

WILL ROGERS: FORGOTTEN MAN

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Shortly after the tragic death of Will Rogers, the Kansas City Journal-Post editorialized that "It will then be a real service to America if someone will seriously undertake to write an authentic account of his life and work, with special accent on the last fifteen years of it. For within that period Will Rogers grew on the American scene to a greater stature than would probably have been possible for any man who lacked his diverse qualifications."¹ Not only has such an account not been written, but in many ways, Will's contributions to American history and humor have been forgotten by scholars. True, there are still many of Will's generation who remember with pleasure their reaction to his daily newspaper column, and his childhood friends and relatives as well as his friends in the entertainment world have kept alive certain aspects of Will's life and career. However, one does not find a great deal written on the techniques of humor that he utilized and one does not find a great many references to his comments on his times in scholarly historical works.

Clearly Will Rogers belongs to the long line of cracker-barrel humorists from Jack Downing through Sut Lovingood, Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, Bill Arp, Josh Billings, Bill Nye and Mark Twain, to Finley Peter Dunne, but in some ways he is more important than any of these.² Mark Twain was a better and more serious writer, but only Mr. Dooley represents any real competition to Will in terms of influence. Will, after all, had the advantage of much broader circulation than any of his predecessors, plus his national reputation as an entertainer. Will, also, was able to take advantage of modern means of communications and transportation to keep himself alert to the events of significance both in the United States and in the rest of the world. Along with this came his contact and association with many of the important people in government and business--those who were making the news Will commented upon.

Will came as close to being a national spokesman during the latter part of his career as any one writer has ever become. Contemporary and ephemeral as most of his comments were, they were so truly representative of popular feeling that they became powerful interpretations of current opinion. He said for many of the people the unuttered thoughts of their minds. He succeeded in identifying his personality with their lives so

closely that multitudes felt he spoke for them. This was not difficult for Will since he, like many Americans, was a product of the frontier, of the rural scene and of small town life. This Oklahoma cowboy, part Indian, was about as typically American as one person could be.

The approach to humor used by Will Rogers was not new, but he became a master at it. Use of dialect, atrocious spelling and wild grammatical error were typical. He was never the ignorant cowboy that he pretended to be, but he learned early that the pretense of ignorance along with a casual manner led to laughs. He spoke and wrote in the slang and idiom of his native Southwest and this lent support to the appearance of being a "country bumpkin." His gags were usually short and terse and he frequently used the element of surprise along with the traditional "punch line." Comic metaphors, puns and other tricks of the trade were all a part of his repertoire.³

Perhaps the most important elements in Will's humor, however, were timeliness and some basis in truth. Will used items of rather general knowledge and picked up information of local interest for his personal appearances. He liked for people to think of his remarks, "He's right about that." As he himself expressed it to an Advertising Club luncheon in New York, "The only difference between my business and yours is that every gag or lie or joke I tell on the stage is fundamentally based on the truth. And that's where our businesses part--right there."⁴

Will's ability to achieve his goals was seldom questioned during the latter part of his career, but his skill as a humorist was apparent from the earliest part of his career in the theater. On March 1, 1916, The New York Times, commenting upon Will's return to the Palace Theater, referred to him as "indigenous as Bret Harte, Sitting Bull, or George M. Cohan, and as wisely humorous as Mr. Dooley." Only a few years later the same newspaper strengthened this observation with "Not unworthily is Will Rogers carrying on the tradition of Aristophanes on our comic stage." The editorial writer felt further that "He comes nearer being the legitimate successor to Mr. Dooley as a commentator on news and politics than any of the 14 or 15 thousand aspiring humorists, who have tried to don the great man's clothes."⁵

When one turns from the style, techniques and abilities of Will as a humorist and studies the content of his remarks, the reactions are much more varied. He did not please all who read or heard him. Reinhold Niebuhr could declare in his first sermon as a member of the faculty of Union Theological Seminary that "Will Rogers speaks greater truths than the more pretentious prophets of our time dare to utter." Like the king's jester he "could speak the plain truth and go unpunished."⁶ Judge Ben B. Lindsey expressed a similar view in the farcical keynote speech he wrote for Life magazine and its Anti-Bunk Party. Judge Lindsey asked "Why is Will so popular?" and answered "Not so much because he makes us laugh, but be-

cause he really knows us and he knows what he is talking about."⁷ The Nation, on the other hand, expressed in retrospect the belief that "there is some wit and considerable wisdom" in Will Rogers but "the misses outnumber the hits."⁸

Many of Will's contemporaries regretted the lack of a consistent philosophy, such as Twain had, in his writings. The New Republic perhaps best summarized this objection to Will in an editorial written at the time of his death.

