

1963

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Recommended Citation

Webb, James W. (1963) "Irwin Russell's Position in Southern Literature," *Studies in English*: Vol. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol4/iss1/7

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IRWIN RUSSELL'S POSITION IN SOUTHERN LITERATURE

by James Wilson Webb

Irwin Russell was born in Port Gibson, Mississippi, on June 3, 1853. His father was a physician and his mother a teacher in the Port Gibson Female College. Despite the fact that at the age of two he injured an eye, he was able to read easily at four years of age. Two years later he was reading from the works of John Milton. About this time the family moved to St. Louis, but sympathy for the southern cause brought them back to Port Gibson, the war, and the reconstruction. His formal education was completed with distinction at the University of St. Louis. In the meantime he tried writing; and like a number of other southern writers before and after the war, he aspired to be a lawyer. Thereupon he entered the office of Judge L. N. Baldwin as an apprentice; and later, by special act of the Mississippi legislature, he was admitted to the bar at the age of nineteen. Soon beset by wanderlust, Russell went to New Orleans and then to Texas. After a brief period of travel he came back to Port Gibson and seriously began to write.

With the encouragement of Henry C. Bunner, who was then editor of *Puck*, and Richard Watson Gilder and Underwood Johnson of the staff of *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*, along with the good wishes of his father, Russell determined to enter a literary career in New York. Before leaving Port Gibson, he had already made a reputation for himself by having published the following items in *Scribner's Monthly*: "Uncle Cap Interviewed," January, 1876; "Half Way Doin's," April, 1876; "Nebuchadnezzar," June, 1876; "Precepts at Parting," September, 1876; "The Old Hostler's Experience," November, 1876; "The Mississippi Witness," December,

1876; "Novern People," January, 1877; "Mahsr John," May, 1877; "The First Client," August, 1877; "Christmas Night in the Quarters," January, 1878; "Irish Eclipse," May, 1878; "Opinions of Captain Delacy," August, 1878; "The Hysteriad," September, 1878; and one prose piece, "The Fools of Killoogue," October, 1878. The list includes his best poems. Prose works also appeared in northern magazines during this period. In *Popular Science Monthly*, July, 1876, appeared his "Of the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Sciences"; and in *St. Nicholas*, his "Sam's Four Bits," August, 1876; "On the Ice," March, 1877; and "Sam's Birthday," May, 1878.

Russell arrived in New York City in January, 1879, with every indication of a literary success. His friend, Charles C. Marble, says that

Russell lived in New York about six months, from January to July 1879. He loitered at old bookstalls and snatched many a delight from the exposed stores. Only Charles Lamb, with his quiet tastes after his emancipation from the India House, when, as he expressed it, he was "Retired Leisure," got more from them. Especially was everything old sought by him: old prints, of which he was critically fond; black-letter volumes, for he was a connoisseur in printing, recognizing at a glance the various types used in book making.¹

He soon became a featured writer in the "Bric-A-Brac" section of *Scribner's Monthly*. Gilder and Johnson evidently saw in Russell great possibilities. The policies of the *Scribner's Monthly Magazine* during the period of reconstruction and immediately afterward favored those who wrote without malice or sectionalism. The South, filled with picturesque scenes and various dialects, produced a rich vein of local color material—Harris's Georgia Cracker, Cable's Louisiana Creole, and Russell's Mississippi Negro. Russell, Harris, and Page portrayed the Negro character and dialect in their contributions to *Scribner's Monthly*. Their stories were relatively free of propaganda. They presented the Negro character with his philosophy in colorful settings. Gilder, through his magazine,

¹Charles C. Marble, "Irwin Russell," *The Critic*, X (November, 1888), 214.

made certain that his contributors were thoroughly American and not sectional in their literary productions.

Scribner's thus exercised a dominant selective influence which shaped the output of Southern writers in patterns of reconciliation. There was no truckling to the contentious partisan who endeavored to keep alive the belligerence of the past. *Scribner's* was firmly Northern and even mildly Republican in its major political tenets. The Southerner who was admitted to its columns, as one of its editors stated, was "tacitly barred from any expression of the old hostility." He was also "Softened in Spirit" by the gratitude of being sponsored by a magazine which more than any other in the United States could start an author well along the road which led to success. Lanier, Harris, Johnston, Cable, Smith, Russell, Edwards, Grace King, and Ruby McEnery Stuart, were all "discoveries" of *Scribner's* and *Century*. They owed to it such recognition as they received, constant encouragement, and liberal financial remuneration. Needless to say their fiction was in complete harmony with the magazine's policy of "standing against sectionalism and for the Union."²

Indeed, the history of the New South may be said to have had its beginnings in the 1870's; and as evidenced by the work of such editors as Bunner, Johnson, and Gilder and contributors such as Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page, southern literature also had its beginnings. Professor C. Alphonso Smith has given southern literature a definite date and identification as a subdivision of American literature by writing that

The year 1870 marks an epoch in the history of the South. It witnessed not only the death of Robert E. Lee but the passing also of John Pendleton Kennedy, George Denison Prentice, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, and William Gilmore

²Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), p. 222.

