

### A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools: A Novel of the South During Reconstruction

Meg Groeling  
bloodnight@aol.com

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## Feature Essay

### Civil War Obscura

Summer 2018

**Tourgée, Albion.** *A Fool's Errand. By One of the Fools: A Novel of the South During Reconstruction.* First published by Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1879, softcover from \$8.00, hardcover from \$27.95 at amazon.com and others ISBN 9781519082527

As one reads modern books analyzing Reconstruction by historians such as Alan Guelzo, Eric Foner, and Brooks Simpson, the name of one other author often pops up: Albion Tourgée. His novel, *A Fool's Errand*, is mentioned as having a unique point of view due to having been published in 1879, during actual Reconstruction. Albion Tourgée has some pretty impeccable credentials to back up his effort, although the book was initially published anonymously. Nevertheless, it was an immediate hit nationwide, selling over 200,000 copies.

Tourgée was a Union soldier who was wounded at the First Battle of Bull Run and the Battle of Perryville. He was also a Radical Republican, lawyer, politician, and sometimes diplomat. He served as the lead attorney for Homer Plessy in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, cementing his progressive as well as intellectual credentials. In 1897 President William McKinley appointed him U.S. consul to France, where he served until his death in 1905.

Tourgée constructed *A Fool's Errand* by drawing on his own experiences in the Deep South after the Civil War. Today, expressions like "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags" are understood as specific groups who did specific things: a *carpetbagger* was a person from the Northern states who came South after the war to exploit the local populace for financial profit; a scalawag was a local white Southerner who collaborated with Northern Republicans after the war, again for profit. Tourgée put faces and personalities behind these words. Yesterday's carpetbagger would be today's entrepreneur.

The main character, Comfort Servosse, is a Union officer who served in the South. While there, he was so impressed with the potential the area offered to not only make money, but to create a new—perhaps better—civilization. Servosse and his family come South with no hidden agenda. They want to make a decent living in a pleasant place. It was not to be. The troubles that they encounter are the kind that make or break a family, and by the end ...well ...read it and find out. In Comfort's words, "We tried to superimpose the civilization, the idea of the North, upon the South at a moment's warning ... it was a fool's errand." Much later, Tourgée claimed Reconstruction was a failure "so far as it attempted to unify the nation, to make one people in fact of what had

been one only in name before the convulsion of Civil War. It was a failure, too, so far as it attempted to fix and secure the position and rights of the colored race.”

Albion Tourgée's writing style is one of the most compelling reasons to read this excellent book. He is a terrific writer. There is a distinct elegance to good nineteenth century writing that uses language like a rapier, not a club. The San Francisco *Chronicle* said, "Its word-pictures are so realistic that one sees, hears, and feels the very presence of the individuals that crowd its pages." I agree. *A Fool's Errand* reads as easily now as it did in 1879. With its commentary on racial issues in the American South, it continues to be essential reading for citizens of the twenty-first century (and Civil War fans) as it was for those of the nineteenth. Check out the offerings from the online booksellers and try this one out yourself.

*Meg Groeling received her Master's degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: the Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois University Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War, and reviews a lot of books. Meg can be reached at bloodnight@aol.com.*