

Albion Winegar Tourgée. *Bricks Without Straw: A Novel.* Edited by Carolyn L. Karcher. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. 450 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4413-1.



Reviewed by Miriam Farris

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Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason (Brigham Young University)

Historians and literary scholars are turning to the life and letters of Albion W. Tourgée (1838-1905) as early sources of social history on the Reconstruction era. Carolyn L. Karcher, professor emerita of English at Temple University, finds in the novel *Bricks Without Straw* (1880) “Tourgée’s revisionist history of Reconstruction” (p. 40). Although Tourgée wrote about the current events surrounding him in the postbellum South, the author aimed to revise historical narrative, literary tropes, and racial stereotypes even as they were developing in nineteenth-century American popular culture. Indeed, Tourgée’s revisionist writing also offers fresh material to present-day scholars who are already schooled in the significance of bottom-up history and popular, historical fiction. Recognizing the conceptual and artistic merits of Tourgée’s fiction, Karcher has provided readers with a thorough introduction and more than one hundred annotations in the new edition of *Bricks Without Straw*, published by Duke University Press in 2009.

Other recent scholarship on Tourgée includes a biography by historian Mark Elliott entitled *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourgée and the Quest for Racial Equality from The Civil War to Plessy v. Ferguson* (2006). Like Karcher, Elliott presents Tourgée as a dynamic political figure who anticipated social history, as well as the civil rights movement, by a century. Both Karcher and Elliott owe much to the scholarship of Otto H. Olsen, whose biography, *Carpetbagger’s Crusade: The Life of Albion Winegar Tourgée*, was published in 1965. Four years later, *Bricks Without Straw* was reprinted by Louisiana State University Press with Olsen’s introduction. Olsen did much to resurrect Tourgée’s fiction from the tombs of literary history, but Karcher’s edition carries the promise to truly resuscitate *Bricks Without Straw* as a novel worth studying.

Practically speaking, students and scholars may now discover the novel without having previous familiarity with the book, whereas prior to Karcher’s edition, one had to seek out an out-of-print copy in the library or on the Internet, as was

the case for the reviewer when she began her research several years ago. Karcher's hope, no doubt, is that scholars will be able to acquire the novel with greater ease, and that students will be assigned *Bricks Without Straw* with greater intentionality. With the help of Karcher's introduction and annotations, readers will also understand *Bricks Without Straw* within the historical context of Reconstruction and Tourgée's prolific career, thus facilitating an enhanced appreciation of novel. Karcher's edition lends itself to study rather than leisure reading; the pages have generous margins for note-taking, but the overall size of the book is rather bulky, in fact two inches longer and one-and-a-half inches wider than the original edition. Regrettably, the pagination differs between the original, LSU, and Duke editions. Nevertheless, the reading experience is rectified by the additional content Karcher provides about Tourgée's life and letters.

Tourgée grew up in the Western Reserve, surrounded by abolitionists whose New England roots influenced the cultural identity of free labor in the greater North and West. As a proponent of free labor, Tourgée never regarded slavery as a legitimate economic system, but he did not become an "advocate of racial equality" until the Civil War, when fugitive slaves joined him to fight in the Ohio 105th Volunteer Infantry (p. 6). During his tenure as a Union soldier, Tourgée also spent time in a Confederate prison, where his sympathy for southern poor whites was kindled. After the war, Tourgée advocated for both freedmen and poor whites, locally in North Carolina, and nationally through the legislative process. In 1865, Tourgée moved with his family to Greensboro, where his political career included roles as an attorney, journalist, Union League officer, businessman, judge of the State Superior Court (1868-74), and perhaps most significantly, the primary author of the 1868 North Carolina State Constitution. When his active political career was supplanted by the "redeemer" state government in 1874,

Tourgée took to writing in the hopes that fiction might influence the hearts and minds of northern readers, whom he believed had abandoned the cause of Reconstruction in the South.

Although the 1868 constitutional convention presented landmark change for Reconstruction in North Carolina, the "reign of terror" that ensued immediately thereafter by the Ku Klux Klan proved to thwart progress for African Americans and poor whites. The Klan murdered two of Tourgée's closest political allies, Wyatt Outlaw and John W. Stephens, and threatened Tourgée's life many times over. However, Tourgée managed to remain in the Piedmont until 1879, the same year his earlier and better-known novel, *A Fool's Errand*, was published. *A Fool's Errand* dramatizes Klan violence at length and in great detail, portraying the victimization of African Americans by white supremacists. *Bricks Without Straw* also includes Klan violence; but as Karcher notes, the novel "restricts the Klan to a single, albeit devastating, episode in its dramatization of Black Reconstruction," which is characterized by freed people acting as "agents in a struggle for self-determination" (p. 30). Karcher suggests that, as "active agents," the African American characters in *Bricks Without Straw* provide a revision of other fictional portrayals of freed people found in the body of white-authored Reconstruction fiction.

