

ROCHESTER HISTORY

Edited by BLAKE MCKELVEY, *City Historian*

VOL. XIII

JANUARY, 1951

NO. 1

Some Aspects of Rochester Journalism In the 1890's

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Newspapers perform for their community the service of chronicling and commenting upon what happens around them. In doing this newspapers reveal not only the quality of their fact-gathering machinery, but all those attributes of personality and temperament which determine a journal's outlook and give it a distinctive character. It is the personality aspect of Rochester journalism which will concern us here; our discussion will be entirely of newspaper attitudes and ideas—political, cultural, and social. Such matters as news gathering facilities, printing equipment, personnel, size of circulation, etc., interesting as they are, will be dealt with, when at all, only incidentally.

In 1890 the Rochester community was served by five daily English-language newspapers. These were the net result of a complicated series of mergings and schisms which had taken place among journals all during Rochester's growth from village to city. The natural consequence of the shifts and rearrangements was a certain heterogeneity of point of view; but there was also to be found, in several respects, a basic homogeneity which stemmed from generally prevailing attitudes toward certain social phenomena and from journalistic practices common to the time.

Politics

The five journals were of quite different political complexion. The Republican *Democrat and Chronicle** and the Democratic *Union and*

ROCHESTER HISTORY, published quarterly by the Rochester Public Library, distributed free at the Library, by mail 25 cents per year. Address correspondence to the City Historian, Rochester Public Library, 115 South Avenue, Rochester 4, N. Y.

*Advertiser** were 'regular' in their political conduct; the Republican *Post-Express** was independent of party dictation for about half of the decade and the *Morning Herald* for most of it; the kaleidoscopic *Rochester Times* was by turns or simultaneously, Republican, Populist, Prohibitionist, or coquetting with the Democrats, but always with a peppery bias in favor of the common man.

Of the two political 'regulars' among Rochester journals, the *D&C* manifested more notably the qualities which frequently attend uncritical party allegiance. Though the paper absorbed many journals in its evolution from weekly to daily, it always remained undeviatingly Republican. The 'Democrat' in its title connoted democrat with a small 'd' and referred merely to its early anti-Masonic and anti-aristocratic tradition. In all matters involving party policy and party personnel it expressed itself with partisan vehemence, inevitably finding humaneness, rationality, and sound sense on the side of the Republicans and dishonesty, stupidity, improvidence and irresponsibility on the side of the Democrats.

Though in party fidelity the *U&A* maintained a similarly unbroken record through many changes of ownership, it did not assume that virtue and truth resided automatically where its loyalties lay. With the emergence of each new political issue, the *U&A* evaluated quite candidly the position taken by the Democratic party and used vigorously the privilege of dissent, though it regarded a break from party as unthinkable. The firmness of its loyalty was put to the test by the circumstances of the campaign of 1896 when the question of bimetallism and the personality of William Jennings Bryan were at issue. The *U&A* disagreed with its party and argued hotly against almost all the planks in the platform as they took shape in the tumultuous national Democratic convention. The editors watched with consternation as the free-silver advocates got the upper hand, and expressed constantly increasing distaste for Bryan, the candidate whose proposed currency innovations seemed to promise complete ruin to the country. Yet the *U&A* did not bolt from the party. When it became clear that a fight to alter the currency planks of the party was hopeless, the editors directed their combative energies against the current forms of basic Republicanism (apart from monometallism)—protective tariffs, trusts, and "all manner of atrocious class legislation"—and maintained an unhappy silence about the activities of their own party.

*Hereinafter these papers will be cited as *D&C*, *U&A*, and *PE* respectively.

No problems of disagreement with party agitated the *D&C*. In 1896 it took up with pugnacity the defense and promulgation of the Republican side of the currency argument. Its technique consisted largely in abuse of the Democratic party and sneers at Bryan and his followers. Berating and taunting was a procedure applied also to the tariff question, an issue in the campaigns of '92 and '96, though on this subject the *D&C* employed, in addition, the more rational devices of long, argumentative editorials and full reports of speeches made by high-tariff exponents on the stump all over the country. Arguments of this sort were soberly answered point for point in characteristic fashion by the conscientious *U&A*, which, on the tariff question, was entirely in accord with its party's principles.

The politically independent *PE* showed at times a detachment that verged on apathy. Although the paper was nominally Republican, its editors, men of marked talent and a strong sense of social responsibility, were not concerned with party aggrandizement and did not deal with issues on the basis of party sponsorship. They acquiesced gracefully to the Republican defeat at the polls in 1892, stood ready to praise the Democrats for what they might achieve, and urged their fellow-Republicans to allow the victorious Democrats to test unhindered the validity of low-tariff principles. The same 'sweet reasonableness' was shown by the *PE* on the subject of the then much discussed single-tax plan of Henry George. "There is neither a right nor a wrong," it said, "in public or private ownership of land. It is a matter of social arrangement; and either system may be adopted as the conditions of civilization seem to be best served by either."* The idyllic character of this journalistic situation was emphasized by the complete congeniality with which Joseph O'Connor, a man of Democratic background and conviction, was able to serve as editor-in-chief. But the picture changed abruptly about the middle of the decade when the Republican leader, George W. Aldridge, acquired a behind-the-scenes control of the paper. Then partisan politics became paramount, Mr. O'Connor resigned, and the character of the paper was transformed. Editorials altered in tone, in pace, in volume, in dignity. From the one or two charming, leisured, judiciously-worded editorials of political commentary of the early nineties the paper evolved, by August of 1896, an editorial page in which as many as six out of seven columns were shrill examples of standard campaign invective.

