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Dime Novels

By: **Colin T. Ramsey** and Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola

Abstract

At the end of John Ford's 1962 Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a persistent reporter, having just heard the truth about who actually shot the notorious murderer, wads up his notes and tosses them in the trash. His explanation is simple: "This is the West," he remarks matter-of-factly; "when the legend becomes fact, print the legend." The film thus sums up the long and entangled history of the American West and the printed word; and, until the advent of film at the beginning of the twentieth century, no print medium played a bigger role in the creation of the West as a place of legend than the dime novel. Indeed, the dime novel's preference for "legend" over fact was visible even to some who themselves became a focus of the dime novels' legend-making.

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Dime Novels

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At the end of John Ford's 1962 Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a persistent reporter, having just heard the truth about who actually shot the notorious murderer, wads up his notes and tosses them in the trash. His explanation is simple: "This is the West," he remarks matter-of-factly; "when the legend becomes fact, print the legend." The film thus sums up the long and entangled history of the American West and the printed word; and, until the advent of film at the beginning of the twentieth century, no print medium played a bigger role in the creation of the West as a place of legend than the dime novel. Indeed, the dime novel's preference for "legend" over fact was visible even to some who themselves became a focus of the dime novels' legend-making. For instance, in his *Autobiography*, Kit Carson relates the story of his 1849 pursuit of a band of Jicarilla Apaches who had killed a man named James White and captured his wife along the Santa Fe Trail. News of the attack quickly reached a nearby cavalry garrison, and Carson was hired to help track down the raiding party. They caught up with the Apaches, but the soldiers ignored Carson's advice to charge the camp. The Apaches then promptly killed Mrs. White and escaped. Carson describes the scene this way:

The body of Mrs. White was found, perfectly warm . . . shot through with an arrow. . . . In the camp was found a book, the first of the kind that I had ever seen, in which I was made a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundreds, and I have often thought that Mrs. White would read the same and, knowing that I lived near, she would pray for my appearance that she might be saved. (Quoted in McMurtry 2001: 20)

The sight of the book prompts Carson, apparently surprised at his own fictional celebrity, to muse about the difference between the factual West of his own experience and the legendary West already being created around him in print. As Larry McMurtry writes, at this moment "real life and the dime novel smacked into each other" (2001: 20).

Precursors of the Dime Novel

It is interesting that Carson says the book was “the first of the kind that I had ever seen,” thus placing it in an identifiable category easily recognized by his readers: a cheap “Western” in which certain features of plot and character are standardized, predictable, and highly violent. That is, he is describing a typical dime novel. But there is one problem in the scene: Carson’s dates don’t add up. His search for Mrs. White took place in 1849, but the first true dime novel, *Malaeska; The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, did not appear until 1860, more than a decade after Mrs. White’s death. She couldn’t have had a dime novel in her possession.

This inconsistency reveals that the dime novel form is more complex than we might first assume. Though cheap paper-backed fiction had begun to appear as early as the 1830s, the dime novels’ nearest precursors were the story papers of the 1840s and early 1850s. These were eight-page weekly newspapers, containing several serialized stories in each number, as well as small amounts of humor, correspondence, and similar miscellaneous items (Denning 1998: 10). Aside from their cheapness, the story papers shared with the later dime novels their sensational and sometimes violent content. Carson was himself featured as a central character in some of the story papers of the late 1840s, and, despite the fact that he calls what he found a “book,” it is certainly possible that it was a story paper he discovered next to Mrs. White’s body. Furthermore, the story papers’ newspaper format made them, like the later dime novels, cheap enough to be affordable even to a pioneer family.



Figure 23.1 Title-page of Ann Stephens’ *Malaeska; The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, as reissued by Beadle in 1860.

In any case, the story papers achieved an extremely wide circulation by the 1850s, numbering into the hundreds of thousands, and, though they certainly contained Western stories with violent plots, they also featured other serials to broaden their appeal to an entire family. Each issue would typically include several different narratives from various genres, including sea stories, historical romances, domestic romances, and of course, Westerns (Denning 1998; Johannsen 1950). Indeed, the story papers' use of multiple generic styles to appeal to a broad audience was adopted by the first true dime novels of the 1860s.

