Through a murder, darkly

Scandal that toppled a prominent N.Y. family offers a snapshot of America at the turn of 19th century

By Glenn C. Altschuler, Globe Correspondent | August 1, 2010

In 1897, Clarence Walworth published “The Walworths of America.” Eager to breathe life into his ancestors, the author offered readers “a Walworth standing in his own doorway, the children smiling through the window-panes, or chasing the dog in the orchard.” Clarence didn’t mention the act of parricide that haunted the Walworth family: On June 3, 1873, Clarence’s brother, Mansfield Walworth, a novelist, was murdered by Frank Walworth, his 19-year-old son.

In “The Fall of the House of Walworth,” Geoffrey O’Brien, poet, cultural historian, and editor in chief for the Library of America, tells the story of the implosion of a once-prominent family. Exquisitely written, by turns sad, surprising, and suspenseful, the book illuminates the rapidly changing world of 19th-century America, with its visions of virtue, codes of honor, class conflicts, and culture of aspiration.

O’Brien sets the crime — and the public scandal that followed — in the context of the rise and fall of Saratoga, N.Y., the home of Chancellor Reuben Walworth, a jurist, one-term congressman, and unsuccessful candidate for governor, whose will, essentially disinheriting his son Mansfield, helped set the tragedy in motion. In the 1830s, O’Brien writes, Saratoga, with its spas and patriotic pageants, was a “public space where superior specimens from all over — what passed for the best in the nation — could parade themselves,” where a tourist could mingle with senators, soldiers, and singers “and feel part of their world.”

By the end of the Civil War, however, Saratoga was past its prime, its bubble world of cultivated elegance burst by petty thieves, confidence men, industrial accidents, robberies, rapes, and murders. In 1873, O’Brien observes, New York City tabloid reporters dismissed the resort as yesterday’s news and delighted in exposing the secret decadence of the self-nominated patricians who held court in its parlors and ballrooms. No longer politically potent, the once revered chancellor, who had flaunted his “tee-totaling virtue in the face of the vibrant Gomorrah at the mouth of Hudson,” could now be derided as a pretentious, faux-aristocrat, “‘vain, conceited, loquacious, irascible, always overbearing, often grossly partial’ and given to citing absurd precedents from Arabian and Hindu law.” Mansfield was indicted as a ne’er-do-well, a monster and a madman; and Frank was sneered at as a foppish mama’s boy, decked out in sideburns and boots, the spoiled product of boarding schools.

O’Brien is equally effective in showing how murder unleashed the “savage liberties” of the American press in the Gilded Age, providing all the justification editors felt they needed to cross
the lines separating private and public life. Nothing, he reveals, had prepared the Walworths for
newspaper stories that “stripped their lives of all traces of sensitivity and cultivation and made
them grotesque woodcuts fit for theatrical poster advertising.” Reduced to characters in a play,
they watched in horror as a chorus of reviewers raked over their motives and moral worth. Most
distressingly, he claims, family members had no choice but to assist in the concoction of the	tabloid narratives. The Walworths felt compelled to respond to the evidence offered up by
relatives and acquaintances, named and unnamed, and try to induce the press to explain Frank’s
act as the desperate attempt of a loving son to protect his mother from an abusive husband.

“The Fall of the House of Walworth” has no heroes. But it does have a survivor: Ellen Hardin
Walworth. After her husband’s death and her son’s trial, she wrote her own epitaph: “Here lies
one who found Happiness through suffering.” Exhorting herself to “try, try, try,” Ellen broke
free. She founded and ran a boarding school, won a seat on the Saratoga Springs Board of
Education, fought to modernize the curriculum, and then moved to Washington, working as a
clerk in the Census Office.

In 1890, she joined two women from her social circle to establish the Daughters of the American
Revolution. She studied law at New York University, even though women were still barred from
its practice, served as treasurer of the Authors Guild, and in 1898 was appointed director of the
Women’s National War Relief Association. Acclaimed as a pioneer in the women’s movement,
O’Brien writes, Ellen was the only member of her family to be commemorated with plaques,
monuments, and sculpted heads. When she died, following a series of strokes in 1915, obituaries
made no mention of the men in her life.

Her heirs returned to the Walworth mansion and tried to restore it to its former splendor. They
didn’t succeed. The homestead’s furniture, the manuscripts of Mansfield’s novels, his shell
collection, Ellen’s historical articles, and Frank’s archery scores were transferred to the Saratoga
Springs Historical Society. In 1955, the mansion, which locals said was inhabited by ghosts, was
torn down. The Walworths disappeared along with it. Gone and forgotten. Until now.

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