

Verse in the Newspapers

When the Territory of Wisconsin was divided in 1838, three newspapers west of the Mississippi River were supplying their pioneer subscribers in the new Territory of Iowa with information about political affairs, publishing new laws, advertising local business, and printing anecdotes, short stories, and poetry.

At Dubuque the *Iowa News*, founded and partly owned by John King until June, 1838, was edited by John B. Russell. The *Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* was owned and managed by James Clarke, who was also the Territorial Librarian. While he was absent on business his former partner, C. S. Jacobs, edited the paper. James G. Edwards, a staunch Presbyterian, Whig, and temperance advocate, gave a moral tone to his Fort Madison *Patriot*. In August, about the time the *Patriot* suspended publication, Andrew Logan started the *Iowa Sun* at Davenport.

Not content to fill their four pages with current news and official records, the editors tried to provide a modicum of cultural reading. From week to week with considerable uniformity they devoted

three or more columns to glimpses into the world of letters. Following the practice of Eastern papers, the editors made their selections mainly from journalistic sources, and from current periodicals such as *The Knickerbocker* and the *United States Magazine*. During 1838 they included some of the early tales of Whittier, of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and selections from Dickens and Bulwer Lytton. Occasionally a local contribution was printed.

Verse was seldom crowded out by advertising or the publication of the statutes. As a rule one, two, or three poems headed the weekly literary departments. A century ago Editors Russell, Clarke, Edwards, and Logan included proportionately much more poetry than is now customary. Even though the new Territorial acts constituted a heavy lien on print space, the editors published over 125 poems in 1838. In choosing verse, they apparently employed the clipping shears, utilized their own library shelves, accepted contributions, or turned to miscellanies or anthologies such as the *English Annuals* or the elaborately bound *Gift Books*, then at the height of their popularity.

To approximately half the poems selected, the name of the author was affixed, or that of the newspaper or magazine from which the verses were retrieved. After a century, very few of these

poets still hold their places in English and American anthologies. The *Iowa News* reprinted William Cullen Bryant's "The Lapse of Time", Harriet Beecher Stowe's "To My Brother", and Samuel Woodworth's "The Old Oaken Bucket". The *Gazette* included "The Sky Lark" by James Hogg and "To a Blank Sheet of Paper" by Oliver Wendell Holmes.

In filling the literary columns the editors leaned heavily upon ephemeral versifiers, who, though popular in their day, now seem to have been strangely over-rated, such as Caroline Lee Hentz, the novelist-poet from Alabama; Joanna Baillie, poetaster and dramatist; Epes Sargent of Boston; Nathaniel Parker Willis, first editor of the *National Magazine*; Mrs. Lydia Huntley Sigourney, editor of religious Gift Books and frequently eulogized as "the American Felicia Hemans"; and Amelia Opie who, like Mrs. Sigourney, facile in many literary fields, produced more voluminously than artistically.

The resources of the editors are, however, more easily discernible than the motives for their choices. Judging by the amount of space regularly devoted to verse, it was not used as mere filler, but as a leavening and humanizing influence among the necessary hardships and unstable conditions of life on the frontier. The four editors,

working independently, supplied their patrons with much the same literary pabulum: prairie and agricultural songs, and poems which treated nature romantically; poems dealing with the problems of life; some on local themes; and a few idealizing the Indians.

Poems of sentiment predominated. These stressed motherhood, and the ways of a man with a maid. Parodies were favored, such as "To a Mink" which, with its short lines and rhythm both in stanzaic form and in the sermonic ending, imitated Burns's "To a Mouse".

Humor received its full share of space. Early in 1838 Editor Russell at Dubuque reprinted Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Height of the Ridiculous", and in a later issue he published some verses which had been sung a few months before at a Democratic dinner in New Orleans to the rollicking tune of "Yankee Doodle".

Shall corporations rule the soil
 That WASHINGTON defended?
 Shall honest people sweat and toil,
 And have their rights suspended?
 Shall we be slaves, to pampered Knaves?
 Shall Banks be still our masters?
 Whilst all they pay, from day to day,
 Is nothing but shimplasters.