**PE*, Dec. 16, 1892.

Bryan became a "ranting," "crazy boy," and the Democrats, once the respected members of a trusted opposition, were now "dangerous and disintegrating elements of society." Even in an "off" year like '97, the editorial pages at election time were personal and acrimonious; and in the same year the editors took the occasion of Henry George's death to pronounce his single-tax plan "particularly attractive to the uncultivated mind."

The independent *Morning Herald* showed a more active interest in politics than the *PE* in the years of its independence, but it had nevertheless a similarly fair-minded and undogmatic approach which it acquired by inheritance; for the paper was launched by one of the gifted editors of the (then *Evening*) *Express* who operated it on a plane of enlightened and progressive Republicanism until 1892. New owners and a new editor* then took over to make of the journal a "clean," "tireless," "progressive champion" of Democratic principles, a political *volte face* which affected in no way the open-mindedness of the paper, even when it changed hands again a few years later. The journal's position on the tariff issue illustrates this. The *Herald* during its Republican phase supported the protectionist principle in the McKinley tariff, though not uncritically, pointing unequivocally to certain disadvantages inseparable from high tariffs. These disadvantages were naturally stressed when the paper turned Democratic and urged tariff reductions, but the editors did not cease to inquire impartially into the wage and price effects of tariffs and did not close their eyes to the gratifying yield of governmental revenue from "vicious" tariff levies.

The *Herald* was partisan enough however, to stand ready to expose and to relish, with decorum, any weakening or inconsistency in Republican doctrine. It enjoyed pointing out contradictions in the Republican position on silver as between 1890 and 1896 and as between the national and international applications of their principle. Republican discrepancies were stressed because the *Herald*, like the *U&A*, was at variance with the Democratic party on currency and the personality of Bryan, and could manifest no enthusiasm for the positive aspects of the campaign. The *Herald*, however, ultimately made complete obeisance to party harmony, beginning with a grudging admiration for Bryan's astuteness in debate and at length presenting, though cautiously and reservedly, the standard

*Erickson Perkins, principal owner; J. B. Howe of Utica, chief editor.

free silver arguments. This the professedly 'regular' *U&A* was unable to do.

Though the *Herald's* repugnance to currency manipulation was based largely on its desire to keep the value of the American dollar inviolate, the underlying question was governmental paternalism, about which the *Herald*, when it became Democratic, was indignantly articulate. Like other Democrats of the period the *Herald* made loud outcry at what it called the demoralizing consequences of government aid to business in the form of subsidies, grants, and markets. The editors held that this sort of Republican interference in the national economy had undermined the nation's stamina, fostered socialism and anarchism, and was responsible for all the economic and social ills of the preceding thirty years.

The youngest of the five daily journals was the *Times* founded in 1887 (as against 1826 for the *U&A*, 1828 for the *D&C*, 1859 for the *PE*, and 1879 for the *Morning Herald*). It experienced many changes of ownership, numerous changes of policy (even within a single regime) and battled desperately to maintain itself. Vacillation was an outstanding characteristic of its violent editorials which must have been a source of considerable perplexity to readers who remained faithful to the paper. This paper had, for example, in the campaign of 1892, a brief and spotty anti-protectionist phase while supporting Cleveland for the presidency. It mustered solid arguments for the low tariff position and lamented the devastations wrought by high tariffs on the standards of health and comfort of the working man. But during this same campaign the *Times* became vehemently high tariff when, a few days before the election, it announced its support of the Republican Congressional candidate, John Van Voorhis. The paper's tariff opinions were again altered in 1898 when it found that as prices were going up wages were going down; it then called the Dingley tariff a "monumental example of Republican folly."

The *Times* went through further political gyrations in the course of this ten-year period. When anti-protectionist, it expostulated with Rochester labor to ally itself with trade unions in order to foster, frankly, its class interests; when electioneering for a Republican congressman, it enlarged on the benefits of capitalism and admonished workers to subordinate their interests to those of Rochester, Monroe County, and the nation. Within this same campaign period, the editors, noting the growing strength of the young Populist party, began to veer in that direction.

Further, this little journal in 1892 expressed scorn for people who set up a howl when "forsooth, a little amber was on tap;" but in 1898 it was writing indignant editorials against saloons, was rebuking Mrs. McKinley, the first lady of the land, for the use of wine at her table and was calling for complete prohibition of the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. Also, this paper, in the early years of the decade, had boundless admiration for George W. Aldridge and his management of party business. By 1896, when his power was waning, the *Times* became volubly hostile. It began to describe the once-admired Aldridge techniques as "shrewd machinations" and his one-party rule as the cause of Rochester's notoriously bad government; and in 1899, when Aldridge seemed to be finished politically, the *Times* jeered at him for being a "was."

There was one point of view, however, which the *Times* maintained with some consistency during these years—a belief in the basic importance of matters economic, not only in the political arena, but in the individual happiness of citizens. For example, this journal, when most of its colleagues were preoccupied with the Cuban trouble, persisted in reporting and discussing at length the New England mill strikes and their accompanying economic disturbances. It hammered away repeatedly at the evils of trusts and during these feverish war days quite serenely analyzed the advantages of municipal ownership of utilities. At the same time, like the *New York Journal* which it emulated in some respects, it ranted loudly against wealth *per se*, blaming Wall Street both for holding off from war and later for prolonging it for profit. A specific economic doctrine to which the *Times* remained faithful in its way was the Populist currency principle of bimetallism. About this the *Times*, though strangely non-committal during the '96 campaign when the fate of the principle was being decided, later became quite evangelical. Just after free silver was repudiated at the polls and for most of the rest of the decade the *Times* argued and proselytized earnestly for this lost cause.

