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## A Rare Book of American Proverbs

David Shulman

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Miscellany

A Rare Book of American Proverbs

David Shulman

There is a rare American book of proverbs that until now was unknown to paroemiologists (proverb

researchers). It is Old Comic Elton's *Boy's Own Book of Fun* (1847). The *National Union Catalog (NUC)* lists the New York Public Library (NYPL) as the only library possessing a copy.<sup>1</sup> There are no wraps, and it is bound with other pamphlets (its library class mark is NBF p.v. 65 at present).

It was published anonymously, seemingly by T. W. Strong, but more likely by Elton himself. The NYPL printed catalog does not list *Boy's Own Book of Fun* under the author's name. However, under the title, the entry is recorded and the engravings are attributed to T. W. Strong. The date of publication is supplied as 1847. The NYPL catalog and *NUC* have several entries for Thomas W. Strong as an author, publisher, and engraver. How much Elton and Strong collaborated on *Boy's Own Book of Fun* is a moot question, but I suspect that Elton was the real author and illustrator, as his name is featured in full title and he called himself Old Comic Elton.

I have identified Old Comic Elton; he was Robert H. Elton at 134 Division Street, New York City. Not only was Elton his own publisher, but he was associated with Strong and other publishers and engravers, especially on almanacs, at various dates and places. I have compiled my own checklist and library locations and will continue my research for further proverbs and Americanisms at a later date as time and opportunity permit me.

Because *Boy's Own Book of Fun* was intended to be an example of wit and humor, the NYPL cataloger failed to list it under the subject heading proverbs. Instead, the subject entry is under wit and humor, American. That may be why those who have tried to find publications on proverbs missed it. For example, the foremost authority on proverbs, especially American proverbs, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs (DAP 1992)*, edited by Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder, does not reference Elton's book, which contains over 190 proverbs, many of which are not recorded in *DAP*.

*Boy's Own Book of Fun* includes proverbs, at least one per page, together with an illustration. On page 15, for example, the illustration at the top of the page shows a fireman spraying a water hose upward while bricks are falling from above. The text below the illustration reads, "Whatever goes up is sure to come down" and, Elton adds, "sure to crack his crown." Of course, Old Comic Elton is referring to the harm that can be done by things coming down, such as the bricks in his black-and-white sketch! (This **[End Page 107]** example is about 100 years earlier than the earliest date, 1939, cited in *DAP*.)

Though the illustrations are amusing, the only one worth mentioning is Santa Claus inside a chimney. A check of the books that deal with early American delineations of our Santa Claus character before Thomas Nast's standard version revealed no record of this particular one.

The following list is my own selection and rearrangement in alphabetical order of 89 proverbs: 82 not listed in *DAP*, 5 listed in *DAP* with no date, and 2 with dates earlier than *DAP*. I checked occasionally with Bartlett, Stevenson, and other compilers of quotation dictionaries, as I assumed that Mieder, Kingsbury, and Harder had already covered most of the familiar reference books on quotations and proverbs. I also consulted the more recent and interesting books by Gregory TiteIman, *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings* (1996) and Elizabeth Knowles, *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase, Saying, and Quotation* (1997). Here's a selection of Old Comic Elton's words of wisdom:

All things are wonderful until we know how they are done. [149]

Almost and very nigh, saves many a lie. [137]

Bad luck follows the seeing of a crow in the pigeon's nest. [160]

Be merry and wise and...

## A RARE BOOK OF AMERICAN PROVERBS

DAVID SHULMAN, *Brooklyn, New York*

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2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



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