So far as verse form is concerned the Iowa edi-

tors selected as eclectically as they had their subject-matter. Most popular was the four-line stanza, sometimes the ballad meter but just as often the quatrain with longer lines. Rarest of all was blank verse. The backwash of English Romanticism, with its emphasis upon individuality and freedom, had inspired experimentation with verse forms among American imitators. One versifier, signing himself "Agricola", justified his free verse — or polyphonic prose — by maintaining that truth can be expressed in any medium. He thought his message, "Farmers, Preserve the Feathered Tribe", was of far greater importance than his handling of meters. Incidentally he seems to be right.

Though you may think my verse runs queerly;
A very singular sort;—
Long pulls and short,—
Somewhat like plowing new ground, 'midst the stumps,
Now steady moving,—now by jerks and jumps,
Perhaps they'll say my muse
Wears tight shoes,
Or has great "corns upon her toes,"
And so she limping goes.

In literary quality the poems show wide variety, ranging from absolute bathos through sentiment to basic emotions. Though occasionally the editorial shears may have clipped at random, most

of the poems were lyrical. They ranked higher in singing quality than in either emotion or thought.

A number of the poems idealized the "smoky silent red man". With Indians almost in the backyards of the settlers, with bloody massacres in the recent memory of many villagers, with Indians unceremoniously entering log cabins to demand food, it seems strange that frontier editors should select only poems that exalted or extolled the Indian. All but one of the Indian poems, however, were written by poets who had never peered into an Indian wickiup and smelt its rancid odors or lived through a night of terror when drunken Sauks or Sioux threatened isolated settlers.

Several poems in the Iowa newspapers of 1838 represented the Indian with an aura of sadness and pathos about him. In "The Suicide Chief", an erstwhile leader sits "silent and lone on the cliff" as he muses over the fate of his vanquished warriors and the loss of his wife Orella. At the end of his reverie he decides to do and die nobly. As he poises, ready to make the fatal plunge into the dark chasm yawning below, he cries:

And why should I live! All my kindred are slain;

And the white man ploughs rudely o'er Orella's tomb—
No! I am a *chief*, and my life I disdain!

Ye shades of my lost ones! I come, yes I come!

Less tragically but fully as dramatically the warrior chief in "The Indian's Farewell" scorns the civilization which inconsiderately forces him to abandon the land of his youth. Standing in high relief against the sky, he too grieves over the devastation of his villages and sacred burial grounds through which the white man, paying no heed to disinterred bones, ruthlessly drives the plowshare. This brave has no thought of ending all by suicide. Indomitably setting his face westward "to wilds untamed", he shouts:

The white man's home is for the slave,
The red man's for the free.

More numerous than the poems idealizing the Indian were those whose dominant note was nostalgic, expressive of a yearning for former friends or past experiences. Even the hope of cheap lands or the optimistic desire of ultimately building a better economic and social commonwealth could never fully compensate for such a loss. A young man, for instance, recalled the fields and rocks and trees which had witnessed his "boyhood's thoughtless glee". One young woman yearned for "the shining stream" near "Susquehanna's tide" in place of the "unvaried plain" even though her neighbors assured her that the prairies teemed with promises of filling "Ceres' cornucopias" with

wealth. Others pensively longed to revisit family graves, or homesteads, or churches.

So impressed was James Clarke with a poem entitled "Home" that, in an editorial note, he called especial attention to its underlying theme, that of the oriental benediction "May you die among your kindred". The poem, he wrote, should strike a responsive note in all those who fear "the awful hour" when they come "to die among strangers, in a strange land, with no fond familiar voice to soothe the dull ear of death".

Still—still with memory oft beguile
From each, from all, a thought of *home*.
'Twas there our sun of being rose,
And there we fain would have it set.

Another type of poem reflected a phase of editorial interest in the life of the pioneer Mississippi River towns. Among the most thriving businesses was the traffic in liquor. Steamboats delivered big cargoes of whisky, wine, rum, gin, and other spirituous beverages. Numerous taverns and "groceries" sold their intoxicating wares without restriction.

