THE POETASTER AND THE HORSE-DOCTORS

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Will Carleton is one of the more deservedly obscure of our nineteenth-century poetasters. Although his sentimental ballads and lyrics of farm life expressed the homespun side of the American sensibility -- although he was a kind of Midwest Whittier in a minor key -- he is today all but forgotten. Perhaps he may be remembered longest for his serving as the presumably innocent storm center of a quarrel which darkened the polite brandy-and-velvet atmosphere of the Authors' Club in New York in 1885, and which involved such contemporaries as Mark Twain and novelist Julian Hawthorne.

Carleton (1845-1912), born and raised in Michigan, gradually turned from a career in journalism to one in poetry and platform reading. He made his first impact on the East when Harper's Weekly reprinted one of his newspaper poems, "Betsey and I Are Out," in 1873; his Farm Ballads, published in that year, gave him a national reputation. In 1882 he moved to Brooklyn, where he lived until his death, at which time he was memorialized by the Weekly as "the most popular of [American] poets and the one whose writings have been more widely read and appreciated than those of any poet since the days of Whittier and Longfellow."[1] According to a boyhood friend, "the farmer-pioneers needed a voice to sing the exaltation of their homely life -- and he responded."[2] Carleton saw himself as solidly in the tradition of Burns and Whittier; he was on terms of close friendship with the latter poet, and he greatly admired Mark Twain, whom he had met in 1872. Some idea of his prose rhetoric, of the type which gilded the pages of Every Where, the magazine he founded in 1894, may be gained from a few lines quoted admiringly by another of his critics. "No writer," Carleton rhapsodized, "has ever made the world read him, unless he plucked his pen from the quivering wing of his brain, and before he wrote dipped it in the crimson ink of his own heart's blood."[3] So much for the genius of Will Carleton.

By 1885, when he was proposed for membership in the Authors' Club, Carleton had published five volumes of his folksy verse and had, the year before, made a remarkably successful lecture tour of England, where he passed for the real article -- which, in some respects, he was. But there were some members of the Club who were not so sure. Some may

have remembered the accusation of literary piracy made against him back in 1873 by a Mrs. N. S. Emerson; others may have been wary -- or jealous -- of the reputation as a "money-making poet" which his enormous royalties had secured for him. Could the traditions of the Club harbor such an intruder?

Of course, the traditions did not stretch back very far. Unlike the older and more august Century Club, the Authors' had been founded only in 1882, under the leadership of E. C. Stedman, who had defined its aims benignly and vaguely as "literary and social good-fellowship, and the bringing of authors into closer union, independently of the publishers for whom they may work."[4] The Club met fortnightly in its own rooms decorated with old engravings and casts of Greek sculpture, and it boasted most of the usual names: H. C. Bunner, George W. Curtis, the brothers Eggleston, Brander Matthews, R. H. Stoddard and the like -- but also such honorary and associated members as Matthew Arnold, Edmund Gosse, Whittier, Lowell, John Hay and Henry James.[5] When George P. Lathrop wrote his description of the Club in 1886 and listed some of its illustrious members, one name conspicuous by its absence was that of Mark Twain, who had been a member as early as 1883. The reason for Clemens' withdrawal may be deduced from what follows.

On December 10, 1885, the Club voted 28 to 7 (the necessary 4/5 majority) in favor of Carleton's admission to its sacred precincts. But then, according to a letter sent by Julian Hawthorne to Samuel Clemens the next day, Carleton's unnamed enemies

> went behind the returns, and said there had been a mistake. One man said he had a proxy to vote against Carleton--a verbal proxy: but he was confronted with a written proxy from the same person, to vote for Carleton. Another man said he might have put in a white ball by mistake for a black one. Then three of those who had blackballed, threatened to resign if the election were allowed to stand.[6]

Hawthorne, no stranger himself to literary quarrels, having crossed swords with his brother-in-law Lathrop for a number of years, was in perilously high moral dudgeon. He declared to Clemens that the Club "has latterly been filling up with men who, because they have passed through a street in which there was a bookstore, are called 'authors'. . . . I hold that we have no right to exclude men who are bona fide authors, merely because half a dozen fellows can be found to say that they are 'unclubbable' men." In appealing for Clemens' proxy for the next vote on Carleton, he added:

> I don't know him [Carleton] and don't read his books: but such transactions as those of last night will ruin the Club if they are allowed to stand. I write to you, because I have every confidence in your sense and sincerity. I daresay you may hate Carleton, or that

his poetry causes you to vomit: but I imagine that will not prevent your voting for him on general principles.

