

## MILLER OF BOSCOBEL:

### HAMLIN GARLAND'S LABOR PLAY

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"Miller of Boscobel," an unpublished and almost unknown play by Hamlin Garland, was produced three times in the year 1909 and thereafter vanished into oblivion. Not only was it never published, the history of its production has never been examined and Garland never mentions its title in all his volumes of reminiscences. His only reference to the work occurs in Companions on the Trail, where he writes, "Late in January I went to Madison to witness Donald Robertson's production of my play."<sup>1</sup>

The house was only half filled but the play was received with kindly applause. I was not deceived. "It has none of the elements of a popular success," I said to Robertson.

"The real test will come in Chicago."<sup>2</sup>

The next two paragraphs deal sketchily with the Chicago production, after which he sums up his reaction at the time. "This whole play writing episode has been a foolish waste of time. I wonder that I allowed myself to be drawn into it,"<sup>3</sup> a comment chiefly useful for establishing that the play was written for Robertson and not an old play recovered from some half forgotten drawer.

Whatever its merits as drama, "Miller of Boscobel" deserves to be included in the Garland canon if one accepts Donald Pizer's evaluation that ". . . all of Garland's work of his early career, published and unpublished, is of permanent value to the historians of American life and letters."<sup>4</sup> But "Miller of Boscobel" is important not only because it is the only play by Garland ever to be produced, but also because it seems to be the culmination of his long interest in writing for the theater. More important, it is his most extensive examination of the labor situation. "Miller of Boscobel" serves, in addition, to extend the period in which Garland is known to have dealt realistically with the social conditions of his day, and by forcing a reexamination of the work of Garland's early period suggests that his career as a Single Tax advocate has a stronger basis in the plight of labor than has been generally recognized.

The history of Garland's dramatic efforts is brief, relatively uneventful and, except for the circumstances surrounding the production of "Miller of Boscobel," generally well known. He wrote his first drama, Under the Wheel, in 1890, published it first in the Arena and then had it published

from the Arena plates in the rare Barta edition. In the same year he wrote a play based on a scandal in the Massachusetts legislature. In succeeding years he dramatized Howell's A Modern Instance, planned dramatizations of several of his own works and began at least two dramas in collaboration with the Hernes.<sup>5</sup> None of these works was ever played. Under the Wheel became the novel Jason Edwards (1892). His drama of political scandal was turned into a second novel, A Member of the Third House. Both novels are bare disguises of the plays which anticipated them, but for an aspiring dramatist no drama disguised as a novel can yield the satisfaction of having a play in production. From this time on Garland began to dream of a repertory theater which would present serious drama for the American public. He had already encouraged the Hernes to produce their play Margaret Fleming themselves when no producer would undertake the venture, and had participated in an attempt to organize an independent theater in Boston. That the dream of a repertory theater remained with him as late as 1904 is attested by his novel of that year, The Light of the Star, in which the heroine triumphantly establishes the theater which he and the Hernes had failed to found.

The success of years of apprentice dramatic writing and the dream of a repertory theater must both have seemed very close to fulfillment for Garland in Madison on the night of January 29, 1909. Not only did he have a play on the boards for the first time, but "Miller of Boscobel" was being presented under the auspices of Donald Robertson, whose repertory theater made Middlewestern theater history and became the forerunner of the present Goodman Theater.<sup>6</sup> The Robertson company, based in Chicago, produced serious European drama both in Chicago and on tour in Iowa, northern Illinois and Wisconsin from 1907 to 1911. Robertson himself, a distinguished actor as well as a director and producer, played the lead in Garland's "Miller of Boscobel" and in the advance publicity received at least as much attention as the Garland play in which he was to appear. The newspapers, both in Madison and in Appleton, where the play was to be presented the night following its premier performance at Madison, attempted to prepare their readers for a realistic social drama. The Madison State Journal in the column "At the Playhouses" after explaining that "Miller of Boscobel" was a play of "labor and her people" went on to list specifically the "vital questions treated in the drama."<sup>7</sup> The Appleton Evening Crescent connected the play explicitly with the Single Tax movement.<sup>8</sup>

On January 30, the day after the performance in Madison, the State Journal published an account of an interview with Garland and Robertson and a review of the play. The interview is of interest chiefly because it reveals the soaring of Garland's dramatic ambitions immediately following the performance. Robertson was reported to have spoken enthusiastically of the play, after which he and Garland went on to outline a plan by which Garland would write further realistic dramas for the company which might,

in time, operate its own small repertory theater.<sup>9</sup> The review of "Miller of Boscobel" is surprising to a modern reader because it praises the play for what now seems sentimentality and criticizes it for Garland's not making his "meaning, his lesson, definite so that every theater goer would carry away with him the text of a lesson learned."<sup>10</sup>

