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The Prism of Laughter: Antebellum Humorists in Regional Perspective.

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THE PRISM OF LAUGHTER: ANTEBELLUM HUMORISTS IN REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE
VOLUME I

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PREFACE

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANTEBELLUM HUMOR

I

In 1839, Ralph Waldo Emerson dedicated a lecture in his winter series to comedy. That selection was a seemingly frivolous topic for such an intellectual man, and yet he defended the discussion in terms that have become standard for those who study humor. Taking a wide, inclusive view of the mind, he suggested that comedy could not be overlooked because "a nail of pain and pleasure fastens the body to the mind. We walk over on the confines of both." Without knowing the one or the other, a philosopher would have a hard time understanding humanity. Those who demand a complete knowledge of thought and behavior must then examine humor and consider this element as an integral component of the human experience.[1]

For all his insight and support of a native intellect, Emerson neglected American humor during that lecture. Instead of giving credit to contemporaries who created many good examples, he discussed the great masters of European literature. The Americans at work all around his country, if taken together, offered a panoramic view of the ideas, issues, opinions, and prejudices found in their society. To achieve a better sense of the

accomplishments of the antebellum humorist, one must first understand the parameters of their craft.

Antebellum America's major humorists consisted of men, professionals usually, and a majority of them were active in either journalism or law. These occupations could be highly combative endeavors in this era and were often connected to politics, another male domain. Women humorists emerged by the 1850s, but they did not join the field through law, journalism, or politics. The press wars around election time drew in men who used humor and wit to make their points. During the 1840 presidential campaign, for example, a Chicago newspaper printed the first lengthy parody ever to appear in that city. A Whig party operative depicted President Martin Van Buren as an incompetent fool who listened to demons hovering about him.[2]

Other humorists started elsewhere and avoided this contentious ribaldry. These figures set out on a course pioneered by eighteenth-century British authors who wrote in a gentler, less insulting, and certainly more creative style. The young Washington Irving introduced this amiable humor into America during the early part of the nineteenth century. A prolific and versatile writer, he had started out as a political hack but moved slowly away from those pursuits. His first book, a mock history of New York published in 1809, had used his state's Dutch

past for what a reviewer called a "good natured satire on the follies and blunders of the present day." Political opponents received a thrashing from lightly-veiled insults, but the attacks were tempered in places by a more hospitable tone. A Boston magazine noted how Yankees received many "humorous remarks, but we are glad to observe [they were] made with so much good-nature and mingled compliment and satire, that they themselves must laugh."[3] As this observation suggested, critics had began admiring a gentler wit as well.

Ten years after his mock history appeared, Irving completed another book, this time a collection of short stories appropriately named The Sketch-Book. His sketches offered impressionistic scenes of the Hudson River Valley patterned after European travel accounts that had become popular following the final defeat of Napoleon. Most of these sketches employed a narrator who acted as an eyewitness who guided the reader through encounters with characters and landscapes described in minute detail. This greater degree of realism allowed readers to see better what the author had in mind and was also great for building sympathy for the people and places visited.

Irving's familiar story from the book, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," gave one such warm portrait. His selection of a local community for fiction grew out of a focus on regionalism that developed among authors

following the War of 1812. The first talented regionalists were found in New York, and included Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and others of the Knickerbocker school. Each of these authors sought out distinctive cultural features of a setting and included them in stories. Their area of the country, the Hudson River Valley, with wide, beautiful landscapes, quaint Dutch farms, and other old associations, provided wonderful inspiration. New England and Southern writers also began searching for defining characteristics of their regions.

The Sleepy Hollow tale stood out because Irving perceived cultural differences that separated the population of New York from their trading rival to the north, New England. The plot, as most know, concerned the rivalry between the Connecticut schoolmaster Ichabod Crane, a "tall, but exceedingly lank" scarecrow fellow with "narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, with hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves," and Brom Bones, a ruffian who sported a "Herculean frame and great powers of limb."[4] The contrasts between the two men, both of whom wanted the hand of the same woman, could not have been more apparent. Crane's Puritan bearing also made him an unpopular figure in the merry neighborhood along the Hudson River. Eventually the hearty Bones humiliated him, ran him out of the village, using a local legend about a

headless horseman. A piece of the area's rich cultural fabric had come in handy.

Other humorists around the country found that folklore and plots from the rich oral archives of story telling provided abundant material for humorous stories. Fascinating accounts of wild animals or super-human feats became part of the tall tales that found their way into almanacs and newspapers. These stories, which did not have great authors behind them, nevertheless remained popular from the eighteenth century forward. The everyday and mundane features of life added another ample source that was heavily utilized for fun. In 1835, Nathaniel Hawthorne described a few of the more amusing things that happened on a canal boat trip. A man dressed in Sunday clothes leaped from a barge and lost his footing. The man fell unceremoniously into the water, "up to his third waistcoat button, and was fished out in a very pitiable plight." On another occasion, a teacher engrossed in a Latin text forgot to lie flat when the boat came to a low bridge and the noise of his head hitting the stone echoed a great distance. Luckily for him, "there was no harm done, except a large bump on the head, and probably a corresponding dent in the bridge." The narrator held back from enjoying his misfortune and only "laughed quietly." With an amiable outlook in place and motivation from regionalism, plus the great reserve of American folk

culture and everyday life at hand, the major ingredients were in place and the curtain rose on a rich period of creativity.[5]

II

The writers who initiated the major writing of the period received support from an eager reading public. Any study of the antebellum audience must start by recognizing the nascent character of the press and book-publishing industry at this time. With its easy access to trade routes, sufficient capital, and large highly literate populations, the Northeast had an advantage and thus developed the most sophisticated print culture. In Boston, New York, and Philadelphia large mercantile libraries came into existence sooner than elsewhere, and the earliest public libraries and circulating concerns also developed quickly. The circulating and mercantile institutions required a fee to use their collections, generally meaning more affluent patrons visited these establishments. Public or free libraries, as they were called, because none charged fees for checking out materials, grew more slowly. Many humorous titles found their way into both kinds of libraries, but this was a slow process that occurred over the entire antebellum era. Religious and secular titles dominated into the 1840s and 1850s. An early lending library at Concord, Massachusetts, for example, had only a trifling amount of

humor, and many private collections such as one of a wealthy New Yorker had no humor at all.[6] By looking simply at books, however, one would obtain an incomplete picture of where humor might be located.

American humor had its highest presence in the popular press. Through their almanacs, Benjamin Franklin and the Ames Family of Massachusetts pioneered dissemination of humor.[7] Following colonial times, newspapers dominated, and through the antebellum period editors dedicated increased space to amusement. About sixty comic magazines came into existence at various times between 1830 and 1860, but most had short life spans. In New York City, for instance, the backing of a major literary editor kept the Yankee Doodle publication afloat for a year during the 1840s. Another ephemeral sheet, the John Donkey, achieved an impressive subscription level, 12,000, which was higher than Horace Greeley's New Yorker an important variety magazine of the 1830s. Twenty years later, the Carpet Bag of Boston won applause for its excellent content, yet the editors could only keep the magazine going for two years. Although so many attempts failed, the willingness of editors to try demonstrated a genuine interest existed for humorous publications.[8]

A difficulty humorists often ran up against was a common prejudice dictating that reading material should improve the mind rather than tickle the funny bone. Both

Henry David Thoreau and Horace Mann complained about every type of mindless fiction. Another New Englander who read diligently eight to ten newspapers a week, and numerous books of literature, felt guilty for having "read too much such trash." A North Carolina minister expressed similar sentiments when he warned of books that came in cheap paper covers. After evaluating many of these statements by leaders and average people, a historian has concluded that "the humorous propensity had little place" in the life of the antebellum American. This conclusion confused the shame some people felt for reading humor with the reality that more and more this genre was gaining wider acceptance. Even if negative attitudes hindered sales of comic material, the genuine efforts at creating humor and the steady growth of publications belied any notion that Americans shunned a hearty laugh.[9]

The most successful publication that fostered native wit, the New York Spirit of the Times, began operation in 1831 and survived for thirty years, an amazing feat in an era of still-born periodicals. The Spirit courted a male audience and encouraged its subscribers to share humorous episodes. Many humorists, particularly those from the Southern states, began their writing careers with submissions to this journal. The magazine began at a circulation of about five thousand and later grew to a peak of forty thousand subscriptions.[10] Similarly,

literary journals, including The Knickerbocker of New York City and Graham's Magazine of Philadelphia, began printing amusing stories and sought out material from urbane writers who knew how to delight the sensibilities of a mixed audience.

While the Northeast developed a large reading audience, a sizable print culture also emerged in the Midwest. At Cincinnati, Detroit, St. Louis, and later Cleveland and Chicago readers sustained many humorous publications. Libraries collected humor books as well, but the developmental process went slowly and slower still in rural areas which were still sparsely populated at the beginning of the antebellum period. As in the Northeast, circulating libraries and private collections led the way in making books available to the masses. A study of Indiana estate inventories filed between 1830 and 1860 found that "a sizable proportion of the estates" contained book collections that were "generally small, conservative, and purposeful."[11] The terms small, conservative, and purposeful meant that people owned five or less books, mostly of a religious or practical nature with little literature and probably no humor.

At Cincinnati, the first regional publishing center and one that dominated the Ohio Valley as New York eventually did the entire country, publishers found school books and religious tracts better sellers than fiction.

Geography, biography, and historical works went faster than light reading selections. Books remained expensive for those who lived away from publishing centers and would only become consumer items gradually. Of the fiction printed out West before 1860, a few thousand titles conveyed amusement, but those books sold in numbers far behind the nonfiction and novels.[12] In the book selling realm, at least, the spread of humor took place slowly in many areas of the country.

In the West, as had been the case in the East, almanacs, newspapers, and magazines delivered jests and jokes to the greatest audience. In 1834 the first comic almanac rolled off a Cincinnati press only a few short few years after a similar publication had gone on sale in New York. Many newspapers built large readerships by publishing entertainment with their news. In New Albany, Indiana, a busy port town on the Ohio River, an editor specialized in wit and satire. After a while his jokes began getting too offensive, and residents chased him out of town. The Niles, Michigan Republican won a reputation for printing more gentle material and in large quantities. Between 1842 and 1860, the editor included over two hundred humorous stories by various authors. A few humorous magazines also emerged in the Midwest but most printed religious or literary material rather than humor.[13]

When compared to the Midwest and Northeast, the Southern states contained a smaller number of publishers, newspapers, and overall print culture. Most of its readers looked outside the region for books. As late as 1861, a gentleman living in eastern Mississippi reported, "I get my books from Harpers, New York, they come here by way of ocean, with but little freight."[14] His parcels took a long trip, indeed, because they traveled first to Mobile, Alabama, and then traveled up the Tombigbee River to a remote steamboat landing hundreds of miles in the interior. This comment illustrated well how southerners remained dependent upon water routes well after the Northeast and Midwest had switched to rail transport. The new form of delivery had made book distribution cheaper, and because states below the Potomac possessed fewer miles of track, publishers neglected markets off the regular routes.

Southerners seeking the latest reading material often waited for the book peddler. Although rural areas everywhere relied upon these traveling salesmen, the South with its dispersed population depended heavily on their services. In 1845, a student at LaGrange College, near the Georgia-Alabama border recalled a visit by "a good, large wagon full of books, some excellent and recent works among them." The youth purchased several volumes by English humorists because he wanted "amusing good wit."[15]

The next best place for as good a selection as in a peddler's stock came at a circulating library. These commercial ventures appeared in towns and port cities around the region. Several good ones, and a library society or two which operated for members only, opened in Charleston, Richmond, Nashville, and New Orleans. Often, plantation districts contained a lending library. The hamlet of Society Hill in South Carolina near the Pee Dee River enjoyed one, for example, and so did Franklin, Louisiana in the heart of sugar cane country. Both of these establishments provided modest selections of humor among their collections.[16]

For the most part Southerners, like others around the country, found more humor in the pages of the popular press. To illustrate the importance of this medium, one need only look at a modest North Carolina farmer who owned few books yet subscribed to four newspapers.[17] The papers he read included a column or two of wit, and editors across the country became known for reprinting stories from other sheets and accepting original contributions. The New Orleans Picayune, for example, abounded with wit, printing over one hundred comic sketches between 1837 and 1841 alone. In St. Louis, the Reveille boasted a circulation of nearly 3,000 and maintained a talented staff who wrote many selections about life in the Mississippi River Valley. Several

studies of small town South Carolina newspapers have revealed how they too printed a wide array of stories, tall tales, and sometimes terrible jokes about miscegenation. Next door in Georgia, a sampling of six newspapers, most from the western border town of Columbus, found that humor took several columns in most issues of the local newspapers.[18]

The region's premier literary magazine, The Southern Literary Messenger, began operation in 1835 and remained in Richmond, Virginia, for thirty years. When it printed humor, the editors presented urbane wit dealing with manners and morals rather than rowdy scenes found in newspapers or The Spirit of the Times. A few ambitious individuals attempted comic magazines, but most of the publications died after only a few months. In Georgia, the Athens Horn of Mirth won a thousand subscribers for the few months it lasted in 1850, but more typical was the Gopher at Waynesboro. This magazine never left 1860 because the owners used its columns for election propaganda; also only fifty people took the sheet. The subscription level of magazines everywhere remained a source of frustration for editors. In Charleston, South Carolina, an important center for literary culture in the South, three monthly periodicals came and went at various points in time. All struggled to keep subscribers. The Southern Literary Journal lasted the longest, four years

during the 1830s, and printed thirty-nine amusing tales during that run. The Magnolia ran for only a year in the 1840s, but published thirteen humorous pieces, an average of one per issue. The last, Russell's Magazine, presented seven stories at various times during its four-year run that started in 1856. The frequency of humorous stories in the periodical press of the South illustrated how a penchant for humor was as strong there as anywhere.[19]

III

Just as the publishing industry had clearly defined regional characteristics so did the major humorists who began writing in the antebellum era. These individuals can be best understood if grouped into the regions where they lived and wrote. Quite often beliefs, values, and assumptions that each put into his humor predominated in one area of the country. Even if atypical in their views, the place where each wrote provided at the minimum inspiration and subject matter. Obviously, the images humorists created from the place and culture where they lived were contrived and fraught with distortions. That remains yet the nature of fiction. Few humorists ever claimed reality was a central goal of what they did, and in the end each rendered what can best be described as impressions. Close examination of the backgrounds of important humorists and discussions of their artistry will

advance knowledge of the antebellum world because humor, like a prism, refracts the many strands of culture.

The humor found in the Northeastern part of the United States actually developed from two cultures and several humorous traditions. Much older, and more homogeneous, New England acquired a distinctive humor earlier, during the late seventeenth century, as a slow fracturing of Puritan belief disrupted society. To cope with wrenching dilemmas that arose from changing social conditions, and to explain why their beliefs fell into decline, people laughed in a numb, almost cynical manner. Humorists fed the need for explanation and relief with writing that contained both plain diction and sharp irony. The bluntness carried disappointed readers through trying difficulties that included reorganizing lives around secular realities rather than religious faith.

An 1832 sketch illustrated characteristics of a New England humor that had been over one hundred years in the making. In "Yankee vs. Yankee," a careless owner let his sheep and hogs wander into an adjacent field. The farmer whose crops were damaged took a knife and cut a hole in one leg of each sheep and then stuck the opposite leg into the opened wound. Next, he methodically slit the mouths of the hogs from ear to ear. When confronted about his vengeance, the culprit suggested that the hogs split their mouths laughing at the three-legged sheep. Left

dumbfounded by what happened, the owner could only grin and remember that "good fences make good neighbors."[20]

Visitors to Massachusetts discovered and commented upon the muffled tone. A British traveler at a lecture noticed how residents of Chelsea, outside Boston, enjoyed only a chuckle at the speaker's jokes but no one laughed out loud. He also noted the popularity of sketches by a judge at Halifax, Nova Scotia, who had captured the brevity of Yankee wit in selections about the character Sam Slick.[21] A perceptive lady at Charleston, South Carolina, read one of the Slick books and recorded in a diary:

> I had heard a great deal of the latter and fancied it to be coarse in its humor, but was most agreeably disappointed and delighted with its life-like pictures of New England life, its rare humor, delicate and yet so true and natural, that everybody enjoyed it thoroughly.[22]

The simple rhythms "so true and natural" were startling because they contained less expressive language than she found in the comedy from her region.

While many humorists were judges and lawyers, a larger contingent worked as journalists. Here New England and Mid-Atlantic writers shared a common trait. In both areas, editors at city newspapers forged a special brand of comedy. With the public trust at issue in many cities and activities of urban confidence men the subject of front-page news, humorists began describing the pathetic

ways criminals duped the unknowing. Author Charles Frederick Briggs captured their stratagems quite well with scenes of helpless people entangled in the designs of evil doers. In addition to exposing frauds, journalists became good at perpetrating their own. The newspaper hoax grew into an art form, and Connecticut Yankee, P.T. Barnum, made fooling others a profitable endeavor at his museum of wonders.[23]

The journalistic perspective flourished in Midwestern cities as well. Yet during most of the period those cities were still emerging from frontier conditions and had not developed into thriving metropolises. Settlers arriving in the region also brought with them humor firmly rooted in the East. In the Western Reserve located south of Cleveland, for example, Yankee settlers formed a distinctive cultural enclave. New Yorkers elsewhere made Knickerbocker humor popular in their neighborhoods. The last important group, the upland Southerners, lived in counties adjacent to and immediately above the Ohio River. The practical jokes, tall tales, and masculine, rough laughter became a regular feature of life along the riverbanks. Scholarship on Midwestern life has been so sparse, however, that the diversity of the region has only now started to attract scholarly attention.[24]

In contrast, Southerners have enjoyed a full complement of scholars studying the exuberance and

physical comedy of their region. A dean of literary scholars, who began a long career by studying Southern humorists, suggested that nearly all of the major humorists supported the Whig political party. In his now outdated and simplistic formulation, the humorists were made into elitists who presented rowdy scenes to single out and denigrate lower-class characters.[25] A gentleman narrator started the tales with an introduction, a formal affair, which separated the author and reader from the action in the story. From this distant position, separated by a frame created around the whole, the narrator held a commanding view.

This interpretation, although fashionable, has limitations because not all humorists were Whigs, and not all acted so vicious. Some sketches were written for reasons other than insult. An amiable humor remained in vogue in the early antebellum period and by missing this trend, the Whig-elitist interpretation has done a disservice to a generation of scholars. More likely, the humorist employed a narrator as a guide for bringing the reader beyond an entry point and into a more vibrant comedy that lay beyond the frame. To get the proper feeling for the action, the reader had to be led in closer, past the barrier of reality, and into a fictional realm. That way the reader could see the characters on their own terms and laugh at them, or with them, as anyone

present might do. Rather than using the narrator negatively, the device permitted a positive arrangement for humorist and reader alike.

The American propensity for laughter, with all its different styles and forms of expression, became an important part of antebellum life. On a daily basis, the popular press printed items that caught the attention of readers. Jokes reinforced prejudices, endeared readers to a distorted view of reality, and fired imaginations. Humor also made people think, identify with characters, and recognize cultural realities. Many defining features of society appeared in humorous stories. The chapters that follow will explore the contributions of the most significant regional humorists of antebellum America.

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VOLUME II

ABSTRACT

This work revises earlier interpretations of antebellum American humorists and sets forth a new model for understanding their accomplishments. Rooted in historical thinking, this study integrated biography, publishing history, critical responses, and a penetrating analysis of the sketches of several major figures. The first third examined Seba Smith, Joseph C. Neal, and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet. A devotion to their communities in Maine, Philadelphia, and Georgia, respectively, and preference for writing warm, genial selections remained important shared influences while cultural differences between the societies in which each matured and wrote made their humor diverge significantly. In both content and expression their stories about the market revolution, politics, and other important topics possessed distinctive characteristics.

The middle chapters examined the western humorists Caroline Kirkland, Baynard Rush Hall, and Thomas Bangs Thorpe. Their perspectives originated in cultural backgrounds in the East and observations of dissimilar communities in Michigan, Indiana, and Louisiana. Each made fun of the people involved in the settlement process and discovered that culture played a major role in how people organized their communities.

The last third asserted the continuing importance of culture and place by discussing the perspectives of three humorists popular during the 1850s. Benjamin Shillaber from Boston, Henry Riley in western Michigan, and Joseph G. Baldwin of Alabama conveyed different concepts of change, and reviewers around the country responded to their published collections more favorably if the material came from their own region. This enthusiasm for a local humorist and apathy for those from elsewhere gave the first indications that the sectional crisis had intruded into the creative process. Over the 1850s as tensions rose, humor became more contentious. The sketches of Northerner Mortimer Neal Thomson and Southerner George Washington Harris illustrated the complete transformation as humorists began using humor as a weapon in the growing strife.

CHAPTER 1

THREE PUBLISHED HUMORISTS: SMITH, NEAL, AND LONGSTREET

I

During the 1830s, the newspaper humorists, Seba Smith, Joseph C. Neal, and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet each took the uncommon step of collecting his sketches and publishing a book. Together, their efforts were a milestone that brought humor beyond the realm of the popular press. A prominent intellectual historian, R. Jackson Wilson, has suggested that antebellum writers published books purely for money, claiming that capitalism, the major context in which they labored, had the strongest influence upon their creativity. As he argued, "whatever their attitudes and experiences may have been, it was the market, more than anything else, that established the conceptual problems they set out to solve in their work."[1] This interpretation places an extraordinary emphasis upon economics and ignores convincing evidence that culture and place have as great or greater an impact upon the author.

Culture and place have received a great deal of attention from anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the Annales school of European historians. Those who follow their arguments have discovered how culture and place have remained inseparable components of human belief and

regulators of behavior. In a study of culture in eighteenth-century France, for example, an expert in these methods argued that place established self-orientation for an author, and the ideas, values, and morals of communities were often reflected in the literature. On this side of the Atlantic, two of the most important antebellum authors, Nathaniel Hawthorne of Salem, Massachusetts, and William Gilmore Simms from Charleston, South Carolina, wrote novels, stories, and tales that bore deep marks from the cultures in which each matured and spent long careers. Detaching either from his community and arguing they somehow transcended influences learned since childhood has led scholars away from a better understanding of who these authors were and how they fictionalized experience. Just as the novels of Herman Melville owed a great deal to the New England coastal villages and the open oceans, a complete understanding of American humorists must take into account their social backgrounds and the times in which they composed mirth.[2]

There on the New England coast, Seba Smith emerged as the first of three major humorists who began writing in the 1830s. His early start, January 1830, and then the regular appearance of his comic letters in a newspaper he edited, the Maine Portland Courier, made him a widely known figure. Within a year or two, Philadelphia's Democratic banner, the Pennsylvanian, began carrying

sketches by Joseph C. Neal, the twenty-four year old editor at this daily newspaper. And in Georgia, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet submitted sketches to the Milledgeville Southern Recorder regularly until he published in a newspaper of his own, the Augusta States Rights Sentinel.

Along with ties to printing and journalism, these three men shared a few other common traits. All were professionals, Smith and Neal remaining career editors while Longstreet moved from law to editing a newspaper, then Methodist minister, and later president of several Southern colleges. Smith and Longstreet both graduated from prestigious Northern colleges, and Neal obtained an education at his mother's bookstore-circulating library on Philadelphia's posh Chestnut Street. Although talented with the pen, none ever took up the uncertain life of an author nor did any become withdrawn intellectuals. These were active, involved men who created humor about their communities, the economy, and politics. Exploration of their biographies and publishing experiences will illustrate how each wrote with some other things than the market mechanics in mind.[3]

II

Beneath the tall-pointed firs growing from the rocky soil in southeast Maine, around villages named Buckfield, Turner, and Bridgton, Seba Smith learned values he later articulated through comic letters about a character named

Jack Downing. This fellow from down east, as contemporaries called his corner of New England, scribbled notes for various relatives and turned them over to Smith's Portland newspaper which printed them, ostensibly so the lad might save on postage. Downing's wonder at seeing a big world outside his village added an engrossing appeal to this comic enterprise. For nearly three years, the letters ran in Maine and at Boston, and then twenty other newspapers around the country, perhaps more, picked up the series. "In all the steamboats, stages, and taverns along the road," an excited contemporary recalled, Downing's adventures had became a favorite topic of conversation.[4]

When asked in later years about that great surge in interest, Smith replied that it was "a matter of great wonderment to me." During a second series commenced in the late 1840s, he admitted that "before writing one of those letters I always feel at a loss to know how to shape it, and feel that it is an even chance that the effort may prove a failure." Through trial and error, he developed a satisfying character and entertaining stories. Many times he never knew exactly what the theme of the sketch would be before putting pen to paper. "Perhaps it may turn out a song, perhaps turn out a sermon."[5]

His only significant manipulation came in the false impression that Downing wrote each letter. This creative

necessity made the series amusing and at the same time obscured his authorship. With each letter going out without a name other than Downing's, and the imperfect state of copyright laws, imitators sprang up and created counterfeit letters with impunity. The appearance of impressive forgeries and the willingness of others to take credit for all the material gave Smith cause for worry. No imitator posed so serious a threat as the New York iron magnate, Charles Augustus Davis. His bogus letters appeared in the New York Daily Advertiser and conveyed bald-faced Whig propaganda. Although his biting satire and different story lines set the work apart, the Davis character attracted nearly as much attention as the original. Nicholas Biddle, embattled President of the Second Bank of the United States, delighted in the pro-bank humor and bragged to Senator Daniel Webster that the "universal diffusion and the actual power of those letters is marvelous." In a remote part of western North Carolina, a party activist pleaded with his United States senator for "something, if nothing better, send Jack's letters."[6]

On more than one occasion, Smith fumed about how "Mr. Davis and a host of other imitators came into the field, bewildered the public," and "eventually impaired interest." By the fall of 1833, he realized that a book was the only way to clear up confusion and secure a

copyright. About this time, an offer from a Boston publishing firm calling itself Lilly, Wait, Colman, and Holden arrived. The modest proposal, ten cents a book on a first edition of two thousand volumes and less on subsequent editions, came from a small operation whose managers knew how poorly American fiction sold, especially when compared to devotional material, books of a practical nature, and anything by European authors. The company believed in Jack Downing, however, because he possessed a popularity that might transcend public reluctance and propel the company into the upper ranks of American publishers. Lilly decided that getting a book out before Davis and the others was an advantage worth having and he urged immediate action.[7]

Smith accepted Lilly's offer and left at once for Boston, where he spent the better part of a month working on a large manuscript. This task was made especially unpleasant due to the pressure of having to get the book out quickly and the cold bare room where he labored day and night. These conditions certainly exasperated his already high-strung nerves. "I have a great many misgivings yet, I fear the thing will be pronounced very flat after all," he reported in one of his first letters home. In truth, Smith had little to fear because as he worked editors had begun anticipating his collection as the next publishing sensation. Along with this good news,

a local newspaper mistakenly announced the book as "just published by Lilly and Wait" which caused a crowd to gather outside the printing offices. These two encouraging signs, which should have put his mind at ease, only deepened anxiety, because now he thought everyone expected something good. Once again he complained, "I cant [sic] get over the notion that to most readers it will appear flat."[8]

Gradually, he gained more confidence and wrote home to his wife, "the publishers here are making considerable effort to get possession of the market." Between the previous letter and this one he apparently had learned more about book selling. Instead of success depending wholly upon artistic quality, as he may have believed when he worried about content, promotion sold the most copies. Those who read the pages and formed an opinion had already bought a copy. Before the manuscript went to press, Lilly and Wait had started contacting editors, booksellers, and bought advertisements in hopes of drumming up pre-publication orders. When a "gentleman came in and paid for four copies to send to Charleston, S.C.," and later a Baltimore bookseller ordered five hundred advance copies, this interest from distant places finally made Smith realize "a considerable bunch of them [will be] sold."[9]

The Philadelphia National Gazette declared The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing one of "the most

popular writings that ever appeared in this country." Strong initial sales confirmed this assessment, and by February, 1834, several magazines welcomed a second edition. Only two months later, a third edition rolled off the presses, and shipments went to New York auction houses for retailers who bought in bulk. Sales stayed brisk, yet Lilly still worried. He admitted that we had "scattered the books already more than strict prudence would dictate. If there is here and there a spot on this side of the Rocky Mountains that our consignments have not touched, one picter [sic] and two or three letters would get the market in all such places." Maintaining that delicate balance between sending out as many books as possible yet still sustaining a high price was a difficult task, and at any sign of the scales tipping, Lilly should have taken corrective measures. Instead, the presses put five or six more editions into circulation. With phony Downing volumes starting to appear as well, the end result was complete saturation. By the fall, this mistake, and others, forced Lilly and Wait into bankruptcy.[10]

Despite the demise of Lilly and Wait and the Davis collection's surging ahead of his in the total number of editions published, Smith won general acclaim from critics. Unlike rivals who relied upon politics for laughs, he explored values, beliefs, and morals for a deeper humor which touched upon the characteristics and

manners of his community. "Mr. Seba Smith is the best painter of Yankee peculiarities that ever wrote," a New York critic declared. Horace Greeley's discriminating New Yorker magazine stated that "his Yankee stories and style are very diverting, and possess an originality and fidelity which are not discernible in the writings of a numerous hord of imitators." Life-long experience gave Smith an advantage over Davis and helped create a better product. The outspoken literary critic Edgar Allan Poe made the correct assessment when he wrote that Downing was only half fiction. The other "half of him, lies in Smith himself."[11]

Soon after publication, circulating libraries around Boston and at two coastal towns in Maine made the volume available for those able to pay a membership fee. Over the next two decades other libraries with similar rules as well as public institutions made Downing available. Early copies were also in Charleston, South Carolina, where three institutions, one serving professionals, another artisans, and a third the affluent Charleston Library Society, all obtained a copy. The book traveled West, too, as a young traveller attested when he thumbed through the pages aboard a steamboat headed down the Ohio River. Libraries of Louisville and St. Louis owned copies. In Indiana the probate inventory of a modest man listed the book among fifteen others he possessed, and in Louisiana a

wealthy planter family had a copy in their collection of nearly three thousand volumes. On a winter evening in 1854, twenty-one years after Downing had first appeared, a Michigan college student read "a little Jack Downing." The popularity of the book among many different people and its appearance in a variety of libraries indicated how humor traveled widely. Rich and modest people in the East, West, North, and South read Smith's work. Although written in and about New England, those comic letters had become a favorite across America.[12]

III

Even though he too was born in New England, the son of a Congregationalist clergyman, Joseph C. Neal grew up under the care of a widowed mother in Philadelphia. Hardly a region in the geographical sense, the city possessed, however, qualities all its own. When Neal became a newspaper editor, he perceived a municipality suffering from festering differences between rich and poor, racial and ethnic prejudices that flared violently, roaming gangs terrorizing neighborhoods, and unemployed milling about the streets. As a contemporary pointed out, his talent lay in describing "the laggards in the rear of civilization who lack energy or ability to make an honorable position in the world." He described every imaginable character in predicaments great and small, a veritable carnival of "small spendthrifts, inferior

pretenders to fashion, bores, half-developed inebriates, and gentlemen enjoying the minor miseries and social difficulties of life." Each "met with a rare delineator in Mr. Neal who interpreted their ailments, repeated their slang, and showed them an image which they might enjoy without wounding their pride."[13]

The "City Worthies," as the series came to be called, ran for six years before being assembled in a collection. During this time, other urban humorists began working in New York City, and a New Orleans newspaper, the Picayune, ran a series under the same title. Other than these efforts, however, Neal worked without the imitators who plagued Smith. He also had the good fortune of securing the best publishing firm in the country, Carey and Hart of Philadelphia. The company took out a copyright in 1837, but an economic panic struck and the resulting depression delayed printing. In November an eager customer out West inquired about the delay, and Neal promised him by February, 1838, "copies will be found upon the shelves of the booksellers of Cincinnati, even if unlucky to remain there!"[14]

In March, the Philadelphia Public Ledger welcomed the long overdue Charcoal Sketches, praising its "humorously delineated" sketches which "team[ed] with ludicrous peculiarities of character." The city's leading literary journal, The Gentleman's Magazine, called it "a pocket

encyclopedia of honest, sensible fun," and especially for those characters who spoke "epigrams in prose, snarl satire with a keen edge, and mutter aphorisms of philosophy and morality." Those "rich characterizations, if Neal got them from our Quaker city, then wisdom cries out from the street and only Neal hears." The Knickerbocker also mentioned the odd cast and pointed out that instead of heaping ridicule the collection built sympathy for Hogarthian dregs.[15]

Other critics either chimed in with similar praise or gave half-hearted recommendations. The latter remained true at both the Southern Literary Messenger in Richmond, Virginia and Charleston's Southern Literary Journal. Despite lackluster reviews from Southerners, libraries in Charleston and elsewhere in the region bought the book. Overcoming a sluggish economy, Carey and Hart sold four editions in the first few years, and then eight more by the 1850s, allowing Charcoal Sketches to surpass Smith's Downing letters in total sales of published editions. In New England people were kinder to the book than the Southern critics. The Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Athenaeum, which rarely collected humor, purchased a copy. Perhaps because Neal had been born in a neighboring village the library made an exception. Several libraries in Boston also thought the work valuable enough to keep. In the West the book could be found at New Orleans,

Louisville, St. Louis, and in a circulating library at Franklin, Louisiana, in the extreme southwest corner of the country.[16]

By February of 1844, Neal had become one of the most popular figures of his day and the subject of a lengthy biography by Graham's Magazine, the successor to Gentleman's. A lavish full-page engraving accompanied the glowing article. For the rest of the year reviewers quoted from its pages when introducing two new books Neal published. The first, a reprinting of his original collection, was hardly novel despite the "new edition" slapped on the title page, and the second contained a shorter selection of material written since 1838. The Knickerbocker praised both collections and cautioned those unfamiliar with Neal's work. The magazine told readers to expect an "honest outbreak of laughter, but when you have laughed your fill, if you choose to look beneath the surface, you will find an undercurrent of truthful observation, abundant matter for sober thought in your graver moments." Even the portraits of criminals "forewarn those who are about to yield to temptation, not by dull monitions and unregarded homilies, but by making [the] actors themselves unconscious protestants against their own misdoings." As this review and others pointed out, Neal's humor contained important messages about an urban community.[17]

Not all reviewers saw beyond the surface and into deeper meanings. At least one condemned what he did read. In a damning review which appeared in the small town Columbia, Pennsylvania, Spy newspaper, Edgar Allan Poe rebuked the press for "puffing up" Neal's reputation and making him more popular than he deserved. Smaller country periodicals were also criticized for blindly following the urban press in praising Charcoal Sketches, a work Poe found deficient in a number of areas. Ever since his days as a rival Philadelphia editor, Poe had watched as colleagues praised Neal's sketches without analyzing them. He had read each and believed them nothing more than "extreme burlesque" handicapped by a "tedious repetition of slang and incident. The loafer always declaim[ed] the same nonsense, in the same style, [became] drunk in the same way, and [went] to the watch house after the same fashion." Having read one of these bits, "we read all ad nauseam." The review grew bitter, charging that the Knickerbocker was completely mistaken. Although he searched for "the sharp wit, the 'under-current of humor,' the moral, the finish of Mr. Neal's writing," Poe ended up disappointed at every turn. In his view the press, "through money and collusion," had raised an "obscure editor of a political paper" to the forefront of American popular literature. He complained, "the most popular author of the day. A-hem! could a greater absurdity be

committed?" Other authors had done more significant work, far better he thought "than Neal will ever do" if he "were to attain an hundredth year."[18]

While harsh and vindictive, the criticism Poe leveled was not entirely off the mark. Neal, his publishers, and friends had become quite successful at inflating reputations for the simple reason that the practice helped sell books. Building up an author and creating an image of success convinced readers the material was worth buying. Poe despised this practice because the content of a book was overlooked too often. The creative side of literature and the business of marketing were thus two separate activities. The form and content of a book took shape as deeper influences, culture and place, acted, and only later, after the work had been finished, did the market become important. Often, writers did not have to gear their work towards a public because no matter what they wrote, promotional efforts would help them reach the market. Even a lackluster book could sell plenty of copies as Poe thought Neal's Charcoal Sketches had done. As a laborer at New York's auction houses also remembered, the content and business of selling were two different activities because he "rarely met with a bookseller who knew anything about the character of the books that passed though his hands beyond the price fixed upon them by the publishers."[19] Rather than writing for the market,

humorists produced material meaningful to them and on subjects they wanted to share with an audience.

Less than a month after Poe's article appeared, Neal left the daily newspaper where he had worked for thirteen years and devoted his energies to a new project, a weekly literary magazine. Over the next several years, he continued writing sketches and found time to marry a young contributor, but eventually succumbed to an unknown illness. Upon hearing the bad news, a Philadelphia friend lamented, "poor Neal, I liked him as a man & admired him as a writer, this decease will be generally deplored."[20] Far from the city, the news prompted a distressed diary entry from an Alabama admirer who also felt the loss:

> July 26, 1847. Learned from a Charleston paper that Joseph C. Neal...is dead. I could have spared almost any other editor in the union, better than him. We shall have no more life-drawn pictures, which he was pleased to call 'Charcoal Sketches,' and his excellent efforts in behalf of newspaper literature will now cease.[21]

The Knickerbocker bemoaned the departure of "a gifted retiring gentleman--a true friend," and Yankee Doodle, a humor magazine running in New York City, memorialized a fallen comrade. "A genuine humorist does not spring up so often that he can be easily spared," a front page editorial read. His genial manner and spontaneous humor, the editor claimed, will be remembered in Philadelphia "to the end of its history."[22]

IV

The last of the three humorists considered here, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, came from middle Georgia. Except for schooling in South Carolina, college at Yale, and legal training from the celebrated Tapping Reeve law school in Litchfield, Connecticut, the piedmont of his state remained home for over fifty years. His youth was spent in and around Augusta on the Savannah River, but later an extensive law practice took him into many surrounding counties. His travels introduced him to the plain folk and planters who later became characters in scenes of daily life and accounts of local amusements. In 1835, he collected all the newspaper contributions made over the previous few years, but instead of finding a publishing firm, as Smith and Neal had, he assembled a volume at his own newspaper press. The Georgia Constitutionalist admired this independent effort but suspected "he might possibly have done better, and the work have had a larger circulation, had it been published at the North." Nevertheless, "he is willing to trust Georgians for support," and rather than faulting him the paper thought his devotions "should ensure [the book] a prompt and large sale" around Georgia. The newspaper which had printed his first sketches, the Milledgeville Southern Recorder, gave a ringing endorsement. "These highly humorous and descriptive essays will be read and

remembered with interest as displaying the genius of 'a native Georgian' when the present generation shall have passed away."[23]

In neighboring South Carolina and Alabama, the Charleston Southern Literary Journal praised Georgia Scenes as excellent humor because the sketches were "partly fiction; partly real," and the Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot, a Whig newspaper, loved the volume's "lively descriptions of Southern peculiarities." The editor also apologized for neglecting the book for several months:

> The writer belongs to an opposite school of politics from ours, and has, not seldom, handled [sic] out friends and opinions in a bold and caustic style, by no means agreeable to our tastes. He is a frank and honorable opponent and we are glad of the opportunity to pay our tribute to his talents. 'His Georgia Scenes &c.' are admirable sketches, drawn with a free hand--natural--witty--sometimes keenly satiric.[24]

In Richmond, Virginia the Southern Literary Messenger, carried a favorable review by editor Edgar Allan Poe who admitted laughing "immoderately" over characters and situations because so many came from life. One of his favorites presented commendable "delineations of Southern bravado," he reported, and others gave the "horrible and disgusting details of Southern barbarity" which depressed him because they too contained "vivid truth." In the final analysis, Poe thought the book "all together

humorous, clever," and certainly an "omen of better days for the literature of the South."[25]

Although satisfied with the content, Poe doubted its sales potential. "Thanks to the long-indulged literary supineness of the South, her presses are not as apt in putting forth a saleable book as her sons are in concocting a wise one," he complained. Longstreet marketed the work himself by sending copies to editors of influential newspapers and magazines, including the Southern Literary Messenger, and also by asking booksellers to take consignments. At a dollar retail or seventy-five cents wholesale, "high prices to be sure, for such a faulty work," he admitted, the book still "sells almost as fast [as] I can distribute the volumes." Of the nearly four thousand printed, two hundred were damaged, rendering them a loss, and another six hundred had to be reduced in price. Still, after accounting for losses and expenses, the profit reached a thousand dollars, all "without sending one volume north of the Potomac," he boasted.[26]

Five years later in 1840, Longstreet made a deal for future editions to come from New York's Harper firm. The reasons for his change in heart remain unknown, but he expected more money by allowing a professional handle sales. He later regretted sending the book away; the first year saw only 2,750 copies sold, leaving him with a

paltry $216.13 profit. The amount disappointed him, especially after realizing a thousand dollars himself, and he wondered if he had not been cheated. He even drew up a whole page of calculations trying to resolve the matter, but this effort only deepened his suspicions about Northern businessmen. Although the book had started off slowly, Harper kept the title and sold eight editions by 1860. This number was several fewer than what the books of Smith and Neal had done, yet still enough for the volume to turn up in a wide variety of libraries across the country. Early editions could be found in South Carolina and New York library collections, near where the volume had been published. During the 1850s, large mercantile and public libraries of the Northeast purchased editions, and out West the Louisville circulating library owned a copy by 1842. The mercantile library at St. Louis obtained two different editions attesting to its popularity there. The wealthy Louisiana planter family who owned a Downing volume, and who had not bought any of Neal's books, also put Georgia Scenes among their extensive collection.[27]

The slow initial sales of the Harper's edition might be attributable to the poor review printed in the prestigious New Yorker magazine. In an uninspiring notice, the reviewer stated flatly that the sketches were about Southern life and "some of them possess considerable

humor," yet "their ludicrousness, unfortunately, is unrelieved by a single instance of beauty, sentiment, or elegance of style." These words engendered an angry response from a commentator in the Southern Literary Messenger. "We fearlessly assert (the opinion of the New Yorker to the contrary not withstanding) that the 'humor,' instead of being 'unrelieved by a single instance of beauty, sentiment or eloquence of style,' is often relieved by all." The prose was written without the "false gloss" and "redundant superlatives" found in romantic prose so popular among literati. The collection was not intended to be "fancy sketches," but rather "faithful delineations of real scenes and characters." A South Carolina College professor concurred, insisting that "thousands among us bear witness to their exact fidelity."[28]

In 1844, another South Carolinian and a leading literary figure, William Gilmore Simms, raised another storm about the book. In a long article printed in a national literary magazine, he claimed the "puritan nature of New England" had restrained mirth in the Northeast while in the Southern states humor flourished as evidenced by "the best specimens of American humor [were], by far, those [sketches] of Longstreet." These and other controversial remarks in the article elicited a sharp rebuttal from a Northern critic. He named a dozen

humorists from his region and their excellent writing. "There is force and vivacity of description in Joseph Neal's sketches," he argued, and "they are good of their class, and seem to have hit the popular taste." Because he was writing for a Democratic magazine, the critic omitted discussion of Jack Downing who had been linked to the Whig cause by the Davis letters. Leaving out Downing was a mistake because that character made the strongest counter claim to any assertion that New Englanders possessed little humor. As for Georgia Scenes, the critic made no direct comments except to point out how the book had sold poorly.[29]

The controversies over Longstreet's work raised questions about the nature of humor in different sections of the country. This point goes directly to the heart of the next few chapters. While contemporaries may have believed humor was regionally distinctive, does the material Smith, Neal, and Longstreet wrote actually contain traits that were significantly different? They were writing about cultures and places separated by thousands of miles, but even then would their sketches only contain variations instead of distinctive features? In current scholarship about antebellum society, questions about distinctiveness have taken center stage as historians and literary scholars alike grapple with regions much more diverse than previously thought.

Recently, a scholar who studied Longstreet and other Southerners stated unequivocally that these humorists "registered what they saw as the distinctive qualities of their region." Were the Southern humorists and those elsewhere writing about whole regions during the entire period from 1830 to 1860? Ever since William R. Taylor looked at literature and the myths of the Cavalier and Yankee, studies have posited a solid Northern perspective against a Southern one. Recent research has subsequently found not one South but many and not a single North but many. I will discuss the humorists from the various regions of the country, and not merely the larger designations of North and South. In the 1830s when Smith, Neal, and Longstreet were writing, controversies over distinctiveness were far from their minds and less important than other looming concerns.[30]

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6. Henry Ladd Smith, "The Two Major Downings: Rivalry in Political Satire," Journalism Quarterly 41 (Winter 1964): 76-77; Biddle to Webster, August 7, 1833, in Charles Wiltse, ed., The Papers of Daniel Webster 7 Vols. (Hanover: Dartmouth College University Press of New England, 1974-), III, 464; James Whitaker to Willie Person Mangum, June 13, 1834, in Henry Thomas Shanks, ed., The Papers of Willie Person Mangum 5 Vols. (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, 1950-1956), II, 164.

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8. Smith to Elizabeth Oakes Smith, October 30 and 31, 1833, ibid.

9. Smith to Elizabeth Oakes Smith, November 6, 13, and 14, 1833, ibid.

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13. Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck, eds., Cyclopedia of American Literature 2 Vols. (New York: Charles Scribners, 1855), II, 456. Both quotations.

14. Derek Colville, "A Rich Store of Southern Tall Tales," Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia 33 (June 1955): 11. Neal to Joseph B. Boyd, November 3, 1837, in Joseph C. Neal Papers, University of Virginia.

15. Public Ledger March 14, 1838; Charcoal Sketches (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1838); The Gentleman's Magazine 2 (April 1838): 278; Knickerbocker 11 (April 1838): 377.

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Orleans (New Orleans: R.C. Kerr, 1858); Catalogue of the Books in the Louisville Circulating Library (Louisville: W.N. Haldeman, 1842); Catalogue Systematic and Analytical of the Books of the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association (St. Louis: R.P. Studley, 1858); Richard Walton Patrick, "Literature in the Louisiana Plantation Home Prior to 1861" (Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1937), 159-169.

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18. Linda Patterson Miller, "Poe on the Beat: Doings of Gotham as Urban, Penny Press Journalism," Journal of the Early Republic 7 (Summer 1987): 152; Kenneth Silverman, Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 422; Poe in Stedman and Woodberry, eds., Works, IX, 251; Poe in J.E. Spannuth, ed., Doings of Gotham (Pottsville, PA, 1929; Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1974), 121 and 104-106 for puffing quotations.

19. Isaac S. Lyon in Graham Hodges, ed., Recollections of an Old Cartman" Old New York Street Life (New York: New York Bound, 1984), 101. His emphasis.

20. Neal to Thomas Carr, December 13, 1844, in Gratz Collection; Pennsylvanian July 19, 1847; Public Ledger July 19, 1847; Joseph Sill Diary, July 17, 1847, in Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

21. Thomas Hubbard Hobbs in Faye Acton Axford, ed., The Journals of Thomas Hubbard Hobbs (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 74.

22. Knickerbocker 30 (August 1847): 179; Yankee Doodle 2 (August 1847): 170; Rufus W. Griswold, an irascible Philadelphia editor, reported matters differently. He claimed in a diary entry on July 19th: "Joseph C. Neal committed suicide this morning at his house in Seventh Street, near by. It is given out that he died of congestion of the brain." The New York Literary World, a book trade journal, repeated this story: "Mr. Joseph C. Neale, the humorist, ended his life in Philadelphia. He had for several months been suffering from a nervous irritability and depression of spirits." See Griswold in William W. Griswold, ed., Passages From the Correspondence and Other Papers of Rufus W. Griswold (Cambridge, MA: W.M. Griswold, 1898), 230; Literary World 2 (August 7, 1847): 18; S. Austin Allibone, ed., A Critical Dictionary of English

Literature and British and American Authors 3 Vols. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1858-1871), II, 1404 claimed Griswold cared little for Neal's humor. In a preface to a second collection of Charcoal Sketches issued after his death, and especially in a diary, Neal's wife hinted that his death may have been more tragic than official sources reported. See Alice B. Neal in Neal, Charcoal Sketches 2nd Series (New York: Burgess, Stringer, and Company, 1848, v and Alice B. Neal in H.B. Richards, Cousin Alice: A Memoir of Alice B. Haven (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1865), 63 and 64.

23. Longstreet, Georgia Scenes (Augusta: States Rights Sentinel Office, 1835); Georgia Constitutionalist September 22, 1835; The Southern Recorder October 20, 1835.

24. Southern Literary Journal 1 (January 1836): 368. Mobile Commercial Register and Patriot February 26, 1836.

25. Poe in James A. Harrison, ed., The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe 17 Vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1965), VIII, 257, and 260-265.

26. Ibid., 259; Longstreet to T.W. White, April 10, 1836, in Jimmy Ray Scafidel, "The Letters of A.B. Longstreet" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1976), 98; Longstreet to James Barton Longacre, September 1, 1842, ibid; Blanck, ed., Bibliography, VI, 1.

27. Longstreet to Longacre, September 1, 1842, in Scafidel, "Letters," 140-141; King, Longstreet, 92; Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Apprentices' Library Society of Charleston, South Carolina (Charleston: B.B. Hussey, 1840); Catalogue of the Books of the Charleston Library Society (Charleston: Miller and Browne, 1845); Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Society Hill Library Society (Philadelphia: C. Sherman, 1850); Bowery Circulating Library Catalogue (New York: J.W. Harrison Book and Job Printer, 1840); Catalogue of the New-York State Library (Albany: Charles Van Benthaysen, 1856); Catalogue of Books in John Harris's Circulating Library (Charlestown, MA: Caleb Rand, 1841); Alphabetical Catalogue of the Library of Congress (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864); Catalogue of the Mercantile Library of Philadelphia (Philadelphia: Mercantile Library Company, 1870); Catalogue of the Public Library of Cincinnati (Cincinnati: Wilstach, Baldwin, and Company, 1871); Catalogue of the Public Library of Indianapolis (Indianapolis: Press of Printing and Publishing House, 1873); Articles of Association

By-Laws and Catalogue of Books of the Ladies Library and Literary Association of Owosso, Michigan (Owosso, MI: J.H. Champion and Company, 1874); Catalogue of the Library of the Boston Athenaeum (Boston: n.p., 1876); Catalogue of the Brooklyn Library (Brooklyn, NY: n.p., 1877); Catalogue of the Books in the Louisville Circulating Library (Louisville: W.N. Haldeman, 1842); Catalogue Systematic and Analytical of the Books of the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association (St. Louis: R.P. Studley, 1858); Turnbull--Allain Family Papers.

28. New Yorker 9 (May 23, 1840): 157; Southern Literary Messenger 6 (July 1840): 572 and 573; Quotation of professor Maximilian Laborde in King, Longstreet, 91.

