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Anni Mirabiles:
Kentucky Literature at the Turn of the Century

William S. Ward

The turn-of-the-century years in Kentucky literature were indeed miracle years. Before 1885 there was nothing that resembled a Kentucky literature: there was no deceased Kentucky author who could be referred to with pride; there was no living Kentucky writer who was known outside the state. Twelve years later, in 1897, James Lane Allen published The Choir Invisible and became the first Kentuckian to write a novel that appeared among the top ten on the national annual best-seller list; and in 1913 when The Heart of the Hills by John Fox, Jr., appeared among the top ten for the year it became the fourteenth time that a book by a Kentuckian had done so. In ten of those years one or more titles appeared there; four times they appeared as No. 1 or No. 2; and in one year no fewer than five of the top ten were by Kentuckians.

1897 The Choir Invisible, by James Lane Allen, No. 2.
1900 The Reign of Law, by James Lane Allen, No. 4.
1902 Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch, by Alice Hegan Rice, No. 2.
1903 Lovey Mary, by Alice Hegan Rice, No. 4.
Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch, by Alice Hegan Rice, No. 6.
The Mettle of the Pasture, by James Lane Allen, No. 7.
Letters of a Self-Made Man to His Son, by George Horace Lorimer, No. 8.
The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, by John Fox, Jr., No. 10.
1904 The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, by John Fox, Jr., No. 7.
1905 Sandy, by Alice Hegan Rice, No. 2.
1907 The Lady of the Decoration, by Frances Caldwell Macaulay, No. 1.
Remarkable though it is, however, such a list does not identify all the books or all the occasions when a book by a Kentucky author was exceptionally popular, for it takes no cognizance of those just below the top ten or those frequently on the monthly or weekly best-selling lists. The sale of Annie Fellows Johnston’s *Little Colonel* series (1896-1912), for example, reached one million before Mrs. Johnston’s death and two million before the middle of the century, and Eliza Calvert Obenchain’s *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (1907) found a million readers; yet neither was among the top ten any single year. Much the same is true of Mrs. George Madden Martin’s *Emmy Lou* (1902), which sold at least a quarter of a million copies, and of Irvin Cobb’s Judge Priest stories and such collections as *Speaking of Operations* (1915), which sold 100,000 during its first year.

No one of these novels or collections of short stories can really be said to be read today, and no one of the authors is regarded as among America’s major writers of fiction; indeed, such a claim was not made even in their own day, with the exception of James Lane Allen, who even by the critics was sometimes called the Hawthorne of his era. Yet, despite their status as “lesser” writers, Allen and Fox regularly receive at least brief attention in literary histories and handbooks that deal with American literature, and Alice Hegan Rice and Annie Fellows Johnston are usually identified. As for titles, it is safe to say that among people who have a modest acquaintance with books there is a fairly high recognition rate among *The Choir Invisible, A Kentucky Cardinal, The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, The Little Colonel* series, and *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*. Not a bad record almost a century later for writers who never considered themselves as candidates for a place in the pantheon of the ages and who wrote almost exclusively about Kentucky.

What, one may well ask, accounts for this period during which so many Kentucky writers should have been so much read and Kentucky so much a place of interest? There is no simple answer to such a question, of course, and perhaps no complete answer is possible; but some background and some facts can be set forth. Sometimes, perhaps, some valid clues can be suggested, but as is
This "Chief of Duffer"
(As Paddy called
him.)

John Fox, Jr.

Title page (opposite) and inscription of John Fox, Jr. From a copy of *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* housed in Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries.
The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come

by

John Fox, Jr.

Illustrated by F. G. Yohn

Charles Scribner's Sons
New York: 1906
so often the case, it is not easy to get beyond such puzzled—almost rhetorical—questions as “Why at this time?”, “Why at this place?”

One could start at any one of several points so far as the national literary scene is concerned, but since the authors involved all wrote short fiction at one time or another, perhaps the short story is the point at which to begin. Washington Irving is usually credited with having sowed the seeds of the American type of short story around 1820, just as Edgar Allan Poe is credited with having been its true father in the 1840s by giving it a plot structure and in general adding to the finesse and art of what before him had been more of a narrative sketch than a short story. By mid-century he and Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others, had made it into an important literary form, but by the latter 1870s Bret Harte gave it a new dimension and the form reached a new peak by the latter 1880s. It was at this time that the local-color movement was flourishing and found fiction—short fiction in particular—well suited to its needs. This is the point at which James Lane Allen came on the scene, began to bring the Bluegrass region to the attention of the nation through his magazine articles, made his contribution to local-color critical theory, and wrote some local-color short stories. Immediately following him came John Fox, Jr., and after him Alice Hegan Rice and the other Kentucky local colorists, some of whom will be noted later.