The Cuban War and Yellow Journalism

Tariffs and free silver were issues about which feelings ran high in the nineties, but it remained for the Cuban insurrection to stir up in the press the mightiest rages, the most fervent patriotisms and the most spectacular changes in journalistic custom. The Cuban question came to involve many fundamental matters of international conduct in which

newspapers were naturally interested, but the situation made crucial also at this time the role of newspapers in a community, their duties to it and to one another.

Students of this period in American history have held that the Spanish-American War was wholly the creation of certain metropolitan newspapers (beginning with those of Hearst and Pulitzer of New York) which were conducting a bitter circulation feud and were stopping at nothing. It is alleged that through lurid stories of supposed Spanish atrocities in Cuba and through persistent jingoistic propaganda the seventy-five-year-old Cuban uprising was whipped into a fresh issue and a *casus belli*.

Of the Rochester daily papers, the *D&C* and the *Herald* showed the earliest concern with Cuba. The other journals were preoccupied with their characteristic pursuits—the *PE* with cultural, the *U&A* and the *Times* with economic matters. The *U&A* persisted longest in a faith in the possibility of peace and gave up only when hostilities began. Even after the formal declaration of war it evinced no enthusiasm for the undertaking. The editors stressed whatever humanitarian motives there were to be found in our involvement and, though not above “the common plebeian feeling of patriotism,” they took every opportunity to inveigh against the growing imperialism of the country.

The *PE* started with editorials deploring precipitate accusations against Spain, but its news reports, in common with those of some other journals at this time, reflected and contributed to the growing panic of the public. Though the *PE* did not have recourse to the “scare headlines” of the sensational press, it did emphasize crises and imply Spanish treachery in the *Maine* explosion long before official investigations were completed. Soon the editorials began to conform to the sentiments embodied in the news columns, and more than a month before hostilities were declared the *PE* was ready for war. The extent of its conversion can be gauged not only by the sabre-rattling in its editorials, but by the kind of ‘patriotic’ jingles it was occasionally moved to print. A portion of one follows:

“Shall we chew the peaceful cud
While the *Maine* lies in the mud?
Shoulder your rifle, bud!
Blood! Blood!
Oh, stars and skies bestud,

Keep watch over the Maine in the mud,
Till revenged in a crimson flood
Of blood—of blood!"*

The *Herald*, though anti-imperialist and opposed to territorial acquisition, exhibited quite early an anxiety over the potential dangers to the United States in the Cuban situation. It stressed the sufferings of the native population, expressed impatience at McKinley's caution, and entertained without distaste thoughts of war. There was neither shrillness nor hysteria in the *Herald's* editorials, yet its news columns failed to show a desirable degree of responsibility, and occasional banner headlines made more than mere suggestions of Spanish guilt before official confirmation.

In this practice the *Herald* was surpassed by its competitor in the field of morning publication. The *D&C*, before the middle of January, was printing early morning extras with huge headlines that had the United States in the midst of war many times before hostilities began. Its news stories, based on reports from the *New York Journal's* Washington correspondent asserted the inevitability of war even before the *Maine* disaster. Harrowing accounts of Spanish brutalities made obvious efforts to tug at American heartstrings. The exultant cry, "Let the Eagle Scream Now," to which the *D&C* was stirred by the American victory at Manila, was in keeping not only with the paper's frenzied belligerence but with the habitually noisy emotionalism of its modes of expression. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the *D&C* demanding "a strong and sensible Americanism" of the type which clamored for annexation and emphasized the commercial advantages of territorial conquest.

But all the Rochester newspapers were outdone by the choleric and importunate *Times* when it ultimately turned its attention to the subject of Cuba. Although the *Maine* explosion was, in the editor's view, no cause for war and war talk was declared editorially to be unwise and inopportune, the *Times* news pages were inflammatory and bellicose. Headlines catapulted the United States almost over the edge of war as early as February when official policy was undecided and obscure. Incendiary despatches from Hearst's *New York Journal* and Pulitzer's *New York World*, though sometimes mutually contradictory, were printed side by side on the front page. Double-column headlines in large, heavy type shrieked, "Drench the Country with Blood if Necessary," "Free the

**PE*, April 28, 1898.

Cubans at Any Cost." In spite of many protestations of anti-imperialism, this little journal in violence, incoherence, and lurid format mimicked, albeit on a small scale, the notorious practices of the sensationalist press.

Another aspect of sensationalism in the Rochester press toward the end of the decade was a development from earlier years. Newspapers showed a fascinated absorption in the harrowing aspects of catastrophes, accidents, assaults, and suicides. In reports of mass disasters, even some of the better journals, dignified and designed for family reading, were fairly explicit about the mutilation of victims and the blood spilled. There seemed to be no queasiness over descriptions of mangled or severed parts of bodies found at the scenes of accidents, and when entrails were identifiable they were usually named and their disposition over the landscape specified. Expressions like "crushed to a jelly" or "hanging by a shred of flesh" occurred frequently. The *D&C* indulged to the full its relish of stories of calamity. It supplied more gruesome details than any other Rochester journal, even the *Times*, which could not afford the space. The *Times*, which made an obvious bid for popular attention, compensated for this by out-doing all its colleagues in the sensationalism of its format, especially in the later years of the decade. It would consistently magnify obscure episodes if they involved crime, sex scandal or misfortune, and would assail the senses of their readers with front-page headlines in huge black type, three quarters of an inch or an inch high. Items about murders in the Rochester area were printed with descriptive captions and subcaptions so explicit as to make text unnecessary, as the following examples illustrate:

BUTCHERED
BODY FOUND ON A MURDERER'S GRAVE
'T WAS DISMEMBERED
AND PLACED IN A ROUGH HEWN PINE BOX
FOUND BY TWO MEN
ON SHEPLEIGH LEDGE, WHERE WIERD (sic) WINDS BLOW
BODY OF CHILD,
DISMEMBERED AND HORRIBLY MUTILATED

OF
MURDER
AN ITALIAN'S HEAD CUT OFF
BLOOD CLOTS

ALL OVER THE SHANTY IN THE TOWN OF YORK

In the Sunday edition which was larger than the daily, the *Times* could be more expansive, and items which had scandalous possibilities were blown up enormously to supply full reports of Rochester's street walkers, disorderly houses, disreputable music halls, and other local dives.