29. Simms, "The Writings of Cornelius Mathews," Southern Quarterly Review 2 (October 1844): 332 and 335-337; Jones, "American Humor," United States Magazine and Democratic Review 17 (September 1845): 211-218; Perry Miller, The Raven and the Whale (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1956), 106 explored the rivalry between Simms and northern critics; The northern political figure Salmon P. Chase gave the book a terse entry in his diary: "Glanced at Georgia Scenes--a poor book." Considering he was the ideological opposite of both Simms and Longstreet, this negative reaction was not surprising. Salmon Chase in John Niven, ed., The Salmon P. Chase Papers 3 Vols. to date (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1993-), I, 138.

30. Richard Gray, Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 62; William R. Taylor, Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961); Lewis P. Simpson, The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the History of the Literary Vocation in America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973); Robert A. Ferguson, Law and Letters in American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Ritchie Devon Watson, Jr., Yeoman Versus Cavalier: the Old Southwest's Fictional Road to Rebellion (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

CHAPTER 2

THE COMMUNITY AS CATALYST

I

In the uncertain times of the 1830s, when the United States "was a civilization in flux," as one historian has argued, people looked to their communities and institutions for strength.[1] Seba Smith made his newspaper a beacon for independents who wanted a home during the tumult of the emerging two-party system that happened during the early years of the decade. In Philadelphia Neal made sure his daily sheet, the Pennsylvanian, followed the Democratic party line, giving a shelter to its partisans. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's newspaper catered to independent thinkers, but still entertained his Georgia audience with comforting pictures of local customs. Edgar Allan Poe called him "a clever fellow, imbued with a spirit of the truest humor, and endowed, moreover, with an exquisitely discriminative [sic] and penetrating understanding of character in general, and of Southern character in particular."[2] These humorists began writing for their communities, and much of what they wrote was meant for a local audience.

Their sketches appeared in newspapers that served their communities, and experiences there provided ideas for subject matter. Thus, the three started out not

writing for the nation or trying to find characteristics of an American character. The scenes of everyday life, the values and customs of their communities, were important to them and came though in many sketches. The following sections will first suggest that community fired the imaginations of these humorists and then assess whether differences between their sketches were substantive or superficial.

II

Before Lilly and Wait published the Downing sketches, Smith wrote a long preface letting readers know more about the place Jack Downing called home:

> Downingville is a snug, tidy sort of village, situated in a valley about two miles long, and a mile and a half wide, scooped out between two large rugged hills that lie to the east and west, having a thick forest of trees to the north, and a clear pond of water, with a sandy beach, to the south. It is about three miles from the main road as you go back into the country, and is jest about in the middle of down east.[3]

Following this idyllic portrait, Smith presented a genealogy of the Downing family. Venerable Zebedee Downing had founded the town and delighted in telling his grandson Jack, and anyone else who would listen, about the "fatigue of Burgwine" during the Revolutionary War battle of Saratoga. His story imparted patriotism and civic duty which he hoped that his descendants would never forsake. With its pleasant setting, old associations, and cherished

republican values, the village became an idealized picture of rural New England.

While Smith has been called a cracker-barrel philosopher for his wit and wisdom, he never intended to be a sage for the masses. Neal, on the other hand, would have gladly accepted that designation. He believed:

> Those gifted with truly humorous genius are more useful as moralists, philosophers, and teachers, than whole legions of the gravest preachers. They speak more effectually to the general ear and heart even though they who hear are not aware of the fact that they are imbibing wisdom.[4]

With this maxim in mind, Neal exposed the social ills that made a mockery of his city's Quaker name. He knew that the "usual lot of humanity" ignored the less attractive sides of the city keeping everything "out of sight" and hence "out of mind."[5] He could not shy away from the growing difficulties and preferred instead to probe the character of individuals living in a dark and dirty metropolis. "Whether he be a philosopher, or whether he be a humorist we are not sure," one critic noted. What was more certain was that Neal delivered "important truths and corrected follies and weakness by playful satire."[6]

Although he wrote about a place far away from Neal's city, Longstreet also worried about the condition of his community. Situated on the Savannah River, Augusta had been a respectable trading port since colonial times. By the 1830s, however, commerce had fallen off substantially.

One planter living across the river blamed poor soil quality, and Longstreet agreed. Indeed, one of his first stories complained that a lush landscape had become "barren, dreary, and cheerless" in the short span of a single lifetime.[7] This example of his anxiety suggested a reason why Longstreet wrote sketches for his community. In the preface to Georgia Scenes, and then in a letter to a magazine editor, he had explained his purpose was to depict Georgians "precisely as we are" so future generations may "know all about us."[8] A noble goal indeed, yet his sketches appeared in a states-rights weekly that defended nullification and blasted Northern interests for hastening decline in the Southeast. He was concerned that Southern society might erode as surely as the land. His scenes looked back on good times, warned about the future, and pleaded for a moral awakening so society might renew itself.

A closer examination of how Longstreet, Neal, and Smith expressed these themes will illustrate how their thinking produced humor that was not at all alike. To highlight the New England traditions and republican values Smith idealized, he sent Downing beyond the village and out into the greater world. His character's odyssey began when the lad took axe handles to sell at the state capital. Once at Portland, the seat of government, the young man became fascinated with the state legislature.

The members were in a predicament because voters had elected an evenly divided assembly. Partisans on both sides refused to make concessions or cooperate in any fashion, putting all state business on hold. The election of a governor, their most important duty, remained in limbo. Downing looked at the situation and offered an innocent, and thus comical perspective on the deadlock.

When the last representative arrived with faulty election credentials, for example, Downing could not fathom the significance of this chance to break the tie. The side that stood to gain by an exclusion balked and refused to seat the man. "I can't see why they need to make such a fuss about it," Downing said, "they've got seats enough for everybody," why even the "standing committees have a chance to set [sic] most everyday."[9] These comments illustrated how baffled he was by the maneuvers of each side, and how he did not understand the concept of partisanship. No one could blame him for not understanding because Downingville had kept itself free of such wrangling. For example, when a lawyer had moved into a vacant building on main street, residents called a town meeting and decided the interloper must leave. If he refused, they promised a dunking and a ride out of town on a rail. Twenty stout men carried the message, and the lawyer departed quickly.[10]

In Downingville, Uncle Joshua also dispensed justice for ages with the time-honored penalty of two shillings for both parties of a dispute, except when they had come to blows. At that point, the fine rose another sixpence.[11] His judgments and the town meetings had settled matters well enough. Consensus guided affairs and kept the place out of the trouble which mired the state legislature. The peaceable kingdom Smith presented there had been a favorite of New England writers for decades when he revived its features and contrasted Downingville with the outside world. Maine, and the whole country for that matter, needed a lesson in the stability the New England village provided.

Downing stayed at Portland for three weeks, giving no indication when he might return. Cousin Nabby admonished her dawdling relative telling him in a letter "you better let them legislators alone; and if you can't sell your ax handles, take 'em and come home and mind your business." She informed him that the schoolmaster had stolen his girlfriend, and a steer he had sold on credit lay dead, making the buyer unhappy.[12] This news from back home did not move Downing because a week later his mother had to write. "O Jack, I'm afraid these legislators will be the ruination of you!" They kept him away from honest labor. "Talking will never build a stone wall or pay our taxes." She pleaded, "I cant see what good twil do for you to stay

in Portland any longer, and I think you had better come home."[13] Even this request failed to move Downing. Instead of coming home, he stayed much longer, and when he left the capital his destination was Washington, D.C., rather than Downingville. An obsession with politics had drawn him away.

Like Smith, Longstreet idealized a harmonious close-knit society. In "The Dance" Abram Baldwin, the narrator, attended a country frolic illustrating qualities the author liked best. The unpretentious crowd in attendance consisted of well-behaved adolescents attired in plain dress. All danced the "good old republican six reel," which Baldwin had forgotten after moving into town. Nostalgia increased when he learned that a woman in attendance had been a first love of his so long ago. When he mentioned this coincidence to her, she searched her memory but could not recall his name. This depressing reality, that he had become unrecognizable to a dear friend and that he had lost his identity when he moved away from the virtuous countryside, did not favor a rural existence over life in town.[14] Rather it suggested that Longstreet worried that good values once dominant everywhere were now only found outside of the mainstream.

In great contrast to the harmony found at the dance, descriptions of a ball in town revealed how corrupt a part of society had become. Unlike the rural party where

everything fell into place easily, this affair suffered from inept management from the beginning. Big problems developed when a Mr. Crouch and a Mr. Noozle argued over dancing partners. Although Mr. Crouch settled matters, bad feelings lingered afterwards. Hearing gossip about his curt action, Crouch denounced the charges as "an infamous lie from beginning to end."[15] Around Augusta, a man's reputation depended upon the perception others had of his conduct. Any hint of impropriety robbed him of his good name, and no one stood for unpleasant rumors.

In the days after the ball, Mr. Crouch challenged Mr. Noozle to a duel. In a vain attempt to resolve the conflict, the seconds corresponded at length. Throughout this drawn out process, both sides engaged in ridiculous posturing. The biggest point of contention became the word "it" in a note describing what had happened that evening. One second offered a solution that "if Mr. Noozle would withdraw his objections to the 't,' Mr. Crouch should expunge the 'i.'" This compromise bordered on the absurd, and with no true resolution in sight, the two men met with pistols. "Crouch shot Noozle, in due form and according to the latest fashion, through the knees."[16]

In his sketches Longstreet made fun of dueling, and not just the formal code practiced by gentlemen. In "The Fight," one of his more well-known sketches, two bullies

took swings at each other because their wives started a tiff at a general store. Neither man could stand by and let his wife feel hurt. In the ensuing brawl, one combatant lost part of an ear and the other a good bit of his nose. At the end of the sketch the narrator thanked the "Christian religion, schools, colleges, and benevolent associations" for banishing "such scenes of barbarism and cruelty" which were "a disgrace to that community."[17] While Longstreet wished for peace, he knew trouble lurked deep within people and only institutions could put the passions in check. His ideals aimed for a peaceful, republican community, as Smith's did, but his was one that worked more on curing the individual of bad behavior rather than working towards consensus. He knew that vices such as ritualistic violence were ingrained in the local culture and not to be driven out soon.

While Smith and Longstreet emphasized social harmony, Neal focused on fixing the divisions in his city. In Downingville residents cared about the entire community, but in Neal's settings characters only worried about themselves. Concerted action for positive ends rarely took place in his sketches, and the chief guiding principal was unfettered individualism. Hoodlums exercised their liberties by making unbearable rackets at night, usually with instruments played out of tune, or by

banging indiscriminately on doors. Neal described how one angry resident threw a bucket of water on them.[18]

In the 1830s despite instances of mob violence, residents had not taken steps necessary for creating a professional police force. Neighborhoods relied still upon a seedy assortment of night watchmen. Their jobs had not changed much since medieval times. In the wee hours of the morning during a rain storm, one of these men came across Ripton Rumsey treading water in a swollen gutter. As his name implied, the fellow had downed one too many tumblers. To cure his drinking problem and give him a safer place to sleep besides the streets, the watchman suggested Moyamensing prison. "The sound of that awful word struck terror in the very marrow of Ripton." He could not stand an isolated cell and preferred to "be stirred up with a pole twenty times a day" than suffer that awful fate. Another story mentioned how people transported to that jail rode in a big dark prison van known as "Black Maria." The teamster's whip coming from atop a paddy wagon cracked "a warning" and gave "a traveling caution to all who are prone to sin." These scenes emphasized how force and deterrence were the peacemakers in Neal's community.[19]

Living in Philadelphia where violence became epidemic during the 1830s and 1840s, Neal familiarized himself with its causes. Rowdy fire companies, ethnic and racial

hatreds, and general malaise were major contributors. Among the worst ruffians, three characters in particular settled their differences with fists. The first one, Orson Dabbs, looked every inch the bully:

> His hat was pitched forward, with a blood thirsty, piratical rakishness, and almost covered his eyes, which gleamed like ignited charcoal under a jeweller's blowpipe. His cheeks were flushed with an angry spot, and his nose--always a quarrelsome pug--curled more fiercely upward, as if the demon wrath had turned archer, and was using it for a bow to draw an arrow to its head. His mouth had set in opposition to his nasal promontory, and savagely curved downward, like a half-moon battery.[20]

Dabbs believed that "fighting [was] the grand umpire and regulator; knock under or be knocked down." Usually he handled the flattening. At a tavern, he caroused so loud that a watchman came over and investigated the noise. The two exchanged heated words, and then a night stick came down heavily. "All I want of you is to behave nice and genteel" the watchman said swinging the instrument. For the first time the message went through a thick skull, and Dabbs "trotted off quietly."[21]

The second man, Rocky Smalt, a protege of Dabbs, believed the "best method of removing difficulties" was to "thump them down." A weak physical constitution hampered his ability to carry out threats. He weighed only ninety-four pounds "counting boots, hat, dead-latch key, pennies, fips, clothes, and a little bit of cavendish" kept on his person. Both Dabbs and Smalt fell for the same woman, and

when by chance they met at her house, Smalt fled from his hulking rival. Wandering around in the streets late that night, Smalt stopped for some shadow boxing in hopes the practice might prepare him for their next meeting. Throwing out blows "right and left," he applied himself "with great vigour." Thinking a fight had broken out, a dog catcher approached the scene. He learned of Smalt's troubles and then offered him some advice. Fighting accomplished little, he argued, and the law would keep him safe from Dabbs. Smalt realized his foolishness and gave up a tough attitude. The official had convinced him a scuffle solved nothing.[22]

Neal took an even stronger stance against violence in "Slyder Downhylle," a story about the third character. The namesake of the story began a downward slide when someone pulled on his nose. This thump insulted him, for "when a nose is constituted a point of honour, it expands to the dimensions of a geographic promontory." To get revenge, a duel took place and Downhylle injured an arm. This affair never elevated him in the eyes of others as did the conflicts in Longstreet's community. The wound hastened his own impoverishment because once hurt he could not work. He turned to gambling and lost every cent, leaving the narrator to conclude, "others may learn from the example."[23]

In great contrast to Philadelphia, Smith presented the New England village as a place free of these type disorders. Outside of it, however, Downing encountered a different situation. In a letter to his uncle, he described the atmosphere in Washington, D.C. If men ever became angry in Maine, "they did n't do nothing but talk and jaw one another, but here if any body does n't do to suit 'em, fact they 'll up and shoot him in a minute." For protection, he asked Uncle Joshua to pack "my old fowling piece into the stage and send it on here as quick as possible. I hope you'll be quick as you can about it, for if I get an office I shant dare to take it till I get my gun."[24]

An incident involving cabinet members John H. Eaton of Tennessee and Samuel D. Ingham of Pennsylvania validated Downing's concern. Sticking close to reality in this story, Smith showed how Eaton and his henchmen met their match when they attacked a rival. Downing told readers how his quick action saved the day:

> I stepped up on to Mr Ingham's front door steps, and threw my hat down, and rolled up my sleeves, and spit on my hands; and by that time the chaps began to stare at me a little. And now, says I, Major Eaton, this is quite too bad. A man's house is his castle. Here's Mr. Ingham in his house as peaceable as a lamb; he is n't a meddling with nobody, and you need n't think to drag him out here to-night, I can tell ye. If you really want to take a bit of a box, just throw away your powder and ball, and here's the boy for you.[25]

The party wanted nothing to do with a boxing match where rules might turn their hunt for vengeance into a clean fight. When the group prepared to rush the stairs, Downing threw them off balance by declaring that no one would get by "Jack Downing of the State of Maine." This phrase startled everyone because he had befriended the president, and a good bit of the country loved those letters of his.

Harming a popular figure would not be advantageous, and Eaton called off the attack. Using calm and sober reasoning, Downing had repelled the hot-tempered Southerners. Instead of meeting force with force, he relied on negotiation, the same way Uncle Joshua kept order in Downingville. Smith implied that vengeance and violence were not characteristic of New Englanders, but common among Southerners. Eaton who came from Tennessee appeared in Smith's stories as someone intent on solving differences through armed confrontation. Through a few other references of a similar nature, Smith perpetuated the impression that New England and the Southern states possessed different cultural attributes.

The sketches of Longstreet only confirmed what Smith had alleged. "Georgia Theatrics" made perfectly clear that in the South a propensity for fighting became ingrained into men from an early age. On a trip the narrator Lyman Hall took into the countryside, he ventured

into the dark corner section of Lincoln County. This place received its name from the "moral darkness which reigned" over the inhabitants the narrator reported. Along one of the paths there, Hall heard sounds of a struggle emanating from behind brush. There, a young man practiced for a brawl by yelling, rolling on the ground, and pretending to gouge out an opponent's eyes. Caught in a ridiculous posture, he explained sheepishly, "I was jist seein' how I could 'a' fout." As much as Longstreet lamented fighting, and set the story in a dark corner, he knew that the youth practiced for a day of reckoning that meant everything to him.[26]

III

The personal correspondence of Smith, Neal, and Longstreet revealed that each of them possessed moderate temperaments. Neal maintained a healthy sense of humor, evident when he missed a deadline for submitting poetry for a journal. A bad cold had kept him in bed, but he assured the editor, "I had no conception of any article but a pocket handkerchief and am not much more poetical yet, but the blow is nearly over and one breathes 'freer and deeper.'"[27] This playful attitude also helped him cope with trials associated with running a partisan Democratic newspaper in a Whig majority city. By chance, next door to his office was the Pennsylvania Gazette, the main Whig organ, run by Willis Gaylord Clark.

Clark shared Neal's love of writing fiction, making the two men kindred spirits. Because one paper printed its edition for morning distribution and the other for afternoon, the two editors discussed what each would print next. When they began trading attacks, each read the responses of the other, and then offered a creative rejoinders. So quickly did replies fly back, an attack made in the morning was usually answered in the evening, and with such ferocity did the battle rage, people followed the fights for days. Little did anyone know, the whole affair had been a well-orchestrated hoax.[28]

With an equal degree of artistry, Neal produced several sketches about other forms of trickery going on in the city. By disrupting community norms, the trickster character in his stories revealed many important characteristics about the culture he inhabited. One of Neal's tricksters, Jacob Grigsby, looked every bit a rough individual. Most people called him the crooked disciple because he possessed an incorrigible personality. "He sometimes awaken[ed] a friend from a day dream, by a slap on the shoulder which might be taken for the blow of a cannon ball." When shaking hands, his arm moved so vigorously "that you are painfully reminded of his affectionate disposition and the strength of his friendship for a week afterwards."[29] He put tacks in

chairs and melon rinds in the street for general inconvenience.

One night after a watchman had ordered him home, Grigsby stamped back to his boarding house angry that his fun had been cut short. The sleeping schedule that night put him in the middle of the bed, and he intended to take full advantage of the comfortable spot. He jumped into place with all his clothes on including a heavy overcoat and muddy boots. Not content with this spot, he tossed and turned keeping the others in bed awake. The other boarders decided they had enough. To end their misery, they all rose and dragged the great offender down the stairs. Awakened by the noise of him hitting each step, the landlord and others stopped the procession before the roommates could dunk him at a street hydrant. Grigsby protested his treatment with a touching speech, but no one listened or showed any sympathy whatsoever. All agreed that a night in the cellar would do him some good. After release from his dank surroundings in the morning, "Grigsby disappeared and returned no more."[30] By treating him with contempt and giving him a dose of his own medicine, the men succeeded in ridding their community of a nuisance.

Smith's correspondence and sketches had none of the playful tones that Neal assumed so often. In an 1852

letter, Smith turned down a request to deliver a comic speech at his alma mater in character:

> I am afraid 'Major Downing' would be somewhat out of place in a commencement exercise. The characteristics of the Major has [sic] been political satire; but I apprehend it would put him to his trumps rather too hard to find anything for satire about old Bowdoin.[31]

As one might imagine, Smith thought of Downing not as a jolly trickster, but more as a straight man in a world of trickery. This finer point was a major difference separating the worlds of Smith and Neal.

When Smith attended a reception for Henry Clay held in Boston, admirers of his began introducing him as Jack Downing. With much dread, Smith reported to his wife that, "at last my host took me by the arm and turned to Mr. Clay and presented me as Major Downing. I assure you I felt rather awkward." He had no reason to fret because Clay:

> Very cordially held out his hand, and with more deliberation and more emphasis than I had seen him address any one before, remarked that he should be very happy to be introduced not only to Major Downing, but to the whole family, cousin Nabby not excepted. He added that he understood there were some counterfeit majors in the field; but said he, I believe they are vetoed.[32]

Even at this moment of levity, Smith described this amusing encounter with a national leader in a plain, unemotional manner.

Coincidentally, this New England plain humor came out frequently in Downing stories. On his way to Washington

where he hoped to obtain a political appointment, Downing stopped in Boston to get recommendations from newspaper editors. Due to a slew of resignations in the Jackson administration, Downing thought he might get a vacant cabinet position. He knew nothing of office holding and only learned slowly about the realities of patronage. One editor endorsed Henry Clay telling him he must come out for him if he wanted an office. Another liked John C. Calhoun, and a yet a third stood for President Jackson, yet whispered that if the general fell ill, "Mr. Van Buren is the republican candidate."[33] Each editor quizzed him on his philosophy and wanted to know his favorite man. Downing had no idea that partisanship mattered so much. Smith thought partisanship and office seekers distasteful. By showing Downing befuddled by the whole system, he indicated that the country had taken a bad turn by allowing such trickery.

Some of Smith's best letters came from a period that covered President Jackson's 1833 Northeastern tour. Downing went along on the trip, and he promised friends and relatives that the president would pay them a visit. In the end, the delegation never came anywhere near Downingville. The residents became utterly disappointed. The dull thud of their hopes dashed was intended to be amusing because the intelligent reader knew the chances of an official visit to that remote location must have been

slim. New England humorists had become expert at evoking despair and Smith proved himself worthy of this tradition by creating a sketch both sad and slightly amusing.[34]

Scholars have argued that Longstreet shared a more serious disposition than other humorists. The Southern diarist Mary Boykin Chestnut called him a "staid Methodist." Yet she qualified her observation pointing out that in the 1860s he had "lost the keen sense of fun that illuminated his life in days of yore." In earlier years, he had been more jovial, informing a boyhood friend that "my household is not at that season, as you might suppose, a solemn sighing Methodistic conventicle; but a gay, cheerful, laughter-loving music-breathing group, who are all free to every enjoyment that true religion does not forbid." This playful attitude came through in many Georgia scenes.[35]

Stories such as "The Character of a Native Georgian" and "A Sage Conversation" introduced Longstreet's best known trickster, Ned Brace. The great attraction of Brace was the mischief he caused in Savannah. The charade began when he made a dramatic entrance at a local tavern. Rather than introducing himself to the crowd there, as was customary, he handed a piece of paper bearing an illegible name to the tavern keepers. Immediately they concluded that he must be an important person and did everything to make him comfortable. Brace took advantage of their

generosity asking for more milk and sugar in his tea and coffee. He then mixed all his food together, "packed it all up to one side of his plate in the form of a terrapin, and smoothed it all over nicely with his knife."[36] Several other guests grumbled their displeasure at the disgusting sight. When confronted about his crude behavior, Brace apologized profusely and suggested that if his meals were sent to his room no one could take offense. The keepers agreed and Brace succeeded in getting the luxury of room service.

During the remainder of his visit, a few more opportunities for mischief presented themselves. The next day, Brace disrupted a church congregation by acting like a dignified guest and then demonstrated an appalling inability to sing. Later on, he caused mourners at the end of a funeral procession to laugh loudly when he assumed the dead man had been a slave. His last escapade came during an early morning fire that consumed part of the town. On the way to assist in putting out the blaze, he overheard a frantic woman asking if the flames had consumed Mr. Dalby's home. Several men assured her that the residence was far beyond the fire. Much relieved she walked past Brace who then remarked casually to a friend next to him, "Poor Dalby, I see his house is gone" which caused her to scream "ten times louder than before."[37] If these jokes were not bad enough, he disrupted the fire

fighting itself by trying to drink out of the buckets as they passed by him.

Not even the elderly could escape his trickery. In the "Sage Conversation," the narrator absolved himself from the character's wrongdoing and praised old women, lest anyone think he was making fun of them. He then recalled the time Brace had boarded at the home of three old women. Testing his idea that they loved gossip, he made up an outrageous story to get them talking. He claimed that two men he knew had married each other and raised children. This tale had its intended effect. While Brace listened from another room picking up some great information, the three ran down all the strange stories they had ever heard including one about a woman who dressed as a man. From this story and his experiences in Savannah, Brace showed that appearances meant everything.[38]

The trickster sketches of Smith, Neal, and Longstreet were helpful in revealing some of their personal attitudes and characteristics of their communities. By making readers laugh at the fate of the annoying, crooked disciple, Neal hoped everyone would realize that united action was an answer to urban problems. Individual impulses needed to be tempered by deterrence and force. Improvements such as a professional police force might

help as well. Better law enforcement would stop bullies and tricksters alike.

In Georgia Scenes Ned Brace served a similar purpose in that he too exposed flaws in his community. As Longstreet saw it, Georgians were too gullible. Their commitments to superficial manners, mainly keeping up good appearances, allowed them to be duped by Brace's gags. When he wrote these sketches, Longstreet wanted his fellow citizens to accept nullification as legitimate and a proper response. He could not believe that people listened to Unionists. Their leaders were tricksters fooling people with well-dressed arguments. They put the abstractions of peace and union ahead of economic well-being. To fall for these arguments, Longstreet reasoned, meant certain ruin. Through humor, Longstreet chided his readers for their inability to see through the designs of others.

That Smith's stories included few tricksters indicated how differently he conceived of matters in Downingville. Downing himself was no shrewd Yankee, but a straight man who suffered from turns of fate and the trickery of others. While fate could not be tampered with, the latter might be reformed. At the time he wrote, many New Englanders were seeking ways to preserve the village ideal and create perfect societies. Through his humor Smith showed that the gaps between the ideal and

reality were growing despite everyone's best efforts, especially in politics where partisanship brought out the worst in men.

Smith, Neal, and Longstreet conveyed themes and other evidence showing that their communities were distinct places with specific values and outlooks all their own. Each humorist coped with the challenges of the 1830s in different ways. Smith and Longstreet hoped that republican values might protect their locales from moral degeneration that Longstreet saw all around him and the continuing unraveling that Smith perceived in New England. Rather than looking to old ethics as those two did, Neal put faith in new methods for attacking the rampant individualism that plagued Philadelphia. If leaders could put aside their political differences and address social decay directly, the humorists thought their communities might be improved.

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CHAPTER 3

HUMOR AND THE MARKET REVOLUTION: THREE DISTINCT PERSPECTIVES

I

The most potent social changes of the 1830s emanated from a dynamic and expanding economy. Across the country, simple trading customs and face-to-face relationships gradually dissolved to be replaced by an impersonal and more complex quest for markets. The demanding task of seeking profit afar also changed ethics and behavior. As people made adjustments and moved awkwardly into the future, their experiences provided humorists with good material for laughs about this time of transition. Seba Smith, Joseph C. Neal, and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet explored the way their communities responded to a decade of economic transformation.

In New England, an increase in commercial activity amplified the differences between rural villages and commercial towns. With experience in both the Maine woods and eastern cities, Smith was well-acquainted with the disparities. Even though he idealized the village, he believed its future lay beyond self-sufficiency and isolation. Rural people needed commerce because their continued prosperity depended upon links to new markets. Keeping with these feelings, Smith introduced Jack Downing

as a naive country boy and sent him with a load of axe handles to market at Portland.

Instead of finding a small fishing village, as he might have expected, the town evinced all the signs of a major trading center. Downing could not believe the activity. "Every body seemed to be as busy as so many bees," and around the docks the masts "stuck up as thick as pine trees." He noticed that so many stores lined the streets, "it seemed as if there was no end to 'em."[1] Overwhelmed by these sights and sounds, he sought advice on how to find buyers in this bustling environment. A cousin recommended that he talk with the editor of the Portland Courier. This suggestion may have been a sly bit of self-promotion on Smith's part. He happened to be the real editor of the newspaper.

Offering a strong dose of optimism characteristic of the times, the editor said:

> Portland is a healthy thriving place, and any man with a proper degree of enterprise may do well here. But says he, Mr. Downing, and he looked mighty kind of knowing, says he, if you want to make out to your mind, you must do as the steamboats do. Well, says I, how do they do? for I did n't know what a steam boat was, any more than the man in the moon. Why, says he, they go ahead. And you must drive about among the folks here jest as though you were at home on the farm among the cattle. Dont be afraid of any of 'em, but figure away, and I dare say you will get into good business in a very little while.[2]

These encouraging words helped Downing overcome anxiety and step boldly into the marketplace. Wasting no time, he

walked down to Huckler's Row where he might test his bargaining skills. At this point, the story took an unexpected turn, for despite having what he thought were superior abilities, Downing was wholly unprepared for the market economy. The outcome would be an embarrassing confrontation.

The trouble started when Downing entered a store and offered to pay two cents for three biscuits. The proprietor took the offer yet cautioned him, "I would n't sell 'em to any body else so." Looking around the neatly organized establishment, he also spied cider going for two cents a glass. Really more thirsty than hungry, he asked to exchange the biscuits for a drink. The owner acquiesced and poured him a glass. His thirst quenched, Downing thought his business done and turned to leave. Before reaching the door, however, the owner stopped him with a request for two cents. Downing claimed that he owed nothing; he had traded the biscuits for the cider fair and square. The owner thought a moment and then demanded payment for the biscuits. Downing explained that he returned the biscuits and would not pay for them. Perplexed by his adamant refusal to pay anything, the proprietor allowed him to leave. Downing returned the next day with two cents. Although he outsmarted the competition, he realized that bartering was no longer acceptable. In town it was fixed prices that governed

most transactions. This antecedent proved to be a valuable first lesson in market economics.[3]

Next, Smith introduced his character to supply and demand. This important concept became clear when no one bought the axe handles. With few trees to cut, and wood available by the bundle, townspeople had little use for axes, much less unfitted handles. Downing never considered that the urban market might be different and thus he found himself in a bind. "I could n't hardly give 'em away" he admitted. Somehow, he had to recoup this tremendous loss.[4]

A short time passed and he heard a rumor that one hundred men had come into town in hopes of getting a sheriff's pole. Recognizing this demand as an opportunity for profit, he decided to supply all those customers with those ceremonial staffs. Downing instructed his cousin Ephraim to collect every bean stake lying around, paint them white, and bring them down in a hurry. Despite having a good plan, he missed a key fact of this matter. The hopefuls who came to town were after appointments as sheriff and used the phrase "getting a sheriff's pole" to describe their lobbying efforts. Luckily, the wagon transporting the stakes halted in thick mud and was unable to move, keeping Downing from being disappointed again.[5]

Smith often introduced other Downing family members and presented stories about them. In one featuring cousin

Ephraim, Smith illustrated the ethical differences between country traders and those more familiar with the market. This time Jack's cousin took a wagon of apples to sell over at the new state capital. Unlike Jack, he sold all his produce and would have earned a profit had he not given so many away on credit. Operating on an informal basis, so typical of the face-to-face relations in his village, Ephraim trusted people, especially the legislators, when they promised to pay him later. At the end of the session, he darted after those who owed, "but 'twas no use, I couldn't catch one of 'em."[6] The legislators cheated Ephraim because he still thought of credit as a courtesy rather than a business arrangement. Smith emphasized the importance of carefully assessing risks. Personal commitments had less meaning. If managed improperly, extending credit could be a ruinous liability.

In the same sketch, Smith also described Ephraim's fascination with land speculation. Up in Downingville, Uncle Joshua started the ball rolling by selling a wooded parcel for double its value. Uncle Jacob, the purchaser, increased the price again and passed it on to another buyer. In time, five people made money off the same property. Ephraim urged Jack to come home and take advantage of this great opportunity for getting rich. Smith used this story to emphasize the similarities between the men who cheated Ephraim and land speculators.

Both took advantage of those who knew little about market relations. The speculators made their money up front by inflating the value and passing a parcel on to someone else. Somewhere down the line, an unlucky person stood a good chance of not being able to sell at a higher price. Then he would be left running around in a panic, just like Downing's cousin when he went debt collecting. Smith knew the perils of entering the market and showed how those characters who rushed forward with little knowledge of its mechanics usually ended up getting into trouble.[7]

While Smith welcomed the market economy and illustrated how characters adapted to its features, his Georgia counterpart, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, was more skeptical. He had cause to be suspicious because his state experienced little of the prosperity so evident in the Northeast.[8] For him the urban and rural split was not as important as the widening gap he perceived between the North and South. In an 1837 letter he wrote:

> The North and N. West must be a commercial and manufacturing people. The South & S. West must be an agricultural people. The former are religiously opposed to slavery. The latter are necessarily slave holders. The former are a sober calculating people, the later are a high spirited, ardent people. The former hold the power--the latter, the wealth, of the nation: and it is not to be disguised that there are pretty strong antipathies already engendered between them.[9]

These beliefs arose from an upbringing in the piedmont among modest farmers and an education with strict

constructionists. Deep within his soul Jeffersonian principles fired a devotion to agriculture, slavery, and independence from commercial interests.

Despite his attachment to those ideals, Longstreet believed farmers had to keep abreast of changing market conditions, implying that no one should look backwards when so many opportunities lay ahead.[10] The apparent contradictions in his thought revealed a janus-faced mentality that Georgia Scenes reflected vividly. Half of the sketches in the book took place in Jeffersonian times, before economic changes had become so pressing, and the others covered an uncertain present.

One scene, set symbolically on Easter day in 1790 lashed out against Northern manufacturing. That Sunday, the narrator happened upon children engaged in the age-old tradition of painting eggs. He commented that their hand-made designs would have "extorted a compliment from Hezekiah Niles, if he had seen them in the hands of the 'young operatives.'"[11] Niles owned an influential commercial newspaper, and the expression "young operatives" referred to child laborers. These lines castigated factory owners for exploiting children and not letting them enjoy similar childhood pleasures. Longstreet made this point with all the subtlety humor allowed but refrained from lingering for any great length of time.

Far more of his Georgia scenes expressed nostalgia. Just like Jack Downing, the main character in "The Horse-Swap" prided himself on his dickering abilities. With an exhilaration and crudity so common to rustic braggarts, Yellow Blossom claimed to be "the best man at a horse-swap that ever stole cracklins out of his mammy's fat gourd." One day this colorful character brought a sprightly horse to trade with old Peter Ketch. The crowd enjoyed a hearty laugh when Ketch removed the saddle blanket and found a huge sore festering on the poor animal's back. That explained the lively gait. Blossom had engineered another fine deal, or so he thought. Ketch's son then let it slip out that the other horse was both blind and deaf. "The Devil he is," Blossom insisted. "I'll be dod drot if he eint" the youngster replied. Several tests confirmed the afflictions. In no time at all "the laugh was now turned on Blossom."[12]

The whole community participated and shared in the delights of that rural barter. Because he set the scene in the present, Longstreet wanted readers to recognize and appreciate the quaint cultural features. Many other sketches conveyed a similar theme. A day at the races described swaggering gentlemen celebrating their good fortune by placing extravagant bets on horses and treating friends liberally with liquor bought with money owed to creditors. Other community activities, a gander pull, fox

hunt, and shooting match all showed characters acting with the pride and slyness found among the horse traders. Longstreet hoped this world might survive the changing times.

Instead of writing about rural people living at the edges of the market economy, as Longstreet and Smith did, Neal captured the dilemma of urban characters closer to the center of the revolution. During the 1830s, Philadelphia grew as rail lines integrated the city into complex trade networks. Factories and other industrial facilities opened for business too. In the suburbs of Kensington and Southwark, on the northern and southern limits of the corporate boundaries, commercial growth came most haphazardly. Because the areas remained outside the city, however, these neighborhoods received little attention from Whig city fathers. Both townships became notorious for population overcrowding, filth, and crime. Neal's Democratic newspaper printed editorials sympathizing with the plight of residents trapped in the terrible conditions.[13]

Keeping with an inclination of his to expose the darker side of urban life, Neal criticized the market economy. He particularly disliked clock conformity. All around the city, shops began requiring their employees to work on a set schedule. Old notions that a man worked when he desired, as hard as he pleased, and took

unscheduled breaks at will vanished abruptly. The demands of the market called for predictable production levels, and thus a system replaced informal practices. This change caused trouble for characters like Dawson Dawdle and Goslyne Greene. As his name implied, Dawdle could not get anywhere on time, and Greene enjoyed being a lazy loafer. Both were decent people, yet the two of them lost opportunities, a sizable fortune in Greene's case, because neither could adjust to the rigorous demands of time.[14]

Hard-working characters also felt the pinch of an accelerating economy. All his life, Dilly Jones had moved from one occupation to another as technology made each one obsolete. At the time the narrator caught up with him, Jones made charcoal. Already, however, coal had begun to replace wood as a primary fuel source. Jones knew he was going to lose his job soon, but feared a loss of status as well. For years he had enjoyed a decent living and reputation for selling a good product. His future prospects, breaking up coal with a pick axe, held none of the same prestige. As the narrator explained, "the idea of being excluded from the upper circles of the society in which he had been in the habit of moving fell heavily upon the heart of poor Dilly Jones." In frustration, he wondered about the fate of men in the steam age, asking "won't folks be of no use at all?" If machines were the

future, he joked, putting a boiler inside of himself might be a good idea.[15]

Another unlucky fellow, Perry Winkle, lost his job when the owners decided to streamline the store where he worked as a clerk. While disappointed at the misfortune of being fired, Winkle worried more about the customers. They loved the personal attention and friendly service he had provided for years. Who would mind the store? This plaintive refrain echoed through Neal's urban scenes. He knew the market economy exacted a large human price as businesses altered work forces and geared operations towards maximizing profit. Ordinary people were laid off from jobs once considered secure and suddenly they found themselves facing uncertain futures. That Neal was able to present his criticism of the shifting economy with both humor and compassion made his sketches all the more compelling.[16]

II

Before the early nineteenth century, only a select few in the country had enjoyed life's finest luxuries. Their expensive furnishings and genteel manners were an exception because few could even obtain much less afford Roman splendor. The lives of this group ceased to be exclusive when the market revolution offered common people a means of obtaining items once considered beyond their reach. Mass production delivered better shoes, clothes,

linens, and a host of other amenities. No longer did people have to make these items at home. In only a short time, a consumer culture blossomed as the expensive items, silverware, imported furnishings, and other signs of elegance came to more households. As wealth also grew, those people with money kept up with the latest fashions. The large cities were the first to see a rising middle class of professionals who managed the market economy and businesses. This group become the one that set trends and was the one others followed. Not everyone understood or could live up to their higher standards of behavior and greater expectations for marriage. Humorists found this realm of life a good topic for amusement.[17]

Keeping with his positive view of the market economy, Smith introduced Jack Downing to a consumer culture in a delightful manner. One evening, Portland held a benefit bazaar at one of the biggest halls in town. Downing wandered by the event and decided to step inside. The entrance fee baffled him for a moment but his confusion soon gave way to amazement. Inside he found long rows of tables and a large crowd looking over the merchandise. "I thought I'd seen most all the world since I left Downingville, bless me," he declared. "I never see any thing that lookt so bright before, unless it was when uncle Zekiel's barn burnt." He could not believe his eyes, "sich a mess of pretty things and queer things."

The bright colors and abundance of items drew him in for a closer look. Then the attractive women who sat behind the booths made Downing wish he "had a thousand dollars to spend." Because the event benefitted the Portland orphanage, Smith could not have introduced his character to consumerism in a more favorable way.[18]

In another revealing sketch, Smith sent the richest resident in Downingville, Uncle Joshua, on an excursion to Boston. This trip proved that he still had a few things to learn about refinement. In the process of telling the story, Smith also demonstrated his own appreciation of consumer culture. Uncle Joshua made the trip to sell turkeys and visit the legislature. He did better than his nephew on both counts. Fresh birds were hard to find, and a man standing outside the market with an "eye like a hawk" bought his whole load for a generous sum. He then sold each at an inflated price. Joshua wondered if he had been too quick to sell.[19]

With his proceeds, Uncle Joshua outfitted himself with a new suit and visited the legislature. By mistake he walked through the wrong door and onto the chamber floor itself. After only a short time, a party leader assumed he was a delegate from a Western district and invited him to dinner. The avenue he took to arrive at the residence for the party, Beacon Street, contained huge mansions. Misunderstanding the pronunciation of the

street, however, he said Bacon Street. Because hogs were a sign of wealth where he came from, he still captured the essence of the neighborhood.

Once at the address, he wanted to enter the house but the door did not budge:

> There was no knocker, and I thumpt with my whip handle, but no body come, And says I to a man going by, dont nobody live here? and says he yes. Well, how do you get in? Why, says he, ring; and says I, ring what? And says he, the bell. And says I where's the rope? And says he, pull that little brass nub; and so I gave it a twitch, and I'm sure a bell did ring.[20]

A neat young man wearing a white apron appeared at the door. Steve Furlong had supervised the village school the previous winter and was surprised to see Joshua. He asked that the Downingville patriarch not mention his previous employment.

At the table, Joshua marveled at the silver candlesticks, gold lamps overhead, and the abundance of food. The turkey, which a servant had obtained that very day at the market, tasted especially fresh and looked vaguely familiar. The whole ambience, however, reminded him of a Thanksgiving meal. The lively conversation covered financial matters, and when he overheard the guests discussing "a great loss on stock" Joshua thought he could offer an opinion. He interrupted and said: "there's one thing I've always observed in my experience in stock--just as sure as you try to keep over more stock than you have fodder one half will die on your hands, to a

sartinty."[21] The other guests stared in disbelief and Furlong nudged him.

Later on Joshua asked Steve if he might come back and teach again. The youth begged off politely saying he was happy. The twelve dollars a month he received in pay and all the clothes his employer's family passed down to him surely beat the fee for watching unruly children. He had clearly bettered himself by moving away from the village. Although Smith idealized Downingville, he believed that its residents could benefit from the refinements found in urban areas. More than anything this and other sketches contrasted the rapid improvements in the cities with rural areas that trailed behind. Anyone moving between the two settings noticed the differences and hopefully managed better than Uncle Joshua.

In contrast to Smith, Longstreet believed refinements corrupted communities, urban and rural alike. Instead of directing laughter towards rustic characters who made fools of themselves, as Smith did, his humor presented refined people as the buffoons. In "The Song," his two narrators, Hall and Baldwin, attended a party in town. Baldwin anticipated an unpleasant evening. He hated European tunes. "Any one who will dare inflict a French or Italian song on the American ear ought to be sent to the Penitentiary without a trial."[22] For a time, Baldwin steered the party away from these by having Mary Williams

play piano selections by Scottish bard Robert Burns. Once she finished, however, the guests clamored to hear Miss Aurelia Emma Theodosia Augusta Crump. She had studied in Philadelphia under Madam Piggisqueaki, a student of Mademoiselle Crokifroggietta. The choice of these names, and their obvious clash with the plain Mary Williams, signaled Longstreet's disgust with the latest European fashions.

The guests who admired the French and Italian songs acted particularly depraved. One woman who implored Miss Crump to play a European tune "went so far as to drop on her knees," giving a "theatric[al] heave of the bosom." That display "threw the young gentlemen into transports." Hall leaned over and whispered "something about 'republican simplicity'" into Baldwin's ear. One young man especially taken, Nick Truck, hailed from Lincoln, that dark corner of the county where Hall had seen a youth acting out a fight. Only years before Truck had been a country boy dancing to the folk tune "Possum up the Gum-tree." But since moving to Charleston and joining a mercantile firm, his rustic virtue had all but disappeared. Unlike Smith who showed Steve Furlong improving his life by leaving the backwoods, Longstreet maintained that Truck ruined his character. Seeing the young man so changed and hearing Crump's music proved too much for Baldwin. He related, "I went home in

convulsions, took sixty drops of laudanum, and fell asleep."[23]

Unlike Longstreet and Smith, who saw fashions entering communities from distant places, Neal focused on the trend setters themselves, the urban middle class. Being a part of this group himself, Neal wrote from an insider's perspective. At the heart of their culture existed a keen awareness that success meant earning money, displaying wealth, and acting genteel. While Neal bought expensive furnishings himself, an Italian clock among them, he also saw the less attractive consequences of refinement.[24]

A sketch of Neal's about a street loafer threw the whole acquisitive lifestyle into question. His character, Olympus Pump, wandered around the city oblivious to the busy scenes around him. At night he gazed at the stars. No watchmen, landlords, or the taskmasters who told their employees to "jump about spry and 'tend the shop" controlled his life. The narrator admired this freedom and the contentment which had disappeared from the lives of many people. He thought an unencumbered spirit and not economic competition should be the essence of life. Although Pump had little property, he was rich in the best properties of man.[25]

In another story Neal elaborated on this theme. The focus, however, shifted to the crass attempts people made

to better their circumstances. The main character, Peter Ploddy, a modest store clerk, envied those who held exciting jobs and dated wealthy women. His thoughts about bettering himself flashed before him when a potent cigar put him into a deep sleep. While unconscious, he experienced a weird dream, a series of visions that showed his friends corrupted by success. One with a talent for oratory fell in with a bad crowd and became a political hack. Others lived wretched lives without ever getting a chance to savor accomplishments. Startled by what he had seen, Ploddy awoke with the realization that there were worse fates than his. He stayed with a regular job and married the modest daughter of his boss. Neal wanted the audience to join Ploddy in gaining satisfaction from within rather than from seeking money and status. This story may have been a favorite of the era because Neal named a second collection after the main character.[26]

The Ploddy story also brought up the topic of courtship. Neal found on this subject the middle class standards became amazingly high. Ambitious and acquisitive, the middle class called for ideals of physical appearance and talents in the genteel arts, singing and dancing mostly, that disqualified many good people. Neal worried about those who fell short. His own shy personality and bouts with illness made him especially sympathetic to those who might be uncomfortable in the

ballroom. One character Berry Huckel, for example, found his weight to be a major obstacle. This fellow was so obese, the narrator claimed, that he did not fall in love but rolled into it. The apple of his eye, a petite socialite, spurned his every overture. His only hope lay in making himself a thin, accomplished gentleman.

A physician recommended strenuous exercises for body conditioning. Down at the gymnasium, he only succeeded in smashing his face against poles and bars. Unhappy with that blistering regimen, he took up boxing. This decision proved equally disastrous because "opponents never knew when to be done hitting at one whose frame gave no jarring to the knuckles." After enduring more pain than progress, the musical arts looked like his last hope. Huckel started practicing on the flute and fiddle. The neighborhood endured the cacophony for a time but finally made him quit. With this avenue shut off, he had to take up dancing. With his usual enthusiasm, Huckel put all his energy into the task. Late one night he started practicing in an upstairs room of the boarding house where he lived. Every time he put his foot down, the sound echoed like a cannon shot, shaking the building and rattling windows. Frightened neighbors awoke in a panic. A number of them broke into the room in a mad rush to learn the cause of the shock waves. In the end Huckel's efforts came to nothing. His love refused to dance with

him and remained beyond his reach. Typical of Neal's stories, the humor came from the experiences of the characters rather than in the message itself.[27]

Neal understood the tribulations of courtship all too well. He remained a bachelor until late in his life. When he finally met his bride to be, the day came after months of correspondence. This unconventional courtship began when a nineteen-year-old school girl from upstate New York submitted several sketches to his magazine. Neal liked the writing and maintained regular contact with her. Philadelphia elites buzzed over the anticipated marriage. Neal had been one of the most eligible men in the city and his marrying a vivacious women half his age caused quite a sensation. As a contemporary remembered, "men and women of cultivated and mature intellects had their misgivings of the fitness of a marriage of such unequal ages and natures."[28] True to his beliefs, he balked at middle class conventions and charted his own course.

Most of what Neal wrote about domestic relations appeared long before he had a home life of his own. The sketches were significant, nevertheless, because Neal recognized the economy's role in altering domestic relations. " 'Tis Only My Husband" described the tensions that entered a relationship where the woman began to take a more active role. After Pedrigo and Seraphina Pumpilion married, Pedrigo mistakenly believed he might "share his

kingdom" yet "remain supreme in authority." Ever since men began working away from their households at factories, offices, and other locations, women began taking charge of the domestic sphere. Steadfastly she resisted his attempts at living by the old ethic by pestering him about extended fishing trips and kept him from eating meals upon return by claiming the cook had gone fishing. This action and others finally broke Pedrigo. He began helping with all the household chores, among them walking "the little Pumpilions up and down the room when they squall o' nights." To confirm her ascendancy, Seraphina took possession of the household finances and kept her husband on a "rather short allowance."[29]

Not all men accepted the changes and one of Neal's sketches presented a household in turmoil. Brandishing a broom and strap, Mr. Gambril chased his wife into the street. She kept at a distance and yelled at him for being away "these two days and nights, and still no money!" He grew angry at her taunting, especially the crack, "What's the use of a corned cobbler?" Had Montezuma Dawkins not settled matters, the fight might have gone on all night. This respectable neighborhood leader sent Mrs. Gambril back inside and listened patiently to her husband's complaints. Dawkins told him to be a man, bear the burdens, and think of the children. "How can I be a man, when I belong to somebody else?"