The drama was presented at Appleton Saturday evening, January 30. Then, on February 3, came the Chicago test for which Garland had been waiting. The production was in Fullerton Hall at the Art Institute, and Garland wrote later, "It held the attention of the audience -- held them very still and tense to the end, and some of my friends were very much affected by it, but their interest proved nothing as to its acceptance by the general public."<sup>11</sup>

Burns Mantle, reviewing the play for the Chicago Tribune, agreed that the audience remained attentive and demonstrated in his review that he had readily grasped the author's intentions.

He wished to speak for organized labor and likewise edge in a word for the hungry non-unionist. He hoped to prove that there are honest labor leaders and rascals as well. He wanted to give capital a poke in its fat ribs but still indicate that beneath the fat and the ribs was a heart that could be reached without destructive blasting. And then to hold these preachments together he planned a poet's love story that should begin with a memory of sunlight on the river and end in a vision of great souls united.<sup>12</sup>

His chief criticisms of the play were that the dialogue was sometimes bookish, that it was overloaded with incident and that it tended to begin a new play with each act. He tempered his criticism, however, by pointing out that Fullerton Hall was not much more than a lecture platform, that several roles were played amateurishly and that it was unfair to pass judgment on a new play produced under those conditions.

The play as it appears in the manuscript (apparently typed by Garland himself) held by the University of Southern California<sup>13</sup> justifies many of Mantle's criticisms, though a modern reader or playgoer might feel that the play is structurally stronger than Burns Mantle implies. On the other hand, a modern reader is likely to be critical of the melodramatic ending which the critics apparently took for granted.

The manuscript version of the play is entitled "The Peacemaker" with a second tentative title, "The Business Lady," handwritten on the title page in addition to the also handwritten title "Miller of Boscobel" (or "Boskobell" as it was spelled in Chicago). Since the performances took place under the title "Miller of Boscobel" that seems to be the title Garland ultimately preferred.

The play is set in an unidentified industrial city with a suburb named Marvinsburg, the site of the Marvin mills, on the outskirts. It is clearly

intended to be a representative location for a labor play. The play opens with the rumor that "anarchist" Miller is in town to lead the labor movement in an impending strike to force recognition of an industry-wide labor organization, suggestive of the I.W.W. When the employers create the Employers Trust to counter the labor demands, Miller calls on Mrs. Warner, owner of the Warner mills, to beg her not to join the lockout planned by the Trust. They recognize each other as schoolmates who had once been in love in the idyllic atmosphere of Boscobel, Wisconsin. Miller has given up the ministry to become secretary of the Union Alliance. Mrs. Warner, moved by the plight of workers jobless at the beginning of winter, promises not to join the lockout although she is threatened with destruction by General Marvin if she opposes the Employers Trust. The act ends as she vows that even business can be run on Christian principles and that she will risk her fortune in the attempt to do so.

The second act, which takes place three months later, shows Mrs. Warner desperately trying to make jobs for men locked out of the other plants. True to his threats General Marvin has cut off many of her supplies and sales outlets through his influence with other manufacturers. Now Miller reappears with two unsavory labor leaders who are trying to wrest control of the Union Alliance from him. The union men demand that Mrs. Warner enforce a closed shop in her mills. She refuses, but confident of the loyalty of her workmen, permits the labor men to speak to her mill hands. The men respond to Miller's impassioned declaration that labor must stand together if it hopes for future dignity and walk out of the mill in a strike for a closed shop. Even Samuel Harding, the trusted mill hand who speaks for labor and who is identified in the playbill at Appleton as a "Henry George man," joins the strike. Mrs. Warner is left alone while the strikers march in the street to the tune of "John Brown's Body."

Thus far the play has moved with increasing momentum to the second act curtain, gaining considerable dramatic intensity in spite of its sometimes improbable dialogue. At the end of this act all of the positions recognized by Burns Mantle have been established and fairly well incorporated into the action of the drama. Mrs. Warner is true to the Christian humanitarian promptings which have been awakened in her by her renewed recollection of the young ministerial student of Boscobel, now Jay Miller the labor leader. Miller and the workman Harding have rejected the view that labor can rely on Christian charity, and embrace union strength as labor's chief hope for justice. Allen and Smart are as unscrupulously exploiting the workingmen in their union as General Marvin is determined to do in his mills. Dramatically this is the strongest act of the play and may tend to overemphasize Garland's pro-labor sympathy. Mrs. Warner's attempt to stem the tide of unemployment singlehanded seems increasingly unrealistic, not only to Miller and Harding, but to the reader.