Simms. In literature it was not only the end of the old but the beginning of the new, for in 1870 the new movement in Southern literature may be said to have been inaugurated in the work of Irwin Russell.³

Russell's contributions to *Scribner's Monthly* after he arrived in New York were as follows: "Sermon for the Sisters," April 1879; "Hope," June, 1879; "Studies in Style," July, 1879; "Nelly," August, 1879; "Larry's on the Force," August, 1879; "Her Conquest," October, 1879; and "Along the Line," November, 1879. Even after he left New York and after his death on December 23, 1879, the following appeared in *Scribner's*: "The Polyphone," February, 1880; "The Romaunt of Sir Kuss," March, 1880; "Rev. Henry's War Song," March, 1880; "An Exchange," March, 1880; "Cosmos," March, 1880; "A Practical Young Woman," July, 1880; and "The Knight and the Squire," December, 1880. H. C. Bunner's poem entitled "To Irwin Russell" appeared in *Scribner's*, March, 1880.

"Christmas Night in the Quarters" alone has assured Russell a significant position in literature. By placing the Negro character and his dialect in a central position in his poetry, Russell clearly indicated their importance as literary material. To use the words of Stark Young, he was "the first to represent in convincing form the literary possibilities of the Negro."⁴ In "Christmas Night in the Quarters" all of the characters are Negroes drawn from life. Brudder Brown, Aunt Cassy, Georgy Sam, and Fiddlin' Josey were servants on the Jeffries plantation, "Greenwood," a few miles east of Port Gibson, Mississippi. The "quarters" on the Christmas night described is completely a Negro's world.⁵ The poem, which consists of small units, combines the features of character studies of several Negroes with a series of striking plantation scenes. From the first section of the poem, which serves as an introduction, one learns that

³C. Alphonso Smith, "The Historical Element in Recent Southern Literature," *Publication of Mississippi Historical Society*, II (1899), 7.

⁴Stark Young, *A Southern Treasury of Life and Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, c. 1937), p. 90.

⁵According to Mrs. Maggie Williams Musgrove, Irwin Russell did look in on such an occasion in the quarters while visiting in the home of the Jeffries family. He then went back to his room and wrote most of the poem before going to sleep. This information was given to this writer by Mrs. Musgrove who as a young girl knew Irwin Russell. In fact, Russell often visited in the Williams home.



IRWIN RUSSELL, 1853 - 1879

At Uncle Johnny Booker's ball
 The darkies hold high carnival.
 From all the country-side they throng,
 With laughter, shouts and scraps of song,—
 Their whole department plainly showing
 That to the Frolic they are going.⁶

After the various characters have moved out on the dance floor, Brudder Brown is asked to "Beg a blessin' on dis dance." He begins his invocation with the following words:

O Mahsr! let dis gath'rin' fin' a blessin' in yo'
 sight!
 Don't jedge us hard fur what we does—you know
 it's Chrismus-night;
 An' all de balunce ob de yeah we does as right's
 we kin.
 Ef dancin's wrong, O Mahsr! let de time excuse
 de sin!⁷

Then Fiddlin' Josey begins a tune and they dance until exhausted. The fiddle is then dismissed and Johnny Booker is called on for a story. His account of the first banjo is told in epic narrative style.

The structure of the poem reminds one of Burn's "Jolly Beggars" and "The Cotter's Saturday Night," although the characters and setting are very definitely localized in Mississippi and in the vicinity of the Mississippi River.

"Dar's gwine to be a 'oberflow," said Noah,
 lookin' solemn—
 Fur Noah tuk the "Herald," an' he read de ribber
 column—
 An' so he sot his hands to wuk a-clarin' timber
 patches,
 And 'lowed he's gwine to build a boat to beat
 the steamah *Natchez*.⁸

⁶"Christmas Night in the Quarters," *Poems by Irwin Russell* (New York: The Century Company, c. 1888), p. 1. This poem was first published in *Scribner's Monthly Magazine*, XV (January, 1878), 445-448.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

In addition to giving actual names, Russell makes extensive use of the unreconstructed Negro's speech patterns, his sententious remarks made humorous with malapropisms and dialect, his adeptness in rationalizing his chicken stealing and other forms of petty thievery, his loyalty to his former master, his good natured exuberance, and his awe of the police office and the law. Russell does not let the old Negro's ability to flatter go unnoticed, even as he is about to cheat a cotton buyer by concealing rocks in a bale of cotton.