Competing fictional portrayals of African Americans included Joel Chandler Harris's *Nights With Uncle Remus* (1883), featuring the loyal slave-turned-storyteller who, like his white master, expresses nostalgia for "better times" before the war. Minstrel shows also abounded both before and after the Civil War in all parts of the United States. The more racially damaging depictions of black men as rapists would emerge two decades later with the publication of Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865-1900* (1902). In contrast, the African American characters in *Bricks Without Straw* represent the complicated circum-

stances in which four million former slaves found themselves at the close of the Civil War: in need of, and striving for, economic independence, education, and political rights.

Tourgée aspired to literary realism, causing him to use dialect for his African American characters, whose plot dominates the first two-thirds of *Bricks Without Straw*. The leaders of the black community, which is called Red Wing, includes Nimbus Ware, the proprietor of an economically lucrative tobacco farm, and Eliab Hill, Nimbus's lifelong friend who is preacher and teacher of Red Wing's inhabitants. Aside from a white Yankee schoolteacher, named Mollie Ainslie, Red Wing is entirely independent of aid or rule by whites. Red Wing's *agency* flourishes as long as racial violence by white supremacists is kept at bay. Symbolically, once the Klan terrorizes Red Wing, the novel's plot shifts to the white characters. At their greatest time of need, freed people are eclipsed by the sectional romance between white southerners and northerners. In the case of *Bricks Without Straw*, a romance ignites between the Yankee Mollie and the Confederate veteran Hesden Le Moyne. *Bricks Without Straw* provides a remarkable twist on the sectional romance plot, a literary genre that Nina Silber analyzes in *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (1993). The historical impact of sectional reconciliation, to the detriment of African American rights, receives comprehensive examination in David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001).

At the risk of collapsing fiction with historical circumstances, Karcher clarifies, "A vast body of first-rate revisionist scholarship on Reconstruction now validates Tourgée's representations of the era in *Bricks Without Straw* and *A Fool's Errand* as extraordinarily true to life" (p. 51). Indeed, present-day scholars find African American agency amidst the volumes of historical evidence which otherwise would be (and have been) interpreted as the failure to secure civil rights for for-

mer slaves during the Reconstruction period. While "agency" is fraught with theoretical and political questions, as Walter Johnson has recently explicated in the *Journal of Social History* (vol. 37, Fall 2003), scholars of Tourgée will discover that imagined agency is as critical for the author's reconstruction campaign through literature.

In an essay entitled "The South as a Field for Fiction" (1888), Tourgée claims that the "romantic possibility" of reconstructing the American imagination "appealed to him even more vividly than [Reconstruction's] political difficulty." [1] Tourgée recognized that political change alone could not cure racism in the United States; therefore, he expanded his methods of reform, which challenged the authority of historical narrative itself. "Fiction is the handmaid of Truth," Tourgée writes in the preface to his novel *Hot Plowshares* (1883), "Imagination is almost always the forerunner of fact.... [Fiction] fills out the outlines History gives, and colors and completes its pictures. It shows what manner of men they were who wrought its great events. It vivifies the past of which History only furnishes the record." [2] In challenging History, Tourgée anticipates the influence of the Dunning school in shaping the historiography of Reconstruction, which helped to seal the "types" of carpetbagger, scalawag, southern gentleman, poor white, and freedman in the American imagination. In a broader theoretical paradigm, Tourgée suggests that historical narratives are crafted just as novels are.

However limited African American agency was during Reconstruction, historical evidence proves that former slaves were able to attain some level of independence, even in the face of oppression. Karcher deduces that, in Tourgée's estimation, education would "accomplish in the long run the racial uplift that Reconstruction failed to secure by legislative means" (p. 44). Karcher may have come to this conclusion because, in her words, "Historians consider education to have been the most successful aspect of the

Reconstruction program” (p. 436, note 28). Education was indeed a cornerstone of freedom for former slaves, but arguably it was equally important as land ownership and voting rights for freedmen. That the black protagonist in *Bricks Without Straw* is a successful and independent tobacco farmer certainly indicates Tourgée’s emphasis on agency—real or imagined—exhibited in freedmen’s land ownership. One recent example of revisionist history on African American land ownership is Sharon Ann Holt’s *Making Freedom Pay: North Carolina Freedpeople Working for Themselves, 1865-1900* (2000). Linking *Bricks Without Straw* with historical events and circumstances presents both an opportunity for new scholarship and a dilemma for interdisciplinary studies. How do students of both literature and history analyze historical fiction by a political writer? The answer should prove to be interesting and provocative in both the classroom and in print.

Notes

[1]. Albion W. Tourgée, “The South as a Field for Fiction,” *Forum* 6 (Dec. 1888). Reprinted in *Southern Studies* 17, no. 4 (1978): 401.

[2]. Albion W. Tourgée, *Hot Plowshares* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1883), 1-2.

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