

The Unknown Tourgee

(Read at a meeting of the Chatauqua County Historical Society, August 7, 1971)

I am profoundly grateful for this opportunity to speak to the members of the Chautauqua County Historical Society about our mutual friend and a literary and political figure who has interested me for nearly 20 years.

When I told my wife that the title of my talk today was "The Unknown Tourgee", she was amused and suggested that it was not entirely clear. (I have no idea what Mr. Nixon thought of the title when I announced it to him.) However, I am quite sure that this is probably the only organization in the world, besides your counterpart in Greensboro, North Carolina, perhaps, most of whose membership knows anything at all about Albion W. Tourgee. I do not intend to recount the major events in Tourgee's life, nor am I going to become involved in a detailed analysis of his writings or philosophy. Rather, I am going to survey the literature about Tourgee in an effort to demonstrate that he is really not unknown, but that our knowledge of him is unbalanced. In my opinion, scholars have repeatedly covered the same ground in their writings about Tourgee and have neglected other significant aspects of his career. In the course of this discussion I will identify some of these neglected areas and suggest why they might profitably be more fully investigated.

From 1905, when Tourgee died, to 1921, when Roy F. Dibble's brief and generally unsympathetic biography was published, next to nothing appeared in print about our subject. It is evident that Dibble's book made little impact for we have to look 20 years ahead, to 1941, to find the next substantial discussion of Tourgee -- Russel B. Nye's still useful

paper, "Albion W. Tourgee and Reconstruction" in the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly. Things began to pick up in the 1940's with North Carolina's chief justice William A. Devin discussing Tourgee's Reconstruction accomplishments in The Torch, George J. Becker discussing him as a "Pioneer in Social Criticism" in the prestigious American Literature in 1947, Owen N. Wilcox recounting the basic facts of his life and career in The Brief in 1948, and the decade is capped when, in 1948, Alexander Cowie devoted a section to Tourgee in his influential book, The Rise of the American Novel.

Of course the diligent researcher would find Tourgee the subject of biographical sketches, brief discussion and commentary, and at least passing mention in dozens of reference books and studies in such wide-ranging fields as the history of the South and Reconstruction, the history of education, the Negro in history and literature, the history of American literature, the history of regional literature, and the histories of Ohio and North Carolina, but these brief and scattered fragments have little of the impact of full books or scholarly articles. In the 1950's and especially in the 1960's Tourgee finally comes into sharp focus in books and articles of reasonably high quality.

In the 1950's these articles and books aid us immeasurably in understanding the man and his writings: Margaret Toth's "Albion W. Tourgee, '62" in the Spring, 1953, issue of the University of Rochester Library Bulletin, discusses Tourgee's letters to Rochester's President Martin B. Anderson who became the character Enos Martin, I am sure, in A Fool's Errand; Wallace Evan Davies' penetrating discussion of Murvale Eastman, Christian Socialist in the Bulletin of the John Rylands Library in 1959;

and books such as Ernest E. Leisy's The American Historical Novel (1950), Arthur Hobson Quinn's The Literature of the American People (1951), Joseph L. Blotner's The Political Novel (1955), Robert A. Lively's Fiction Fights the Civil War (1957), and Frank Luther Mott's A History of American Magazines, 1885-1905, also in 1957, all treat Tourgee seriously and at some length. During this general period -- 1949 to 1960 -- I also note that at least seven doctoral dissertations gave substantial attention to Tourgee. As we shall see presently, two of these dissertations became books on the subject.

Tougree came into his own in the 1960's when we had what might be called a Tourgee "boom". The focal point of the decade, and indeed the single most important study of Tourgee yet produced, is Otto H. Olsen's Carpetbagger's Crusade, The Life of Albion Winegar Tourgee, published in 1965 by The Johns Hopkins Press.

Olsen made extensive use of the Tourgee papers owned by this Society and housed in your fine museum here in Westfield, and it is obvious that he has utilized many other primary and secondary sources bearing directly and indirectly on his subject. This is the one work that all who are interested in Tourgee will want to read, and fortunately Mr. Olsen writes well.