Gambril asked in frustration. "My hours aint't my own--my money ain't my own--I belong to four people besides myself." After more counseling, Mr. Gambril calmed down and agreed to go back inside. At the door, he turned and asked if anyone wanted to buy a family, "I want cash, for I'll have another jollification at New Year's Eve, if I had as many families as I've got fingers and toes!"[30]

Unlike Neal who thought the husband most at fault in the changing realm of domestic relations, Longstreet put the blame squarely on the women. A firm believer in patriarchy, Longstreet cast a disapproving eye on any changes in gender relations. A story about George Baldwin, a promising nephew of the narrator, showed how the young man committed a terrible error by letting his wife misbehave. From the start his love Evelina, the daughter of a prosperous merchant in town, held his farming family in contempt. Their relationship took a turn for the worse when, she mismanaged household affairs, serving terrible meals and letting servants loot the pantry. When friends and associates became aware of the problems, George risked embarrassment unless he brought about improvement. After a long talk, he saw positive results for a time, but then the old ways returned again. George sank into a deep depression and drank himself to death. The last line of the story included a warning to mothers telling them not to "bring up their daughters to

be 'CHARMING CREATURES.'" The narrator blamed poor parental guidance that overlooked instruction in feminine virtue, domesticity, and subservience. The narrator thought these values made happy households.[31]

Despite his approval of most changes the market revolution brought, Smith had a traditional view of domestic relations. Another one of Downing's relatives, cousin Sarah, took a dim view of the superficial standards for courtship then coming into vogue. She complained that none of the men she met while away at boarding school in Portland measured up to her sweetheart back at home: "he is educated enough to know the age of his cows and oxen, to know how to cultivate a field of corn, or a patch of potatoes; can read his bible, and say the ten commandments, and can keep them all." He also owns a farm "free of mortgages or any other embarrassments." The Portland men invested money, and as if by magic, became wealthy in one "great dash." Rather than courting a "neat, industrious, and amiable" woman they preferred one with "a smattering of French" who also "drummed the music out of a piano, sang and danced." Once married, these couples rented "a large house, furnished it elegantly, obtained servants" and, during the season, "went to parties, balls and the theater." This opulent lifestyle lasted only as long as business remained good and the money rolled into their coffers. When hard times arrived,

the wife abandoned her "young broken merchant" for her parent's house. Sarah concluded with sarcasm "do you not think this a refined and intellectual state of society?"[32]

Smith knew the market revolution caused instability among families, yet he hoped the nuclear family with the man at its head might remain intact. In his own marriage, he held to this ideal and frowned upon his wife's demands for more independence. Her efforts even included changing her last name, and that of their children, to Oaksmith. As one gossip recalled, "all was not lovely in their family circle." The domestic troubles found in Smith's own life or within the scenes of Longstreet and Neal were nowhere to be found in Downingville. Cousin Nabby had to ask Sarah to explain a temperance society to her because no one around the village knew its purpose. The disturbing pictures of couples fist fighting and men dealing with their troubles by drinking might be in Portland, but Smith hoped they were not part of Downingville.[33]

III

The 1830s were a time of change in which the United States underwent a gradual economic transformation. The humor of Smith, Neal, and Longstreet reflected the different opinions of three men well-attuned to their cultures. When Smith described the experience of his New

England characters, he wrote with an authority and insight. His scenes, filled with an optimism and hope that people living in the hill-country villages could meet the challenges of a new economy, presented characters who were eager to learn about the market. Their visits to Portland, Augusta, and Boston advanced their knowledge of the world outside the village usually by trial and error. Smith dove into the times, speculating wildly and then nearly going broke when the 1837 panic ruined careless land investments. At a moment when humor had to be farthest from the mind, his wife comforted him with a theme he had presented. Highlighting how Smith urged everyone to become involved in the market, she remarked "my dear husband, we shall have plenty of company if we go down."[34]

Longstreet, situated in a part of Georgia experiencing more economic stagnation than growth, perceived the market economy as a threatening force. His fear grew from a devotion to an agricultural, slave society which appeared at odds with Northern commercial and industrial interests. That factory owners used Congress for obtaining a high tariff favorable to their pursuits made him angry and uneasy about the future. Longstreet's anxiety manifested itself in two ways. First and foremost, he routinely used his sketches to express a nostalgia for an ideal time when Jeffersonian ideals stood

secure, a time when virtue and morality kept society free of corruptions. In other scenes he felt obligated to ridicule those who surrendered to superficial values. These people plunged into the future without regard for the past or what might happen if unfamiliar values took hold in their community.

Neal was more critical of the market revolution than Longstreet. Whereas Longstreet had conveyed dismay, Neal voiced distress. Every day he witnessed industrialization and relentless changes that made the urban landscape a less tolerable place for working people. Nearly all his humorous characters were victims. Perry Winkle lost a job, Berry Huckel never impressed his love, and Dilly Jones became so frustrated that he wondered if the common man might survive the machine age. The only one who avoided the pitfalls, Peter Ploddy, abandoned crass ambition and an acquisitive nature. He plodded along without surrendering to all the temptations of a competitive marketplace. Nearly all of Neal's sketches urged sympathy and compassion because the economic changes of the 1830s would be difficult for everyone.

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CHAPTER 4

THE HUMOROUS CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL CHANGE

I

During the late 1820s and early 1830s, the emergence of two-party politics had a great impact upon newspaper editors. Along with the routine duty of communicating news and information from a decidedly partisan stance, they became obligated to further the interests of well-organized, mass parties. This duty meant pressing arguments and rallying supporters for elections in an increasingly contentious public forum. For individuals who never witnessed the partisanship of the 1790s, the atmosphere was new and unsettling. The humor of Seba Smith, Joseph C. Neal, and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, three editors themselves, expressed reservations about the contentious direction their communities and the whole country had taken. Often, their concerns echoed in similar refrains, but when examined closely the sketches contained distinct understandings of American political change.

At a time when Maine editors were eagerly emblazoning party emblems on their mastheads, Smith established the state's first independent daily. The tumultuous years he had spent in the 1820s on the staff of a partisan sheet convinced him of their foolishness. He presented columns

free of great controversy so Portlanders might have a peaceful alternative to the party organs. Jack Downing started as a character Smith created to illuminate the growing gap perceived between ideals of harmony and the reality of fractious politics. Thus when Downing visited the intransigent legislature in January of 1830, Smith made him oblivious to the power struggle. He had no concept or clue about partisanship and addressed the deadlock from a truly innocent perspective.

To Downing, the wheels of government had "trig'd," or stopped in the mud, he reasoned, and someone had to free them. He joked about how he might go back to his farm and bring down the "little speckled four-year-olds, and give 'em a pull." He bragged, "if they wouldn't make the wheels fly over the trigs in a jiffy, I wont guess agin." The legislators evenly divided between two parties had gotten nowhere by themselves, because the "national republicans pulled the wheels forward as hard as they could," and then "the democratic republicans braced their feet tother [sic] way, and said the wheels shouldn't move another inch forward; they had got on to a wrong road." Meanwhile, the courts "had put that trig there to keep 'em all from goin to destruction." In a vain attempt to find the road justices "pulled like my little tu year olds all day, but I couldn't see as they started the wheels backwards or forwards a single hair."[1]

At loggerheads over everything, the assembly even elected two governors. "What a pity 'tis they should waste so much time trying to make so many governors; for, if they should make a dozen, we shouldn't want to use one this year," Downing mused. This ridiculous action and the bitter fighting continued for weeks which prolonged the session and cost taxpayers "fifteen thousand dollars," he complained. "It seems to me, it costs our farmers a great deal more to husk out their law-corn every winter than it need tu" because voters "let tu many noisy talking fellers come to the husking." These men cared more about "what they can get to eat and drink, than they du about corn." The ones "that don't make much fuss, are apt to husk the most and make the cleanest work." These people ought to be down there getting things done. The two parties were "a trouble-some contrary set, and there must be some way contrived to keep 'em out of the legislature in [the] future."[2]

Their clashes reminded Smith of angry hounds holding onto the same bone. "Sich a tugging and growlin you never see. Up hill and down, bark, bark, and tug, tug."[3] The newspapers kept up the bickering long after the legislators had packed up and gone home. No one could finish reading one of the partisan organs "without having their eyes so full of smoke they couldn't tell a pig-sty from a meeting house." They were nothing but trouble:

> You know rum will sometimes set quite peaceable folks together by the ears, and make them quarrel like mad dogs--so do the newspapers. Rum makes folks act very silly--so do the newspapers. Rum makes folks see double--so do the newspapers. Sometimes rum gets folks so they can't see at all--so do the newspapers. Rum, if they take tu much of it, makes folks sick to the stomach--so do the newspapers. Rum makes folks go rather crooked, reeling from one side of the road to t'other--and the newspapers make one half the politicians cross their path as often as any drunkard you ever see.[4]

Smith had leveled a powerful charge that the two parties had corrupted communities as surely as alcohol did the body.

Smith also smacked the election process by having Downing run in the governor's race as an independent. His family and friends became excited by his prospects and organized the Democratic National Republican nominating convention for giving him the proper backing. This name embraced both parties and illustrated how Smith injected consensus, a characteristic of village life he admired, into the political process. The residents of Downingville feared that "liberties are unquestionably about to receive their doom forever" unless someone made "one last, one mighty effort, to save the state and the country, and place the constitution once more upon a safe and firm foundation." The two parties worried them, and the assembly made Jack Downing its savior, promising "all fair and honorable means, and, if necessary, a little dis-honorable to secure his election." Although he campaigned

among the people and against formidable opponents, only eighty-seven people voted for him--all from Downingville. Smith's hero bungled through a campaign to defeat in a self-deprecating fashion, illustrating how an honest, well-intending candidate stood little chance without a party behind him. Smith emphasized how virtues he thought essential to good government were fast disappearing as parties became integral to the democratic process.[5]

II

Small communities not unlike Downingville moved gradually into the new political system while urban areas with their mix of different classes, races, ethnic groups, and outspoken ideologues tumbled more swiftly into the emerging party system. Philadelphia possessed all these traits, and as editor of the city's main Democratic newspaper, Neal endured the full brunt of party competition. Elections made him feel more akin to a foot soldier marching vicariously through "humorous contests and exposed situations" than carrying on the democratic process. In this competitive setting where trickery thrived, he also took pride in having maintained "honor and honesty" when others had opted for unscrupulous actions. The strains of conducting a big urban daily showed when, in 1838, he contacted United States Senator and future President James Buchanan. An editor's job, he

quipped, was "a thankless and profitless employment," and "it is particularly so in Philad[elphi]a."[6]

This somewhat jaded view came out in comments made about the November days following elections which he called "the season of dejection when a considerable portion of the political world are apt to be despondent." Neal thought these times cruelest to volunteers who assisted in the campaigns and "Peter Brush, The Great Used Up" expressed sympathy for the volunteers cast aside after victory or defeat. For ten years, Brush had gone "to town meetings, hurraing [sic] [his] daylights out," and fighting until his face shined "blue as blazes" from "more black eyes and bloody noses than you could shake a stick at." For this effort, he was overlooked for a government job every time. When a "fat government post" failed to materialize, his abiding faith in democracy, the force that kept him active, waned substantially. Brush became a cynic, declaring "republics is ungrateful" and blaming the party leaders for abandoning him. In a reversal of a familiar Bible story, the narrator explained metaphorically how the leaders monopolized patronage, which he likened to the proverbial loafs and fishes, cramming "all they could into their own mouths" and leaving nothing for the loyal foot soldiers who helped win the campaigns. Brush could hardly believe the gluttony of these Pharisees. "I've got as extensive a throat as any of

'em, and I could swallow the loaves and fishes without choking, if each loaves was as big as a grindstone and each fish as big as a sturgeon."[7]

On a November night not long after he had been cast aside again, Brush, now destitute, wandered over to a doorstep making the landing into a makeshift bedroom. Like so many charcoal sketches, this one took place at night long after most residents had gone inside. During these empty hours when darkness shrouded the city, Neal's characters often arrived at important realizations. Brush's revelation began when the homeowner on whose property he had taken up residence arrived home. A dog at his side detected the stranger asleep at the top of the stairs and let out a rapid, "bow! wow!" Still fast asleep, Brush turned over, and blurted out, "there's a fellow making a speech against our side, but it's all talk--where's your facts?--print your speech in pamphlet form, and I'll answer it." The dog growled angrily, and he continued at a higher decibel, "hurray for us!--everybody else is rascals--nothing but ruination when that fellow's principles get the upper hand--our side for ever--we're the boys!"[8]

Taken aback by this deranged outburst, the gentleman stepped back until he realized the man at his front door was only a trespasser rather than maniac. He leaned over, awoke the unwelcome guest, and asked him to be on his way.

Brush rose and, seeing an upstanding citizen before him, he explained his sorry plight. As long as he was on the subject of his own misery, he requested a signature on a recommendation stuffed in a pocket. The gentleman took a look at the ruffled paper and demurred. Disappointed by this personal rejection, Brush left, but as he turned to go a radical idea entered his brain. Unappreciated by the leaders and frustrated at by failed attempts at getting an office, Brush thought he should form an independent party. Given Neal's devotion to the Democratic party and his participation in the political process, a suggestion of this nature carried a solemn warning no matter how amusing the messenger. The main problem with the party system, Neal contended, lay less in the system's erosion of the traditional community, as Smith had argued though Jack Downing, and more in the trampling of those individuals who made the system work.[9]

III

While Longstreet agreed with Neal and Smith that party competition had generated ills, his humor concentrated less on the damage to communities or the plight of the individual than on what had happened at the top among the leaders and decision makers in the legislative process. In one Georgia scene, he too attributed canine qualities to partisanship when a narrator reported that a dog fight reminded him of "wily

politicians" at work. This comparison and the animal qualities given directly to party leaders showed that his emphasis was different from Smith and Neal. Throughout his political humor, the focus would be on a decline he saw in the quality of leaders. In an 1840 speech to the students and faculty of Emory College, he repeated two central themes found in his humor from the previous decade. First, he said he was glad to see that fewer young men had elected to get involved in the ruinous business of politics. This sentiment showed how much he disliked the present party system. A second trend came through when he wished that everyone might put aside party differences in favor of a "permanent patriotism" that put Jeffersonian principles ahead of others.[10]

These two views appeared in an 1838 magazine piece of his. The namesake of the story, Darby Anvil, labored, as his name implied, at a blacksmith's forge. He had made the shop successful and raised a large family, becoming a model citizen in nearly every respect. At a county barbecue and rally, however, he drank too much and spoke too freely about how he was fit to represent the area in the legislature. Although a man of modest means, he boasted that he could do as good a job as the incumbents, Jones and Smith, two prominent attorneys. Upon hearing his claim, these gentlemen laughed derisively in his face and dismissed him. Instead of crushing his hopes, this

haughty rebuff only strengthened his resolve. Then and there he announced his candidacy before everyone and was thus honor bound to launch a campaign.[11]

Instead of expressing delight in the rise of this common man, Longstreet's narrator frowned upon the reckless ambition which drove Anvil into the race and on the deplorable way he solicited votes. He played upon "the prejudices and weaknesses of the common people of the country" for their votes:

> He rode night and day, attended every gathering in the county, treated liberally, aped dignity here, cracked obscene jokes there, sung vulgar songs in one place, talked gravely in another, told long, dry stories, gave short, mean toasts, jested with the women, and played with the children, grew liberal in suretyships, paid promptly, and dunned nobody, and asked everybody to vote for him.[12]

Rather than closing ranks to fend off their lower class challenger, Smith betrayed his colleague and allied with Anvil whom he saw as a rising star. Not to be beaten so easily, Jones became equally nasty when he unearthed damaging information about his opponents and on election day released the information. The sensation caused "a battle-royal" to erupt at the polling place as partisans from both sides became locked in a huge fist fight. The tumult and confusion allowed Anvil and Smith to maintain their lead and win the election. Their supporters celebrated through the night in drunken revelry.[13]

These intemperate images may have been amusing sights, but Longstreet introduced violence and drunkenness as unattractive qualities. Here, as elsewhere, he meant them to be debauchery worthy of shame. His narrator presented them to undercut Anvil and cast him as a false pretender. Instead of becoming a respectable leader in the legislator and champion of the common man, he spent the session at a tavern drinking and then followed Smith's lead in every vote he made on the floor. Back at home he then bragged about what "we" did for a bill. If the hypocrisy was not bad enough, he also neglected his business and family. His wife pleaded for him to come home and restore the failing business, but he refused claiming "his party would never forgive him."

Darby had become a party man, a willing captive of the very politicians he had sought to replace. Worst of all, his win encouraged other mediocre candidates. Voters should beware of them and combat their "presumptuous ignorance with a fearless tongue," the narrator demanded. "All good men should unite their efforts to redeem the state entirely from its dominion." Unlike Smith and Neal who made average fellows heroes with both Downing and Brush facing corrupt leaders, Longstreet blamed the presumptuous common man as a serious problem and regarded elevated statesmen as better leaders.[14]

Through Jack Downing, Peter Brush, and Darby Anvil, the humorists illustrated how politics had become detrimental to values each cherished. While Downing's comparison of the Maine legislature to a wagon stuck in the mud, Brush's description of greedy party leaders stuffing their faces, and Anvil boasting about his candidacy may have been laughable, these images portrayed three different cultural traditions. Smith's descriptions lamented an erosion of the communal village ideals of consensus and unity while Neal identified greed as harmful to common men who believed in the system. And Longstreet focused on leadership as the most pressing concern in his community. Further analysis of stories not yet mentioned will show how these humorists expounded on their ideas more and also offered solutions for improving the problems they had identified. In each case their suggestions for improvement, even when offered for the whole nation, reflected values found in their specific places and cultures.

IV

After a year of writing about Jack Downing in Portland and around other parts of New England, Smith decided upon a change. April of 1831 saw Downing heading down to Washington, D.C., where he might offer the same kind of commentary he gave the state legislature to the ills Smith noticed in the national government. Downing

left for the capital in hopes of getting a political appointment. He believed that patriotism and devotion to President Andrew Jackson alone would get him an office. He had no idea that party service and connections to other influential men were necessary prerequisites. Smith had his character act in good faith and hope for the best.

At the capital, Downing met the president and had a cordial discussion. Andrew Jackson could not think of anything at the moment he needed done but promised something. After a patient wait, a captain's commission arrived with orders to raise volunteers for service in the disputed Madawaska territory located between Maine and British Canada. This was a real place which had remained a trouble spot all during the 1830s. Cold and desolate, those Northern woodlands were no place to advance a career, and a more ambitious officer would have viewed the assignment as punishment. Yet Downing became overjoyed at the opportunity. He brimmed with patriotic fervor because reports arrived that hostages had been taken and they needed rescue. Downing raised an expedition of volunteers, all sturdy farmers from his village, who marched proudly until sensing any danger and then the column scampered off into hiding. The crisis proved to be a farce as well because the captives turned out to be lumberjacks that had gone into enemy custody in hopes the jail time might entitle them to government land.

Throughout the affair, however, Downing demonstrated a self-reliance and resolve to get the job done which Smith thought was lacking at Washington.[15]

Downing's next assignment came during the nullification crisis of 1832-33, which pitted South Carolina against the federal government. Unlike the nullifiers who deplored a tariff to protect domestic industry, Downing favored the measure and told Uncle Joshua at the next congressional election to "put me up as a Tariff man." His hero, President Jackson, had been "mad enough with the tariff to eat it up," but once in office Downing thought he had become a loyal supporter. Downing remarked that the Whig Portland Advertiser "brought the old gineral round." Downing thought the nullifiers wrong because the tariff was "a cute good thing, and we must n't give it up."[16]

South Carolina remained unwilling to back down, and a crisis developed. Downing thought the situation desperate and the Union in danger. He called out the Maine volunteers and had them march down to Washington quickly. When the rag tag company arrived, a rattled president thought a column of nullifiers was after him, and he reached for a pistol. Downing cleared up the confusion and the men camped at the White House. By this point, Downing had become a member of the Kitchen Cabinet, an unofficial presidential advisory group. He was eager to

offer his views, "Gineral I'll tell you jest what I think of this ere business," he said.[17]

The trouble reminded him of a windy day when he, Ephraim, and two friends went sailing across rough water. The group lashed several logs together and managed pleasantly until Bill Johnson objected to his rowing place. "He was always an uneasy harumscarum sort of chap always thinking every body else had an easier time at everything." The others let him switch sides, yet he complained about the windward seat and wanted to switch back again. "We told him he had his choice, and he should n't keep changing so." Their scolding only infuriated him, and "away went Bill on his own log, bobbing and rolling about, and dancing like a monkey to try to keep on the upper side." The current overwhelmed him, and "it would be gone goose with him pretty soon if he staid there." Frantically, he called out for help, and when "he was jest ready to sink for the last time, and our logs come pesky near getting scattered" the group came back together. The moral of his tale was "if you let South Carolina cut the lashings you'll see such a log-rolling in this country as you never see." Even in a national crisis, Downing suggested that people had to work towards a common goal and put individualism aside.[18]

For Joseph Neal, the dilemmas of the Philadelphia political scene provided enough for his humor without

having to go to the national level. Nor did he write anything about the nullification struggle. His "Peley W. Ponder; or the Politician Without a Side" story described the increased confusion people experienced around election time. Ponder's problem was actually an inherited one, too, because his mother had died when she could not decide upon which doctor to summon, and a wagon flattened his father when he stood fast trying to determine which way to get out of the road. Not in any danger himself, Peley merely needed an office. At first he was determined to go with the party leading in the polls and went down into the street to listen closely. This ploy failed because each claimed the lead. Next, instinct told him to run back and forth between the two camps and listen for the best arguments and decide on this basis. As he stood in the middle of the street, exhausted and utterly bewildered because both sides had good things to say, a dismal thought entered his brain. What if both sides lost? The knowledge that he might lose every time disturbed Ponder more than anything. Instead of providing an ideal, as Downing did, this character illustrated how people might become helpless in a confusing, fractious system.[19]

Longstreet also wrote a sketch in which he provided a counter-example or illustration of how politics could have a negative effect on people. In his story a whole community, rather than an individual, suffered from the

machinations of politics. Set in the days of the early republic, the "Natville Gem" told of a young, Yankee Federalist who traveled into Georgia scouting out a place that might support a newspaper. At Natville, he found the wealth and support needed for success, and with the blessing of the town leaders he founded the Natville Gem. Originally, he wanted the sheet to support his party's cause, however, the whole community united behind the Jeffersonians, and he switched sides for their patronage. His accommodation, while helpful in getting the paper started, proved to be a liability. The editor was too willing to print anything submitted to him, and he let someone slip an insulting barb into an issue. The personal affront sparked both outrage and controversy. The once quiet village became a fractious place as the Jeffersonian community divided into two factions.

Then during the fall elections a "hot canvass" proceeded as both sides jostled for advantage. Emotions ran high and not surprisingly a brawl took place on election day. Most of the men in town became involved and "no pen can describe it," the narrator lamented. The day after the fight, several men, battered and angry, gathered at the tavern for drinks and discussion of about what had happened. Blame for the fight soon fell upon the newspaper and the group wasted little time in running the editor out of town. Hard feelings lingered awhile longer

until a religious revival swept through and brought neighbors back into friendship. Longstreet's allegory argued that Christian fellowship and men united under Jeffersonian principles ensured a peaceful, productive community.[20]

In another story, this time about nullification, Longstreet gave an even stronger message that also asserted the superiority of Jeffersonian principles. Unlike Smith, he was a nullifier who hated the high tariff. His States Rights Sentinel newspaper was founded specifically to convince people nullification was valid. "I believe nullification to be the proper mode of resistance to the tariff," he stated. While resolute he also declared, "I am ready to relinquish [nullification] for any other mode which may unite the people of Georgia." This plea showed that he understood that not everyone was behind his cause. Humor was a more subtle way of getting his point across to his audience.[21]

His sketch, "The Gander Pulling," presented both a graphic illustration of a rural blood sport and a subtle plea for his countrymen to rally behind states rights. The opening section of the story had little to do with the game itself. This digression explained how the theories of government in each community dictated if the place thrived or went out of existence. Residents who inhabited the Georgia hamlets of Harrisburg and Campbellton found

that their unionist sentiments led to ruin. They believed the Constitution joined states into "a single body, for the maintenance of those principles which they deemed essential to the public welfare." Instead of looking after their own interests, the towns put faith that other areas of the country would help them also grow and prosper. Two other towns, Augusta and Springfield, conceded that individuals ought to "love the sister states very much; but that under the Social Compact, she ought to love her own state a little more." By keeping a measure of independence, these "separate bodies" might "preserve the private welfare." The narrator insisted the latter views were the best guiding principles and had sustained the republic since Jeffersonian times. The former towns were thus doomed and would be "nullified," the narrator joked. Longstreet's stance came in direct contrast with Smith's sailing story that put cooperation over individualism as the best principles for the Union.[22]

The actual gander pulling had all the elements of an individualistic affair. This blood sport, something not to be found anywhere in the Downing's letters or sketches about Philadelphia amusements, took place at a flat field where participants rode around trying to grab a greased goose dangled from a pole. A festive scene of betting, drinking, and bragging gave the whole event a carnival

atmosphere. As one might imagine, the event became a loud, rollicking, bloody mess:

> The poor gander withstood many a strong pull before his wailings ceased. At length, however, they were hushed by Odum. Then came Bostwick, and broke the neck. The next grasp of Odum, it was thought, would bear away the head; but it did not. Then Bostwick was sure of it; but he missed it. Now Odum must surely have it. All is interest and animation; the horses sweep round with redoubled speed; every eye is on Odum; his backers smiling, Bostwick's trembling. To the rope he comes; lifts his hand; when lo! Fat John Fulger had borne it away the second before.[23]

Longstreet's prose captured the tension and excitement of a zestful competition.

The Georgia countryside, the New England village Smith knew so well, and the Philadelphia streets Neal described were the basic frames of reference for the concerns each of these humorists raised about the emerging mass party system. Like the stories they wrote concerning community traits or the market revolution, their depictions of politics came with messages not merely about an issue, but dealing with the business of governing itself, the direction their communities were headed, and the fate of their country. Their humor reflected ideals and views each developed from close attention to the places and cultures each knew best.

END NOTES

1. Smith, The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing of Downingville, Away Down East in the State of Maine (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, and Holden, 1833; New York: AMS Press, 1973), 63 for first two quotations and 73 the others. His emphasis. Hereafter cited as Downing. All citations are to this edition.

2. Ibid., 58, 63, 75, and 64.

3. Ibid., 87-88.

4. Ibid., 79 and 86. His emphasis. Smith would describe Downingville on pages 104-106 as a dry community free of drunkenness which makes this comment an especially strong indictment.

5. Ibid., 90-92 and 97. Perry D. Westbrook, The New England Town in Fact and Fiction (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1982), 132.

6. Neal to Thomas Carr, December 13, 1844, Simon Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Morton M'Michael, "Joseph C. Neal," Graham's Magazine 25 (February 1844): 51; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), passim; Neal to James Buchanan, January 11, 1838, in James Buchanan Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

7. Neal, Charcoal Sketches (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1838; Philadelphia, 1844), 130, 133, and 134. Hereafter cited as Sketches. All citations are to this edition. I analyzed the version included in the published volume. For an earlier press version that was less critical of politics see David E.E. Sloane, ed., The Literary Humor of the Urban Northeast, 1830-1890 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 70-77.

8. Neal, Sketches, 136-137.

9. Ibid, 141. The press version had not included this ending. In it a night watchman found Brush sleeping, woke him up, argued about politics, and then carted him off to jail.

10. Longstreet, Georgia Scenes 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1840; Nashville: J.S. Sanders and Company, 1992), 171. Hereafter cited as Scenes. All citations are to this edition. Longstreet in Bishop Oscar Penn Fitzgerald, Judge Longstreet (Nashville: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1891), 79.

11. Longstreet in Fitzgerald, Judge, 214-216.

12. Ibid., 213 and 227 for the block quotation. Scholars have argued that the narrator was upset because a working man challenged the leading men of the community. See Ritchie Devon Watson, Jr., Yeoman Versus

Cavalier: The Old Southwest's Fictional Road to Rebellion (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 59-60. A closer examination showed the narrator more upset by vote pandering and lackluster legislative performance.

13. Longstreet in Fitzgerald, Judge, 218; 221-222; and 238.

14. Ibid., 240-241. All quotations.

15. Smith, Downing, 140-144; 147-150.

16. Ibid., 98-99.

17. Ibid., 178-181.

18. Ibid., 181-183. All quotations.

19. Neal, Charcoal Sketches 2nd series (New York: Burgess, Stringer, and Company, 1848; Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1865), 187-191.

20. Longstreet in Fitz R. Longstreet, ed., Stories With A Moral, Humorous and Descriptive of Southern Life a Century Ago. (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1912), 22-35.

21. Longstreet to William Cumming, J.P. King, and Augustus Slaughter, August 24, 1832, in Jimmy Ray Scafidel, "The Letters of A.B. Longstreet" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1976), 5.

22. Longstreet, Scenes, 111.

23. Ibid., 117-118.

CHAPTER 5

HUMOR FROM THE WEST: KIRKLAND, HALL, AND THORPE

I

In the early antebellum era the American West was still thought of as the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, north to the Great Lakes and south to the Gulf of Mexico. This region had been the subject of legend, lore, and humor for many years. Both pioneers who had settled the land and respected literary figures in the country's urban centers had a hand in creating a Western humor.[1] When Caroline Kirkland, Baynard Rush Hall, and Thomas Bangs Thorpe began writing in the late 1830s, each drew upon experience as well as accepted conventions. These three had been well-educated in the East and then moved into Michigan, Indiana, and Louisiana, respectively. While there, they discovered a setting and settlers that offered ample subject matter for comedy.

Caroline Matilda Stansbury spent the first few years of life in her birthplace, New York City, and later attended Quaker schools outside the upstate hamlet of Utica. Her biographers have emphasized these two facts, more than any others, and consequently scholars looking for the major influences on her writing have thought Quakerism or urban thought paramount in her intellectual

development. The most comprehensive study of her life stated flatly, "Quakerism was a strong force" because later "she devoted as much time and energy to teaching as she did to writing; she espoused a number of charitable and reform movements; she habitually inserted a strong humanitarian feeling in the essays she later prepared." While all these assertions may be true, the reform impulse was not exclusively a Quaker phenomena. In fact, most studies point to New England as the ideological center of antebellum reform. Not coincidentally, Caroline had several connections with this area of the country.[2]

Her father maintained close ties to Connecticut and actually moved the family into the state for five years while he ran a bookstore. Caroline lived there from age three to age eight. Years later her father went to New Haven where he died. A biographer thought her own "versatile nature and witty turns of speech were so much like his own." Her father's political conservatism and insistence that she daughter get a good education could well have been rooted in old Puritan habits. When young Kirkland left Connecticut, she went off to Utica for twenty years. This area of upstate New York possessed a culture connected directly to New England. A historian who completed a demographic and social history of Utica found that "almost 90% of the pioneer families" arrived from either Connecticut or Massachusetts. Their influence

dominated for a long time, as reflected in the Federalist voting returns which remained high until that party's demise in 1815. The Utica town charter also "set up a system of community control that was reminiscent of Boston in 1630." As late as the 1820s, for example, theater companies stayed in town at their own peril because in this "Puritan stronghold," as a historian called the place, frivolous displays were not welcomed. Calvinism also ruled hearts and minds. In this particular environment, Caroline lived during late childhood, adolescence, and as a young adult. The impact this setting had upon her humor would be substantial.[3]

While living in this Yankee colony, she also met William Kirkland, an instructor at nearby Hamilton College. He and his relatives were a family of New England educators. An uncle had become president of Harvard and his own father had been instrumental in founding Hamilton. The elder Kirkland also became the first mayor of Utica, sworn to uphold its Puritan charter, and he went on to hold other high offices. Most importantly, his mother became a Unitarian and devoted energies to reform causes, including abolition. Caroline fell in love with William and at marriage took a name steeped in New England traditions. Shortly after marriage, the two opened a school around Geneva, New York, where they remained until 1835. A few years later they

packed all their worldly possessions and traveled over the Great Lakes and into the rapidly expanding Michigan territory. The business opportunities on this frontier beckoned people westward, and after only a year as principal of a Detroit woman's school William also became involved in the frantic land speculations. He purchased several large tracts fifty miles west of the city. A settler described this country as "undulating, uniformly covered with oak timber," blessed with rich soil, tall grasses, marshes, and little lakes, "a peculiar feature of this country," which made the whole landscape "so unlike anything in New York."[4]

William set aside two hundred acres for a village he called Pinckney:

> Situated in the southern part of Livingston County, on Portage Creek, two miles from its entrance into Portage Lake. It is in the midst of one of the finest and best settled agricultural districts in the State, and is already the natural center of business for not less than two hundred or three hundred families. A Flouring-Mill is now in operation, which has just been constructed at a cost of from Seven to Eight Thousand Dollars, and there is no mill nearer than ten miles, and in some directions it will command the business for twenty miles. A Good Temperance Tavern and Store have also been erected, and other buildings are in progress. A healthier spot is not to be found in Michigan.[5]

Not unlike other plats, this one gave a cheery description that contained more hopes and dreams than facts. In reality, few people lived at the site which was not yet a commercial hub or inhabited by industrious farmers.

Insights into the people came from those promises of a temperance community and the name of an adjacent settlement which neighbors called "Hell."[6]

In the fall of 1837 the Kirklands moved into their community, a tiny place consisting of a mill and a few homes clustered together. In a letter to a New York magazine editor written during the dead of winter, Caroline explained that her husband's claims notwithstanding, the shaking ague had afflicted her ever since arriving, but she was "yet alive, and in possession of as many faculties & feelings as are usually the lot of dwellers in the woods and fields." The family had actually moved into slightly better accommodations, she reported, a small dwelling with three rooms and a kitchen. The days were lonely and uneventful except when a recent flood washed away part of the dam. After relaying this big item she wrote sarcastically, "don't say I haven't sent you Pinckney news."[7]

Afraid the editor might think she lived in complete isolation, Kirkland explained how the latest literature had reached her door. Harriet Martineau's two volume Society in America had been published recently, and she read the book, enjoying the "many plain truths which we sadly need as a nation." Touring only a few years before, Martineau had passed though Michigan and on a road out of Detroit made a keen observation. She realized in the

United States, "their humour helps themselves and their visitors through sloughs of Despond, as charitably as their infinite abundance of logs through the swamps of their bad roads."[8] By chance, this remark touched upon a reason why Kirkland started writing humor.

Mired in what she regarded as a wilderness, and feeling unhappy about prospects, she wrote humor as a means of escape. Years later, she explained:

> The strange things I saw and heard everyday prompted me to description for they always presented themselves to me under a humorous aspect--finding my letters amusing to my friends, I thought of 'more of the same sort' for a book--but always felt serious doubts whether it would be possible to find a publisher for such stuff.[9]

Her fears were justified, but here William provided invaluable assistance. Already, he had become a regular contributor to Unitarian magazines, and this influence helped him persuade New York tract publisher, C.S. Francis, to expand his offerings in 1839 and publish his wife's cleverly entitled manuscript, A New Home--Who'll Follow?.[10]

Instead of using her name on the title page, however, Kirkland assumed the pseudonym "Mary Clavers" and disguised Pinckney, too, calling it Montacute. These efforts were done in hopes that no one would recognize incidents taken directly from life. In contrast to other authors who wrote with romantic notions about the West, the New York Mirror explained how she gave no "unwholesome

food," but instead hearty pictures which turned "reality [in]to fiction." In this "amusing volume," the New York Knickerbocker claimed, the author had demonstrated "a keen eye for the ridiculous, and a ready appreciation of the burlesque." The London Athenaeum, which regularly berated American authors, recommended her "quiet village humour to all who have any appetite for what is humourous and graphic in the light literature of America." These compliments certainly helped sales; the book went through five editions and was purchased by a wide variety of Northeastern libraries.[11]

In Michigan many had heard of the book, and especially a sketch Kirkland had written about woman at a benevolent society meeting. Most, though, had not read the book because Kirkland prevented copies from going on sale at bookstores around the state. She knew local reaction when people recognized characters and scenes taken from life might not be good. Despite her best efforts, copies found their way into the area anyway and, as anticipated, scenes upset residents. A man who visited Pinckney not long after the book reached there told a correspondent how Kirkland "was in bad odure [sic] with her neighbors." Ladies who had been depicted as superficial gossips became miffed and believed she had "slander[ed] them most scandalously." While that unattractive picture was meant only to lampoon people who

minded the business of others, the community took the chiding as an insult. After learning more about the book, the visitor summed up the opinion of many when he claimed, "there is not the least benefit to mind or mortals in her writings."[12]

The hard feelings the community felt bothered Kirkland and in the preface of her second book she gave an apology. "I am sincerely sorry that any one has been persuaded to regard as unkind what was announced merely as a playful sketch, and not as a serious history," she wrote. In private, however, she was more defensive. "I am told some Western people find fault with my sketches, yet there is a much greater number who confirm your judgement that my pictures are in the main true," she informed a Michigan friend. So many other books about the West were merely "self glorification" misrepresenting the region. She asserted, "I love the West, and shall be glad to do it good by telling the truth, even if I get the dislike of some." Most "intelligent people" knew the scenes were only "likenesses," and she vowed to continue making them that way.[13]

The warm reception Eastern critics gave A New Home spurred Kirkland to finish another book on the subject. Actually, she wrote a two-volume set entitled, Forest Life. The Knickerbocker and critic Edgar Allan Poe were not enthusiastic about this second effort. Grasping for

something good to say, Knickerbocker told its readers the episodes were reminiscent of village sketches by New England novelist Catherine Maria Sedgwick. Her creativity on Western themes was exhausted, Poe thought, and he hoped the "peculiarities of city life" might yet get her attention. The London Athenaeum, which had liked her first book, gave a stern lecture this time. "As some strange chance may waft a stray Athenaeum to Mrs. Clavers' door, we will not lose the opportunity of counselling her, in her future confessions and lucubrations to think more of the beauty of brevity, and less of the 'quips and counter checks' of fine writing." This warning was given "with kindness for we have prejudice in our hearts for her" and feel "sorry she was born on the other side of the Atlantic."[14]

In March of 1843, Kirkland's brother sent several good notices clipped from Eastern newspapers. After looking them over, Kirkland joked that "a little cash would be more acceptable than a great deal of praise." Since the previous fall, most of her stories were written "for those who pay best." With each "dull" article she thought her literary reputation suffered, yet money was more important. Pinckney had turned out to be a financial disappointment. The site lay too far north, miles off the roads around Detroit, and in 1840 when the railroad passed south through Ann Arbor and Dexter but no farther north,

commerce flowed elsewhere. William, his parents, and Caroline's relatives who had sunk money into the community never received a fair return on the investment.[15]

The settlement's failure was one reason why the Kirklands left Michigan, but certainly not the only one. With their Eastern manners and mores, William and Caroline also felt uncomfortable among the raw settlement and simple neighbors. Gradually, her letters had reflected a growing disillusionment. She mentioned the "madness" of living in a "remote region" and thought "solitary confinement at hard labor [was] only a step beyond" her existence. With children also reaching school age, a concern for their future entered as well. Therefore, the family moved in 1843 and settled in New York City. During the 1840s the metropolis had become the nation's literary capital, and this new home proved to be more amenable than the one they had left in Michigan. Despite deafness and failing eyesight, William became editor of the Evening Mirror newspaper and co-editor of a Unitarian weekly. Caroline wrote more Western sketches and went back to educating young ladies. She reported early on "my school is not as yet very profitable, but I hope to make it much more so than writing has ever been to me."[16]

In 1845 Kirkland assembled stray magazine articles for Wiley and Putnam who published them as Western Clearings. The publishers decided the book would sell

better if they paired it with a well-known Western author. The stories Kirkland had written for the volume were no different than her earlier work which was not promotional at all. The Cincinnati author and guiding spirit in the movement for a Western literature, Judge James Hall saw a book of his go into that matched set. Neither he nor Kirkland was happy with the marriage. Kirkland found "glaring faults of style" in Hall's writing, and admitted while she had hoped "to find him dull--so that there might be no love lost between him and Mrs. Clavers," she found a little merit in his work. "I cannot deny that the Judge is very agreeable, and altho' he saw a different West from any that ever met my view I find his stories more readable that any Indian stories I ever read--worth a thousand of Mr. [William Gilmore] Simms."[17]

Hall's reaction contained not an ounce of conciliation. He wrote the publishers:

> I beg you not to inflict so great an injury upon me, and so great a disgrace upon my book. The Western Clearings is a wretched imposition--a vile piece of humbug. If the authoress ever was in the West she has failed to convey the slightest idea of the country or its people.[18]

This reaction was typical of how Western critics saw Kirkland's work. With pride burning bright within them, as a scholar has argued, each of these promoters "shunned Kirkland's realism." She had presented unpleasant scenes they preferred not to see. Legends, lore, and the glorious feats of settlers were more to their liking.[19]

By the late 1840s, Kirkland had become editor of the prestigious Union Magazine, and, sadly, a widow. She had been writing for Yankee Doodle, a humor magazine, when William had drowned at a Hudson River steamboat landing. Her grief cut short a promising new series of urban humor. "I fear my present condition of mind will forbid all hope of anything that would be an advantage," she told the editor. A recent scholar wondered "how the series and Kirkland's career as a satirist would have progressed if matters had developed otherwise; as it was, she did not write again for Yankee Doodle and rarely struck the comic vein again." Over the next decade, she wrote sentimental fare for various ladies magazines. By this time, the place she had written about had faded anyway as political debates over the Mexican Cession introduced another West into the American imagination.[20]

II

On a wintry day in late 1832, the turnpike town of Bedford, Pennsylvania, received a visit from a family needing repairs on a dilapidated carriage. The father's "hair was almost white, and yet he was not old. He wore a faded camlet cloak, carelessly thrown over his tall frame, and a seal skin cap concealed a head remarkable for its intellectual countenance." Townspeople thought he might be a drover or perhaps a fugitive prince in disguise. Upon inquiry, they learned he was none of these, but in

fact the Reverend Baynard Rush Hall, formerly professor of ancient languages at Indiana College. Now unemployed, he and his family were heading back to Philadelphia after ten years out West.[21]

Both Hall and his wife were originally from Philadelphia. Orphaned at three years old, he enjoyed the care of his guardian, the prominent doctor Benjamin Rush and a generous maternal uncle in South Carolina who funded his education at grammar schools around Princeton, New Jersey, and Union College in Schenectady, New York. Upon graduation in 1820, a professor predicted Hall would "be at the head of one of the first institutions of learning in our country." Next, Hall entered Princeton's theological seminary where he studied to be a Presbyterian minister. After finishing those studies, he and his wife joined her family who had in the meantime moved out to northern Kentucky. A year passed, perhaps less, before the Halls traveled north into land known as the New Purchase. This large area of central Indiana recently purchased from the Indians, hence the name, contained only a few ministers and educated men. Out on this intellectual frontier, Hall's brother-in-law, the Presbyterian missionary Isaac Reed, had made great strides in advancing faith and the cause of education. He had been among a select group that won a state-funded learning seminary for the town of Bloomington.[22]

A colleague remembered how Hall's "high intellectual culture and refinement" made him feel out of place at that settlement. Unlike Kirkland, however, he became friendly with neighbors, in part, because "an incessant current of humor lent animation and brilliancy" to his character. Long after he left the area, people remembered his sermons and "said they would like to hear him preach again." Hall struggled at first with the isolation but soon learned how to cope. For example, when he needed a book, Hall contacted a friend back East and instructed him to send the volume in a package by way of Indianapolis during the time that the legislature met. Only then did the mail run on schedule. His willingness to improvise helped, too, when he became the first principal of the learning seminary. He made the institution a success, and prominent men enrolled their sons because, as one related, Hall was "a man of first-rate talent."[23]

In 1827, the legislature designated the school Indiana College, the state's first public institution of higher education, and Hall felt sure he would become its president. Instead of allowing him to step into the job, however, the trustees selected another man. The Reverend Andrew Wylie, a slightly older Presbyterian minister and President of Washington College in Pennsylvania, filled the position. Hall fretted for a time about being passed over but continued teaching. When Wylie fired a professor

and refused to reconsider, an epic feud erupted between the two men. Hall resigned in protest, and students walked out of classes in sympathy. "Both parties were prepared with ample documents for a judicial contest," a trustees report stated, but Hall agreed to stay a year longer, until a replacement could be found, and then withdraw.[24]

When the Halls pulled into Bedford on their return East, the townspeople invited their "weary and care-worn" visitor to give a sermon. Pleased at what they heard, the elders asked if he might stay and fill a vacant post. He said yes, turning a brief stop for repairs into a five-year residence. During this time he opened a classical and mathematical academy for boys and published a Latin grammar book. He also gave a public lecture warning youth about reading "fictitious works" which gave "false and exaggerated views." The half-truths "defile the imagination and inflame the passions," he argued. As a solution, he recommended "that this very night [youth] ought honestly to collect and burn without mercy all their novels and romances." Although unusually harsh, the sentiments were not, however, out of place coming from a minister, educator, and father. These comments were strange, however, because five years later he wrote a fictional account of his Indiana days.[25]

By February, 1843, Hall lived in Trenton, New Jersey, and had just finished revising over one hundred pages of a manuscript D. Appleton and Company, a major New York firm, was to publish. The two-volume set entitled The New Purchase or Seven and A Half Years in the Far West chronicled those Hoosier days of ten years earlier. "I have had a hard writer's work," and "I am satisfied the work will not be a failure," he told a friend before turning in the final draft. Those stacks of pages he slaved over turned out to be an unusual work that contained elements of many genres. Judge D.D. Banta, a late-nineteenth century historian of Indiana life, explained the volumes could not be called "a novel, a Western romance, a history, or travel book. But all of them." He also doubted "if there be an imaginary character in the entire book." Wylie appeared as the "Reverend Constant Bloduplex, D.D. of Wheelabout," an insulting name which illustrated one of Hall's intentions for the book, mainly, revenge. "Hall left in an ill temper and wrote in it too," Banta recalled, and the pages contained little of "that genial warm, cozy, easy flowing humor, that some of us old-fashioned people like, it is a wild, whimsical, grotesque sort of humor." At the time, Hall predicted that "two or three dozen" should sell in the New Purchase. Instead of putting his own name on the book he selected "Robert Carlton" because, as he wrote,

the contents gave "reasons enough for concealing his name."[26]

In Bloomington everyone wanted a copy, but there were too few to go around. Crowds gathered and listened as someone read the pages aloud. Most laughed, however, when General Jacob Low heard about his character:

> He lost his temper and went home in a towering passion. But by the following morning he wisely concluded to treat the whole matter as a huge joke and that so doing he had received more pleasure from the book and the laugh at him had fallen harmless.[27]

Low was then seen reading from the book adding real names to the characters when he came across them, including his own. The more positive reaction in Bloomington contrasted greatly with that chilly reception Michigan neighbors gave Kirkland's book.

The New York Knickerbocker thought the book a "sterling attraction" and compared Robert Carlton to Mary Clavers. This was itself "very high praise," the editor stated, yet in the final analysis he believed her work far superior. The Athenaeum, which had praised A New Home, thought the New Purchase an imitation and a poor one at that. Occasionally "some amiable exaggerations of homeliness" appeared which the reviewer thought were copied directly from Clavers. At other points were the usual descriptions of western life, "need we add, how distasteful [were] all such nods, and becks, and wretched smiles." Too often Carlton "rants and riots in his off

hand fashion about clearings, hut-buildings, camp meetings, and perils from snakes, swamps &c." While the editors often "turn[ed] to American books with an appetite, famine's self could not make a meal on the volumes before us."[28]

Despite this heavy criticism, the public bought the first edition "almost immediately even at $1.50, and in the midst of the cheap literature age, when English works were selling for a shilling," Hall related. A thousand copies made it into circulation but not many more. A few years later the publisher planned to print another six thousand volumes, but the death of the firm's founder prevented those plans from going through. About this time Hall moved again, this time finding a teaching job at an academy at Poughkeepsie, New York. Later, he started his own academy farther down the Hudson River at Newburgh. During this period, he wrote a book of moral stories which, although "very popular," reaped a "small profit--books are so cheap" he complained. Also finished were a monograph on teaching and a novel written in response to Uncle Tom's Cabin. By the time that book appeared he had relocated in Brooklyn where the Park Institute employed him as principal, and a congregation at a Dutch Reformed Church heard him preach on Sunday.[29]

In 1855, John R. Nunemacher, a bookseller from New Albany, Indiana, located on the Ohio River opposite

Louisville, asked Hall if he wanted to publish another edition of A New Purchase. Demand existed, Nunemacher thought, because people frequently came into his store asking for one or both volumes. When he had asked Samuel W. Fisher, a leading Cincinnati bookseller, for a copy, he replied, "I do not feel willing to sell the book, as it has afforded me no little amusement and portrays very graphically frontier life and I knew not where in this vicinity to get another." He suggested the Appleton firm, and "if after that you desire a loan of this immortal work I will endeavor to accommodate you." People living in the East must have had trouble finding copies, too, because while the Athenaeum libraries in Boston, Philadelphia, and Providence, Rhode Island bought the first volumes, few others did. Perhaps the time had arrived for another edition.[30]

Over several weeks, Hall negotiated a deal in which he retained the copyright and received five percent on the first edition of one thousand books retailing at a dollar and twenty-five cents each. If a second edition went to press, he would receive eight percent on that run, and then ten percent on a third. This sliding scale helped Nunemacher reap a profit even if the book failed. The two also agreed that the book would be condensed into one volume. A shorter version would be easier to sell and editing the tomes allowed an expunging of unflattering

things written about Reverend Wylie who had died recently after twenty-three years as president of what become under his leadership Indiana University. "There would be so manifest unkindness in reprinting a vast amount of what pertains to the late president of a certain college, that I would nearly soon consent to have a finger taken off, as to continue that," Hall related. "This gentleman richly deserved all that was done to him some years ago--but he is now in the other life and I hope a better one." Nearly one-hundred and thirty pages vanished, including "a single passage alluding to the scriptures too irreverently." After reading over the revised version, Hall liked what he saw. "Its raciness is not in the least lost. I consider the book positively improved and shall not be ashamed of the work now."[31]

Nunemacher began rounding up endorsements, and Hall told him that "the authoress of the 'New Home,' sends me word at one time, that 'I could never write another work like the N. Purchase, if I wrote an 100 years.'" In truth, Kirkland had given this compliment to a friend who passed this news along to Hall who in turn made up this direct quotation: "another such book will not be written for an hundred years--Caroline Kirkland." Similarly, the respected New York literary figure, N.P. Willis, remarked casually the volume was the most "impulsive" he had ever touched, and that too appeared on a broadside sent out to

booksellers and editors. Hall also claimed he could get a good review from the respected Knickerbocker writer Frederick Cozzens who was the "nephew of my particular friend." In addition to literary figures, Hall knew a few other editors and booksellers. A store in Syracuse, New York, "greatly prize[d] the work " and was glad to see another printing. "One of us read the book many years ago and well remembers the pleasure it afforded," a Philadelphia retailer told Nunemacher when he ordered one hundred copies.[32]

Throughout the winter and into the next spring, notices and reviews began appearing. In Britain where the Athenaeum had thrashed the first volumes, National Magazine recommended its "fine humour, delicate wit, and pungent satire." The New York Times printed Nunemacher's broadside word for word and concluded "it is one of the best books yet written concerning life in the West." In Cincinnati a newspaper gave a similar response, explaining how the book's "spice of exaggeration" captured the spirit of living in the backwoods. The Cincinnati Gazette also commented that "this is the raciest and most faithful description of Western life and manners ever to appear."[33]

Indiana newspapers were simply glad to have a copy, and one editor admitted he had "never read it at all--the first volume of the old edition was all we ever met with.

