

Biographical Details of Norman W. DeWitt

Post by “Joshua” of July 23, 2023 at 2:47 PM

Introduction

I have had some success in tracing the early life of prof. Norman Wentworth Dewitt, born September 18, 1876 in the small hamlet of Tweedside, Ontario, on the Niagara Peninsula. An early ancestor was [Nicholas de Witt](#), born 1594 in East Frisia. Nicholas was a Doctor, and in that capacity is alleged to have accompanied Henry Hudson in his exploration of the Hudson River as Ship's Doctor on the *Half-Moon*.

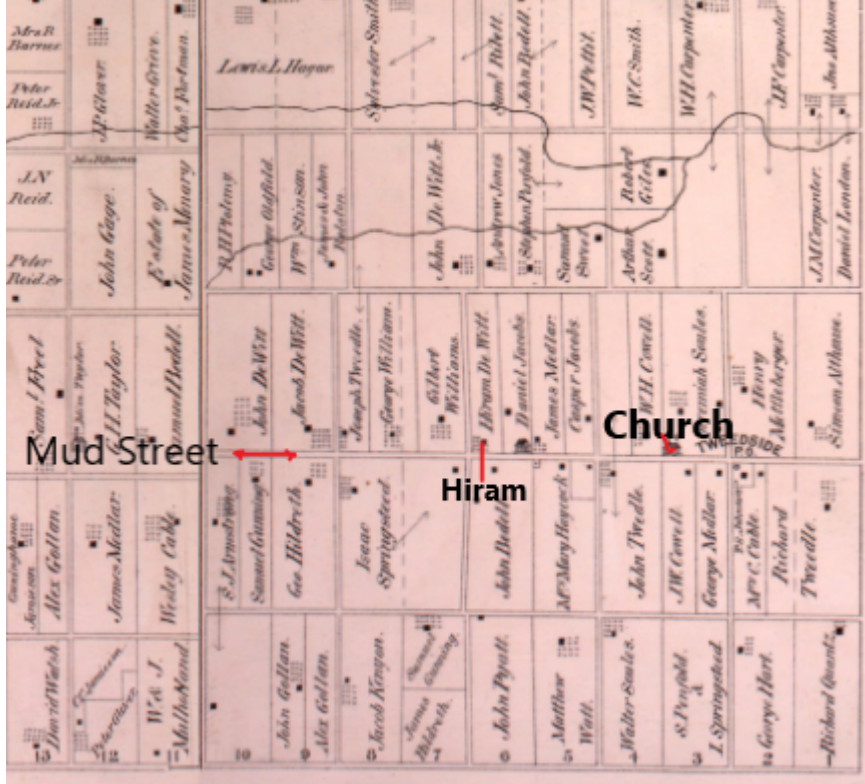
Nicholas de Witt had a son Tjerck Claeszen de Witt, who emigrated without his father to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, on Manhattan, in what is now New York. There he died in 1700. I am on the point of confirming that his descendants were Loyalists during the American Revolution, and during or after the War they removed themselves to Upper Canada (so named because it lies around the upper reaches of the Saint Lawrence River which empties out of Lake Ontario and runs northeast to the sea).

According to the magisterial genealogy compiled by Vona Smith, née DeWitt, called *Tierck Clafsen DeWitt and Descendants of His Son Luycas DeWitt*, published 2004, Norman DeWitt's father Hiram was born into the 11th generation of that line in 1830 at Saltfleet, a Township in Hamilton, Ontario.

Hiram DeWitt, his father John, and his brothers John Jr. and Joseph owned contiguous or at least approximate farms in the area of Tweedside, as shown on this undated Township and Concession Map:

<https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/Images/Maps/TownshipMaps/wen-m-saltfleet.jpg>

Tweedside appears in the southeast corner, and Hiram's farm--Norman DeWitt's boyhood home--was two blocks west of the Post Office and a block and a half west of the Methodist church, both of which fronted on Mud Street.



The Methodist Church in Tweedside was a simple red brick affair, first built in 1874 two years before Norman DeWitt was born, and then rebuilt in 1897. This rebuilt church was still standing in the first decade of the 21st century. I have a [here](#) a recommendation from 2002 either to lease the church, to renovate it, or to demolish the dilapidated structure. In any case the church was demolished, though I cannot determine precisely when this happened; the cemetery is still in use.