The strands of literary history sometimes have a way of seeming to work in collaboration as if to achieve foreseen ends. We have already observed that the short story and the local color movement were mutually supportive as the nineteenth century came toward an end and the twentieth began. To this seeming collaboration must be added the sudden opening of publishing opportunities in the magazines. It is perhaps impossible to determine what is cause and what is effect, but it is certain that the three worked together in remarkable fashion and that without this coordination there would have been no outlet for the literary outburst that expressed itself in Kentucky and in the nation. On the other hand, perhaps there would have been no outburst if the outlet had not been there. But regardless of which was cause and which was effect, it was an age of short fiction and Kentucky participated in it with remarkable success.

It was the imagination, vigor, and drive of just a few men—Edward Bok, Frank Munsey, Irving Bacheller, S. S. McClure, and
George Horace Lorimer—who brought a revolution in the publica­tion of magazines. More pages became available for the publica­tion of literature, payments to authors increased sharply and were generally made when manuscripts were accepted; experienced and promising writers were sought in the British Isles and on the Con­tinent as well as in the United States; and the reading audience in­creased rapidly as subscription prices went lower because of better business efficiency, improved technology, increased use of advertis­ing, and as higher volume in sales led to lower costs per unit.

Kentucky authors published in all of the leading magazines of the day—Ladies' Home Journal, Munsey's Magazine, McClure's Magazine, Saturday Evening Post, Cosmopolitan, Century Magazine, Harper's Magazine, St. Nicholas, Atlantic Monthly, and others. Only two of their editors need be spoken of here. One is the editor of the Saturday Evening Post, George Horace Lorimer, a native of Louisville. During his editorship of the Post Lorimer consistently played a leading role in providing inducements and rewards for writers as he increased the Post's circulation from 1,800 in 1898 to 1,000,000 in 1908 and lowered the cost per issue to as little as five cents. His editorship was perhaps the most brilliant in American magazine annals. Furthermore, Lorimer in­vented and published a new sub-genre in fiction, "business" fiction. Appearing first serially in the Post, the installments were published subsequently in book form in 1903 as Letters from a Self-Made Man to His Son, became the No. 8 best-seller in 1903, and remained in print for forty years. The other editor is S. S. McClure, who must be singled out because of the number of Kentuckians who published in McClure's Magazine and because of his relationship with Alice Hegan Rice and Mrs. George Madden Martin. It is in­teresting to observe that Lincoln Steffens, the leader of the muck­raking school, was managing editor of McClure's from 1902 to 1906 and that he and muckraker Ida M. Tarbell were friends of Mrs. Rice and Mrs. Martin and visited in their homes.

The revival of interest in the historical novel in the 1890s also made a contribution to the sudden increase in the literary output of Kentuckians. As in the rest of the country, a somewhat na­tionalistic spirit was abroad, thus bringing American subjects to the fore. The Revolutionary War and the frontier—in Kentucky as well as farther West—attracted writers, and for the first time the Civil War and Reconstruction won attention, for they were now far enough in the past to be viewed in retrospect. Such an interest,
of course, fits hand in glove with the local-color movement, for greater knowledge of the past would yield up more subjects for the local-color writers.