The third act justifies, as the second act did not, Burns Mantle's comment that each act seemed to begin a new play. Too much has happened off stage in the intervening five days which must be narrated in the dialogue of the act. It appears that an attack on the Marvin mills is imminent; the National Guard has been called out; Miller has disappeared and is being sought by both the police and the National Guard; and General Marvin is angrily demanding more troops from the governor. Mrs. Warner comes to General Marvin's office, now the headquarters of the National Guard, to seek news of Miller. Miller is brought in together with Samuel Harding and his niece, at whose home Miller was discovered. He had been given knock-out drops, presumably by Smart and Allen, some days before and had been ill and out of action during the days when violence mounted. At this point a series of explosions, each nearer than the last, rocks the building. A young woman enters the office from the rear holding a roll of music from which smoke slowly curls. Harding and his niece recognize her as Sarah Schmidt, a quiet anarchist seamstress who rents a room in the niece's home. Sarah advances, announcing that she plans to blow up General Marvin, who stands terrified. Miller lunges at her and pushes her through the door just as the bomb explodes. He is killed, as she presumably is also, and the curtain falls.

At least that is as the manuscript play is written. However, there is reason to believe that in the actual production the ending was sentimentalized by allowing Miller to live and bring about some kind of capitulation from General Marvin. Unfortunately, the only actor's script I have discovered is that for the role of Joe Marvin, a minor part. It is from his part, together with the evidence of the reviews, that the deduction that the end was altered must be made. None of the reviewers uses the term "tragedy" or comments on Miller's violent end. The Burns Mantle review, indeed, speaks of a play which ends with a vision of "great souls united." Since this reference is clearly to Mrs. Warner and Miller, it implies that he survived the explosion.

In the Joe Marvin script, several short lines at the end have been crossed out but the final stage directions read "(as they clasp hands, Wood and the others cry) 'Bravo General.'" The General seems to capitulate to someone. It must be Wood, Mrs. Warner or Miller -- Miller is most likely.

Since the Marvin script elsewhere follows the manuscript of the play it would seem that only the very end of the play was altered for the performance. It is impossible from the evidence available to conclude whether the change was made by Garland, by Robertson in his capacity as director or by common consent of both. In any case the change did irreparable damage to the play although it provided the semblance of a happy ending. Miller died in the manuscript version a selfless Christian hero. He seems to have lived as a Horatio Alger hero. The striking laborers, too, are robbed of their stature when Garland permits an intransigent anti-union mill owner to

be converted in a moment. Actually, the end of the play, whether melodramatic or sentimental, begs all the legitimate questions about labor-capital relations which have been raised by the play. The third act was interlarded with speeches designed to prove that Miller, and Garland, supported only a national, American, non-violent labor movement not to be confused with the anarchical violence of foreigners. In this connection it is significant that Harding, the second pro-labor spokesman, is a veteran of the Civil War and his loyalty is therefore beyond question. Sarah Schmidt may serve in this context as a warning against foreign labor agitators, but she is otherwise irrelevant to the labor questions posed by the play. She is not "labor" as the term has been used throughout the drama and hence there is no vital dramatic connection between the conflict in which Miller is engaged and the explosion which ends the play.

If "Miller of Boscobel" is a call to labor to unite, it is also a warning to be wary of labor leadership. But it can be interpreted equally well as an admonition to capital to support the social gospel. Perhaps "Miller of Boscobel" is most important as a document of 1909 for what it does not say. It urges neither a workers' utopia nor capitalistic paternalism. The chief strengths of this play: Garland's earnest humanitarianism, his recognition of major social issues and his final literary rejection of any simple solution for the problems of labor, all stand as testimony to Garland's basic realism rather than to his skill as a dramatist.

Donald Pizer has said of Hamlin Garland, "At the close of 1895 there occurred a number of events which firmly established 1896 as the year ending his career as a Middle Border realist and beginning that as a Rocky Mountain romancer."<sup>14</sup> Most other critics assign a similar date to this change, although Lars Ahnebrink sees faint stirrings of realism in Garland's work as late as 1900. "Miller of Boscobel," however, is testimony that Garland, even though he abandoned the Middle Border after 1896, continued a realistic concern with American labor problems. Garland seems, in fact, to have employed the Homestead strike of 1892 as the basis for his labor play. Certainly the resemblances between the conduct of Henry Clay Frick, manager of the Homestead mills, and General Marvin of Marvinsburg go somewhat beyond the bounds of chance.

