

TERRILL'S PURGATORY: FIRST PLAY PRINTED IN OKLAHOMA

By Paul T. Nolan*

Ira N. Terrill's *A Purgatory Made of a Paradise*, a "tragedy in 3 acts, depicting early day scene in Oklahoma" (1907), holds its "first" position in State history on negative grounds. It was neither the first play written in nor copyrighted from Oklahoma. As early as 1889, Mary Isabella Hassin Blackburn, Oklahoma, wrote and copyrighted *The Boomers; The Opening and the Settling of the Cherokee Strip*; and between *The Boomers* and Terrill's dramatic composition, over a half dozen other plays were written in and copyrighted from Oklahoma. Not only were these plays not printed, however; but seemingly all have been lost, a fate that seems certain to have befallen *Purgatory*, too, if Terrill had not given his manuscript to a printer.

Terrill's play is now the earliest extant drama written by a resident of Oklahoma dealing with the Oklahoma scene, but, again, it was not the first play written on an Oklahoma subject. Not only *The Boomers*, but seemingly at least two others—George and Warren Noble's *The Train Wreckers* and J. Frank Guadaris's *Paradise Regained*—used the Oklahoma Territory and State history as the subject matter for its drama.¹

Considering the history of Terrill and his play, however, one is less concerned that *Purgatory* holds "first" honors with qualifications than he is that the play exists at all. Terrill with his actions, both private and public, and with his pen (in and out of prison) made enough enemies in the new Territory so that even as late as 1929, after he had been dead for several years, he was still remembered by one of his contemporaries, Dan W. Peery, as "a wild-eyed, vicious, beastly anarchist."² It should come as no surprise, therefore, that copies of his plays were not treasured. A citizenry unconcerned with preserving such manuscripts as *The Boomers* was not likely to make a place

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¹See article, Paul T. Nolan, "The Boomers: Oklahoma Playwrights Opened the Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XLI (Autumn, 1963), pp. 248-252, for a general coverage of playwrighting activity in Oklahoma from the beginning to World War I.

²Dan W. Peery, "The First Two Years," [Part One], *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. VII, (December, 1929), p. 447.

on its bookshelf for *Purgatory*; and a survey of the public and university libraries of Oklahoma, during the spring of 1964, failed to uncover a single copy of Terrill's "notorious play."

Although Terrill had his play printed, thus making it generally available, today only a single copy of it is known to be in existence. The Library of Congress, which owns this single copy, moreover, seemingly did not keep either of the typed manuscript copies which Terrill first submitted to the United States Copyright Office for protection.³

It is for these several reasons—the historical interest of the play as the first printed dramatic composition of Oklahoma, the fact that the subject matter of the play is taken from events in Oklahoma history, and the general lack of availability of the one extant copy—that the play is here being reviewed. No claims are here made for its worth as literature, nor is any argument intended as to the validity of Terrill's view of the settlement of the Territory. It is, rather, that the play is here presented as an artifact of Oklahoma history which should be of some value as a footnote in the history of the settlement.

I

Ira N. Terrill was, whatever else may be said of him, an interesting minor figure in the early history of the state, a man who attracted strong defenders and attackers. As early as 1890, one state historian, Marion Tuttle Rock, wrote of him:⁴

In nearly all legislative bodies will be found representatives of classical sublimity and honest grandeur. Hon. Ira N. Terrill, Alliance member from Payne County, is one of the latter class. His herculean blows in defense of the people's rights made him one of the most prominent members of the first legislature of the Territory. He was brave and fearless in the defense of any and all principles that he conceived to be just, and whether in the majority or minority was a matter of supreme indifference to him.

Rock, who seems to have been Terrill's first "biographer," knew him well enough to be able to list some of the facts of his life, even those belonging to Terrill's career before his entry into Oklahoma. Rock wrote:⁵

³ *Dramatic Compositions Copyrighted in the United States 1870 to 1916* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Printing Office), 1916, *passim*; and correspondence with the Library of Congress.

⁴ *Illustrated History of Oklahoma* (Topeka, Kansas: C. E. Hamilton & Son Company, 1890), p. 255.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Mr. Terrill first became prominently noticed during the convention called at Guthrie in the summer of 1889 for the purpose of organizing a provisional government of Oklahoma, in which he took a deep interest and active part. He there gave evidence of a sound judgment and honest heart, which he so ably demonstrated in Oklahoma's first legislature. Clark County, Illinois, was his birth-place, an event that occurred April 17th, 1853. He was educated in the schools of his native State, and has devoted his life largely to agricultural pursuits. In 1884 he removed to Sedgwick County, Kansas, where he resided until the wave of civilization swept over Oklahoma, when he took advantage of the tide and landed in Payne County, where he made himself and family a happy home. He was united in marriage in 1874 to Miss E. J. Parsons, of Decatur, Illinois, and they have a family of four children, two sons and two daughters.

