# William F. Friedman on Edgar Allen Poe

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The following two pages are taken from the U.S Signal Corps Bulletin (No. 97, July-September 1937).  These two pages show the extent of Poe's writings on cryptography.

The complete article, entitled "Edgar Allen Poe, Cryptographer", can be found in "Cryptography and Cryptanalysis Articles", Volume 2, published by Aegean Park Press (1976).

# EDGAR ALLEN POE, CRYPTOGRAPHER*

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It is a curious fact that popular interest in this country in the subject of cryptography received its first stimulus from Edgar Allan Poe. Should a psychologic association test be made, the word "cipher" would doubtless bring from most laymen the immediate response, "Poe" or "The Gold Bug." The fame of Poe rests not a little on his activities with cipher, and much of the esteem in which this American genius is held today rests in part on the legend of "Poe the cryptographer."

Several years ago, in an extremely interesting and penetrating analysis, Joseph Wood Krutch discussed Poe's activities in cryptography, saying:

Doubtless nothing contributed to a greater extent than did Poe's connection with cryptography to the growth of the legend which pictured him as a man at once below and above ordinary human nature; but the whole subject is still unfortunately wrapped in some obscurity, and it is impossible to be sure of the facts as distinguished from his own report of them.[1]

The popular conception of, and the reaction toward, the subject of cryptography in Poe's time—and to a certain extent today—are the remnants of a medieval point of view, which regarded it in somewhat the following light : A cryptogram is a piece of writing to which a meaning exists but is not immediately perceptible; its intelligibility is concealed, hence mysterious or occult, and thus supernatural. Therefore anyone practicing the art is of necessity the associate of forces governing supernatural phenomena. The mental portrait the average layman has even today of the professional cryptographer is that of a long-haired, thick-bespectacled recluse; a cross between a venerable savant and a necromancer who must perforce commune daily with dark spirits in order to accomplish his feats of mental jiu-jitsu.

This impression was doubtless prevalent in Poe's time because authentic information concerning cryptography was extremely limited and is even today quite meager. One of the interesting anomalies in the whole field of cryptology is the paucity of sound literature on the subject. In the most extensive bibliography in print,[2] the number of treatises of real technical merit does not exceed a dozen. Such a pitiful showing for an art that has been practiced from time immemorial cannot be ascribed to a lack of interest in the subject on the part of the general public, or to a lack of usefulness as a branch of knowledge. On the contrary, cryptography is employed to a great degree every day in all countries, in diplomatic, military, naval, busi-

ness, and social affairs; and as a pastime, it presents many of the elements that constitute the *raison d'être* of the best types of puzzles. Even those who have never delved into it agree that the subject intrigues and tantalizes them. Yet information concerning methods of preparing cryptograms of sound merit is very meager, and that concerning methods of solving them is abysmally lacking to all except a very small circle of professional cryptographers who remain in office only so long as they violate no governmental secrets connected with their work.

It is not strange, then, that in a field wherein popular interest is great but popular knowledge extremely limited many spurious ideas should be current. This state of affairs existed in Poe's day, and consciously or subconsciously Poe saw an opportunity to exploit it for his own purposes. To exhibit deep understanding and thorough knowledge where the stock of knowledge on the part of others is practically nil, would seem to be a pardonable source of gratification to a perfectly normal person; what could be more soothing and reassuring to the victime—according to Krutch's view—of a rather well-developed inferiority complex?

Poe's known cryptographical writings include the article "A Few Words on Secret Writing" which appeared in the July 1841 issue of Graham's Magazine; three supplementary articles appearing in the August, October, and December issues of the same magazine; his tale The Gold Bug; and, if it may be included under the heading of cryptographical writings, a recently discovered letter written to a Mr. Richard Bolton, of Pontotoc, Miss. In none of them can the serious student of the subject find any evidence that Poe was more than a tyro either in the art of cryptography or in its handmaid, the science of cryptographic analysis. Long before his day, men who had made a study of these matters were far more proficient, and their names are all but forgotten.

One of the references that Poe made to cryptography occurs in connection with a review of a book entitled Sketches of Conspicuous Living Characters of France, which appeared in the April 1841 issue of Graham's Magazine. It is as follows:

In the notice of Berryer it is said that, a letter being addressed to the Duchess of Berry to the legitimists of Paris, to inform them of her arrival, it was accompanied by a long note in cipher, the key of which she had forgotten to give. "The penetrating mind of Berryer", says our biographer, "soon discovered it. It was this phrase substitute for the 24 letter of the alphabet—*Le gouvernement provisoire!*"

All this is very well as an anecdote; but we cannot understand the extraordinary penetration required in the matter. The phrase *Le gouvernement provisoire* is French, and the note in cipher was addressed to Frenchmen. The difficulty of deciphering may well be supposed much greater had the key