Another precursor of the dime novels was the pamphlet novel of the 1830s and 1840s. These texts, like the story papers, also sold quite well, until increased postal rates put them out of business in 1849 (Denning 1998). Pamphlet novels were also larger than the later dimes, at about six by eight inches, and they were shorter, at roughly fifty pages. Though some cost as little as twelve and a half cents, the more typical cost of pamphlet novels was twenty-five cents or more. The difference in cost may seem inconsequential now, but the more expensive pamphlet novels were still beyond the means of many workers when the average laboring wage was only about a dollar per day (LeBlanc 1996: 14).

This brief review of the dime novels' precursors demonstrates that dime novels cannot be understood without considering, in addition to their typical contents, both their distinctive physical form and the contexts of their production and marketing. As Bill Brown puts it, "the dime Western is... a subgenre that is inseparable from its systematic modes of production and distribution" and is "most recognizable by the standardized packaging" (1997: 6). We must therefore see the dime novels of the 1860s both as falling within an already established market tradition of cheap popular fiction and also as a new form of reading matter. Their novelty was defined by their distinctive marketing practices and by their peculiar mode of rapid, almost industrial production, a system that resulted in generally standardized content.

Packaging and Marketing

In 1860 Beadle & Adams, a former publisher of cheap song and etiquette books, put out *Malaeska; The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* as the first title in their new series "Beadle's Dime Novels." Thus the term "dime novel" was, in the beginning, essentially a brand name (Cox 2000: xiii). Beadle & Adams highlighted the price as a definitive component of their new series: both as a selling point in itself, and also as a marker to distinguish Beadle's product in the wider marketplace. These first dime novels measured four inches by six and ran to about 100 pages each. They were paper-bound, and the backs were an unusual salmon color; and of course, each one cost a dime. The "Beadle's Dime Novels" series was an instant success, and the firm brought out a new title about once every two weeks for the next fourteen years, until it replaced the series with "Beadle's New Dime Novels." Though many of these early

dimes had only black-letter text on their covers, fully illustrated covers rapidly became the standard, and they became increasingly lurid as time went on.

Beadle enjoyed such success with its first dime novel series that a number of other publishing houses immediately began putting out their own. For instance, in 1863 Irwin Beadle left his brother Erastus' publishing firm to found a new venture with George Munro, formerly the foreman of Beadle's printing plant. They began putting out "Irwin P. Beadle's Ten Cent Novels" that same year (Cox 2000), though the series became "Munro's Ten Cent Novels" in 1864 during trademark litigation with the original Beadle firm. "Munro's Ten Cent Novels" went on to become the most serious competition for "Beadle's Dime Novels," but the success of the new dime format was such that additional publishers continued to bring out dime novel series of their own, under such titles as "DeWitt's Ten Cent Romances," the Talbot firm's "Ten Cent Novelettes," and so forth.

This rapid proliferation of dime novels in the marketplace led Beadle to offer cheap texts in a new format by the early 1870s in order to stay ahead of the competition. "Beadle's Dime Library" series inaugurated the "library" format: these novels were quartos, about eight by twelve inches, each comprising a single sheet folded four times and then bound and cut to produce a sixteen-page pamphlet of multi-column print. Later, the library format also included octavo pamphlets of thirty-two pages (LeBlanc 1996: 15). Again, other firms soon followed suit, bringing out their own library series. With the revised format, new issues came out even more frequently, often weekly, and prices continued to drop. In the late 1870s Beadle created its "Half Dime Library" and "Nickel Library." Other firms did likewise, bringing out their own nickel series. These nickel novels, however, unlike their earlier dime counterparts, were aimed primarily at adolescent boys, and they were shorter than the dimes, usually about fifty pages.