The lovers of the ludicrous will thank the publisher for preserving this excellent work from oblivion." Another editor reported on the excitement overtaking Bloomington again. The influential Indiana Sentinel was more restrained in its praise and also pointed out a serious flaw in the design of the revised edition. The Sentinel reviewer obviously knew that the original intent of the volumes had been to ridicule Reverend Wylie. Now that this feud had long passed, and those pages were expunged, the critic believed the volume had lost some of its earlier allure. "In some parts of the book the descriptions are very tedious, and too much attention is bestowed upon trifles."[34]

At New Albany, Indiana, on the Ohio River, the town's two newspapers, the Salem Democrat and Whig New Albany Tribune, offered enthusiastic responses. The Democrat thought Hall had produced "a book for the lovers of polite literature. Narratives, biographies, and histories are our most popular books, and while this may not strictly come in either class, it combin[ed] the most interesting of all." The Tribune enjoyed the "accurate delineations of Western scenery and character." Hall had not written with the intention of producing a book that might excite regionalists, but that was exactly what his work did for many. Reviewers picked up the book and in the contents found the allure of the West.[35]

Perhaps Hall and Nunemacher should have emphasized Western themes in advertisements because while sales had started off strong the receipts fell off considerably by year's end. A friend of Hall's living in Troy, New York, complained about having trouble finding the book. "I have seen neither advertisement nor notice in any paper and periodical" and bookstores had plenty of other books "by the ton" but no New Purchase. Frederick Cozzens who had promised a Knickerbocker review failed them and other major publications also never issued notices. Without advertisements and reviews, the public had no opportunity to learn about the book. By the next July, things appeared grim indeed. Hall told Nunemacher, "I am very sorry our Book appears to be dead."[36]

III

Thomas Bangs Thorpe grew up among the picturesque Dutch farms around Albany, New York, in the heart of the fertile Hudson River Valley which had inspired Knickerbocker authors and the country's first great painters. Thorpe himself possessed a talent with the brush, and at the age of eighteen, he exhibited a painting at the prestigious American Academy of Fine Arts in New York City. His instructor, one of the finest in America, urged him to sail for Europe where he might obtain further training and patronage. Unfortunately, Thorpe's father, a Methodist minister, had left only modest means for his

widow and young son. His mother had remarried, but his stepfather was unwilling to make a substantial financial commitment. As a compromise, Thorpe went off to Wesleyan University at Middletown, Connecticut.[37]

For three years, he followed the curriculum but learned more from meeting the planter's sons who came to school from towns in the lower Mississippi River Valley. That area stretching from Alabama over to Arkansas, which included the river and many other tributaries, sounded intriguing. Thorpe dropped out of college, citing poor health as an excuse, and set out to explore the Old Southwest, that area he had heard so much about. After a perilous trip over frozen mountain roads, he arrived in Cincinnati just after New Years Day, 1837. The rest of the journey went by boat down eddying currents until he arrived at Bayou Sara, Louisiana. Friends had recommended a stop there because many planters lived nearby and the families might desire portraits. For the next year he divided time between roaming the countryside and courting the affluent farther south at Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

After months of moving around, Thorpe settled down in Jackson, Louisiana, ten miles east of Bayou Sara in the heart of the cotton country of the Feliciana Parishes. Evidently he had found a niche among the planters because several solicited portraits, invited him to barbecues, and took him hunting. On one excursion during the fall of

1838, his party ran across Tom Owen, an eccentric bee hunter. The amusing scene of this rag-tag rascal scampering up a tree in search of an easy meal inspired a sketch about the encounter for the New York The Spirit of the Times. This sportsman's magazine had a national readership and accepted original hunting narratives, descriptive scenes, and tall tales. Thorpe copied other contributors who blended masculine frontier feats with the refinement of an Eastern gentleman. The boisterous tone and thick dialect associated with tall tales were there but tempered by a narrator who opened and closed the story. Thorpe proved to be a master of this prevailing style.

"Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter," impressed readers, and newspapers reprinted the piece far and wide. Thorpe visited New York sometime after this story appeared so his new wife might have a child at her parent's home. He took the opportunity to stop by the Spirit offices and meet the editor who would be a godfather to many Southern humorists. During their conversation, the editor urged Thorpe to keep writing. After his wife gave birth to a daughter, the new family traveled back to the Old Southwest and settled at St. Francisville, a river town adjacent to Bayou Sara. Situated upon a bluff near hardwood forests and rolling hills, the place provided a picturesque setting. During two impressionable years

spent there, Thorpe completed nearly twenty sketches describing "the prairies, swamps, scenes on the Mississippi, scenes inland, with the rural sports peculiar to the Southwest." On occasion, he also "indulged [a] pen in humorous sketches."[38]

He and his family then moved briefly to New Orleans and next to Concordia Parish, another cotton plantation district located opposite Natchez, Mississippi. He edited the parish's Whig newspaper and continued writing sketches. "I think my work will be great[,] original in its character, and I believe will occupy a place in literature hereforto neglected or not thought of," he told a Philadelphia editor. He continued: "I hope to strike out new and if possible original articles and speculations for I am satisfied that from the Southwest is to come the first great original and national literature for the country." These sentiments illustrated how Thorpe had become a Western promoter and unlike Kirkland and Hall who merely described their experiences he celebrated the region. His efforts were welcomed by other important promoters such as William Henry Milburn who complimented "my friend T.B. Thorpe for many of the most truthful and lifelike pictures of Western habits, character, and humor ever published."[39]

In 1845 when Thorpe planned his first collection, he had become so enamored of the scenery and sports in the

region that he had forgotten how humor launched his career. His book Mysteries of the Backwoods included only three humorous sketches out of sixteen. He fussed more over making sure the dialect or "peculiarities of language used in the West," as he called them would be conveyed correctly. He hoped the printer might get the spellings down correctly because he wanted to show others he knew the Old Southwest and its people. "My long residence in the South has given me a command of incidents, scenery, etc., that would give me an advantage over any writer superior to me in other respects" he bragged. The Philadelphia firm of Carey and Hart firm paid him over seven hundred dollars from the first edition, a princely sum, and printed four thousand volumes, an unusually large printing.[40]

Much to Thorpe's surprise, the Spirit snubbed his collection by not giving a review at all. Other critics were as unkind including Edgar Allan Poe who called his sketches "much overrated." The New York Knickerbocker acknowledged their "wide popularity," yet added little else to their brief review. Among publications that offered an enthusiastic response, most enjoyed the humor the best. The Charleston Southern Quarterly Review thought the descriptions of natural scenery impressive but the "vein of humor" most pleasing. The Western promoters trumpeted the book's arrival. The Cincinnati Miscellany

welcomed this "admirable publication which affords a more accurate idea of the manners, habits, and sports of the West." At the New Orleans Commercial Review, a new journal under the direction of J.D.B. De Bow, the review repeated the praise. The reviewer welcomed the lively pictures of "Western life, and the rare peculiarities and originalities of Western manners."[41]

Thorpe monitored the press and kept up with how the volume did across the country. "Tom Owen has done well here I should judge, at least as far as New Orleans City is concerned," he told Carey and Hart. "As it regards the North I still have hope." The reviews had been a problem and were not going as well as expected. He complained, "I have not seen a notice of it that betrays its real character, the New Englanders of all people in the world would like the Mysteries, if they could find to read it." The poor responses that kept coming in might be attributed to that decision of his to exclude his best sketches. Thorpe realized this mistake and declared "my next volume shall be as you propose, composed entirely of humorous sketches, and nothing else." That volume would be delayed another eight years as Thorpe became diverted into a number of other projects.[42]

During the Mexican War, he became a war correspondent for New Orleans newspapers and went on assignment to the battlefields. He became active in politics and in 1852

lost a campaign for state superintendent of education. Following this defeat he moved back to the North. This change of venue surprised at least one critic who wrote "in the mutation of all sublunary things," Thorpe was "no longer a resident of Louisiana, but of New York." Not long after returning, he settled details with D. Appleton and Company for a second collection of humor. This time he entitled the book Hive of the Bee-Hunter to alert readers to "Tom Owen" and his other humorous sketches. The volume included the stories from Mysteries, except for three, and added ten new ones to these. This arrangement must have pleased readers because Hive could be found in twice as many library catalogs as his first book.[43]

This time critics also gave more favorable reviews. Knickerbocker put the title in a coveted place at the top of its spring publications list. The substantial review also explained how the author was probably more well-known in the West and South, but the magazine "cordially commended" Hive to everyone. Instead of silence, probably the deadliest weapon in a reviewer's arsenal, the Spirit of the Times gave a grudging recommendation. Although "Mr. Thorpe [wrote] rather carelessly," the review stated, he had managed to "paint the Southwest in all its phases." The Southern Literary Messenger reprinted Spirit's assessment verbatim, and the Southern Quarterly Review gave a short notice asserting that Thorpe had proved once

again that he knew the Southwest better than anyone. Various other Southern newspapers were also impressed. The Charleston, South Carolina Courier "recommend[ed] all personally unacquainted with the scenery to snatch a leisure moment and accompany Mr. Thorpe in his wanderings," and the Chicago Tribune urged those "suffering the ennui of protracted city life" to read the sketches.[44]

With the publication of that second collection in 1854, Thorpe achieved an important milestone. Ever since hearing about the Old Southwest from college chums, he had admired the area and could now return their kindness by preserving a small portion of the colorful scenery, sports, and humor. Throughout his many writings he celebrated and promoted this land as a place particularly blessed with great rivers, lush forests, and large plantations. Although he too left the West after disappointments, he savored his experiences and even returned there when given the chance during the Civil War. When Kirkland and Hall left Michigan and Indiana they would not return. For Kirkland, her humor was more critical and directed at the worst features of pioneer life. Although his experiences were equally unhappy, Hall wrote with a greater appreciation of settler life. His humor was thus more playful and any sharp wit targeted academic enemies rather than Westerners as a whole.

Eastern critics enjoyed Kirkland's realistic pictures and appreciated her humorous appraisal of settler life. The images she presented were a change from the usual romantic fare being written about the West. In 1844, one critic put her near the top of his list of the North's finest humorists, calling her "the best magazinest (in tales and sketches of American Life) we have."[45] Hall wrote sketches that placed him neither in the romantic camp nor as a realist. Easterners who examined both his editions were not satisfied with the material. Reviewers who were western promoters, however, located good material for their cause and hailed him as one of their own. Thorpe came out as a western promoter himself and was able to communicate his love of Old Southwest effectively.

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CHAPTER 6

LAUGHING AT THE WILDERNESS

I

In an autobiographical article submitted for inclusion in a dictionary of antebellum authors, Thomas Bangs Thorpe claimed the natural scenery of the Old Southwest stimulated his interest in writing. No place from his youth had done so, not even the craggy mountains found in upstate New York nor the "beautiful scenery of the Connecticut River."[1] Only the Mississippi Valley with its magnificent forests, deep waterways, and abundant game had provided that spark. As for Caroline Kirkland and Baynard Rush Hall, they were moved as well by the settings encountered after moving to Michigan and Indiana. While these three humorists were aware of Romantic trends that idealized landscapes, they set out on a different course that opened the land itself, Western living conditions, and related experiences to merriment. Not many literary figures had taken a step in this direction. Kirkland, Hall, and Thorpe thus initiated an enterprise without having established guides.

Long before the three humorists ever set foot in the West, however, their perspectives were being formed. All three grew up in the Mid-Atlantic states where cultural

influences acted upon them. As mentioned previously, Kirkland matured with New England influences foremost in her life. Suspicions she held about wilderness that entered the way she interpreted the Michigan woods may have come from her cultural upbringing. Only a hundred miles southeast from where she lived in New York, yet a cultural world away, Thorpe grew up around Albany, New York, and became instilled with a Knickerbocker appreciation of idyllic scenery. He absorbed a more positive view that would go along with him wherever he traveled. A state away, Hall began his life as an orphan and steward of a prominent Philadelphia physician. He then attended schools in rural Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Schenectady, New York. This urban life and uprooting experiences meant that no single influence would have a lasting impact on how he described the environment. Without great predispositions, he journeyed West with a more open mind. The origins of these three humorists provide important clues about the nature of their humor. Along with internal predispositions, Western experiences also played a critical role in shaping their perspectives.

The Michigan wilds jolted Kirkland's Eastern sensibilities because most of her life to that point had been spent in comfortable circumstances. Pioneer life with all its challenges was something she had not prepared for at all. The same might be said for the narrator of

Kirkland's A New Home, Mary Clavers. When she journeyed for the first time outside Detroit, she expected to find the worst. Much to her surprise, a colorful display greeted the eyes at every turn. Spring had begun and "the scattered woods for many miles were gay in their first gosling-green suit of half-opened leaves." Pausing beside a winding path where "upwards of twenty varieties of wild-flowers" grew, she remarked how each bloom deserved a poet more eloquent than Shelley, Lamb, or Bulwer. Whenever Clavers spoke in positive terms about the setting, she typically offered a literary or historical allusion. Something as trivial as asparagus, for example, a vegetable which took three years to mature, was elevated with her explanation of how its long growing season approximated the time a seventeenth-century French Cardinal waited for a promotion. Then at another time she commented how the morning felt "cool and moist as the grotto of Undine," a reference to a character from an 1811 German romance.[2] Through these and other educated comments, Clavers anchored her reactions in a scholarly world. These artistic choices, to take an elevated vantage point and to write as a reluctant transplant, made for a more critical perspective as well.

Indeed, Kirkland wrote frequently in negative terms because, although her narrator had seen lovely sights, she more often than not met the landscape's most hazardous

conditions. A stroll around "lovely lakes, each a lonely gem set deep in masses of emerald green," for instance, became disappointing when soft ground gave way under foot. "One shoe provokingly disappeared" she explained and, despite her best efforts, "down went the stocking six inches into the black mud." Two reed cutters who thought it strange to see a well-dressed lady walking around the lake in the first place laughed loudly. With characteristic understatement she concluded, "nobody should ever go one mile from home in thin shoes in this country."[3]

Wearing boots after heavy rains was not only prudent but necessary because woodland roads typically became seas of mud. Wagon riders might expect "an unpleasant jolt" or, "in extreme cases, a temporary stand-still or even an overturn of the rash." A good driver stopped before each "dark gulf," walked its edges, and sounded depth. When the Clavers came upon their first mud hole, her husband suggested they charge straight through. Mrs. Clavers, alighted from her seat and elected for a safer route by way of a foot path around the puddle. Ditches on either side of the road had overflowed with water and thus in the middle of a way around she risked even more danger if the slippery mud knocked her over into the deep abyss. The couple had become separated, unable to help the other, and still no closer to getting around the mire. At this

point, the bickering began. Blame over who was most at fault went back and forth until both were ready to turn around in defeat. Then a buck-skinned French trapper appeared, saw the problem, and in broken English asked "want to cross?" Getting an overwhelmingly affirmative response, he located a rail for the wagon and a pole for Mrs. Clavers. Next, he pointed out the best place for negotiating a passage, and, in no time at all, the couple resumed their journey. Like the two reed cutters who went over and helped her, the trapper became another indispensable teacher educating Kirkland about Western ways. Without knowledge of the setting or having a background that prepared her for the conditions, Clavers faced great challenges surviving in the Michigan woods.[4]

The first difficulty faced out in the forest was the reality that snakes could be found everywhere. When she heard about the prevalence of giant timber rattlers along the woodland paths, she quipped, "my desire for a long walk through the woods was somewhat cooled."[5] After a big snake slithered up to the back door, "that snake absolutely haunted us for a day or two; we felt sure that there were more near the house." When evening fell and everyone returned home, Clavers stepped inside and "reached the middle of the room, when I trod upon something soft, which alluded my foot. I shrieked 'a snake! a snake!' and fell senseless on the floor."

Consciousness returned soon and a "general smile" filled every face because she had merely upset a toad.[6]

"I did not repent my fainting though it was not a snake, for if there is anything besides a snake that curdles the blood in my veins it is a toad," she admitted. Some settlers "'liked to have toads in the room in fly time,'" but she called that uncouth and exclaimed, "shade of Chesterfield, forgive me!" that "any body can be willing to live with a toad!" Apparently the shock impaired her health because the next morning she experienced "a severe head-ache and racking pains in every bone." A neighbor visited and gave an unscientific prognosis, "'why, you've got th' agur! Woman alive! Why, I know the fever-agur as well as I know beans! It a'n't nothin' else!" A typical pioneer endured the illness at least once. When one lady survived a season without showing symptoms, a relative chided, "you are such an enemy to the disorder that I almost wonder at you." This joshing was only meant in jest because the correspondent quickly corrected herself, saying she understood ague was "no joking matter."[7]

Clavers, on the other hand, found her predicament amusing because while she lay prostrate her husband had to assume all household duties. After only a short time on the job, his performance left so much to be desired that she exclaimed in exasperation, "oh! for one of those

feminine men who can make good gruel and wash the children's faces!" Hungry children had bedeviled his sensibilities and "stooping over the fire made him very dizzy." Before the hearth he put "the hot side of the bowl to his fingers--and the sauce pan would overset," and once when reaching for a bowl "he had very nearly fallen on the coals." When a child became ill, matters became hopeless. A physician from a nearby settlement, a man whose European training surprised them, found a neighbor who agreed to mind things until Mrs. Clavers recovered.[8]

The humor in this segment relied heavily upon role reversal, a device which had been around for ages, but was entering a new phase during the antebellum era. As responsibilities of men and women diverged in the market economy, separating living quarters and work spaces, men went away from home during the day and women became supreme in what historians have called the domestic sphere. Kirkland's sketch was critical of these roles because her Western setting was clearly unsuited for a strict separation. Everyone, no matter the gender, had to pitch in and lend a hand. Her eastern ideals were often belied by Western realities.

Along with snakes and ague, Clavers told of another unnerving experience. The couple had been traveling all day though the mud when they arrived at a trading outpost for an overnight stay. Around several buildings across

the yard where they were staying, a large number of Indians had gathered for some drinking. Clavers disapproved of selling alcohol to anyone, and probably would have said something to the Frenchman, but remained so tired that she concentrated instead on getting sleep. "The first nap was in all its sweetness," she related, when a "hideous yelling, which to city ears could be no less than an Indian war-whoop" jolted "everyone on foot in an instant." The resulting "confusion which ensued in the attempt to dress in the dark was most perplexing and would have been amusing enough but for unpleasant doubts." Believing an attack eminent "everyone [grabbed] something which could be used as a weapon." About this time the host stumbled out of bed, strode to the door, and confronted a drunken wretch. After sending him away the man turned and "seemed much surprised at the confusion." He promised "it was 'noting at all' [sic] but the Indians coming for whiskey."[9]

A defining characteristic of the humor in this sketch and in the ones about the snake and ague was a flat, blunt tone and bare bones narration. The plot also built quickly to a climax and fell abruptly. Instead of dwelling upon the scene of confusion in the Indian story, perhaps describing how the place looked or focusing on any characters, Kirkland relied more upon brevity for a sharper effect. The quotes given above are about the

extent of what she wrote. Thus, the humor was pointed and hit the reader with a hammer force. These attributes of bluntness indicate that her humor was plain in style and hence more of a New England variety. Overall, her interest in the differences between Eastern norms and Western realities were another tell-tale sign. New Englanders wrote about ordeals generated by disparities between ideals and reality. Rooted in old themes, Kirkland's humor updated ideas and carried them into a Western setting, in effect, creating a broad cultural continuum.

II

A number of the miseries Clavers endured were hardly unique to Michigan. Baynard Rush Hall himself wrote frequently about the snakes, Indians, and treacherous mud holes his narrator, Robert Carlton, survived. In a characteristically punchy tone, more folksy than Kirkland's stiff narrator, Carlton explained how wet Indiana roads were so impassable that "traveling by land became traveling by water, or by both: viz., mud and water." The trick, as he saw it, was "not to find a road but a place where there is no road," a thruway with ground "thick enough to bear, or that has at least some bottom." This slow maneuvering only caused delay, and, "in utter despair of finding a royal road to the New Purchase," his party threw caution away. They plunged bravely "into the

most-ill-looking, dark-coloured morasses." Rather than being careful, as Clavers had recommended, Carlton urged travellers onward at all costs.[10]

Instead of looking down upon flowers or the glimmering azure of glacier lakes, Carlton turned his gaze upward, in a more positive manner, towards a leafy canopy overhead. "What grander the column-like trees ascending, many twenty, many thirty, and some even forty feet, with scarce a branch to destroy the symmetry!" These sheltering giants provided nooks for squirrels who lived "far beyond the sprinkling of a shot-gun and almost beyond the reach of the rifle!" With these words, the narrator slipped slightly into exaggeration, something he did often when describing natural features. Rather than throwing up a barrier of literary or historical allusions, Hall took many liberties with descriptions and language. When the narrator spoke of the "circumambitudialitariness" of tree trunks one had to think before realizing he meant a wide circumference. When he claimed trees grew six to seven feet around, Hall presented an entirely believable fact. Then he followed up on this credible statement with a story about a gargantuan sycamore growing at the confluence of the Wabash and White Rivers. Towering high up into the sky and extending nearly ninety feet in width, its hollow trunk cavity stabled a dozen horses the narrator asserted. If this fact were not spectacular

enough, Carlton swore that a respectable person, a bishop no less, had cantered his horse around inside without ever bumping his head. This fantastic claim celebrated a rich environment with expansive rather than restrictive techniques.[11]

Most of the time, Hall wrote accurately and with elegance. When among other towering oaks, Carlton once asked, "shall we feel no sublimity in walking amid and around such ancients?" These "trees that have tossed their branches in the sun light and winds of eight centuries--that have scorned the tempests and tornados, whose fury ages ago prostrated cities and engulfed navies!" These monuments "belong to the era of Egyptian architecture--they are coeval with the pyramids." To walk among them humbled him like no other experience.[12]

Generally speaking, Hall's A New Purchase had a less formal tone than Kirkland's A New Home. Carlton addressed the reader frequently and even let his emotions show. When passing by an old home site, a site dearly remembered, he recalled seeing "a new brick house in our garden; and the [old] cabin was changed into a stable." The sight caused no bitterness about having lived in a place more suitable for animals. Memories came flooding back, and he became saddened as all the difficulties came back into mind. The narrator became emotional and fell into a "girlish fit of tears:"

> Yes!--I cried like Homer's heroes--and that in spite of the critic who, running over the book to make an article will say, 'the author, tender-hearted soul, cries again towards the close of year the third, Chap. xli. p.77, Vol.II.' Yes! I cried![13]

Digressions that addressed the reader directly were common in Hall's narration. The exclamation points also abounded--well over a thousand littered the three hundred pages of volume two alone. He also shifted topics abruptly.

In the middle of a page he stopped and simply announced, "here comes our first snake story." Then off the narrator went into several paragraphs about the encounter. Carlton explained how he and a group on a trail heard a tell tale rustling of leaves but:

> It was not, indeed, a rattlesnake, but a very fierce, large, and partly erect, black one, with a skin as shiny as if just polished with patent blacking, a mouth wide open and astonishingly active tongue! Several feet of head and neck were visible, but how many of body and tail were concealed can never be told except by Algebra; for when with curiosity still stronger than fear, the driver and myself got out for a nearer inspection, not only did her ladyship increase her vengeful hissing but she was joined in that unpleasant music by some half dozen concealed performers; and then our new and yet long acquaintance, instead of vanishing, as had been supposed on our nearer approach, darted head foremost at us, and believe me reader, in the true Western style, like 'greased lighting.' Our retreat could not have been more abrupt and speedy--we pitched and tumbled into our wagon.[14]

Almost as frightened as her agitators, the queen snake pulled back and beat a hasty retreat followed by

"more of her subjects than we even dared to shake a stick at." Most were "infant black snakes; for the protection of which we then conjectured the dam(?) snake had endeavored to intimidate us--in which attempt she had very reasonable success."[15] As this example illustrated, Hall's humor came as much from the telling of the story as from what actually happened. These long, rollicking adventures were more similar to the work of Southern humorists and a great contrast to Kirkland's brief and pointed tales.

Also instead of relying heavily upon allusions of the sort that Kirkland mentioned, Hall's narrator drew upon folk traditions. His humor had a vibrant character and included long sections of vernacular dialect, animals who frequently took on human qualities, and practical jokes. Along with these fun topics, the shooting matches, a barbecue at a place called Guzzleton, and adventures of a character named Hunting-Shirt Andy made for a great variety of different tales. In Hall's stories anything might happen.

One of Andy's experiences provided the narrator with an opportunity for relating one of the more hilarious practical jokes that happened in the New Purchase. When Andy learned two medical students wanted to exhume an old Indian chief, he and a friend put on Indian costumes complete with war paint and a head dress. They carried

rifles to a spot near the grave site. Once the two came and began "diggin like the very devil," Andy said in his own words, the two fired at a tree only a half-foot above the victim's heads. "Three balls [went] crack-wack right into the knot and bark peel[ed] right sharp." Then "the way they drop[ped} tools and [made] tracks was funny. I've seed runnin in my days that's sartin--but if them chaps didn't get along as if old Sattin was ahind 'em," he chuckled. All the war whoops that followed the shots were so frightening one lad kept running until he reached a settlement several miles away. After listening to his agitated report, scouts sallied out for investigation but soon returned with the truth which caused "a mighty powerful heap of laffin."[16]

This story illustrated that Hall's humor was expansive and relied upon exaggeration often from his narrator or characters. Although highly learned with academic credentials and plenty of Latin quotations in his book to show his intelligence, Hall respected the Hoosiers and had fewer qualms about living in a pioneer society. At a shooting match, for example, narrator Carlton, although a temperance advocate, participated in the contest joyfully. He had no intention of drinking from the prize whiskey keg because if he beat the others, they would watch him pour the contents out on the ground.[17] In the absence of overriding cultural ties pulling him in

another direction, Hall's humor approximated the style prevalent among the settlers of frontier Indiana.

III

After reading Thomas Bangs Thorpe's book Mysteries of the Backwoods, an Eastern editor wrote a review congratulating the author for giving the public glimpses of nature in all her "beautiful, interesting, and imposing forms." As this comment hinted, Thorpe thought of the environment of the Old Southwest as sublime in appearance and powerful in force. A descriptive piece, one "much admired" by the public called "Primitive Forests of the Mississippi," conveyed the author's love of Louisiana and illustrated his deep abiding appreciation of the intricate relationship between humanity and nature.[18] His narrator, a hunter not unlike himself, became separated from others and stumbled into a magnificent old-growth forest. There, beneath trees more resembling a cathedral than a stand of oak, he experienced something of an epiphany:

> The sun, although now in its meridian splendor, but occasionally sent a ray through the surrounding gloom, and only tended to make the twilight that rested on every thing more visible. Gigantic trees obstructed my path, and as I cast my eye upward, my head grew dizzy with the height; here, too, might be seen dead trunks shorn of their mighty limbs, and whitening in the blasts of years, that appeared, dead as they were, as mighty as the pillars of Hercules; and I could not help comparing them to those lone columns of fallen temples, that occasionally protrude themselves above the ruins of Choeops and Thebes.[19]

Similar to Hall's narrator in A New Purchase, this gentleman noticed the timeless beauty around him and grasped that humanity and nature were inexorably linked together.

Thorpe's "A Storm Scene on the Mississippi" presented a less sublime picture and more of a striking illustration of nature's power. The narrator traveled along the river's edge with a group that suffered through a humid, "stifling atmosphere" and bites of the "venomous musquito [sic]." These irritations were nothing when compared to a fate yet to befall them. Towards sunset an Indian guide noticed a darkening sky and warned pretty soon, "'storm too much!'" All understood he meant a thunderstorm had gathered strength, and they had better find shelter soon because these disturbances were "no trifling affair." Damaging winds, lighting, and drenching rains each provided a hazard so serious that when pounding down all at once their force could be deadly. Luckily for the tired wayfarers, an abandoned cabin high on an extended river bank provided a perfect cover.[20]

No one ever wondered why this choice spot had been abandoned. Their conversations turned upon the foul weather overhead and the worst storm each had ever experienced. An old wood chopper spoke up and told a riveting tale about piloting a flat boat down from Pittsburgh. He came within three hundred miles of New

Orleans "without meeting with any other accident than that of getting out of whisky twice" when rough weather blew up, causing blinding darkness and so many waves that the surface became "rough as an alligator's back." Next "thar was the tallest kind of noise overhead, and the fire flew up thar like fur in a cat fight." A bright flash revealed a dangerous obstacle in front of him. "A big tree had stuck fast, and was bowing up and down, ready to receive us, and we found ourselves rushing straight on it." Unable to avoid impact, the boat hit and "broke up like a dried leaf." Everything, "pork and plunder scattered, and I swum half soaked to death, ashore." His clothes, tobacco, money, and two prize gamecocks were all lost. The devastation taught him, "a storm on that ar Mississippi, ain't to be sneezed at."[21]

Confirmation of these provident words came when rain "descended in one continued sheet," piercing the roof, and soaking the room inside. Despite the miserable conditions, fatigue put all asleep except for the narrator. He spent restless hours tossing and turning. Not long after he drifted off, the Indian woke him up in a panic. In a broken tongue he conveyed something urgent yet every octave became lost in the din of the driving rainstorm coming down outside. The wood chopper noticed the commotion and asked what was the matter. "<u>River too near</u>," the frightened Indian repeated. "He's right, so

help me----," he determined after listening carefully. Outside the river had risen and had eroded the bluff underneath the cabin. The alarm went up and everyone left with the last one out seconds before the ground underneath gave way. Morning brought a serene calm and light revealing that the "long jutting point had disappeared, house, garden spot, fields, and fences had vanished completely. The caving banks had obliterated all signs of humanity and left in its place a primitive solitude."[22]

Nature triumphed with unbelievable ferocity, although no loss of life. This fact is notable because Thorpe spared characters in an era when romantic authors reveled in death by natural disaster. Instead of taking that route, Thorpe made survival and conquest of nature major themes. His hunting stories revealed this departure graphically because hunters generally killed their prey, no matter how formidable or elusive. Even an unlucky man who found himself trapped between a vicious bear and angry rattle snake managed an escape and came away unhurt except for a peculiar graying of hair. Laughter about close calls whether at the river bank or when hearing a story about a man's hair going gray all at once provided significant comic relief. Many of Thorpe's stories thrived on relating this humorous side often ignored when considering the clash between humanity and nature.[23]

Thorpe's hunting story, "The Big Bear of Arkansas," a favorite in his own time, has become a classic of Southern humor. All the attention came due to the story's good descriptions and elaborate message. The piece introduced a narrator who set the scene and established an outer frame for a story within a story. An unsophisticated character, not unlike the wood chopper, told the inner tale. This sharply defined frame had been a common technique employed by antebellum humorists for years. That barrier separated the outer narrator and reader from a more boisterous inner world. Going into this sanctum and following the vernacular character was also a crucial part of the amusement. Readers could laugh with the inner narrator or at him.[24]

The plot of the big bear story opened aboard a steamboat named Invincible, a fitting title because the vessel symbolized the inevitable march of civilization. Of all those aboard the boat, the most colorful passenger, Jim Doggett, had the finest story to tell. Someone had given him the nickname, "big bar of Arkansaw [sic]" after "the greatest bar that ever lived, none excepted." He received this nickname from hunting in "the creation State, the finishing up country; a State where the sile runs down to the centre of the 'arth," he boasted. This sile, or soil to the educated, provided beets as large as cedar stumps and potatoes the size of Indian mounds. In

fact, he claimed, "planting in Arkansaw is dangerous. I had a good sized sow killed in that same bottom land; the old thief stole an ear of corn and took it down where she slept at night to eat." Not finishing the whole cob, the remaining kernels lay under her belly and "before morning the corn shot up and the percussion killed her dead." Upon hearing this, a skeptical listener mumbled how the story "smelt rather tall." Through this clever admission, Thorpe reveled how he too relied upon tall tale folk traditions for a humor with a local flair.[25]

While Doggett joked about Arkansas, a place he knew well, the monstrous bear he encountered in this magical land left him at a genuine loss for words. On the first pursuit, he tracked the animal all day over eighteen miles without catching a single glimpse. Later on with a friend's help, he cornered the beast and put a bullet into its head, to no effect. The creature escaped by several tricky maneuvers and swam out to a wooded island in the middle of a lake. Doggett thought he had the bear cornered and crept up on the hiding spot, but instead of seeing his nemesis, an entirely different bear emerged out of the brush. This bizarre turn of events left him perplexed and awed by what was by all accounts a supernatural occurrence.[26]

When Doggett learned the big bear roamed at large, he vowed to either kill "THAT BAR, and bring him home" or let

neighbors "divide my settlement among them." The morning before the great hunt, Doggett awoke and "went into the woods near my house, taking my gun and Bowie-knife along, just from habit, and there sitting down also from habit." At this embarrassing moment, as he was relieving himself, "what should I see, getting over my fence, but the bar!" Its ghostly figure pushed through a stand of rails and came at him. "I raised myself, took aim, and fired," causing him to let out a terrible wail. "I started after, but was tripped up by my inexpressibles, which either from habit, or the excitement of the moment were about my heels, and before I had really gathered myself up, I heard the old varmint groaning in a thicket nearby, like a thousand sinners, and by the time I reached him he was a corpse."[27]

This scene provided a measure of dark comic relief that tempered the supreme battle between man and beast. Doggett accomplished the task with less effort than expected and consequently "never was satisfied" at the kill. In "my private opinion that bar was an unhuntable bar and died when his time come," he declared. Elusive and powerful at first, the game had surrendered easily once someone took up the challenge in earnest. Literary historians have thought the bear's passage special, too, because of its supernatural aura and death on a Sunday morning. Both these suggest Christ-like qualities. The

death thus represented, as scholar Richard Slotkin has argued, "the final extinction of the active principle of wildness in the wilderness--an extinction for which man is the instrument, but nature herself ordainer." Nature bowed in sacrifice before the march of mankind. Thorpe may have lamented this day when game no longer roamed the forest, as some have contended, but this story made clear that humanity would destroy in the name of civilization.[28]

In another sketch from 1841, "Scenes on the Mississippi," Thorpe conveyed the same theme but this time failed to soften up the civilizing process. Here he showed the "melancholy exhibition" of Indian removal. Overcome with sadness at leaving familiar hunting grounds, the tribesmen being displaced slept in a depressing, near vegetative state. Little movement took place except when eating or removing the dead. On the upper decks the narrator and other passengers passed time without much thought of those below. The steamboat stuck on a sand bar, however, and then a shot rang out. "Another rifle was discharged, and a loud Indian whoop followed that made our blood run cold," he recalled. A military officer left the room quickly and with a grave expression across his face. Images of mutiny and massacre haunted everyone, throwing them into panic not unlike the one Kirkland's travellers or Hall's medical students experienced. The

fear of Indian uprising was obviously a prominent theme in the minds of Americans, and one humorists thought suitable for satire.[29]

Much to their relief, Thorpe's characters learned the commotion had started when a bear swam away from the river bank and into plain sight. The Indians became excited and could hardly pass up an opportunity to bag this prize. "What a scene! not an Indian that was able, but was upon his feet, his eyes sparkling with fire, and his form looking as active as a panther's." The hunt revitalized their spirits completely. The lively pursuit ended, however, when a white hunter took aim and killed the bear on his first try. With an air of haughtiness, he bragged about hitting the target and if he had hit a brave instead, "I should not have been ashamed of the shot--for the Bar is the best of the two, and a perfect Christian, compared with the best copper skin." The crassness of the hunter's remark revealed a viciousness within the hunter, and by extension, in how humanity rolled back the wilderness. Thorpe had muted this impulse in the big bear story but here the truth came through unchecked. This comment came in a time when another character had remarked, "it is good to be shifty in a new country." Thorpe, and other humorists knew that success in the Old Southwest required cleverness, a mean streak, and dogged determination.[30]

Kirkland had described a challenging West, too, but wished readers to laugh at the poor conditions rather than in glee at a wonderful place. The 1855 Cyclopedia of American Literature explained, "it is not her fault if the laugh which her humorous sketches excites is not a good-natured one." Michigan hardships had produced a seething bitterness and dry, blunt wit. The differences between Eastern comforts and Western realities raised her ire and ultimately gave her expressions a ring more New England than Western. Out West, Kirkland had circled her wagons, latched on firmly to her own cultural origins, and tried not to let standards slide. Her humor derived a great deal of its strength from this futile resistance. A scholar has even suggested that the struggle in A New Home echoed themes from Indian captivity novels popularized by Puritan women. Although the circumstances between the women were vastly different, Kirkland's writing reflected a similar sense of anguish.[31]

Although Hall sometimes expressed disappointment about mud, snakes, and the like, he felt less isolated than Kirkland did. His stories about Indiana glowed with jolly accounts of gigantic trees and magical surroundings. When confronted with hardships, whether mud holes or threatening snakes, narrator Carlton laughed heartily and made others share a chuckle at his misfortunes. All the tall tale exaggerations, rollicking action, practical

jokes, and mountain of exclamation points made the sketches fun for the reader. The style was definitely more local in origins and separate from stuffy Eastern writing conventions. Hall had enmeshed himself in the folk culture of southern Indiana and laughed with his subjects rather than at them. This crucial difference between his sketches and Kirkland's explained why their humor came from different perspectives. Also, because of weak cultural ties, he became susceptible to the area's culture and readily accepted the type of humor prevalent. In this instance, the absence in Hall's past played an important role in determining how he approached his Western setting.

The tall tale language, and folk elements which enlivened Hall's sketches were also present in Thorpe's. The two employed frame narrators and enjoyed having rowdy characters who spoke with thick dialect. By any count, Hunting-Shirt Andy and Jim Doggett could have been first cousins. Kirkland's stories contained fewer of these characters and less dialect. The prestigious North American Review thought her dialogue merely a "Yankee form modified by Western usage."[32] Thorpe and Hall made greater strides in relating the cultural traits of their settings. Even though their humor had so much in common, Thorpe and Hall approached the West differently. Thorpe's Knickerbocker origins caused this divergence.

Whenever Carlton wrote, he used airy terms, a prairie was a "half-celestial fairy scene." These billowing images indicated a perception of nature as wonderous.[33] Thorpe's Old Southwest settings came across as more serious and striking. Thorpe saw God and nature linked closely together in a romantic Knickerbocker sense. The Mississippi River, for example, displayed both Old Testament wrath, in its storms, and New Testament promise, with the water's nourishing silt. Instead of accepting the West as only a wonderful place, as Hall did, or recoiling completely as Kirkland did, Thorpe brought these landscapes into the realm of all human experience. His concentration upon the clash between environment and humanity brought this reality to life for readers. The big bear story remains a brilliant achievement for bringing the struggle of humanity and nature into clearer view. Quite often stories designed to be humorous also presented important parables about their times.

END NOTES

1. Griswold, Prose Writers of America (London: Richard Bentley, 1847); Thorpe manuscript in Rufus W. Griswold Manuscripts, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts; Augustus Baldwin Longstreet lived briefly at Jackson, Louisiana about seven years after Thorpe had moved away. He was also taken with the scenery and recommended, "if your wish to behold more beautiful woodlands than your eyes ever beheld, just come and take a ramble with me around Jackson. I doubt, whether more lovely forests are upon this earth." Longstreet to Bishop Andrew, March 21, 1849, in Jimmy Ray Scafidel, "The Letters of A.B. Longstreet" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1976), 431.

2. Kirkland, A New Home, Who'll Follow? (New York: C.S. Francis, 1839; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 5, 81, and 84. Hereafter cited as Home. All citations are to this edition; See Derek A. Watts, Cardinal De Retz: The Ambiguities of a Seventeenth-Century Mind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 281-282 and note on page 210 in this edition of A New Home for further explanation.

3. Kirkland, Home, 73.

4. Ibid., 6-7.

5. Ibid., 16.

6. Ibid., 59-60.

7. Ibid; Sara Preston to Ann Preston, March 20, 1838, in Preston Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

8. Kirkland, Home, 61.

9. Ibid., 85. All quotations.

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CHAPTER 7

A NEW FABLE OF THE BEES

I

In 1714, an Anglo-Dutch physician published a set of satirical essays entitled The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits. Throughout the Western world, its main allegory about a hive of villainous bees remained controversial for over a century. In 1869, an admirer dubbed Bernard Mandeville's effort "the wickedest cleverest book in the English language."[1] Few individuals had mustered courage enough to argue what he did and in so creative a manner. As the secondary title implied, the book described a prosperous hive which benefitted from vice; moral improvement brought about their ruin. This dialectic of sin leading to fortune and charity to loss assaulted Biblical teachings and mocked conventional wisdom. The most formidable critic of this perspective, French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, believed greed and commercialism a primary cause of social ills. During the rest of the eighteenth century, the contending perspectives of Mandeville and Rousseau represented two opposite positions in a wide spectrum of debate about morality and political economy.

American colonial leaders followed these intellectual discussions and embarked upon their revolution cognizant

of each position. A majority rejected Mandeville's thinking, at least until the 1790s. At this time, a kindred spirit emerged in the Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton who envisioned the United States as a competitive, trading nation with manufacturing at its heart. In contrast, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson envisioned a land of virtuous farmers. On the surface, their ideological clash bore some resemblance to that pitting Mandevillian against Rousseau, because at its crux remained the old question of what constituted a prosperous, moral society. After an electoral triumph in 1800, the Jeffersonians stayed their course until foreign trade problems and War of 1812 caused disillusionment. The jolts of these problems convinced leaders more commercialism would improve their ailing country. As a leading scholar of the period stated, "the cumulative force of experience nudged many Jeffersonians into accommodating much of what they had traditionally feared and rejected."[2]

While leaders were able to see events from a wider vantage point and adjust their thinking accordingly, the response time for the rest of America stretched out over several decades. Acceptance of commerce and manufacturing as both beneficial and necessary emerged only gradually. By the 1820s, when improvements in transportation, and other structural alterations pushed the economy into high

gear, a Mandeville frame of mind became commonplace. The acquisitive nature once regarded as undesirable even emerged as a prized possession called "go ahead." Making an adjustment of such great magnitude, a leap of faith in essence that revolutionary forbearers and victorious Jeffersonians had resisted, remained difficult and not everyone made the shift cleanly or without trepidation. Early American authors chronicled the public's transition in many different stories. Not coincidentally, several of these mentioned bees and bee hunters. The country's first outstanding novelist, James Fenimore Cooper, presented an industrious bee hunter in his 1827 novel, The Prairie. A few years later Maine humorist Seba Smith had his character Jack Downing mention that commerce really made folks "seem to be as busy as so many bees." These and other early references were in fact only harbingers of stories yet to come.[3]

Authors associated bees with commerce, as Mandeville had, and a few writers took the metaphor a step further by making hives symbolic of American society. The most well-known Knickerbocker author, Washington Irving, wrote a highly influential bee story. Like Cooper, Irving gave his account a frontier setting. He had the good fortune of first-hand experience derived from a trip out to the Oklahoma Indian reservations. Reading his 1835 account of a bee hunt, one can not help but think of Mandeville, and

of how Irving and others were busy creating a new fable of the bees.

At the front of Irving's party stood the hunter, a tall lanky fellow wearing "homespun garb that hung loosely about his limbs" and "a straw hat shaped not unlike a bee-hive." Although primitive-looking, he possessed a sixth sense helpful in the difficult chase that eventually took everyone to the hive. Upon arrival, he and several men bent over and "plied their axes vigorously." Undisturbed by the chopping, the inhabitants up above "continued to ply at their usual occupations like so many merchantmen in a money-making metropolis little suspicious of impending bankruptcy and downfall." When doom arrived, survivors gathered nearby buzzing "doleful lamentations over the downfall of their republic." In what was likely a playful stab at Jean Jacques Rousseau, Irving noted how the destruction resembled something "which the 'melancholy Jacques' might have moralized by the hour."[4]

Although catastrophe befell the bees, the hunters collected what they were after, bears licked up the remainder, and:

> I beheld numbers from rival hives, arriving on eager wing, to enrich themselves with the ruins of their neighbors. These busied themselves as eagerly and cheerfully as so many wreckers on an Indiaman that has been driven on shore; plunging into the cells banqueting greedily on the spoil.[5]

The passage above evoked the spirit of Mandeville's fable as everyone took advantage of the loss. At the start of his next chapter Irving advised parents not to send their "youth abroad to grow luxurious and effeminate," but to arrange for them a "tour on the prairies" where they might learn the "manliness and self-dependence" necessary for success.

II

In the late 1830s, perhaps inspired by Irving, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Baynard Rush Hall, and Caroline Kirkland wrote bee fables. Thorpe's "Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter," published in 1839, became instrumental in establishing his national reputation, and resembled Irving's earlier story in both text and spirit. Its protagonist "was adorned with an outlandish pattern of a hat, resembling somewhat an ancient hive; his nether limbs were ensconced in a pair of inexpressibles, beautifully fringed by the briar bushes." This resemblance to Irving's character proved uncanny. "Yes, the mighty Tom Owen has 'hunted' from the time he could stand alone until the present, and not a pen has inked paper to record his exploits," his narrator explained. Unnoticed and unappreciated, Owen "tracked his game through the mazy labyrinths of the air" and then "marched homeward with his spoils, quietly and satisfiedly sweetening his own path through life."[6]

Thorpe's narrator encountered this unsung hero when he came bounding up a plantation avenue and over to a hive lodged in a nearby tree. As a group of onlookers gathered, a shiny axe came out and the sharp crack of chopping filled autumn air. Unlike Irving's melancholy bees, however, the Southwestern variety refused "to give up their home and treasure without showing considerable practical fight." A large swarm descended with considerable ferocity, as nature was wont to do in Thorpe's sketches. "When the trouble thickened," Tom and a surly slave were the only ones left unfazed by the danger. But soon his helper "fell into all kinds of contortions: first he would seize the back of his neck, then his shins, and then he would yell with pain." Undaunted, Owen stood alone and hacked until the tree trunk fell and "the sun, for the first time in at least two centuries, broke uninterruptedly through the chasm made in the forest, and shone with splendor upon the magnificent Tom, standing a conqueror among his spoils."[7]

While Irving might have admired this flattering portrait of great ambition and determination, the Indiana humorist Baynard Rush Hall took a different approach. His perspective on political economy came from his being a Presbyterian minister and life-long educator. Late in life, he affirmed that he had been an "old school Pres.--belong to Dutch Reformed," meaning that he held strict

moral standards. Once in a speech advising youth, he argued that success came only after "passions [are] controlled, appetites curbed, forbearance practiced and prudence exercised." Restraint rather than boundless exuberance remained Hall's watchword. Another hint of his inclinations came from a niece who overheard him say that "it would not take much to make him give up professional life and go to farming" because agriculture was "the way to become wealthy." These sentiments indicated that at heart, Hall remained an old Jeffersonian.[8]

In the fall of 1826, his ideals dawned even more clearly in a sermon preached before the Indiana state legislature. At one point in the homily, he argued that a thriving economy did not necessarily signal a righteous society. Taking cues from Rousseau, the Old Testament, or another source, he warned how "a nation may be prosperous whilst the people themselves may be wretched." With the passing of the founding generation, no visible reminders of the true principles of the nation existed anymore. Hall made this point because only months before Thomas Jefferson and John Adams had died on the Fourth of July, "like aged trees; one after another." Other patriots were also "falling around us," he mused. By comparing the former presidents to trees, Hall gave an important clue about his fable. Cutting down the tree in the bee hunt symbolized for him the loss of old republican values.[9]

Narrator Robert Carlton went out on a bee hunt only reluctantly. His companions convinced him to go along because they wanted honey for a celebration. After a brief tracking, "the hive was ascertained to be in a hollow limb of the largest patriarchal sire of the forest--a tree more than thirty feet in circumference." It took "six men touching each other's hands to encircle the trunk." These sturdy volunteers "divested of garments excepting shirts and trousers" and swung axes in a "circle of rude harmony. Never before had the music of six axes so rung out to enliven the grand solitudes!--and a smaller number was not worthy to bid such a tree fall!" When its noble branches swayed for the last time, he cried, "tree!--tree!--no wind stirs them so--they incline towards the earth--away! hunters, away! away! Hark!--the mighty heart is breaking!"[10]

The ground shook under its weight, and as in the Tom Owen story, sun light poured "the tide of all his rays over an acre of virgin soil, barely discerned by him for centuries!" Carlton asked sarcastically if the hunters felt "rewarded and honoured when for their sake such a tree lay prostrate!" Something was wrong when:

> The sublime and ridiculous are separated by narrow limits; for could any thing be grander than such a tree and such an overthrow? Could any be meaner than the purpose for which it fell?--viz:--To get a gallon of honey to sweeten a keg of Whiskey!"[11]

Bee hunting also bothered Caroline Kirkland, but not for the same reasons. Unlike Hall, her stories about the Michigan pursuit raised concerns about work ethics rather than the changing economy. In "Idle People," a story published in her 1845 collection, Western Clearings, bee hunting came across as a temptation luring men away from honest toil. Unlike Irving and Thorpe who glorified the sport and had their narrators go along on jaunts, her narrator stayed at home and condemned the quest for honey as a lazy pursuit. Significantly, she refrained from using the term "hunting" for the task and instead preferred to call the process "baiting." The choice of this word made the endeavor closer to fishing. The way she described the hunt, individuals found and marked the tree. Then at night they crept back to steal the honey away from its slumbering guardians. No danger existed here, no courage or honor were required at all.[12]

In 1840 Kirkland had written her longest bee fable. This one contained a well-developed plot and a hunter who possessed few redeeming qualities. His whole family lived in squalor on the edge of a swamp. The narrator moralized his case explaining "one of the greatest temptations to our friend Silas is the bee hunt. The slightest hint of a bee-tree will entice Silas Ashburn and his sons from the most profitable job of the season, even though the defection is sure to result in entire loss of the offered

advantage." Once while wandering about, he came across a nest and marked the spot. Before he could cut the tree and empty its contents, someone pilfered the prize. Not long after, a niece of the wealthy family upon whose property the tree sat paid a neighborly visit. In the middle of a gift basket sat a nice, fresh jar of honey. Ashburn asked where the jar had come from and when she said the bee tree he had marked Ashburn became furious. He scowled, "you'll just take that cursed honey back to your uncle, and tell him to keep it, and eat it, and I hope it will choke him! and if I live, I 'll make him rue the day he ever touched it." The niece departed and told her uncle about the troubling encounter.[13]

In the coming days, her uncle's property suffered vandalism, and concerned neighbors warned him about arson. Mr. Keene worried a little but took no extra precautions. Late one night, however, he awoke in horror when smoke began billowing through his bedroom. Running downstairs, he and his wife met Silas in the middle of the house. He clutched a big club. They thought he had come to kill them, and both started shrieking in terror. Their reaction stunned Silas because he had come to warn that a dependency building had caught fire. Ashburn said, "I'm something of a Yankee, and it's my notion that there was some sparkin' a goin' on in your kitchen, and that somehow or other the young folks managed to set it a-fire." The

niece and a young man had been out back and forgotten to extinguish the hearth.[14]

With this act of kindness, Ashburn redeemed his sullied reputation and proved his goodness. In appreciation, Mr. Keene offered steady employment. Soon his "house assumed so cheerful an appearance that I could scarcely recognize it for the same a squalid den," the narrator remembered. Kirkland wished that old values of neighborly service and concern for others might remain no matter how great differences in livelihoods became. Instead of laughing at Keene's misfortune and saying good riddance to his rich neighbor, however, Silas extended a hand to help. Thus, the fable of the bee tree condemned greed and selfishness without insulting the accumulation of wealth. Kirkland thought the world should have morality and economic vitality.