Carpetbagger's Crusade was developed, over a period of five years, from Mr. Olsen's doctoral dissertation, which he called "A Carpetbagger: Albion W. Tourgee and Reconstruction in North Carolina", and even before he felt his revision and additional research was ready to be published, another dissertation was turned into a book and published. Theodore L. Gross completed a dissertation in 1960 called "Albion W. Tourgee: Reporter of the Reconstruction" and in 1963 a revised version of it was

published as Albion W. Tourgee in Twayne's United States Author Series. This relatively brief work (176 pages) offers a review of the main events of Tourgee's life and presents an analysis of his major books as literary works.

The 1960's also saw the reprinting of some of Tourgee's books, an indication of the rising interest in the author and a realization of his proper place in American literary and political history. A Fool's Errand was issued in a handsome edition, with an introduction by the distinguished historian John Hope Franklin, by the Harvard University Press in 1961, and it was also issued in paperback in 1965. In 1966 the novel was again issued, in the Harper Torchbooks American Perspectives series, with an introduction by George M. Fredrickson. Another of Tourgee's important novels about Reconstruction, Bricks Without Straw, was reprinted in 1969 by the Louisiana State University Press with an illuminating introduction by Otto H. Olsen. Other books of Tourgee are available in offset reprints from the Gregg Press and Greenwood Press.

Other works by Tourgee made their first appearance in print in the 1960's. His Civil War diary, a prized possession of your Society, was published in Ohio History in 1965, the play version of A Fool's Errand, done in collaboration with the famous actor and dramatist Steele MacKaye, was issued in 1969, and several important documents and letters to and from Tourgee constitute a major part of Otto H. Olsen's fascinating study, The Thin Disguise: Turning Point in Negro History. Plessy v. Ferguson, A Documentary Presentation (1864-1896), published in 1967.

I am pleased to say that the journal I edit at Kent State, called The Serif, published two interesting Tourgee items: an account of his brief correspondence, with excerpts, with Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1964, and an important letter to Jeremiah Whipple Jenks, edited by Otto Olsen, in 1965.

Perhaps the single most significant event of the 1960's for scholars across the country who were interested in Tourgee and his era was the availability on 60 rolls of microfilm of the great Tourgee archive of the Chautauqua County Historical Society. Hopefully, the archive has been made more accessible through a 59 page index issued by the Kent State University Press in 1964. Another finding aid of some value is a checklist of his writings, including newspaper and magazine appearances, which appeared in Studies in Bibliography in 1965.

The 1960's also saw a considerable increase in the number of articles about Tourgee, easily doubling all the work that had gone before. As might be expected, the two scholars who produced books on Tourgee during this decade, Otto H. Olsen and Theodore L. Gross, also published a number of articles on their subject. Olsen wrote "Albion W. Tourgee: Carpetbagger" for the Autumn 1963 issue of The North Carolina Historical Review, and "Albion W. Tourgee and Negro Militants of the 1890's" for Science and Society in 1964. Theodore Gross wrote "The Negro in the Literature of Reconstruction" and "The Fool's Errand of Albion W. Tourgee" for Phylon in 1961 and 1963, and "Albion W. Tourgee: Reporter of the Reconstruction" in the Mississippi Quarterly for Summer 1963. Ted N. Weissbuch published "Albion W. Tourgee: Propagandist and Critic of Reconstruction" in the January 1961 issue of The Ohio Historical Quarterly, Monte M. Olenick's "Albion W. Tourgee: Radical Republican Spokesman of the Civil War Crusade" appeared in 1962 in Phylon, 1964 saw the publication of both Sidney Kaplan's "Albion W. Tourgee: Attorney for the Segregated" in the Journal of Negro History and C. Vann Woodward's "The Birth of Jim Crow" in American Heritage, both of which have accounts of the case of Plessy v. Ferguson in which Tourgee played an important part, and there were articles

on his early life and writings about Ohio in Ohioana in 1962, on his plan for a national education program in the November 1963 issue of the Peabody Journal of Education, and on his editorship of The Basis in Niagara Frontier in the Spring of 1965. Perhaps there was no greater tribute to Tourgee's importance than his inclusion in Edmund Wilson's Patriotic Gore, sub-titled Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War, which was published in 1962. Wilson, whose reputation as a critic and literary historian is formidable, devoted 19 pages of his book to a study of Tourgee's early novels, and the author is discussed elsewhere in the book.