Ultimately, the expansion of the market in popular fiction turned the dime novel into a generic term that referred to all cheap fiction with paper covers (Cox 2000: xiv). Moreover, whatever the particular cost, the series format was, from the beginning, a marketing technique designed to create a continuing interest in readers/buyers. As Bill Brown notes, "Lists of other novels in the series were printed in each book, and novels in a series made occasional reference to others." That is, the dime novel publishing houses used the series format to "orchestrate consistency and change, the *effect* of stability and the *effect* of novelty" (1997: 22, emphasis in original). Given the ever-expanding number of titles, new material obviously needed to be rapidly produced. The problem, from a marketing standpoint, was managing to meet such a high production demand without losing the important quality of recognizability for readers.

Content, Production, Authorship

Another of the Beadle firm's marketing innovations provided the solution. In 1877 the "Half Dime Library" introduced the concept of the recurring character with Deadwood

Dick (LeBlanc 1996: 16). An almost instant hit, Deadwood was an outlaw and the leader of a band of rogues. He was thus typically depicted as an appealing anti-hero, though in the later of Beadle's thirty-four issues devoted to him, he functioned as a detective as much as an outlaw. He was also instantly recognizable to readers, who understood that a Deadwood Dick dime would feature a dependable complex of additional recurring characters (such as the sometimes opponent, sometimes love interest Calamity Jane) and a standard set of Western settings and narrative situations. Deadwood proved particularly popular, and other firms quickly picked up and extended the recurring character concept. Indeed, in a move that mimicked the story papers of the 1840s, many dime novelists began to employ recurring fictionalized versions of actual Western personalities, such as "Wild Bill" Hickock and Buffalo Bill Cody, and this intermixture of fact and fiction was reinforced through various other complementary series, such as the "Dime Biographies" of actual Western figures (Brown 1997).

As the use of recurrent characters grew, so did the standardization of narrative situation. Though the first dime novels generally engaged a wide variety of settings and scenes, and tended to emphasize relatively complex characterization and the resolution of long-term conflict, dime novel plots increasingly became vehicles for multiple scenes of violent confrontation (Brown 1997). Understandably, the author's role in creating such similar narratives was not seen as a marketable commodity. Thus, for the most part, dime novels were an anonymously or pseudonymously authored discourse in which trademark characters were marketed more prominently than authors (Denning 1998: 20). Around such characters, unnamed "hack" authors could write any number of new stories. However, a small handful of writers achieved relative notoriety for their dime novels. For instance, the writer who invented Deadwood Dick, Edward Wheeler, became quite well known, and his name became valuable in its own right – indeed, so important was it that when he died Beadle suppressed the information and continued to publish titles under his name for some years. Such suppression, and the substitution of narratives by other authors under Wheeler's name, was possible because, by the early 1870s, dime novel production was taking place on a very nearly industrial scale. The large publishing houses had begun to produce their dime novels in what were, in essence, fiction factories. Bill Brown describes the Beadle firm's vertically arranged William Street office this way: "writers composed stories upstairs; below them, editors blue-penciled offensive language and excess words, artists produced illustrations, and typesetters set type; below them ran the presses" (1997: 27). Naturally, such an industrial system of production tended to further denigrate individual authors' creative impulses in favor of adherence to pre-established formulae, even if the occasional author managed innovation nonetheless.

Ultimately, then, we should see the dime novels as a significantly mass-produced form of reading matter that depended upon a set of nearly interchangeable character types and easily reproducible marketing, and employed quasi-industrial production methods that de-emphasized individual authorship. However, despite these facts, we should not dismiss the form as being uninteresting or assume its readers were unsophisticated.

Two Early Beadle Dime Novels

In her feminist critique of Western novels and films, *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins describes a surprising thematic connection between twentieth-century Western novels and nineteenth-century domestic “sentimental” novels: “The sentimental heroine, always unjustly treated, was forbidden to show her anger; the Western hero, always subject to duress, is forbidden to register his pain. . . . One has to ask why” (1992: 125–7). Why indeed? The similarity Tompkins describes is significant precisely because Westerns and domestic novels appear, intuitively, dissimilar. However, early dime novels, particularly those of the 1860s, followed their story paper predecessors’ inclusion of various genres in order to reach as broad an audience as possible.

