

Carolyn L. Karcher
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Albion W. Tourgée's Reconstruction Novels:
Promoting Political Change through Literature

"I am *terribly* beaten— There is no redeeming feature in the whole matter— I think every county has gone against me— . . . I can see nothing before me now but the most pinching and hopeless poverty. . . —[A]ll is a black dull night— . . . I have ended a life of bright promise in utter ruin. . . ." "I am dead politically and can have no more place in public life. . . ." So wrote Albion W. Tourgée after his crushing defeat in the election of 1878, when he ran for a congressional seat as the Republican representative of his adopted home district centering around Greensboro, North Carolina (#2248, 2249).

The tidal wave of reaction that destroyed Tourgée's political career also swept away almost everything for which he had been fighting since his arrival in Greensboro in October 1865. As a Union soldier during the Civil War, Tourgée had dedicated himself to bringing about a "fundamental thorough and complete revolution & renovation" of American society—one that would transform a nation built on slavery into a republic built on equal justice for all citizens, whatever their race or class. Like many of the white Northerners derisively called "carpetbaggers," he had gone South to fulfill this ideal by participating in the Reconstruction program through which Radical Republicans sought to eliminate the vestiges of slavery and institute genuine democracy in the former Confederate states. During his fourteen years in North Carolina, Tourgée had played a key role in writing a new state constitution that provided for local self-government rather than rule by an autocratic elite. In addition, he had forged an effective coalition uniting Blacks, poor whites, and upper-class converts to Radical

Republicanism; served for six years as a Superior Court judge; and waged a heroic struggle against the Ku Klux Klan. By the time Tourgée underwent his humiliating rejection by North Carolina voters in 1878, however, Klan violence had overthrown Reconstruction not only in North Carolina, where Tourgée had lost his judgeship in 1874, but throughout the South; the northern public and press had succumbed to the southern propaganda campaign against Reconstruction; Democrats (then backers of white supremacy) had recaptured the US House of Representatives; and a Republican president who owed his election to a panel of judges and a secret deal had initiated a “let alone” policy that restored the former slaveholding class to power.

It was at this juncture that Tourgée found a new vocation in the depths of his despair. If he could no longer act in the political or judicial sphere, he could influence public opinion through literature and thus perhaps reverse the nation’s catastrophic course. Tossing and turning during a sleepless night, Tourgée arrived at a sudden inspiration, which he awakened his wife to announce: “I am going to write a book and call it a ‘A Fool’s Errand.’” He “immediately rose” and wrote four chapters (#9722). He continued to work on the novel in spare moments over the next eighteen months, but finished it only after leaving North Carolina in August 1879.

A Fool’s Errand tells the story of a man much like Tourgée himself. Its hero Comfort Servosse, whom Tourgée ironically calls “the Fool,” shares his creator’s Huguenot and Yankee roots and follows a similar path. He, too, suffers from wounds inflicted during his Civil War service in the Union Army and goes South both to benefit from a warmer climate and to infuse the region’s backward economy with free labor principles, and he, too, quickly finds himself ostracized by his neighbors for associating with “nigger teachers,” conducting a “sabbath school for colored people,” and selling land to the freedmen. Initially less politicized than Tourgée, the

Fool becomes gradually radicalized by his exposure to southern intolerance—a fictional strategy Tourgée adopts to win over readers blinded by distorted accounts of Reconstruction. A political meeting fittingly completes the Fool’s radicalization as his neighbors force him to articulate his personal views—identical with those Tourgée had publicly promulgated—and then try to bloody him on his way home. Thereafter the Fool, like Tourgée, becomes “a marked man in the community,” a butt of abuse in the local newspaper, the recipient of threatening letters, and—once he joins the Union League and is elected to the Constitutional Convention—a target of the Ku Klux Klan.

A Fool’s Errand devotes thirteen chapters to the Klan. Drawn from Tourgée’s voluminous files of complaints brought to him as a judge, they overwhelm the reader by sheer accumulation. As if amassing evidence in the courtroom, Tourgée summons an array of witnesses brutalized by the masked marauders. The parade of grisly testimony climaxes with the murder of a poor white Radical and the lynching of a Black Union League leader, modeled on the fates of Tourgée’s political allies John W. Stephens and Wyatt Outlaw.

A Fool’s Errand provides not only a graphic eyewitness account of the terrorism that overthrew Reconstruction but a postmortem of the disaster. It is Northern Republicans who turned Reconstruction into a fool’s errand, he stresses, not the idealistic “fools” who dedicated their lives to implementing the Radicals’ program of racial equality. The party’s “cowardly, vacillating, and inconsistent” policy unleashed the Klan, and Republican leaders’ “cowardly shirking of responsibility” and “snuffling whine about peace and conciliation” allowed it to triumph. Tourgée documents his charges with fictionalized versions of his exchanges with the Northern politicians he sarcastically calls “the Wise Men.” Cementing his case, a chilling letter

from one of the Wise Men responds to the Fool's plea for decisive action against the Klan by arguing that the Constitution does not authorize the federal government to "interfere in the internal affairs" of the southern states: "If the colored people and the Union men of the South expect to receive the approval, respect, and moral support of the country, they must show themselves capable of self-government, able to take care of themselves. The government has done all it can be expected to do,—all it had power to do, in fact. It has given the colored man the ballot, armed him with the weapon of the freeman, and now he must show himself worthy to use it" (152-53, 211). Only one remedy remains, concludes Tourgée at the end of the novel: "Let the Nation educate the colored man and the poor-white man *because* the Nation held them in bondage, and is responsible for their education: educate the voter *because* the Nation can not afford that he should be ignorant" (346-47).

