

**MARK TWAIN AND THE PHILIPPINES:
CONTAINING AN UNPUBLISHED
LETTER**

MORTON N. COHEN

Although Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" is the most famous piece of literature evoked by the Philippine phase of the Spanish-American War, it is not only the utterance by a man of letters on America's venture into imperialism. One of the most forceful voices heard on the subject on this side of the Atlantic was that of Mark Twain, who held strong convictions diametrically opposed to Kipling's.¹

Twain's political opinions in general and his views of American expansion in particular have been well chronicled, but the account is enriched by an unpublished Twain letter that has recently come to light and the unpublished letter from the admirer that elicited it.²

At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Twain was living in Europe, lecturing and writing, his only means of earning enough money to pay the debts he had incurred when the Webster Company collapsed. While abroad, he undoubtedly heard a good deal of criticism of his country's policy in Cuba. But he defended the United States' position, believing that America was genuinely concerned for the Cuban people. He was not, however, sympathetic with the government's attitude toward the Philippines, for even before he returned home he saw that Washington did not intend to give the Filipinos immediate independence.

He had, of course, read the reports of Dewey's victory over the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, of the Rough Riders' victory in Cuba, and of Spain's capitulation to McKinley's demand that she relinquish the Philippines in exchange for \$20 million. He also knew that the Filipinos had risen in revolt when they realized that they were merely trading Spanish for American domination and that the United States had sent 70,000 men to the archipelago to defend Old Glory. He was certainly disturbed by the reports that American soldiers had resorted to humiliating bushwhacking to route Filipino guerillas and that atrocities had been committed by American prisoner-of-war camp authorities.

He arrived back in New York on October 15, 1900, to a tumultuous welcome, and he seized the opportunity, while in the limelight, to speak out quickly and passionately against American imperialism. During his first interview, on the evening of his arrival, he excoriated the government. "I have seen," he said, "that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the peo-

Salem, Mass.,
30 Dec. 1900.

Dear Sir:

Will you forgive a stranger
for intruding upon your scant leisure
this expression of gratitude for your
"Salutation" to the incoming century?

In my opinion it is, so far as I know,
the best thing you ever did. Indeed,
I rank it with Lincoln's immortal
speech at Gettysburg.

It has done me good. I have stopped
taking medicine, now that somebody
has done something effective to rouse
the public from their stupid apathy in
this universal origin of terror.

It is a great strain upon one's self:
Confidence to continue to harbor the
conviction that he is right, and all
the "powers that be" of Christendom are
wrong in their fearful onslaught,
upon human beings. And if wrong,
how appalling the magnitude of the
error or crime!

You have cheered me. You reassured
me against the depressing doubt of my
own sanity, and you encourage me
to believe there is yet hope that old
Wallen's sentiment, echoed by Charles
Sumner on the title-page of his
first great plea for universal peace,
may prevail throughout the world:-

"What angel shall descend to recount
These Christian states, and call them guilty folk?"

I implore you to continue to improve
the advantage which the high place you have
attained gives you for reaching the public
ear and conscience, by stirring of the phre-
neses until they stop, to think; which it would
be distrustful the providence of God to doubt
must be followed by relenting and repentance.

Least, as I began, with the profound
thanks of,

Yours Cordially,

Wm. Samuel L. Clemens,
14 W. 22nd St.,
New York, N. Y.

Abner Goodell.

14 West 10th

new

Dear Sir:

I think you
it is a "universal
terror." There
a universal
error also—
indifference
avoidable for
press & people
of honor is sh
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think, — an ou
— & has fairly

Figure 1

Figure One: Abner Goodell to Samuel L. Clemens, December 30, 1900.
Figures Two and Three: Samuel L. Clemens to Abner Goodell, December 31, 1900. See also inside back cover.
Figures Two and Three © Copyright 1960 by The Mark Twain Company.

Dec. 31/00.

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appeared

from Governments.
I find but few men who
disapprove of our
theft of the Phillipines &
of our assassination
of the liberties of the
people of the Archipelago.

I thank you very much
for your letter. I shall
receive many of its
kind.

Sincerely,
S. L. Clemens,
-2

Figure Three

ple of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem."³ And when he spoke at a dinner in his honor at the Lotus Club on November 10, he again expressed anti-expansionist sentiments.

His was clearly a minority position. Imperialism, in the guise of Destiny, was the cry of the day, especially in the yellow Hearst and Pulitzer press. Twain, at the height of his success, must have realized fully that by embracing an unpopular cause he was jeopardizing the very audience upon whom he depended for a living. "Mark Twain feared a possible return into debt as he feared almost nothing else," Professor Gibson has written;⁴ and yet hardly a month passed in the three years after his return to this country during which he did not, in one way or another, denounce imperialism. The more he read about American operations in the Philippines, the stronger grew his indignation, the more frequent his outspoken appeals, the more vehement his public denunciations. On December 13, 1900, at a Waldorf-Astoria banquet, when he introduced Winston Churchill, then a young war correspondent, he interspersed his gracious compliments with frank admissions that he and Churchill did not see eye to eye on imperialism, and he restated his position on recent events in South Africa and China, as well as the Philippines.