Today only the foundation remains;



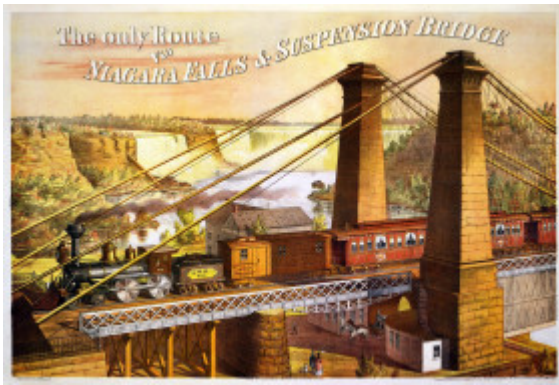
Our young scholar will, no doubt, have scaled those steps in his youth.

The land all around is farm country, and nothing else of old Tweedside remains. 4 miles (6km) to the north was the line of the [Great Western Railway](#) bisecting the coastal town of Winona along the south shore of Lake Ontario. The journey from Tweedside to Winona would require crossing the [Niagara Escarpment](#), a massive geological landform running in a great arc from New York state to Wisconsin. The road shown on the Saltfleet township map above contains two switchbacks.

40 miles (~60 km) to the east on the Great Western lay Niagara Falls, and the border crossing to the United States by way of the [Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge](#)--"the first working suspension railway bridge in history". This bridge was, to the credit of John Augustus Roebling, an incredible achievement.

Quote

American engineers regard the Suspension Bridge as a major achievement of efficiency. In a fledgling country where resources—material and financial—were limited, they had to make do with whatever was available. This goal was espoused by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which opined, "That is the best engineering, not which makes the most splendid, or even the most perfect work, but that which makes a work that answers the purpose well, at the least cost." Roebling had built a bridge that rivaled grander bridges of leading European nations at a much lower cost.



An advertisement for the bridge and the falls, dating to 1876, the year DeWitt was born. It's difficult to imagine now looking at a satellite view of Tweedside 40 miles west, but this was an energetic and industrious age for the two countries. Going west from the small town of Winona, the Great Western Railway followed the lake to the port city of Hamilton and the main railyard. From Hamilton, the line forked--west, deeper into the country before crossing the border again at Detroit--or northeast, and on to the great city of Toronto.

Of Norman DeWitt's early [education](#) I can give no account. His mother Margaret emigrated from Ireland and was orphaned at the age of 5. She was raised in the family of Tweedsider Thomas MulHolland, and was married to Hiram DeWitt in 1868. However it happened, it strikes me as likely that in the autumn of 1894, at the age of 17, Norman Wentworth Dewitt and his luggage must have boarded a passenger steam train on the Great Western Railway, bound for Victoria College at the University of Toronto.

More to come!

Post by "Cassius" of July 23, 2023 at 4:35 PM



here too for
ne university



Post by “Cassius” of July 24, 2023 at 7:51 PM

Probably a good place for another general comment about DeWitt. It has been said at various times and places that the emphasis on DeWitt's book here at EpicureanFriends gives the group a "DeWittian" flavor. I don't really know what that would mean, but if it's in part true, in my mind it is not because there is any particular "DeWittian" spin on Epicurean philosophy.

To me, what really distinguishes DeWitt from other commentators is that he seems to have devoted almost his entire professional writing career to the study and exposition of Epicurean philosophy exclusively. So far as I know he never came right out and endorsed it beyond the praise that he gives it in passages such as his "[Philosophy for the Millions](#)" article, but it's unmistakable that he saw tremendous value in it and he thought the best way to understand and apply it was to work to get a comprehensive knowledge of the many aspects of it before becoming wedded to a particular interpretation.

There's pretty much something in DeWitt that can be used by almost anyone who has a particular interpretation of Epicurus that they want to advocate, even on issues like ataraxia

and the highest good and katastematic and kinetic pleasure. In the end it's not so much the position that DeWitt takes on specific issues, but the way he digs into the material and looks for a "sympathetic" spin that gives effect to the widest sweep of the philosophy. It's that attitude that I admire about DeWitt and what I think makes him so valuable as an introduction to the philosophy.

Most of us will never approach the depth and sweep of learning that a classical scholar in the early 20th century could obtain. We have access to all sorts of manuscripts and resources that he did not have, but what I think the people of that period have over us is "time" -- a slower pace of life where they could devote huge blocks of time to studies with levels of attention that we can't hope to muster today. The chapter 14 of his book that we are going through now on the podcast puts this on display. DeWitt has this sweeping knowledge and absorption of the works of Virgil and Horace and all sorts of other ancient writers that can't be duplicated without huge amounts of time that few of us outside of academia (and maybe inside too) will ever duplicate -- certainly after a lifetime of effort as he devoted to it.

