

Artemus Ward: His Works, Complete, including a biography

Meg Groeling
bloodnight@aol.com

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Feature Essay: Civil War Obscura

Groeling, Meg

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Ward, Artemus. *Artemus Ward: His Works, Complete, including a biography.* New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., 1874. PAPERBACK. \$15.65 ISBN: 9781440063527 pp. 402

Sometimes the world is not very funny, but the anecdote concerning Abraham Lincoln's reading of a piece by political humorist Artemus Ward immediately before presenting the Emancipation Proclamation deserves a nod here. Apparently, on September 22, 1862, Lincoln was waiting in his office for a cabinet meeting to begin. He was reading a small book and chuckling as all the men assembled. Finally, he looked up and asked, "Gentlemen, have you ever read anything by Artemus Ward?" The answer would have been "yes" from them all, as newspaperman Charles Farrar Browne's alter ego, Artemus Ward, was familiar to nearly everyone in the country. The president read his cabinet a short passage from *Artemus Ward: His Book* called "High Handed Outrage in Utica":

In the Faul of 1856, I showed my show in Uticky, a trooly grate sitty in the State of New York. The people gave me a cordyal recepshun. The press was loud in her prases.

I day as I was givin a descripshun of my Beests and Snaiks in my usual flowry stile what was my skorn disgust to see a big burly feller walk up to the cage containin my wax figgers of the Lord's Last Supper, and cease Judas Iscarrot by the feet and drag him out on the ground. He then commenced fur to pound him as hard as he cood.

"What under the son are you abowt?" cried I.

Sez he, "What did you bring this pussylanermus cuss here fur?" and he hit the wax figger another tremenjis blow on the hed.

Sez I, "You egrejus ass, that air's a wax figger—a representashun of the false 'Postle."

Sez he, "That's all very well fur you to say, but I tell you, old man, that Judas Iscarrot can't show hissself in Utiky with impunerty by a darn site!" with which observashun he kaved in Judassis hed. The young man belonged to 1 of the first famerlies in Utiky. I sood him, and the Joory brawt in a verdick of Arson in the 3d degree. (p. 34-35)

Secretary of War Edwin Stanton did not appreciate the joke and grumbled about wasting time. He allegedly rose as if to leave the room, prompting Lincoln to put the book down and say, as if in apology, "Gentlemen . . . with the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die."¹

Then the president read his text of the Emancipation Proclamation aloud.

Today's readers are probably more familiar with the Emancipation Proclamation than they are with the tangled diction of Artemus Ward. Classic Reprint Series' volume of *Artemus Ward: His Works, Complete, including a biography* is an excellent beginning for those who attempt to understand our forebearers and their sense of humor more fully. Understanding their humor is often more of a task than it might initially appear.

Abraham Lincoln thought this particular anecdote was highly entertaining. Nevertheless, it risks falling on deaf ears when read today. The American Civil War is a century and a half removed from us, and sometimes those folks are a complex group to understand. Our world view is much different from theirs—more linear, not as intuitive. Reading the comedy of Artemus Ward is one thing that can help unravel the intricacies of the mid-nineteenth-century American mind.

The real author of *Artemus Ward: His Works, Complete, including a biography*, was a young man named Charles Farrar Browne. He was born in 1834 in Waterford, Maine. Due to a complicated series of familial bad luck, he began working as a typesetter when he was thirteen.² He worked for the *Carpet-Bag* periodical, which had an editor congenial to humor simply meant to make people laugh, with no other purpose. He set the type for stories from future luminaries such as Mark Twain. He moved from Boston to Cleveland during the early days of his career, finally taking over the editorship of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. He spoke with many people along the way, saw sideshows, and attended lyceum lectures. Young Browne began to develop the persona of Artemus Ward, an illiterate rube but with “Yankee” common sense. Ward was allegedly a corpulent middle-aged man who ran a sideshow consisting of wax figures of famous people. Ward's spelling was phonetical and considered hilarious when seen in print. Ward's “autobiography” includes:

I hav no doubt that a article onto my life, grammattically jerked and properly punktooated, would be a addition to the chois literatoor of the day . . . I got up a series of wax figgurs, and among others one of Socrates. I tho't a wax figgur of old Sock would be popular with eddycated peple, but unfortinilty I put a brown linen duster and a U.S. Army regulation cap on him, which peple with classycal eddycations said it was a farce (316-17).

As Browne developed his persona of Artemus Ward, his essays were clipped and reprinted in newspapers nationwide, and collected into books. Soldier letters, conversations, and presidential hopefuls quoted Artemus Ward. The real Artemus Ward, Charles Browne, was happy that he was selling books and being quoted, but he had another idea. Browne twisted the concept of the lyceum lecture (a wholesome, informative, family evening out) into what is now recognizable as sketch comedy on late-night television. He booked himself into lecture halls as Artemus Ward and gave his lectures grandiose names. These names had little to do with the presentation of the evening, to the delight and amusement of all. He eventually included some special effects, which had planned occurrences of malfunction. These, too, were part of the show. Browne was amazingly successful in America and soon booked himself in England. He was equally popular there. Biographies expressly point out that Brown was one of the few comedians appreciated by the British, who take their comedy very seriously, then as well as now. Unfortunately, Charles Farrar Browne died on March 6, 1867, in Southampton, England, of tuberculosis at thirty-three. His remains were removed to the United States in 1868 and buried at Elm Vale Cemetery in Waterford, Maine.³

Would audiences today have found Artemus Ward as funny as American and British citizens did in the 1860s? Many of Ward's conceits would be familiar: the double-take, the misuse of words, the alleged influence of the important on the unimportant, and vice versa. According to reviews, his timing was impeccable, and his *bon mots* were always current. Modern comedy writers and presenters have used the alternative persona effectively, especially Stephen Colbert, and the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. By reading *Artemus Ward: His Works, Complete, including a biography*, readers will be able to make up their minds, remembering that, as Artemus Ward would be writing and performing for modern audiences, he would have up-to-date material. Would the dialect work? Probably not so well. In the 1800s, it was a thing—today, dialect is the essence of political incorrectness.

Why should we care? Because understanding the humor of the battlefield, the operating room, the graveyard, and war itself, is essential to understanding the men and women who created, fought, and survived the American Civil War. And those folks loved Artemus Ward.

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 Savas Beatie also publishes. In addition, she is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War. She and her husband live with three cats in a 1927 California bungalow covered with roses on the outside and books.*

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¹ John J. Pullen, *Comic Relief: The Life and Laughter of Artemus Ward, 1834-1867*. (Archon Books: 1983).

² Pullen, 18

³ Pullen, 161-63