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Review Of "Bricks Without Straw: A Novel" By A. Tourgée

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BRICKS WITHOUT STRAW: A NOVEL. By Albion Tourgée. Ed. Carolyn L. Karcher. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. 464 pp. \$84.95.

It is Albion Tourgée's (1838–1905) time in U.S. studies—again. A best-selling novelist and activist, Tourgée fought against Jim Crow but was eclipsed by its dark shadows. Returning to prominence in the 1960s, following the Civil Rights movement and historians' revisionist readings of the Reconstruction era, this important American author from the post-Civil War era was primarily defined then as an activist lawyer and crusader for black civil rights. Tourgée's second afterlife began in the last decade or so, as American cultural studies has been transformed by poststructuralism, critical race studies, and the new historicism, with the result that we now can understand more profoundly than before why Tourgée's innovations as a *novelist* were central, not peripheral, to his critique of U.S. fictions of white supremacy. Charles Chesnutt's fiction and Mark Twain's late, darker writings became integrated into the U.S. literary canon, thereby opening up a new context for Tourgée, for his mixed-mode novels also blend satire and melodrama, dialogue and oratory, to construct counternarratives undoing America's racial masquerade and historical amnesia. The second phase of Tourgée's revival does not negate the emphases of the first; rather, it expands the methods of inquiry.

Unlucky in life, Tourgée has proved fortunate in his biographers and critical commentators, beginning with Edmund Wilson (in *Patriotic Gore* [1962]), Theodore Gross, and Otto Olsen in the 1960s and continuing, most recently, with Mark Elliott (in *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourgée and the Quest for Racial Equality* [2006]). My own *Sitting in Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism* (2008) placed Tourgée's quest for equal educational opportunities for blacks and whites and his first two novels (*A Fool's Errand* [1879] and *Bricks Without Straw* [1880]) in the context of many other fictional representations of black schools in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras, including those by Lydia Maria Child, Frances Harper, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Hines Page, and George Washington Cable. In that study I made the case that *Bricks Without Straw* was Tourgée's best novel and should be back in print and widely taught. Now Carolyn L. Karcher has accomplished the first of these goals and made probable the second, offering footnotes, a chronological overview, and a sixty-four-page essay that should become *the* source for a critically sophisticated introduction to Tourgée's life and work in historical context.

As Karcher says, Tourgée should be taught alongside Chesnutt and Twain in any in-depth literary-historical study of the period; he will also pair well with other figures, such as Ida B. Wells and Du Bois. In addition, Tourgée proves indispensable to any history of Reconstruction—both its reformist promise and its limitations and tragic demise. Elliott showed in more depth than ever before how profound was the twenty-nine-year-old Tourgée's influence on North Carolina's Reconstruction constitution of 1868, arguing that “nearly every article” of the document

bore Tourgée's influence (qtd. in Karcher 17). Karcher has done her own extensive research in the Tourgée archives and puts it this way:

Among the innovations he introduced were the division of counties into self-governing townships that elected their own commissioners, school boards, justices of the peace, and constables; the abolition of property qualifications for holding political office; the popular election of superior court judges, hitherto appointed by the state legislature; . . . the banning of stocks, whipping posts, branding irons, and other methods of corporeal punishment; . . . the elimination of court costs for defendants found innocent in criminal proceedings; and the incorporation of a "Homestead Clause" that protected debtors from having their land seized by creditors. (17-18)

These and other changes connected to Reconstruction caused Tourgée and his wife to be ostracized by some of his white neighbors in Greensboro while blacks endured revenge killings throughout the state.

Tourgée had an equally profound effect on U.S. history. His defense of the plaintiff Homer Plessy before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 is fairly well known, but what other novelist, except perhaps Harriet Beecher Stowe, may legitimately claim to have influenced a major political party's platform and the outcome of a presidential election? In Tourgée's case, the party was the Republican Party and the elected president was James Garfield—who was assassinated after just a few months in office and replaced by Chester A. Arthur, who showed much interest in cultivating his prodigious sideburns but little enthusiasm for Garfield's reformist agenda involving racial and educational equality. The newly egalitarian North Carolina constitution also proved short-lived, brought down in the 1870s by resurgent white supremacists.

Building on Elliott's research but going beyond it, Karcher has a profound grasp of Tourgée's innovations as a novelist, including how they are constitutive of, not just adjunctive to, his activist work and his historical analysis of America's postwar crisis. Here is Karcher's adept summary of some of *Bricks Without Straw's* innovations:

an array of complex, full 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 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. (1)

The novel's portraits of blacks defending their rights, building their communities, and creating coalitions with whites were particularly daring. As Karcher shrewdly states, this narrative was Tourgée's clever revision of the "romance of reunion" theme involving southern and northern whites that was fast becoming a best-selling formula in postwar fiction (44-48). (Think of John De Forest or Joel Chandler Harris.) Newly powerful interracial coalitions during Reconstruction, Tourgée makes clear, provoked the white terrorist atrocities that followed.