. . . I alluz tells the people, white an' black,
 Dat you's a r'al gen'l'man, and dat's de libin' fac'—
 Yes, sah, dat's what I tells 'em, an' it's nuffin else
 but true,
 An' all de cullud people thinks a mighty heap
 of you.⁹

All of these things have subsequently served to enrich American literature.

Russell's early death, however, prevented him from exploiting this vein of local color material to the fullest extent; nevertheless, his work prompted others to go on with it. In more recent years one finds essentially the same kind of treatment of Negro material in the work of Roark Bradford and Paul Green. According to Joel Chandler Harris, it was Russell who "was among the first—if not the very first—of Southern writers to appreciate the literary possibilities of the negro character, and of the unique relations existing between the two races before the war, and was among the first to develop them."¹⁰ When asked on one occasion whether there was any real poetry in the Negro character, Russell replied enthusiastically:

I tell you it is inexhaustible. The Southern Negro has only just so much civilization as his contact with the white man has given him. He has been only indirectly influenced by the discoveries of science, the inventions of human ingenuity and the general progress of mankind . . . and yet he has often manifested a foresight and wisdom in practical matters worthy of the higher

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. ix.

racess. You may call it instinct, imitation, what you will; it has nevertheless a foundation. I am a Democrat, was a rebel, but I have long since felt that the Negro, even in his submission and servitude, was conscious of his higher nature and must some day assert it.¹¹

On another occasion, Russell stated that he had lived long enough with Negroes and long enough away from them to appreciate their peculiarities, to "understand their character, disposition, language, customs, and habits."¹² Unmistakably, he was a conscious artist. He was aware of the differences from area to area within the South and spoke of the dialect of his section, Port Gibson, Mississippi, and compared it to dialects of other sections. In a letter to a friend he calls attention to the distinct character of two different dialects in the South. He says

That which obtains in the Southwest is the "Virginia" form, which is totally different from the one used in South Carolina, eastern Georgia, Florida, etc. The latter resembles the dark language of the British West Indies. The different regions were supplied with slaves from different parts of Africa, which accounts for the difference in dialect. There is a colored man here, who is from Charleston, at whom the other negroes laugh, because he talks "Souf C'lina," he says "him" for "it" and "dead" for to "die."¹³

Some of Russell's chief faults are inconsistencies of spelling, even within the same line (*de* and *the*, *an'* and *and*, *whut* and *what*, *sah* and *sar*, etc.), and he frequently makes use of eye-dialect, misspellings that pronounce the same as correct spellings.

In commenting on Russell's dialect, Joel Chandler Harris noted that

The most wonderful thing about the dialect poetry of IRWIN RUSSELL is his accurate conception of the negro character. The dialect is

¹¹Marble, "Irwin Russell," p. 214.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 200.

not always the best,—it is often carelessly written,—but the negro is there, the old-fashioned, unadulterated negro, who is still dear to the Southern heart.¹⁴

Dr. Alphonso Smith has said that Russell's "dialect, both in its grammar and in its rhetoric, is an improvement on everything that preceded it."¹⁵ His use of dialect should establish him as one of the monuments in the literary field of Negro dialect and Negro character writing. Professor Alfred Allen Kern has said: "It is his distinction to have discovered not only a new literary form—the negro-dialect poem—but also a new literary field—that of negro life—which has since been the most widely cultivated of all fields in Southern literature."¹⁶

Russell's genius began to wane after he had been in New York for a short time. This decline was partially due to his wretched experiences in the Port Gibson yellow fever epidemic prior to his leaving for New York. Most of his poems after this period betray a note of sadness; the humorous touches in his earlier poems are lacking. No doubt the fact that he had removed himself from his native sources had something to do with this absence of humor. He was too remote from his source of material. Fred Lewis Pattee commented about Russell:

To him poetry meant something not esoteric and idealized, but something that lay very close to the life of every day, something redolent of humanity, like Burns's songs. He maintained that his own inspiration had come not at all from other poets, but from actual contact with the material that he made use of.¹⁷

Dr. Russell, Irwin Russell's father, died in April, 1879. Russell, far from home, became sad and homesick. His health began to fail and nostalgia clouded his brain. He was sick for many weeks and was cared for by Bunner and Johnson. After partially recov-

¹⁴*Poems of Russell*, pp. x-xi.