III

During the late 1830s and early 1840s when the bee fables appeared, the United States experienced a tremendous economic boom followed by a severe depression. These unstable times were cause for concern and certainly inspiration for the fables and other stories the three humorists wrote about the economy. When looking at those additional sketches, the places where they were written, Michigan, Indiana, and Louisiana, had a significant impact on the contents. Situations in the West provided ample

opportunities for humorous commentary about economic instability everyone experienced during these years. Most of the writing reinforced views presented in the bee fables.

Stories about land speculation figured prominently in Kirkland's A New Home and were the topic of a scathing story in Western Clearings. Her interest in this piece of Americana originated in her husband's own land deals. His ventures at Pinckney had dragged her into the wilderness in the first place. Because Mr. Kirkland fell into trouble when a shady land agent made off with their investment, she took a dim view of the activity. In her book a character also "absconded or, in Western language, 'cleared'" with proceeds from Montecute, the village started by the Clavers. The couple knew nothing for certain until a gentleman brought to their attention that lumber and other supplies for their partner's mansion had been billed to the partnership. Other funds had gone "for the purchase of certain lands which were intended for his private behoof and benefit." Mr. Clavers fumed because if these deals came up short, their agreement "rendered himself liable for whatever that gentleman chose to buy or engage in his name." Consultation with a lawyer confirmed the worst, and "all that could be done was to get out of the affair with as little loss as possible and to take warning against land sharks in future."[15]

Along with rendering her own experience into fiction, Kirkland also fictionalized the unsavory process of luring Easterners to a location hardly fit for settlement. Chapter twenty-one of A New Home described the precipitous rise of a village, "one of the many speculations of the enterprising Mr. Mazard," the man who had swindled the Clavers. He had obtained the tract when an original purchaser "saw the woody swamp in which he was to pitch his tent" and "was glad to sell out to a speculator at a large discount." This gentleman had better "try elsewhere" and remember "the old and sound principle of 'look before you leap,'" she cautioned. Not bothered by the poor soil, Mazard drew up a slick advertizement promising a varied landscape, "as he did not say which kind predominated, nobody could complain if imagination played tricks." He attracted "an old gentleman of some property in Massachusetts [who] became the fortunate owner."[16]

No one in the East knew the poor quality of the land, and Mr. Tinker had no trouble lining up settlers. Mr. Mazard also agreed to find buyers for the expensive town lots. "We are not informed what were the internal sensations of the lot holders, when they brought their families" to the disappointing site. Clavers assumed that "Mr. Mazard's multifarious avocations [had not] permitted him to visit Tinkerville after the settlers began to come

in." This was just as well because "there was abundance of water there to duck a land-shark, if they could catch him near it."[17]

During the 1830s, when Kirkland created these unflattering portraits, Michigan territory had became a locus of land mania. By one count, fully fifteen percent of all federal acres sold in 1836 sat somewhere on the lower peninsula. Plans emerged for hundreds of towns and villages. An agent for a place called Goodwinville told an investor, "I want to locate [lots] for you and we will divide the profits of the investments in such a manner as you may think right." In this case, improvements went up, and a community grew--albeit faster after its name became Union City. Other deals failed miserably, and victims of deceit could be found everywhere. Ironically, most settlers had no problem with speculation per se; they did, however, express anger at the fraudulent agents.[18]

In several stories, Kirkland explained that speculators from outside the community were hated, and when spotted lurking about farmers "reversed or at least suspended hospitality." Those who bought land "not to clear and plough, but as men buy a lottery-ticket or dig for gold--in the hope of unreasonable and unearned profits" deserved little courtesy. These men were hated for disturbing the peace. "The whirl, the fervour, the flutter, the rapidity of step, the sparkling of eyes, the

beating of hearts, the striking of hands, the utter abandon of the hour" in speculative times was "incredible and inconceivable." Sometimes for miles around people left their normal occupations: "the tradesman his shop; the farmer his plough; the merchant his counter; the lawyer his office; nay, the minister his desk, to join the general chase." To stop this insanity, farmers became rude and defensive. "No personal violence was offered them, as might have been the case at the Southwest; but every obstacle, in the shape of extravagant charges, erroneous information, and rude refusal, was thrown in their way."[19]

Kirkland described an occasion when a stranger stumbled into a neighborhood angry at speculators. The story appeared in "The Land-Fever," a sketch which condemned speculation. Her narrator explained when "the whirlwind was at its height, a gentleman wearing the air of a bank-director drew bridle at the bars of one of the roughest log houses in the county." This Mr. Willoughby needed a bed for the night and the humble abode appeared to offer the only accommodations. When he asked the owner about a certain tract of land nearby, the farmer assumed he was a speculator. In truth, Willoughby had come to link up with friends for a hunt on the land in question. The family invited him in but made sure he remained uncomfortable the whole night. Dinner conversation

remained difficult, and the supper, a thick potato mush with salt, pork fat, and gravy, did little good for the stomach. If things could not get much worse, the sleeping arrangements proved terrible. The hunter's resting spot sat directly under a hole in the roof where water soaked both his body and a prize saddle he had brought inside to avoid the rain. In the morning, when the family learned the truth, they apologized and in atonement for the previous day's sins the mother prepared "her very best breakfast."[20]

A different kind of speculation took up several other chapters in A New Home. Once again, the trouble involved a neighboring settlement. Clavers explained sarcastically that "the very next intelligence from our urban rival came in the shape of a polite note offering stock in the 'Merchant and Manufacturers Bank of Tinkerville.'" The state banking law of 1837 had made incorporation of these concerns easier. Whereas seventeen existed before the legislation, twenty-three additional ones began operations following the bill's passage. Kirkland thought the number much higher because her narrator claimed, "some thirty banks or more were the fungous growth." This unsavory comparison of speculative banking to fungi served the same purpose as her other story entitled, "The Land Fever." She made both forms of the business, land and financial, into a bodily malady that corrupted communities. Clavers

thought these banks trouble and the term "wild cat" appropriate because "these cunning and stealthy blood-suckers" proved "more fatal in their treacherous spring than ever was their forest prototype."[21]

The board of directors made a friend's husband the first, and as matters went, the only chief executive of the Tinkerville office. He lent credibility to the enterprise, signed notes, and collected a handsome salary. In an ostentatious display of wealth, he paraded around in a fancy carriage, bought a bright Parisian bonnet for his wife, and carried furniture purchased in the East through "our humble village in triumphal procession." Others also made a killing off the enterprise. "A long-headed Yankee" watched closely, and, seeing too many bills in circulation, he took advantage of the resulting inflation. As fast as he could, he turned "splendid notes of the Merchants and Manufacturers Bank of Tinkerville into wheat and corn." The debased value of the notes allowed him to buy grain at a lower actual price and increase his profit when he sold the commodity to someone with hard currency. Lest one think the farmer selling the crops a rube, he "winked knowingly" and passed on the notes by paying "the last dollar on certain outstanding debts." The bank president, Yankee, and farmer all knew the game and became successful players. Clavers found nothing wrong with their cleverness.[22]

The undoing of the bank came when state commissioners opened its vault. Upon inspection, they discovered "broken glass and tenpenny nails covered above and below with half-dollars." With that revelation the whole ruse ended abruptly, and Clavers sighed "alas! for Tinkerville, and alas, for poor Michigan!" Everyone holding the notes lost his investment, and many were impoverished. Easterners may have known panics but, according to Clavers, they "can form no idea of the extent and severity of the sufferings on these occasions." Musing about the consequences, Clavers asked "can we wonder that the poor, feeling such wrongs as these, learn to hate the rich, and to fancy them natural enemies?"[23]

Whereas Kirkland presented speculation as a scourge, Thorpe did the exact opposite. He lamented the end of boom times. A story of his called "The Way Americans Go Down Hill" provided insights into how Thorpe approached speculation. This story described a harrowing stage coach ride passengers elected to take down the side of a mountain in the middle of winter. When given the choice between freezing on a slow, cautious descent or getting to the warmth at the tavern below, all chose a fast ride to the bottom. The narrator claimed he knew full well that "the slightest obstacle, the stumbling of a horse...a too strongly drawn breath would have projected [them] over the mountain side as if shot from a cannon." After getting to

the bottom safely, and amidst a great deal of self-congratulation, one rider quipped "one must run a little risk rather than be delayed in a journey." More shaken, the narrator explained:

> I have often in my dreams, fancied myself on a stage coach, just tumbling down the ravines that yawn on the sides of 'Ball Mountain;' and when I have started into wakefulness, I have speculated on that principle of the American character that is ever impelling it forward.[24]

When Thorpe wrote this sketch in 1844, the country had not yet shaken the ill effects of a serious depression. Two years earlier, Thorpe had entered local politics, perhaps to effect improvement, and won a seat on the East Feliciana Parish Police Jury. In an acceptance speech he joked, "fellow citizens, we are all broken and gone to----! Well, I go in for economy and eternal improvements."[25] These jovial words reflected his pro-business leanings, a disposition not uncommon for members of the Whig political party, an organization active and successful in Louisiana. Thorpe wrote a number of stories that looked upon financial misfortune as a matter of course in the regular cycles of business. Because there was nothing anyone could do to effect immediate improvement, everyone might as well laugh at the outcome and make the best of hard times.

In a story about an efficient steamer on the Mississippi, a character piloting the boat held little sympathy for those hit hardest by the depression. He

pointed at the wretched cabins lining swampy bottoms and wondered how the inhabitants made a living. "As far as he could judge," their only occupation was "sitting on the heads of barrels and looking out on the landscape." Seemingly without land in their possession, as far as he could see, they lived off of "unhealthy air." The boat moved on past them and upon reaching a landing the narrator saw remains of "a great city conceived of by land speculators in 'glory times.'" The place had become a ghost town with "several splendid mansions decaying in half-finished frames that were strewn upon the ground." Thorpe bemoaned that this river port had died in infancy. The sketch expressed far more sympathy for the speculators than for those suffering from the depression.[26]

In another sketch, Thorpe even ridiculed the state legislature for imposing a vindictive tax on exchange brokers. In wake of the collapse of financial markets, brokers had been singled out and saddled with the blame. New Orleans brokers prided themselves on being crafty fellows and nearly all evaded the statute by calling themselves bankers. These maneuvers brought "the eagle eye of the law into various places of mammon." The narrator could not believe authorities hauled upstanding citizens into court and made them "answer for the dreadful offense of trying to get an honest living without paying two hundred and fifty dollars for the attempt." In

addition, he noted, prosecutors bullied the accused into testifying against friends in what turned out to be distasteful trials. One witness, however, beat the prosecutor by refusing to give direct answers. He side-stepped intense efforts at breaking his resolve. When asked if a certain gentleman sold bills of exchange, he replied that no he only "remitted them to his correspondences." Foiled by these vague answers, the inquisitor became angry and demanded names of brokers in the city. "Never met one, since the law was passed imposing a tax of two hundred and fifty dollars on them," he snapped back. The whole sketch made the law appear foolish.[27]

In Hall's The New Purchase, land sharks, evasive brokers, and confidence men so plentiful in sketches by Thorpe and Kirkland were few and far between. His narrator had little interest in speculation and was more interested in how Westerners established and maintained contact with outside markets. General stores became a crucial link, he thought, in the long chain from the Eastern suppliers to Western buyers. John Glenville opened the first major establishment in Carlton's neighborhood. He profited by selling supplies, extending credit, and conducting business in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Settlers counted upon him for goods and, as Hall indicated, relied upon his knowledge of accounting,

markets, and prices. In appreciation for his honesty and help, the community named the settlement in his honor and sent him to the legislature. Later on when robbers looted his store, customers volunteered to track down the men responsible. The community shared in the loss, and instead of laughing at his predicament, they all wanted to help.[28]

As one might imagine, the store owner acted as middle man in the market relations between Eastern suppliers and settlers. This position often led to amusing incidents when he offered goods for sale that had not been seen before in the West. For example, one day an independent frontier women from Illinois came into the store looking for crockery. Unknown to her, "among his earthen and sham-Liverpool were found some articles similar to things domesticated in great houses." Made of fine porcelain and fitted with elegant handles these chamber pots looked so fancy no one could blame the shopper if she mistakenly "elevated them in the domestic economy." Glenville thought she knew what she was doing but thought her comments about their great capacity rather odd. When she became excited and declared, "well! I never! if them yonder with the handles on, aint the nicest I ever seen--but I must have three anyhow," he thought that number "a large purchase, to be sure, of the article; but curiosity asked no questions." He wrapped up the

items and sent her along. Some time later, Glenville accepted an invitation to dinner, and in his honor the family spread their finest settings. "When supper was placed on the table what do you think was there?" Sure enough, a large white chamber pot sat on the table filled to the brim with frothy white milk. The story ended by complimenting Glenville for acting politic and saying nothing. Only a lesser man would have embarrassed the hostess. This vignette illustrated both an ignorance of fancy items and the key role a store keeper played in bringing supplies to settlers.[29]

All these stories involving various aspects of the antebellum economy reflected how each humorist viewed the changes in the economic nature of the country. Thorpe remained optimistic and his Tom Owen story illustrated the courage and fortitude that businessmen, especially brokers and speculators, needed for success. Kirkland's narrator took a slightly different view because while she saw nothing wrong with business ingenuity, she felt those who advanced by fraudulent means deserved rebuke. Contemporaries of hers in New England had already begun to fashion a middle ground between acquisitive impulses and Godly behavior. They called this concept progress and believed the idea linked economic advancement and moral values. Unlike Kirkland, Hall preferred a more traditional economy where people entered the market on

their own terms. During the 1820s, he had found a pleasing state of affairs in Indiana and his 1843 book looked back on those times with nostalgia.[30]

The sketches Hall, Kirkland, and Thorpe wrote were also meaningful illustrations of how humor brought larger concepts to the average reader. Barely a century before, European philosophers had carried on debates about political economy in dense tomes and through high-minded fables. In antebellum America, a broader segment of society became involved in these discussions in their local communities, the state legislatures and on the national level though political parties. As many shades of opinions burst to life in this more democratic process, the humorists picked up on the variety and engaged the reader though mirthful prose. Humorists played a pivotal role in communicating both thought and feelings about the economy.

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9. Hall, Righteous the Safe-Guard and Glory of a Nation (Indianapolis: Smith and Bolton Printers, 1827), 8 and 22.

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14. Ibid., 83-84.

15. Kirkland, A New Home, Who'll Follow? (New York: C.S. Francis, 1839; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 54 and 55. Hereafter cited as Home. All citations are to this edition.

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17. Ibid., 83.

18. J. Goodwin to E.W. Morgan, April 5, 1837, in Morgan Family Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Susan E. Gray, "Local Speculator As Confidence Man: Mumford Eldred, Jr. and the Michigan Land Rush," Journal of the Early Republic 10 (Fall 1990): 387 and 402.

19. Kirkland, Clearings, 2 and 4.

20. Ibid., 6-7 and 14.

21. Kirkland, Home, 120 and 121; Larry Massie, "Plows, Ships, and Shovels: Economic Development in Michigan, 1836-1866," in Richard J. Hathaway, ed., Michigan: Visions of Our Past (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989): 99.

22. Kirkland, Home, 120; 123-124; 127; 124-125.

23. Ibid., 126.

24. Estes, Collection, 215-220.

25. Ibid., 5.

26. Ibid., 255.

27. Ibid., 257 and 258.

28. Hall, Purchase, I, 231.

29. Ibid., I, 229.

30. Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England As Region and Nation," in Edward L. Ayers, et al., All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 51.

CHAPTER 8

THREE PERSPECTIVES ON REFINEMENT IN THE WEST

I

Along with sketches about wilderness experiences and bee fables, Caroline Kirkland, Baynard Rush Hall, and Thomas Bangs Thorpe included a number of stories about refinement. Eastern humorists had taken up this topic during the early 1830s, and when Kirkland, Hall, and Thorpe began writing in the late 1830s, they demonstrated how the topic had relevance for Westerners. In fact, settlers took a great interest in material culture and improvement of manners. The arrival of elegance and respectability presented a special case for them, however, because its introduction came at a time when many settlements were barely out of their original state. The peculiar ways characters of Kirkland, Hall, and Thorpe reacted to the novelty of refinement and adapted to the tenets of finer living illustrated how culture evolved differently in different places across the West.

In Hall's The New Purchase, an Indiana community became excited when the narrator announced that he would bring a piano into the village. Robert Carlton wrote that "no small sensation" was created when locals realized what he planned. "A pianne! what could it be? Was it a sort a fiddle-like--only bigger, and with a powerful heap of wire

strings? What makes them call it a forty pinnne?--forty--
-forty. Ah! yes, that's it--it plays forty tunes." Those with knowledge of its sounds revealed nothing but instead "did all in their power to mislead conjecture, enjoying their neighbor's mistakes." Everyone took part in the discussions and considered the event an important moment for the community.[1]

Once the narrator returned with the precious cargo, wide-eyed enthusiasm swept up settlers. For several days, neighbors made a beeline to the home where the Carlton family "played tunes on it and vastly to the amazement and delight of our native visitors." Even the casual passersby considered "the notes as those of invitation, [to come] by day or night, not only around the window, but into the entry, and even into the parlor itself." Without knocking at all young and old stepped through the threshold. A few went over and "'a sort o' wanted the lid tuk up like to see the tune a playin [sic]." Carlton obliged and endured the inconvenience because "all this was, indeed, annoying, yet amusing. Besides, we might have well have left the Purchase, as to bolt our door or quit playing." An unwritten set of rules, different from any Eastern sense of decorum, said that he must welcome neighbors and put up with "some rusting of wires from perspiring fingers" reaching inside the instrument. These

Indiana settlers considered the piano as much a part of their community as Carlton himself.[2]

Few of those settlers had known refinement, and the piano had been their first introduction. Carlton recalled how the music of Beethoven moved one lad to exclaim "if I had a puttee wife and such a fixin, I'd never want nothing no more no how!" The notes had touched "chords in his heart never before so vibrated." Each uplifted him and produced "enrapturing visions--so lofty! so aerial! so unlike his cabin, his sisters, and perhaps his sweetheart!" A great composer liberated feelings from deep within his soul and encouraged him to strive towards material betterment. The sight of coarse neighbors becoming so transfixed amused Carlton because refinement had been something second nature to him.[3]

The reaction of the Michigan village where Mary Clavers lived was more subdued. Kirkland's characters were simply not as excited about the piano Clavers put in her home. When the schoolmaster came for dinner at the household, however, he asked plenty of questions about all the fine items on display. The Clavers were the first family to bring Eastern refinement out to their area. The pictures on the wall drew his attention first, then he bent over and "scraped a little of the crystallized green off my ink stand to find out how it was put on." Next, he "pulled up a corner of the parlour-carpet to see whether

it was wove like a bed-spread." At every opportunity he inquired about one thing or another, and Clavers answered patiently even though his curiosity had became quite annoying. He saved the piano for last and said, "well! I heard you had one, but I didn't hardly believe it." Before she might reply, he had dropped down on both knees and begun to crawl around underneath. On the other side, he stood up, looked satisfied, and asked for a song. She promised a demonstration after supper. The school master sat down at the table and "finished his meal by the time others had fairly begun. Then, throwing himself back in his chair said, 'I'm ready whenever you be.'" This punch line provided both a climax to the story and illustrated how Clavers could not be sure that her Michigan community understood the importance of refinement. One had to savor and enjoy life's finer pleasures in a way that the schoolmaster with his battery of questions and hasty dinner could not comprehend. Significantly, he became impressed yet utilitarian impulses overwhelmed any sense of propriety he may have possessed.[4]

The piano story Thomas Bangs Thorpe presented had yet another twist. He wrote about community leaders who held a strong influence over their fellow settlers. These venerated men became idolized for their intelligence, high position, and judgement. At times, people hung on their every word. Oftentimes these gentlemen had little

refinement themselves, yet possessed an intangible quality, perhaps trust or prestige, that allowed them considerable influence. When these leaders became refined, they were able to drape themselves in its fashionable airs and bolster their position even more.

The grand master of Hardscrabble, the village setting of the story, came from a family that included a state senator, and possessed a name that rang with Biblical authority. Moses Mercer, much to the chagrin of all, had been away on a hunting trip when a New England family moved into town with a piano among their possessions. Without their leader to consult about the curious wonder, and the owners still unapproachable strangers, the villagers found themselves rudderless. All knew the instrument had to be something special because the English visitor Captain Marryet had encountered one wearing pantaloons, and newspapers reported that a well-attired gentleman presided at its performance. Many then speculated that a piano was some type of animal. A few rejected this guess because a busy man had hurried through town pasting up advertisements for a girl's school which read, "the use of the piano to be one dollar a month." If an animal, the creature had to be gentle enough for the girls to play with it. These discussions kept interest alive and when strange noises traveled from behind the house walls where the family was moving in furnishings "it

was presumed this was the piano and the excitement rose higher than ever." Two old women decided upon a look for themselves and planned a neighborly visit. The women stepped inside and acted polite, yet the whole time "eyed every thing in the house with intensity." The hostess reported the piano had broken a leg on the trip west and the damp weather had impaired its tone. She promised a performance at some other time. That settled matters for the ladies. The family owned an animal with a broken leg and the "Mass-sis-sip fogs has given it a cold, poor thing."[5]

Because they had not made a visual inspection, their visit did little to quiet all the active imaginations. Moses Mercer's return could not have come sooner, and the villagers sighed universal relief. He had been their oracle and fountain of knowledge. "'Mo' knew everything; he had all the consequence and complacency of a man who had never seen his equal and never expected to." He bragged about visiting the state capital where he met the fashionable set and where he was happy to report pianos were as thick as woodchucks. He explained how a piano made music, and that fact excited the listeners even more. Now they would have to hear a song. Mercer's side kick, Jim Cash, wanted to sneak up and get the first glimpse. The two crept up when the owners were away, and there in a corner on the gallery sat a contraption off by itself.

Its bars, rollers, and long crank looked interesting, and Cash wondered if he had stumbled upon the piano. "Mercer turned to the thing as cooly as a toper would to a glass of brandy and water, and said, 'that was it:'"

> With trembling hands, Cash reached out his hand, and seized the handle of the crank (Cash was at heart a brave and fearless man), he gave it a turn, the machinery grated harshly, and seemed to clamor for something to be put in its maw. 'What delicious sounds,' said Cash. 'Beautiful,' observed the complacent Mercer, at the same time seizing Cash's arm, and asking him to desist for fear of breaking the instrument, or getting it out of tune.[6]

The two left satisfied and told villagers about the encounter. Several days later, the family invited a crowd over for a house-warming party. Mercer, Cash, and others waited impatiently for Mo to request a song. Graciously he complied and all were ready for the big moment. Instead of going out to the gallery, however, the hostess stepped over to what looked like a large corner table. Off came a cloth and with one quick motion a cover rose revealing a long line of black and white keys. The guests enjoyed the music, but were a little puzzled. This piano was nothing like what Mercer had described. Cash himself walked up afterwards and asked about the instrument on the gallery. The hostess blushed, embarrassed at someone having seen the thing, but told him he had not run across a musical instrument but, "a--a--YANKEE WASHING MACHINE." Her reply could be heard across the room and grated across Mercer's ears, "as if rusty spikes had been thrust in

them." His knees shook under the weight of the truth, and a reputation that he had cultivated for years crumbled before him. All the talk about seeing pianos thick as woodchucks had been a lie. He remained at the village, but soon left under the cover of darkness. His reason for going was a Yankee peddler who showed up selling washing machines called "patent and highly concentrated Mo Mercer's Pianos."[7]

Appearances meant a great deal in Hardscrabble. When Mercer lost face he was not simply exposed as a fraud but removed entirely from his leadership position. The way everyone looked up to him, deferred to his judgement, and then cast him aside when he proved to be a false prophet revealed a society where hierarchy meant something. This story and the others by Hall and Kirkland revealed that Western communities were not at all alike in their reactions to refinement. No one great obsession guided behavior. Characters in Hall's stories carried themselves with a democratic spirit not present in Thorpe's story, and the people in Kirkland's account illustrated how they had little interest in making only superficial changes. The schoolmaster was less excited than Hall's young man. The sounds had given the latter hope that he might become better. In Hardscrabble the notes of a piano had a big impact. The instrument banished a respected authority figure when he turned out to be an ignorant pretender.

II

Throughout A New Home, Kirkland's narrator stated how Western society was less impressive to her because people refused to part with their rough and unadorned behavior. Similar to Mary Clavers, Kirkland could not believe that anyone could be proud of simple ways. When a relative wrote and explained how she had lost a piano on a westward move, Kirkland replied that "such a blow would almost un-woman me." Pianos and other material possessions were as much a part of her being as values or morals. This powerful remark revealed a deep attachment she had for refinements. She even admitted a piano was valuable because "good surroundings came in conjunction with a good soul." Her narrator shared these devotions and expressed dismay over the rough life of a pioneer. "I do not remember experiencing, at any time in my life, a sense of more complete uncomfortableness that was my lot" she remarked when first going into the Michigan woods. This place "was so different from our ideas of comfort, or even decency," and a great deal of the discomfort stemmed "entirely from my anticipations of the awkward and tedious inconveniences of our temporary sojourn at this place." At first, Clavers struggled "to carry through the ordinary nursery routine, in a log-hut, without a servant, and with a skillet for a wash-basin." Most settlers possessed "almost literally nothing but a bed, a chest, and a

table." These places looked so bare, compared with the houses she had known back in New York, and she could not believe her neighbors could be happy under these spartan conditions.[8] When Clavers had packed her household into a large wagon, she expected to transplant her belongings completely, but upon arrival at Montecute the baggage ended up in storage until a big enough cabin could be made ready. Then she "induced Mr. Ketchem to procure a wagon and carry to our new home the various articles which we had piled in a hovel on his premises." Neighbors showed up to help unload, and "the release of the pent up myriads of articles which crammed the boxes, many of which through ranked when they were put in as absolutely essential seemed ridiculously superfluous when they came out." The volunteers, seasoned veterans of pioneer life, made derogatory remarks each time a wondrous item came out of a box. A set of dainty tables puzzled a neighbor who "looked very scornfully after all and said 'I guess they'll do better for kindlin's than any thing else, here.'" A prized cupboard once deemed essential shared a similar fate and went outside for "yeoman's service as a corn-crib." Clavers soon realized "common sense was on their side." None of what she had brought out was necessary for living in a young settlement.[9]

Adjusting to a world without refinements remained difficult because much of what Clavers was called to do

assaulted the fibers of her soul. She had the most trouble, for example, adapting from strict standards of private property to a more communal sense of sharing. Every once in a while what she called a snotty-nosed brat wandered up the path wanting to borrow something, "'cause you've got plenty. Whoever comes into Michigan with nothing will be sure to better his condition." Those who had "money or mere household conveniences," will be besieged and refusing to loan something stood tantamount to "an unpardonable crime." Almost anything might be borrowed. "Wheel-barrows, your shovels, your utensils of all sorts belong, not to yourself but to the public who do not think it necessary even to ask a loan, but take it for granted." Even the most personal of items: "bedsteads, beds, blankets, sheets, sieves, smoothing irons, churns, and other things must be given faithfully." Butter churns "run about as if they had legs," and once she gave out her broom, thread, tape, thimble, scissors, shawl, shoes, combs, and brushes. One fellow thought nothing of asking her husband for "his shaving apparatus and pantaloons." What bothered her most was the absence of gratitude. Pens sometimes came back with the retort, "you sent an awful bad pen." This case reminded her of a story about a Quaker who loaned out a wheelbarrow that came back broken and with complaints from a neighbor that the problem had to be fixed for further use that afternoon. Instead of

getting angry at the damage, the Quaker smiled and made repairs. Clavers wished she possessed this patience. Michigan settlers with their different manners and customs drove her crazy.[10]

She had one of her greatest pleasures when the women of the community organized the Montecute Female Beneficent Society. Clavers explained, "it would have been enough to have said it is a Ladies' Sewing Society, and so saved all this wordiness." The organization copied Eastern associations and represented a great effort towards refinement. "This association is the prime dissipation of our village, the magic circle within which lies all our cherished exclusiveness," she explained. While beneficial for being the "hive of industry, the mart of fashion," and any number of other positive qualities, the society soon became "the fountain of scandal, the hot-bed from which springs every root of bitterness among the petticoated denizens of Montacute." Comments of this kind and her unflattering portraits of members put Kirkland into trouble with her Michigan neighbors. In later years a local historian commented upon that "severe and pungent" story, pointing out how she had damaged a community's pride with a "ludicrous" anecdote.[11]

The prime mover behind the society, a Mrs. Nippers, possessed a terrible reputation. Her house had "no ear or funnels coming out of the windows nor a mirror or

telescope," Clavers related, yet somehow she knew everything about everyone. Her gossip moved quickly through the village, keeping the local rumor mill grinding during all seasons. Naturally, her victims hungered for revenge, and a perfect opportunity came when Nippers began organizing the sewing group. Instead of giving her the presidency, as she expected, they elected another woman. Angry about the slight, the foiled candidate began making the rounds of the village cultivating dissent.[12]

Clavers hosted the first meeting and, knowing that her refined manners often bothered other settlers, she made simple preparations. She also selected a plain outfit, but when the first ladies arrived all in their good clothes, "much to my discomfiture," she explained, the others assumed she had forgotten to change. The other women arrived and almost from stepping inside Mrs. Nippers began harping. "What! isn't there any work ready?" she announced loudly. "Well, I did suppose that such smart officers as we have, would have prepared all beforehand." During the middle of the bee, she raised another storm by suggesting that people living on the edge of town had not been invited to join, and the twenty-five cents membership fee was too much anyway. Another lady spoke up and debunked these accusations, saying Mrs. Nippers had planted those ideas. The truth hurt and she sewed "in

silence for some time" carrying "her colours at half-mast for the remainder of the afternoon."[13]

Towards the end of the day, a husband came by to fetch his wife home. The man noticed Mrs. Nippers but kept his anger over her gossip to himself. At this moment a lady across the room suggested a piece of cloth be sponged as Mrs. Nippers had suggested. The man broke in, "well, sponge it then, by all means nobody else knows half as much about sponging." A few ladies wondered what he meant, and then an old matron who had sat quietly all day explained that when one travels around the neighborhood "getting your dinner here and your tea there, and sich like; some folks calls that sponging." The remark put Mrs. Nippers in her place because while collecting gossip she had eaten more than her fair share of free meals.[14] Clavers thought the man's insult particularly enlightening. "I have thought that almost any degree of courtly duplicity would be preferable to the brusquerie of some of my neighbors: but on this occasion I gave all due credit to a simple and downright way of stating the plain truth. The scrofulous hint probably brightened my mental and moral vision somewhat."[15]

Clavers also learned how refinements were not always a sign of better people either. Once she ran across a family living in an unusually large home above a beautiful lake. A woman carrying an "air rather of Paris than

Michigan" invited them inside where "there was a harp in the recess, and the white-washed log walls were hung with a variety of cabinet pictures. A tasteful drapery of French chintz partly concealed another recess, closely filled with books; a fowling piece hung over the chimney, and before a large old-fashioned looking glass stood a French pier-table on which were piled fossil specimens, mosses, vases of flowers, books, pictures, and music." Excitement over finding kindred spirits diminished when she discovered this splendor had not been purchased through honest labor. The father had barely worked for a living, and the family sustained itself from "a small income which still remained of his wife's fortune." Clavers deplored how the children learned "to despise plodding industry, and to indulge in repinning [sic] and feverish longings after unearned enjoyments." After conveying this story, she apologized for "a chapter of sermonizing." Refinements had to be earned, and those who did little work for them were worse than those people who lived without.[16]

While Clavers discovered that refinements were not everything in life, Baynard Hall learned that the democratic spirit at his community was not necessarily a good quality. On the one hand, Hoosiers enjoyed this spirit when they gathered for jolly celebrations as happened when store owner John Glenville organized a

Fourth of July barbecue at Guzzleton. No fancy refinements were required for community members to have a good time. Narrator Carlton loved the romantic spot with its bower of "hackberry, the buckeye, the sycamore, and other trees" that shaded a long plank table without distinctions. After the customary orations, "common, uncommon, and rabble" marched over and ate enough food "for a whole settlement--and all other settlements." By design "if the legs were judiciously disposed under the table, and the head properly inclined above, the contents of one's plate could be shovelled into the mastication aperture with amazing dexterity and grace." Carlton explained, there were no "genteel nor polished doings at all; we were then too far West for refinements!" The event proved to be something of an exception.[17]

The placid democratic spirit on display at the Arcadian Fourth of July feast was admirable, yet Carlton knew he was only seeing one side of his community. Just as people had barged into his home to see the piano, he discovered that in the management of the state learning seminary, the harmony of the barbecue broke apart. The democratic settlers believed education was not a refinement, but rather a right children should receive just as everyone thought they were entitled to a piano performance. The school used tax dollars, and so "it was democratically believed, and loudly insisted upon, that as

the state had freely received, it should freely give." As a proud yet illiterate resident declared, "'larnin, even the most powerfullest highest larnin'" ought to be free. When the chief administrator insulted these convictions by asking for a tuition increase and larger salary, a storm of controversy erupted. Carlton, a teacher at the school, could not believe the fury. The school's charter led to most of the trouble because by its provisions "the faculty oversee the students; the trustees oversee the faculty; the board of visitors, the trustees; and the legislators the visitors;--the people oversee the legislature, and the people of Woodville [the school's location], the entire whole." These highly democratic arrangements created a circle "as vicious as that of the Church militant and insultant" chasing after each other.[18]

Carlton added, "in all matters pertaining to 'high larnin'" the inhabitants were not experts at this refinement. Few "know the second letter of an alphabet from a buffalo's foot" he joked. Despite their ignorance many thought their opinions should be taken into consideration. Those placed in charge who should have been smarter than the average citizens proved themselves about as incompetent. These "ninnies, nincompoops, [and] ninnyhammers," the narrator called them, squandered every cent allocated for school buildings. Rather than taking competitive bids, contractors who lived near the site

received the jobs and were "curiously exorbitant in their demands for their silly work." In disgust, the narrator concluded, "nothing can ever make State schools and colleges very good ones; but nothing can make them so bad as for Uncle Sam to leave every point open for debate, especially among ignorant, prejudiced, and selfish folks in a New Purchase."[19]

On another occasion, the excess emotion at an evangelical camp meeting reminded him of how the popular mood often ran into excess. Because he had been trained as an academic Presbyterian minister, Hall gave his narrator a critical eye not unlike his own. Over several pages the narrator quoted the various preachers who raved in heavy dialect about "Johnny Calvin." An African-American preacher from Kentucky rose and thrilled spectators with a dramatic rendering of the duel between David and Goliath. An excited preacher saw the act and cried "yes sinners! you'll all have to fall and be knock'd down some time or nuther, like the great giant we've heern [sic] tell on." At least one person took this pronouncement seriously and fought the Devil within himself by screaming and shaking in a frenzy. This sight proved enough for Carlton, and he left disgusted at the whole spectacle. Once again, manners and dignity fell aside in the rush of popular enthusiasm.[20]

Another manifestation of uncivilized, popular fervor that drew his anger came when the narrator became caught in the middle of a Charivari, or as people in Indiana said, "Shiver-ree." In this ritual, participants stood outside the windows of newlyweds and made unbearable noise until bought off with alcohol. The custom had French origins, and, according to Carlton, was "a custom derived from the Canadians." When news of John Glenville's service became known a Charivari group gathered outside his house. "The human performers were estimated from two hundred and fifty to three hundred and fifty!" Most came running to "do special dishonour to d--d 'ristocraticul [sic] and powerful grand big-bug doins." Glenville had been a store owner, legislator, and good drinks were expected that night. Equipped with cow bells and other noise makers, the crowd began gathering outside the house early and created such a racket the marriage service could barely be heard by those in attendance. Afterwards, the groom and others began ferrying buckets, pitchers, and cups outside in hopes of placating the unruly masses.[21]

The participants enjoyed the gesture yet demanded "big-bug wine," the best in the house, and when those bottles were not forthcoming matters turned ugly. The more demanding members of the crowd began jeering and rushing the entrances in an effort to wreck the reception. Pretty soon a full scale siege commenced. The wedding

party turned back each assault, but not all the entrances could be covered effectively. An unattended window on the side slid open quickly, and someone threw a frightened piglet inside. Two ladies sitting on a couch underneath the frame caught a glimpse of pork flesh as the screaming beast tumbled down one's shoulder and sprang across a lap. Frightened guests leaped on top of chairs and ran into several furnishings that crashed onto the floor. The bedlam in soon matched the chaos outside. At this moment of confusion, a fellow sensed the disorientation and tried the door but quick action prevented an entry. The door slammed in his face and caught his finger in the frame. "It is wonderful how hard a fellow can pull when his hand is thus caught! Why, in spite of all the force against him, he did jerk his hand out--and left nothing behind except the skin of a thumb with a nail attached!--a scalp for the victors!"[22]

By this time the horseplay had gotten out of control, and the frightening scene began scaring several children inside. Carlton's daughter fainted and fell into a seizure. He decided this was the end and went out to stop the fury. As he and a few others waded outside, rocks flew their way, and several people yelled "knock 'em down!--drag the big-bug Yankees through the creek!" Carlton found a friend, and after explaining the problem, the brave soul spoke up telling those assembled, "Bob

Carltin's a powerful clever feller, arter all, albeit he's thick with big-bugs--and bust my rifle, if any man knocks him down to-night." The crowd thinned after these magic words because "an appeal to manliness disperses Hoosiers." No one wanted to be singled out for hurting a poor, helpless child.[23]

Thomas Bangs Thorpe worked as a portrait painter and newspaper editor which put him into contact with a different class of people. Planters and professionals became his regular associates rather than common folk. These gentlemen fascinated him and became the subject of stories. These leaders commanded a respect he admired, and most importantly, "the planters are men who can command their time, and are from their youth practiced sportsmen. All are good shots and all possessed eminently of qualifications for refined pleasure." The mere act of chasing deer, turkey, fox, and bear confirmed an affluence. The "manly sports of the South make its denizens noble in their dispositions and encourages chivalrous sentiments." Not unlike others who wrote in the sportsman's genre, the glamorous and oftentimes far-fetched gaming exploits of these privileged few became the subject of a tale or two.[24]

One his best stories concerned the steamboat Nimrod, which according to a headnote, a Barrow settlement planter had built expressly for hunting trips along Louisiana's

rivers and bayous. One of its large decks stabled a dozen horses comfortably and other berthed a large party of guests. A special arsenal held armaments and ammunition for various game, and then on a deck all by itself stretched a long, ornate bar where "a negro replenishes and keeps the tumblers like crystal, but only changes empty bottles for full ones; no other change is permitted." All drinks came gratis. No business discussions or businessmen came aboard because "the very atmosphere of the boat would kill off such characters." The steamer was a pleasure craft in every sense of the word. A rough wood chopper wandered aboard during a stopover and found "something un-natural 'bout [the boat]--too comfortable for this world, by half--all the crew with long-tailed coats on, and tights--no cargo, save arms, ammunition, ten horses, and a raft of hounds--and they don't pay for liquor!" The vessel startled him because its presence brought "into the wilderness the comforts of refined life thus mixing up the life of a perfectly wild hunter and the associations of the drawing room." The Nimrod symbolized how civilization had come to the Old Southwest.[25]

The gentlemen who came aboard were competitive, like the hunter, yet dignified. Each wanted a commanding role on board, meaning that the steamer only started in spite of their assistance. As everyone sat down for breakfast

the first morning, the cabin swayed to the side and then the vessel stopped with a sudden jerk. Upon closer investigation, the others found the gentleman left at the helm had taken his rifle and gone out on the deck. He let the boat drift into a mud bank because a wild turkey had come into view by the river's edge. The deck provided the only clear line of sight for a shot.

Thorpe's characters frequently acted with this single-minded determination. A prime example of one of these determined yet reckless individuals came in the person of Colonel Pardon Jones. Friends thought he walked with a "halo of glory glittering in his path and narrowing its circle to settle upon his capacious brow." People looked up to him as a leader, and when passengers headed upriver realized the narrator was going for a visit at the colonel's plantation, everyone treated him like royalty. "The captain waived his title to the head of the dinner table, and left me the honor of carving a tough Muscovy duck, with a dull knife." The colonel greeted his visitor at the levee in full-dress uniform, and after a smart salute took him under a shade tree where he might give an interview. Jones had announced for Congress.[26]

He insisted that "he went emphatically for the people, the whole people, and for nothing but the people: and what the people wanted was the constitutional wants of the land." The narrator brushed aside this rhetoric and

moved on to pressing issues. The Second National Bank of the United States had been a sore point ever since President Andrew Jackson defeated a re-charter request and withdrew government deposits. Opinions ran strong on the subject. Instead of taking a firm position, his "frank and open" thoughts were rather murky. The colonel said:

> If there could be a Bank established without any influence, capable of relieving the distress of individuals without using government funds, causing the exchanges to be always in favor of "Luzianna," reducing the tariff, and at the same time protecting manufactories, and if such a Bank met with the approbation of the executive and two-thirds of both houses of Congress, [I] would then go for it heart and sword; but if otherwise, the thing was up, and stood no more chance than a "stumped tail bull in fly-time."[27]

On most controversial issues he spoke "in an equally clear and statesman like manner." Jones obscured his opinions and based his candidacy on patriotism. Whenever foreign affairs came up in the interview he perked up, spoke boldly, and rattled his saber. The mention of Thomas W. Dorr, a rebel in Rhode Island who wanted a wider franchise, caused him to draw "his sword and flourish it in the air." Upon finishing an agitated gesture, he brought down the point and "shaved off the toe of his boot." This mishap recalled both the sudden jolt when the Nimrod halted. The incident revealed that he was no better than other people, and to stay in charge he maintained an illusion of grandeur. Jones used patriotism and his military bearing as an effective cover for hiding

his shallow grasp of issues. Thorpe admired the cunning of Jones and Moses Mercer, yet the stories about the two characters exposed each as frauds who pretended to have every answer for their followers.[28]

Through stories about refinement, Kirkland, Hall, and Thorpe revealed that major cultural traits separated their communities. Hall and Thorpe presented people enchanted by refinements, yet Hall's Indiana community was more democratic while Thorpe's looked elitist. Refinements thus served different functions in these worlds. Kirkland perceived her community as curious about refinement, yet less interested in correcting their bad habits. Plain and simple ways were fine with them. While her narrator might not have agreed with this outlook, she finally appreciated the perspective. As the sketches of these humorists suggested, the West contained diverse communities where refinement proceeded unevenly. As eastern refinement inched into communities, in the form of pianos, manners, or customized hunting boats, the existing cultures melded them into their distinct societies.

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THE PRISM OF LAUGHTER: ANTEBELLUM HUMORISTS IN REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE
VOLUME II

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CHAPTER 9

THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURE AND PLACE: SHILLABER, RILEY, AND BALDWIN

I

By the 1850s, more humorists were writing for newspapers and magazines than ever before. Their work appeared in regular columns and special sections of publications. Most of the new entrants into the field were still lawyers, journalists, and increasing numbers from other professions. Generally all the men, and a few women who began writing, had other responsibilities and wrote as an avocation. Three of the most fascinating humorists who began writing during the first few years of the decade, Benjamin Shillaber, Henry Riley, and Joseph G. Baldwin, best exemplified individuals who became nationally known at a time when books of humor began selling in great numbers. All three saw their contributions in the pages of newspapers and magazines and then critics reviewed their books for large audiences. The way these humorists approached their craft also stayed consistent. The selection of material, plot of stories, and messages still depended upon the culture and place each held dear. The success of these three also depended upon a formula that included an amiable humor.

Another important reason for singling out Shillaber, Riley, and Baldwin rested in a seemingly unimportant

aspect of their lives. All three did not stay in their birthplaces and childhood homes but instead settled in different locations where they only later started writing humor. The sketches were not then about communities known from youth, but more reactions to places they settled into and made home. The moves each made were not entirely jarring experiences, and in each case adjustments came easily. Shillaber went from his birthplace in New Hampshire to Boston, and Baldwin left the Shenandoah Valley for the black belt of Alabama. Riley, however, began life in western Massachusetts and then traveled into upstate New York and later over to southwestern Michigan. The three moved as young men in their twenties and thus carried strong personal and cultural links from the areas they left. Culture and place thus remained essential in explaining the meaning and purpose behind humor. The exact details of lives and personalities had a great bearing on the written word and attested to the continuing power of culture and place.

After yeoman's service, toiling for nearly twenty years in the business, Benjamin Shillaber became an important figure in the elite world of the Boston press. His connection with the print world had started back in the 1830s and at the bottom of the newsprint hierarchy. As a printer's assistant and then reporter, he learned a field that had grown with improvements and advent of the

so-called penny press. With the expansion came needs for those talented with a pen. Shillaber found that he could write well enough, and a Democratic daily, the Boston Post, hired him as a legislative reporter. That newspaper remained an amiable place, and he eventually took the editor's spot. A contemporary noted that even following his success, Shillaber still arrived at work in disheveled clothes that made him resemble a rough backwoodsman rather than editor of a city daily. His ruffled appearance, large hat on head and carpet bag in hand, reflected an attempt on his part to maintain connections to his humble origins.[1]

When Shillaber first arrived in the Brahmin capital from up the coast, the comic character Jack Downing had just entered the national scene. Similar to Downing's creator, Shillaber descended from a family steeped in New England traditions. Both of his grandfathers had fought in the American Revolution, and these patriots received his "profound veneration," he explained. He grew up in modest circumstances at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and obtained a grammar school education before going off to a Dover newspaper office. There he admitted getting "all I have," he remembered, in the way of practical knowledge.[2]

As a Post reporter, Shillaber had occasion to put his common sense to use on numerous occasions, especially when untangling legislative matters. His job also exposed him

to numerous speeches given in this country and overseas. An oration by the British reform politician Sydney Smith caught his eye and left a deep impression. In the speech, Smith railed against conservatives who resisted change. To make his point, he made up an old lady named Mrs. Partington and claimed she foolishly tried to stop an incoming tide of the ocean using only a broom. This image chided opponents of change and pointed out the futility of resistance. When Shillaber read this bit of humor, he had an entirely different reaction. To him, that quaint old lady needed honoring for valuing the past and its traditions. Not everything could be saved, but the future was not something that should be welcomed with open arms. In the late 1840s, when he decided upon a little "humorous experiment" that might express his views, he introduced an elderly woman named Mrs. Ruth Partington. She shared a surname with her British counterpart introduced years earlier except for her personality and manners which were thoroughly New England in origin. In fact, she possessed a sense of humor not unlike Shillaber's own grandmother who had been "keen witted, but very grave; her humor never indulging in the levity of a laugh." In later years, he admitted that similarities existed between his creation and Smith's character, but those resemblances were accidental. "Having certain things to say which needed an exponent, her name at once suggested itself, and I assumed

it, as I supposed, for the time only; but the name grew to be a household word, matters multiplied" and soon everyone knew "the kind, the amiable, the sagacious Mrs. P."[3]

After learning that numerous readers also shared the same last name as the lovable character, he "wondered that the Partington family did not rise in indignation to crunch one who has so abused their intelligence." Partington and the rest of her eccentric family delighted readers with their sayings and doings. A mischievous nephew named Ike became a particular favorite, and Shillaber remembered how he had "wonderful success with Ike as a foil." A scholarly assessment of the whole clan advanced the idea that these characters became popular and indeed beloved by admirers because they ably illustrated Yankee habits. The article concluded that in his life, Shillaber "met the cultivated, the educated and the medium classes of people, and from his contact and study came some of his best 'Partingtonians.'"[4]

In addition, Shillaber possessed a knack for the humorous and illustrated this talent each time Mrs. Partington spoke. She became known as the "utterer of certain nonsenses" which first appeared in the Boston Post during February of 1847. The initial submission came entirely for "fun, for the author's own amusement," and appeared "among the 'all sorts of paragraphs' as fatherless waifs." Shillaber remained fully "content to

see them caught up and read with no ambition beyond. They continued for three years until what had been commenced as a pleasantry for the moment assumed formidable proportions." As Shillaber indicated, his work caught on fast. When the first sketches appeared, the Post's owner had been away, relaxing at a New York resort in Saratoga Springs. He got so many compliments from arriving visitors who had read or heard about Partington that he dispatched a note back to the office asking, "Who the deuce is Mrs. Partington?"[5]

In time, thousands across the Northeast and other areas of the country learned her name. Newspapers everywhere began reprinting her sayings, and she entered into the country's collective experience. Partington became so popular that Emily Dickinson, the recluse living in Amherst, Massachusetts, quoted her in private correspondence, and another great poet, Walt Whitman, read the sayings and called Shillaber "a good man--possessing some strong qualities--was emotional, democratic, frank, genuine: a fair sample of our better [than] average professional man." Shillaber himself "never supposed" the sayings "would go beyond a dozen," and yet in a few short years, he joked, "there [was] a Mrs. Partington quite prominent as a temperance lecturer down in Maine." Towards the end of life, he expressed delight in pleasing so many people. "The old dame has offered me very many

pleasant moments in scribbling her sayings & her popularity has been a source of great satisfaction to me."[6]

His first squib told of how Mrs. Partington poured alkali into a cup of tea in hopes of improving the "ile" taste of Boston water. This weak jest about the terrible taste of the city drinking water went largely unnoticed, and actually the next little sketch received more attention. In this second one a merchant bragged about being able to weather the high price of English breadstuffs because he bought bread by the pound. Mrs. Partington replied that it made "no difference to her whether flour was dear or cheap, as she always had to pay just so much for a half-dollar's worth." This dead pan wit remained an important part of Shillaber's comedy. Another early saying read: "Mrs. Partington says there must be some sort of kin between poets and pullets, for they both are always chanting their lays." The full meaning of this country humor becomes apparent when one understands that a pullet was a hen who had started laying eggs. Laying an egg also meant producing a bad product, and thus Shillaber took a jab at proud poets who he thought were no better than squatting hens. Not infrequently did rural lore creep into the sayings, if for no other reason that Mrs. Partington came from the countryside.[7]

A longer piece that appeared somewhat later entitled "New Remedy for a Drought" evoked a rural setting and the quaint, folksy humor so often characteristic of the Partington sayings. To get the total effect, the story merits full quotation:

> Mrs. Partington was in the country one August, and for a whole month not one drop of rain had fallen. One day she was slowly walking along the road, with her umbrella over her head, when an old man, who was mending up a little gap of wall, accosted her, at the same time depositing a large stone on the top of the pile.
>
> "Mrs. Partington, what do <u>you</u> think can help this 'ere drought?"
>
> The old lady looked at him through her spectacles, at the same time smelling a fern leaf.
>
> "I think," she said, in a tone of oracular wisdom, "I think a little rain would help it as much as anything."
>
> It was a great thought. The old gentleman took off his straw hat, and wiped his head with his cotton handkerchief, at the same time saying that he thought so too.[8]

Along with pleasant drollery, Partington provided amusement when she became confused or mistaken. This happened a great deal of the time, so much in fact that many believed her an American malaprop. One of Shillaber's true gems, illustrating how unaware his character was of her mistakes, placed her in a discussion about the literary achievement of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a great Massachusetts novelist. The story began with a question:

> "What is your opinion of the humor of [Nathaniel] Hawthorne, Mrs. Partington?" asked a young neighbor that had been reading, "Twice-told Tales."