Further interest in the clinical details of physiology overreached itself in certain patent medicine advertisements whose number and extent in a newspaper maintained a direct ratio to the paper's sensationalism. In the 1890's there was no regulation of advertising. Advertisements were not so labelled. Even the *PE*, at least once, made use of the editorial page to relate the miraculous cure of a "prominent" Rochesterian by Dr. David Kennedy's Favorite Remedy and to report the cases of other Rochesterians who owed their recovery—from blotches to bladder-stones—to the same remarkable medicine. The less scrupulous *Times* wrote "Editor" under a eulogy of Dr. Greene's Nervura Blood and Nerve Remedy. In fact, Dr. Greene's medicine, ubiquitous and omni-active, could be read about all during this decade in any Rochester paper, in narrative accounts with titles like "A Husband's Love," "The Truth of It," "Her Secret," or "Beautiful Dawning." The reports dealt with women on the verge of nervous prostration and with men who were saved, or could be, from suicide, from insanity, and paresis. This medicine was proclaimed a cure for St. Vitus Dance, epilepsy, headache, neuralgia, bloated bowels, stiff joints, weakness in women, loss of appetite, womb trouble, sleeplessness, catarrah, sinking spells, despondency. In similar advertisements never-failing cures were attributed to Hood's Sarsaparilla, to Paine's Celery Compound, to Dr. Grady's Elixir Vinkola Compound, to Mandrake Pills, and to Horsford's Acid Phosphate.

An advertisement for the Sander electric belt was one of a category of advertisements of an especially lurid kind dealing with human generative functions. They appeared rarely in the *PE*, occasionally in the *Herald* and the *U&A*, and most frequently in the *Times* and the *D&C*. Linked with other evidences of sensationalism in newspapers, these

advertisements became bolder toward the end of the decade. They were written in rather unsavoury terms, were usually hortatory and alarming and hinted darkly at the terrible consequences of "sins of the parents," "crimes against nature" and "youthful errors." When addressed solely to women these advertisements flowered fully into rhapsodic prose graced with innuendos of determined delicacy. Some of the advertisements became quasi-sermons as much as three columns long (particularly in the *Times*), and they bore titles like: "The Awful Life of a Lawful Wife" or "Crushed by her Crown." They exhorted all womankind in lugubrious language, with pious, homiletic asides, to learn about their bodily functions, to cease their "daily martyrdom" and, without "offensive examinations," to achieve, through Dr. Pierce's Favorite Prescription or Lydia Pinkham's Compound, painless childbirth and a life free from ulceration, inflammation, fibroid tumors, and dull, dragging pains.

Women

The doleful picture of woman's lot on earth as presented in patent medicine advertisements was complemented by other notions prevalent at the time about women. These were many and contradictory and some of them were highly charged emotionally, making of the feminine enigma a greater enigma still, but leaving to women a fairly wide arena in which to perform.

An increasingly important element of the newspaper-reading public in the nineties, women were handled by four of the Rochester journals with a resolute masculine gallantry compounded of respect, indulgence, affectionate jocularly and pretended exasperation. These papers stressed, whenever possible, the essential femininity of women in circumstances of considerable diversity. When, for example, these papers, through syndicates or their own special correspondents, interviewed wives of famous men, reporters invariably assured their readers that their subjects were "sweet voiced," "had a sweet and dainty womanliness," and experienced joyous self-effacement in their domestic duties and in their husband's careers. Women who were famous in their own right were described with the same emphasis on femininity. Rochester editors were eloquent on the 'instinctive purity' of women, their 'innate' modesty, their nobility and their special moral sense, and any serious feminine misbehavior was automatically attributed to bad company. Lizzie Borden, on trial in Massachusetts for the murder of her parents, was enveloped in the *Herald's* habitual tenderness for all women. "Every man," this

journal said, "who has faith in womankind will hope that Lizzie Borden will be acquitted."

This attitude was fostered as a matter of course in newspaper features meant especially for women readers—articles on fashions, household management and women's interests outside the home. In their general approach to matters feminine, these articles crystallized and kept constantly before the public the current ideas, mutually irreconcilable as they were, concerning women. In word and sketch, women, in spite of the tremendous biological burden so gruesomely described in the medical advertisements, were depicted as eternally dainty and almost unendurably delicate; as haughtily corsetted, yet graceful and languorous; they appeared at once child-like and wise, serene, yet gay, clinging, yet monuments of strength; they went often on grim errands of mercy, but they were squeamish about physiology and unable to face sordidness.

In those columns which dealt with women's sports and summer activities, much playful chivalry and mock seriousness were in evidence. Writers showed tolerant amusement of the woman cyclist and her costume, and endless absorption in the behavior of the "summer girl." The summer girl was invariably pictured as wearing a shirtwaist with a high, stiff collar, a leather belt and Oxford ties. She loved tennis and golf, could "pull a good oar," and bore herself with an air of non-chalance. Her love affairs were notoriously evanescent. She practiced flirting without any danger to her reputation so long as she was unmarried; this innocent pastime was but an expression of her feminine vivacity and served to show to advantage her wit and her erudition. In her little tricks for temporary conquest she might employ a stringed instrument, preferably the mandolin which is small and can therefore be held gracefully, though the guitar has the advantage of "soulful tones" and is the most effective accompaniment "to a flirtation that has progressed considerably." Her type was fixed—though it might vary within set limits—for she might be the "typical flirt" or the "sentimental type," or the "mischievous," "sympathetic," "clever," "chummy" or "shy" type. Her techniques were obviously predictable and entirely transparent, but she was repeatedly the subject of examination.