And that's also why I can laugh and forgive DeWitt's tendency to draw parallels to Christianity that I suspect most of us think are excessive. I doubt we will ever really know whether DeWitt considered himself a full Christian or whether his philosophy won out in the end, but even today many of us still labor under restraints that make the Christian-Epicurean dialogue still relevant.

DeWitt's pictures indicate to me that he had a lively and even impish kind of look in his eyes, and that kind of "let's stir the pot" attitude is something great to bring to the study of Epicurus. And as for courage even beyond the religious taboos, I suspect still in early 20th century Canada the ingrained dismissive attitude of "Epicurus isn't worthy of study" was still present. Emily Austin mentions that this survives today; it had to be as strong or stronger in the first part of the 20th century. And yet DeWitt tied himself to the mast of Epicurus like Odysseus sailing past the sirens. That's something that we can work to emulate, but DeWitt succeeded in a way I suspect few others in Epicurean studies will be able to duplicate.

Post by "Joshua" of July 24, 2023 at 10:30 PM

Quote

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It's beside your main point, but what I'm finding in my research is that his academic interest in Epicureanism may stem from later in his career than I realized. There is, first, his dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago; a study of the erotic in "[The Dido Episode in the Aeneid of Virgil](#)", 1907. He surveys the literature of Greece and Rome in laying the groundwork for his thesis, but one figure is curiously absent: Lucretius.

Excluding the above, his next six publications (1912-1924) are all on Virgil. Then an article on litigation and Cicero, followed by two history textbooks (1927 and 1934) for the curriculum in Canada.

After these, a course correction; at the age of 59, in an essay entitled "Parresiastic Poems of Horace" (1935), he writes on *παρρησία* (*parrhesia*, *frankness of speech*) as an unique virtue of Epicureanism. After this, essays on *Epicurean Gratitude* and *Epicurean Kinetics* ('37 and '41). Then a detour with his son through a cooperative translation of Demosthenes (1949), and right back to Epicureanism.

In 1954, *Epicurus and his Philosophy* and *St. Paul and Epicurus* are both published; it seems likely enough to me that he spent more than five years on these two texts, and may have worked on them while coordinating the translation of Demosthenes with his son.

One last thing at the very end of his life--an essay on daily life in Rome called "Vesta Unveiled", as part of a collection of essays published in honor of [Berthold Ullman](#), a Classicist who earned his Ph.D at Chicago a year after DeWitt.

So most of the last twenty years of his life were devoted to the study of Epicureanism, most of his early career to Virgil.

Post by "Cassius" of July 25, 2023 at 6:54 AM

Thanks for the correction Joshua. I have tried to download most of his essays on Epicurus and I need to put them down in a list with dates. I have tended to mark in my mind his "[Philosophy for the Millions](#)" as sort of the beginning of his real emphasis, and that was in 1947, but he started before that:

Here is the start of a timeline with the main articles on Epicurus:

1876 - Date of Birth

1932 - Vergil and Epicureanism (In the same year he wrote "Vergil and the New Testament")

1932 - Notes on the History of Epicureanism

1936 - Epicurean Conturbinium

1936 - Organization and Procedure in Epicurean Groups

1937 - The Epicurean Doctrine of Gratitude

1937 - The Later Paideia of Epicurus

1939 - Epicurean Doctrine in Horace

1939 - Epicurus, Peri Fantasiae

1939 - Epicurus, ΠερίΦαντασίας

1940 - Epicurus' Three-Wheeled Chair

1941 - Review of Cicero's Presentation of Epicurean Ethics by Mary N. Porter Packer

1941 - Epicurean Kinetics

1941 - Review of The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers: The Complete Extant Writings of Epicurus,
Epictetus, Lucretius, Marcus Aurelius by Whitney J. Oates

1942 - Virgil, Augustus, Epicureanism

1943 - Epicurus and Leucippus

1943 - Epicurus - [All Sensations Are True](#)

1943 - Review of Philodemus: On Methods of Inference: A Study in Ancient Empiricism by Phillip Howard
de Lacy ; Estelle Allen de Lacy

1948 - Epicurus - His Perpendicular Universe

1949 - Meditations of an Epicurean

1950 - Epicurus - The Summum Bonum Fallacy

1951 - Review of "The Epicureanism of Titus Pomponius Atticus by Robert Leslie

1954 - Epicurus and His Philosophy

1954 - St Paul and Epicurus

Post by "Don" of July 25, 2023 at 8:41 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Probably a good place for another general comment about DeWitt. It has been said at various times and places that the emphasis on DeWitt's book here at EpicureanFriends gives the group a "DeWittian" flavor. I don't really know what that would mean, but if it's in part true, in my mind it is not because there is any particular "DeWittian" spin on Epicurean philosophy.

