

2012

The Myth of Ephraim Tutt

Molly Gupstill Manning

The Myth of
Ephraim Tutt

*Arthur Train and
His Great Literary Hoax*

MOLLY GUPTILL MANNING

FOREWORD BY JOHN TRAIN

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA PRESS
Tuscaloosa

Copyright © 2012 Molly Guptill Manning
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America

Typeface: Garamond

Cover photograph: Arthur Train in his study with a portrait of Ephraim Tutt behind him. Photo by Underwood & Underwood. Photo courtesy of Princeton University Library.
Cover design: Erin Kirk New

∞

The paper on which this book is printed meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Manning, Molly Guptill, 1980-
The myth of Ephraim Tutt : Arthur Train and his great literary hoax / Molly Guptill Manning ; foreword by John Train.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8173-1787-4 (hardback) — ISBN 978-0-8173-8657-3 (e book)

1. Train, Arthur Cheney, 1875-1945.—Criticism and interpretation.
2. Train, Arthur Cheney, 1875-1945. Yankee lawyer.
3. Train, Arthur Cheney, 1875-1945.—Authorship.
4. Literary forgeries and mystifications—History—20th century. I. Title.

PS3539.R23Z78 2012

813'.52—dc23

2012020090

For my wonderful husband, Chris



Contents

Foreword by John Train	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	i
1. Arthur Train	6
2. <i>Yankee Lawyer: The Autobiography of Ephraim Tutt</i>	38
3. The Cooperation of the Press	71
4. Here We Go Again!	88
5. "As Popular as Pin-Up Girls"	117
6. Mr. Tutt, the Celebrity	140
7. Pygmalion and Frankenstein	158
8. Mr. Tutt's Day in Court	172
9. Life after Death	195
10. Mr. Tutt at His Best	212
Epilogue	224
Appendix: Arthur Train's Books	231
Notes	233
Selected Bibliography	251
Index	255
Photographs follow page	109

Introduction

May 23, 1945, was a grueling day for the infantrymen of the Seventh Division. As “wind and rain lashed at the[ir] camouflaged bodies,” they slowly advanced through mud and enemy fire to gain control of strategic hills on Okinawa Island, Japan. Servicemen stationed nearby reported trudging through a “stream of death,” as they faced some of the “fiercest fighting of the Pacific war.” In fact, the mixture of rain and blood that covered the ground was so deep that the “infantrymen almost swam through the red pools of liquefied earth,” and the mud below was so thick that it “seemed determined to pull off the shoes of the plodding doughboys.” Despite the challenging terrain and menacing attacks, by nightfall the Seventh Division added two more hills to the territory American forces controlled. The Seventh Division’s conquest was front-page news in the United States—with each victory, World War II seemed closer to an end.¹

After the Seventh Division retired to their camp that night, it was not long before a familiar debate arose, transforming the otherwise united group into two competing factions. Since they had already endured countless discussions on the topic, many of which grew rather heated, the unit decided that their disagreement had smoldered long enough. The following day, a sergeant, captain, and technician fifth grade (T/5) wrote a joint letter to Charles Scribner’s Sons, the publisher of *Yankee Lawyer: The Auto-*

biography of Ephraim Tutt, in the hopes of securing an answer to the controversy that had long vexed their infantry division.

“Dear sirs,” they began, “having read your published book, *Yankee Lawyer* . . . we have started a never ending discussion. The question raging back and forth is whether Ephraim Tutt is a real or a[n] imaginary character.”

They explained: “We have read many magazine stories written by Arthur Train [about Ephraim Tutt] for the *Saturday Evening Post* which we have readily taken for fiction, however your published book has divided us into two camps as to the authenticity of the character.” On the one hand, some of the men believed that Ephraim Tutt was not a real person, and his “autobiography” was just another story written by Arthur Train. Those on the other end of the debate were certain that the book could not possibly have been a work of fiction. Having reached an impasse, the men playfully reported, “At the moment we are fighting two battles, one with the Jap[anese] on Okinawa and the other among ourselves about your particular book. We have no doubt as to the outcome of the argument with the Jap[anese] but are certainly up in the air about Ephraim Tutt.” The men asked for clarification so that the matter would be settled and peace might be restored to the Seventh Division’s leisure hours.

Considering the danger the men faced each day, it is rather surprising that one of their most pressing concerns was to determine whether Ephraim Tutt was a real person. However, the significance of the book transcended the issue of whether Tutt existed; the principles that Tutt represented galvanized the men and renewed their sense of purpose in fighting the war. As the men of the Seventh Division remarked, “Real or imaginary, Ephraim is a hell of a lot better ideal and inspiration to fight for than blue berry pie and a chance to boo the Brooklyn Dodgers.”²

For a quarter of a century, Tutt had accompanied Americans through prosperous times as well as some of the most challenging events in the nation’s history. He provided entertainment during the lighthearted 1920s, he was a source of comfort and hope to Americans as they persevered through the Great Depression, and, by the time World War II commenced, Tutt had attained the status of an American icon and was considered as historically significant as Uncle Sam and Paul Bunyan. By midcentury

Tutt was so popular that he was on the radio and had a television program, books about him were on national best-seller lists, his “life” story was written into a script for the New York stage, and he was asked to endorse certain products. To his fans, however, Tutt was not a mere literary luminary but an old soul they had come to know over the years who felt like a longtime friend. In fact, Tutt felt like such a familiar part of people’s lives that after reading his autobiography many confused him for a former college classmate, an acquaintance from the past, or even a long-lost relative. Tutt’s longevity in print caused many people to feel as though he were much more than a character.