Rock's judgement of Terrill's worth, although this was obviously shared by enough of Terrill's neighbors to elect him to public office, seems to have been a "minority report" in Oklahoma. More typical of the general view—although probably more vehemently expressed than most—was that voiced by Dan W. Peery; "It is hard to understand the reason why seemingly intelligent people would elect such a wild-eyed, vicious, beastly anarchist as Ira N. Terrill to the legislature,"⁶ Peery wrote a decade after Terrill's death.

Peery, like Rock, recognized that Terrill possessed qualities that would lead him to success in public affairs; but, unlike Rock, he had a strong conviction that Oklahoma was not the place for such affairs. "It is true," he wrote, "he was rather a cunning talker who always posed as a friend of the people, but a man so crude in his methods that he could never deceive the people a second time. He would have been in his element in one of those anarchist meetings in the notorious 'Hay Market' in Chicago."⁷

Peery's objections to Terrill—which he later justified in terms of Terrill's personal behavior—started first, Peery freely admits, in a political dispute. Terrill, Peery believed, "betrayed" a good cause, the proper placement of the Territorial capital.

But once Terrill had shown himself on the "wrong" side, Peery found additional reasons for his objections. Peery wrote:⁸

The writer remembers distinctly that on one occasion the Hon. W. P. McCartney was a member of the Council from Kingfisher County, and under the rules had a perfect right on the floor of the House. Now Terrill was bitter against McCartney and he arose in his seat and in an angry voice demanded that the speaker should have

⁶The First Two Years" [Part One], p. 447-448.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

McCartney expelled from the floor of the House. The speaker refused to do so, saying that McCartney had the right to a seat on the floor of the House. Terrill became more abusive and finally said that as the speaker would not put McCartney out he would, and raising the top of his desk grabbed a big forty-five and said he would give McCartney just one minute to get out of the House. Just as he placed his gun on the desk, the sergeant-at-arms, J. N. Jerome, stepped up behind him and grabbed the gun from him. If McCartney was frightened in the least, no one knew it, but the writer [Peery] will concede that he was scared as he was right between Terrill and McCartney.

Although Peery could have given more details about Terrill's life than did Rock, he found his job as Boswell for the playwright-legislator distasteful. "There is no use discussing his character further," he says, "the record of the criminal courts in his record. He was convicted of the murder of a man in Guthrie and served a part of his time in Lansing, Kansas."⁹

Terrill, of course, had maintained that his conviction for this "crime" was unjust; but Peery not only considered his arguments not worth repeating, but he even objected to the fact that Terrill made them. "While in the penitentiary," Peery wrote of Terrill's literary efforts to free himself, "he kept up a constant agitation and he was the theme of many newspaper stories, most of them inspired by Terrill himself." That Terrill was successful in this campaign impressed Peery not at all. In fact, he viewed Terrill's success as one more piece of evidence against the man's character: "He caused so much disturbance and insubordination," Peery reported, "that Kansas was glad to get rid of him."¹⁰

Terrill's efforts, after his release from prison, to effect some reforms were viewed with contempt by Peery: "He [Terrill] had secured a number of pictures taken at the Kansas penitentiary, where Oklahoma was confining its convicts, and from them he made slides and gave 'lectures' illustrated by magic lantern pictures telling of the horror of that Kansas institution."¹¹ Peery was certain that Terrill was insincere in this campaign, too; and he was able to point out with obvious satisfaction that if Terrill did not like prison conditions in Kansas, he was himself responsible. Terrill had been "the father of the bill" that sent Oklahoma prisoners to Kansas to work in the coal mines "to earn their board and keep."¹²

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²"The First Two Years" [Part Two], *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. VIII (April, 1930), p. 94.

Even Terrill's later work as a geologist and oil man was viewed with scorn and suspicion by Peery who concluded: "He afterwards, developed into a great 'Geologist' and regular 'Rock Hound' and was selling leases in Texas."¹³

The disinterested observer looking back at Terrill's career cannot help but be impressed by the variety of talents the man displayed. He was a farmer, a legislator, a prison-miner, a lecturer, a geologist—with or without quotation marks, a reformer, a playwright; and in spite of Peery's refusal to take any of Terrill's successes seriously, the fact that a man convicted of murder could effect his release from prison and then build a new career suggests some qualities in the man beyond the ability to talk cleverly.

