

William Lysander Adams (1821–1906)

By Richard Etulain

Four years after arriving in Oregon in 1848, William Lysander Adams was in the local headlines with his first major publication. Using the pseudonym Breakspear, he published *A Melodrame Entitled "Treason, Stratagems, and Spoils," in Five Acts*, a thirty-two page pamphlet satirizing the majority Democrats of Oregon. It was, according to cultural historian Edwin Bingham, "decisively the best piece of writing from...[Oregon's] pioneer period." The publication and the attention it gained launched Adams's reputation as a provocative thinker and writer during the formative years of Oregon as a territory and a state.

Born in Painesville, Ohio, in 1821, the young Adams became a dedicated Campbellite (part of the Christian Church tradition) and a strong Whig. He emigrated west in 1844 over the Oregon Trail, taking with him his library of 250 books but with pennies in his pocket. Adams became a teacher and a farmer near Carlton, Oregon, and married Frances Goodell in 1844; the couple had eight children.

After two trips to the California gold fields, Adams turned to writing, contributing to the *Weekly Oregonian* under the pen name "Junius." Soon after publishing *Melodrame* as a serial in the *Oregonian* in 1852, the satire was reprinted as a pamphlet. His writing gained attention throughout Oregon Territory. The *Oregon Statesman* stirred the most comment, as Adams made satirical attacks on Democrats such as O. C. Pratt and Asahel Bush and accused the Democrats of trying to overturn the Oregon territorial government and replace it with a new state headed by Mormon leader Brigham Young. With its lively wording, pointed criticisms of his opponents, and poetic ideas, Adams's prose attracted readers.

In 1855, Adams purchased the *Oregon Spectator* for \$1,200 and renamed it the *Oregon Argus*—the "parson Billy" of the "Oregon Air Goose" to Adams's critics, including Asahel Bush. First as a Whig and then as a Republican newspaper, the *Argus* attracted and spoke for burgeoning numbers of Whigs and Republicans in a Democrat-dominated Oregon. Adams's newspaper clearly supported abolition, and Abraham Lincoln was among its readers. Through his newspaper and as a public speaker, Adams was instrumental in founding the Republican party in Oregon.

Adams left the *Argus* in 1861 and accepted President Lincoln's appointment as Custom House Collector in Astoria. He also began to practice homeopathy, which led him in 1873 to move to Philadelphia, where he enrolled in medical school and gained a law degree. Returning to Oregon in 1875, Adams practiced medicine, first in Portland and then in Hood River. He and Frances divorced, and he married Mary Susan Mosier in 1881; they had two children. He became a farmer and built a new home. Drawing on his medical practice and his longtime interest in writing, he published *A History of Medicine and Surgery from the Earliest Times* in 1888.

William Lysander Adams died in 1906 and was buried in Hood River.

Sources

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