

Journalistic Literature

In the year Iowa became a Territory, four pioneer editors in their respective Mississippi River towns were harriedly seeking to collect news, to elicit advertisements, and to secure payment for subscriptions. In spite of these engrossments, all four maintained the position that weekly papers ought to do more than encourage the immigration of "moral, industrious, and intelligent cultivators of the soil" into the new commonwealth. In addition to extolling the "boundless resources of Iowa" and furnishing their communities with local and national news, they weekly set aside from one to four columns for literary pieces leaning expressly toward "morality, edification, and relaxation".

In the words of one editor, the ideal paper "should possess a style of parity and taste" and "should breathe sentiments of the loftiest and purest morality." He furthermore felt that it lay wholly in the realm of good taste for a journal's essays and stories to be "grave and gay by turns", and on occasion to cause "the obtrusive tear to trickle down the sternest cheek" or to permit the "wrinkled brow of care to be made convulsive with the impulse of laughter."

This self-imposed duty of filling editorial, news, and literary columns with "wholesome, elegant, and moral" matter, the editors accepted seriously. The influence of William H. McGuffey upon literary taste in Iowa was as yet negligible, for he had just begun to publish his *Eclectic Readers*. The ideal of "laying a basis for good taste in reading" was better realized by the editors in the essays they selected than in the grave and gay fiction they printed.

Except for some minor instances, very few of the articles and stories represented original contributions to the Iowa journals. The majority were borrowed from eastern papers and from current English and American magazines. The essays varied in length from résumés of editorials in metropolitan papers to a long excerpt from a lecture on "The Political Necessity of Popular Education" delivered by Henry Ward Beecher before the mechanics of Cincinnati. The stories likewise either related briefly a humorous anecdote, or told a long, lugubrious story of a maiden who died of a broken heart. One such story, "He Will Come Tomorrow", lifted from *Blackwood's Magazine*, filled seven columns of the *Iowa News*.

Copyright was neither generally used nor respected. Editors everywhere borrowed whatever they wanted and often neglected to give credit to

authors and magazines. Indeed, anonymity had been encouraged by publishers. Such magazines as *The Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine* had but recently relinquished their habit of concealing the names of their contributors. Often in levying upon the columns of eastern and southern newspapers, Iowa editors had no way of knowing who wrote an admonitory article, "On Courtship", or the humorous portrayal of "The Adventures of a Bashful Man". In these pioneer papers, the editors acknowledged the sources of scarcely a third of their literary borrowings.

Where the authority was known it was often freely acknowledged. *Blackwood's Magazine*, for instance, is credited with an informative essay on "Irish Blunders"; *The Edinburgh Review* with Lord Brougham's "Character Sketch of George Canning", and *The Knickerbocker Magazine* with "The Blunderer", a story based on the question: do manners civilize? From this magazine too was borrowed a scientific article entitled, "The Gulf Stream, A New Theory", and from *The Southern Literary Messenger* a biographical sketch entitled "Roger Brook Taney", proclaiming Taney's fitness for the post of Chief Justice.

The current Annuals or Gift Books were freely pillaged for moral, romantic, and sentimental tales. From the *Ladies' Garland* the editor at Davenport

selected "The Last Herring". In this moral tale the widow of Pine Cottage and her five very ragged and very hungry children shared with a stranger the last bit of food in the house, a "smoking herring fresh from the hob". Shocked at the discrepancy between the bare board and the family needs, the stranger, breaking into sobs, revealed himself as the long lost son of the widow.

From a Bulwer-Lytton contribution in *The Amulet* was drawn a passage of polyphonic prose, dealing lyrically with a dazzling maiden brought into a tapestry-like setting with Eros and Bacchus in the foreground surrounded by a bevy of dancing nymphs and dryads. From *Bentley's Miscellany* came a terror story of "An Extraordinary Memoir of that Most Extraordinary Italian Archfiend, Mascalbruni", purporting to have come from the pen of Captain Medwin.

Less frequently editors drew upon books, fresh from the press, such as Irving's *Astoria*, Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, and Bulwer-Lytton's *Ernest Maltravers*. At least three travel essays were cut from J. L. Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia and Poland*, first printed in 1838. One of these vividly described the battle of Krakow. The greater proportion, as ascriptions indicate, were clipped from the *New York Mirror*, *New York Sun*, *Boston Post*, *Boston Ad-*

vocate, *Pittsburgh Visitor*, New Orleans *Picayune*, and the Saint Louis *Bulletin*. Often, however, credit was loosely given to a Boston, a Western, or a Scotch paper.

