

## SABATINI IN NORTH AMERICA

By

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Despite his long-term association with publisher Houghton Mifflin and his success in selling books in the U.S., Sabatini surprisingly only visited North America twice in his fifty-year writing career. Just to clarify his popularity in the U.S. as of 1930, after his steadily rising success with *Scaramouche* in 1921 and *Captain Blood* in 1922, neither of which made the top ten best seller lists in the year of their publication, three of his novels did make the top ten lists in the 1920's. My hunch is that it took a couple of years for the popularity of *Scaramouche* and *Captain Blood* to reach momentum and thereby influence the sales of later novels published subsequent to 1922. *The Sea Hawk* was # 9 on the best seller list in 1923, *Mistress Wilding* was # 9 in 1924 and *The Carolinian* was # 9 in 1925. It is surprising to me that Sabatini did not break into the U.S. top ten best sellers for any of his published books after 1925. While *The Sea Hawk* has been almost universally recognized as one of his best, neither *Wilding* nor *Carolinian* have been proposed to be in that category and I would guess that many on this list would rank others higher.

At the time Sabatini made his first visit in 1930, the newspapers reported that his book sales in the U.S. exceeded his sales in the U.K. At the time the movie of *Captain Blood* starring Errol Flynn was released five years after his 1930 visit, Sabatini had sold 200,000 copies of *Captain Blood* and 146,000 copies of *Scaramouche* in the U.K through his publisher, Hutchinson & Co. His success in the U.S. apparently was even better. By 1930, Houghton Mifflin had published 13 printings of *Captain Blood*, including one printing for its Riverside Bookshelf, and the reprint house of Grosset & Dunlap had published three printings.

### Visit in 1930

Sabatini's first visit to the U.S. was in 1930 when he crossed the Atlantic to "assist in staging his play *The Tyrant*." There is no indication why his presence was needed or desired in terms of staging the play but he was only in the U.S. for one month. He arrived in New York on October 22, 1930 on the ship *Ile de France*. As he arrived, he described his visit as "long overdue." As Sabatini fans know, *The Tyrant* is a play based on an episode in the life of one of Sabatini's favorite historical characters, Cesare Borgia, and was published in book form by Hutchinson & Co. in the U.K. in 1925, with an introduction written by Sabatini. The play as presented in the book has four scenes. However, by the time it was brought to Broadway in 1930 it had five scenes, including the Castle of Solignola (2), the Palace of Assisi, the Communal Palace and the Pieve Palace.

*The Tyrant* was presented in the Longacre Theatre, which is located in the heart of Broadway on 48<sup>th</sup> Street. The theater first opened in 1913 and is still in existence as a venue for Broadway plays. *The Tyrant* opened on November 12<sup>th</sup> and ran for a total of thirteen performances, closing sometime in late November. It starred Louis Calhern as Cesare Borgia and Lily Cahill as the female lead, Panthasilea. The review of the play in the New York Times by Brooks Atkinson was devastating. "As a playwright Rafael Sabatini is still the novelist. But not a very good novelist, if 'The Tyrant,' which played at the Longacre last evening, is a token of his writing for the stage." The reviewer goes on to offer some praise to

Sabatini's writing abilities with the words, "as a novelist, Mr. Sabatini can swash a buckle with the rest of them. No one has accused him of languor in print." The review concludes with the following paragraph:

In view of the infirmities of the play, it would be unfair to expect the performances to be altogether healthy. Certainly the acting is dull. Louis Calhern makes a perfunctory Borgia. Lily Cahill is a lovely temptress imprisoned behind the wooden paneling of a play. The huge cast is cluttered with people of high station. ... Mr. Sabatini has conducted his notabilities with a guide's fearful caution through the lounging rooms of a tediously frescoed play.

Based on the review and the poor audience reception of the play, Sabatini did not linger in New York very long after the opening of his play. He left New York on November 21st by ship to return to his home in the U.K. One might have thought that this experience would have soured him on his North American audience, but it did not.

### Lecture Tour in 1931

Instead of going home, licking his wounds and starting another book, he and his U.S. publishing house, Houghton Mifflin, decided to promote a Sabatini lecture tour of the U.S. and Canada in the following year. This must, in part, have been a realization by both that book sales in North America could be improved by a personal lecture tour involving a subject about which no one was better equipped to discuss than Sabatini. The subject of his lectures would be "Fiction in History and History in Fiction." The information about this lecture tour is based on research in the Houghton Mifflin archives by Jesse Knight, very helpful and significant information on the tour, particularly in Methuen, Massachusetts, obtained and provided by one of the Sabatini group members, Ernie Romano, and my own research.