Published anonymously in November 1879, *A Fool's Errand* caused a sensation. It sold so fast that bookstores could not keep up with the demand, exceeding five thousand copies in the first six weeks and nearly 150,000 before the year was out. Domestic sales would reputedly "[reach] the high water mark of 600,000" in Tourgée's lifetime, and translations into German, French, Italian, Swedish and Russian would extend its fame beyond US borders (#9907). Reviewers widely hailed *A Fool's Errand* as "The New 'Uncle Tom,'" predicting that it would prove "as serviceable in enlightening the North about the startling events of the reconstruction period" as Stowe's masterpiece had in exposing the evils of slavery. Even a North Carolina organ recognized the power of a novel "destined, we fear, to do as much harm in the world as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'" Tourgée must have been especially gratified by the reviews that urged statesmen to heed his message. "If every representative and senator in Congress, if the

governors and state officers of every State in the Union, could read this volume," proclaimed one newspaper, "we should be nearer a solution of the problem of reconstruction."

Eager to capitalize on the success of *A Fool's Errand*, Tourgée's publishers persuaded him to drop his anonymity and furnish a fictional sequel to his bestseller. The result was *Bricks Without Straw*, published on the eve of the 1880 election, which it did as much as *A Fool's Errand* to swing to the Republicans.

Bricks Without Straw cries out to be rediscovered as one of the most powerful race novels ever written by a white American. That is why I have prepared a new edition of it, forthcoming in a few months from Duke University Press, and why I will devote the bulk of my talk today to persuading you to read it. Unjustly overshadowed by *A Fool's Errand*, Tourgée's second novel about Reconstruction in fact surpasses its predecessor both conceptually and artistically. Conceptually, *Bricks Without Straw* accomplishes the rare feat of envisioning Reconstruction from the Black community's standpoint—a more ambitious undertaking than fictionalizing an author's own experience. Artistically better constructed than *A Fool's Errand*, *Bricks Without Straw* features an array of complex, fully rounded characters; a plot that successfully integrates the political action centered on African Americans with the love story centered on whites; a sophisticated narrative technique that relies on flashbacks rather than on linear progression; a self-conscious use of dialogue and dialect to give voice to the voiceless; and an experimental open ending that calls attention to the problems history has left unresolved.

The literary achievement modern readers will prize most highly in *Bricks Without Straw* is its revolutionary approach to depicting African Americans—the product of Tourgée's extensive political interactions with them. Casting off the blinders that so drastically limited white

perceptions of African Americans, Tourgée defies conventions of racial stereotyping ubiquitous in the writings of his predecessors and contemporaries, who either embraced these conventions uncritically or resorted to covert strategies for undermining them. No other white writer of Tourgée's time—and few since then—portrayed African Americans with such realism, treated them as independent political agents instead of as menials attached to whites, and accorded them dominant roles in the plot.

Complementing *A Fool's Errand*, *Bricks Without Straw* shifts the focus from Tourgée's autobiographical persona to the freedpeople, whose story he had subordinated to his own in the earlier work. Elevating them from minor characters into central protagonists, and implicitly answering the Wise Man in *A Fool's Errand* who had questioned the capacity of the "colored people" for "self-government," Tourgée's second Reconstruction novel portrays the newly emancipated slaves not as pitiful victims of white violence but as active agents in a struggle for self-determination. *Bricks Without Straw* consequently restricts the Klan to a single, albeit devastating, episode in its dramatization of Black Reconstruction.

Tourgée explains the title in a satiric preface that purports to be a translation from an ancient Egyptian papyrus. Paralleling the Bible's Exodus story, it tells of how Pharaoh commands the laborers he holds in bondage to make bricks with stubble gathered from the fields instead of with straw furnished by the taskmaster. Pharaoh wants to build a palace that will advertise his "glory" to the world, but he wants his laborers to do it overnight without the necessary materials, just as the American nation wants the newly freed slaves to uplift themselves overnight by their own unaided efforts. Speaking through the "the king's jester" Neocapos, who undertakes the "fool's errand" of ridiculing Pharaoh's folly, Tourgée warns that

the “palace” built with these ill-made bricks will eventually collapse. The rest of the novel illustrates how the nation has imperiled its own safety by condemning the slaves it has emancipated at such great cost to make bricks without straw.