It was a striking fact about Will Rogers that millions of his admirers never realized the general direction in which his ideas pointed, or how little fundamental philosophy he had. His vivid likeableness, his unfailing gift of humor, covered a multitude of sins. He was in fact, in a fumbling and haphazard way, a truculent nationalist and isolationist of the Hearst school; he was Nietzschean in his ultimate reliance upon brute force. With his incessant hammering upon Congress, he probably did something to accelerate the decline of faith in the democratic process that has been seen in America in recent years. He selected the object of his stinging barbs of wit with discretion; no one knew better than he which side of his bread was buttered, and how to make the butter coating thicker. What he did, of course, was to drift along with the currents of prevailing opinion in the groups where he found himself or to which he aspired.⁹

In turn O. O. McIntyre, the columnist and press agent for Florenz Ziegfeld during a part of Will's days in the Follies, explained this variety of criticism in his own column, "Kitty Kat." As McIntyre saw it:

Something about Will Rogers fearfully upsets pseudo-intellectuals and a sprinkling of parlor pinks. He gets in their long hair. Everything he does grows increasingly irritating.

His gum chewing is a fraud, his ridge-hopper twang a pose and his scrambling of the queen's English a sop for the sodbusters.

Will is everything he doesn't seem to be--according to their version.

But there does not appear to be anything they can do except cluster at Alexander Woolcott's gossipry and jeer. Will Rogers irritates because he

has confounded these hooting intellectuals time after time. He always lands on top.¹⁰

The truth as usual probably lies somewhere between the extremes of adulation and criticism. That Will had anti-democratic leanings and did admire power in whatever form it appeared, there can be little doubt. His attacks on the follies of Congressmen and other elected officials were really aimed at the weaknesses of the democratic system and representative government. In one of his earliest newspaper articles Will expressed a basic criticism of democratic government more bluntly than was later typical of him when he wrote, "I have always said office holders should be elected for life (subject, of course, to impeachment for neglect or dishonesty). Then they could give all their time, instead of worrying about how to stay in there," This anti-democratic inclination came to the fore later in his many comments in praise of Benito Mussolini. Typical of Will's attitude was a comment made on a trip to Rome in 1926 that "Some over home say a Dictator is no good; yet every successful line of business is run by a Dictator. . . . Dictator form of government is the greatest form of Government there is, if you have the right Dictator. Well these folks have certainly got him."¹² Similarly, in Mexico, Will had nothing but praise for former strongman, Plutarco Elías Calles, whom he described as "the strongest and most dominating character in either North or South America."¹³

Will was not the crusader that Mr. Dooley was. There is no strong anti-imperialism, for example. There is in Will none of the rebellion of Mark Twain. Will usually ignored issues on which public feeling ran particularly high.¹⁴ It is, at the same time, true that Will attempted to strike a balance in the things he wrote. He criticized both political parties; he poked fun at famous people, and joked about all manner of world affairs. He said so many things on so many different sides that he inevitably irritated some people. Yet he equally inevitably said something that almost everyone could agree with.

Indicative of the "something for everyone" ability of Will is the fact that the New York Times, on June 30, 1924, praised the humorist for his account of the Democratic Convention. The Times said, in essence, that when professional humorists stop trying to be funny and express resentful indignation as Will Rogers did after the Friday session of the Democratic Convention, then the managers of such gatherings should consider a change. It is interesting to note that the advent of television did have the kind of beneficial effect on political conventions that the Times' writer hoped Will would have. Yet, the same newspaper saw fit to omit Will's column for February 2, 1933, because the editors disapproved of his attack upon the costs of loans and interests.