Sabatini was astute enough to realize that he would need professional help in organizing and promoting the tour. To achieve this, he hired a specialist in organizing lecture tours, which was the firm of Lee Keedick of New York. Keedick was described as a man who "built up a vast industry in a field of which very little is known ... Mr. Keedick's work is on an entirely different scale from the ordinary lyceum, and can hardly be classified under the same head, for the reason that he has specialized in world-renowned lecturers only." Keedick's letterhead's subheading states that he is "Manager of the World's Most Celebrated Lecturers."

Keedick produced a four page brochure to promote Sabatini's tour. It highlighted Sabatini as the author of international best-sellers "Scaramouche" "Captain Blood" "The Snare" "Sea-Hawk" on his first American tour. Thanks to Ernie, we have a copy of the brochure. The brochure states that Sabatini will "deal especially with the myths enshrined in history and will also explain the conditions upon which history has always been written." The brochure ends with the words, "In his stories readers find quick action and exciting episodes which gives to every page a living reality, a colorful twist. That, and the fact that they sense from the very first pages a touch of genius."

In a posting to the Sabatini group on January 26, 2006, Jesse Knight provided an itinerary of his North American tour, which he obtained from his research in the Houghton Mifflin archives located in the Harvard University Library. Based on available information, I am able to provide the following details about seven of the twenty-one venues listed by Jesse in his posting

New York City. Sabatini arrived in New York on October 13<sup>th</sup> after “traveling down from Canada without any meals.” He must have arrived by ship in Canada instead of New York. While he was in New York, he stayed at the Hotel Chatham on Vanderbilt Ave and 49<sup>th</sup> Street. On October 16<sup>th</sup>, he conducted his first lecture on his North American speaking tour in a venue at Columbia University. One would presume that Columbia University would be a natural audience for Sabatini and that it would have been well attended. Sabatini’s upcoming lecture tour had been mentioned in the New York Times on September 24 and October 1, 1931.

Sabatini went out on his lecture tour after leaving New York stopping at seven cities. He was back in New York by November 11<sup>th</sup>. The New York Times printed a small notice of an afternoon reception for Sabatini on November 11 at the Shelton Hotel, a “stately breath-taking building” on the corner of Lexington and 49<sup>th</sup> Street, hosted by F. Fraser Bond, a Columbia University Professor of Journalism who wrote several books on writing, including *You Can Write* and *How to Write and Sell Nonfiction*. Sabatini lectured somewhere in Brooklyn on November 12<sup>th</sup> and then left New York again to travel to twelve more cities.

Jesse states that Sabatini was back in New York again “by the middle of December,” which is consistent with his lecture schedule, and goes on to suggest that Sabatini may have spoken in the area one more time before sailing for England. There is no definitive indication of another lecture at another venue in the New York area in December of 1931, but it is possible that he did give his final lecture there.

Methuen, Massachusetts. While Methuen seems an unlikely venue for a lecture tour, it turns out that the Methuen appearance was sponsored by a local organization called the Methuen Public Forum. Ernie Romano has found that the Methuen Forum was headed by Rev. Egbert Jenkinson, that they had been sponsoring famous guest speakers for many years and that among their past speakers were Sergeant York and Admiral Byrd. The Methuen lecture was presented in the Central School Hall in Methuen on October 18<sup>th</sup>. Prior to the event, Sabatini had dinner with Rev. Jenkinson in Methuen and after his lecture he returned to Boston, where he was staying at the Union Club. The local sponsor was urged to set aside time for Sabatini to autograph his books for the attendees of the lecture. Although there is no other documentary evidence regarding book signings, it stands to reason that both Sabatini and his publisher would have pushed to include time for book signing events at every lecture.

Boston. Sabatini presented his lecture in Boston on October 25<sup>th</sup> at Symphony Hall, which was built in 1900 for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and is acoustically one of the top three concert halls in the world. According to a review in the Boston Globe, Sabatini was critical of some historians as being “prone to sensationalize and exaggerate their facts.” He went on to divide historical myths into three classes. “The genuine, caused at the time of the events themselves by suppression or falsification of records; the synthetic, built up afterward by the speculation and fiction of later historians; and the transparent, which are easily solved by logic.” Sabatini ended his lecture by concluding that “greater satisfaction and even entertainment is obtained from the study of history when it is approached in a critical state of mind.”

Washington, D.C. Sabatini presented his lecture there at the auditorium of Central High School, traditionally known as one of DC’s most prominent public schools, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. His lecture was first in a winter series sponsored by the Community Institute of Washington. Sabatini was introduced by Sir Wilmott Lewis as “the master of the craft of Walter Scott.” During his lecture, he remarked that the

“reporters of history included a great many propagandists and scandal mongers, who colored their writing with doubtful facts to satisfy their vanities. For this reason he warned students of history to investigate every possible source before reaching conclusions.”