Tourgée knew that the story he wished to tell demanded a new type of novel, as perfectly adapted to impelling the northern public to complete the work of Reconstruction as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been to inspiring its antebellum readers to fight against slavery. Stowe had wrought her magic, he believed, by painting “a slavery which the free man could understand and appreciate” and by embodying it in characters familiar to the northern mind because they were “essentially New Englanders ” or “blackened Yankees.” By this very means, however, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had fostered the illusion that white and Black Southerners would easily reach an accommodation akin to that of Stowe's benevolent masters and lovable slaves. Fifteen years of turmoil had disabused Northerners of this comforting illusion, but without enlightening them as to either the true causes of the South's endemic violence or the elements of a long-term solution. Hence, most had supported the federal government's rapid retreat from Reconstruction.

To awaken the northern public from its slumber and summon it back to the unfinished task of liberating African Americans from white domination, Tourgée created a novel that combined the prime attribute of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—its “power to touch the universal heart”—with the social realism it conspicuously lacked. Through realism, *Bricks Without Straw* corrects readers' misconceptions and equips them for promoting effective policies in the South. Tourgée replaces Stowe's saintly Uncle Tom and comical Topsy with three-dimensional Black characters endeavoring to forge new lives for themselves. He shows them interacting primarily not with whites but with each other, and he traces the development of a free, self-dependent

African American community. Tourgée's realism illuminates the world of southern whites as well. *Bricks Without Straw* reveals the complexity of southern society, provides glimpses of the relations between poor whites and Blacks, and probes the psychology of the former slaveholders. Realism does not in itself arouse readers to action, however, as Tourgée's running quarrel with its literary proponents indicates that he discerned. He therefore infuses the emotional appeal of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into *Bricks Without Straw*. Through a narrator appalled by the nation's moral torpor, he strives to ignite in his readers the same fervor Stowe had sparked in hers. Stowe's readers had gone to war to free the slaves. Tourgée wanted his readers to fulfill that war's promise by rededicating themselves to the forsaken goal of Reconstruction.

Tourgée carefully crafted the narrative strategies, characters, and plot of *Bricks Without Straw* to challenge the stereotypes that white supremacists had disseminated of Reconstruction as an era of rampant "Negro domination," and to present an alternative history of the brief interlude during which African Americans in the South had sought to exercise the rights the US Congress had extended to them in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Constitutional Amendments awarding them freedom, citizenship, and (for men) qualified suffrage. The novel proper opens with a fictional device that mirrors the legislative process of giving Black men a voice in determining their own and the country's future—a chapter-long monologue in which the main protagonist Nimbus ponders the "strange queries which freedom had so recently propounded to him and his race." "I'm dod-dinged now ef I know who I be ennyhow," exclaims Nimbus as he reflects on the changes of identity he has undergone over the past few years and recalls how each step of his journey from slavery to citizenship has been marked by a white authority's forcing him to adopt an unwanted second name (10-11). Tourgée makes clear that Nimbus equates naming with

establishing an identity and that he regards defining his identity for himself as the essence of freedom. Like Malcolm X a century later, Nimbus refuses to let white society “brand” him or his children with the “slave-mark” of his master’s surname (54).

Tourgée’s description of Nimbus systematically reverses both the falsifications of racist ideology and the clichés of minstrelsy. Unlike the “burnt-cork” stage Negro, emphasizes Tourgée, Nimbus is no comic figure (26-27). “Earnest,” “thoughtful,” and “quiet,” he does not shuffle or jump Jim Crow, but holds himself manfully erect. His head is not ape-like, as caricatured in proslavery textbooks, but “shapely” and “well-balanced.” His “self-reliant character” gives the lie to claims that the Negro cannot manage without white supervision. While discrediting the stereotypes that “have come to represent the negro to the unfamiliar mind,” Tourgée simultaneously draws attention to the racializing process that the white mind goes through on seeing a human being in a black skin. Unable to recognize a “fine figure of a man” in “ebon hue,” Tourgée implies, the white mind automatically perceives the same traits differently under a different racial exterior, even resorting to a different vocabulary to register its impressions. Tourgée pointedly notes, for example, that “if [Nimbus] had been white,” his face would have been perceived as “grave,” but that because he is Black, the appropriate word is “heavy.” Similarly, the very person who “in a white skin would have been considered a man of great physical power and endurance” metamorphoses into a savage brute in the white imagination once the skin color changes to black (26-27).

Tourgée specifically dispels the image of the Black man as a savage brute—a major ingredient of the white supremacist campaign against Reconstruction—in a scene that shows Nimbus demanding his rights and shielding himself against violence, but not retaliating in kind

when his former master Potestatem Desmit brandishes a cane over his head. "I'se been a sojer sence I was a slave, an' ther don't no man hit me a lick jes cos I'm black enny mo'," warns Nimbus as he parries the blow and wrests away the cane (105). Loath to harm an "ole man," he leaves Desmit on the ground "where he had fallen or been thrown" in the tussle—an ambiguity that heightens Nimbus's self-restraint—and decides to lodge a complaint and "let de law take its course" (106). It is not the freed Blacks who violate the rule of law, Tourgée indicates, contrary to white supremacist propaganda, but their disgruntled erstwhile masters.