Such were some of the principal developments which contributed to the publication of Kentucky literature between 1885 and 1915. These contexts do not, however, answer the question of why Kentuckian writing about Kentuckian should have been read so widely. Obviously the authors and their works had something to do with it, but some of the explanation must reside in the state itself and the way its history had become a portion of the folklore of the nation. First to come to mind is the legend of Daniel Boone and the first settlers as they pushed their way westward across the mountains, fought the Indian, and carved the first state west of the Alleghenies out of the wilderness. By the close of the century the tradition of Boone and the tall, silent Kentuckian gave way to the less well-mannered Kaintucks of keelboat days. Then came the War of 1812 and the gallantry in death of the Kentucky militia in the carnage at the River Raisin in 1813; but better known was the victory in 1815 of the Kentucky riflemen under Andrew Jackson when they repulsed the British at the Battle of New Orleans and inspired Samuel Woodworth to write "The Hunters of Kentucky." This lively song was sung for years and was a rousing favorite on the showboats that plied the rivers. A little later Kentucky's Kit Carson carried the spirit of the frontier to the Far West, and even that notable Tennessean Davy Crockett of Alamo fame sometimes called himself a Kentuckian. Theodore O'Hara's Bivouac of the Dead (1847) immortalized the Kentucky dead in the Mexican War and parts of his poem were inscribed on shafts in military cemeteries across the country and were quoted over and over at military dedication services. During the Civil War Kentucky was neutral, but General John Hunt Morgan left Lexington, joined the Confederate Army in Tennessee, and he and his men in daring, swashbuckling fashion carried out raids in Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio that won him a national reputation as "The Thunderbolt of the Confederacy."

During the remainder of the century there were no new frontiers to conquer and no military adventures until the Spanish American War. Perhaps, however, it is not too much to say that in the association of Kentuckians with frontiers and the violence of battle there is some sort of continuity after the Civil War in the mountaineer moonshiner's stand against the revenue agent. This
resistance made national news and no doubt many people had more than grudging admiration for the mountaineer's outraged sense of justice that his government would curtail the use to which he put his land and infringe upon what he regarded as his personal rights. The celebrated feuds, too, belong to the same tradition of violence and the Hatfields and the McCoys were not the only families to be known far and wide because they insisted upon settling outside the law some grudge or grievance or even principle that was important to them. Such are some of the segments that go together to form the legend of the tall Kentuckian. Sometimes he played his role outside Kentucky, and sometimes other states claimed him, but historically he was a Kentuckian and has become a part of the folklore of the nation.

There was another tradition that was equally well known, a tradition related to the land. First it was the land itself that attracted the settlers as they sought what seemed to them a new Eden across the mountains. Then during the 1790s and the early decades of the new century with pioneering a memory rather than a continuing reality, the gentry arrived in increasing numbers and on this land started building a world that fostered educational and cultural opportunities, landed estates, fine mansions, and the satisfactions that come from leisure. This was the affluent life of the new aristocracy and it grew out of the undulating Bluegrass fields that workmen—including slaves—tiled. The first settlers had a sense of moving into and occupying their Eden; the gentry were more concerned with shaping—even fine-tuning—theirs.

Life was probably never as ideal on these lands as the legend would have it appear, but after the Civil War and the lean days of Reconstruction, "the old days" looked better and better as they receded into the past and were viewed through the mists of time. A nostalgic view of the antebellum days applies to the entire Old South, but it applies to Kentucky in ways just a bit different from anywhere else. For one thing, the brand of slavery that prevailed was milder, more domestic, and more paternalistic. For another, Kentucky remained neutral during the War and saw more volunteers join the Northern army than the Southern; and it was the birthplace and childhood home of Lincoln. Most important of all, perhaps, it was the place about which Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" was written in 1850 and subsequently introduced to the world by Christy's Minstrels in 1852. It would be impossible to measure the influence the song has had in making
the Commonwealth known to the nation and in creating an image that is kindly, and comfortable, and gentle. Nor can one overlook the 2,000,000 copies of Mary Jane Holmes's novels that the nation bought in the 1850s and 1860s. Sunshine and Tempest, Lena Rivers, and Hugh Worthington portrayed as very special the Bluegrass gentry who lived life in the genteel tradition.

It was images of this sort—as well as images of frontiers and violence—that helped win an interest in the state by the time James Lane Allen came along. Particularly in his earlier works such as The Bluegrass Region of Kentucky (1886) Allen reveals a sense of the close affinity between man and the land, as well as a longing for the old ways that somehow seemed to prevail before the Civil War. An understanding of the gentry also gives insight into Mrs. Rice's Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch (1902). For today's generation Mrs. Wiggs is far too docile and far too long-suffering, but Mrs. Wiggs had faith in the goodness of human nature, believed that rich and poor should be supportive of each other, and had confidence that if the poor did their share the largesse of the affluent would somehow see them through. As for the world of Annie Fellows Johnston's Little Colonel stories, no one has more unstintingly glorified the mellowness of an earlier way of life in Kentucky.

