

### **PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities, a Journey Through the Desolated States, and Talks With the People, 1867**

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## Feature Essay

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**Trowbridge, John Townsend and with a new introduction by J.H. Segars.** *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR:The South: A Tour of Its Battlefields and Ruined Cities, A Journey through the Desolated States, and Talks with the People, 1867.* Mercer University Press, \$30.00 softcover ISBN 865549699

### Prospects for Peace in a War-torn Country

What duty does a victorious nation have to help rebuild a vanquished foe after a war? How can a devastated land reestablish political and economic order and stability? How can the victor ensure that the ruling majority respects the legal rights of a minority? These questions confront every nation that prevails in a military contest. They are especially complicated in the wake of a civil war, when the defeated must be reintegrated into the political, economic, and social life of the nation.

As the American Civil War drew to a close in the summer of 1865, northerners were weary of stories of battlefields and the challenges facing the newly freed African Americans in the South. Few journalists were interested in examining the South firsthand to chronicle its condition and its prospects. John Townsend Trowbridge (1827-1916) stood as an exception to this general apathy toward postwar conditions in the South. Born in New York and reared in Massachusetts, Trowbridge wrote fiction, poetry, and children's books, and contributed to literary publications of the day. Challenged by a publisher to take the assignment and encouraged by a good salary and expense account, Trowbridge agreed in the fall of 1865 to travel through the war-torn former Confederacy, interview its inhabitants, and report his observations in a literary travelogue. Originally published in 1867 and sold door-to-door on a subscription basis, Trowbridge's narrative has been reprinted in abridged versions.

Over the course of two trips in the fall of 1865 and winter of 1866, Trowbridge spent four months traveling through ten southern states. He visited

many, if not most, of the major battlefields and cities of the South, talking with hundreds of people of all classes and conditions. He traveled by train, steamboat, ferry, stagecoach, wagon, on horseback, and on foot. His prose is vivid, whether he is describing the natural beauty of the scenery in remote areas or the desolate battlefields where contending armies met. He also sympathetically and evocatively pictures the squalid living conditions of poor southerners, both black and white. He records the voices of a host of characters in their own idiom, allowing them to tell their own stories, whether humorous or pitiable, inspiring or revolting, in their own way.

Much of Trowbridge's narrative addresses the economic situation and prospects of the various regions through which he passed. He provides an overview of the productivity of the land, the potential for northern investment, the reestablishment of transportation networks, and the labor situation. Trowbridge counters the common white southern belief that the freedpeople would not work by detailing numerous examples of African Americans who were working for wages or were raising their own crops on land they had acquired. He found evidence of neither more nor fewer lazy and idle freedpeople than he did of lazy and idle white southerners. His assessment of the capacity and willingness of the freedpeople to work when treated fairly was uniformly positive.

However, Trowbridge also found a very general disposition among white southerners to manipulate labor contracts to their advantage and to keep the freepeople in debt by furnishing them with supplies at dishonest prices. After extensive interviews in several states, Trowbridge concluded that it was impossible for the most honorable men who had been brought up under the institution of slavery to deal at all times and altogether honorably with those they had all their lives regarded as chattels. Because slavery had so corrupted the perspectives of white southerners, the Freedmen's Bureau was essential as a temporary referee between employers and laborers for the benefit of both races. Trowbridge lauded the work of the Freedmen's Bureau and particularly the freedmen's courts that adjudicated contracts between former masters and former slaves. The portrait he presents is one of improving justice for the freedpeople and a growing willingness by white southerners to adhere to contracts with their black laborers.

When Trowbridge turned his attention to questions of the war, the Union, and prospects for reconstruction, his portrait of white southerners became

considerably more positive. He rarely found a former Confederate soldier who had much of the spirit of the Rebellion left in him. His guide on the battlefield at Fredericksburg was a former Confederate soldier who was glad the South had lost because it had been a rich man's war. Southern white women generally remained more rebellious than men. In Corinth, Mississippi, a woman who had earlier criticized Yankees, and especially New England Yankees like Trowbridge, later seemed to have forgotten her vituperation. And here I may remark that, Trowbridge observed, whatever hostility was shown me by the Southern people on account of my Northern origin, it usually wore off on a short acquaintance. Only in South Carolina did he suffer gross personal insults because he was from the North.

Although Trowbridge was an abolitionist and was compassionate toward black southerners, he was also sympathetic to white southerners whose world had been turned upside down. When considering the graves of Confederates killed at Gettysburg, he found himself hating their infernal cause but acknowledging that these, too, were brave men. At Antietam, he did not object to both rebels and patriots sharing a place in the National Cemetery, for while the holier cause was clouded by much ignorance and selfishness, the darker cause was brightened here and there with glorious flashes of self-devotion. Trowbridge informed his northern audience that the inhabitants of Richmond were no longer enemies, but tamed complacent citizens of the United States like yourself.

The cumulative effect of these vignettes is to present a properly chastened white South, rapidly coming to accept the political and economic results of the war. The former Confederate states would remain in the Union, and African-American southerners would be free. In addition, former Confederates would quickly begin to accept the idea that the freedpeople would work profitably for wages, and many white southerners even began to accept the idea of suffrage for African-American men.

The prospects and limits of this transformation, as well as the limitations of Trowbridge's own vision, are clear from a verbal sketch midway through his odyssey. On a railroad journey in northern Alabama, Trowbridge spoke with an aristocratic young South Carolinian, who believed that God had decreed the end of slavery and the subjugation of the Confederacy. Although the young man admitted that we brought it all on ourselves, he went on to detail how, a few weeks earlier, he had savagely whipped a freedman with 130 lashes, hard as I could lay it on, for allegedly stealing some whiskey. His helpless victim offered

no resistance because he knew that to do so would mean death. The South Carolinian blithely declared, That's the way we treat our servants, and shall treat them, until we can get used to the new order of things, if we ever can.

Trowbridge suggested that the Freedmen's Bureau would help protect the freedpeople from such abuse, but ultimately Trowbridge admitted that the young aristocrat enlisted my sympathy. Although he lamented the effects of President Andrew Johnson's liberal distribution of pardons to former rebels, Trowbridge's own benign portrayal of the mindset of white southerners may have contributed to a lessening of northern political will to ensure substantive justice for the freedpeople. Ironically, Trowbridge perhaps aided the postwar retreat from reconstruction, as northern whites left the freedpeople to fend for themselves against the increasingly repressive labor system and political disfranchisement erected on the ruins of slavery.

Fortunately, this new edition from Mercer University Press presents the original, unabridged text. However, J. H. Segars provides a disappointingly meager editor's introduction. Fewer than seven pages long, the introduction devotes only two paragraphs to summarizing Trowbridge's life, little more to the publication history of book, and a few observations about Trowbridge's talent and style as an author. Most disappointing is the lack of any assessment of the book's impact on popular attitudes during the critical years of Reconstruction and the perhaps even more important years of redemption that left freedpeople with nothing but freedom. Did Trowbridge's even-handed, perhaps even sympathetic, portrait of white southerners assist in national reconciliation at the expense of black southerners? Surely, given Trowbridge's abolitionist views, this result would have been a tragic and unintended consequence of the book's publication. Nevertheless, Trowbridge's fascinating description here in unabridged form of the postwar South raises important questions about how best to reconstruct a war-torn country, questions as relevant today as they were in the 1860s.

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