It is not surprising, in the light of his pronounced views and his obvious desire to influence American policy if he could, that he granted a request from the Red Cross Society at the end of 1900 to write a greeting which, he understood, would be read on New Year's Eve, along with other messages from famous people, at numerous meetings across the country. But after he wrote his statement, he discovered that the Society was using only his name in its advance notices, and he asked the Red Cross manager either to publish the other names as well or return his contribution. The manager returned the greeting, and Twain sent it instead to the New York Herald, which printed a photograph of it in its issue of December 30, 1900. The text reads as follows:

A salutation-speech from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth, taken down in short-hand by Mark Twain:

I bring you the stately matron named Christendom, returning dedrugged, besmirched and dishonored from pirate-raids in Kiao-Chou, Manchuria, South Africa, & the Phillipines [sic], with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap & a towel, but hide the looking-glass.

Mark Twain⁵

New York, Dec. 31, 1900

Professor Gibson has pointed out why this piece is perhaps Twain's "most perfect single piece of persuasive writing" and has described the reaction to it in some detail.⁶ The hitherto unpublished material, a letter

from an admirer and Twain's reply, give further evidence of Twain's strong opinions.

The admirer was Abner Cheney Goodell (1831-1914) of Salem, Massachusetts, a lawyer and historian, sometime President of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, who owned an exceptional library on witchcraft and was, at the time he wrote to Twain, an editor and annotator of the laws of colonial Massachusetts.⁷ He writes from Salem, on the same day that Twain's greeting appeared in the Herald:

Dear Sir:

Will you forgive a stranger for obtruding upon your scant leisure this expression of gratitude for your "Salutation" to the incoming century.

In my opinion it is, so far as I know, the best thing you ever did. Indeed, I rank it with Lincoln's immortal speech at Gettysburg.

It has done me good. I have stopped taking medicine, now that somebody has done something effectual to rouse the public from their chronic apathy in this universal reign of terror.

It is a great strain upon one's self-confidence to continue to harbor the conviction that he is right, and all the "powers that be" of Christendom are wrong in their fearful onslaughts upon human beings. And if wrong, how appalling the magnitude of the error of crime!

You have cheered me. You reassure me against the depressing doubt of my own sanity, and you encourage me to believe there is yet hope that old Waller's sentiment, echoed by Charles Sumner in the title-page of his first great plea for universal peace, may prevail throughout the world:--

"What angel shall descend to reconcile

These Christian states, and end their guilty toil?"

I implore you to continue to improve the advantage which the high place you have attained gives you for reaching the public ear and conscience, by stirring up the pharisees until they stop, to think; which it would be distrusting the providence of God to doubt must be followed by relenting and repentance.

I end, as I began, with the profound thanks of,

Yours cordially,

Abner C. Goodell

Mr. Samuel Clemens,

14 W. Tenth St. ,

New York, N. Y.

Mark Twain's reply shows once more how deeply he felt about the war in the Philippines, how courageously he spoke out on the subject at every opportunity, and how, though he felt abandoned in a sea of hostile popular opinion, he fully intended to continue on his lonely course:

14 West 10th Street.

New York, Dec. 31/00.

Dear Sir:

I think you are right: it is a "universal reign of terror." There seems to be a universal reign of error also --& a strange indifference to that formidable fact, in pulpit, press & people. The standard of honor is shrinking pretty fast everywhere, I think, --among individuals--& has fairly disappeared from Governments. I find but few men who disapprove of our theft of the Phillipines [sic] & of our assassination of the liberties of the people of the Archipelago.

I thank you very much for your letter. I shan't receive many of its kind.

Sincerely yours,
S L. Clemens

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The City College of New York

Footnotes:

¹ For other literary expressions on the subject, see Fred Harvey Harrington, "Literary Aspects of American Anti-Imperialism, 1898-1902," New England Quarterly, x (1937), 650-67.

² For Twain on imperialism, see William M. Gibson, "Mark Twain and Howells: Anti-Imperialists," New England Quarterly, xx (1947), 435-70. I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of Professor Gibson in preparing this note and the generosity of Mr. A. Gittes, of the Oak Grove Galleries, Malden, Massachusetts, owner of the Mark Twain letter, and the Trustees of the Mark Twain Estate, for permission to quote the Twain material.

³ "Mark Twain Home, An Anti-Imperialist," New York Herald, October 16, 1900, 4.

⁴ Gibson, 470.

⁵ "New Century Greeting Which Twain Recalled," 7.

⁶ Gibson, 451 ff.

⁷ See obituaries in the New York Times, July 22, 1914, 9; and the Boston Globe, July 21, 1914, 14. The Goodell letter is among the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley, Goodell's quotation (which, in the second line, should read The for These) is from "Of the In-

vasion and Defeat of the Turks, in the Year 1683," by Edmund Waller (1606-87). See Thomas Park, ed., The Poetical Works of Edmund Waller (2 vols., London: Stanhope Press, 1806), i, 93. Charles Sumner (1811-74), Senator from Massachusetts, reproduced the lines on the title page of his The War System of the Commonwealth of Nations. An Address before the American Peace Society, at its Anniversary in Boston, May 28, 1849 (Boston: Tickner, Reed, and Fields, 1849).