One more literary work must be cited as giving national visibility to Kentucky at the turn of the century. This was Charles T. Dazey's play, In Old Kentucky, a Cinderella sort of play whose climax comes with the running of a famous race, the Ashland Oaks. Its characters are a set of stock characters that include a Bluegrass Prince Charming, a mountain lass, a great speculator and horseman (Colonel Sandusky Doolittle), and an assorted lot of kinsfolk and racetrack characters, with a feud thrown in for good measure. In Old Kentucky was an amazing crowd-pleaser from the day of its opening in St. Paul in 1892 until it completed its road tour twenty-seven years later. Its audience was different from that of James Lane Allen, John Fox, Jr., Alice Hegan Rice, and Annie Fellows Johnston, and yet its appeal skirted the edges of all of them, exaggerated though the action was with its slapstick and melodrama. It is estimated that seven million people saw In Old Kentucky.

Such are some of the wide-ranging reasons why the nation had some acquaintance with Kentucky and curiosity enough to make best sellers of Kentuckians' books about Kentucky. Unexplained,
however, are the reasons why at this time so many Kentuckians wrote so much with so much appeal for so many people. Many Kentucky towns likely had their writing groups and book-reading clubs, but it is doubtful whether many of them could really be called successful. Exception must be made, however, for the Authors Club of Louisville. It was organized just before the turn of the century—perhaps in 1898—and at first had eight members, though the membership was later expanded to twelve. In 1909 *Who's Who in America* listed seven of them, and before the group was dissolved they had published seventy books in addition to many articles, stories, and poems that appeared only in magazines. Five times between 1902 and 1907 their novels appeared on the nation's top-ten best-seller list, once as No. 1, twice as No. 2, and once each as No. 4 and No. 6; and almost constantly some member’s name was on the weekly or monthly best-seller lists. Two of its members saw their works sell in excess of one million copies, and volumes that sold in excess of 100,000 were not unusual. In short, these members were writing for a national audience.

Meetings took place in the homes of members, generally on Saturday mornings. At these meetings there was usually a central program such as a discussion of or a reading from some significant book or author. Sometimes they discussed the principles of writing, but more often they discussed each other’s writing. Criticism and analysis was frank and honest. The only limitation was that it had to be constructive and be intended to improve the work under discussion. One of the group’s projects was that each member should write a short story motivating and explaining what “a well-bred young lady” could possibly have been doing “in a barber shop at midnight”—a shocking situation in those proper days. Interestingly enough, the stories were submitted to *The Black Cat*, a magazine for writers of fiction, and the editors chose to make the stories the entire issue for February 1902.

The writings of two of these members—Alice Hegan Rice and Annie Fellows Johnston—have just been cited. The remaining members deserve identification here.

1. Margaret Steele Anderson. Poet, critic, lecturer, and Book Editor of the *Louisville Evening Post*. A poet and art critic of considerable sensitivity who had “a touch of genius, not


3. Mary Finley Leonard. Author of a number of children's stories that received favorable national reviews: Everyday Susan; Story of the Big Front Door; Little Red Chimney.

4. Frances Caldwell Macaulay. A kindergarten teacher in Louisville who taught in a mission school in Japan. The letters she wrote back home about her experiences, edited a bit by Alice Hegan Rice, with the addition of a slight but plaintive love story, were published as The Lady of the Decoration and became the No. 1 best seller in 1907. Four sequels also proved to be popular.

5. Eva Madden (sister of Mrs. George Madden Martin). A pioneer newspaper woman who joined the New York Herald staff and became its foreign correspondent in Italy. She was the author of a number of children's stories and of a historical novel, Two Royal Foes.

6. Mrs. George Madden Martin. After 1920 Mrs. Martin entered the arena of controversial political and social reform, but from 1900 till that time it was a different sort of reform that enlisted her interest and led to Emmy Lou, Her Book and Heart in 1902. Emmy Lou, sometimes on best-seller lists, deals with the problems of a born-to-be-loved little girl who is slow to learn in school but is always faithful and always tries. The novels and its sequels are credited with having motivated change in teaching methods.