> "I don't know," said she, looking at him earnestly; "but if you have got it, you'd better take something to keep it from striking in. Syrup of buckthorne is good for all sorts of diseases of that kind. I don't know about the humor of Hawthorne, but I guess the buckthorne will be beneficious. We eat too much butter, and butter is very humorous."
>
> There was a slight tremor in his voice, as he said he would try her remedy, and a smile might have been perceived about the mouth, next day, when she asked him, with a solicitous air and tone, how his humor was.[9]

The key to understand the story above was knowing that in old usage humor meant bone marrow or internal body fluids. Why Shillaber created a charming yet dim-witted old lady has never been determined completely. He could have been making fun of the rising number of women involved in social reform causes or those writing domestic fiction. Any number of other developments could have influenced him as well. A good reason, often overlooked, presented itself when he commented on the scenery on a trip he took out into the New England countryside. At one spot he thought "hill and dale, wood and field, though mingled with too much town, [were] nevertheless charming." The intrusion of the urban sights into the setting bothered him, and later he said another similar scene "command[ed] beauties that are exceedingly impressive however impaired by the rush of trains that cut off the view twenty times in a day, but the view remains defiant of noise, and I drink my fill of admiration." Again, the appearance of something related to industrial progress

interrupted. Shillaber was annoyed at these intrusions because those rural settings got disturbed by industrial progress. This attitude made up a central component of his thinking and went right to the heart of why he brought Mrs. Partington to life.[10]

On a trip made home in the early 1850s, closer to the time he began writing humor than the journeys mentioned above, Shillaber became disappointed by all the changes that had happened to Portsmouth. Over the previous twenty or so years that he had been gone sites familiar to him had disappeared from the landscape. A cellar where he caught frogs was torn up and the old mill pond where he enjoyed endless hours of swimming and horse play "was run through the bowels with two railroads." The violent characterization of what happened to the site illustrated his strong negative feelings about these developments. Shillaber confronted a town elder about the unchecked developments, and the gentleman said that he could not save everything especially "if so many old residents would not stay around to look after things."[11] This answer cut deeply into Shillaber's heart because he had left the town and not been there to save places. This bittersweet homecoming reminded him as well of the many people he had known as a child growing up. Shillaber explained that several of these old residents had everything to do with the creation of Partington:

> And a great gratification it is, I assure you, to see my paragraphs copied, and my blessed old creation, the venerable prototype of many an old lady of our town that you doubtless remember still regarded kindly and her vernacular sayings preserved as when she was first introduced to the readers of the "Post." Did you not recognize in her some of those kind motherly bodies that in our young days lived around Portsmouth, with benevolence to their feet soles but whose ideas were of the primitive kind that made worldly wisdom seem foolish in their expression. The one that I remember as coming nearest to it, at this time, was Mrs. Meldon (now in glory)-she has formed the basis for many a public laugh, though the public only saw Mrs. Partington. Betsey Fernald was another and Polly Martin was another--a regiment of Mrs. Partington's might be found in the old town (city, now God save it.)[12]

Mrs. Partington's values "belong to a past generation," Shillaber attested, and at least one contemporary critic concurred. This critic pictured the old matron "antique wearing a petticoat maybe holding a pinch of snuff between her thumb and finger, a pair of spectacles astride her nose, and a mouse-colored parasol in her hand." One admirer sent Shillaber a drawing of her wearing a fancy outfit. He criticized the picture for its finery. "The ornate cap is antagonistic to the primitive simplicity of the original," he wrote back. The clothes had to be plain and unadorned, just like her persona. Shillaber thought people needed a reminder of the past as well as something that might comfort them during the awkward transition into an industrial age. Later in life, he felt satisfied that the character had "done good to my generation, for I believe many a laugh has been the traits

of my small labor, and people have felt happier while under the operation of a dose of Mrs. P."[13]

II

In a small New England village bearing the gracious title of Great Barrington Henry H. Riley spent the first years of life. After being orphaned at age ten, he left this picturesque setting in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts for an uncle's home in upstate New York. At New Hartford located outside Utica, the same place where Caroline Kirkland had moved at an early age, Riley matured within the region's rich New England culture not unlike she had also done a few years earlier. And like to Shillaber, Riley's professional career began when he entered a newspaper printing room. For almost the entire decade of the 1830s, Riley moved about the Empire State working on various sheets. This life promised a steady income and offered in time an opportunity for Riley to try his hand at writing fiction.[14]

While in New York City and employed as a journeyman printer he wrote a few stories and poems for the fledgling Knickerbocker magazine. An early set of sketches describing a close-knit community presented the narration and animated descriptions that would make his humor so appealing. In his next two stories, the realism developed in the earlier submissions disappeared in favor of romantic stories about New England's colonial past. Two

poems the magazine published around the same time as those other stories, 1836 and 1837, presented material more thoughtful and substantive. His "Thoughts in Trinity Church-Yard" and "A Touch at the Times" both written during the boom times of the 1830s claimed how a "spirit of speculation is devouring us up. It is working a melancholy change in the better sentiments and affections of the heart." The "falling chink of many dollars" and "rustling of bills" stifled creativity. Not unlike Shillaber, Riley remained skeptical about the benefits from the dawning industrial age.[15]

His next contributions maintained an air of protest but took a less direct approach. Entitled "Autobiography of A Broomstick," this two-part series presented the history of a piece of wood from its time on a tree to its use as a cleaning instrument. Its trips through one household after another gave plenty of opportunities for seeing the joy and sadness among common people. Riley managed a laugh or two when the broom suffered, but otherwise his tale remained a fable. His last work for the Knickerbocker came in an 1839 series called "My Fishing Ground." Here, he departed from the urban perspective he had so far developed with the poetry and broom stories and broke into romantic rural imagery. The descriptions were similar to those of other New York Knickerbocker writers. Taken together all these efforts

illustrated a phase in Riley's development as a writer that experimented with different styles. That his editors appreciated these contributions can only be assumed from a long list of the distinguished authors who in the opinion of the editors had made their venture successful. Down the columns which honored Longfellow and other literary greats appeared the name "H.H. Riley."[16]

Instead of remaining in Gotham and contributing further to the magazine, perhaps developing his writing talents more, Riley decided upon the more certain life of editing a Democratic newspaper in an upstate factory town. A New York traveller's guide contained a bland entry about Waterloo, calling it a "large handsome town," but saying little else other than the place remained "the seat of justice for Seneca County." For nearly five years, Riley lived an uneventful existence in this uninspiring place. He conducted the Seneca Observer, wrote editorials, one of which mentioned Jack Downing, but otherwise maintained a monotonous partisan line. Not many fiction pieces and almost no humor graced the pages of issues. At some point, he grew tired of newspaper life and began reading law. Under the direction of a respected local judge, he got the essentials and then departed for Michigan.[17]

Arriving at Kalamazoo in the spring of 1842, he passed a bar examination and then looked around for a place to practice. A final move placed him approximately

thirty miles south in the heart of the St. Joseph country. An early settler explained that the region took its name from the "St. Joseph River, a noble stream about 250 miles long," which meandered through "the counties of Cass, Berrien, Kalamazoo, a part of Calhoun, and Branch and St. Joseph." For its lovely beauty this "new and far-famed region is frequently called the garden of the West." Settlers from everywhere had poured in during the 1830s, and by the time Riley got there its fertile fields were "now almost entirely filled up."[18]

The settler who described the St. Joseph River as a noble stream also commented upon the region's "great many little villages--more than a fellow can count." To another visitor, these "huddle of houses" sitting "peaceful and quiet-like" were "nothing grand or wonderful" yet all the same "beautiful and interesting." Riley found one of these fascinating villages and made the place home. When he arrived at Constantine, its pioneer days were fading as the axe gave way to the hum of saw mills. Steamboats docked during high water, and a railroad line reached the town in 1851. A refined society established itself as well, if the complaints of one resident about a self-styled aristocracy running the town can be trusted.[19]

The transformation of this Eden into a bustling business community moved Riley to write again. In 1853, a

new sketch about a Western bee hunt appeared in the Knickerbocker. His narrator took a jaunt with a Tom Owen-type fellow and helped him fell several trees. After cutting up the trunks and ruining several hives, his narrator regretted the whole enterprise. Unlike Irving and Thorpe, Riley lamented the loss because the hunters "had destroyed six cities, and banished their people. We had humbled the pride of six cities and brought it to the dust." A whole civilization crumbled, and the narrator, obviously humbled by the experience, asked plaintively "is it strange that I felt sober?"[20]

Two other stories followed in December of 1853 and January of 1854. Both these contributions introduced a fictional village named Puddleford. This place had to have been modeled after Constantine. Riley's new home in the St. Joseph country provided a "convenient microcosm," in the words of one scholar, for exploring the transformation from a pioneer period of settlement in the Midwest to the growth and expansion of towns. In later years Riley explained that his intention had not been "merely humor," but revealing "strong points of human nature in the rough; how stern, honest men struggle with the hardships of a new country, meet and dispose of them, and how law, religion, and order is laid in strength, if not in beauty." "Much of the history of Michigan lies in the heads of old settlers, unwritten, and which if

preserved, will like wise improve by age," he told a correspondent in the late 1850s. At an 1878 historical meeting, Riley addressed a large crowd and reminded everyone of the huge debt owed their rugged ancestors. "God bless them," he said. "They have a great deal to do with the prosperity of those who [came] after them." By the time he spoke these words, times had changed even more, and only in memory would "the good old pioneer society live on." His stories had been an early attempt at preserving those bygone days.[21]

III

Joseph G. Baldwin enjoyed a far different background from that of Riley and Shillaber. His life began in good circumstances within the magnificent Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Baldwin's father owned a textile factory and mill, and sent his son to the prestigious Staunton Academy. His first job put him in the law office of an uncle, a judge, and a cousin, later a cabinet member in the Millard Filmore administration. These family members followed the Whig party, and he too joined, but gravitated more towards its states-rights wing. A brother edited a Whig newspaper in Lexington, and after leaving the law office he worked there. Tradition puts him and the young author Alexander Caruthers together as friends and collaborators on an insulting satire aimed at Germans attending a local Democratic party convention. If this

piece came from Baldwin, the sketch was his earliest attempt at humor.[22]

Eventually, Baldwin left his brother's newspaper and started one of his own at Buchanan, a village on the western terminus point of the James River and Kanawah Canal. After six months that venture failed, a woman shunned his romantic overtures, and he wanted a change. Word arrived from a friend that young lawyers were doing well in the Old Southwest. Baldwin possessed enough experience with the legal profession from clerking at the family office and he decided to try out this occupation. In a letter to his uncle he expressed an interest in making "a start to the South. This is a movement to which I have been looking forward for sometime." A friend "assures me that the reports we hear of the great unhealthiness of the country and recklessness & immorality of the inhabitants are greatly exaggerated. Missi[ssippi] is remarkable for the generous dispensation its inhabitants manifest." These comments suggest he possessed a few preconceptions and already held an abiding interest in the moral fiber of society. Ironically, his humor would discuss the recklessness and immorality that he at first discounted. He concluded the letter with a measure of hope, optimism, and expectation. Any young man "who is worthy of success" might do well if he "will expect himself to ensure it."[23]

During the 1830s, large sections of the Old Southwest, mainly in Mississippi and Alabama, opened for settlement, and a cotton culture blossomed in this fertile territory. Land speculation reached frenzied proportions by 1836 when bankers, lawyers, and settlers vied for advantage. A leading prosecuting attorney in Dekalb, Kemper County, welcomed Baldwin and granted him a few minutes to speak on behalf of a defendant. This favor provided a chance for recognition, and the prosecutor remembered the favorable impression made. "His speech was marked by the clearest and most convincing logic, rising at times into vivid oratory." He recommended a move east across the border into Sumter County, Alabama, where large plantations lined the Tombigbee River. Baldwin settled on a northerly stretch at Gainsville, a spot perfect for reaching court circuits in eight surrounding counties.[24]

After a few years, Baldwin married the daughter of a Whig judge, and not long after ran for the state legislature. He won a seat handily and attended the 1844 session where he boasted about being "pitted offhand against their strongest opposition--I gained great credit. They say I skinned him like an eel." Despite good debating skills, he stayed only one term, yet remained active in the party, attending the 1848 national convention and losing a hard-fought bid for Congress. Around this time he moved to Livingston, county seat of

Sumter, and began working with another law partner. His colleague described him as "a grand man of great intellect" who "leaned a little forward" when walking. His steps were usually rapid, "with his hat rather back on his head, an expression of countenance somewhat pensive, except when lit up by some person or thing which awoke his attention."[25]

A contemporary also reported how "in the midst of his professional labors, Mr. Baldwin found leisure to write" a series entitled "The Flush Times of Mississippi and Alabama." Eighteen sketches appeared in the premier journal of Southern letters, Richmond, Virginia's Southern Literary Messenger between July of 1852 and September of 1853. His law partner marveled at their creation, each one leaping magically "from tongue to page." Despite the haste and perhaps carelessness in which he wrote, another contemporary thought "this work was an admirable hit, containing a variety of transactions in detail, with scenes in court and elsewhere, rich in originality and characters, and rarely surpassed in the humor of the narrative." Only one person complained that "the humor of Baldwin had little or no spontaneity," and "while his wit was quite elaborate, the best articles in the 'Flush Times' were anecdotes that had floated about for years before he seized upon them." Indeed, the stories, "mostly descriptive of persons and scenes well known in the

section where he resided" were less original, but the impressions offered important glimpses of white society throughout eastern Mississippi and western Alabama.[26]

In one of his stories, a narrator observed almost casually that political partisans in the Old Southwest "not only went back to first principles, but also to first times." Their debates rarely omitted references to John Adams or Thomas Jefferson, "as if an interminable dispute had been going on for so many generations between those disputatious personages; as if the quarrel had begun before time, but was not to end with it." Baldwin's commentary emphasized how people in his community honored old principles. The ideals of the American Revolution placed virtue highest among the priorities. As a Virginian he could not help but remember his state's role in the founding of the United States and early political affairs. Although politics and society had changed substantially since the founding and even the 1790s when the debate over these republican ideals first intensified, many people still looked to those ideas as important guides for the present. "Like Goldsmith's 'Good Natured Man,' arbitrating between Mr. and Mrs. Croaker," Baldwin joked, at election time the hallowed Resolutions of 1798 even "agreed with both parties on every occasion."[27]

Whereas other humorists of the Old Southwest made tall tales and hunting stories their staples, Baldwin

brought up the "flush times" of the 1830s and mocked corrupt behavior. A chief concern of his centered on the erosion of republican principles as greed drove men and institutions into moral eclipse. His narrator spoke with a patrician voice necessary for criticizing the transgressions of society. When his sketches first appeared, Baldwin appreciated that local newspaper editors received the effort as one of a distinguished writer rather than frontier raconteur. He maintained dignity and an upright bearing in his own life and advised a son attending the University of Virginia, "uproarious, bizarre humor is not the style of a gentleman or scholar." His first collection appeared when he was visiting Mobile, Alabama. A number of people complimented his book. "The ladies profess to admire it very much. It is spoken of as a book of a great deal of elegance and beauty. It is more appreciated as the reader is more intelligent," he wrote home. Only a year later, however, he wrote a political history of the United States because many had taken his humor merely at face value without recognizing the points he was making. The new book might show once and for all "I am not a mere joker."[28]

As the biographies of Baldwin, Riley, and Shillaber illustrated, culture and place determined the character of their humor. Although sharing similar occupations in journalism or law, each drew upon customs and ideas from

where he grew up and then later lived. All three brought in experiences from everyday life for dozens of entertaining sketches. Shillaber included impressions from a New England village for his urban newspaper while Riley and Baldwin wrote about separate Western locations. They examined these from the perspectives of a New Englander and Virginian. Their humor would diverge because each lived and wrote in distinct places and within different cultures. Time had not brought divergent perspectives closer together.

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CHAPTER 10

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

I

When Benjamin Shillaber began writing humor during the late 1840s and early 1850s, he went about the task in much the same way Seba Smith had done twenty years before. He introduced an eccentric character from a quaint New England village, and then moved this person away from familiar surroundings and into a growing city. Incongruities between the character's values and urban mores provided great material for comedy. By the 1850s, the ever widening gap between rural and urban locales continued unabated in the Northeast, and remained an important issue. The region's authors witnessed the emergence of large urban complexes, bigger factories, the ascendancy of railroads linking places together, and other industrial developments. Because the transformation from rural to urban had taken place in a generation or less, Northern authors instilled stories, novels, and even poetry with a stronger sense of change. A scholar who surveyed Northeastern humorists during the fifty years between 1830 and 1890 thought they were motivated by "the irony arising from the conflict between competitive economies" of "village and city life."[1]

Both Smith and Shillaber came from New England villages, idealized life there, and bemoaned the eclipse of those places. Their characters, Jack Downing from a repose of old republican virtue, Downingville, and Mrs. Partington who hailed from somewhere west of Boston, shared a few traits. Both looked at matters with a great deal of common sense and had heightened senses of right and wrong. Neither knew much about city life which made for great comedy when the two moved to Portland and Boston respectively. Despite having characters sharing important similarities, Shillaber's humor held none of Smith's optimism. He thought the market revolution a destructive force that would sweep away time-honored values and replace them with less attractive alternatives. Whether the 1850s had sparked a negative reaction within him or not, he held firmly this opinion and made Partington symbolic of a better past. Unlike Downing who made attempts at adaptation, Partington never tried and remained hopelessly lost.[2]

What worried Shillaber most were the physical signs of change. Abundant evidence of those agents of transformation existed in plain view. Complaints he made about a railroad destroying a boyhood haunt and other negative comments suggest a disposition that was not favorable. As lines snaked out of Boston during the 1830s and 1840s, Shillaber witnessed farms and villages changed

by more complex networks of exchange. His impressions came through clearly in a short biography of Mrs. Partington included at the front of the collection of her sayings. Her old, beloved family domicile sat where an extension of the Beanville Railroad had to go. "The house was a stanch piece of work, erected at a time when men were honest, and infused much of their own character into the work." Different from the "modern homes that sprang like mushrooms around it" and containing "oak paneling and thick doors [that] imparted the idea of strength," its fine craftsmanship symbolized a bygone era. The railroad received permission for their line and the house was condemned.[3]

Mrs. Partington's husband, Paul, had died years earlier, and the narrator thought he "never would have parted with it thus." He "would have fortified it and defended it while a charge of powder remained in the old powder-horn that hung above the mantel-piece, or a billet of wood was left to hurl at the assailants!" Mrs. Partington grew sad at the prospect of leaving. She wanted to stay but the "march of improvement" would not allow it. That "ruthless spirit of progress all-grasping stops not at anything in its path, whether it be a homestead or a hemisphere." This displacement, almost criminal in the way Shillaber described it, became a bitter theme often revisited in the course of his

sketches. For example, a description of a Thanksgiving feast at the home opened with the statement that the happy scenes to follow had taken place before the railroad had destroyed "the Partington mansion, and uprooted and overturned the old family shrines without regard to their sacredness--the Vandels!" In another story, the villains "had driven her from the homestead," and at another place "the railroad ploughshare had upturned her hearth-stone." All these descriptions made the tracks into a potent force of change, arbitrary and barbaric. This force even assaulted the beloved institution of family.[4]

Despite suffering under an unhappy fate, Mrs. Partington took the loss well, remarking "it was no use to try to stand against a railroad." She left and went to live in Boston. Her nephew, orphaned and under her care, went along too. The technological improvements which had driven her away were even stronger in the city. As Shillaber showed in numerous vignettes, nearly all left Mrs. Partington befuddled. When Isaac read aloud a newspaper piece about "making bread by steam" power, she exclaimed "bred by steam-power!" The thought of anyone raised by machine bothered her. "Bred by steam! what will the world come to next?" she asked. "People are fast enough now; but what will they do when they come to be bred by steam-power, if they act according to their bringing up? Ah, Isaac, people may be faster now, but

they are no better than they used to be!" When he explained that "it was a new mode of making bread" to eat, she "looked at him steadily for a moment" and then "resumed her knitting." Of all the inventions she learned about, the telegraph was among the hardest to comprehend. The idea of sending private letters down something resembling a clothes line jarred her sense of propriety. Then the idea of humanity harnessing "heaven's blessed lightning" for "a dancing on a tight wire," well she declared, "it's absolute blasphemy, and outrage on the highway, and again all natur and scriptur [sic]."[5]

Even the terms used in everyday conversation sounded foreign. As the narrator explained, "some of the mercantile phrases were at times imperfectly understood." Mrs. Partington wondered "what [do] they mean by a better feel in the market?" When out shopping "I'm shore I don't feel any better there. I don't believe anybody does but the butchers, and that's when they are pocketing the money." The desire for profit made her wonder "why people want to be always struggling for wealth." In her life "food and raiment and clothes to wear to meeting" were all she ever wanted. Certainly there was nothing worth going into debt. Shillaber's character advised her nephew to "never get in debt, no matter whether you are creditable or not." Living off bread and water was preferable to feasting on rump steaks and owing for them. A sense that

debt robbed one of freedom and pride remained a central part of her thinking about economics. This view had been eclipsed by the credit and consumerism growing in the Eastern cities.[6]

Another example of Partington's old-fashioned manners came when a schoolmaster paid a neighborly visit. In the course of conversation he expressed concern that "we have little left of the revolutionary stock, now." He meant that the legacies of the Revolutionary generation had become less dear to people. This conversation baffled Mrs. Partington because she thought that this past yet existed in a closet. Reaching into the back where there sat a pile of curious antiques, she pulled out "with a present-arms motion, an old musket-stock." Her guest heard that the item had been through "times that tried men's souls." The past had a place in her home and heart.[7]

On plenty of occasions, Partington's old-fashioned manners made her act foolish. The first time she boarded a city omnibus a ticket taker approached with palm out, and, thinking he was giving a greeting, she reached over and shook his hand saying "How do you do, dear?" He replied, "Fare ma'am!" To which she said, "well, I'm shore, I'm glad of it, and how are the folks at home?" The ticket taker "shouted without drawing back his hand:

'I want you to pay me for your ride.'" She uttered, "'O! I thought it was some one that knowed me."[8]

On another occasion, Mrs. Partington confessed, "what a queer place this Boston is!" Nothing was what it seemed. Spotting a sign reading "Hair-Dressing" she remarked how the product must be "something like guano" for the hair. A clerk inside the store advertizing the tonic, a "pretty young man smelling as sweet as catnip," stood ready to help. She asked to "look at some of his hair manure." He stared wide-eyed for a second "as if I'd been a Hottenpot, or a wild Arad [sic]." Then replied, "O, ah, yes! set down here in the chair, mem,--scratch, perhaps, mem!" Instead of understanding that he wanted to give a demonstration of the scalp potion, she exclaimed, "you saucy fellow! I can do all my own scratching, and some of yourn, too, if you say that again--scratch, indeed!" Shillaber's humor included numerous scenes of Mrs. Partington having a hard time adjusting to urban life. Her trouble was meant to show how striking change was in the Northeast.[9]

II

Out in the Michigan community Henry Riley fictionalized, the town of Puddleford underwent a transformation. Riley chronicled the change in nearly the same terms as Shillaber. He described Venison Styles, a hunter who lived in the forest, who was chased by signs of

civilization springing up around him. In appearance, he made "a noble specimen of the physical man; tall, brawny--a giant in strength." After a hearty greeting when the two met, Styles guessed the narrator had come to "settle, I s'pose--to cut down the trees and plough up this ere ground." This news came as no surprise because, as he said, all his life he had "moved and moved, and I can't keep out of the way of these ploughs and axes." Settlement had driven animals off because "game can't stand church-bells, stranger, they can't; they clears right out." Sawmills provided another annoyance. "I always hated a saw-mill. Its very sound makes me mad. I never knowed a deer to stay within hearing of one."[10]

After listening to these lamentations, most related to the physical signs of change reaching the area, the narrator suggested Styles "give up his hunting and fishing, and settle down, and till the soil for a living." The mighty hunter would have nothing to do with this suggestion. "What does the soil want <u>tilling</u> for?" he asked. "Was the earth not made fine the way it was?" He had depended little upon the settled world and was not thinking of ever starting. "I hate physic [medicine], books, newspapers, and even the mail-carrier." On "he rattled about civilization--its effects, &c., &c." until several birds caught his ear. Then he paused for their lovely melodies and declared "them throat's warn't tuned

by any singing-master; they always keep in order. If men would only jist let natur [sic] alone, we could get along well enough." Styles thought it "'taint right to make any additions to natur. 'Taint right to invent music, not to mock the birds, nor cut down the woods, nor dam up the streams."[11]

These physical changes pushed Styles westward "like clouds before the tempest." Similar to the fictional character Natty Bumpo, the leatherstocking hero of Knickerbocker author James Fenimore Cooper, Styles became a symbolic figure in Riley's writing. The narrator thought him "a connecting link between barbarism and civilization." Half of him embodied the spirit of pioneers, and the other half remained "dark and gloomy in savage solemnity." Riley thought Styles a relic of a fading past and presented him as a reminder of the rapid pace at which settlement had taken place.[12]

Puddleford grew into a respectable town in no time and remained a modest village until a railroad track "was built plump through its heart." Thereafter its character changed. Riley's narrator noted, "it is not what it used to be--its people, its habits are very different." If the reaction of Squire Longbow, a respected leader, to the first locomotive was any indication, the people of the village were deeply affected. "He ran and wheezed after the steam-horse, like a madman, lost his green eye-shade,

and committed a very serious breach in the rear part of his pantaloons." He hid behind a tree and remained frightened by the mechanical hiss. Once coaxed out from hiding and after someone explained the possible benefits of having a rail line through town, he became an eager convert to the change. Pretty soon, he was boasting about how the town population would grow by ten thousand. Puddleford would become "one of the ex-poriums (emporiums) of the West." The townsfolk became proud and started wearing Sunday clothes every day. With refined Easterners arriving daily, everyone wanted to look good for potential investors.[13]

The railroad brought money and, consequently, "different habits, thoughts, and feelings," the narrator reported. "Purchases of farms and village property went on, year after year, until many a Puddlefordian found themselves ousted from the community. The place has now, like the snake, cast its skin; and the old pioneers" moved into the outskirts of town, or have "emigrated to wilds still farther West." A few remained; Squire Longbow could still be seen walking the streets, but a younger, scholarly fellow replaced him as justice of the peace. Aunt Sonora "was dissatisfied, too, with the revolution in society" and mumbled disapproval about the "hull passel of flip-er-ter-gib-its." She "could n't see what in created natur' the place was coming to" when people put on

"broadcloth, and the women silks, and flar'd and spread about like peacocks." Before the railroad arrived, people dressed plainly and not one household contained a piano. The narrator thought the instrument only good for "bewitching souls and purses," but he hastened to add, however, "reader, I have no spite against pianos." The days when a family lived all "nestled away in the log hut" were fading fast. Previously there were no "startling events to disturb any person's serenity--no rise or fall of stocks--no crashes in business."[14]

Of the remaining inhabitants living there when the rails arrived, Ike Turtle, one of the two town lawyers, became "a little more polished" and consequently became wealthy. Others were not as fortunate and lost out in one way or another. As if to mark the final passing of the frontier, "poor Venison Styles" died. "Dear old Hunter!" the narrator lamented. With his final departure and "children scattered in the wilderness," the living spirit of frontier Michigan also passed away. Riley looked at the process as ongoing. In 1874 when he wrote an updated preface for his book, Riley claimed in the twenty years that had past "the world has turned round and round, and so had Puddleford. I can not attempt to describe the Puddleford of today." So much had changed. Turtle was not around but his children had become geniuses just like their father. Squire Longbow, bent with age, still walked

"around on his staff" and spoke frequently about old times. Aunt Sonora, who had fretted more than he about change, had gone "to her reward." Puddleford became a different place, and the deaths of Styles and Sonora, especially, illustrated the passing of an honored past.[15]

The narrator of the Puddleford stories sympathized with the characters who faced a changing world. Riley tied their displacement to the railroad which brought the prosperity and refinement. Instead of looking at these changes as positive marks of advancement, however, Riley expressed misgivings in a manner similar to Shillaber's. Both humorists created quaint characters and described how they coped with alterations. The crafty lawyer in Puddleford did the best in his community, and Partington muddled along without hopes of ever making a successful adjustment. Both Riley and Shillaber drew upon values from being raised in New England. Both humorists witnessed significant growth in the places where they moved and created a warm humor meant to bring up sentimental remembrances of olden times. Each saw physical developments, the laying of railroad tracks especially, as instigators of profound change.

III

The closest Joseph Baldwin ever came to seeing the physical changes of the sort Shillaber and Riley wrote about came when he visited New York City. The urban

colossus witnessed on the trip must have made his home, Sumter County, Alabama, appear minuscule by comparison. Not one single rail line would pass though Baldwin's neighborhood or anywhere nearby while he lived there, and its largest community, Livingston, remained a modest courthouse town. In contrast, Gotham in 1853 contained many tall buildings and a staggering population. Baldwin wrote that the throngs of people were so thick that he thought of a crowd coming out of church. At no other time had he seen so many people in one place. After taking in the sights and settling matters for his first collection of sketches, he returned south via the Shenandoah Valley. Naturally, he stopped at his old haunts. Seventeen years had past since he left for the Old Southwest, and the appearance of this place made him gasp at the power of change. He thought:

> What a world we live in! I seem to be only beginning to realize the changes going on. They come gradually or item by item, but when we go off and return we see the work of years presented in the aggregate, and what an aggregate![16]

About a month later, he realized that finding the best words for romantic expressions had become a challenging task because airy utterances contained less feeling in an "railway, sausage-chopping machine age." Over these few months in 1853 after he returned from the Northeast, Baldwin began to see how railroads and other physical signs of change were powerful agents. These

forces had been less visible in his area of the country, and earlier when he had been writing humor he had less conception of their strength. Once he realized these were important driving forces, Baldwin left Alabama for brighter prospects in California, where he might yet be closer to the crest of a rising tide.[17]

When Baldwin wrote in the 1850s, he looked back on the 1830s and thought the mad land speculations of the era a primary source of change. In the Old Southwest, few physical signs such as a railroad had accelerated the economy or molded society. He believed the behavior of land sharks and opportunistic lawyers shaped the society that developed. Baldwin's idea reached back to republican notions that choices people made between virtue and corruption determined the future of society. If a community remained virtuous, prosperity remained, and conversely vice brought about utter ruin. This view did not rely upon advancement and progress, as existed in the thinking of Riley and Shillaber. Baldwin's humorous sketches thus operated on a different concept altogether.

One of Baldwin's first stories described how morals lapsed when large sums of money were at stake. "There is no stopping in such a crowd. He who does not go ahead is run over and trodden down." His "How the Times Served the Virginians" sketch explained how newcomers from his state were shocked when they encountered a "society wholly

unorganized. The law was well-neigh powerless--and religion scarcely was heard of except as furnishing the oaths and technics [sic] of profanity." For a people who took pride in their ancient laws and the legacies of Virginia's founding fathers, many of whom had been great legal thinkers who created the institutional bedrock of the nation, sights of the free-wheeling Old Southwest presented an unsettling picture.[18]

Contributing to the whole desultory character of the times was "a second great experiment of independence; the experiment of credit without capital, and enterprise without honesty." Anyone with half-baked plans might obtain money because "the state banks were issuing their bills by the sheet and no other showing was asked of the applicant for the loan than an authentication of his great distress for money." Easy credit and too many bills put in circulation by unscrupulous bankers caused a steady rise in prices. As land "see-sawed up" on a spiraling curve, morals rocketed downward as people rushed to take advantage of a lucrative situation. The number of seedy taverns also multiplied across the countryside for those with more money than sense. Gambling also became epidemic and "swindling was raised to the dignity of the fine arts. Old times were changed--old manners gone" now that "commerce was King."[19]

A whole panorama of scoundrels paraded through these "flush times." Among the infamous crowd, Ovid Bolus stood out like a sore thumb. He took pride almost shamelessly in being a "natural liar." To him, truth was too inconvenient. Fabrication and distortion served his interests better and usually he thrived by deceit. Worst still, Bolus frequented political strategy sessions going into "the laboratory where the political thunder was manufactured" and giving pointers. Nothing seemed sacred to him. Once he became engaged to a woman but cleverly worked his way out of that commitment. The charades continued until he forgot that "lying is a very delicate accomplishment." No one could do it all the time and not expect people to catch on after a while. When that moment arrived, Bolus had to take his game elsewhere.[20]

Rogues came in all ages and sizes in the flush times, from a child who gave adults his money for betting at gaming tables to the more legitimate activities of crafty lawyers Cave Burton and Simon Suggs, Jr. The former, a Kentucky gentleman, possessed a high "regard for the truth" because he "spent most of his conversation in embellishing it." Suggs, Jr. became a "shifty" figure not unlike his father who had been invented by another Alabama humorist. The junior possessed no qualms about cheating his own father at a game of cards. Suggs, Jr. placed hot pepper in Dad's snuff as a distraction so he might slip in

a winning card. Examples of authority figures lying and cheating illustrated how badly Baldwin believed society had gone out of kilter. As a scholar has pointed out, his characters illustrated a "dark side of humanity." Their immorality rather than railroads or physical change remained Baldwin's chief concern.[21]

Even when writing serious articles, for example a eulogy for the Mississippi legislator Seargent S. Prentiss, Baldwin remained conscious of morality. The bad attributes of this late Whig leader appeared in the text along with the good. Prentiss possessed a quick temper, bitterness towards enemies, and weakness for gambling. Baldwin's showed that even the greatest of leaders could fall into temptation. Another political salute took a similarly high-minded tone. The article admonished another party man, telling him "moderation in all things is a virtue I have often recommended to you, but I am afraid not always with success."[22]

The narrator of Flush Times also addressed the collective sins of the country for Indian removal. On the sensitive issue of the land grab that enabled white settlers to take Indian territory in Mississippi and Alabama, he scolded citizens for "swindling the Indians by the nation! Stealing their land by the township!" and then "stripping them to the flap, and bidding them God speed as they [go] howling into the Western wilderness to the

friendly agency of some sheltering Suggs duly empowered to receive their coming annuities and back rations." The use of the name "Suggs" indicated how much of a scoundrel he thought those agents were towards the Indians. Individually and collectively, Baldwin exposed the unsavory side of life with a mocking humor meant to inform and awaken the reader's sense of morality.[23]

An unfinished manuscript of his written later in life still complained about pecuniary aggrandizement:"

> You might as well attempt to teach school boys not to rob orchards or birds nests or to play truant by the example or warnings of their predecessors as to teach men, 'children of a larger growth,' to steer clear of the enticements of speculation.[24]

So long as greed drove individuals, "order, Heaven's first law, seemed unwilling to remain where there was no other law to keep it company." So long as the flush times continued, Mississippi and Alabama suffered under what he called a "hell-carnival" of farcical courts, opportunistic lawyers, and ruffians of high and low degree.[25]

When the speculative boom collapsed in 1837, Baldwin must have taken pleasure in seeing the flush times come to a grinding halt. The reversal of fortune left speculators in the lurch, penniless and unable to back any more grand schemes. Instead of rejoicing at these state of affairs, he blamed President Andrew Jackson for cutting the good times short. "How the Times Served the Virginians"

described the president's dispatch of the Specie Circular as an act befitting an arbitrary god:

> The Jupiter Tonans of the White House saw the monster of a free credit prowling about like a beast of apocalyptic vision, and marked him for his prey. Gathering all his bolts in his sinewy grasp, and standing back on his heels, and waving his wiry arm, he let them, all fly, hard and swift upon all the hydra's heads.[26]

The circular, a powerful and far-reaching document, demanded gold instead of paper for federal land sales. This change in policy caught many investors short of hard currency. As people obtained the correct purchasing medium, the subsequent drain on banks curtailed speculation and strangled growth. "Promising young cities" marched "back again into the wilderness," the narrator wrote. Apparently, the wrongful actions of the president were as corrupt as the speculation itself and therefore not above rebuke.[27]

IV

Baldwin and the other two humorists were not merely content with pointing out the ironies and tribulations associated with change. Each went a step further at some point and wrote comedy explaining how they thought readers should fortify themselves against the worst effects. For example, Mrs. Partington wanted to pass along her good values to a nephew who might perpetuate goodness. These intentions faltered on the reality that Boston was not the rural countryside, and its streets provided too many

temptations. When she saw the youngster playing the game "knuckle up" he had learned from neighborhood chums, the old lady observed "this is a marvelous age, and perhaps there's no harm in 'em, but I'm afeared [sic] you will learn how to gambol [sic]." She suspected he had discarded advice against gambling and become "a bad boy." The narrator remarked, "there is much reason in the old lady's fear" because Ike had picked up bad habits. His practical jokes remained a constant source of complaint. Some might be innocent enough, such as removing the glass from Mrs. Partington's spectacles, breaking windows, but on the fourth of July he stuffed firecrackers down a man's pants.[28]

Another time, Mrs. Partington told him to "take our Tabby," the cat, and "drop her somewhere" so she might not get in the butter anymore. Instead of turning it loose somewhere across town, he hanged Tabby from an apple tree. "She dropt just as easy," he related. When Mrs. Partington discovered the grisly act, she demanded explanation. Ike answered that the cat, distraught over being turned out, committed suicide. That was not the last time Ike committed unspeakable cruelties. The next incidents occurred on country visits. With a different cat, he fastened clam shells to its paws for a skating lesson across a frozen pond. In the spring, he placed hot coals under a turtle to see if the creature might run away

leaving its shell behind. Despite Mrs. Partington's best efforts and doses of country living, city life had made Ike sinister. Not surprisingly, in later years Shillaber wrote many children's books that featured Ike and moral messages aimed at improving youth.[29]

Baldwin advocated domestic happiness as well, but he made the father's authority the most important aspect of the family rather than the instruction of children. A benevolent father served as a model and peacemaker. His ideal father must not have been that different from Mr. Wormley, an innkeeper in a Flush Times story. This noble Virginian watched over his wife, children, slaves, and guests with a paternalistic kindness. No children misbehaved or played disturbing jokes, and on any given afternoon the sitting room glowed in harmonious bliss:

> Such a concordance--as if all hearts were attuned to the same feeling--the old lady knitting in the corner--the old man smoking his pipe opposite--both of their fine faces radiating in the pauses of the laugh, the jest, or caress, the infinite satisfaction within.[30]

Another story which appeared in the Southern Literary Messenger a few months after the publication of his collection further illustrated the singular role Baldwin believed the father ought to assume. Entitled, "Old Uncle John Rosser and the Billy Goat," this barnyard anecdote explained how a goat was smarter than its owner. Because of this, and because of his "gravity and respectability," everyone called him "William" rather than Billy. "What a

stately gait--how dignified--how decisive and soldierly in his movements."[31] The narrator admired how he took care of the other goats:

> How he puts himself at the head of the harem and orders things about with a sedate and self appreciative authority, like a gentleman at his inn, and keeps his wives straight, but in a quiet, patriarchal, Turk-like way; never leaving his own family for a friend's, and never suspecting fidelity.[32]

Since this story appeared shortly after the Wormley sketch, the line above reading, "like a gentleman at his inn," might well compare William and Wormley. In any case, this comparison of a goat and father figure recommended that men retain patriarchal authority. So long as integrity was foremost and greed in check, changes from outside the family circle might be weathered.

In addition to the family, Baldwin thought institutions must be bulwarks as well. His narrator noted how the town of Patton's-Hill, for example, became a "stolid, quiet, moral and intelligent" community once churches, schools, and masonic lodges replaced the "wild work of the doggery." As speculation slowed across the Old Southwest, and better people moved into the area, the judges and lawyers quit tolerating corruption. The story, "John Stout, Esq., and Mark Sullivan" explained that this change could not have come sooner. A suspect accused of murder in this story was not going to get a casual reprieve from a false plea of self-defense. He realized

things had changed and complained how too many families and preachers had arrived with "their new-fool ways." Worst of all the "doggery-keepers got to sellin' licker [sic] by the drink, instead of the half-pint, and a dime a drink at that." Stable households and religion brought an end to rough and rowdy days. The accused hoped he might leave for Texas where these influences had not yet arrived. The narrator reported this wish with a sense of approval because the vital institutions of family and churches had ensured moral and ethical conduct. Once these conditions prevailed, a healthy prosperity could not be that far behind.[33]

In Puddleford, the law meant something; but community meant everything. No better illustration of how community took precedence came when a stranger pulled up in front of the Eagle tavern. The keeper "was asleep on a wooden-box behind the bar, snoring louder and louder." Squire Longbow, who played checkers with others around the stove, heard the noise outside and suggested someone help the guest because "this ere's a licensed tavern, and you must be up and doing, or the la' 'll be inter you." The visitor with a "face flushed, and his temper or his dignity, or both, in the ascendant," stormed inside and yelled, "is this a tavern! Are you all dead!"[34]

The townsfolk learned "the stranger was none other than the junior partner of the firm of Follet, Fizzlet, &

Farindale, a dry-goods establishment doing business in the city of New-York." He arrived at Puddleford looking for the firm of Whistle & Sharp, whose account the narrator joked with a pun, "had been in the rear for some time." The people sitting around the tavern assured him the local firm would pay. The group then asked him to go on a snipe hunt. This strange fowl little known outside of Puddleford lived in great numbers by the river or so the men claimed. Several fellows explained how they had bagged three hundred just the "night before last." Farindale had hunted before but knew little about these birds. Turtle told him, "great singers! Catch any tune! Got one up to my house that goes thro' half of 'Old Hundred' by jest hearing the folks hum it round the house." The other lawyer, Bates, also assured the stranger that "hain't got mor'n two or three bones in their whole body; all the rest meat."[35]

With these wonderful images enchanting his mind, Farindale could not refuse. They told him to stand out in the shallow water with a bag until the others flushed the game. The New York businessman stood there by himself "sinking deeper and deeper in the mud." Water washed "over the top of his boots" and he heard some rustling in the brush, but after awhile the riverbank soon fell silent. The narrator chuckled, "what ever became of the Puddlefordians is more than I can say." The townspeople

humiliated their visitor with this ruse and gave him a preview of what was to come if he proceeded with the court action. The community stuck together and was not about to let an outsider get the better of them.[36]

Farindale spoke with Whistle and Sharp about the debt, and they assured him the company was sound, worth ten times the amount owed, but at the moment, had no assets. Both proprietors welcomed him to sue and even promised to pay legal costs. Their enthusiasm puzzled Farindale who "began to think another sniping expedition was afoot." At the hearing a judgement came down in favor of the plaintiff for the amount of $324.16. All that remained was for the sheriff to collect the money. Unknown to Farindale, Michigan relief laws allowed a party to turn over property for payment. This helped out villages where money was scarce or where most "exchanges were made by barter." Additionally, the sheriff who collected the monies prided himself on being "a man of the people." A true "politician," as the narrator explained. As it turned out, "Follet, Fizzlet & Farindale never voted for <u>him</u>--never could vote for him; Whistle & Sharp had, and would again." So this meant the officer accommodated friends by letting them pay in property.[37]

At this point the story took an unexpected turn. The narrator explained Whistle & Sharp purchased the communal "steamboat-cylinder, crank, and shaft." Years earlier, a

craft had run aground on a sand bar in the river and broke up, leaving an unsightly wreck. This part about a wrecked craft might well have been literally true because a traveller passing Brown's ferry near Constantine spotted "a steamboat where an attempt was made to navigate the river, but from its improper construction for that purpose it was laid aside." The other parts contained more fiction than fact. The narrator explained how the internal parts of the boat, the "mass of iron weighing many tons, had for a long time been a perpetual bar to the collection of all debts against Puddlefordians." Whenever anyone fell into trouble, he passed ownership papers along, and the debtor presented them as property for payment, as per the relief laws. Local assessors then determined the parts were indeed valuable, and especially if someone could get them out of the river. Farindale learned the parts were worth more than his award so if he accepted the property, he would end up owing the owners a balance. Needless to say, he gave up the collection.[38]

Through close cooperation, the Puddleford folk fended off another creditor due in no small part because the village acted as an extended family. This sketch's main theme, village unity, resembled the main theme found in the stories about Jack Downing's Downingville. The emphasis that Riley placed upon his fictional village, and the alterations brought by the physical changes of a

railroad made his work similar to the humor of Shillaber, as well. The similar views of these three New Englanders came into sharpest focus when contrasted with Baldwin's point of view. He emphasized how change accompanied moral choices rather than physical change and he found no unity in the flush times. Similar to Augustus Baldwin Longstreet who had written about moral choices twenty years earlier, Baldwin made fun of immorality. Rather than diminishing over the years or waning once people became settled in the West, cultural influences remained a central component of antebellum humor.

END NOTES

1. See David E.E. Sloane, The Literary Humor of the Urban Northeast, 1830-1890 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 10.

2. For the economic changes in Massachusetts see Christopher Clark, The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); See J. Mills Thornton, III, Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 267-321; For Michigan see Larry Massie, "Plows, Ships, and Shovels: Economic Development in Michigan, 1836-1866" in Richard J. Hathaway, ed., Michigan: Visions of Our Past (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989), 97-114 and Rohrbough, Malcolm J. The Trans-Appalachian Frontier, 1775-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 226-245; Also see Lewis O. Saum, The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America (New York: Greenwood Press, 1980) and Lewis Perry, Boats Against the Current (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

3. See William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1843 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 63. Shillaber, The Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1854), 15 and 16. Hereafter cited as Partington. All citations are to this edition.

4. Shillaber, Partington, 33, 43, 97, 104, and 242.

5. Ibid., 287 and 354.

6. Ibid., 96, 199, and 339.

7. Ibid., 204.

8. Ibid., 189.

9. Ibid., 113.

10. Riley, Puddleford and Its People (New York: Samuel Hueston, 1854), 14, 15, and 17. Hereafter cited as Puddleford. All citations are to this edition.

11. Ibid., 15-16.

12. Ibid., 17.

13. Ibid., 252 and 253.

14. Ibid., 253-255, 264, and 110.

15. Ibid., 254; Riley, Puddleford Papers or Humors of the West 3rd ed. (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1875), 7-8.

16. Baldwin to Sidney Baldwin, July 4, 1853, Robert MacDonald Lester--Cornelia Baldwin Gray Collection Relating to Joseph G. Baldwin (1815-1864), Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

17. Baldwin to Sidney Baldwin, August 4, 1853, in ibid.

18. Baldwin, The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1853; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 72-105. All quotations. Hereafter cited as Flush Times. All citations are to this edition.

19. Ibid., 227-230 and 84 and 81.

20. Ibid., 1-19.

21. Ibid., 84, 155, and 121-141. Johnson Jones Hooper, Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845) introduced Suggs, Sr. Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham, Humor of the Old Southwest 3rd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), xxxvii;

Eugene Current-Garcia, "Joseph Glover Baldwin: Humorist or Moralist?" in M. Thomas Inge, ed. The Frontier Humorists: Critical Views (New York: Archon Books, 1975), 170-186.

22. Baldwin, Flush Times, 197-213. L. Moody Simms, Jr., "Joseph G. Baldwin's 'Benjamin Oppelt, Esq. of Mississippi'--Another Uncollected 'Flush Times' Sketch," Alabama Historical Quarterly 38 (Spring 1976): 26.

23. Baldwin, Flush Times, 238. Suggs refers to Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs.

24. Baldwin in Richard E. Amacher and George W. Polhemus, eds., The Flush Times of California (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966), 29.

25. Baldwin, Flush Times, 53-54 and 263.

26. Ibid., 90.

27. Ibid.

28. Shillaber, Partington 43, 86, and 352.

29. Ibid., 91, 92, 93, 257, and 177. John Q. Reed, Benjamin Shillaber (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), 78-95.

30. Baldwin, Flush Times, 102-103.

31. Baldwin, "Old Uncle John Rosser and the Billy Goat," Southern Literary Messenger 20 (February 1854): 121.

32. Ibid.

33. Baldwin, Flush Times, 192 and 308. A doggery was a bar.

34. Riley, Puddleford, 145 and 146.

35. Ibid., 151.

36. Ibid., 152.

37. Ibid., 154-156.

38. Ibid., 156-158. Ebenezer Matoon Chamberlin, "Journal of Ebenezer Matoon Chamberlin, 1832-35," Edited by Louise Fogle Indiana Magazine of History 15 (September 1919): 252.

CHAPTER 11

ENTHUSIASM AND APATHY IN THE REVIEWS OF PARTINGTON, PUDDLEFORD, AND FLUSH TIMES

I

A milestone in American publishing took place in 1852 when Harriet Beecher Stowe published her novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. For nearly a year she had serialized the story in a national magazine, but the Boston firm handling her collected edition could not predict future sales. The publishing industry, although much improved, remained an inexact business. Stowe knew less about her prospects, and rather than accept half the profits after paying half the production expenses, the first offer of the publisher, advice of a trusted friend made her take a ten percent royalty. In retrospect, she erred on the side of prudence and lost a fortune when the book became a phenomenal best-seller.[1]

Stowe's success exemplified two important changes. The first involved the publishing industry itself. Technology and better control of production had made large editions possible when demand warranted. The second and perhaps more significant of the two developments was the intrusion of sectional issues into literature. The content of Uncle Tom's Cabin, with its forthright images of slavery, had solidified opinions on both sides of the dispute. Northerners welcomed the book as an honest

portrayal while Southerners became angry and disputed the images. A New England tutor teaching in the South noticed how his employers promised their copy "will burn." Then in the North, a Michigan gentleman perceived the strong opinions there and advised a political colleague to "obey the sixth commandment--thou shalt not kill Mrs. Stowe's late work."[2]

During the early 1850s, other books benefitted from the expansion of the publishing industry, and a few became entangled in the sectional crisis as well. Stowe's book was thus symbolic for signaling how a changed environment existed. Authors seeking publication faced the Charybdis of different market conditions and divisive sectional feelings. Within this context Benjamin Shillaber, Henry Riley, and Joseph G. Baldwin introduced collections of their humor. Their three books combined had far less in sales compared with Stowe's book and theirs were not lightening rods for sectional conflict. Yet, for Shillaber and Baldwin at least, they sold more copies than had any previous humorists. All three received enthusiastic reviews from magazines and newspapers close to their homes.