Hawthorne's letter, which also contained further violent criticisms of the Club while proclaiming its theoretical usefulness, was answered by Clemens from Hartford within the week (on December 18th) in a letter which included his proxy. Where Hawthorne had been impassioned and lofty, Clemens was ruthlessly blunt. He agreed with all of Hawthorne's strictures except the statement that such maneuvers "will ruin the Club"; "that sort of procedure," Clemens declared, "has already ruined it." It is no more an author's club, Clemens went on pungently, "than it is a horse-doctor's club." Its name is "a sarcasm," he added, and concluded that he would like to see a new one started "on a sane plan."

Clemens' last sentiment was received gleefully by Hawthorne, who declared, "I am ready to support the new Club whenever it chooses to be born." Hawthorne was now hopelessly entangled in the politics of the affair, and in his reply of December 23rd to Clemens, asks for still another proxy and for Clemens' signature on a petition to have the Carleton matter voted on again at the next meeting (on the 31st) rather than postponed to the following year when new rules would be in effect.[7] George P. Lathrop also wrote to Clemens the following day, enclosing another copy of the petition and begging for his support. He declared that "the feeling in favor of Carleton is overwhelming," and shrewdly quoted John Hay's remark about his "esteem" for the Michigan poet. The fact that both copies of the petition remain attached to their respective letters to Clemens in the Mark Twain Papers surely suggests that Clemens never sent them back; and indeed, he may, in the press of business affairs, have washed his hands of Will Carleton, Julian Hawthorne, George P. Lathrop and the Authors' Club with one eloquent stroke of silence.[8]

Was Carleton ever elected? Indeed he was. Lathrop's letter had predicted that he would "receive an affirmative vote of 35 or 40," and had listed the names of twenty-one pledged supporters. Yet, since Carleton is not mentioned in Lathrop's list of members in the Harper's article of 1886, it is possible that his election took place after the controversy died down. Carleton's membership is recorded in Who's Who in America (1899-1900), 113. It is probably worth mentioning that that very clubbable man, Julian Hawthorne, is included in Lathrop's list of members, even though he had piously written Clemens that "My resignation will be in the hands of the [Executive] Council after Carleton has been voted upon -- whether or not he be elected." Despite all these shenanigans, which were probably not atypical of what the "literary and social good-fellowship" alluded to by founder Stedman had declined to within a few years, the latter was still capable of remarking, in 1895, that the Club had been "of service in bringing about the entente which now exists among New York authors."[9] Quodcunque ostendis mihi sic, incredulus odi.

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Footnotes:

[1] Harper's Weekly, LVI (Dec. 28, 1912), 32.

[2] Byron A. Finney, Will Carleton (Lansing, Mich., Historical Commission, 1917), 14.

[3] A. Elwood Corning, Will Carleton: A Biographical Study (New York, 1917), 87. A more balanced appraisal than either Finney's or Corning's is that of J. T. Trowbridge, "Will Carleton," Harper's, LXVIII (March, 1884), 572-579. Also see DAB, III, 492-493. Carleton describes his platform career in "Experiences of a Public Lecturer," Lippincott's, XXXIX (April, 1887), 670-676.

[4] Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman, ed. Laura Stedman and G. M. Gould, 2 vols. (New York, 1910), II, 465.

[5] George P. Lathrop, "The Literary Movement in New York," Harper's, LXXIII (Nov., 1886), 830-831.

[6] This letter, and those which follow by Clemens, Hawthorne and Lathrop, are among the Mark Twain Papers in the General Library of the University of California, Berkeley. I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the kind permission granted by the trustees of the Mark Twain Estate, and by Mr. Henry Nash Smith and Mr. Frederick Anderson, to examine and quote from these letters, including a photostat of the Twain letter: Copyright © 1964, by the Mark Twain Company.

[7] Still another proxy request -- perhaps there were many -- was sent on December 28th to Sydney Howard Gay. In this letter Hawthorne notes that among those pledged to support Carleton are Bunce, Clemens, Conway, Curtis, G. C. Eggleston, Godwin, Hay, Lathrop, Roe, Stedman, Warner and others. This letter is in the Department of Special Collections at Columbia University; I am obliged to Mr. Roland Baughman for permission to summarize its contents.

[8] What may be a recollection of these events was preserved by Julian Hawthorne in 1929. "When a literary club to which we both belonged," he wrote, "began to accept members on other grounds than that they should have 'produced works proper to literature' he [Clemens] handed in his resignation; he wasn't paying his dues for the sake of consorting with office boys and millionaires": "Mark Twain as I Knew Him," Overland Monthly, LXXXVII (April, 1929), 111.

Corning (Will Carleton, 77) notes that Carleton invited Clemens, among others, to participate in authors' readings for the benefit of the Mary A. Fisher Home for indigent authors and artists; but Corning's failure to supply dates leaves Clemens' relations with Carleton after 1885 conjectural only.

[9] Life and Letters of . . . Stedman, II, 466.