The picture of a charming female, gently toying with love and relinquishing to the male without envy its more vigorous expressions, was not acquiesced in by the *Times*, maverick among Rochester's journals. The working class women among *Times*' readers were not cushioned by any fictions about their fragility, and the paper brooked no

concessions to a double standard. With its usual vehemence on issues over which it became aroused, the *Times* termed a "disgrace to civilization . . . talk about 'fallen women,' 'street walkers' . . . whom everybody shuns . . . when no corresponding nomenclature and no corresponding ostracism are applied to the bifurcated moral lepers who are received without challenge everywhere in decent society. . . ." As early as 1892, while the *Times'* colleagues were making gallant remarks about the charm with which women presided at tea tables at cultural clubs (where most of the intellectual pabulum was provided by men) this paper expressed itself strongly in favor of a separate club house for the women of Rochester.

The "new" woman who was trying to make a place for herself in the serious professions was received variously by Rochester journals. She was given energetic prodding both by the *D&C* and by the *Times*. From the *PE* and the *Herald* she got full reports, written with manifest respect, of all the details of large public meetings dealing with women's rights, but few editorial comments. The *Herald* was not averse to printing an occasional article (sometimes written by a woman) which deplored the passing of the "old maid," that gentle creature, always on hand to help at weddings, deaths and illnesses, who was giving way to the assertive bachelor woman. From the *U&A* this new woman got outright disapproval in her fight for equal suffrage, but without vehemence or rancor and with the assurance that the editors did not wish to see woman suffragists insulted.

In spite of all the contradictions involved, journalists dealing with women dealt with them by rather uncomplicated standards. Women were taken to be whatever on the surface they appeared to be. If, in a court trial, a woman was charged with bigamy, fraud, adultery or extortion, it was her behavior in court which was carefully scrutinized for proof of her character. If she conducted herself modestly and shrank from the attendant publicity, she was almost invariably presumed by reporters to be innocent of the crime charged. If her behavior was not genteel, this was emphasized in news reports with more than mere imputations of guilt. The *Herald's* drama critic, too, found quite implausible an adulteress in a French play because she was depicted as unselfishly devoted to her child. In that era, black was black and white was white in human character with, of course, due allowances made for remorse in basically good people led astray. The consistently lily-white maiden whose every

thought was for the welfare of others and whose most venturesome fling was an arch flirtation seemed credible to all.

Literature and Literary Criticism

The prevailing sentimental view of women was to a great extent responsible for the peculiar quality of literary and dramatic criticism, and of journalistic comment on the other arts. In Rochester, as everywhere in this country at the time, an excessive and, in large part, irrelevant moralism surrounded every discussion of beauty. Art, like woman, was required above all to be virtuous, pretty, and pleasant to live with. Rochester newspaper editors occasionally, in general remarks on the arts, made concessions to purely aesthetic standards of evaluation, but in their judgments of particular works they usually deferred to the moralities.

The *PE*, whose owners and editors were cultivated and well-read gentlemen of artistic sensibility,* declared that "the vital principle of literature . . . is how well a story or novel is created," and that the true critic recognizes alike the worth of Zola and Stevenson, Strindberg and Kipling, George Moore and Stanley Weyman, Tolstoi and Stockton. This journal admitted the strong descriptive powers of August Strindberg and to the "rare purity" and "originality" of his style, yet it expressed extreme distaste for his works, seeing in his pessimism, his realism, his bitterness, his negation of life and his remorseless exposure of human fallibility, only evidences of the decadence of the times. Toward specific works of Zola, too, the editors, overcome by fastidiousness, reacted with indignation and outrage. So great was their embarrassment at the psychological probing into human motivation that they turned with relief to writers of lesser stature who did not practice it. The editors thus were able to regard George DuMaurier as "the most original man of his time" and as a great novelist surpassed only by Meredith and Hardy. Works of any emotional intensity were treated with uneasiness and with suspicion—and even Joseph Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands*, though on the whole favorably reviewed by the *PE*, was pronounced to be "pitched in too high a key."

In spite of this bias in the direction of conventionality, the *PE* did most among Rochester journals to give substance to the city's reputation

*William S. Kimball, William D. Ellwanger, George H. Ellwanger, Joseph O'Connor, etc.

as a center of culture. Joseph O'Connor's daily column, "The Rochesterian," begun in 1898, discussed literature, local affairs, world politics, history, and philosophy in an erudite style much admired by his contemporaries. He was lavishly praised by editors of the great metropolitan dailies and made the *PE* nationally famous. The paper's editorial columns were full of learned discussions of contemporary literary figures, and neither politics nor war were allowed to encroach upon their literary preoccupations. On the death of Tennyson, the *PE* editorials were scholarly essays on the place of this poet in the history of culture, and pages were filled with reminiscences and long quotations from his poems. The paper at various times discussed, too, William Morris, Meredith, Henry George, Herbert Spencer, Dickens, Thackeray, the status of American literature as distinct from English, the battle between naturalism and idealism in literature, and the books of Rochester authors as they appeared.

When, in the middle years of the decade, the *PE* began regularly to allot certain columns to book reviews ("Our Weekly Review of Literature"), they often occupied a whole page. Some of the reviews were quite long, in a graceful, leisurely style showing considerable critical acumen; others were more pedestrian, and when dealing with books on serious subjects, could be quite pedantic and forbidding. No efforts were made by the *PE*, or any other newspapers which dealt with literature, to woo the reader; there were no concessions even to minimal reader comfort. Type was small and close, paragraphs were inordinately long, and captions only slightly larger than the body of an article, with the result that pages were of an almost unbroken, and scarcely legible, solidity.