But Garland includes many elements common to the labor unrest of the day. The struggle for union leadership, the divisions into groups supporting craft unions as opposed to industry-wide unions, the antagonisms between native and foreign born workers, are all illustrated in the McKees Rock strike which took place in the summer after "Miller of Boscobel" was produced.<sup>15</sup> Miller's background as a minister is reminiscent of the more than 300 ministers who, during 1908, were members and leaders in the Socialist Party<sup>16</sup> and whose work ranged from mild preaching of the social gospel to actual participation in the labor movements of the day. The portrait of Miller may also have been colored by the character of Eugene Debs,

associated with the Pullman strike (1894) near Chicago and in 1909 both a socialist and a leader in organizing the I. W. W.

However, the history of the Homestead strike is probably responsible for the dramatically disastrous final act of "Miller of Boscobel." It can hardly be coincidence that shortly after the end of the strike Frick was shot, while sitting in his office, by a New York anarchist who played no part in the general strike. In view of such a parallel, together with Chicago's recollection of the Haymarket Riot, Garland and his audience may both have had a predisposition to accept Sarah Schmidt and her bomb more easily than a modern reader can do.

The evidence of Garland's continuing interest in the problems of labor not only demonstrates that his concern with realistic literature persisted until at least 1909, but also serves to make his support of the Single Tax more comprehensible. It has always been difficult to reconcile Garland's Single Tax activities with his experiences on the Middle Border and with the content of the novels and stories which seem designed as Single Tax arguments. As Samuel F. Hayes states, "Farm spokesmen had not been friendly toward the philosophy of Henry George that inspired many labor leaders; George's Single Tax, instead of reducing the tax burden, as rural reformers wished, would throw it exclusively on the owners real estate."<sup>17</sup> That Garland was aware of the potential hardship of the Single Tax upon American farmers is proved by his largely neglected article, "The Single Tax in Actual Application," in which, in the course of discussing the New Zealand tax system, he proposes that American farmers would need an exemption of \$750 or \$1000 from taxation designed to curb speculative landholding.<sup>18</sup>

Such facts, together with Garland's consistent failure to present his speculators as villains or to present situations which might reasonably have been alleviated by the Single Tax, suggest that Garland's commitment to Single Tax doctrine did not arise primarily from his Middle Border experience. It was in Boston, faced for the first time with the realities of poverty and the helplessness of labor, that Garland became a Single Tax convert. Thus, the production of "Miller of Boscobel," devoted to an examination of labor's need to organize to maintain the dignity of the workingman, suggests a closer reexamination of labor's position in three of Garland's earlier works: Under the Wheel, Jason Edwards and Hesper.

Under the Wheel is avowedly a Single Tax drama as Jason Edwards is a Single Tax novel. Their importance, however, lies not primarily in their advocacy of Henry George's panacea of poverty, but in their rejection of the American legend that a working man oppressed in the East had only to escape to the West to begin again as a free man. Jason Edwards, the chief figure of both the play and the novel, is a Boston laborer, living in a tenement, surrounded by other men who share his precarious life. He is caught between cuts in pay and ever-rising rents, haunted by the fear of illness and old age. In Jason Edwards other workmen prepare to strike against

their employers, but Edwards himself grasps at the legend of the American West, "The way out for so many before us -- I mean to go West and get free land and start again."

Edwards in both the play and the novel has several advantages for beginning a new life on the Great Plains. He and his wife were raised on farms; he obviously has enough money for the trip and down payment on the land he buys. His daughter Alice also provides some income by teaching. With all these advantages he fails. The Edwards family holds land speculators responsible for this failure, but it is at least equally due to the fact that middle-aged men habituated to factory jobs are unfitted for the hardships of the Great Plains. The hope of the workingman is to alter the mill towns, not desert them. Such a reading of Jason Edwards is at least partly supported by the fact that in 1872 the National Labor Union had argued that the public lands should "be granted no longer to business corporations but be reserved for settlers, perhaps workingmen seeking a new start in the west."<sup>19</sup> But for that matter resettlement schemes for workmen were commonplace of the nineteenth century labor movement.