A case in point is *Malaeska; The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, by Ann Sophia Stephens, a nineteenth-century magazine editor who was one of the most prolific and popular authors of her day. Like the story papers, *Malaeska* included several stylistic genres, though unlike them, it included this varied content within a single narrative. Stephens’ novel marks a point at which the conventions of the domestic fiction often published in the women’s magazines were welded onto the narrative conventions that would become the mainstay of dime novel Westerns. *Malaeska*, then, is a kind of “missing link” between genteel nineteenth-century sentimental fiction on the one hand, and later “blood-and-thunder” (Durham 1954–5: 34), dime novel Westerns on the other. *Malaeska* suggests that early dime-novel readers did not always restrict their reading to the kinds of novels which twentieth-century critics have designated, as Nina Baym puts it, “by and about women” (1978: 24) or, correspondingly, by and about men. Stephens, after all, had adapted the dime edition of *Malaeska* from her serialized version published in 1839 in the *Ladies’ Companion*.

In fact, the earliest version of *Malaeska* did not even appear as a serial in the *Ladies’ Companion*: it was actually published as “The Jockey Cap” in a single issue of the *Portland Magazine* in April 1836. Stephens had founded the *Portland Magazine* in 1834, and she was the magazine’s sole editor and its most regular contributor until her family moved to New York in 1837. “The Jockey Cap” version of *Malaeska* is unmistakably a Western, although, as in other early examples of the genre, the frontier – the space between European occupation and Indian country, between “civilization” and “savagery” – is not on the high Western plains, but in New England. The story takes place during the early eighteenth century and concerns the interaction between Indians and European settlers living on the border between Maine and New Hampshire near a large hill called the Jockey Cap. Throughout the story, Stephens juxtaposes an emotionally indirect language of manners with blood-soaked description of battles for survival. The result is a sort of tension between the two levels of discourse which is common to Westerns, especially the dime novel variety. In any case, in “The Jockey Cap,” Stephens is quite clearly writing in a genre distinct from the domestic novel.

The main plot of “The Jockey Cap” involves hostilities between Indians and settlers and begins when an Indian fires upon hunter Arthur Jones. Jones kills his attacker and scalps the body. This killing, it appears, will start a war between the settlement and the nearby Indian village. However, another man, Bill Church, decides to travel to the village and prevent the war. Once Church arrives, the reader discovers that he has an Indian wife and child there. Despite his entreaties, the Indians decide to fight, and a terrible battle between the settlement and the Indian village ensues. In the midst of it, the figure of the White Hunter, Bill Church, figures prominently until he encounters his father-in-law, the Indian chief, and they kill each other. In Stephens’ schema, then, Indian and white are completely incompatible. If Stephens has created a sexual relationship between Indians and whites, the union is demonstrably untenable; it can not prevent a “savage” war, and it even causes, at least indirectly, the “savage” death of both Malaeska’s Indian father and her white husband.

The narrative ends after the battle, when Malaeska finds the bodies of her father and husband and buries them together in a single grave. Its conclusion describes Malaeska more or less haunting the area, making baskets for the settlers, but living apart from both them and her tribe. She is thus utterly disinherited; she has no social status, indeed, no social identity, as either Indian or white. Malaeska becomes a tragic figure, surviving the war itself only to be locked in a no-man’s-land between separate and irreconcilable social structures.

Interestingly, it was the disinheritance plot of “The Jockey Cap” that Stephens exploited in her later versions of the tale. By 1839 she had begun writing and editing a women’s magazine called the *Ladies’ Companion*, and she extended the Malaeska story in its pages. The *Ladies’ Companion* version takes the narrative far beyond the point when Malaeska finds her dying husband at the end of the battle, and Stephens here shifts the setting to one more typical of domestic novels, in a kind of “Malaeska takes Manhattan.” In the *Ladies’ Companion* version (which would ultimately become the dime novel version), the hunter, whose name is now Danforth, actually survives long enough to tell Malaeska to find his parents in Manhattan: “find your way to them, and tell them how their son died, and beseech them to cherish you and the boy for his sake” (p. 31).