The *D&C* early in the decade, had a regular column called "Literary Notes" which offered little more than announcements of forthcoming books, uninspired resumé of the books' contents, and occasionally a few mechanically favorable comments savoring of press-agentry. The notes made little distinction between good and bad; William Dean Howells, Horatio Alger, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Hall Caine, James M. Barrie, and Mark Twain were treated impartially as writers with new books on the market. The notes rarely ran longer than three columns, gradually grew sparser, and were eventually discontinued for a number of years. When editorial comments were made in the *D&C* on literary subjects, as they were on the death of celebrated writers, or when, for some reason, a particular author excited public controversy, the moral

basis of their literary judgments was made quite clear. An editorial entitled "Moral and Immoral Literature" declared that Gabriele D'Annunzio's genius which made vice attractive by the "intensity and grace of his style" was a "curse to mankind, while genius regulated and directed by moral obligation projects a pathway of light down the ages . . ." For the *D&C* editors, DuMaurier's *Trilby*, "one of the most moral books ever written," and "the work of a clean-minded, cultured man," fulfilled all the requirements of good literature.

The *U&A* did not concur with this opinion. While making no claims to literary connoisseurship, this paper nevertheless recognized *Trilby* for what it was and pronounced it vastly over-rated from the literary standpoint. With the same clarity, this unpretentious and frankly bourgeois paper saw the nature of the competitive race between good literature with its genuine dramatic power, and works of no literary merit with their sensational effects. Thus the *U&A*, unlike the *PE* was able to see with detachment what Byron's place in literature was to be; yet it was not the perfect literary critic, for it was too hearty for the refinements of Henry James whose cleverness it found "exasperating" and whose stories it found woefully without wit or drama or humor.

The *Herald's* book columns, variously called "Current Literature," "Literary By-Ways," "Books and Authors" or "New Books," appeared each Saturday until the war news temporarily crowded them out. They showed no consistent standard of judgment, dispensing disapproval to H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and D'Annunzio's *Giovanni Episcopo*, and approval to Alger's stories for boys, William Morris' poems ("simple, sensuous, passionate and full of energy"), DuMaurier's *Trilby*, and Sienkiewicz' *With Fire and Sword* which they pronounced superior to Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. Editors of the *Herald* found Zola's novels to be "works of art," but "nauseating," and of an "art that corrupts," "gratifying the baser passions;" yet a reviewer in the *Herald* book column praised Zola's *Money* as a "powerful novel which holds the interest of the reader to the end" on a "difficult subject handled with the most perfect skill."

The least concern for literature in Rochester newspapers was shown by the *Times* which, alone of the five journals, had no book column and only occasionally commented on current magazines. It was the only Rochester paper to ignore editorially the death of Tennyson and to print only terse news reports of his death and funeral. *Times* editors, when they discussed literature at all, minimized the importance of romantic

love in it and left no place for the gracious and the gentle, let alone the frivolous. They valued whatever would lift the reader "out of his weary old self," whatever would "help him socially or spiritually," whatever would provide sociological, philosophical or other serious data for thought. These attributes the *Times* found alike in the stories of Marie Corelli, Conan Doyle, R. L. Stevenson; in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Ben Hur*, and Zola's *The Downfall*.

Drama and Dramatic Criticism

The limitations of literary criticism in Rochester journals had their counterpart in dramatic criticism. Rochester papers, for the most part subscribing without question to the sweet picture of pure womankind presented in many of the plays which came to the city's theaters, balked at the kind of woman depicted in plays from the French and other European languages. When the *Clemenceau Case* from a novel by Dumas was performed in Rochester in 1891, the *D&C* devoted a whole column to reviling it. The *PE*, when the play came again two years later, informed its readers that the novel was "one of the dirtiest of French literature," and that the play painted "the fairest of God's creatures so black, so horrible." "There might be in France such women," it declared, "but in America she lives only in imported fiction." Another French play, *Thérèse*, from the Zola novel *Thérèse Raquin*, was called by the *Herald* "intensely horrible," "morbid," "fetid," "exposing the murky depth of vice and crime." Yet the critic was compelled to admit, perhaps with a shudder, that the drama was "true to life" and that, without help from sensational lighting or "musical chills" or curtain climaxes, it was still "absolutely unforgettable." The *U&A* sought a moral in this play, and found one, in the tragic consequences of illicit love; it was able, therefore, to observe placidly that *Thérèse* was no more immoral than the general run of society dramas.

The *D&C*, also aware of the extent of the indecency tolerated in the American drama, pointed out that in theaters of good reputation like Rochester's Lyceum, crowded houses witnessed without protest such "malodorous" plays as *Never Again*, *The Girl from Paris*, *In Gay New York*, *Mr. Bill*, and *Danger Signal*. These plays, presented over and over again in Rochester's theaters throughout the years of this decade might have brought "the blush to a young person's cheek," but they never aroused the ferocity of disapproval or the sense of moral outrage which the French plays managed to excite. The difference in literary

merit between these two types of offerings was immeasurable, yet this rarely received notice in critical evaluations. The native plays in this group were risqué and oblique in their treatment of human delinquency, the French were frankly searching and unblinking. Among critics the French drama in the Rochester of that day accomplished little beyond increasing the urgency of the demand for the wholesome, the cheerful, and the edifying in plays. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the *Old Homestead* were found to be entirely to everyone's satisfaction.