Along with the stereotype of the lawless Black savage, Tourgée counters allegations that Reconstruction had delivered the reins of government to ignorant ex-slaves who launched a carnival of misrule. Accordingly, he depicts Nimbus as unwilling to run for office on the grounds that he "hain't got no larnin'" and understands tobacco cultivation better than governance (186). Rather than aspiring to rule over whites, Nimbus acts as a leader of the African American community. Tourgée meticulously delineates the factors that have gained Nimbus his leadership: service in the Union Army, which has "taught him to stand his ground, even against a white man," a crucial "lesson of liberty" (104); investment of his military bounty money in land, through which he has acquired economic independence; skill and hard work, which have helped him to prosper as a tobacco farmer; community spirit, which he has demonstrated by donating a portion of his land and timber to establish a church and school for the freedpeople and by selling small parcels of his plantation to freedmen anxious to follow his example of home ownership and self-employment; and willingness to defend the rights of his fellow freedmen at great risk to his own safety, which encourages them to do likewise. In short, Tourgée characterizes Nimbus as a born leader whose illiteracy does not prevent him from

exerting a beneficial influence over his peers, but does give him a sense of his limitations.

Tourgée had worked with many Black men like Nimbus during his stints as a Civil War soldier and Reconstruction politician and judge: fugitive slaves in Union army camps (one of whom he had hired and actually renamed Nimbus and some of whom enlisted as soldiers); members of the interracial Union League chapter Tourgée had joined soon after arriving in Greensboro; organizers like Wyatt Outlaw, whose lynching he had dramatized in *A Fool's Errand*; his Greensboro neighbor Harmon Unthank, the “uncontested ‘boss’ of the [local] Black community,” with whom he had cooperated during two electoral campaigns in 1868; and the fifteen African American delegates alongside whom he had served in North Carolina’s 1868 constitutional convention. This exposure to a broad range of African Americans in military and political settings is what enabled Tourgée to sketch Nimbus so much more realistically than authors who had known Blacks primarily as menials.

Though Nimbus is the most memorable of the African American protagonists in *Bricks Without Straw* (or for that matter in Tourgée’s entire corpus), the treatment of Nimbus’s childhood friend and fellow community leader Eliab Hill also challenges stereotype. Tourgée depicts Eliab, like Nimbus, with a “broad, full forehead” and a “finely poised” head rather than the misshapen cranium imputed to the Negro in proslavery textbooks. He gives him a “directness of gaze” (52) that suggests pride in his identity rather than any sense of inferiority to whites. And once again countering the image of the Negro as a perpetual child, incapable of providing for his own needs, Tourgée accentuates the “self-helping” character Eliab shares with Nimbus, which he exhibits by earning his living as a shoemaker despite his severely crippled condition, the result of a rheumatic fever contracted at age seven (53).

Eliab represents an alternative route to African American empowerment—the acquisition of literacy—that historically complemented or substituted for the economic advancement Nimbus has attained through land ownership. Taught to read by his indulgent mistress, he has exerted a magnetic influence over his community as a preacher ever since his days as a slave. In that role Eliab personifies what Tourgée calls the “inseparable” fusion of religion and politics among African Americans, whose “religion is tinged with political thought, and their political thought shaped by religious conviction” (184). Eliab’s Christianity, unlike that of Stowe’s Uncle Tom, does not call for turning the other cheek. Thus, he reacts to a Klan incursion by wishing he had a good repeating rifle, so that “he might not only sell his life dearly, but even repel the attack” (284).

Tourgée also rejects the white conventions of his time in eschewing the racial theorizing his contemporaries habitually applied to mulattoes. While describing Eliab as “almost white,” he does not attribute the preacher’s “erect,” manly carriage, “thoughtful brow,” and “nobility of expression” to his white blood, or his stunted physique to the “taint” of black blood or the ill effects of miscegenation. The physical contrast Tourgée draws between the light-skinned Eliab and his comrade Nimbus, whose complexion is black as a “thunder-cloud,” serves neither to establish a hierarchy of color nor to bolster fallacies linking behavior to blood quantum. Instead, it conveys the image of an African American community reliant for survival on the solidarity of mulatto and Black, literate and illiterate, needy and prosperous. “The colored people must stand or fall together,” preaches Eliab (202). His lifelong bond with Nimbus and the twin leadership roles the two play illustrate that message.

The theme of racial unity differentiates *Bricks Without Straw* strikingly from such white-

authored classics as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Unlike Stowe and Twain, Tourgée emphasizes his African American characters' relations with each other instead of with whites, roots his Black and mulatto protagonists firmly in the African American community, and centers his novel on the collective fate of the African American people.