Will's articles were frequently the subjects of indignant letters to the editor. He was criticized for spreading misinformation about the stock ex-

change and not realizing that it was, at the time, regulated by the government.¹⁵ He was taken to task for suggesting jokingly a socialistic scheme for payment of soldiers' bonuses by taxing war profiteers. This, it was felt, would stir up class antagonisms.¹⁶ He was accused of trying to undermine the judiciary and in general not sticking to facts.¹⁷ He was blamed for the fact that too many people blamed the Congress and the state legislatures for everything bad that happened. The fear was expressed that Will's remarks were not properly evaluated by the readers.¹⁸ He was even taken to task by the Chicago Journal of Commerce for his criticism of the railroads in an article for the Saturday Evening Post. It might be added that the infant aviation industry did not share the criticism.¹⁹

Criticisms ranged from the completely unfounded to those with which many Americans agreed. Columnist Arthur Brisbane alleged that "The nation's ardent young friend, Will Rogers, very rich and therefore, conservative, shudders at the mention of Russia, as he should do, since Russia would not let him keep his 25 millions. But, shuddering, he should observe closely. It is important to know what is going on, though you do shudder at the knowledge. Never be an ostrich."²⁰ This was strange criticism of a man who had been to Russia and written a book entitled There's Not a Bathing Suit in Russia. On the other hand many Americans agreed that Will had overstepped the bounds of good taste when he imitated President Calvin Coolidge giving a "State of the Union" message on radio. The fact that many listeners were deceived by the imitation may have increased the indignation.²¹

Sometimes the criticisms of Will came from other writers of consequence who were objecting not only to what he had said, but also the influence he carried. Walter Lippman, for example, reproved Will for his expressed conviction that America should insist on the collection of the war debts at the time of the world depression. The rebuke consisted merely of a question designed to show that Will was misquoting the campaign pledges of both Hoover and Roosevelt, but by this rebuke Lippman was conceding to the humorist an importance and place among the opinion makers of the nation.²² More specifically, H. G. Wells, writing in Colliers, stated that the defeat of a resolution making the United States a member of the World Court in early 1935 was due in large measure to Will Rogers. A last minute avalanche of 40,000 telegrams against the proposal were prompted by radio speeches of Father Coughlin and Will.²³ Here then was a major national policy decision which Will clearly influenced. Again, it is not surprising that Will brought mixed reactions from his readers since he commented upon so many different subjects. It is also obvious that there would be agreement and disagreement with anything he had to say on a matter of importance. The question that is difficult to answer is to what extent Will was reflecting public opinion and to what extent he was creating it. In either

event, his comments become significant as expressions of a major portion of American public opinion during his lifetime.

Will did occasionally try to answer his critics. Sometimes his answer took the form of another humorous column as was the case in this answer to one author of a letter to the editor.

Got some news for you. Fellow wrote the New York Times (my mother paper), took exception to some fool thing I had written and forgot about. The Times took it serious, and so did people arguing over it. They thought the fellow was surely some authority. Now what do I find out? He is a young Harvard graduate, Charlton Ogburn, Jr., 22 years old. And like all Harvard graduates "Junior" wanted to do something "worth while" for his old alma mater.

But America's sense of humor has taught 'em there is three things they must never take serious: a columnist on any paper, a political speech by any candidate, and a Harvard graduate if he hasnt been out 4 years. Harvard is an 8-year school--4 in and 4 out. But after then they're just as human and fine as any other college graduate. So dont take this debt thing too serious from either Harvard or O. C. C. (Oklahoma Cow Camp). Their information on the subject is about equal.²⁴

In a more serious vein Will wrote about the various letters criticizing him for talking about politics. He pointed out that he had traveled a great deal, met a lot of people and would have had to be "pretty dumb" not to have picked up something. He wondered where his critics got their information. As he summed it up, "Now I read Politics, talk Politics, know personally almost every prominent Politician, like 'em and they're my friends, but I cant help it if I have seen enuf of it to know that there is some Baloney in it all. Now I'm going to be like an Umpire or a Referee. I'm going to keep on doing the same as I have in the Past. I'm going to call 'em just like I see 'em. If I dont see things Your way, well why should I?"²⁵

Will perhaps summed up his own strength and weakness in a reply he wrote to Will Durant concerning his personal philosophy. In this column it is possible to see how Will could poke fun at so many sacrosanct aspects of our society and, at the same time, fail to provide the kind of intelligent, reasoned attitudes that many of his critics wished for. As Will wrote it:

So I cant tell this doggone Bird Durant anything.
What all of us know put together dont mean anything. Nothing dont mean anything. We're just here

for a spell and then pass on. Any man that thinks that Civilization has advanced is sho an Egotist. Fords and bathtubs have moved you and cleaned you, but you was just as ignorant when you got there. We know lots of things we used to didnt know but we dont know any way to prevent 'em happening. Confucius perspired out more knowledge than the U.S. Senate has vocalized out in the last 50 years.

