

Burdette in American Humor

What is Burdette's role in American literature, and how does he fare today? Let us answer the former question first. But in so doing it is necessary to discuss his fellow "literary comedians" and bumper crop of cracker barrel philosophers who flourished roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth.

In 1867, when Burdette was teaching school near Peoria, Charles F. Browne, better known as Artemus Ward, died. Browne, a humorist and lecturer, was the first of the literary comedians to spread indigenous American humor to England. His "Artemus Ward's Sayings," originally run in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, were the record of imaginary adventures of an itinerant showman. Robert Burdette in all likelihood never saw Ward; but he did know most of the other funny men who roamed the country; for, indeed, he competed with them and they with him.

There was, for example, the celebrated Petroleum V. Nasby, another journeyman printer like Ward, whose real name was David R. Locke. Nasby won fame with his overdrawn Copperhead, whose atrocities in spelling and grammar closely resembled Ward's cacography. Lincoln is said to

have held up business of state as he read with delight the spattered English of Nasby extolling the Union cause.

Another exponent of autochthonous American wit in Burdette's day was the inimitable Josh Billings, christened Henry Wheeler Shaw. Two-and-three-line aphorisms were his forte — plain, pungent and earthy. For a time he had a teller of tall tales by the name of Melville D. Landon conducting his lecture tours. Then Landon, as Eli Perkins, went free wheeling on his own with marked success. To this list of traveling mirth-makers must also be added the lanky, bald-headed Edgar W. Nye, who as Bill Nye achieved great popularity, particularly in the Midwest. Nye teamed up with the poet Riley, and the twosome swept the country with their mellow wit. Yet read today, Nye's humor seems tepid, monotonous and very dated.

Here, then, was the world of Robert Burdette, a nation imbued with Jeffersonian democracy, still largely rural, where native wit and common "horse sense" were more to be desired than books and degrees. "Roaming Robert," like his fellow humorists, spoke for the common man. He was the product of his time, and his lectures and letters were tailored to his generation. In an era before the motion picture (to say nothing of the automobile, radio and television) the traveling lecturer coming to town was heralded like the premiere

showing of Cinerama and similar motion pictures in recent years.

Burdette was like most of his colleagues of the literary comedian school in that he was born in the East and later came to the Midwest. Furthermore, his success stemmed largely from appeal to folks beyond the Alleghenies. His wit, like that of his contemporaries, was unsophisticated if not naive, literate but not "literary," written for the period and not for posterity. All used the newspaper as a stepping-stone to fame on the road. Most of their writing was ephemeral. At best the bulk of their work was like the impression gained on a one way trip: it is new, amusing, fleeting. But rereading it smacks of returning over the same old route: it is apt to appear boring, tiresome and vapid.

There are other similarities. Their sense of place, other than the general American scene, was not pronounced. True, Burdette's columns had a strong Midwestern flavor; and, while Burlington is informally described, the setting is more or less incidental. Finally, none of the literary comedians used the integrated, organized planning found in the better novels nor could they hold the sustained interest required of a book-length story.

So much for characteristics in common. How did Burdette differ from his fellows? From his start in Iowa to his last years in California Robert Burdette wrote under his own name. Pseudo-

nyms were not for him. Nor did he willfully misspell words or revert to the grammatical gyrations of Artemus Ward and Petroleum V. Nasby. While occasionally resorting to epigrams and terse philosophical quips, he had little of Josh Billings adroitness for grinding out aphorisms. And whereas exaggeration was an important element of his wit, he left the telling of tall, preposterous tales to his friend Eli Perkins. There is, on the other hand, some resemblance between the stories of Burdette and those of Bill Nye; yet the former is usually bucolic and smacks of the village, whereas the latter tends more toward the town and city.

By and large, however, the literary comedians were all of a piece. None of them had the lasting qualities of, say, Mark Twain. To quote Petroleum V. Nasby: "Wat posterity will say, I don't know; neither do I care. . . . It's this generashen I'm going for." The same could be said for Robert Burdette.

As a matter of fact the dated, homespun, grass-roots waggery of "The Burlington Hawkeye Man" and his contemporaries had run its course. To be sure, there were descendants like Finley Peter Dunne's "Mr. Dooley," Ken Hubbard's Hoosier bumpkin "Abe Martin," and Will Rogers, with his "Oklahomely" wit. But they merely served as a transition between the earthy, cracker barrel philosopher of yesterday and the "modern"

wit compounded of less spit and more polish. There is a world of difference between "The Rise and Fall of the Mustache" and the urbane, sophisticated pages of *The New Yorker*. Nonetheless, Robert Jones Burdette spoke to the condition of his time as Clarence Day, Robert Benchley and James Thurber do to ours. The "funny little fellow" from the river-town of Burlington gave to Iowa and the nation a heritage of good humor; he made contemporary life on the farm and prairie happier, pleasanter and more endurable. Can more be said for the humorists of today?