Tourgée's departures from the white conventions of his time stand out even in the case of the one character in *Bricks Without Straw* who acts the part of a "jester" or minstrel: Berry Lawson, the cousin of Nimbus's wife Lugena. Unlike such minstrel figures as Twain's Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, Berry does not entertain the white reader with self-important posturing, malapropisms, superstitions, or slapstick as the butt of a white character's practical jokes. Instead, he entertains his fellow Blacks by "laughing to keep from crying" (as Langston Hughes would famously phrase it) over their white bosses' countless ways of cheating and exploiting them—a typical form of African American humor. "When I went [to work sharecropping] dar I didn't hev a rag ter my back—nary a rag, an' now jes see how I'se covered wid 'em!" Berry jokes to roars of wry amusement (190).

Just as Tourgée fashions his characters to counter the prevalent stereotypes of African Americans, he devises his plot to rewrite the history of Reconstruction. Rather than an orgy of misgovernment by Black buffoons, he shows, Reconstruction can best be understood as a thwarted quest for self-determination. The first third of the novel highlights the freedpeople's progress toward economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy, the second third dramatizes their spirited resistance to the tactics white supremacists use to regain hegemony, and the last third describes their relapse into semi-slavery once their resistance is crushed.

The initial phase of the action begins in 1867 but flashes back to the decades before the

war and retraces the milestones on the road African Americans have traveled from slavery to citizenship. For Nimbus, who recapitulates his people's odyssey, the first of these milestones is his escape from Confederate Army lines, where he has been sent to "work on fortifications," to the Union Army encampment, where he enlists in the war for his people's freedom (29, 32). Much as W. E. B. Du Bois would later characterize the slave's "withdrawal and bestowal of his labor" as a "general strike" that "decided the war" and would credit Black soldiers with making "the slaveholders face the alternative of surrendering to the North, or to the Negroes," Tourgée underscores that "the South fell—stricken at last most fatally by the dark hands which she had manacled, and overcome by their aid whose manhood she had refused to acknowledge" (33).

Tourgée hails the second milestone Nimbus passes—the registration of his marriage after he returns home from the war—as "the first act of freedom, the first step of legal recognition or manly responsibility!" (36). Once again exemplifying Tourgée's acuity as a historian, the understanding he reveals of this act of self-affirmation anticipates Herbert Gutman's groundbreaking analysis of North Carolina and Mississippi marriage registration records as proof of the ex-slaves' "commitment to legal marriage." In Tourgée's words: "The race felt its importance as did no one else at that time. By hundreds and thousands they crowded the places appointed, to accept the honor offered to their posterity, and thereby unwittingly conferred undying honor upon themselves" (37).

To clarify the significance of the third milestone Nimbus crosses—his appeal to a Freedmen's Bureau officer to settle a dispute over wages owed his wife by her employer, their former master Potestatem Desmit—Tourgée must rehabilitate the reputation of the government agency so maligned by southern whites. The planters wanted a labor force that they could

exploit and abuse at will. In their view, the Freedmen's Bureau indulged the native laziness of a race that needed to be driven to work with the lash and kept to the grindstone with draconian laws. North Carolina's Conservative Governor Jonathan Worth, expressed this opinion succinctly: "The race never did work voluntarily and never will," but "with the Freedmen's Bureau here the necessary discipline cannot be used." Well before Reconstruction ended, southern planters had won their propaganda war against the Freedmen's Bureau, which was divested of its labor-regulating function in 1869 and dismantled in 1872.

As Tourgée observes, the credulous northern public believed the Freedmen's Bureau was a "terrible engine of oppression and terror and infamy, because of the denunciations which the former slave-owners heaped upon it. . ." (107). He refutes this misrepresentation both by stressing that neither the freedmen themselves, nor white Unionists, nor the "teachers of colored schools" joined in the "torrent of detraction" (108), and by giving the reader a glimpse of a Bureau officer mediating a typical dispute. In his rendition of the scene, Tourgée accentuates Nimbus's moderation, the Bureau officer's low-key handling of the matter, and the ex-slaveholder's wounded pride, which led him to translate a minor altercation into "the most degrading ordeal he could by any possibility be called upon to pass through" because it put a "gentleman" on the same level as a "negro" (114). The real reason for the planter class's hostility to the Freedmen's Bureau, Tourgée indicates, is that by providing a mechanism through which laborers could seek redress for mistreatment, the agency schooled ex-slaves in the exercise of their rights as citizens entitled to equal protection under the law.

The mediation of the Freedmen's Bureau also helps Nimbus fulfill his dream of purchasing land—the fourth milestone he reaches. His development into one of the most

successful tobacco farmers in the county contradicts the propaganda of planters like Worth, who must surely have known as well as Tourgée did that tobacco cultivation required intensive year-round labor and that mastering the cultivation of the “fine tobacco for which the locality was already celebrated” (136) took “years of experience.” Nimbus’s example, replicated by the growth around him of a Black community made up of “thrifty” artisans and farmers to whom he has sold parcels of his land, likewise paints a picture of Black Reconstruction that Du Bois would amplify half a century later.