After his lecture, Sabatini was guest of honor at a reception, dinner and dance sponsored by the Lido Civic Club, an Italian-American organization in Washington, which took place at the Mayflower Hotel. An illuminated Venetian scene was the setting for this event and the Italian Embassy was represented as were other prominent Italian Americans, including Fiorello LaGuardia of New York. Prior to his lecture, he was the guest at a luncheon sponsored by the Women’s National Press Club.

Toronto, Canada. On November 5<sup>th</sup>, Sabatini stayed at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto and presented his lecture at the Eaton Auditorium located at the corner of College and Yonge. Eaton Auditorium was opened as a 1300 seat premier performance venue on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the Eaton Department Store in 1930. While in Toronto, he was interviewed by a local newspaper reporter. On November 6<sup>th</sup>, he was the guest of honor at the Canadian Women’s Press Club in Toronto where his portrait was sketched. An interesting side note to this lecture is that, as a result of his Toronto visit, autographed copies of seven of his books were being sold at Eaton’s Department Store. Previous to discovering this information, I had been skeptical of the authenticity of autographed copies of Canadian editions of his books that have been offered for sale by on-line book stores. Also interesting is that Sabatini attended a luncheon in his honor by both the U.S. and the Canadian Women’s National Press Club.

Minneapolis and St. Paul. Sabatini was in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area from November 19 to 21, 1931. According to Jesse’s information, he stayed in Minneapolis at the Nicollet Hotel, an eleven story hotel built in 1923. Sabatini lectured on the 19<sup>th</sup> in St. Paul to 1000 people and autographed “30 or 40 copies of books purchased in the hall.” I have not been able to locate any information regarding the location of the hall in which he spoke. Jesse also noted that Sabatini mentions that Mabel Ulrich hosted a luncheon for him in Minneapolis. I have no information on what organization sponsored the luncheon but did find something on Mabel Ulrich, who is a very interesting woman. Mabel Ulrich was an M.D. who graduated from John Hopkins in 1901 (obviously a pioneer). In her early career, she was a lecturer on social hygiene. She also owned a book store in Minneapolis and was head of the WPA Federal Writers Project in Minnesota. She died in 1943 by accidently falling off a cliff. I find some people’s lives so interesting.

Detroit. Sabatini appeared in Detroit on November 30<sup>th</sup>, where he lectured in the evening at Orchestra Hall, a 2014 seat concert hall and home to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra which opened in 1919. His lecture was sponsored by the University of Detroit Alumni Association. I have an original flyer announcing the Sabatini event which was billed as the Outstanding Event of the Year and showing that ticket prices ranged from \$.50 to \$2.50. According to Jesse, Sabatini was interviewed by a Detroit newspaper. However, the archives of the Detroit Free Press are missing for the year 1931 so I have been unable to find a copy of that interview.

Chicago. Sabatini spoke in Chicago on December 6<sup>th</sup> at 4 o’clock as part of the Town Hall Series. His venue was the Palmer House Hotel, which was located on the corner of State and Monroe Streets and at twenty-five stories was touted as being the largest hotel in the world at that time. He also stayed in the Palmer House while he was in Chicago. The Chicago Tribune described him as “slender and elegant, with an Oxford accent and a black ribboned monocle.” To my knowledge, this is the only mention of Sabatini sporting a monocle. I wonder if Jesse ever looked into Sabatini’s use of a monocle. In his pre-lecture

interview with the newspaper, Sabatini stated that Al Capone is not in the same class of swashbuckling adventurers as Capt. Kidd, Robin Hood and others. He said Capone would not make a fit subject for his pen because he has no ideals. There was no reporting on what Capone thought of Sabatini's remarks or if Sabatini left town quickly after his lecture.

According to Jesse, the last stop on his lecture tour before returning to New York and then home was Omaha, Nebraska, where he spoke on December 11<sup>th</sup>. I have not been able to find any newspaper archives from Omaha for 1931 so we do not know where he spoke but the lecture topic was still the same. Prior to Omaha, he lectured in Iowa City, Iowa, the home of the University of Iowa, on December 7<sup>th</sup>. Even though the highly regarded Iowa Writer's Workshop did not begin until 1936, the University of Iowa must have been an institution even then that was known for its interest in writers and writing. It is, therefore, no surprise that Iowa City was one of the mid-west stops on his lecture tour. Unfortunately, there are no newspaper archives for Iowa City in 1931 so there are no details on his lecture there.

An unanswered question about the tour is whether Sabatini gave different versions of his lecture in different cities, even though the topic was supposed to be the same for all of them. The newspaper accounts that are available are so varied in their reporting that it is difficult to ascertain whether it was the same written presentation that was used in the various venues. If Jesse knew the answer, he did not provide it to anyone to the best of my knowledge. I would like to believe that Sabatini did not give an identical lecture in all twenty-seven cities.