

This Day in History... June 5, 1910

Death of O. Henry

On June 5, 1910, American author O. Henry died in New York City.

The famed author was born William Sydney Porter on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. He loved to read from an early age, with some of his favorites including *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

Porter worked in his uncle's drugstore as a teenager and was a licensed pharmacist by the time he was 19. Then in 1882, he moved to Texas where he worked as a shepherd, ranch-hand, cook, and babysitter. Porter worked several other odd jobs in the coming years, including draftsman, bank teller, and journalist. It was also during this time he began writing as a side job. Porter was a talented singer and musician as well and enjoyed singing and acting at town gatherings.



Henry was the 18th honoree in the Literary Arts Series.



Carelessness with bookkeeping while working as a banker led to Porter spending three years in prison.

While working at the bank, Porter had founded a humorous newspaper, *The Rolling Stone*, which included satirical works on life, people, and politics. While the paper ultimately failed and closed in 1895, it got the attention of the *Houston Post* editor, who offered Porter a job. However, it turned out that when he was a banker, Porter was careless with his bookkeeping and may have embezzled money. He was soon arrested for embezzlement.

At the train station on his way to the courthouse for his trial, Porter decided to flee, first to New Orleans and then to Honduras. He spent about six months in Honduras, where he befriended notorious bank robber Al Jennings and wrote the book *Cabbages and Kings* that coined the term "banana republic." However, when he learned his wife was dying, Porter returned home and surrendered to the court.

Porter was found guilty of embezzlement and sentenced to five years in prison. He worked as the night druggist and had his own room in the hospital wing. Porter also published several stories from prison under a variety of pseudonyms, though O. Henry became his most well known. He would send his stories to a friend in New Orleans who would then send them to the publishers, so they wouldn't know the author was in prison.



Stamp issued for the 120th anniversary of the American Pharmaceutical Association.

Porter was released from prison after three years for good behavior. He moved to New York City in 1902, marking the start of the most creative and successful period of his career. He would write 381 short stories during this time, including one a week for over a year for the *New York World Sunday Magazine*. While the critics often gave him bad reviews, the public loved his stories, particularly his witty writing and exciting plot twists. One of his most popular works was "The Gift of the Magi," a tender tale of a young couple who sell their most prized possessions to buy Christmas gifts for each other.

Struggling with alcoholism and other health issues, Porter died on June 5, 1910.

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