“[T]hese black folk wanted two things—,” Du Bois would write: “first, land which they could own and work for their own crops,” giving them “economic freedom”; and second, “schools,” which could satisfy their thirst for knowledge and open the doorway to “political power.” The school and church Nimbus builds on his land at Eliab’s suggestion, with the assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau, which additionally supplies a Yankee schoolteacher, constitute a fifth milestone for the community.

The last milestone on the road from slavery to citizenship was gaining the right to vote, the crowning legislative achievement of Reconstruction, introduced in the 1867 Reconstruction Act and written into the US Constitution in the 15th Amendment of 1870. Chapter 19, “The Shadow of the Flag,” climaxes Tourgée’s celebration of Black Reconstruction’s successes as the “colored voters” of the vicinity, under Nimbus’s leadership, “meet at the church on the morning of election and march in a body to the polls with music and banners, in order most appropriately and significantly to commemorate their first exercise of the electoral privilege” (149). This chapter also marks the transition to the next phase of the novel, which focuses on the conflict between the African American community and white supremacists. Paralleling incidents that

occurred all over the South, “well-armed” whites block access to the polls, shoot into the procession, and almost precipitate a bloody clash.

With the aborted celebration of Black suffrage, Tourgée’s revisionist history of Reconstruction moves from chronicling the ex-slaves’ accomplishments since their emancipation to dramatizing the harassment, economic coercion, electoral fraud, and sheer terrorism through which white supremacists recaptured power, reversed Black gains, and drove the freedpeople back into quasi-slavery. As in *A Fool’s Errand*, Tourgée contests the era’s dominant explanation of why Reconstruction failed. The blame should fall not on the ex-slaves, carpetbaggers, and scalawags scapegoated by white southern propagandists, he argues in *Bricks Without Straw*, but on “the Nation,” which refuses to protect the ex-slaves it has enfranchised, yet expects them to uplift themselves in the face of unremitting opposition from an “unscrupulous, . . . aggressive, turbulent, arrogant, and scornful” ruling class (401).

While lashing out against the national government and exposing the viciousness of the white supremacist onslaught, Tourgée nonetheless highlights the Black community’s valiant resistance. When the freedpeople are confronted with threats of retaliation for their political activities, Nimbus and Eliab lead a mass meeting at which Nimbus advocates a general strike and vows to underwrite the striking plantation workers until their white employers back down, and Eliab urges “[e]very man [to] do his duty and vote, and act as a citizen whenever called upon to do so, for the sake of his race in the future” (201). The two also organize the Black community for self-defense after being sent a coffin-board painted with a “skull and cross-bones” and the letters K.K.K. (250). Even at the height of the Klan attack in which the white supremacist juggernaut culminates, Tourgée shows his Black characters fighting back. Although the masked

night riders succeed in brutalizing Nimbus's wife Lugena, bludgeoning the helpless Eliab almost to death, and burning down the church and schoolhouse that serve as the institutional vehicles of the freedpeople's uplift, they do not escape unscathed. Nimbus dispatches a Klansman with his army saber, "swung by a practiced hand" (289). Berry, who had earlier contended that it would be futile to fight against insurmountable odds, drives off the invaders with the "fierce angry challenge of [his] rifle" (290). Most memorably, Lugena, seeing a Klansman aim a pistol at Nimbus, seizes an axe and brings it crashing "down through mask and flesh and bone," cleaving the head of their foe (289).

Despite the bravery and resourcefulness with which Tourgée credits his African American characters, he cannot sustain his vision of an aut centered Black community. After the Klan attack, which ushers in the third and last phase of the novel, the Black protagonists lose their agency, and white rescuers come to dominate the action. Perhaps Tourgée sought to spur his white readers to discharge their responsibility toward the freedpeople they had so shamefully abandoned, an explanation in keeping with his having timed the publication of *Bricks Without Straw* to intervene in the 1880 electoral campaign. Or perhaps he could no longer conceive of how the defeated freedpeople could help themselves in an era of unbridled white supremacy. In either case, through the device of letting his Black characters tell their stories to sympathetic whites, Tourgée gives them a voice in exposing the realities of the unreconstructed South, if not in shaping the nation's future.

Nimbus bitterly recognizes that abstract rights mean nothing unless enforced, or, as he puts it, "dat de right ter du a ting an' de doin' on't is two mighty diff'rent tings, when it's a cullu'd man ez does it" (313). He doggedly keeps on fighting as he flees from one southern state

to another. Yet Nimbus's resistance only lands him in jail and subjects him to a new form of enslavement: fined for striking back at a white boss, he is "auctioned off" to pay the fine and repeatedly caught when he tries to escape (485-86). He resurfaces many years later completely "broken," with the look of "furtive wildness which characterizes the man long hunted by his enemies" (480). The intrepid defiance that served Nimbus so well during the Civil War and the early phase of Reconstruction, Tourgée indicates, turns into a dangerous liability under the draconian regime that has replaced slavery.

Admitting defeat more readily than her husband, Lugena concludes that "'Tain't no use" to stand up to white supremacists because "Dey'll hab dere will fust er last" (338).