Gravity and gaiety, exalted and humdrum style, proverbs and puns, elbowed one another through the four pages of the *News*, *Sun*, *Gazette*, and *Patriot*. One week an editor might supply in a "Letter from Paris" an account of the dancing Bayaderes from India, who sometimes moving "to the sound of the castanet resembled animated suppleness". Just below he would insert a criticism of Henry Clay, or a philosophical consideration of "What is Life?", or reprint one of the *Essays of Elia*. The *Iowa Sun* in October, 1838, carried copious extracts from Emerson's "Oration on Bonaparte" delivered before the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College on July 24th.

In the essays, humor consisted largely of advice to the love-lorn or instructions for the bashful lover in the technique of courtship. In the stories, a humorous element was essayed by introducing into the conversation a few words imitative of German, French, or negro dialect. The effects were grotesque rather than convincing.

Very few of the authors of the short stories are still known. Among the almost forgotten names appear those of George D. Prentice, Miss Win-

chester, Miss M. Miles, C. F. Hoffman, William L. McClintock, and Mrs. Samuel Carter Hall. Rather strangely, Washington Irving, widely known at the time, was represented only by a sketch, "The Hunters of the Prairie, or the Hawk Chief", and by a descriptive account of Oregon taken from *Astoria*.

Two stories came from the pen of John Greenleaf Whittier who, unlike Irving, was just then coming into recognition. In the first of Whittier's stories, "The Bachelor's Dream", a crusty old bachelor was vividly impressed by a vision in which, in the realm of an icy-cold hell, he met the woman he had loved in his young manhood. Nothing except his heart and hers held any semblance of warmth. So haunted was he by the symbolism of the frigid realm and the futility of keeping an old sentiment alive that even though he had passed his fiftieth birthday, he not only resolved to marry but did so, and, of course, the ending implied that he lived happily ever after.

The other, "A Night Among Wolves", published in 1831 in Whittier's *Legends of New England*, vividly narrated a legendary tale which was climaxed with an incident of horror. A group of young men and women, returning from a New England quilting party, were overtaken by a pack of hungry wolves. To escape, the young people

had but one recourse — that of climbing a pine tree. Numbed with the cold they waited through the long hours of the night while below in the moonlight “the gaunt and attenuated wolves” filled the night with their howls. Suddenly, toward morning, a large branch snapped. The helpless onlookers watched Caroline Allen, who a few hours before had been the life of the gay party, plunge into the midst of the pack and, as the maddened wolves tore her to pieces, they saw the snow redden with her blood.

In the choice of essays, as space fillers or as leading articles, the editors generally selected moral, political, or philosophical themes. Very often an item treated as news in one number became a topic of reflective comment in a succeeding issue. Few biographical sketches of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Dolly Madison, or Henry Clay reached their final sentence without the author’s sermonesque comment upon the virtue of character or the vicissitudes of life.

The coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837 furnished the theme for two fairly long essays in the *Iowa Territorial Gazette*. As a means of extolling American democracy by satirizing monarchy, one writer ridiculed the English approval of monarchy and the retention of the outmoded tradition of employing the throne as a symbol of power. Cynic-

ally he showed that the nineteen-year-old girl, "thanks merely to the *glorious principles and privileges* of a monarchical government", through the demise of William IV and the accident of her own birth was only by chance born to be a queen. To the writer it seemed preposterous that through heritage any person might be

Deemed e'en from the cradle fit
To rule in politics as well as wit.

From a very different angle the author of the second essay, clipped from the *New York Star*, wrote sympathetically of the present and future responsibilities which the young and carefully reared Victoria faced. While he most sincerely hoped that the coming age of Victoria might be one of widening potentialities, he wondered whether the young girl on the British throne would develop into another Queen Mary, an Elizabeth, or an Anne. To this writer the coronation did not consist of medieval pageantry; he was concerned, almost pensively, with the responsibility which had fallen upon the young woman.