In doing a quick search for "DeWittean/DeWittian" on the forum and finding that only I and Cassius seem to have been the only people to actually use that term in writing, I'll add my two cent reply to his post.

I have great respect for DeWitt's scholarship, especially his individual academic papers.

I think he has some interesting takes on difficult topics. Look no further than his conjecture that Epicurus owned a three-wheeled chair due to his infirmities. I don't necessarily agree with all his takes, but he's willing to dive in where others fear to tread.

I have no doubt of his passion for Epicurus and his philosophy and in spreading the word about its applicability and usefulness.

What I personally have issues with is his tendency to go far beyond what the texts and evidence have to offer. Especially the books written in retirement: *Epicurus and His Philosophy* and *St. Paul and Epicurus*. I think he often interprets and extrapolates far too much with very little evidence to make a point he wants to make. Following up on his references is frustrating because his text will say one thing and the reference don't back it up. Or he'll simply make things up for the sake of historical narrative or philosophical stance. He was skilled at creating historical fiction based loosely on the evidence. That's one of my big issues with DeWitt.

The other, again especially in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, is his antiquated and sometimes opaque writing style. Parsing DeWitt can sometimes be almost as difficult as parsing ancient Greek! That is one of the reasons I'm reluctant to fully endorse DeWitt as an introduction to Epicurus and his philosophy. I *fully* agree that his methodical, synoptic approach is valuable and I am grateful for the podcast for taking the time to really go through his book. That has been extremely valuable. But confronted with *Epicurus and His Philosophy* as a starting point can be daunting, and I fully admit I have yet to get through a reading cover to cover. For me, he's valuable to dip into now and again, but I can't do prolonged readings. That's one of the reasons I like his papers: short and to the point.

DeWittean is NOT meant to be pejorative (all the time), but I still feel that he's not the be all and end all - the arkhe and the telos - of Epicurean scholarship. Nor do I think Cassius thinks

that! I just thought I'd get my perspective out there.

Post by “Cassius” of July 25, 2023 at 9:05 AM

Your comments are helpful for someone tackling the book so I am glad Joshua started the thread.

[Quote from Don](#)

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If I had to point to one thing, this is the key. The prime issue that I believe I see in many people who think they appreciate Epicurus is that they start and stop with the ethics as if they are self-evident and can be understood fully just by reading the letter to Menoecus. I am convinced that anyone who takes the time to get a grasp of the "big picture" of the philosophy, including the physics and canonics, is in most cases likely to come away from the ethics with an entirely different picture than those who think that the implications of pleasure as being the guide of life are easy to grasp on first reading.

DeWitt's book goes after a synthesis of the big picture in a way that I don't think most other commentators even attempt to do, and that's its great merit. As anyone who dives into it will see, it's difficult to understand or evaluate or even trace down many of the allusions that Dewitt mentions, but someone who makes an effort to grasp the big picture is going to be far better off than those who don't even make the effort.

I think that's what we're after here at EpicureanFriends too, and if there emerges from that a distinct flavor that separates this from other approaches, it's not adherence to DeWitt's conclusions that makes the difference. It's much more a shared approach of going after everything we can find that sheds light on what Epicurus may have been thinking, and trying to place it fairly but sympathetically to reconstruct the larger picture, that makes the difference.

Post by “Don” of July 25, 2023 at 9:57 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Fully endorse that 😊👍

Post by “Pacatus” of July 26, 2023 at 6:25 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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I endorse that as well -- just from my personal experience on here. And, I confess, I have never finished DeWitt. 😊😊

Post by “Cassius” of July 26, 2023 at 7:53 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

And, I confess, I have never finished DeWitt.

Ok since it is confession time -- have you read Lucretius from start to finish? 😊 Just curious!

Post by “Pacatus” of July 26, 2023 at 7:54 PM



Post by “Don” of July 26, 2023 at 8:08 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)



Award for Best Use of Emojis on EpicureanFriends!

Post by “Titus” of July 31, 2023 at 9:09 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

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Personally speaking, his creative stance "creating historical fiction" is the reason why I adore "St. Paul and Epicurus" so much. While his assumptions are often experimental and lacking obvious evidence, this is exactly the reason why his work is so valueable. Deciphering and reinterpreting of texts relating to a 2000 years old tradition is quite a tricky task. No other person than an expert in ancient languages and Epicureanism seems to be qualified of recognizing hidden parallels in the original texts. Any other interpreter, who are usually theologians, would be stuck in the spider's net of tradition - or promoting their own agenda. DeWitt's analyses in "St. Paul and Epicurus" can hardly be read as hard evidence, but they are interpretations to talk about. Unfortunately, it seems hardly anyone have discussed his assumptions. In my opinion, they are more groundet than most of theologian's writings.

