived and carelessly done, without any reference to historical justification or fact and even with Jeffery's name mis-spelled. But it went well enough, though without causing any noticeable enthusiasm, and was kept on the Glee Club program.

The song was first printed in Amherst College Songs, which Elijah Williams planned and published and Norman Foster and I arranged, as a sort of 1906 product. Unfortunately Professor Bigelow wasn't called on for help, and the book was pretty much of a mess. It was a thoroughly haphazard job, done at odd moments during a hectic Senior Spring Term when serious work was the last thing the editors were living for. In fact the book had no editing; otherwise such startling things wouldn't have appeared in it as crediting the words and music of the Sabrina slogan - as well as the Balfe music to which he wrote his "Hail Alma Mater, old Amherst the true" - to Prof. J. F. Genung. Nungie, in his amiable style, did a review of the book for the Student - he called his review something like "A Bit of Unofficial Editing" - humorous in tone but pretty scathing in its implications, which still heats me up with shame even to remember. Among the typographical errors in the book was one in "Lord Geoffrey (sic) Amherst" which wasn't caught, and as a result of it an E natural has come to be generally sung as an E flat in the repetition of the line "in the wilds of this wild countree". Some good critics say it should have been an E flat in the beginning; it is better, musically, that way. I've never been able to agree with them, or to restore the singing of the tune to the way I liked it best.

} 5-26-06

Sometime in 1907, it must have been in the spring, a man named W. I. Evans who worked in the Co-op undertook to publish the song as a piece of sheet music. In that form (which is the first separate edition) the E flat got changed to E natural - too late -

and there was a cover drawn by W. E. Hill, then a sophomore, which I wish might have been kept in the later editions. It still seems to me to express, jauntily and happily, the rather caricature idea from which the song first came. Mr. Evans wasn't really a publisher and had no way of keeping his venture on the market. Eventually he sent me the plates and his unsold copies, after Charles W. Homeyer of Boston had asked to take over the publication. Mr. Homeyer re-issued the song and continued to be its publisher from 1913, I think, (though somehow the name of Oliver Ditson crops up as an association) until some years later, June 8, 1926, when I assigned the copyright to Amherst College, along with whatever other rights there were.

If I've gone to an absurd length in answering your letter it's maybe the effect of being in the midst of H.G. Wells' autobiography. I didn't know I'd have an immediate chance to see how many trivia I, too, could dig up out of the past.

Faithfully yours,

/s/ James S. Hamilton