Tourgée also sought in his novels to counter slanders against the Freedmen's Bureau; black students, teachers, and legislators; and the aims of Reconstruction itself. Instead, he offered alternative narratives, testimony, facts, and an appeal to the nation's founding ideals. Tourgée's defense of Reconstruction recognized its internal flaws but saw it in sum as a potential second American Revolution tragically betrayed. He demonstrates that, had it been defended and implemented by the full force of federal power, it could have assuaged class as well as racial divisions throughout the South. Such a reading of Reconstruction, of course, soon lost out to white supremacist narratives that treated it as a blot on American history worse than slavery. But Tourgée's "fool's errand" eventually had the last laugh. As Karcher says, Tourgée not only influenced Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) but also has had many of his claims validated by contemporary historians of the postwar period (4, 50–52).

Karcher is equally astute when assessing some of the limitations of Tourgée's fiction. Despite the egalitarianism at the core of *Bricks Without Straw*, its creator was drawn to romanticizing crusading whites, most notably during a scene in which his heroine, "a white set face, mounted on her black horse" (186), miraculously reduces black demonstrators and white counterprotesters to equanimity and then cheers. Karcher observes, "The episode foreshadows the disempowerment Tourgée's African American characters undergo after the overthrow of Reconstruction, a development reflected in the plot's shift away from them and toward their white benefactors" (40).

Other intriguing anomalies in *Bricks Without Straw* are not much discussed by Karcher, although they should be evaluated when the book is newly taught. Literacy was well understood by both blacks and Tourgée to be a prerequisite for empowerment, but there is curious slippage in Tourgée's novel as it juxtaposes the life stories of its paired black heroes, one apparently illiterate and the other well educated. Nimbus needs others to help him purchase property and register his marriage, yet in one key scene Nimbus confronts a white man defrauding a black female employee by citing her "papers" to show she is owed wages, not just rations (153). Tourgée's narrator suggests that "army life" taught this black hero to "stand his ground" (153), but Karcher misses a chance here to ask whether Nimbus is indeed as illiterate as Tourgée elsewhere portrays him. Could he have received instruction in the Union Army's experimental literacy programs, especially those initiated by General Benjamin Franklin Butler in North Carolina? It is a moment where one element of Tourgée's fiction, his fondness for fixed binaries, conflicts with another, his intent to depict the complex causes of historical change.

Karcher correctly emphasizes how Tourgée deploys a convention from popular romances, a stolen inheritance plot, to revolutionary new effect when he links it to the betrayal of Reconstruction. But for Karcher's point to be truly effective, we must understand how this key narrative motif evolved in varied historical contexts: it was used differently by Scottish, Irish, and British authors, and by white and black writers depicting the U.S. South (E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* [1859] and Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar* [1901–2] are two examples). Further, given the current state of scholarship on *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), it was not propitious for Karcher to elevate Tourgée's blacks by putting down Twain's Jim as simply

“one-dimensional” (33). Elsewhere, when she gives us reasons for teaching Twain and Tourgée contrapuntally, she’s on firmer ground (see 46–48).

At least two future approaches to *Bricks Without Straw* will prove fruitful. One should both test the novel’s factual claims still more rigorously and confront the paradox that in 1880 the most veracious and powerful historical account of postwar events in the South was written in fiction, not other modes. The ending of *Bricks Without Straw* that Karcher rightly celebrates includes an eloquent peroration by Tourgée’s primary white hero on not only federal support for education as the solution to racism but also township-hall meetings and local elections as the cure for statewide political corruption. But how demonstrably true is Tourgée’s broad claim in *Bricks Without Straw* that the South’s lack of township-based elections weakened its democratic traditions compared to New England? A second, complementary approach to *Bricks Without Straw* should focus on the variety of literary forms used by Tourgée, including how they interact in both successful and unsuccessful ways. Sentimental romance, legal disquisition, and Socratic dialogue are just three of many. Tourgée was hardly a ventriloquist virtuoso of rhetorical forms like Twain, but the structure of *Bricks Without Straw* is deeply dialogic, both on the level of individual scenes and as a whole, through its audacious mix of genres, styles, and voices. We need to investigate more thoroughly the ways in which a hybrid narrative such as *Bricks Without Straw* enacts change *textually*; it does not just argue for it. We have done that recently with Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass; now it is the turn for a writer who is one of their most honorable heirs. It is Tourgée’s time again, and Carolyn L. Karcher has helped make it so.

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THE COMPLETE LETTERS OF HENRY JAMES, 1872–1876. VOL. 1. Ed. Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008. lxxi + 410 pp. \$125.

The goal of publishing every one of Henry James’s (1843–1916) more than 10,000 extant letters represents an inspired undertaking—an enormous commitment by the Center for Henry James Studies, General Editors Greg W. Zacharias and Pierre A. Walker, and the University of Nebraska Press. The 410 pages of the present volume include eighty letters. At this rate, it will take 125 volumes to publish them all. The present volume is the third volume of *The Complete Letters* to be published. Two earlier volumes include letters from 1855 to 1872. Readers may be confused by the decision not to number the volumes consecutively. The present volume is actually the first of three covering 1872–76 and includes letters written over just a fourteen-month period (May 20, 1872–July 8, 1873) even though the title page indicates otherwise. Volume 2 (letters written July 15, 1873–October 15, 1875) was