Relating to "St. Paul and Epicurus" this is, for the first time, a Christianity which makes sense to me. While DeWitt doesn't formulate his final conclusion, the reader imagines St. Paul bringing the heavens of the blissful and eternal gods to Earth, offering their salvation to mankind!

[Quote from Don](#)

The other, again especially in *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, is his antiquated and sometimes opaque writing style. Parsing DeWitt can sometimes be almost as difficult as parsing ancient Greek! That is one of the reasons I'm reluctant to fully endorse DeWitt as an introduction to Epicurus and his philosophy.

As a non-native speaker, I definitively agree with you. 😊

Post by "Cassius" of July 31, 2023 at 9:19 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

While his assumptions are often experimental and lacking obvious evidence, this is exactly the reason why his work is so valueable.

I very much agree with this and the rest of the paragraph / post. You can't accept at face value anyone's speculations, and you shouldn't accept Dewitt's. But a classical scholar can bring together a huge array of information and draw parallels that others simply can't, and those provide food for thought whether they pan out to be "provable" by other facts or not. The material in *St Paul and Epicurus* where DeWitt discusses that the early Christians considered Epicurus to be an "antichrist" figure is particularly stimulating and useful. I think probably some significant number of them did consider Epicurus that way, and thinking through the ramifications of that would be very stimulating for any number of modern Christians in re-examining their own views. I'd personally be very interested to read much more writing about the new testament from that very same perspective. Presumably there's a lot buried in the "church father" material and other records of the "early church" (to the extent they exist) that involve confrontation with Epicurean arguments. DeWitt had the scope of study to start the process but I would think there's a lot more to be done.

One of the points DeWitt brings out in the final chapter of *Epicurus and His Philosophy* was that the dying down of the controversies in which the Epicureans were involved with Judeo-Christianity marked the parallel dying down of the Epicurean school as a whole. It might well be that any resurgence of interest in Epicurus will end up being accompanied by the re-lighting of those same flames of controversy.

Post by “Cassius” of July 31, 2023 at 9:21 AM

I don't expect to have the time or energy for it myself, but a book-by-book response to the New Testament from an Epicurean perspective would make for a great addition to modern Epicurean scholarship.

Post by “Titus” of July 31, 2023 at 9:32 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

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Thank you stimulating my appetite for reading. Because of "his antiquated and sometimes opaque writing style" I discontinued reading "Epicurus and His Philosophy" after reading his voluminous biographical notices on Epicurus.

Post by “Cassius” of July 31, 2023 at 10:27 AM

Since this is a biographical thread and perhaps more likely that someone in the future will come across this, I should note here that personally I don't find DeWitt's style either antiquated or opaque. I know some people do, however, so that's a warning that everyone should have, just like I warn people that the first chapter of "A Few Days In Athens" had a tendency to put me off from wanting to read more. DeWitt is definitely not breezy, but I don't find him any harder to follow than any number of other academic writers. He is certainly a lot easier to read than someone like Nietzsche, who also throws in lots of allusions that can make him extremely difficult to follow. So I think part of the issue is that DeWitt throws in so many references to other classical writers like Horace and others that it's hard for someone who is not already familiar with those sources to assess whether what he says is correct until you pursue the

footnotes yourself.

But we aren't all going to agree on this and I just wanted to note mainly that different people have different responses to his writing style.

Post by “Joshua” of July 31, 2023 at 2:03 PM

DeWitt can be intentionally classicizing in his prose, as here in his description of Canada:

THE CLASSICS IN CANADA

The Dominion of Canada consists of a ribbon of provinces extending from ocean to ocean north of the United States boundary. These provinces are bound together by political necessity rather than by economic or cultural unity; they differ in origin, history and traditions. Quebec differs in language also, and the cur-

Since he published this article in *The Classical Weekly* his intended readers cannot have failed to notice the allusion. It is to Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, "Of the War in Gaul":

Quote

All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in our Gauls, the third. All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws.

What exactly did he mean to convey by this? Perhaps that Canada and its partially French (i.e. Gallic) heritage stand in relation to a southern empire governed as a republic, and that both province and empire are removed from the real seat of culture--for Rome, Greece; for North

America, Europe.

The University of Toronto from which he writes is then a frontier outpost of Classical studies with only a nominal connection to the old ways, and has a decision to make about its future. Much like the New England of the preceding century--the New England of Emerson and Thoreau and their classically trained fellows.