Are you still with me? I hope so, for this long recital shows, I hope, that we have a great deal of fascinating reading about Tourgee to occupy us. However, I hope you noticed in the reading of the titles of these articles that most of the work centers around Tourgee's experiences in North Carolina after the Civil War and on the books he wrote from those experiences. Words like Reconstruction, Negro, Civil War, and Carpetbagger are predominant in these titles; Edmund Wilson's absorbing appraisal considers only the early books, fully 225 of the 395 pages in Otto Olsen's definitive biography are devoted to the North Carolina years, and about three quarters of Theodore L. Gross' study of Tourgee's books is concerned with the novels of Reconstruction.

No one who has read most of Tourgee's writing will deny, I think, that his experience in the South was the single most important event in his life. It was the experience that he returned to time and time again, that he drew upon consistently in his writing and philosophy, and which provided the source of his fame as a novelist. This experience certainly deserves all the attention that has been given to it, and some aspects

of it could even stand more research.

But Tourgee lived only 14 years in the South -- from October 1865 until September 1879 -- 14 years in a lifetime of 67 years. While we concede that these 14 years were crucial in his life and work, we also suggest that there were other experiences, influences, and activities that are worthy of investigation and commentary.

One might investigate with profit his two adventures as an editor of magazines. Our Continent was published in Philadelphia from February 15, 1882 to August 20, 1884, and in it Tourgee presented some of the best known authors of the day: James Lane Allen, George Boker, Rebecca Harding Davis, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Joel Chandler Harris, Julian Hawthorne, Sarah Orne Jewett, E.P. Roe (whom Tourgee claimed to be his favorite novelist, by the way), Frank Stockton, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and even Oscar Wilde (Tourgee was shocked at his fee of \$1000.00 for a brief poem, but he paid it). Despite the impressive list of contributors and an attractive format, the magazine was a failure, but a magnificent failure.

His second and final crack at editing a magazine came in 1895 when The Basis was published in Buffalo with most of the editorial activities carried out in his home in Mayville. The magazine featured the editorials and articles of Tourgee and some fiction by his daughter Aimee, but the roster of authors never approached the quality of those in Our Continent, and the journal failed in 1896.

Shortly after the affairs of The Basis were brought to a close, Tourgee received an appointment as consul at Bordeaux from President McKinley and on July 3, 1897, he sailed for France. Tourgee must have had a great time in France, and someone could write an interesting and amusing

ticle on American Consular work based upon Tourgee's experiences. He seemed to be constantly embroiled with U.S. officials in the State Department and with French officials. He criticized French wines, called State Department communication incomprehensible, and had one of his reports edited because he was "not authorized to criticize either the French Embassy at Washington or the Secretary of the Treasury." A most amusing incident became known as the affair of Tourgee's bath, and it provoked some 30 pages of consular correspondence and became the subject of an international diplomatic dispute.

Another field for investigation, it seems to me, would be his books of political commentary. The first of these, A Man of Destiny, was published as a series of columns in the Chicago Inter Ocean from December 1884 to March 1885 and as a book later in 1885. The series and the book were published under the pseudonym "Siva", the destroyer in Hindu mythology. The pseudonym was well chosen, for Tourgee set out to destroy the political career of Grover Cleveland in these pieces. Otto Olsen calls them the low point in Tourgee's writings, and I am inclined to agree.

The "Siva" columns were so popular that the Inter Ocean was glad to get another series from Tourgee. This time he commented upon the dying idealism of the Civil War in an anonymous series called The Veteran and his Pipe running from April to August 1885 and published as a book in 1886. There is much more political writing, mostly in the Inter Ocean, which did not appear in book form, but these two books give us a fair idea of what it is like.

In 1887 he published a series of interesting articles in the Northwestern Christian Advocate urging good citizenship through participation in all aspects of government. These essays were gathered together and published

in 1888 as Letters to a King. Tourgee's last book of non-fiction, The War of the Standards, was published in 1896 and was endorsed and distributed as a Republican campaign document. Tourgee's participation in the campaign of 1896, which eventually lead to his appointment as U.S. Consul at Bordeaux, and his stand on the very lively currency issue which dominated the campaign, merit further investigation also.

During this period which we have just been discussing, when he was under the heavy burden of magazine editorship or column writing, Tourgee produced a steady stream of fiction, most of which has been ignored by the critics.

Hot Plowshares, his last novel to be based on Reconstruction, was serialized in Our Continent from July 1882 to May 1883 and published in book form in 1883. He then embarked upon a series of regional novels set in this part of New York State, surely inspired by the delight, security, and peace he found in his new home in Mayville.