We have got more toothpaste on the Market, and more misery in our Courts than at anytime in our whole existence. There aint nothing to life but satisfaction. If you want to ship off fat beef cattle at the end of their Existence, you got to have 'em Satisfied on the range. Indians and primitive races were the highest civilized after all because they was more satisfied, and they depended less on each other, and took less from each other. We couldnt live a day without depending on everybody else. So our Civilization has give us no Liberty or Independence.

Suppose the other Guy quits feeding us. The whole Thing is a "Racket," so get a few good Laughs, do the best you can, take nothing serious, for nothing is certainly depending on this generation. Each one lives in spite of the previous one and not because of it. And dont start "seeking knowledge," for the more you seek to get the nearer the "Booby Hatch" you get. And dont have an Ideal to work for. That's like riding towards a Mirage of a lake. When you finally do get there it aint there. Believe in something for another world, but dont be too set on what it is and then you wont start out that Life with a big Disappointment. Live your life so that whenever you lose, you are ahead.²⁶

Whatever the philosophy or lack thereof in Will Rogers' writings, whatever the correctness or incorrectness of his opinions, there can be no denying the evidence that he influenced American public opinion to a considerable extent during the 1920's and early 1930's. No account of American history during that period would be complete without some recognition of the fact that thousands of Americans daily read and believed Will's comments upon current events. No account of the history of American humor would be complete without a realization that Will represented the last of the cracker-barrel humorists who depended upon the written word alone to reach a large

audience and the first of the new humorists who would reach still larger audiences through the radio and the moving pictures. With the advent of television and other modern entertainment media, it seems unlikely that anyone will ever again achieve the unique distinction that Will Rogers did.

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Footnotes:

¹ August 20, 1935.

² Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1942); Dixon Wecter, "Will Rogers," Dictionary of American Biography (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1944) XXI, 635-637; and Lois H. Walker, "Traditional American Humor and Will Rogers," (Unpublished M.A. thesis, Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College, 1942).

³ E. P. Alworth, "The Humor of Will Rogers" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Missouri, 1958), 95-120. See also The Literary Digest, November 15, 1919.

⁴ The New York Times, December 8, 1922.

⁵ November 13, 1922.

⁶ The New York Times, November 19, 1928.

⁷ May 31, 1928.

⁸ November 5, 1949.

⁹ August 28, 1935.

¹⁰ The Tulsa Daily World, December 24, 1933.

¹¹ The Tulsa Daily World, March 1, 1925.

¹² Will Rogers, Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President (New York, 1926), 147.

¹³ The Tulsa Daily World, December 18, 1931.

¹⁴ Will Rogers, Jr. maintains that his father always felt his proper sphere was humor rather than reform. Interview at Claremore, Oklahoma, April 12, 1957.

¹⁵ The New York Times, November 4, 1934.

¹⁶ Ibid., June 7, 1935.

¹⁷ Ibid., July 25, 1935.

¹⁸ Editorial in The Tulsa Daily World, April 10, 1935.

¹⁹ Will Rogers, "Flying and Eating My Way East," Saturday Evening Post, CC (January 21, 1928), 3-4. Tulsa Daily World, January 27, 1928.

²⁰ The Tulsa Tribune, September 16, 1930.

²¹ The New York Times, January 6, 1928, and editorial the following day. See also various letters to the editor during January.

²² The Commonweal, December 14, 1932. See also various issues of The New York Times during November, 1932 for comments on this controversy.

²³ May 25, 1935. Secretary of State Cordell Hull confirms the fact that Will's opposition hurt painfully in his Memoirs, 2 vols. (New York, 1948), I, 389.

²⁴ The New York Times, December 15, 1932.

²⁵ Ibid., December 18, 1932.

²⁶ Ibid., July 5, 1931.