

Plowing Through History or "The Ploughman"

Elizabeth N. Shor, January 1990

On the lawn of the old Director's House (T-16) at Scripps Institution of Oceanography is a remarkably fine bronze sculpture, nearly life-sized, of a farmer sitting on his plow, with a skinny dog at his feet.





It is "The Ploughman," one of five sculptures commissioned by Edward W. ("E. W.") Scripps to Arthur Putnam in 1903, to represent the history of California's development. These were to be located at Scripps's home, Miramar Ranch, which occupied several hundred acres of isolated mesa land north of the city of San Diego. Of the five sculptures, the Indian, the padre, and the ploughman were completed; the soldier and the Mexican woman on horseback were not. After Miramar Ranch was subdivided, the first two were placed in Presidio Park, under the auspices of the San Diego Historical Society. "The Ploughman" was given to Scripps Institution by the Edward W. Scripps Trust, and was set into place in April 1976.

Some members of the Scripps family say that the person memorialized in "The Ploughman" is Illinois fanner George Henry Scripps, the older brother of Ellen Browning Scripps and half-brother of E. W. Scripps. The pose in the sculpture represents a time of decision, when George chose to contribute to the family's fledgling newspaper

business. According to E. W. Scripps's biography ("I Protest"), in 1873 that business was being run by older brother James when George decided to sell his Illinois farm to help finance it. At that same time, Ellen became an editor on James's paper. Twenty years and several newspapers later, George shifted his financial support from James to his much younger half-brother Edward, who then slowly created a major newspaper empire (Scripps-Howard, etc.). The most significant endorser of E. W. Scripps always was Ellen B. Scripps, 18

years older, and the one person on whom he consistently relied. George H. Scripps became very wealthy, and when he died unmarried in 1900, he left his estate to Ellen B. and E. W. Scripps. Ellen used that legacy to help found a biological station that became Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

The sculptor Arthur Putnam (1873-1930) became widely recognized in his brief career, especially for his animal sculptures. Son of an Army officer, he was born in Mississippi and spent most of his youth in Nebraska; he moved to La Mesa, California about 1891, to join his widowed mother. He studied art in San Francisco and Chicago, with emphasis on the sculpture of live animals; his favorite subject was the puma. He gained support from several California philanthropists. In 1905-1906 his works were exhibited in Rome and Paris. Surgery for a brain tumor in 1911 left Putnam incapacitated as an artist. After his collapse, some of his sculptures were cast in Auguste Rodin's foundry in Paris for the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco, and in 1921, hundreds of others were cast at the expense of Mrs. Adolph B. Spreckels. Besides commissioning the unfinished California history series, E. W. Scripps supported Putnam's expenses for a few months during 1915 in one of the cottages on the campus of Scripps Institution. Putnam moved to Paris in 1921, and died there in 1930.

Thanks to the generosity of the Edward W. Scripps Trust, "The Ploughman" – perhaps George Henry Scripps -- muses on the campus that he never saw or imagined, but which his legacy helped to create.