Metamorphosing with disconcerting suddenness into an abject dependent who kisses the hem of her benefactor, she entreats the schoolteacher Mollie Ainslee to take her and her children to safety before the Klan avenges the man she has axed. Only through Mollie does Lugena fulfill Nimbus's dream of landownership, this time in Kansas, where thousands of desperate freedpeople were embarking on a mass exodus as Tourgée was completing *Bricks Without Straw*.

Berry, whose family Mollie has also rescued, makes his own way to Kansas after struggling in vain to escape from the cycle of debt in which sharecropping traps his class. No matter what he tries or how hard he works, he remarks with his usual pointed humor, he falls afoul of tactics the planters have invented to keep him down: a system of overcharging sharecroppers for supplies advanced on credit; a Landlord and Tenant Act that gives the landlord the power to seize the whole crop at his discretion; a "sunset" law that forces tenants to sell their crops only to the landlord rather than seeking the best price for their produce. Berry even sees election commissioners disposing of excess ballots and decides that it is "no use" risking his life

to vote if the outcome is predetermined (493-500).

Of the African American protagonists, Eliab alone grows “more self-reliant” (480). Nursed back to health and spirited off to college in the North by his former master Hesden Le Moyne, Eliab illustrates Tourgée’s belief that education will accomplish in the long run the racial uplift that Reconstruction failed to secure by legislative means. In a letter to Mollie, Eliab also articulates Tourgée’s view that African Americans must not only free themselves “through the attainment of knowledge and the power which that gives,” but strive to overcome the prejudice slavery has “created . . . in the hearts of the white people” (446). Eliab himself exemplifies the empowerment education confers and expresses the insights of a teacher who has shared his students’ travails and who consequently understands their needs better than any outsider can. Still, he realizes that faced with such a monumental task and with so little prospect of regaining their stolen rights, all too many of his fellow freedpeople have sunk back into the “dull, plodding hopelessness of the old slave time” (445).

Unwilling to invent a utopian a solution to the problem of a thwarted Black Reconstruction—and not yet able to foresee a time when African American intellectuals would meet to debate solutions of their own to the race’s continuing oppression—Tourgée reorients his plot from the quest for Black self-determination toward the goal of unifying northern and southern whites around a common agenda of national regeneration. Thus, he arranges a marriage between Mollie Ainslee and Hesden Le Moyne, who embraces her ideals. By rebuilding the school house burned down by the Klan, hiring Eliab to take charge of it, and helping Mollie watch over the freedpeople she has repatriated in Kansas, Hesden demonstrates that genuine reconciliation between North and South entails a joint commitment to equal justice for African

Americans.

Tourgée nevertheless seems aware that such fictional formulas cannot bear the weight of suggesting alternative scenarios to the quasi-reenslavement of southern Blacks by an intransigent white supremacist ruling class. Deliberately undercutting these formulas, he leaves his characters at an impasse and his plot at loose ends. In the last two chapters, “What Shall the End Be?” and “How?,” Tourgée abandons narrative for polemic. Speaking through Hesden and addressing northern politicians through the aptly named Congressman Washington Goodspeed, he pleads for the measure he has come to consider “the *only* remedy” for the nation’s ills: a federal education bill that circumvents state control and racial inequity, as well as conflict over integration, by donating funds directly to southern schools and tying the amounts to need and good management (516-18).

The novel’s inconclusive ending disturbed even Tourgée’s otherwise enthusiastic publishers. Complaining that it seemed “crude and unfinished” because “the story was not completed” and the conversation between Hesden and Goodspeed simply “stop[ped] short,” they inserted a sentence to provide a sense of closure. Tourgée’s insistence on retaining the “rough-hewn” aspect of his final scene confirms that he intended to deny his readers the gratification of their desire for a fictive closure at odds with historical reality.

Modern readers accustomed to experimentation with literary form can better appreciate Tourgée’s unresolved ending and subversion of fictional formulas. Compared with the farcical chapters climaxing *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, in which Tom Sawyer undertakes to “set a free nigger free” by subjecting Jim to ordeals that almost culminate in his lynching, the unsettling denouement of *Bricks Without Straw* works far more effectively to refocus readers’

attention on the plight of African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South (the purpose some critics see in *Huckleberry Finn*'s much discussed "evasion"). Reading and teaching *Bricks Without Straw* alongside classics like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will eventually win Tourgée's powerful novel the reputation it deserves as one of American literature's best works of social protest, political critique, and race fiction.

"About the Negro as a man, with hopes, fears, and aspirations like other men, our literature is very nearly silent," yet "[t]he life of the Negro as a slave, freedman, and racial outcast offers undoubtedly the richest mine of romantic material that has opened to the English-speaking novelist," Tourgée would note in a much quoted essay, "The South as a Field for Fiction" (1888). While looking forward to the day when "the children . . . of slaves" themselves would "advance American literature to the very front rank" by exploiting that mine, he pointed the way in *Bricks Without Straw*. His portrayal of African Americans as political agents is unprecedented for a white author of his time and has seldom been matched since.