In many ways, the subsequent development of the story corresponds to the “overplot” of nineteenth-century “women’s fiction” described by Nina Baym: “[Women’s] novels . . . all tell about a young woman who has lost the emotional and financial support of her legal guardians – indeed who is often subject to their abuse and neglect – but who nevertheless goes on to win her way in the world” (1978: 9). Baym continues by noting that such heroines’ “own ways” are typically very humble by modern standards, generally involving only “domestic comfort” and a “social network” (p. 9). Correspondingly, the “overplot” formula of the central female character becoming a de facto orphan is given greater development in the *Ladies’ Companion*/dime novel version of the Malaeska story (although Stephens did revise her *Ladies’* text for Beadle, the narrative remains largely the same in both editions). Also, once Malaeska arrives in Manhattan, her response to the environment underscores her role as a domestic-styled heroine: while she is walking the streets searching for the

house of her husband's parents, passers-by gawk at her because of her Indian appearance. She is humiliated by the staring, but she bears it without complaint with the "delicacy and refinement of civilized life" she had learned "from her husband" (p. 39). The mark of her "good breeding," of her natural aristocratic mien and her lost inheritance, is that she suffers in silence.

Upon reaching the Danforth home, Malaeska is mistreated and emotionally abused by her father-in-law, who is so racist that he demands that she hide from her son the racial reality of his parentage; Malaeska is allowed to stay in the house only as a hired servant. Here again, however, she suffers quietly, even serenely. Furthermore, this sentimental narrative element is echoed in the very language Stephens employs to describe Malaeska's situation: "she was his mother; yet her very existence in that house was held as a reproach. . . . poor Malaeska! hers was a sad, sad life" (p. 48). We are thus invited to feel pity for Malaeska, but also to feel admiration for her strength. Like Ellen Montgomery in the style-defining domestic novel *The Wide, Wide World*, Malaeska suffers in silence, but that silence reveals inner strength.

It is thus revealing that this version was chosen for republication as the first dime novel. When the Beadle editors selected *Malaeska* to launch their new series, they were apparently counting on Stephens' reputation to help boost sales (Mott 1947: 49; Stern 1963: 45). The fact that Beadle & Adams would attempt to capitalize on Stephens' great popularity as a writer for women's magazines suggests that the early dime Westerns did not aim *only* at working-class men and boys, or, at least, that popularity in genteel women's magazines did not preclude popularity with a male working-class readership. Certainly, young Civil War soldiers and even younger teenage boys, as well as loggers and immigrant factory workers in the cities, read the dime novel edition of *Malaeska*; but middle-class women also read it, and, furthermore, they had been reading Stephens' Indian stories in the magazines for some time, apparently enjoying them considerably.

Only a few months after the success of *Malaeska*, Beadle published Edward S. Ellis' first book, *Seth Jones; or the Captives of the Frontier*, as number four in the "Dime Novel" collection. Twenty-year-old Ellis was the schoolteacher son of the famous hunter Sylvester Ellis, and his extensively marketed book launched him on a lucrative writing career lasting until his death in 1916 (Johannsen 1950: 93–6). In 1864 Ellis published *Indian Jim: A Tale of the Minnesota Massacre*. At the time, nothing distinguished it from the other dime Western novels about Indian captivity, except that it did not have the bestselling potential of some of his earlier efforts. However, by that time he had established himself "as the new novelist of the frontier" (Brown 1997: 165), and Minnesota was just another frontier he chose to tackle.

It isn't clear how Ellis became interested in the US–Dakota Conflict, the six-week war fought in 1862 pitting white settlers, the US military, and conciliatory Dakota Indians against groups of militant Dakotas in the recently established state of Minnesota. But the opening up of new territories acquired after the Mexican War, the discovery of gold in California, and the Dakota War itself helped to re-establish "frontier conflict with Native Americans as a central topic in the national

imagination” (Brown 1997: 166). However Ellis came across his information, details in *Indian Jim* indicate that he used historical persons and events to authenticate his novel and to provide the appearance of novelty and currency.