In expanding Under the Wheel to produce Jason Edwards, Garland chose to expand the Eastern scene. The first half of the novel demonstrates both his shock upon facing Eastern tenement life and his outrage that men like Edwards should lead lives of virtual slavery. The warning that workers can no longer cherish the dream of new lives in the West remains unaltered, but the squalor of the city slum is so vivid it almost dissipates the force of Edwards' failure in Boomtown. Garland presents no evidence in Under the Wheel or Jason Edwards that the Single Tax would guarantee Eastern mill hands success as Great Plains farmers; he does imply that the Single Tax might make such migration unnecessary.

Garland's novel Hesper (1903) has been generally relegated by critics to the period when Garland had abandoned realism for romantic novels of the mountain West. The production of "Miller of Boscobel" in 1909 suggests that despite its romantic setting Hesper is primarily a labor novel. In the battle between the absentee mine owners and the working miners Garland's sympathies are clearly with the miners. However, his hero, Robert Raymond, is not a union man but the owner of a small independent mine. Like Mrs. Warner, Raymond is caught between the ruthlessness of other owners, whom he cannot in conscience join, and the miners' need to present a united front. The miners, like Mrs. Warner's mill hands, commit themselves to the cause of labor unity. Ultimately, Raymond preserves his own labor force by making the men part owners of the mine.

Thus an examination of Garland's works dealing with labor, from Under the Wheel through Jason Edwards to Hesper and "Miller of Boscobel," demonstrates a consistent sympathy with labor and a consistently less doctrinaire attitude toward the solution of its problems. If Jason Edwards and Under the Wheel advocate that labor remain at its post and work for the



Single Tax, Hesper merely suggests the solution of shared ownership. For one thing, Garland seems to have believed that shared ownership was possible only in small enterprises. In a surviving fragment from an earlier version of "Miller of Boscobel," Mrs. Warner tells Colonel Wood that she wishes to sell her holdings and establish smaller businesses in which the workers may have a share. Certainly, attractive as shared ownership may have seemed to Garland, he did not, in "Miller of Boscobel," offer any solution for labor's problems except the united and selfless dedication of workers to the task of forcing recognition from their employers.

Hamlin Garland's writing and production of the play "Miller of Boscobel" appears to mark a watershed in his career. After many apprentice efforts at playwriting he finally had a drama accepted and produced. The failure of this play marks the end of his serious concern with drama. Thereafter he continued to attend the theater and through the twenties his lecture tours included dramatic fragments and readings but he never again attempted to write a full-length play nor involved himself in the hazards of repertory theater. Second, "Miller of Boscobel" marks the high point of Garland's sympathy with the sweeping labor movements of his time. Although "Miller of Boscobel" is anticipated by Jason Edwards and Hesper, this drama is his most extended and concentrated examination of the conflicting philosophies and interests which produced such notable labor wars as the McKees Rock strike, the Homestead strike and the Pullman strike. After 1909 none of Garland's writing recurs to the subject of labor and, in fact, his later autobiographical volumes show an increasing sympathy with his capitalistic hosts.

Third, and perhaps most important for the historians of Garland's career, "Miller of Boscobel" offers evidence that Garland, after 1896 when the Middle Border had become history, made a genuine effort to find another subject suitable for realistic literary treatment. The failure of "Miller of Boscobel" may have been at least as strong an influence as the lure of the Rocky Mountains in determining Garland's subsequent turn to Western romance.

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Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Hamlin Garland, Companions on the Trail (New York, 1931), 405.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 405-406.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Pizer, Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), 1.

<sup>5</sup> James A. Herne, Shore Acres and Other Plays (New York, 1927), xxii.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas H. Dickinson, The Insurgent Theater (New York, 1917), 66.

<sup>7</sup> Madison State Journal, January 28, 1909.

<sup>8</sup> Appleton Evening Crescent, January 29, 1909.

<sup>9</sup> Madison State Journal, January 30, 1909.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Hamlin Garland, Companions on the Trail, 406.

<sup>12</sup> Burns Mantle, Review of "Miller of Boscobel," Chicago Tribune, February 4, 1909.

<sup>13</sup> I wish to acknowledge the courtesy of the library at the University of Southern California in making this manuscript available on microfilm.

<sup>14</sup> Pizer, 164.

<sup>15</sup> John M. Ingham, "A Strike in the Progressive Era: McKees Rock, 1909," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XC (July, 1966), 365.

<sup>16</sup> David A. Shannon, The Socialist Party of America (New York, 1955), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel F. Hayes, The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914 (Chicago, 1957), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Hamlin Garland, "The Single Tax in Actual Application," Arena, X (June, 1894), 56.

<sup>19</sup> Hayes, 33.