

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain, whose literary achievements this number of the Journal of the Central Mississippi Valley American Studies Association memorializes, a scant fifty years ago was regarded in all respectable literary quarters as a clever humorist but not quite a gentleman--culturally naive and aesthetically malformed. I recall that as late as 1923, after undertaking to do a master's thesis under the direction of the late Killis Campbell, when I told another one of my professors (European born, educated, and cultivated) about my decision, he struck his forehead with clenched fist in a gesture of surprised consternation and expostulated, "My God! How can you waste your time on such a boor?" He had read Innocents Abroad; he read no more; he never got over it. To deem Mark Twain worthy of scholarly attention (even for an M. A. essay), to put him in the company of the urbane Longfellow, the saintly Whittier, the witty Holmes, suave Lowell, and aloof Emerson, seemed little short of sacrilegious to the inheritors of gentility.

Today seasoned scholars and astute critics--Henry Nash Smith, for example--take Innocents Abroad quite seriously as an artistic work, as deserving of critical attention as are Henry James' more involved and sophisticated "cosmopolitan" novels,--even to finding a study of such matters of technique as point-of-view in Mark Twain's books as interesting and rewarding as James' later refinements. And writers as various as Sherwood Anderson, Rudyard Kipling, and Ernest Hemingway freely admit their indebtedness to Mark Twain, the last declaring that all modern American literature starts with Huckleberry Finn, a book once banned from high-school libraries.

Since 1960 marks the 125th anniversary of Mark Twain's birth and the 50th anniversary of his death, a half dozen memorial convocations and conferences have been held, and as many more are scheduled for this fall. I have myself participated in four such affairs--one in Mark Twain's native state of Missouri, where admirers of Mark Twain, to make sure they would be the first to commemorate the double anniversary, held a week-long session in June of 1959. A number of special issues of magazines as well as learned journals, including this one, honor him. On my desk, waiting to be reviewed, lie five volumes dealing with Mark Twain; and as I consider the editorial work that I do for one of our professional journals, I estimate that, in terms of the number of articles submitted for publication, Mark Twain follows hard upon Henry James, Hawthorne, and Melville. In short, he holds today a secure place in the very best of American literary company--something he did not live long enough to experience, or even to think possible, except for the assurances of friends like George Washington Cable and William Dean Howells, who obviously made a better appraisal of his literary worth than he himself could or dared make.

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