Yet all the Rochester journals except the *Times* made efforts at serious critical evaluations of the drama. The *D&C* displayed a tireless interest in the theater and had the distinction of employing a critic* so well regarded for his discrimination that New York producers arranged dramatic tryouts in Rochester to get the benefit of his judgment. The *D&C* made a practice of printing very detailed advance notice of plays and variety shows each week, and since, in season, each of the four theaters had at least two changes of program a week, considerable space was devoted to this coverage. These notices included very full recountings of plots and counter-plots, descriptions of the careers of the chief performers, quantitative data as to costumes, actors and scenes, and the railroad cars needed to transport them. This information, written up with stereotyped enthusiasm, was supplied by press agents to all the newspapers (but rarely, except for the *D&C*, used in its entirety) and was followed the day after the opening performance with the journals' own reviews. Since this was the era of the farce comedy and the drama of the photograph-of-the-long-lost-sister-in-the-locket, criticisms vacillated between impatience with such "irredeemable rot" and a grudging approval of it, usually in weary acquiescence to public taste.

Public taste was, for the most part, simple. Audiences were impressed by mechanical feats in both setting and performance and had a child-like love of huge undertakings. They loved to witness the familiar struggle between virtue and villainy in standardized situations involving a mother's love, a sister's misfortune, or a fraudulent inheritance. The public was enthralled by mistaken identities in melodramas and endlessly amused by them in comedies. When settings resembled real-life scenes, people gasped, exclaimed and applauded—even when hum-drum things were reproduced, like a fire house, a coal mine, a railway crossing, an orphan asylum, a military academy, or a barnyard. Theater crowds were

*Col. George F. Warren (see article by George David, *D&C*, June 18, 1939).

so fired by this type of realism that it is not surprising that critics were occasionally caught off guard. They would themselves sometimes list as attractive features of a production such items as a horse race in which two real horses jump over a hurdle on the stage in full view of the audience; real boats in the Henley regatta scene, with water "from two to eight feet deep" in a 1400-foot area; the interior of an ocean-going steamer; a battle scene; a shipwreck in real water; a trolley car clanging across the stage at full speed; a steam pile-driver in action; a fire scene with the demonstration of the newest life-saving method; a telegraphic office with its authentic clicks relaying the fateful message. But more often the critics in the face of such crudeness would be bored and would recount mechanically the proffered melodramatic "marvels."

For the *Herald* at least there was realism of a more desirable sort which resided not in water tanks and fire engines but in skillfull and convincing character portrayal. The *Herald's* critic showed remarkable sophistication when he pointed out, practically without support from his colleagues, the sensational qualities of the very popular *Sbenandoab*, performed again and again in Rochester and other American cities where critics and public alike were each time affected by the death scene of "quiet intensity" among the marching troops (300 of them), the horses (40 of them), the bugle calls, the signal lights, the retreats and the rallies.

Confronted by 'pathos' in a play, almost all Rochester critics melted into tender susceptibility. The *Herald's* perceptive faculties were quite corroded by the "rough-appearing railroad contractor" who "related to little Flossie . . . the touching story of his early life." The *D&C* reviewer wiped away a tear with the rest of the audience when a heroine, singing Tosti's "Good-Bye," fainted in the middle of it. The *U&A* found itself absorbed in the "heart interest" of *Slaves of Gold* which dealt with a long separation of father and daughter. The *PE* was moved by the "dramatic strength" of a scene in which a fasting priest, having traced the hiding place of a lost gem, dropped dead as he was about to grasp it.

Rochester critics, however, remained adamant before the seductions of the many 'specialty numbers' designed to freshen up hackneyed old plays that had pounded the boards for many years or to conceal the inadequacies of new offerings hastily thrown together. Sometimes plays became mere vehicles for these multiplying specialties which might be anything from a whistling act to a serious performance on the piano; a vulgar can-can dance or a cornet solo by the 'refined' Miss So-and-So; a

humorous ditty or a demonstration with Indian clubs. These numbers stopped the action of the play, often long enough for the rendering of encores, and although a reviewer might go so far as to term such divertissements "clever" or even "excellent," he was never taken in by their quality as drama.

When good plays (other than French) came to Rochester at intervals during these ten years they brought out the ambivalent character of the critics' attitude toward the public. The most common reaction to good plays on the part of critics was relief. But audiences at performances of Shakespeare and Sheridan were usually small and select, and reviewers would alternately praise Rochesterians for their devotion to culture and reproach them for supporting it on so small a scale. The greatest discrepancy between critical and popular response occurred, however, in Rochester's reception of French problem plays. Reviewers, we know, were outraged and shocked by them, but audiences which at other plays fidgeted, rustled their programs and rushed for their wraps before the final curtain, astounded the critics by sitting hushed and spellbound to the end.

Some Miscellaneous Items

There were, of course, many other items appearing occasionally or regularly in the Rochester press which further revealed common attitudes or distinguishing characteristics, but space permits no more than a cursory reference to a few. All the papers covered sports news with varying degrees of completeness; none of the journals reported adequately painting and sculpture in Rochester, always supporting without question the presumed connection between art, gentility, prettiness, and moral uplift; music received little more than bare news coverage, since most Rochester performances then were only amateur or semi-professional; religious activities, reported respectfully, but at varying lengths, by four journals, were treated with open hostility by the editors of the *Times* who disapproved "mahogany-lined edifices" and "long-faced missionaries" as a substitute for the amelioration of poverty; as for news of the *beau monde*, the proletarian *Times* was scornful, the middle class papers were unconcerned, and only the *Herald* and the *PE* chronicled its doings.

