

S. S. Van Dine

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S. S. Van Dine was the pseudonym of **Willard Huntington Wright** (October 15, 1888 - April 11, 1939), a U.S. art critic and author. He created the once immensely popular fictional detective Philo Vance, who first appeared in books in the 1920s, then in movies and on the radio.

Willard Huntington Wright was born to Archibald Davenport Wright and Annie Van Vranken Wright on October 15, 1888, in Charlottesville, Virginia. He attended St. Vincent College, Pomona College, and Harvard University. He also studied art in Munich and Paris, an apprenticeship that led to a job as literary and art critic for the Los Angeles Times. Wright's early career in literature (1910 - 1919) was taken up by two causes. One was literary Naturalism. He wrote a novel, *The Man of Promise*, and some short stories in this mode; as editor of the magazine

The Smart Set he also published similar fiction by others. In 1917, he published *Misinforming a Nation*, a scathing critique of the inaccuracies and English biases of the *Encyclopedia Britannica Eleventh Edition*.

In 1907, Wright married Katharine Belle Boynton of Seattle, Washington. He married for a second time in October 1930. His wife was Eleanor Rulapaugh, known professionally as Claire De Lisle, a portrait painter.

From 1912 to 1914 he edited *The Smart Set*, a New York literary magazine. He published *What Nietzsche Taught* in 1915. In this book, he provided information and comments on all of Nietzsche's books, as well as quotations from each book. Wright continued writing as a critic and journalist until 1923, when he became ill from what was given out as overwork, but was in reality a secret drug addiction, according to John Loughery's biography *Alias S.S. Van Dine*^[1]. His doctor confined him to bed (supposedly because of a heart ailment, but actually because of a cocaine addiction) for more than two years. In

frustration and boredom, he began collecting and studying thousands of volumes of crime and detection. In 1926 this paid off with the publication of his first S. S. Van Dine novel, *The Benson Murder Case*. Wright took his pseudonym from the abbreviation of "steamship" and from Van Dine, which he claimed was an old family name. According to Loughery, however, "there are no Van Dines evident in the family tree" (p. 176). He went on to write 11 more mysteries, and the first few books about his upper-class amateur sleuth, Philo Vance (who shared a love of aesthetics like Wright), were so popular that Wright became wealthy for the first time in his life, "but the pleasure was not unalloyed. His fate is curiously foreshadowed in that of Stanford West, the hero of his only novel, who sells out by abandoning the unpopular work in which he searched for "a sound foundation of culture and aristocracy" and becoming a successful novelist. The title of an article he wrote at the height of his fame, "I used to be a Highbrow and Look at Me Now", reflects both his pleasure, and his regret that he was no longer

regarded seriously as a writer."^[2]

His later books declined in popularity as the reading public's tastes in mystery fiction changed. He moved into a penthouse and enjoyed spending his fortune in a style similar to that of the elegant and snobbish Vance. Wright died April 11, 1939, in New York City, a year after the publication of an unpopular experimental novel that incorporated one of the biggest stars in radio comedy, *The Gracie Allen Murder Case*.

In addition to his success as a fiction writer, Wright's lengthy introduction and notes to the anthology **The World's Great Detective Stories** (1928) are important in the history of the critical study of detective fiction. Although dated by the passage of time, this essay is still a core around which many others have been constructed. He also wrote an article titled Twenty rules for writing detective stories in 1928 for [[The American Magazine] which was reprinted a number of times.

Wright also wrote a series of short stories for

Warner Brothers film studio in the early 1930s. These stories were used as the basis for a series of 12 short films, each around 20 minutes long, that were released in 1930 - 1931. Of these, *The Skull Murder Mystery* (1931) shows Wright's vigorous plot construction. It is also notable for its non-racist treatment of Chinese characters, something quite unusual in its day. As far as it is known, none of Van Dine's screen treatments have been published in book form and it seems as if none of the manuscripts survive today. Short films were extremely popular at one point and Hollywood made hundreds of them during the studio era. Except for a handful of comedy silents, however, most of these films are forgotten today and are not even listed in film reference books.

References

1. ^ Loughery, John (1992). *Alias S.S. Van Dine*. New York: Knopf. ISBN 0-684-19358-2.
2. ^ Symons, Julian (1974). *Bloody Murder*, revised edition, London:

Penguin. ISBN 0-140037-942.

External resources

- Biography
- Contemporary Biography: Biography
- Bio and Work Analysis: Biography
- Bibliography of UK first Editions: Bibliography
- *What Nietzsche Taught* by Willard Huntington Wright

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