The first of these local color novels is Button's Inn (1887), based upon the well-known local landmark located on the road from Mayville to Westfield. Otto Olsen recounts the charming way in which this novel came to be written. To quote Mr. Olsen: "...it was during their weekend buggy trips to and from Westfield, where Aimee attended the academy, that she became fascinated with an old house along the way and coaxed her father into undertaking the tale of Button's Inn." The novel has been called "gothic" by one critic and it was serialized in both the Chicago Inter-Ocean and the Buffalo Sunday Express in 1886 and 1887.

Next came Black Ice in 1888, set in what is obviously Mayville and drawing heavily upon the daily activities of the Tourgee household with some dramatic and picturesque descriptions of Lake Chautauqua. The book

is dedicated to Dr. William Chace, the family physician, who appears as the character Dr. Colton in the novel.

A Son of Old Harry, serialized in the New York Ledger in 1891 and issued as a book later in the same year, reveals Tourgee's love for horses (Readers of A Fool's Errand will remember that one of its most exciting chapters is about a daring midnight horse-back ride by the hero's daughter.), and is perhaps most remarkable for its account of small-town life at the turn of the century.

The last of Tourgee's regional novels, The Mortgage on the Hip-Roof House (1896), is really a boy's book patterned closely after the Horatio Alger stories. It is a slight book, with all of the Alger trappings, but interesting to us because of its descriptions of travel on Lake Erie and the orchards which are so much a part of the local landscape.

Three books of larger importance published during these years may well be called novels of social criticism and deserve much more attention than has been given to them.

Eighty Nine; or the Grand Master's Secret was published in 1888 under the pseudonym Edgar Henry and was sponsored by C.B. Matthews, president of the Buffalo Lubricating Oil Company, who was fighting John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company at the time. The novel expressed concern for the monopolistic tendencies of large companies and also managed to drag in descriptions of various Ku Klux Klan activities. It even has another of Tourgee's exciting horseback rides. The novel was not a popular success and the fact that Tourgee insisted upon using a pseudonym, a practice that benefactor Matthews objected to, probably contributed to this lack of success. The novel did stir up much comment in the papers, however, one of them denouncing it as abetting unrest and treason.

The novel I think the most important of all of Tourgee's work after Fool's Errand and Bricks without Straw is the second of these novels of social criticism, Murvale Eastman, Christian Socialist. The novel was first published as a serial in The Advance from October 1889 to July 1890 under the title "Nazirema." It appeared with its new title as a book later in 1890. Tourgee's wife wrote the following in her diary entry for September 17, 1889: "After a year and a half of thought, Albion began today his story. The agony - I can use no other word - of decision was intense. He wished to do so well - to put so forcibly the truths which have weighed upon him so long." And he did succeed to a remarkable degree in this novel about the application of Christian principles to social problems of the day. The book was generally well received by the press and it has since been compared with Harold Frederic's The Damnation of Theron Ware for its attack on religious hypocrisy and to William Dean Howells's A Hazard of New Fortunes for its social awareness. Surely this novel deserves to be better known and available in a new edition.

The last of the novels of social criticism is Pactolus Prime. It began as a Christmas short story in the Advance for December 1888 with the subtitle "The White Christ" and soon expanded into a novel-length serial running to March 1889. There is evidence in the Tourgee papers that Tourgee first conceived of the story in the form of a long narrative poem. This is the least successful of the three novels and was singled out by Southern critics for special condemnation. Its subject was black pride, religious hypocrisy, and Federal aid to education. Olsen concludes that it "...certainly was an angry and bitter work, but it was also an essentially accurate exposé of a national shame so great that it may well have warranted the rancor displayed by its author."

Among other books that bear investigation are With Gauge and Swallow. Attorneys (1889), a group of legal stories with detective story overtones, Out of the Sunset Sea (1893), an historical novel based upon the voyage of Columbus to the new world which was originally conceived as a collaboration with the eminent historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, and The Man Who Outlived Himself (1898) a collection of three long stories which proved to be his last book.

There are other phases of Tourgee's career which would be interesting areas for investigation - his relations with and opinions of authors and politicians, his experiences on various lecture tours for which there are many fine letters to his wife in the Tourgee papers, his various business ventures - to mention a few, and a readable selection of his letters could also be made, I feel, but this is certainly enough on which to rest my case for the need of a more balanced portrait of Albion W. Tourgee.

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