Even more valuable are the insights Tourgée offers into a historical period that still shapes our political realities more than a century later. His eyewitness account of how a revolution that promised so much was suppressed; his chilling picture of terrorist violence against African Americans condoned, of civil rights abrogated, of constitutional amendments subverted, of electoral fraud institutionalized; and his scathing indictment of an American public too apathetic and gullible to challenge the propaganda that rationalized such outrages remain eerily relevant today.

Bricks Without Straw at first sold even faster than *A Fool's Errand* had. Reviewers praised the book for its "caustic" irony reminiscent of Swift's, its "strongly drawn" characters

(especially *Nimbus* and *Eliab*), its “thrilling” plot, its vivid picture of a representative Black man’s “unequal contest with the circumstances,” its truthful delineation of southern society, and its fair-minded criticism of both sections—the South for “the methods by which it has regained political control,” the North for “the pusillanimity . . . by which the fruits of the war have been lost.” Reviewers also quoted long extracts from the passages they pronounced most “striking”: *Nimbus*’s opening soliloquy, his argument with the clerk trying to register him with his master’s surname, the scenes describing the Black community’s reactions to Klan terrorism, and Tourgée’s analysis of southern psychology. They particularly commended Tourgée for prescribing a “remedy” for the “disease” he had diagnosed, “namely, education.” Not even those who objected to the author’s blatant “political sympathies” could “afford to disregard his suggestive and incisive treatment of a subject in which the whole country is profoundly interested,” concluded *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. Pervading all the reviews, however, was a sense that the mistakes of a botched Reconstruction could not be “undone”—a resigned acceptance of the status quo that boded ill for the commitment Tourgée hoped to inspire to a massive federal education program for the South. The review that most ominously reflected the national mood was the *Atlantic Monthly*’s. Once a bastion of abolitionism, this journal had so thoroughly imbibed the stereotypes Tourgée was vainly attempting to dislodge that its editor reproached him with having produced an incomplete picture of history by omitting them.

Despite these auguries of the marginalization Tourgée would shortly meet with, for the moment *Bricks Without Straw* and *A Fool’s Errand* helped decide the 1880 election and won him more influence over the leaders of the Republican party than he had ever exerted, even in his heyday as a Radical politician and judge. Both the party’s platform and the inaugural

address of Republican president elect James G. Garfield, whom he had known since his childhood in the Western Reserve, echoed Tourgée's call for a nationally funded public education system to stamp out illiteracy in the South. Clearly, Tourgée had intervened in national politics at a pivotal moment, when a sizable segment of the Republican camp had come to recognize the bankruptcy of President Hayes's "let alone" policy and still hoped to rectify it. But Garfield's assassination four months later brutally ended Tourgée's fleeting access to political power, as well as the revival of the party's progressive wing.

Tourgée would spend the rest of his life championing African American rights in novels, articles, lectures, speeches, and letters to a total of six different presidents. An increasingly lonely voice in the wilderness of white America, he would attract an immense Black following in the late 1880s and 1890s, after he launched the column "A Bystander's Notes" in the *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean*, a progressive Republican newspaper. Widely reprinted in the Black press, Tourgée's "Bystander" column publicized the terrorism to which African Americans were still being subjected, berated the Republican party for ignoring the fraud and violence used to disfranchise African American voters throughout the South, attacked Jim Crow, and denounced lynching, denying that it was provoked by Black men's rapes of white women and arguing rather that it served to cow Blacks into abject submission. Tourgée's standing in the African American community reached its height when he founded an interracial civil rights organization in 1891, anticipating the NAACP, and challenged segregation *pro bono* as the lawyer for the African American plaintiff in what became the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896.

The African American luminaries who paid moving tributes to Tourgée as "a friend whose faith never wavered, whose courage never failed and whose loyalty was free from a

'shadow of turning' to his dying day" included Ida B. Wells, Charles W. Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper best summed up what Tourgée meant to African Americans: "In presenting truth from the colored American's standpoint, [he] excels . . . in fervency and frequency of utterance any living writer, white or colored' and "speaks with all the eloquence and passion of the aggrieved party himself." Yet African American accolades could not keep Tourgée's memory alive during the long reign of white supremacy. Indeed, nothing more starkly epitomized the triumph of the racist propaganda machine that Tourgée had fought so tenaciously than the bestseller status he lived to see attained by Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), which far eclipsed the commercial success and political influence of *A Fool's Errand* and *Bricks Without Straw*.

Not until *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) marked the emergence of the modern Civil Rights movement and the turn of the tide against white supremacist ideology did scholars rediscover Tourgée's writings. And not until the rollback of civil rights and affirmative action in our own era, so much like the backlash that nullified the achievements of Reconstruction, did the Tourgée revival really take off, as if we needed to live through an experience akin to his before we could properly value this great prophet's legacy. Standing as we do today on the eve of an historic election in which our generation, like Tourgée's, must choose whether to vote for the future or the past, for an equal partnership of all races or a continuation of white hegemony, we can at last glimpse the harbinger of what Tourgée's heroic struggle did so much to create: a truly reconstructed America.