Because Shillaber had created a character whose "wise and humane blending of humor, philosophy, and benevolence" had provided entertainment for years, the Partington name give him a slight edge in the publishing business.

Readers would recognize her and others may have also known Shillaber's name too because he had acquired what a contemporary called "a reputation which some lovers of notoriety would give a dukedom to possess." Instead of rushing a volume into print not long after his character became a big hit, however, Shillaber embarked upon another endeavor. He left the Boston Post and launched a comic magazine. This way he might capitalize on his creation and test her popularity without incurring any of the same risks of a putting out a book that might not sell. Not many humorous periodicals had ever been attempted, few had survived for long, and so the risks were great. The Carpet Bag magazine faced an up hill struggle.[3]

At first, sales of the big sheet went well and copies went to bookstores across the Northeast and Midwest. Despite a promising start that saw several thousand issues go out weekly and outstanding contributions from talented writers from all over the country, circulation dropped substantially after a year of publication. Unsold issues began piling up in mountains rising from floor to ceiling. Shillaber thought the magazine had lost readers during the 1852 election campaigns when a contributor insulted the Whig candidate for president. He suspected the intellectual wit also went over the heads of those who preferred the simple drollery of Mrs. Partington. He lamented, "I am fearful

that we have made it too humorous to suit readers who can not see nor appreciate a joke unless it is as palpable as a brick." After two years, the editors gave up and Shillaber ended what he later called a "disastrous association with the C.B."[4]

Shillaber returned to newspaper work and almost at once found that publishers wanted a Partington collection into print. Instead of writing as others had, the eminent New York publisher James C. Derby paid a personal visit. He wanted a Partington collection out under his name and offered a flat payment of a "thousand dollars in cash." Shillaber accepted this great sum, and then weeks later, Derby sent a check for double the amount because pre-publication orders had topped twenty thousand copies. Shillaber could not believe this great fortune and from then on believed "I did not strike the bonanza but the bonanza struck me." Indeed, after a few years the total number of volumes in print reached fifty thousand copies. This outstanding success had been completely unprecedented for a humorist, and nearly five or six times greater than successful collections in the past.[5]

Henry Riley came nowhere near this success. In the spring of 1854, while Shillaber's books rolled off the presses in record numbers, Knickerbocker published Puddleford and its People. Perhaps the magazine wanted to help out an old contributor or even break into the

book-selling business, but for whatever reason, the editors took up a tremendous challenge. Marketing a book required advertisements, contacts with booksellers, and other efforts. By the fall, the editors acknowledged having difficulties.

They reported only "the first edition (2000 copies)" had been sold. They had hoped for ten thousand and would reach that goal if readers "knew how much pleasure they would derive from a perusal of the book." Evidently sales remained sluggish because a second edition was not printed until two years later. In 1860 Riley added a few chapters and selected a more appealing title so readers interested in Western topics might buy his Puddleford Papers, or Humors of the West. The firm of James C. Derby also acquired the book but did little better. Finally in 1875, a Boston firm attempted a third edition, and Riley wrote in its preface how "the public have received it in the past quite well as it deserved, perhaps." This hesitation revealed frustration from getting a less impressive reception in previous years. With publishers selling tens of thousands of other humorous titles, his meager showing must have been a disappointment.[6]

Thanks to the editor of the Southern Literary Messenger, Joseph G. Baldwin had none of these troubles. The good gentleman took him northward and into the offices of D. Appleton and Company. The Appleton firm, a major

New York publisher, agreed to put out a collection. By terms of their agreement, Baldwin received a ten percent royalty. He explained to his wife "from what I hear a first book never brings anything but dry fame to the author." In the months following its December 1853 publication, however, Flush Times became a best-seller, and he made money from the nearly twenty thousand copies that made their way into circulation. As many as ten printings took place the next year, and five more editions more came out before the Civil War. Towards the end of the decade, a Southern periodical commended him for "the delightful volumes" which had "left their impression upon thousands."[7]

II

The most enthusiastic reviews of Partington, Puddleford, and Flush Times generally appeared in magazines and newspapers located within the region where the humorist either lived, wrote, or had a personal connection. Although libraries everywhere collected these books, a bias existed among critics. Even when publishers arranged reviews by sending a copy to friendly editors, some notices were better than others. An examination of advertisements put out by the publishers James C. Derby, the Appleton firm, and the Knickerbocker magazine revealed that even through the manipulation a similar pattern emerged. The most animated responses given to a

collection came by and large from editors in the same region as the humorist. Shillaber enjoyed his best reviews in New England, Riley in Michigan and parts of New York, while Baldwin enjoyed the greatest praise from Alabama and the Southern states. A survey of the major literary periodicals and newspaper reviews, some independently collected and others quoted in the advertisements, illustrated the existence of this regional bias.[8]

At the Boston Life Boat magazine, the editors who looked at the Partington volume liked what they saw. Their review paraphrased the adage, "laugh and be fat," and claimed while reading the volume they "shook and shook until it has seemed as though we had increased in weight some fifty pounds." Other sources in New England gave reviews in the same lively tone. In New York City, a place where New England authors often suffered from unfriendly critics, two of the newest variety magazines, Harper's and Peterson's, were equally passionate in their praise. "Mr. Shillaber will be the death of us," the later professed. If we do not put down his volume "we should die of laughing." The former expressed thanks for the colloquial wit and grandmotherly demeanor that made Mrs. Partington so endearing. The city's venerable Knickerbocker magazine quoted liberally from the book, a sure sign the reviewer liked it, and concluded by calling

Partington's humor superior to anything yet published. "Without prototype or an equal," her sayings were "fun as an egg of meat." The most penetrating comments came from the dignified pen of New England clergyman Henry Ward Beecher. Writing in the city's Independent, he praised the sketches for their moral messages and noted how "Mrs. Partington is original, genial, laughable, and not uninstructive."[9]

Outside of New York, and farther still from New England, Graham's magazine of Philadelphia, which had a far wider circulation than the Knickerbocker, wrote a positive assessment. Partington, the magazine thought, was a "Yankee minerva." These words were not jolly nor a glowing affirmation, but the editor had printed a sketch from the volume. Anytime a magazine or newspaper offered a portion of an author's book under review, this generosity signaled a fondness and desire to help the seller. Of all the major national literary magazines only Graham's reviewed all three books. Both The Puddleford and Flush Times volumes received only a fraction of the space devoted to Shillaber's effort. Even though the reviewer thought Baldwin's collection a "brilliant, vigorous book" that "excels in broad and rollicking fun," none of his sketches were reprinted. A short review of Riley's humor came across as rather flat. The piece stated that "a good lively book is a good thing, and among

the very best of the lively books, published of late months, we place 'Puddleford and its People.'" Nevertheless, the magazine extended the same favor given to Shillaber and presented a chapter from this" racy, quaint, eccentric laughter-moving book." A carte blanche recommendation then followed: "read it--it speaks for itself."[10]

Aside from the favorable treatment at Graham's, Riley received little other exposure from major journals. The exception came, of course, at the Knickerbocker. His patrons took every opportunity to extol its virtues. When Riley's promoters bragged that the volume "will command success because it deserves it," this arrogance probably disgusted those who might otherwise have given an endorsement. The National Magazine, for example, one of the few to carry a notice, made an unemotional announcement that misspelled Riley's name and remarked the "pictures are of the grotesque--satiric class, overdone occasionally, but full of genuine humor." These negative words were better than nothing, which was what the book received from most of the press. Without good exposure, the collection was doomed to sell poorly.[11]

Perhaps to help Riley, their Western humorist, the Knickerbocker ignored Baldwin's book and did not give a review at all. The New York Whig North American Review, however, issued tepid praise for Flush Times. The

reviewer called his sketches "intensely comic" and admirable for their "eloquent and life-like characterizations." More negative words came from the Southern Literary Messenger which proclaimed Flush Times "the very best things of the kind that the age had produced." The New York Spirit of the Times, which maintained a large Southern readership, repeated those words telling everyone not to miss its grand "embellishments." The region's most prominent literary figure, William Gilmore Simms, editor of the Charleston Southern Quarterly Review, gave perhaps the most insightful critique. In the same way that the native New Englander Henry Ward Beecher had grasped the significance of Shillaber's work, Simms also thought that behind the "fun, spirit," and "unflagging merriment" sat something more. Baldwin had a moral voice that called out in a "frank and genial" tone.[12]

The reviews of Baldwin's book from Southern newspapers were flattering. In Lafayette, Alabama, the home town of Baldwin's wife, a newspaper editor gave Flush Times an outstanding review. The Chambers' Tribune gave a lengthy paragraph of superlatives which concluded that the book delivered "an admirable performance, evincing abilities of a very high order." On the Gulf coast, the Mobile Daily Advertiser gave a much shorter review yet still raved, "one of the best things in the season.

Portraits drawn, con amore, of bench and bar." The author "ranks, intellectually, and as a lawyer, among the very first men in the State, and for dry and genial humor, we know not his superior in the South." In his home state of Virginia, the responses were also outstanding. A Winchester paper thought his work "would be in great demand," and the Lynchburg Virginian suggested "for a winter evening or a rainy day, it is a charming book. It will chase away the 'blues.'" Certainly, "one of the most entertaining volumes of the season." The Louisville, Kentucky Journal expressed identical sentiments. "One of the most mirth-provoking little works we ever met with."[13]

In contrast to glowing accounts from the South, Baldwin's book received half-hearted endorsements from Northern newspapers. The Springfield, Massachusetts Republican explained that "this book will be good any where, but in Alabama and Mississippi it will be read with an appreciative gusto which few in this latitude can comprehend." As this statement contended, Baldwin's appeal faded when readers unfamiliar with Southern society picked up the volume. The New York National Democrat gave a nod, "one of the most entertaining books we have read in a long time" but no jolting praise. Their rival, the New York Commercial Advertiser, thought "there is not a page of the book that is not invested with the deepest

interest, and which will serve to beguile a weary hour with reading of the most entertaining kind." Again, these compliments were general and might as well have been attached to any book.[14]

Another notice appeared in the Newark, New Jersey Daily Advertiser which stated that Baldwin's pages "abound in sparkling wit and irresistible humor, and to members of the bar particularly, must prove a source of much merriment." The review left out why a lawyer might enjoy the book and, if anyone wanted to find out more, they would have to examine the contents themselves. The Troy, New York Daily Times and Buffalo Daily Courier offered equally nondescript notices. "Each chapter begins with a smile and ends with a horse laugh" the former reported, and then the latter claimed nothing so amusing had appeared since "the publication of Judge Longstreet's Georgia Scenes." These were great compliments, yet again each said very little about the book. None of the descriptive adjectives and fervor of the Southern reviews showed up here. Newspapers in Worcester, Massachusetts, gave more superficial responses. The Daily Spy explained "this is a series of dashing, graphic, and able sketches of men, manners, habits, scenes, incidents, accidents, and events which past before the author's observation." The Palladium did better than this laundry list. In "330 pages the reader may be sure of 330 laughs," the editor

promised. While these may be seen as endorsements, neither review revealed the true character of the book.[15]

The newspaper reviews of Riley's Puddleford repeated the pattern. The Michigan Western Chronicle, a newspaper printed at nearby Centreville and read in Constantine, gave unqualified praise. The editor wrote, Riley's "talents and ability needs no commendation at our hands. Anyone living in the West has seen Puddleford, the tavern and the people." Underneath big block letters announcing the publication, the review called him "an equal of Dickens," and his humor "will be read and appreciated by everyone." Over in Niles, two counties away, the Republican newspaper concurred, telling readers the book was "decidedly amusing, a history of Western fun, with illustrations deliberating adventures and events, and the peculiar characteristic[s] of Western life." Both the Republican and Chronicle directed everyone to specific book stores where they might pick up a copy. The editors of the St. Joseph country became very proud of their home town humorist.[16]

In contrast to the good reactions from Michigan, the Charleston, South Carolina Courier reviewed the book and had a bland reaction. This newspaper's comments began by pointing out the Knickerbocker's role in getting the book published and claimed if the Knickerbocker was involved, the book "must be good." Apparently, no one had read the

pages themselves to find out if this assertion contained any truth. "We infer from the title and a few glances here and there at the work that it is somewhat after the plan of Poole's Little Peddlington, a quiet touch of satire converged in the description and history of a secluded settlement through all its stages, up to the dignity of a railroad station." That was all the reviewer could find to say other than the "expressive" etchings, or illustrations in the volume, looked "really illustrative." This last meaningless comment showed how hard a writer uninterested in the book looked for something good to write. The evasive and apathetic response also came at the Troy, New York Budget. The editor called Puddleford "an original work of great humor and 'showing off' some of the characteristics of certain classes of American people, with the greatest possible success." Not surprisingly then, the Knickerbocker left out endorsements from newspapers in the South and other places without connections to Riley.[17]

Parts of New England were sometimes unfavorable as well. For example, the Massachusetts Berkshire Courier which served Riley's birthplace and which should have been excited by the work of a former resident issued only tepid approval. "This work is descriptive of life and scenes in the far West. It is written with great humor and originality, and judging from the few chapters which we

have read, we have no doubt that it will be classed among the most amusing and interesting literature of the day." Nowhere did the editor mention that a few of his more sentimental chapters described their community. The reasons for this apparent apathy remain as obscure as the source of the excitement that came from the Vermont Burlington Sentinel. Its editor thought the book "the most entertaining book for 'Western Life' and human nature in general that we have read for many a day." The characters came across with "so much piquancy, humor, and spirit. Mr. Riley has a keen eye for the ludicrous, the quaint, and the characteristic, and reproduces them on paper with remarkable fidelity and force. We hope he will write many more books as pleasant and wholesome as 'Puddleford and its People.'"[18]

Newspapers at Boston, Buffalo, and Rochester, New York also printed spirited reviews. The response of the Boston Yankee Blade read:

> A capital mirth-provoking volume which we commend to all hypochondriacs and ingrubrious people who fret about the times or the weather instead of shaking their sides and 'giving their cheeks a holiday.' The author has a rich vein of fun in his composition, and his satire is sometimes as subtle as Swift's, sometimes as broad as 'broad Scotch.' Buy the book, and take it with you during the dog days to Nahant, or 'the notch,'and if you can get through its kaleidoscopic views of Puddleford and its politics, its social wars, educational efforts, trainings, philanthropy, and camp-meetings without cracking a rib or two, you are made of sterner stuff than flesh and blood.[19]

The Buffalo Morning Express loved the characters, saying they were "much too queer to justify the supposition of an archetype." The Daily Democrat at Rochester also enjoyed the strange personalities. "Each is an original, quaint, and not in the least tame. They are people who have 'come up' like wild burdock and elbowed their way to distinction." The editor mentioned the names of each one and expressed interest in meeting "Jim Buzzard who wouldn't allow the doctors to get any of their stuff down his throat, and if he couldn't stand it as long the agur, would give in." All these comments went into specific detail about the book and expressed more than a passing interest.[20]

In contrast, the Boston Traveller told readers to expect "broad caricatures" of "the minister, deacon, chorister, and choir, justice of the peace, shopkeepers, etc. etc." No other details were then forthcoming. The Rochester Daily Union gave equally boring details. Instead of introducing characters as a rival newspaper had done, the editor wrote that "Puddleford seems to be a town in the extreme far West, which contains some noted characters; noted hereafter if not hitherto, by the place they occupy in the volume before us." These words merely restated fact. The oldest newspaper in the country, the Hartford Courant, thought "there is no scandal in it, but a quiet, genial satire that expends itself sometimes upon

the expectations and disappointments of fastidious Eastern people visiting the West." Even in the Morning Register of Sandusky, Ohio, the editor noted only Riley's "racy humor, which will make a 'hit' where it was designed while at the same time the reader's face is kept in a broad smile from the caricatures and fancy depicted on every page." Once again monotonous endorsements illustrated how books were not as well-received outside of home areas.[21]

A few newspapers which gave half-hearted reviews to Baldwin and Riley, however, became excited about the Partington volume. The New York Tribune which had written how Riley's "frisky pen runs into caricature, but usually his portraits are faithful as daguerreotypes," devoted many more lines to Shillaber's book. The reviewer boasted, "a regular Yankee institution is Mrs. Partington, and well deserves the compliment of a book devoted to her sayings and doings." Its editors were thankful "she is here brought before the public, which is so greatly indebted to her unique vocabulary for exhaustive stories of fun in a style worthy of her distinguished character." The latest rival of the Tribune, the New York Times, concurred. The editors thought the character a "good old spul, not eminently wise, but eminently great-hearted."[22] The Buffalo Morning Express could not write enough:

> She has caused many a lip to relax from incontinent primness into the broadest kind of grin--has given to many a mind the material for an odd but not useless revery--has scooped out

> many a cove on the dry shores of newspaper reading, and invited the mariner reader to tarry and refresh himself. 'Ruth Partington' is a christian and a patriot. Such a book will go everywhere--be welcomed like a returned exile--do good, and cease not.[23]

The Worcester, Massachusetts Palladium which was unexcited about Baldwin's volume thought "her 'sayings' have gone the world over, and given her an immortality that will glitter and sparkle among the records of genius wherever wit and humor shall be appreciated."[24]

In both New England and New York the reviews of Partington were so good that James C. Derby did not even bother printing notices from newspapers in any other part of the country. Perhaps he did not even ask for their opinions. None of the major Southern literary periodicals had reviewed the volume. A measure of their possible reaction came in an 1853 issue of the Raleigh Weekly North-Carolina Standard. Under the heading: "A Tolerable Partington" a joke read, "well how is it, that the fugitive slave bill is the only nigger the pesky abolitionists make any fuss about. Aint there the Bens, and Joes, and Jims, and Sams, that's just as good? Lord take pity on us! Give me just a little brandy and water for I can't understand it! And the old soul dozed." Predictably, this paper offered not one notice or review of Shillaber's collection. This same paper printed, however, a lengthy review of Flush Times. The editor thought Longstreet's humor better, yet Baldwin's sketch

"How the Times Served the Virginians" exceeded anything he had read anywhere. The newspaper then quoted liberally from this sketch and concluded "for broad humor and graphic description we consider [Baldwin's book] unequaled." The very different ways this paper treated Shillaber and Baldwin was evidence of a regional bias emerging against humor from outside an area.[25]

The Columbia, South Carolina, Palmetto State Banner mocked Partington as well. A "Mrs. Partington's Opinion of the Ethiopians" sketch in 1851 insulted the character, African-Americans, and abolitionists in a vitriolic vein. A year or two following this appearance, the editors printed the ditty, "all work and no pay makes Jack a dull boy" in an effort to collect money form delinquent subscribers. An assistant of Shillaber's wrote a reply saying how glad he was to see the Carolinians promoting the abolitionist position of paying people who worked. The Banner staff believed Shillaber responsible for the insult and poured out wrath at him. On a lecture tour of the Ohio River Valley Shillaber stopped at Smithland, Kentucky, for a speech but met a hostile group there as well. They calmed down after he explained how much Boston's abolitionists bothered him. The unflattering parody of Mrs. Partington in at lest two newspapers, the libel from a South Carolina editor, and a hostile reaction

at a Kentucky stop indicated how his humor had fewer fans in the Southern states.[26]

III

The different reactions newspaper and magazines gave to these three humorists illustrate the extent of a rift that was developing in the country. Sectional politics which had plagued the nation for sometime before the 1850s broke into the open during 1854, just as these humorists published their books. The country's mood began to darken, and the reactions of the press showed how deep the stresses of sectional strife went. Although not altogether conscious of what they were doing, magazine and newspaper reviewers responded to humor about their own region with more enthusiasm. Editors enjoyed books about their own areas and good reactions for them had become a rule while apathetic responses became the norm for books that came from another region. After 1854, the prospect of ever having a humorist admired with by all sections of the country was becoming more unlikely. Sectional loyalties had begun solidifying, and more often than not, favoritism swayed editors. Soon, the humorists themselves began surrendering to the bias that had taken over their reviewers, and a complete transformation of American humor began.

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16. Western Chronicle July 13, 1854. Niles Republican July 15, 1854.

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18. Courier and Sentinel in Knickerbocker 43 (September 1854): 331.

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CHAPTER 12

THE SECTIONAL CRISIS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF ANTEBELLUM HUMOR

I

Few instances in American history have provided the drama that accompanied the debates in Congress during the tumultuous year of 1850. A long and drawn out dispute over the admission of territories acquired by the Mexican War and the place of slavery in those lands pitted representatives against one another. At stake in this war of words was the fragile balance between slave and free states. After an omnibus compromise bill went down in defeat, and the president died unexpectedly, leaders forged several agreements which a twentieth century historian called "the armistice of 1850."[1] For the time being, calmer heads had prevailed, however, this truce provided no guarantee of peace. Conflict over slavery had not originated in the political arena, and the wrangling at Washington only reflected deeper divisions.

The dispute plaguing leaders in 1850, and for years thereafter, had origins in a perception that differences existed between North and South. Slavery remained the single most significant distinguishing feature of the two regions, and partisans eager for support exploited strong feelings about the issue. When making arguments for or against, both sides asserted that their section or the

other possessed distinct values, customs, and traditions. Strengthening these underlying prejudices and giving voice to them were a voluminous cache of fictional images that had bombarded the public since the 1830s. The number of these images grew during the 1850s, but while the romantic and sentimental fiction of the decade has benefitted from through analysis by scholars, the humorous material has received comparatively little attention.

A fascinating characteristic of the humor written in the 1850s was how tone began changing with the escalation of the conflict. The warm, genial sketches and lovable characters which had been a staple, North and South, disappeared gradually as tensions rose. Humorists continued writing about their communities, refinement, and other familiar topics except now many became involved in the sectional conflict and used humor for partisan purposes. Sarcasm and invective, which had been an exception, became more common as a "good-natured humor largely gave way to patriotic gore."[2]

An early example of how this shift manifested itself came in 1852 when a collection entitled, Southern and Southwestern Sketches, rolled off a press at Richmond, Virginia. Previously, these anthologies had offered selections from around the country without much discrimination. This book departed from the norm by specifically excluding Northerners. The editor drew an

imaginary boundary around his region setting the place apart and making it into a single entity by claiming the book's sketches presented "the peculiar humor of the South." A Richmond newspaper seconded this regionalism with a ringing endorsement that called the book "very judicious, and as it is Southern in character, and in every respect home made, it is particularly deserving public encouragement." Another line in the largely self-serving preface congratulated the authors for presenting innocent mirth in their stories rather than the "poison" Northerners were writing.[3]

Exactly what this editor meant by "poison" became crystal clear when three years later the Memphis, Tennessee Daily Appeal raved how "there is more abolitionism in Peter Parley than in Uncle Tom's Cabin." The creator of Peter Parley, a New Englander named Samuel Griswold Goodrich, had built a reputation for moralistic juvenile literature. Although he reframed from advocating abolition, his antislavery stance was recognizable and strong enough to lead him into the new Republican party. The Appeal editor warned that "more real danger" came from subtle messages found in these "Northern literary publications coated to disguise their poison than in the weekly attacks of Fred Douglass' free negro print." Poison obviously meant antislavery remarks. Northerners were just as guilty of making sweeping generalizations.

An 1854 article in New York's Eclectic Magazine, for example, divided the nation's humorists into only two categories: those from New England, where humor was restrained, sly, and sarcastic, and the "horse screaming" variety from the humorists in the Old Southwest. No longer were there a variety of different perspectives or Eastern and Western humorists. This magazine drew a line as well putting all humorists into two sections: North and South.[4]

In 1858, Boston humorist Benjamin Shillaber noticed a shift in tone too. He blamed the change on the current political and sectional troubles where Northern partisans used laughter for insulting proslavery opinions. "Satire is an ugly weapon in the work of reform," he complained. "It tears asunder, it cauterizes, it blisters. No one is really made better through it. The assailed, though he may fear the sting, will never be better through its application though he may seem so. A satirist lives all the time in boiling water." His assessment undoubtedly came with a degree of consternation, for as the popularity of a combative satire rose the appeal of the gentle Mrs. Partington fell dramatically.[5]

A second collection of Partington sayings published in 1859 sold barely 10,000 pre-publication copies, or half what the first volume had done. The passing of Mrs. Partington from popularity marked the end of amiable

humor. Decades afterwards, an autograph collector found Shillaber defiantly proud for keeping his character out of the struggle. "That I have ever striven to formulate wealthy and pure humor give[s] me a thankful feeling on looking back over the forty years of my literary effort & that I have done some good is warranted by your assurances, and that of other good souls," he confided. That he never "wittingly encouraged a wrong nor wounded the feelings of a single worthy soul" showed how he could not or would not change with the times.[6]

II

Nearly all of the amiable humorists discussed in this study became involved in the growing storm. The plight of Seba Smith and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, two key figures in the emergence of antebellum humor, offered an overview of how two humorists took the fateful steps. Because not all paths were similar, the experiences of these two were only illustrative. Their journeys began diverging not long after their first books of humor appeared in the 1830s. Smith left Maine following collapse of a land investment in the later part of the decade and took the family to New York City where he and his wife became editors and writers. By 1840, a newspaper reported Smith managed the Rover, a new fiction magazine, and contributed regularly to other periodicals. For a time, Jack Downing returned, rising from an early grave

Smith had put him into back in 1836, but the new stories failed to rekindle the old excitement and Smith dropped the series.[7]

By the middle of the decade, Smith had finished writing another set of humorous stories about life in New York City. Not surprisingly, these urban scenes bore unmistakable signs of something put together by a transplanted New Englander. The lead story in his 1845 collected edition described New York's infamous May Day moving frenzy. On the first of that month almost everyone's lease expired, and a gigantic migration of renters took place. This total breakdown of community, indeed utter chaos of displaced families scrambling after living accommodations, made for good humor, yet Smith laughed more in disgust than pleasure. The New England writer Lydia Maria Child witnessed May Day and reacted in much the same way. She and Smith held tightly to village ideals that honored a stable community, family, and harmonious domesticity. As far as they could tell, these ideals meant nothing to New Yorkers.[8]

During the whole time he lived in the city, Smith looked back home to Maine and other areas down east. Although he published a poetry volume and a scientific treatise, both of which were greater sources of pride than financial gain, his great love was New England, and he continued writing about life there. The sketches he

published around this time were less humorous and approximated more clearly what would be called local color. His images of New England life were highly sympathetic, sentimental and provided quaint scenes of Yankees at work and play. Jack Downing was nowhere to be found, yet despite this one drawback his collection of these stories went through three editions rather quickly after publication in 1854. An editor of a major New England newspaper declared, "it is a very laughable affair, and every family in all Yankeedom will enjoy its perusal." The Salem Register in Massachusetts thought 'Way Down East, as Smith entitled the assortment, "a charmingly interesting book, this, for all who hail from down east, or who like to read good stories of home life among the Yankees." Benjamin Shillaber's Boston Post summed up most other reactions when the newspaper declared the selections "real Yankee."[9]

Outside the region, less enthusiasm existed for something so thoroughly New England. The Cincinnati Mercantile Journal reported how this "collection of sketches more or less humorous" struck their editor as "readable, though not remarkably brilliant." The down east dialect was hard to follow at times, and "there are many who consider that style the perfection of wit, and by those the 'major' will no doubt, be extensively read." Of forty or so reviews Smith saved in a scrapbook, a few

clipped from New York and Philadelphia newspapers, were as flat, and he saved none from Southern sources. The reviews from his region expressed adulation, while those outside were less complimentary.[10]

Writing and editing poetry, prose, and humor kept Smith busy but provided an uncertain income. In 1847, he tried something new. He became a regular contributor for a Whig party journal, the National Intelligencer. Smith had sympathized with the party since the 1830s, but refrained from being a partisan on retainer. He joined the staff as an occasional correspondent without any intention of becoming a party hack. The bland articles he submitted first received testy, impatient comments from the editors. They wanted Jack Downing to return, but hoped Smith would start up another series on his own. Finally, the managers broke down and told Smith, "your allusion [sic] in a former letter to Major Jack Downing...we should like very well to hear from him on the occasion of young Hickory's visit to New York and down east." Democratic President James K. Polk needed ridiculing on his trip, the editors thought, and who better to do this than Jack Downing. Smith obliged the request, and with this first fateful step his character sprang to life with a different meaning and purpose from the one of the 1830s.[11]

The latest Downing possessed none of the innocent qualities of a simple farmer from Maine, however. From the beginning he had a cause to further and thus attacked the Polk administration and other influential Democrats. When he insulted Virginian Thomas Ritchie, that editor shot back an angry response. He could not believe Jack Downing had sunk so low and of all things called him a Federalist. These letters must be a "trashy forgery," something concocted by a poor imitator. The original Jack Downing could not be so crude. This angry reaction and disbelief illustrated how much Smith had changed.

During presidential elections in 1848 and 1852, Downing's mocking gathered plenty of steam. The character stumped for Democrat Lewis Cass to parody Democratic campaign volunteers, and Downing learned how no one in the North wanted the senator elected "so I wheeled about and turned about and jump'd Jim Crow in the slave states." Down there even fewer became excited by the candidate. Downing appeared foolish for bumbling around looking for votes that were not there, and the Democratic contender looked weak. The 1852 contest witnessed Downing running around again, but this time he tried unsuccessfully to mollify divisions between factions in the Democratic party. The content and tone of this second series thrived on a combative, insulting tone and in giving terrible impressions of the opposition.[12]

When his character entered the political wrangling which erupted during debates over David Wilmot's Proviso restricting slavery in the Mexican Cession, Smith fueled contempt for the on-going negotiations by having Downing make ridiculous suggestions. To the idea that the Missouri Compromise line of 1820 should be extended all the way to the Pacific coast, one way of resolving the dispute, Downing replied that while leaders were marking on the map they should extend the line around the whole globe, making Europe free territory and Africa slave. That way Democrats would map out areas before conquest, and that made better sense than seizing land and then trying to decide. This outrageous suggestion took a jab at the expansionists in the Democratic party and was more cynical than amusing.

In a longer letter resembling a parable, Smith then offered further advice about the Mexican Cession though a story about Uncle Sam's two sons. One, Jonathan, represented the North, and John, the South. Both nearly came to blows over whether or not to allow thistles (slavery) on the property. The two brothers turned against each other, and neighbors took advantage of this discord to seize their land. In the end, the brothers reconciled, mainly for their own good, and the story ended on a positive note.[13]

As that happy ending indicated, Smith had not submerged himself completely in the growing storm. He had less chance for that after 1856 anyway because his letters ceased with the demise of the Whig party itself. Three years later, he published a comprehensive collection of all his letters called My Thirty Years Out of the Senate. This title lampooned Thirty Years' View, a memoir published by the Democratic Senator Thomas Hart Benton and, not surprisingly, rave reviews arrived from old Whig newspapers. The New York Tribune mentioned that readers might not remember the first series because their fame "has in a great measure subsided." Nevertheless, the older letters "will still command readers by their rustic humor and excellent daguerreotypes of Yankee peculiarities." The second series was good for its political content, the paper thought, but not as impressive in its humor.[14]

A number of lackluster responses also appeared in newspapers across the country. Perhaps the most hostile came from the town of Eatonton, Georgia, where a pro-Southern magazine calling itself the Plantation gave a scathing assessment. The magazine's editor recoiled at the Yankee wit, and called Smith's work, "mere trash and rubbish--dull, stale, and unprofitable." The second series, "the letters written subsequent to 1833," were plainly "not so interesting as those preceding that

period."[15] These blunt denunciations lashed out at a time when sectional tensions had reached a breaking point. South Carolina left the Union during the month when the magazine printed the review, and Georgia departed four weeks later. The review of a humorous book had in this case turned into a mechanism for generating discord.

Augustus Baldwin Longstreet had moved to Columbia, South Carolina in the late 1850s for duties as president of the state college there. For the better part of twenty years, he had served as a Methodist minister and educator at the top posts of several Southern schools. As an energetic clergyman, his greatest accomplishment had come in 1844 when he stood firmly by proslavery views and helped split the Methodist Church into Northern and Southern branches. Senator John C. Calhoun heard of his efforts and wanted to know if "Judge Longstreet, and other prominent members of the conference would take Washington in your route home, and spend a day or two with us in order to afford an opportunity of exchanging ideas on a subject of such vital importance."[16]

A few years later, when the Wilmot Proviso raised tempers, Longstreet sprang into action again. His experience as a humorist and writer for popular audiences helped him fashion proslavery articles that would appeal to a mass audience. His work contained arguments but none of the dense reasoning found in the work of a theorist.

Published as Voice From The South: Comprising Letters From Georgia to Massachusetts, his articles were written in the form of a fictional correspondence between the two states mentioned in the title. At one point, Georgia asked what would become of slaves if set free "adrift on the world homeless, breadless, penniless. Sister Massachusetts, do you think this would be right?" At other points the letters attacked abolitionists for declaring slavery sinful. Because Longstreet found Biblical justification, he labeled critics "satan's henchmen." His words and arguments were strong and provocative because he thought the enemies of slavery threatened an inviolate tradition of his native land.[17]

Through a favorable marriage Longstreet had inherited both land and slaves. This good fortune had tied him to other slaveholders, and perhaps because he had not been so privileged, he became an even stronger advocate. The Voice letters even claimed that slaves were the happiest race of beings on Earth. A Georgia scene Longstreet had written about a slave girl named "Rose," however, betrayed this assertion. The story, "The Mother and Her Child," described a baby who began crying, and how her mother blamed Rose for the problem. When charged with hurting the infant, the accused professed innocence. The skeptical mother slapped Rose and cried, "You lie, you slut." The baby continued wailing, and the mother yelled

hysterically, "You little hussy you, if you don't tell me how you hurt him, I'll whip you as long as I can find you." Eventually, the mother discovered that a feather in the infant's ear had caused all the trouble, and for this mistake Rose suffered chastisement. Longstreet drew upon a cultural background where slaves were treated unfairly in life as in fiction.[18]

During the 1850s, Longstreet remained on the path he had set out upon during the 1830s and 1840s. The Southern partisans at the Memphis Daily Appeal recognized his efforts and called him a great proponent of Dixie, a "sage instructor, pure man of the Gospel, and fearless advocate." They praised the candor displayed when he stepped forward and spoke his mind. "There is no man in Georgia who will dare stand up and say that A.B. Longstreet speaks from impure motives." Their hero kept a high profile indeed. He remained active in politics and traveled around giving speeches. A Mississippi women reported that he stayed at her family's plantation for two weeks in October of 1857 while speaking in four surrounding towns. The sectional controversy had motivated Longstreet to carry his firm belief in slavery and support for states rights to southerners everywhere. In thought, word, and deed, Longstreet did all in his power to meet Northern critics and defend the South as he had done for Georgia during nullification.[19]

III

Among Western humorists, two individuals remained relatively detached from the growing crisis. Caroline Kirkland, who lived in New York City, produced an astonishing array of stories, essays, travel accounts about visits to Europe, and a children's biography of George Washington. In her researched account of the first president, she claimed he "thought slavery an evil so obvious that he rested in the belief that the good sense and principle of the whole United States (for all were slaveholders then) must in time operate for its extinction." Other than this foray which made the founding father an antislavery ally, she steered clear of the growing troubles. Her fellow Michigan humorist Henry Riley maintained an even lower profile concentrating on a law practice, adding a few chapters to Puddleford for an 1860 edition, but not writing anything connected to the controversy. During the 1850s he served in a few local political posts and attended the ill-fated Democratic convention in Charleston, South Carolina, voting countless times for moderate Stephen Douglas. Neither of these Michigan humorists added anything substantial.[20]

The same could not be said for Joseph G. Baldwin, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, and Baynard Rush Hall. Uncle Tom's Cabin galvanized each of them into action. Baldwin held proslavery opinions, and he had condemned "fanatic"

abolitionists in terms Longstreet might have admired, and also called critics an "odious" bunch on another occasion. His law partner recalled that "Baldwin was always considerate of the feelings of others" and thus his criticism of Stowe and her work remained polite. Thus, the Flush Times sketch "Samuel Hele, Esq." slighted rather than slapped. This story described a conversation between Hele and the teacher Miss Charity Woodey, a puritanical New England school mistress. She had became unpopular because in manners and habits the lady had lost "all that is lovable in woman" and gained "most of what is odious in man."[21]

Hele talked with her at a party, and she asked if blacks were treated well on surrounding plantations. He replied that on the whole most were fine, but a few knew only pain and suffering. In a frightful tale of their treatment, embellished for great effect, he claimed a master tied slaves tightly on racks in dark dungeons and then blew off their heads by lighting gunpowder stuffed in mouths. Miss Woodey shuddered when she thought of such a gruesome scene. When Hele then told her of how a "Yankee school teacher--some years ago--got mobbed, complete with tar and feathers for saying something against slavery," she took the hint, went home, and packed her bags. In haste the next morning, she left a letter behind "addressed to Harriet S--" containing:

> Some interesting memoranda and statistics on the subject of slavery and its practical workings, which I should never thought of again had I not seen something like them in a very popular fiction, or rather book of fictions, in which the slaveholders are handled with something less than feminine delicacy and something more than masculine unfairness.[22]

Baldwin's certainty about slavery, and that stab at Stowe who he felt had exaggerated her images as Hele had done, was not to be found in the thinking of Thomas Bangs Thorpe. One of his hunting stories illustrated a fracture in his thinking about slaves. Rather than describing them as passive stick figures acted upon by whites, the sketch described slaves acting on their own when they took dogs and axes out in the pursuit of opossum. "[N]othing," the narrator related, "could be more joyous than their loud laugh and coarse joke[s] on these midnight hunts." When the hounds put a 'possum in a tree, the hunters chopped at the trunk, all the while singing songs with voices that might "command ten thousand a year from any opera manager on the Continent." Similar to the Indians in "Scenes on the Mississippi," published only two months before, the slaves recovered human qualities when chasing game. Few other Southern-born humorists would dare show blacks enjoying such freedom in a midnight hunt with axes.[23]

Thorpe's departure from the norm reflected an ambivalence that later surfaced more strongly in a novel he wrote about the plantation regime. The political and social dilemmas planters faced in the 1850s interested

him, and his novel, The Master's House, centered on the character Graham Mildmay, a genial young planter. Mild in politics, as his name indicated, he became embroiled in one conflict after another. The plot included enough stereotypical images of plantation life that for years scholars thought the work a feeble attempt to modify Stowe's impressions. A careful reading by more recent scholars, however, has revealed many negative images that have convinced most scholars the book presented "both sides of the slavery question."[24]

Thorpe's descriptions of the profane slave trader Mr. Dixon and a sinister overseer appropriately named Mr. Toadvine gave the most critical pictures of the slave regime. The former styled himself "a bitter enemy of the African race." Ample proof of this assertion came when he tracked a runaway up to Vermont and then chased him off a cliff and into a dangerous, log-filled river. As for the latter character, he meted out wicked punishments and lynched a slave rather than letting him serve a jail sentence. Readers meeting these unsavory characters saw villains worse than Stowe's Simon Legree. Mr. Dixon, however, reformed his person when a deathly illness caused him to suffer through haunting visions. "I've seen whole gangs of niggers with their backs all bloodied, their eyes all sunken, pointing their long skinny fingers at me, and they keep on doing it whenever I am alone." Following

this unnerving experience, he quit slave trading and viewed what he had done as wrong.[25]

The novel's last scene also hinted that slavery caused problems for the Southerner. After two catastrophic events, the killing of a neighbor in a duel that grew out of political differences and the death of his wife, Mildmay found himself alone. As the sun left the horizon near the plantation, "the thick darkness of a starless night enshrouded the form of Graham Mildmay."[26] This unhappy scene where the protagonist became draped in black suggested trouble for the Southern slaveholder. Precious few who lived in the Southern states expressed the kind of misgivings about slavery Thorpe held in so public a way. Thorpe departed so dramatically because his background and values put him on the opposite side of a widening divide.

While Thorpe agonized in his fiction, the Indiana humorist, Baynard Rush Hall, wrote a novel of more certain convictions. Mrs. Hall explained that her husband had read Stowe's serialized novel in a magazine before they were ever published and found the work "very entertaining but too much abolitionism." For months, he had labored on a reply that gave "the other side of the subject," and Charles Scribner had agreed to publish this unusual manuscript. Frank Freeman's Barber Shop introduced a New England minister named Edward Leamington who had journeyed

southward on a trip to costal South Carolina. This character may well have been a caricature of the author himself because in stories about Indiana, Hall had put himself in the book as a traveler and included, incidently, a section about a harrowing stage coach ride in the Carolinas. And although the novel's preface denied resemblances between characters and anyone real, Hall later admitted that a slave named Dinah was modeled directly after his nursemaid. The possibility existed, then, that Hall included autobiographical sections in his fiction.[27]

Leamington's inspections of various plantations on the sea islands near Beaufort left him with a favorable impression. He accepted slaveholding wholeheartedly and even befriend an African-American named Frank. Because this slave was going to fall into the hands of greedy auctioneers, the reverend bought him and treated him kindly. After returning to Boston, he lost Frank when abolitionists helped him escape. These supposed friends used him for antislavery lectures, gave little in return, and Frank Freeman, as he called himself, ended up in a Philadelphia barber shop cutting hair and looking over his shoulder fearful of re-capture. The novel implied that Frank would have been happier in slavery. In the end, Frank booked passage to Africa, and the novel concluded with words that Stowe would have endorsed, "reader, join

the author in this prayer--God Bless the colonization society."[28]

Why Hall presented his view has never been determined satisfactorily. The New York Literary World, a respected literary magazine which printed a brief notice of the book, claimed the effort had not been conceived with malice, but done more in the spirit of "steer[ing] a middle course between abolitionist and slave-holder." Although "pointed and spirited," the text had its lighter moments and plenty of "humorous scenes of negro life." Perhaps images of happy slaves were ones that a reviewer at the Chicago Tribune criticized when he thought the novel's "objectionable parts" needed revision or removal altogether. The book's "untruthful sentimentality" irritated him, and the author's "thrusting at abolitionists, then a concession to the evils of slavery" made for confusing reading. The New York Times agreed but did not pan the effort outright. Reverend Hall had "taken the pen in justification of the South and its institutions" and presented an impression that "may not be correct," yet he deserved an audience because "add Dr. Hall's book to Mrs. Stowe's, and divide them [by] two" and one might have a reasonable perspective, the reviewer suggested.[29]

Each of these reviews also brought up the question, where had Hall had obtained impressions of Southern

slavery? He had resided in only one slave state, northern Kentucky, for a few years during the 1820s, and yet Frank Freeman contained intimate portraits of the sea islands of South Carolina. Hall possessed a connection to that setting, however, and may have visited or taken something from contacts with relatives living there. An uncle and others had planted cotton on Edisto Island since the 1790s, and early in his life these planters had forwarded large sums of money for Hall's education. Baynard, their surname, was also Hall's first name. Additionally, he named two daughters, Edistina and Carolina, perhaps out of gratitude for the assistance the Baynards had given him. Those Baynards were Presbyterians as well, his faith and the one he spent a lifetime serving. These strong links to Southern cousins probably explained why he wrote a novel defending a culture he had not known all that well. His novel was then a testament to the power of culture and the influences this concept had on the minds of antebellum writers.[30]

Due to his keen abilities as a humorist, Hall had conveyed his reply to Stowe's book skillfully. Both he and Joseph G. Baldwin created elaborate criticisms that came out within a year or so after her publication. They took a shorter time to respond than Thorpe had done because he had difficult choices to make. His cultural background had not included slavery and any other Southern

influences. He had moved to Louisiana in his twenties and lived there for sixteen years, but yet remained an outsider looking into the culture. He could not bring himself to write a clear-cut defense of slavery because his New York background still exerted a strong pull on his mind. His reply to Stowe had none of the attacks upon her book that Baldwin, or Longstreet for that matter, would have enjoyed, and Thorpe's departure from the region in the 1850s symbolized how cultural backgrounds mattered a great deal in times of crisis.

Nearly all of the humorists who became involved in the turmoil after 1850 moved into their roles with ease. Smith started the journey when he moved to New York and began longing for home. His stories about New England written in the late 1840s and 1850s showed a devotion and more pronounced regionalism. Getting involved in partisan political battles for the Whig party then sealed his fate. As sectional issues crowded the political dialogue, he eagerly stepped into the battles giving a New Englander's perspective. The final demise of the Whig organization cut off participation in 1856 and ended his series. This development was probably a good thing because Smith could not quite bring himself to push sectional causes with a fervor that others did.

Longstreet had been an ardent Southern defender since nullification and would be a leader in the proslavery

group that helped split the Methodist Church in the 1840s. His skills as a humorist then helped when creating proslavery articles a popular audience could read and understand. The humorists who emerged in the middle of the 1850s, those who had not written anything major before, entered an environment where they could become involved in the struggle as easily. Many of them held less reservations about getting involved in the sectional conflict. In fact some made names for themselves by capitalizing upon the bitterness in the country. Two in particular rode the rancorous times by introducing outrageous characters and producing devilish sketches.

END NOTES

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3. Oliver Baldwin, Southern and Southwestern Sketches (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1852), ii; Richmond Dispatch cited in ibid., xxii; For more about how humor draws boundaries see John Lowe, "Theories of Ethnic Humor: How to Enter Laughing," American Quarterly 38 (Spring 1986): 439-460.

4. Memphis Daily Appeal December 5, 1855; Daniel Roselle, Samuel Griswold Goodrich: Creator of Peter Parley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1968), 139-140; Eclectic Magazine 33 (September 1854): 138-139.

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6. Ibid., 29; Shillaber to C.L. Moorhouse, March 28, 1888, in Shillaber Papers, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Shillaber to Mrs. Morris P. Ferris, April 3, 1889, in Shillaber Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

7. For biographical details about Smith see Milton Rickels and Patricia Rickels, Seba Smith (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977). New York Signal January 27, 1840 in Seba Smith Papers, New York Public Library, New York, New York.

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10. Advertizement in Burdett, Three, 408. A search of the Southern Literary Messenger and Debow's Review found not a single notice.

11. Joseph Gales to Smith, June 25, 1847, Seba Smith Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia. For the amount of his compensation see Smith Papers in Appleton Oaksmith Collection, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

12. Smith, My Thirty Years Out of the Senate (New York: Oaksmith and Company, 1859), 268, 312-313, and 379. Hereafter cited as Thirty. All citations are to this edition. For further discussion see James Schroeder, "Major Jack Downing and American Expansionism: Seba Smith's Political Satire, 1847-1856," New England Quarterly 50 (June 1977): 214-233.

13. Smith, Thirty, 273 and 325-331.

14. Benton, Thirty Years' View 2 Vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1854-1856); New York Tribune April 12, 1859; Smith collected forty-one reviews from around the country. All are found in the Seba Smith Papers, University of Virginia. Thirteen were from New York City newspapers. Two came from Boston and another two from Washington, D.C. Only one came from Philadelphia. Seven appeared in New England newspapers and eight from various places around the rest of the Northeast. Only five were from the Midwest and three from the Southern states.

15. Seba Smith collected a few reviews from Southern sources. See the Smith Papers, University of Virginia; Also the Richmond Daily Dispatch March 21, 1859 gave a one line, flat review; The Plantation: A Southern Quarterly Journal 2 (December 1860): 670 and 671.

16. James R. Scafidel, "A.B. Longstreet and Secession: His Contributions to Columbia and Charleston Newspapers, 1860-61," in James B. Meriwether, ed., South Carolina Journals and Journalists (Columbia: Southern Studies Program, 1975), 77-87; For all biographical information on Longstreet see Kimball King, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1984); Georgia Scenes (Augusta: States Rights Sentinel Office, 1835); Calhoun to William Capers, June 4, 1844, in Clyde N. Wilson, ed., The Papers of John C. Calhoun 22 Volumes to date (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959-), XVIII, 708.

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24. Thorpe, The Master's House: A Tale of Southern Life (New York: T. L. McElrath and Company, 1854). Hereafter cited as Master's. All citations are to this edition; Barrie Hayne, "Yankee in the Patriarchy: T.B. Thorpe's Reply to Uncle Tom's Cabin," American Quarterly 20 (Summer 1968): 182; Also see Ritchie Devon Watson, Jr. Yeoman Versus Cavalier: The Old Southwest's Fictional Road to Rebellion (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 65-69.

25. Thorpe, Master's, 94 and 111.

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27. Martha Young Hall to Williams Family, August 30, 1852, in Worthington B. Williams Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana; Frank Freeman's Barber Shop (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852). Hereafter cited as Freeman. All citations are to this edition; Hall, A New Purchase; or Seven and A Half Years in the Far West 2 Vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1843; New York: Arno Press, 1975), I, 33-36;

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28. Hall, Freeman, 94 and 332.

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30. Searches at the South Carolina Historical Society and the Beaufort Public Library gave no indication that Hall ever visited Edisto Island; Nell S. Graydon, Tales of Edisto (Columbia: R.L. Bryan, 1955), 144; United States Manuscript Census Returns. Population Schedule, Orange County, New York, 1850, East Baton Rouge Parish Public Library, Bluebonnet Regional Branch, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

CHAPTER 13

THE TRANSFORMATION COMPLETE: MORTIMER NEAL THOMSON AND GEORGE WASHINGTON HARRIS

I

In the early spring of 1855, the Toledo Blade newspaper received an unexpected visitor. The young man who stepped through the doorway, "a good looking fellow with dark brown eyes, regular features, long hair, and pointed beard resembl[ed] some of those wonderful bas-reliefs of Assyrian kings." Although a suave figure, few at the office would have recognized him, and when Mortimer Neal Thomson introduced himself, even fewer would have known his name. He was only twenty-four years old and had only recently found a calling in life. For the past seven months, his humorous sketches had appeared in newspapers around the country under the unforgettable name, "Q.K. Philander Doesticks, P.B." The Blade staff must have known these stories because each one had appeared first in a rival newspaper edited by Thomson's brother.[1]

In a note penned to a friend, the Ohio editor commented, "'Doesticks' himself had just been in the office, his nonsense is to be published." Thomson had stopped by in hopes of getting an advertisement. The editor acquiesced and told a friend to watch, "you will see our Adv't in tomorrow's paper." The editor lingered a bit more on the man behind the book. "I suppose you know

who he is--Thompson [sic], son of the lawyer at Ann Arbor. He seems to be a very modest fellow, in his bearing and appearance." A contemporary who knew him better gave a similar report. In public he "never makes a joke, nor says a funny thing. He is simply a cheerful, lively, well-bred gentleman." No matter his personal qualities, the Blade editor wrote, "I rather think he means to take advantage of the taste of the age, depraved or chaste, to feather his nest out of it."[2]

A more accurate statement could not have been made. Thomson had capitalized on an important shift in tone creating a biting humor, a disparaging mix of jokes and jests, that cut deep into the heart of his time. As a colleague remembered, he drew "on events and personal experience, issuing them raw," and another critic observed that his "comical idiosyncrasies of thought and criticisms caught the spirit of the age." When his sketches of urban New York started reaching the public's attention, the city's Tribune newspaper had taken notice. "The opinions of critics may vary as to the degree of literary merit which they possess, but the great mass of readers seem to be unanimous in laughing at their wit and originality."[3]

When his sketches first became popular, Thomson worked as a clerk at a Manhattan jewelry store. Before that job he had traveled with an acting company that he had joined not long after University of Michigan officials

had expelled him. His membership in a secret fraternity caused anger among faculty members, and practical jokes involving dead animals brought in for dissection had also upset them.[4] The ebullient lifestyle he thrived on at college and as a thespian prepared him well for New York City. He had been born in Riga, New York, an upstate town of three thousand near Rochester, and although New England cultural influences persisted there, his family moved west before many took root. Michigan had some effect, but that setting had less impact than Gotham. The effervescent atmosphere which greeted him in 1854 nourished his abilities and propelled him to the forefront of American humor.