Journalistic Style

The *PE*, conscious of its status as the "quality paper" of Rochester, showed, with very few lapses, an awareness of what constitutes good

prose style. Its editorials while the paper was politically independent were written with dignity and with clarity. Its news reports could always be counted on to tell the salient points of a story with directness and with good taste, without underscoring their human-interest aspect for pathos or for comedy. Not so the *D&C*. Editorial style here suffered a loss of dignity through the paper's rancorous partisanship and news stories suffered from ponderousness through the overplaying of the human-interest technique. Simple episodes involving obscure people in remote villages were blown up to saga length for the humor, the sentiment, or the evidences of homely virtue they could yield. This elaborate verbosity affected other news items, including those of a more impersonal sort, so that the main points of stories in the *D&C* had often to be painstakingly ferreted out.

Though stories of human-interest appeal occurred frequently in the *Times* and occasionally in the *U&A*, in neither case was much space devoted to their telling. The *Times*, with its grim attitude toward life, rarely found human events amusing; it stressed the tragic or the sensational in its stories, and, unable to support financially any space-consuming devices, came to the point with no shilly-shallying. Its editorials, too, were direct, even brusque, and, as befitted the paper's role as spokesman for the common man, scornful of the pampered graces of upper class papers, even to the extent of being a shade ungrammatical at times.* The *U&A* sometimes resorted to heavy humor in its captions but it was usually brisk and sober and its editorials showed always an unostentatious respect for language and learning.

The *Herald*, like the *PE*, wrote with the presumption of a certain cultivation in its readers. This on the whole served to make the *Herald's* writing style very good—direct and clear in news reports, informed, reasoned and graceful in editorials. When, on its editorial page, it wrote leisurely pieces of social commentary, the paper achieved a style of considerable charm and urbanity. This was true when, gently and with flawless chivalry, it came out for reform in the size of ladies' theater hats. It was true again when the editors wrote in defense of the all-night street car service proposed by the Chamber of Commerce. The argument here was polished, tranquil, and witty. The editor contended that a man ought not to be required to go to bed until he is ready; he pointed out that

**Times*, Dec. 14, 1899 ("why don't somebody . . ."); Sept. 1, 1899 (Aldridge don't talk out . . .").

wicked people, woovers, and workers want all-night cars, and that the good, the married, and the idle do not. The genial editor, "espousing the cause of the sinner, the lover, and the worker," found himself "on the side of the majority."

Inter-Press Relations

Rochester newspapers of the 1890's were very outspoken about their feelings toward one another. Even those papers which conscientiously discussed political and social issues on their merits were occasionally carried away by the custom of personal bickering among journals. During the years when the *PE* was quite aloof from politics it had a few exchanges with the *Herald*, but they were conducted on both sides with elaborate dignity and courtly irony. Later, when the *PE* turned partisan Republican it became irascible and called the *Herald* among other things, an "organ of political mongrelism" and "the Yellow Kid."

The *Herald*, a "plain-spoken but courteous adversary" when issues were debated, also became involved at times in personal abuse. This paper (having in the course of the decade changed its party allegiance, reversed itself on fundamental principles, and withal tried to maintain a certain degree of detachment) was attacked from all sides for its fidelities and its apostacies alike. The *D&C*, the *Herald's* morning competitor, charged the *Herald* with "mendacity, recklessness and an utter lack of principle" and with belonging to the "abominable school" of Yellow journalism; but the *Herald* was called yellow also by the Democratic *U&A* which could not endure the *Herald's* "political stomach." The *Herald* responded to these attacks usually in fairly gentlemanly fashion but occasionally it lashed out in real fury against the *D&C* which it called a "porcine," "senile, lecherous journal" that "lied with the coarseness of the fishwoman."

The most bitter personal hostility, as one might expect, existed between the *U&A* and the *D&C* which sparred with each other incessantly on various issues,—real or trumped up for the release of venom. Each shouted with triumph when it found contradictions in the other's position; sentences taken from the hated rival's editorials would provide texts for answering editorials the next day and sometimes the debate went on for days, weeks, or months. The *D&C* used less argument and more invective than the *U&A*, but neither minced words. The *D&C* said of the *U&A's* interpretations of the Sherman Silver Act of 1890 that they "would create a laugh of derision in a lunatic asylum!" the

U&A countered, "Judging from the cachinnation coming from the Chronicle office, it is evident that they do already." Retorts were rarely barbed, however; they were more usually wordy, ponderous and savage, employing the bludgeon rather than the rapier. The *D&C* would call the *U&A* "fatuous" and "stupid" and small in circulation. The *U&A* would charge the *D&C* with "misrepresentation and abuse;" with "presuming a little too much upon the ignorance of its readers;" with "unscrupulousness," "ignorance," "recklessness;" with a policy of falsification, cowardice, and calumny.

In this noisy scene of wrangling and recrimination, the *Times* played a very small part. Contentious and bellicose as this paper was on any issue it undertook to support, it nevertheless rarely succeeded in engaging the interest, or even the passing attention, of other Rochester journals. Once, near the end of the decade when it was noticed in an editorial in the *PE*, the *Times* treated the triumph ironically, observing that it was not in the same "set" socially as this "exclusive journal of literature, society and the drama." The *Times*, in its turn, rarely attacked its colleagues as individuals, but as an unscrupulous group which allegedly copied the news items that it, at great expense, acquired before all other papers through superior telegraphic services.

Thus, when the decade—and the century—closed, there were still left in Rochester's journalistic palaestra five vigorous contestants, tilting and jousting ceaselessly with one another; scolding, haranguing, cajoling, teaching and entertaining the local citizenry; and reflecting, while they shaped, the principles, prejudices, emotions, conventions, and intellectual concepts of their community. No one of them could be called the perfect newspaper and one or two of them displayed, on occasion, some rather unlovely qualities; but together they offered ample opportunity for the healthy encounter of opposing opinion and constituted a colorful example of practical American journalism in action.

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