In the editorial selection of stories to be read by the light of tallow candles in pioneer cabins while hickory slabs crackled in open fireplaces, the editors exhibited a decided preference for wholly decorous stories. Had any one raised the objection that many of the stories failed to present life

realistically or face it squarely, these men probably would have resented the criticism. A few tales, generally very brief ones, were designedly pietistic, little apologues preaching generosity or honesty; a few others by detailing misery and squalor pictured the miseries that the drunken father brought to his home.

From one of the popular gift books, *The Violet*, one editor selected "The Cottage", a parable teaching the lesson that if one desires happiness in life he must disregard public opinion and live by his own decisions. A farmer wanted to paint his cottage grey to match the overhanging rocks. One well-wisher advised white paint, another black, but neither color proved serviceable or harmonious. He finally compromised by mixing black and white and found that they produced the original grey which he had intuitively felt made the cottage an integral part of its surroundings. The theme itself was probably old before Aesop clothed it with the story of the father, the son, and the ass. The author of "The Cottage" closed his lengthy apologue with these sententious words: "If then neither the council of our foes nor of our partial friends is safe to be taken we should cultivate a correct judgment which like the grey paint mixing both together may avoid the evil and secure the good."

Throughout these newspapers, legends dealing romantically with distant times and places and with themes of love and heroes occupied generous allotments of space. "Gertrude Vonder Wart or Faithful Unto Death" was a story of eleventh century Swabia. The husband, tortured for days and kept at the point of death, lay on a platform, his body bruised by the wrack. His wife dared hunger, thirst, cold, and threats against her life to remain on the wrack with her husband — truly faithful unto death. The tale of "Eustace de Santerre" retold a story dealing with the Crusades in twelfth century France, with mistaken identity as the motif; and "The Village Prize" recounted the long jump by which, with the assistance of General George Washington, Henry Carroll won his Virginia bride, Annetta.

"The Mountain of the Lovers" embodied the sentimentalism and romanticism which had dominated English literature for several decades. The caption gave a forecast of the theme. Pride of nobility ruled the baron, while love possessed the daughter and her yeoman lover. In ridicule of the lover's presumption, the cruel father promised his daughter to his low-born neighbor if the latter would carry her to the summit of a high mountain. The peasantry assembled. Eyes measured the ascent and heads were shaken. On horseback the

father rode to watch the feat. The lady stood nearby "pale, desirous, and dreading". The lover was resolute, and even eager for the contest, for "if he died for it, he should at least have had her in his arms and looked into her face." He began the ascent.

Throughout the tale the peasants supplied the note of sympathy. Whenever he hesitated the women burst into tears and the men shouted their encouragement. If he staggered "the multitude made a movement as if it would assist him." At the final moment of achievement, the father, still angry, sullenly spurred his horse and shouted that his attendants should separate the lovers who had collapsed at the summit. An old counsellor who had watched the agonizing climb leaned over the lovers but made no move to separate them. Instead "he turned his old face, streaming with tears, up to the baron," crying, "Sir, they are dead."

However much an editor might approve of fiction which "caused the obtrusive tear to trickle down the face", he must have realized that such a story as "Tears and Smiles" satirized the absurdities of current fiction. By combining melodramatic language with the machinery of the epic, the author so drenched his story with tears that it provoked smiles. Betrothed in her cradle to John

Draguignor, June Falaise at the age of sixteen awaited word that John would presently come to claim his bride. When the expected message was found to contain a laundry list of male attire, June died in a swoon and her father lost his mind.

Perhaps the Iowa editor who reprinted this story had some vague realization that such nonsense ought to mark the end of a literary era. Nearly two decades earlier Thomas Love Peacock had ridiculed the clap-trap of the romantic novels and sentimental tales in *Nightmare Abbey* and *Headlong Hall*. After a hundred years it is difficult to know whether the Iowa pioneers enjoyed the absurd sentimentality or the broad satire in such literary rubbish.

For including in their papers at Dubuque, Davenport, Burlington, and Fort Madison essays and stories calculated to provide an imaginary relief from the hardships of primitive life on the frontier, Editors Russell, Logan, Clarke, and Edwards may have had considerable justification. Through fictitious suffering, pioneer readers could vicariously escape from their own cold cabins, dreary work, and snow-blocked roads. Though the editors' taste may have been faulty, they reflected the standards of the time and showed some concern for cultural attainments.

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