II

A counterpart and contemporary took his inspiration from a place very different from New York. The tall mountains and wide valleys of east Tennessee nourished the creative spirit of George Washington Harris. As a child, he went with a half-brother to Knoxville, far from western Pennsylvania where he had been born. His guardian was a respected silversmith and metals craftsman who later became mayor, and he apprenticed the young man in the painstaking procedures required for making fine products. Harris developed more than ordinary talent because the local newspaper called him a genius at the trade, "one of the cleverest fellows we have ever known." When he came of

age, Harris had left the shop, however, and joined the crew of a steamboat plying the Tennessee River.[5]

How much previous knowledge he possessed of this business has not been determined, but after only a short time, he became captain of a vessel. During the late 1830s, the United States government contracted the boat for deportation of Indian tribes. Tradition has evolved that on a journey Harris rebuffed General Winfield Scott, the officer in charge, and on another occasion he threw a nosy government official overboard. Although a "little fellow," he carried himself with a "gentlemanly bearing" and projected a forceful personality. In quick, nervous steps he marched around the deck enforcing every regulation strictly, including a ban on alcohol. Friends remembered a Presbyterian upbringing had a great effect on his character and made him a life-long "blue sabatarian [sic]." In due time, he become an elder at the First Presbyterian Church, and a son took the name of a long-time minister. These themes, often overlooked by scholars, told of a determined individual rather than hapless bumbler.[6]

At the outbreak of the Civil War, a fellow met Harris and discovered a "very solemn, rather owlish sort o'person--quite a serious looking man." During conversation, "his face had no trace of wit, humor, jest or joke--nor anecdote, nor jest, nor joke flowed from him

on that occasion."[7] The absence of mirth surprised that contemporary because his fantastic stories had been popular for years. Harris had first written for the public back in 1840 when Elbridge G. Eastman, an editor and lieutenant of gubernatorial candidate James K. Polk, accepted articles for that year's Democratic election campaigns. By the time those selections appeared, Harris had married a daughter of a port official, a prominent man in town, and moved on to three hundred seventy-five acres in Blount County. An inventory of his household possessions revealed fine furnishings, a significant book collection, and other genteel accoutrements. A daughter remembered his love of reading, and records confirmed membership in several circulating library societies.[8] Out on a placid farm, Harris fashioned himself a country squire, and if credit problems had not ruined the endeavor, he might have become a planter. Bad economic times combined with his own mistakes, however, altered this course, and returned him to town and the metals trade. At this point, his career as a humorist began.

Between 1843 and 1847, Harris published eight sketches in the New York sporting magazine The Spirit of the Times. Many humorists had started out in its pages, Thomas Bangs Thorpe among them, and with the publication's male readership in mind Thorpe's first submissions described hunting, fishing, and horse racing. When a

reader saw the articles and claimed mountaineers enjoyed only two pursuits, religion and politics, Harris responded with "A Knob Dance--A Tennessee Frolic." In this story, the narrator took readers through a wild, rollicking world where plain folk danced, loved, and fought in a colorful life-like mosaic. Every character possessed a realistic personality, and whenever anyone spoke, as a man did when he described a fight: "Sam hit him strate atween the eyes an after a few licks the fitin started. Oh hush! It makes my mouth water not to think what a beautiful row we had." The dialect here and in other places came through in expert renderings of contemporary speech. This story received less attention, however, than a subsequent one which described a practical joke played on a sleeping Irishman. To get back at a their comrade for being so annoying, a hunting party tied deer entrails around him and then yelled "HU WEE! HUW WEE! A big copperheaded black rattle-snake, eleven feet long, has crawled up my breeches and is tying himself into a double-bow-not round my body!" For years Spirit readers chuckled, and remembered Harris as author of a "Snake-Bit Irishman."[9]

After an impressive start, no further sketches appeared. During what became a long literary silence, Harris sold his metal shop, failed at a couple of business ventures, and returned to the river as a steamboat captain. He nearly left writing for good, but the Spirit

took at least one belated sketch with promises that more were forthcoming. The spark that rekindled dormant fires came in 1854 when Harris conducted an official survey of the copper deposits surrounding Ducktown in southeastern Tennessee. In this remote mining community tucked between lofty mountain ranges named Stansbury and Frog lived inhabitants whose temperament matched the whitewater flowing in the nearby Ocoee River. Their reputation even imprinted itself on a local stream which someone named "Fighting Town Creek." Contemporaries who passed though also made comments about meeting "wild mountaineers." This setting, the colorful people, and their customs, stayed with Harris.[10]

In the November 4th, 1854 Spirit of the Times, Harris published a sketch about a mountaineers, a "queer looking, long legged, short bodied, small headed, white haired, hog eyed, funny sort of a genius" named Sut Lovingood.[11] A ruffian named William Sut Miller lived in the area Harris visited, but Sut was more likely a composite character. Elbridge G. Eastman, the Democratic editor, recognized Sut's entertainment value, and further adventures landed in his Nashville Union and American newspaper. Eastman became a dependable patron and helpful promoter who declared in 1858 that the Lovingood sketches had

> obtained a circulation and popularity, throughout the country, which no similar productions, in modern times have enjoyed. Sut is well known in the distant states of the

> Union, as he is at home; he is as great a favorite in the refined and educated circles of the Southern and Eastern cities as he is among his native mountains of Tennessee. His stories are sought with avidity wherever genuine wit and humor are appreciated. He is regarded by the critic and the scholar as a compound of fun and folly blended by the power of genius into a character at once life-like, truthful and original. Sut will live in the recollection of his acquaintances as long as there are lovers of good fun and mean whiskey on earth.[12]

In the year of that assessment, Harris ventured North looking for a publisher. No details exist about his trip other than its disappointing outcome. Even with popularity and a few anthologies carrying his sketches, Harris could find no one willing to issue a full collection. Scholars have speculated that the gritty subject matter may have caused rejection, or his zealous pro-Southern opinions. Not until 1867 did Harris see the antebellum work and his numerous post-war sketches published in a fat volume entitled Sut Lovingood. Yarns Spun By a 'Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool'. Dick and Fitzgerald, a New York firm specializing in popular fiction and humor, printed an unknown number of editions.[13]

The literary critic Samuel Clemens, soon known as Mark Twain, penned a favorable review. He remembered the antebellum stories and pointed out how Westerners would appreciate the racy humor more than their Eastern counterparts. Urbane editors on the East coast were sure to balk and "possibly taboo it." This assessment may

explain why the New York Tribune had issued only a brief publication announcement rather than a full review, and also why the New York Times blasted the book. "The wit of the so-called 'Yarns' is coarse, and their burlesque is exceedingly broad--at times, indeed, offensively so--but there are those who enjoy such reading, nevertheless." Down to the present, critics have responded similarly. Edmund Wilson believed the Yarns "by far the most repellent book of any real literary merit in American literature."[14]

While Harris took a beating from critics and only enjoyed modest success in book sales, Mortimer Thomson watched his collection soar among critics and the public alike. The New York Tribune which snubbed Harris in 1867 thought Thomson possessed "a keen perception of the humorous side of things," and wonderful skills in presenting "the many-colored absurdities of metropolitan life." The Edward Livermore firm began printing Doesticks What He Says in the summer of 1855, and on the first day over seven thousand copies were sold. Another six thousand went out by week's end, and the numbers kept climbing. The New York Railway Journal raved, "Doesticks is one of the few immortal names that were not born to die." He "will always be with us. We step into our library, and behold there is the ubiquitous Doesticks! We listen to the thoughts that breathe--the quaint

philosophy--the piquant illustration!" In less than a decade, the total sales of Thomson's book exceeded 77,000 copies. This terrific figure, an outstanding number for a first-time author, but especially a humorist, indicated that his sketches had touched a nerve among the public and would be "much talked of in the papers." In only a short time, Thomson enjoyed "a large fortune" and went from a meager existence to living "in elegant style in Brooklyn."[15]

III

Mortimer Neal Thomson and George Washington Harris presented characters and scenes of a greater intensity than any other humorist had ever done before. In a major departure from convention, their outlandish characters, Philander Doesticks and Sut Lovingood, narrated each and every story themselves. No gentlemanly figure stood between them and the reader. No outsider tempered the action at all. Mood and language came through undiminished and without translation. Although sharing similarities of structure, design, and sometimes even plot, the sketches still diverged stylistically.[16]

Thomson wrote about the urban North and the particulars of city life. From the theaters on posh avenues to P.T. Barnum's museum of oddities at a busy intersection, Doesticks experienced all the amusements. While visiting the Barnum attraction, Doesticks befriended

two fellows who appeared in later episodes. The better dressed of the two wore clothes making him a representative of the man-on-the-make so often categorized as "young America." His fancy coat, high collar, top hat, and polite demeanor made him dignified until he told anyone his name, "A. Damphool, Esq." The other individual was more brawn, a tough guy calling himself "Bull Dogge." As the three viewed the curiosities at the museum, each made pithy comments. The sight of a "wax-figure of a tall man in a blue coat, with a star on his breast," for example, made Damphool remark the figure must be "a policeman who was found when he was wanted; but Bull Dogge says there was never any such person, and the whole story is a gay fable." Another sketch described a comical New Year's eve party. On that occasion, Doesticks concluded, all of New York went "to bed with a huge brick in its municipal hat, and as the legitimate effect of such indiscretion, awakes next morning with a tremendous corporate headache."[17]

The theme of drunkenness and revelry appeared frequently in Thomson's stories. His very first sketch, the one that made his reputation, described an excursion to Niagara Falls, and its title, "Doesticks on a Bender," said everything. A few facts put this story in a proper historical context. By the 1850s, excursions to the New York-Canadian border to view the hydraulic wonders had

become a fashionable pastime. The place developed into a tourist spot complete with Indians hawking handicrafts and affluent city dwellers buying them. Two other relevant themes were drunkenness, which had been a target of social reformers for years, and Irish immigration. Added together, these pieces and parts established a setting into which Doesticks brought his fun.

The story started off innocently enough with a visit to majestic falls for a day away from the city. Instead of commenting upon the beauty upon first arriving, Doesticks reduced the scene to "big rocks, water, foam, place where the water runs swift." The rush of water was fascinating because the spray made "the ladies faint, scream, and the paint washed off their faces." Other sights included "aristocratic Indians on the dirt and then inhabitants getting swindled, strangers, the waiters being impudent, and all the small boys swearing." Unflattering descriptions continued as he cursed "the dampness of everything, the cupidity of everybody, which is a diabolic fact, and the Indians and niggers everywhere, which is a satanic truth."[18]

After these crude remarks which cut deeply into one of the most popular attractions in the United States, Doesticks bought a glass of beer and walked up to the falls. He grabbed another and then walked below the falls. "Another glass of beer--immediately--also

another." He galloped over to the observation point on Goat Island where a guide gouged him for a tour including "nine cents a sneeze." He gazed again on the waterfalls, but "didn't feel sublime any; tried to, but could't; took some beer and tried again." He failed yet "began to feel better." The billowing white caps looked like "one sea of beer--was going to jump down and get some." The guide saved him by suggesting a walk "over to the hotel to get a glass of beer."[19]

Doesticks continued drinking on this terrible binge, downing glass after glass, because the last batch had been so bad "I had to take the taste out of my mouth." Gradually, the story became incoherent as drunkenness overwhelmed the narrator's motor skills. His description of lunch presented an amusing scene. "Called for a plate of beans, when the plate brought the waiter in his hand, I took it, hung up my beef and beans on a nail, eat my hat, paid the dollar a nigger." After finishing, he stumbled outside with a "very bad headache" and "rubbed it against the lamp post." Uninjured, he continued staggering on along, and soon met a "station house who said if I did not go straight he'd take me to the watchman--tried to oblige the station house."[20]

The story finished with a loud crash as a servant pushing a baby carriage ran into the inebriated man. Before the accident, Doesticks spotted "a baby with an

Irishwoman and a wheelbarrow in it; couldn't get out of the way." The woman was no help either because she "wouldn't walk on the sidewalk, but insisted on going on both sides of the street." The collision was "awful, knocked out the wheelbarrow's nose, broke the Irishwoman all to pieces, baby loose, court-house handy took me to the constable, the jury sat on me. The dungeon put me into the darkest constable in the city." The trip upstate ended on a sour note: "Niagara non est excelsus (ego fui) humbug est!"[21]

The very first Lovingood sketch Harris published, "Sut Lovingood's Daddy, Acting Horse" involved an incident almost as ridiculous. The action took place on a farm, however, a typical setting for a Harris sketch, although any open spot outside taverns, churches, or in the middle of a town square, wherever people congregated and Sut could make a spectacle of himself, was good enough. As scholars have noted, Sut defied hardships by laughing at misfortune. Once, Sut entertained mountaineers by telling them about the family horse who died. "Yu see, he froze stiff; no, not that adzactly, but starv'd fust, an' froze arterards." The animal became so hard, seventeen days passed before they "cud skin 'im." The story took a twist when Sut's father volunteered for the job so plowing might go forward. "When we got the bridil fix'd ontu dad, don't yu bleve he sot in tu chompin hit jis like a rale hoss,

an' tried tu bite me on the arm." He pawed at the ground, made horse noises, and played the part almost too well. Sut's mother said he "wer a mos' complikated durned ole fool." He certainly played "hoss better nur yu do dus husban," she told him. Once in the field, the two-legged beast "made rite peart plowin, fur tu hev a green hoss" until "we cum to a sassafrack bush." Dad pushed through the branches and into a "a ball ho'nets nes' ni ontu es big es a hoss's hed."[22]

As Sut explained, the plow had destroyed a nest and the inhabitants were quite upset. These were not ordinary honey bees but aggressive hornets who attacked in a manner reminiscent of Thorpe's swarm in the "Tom Owen" tale. Yet instead of facing the pain with dignity as Thorpe's character had done, Sut's father "kick'd strait up onst, then he rar'd, an' fotch a squel wus nur ara stud hoss in the State, an' sot in tu strait runnin away jis es natral es yu ever seed any uther skeer'd hoss du." Off he went fleeing through the undergrowth, hitting a fence and crashing though its rails. All the time he fanned the air around his head, and yelled frantically. In the process his clothes tore off, adding embarrassment to the other pains.[23]

Making an escape also proved difficult because try as he might, "he seem'd tu run jis adzactly es fas' es a hon'et cud fly." A pond provided relief, but by the time

its soothing waters acted, the damage had been done. Sut stood on the bank and chided his Dad for being afraid of a few "hoss flies" and taking a swimming break. The father yelled back, "hoss flies h--l an' (dip)," as he went under water and came up again, "durnation!" The worst part came later when the stings swelled his head into the size of a wash pot leaving "jist two black slits" for eyes. A visitor passing the cabin saw Sut's father laid out on the ground with his wife rubbing ointment on him, and thought a big fight had happened or illness had struck. Sut set the record straight. His Dad was only "gittin over a vilent attack ove dam fool."[24]

In the folk humor of Appalachia, humiliation, especially when coupled with nakedness, meant a storyteller perceived folly and wished to punish the victim. Sut could not feel sorry for his father because his old man had surrendered patriarchal authority, not to mention dignity, when he strapped on a horse's bit. No true man stepped out of his expected role as a leader, nor allowed himself to be constrained similar to a slave. The ridicule his wife heaped upon him at the start and end when hearing about the hornets, "law sakes! I know'd he cudent act hoss fur ten minutes wifout actin infunel fool, tu save his life," illustrated his degraded position. This bee fable had its origins in folk culture, and yet the story still weighed in heavily for the Jeffersonian

ideal of a strong, independent yeoman farmer. Sut apparently looked up to this ideal because he had less respect for his father following the incident. "I broke frum them parts," he explained, "an' sorter cum over yere tu the copper mines."[25]

These stories by Thomson and Harris illustrated how the settings and subject matter remained decisive. Doesticks inhabited a city with all the absurdities of life there, while Sut lived in a rural place where every-day hardships became a source of amusement. Thomson wrote about fashionable resorts, drunkenness, and included prejudices against the growing number of ethnic minorities in Northern cities. Harris made fun of a poor, white trash family and highlighted the importance of patriarchy among Tennessee mountaineers. Another distinguishing feature, easily recognizable, was Sut's coarse vernacular. Harris built his humor as much on the telling of a tale as from the action itself. In contrast, Thomson's sketches were more refined in language, and told a story with little elaboration. As a consequence of these stylistic choices, Thomson's sketches remained consistently shorter. On average, each of his ran nine pages compared with twelve for Harris. Doesticks told entertaining stories, especially when drunk, yet Lovingood remained unrivaled for the colorful dialect that came out every time he spoke.[26]

IV

Even when many of the structural and design features of sketches were nearly equivalent, as in the case of Thomson's "Special Express From Dog Paradise--A Canine Ghost" and "Sut Lovingood's Dog," selections about two thousand words in length, cultural influences still made the stories diverge. Typically, Thomson relied upon witty, urbane themes. His story opened with Doesticks lamenting the loss of his bull-terrier "Pluto." The little fellow had disappeared and was presumed dead. One evening after a "nightcap (liquid and hot with nutmeg)," his cat informed him of an apparition that had requested an audience. Doesticks may have been drunk again, but given the skepticism about spiritual mediums elsewhere in Thomson's volume, his character's drinking at this point hinted that anyone who saw ghosts had to be impaired in one way or another. After he agreed to the meeting, the "warning growl and friendly wag of the tail" told him Pluto had returned from the dead. The dog remembered being drowned when thieves who sold animals "in foreign markets" put too many captives on a boat. By foreign markets, the narrator probably meant food marts in ethnic neighborhoods because throughout his descriptions many other puns littered the text. The dog, for example, described the barge which had "embarked" from the dock. Pluto then explained how he had "witnessed the final

disappearance of his mortal remains through the jaws of a confiding drayman who had asked for mutton pie."[27]

The rest of Thomson's story described the different animals met in the afterlife. Most of these spirits were historical or literary notables, making a good command of allusions necessary for understanding the jokes. The Trojan horse from Homer, for example, towered before him yet was "suffering from indigestion." St. George's dragon, the monster from Dark Ages mythology, possessed a temperament "much more amiable" than expected. Then the Black Swan, the swan of Avon, congregated with the geese who saved early Rome from Gaul attack for tadpole hunting, and Coleridge's "'mastiff bitch'" became the proud new mother of "thirteen lovely cherubs." Both "Edgar A. Poe's raven and Barnaby Redge's grip had just been detected stealing corn from a quail trap, and hiding it in an empty powder horn."[28]

The Harris dog story followed a simple formula of setting the scene, moving the action along, and then at some point letting "all hell break loose." Sut's canine friend, unceremoniously named Stuff-gut, "wur a powerful dog, an' sometimes ye'd think that he wur two ur three dogs" except he was missing a tail that Dad, "durn <u>him</u>," cropped off. He had to wag "his hole stern sorter like a fashunabil gal walks when she thinks sum he feller is lookin at 'er."[29] The adventure began when Sut and the

dog walked into town. When Sut finished drinking and turned to return home, his canine companion came

> a tarin down the street fifteen times faster nor I thot he cud run, jis' a bowin ove hissef, his years sot flat ontu his neck, an' his bristles all sot like a black pearch's top fin, his eyes shot up fast an' tite, and he hed on a sort ove haness made outer strings, sorter like the set Dad wore when he acted hoss, an' he were haulin ove an' old stage latern and hit filled with wet powder, an sot' afire.[30]

Sut spotted the scoundrel responsible for torturing Stuff-gut, and in no time at all had put his "jaws ontu a mouthful ove his steak." During the resulting fight, Sut exacted what he thought would be a fitting revenge by striking a whole pack of matches and stuffing the flaming bundle into a back pocket. Much to the surprise of everyone, the poor man "had two pounds ove gun-powder in tother pocket, a-takin home to a shootin match." The panic stricken victim started running for water but upon reaching a Yankee peddler's wagon the bomb exploded launching him up and through the parked vehicle. His pants burned off as "the sittin part ove him wus blowed tu kingdom cum, and so wur everything else belongin tu that regin." The blast ripped the wagon apart too making "it rain tin buckets, an' strainers, an' tin cups, an' pepper boxes," and the whole inventory for two minutes and a half. "Thar wus wun cussed nutmeg-makin Yankee broke plum up, an' I'm durn'd glad ove it," Sut declared.[31]

Once again, humiliation and suffering made up the important themes of a Harris story. Sut had jumped so easily into a fight because something more was at stake than retribution. Hurting a man's dog was tantamount to insulting him, and a challenges of this nature could not go unanswered. A masculine code of honor provided motivation for behavior. Harris drew upon this important principle for a humor more primeval than intellectual. In his Tennessee scene, Sut joked about many things but not the harm that came to his dog as Doesticks had done when Pluto was killed and eaten. Instead the humor relied upon Sut's angry response to the injury. In the Sut story, those values of patriarchy and honor came through clearly.

V

No better illustration of how the sectional crisis affected American humor could be given than by examining other sketches by Thomson and Harris. From the beginning their writing had been different stylistically, and as the 1850s wore on, the two became embroiled in sectional strife that separated their work even more. The tone and content also deteriorated into Swiftian satire. Thomson and Harris became caught up in a darkening literary landscape and were willing actors in fostering discord. Each began a slow movement into a role as a sectional partisan by first becoming involved in politics. In this

realm, the two humorists sharped their skills for use in conflict against sectional rather than political enemies.

A recurrent theme in the sketches of Thomson and Harris, one very helpful for individuals involved in a protracted dispute, was an overwhelming sense of righteousness. Neither humorist could sustain partisanship for long without this vital self-assurance. That both humorists possessed this trait in abundance was clear from the beginning because each created characters that specialized in exposing corruption. When his first collection appeared in 1855, Thomson received praise from a Baltimore newspaper for being a satirist "of a high order" who "aimed with severe accuracy against a vast number of the follies, frailties, and humbugs of the day." A New England critic also enjoyed the "trenchant" blows at "humbug" delivered "most unmercifully." Two years later, he showed that time had not diminished this capacity.[32]

His story, a featured article in the New York Knickerbocker magazine, described how many of Gotham's residents were pretending to be robbed in order to get out of paying bills. Thugs garroted, as the slang went, someone at Doestick's boarding house and stole all his money or so he claimed. The landlady believed him, felt so sorry for the loss, and "could not find it in her heart to refuse him three months' longer credit." Pretty soon another tenant fell victim, and strangely the experience

kept happening twice a week, leaving him "unsteady in the legs and breath to smell of run-punch." The criminals were not above accosting innocent children either. "I sent the little errand-girl with a dime for some beer, and she returned in tears with the news of another robbery." Interestingly enough, "she had her fist full of lemon-candy, and had two big applies in her pocket, which I suppose the robbers had given her."[33]

The city's fortune tellers were another set of people Thomson exposed as frauds. Doesticks prefaced an account of their activities entitled, "Modern Witchcraft," by explaining that if "these Doesticks letters are purchased and perused," then "no impudent humbug, properly managed, will turn the stomach of the enlightened Yankee nation." Fortune telling had become one such humbug. Doesticks visited a medium in hopes of diminishing their allure. Sitting in the dirty, grimy room, he asked the woman for information about his future wife, a good lottery number, and the person who stole a favorite pocket knife. The lady dealt a greasy pack of cards and came up with a couple of ridiculous answers. "A month has passed--67 seems a promising number," he reported, but otherwise none of what she said had come true. Towards the end of the decade, Thomson published a whole book describing all the fakes and charlatans involved in the whole sordid business. The Knickerbocker magazine thanked him for the

"expose of the corruptest [sic] classes of male and female swindlers in the metropolis."[34]

No rank of society, not even the highest, could consider itself immune from his righteous mocking. During 1857 when Thomson stood at his zenith, New York's fashionable set became amused with a jovial poem called "Nothing to Wear." A prominent attorney had written the piece to make fun of his wife who possessed an insatiable appetite for the latest clothing fashions. The mighty Doesticks received a dollar a line to write a parody of the poem so Thomson dashed off eight hundred of them in less than a week. Instead of attacking the conspicuous consumption or consumerism, however, his poem defended wealth and rich people as generous patrons. At every turn, the narrator, a spirit named Charity, debunked her rival Cant by pointing out the kindness of various public amenities given by the wealthy such as the Cooper Institute or Astor's Library. Thomson's text may have been a genuine endorsement of these projects or a clever stratagem for showing how little these institutions did for those in need.[35]

As Charity and Cant argued further, the two flew into Norfolk, Virginia, where yellow fever was ravaging the population. The "pestilence there was doing its worst/Hundreds were dying, and hundreds/were dead./Many who should have been bravest/Had deserted their trust, and

shame-/lessly fled." Into this dismal environment came, "men from Northern cities./Nursing the sick with the tenderest/care,/Whose kindred had fled to less dangerous/lands,/Leaving the dying to stranger's hands." Those who sent relief were none other than "the wealthy, the rich, the opulent,/few/of Madison Square and the Fifth Avenue." Not only did these lines possess a catchy jingle that made wealthy benefactors appear generous; they also insulted Virginians who appeared cowardly for running away. This bit was a small part of the overall text, yet a particularly revealing one.[36]

The attitude Doesticks displayed in his exposes was matched in vigor by Sut Lovingood who lambasted "the durnd infunnel, hiperkritikal, pot bellied, scaley-hided, whiskey-wastin, stinkin ole groun-'hog" parson Bullen. Sut and a young woman were caught together at a camp meeting, but rather than forgiving the transgression and not informing the woman's parents, the clergyman informed on them after finishing a good meal at their home. To punish Bullen for not practicing Christian forgiveness, Sut slipped a lizard into the Reverend's pants when he spoke about Hell's serpents at the camp meeting. Chaos, nakedness, and humiliation followed in the typical pattern of a Lovingood sketch. This time the victim "did the loudest, an' skariest, an' fussiest runnin I ever see, tu be no faster nur hit wer, since Dad tried tu outrun the

ho'nets." Sut's stories stripped morality into "simplicity and truth," meaning something was right or wrong. No middle ground existed. Even though he caused disturbances, Sut respected goodness and attacked any perversion of principle.[37]

A story Harris wrote in 1857 expressed more of this righteousness. In this adventure, Sut had fallen in love with Sicily Burns, a beautiful woman who would have nothing to do with him. She grew tired of overtures and decided upon a fitting cure for his lust. A Yankee peddler brought around some baking soda and she slipped some into his drink. For once, Sut took a taste of his own medicine and had to run off in humiliation as his insides nearly exploded. The plot of this scene bore striking resemblance to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. If this comparison has any validity then the peddler would have been the serpent or the Devil. Sut railed against this character for selling the soda. He "hes my piusest prayer, an' I jis wish I hed a kaig ove the truck intu his cussed paunch, wif a slow match cumin out at his mouf," Sut declared. In Sut's sanctimonious opinion, the peddler's "soul wud hev more room in a turnip-seed tu fly roun in than a lether-wing bat hes in a meetin-hous." This stereotype gave an intense condemnation several times more serious than the words Thomson used against the citizens of Norfolk. Still, both passages made ugly,

unsubstantiated attacks on the other's region whose main purpose could only be to breed anger.[38]

VI

The political views of Thomson and Harris had an important bearing on many of their sketches. Thomson's party affiliation and political philosophy has fallen, however, into obscurity. A twentieth century biographer claimed he supported Democrats and even voted for the moderate presidential candidate James Buchanan. His employment on the Tribune newspaper, an early Republican banner, and then harsh antislavery view expressed in 1859 placed him squarely in the camp of those unhappy with Southern slavery. This anomaly may mean he changed his views at some point or his thoughts defy neat analysis. The Democratic and prosouthern convictions of Harris were rigid and thoroughly documented in his own time. In any case, by the late 1850s, the two humorists found themselves on the opposite sides of the sectional divide.[39]

Interestingly, both Thomson and Harris were opposed to the upstart Know Nothing party and unleashed bitter denunciations against their members. This organization which rose in the Northern states during the middle of the decade included Whigs, nativists, and those unhappy with the Southern influences in the Democratic party. Secretive and prejudiced, the members rallied around the

flag and mystical bonds of patriotism. Thomson's satire of the party included a scene where Doesticks and Bull Dogg attended one of their initiation ceremonies. Elaborate costumes and Irish whiskey figured heavily. The members drank whiskey so they might prove devotion to their anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic creed, Doesticks claimed, because the members "expung[ed] the foreign element from the liquid comforts of the country." Sut's complaints about Know Nothings were not as crude, but still contemptuous. In an off-hand remark, he mentioned how a large helping of soap would be necessary for washing "away the sins of a whole know-nothin Congressional deestrict."[40]

Harris also campaigned for James Buchanan in the hotly contested 1856 election. The Nashville Union and American which had been publishing Sut's adventures knew that "George Harris [was] an out and out Democrat, a good writer and a tip top clever fellow." By November, he had written a political satire entitled "Playing Old Sledge For the Presidency." Sut was not included in this account of a Washington card game between "Buck-cannon, Fillmore, and Fremount" who were thinly-veiled caricatures of candidates, James Buchanan, Millard Fillmore, and John Fremont. Running around the table looking nervous during the dealing was a friend of the "darned mule eatin" Freemount named "Sea-ward," an obvious reference to

Republican strategist William Seward. Buck-cannon won the game narrowly and the Republicans brayed defeat acting more like barnyard mules than people. Perhaps as a reward for this sketch, or more likely service to the local party, he was appointed Knoxville's postmaster.[41]

Although a satisfactory administrator, Harris quit after less than a year. The lure of politics could not keep him away for long, however, and during the late spring of 1858, he registered opinions about the clashes between Northern and Southern representatives at Washington, D.C. Harris composed several letters as if they were written by Sut Lovingood himself. These epistles appeared in the Nashville Union and American newspaper. These pieces showed how Harris had become an angry partisan bent on lashing out at Northern antislavery critics. Harris Scholar M. Thomas Inge has argued that his June 19 letter endorsed the May assault Representative Preston Brooks made on Senator Charles Sumner. Sut complained how Northerners made verbal attacks but then back away from a fight. "Here's the redoubtable prize ox in the human cattle show. Wilson, of Mass.," he wrote referring to Sumner's ally Senator Henry Wilson. That leading antislavery agitator acted no better than "the veriest coward that ever truckled to an inferior foe--sows his insults broadcast, and then simply acts poltroon." Sut knew that "a four year old, well preserved hickory"

was the "true antidote for his grog-house poison." Ominously, he also predicted in the letter "trenchant horns are so soon to lock for life or death."[42]

Thomson had edged into the sectional disputes a few years earlier. In 1856, Doesticks had written a mock history of the United States based on the Longfellow poem "Hiawatha." A reviewer thought his parody of the poem crude for taking "an unlimited quantity of hits at every body, of which everyone must good-naturedly take his share, to pay for the privilege of laughing at his neighbors." A number of jabs were, however, aimed at slavery. In particular, chapter eleven berated Southerners for enslaving "Cuffee" and making "him work and do his drudging./But he didn't mean to pay him/That would be no speculation,/For he loved his darling dollars." To accomplish the enslavement, Cuffee was "mauled and pummeled" into submission. Pluri-bus-tah, a personification of the country and main character, worried his wife Liberty "might rebel against" his actions, "make a row and scratch his eyes out." Nothing of the sort happened in the poem, but the narrator had made his point. In March of 1858, Thomson expressed gloom over the escalating crisis by telling friends he believed "North and South would fight, the latter getting tremendously licked."[43]

The Plantation magazine of Eatonton, Georgia which had recently come into existence, and was eager to blast anything written in the North, attacked the volume wholeheartedly. The editor singled out Thomson's humor as a perfect example of Yankees foisting their values on the rest of the country. Agreement came from a Charleston, South Carolina, newspaper which dubbed the book, "a burlesque." At Boston, New York, and Philadelphia newspapers were more jubilant in their appraisals. "It overflows with fun" and "this is far the cleverest thing that Doesticks has done," the editors declared. A Newark, New Jersey, newspaper continued, "we said of Doestick's first work that it was a quaint teacher of morality and a promoter of good works, we are ready to reiterate in respect to this volume." The pages criticized "deception, arrogance, and emptiness" while at the same time the criticism promoted "morality, virtue, temperance, economy, and patriotism." The reviews of Thomson's book from Northern and Southern critics could not have been more at odds.[44]

VII

In fiction written before and after the Civil War, George Washington Harris lambasted Yankees and expressed hatred towards African-Americans. A scene where a Yankee peddler caused trouble for Sut has been mentioned above. Other stories, "A Razor-Grinder in a Thunderstorm" and

"The Widow McCloud's Mare" expressed more outrage at the peddlers in Sut's neighborhood. "Sut at a Negro Night-Meeting" and "Frustrating a Funeral" showed the terrible pranks played on unsuspecting blacks assembled on religious occasions. These stories followed a pattern of Harris attacking enemies in Tennessee. Two stories Harris published in late summer of 1858, however, represented a new departure because he started criticizing Yankees living in the North and the North itself. In effect, his prejudices were turned out of his own region and towards another. The motivation for this change may have been the trip he made to New York and anger over not finding a publisher.[45]

The first of these sketches entitled "Sut Escapes Assassination" described the utter shock Harris's character experienced upon arrival in the urban North. "I tell you, now, a man what's been tu that ar place, New York, hes suffered all he'll ever hev to suffer, and larnt more nur wun man ortur know," Sut exclaimed. Two good legs and whiskey were necessary for an extended stay in that "cussed, h'isey, skary strange-lookin' country." The whole time up there, he longed for Tennessee "whar the south birds chirp and the bar growls, whar the wild harycane dus es it pleases, an' what thar's plenty of a'r to breath an' plenty ove room tu run." The buildings and the people made him nervous. When he met P.T. Barnum, Sut

thought the showman wanted his skin for display as a "Ramus Scrambleusimus." Then when a photographer asked him to sit for a portrait, Sut thought his life was in danger. That big "durn'd bunty connecticut gun" might shoot him full of holes.[46]

His next sketch about the city singled a couple of people for ridicule. At the top of the list were the antislavery activists Henry Ward Beecher and Horace Greeley. Coincidentally, both men were friends of Mortimer Thomson who knew the former "very well" and worked for the latter as a special Tribune correspondent. Harris thought little of Thomson's friend or his employer. He dubbed "Ole Beecher" a stern puritan and his sister, whose name was not mentioned but was likely Harriet Beecher Stowe, strong-willed and ugly. Then to make fun of Greeley, Sut associated him with free love utopian communities and other social reform movements Greeley had not supported. That "durn'd fool" was so clean he walked around in a white suit and carried a "nigger trap" as a protest against the fugitive slave law. Along with Beecher and Greeley, the "wuthless" dandy was panned because Sut thought well-dressed, perfumed men "stink of a pole-cat." Then a policeman he fought with was no better than an "ugly cackus," this last insult finishing a story whose main purpose had been to denigrate Northern urban

culture. Without qualification, Harris made the whole city and its people an unattractive lot of reprobates.[47]

Doesticks visited the Southern states on only one occasion. On the way to Michigan, he stopped by a Kentucky tavern. Thomson described the experience in a long catalog of horrors and stereotypes starting with the hot sun which "melted and blistered" the skin. The public house in the sunny Old South turned out to be a less than a hospitable place because "comfort [was] mercilessly sacrificed to show." Every furnishing was "too nice to use." Then the slave attendants, "every one of these woolly-headed nuisances," wanted a tip before doing anything. Getting a good night's sleep proved as hard as obtaining good service. The "ferocious fleas, bloodthirsty bed bugs, and murderous mosquitoes" doomed one to be "a modern Macbeth who would sleep no more." Breakfast consisted of muddy coffee, a "mass of bones, sinews, and tendons," called chicken and a slab of "gutta-percha" steak. That unbearable stay which compared to Sut's New York experience left Doesticks feeling as disgusted by the Southern tavern as Sut felt about the Northern city.

Thomson wrote only one other major story dealing with the Southern states. His piece, a non-fiction expose of an infamous slave auction at Savannah, Georgia, required him to risk life and limb for the story. Early in March

of 1859, the antislavery New York Tribune sent him southward incognito for a well-publicized dispersal of a large planter's estate. As a friend remembered, the Georgians "would have tarred, feathered and ridden him on a rail had they known his mission." Over four hundred slaves, "the largest sale of human chattels that has been made in Star-Spangled America," Thomson reported, went on the block because a Philadelphia heir needed money. Thomson sympathized with the slaves and described the terrible conditions they endured leading up to the sale.[48]

Between sentimental scenes of slave families being torn apart and a section about two lovers uncertain when they might next meet, appeared bitter sections where he described managers and buyers with scathing effect. The auctioneer, a fat "rollicking old boy" with a "peely, red cabbage face" set the rules and took every bid with a wide smile. Out in the large crowd at the race track, the extravaganza's location, roamed an unsavory bunch. Bespectacled gentry rubbed elbows with "rough backwoods rowdies" who "waxed louder and talkier and more violent" as they drank more whiskey. Most fascinating to Thomson was the "Georgia fast young man with his pantaloons tucked into his boots, his velvet cap jauntily dragged over to one side." Nothing could have prepared him for this chap. "Altogether an animal of quite a different breed from your

New York fast man," he surmised. The plug tobacco cheek and "revolver or convenient knife ready for instant use in case of a heated argument" clearly set him apart. In all these descriptions, the Southerners came across in unflattering portraits.[49] When Thomson returned and published his account, the Tribune sold out of its daily edition and had to print extra copies. The Boston antislavery periodical Atlantic Monthly enjoyed the striking portraits, and the editors saw none of the stereotypes but only a work of "accurate fidelity." The American AntiSlavery Society took an interest in the article and by the end of the year had published the work separately. Thomson had presented a satire worthy of a humorist yet presented the story as a true account. Southerners were evidently unhappy with his interpretation because from then on Thomson remained a marked man. During the Civil War when he served as a war correspondent at Port Royal, South Carolina, not far from Savannah, authorities warned him to stay within their lines. His handiwork was known in the enemy camp.[50]

When Thomson and Harris turned their humor on each other's region, they attacked places and cultures they believed hostile to theirs. In New York, Sut complained about not having freedom and the mountain air he enjoyed so much. The streets of New York were made into a stifling place. Doesticks thrived on that very atmosphere

and could not stand the crude Kentucky tavern. Add to their perspectives righteous indignation and the elements for a bitter, uncompromising satire emerged at once and was used by both men against the other's region. Thomson and Harris made exceptional strides in moving humor farthest away from the amiable tones of previous decades and into a form fit for the great propaganda humorists of the Civil War.

VIII

When Mark Twain wrote his autobiography early in the twentieth century, he looked back over fifty years of the humorous art in America. His association with this genre had begun at an early age. In the 1850s, Benjamin Shillaber published the teenager's first comic sketch in the short-lived but much celebrated Carpet Bag magazine. Over the years, Clemens had the privilege of coming into contact with several other leading humorists who had left indelible marks on the antebellum period. Joseph G. Baldwin's son had befriended him while he roughed it on the flats of Nevada, and in 1870 Thomson wrote him requesting a copy of a book. Nearly all of the antebellum humorists and their characters were forgotten by the time Twain penned his memoirs. He lamented their passing especially the fictional fellows, Ike Partington and Doesticks. Both had been "in everybody's mouth" but now were "no longer mentioned." Others, Ned Brace, Peter

Ploddy, Tom Owen, and bigger names had been forgotten by Twain if he had ever known them. Their time, their culture, and their places were long gone.[51]

Twain explained that humor was only "fragrance, a decoration" and by its very nature would not last. He argued that the best sketches, those that both preached and taught, would last forever, but "by forever I mean thirty years," he explained. Too much changed in that time frame for anything good to survive longer. The period between 1830 and 1860 lasted that magical thirty years Twain called "forever." That distance separated different forms of humor and included many perspectives from all around the country. Through all the transformations of the era, however, culture and place remained the creative guideposts of a generation. At first cheerful laughter echoed in communities, East and West, but as the thirty years closed conflict overwhelmed the humorists and split them North and South.[52]

END NOTES

1. "Q.K. Philander Doesticks" undated newspaper article in Thomas Butler Gunn Diary, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri; For biographical and publishing information on Thomson see: Fletcher Daniel Slater, "The Life and Letters of Mortimer Thomson," (MA Thesis, Northwestern University, 1931), David E.E. Sloane, "Mortimer Thomson" in Stanley Trachtenberg, ed. American Humorists 1800-1950 2 Vols. Dictionary of Literary Biography Series Volume 11 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1982), II, 491-496, and Edward J. Piacentino, "Mortimer Neal Thomson" in Steven H. Gale, ed. Encyclopedia of American Humorists (New York: Garland Press, 1988): 437.

2. Joseph R. Williams to Charles S. May, April 26, 1855, in Charles Sedwick May Correspondence, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. "Doesticks" in Gunn Diary.

3. Gunn Diary, November 13, 1859; New York Herald June 26, 1875; Tribune quotation in Slater, "Thomson," 25.

4. New York Times June 26, 1875.

5. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical and publication information comes from Milton Rickels, George Washington Harris (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1965); Knoxville Register June 26, 1846 in Donald Day, "The Life of George Washington Harris," Tennessee Historical Quarterly 6 (March 1947): 12.

6. Day, "Harris," 8. "George W. Harris" undated newspaper article in George Frederick Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

7. Herman M. Doak in M.Thomas Inge, ed. "A Personal Encounter with George Washington Harris," The Lovingood Papers 3 (1963): 11.

8. Day, "Harris," 12 and 15.

9. Harris in M. Thomas Inge, ed., High Times and Hard Times (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), 24-37; 50 and 57 for story quotations. Hereafter cited as High. All citations are to this edition.

10. Rickels, Harris, 28-29. Also see Ben Harris McClary, "Sut Lovingood's Country," Southern Observer 3 (January 1955): 5-7.

11. Harris, Sut Lovingood's Yarns Edited By M. Thomas Inge (Schenectady, NY: New College and University Press, 1966), 33. Hereafter cited as Sut. All citations are to this edition.

12. Nashville Union and American June 30, 1858.

13. Harris, Sut Lovingood. Yarns Spun By a 'Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool' (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1867). Jacob Blanck, ed. Bibliography of American Literature 9 Volumes to date (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955-), III, 384.

14. San Francisco Daily Alta California July 14, 1867; New York Tribune April 6, 1867; New York Times April 8, 1867; Wilson, Patriotic Gore (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 509.

15. New York Tribune July 23, 1855; Slater, "Thomson," 31; "Doesticks" advertizement in Mortimer Neal Thomson, The History and Records of the Elephant Club (New York: Livermore and Rudd, 1857), 329; Lyle H. Wright, "A Few Observations on American Fiction, 1851-1875," Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 65 (April-October 1955): 92; Clifford Thomson to Mortimer Thomson, January 16, 1857, in Clifford Thomson Collection, New York Historical Society, New York, New York; Thomson, Doesticks What He Says (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1859). Hereafter cited as Doesticks. All citations are to this edition; "Doesticks' books" advertizement in Thomson, Elephant, 330; Of the twenty comments in this advertizement, six came from New York City newspapers and ten from other newspapers around the Northeast. Of those ten, six were out of New England, mostly Boston newspapers. Of the four outside the Northeast, two came from the Midwest and two from the southern states. Thomson's biographer commented how he could not "imagine the book had a very extensive sale in the South" Slater, Thomson, 110; For the last quotation see "Doesticks" in Gunn, Diary.

16. J. Louis Kuthe, "Q.K. Philander Doesticks, P.B. Neologist," American Speech 12 (April 1937): 114-117. Carolyn S. Brown, "Sut Lovingood: A Nat'ral Born Durn'd Yarnspinner," Southern Literary Journal 18 (Fall 1985): 90-92.

17. Thomson, Doesticks, 45 and 179.

18. Ibid., 26 and 29.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 30 and 31.

21. Ibid.

22. William E. Lenz, Fast Talk and Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 106-107 and 112; Elaine Gardiner, "Sut Lovingood: Backwoods Existentialist," Southern Studies (Summer 1983): 177; Harris, Sut, 34, 35, and 36.

23. Harris, Sut, 36.

24. Ibid., 37 and 38.

25. Ormonde Plater, "The Lovingood Patriarchy," Appalachian Journal 1 (Spring 1973): 82 and 92. Harris, Sut, 38.

26. A comparison of Doesticks What He Says and Sut Lovingood's Yarns reveled that Thomson wrote thirty-six stories that ran three hundred and thirty-three pages for an average of nine pages a story. Harris included twenty-five in his three hundred page book for an average of twelve pages per story. Different type settings and arrangements accounted for the page differences, but I think style was also an important factor. Interestingly enough, the average for Joseph G. Baldwin was also twelve and for Longstreet eleven. Among the humorists with the strongest New England connections, Caroline Kirkland wrote six pages on average, Seba Smith came in at three and Shillaber one. Although these numbers show a pattern, plenty of exceptions preclude any conclusions. Joseph C. Neal's sketches ran an average of around twelve pages and so did Henry H. Riley's stories. Thorpe came in at eleven and thirteen for his books and Hall at nine.

27. Thomson, Doesticks, 264 and 265.

28. Ibid., 266, 267, and 268.

29. Elmo Howell, "Timon in Tennessee: the Moral Fervor of George Washington Harris," Georgia Review 24 (Fall 1970): 312; Robert Micklus, "Sut's Travels With Dad," Studies in American Humor n.s. 1 (October 1982): 89-94; Harris, Sut, 124.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 126.

32. Baltimore American and Boston Gazette in Thomson, Elephant, 330.

33. Thomson, "Doesticks On Garroting," Knickerbocker 49 (April 1857): 421.

34. Thomson, Doesticks, 65 and 71; Thomson, The Witches of New York (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1859); Knickerbocker 53 (March 1859): 301.

35. Slater, "Thomson," 134-153. Thomson, Nothing to Say: A Slight Slap at Mobocratic Snobbery, Which Has 'Nothing to Do' With 'Nothing to Wear' (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1857), 28-29 and 35-36.

36. Thomson, Nothing, 52, 55-56.

37. Harris, Sut, 52-53 and 56-57; Richard Gray, Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 67; John Wenke, Sut Lovingood's Yarns and the Politics of Performance," Studies in American Fiction 15 (Autumn 1987): 206; Inge, "Sut Lovingood: An Examination of the Nature of a 'Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool," Tennessee Historical Quarterly 19 (September 1960): 244 and 247; David C. Estes, "Sut Lovingood at the Camp Meeting: A Practical Joker Among the Backwoods Believers," Southern Quarterly 25 (Winter 1987): 64.

38. Harris, Sut, 71-72.

39. Slater, "Thomson," 114; Sloane, "Thomson," in Trachtenberg, ed., Humorists, 491-496; Rickels, Harris, 31.

40. Rickels, Harris, 30; Slater, "Thomson," 114; Thomson, Doesticks, 246; Harris, Sut, 91.

41. Slater, "Thomson," 114; Nashville Union and American December 4, 1848; Harris in Inge, ed. High, 1967, 233-236; Rickels, Harris, 30.

42. Harris in Inge, ed., High, 82-84.

43. Thomson, Plu-ri-bus-tah (New York: Livermore and Rudd, 1856); Advertizement in Thomson, Elephant, 326; Thomson, Plu-ri-bus-tah, 124, 128 and 129; Gunn, Diary, March 28, 1858.

44. Plantation in David E.E. Sloane, "The Humor of Old Northeast: Barnum, Burnham, and the Hen Fever," Studies in American Humor n.s. 6 (1988): 155. All other quotations are from "Notices" in Thomson, Elephant, 327.

45. The four sketches appeared in Sut Lovingood. Yarns Spun By a "Nat'rl Born Durn'd Fool (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1867) and had not been published before. Their content reveled few clues as to the date of their creation. If they are postwar sketches, the humor showed that the Civil War made his prejudices worse. Discussions of these sketches are included in Alan Henry Rose, "Characteristic Ambivalence in the Yarns of George Washington Harris," Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin (September 1975): 115-116 and Rose, Demonic Vision: Racial Fantasy and Southern Fiction (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976), 63-69.

46. Harris in Inge, ed., High, 126-132.

47. Ibid., 134-143; Gunn Diary, December 23, 1858; Beecher to Thomson, December 25, 1858, in Clifford Thomson Collection.

48. Piacentino, "Thomson," in Gale, Humorists, 437; Slater, "Thomson," 179; Gunn Diary, March 3, 1859; Thomson, "American Civilization Illustrated: A Great Slave Auction," in David E.E. Sloane, The Literary Humor of the Urban Northeast, 1830-1890 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 172.

49. Thomson, "Auction," in Sloane, Northeast, 173-181.

50. Edward J. Piacentino, "Doesticks' Assault on Slavery: Style and Technique in the Great Auction Sale of Slaves at Savannah, Georgia," Phylon 48 (Fall 1948), 196-203; Atlantic Monthly 4 (September 1859): 386-387.

51. Mark Twain, The Autobiography of Mark Twain Edited by Charles Neider (New York: Harper Brothers, 1961), 273; Thomson to Twain, October 21, 1870, in Fred W. Lorch, "'Doesticks' and Innocents Abroad'" American Literature 20 (January 1949), 447; Clemens to Jane L. Clemens, November 2, 1866, in Edgar Marquess Branch and Michael B. Frank, eds. The Letters of Mark Twain 4 Volumes to date (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), I, 365.

52. Twain, Autobiography, 273.

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VITA

Mr. Robertson is originally from Greenville, South Carolina. He attended Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, where he graduated after three years of study. In 1990, he entered Louisiana State University and attained a Master of Arts degree in history. That same year, the Louisiana Historical Association awarded him the first Hugh F. Rankin Prize for his essay, "The Emergence of the Whig Party in Louisiana's Florida Parishes, 1834-1840." He entered the doctoral program at the university immediately and expects to graduate in May of 1997.

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DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

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Major Field: History

Title of Dissertation: The Prism of Laughter: Antebellum Humorists in Regional Perspective

Approved:

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Date of Examination:

March 19, 1997