8. Ellen Churchill Semple. An internationally known anthropogeographer, lecturer at Oxford, and adviser to Woodrow Wilson on territorial boundaries for the Treaty of Versailles. A reviewer for the Nation says of her Influences of Geographical Environment: "A remarkable book ... places Miss Semple among a handful of women the world over who are the peers of the foremost men of science."

9. Margaret Womack Vandercook. One of the authors of The
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Campfire Girls series and a writer of both verse and fiction.


There was also a locality in Louisville at the turn of the century which was associated with writers. This was the neighborhood of St. James Court and Belgravia Court. There was no official or unofficial connection between this neighborhood and the Authors Club, but in view of the date of its formation, its association from the beginning with authors, actors, artists, musicians, and residents generally interested in and supportive of the arts, and the personal relationships between members of the Club and the residents of the neighborhood, perhaps a word more should be said about it. Its origins go back to 1883 when Louisville's Southern Exposition took over forty acres of land just south of and including Central Park. After the Fair was closed, the Victoria Land Company purchased the tract and designed the Courts, modelling them after the residential parks in London and lining them with linden and horse chestnut trees. Dominating the center of the quiet, secluded, and fashionable area was a handsome fountain. The neighborhood is still intact, it should be noted, and some of the houses are now apartments, but this remnant of the gas light era still carries on much as it did at the height of the Victorian period. Both Courts remain open to pedestrians only and each fall sponsor an Autumn Arts Fair. Among the writers who lived in the Courts during some or all of the life of the Authors Club were Cale Young Rice (husband of Alice Hegan Rice and author of poetic dramas), Madison Cawein (Kentucky's first nationally known poet), Fannie Macaulay, Charles Neville Buck, Abbie Carter Goodloe, Elizabeth Robbins, Eleanor Mercein Kelly, Virginia Cary Hudson, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts.

To try to generalize meaningfully upon the foregoing remarks about the Authors Club and these Courts as background for Kentucky's literary productivity and the popularity of its authors at and following the turn of the century is perhaps an exercise in futility. In the first place, the Authors Club and the St. James/Belgravia Courts neighborhood were Louisville phenomena and may be merely effect rather than cause for the literary activity that has just been described. Yet can one be sure that the success of the Louisville writers did not reach out into the state and in-
spire or motivate others to write what otherwise they might not have written, and how can one say that the Authors Club did not inspire, uncover, or cultivate talent that would have lain fallow. One can hardly deny that there was a substantial literary renaissance in Louisville and that the state at large had entered into the mainstream of American literature for the first time. But still the question of “Why?” remains less than wholly explained. It can be said that the time was one of prosperity and assurance, that it thought well of itself, and that it was in a mood for literature in the friendly, homespun, sentimental tradition. “Glad” books such as Little Women, Elsie Dinsmore, The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew had already prepared the way for books with sentimental leanings. In any event Kentucky did become remarkably productive of literature that seemed to suit the national taste.

The embarrassing spotlight that muckrakers such as Lincoln Steffens, Ida M. Tarbell, and Upton Sinclair were to shine on American business and politics was to contribute to a new tone in American writing, but it was not till 1902 that the American character and certain burning problems were to be caught in its bright glare; and at that time, as it does now, it took time to write books, get them into print, and affect the national temper. With the second decade the role of Kentucky writers in the national scene declined significantly, though homespun, sugary books continued to make the national best-seller lists. By the time the decade was half gone war clouds appeared, though without radically changing the character of the best-seller lists. By the time World War I was over, the national intellectual climate had altered greatly, and never again would homespun, folksy fiction play the role to which it had for a while been accustomed. Of the writers on the Kentucky scene at the turn of the century, only James Lane Allen and Mrs. George Madden Martin seem to have attempted to come to grips with the intellectual, social, and moral challenges of the day, but as it happened, their best work was already behind them. On the other hand, Virginia Cary Hudson was to become a national best-seller sensation posthumously (1962) with the O Ye Jigs and Juleps she had written as a girl. Eleanor Mercein Kelly was to strike out in new, fresh fashion with such novels as Kildares of Storm and Basquerie. Elizabeth Madox Roberts, returning to her native Springfield, was to face significantly into the future and become one of the greatest writers the Commonwealth

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has produced. Withal, these years constitute a remarkable phenomenon in Kentucky's literary history.