¹⁵Alphonso Smith, "Dialect Writers," *Cambridge History of American Literature*, William P. Trent and others, eds. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), II, 354.

¹⁶Alfred Allen Kern, "Irwin Russell," *Library of Southern Literature*, J. C. Harris and R. A. Alderman, eds. (Atlanta, Georgia: Martin & Hoyt Company, 1907), X, 5606.

¹⁷Fred Lewis Pattee, *A History of American Literature Since 1870* (New York: The Century Company, 1921), p. 280.

ering his health, he secured a place as a coal heaver below decks on the freighter, *Knickerbocker*, and reached New Orleans during the latter part of August, 1879. Upon arrival in the city he was black, dirty, and without money and friends. He immediately set out to find employment.

I wrote out some stuff—an account of the trip, I believe—and signing my own name to it, took it to the office of the *New Orleans Times*. The City editor, Maj. Robinson, took my copy, looked me over as if he wondered how such a dirty wretch ever got hold of it, and asked me how I came by it. I told him that I had traveled south on the ship with Mr. Russell, and that he had sent me. “Go back and tell Mr. Russell that I would be pleased to see him” said the Major and I did so. I could not present myself again at the *Times* office, so I left a letter there, telling the whole truth, and winding up thus: “What a time I had in that den of a fireman’s forecandle, living on tainted meat and genuine Mark Twain ‘Slumgullion,’ I won’t try to tell you. I only tell you all this to make you understand why I did not let you know I was my own messenger last night. I never was in such a state before in all my life, and was ashamed to make myself known. However, needs must when the devil drives. I suppose I am not the only sufferer from Penurge’s disease, lack o’ money, but it is hard to smoke the pipe of contentment when you can’t get tobacco.”¹⁸

Russell’s experiences are described in “Fulton’s Seaman,” his first contribution to the *New Orleans Times*, August 24, 1879. This piece was instrumental in getting him a place on the staff of the *Times*, later known as the *Times Picayune*.

Immediately after Dr. Russell’s death, Irwin’s mother and sisters had gone to California—not realizing young Irwin’s condition.

¹⁸William Malone Baskerville, *Southern Writers: Biographical and Critical Studies* (Nashville, Tennessee: Methodist Church Publishing House, 1902), I, 35-36.

Life was now running low for the young writer. His last poem, "The Cemetery," was published in the *New Orleans Times* ten days before his death. Strange to say, he did not appeal to members of his family or to friends in Port Gibson—many of whom would no doubt have come to his assistance if they had known his predicament. Pride and sensitive temperament kept him struggling alone and living in a cheap boarding house of an Irish woman on 73 Franklin Street. She did what she could for him, but liquor and exposure had done their worst for his frail body and he was too weak to recover. Letters came from his mother and sweetheart but were too late. His landlady is said to have written a full account of Russell's death to his family, but the contents were never revealed. He died on December 23, 1879. His body was first interred in New Orleans and later moved to Bellefontaine Cemetery in St. Louis.

From 1879 until 1888, Irwin Russell was almost forgotten. In 1888 a small collection of poems with a preface by Joel Chandler Harris was published by friends. During the same year Russell's cousin and close friend, Charles C. Marble, contributed an excellent biographical sketch to *The Critic*, which came out in the October and November issues. The October number also published a review of the 1888 edition of Russell's poems. In 1907, a tribute to the poet's memory was paid by the school teachers of Mississippi. They had a bust made of him which was placed in the Hall of Fame in the capitol building in Jackson, Mississippi. It has since been placed in one of the rooms of the Old Capitol, now restored as a museum. It is a particularly fine piece of work done by Elsie Herring, a pupil of Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

In 1917, Professor Maurice Garland Fulton, with the help of Mrs. J. M. Taylor, published a more complete edition of Russell's poems which includes a biographical sketch of the poet.¹⁹

Today Russell is remembered largely for his "Christmas Night in the Quarters." Though he was the first to realize the value of the Negro as a literary character, his untimely death prevented his giving a more complete treatment of him. In his own time, Joel Chandler Harris was of the opinion that he did not know where "a

¹⁹Irwin Russell, *Christmas Night in the Quarters and Other Poems*, with an introduction by Joel Chandler Harris and an historical sketch by Maurice Garland Fulton (New York: The Century Company, 1917).

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happier or more perfect representation of negro character could be found.”²⁰ Harris, Page, and others further exploited Russell’s vein of literary material and in so doing contributed significantly toward the establishment of the literature of the New South.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. xi.