Because *Indian Jim* is not well known today, a brief plot overview is necessary. The book opens in August 1862 (the date the Dakota Conflict actually began) with two cousins, Marian Allondale and Adolphus Halleck, traveling up the Minnesota River to stay with family friends, the Brainerds. Marian and Adolphus are engaged but behave more like friends than lovers. An artist, Adolphus possesses overly romantic notions about Native Americans, while Marian exhibits stereotypically negative views, though she admits that “The *Christian* Indians are somewhat different” (Ellis 1864: 15). Despite the fact that Halleck’s romanticism blinds him, Ellis is careful to tell readers that deep down he is a gentleman (p. 10). This is to validate the amount of space devoted to him and to make his final transformation more credible. The Brainerd family consists of both parents as well as two unmarried children, twenty-one-year-old Will, a wounded Civil War veteran, and seventeen-year-old Maggie, a beautiful and religious young woman. Predictably, during the course of the story, Marian is attracted by the “modest and manly” Will (p. 19), and marries him at the end, while Maggie is attracted by the possibilities of converting the irreligious and irresponsible Adolphus. He, in turn, responds to a related but different sensibility from his own – the spiritual rather than the artistic.

As war breaks out, the family has to leave its homestead, but a friendly Christian Dakota, the Indian Jim of the title, aids them in their flight and serves as a physical and even moral guide. Adolphus’ romanticism, indecisiveness, and inability to interpret events correctly is constantly challenged, especially when Dakotas capture Marian and Maggie. Finally, when Maggie dies at the hands of a vengeful Indian, Adolphus understands the error of his ways and prepares to enter the ministry. This rather abrupt and sentimental plot resolution is typical of dime Westerns. Most of them were one hundred pages long, so Ellis may have rushed his ending to meet the formula length requirement.

The two most important characters in the book are Adolphus Halleck and Indian Jim. Ellis draws on nineteenth-century stereotypes of the impractical, illusion-filled artist and the “good” Indian respectively, yet he also complicates both characters somewhat. Through these opposing characters Ellis continues a dialogue initiated by Fenimore Cooper on reading the landscape, reading human nature, and reading books. In the presence of so much fragmented information, the writers ask, what interpretive guide should be used? While Halleck is the most important character because he changes so fundamentally (perhaps unconvincingly), the text also invites readers to examine their own methods of constructing politics, people, religion, and region. However, ultimately, Ellis issues not so much an invitation as an imperative to use the Bible as the single guidebook in life.

At the beginning, Halleck views the Indians in idealized terms as figures in a wild landscape, and he privileges his role as artist and scholar; that is, he “sees” things artistically but turns a blind eye to whatever does not fit his predetermined views.

This is no White Hunter! He is removed from reality because he is too busy either reading about it or representing it in his art. For example, at several points he withholds or ignores crucial information because it would reinforce the negative characteristics of the Sioux that he refuses to acknowledge. Sometimes his bravado is completely misplaced; at other times, he sketches at morally inappropriate points. Finally, in two clear but heavy-handed tropes, Will lectures his friend on reality versus fancy – “It’s time, ‘Dolph, you gave up those nonsensical ideas, and came to look upon the American Indian as he *is*, and not as your fancy has *painted* him!” – and then, a little later, on plain sight and common sense regarding Indians versus romanticized views that are not self-evident: “You’ll have to provide yourself with a microscope, ‘Dolph, if you wish to discover these phenomena; for, you see, they are not visible to the naked eye” (Ellis 1864: 72, 78; emphasis in original). A little earlier, Adolphus had trouble interpreting information viewed through a telescope; now Will tells him he needs a microscope. Although Ellis introduces Halleck as someone influenced by the nineteenth-century American Romantic painter Albert Bierstadt (pp. 9–10), he may have decided to make his main male character an artist primarily to underscore his flawed *vision*. In other words, Halleck’s being an artist may be just an excuse for a kind of character pun on sight and insight. By the end of the book, Adolphus Halleck abandons one-dimensional artistic representation for deep spiritual truths.

