

The Capriciousness of Fame

By MICHAEL F. BROWN

THE TINY ISLAND of Esteves lies just off the shore of Lake Titicaca on the outskirts of Puno, the capital of Peru's Altiplano region. My family and I were traveling with a group of Williams College alumni as part of a program that pairs alumni with faculty knowledgeable about a destination's natural environment or culture. When I discovered that a forgotten chapter of Williams history could be explored close to our hotel, we took a detour to the hill at the island's center.

Here was the grave site of James Orton (1830-77), Williams College Class of 1855. The story of how Orton came to be buried so far from home weaves together the history of one man's passion for the natural sciences and the transformation of American higher education in the 19th century.

Today, when lavish support for the life sciences threatens to turn the humanities into an afterthought at some American research universities, it is hard to imagine the precarious situation of the sciences in the early 1800s. Most institutions of higher education saw the study of nature primarily as a way to contemplate the beauty of God's creation. Most colleges did not endow professorships in geology, botany, or astronomy until decades later.

Frustrated by institutional reluctance to embrace the new insights of natural science, a group of Williams students founded a Lyceum of Natural History in 1839. This was part of a national grassroots student movement that agitated for the creation of natural-history museums and the addition of science courses to college curricula. Although many of the first college museums were little more than cabinets of curiosities stocked by well-traveled gentlemen, they laid the groundwork for more systematic collections at universities and nascent research institutions.

James Orton matriculated at Williams after demonstrating a gift for science during his high-school years. At Williams he joined the Lyceum of Natural History's expeditions to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, eventually becoming the lyceum's president in his senior year.

After a brief stint as a minister to rural congregations in Maine and New York, Orton yielded to his love of science, accepting a visiting position as a professor of natural history at the University of Rochester. A year later, Williams's lyceum invited him to lead an expedition to South America with modest financial support from the college's trustees.

The first of what became three expeditions took Orton and his companions from New York to Quito, Ecuador. From there they made their way by horseback across the mountains and down the vertiginous eastern side of the Andes toward the Amazon, a punishing journey that over the centuries had taken the lives of many foreign travelers.

In this and Orton's subsequent expeditions to South America, he scrambled up volcanoes, collected specimens of every plant, animal, or mineral within reach, and recorded observations on local customs and languages. He even tried his hand at archaeology, although by today's standards his work was only a step removed from looting. Hundreds of the group's specimens found their way to the cabinets of scientific institutions, including



James Orton, 1830-77

Harvard, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Smithsonian.

The success of Orton's first expedition led in 1869 to an appointment at Vassar College, where he chaired its natural-history department. His feverish productivity over the next four years makes today's publish-or-perish credo seem like a slacker's holiday. The most widely read of his works was a popular account of his first expedition, *The Andes and the Amazon* (1870), a best seller in its time.

Orton wrote quickly and well. His descriptions are evocative and detailed, mostly shunning the flowery rhetoric characteristic of his time. Unfortunately, his progressive scientific views were not matched by similar attitudes toward race and culture. He regarded South America's population as indolent and corrupt, incapable of developing its nations without the help of American discipline and know-how.

However distasteful Orton's prejudices are to modern sensibilities, it's hard not to admire his determination to join the ranks of the world's great scientific explorers. For his second expedition, which began in 1873, he ascended the Amazon from Brazil, concluding the journey by climbing the famously difficult trail from Balsapuerto to Moyobamba and then on to the Pacific coast.

Orton managed the first two expeditions without major crises, but his luck ran out on the third. He and another American, Ivon Heath, set out in 1877 to explore the previously uncharted Rio Beni of northern Bolivia's Amazonian region. Battered by violent tropical storms and tormented by biting insects, soldiers attached to the party mutinied and decamped with most of the group's supplies. Orton and Heath had no choice but to retreat back into the mountains.

Whether injured in the mutiny or affected by altitude sickness, Orton's health began to fail as he and Heath crossed the mountains to Lake Titicaca, where they booked passage on a schooner bound for Puno. Halfway across the lake, Orton took a turn for the worse and died.

Because Orton was Protestant, local church officials refused to allow his burial in the town's cemetery, but the owner of Isla Esteves was an Orton admirer and graciously offered a burial site on the island. A makeshift grave was replaced in 1921 by a stone monument paid for by the Vassar Alumni Association. The inscription on the monument reads, in part, "In memory of James Orton, learned North American author, professor, explorer of South America." Orton's field notes and specimens from his last expedition disappeared in transit from Puno and have never been recovered.

ORTON is scarcely remembered at Williams today, despite his long and cordial connection to the college. His name is attached to a student prize offered annually to a promising senior anthropology major, but as far as I know, our alumni group was the first Williams delegation ever to visit Orton's grave. Vassar does a better job of honoring his life and work: An alumni publication recently dubbed him "Vassar's Indiana Jones."

In the world at large, Orton has vanished almost as completely as his 1877 field notes. A river in northern Bolivia bears his name (misspelled on some maps as Orthon), as does the settlement at the river's mouth (Boca de Orton, population 50). His name lingers on in the species or subspecies epithets of two South American reptiles, including Orton's Anole (*Anolis ortoni*), and in a genus of insects (*Ortonia*) whose taxonomic status is disputed in some quarters. That's about it.

Why hasn't Orton been admitted to the pantheon of scientific explorers he tried so hard to emulate? The brevity of his academic career, which lasted only 11 years, surely plays a part. He may also have been too much of a generalist to make a permanent mark on any one field of natural history. Perhaps his appointment at a newly established women's college left him at the margins of the prestige hierarchy of the natural sciences.

As my wife and I raised a glass to Orton's memory after our visit to his grave, I found myself pondering the capriciousness of fame. Most academics believe that through our scholarly labors, we make a significant contribution to our chosen discipline and perhaps even to human understanding in general. Yet whether we die *in medias res*, as Orton did, or end our careers voluntarily with the label "emeritus" attached to our titles, our offices and labs will soon be occupied by others. Over the decades, most of us will merge into the undifferentiated mass of an institution's ancestral figures, remembered collectively rather than individually.

One could fare worse than to be memorialized by a column of granite on the shore of Lake Titicaca, prompting the occasional visitor to ask, "Who was James Orton and how did he end up here?" ■

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