

HENRY CLAY DEAN'S "CORRESPONDENCE"
WITH HORACE GREELEY

BY JOHNSON BRIGHAM

There were epithet-slingers in those days. As great and good as was Horace Greeley, there were times when the philosopher and sage of the *Tribune* threw reason and philosophy to the winds, and seizing the readiest weapons of speech, hurled them at the opponents of his views with a scornful petulance which closed debate. Occasionally he found his match in invective—as in the case of Henry Clay Dean, of Iowa.

In Dean's "Crimes of the Civil War"¹ was a chapter² entitled "Correspondence between the author and Horace Greeley." The unconscious humor in the chapter heading lies in the fact that Dean's part of the correspondence covers more than eleven pages, while Greeley's part is only a brief note of five lines.

In October, 1867, Dean opened the one-sided "correspondence" by calling the *Tribune* editor to account for applying to the Greenbackers of that time the epithets "swindler," "villain," etc., and challenging him to a joint discussion of the question of paying the public debt in greenbacks.

Greeley addressed Dean, then at Mount Pleasant, Iowa, saying: "Should I ever consent to argue the propriety and policy of wholesale swindling, I shall take your proposal into consideration. I do not know where the cause of national villainy could find a fitter advocate than yourself."

Dean replied in a ten page letter, in which he indulged in much irony, more insinuations and a torrent of abuse, then at some length defended his position and concluded by renewing his challenge to a joint debate.

He acknowledged the "polite note" of September 8; was not surprised at the "courteous tone"; noted the "jewels of literature" hitherto "confined to the barroom and ball alley," but now "redeemed from their vulgar use," having been found to fit the author's thought and style.

¹"Crimes of the Civil War, and Curse of the Funding System," by Henry Clay Dean. A copy of this scarce book is in the Iowa Authors collection of the Historical Department.

²Chapter XI, pp. 242-53.

Dean then proceeded to charge Greeley and the "freebooters and highwaymen" of whom he is presumably the leader in villainy, with responsibility for "the burning of cities, the overthrow of states, the murder of the innocents," the despotism of capital and "the robbing of the poor" that the opulent may riot in luxury. Then follows an extended argument; this with a page of abuse in which he charges the editor with many crimes and affairs including the pocketing of "a thousand dollars as a gift of river contractors," and of withholding testimony incriminating himself. He did, however, credit Greeley with giving bail to relieve Jefferson Davis. He concluded with a renewal of his challenge.

It is needless to add that the veteran journalist had too much self-respect to respond to the challenge or to dignify the libels by noticing them.

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