Indian Jim performs a number of functions in the book. At one level, Ellis cannot move beyond stereotypical characteristics; for example, like the presentation of many nonwhites in popular fiction – Indians and African Americans alike – Jim is inarticulate. But two things differentiate Jim from other Sioux in the book: his ability to read signs and his Christianity. Late in the novel, in a remarkable authorial comment, Ellis writes that Adolphus and Will “were hourly in danger of attack and massacre; but under the good providence of God, the skill of Christian Jim saved them. *He detected ‘signs’ constantly*, and, by timely foresight and precaution, avoided discovery” (Ellis 1864: 76, emphasis added). At several points, the narrative conspicuously uses the word “signs” to describe Jim’s and the settlers’ as well as the Dakotas’ attempts to read what is going on (see pp. 77, 80, 83). But Jim’s success in negotiating danger is based not only on sound knowledge of the land but also on the bedrock of Christianity; it is typological and providential. Yet he has to disappear from the novel because, with Maggie’s death, *she* becomes the major Christian sacrificial symbol. And in contrast to Jim, her last words to Adolphus are not just articulate but eloquent: “Yes; seek me – meet me –” (p. 98).

Two other aspects of this dime novel, its literary and historical allusions, suggest more technical skill than is evident in many other examples of the form. Sometimes Ellis is self-consciously literary, for example, when he describes Halleck as having admired the Indians ever since he read Cooper, or when he refers to Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* or to the humorist Artemus Ward (1864: 10, 14, 30). Yet there are also subtler examples of intertextuality that may indicate Ellis’ influences and reading. For instance, while Maggie’s dying words fall into a nineteenth-century sentimental

tradition of saintly characters' final prophetic utterances, they do seem to recall one of the most famous examples, little Eva St. Clare's transcendent death in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Also, after dinner on the evening that Marian and Adolphus arrive at the Brainerd house, the moonlit atmosphere is described as "a fairy veil thrown over the rugged, disproportional outlines" (p. 25). The full passage is several pages long and is reminiscent of Hawthorne's famous definition of romance in the Custom House section of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Both earlier novels were bestselling romances that must have been familiar to the bookish Ellis. Perhaps he was trying to legitimate his own writing by such apparent allusions and by establishing *Indian Jim* within the same genre.

The historical references to the US–Dakota Conflict, however, help to place the novel in the dime Western and historical romance traditions. It is true that many of the references are fleeting, but Ellis inserts them fairly naturally and convincingly within the fabric of the narrative. For example, in discussing Christianized Dakotas, Marian refers to the real-life missionaries Dr. (Thomas) Williamson and Mr. (Stephen) Riggs. And in line with the dime Western's sensationalism as well as the actual reports of Indian atrocities during the war, Ellis describes several whites killed brutally (1864: 90–1). Such accounts, whether true or not, had been extensively reported in the local and national press and had reinforced the call for massive executions after the war was over, even though Abraham Lincoln reduced the number actually hanged to thirty-eight – something also mentioned in *Indian Jim* (p. 71).

In conclusion, what may have made *Malaeska*, *Indian Jim*, and the Western dime novels which followed so enormously popular was that they combined and transformed two very popular narrative types, the frontier tale and the "sentimental" tale. Such stories had great appeal across both gender and class barriers. Indeed, *Malaeska* and *Indian Jim* tend to suggest not only that the broad reading public was willing to read novels which combined the stock characters and narrative formulae of the frontier "Indian" story and the "sentimental" tale – either in women's magazines or as paper-bound dimes – but that they particularly prized such genre transformations, if the popularity of these two novels is any indication. *Malaeska* specifically sold more copies than any other Beadle & Adams dime novel and stands as the only truly "bestselling" dime.

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