Editor James G. Edwards, who was convinced that saloons were a detrimental influence in the new Territory, gave a prominent place in one issue of the *Patriot* to "The Wine and Spirit Drinker". He ascribed its authorship to Christopher Caustic,

a physician, and author of *The Terrible Tract-
orum and Other Poems*. In this poem the cynic,
employing the mocking octosyllabic couplets of
Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, assumed the rôle of a
doctor viewing human foibles. Satirically he be-
gan:

We hold in utter execration
What's styled the *Temperance Reformation*,
To live without good alcohol
Is tantamount to fol-de-rol:
For nine-tenths of our doctor's fees
Come from Bacchanalian devotees
And votaries of Sir Richard Rum
Have ever, and will ever come.

With ironical overpraise he shows that alcoholism

Is indispensable now-a-days
To make our patriotism blaze.

contending that without it "stump oratory" would
fail, and that the lower orders

Might rise to riches and renown,
And turn society upside down.

And perhaps

The mounting mobocratic masses
May over-top US UPPER CLASSES.

He adds

There's nothing like intoxication
To thin off extra population,

and closes with a hypothetical interrogation:

By your good leave, I question whether,
War, famine, pestilence, together,
Could fill, of alcohol the place;
In doctoring off the human race.

The new Territory of Iowa possessed a few local poets. In versifying power their contributions varied about as much as those selected from journalistic sources. A few were execrably bad, written in uncertain meter, with confused thought or an excess of sentimentality, but others possessed some poetic merit. One of the better ones commemorated the passing of old Fort Armstrong on Rock Island. The Indians revered this spot, especially the cave that sheltered a good spirit, and Americans cherished it as an early outpost of civilization. In the last lines the poet, regretfully mindful that the Fort had compelled the Indian to move westward, bade farewell to the cave and its sacred spirit, and to the soldier graves!

Just so, gallant Fort, has thy bright glory pass'd,
Thy beauty departed, thy vigor is o'er,
The first on thy wild shore now leaves thee the last,
And the war chief who rais'd thee, shall guard thee no
more.

Then farewell to Fort Armstrong, a tear for the dead,
A smile for the living, a hope towards the Sioux;
A sigh for the plum'd chief, in mantle of red,
And a blush for my country—and a deep blush for you.

The longest of the local contributions, printed in the *Burlington Gazette*, was signed with the sobriquet "Deacon Kurtz". Editor Clarke did not reveal the poet's identity beyond saying that he had written considerable unpublished verse, and that in 1837 he had delivered a dedicatory address at the opening of the Saint Louis Theatre. Perhaps the "Deacon" was Clarke himself. Whoever he was, he had learned his diction from the classics. One poem, built on the theme of the transitoriness of life, was called "Fuit Ilium". In another, he translated rather freely the famous song of Catullus extolling the love of Lesbia for her sparrow; and in imitation of Anacreontic style he retold the story of the desertion of Hebe by the fickle Adonis. In the last stanza the disappointed Hebe thus warns unwary virgins:

"O'er me," cried the desolate fair,
"The storm with its gloomy wing hovers,
"Ah! ever let maidens beware,
"Aye, beware of these *sun-shiney* lovers."

A Burlington citizen who called himself "Hawkeye" submitted to Clarke's literary columns a "Prairie Song", set to the music of "Bonnetts O' Blue". While its theme suggests local color, its diction followed closely that of the contemporary poets of the English countryside. In spite of its imitative qualities it possessed

melody and tried to interpret the beauty of the native scene.

Oh! come to the prairie with me,
And list to the lark's early lay;
Where the elk and the deer wander free—
Oh! come to the prairie, away.

There's health in the ruby deck'd rill,
And pure is the breeze we inhale,
The bee sweetly sips at its will,
Whilst odors expand on the gale.

Though the verse chosen by these frontier editors was often commonplace and never rose to high poetic levels, it was about on a par with the magazine and newspaper contributions which were then finding their way into English Annuals and into the popular Gift Books of the day. Wholly decorous, often moralistic, and occasionally didactic in tone, the verse and prose selected for the first Iowa papers by Clarke, Russell, Edwards, and Logan indicates that in their opinion editorial responsibilities extended to the broadening of the mental and moral horizons of their readers.

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