When his autobiography was published, readers were suddenly unsure of whether Tutt was a living person, or if the book was actually written by Tutt’s faithful chronicler, Arthur Train. Spirited disagreements about who wrote *Yankee Lawyer* abounded. Letters filled the mailboxes of Charles Scribner’s Sons, Arthur Train, and Ephraim Tutt, as the book seemed to inflict on its readers either confusion or amusement. For example, one reader reported that “the identity of Mr. Tutt has been the subject of discussion . . . for several days with more basis for argument than the ‘Baker Street Irregulars’ have for the actual existence of Sherlock Holmes.” Other letters reported that disputes over Tutt’s existence had resulted in all sorts of contention and strife—countless bets and wagers were made, friendships were compromised, tension developed between members of literary groups and bar associations, and even a federal judge complained that he was at a loss of what to make of the book (it did not help when he called local booksellers and one said the book was fiction by Train and the other said it was an autobiography by Tutt). For some, it seemed that their sanity hung in the balance. “Who, in Heaven’s name, wrote *Yankee Lawyer*,” one woman demanded, seemingly at her wits’ end.³

Yet other readers congratulated Arthur Train for having written such a wonderful tribute to the Ephraim Tutt character; they found his “hoax” gloriously clever. One enchanted reader remarked: “Are you not a pioneer in your field? Has any previous writer of fiction turned the tables on himself as you have done? I cannot think of any other writer whose books, over so considerable [a] span of years, have set the stage so perfectly for such a

performance. And how admirably you have pulled it off!" In another letter, a woman wittily requested Train's autograph: "While 'Mr. Tutt' is my old friend—it is through Mr. Train 'we met.' So—I'd rather, if you please, have Mr. Train autograph this book." Train typically satisfied such requests (though he had a tendency to sign whatever name a reader requested—his own or Tutt's).⁴

The answer to the question asked by members of the Seventh Division and countless others is that Ephraim Tutt never existed—at least not in a physical sense. However, by my own conservative estimate, upward of tens of thousands of people around the world sincerely believed he was a living lawyer who practiced in New York during the first half of the twentieth century. Although it was not Arthur Train's intention to mislead anyone, Tutt's autobiography was so masterfully written, with so many historically accurate details and realistic flourishes (such as providing actual photographs of people who were identified as Tutt and his parents), that a significant number of people became unsure whether Tutt was just an imaginary character or if he had actually lived the life Train had given him. For those who wished that Tutt was a real person, his "autobiography" provided the little encouragement needed to transform their wish into (what seemed to be) a reality.

In the end, Train's publication of *Yankee Lawyer* proved to be one of the greatest and most unique literary hoaxes in the history of that mischievous tradition. While the literary hoax has taken many forms over the years—from Jonathan Swift's 1708 prank publication of a false almanac that predicted that a townsman who irked him would die on an appointed date (followed by the publication of an elegy confirming that this vexatious individual had passed away when he had not) to James Frey's recent publication of his embellished and fabricated "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces*—it has never featured an established creature of fiction writing his own autobiography. Train's feat is also unparalleled because he did not intend for it to be a hoax; he genuinely believed that it would have been impossible for anyone to confuse Tutt, who was such a well-known character, for a real person. After all, the truth was hiding in plain sight

the whole time—Train's creation of a fictitious Ephraim Tutt was common knowledge. As a result, even readers who wanted to believe in the existence of a living Ephraim Tutt often had their doubts, and these readers were generally amused when their suspicion that Tutt was a creature of fiction was confirmed. In fact, one reader—who had mailed a fan letter to Tutt one morning, discovered Tutt did not exist by the afternoon, and wrote a second letter to Tutt's publisher the same day—wrote: "Go ahead. Laugh. I have laughed at myself since writing early this morning." He described Train's hoax as "superb" and wished he could obtain Train's autograph.⁵

However, not all people approached Train's ruse with such lightheartedness. Some were so upset when they learned Tutt was not real, they shed tears and wrote angry letters to the guilty parties. One woman, who had written to Tutt and then learned he did not exist, demanded that Scribner's return her prior letter to her and noted "you will perhaps forgive a feeling of profound sadness that a character so fine should be a travesty of all that it proclaimed to champion!" She even commented that "Train should not have worked so hard and done such a good job," for Train "would have been a greater advocate of justice had his character Tutt stood on the honest legs of fiction."⁶ Other letters expressing sadness, shock, disappointment, and irritation were mailed. One reader felt so outraged by Train's literary mischief that he even sued for fraud.

It is often difficult to identify at what point a literary hoax crosses the proverbial line. However, in the case of Arthur Train, his unprecedented stunt of publishing his own character's autobiography is one hoax that should not go down in history as a reprehensible one. Train wrote *Yankee Lawyer* to impart vitality on his most popular and beloved character and to ensure that Tutt would live beyond the limited years that Train—a mere mortal—had left. On both points, Train succeeded, and for the most part, Tutt's fans—whether they were fooled or not—were grateful to have read the story of Tutt's extraordinary life.