Basic to all of Peery's objections, of course, was Terrill's politics. Peery was not only a conservative and an ardent segregationist, but, perhaps of more importance, he was a member of the party that favored Oklahoma City for the Territorial capital. Terrill was—or, from Peery's view, posed as—a liberal, "a champion of the people" and, in Peery's words, Terrill had joined with "the Guthrie crowd" to defeat the bill to make Oklahoma City the capital. "He betrayed us," Peery argued.¹⁴

Even allowing for Peery's bias, however, it seems obvious that Terrill was a man who could arouse violent support and violent opposition, a quality that should have made his play, *A Purgatory Made of a Paradise*, a drama of some power.

II

When Terrill completed his play and submitted a typed manuscript for copyright protection, January 2, 1907, he was fifty-four years old. He had spent the past dozen years as the central figure in some violent, contemporary actions—a legislative battle, a gun fight, a campaign for a release from prison, another campaign for prison reform. If one were to judge from this career, one should judge that *Purgatory* should have the quality of the modern plays by Jean Genet, also a former convict.

There is no question, moreover, that Terrill intended his play to do service in the battle against his enemies. "Could I but sing as Shakespeare sang," he wrote, "I'd tell the story full. I'd sing of monstrous robber gangs/ That flesh from breast does pull—The deamons, shylocks, and the knaves/ Who curse our once fair land/ And rob our cradles

¹³"The First Two Years" (Part One), p. 448.

¹⁴"The First Two Years" (Part Two), pp. 104, 107.

and our graves/ To fill the greedy hand." This play, Terrill hoped, would be a "clanging bell" that would not stop until justice returned to Oklahoma, "By ballot or by ball" and until punishment was given to those "men who thus do steal the home . . . who wish to steal by law."¹⁰

Unfortunately for those who like the romance of the creed that makes the poet the "natural legislator" of mankind, Terrill's targets were beyond the range of his poetic capabilities. In spite of the fact that he went to the expense of having *Purgatory* printed, so little appeal did the play have that there is no evidence it was ever produced, or—except for its inclusion in the copyright file records—that it was even read. This neglect of the play, moreover, resulted from neither the efforts of Terrill's political enemies nor from the enmity of insensitive critics. Terrill simply over-matched himself when he elected to use the form of the heroic drama as the vehicle for his protest. The entire play is written in heroic couplets, yoked together with forced rhyme. The quality of "strange violence" may be sampled by considering the opening scene of the play:

ACT ONE

(*First Scene—A choice piece of land—*

(*Enter Traveler.*

Enter Knight.)

T. —Hold! Who comes here?

K. —An humble knight

Who holds as claim this lovely site.

I purpose here to make a home

For wife and children; soon to come.

If home you want, my friend, I'll see

If claims near mine yet vacant be.

Shakespeare's "influence" on Terrill was disastrous. But seemingly Terrill felt that the loftiness of his sentiments and the rightness of his ire could be properly expressed only in poetic diction. Halfway through the play, however, Terrill loses patience with the dramatic form itself. Much of the play is little more than a rhymed recitation of grievances, interrupted by such short scenes as that which opened Act One.

Terrill's problem as a playwright was in part a lack of decision on the kind of composition he intended. Just as is

¹⁰ All citations from the plays are taken from the only known extant copy: Ira N. Terrill, Sr., *A Purgatory Made of a Paradise: A Tragedy Depicting Early-day Scenes in Oklahoma; In Three Acts* (No location or printer), 1907, 58 pp.

in the plot, he is concerned both with the abstract qualities of justice and honor and with the concrete problems of land and legal papers, so in the form, he is one moment playwright—showing his action, the next narrator—explaining it, and the next orator—calling his followers to take some physical action.

This same lack of concern with his dramatic materials is evidenced in the characterization. The "personnel" of the play are an odd mixture of drama types: "heroic characters"—The Traveler (seemingly the representative new settler), The Knight (Terrill himself), and the Knight's daughter (purity); "Humour characters," in the style of *Little Orphan Annie*, not of Ben Jonson—Sooner, Hunter, Bill Diceheart, Boomer, Halfwit, Acuss Wise, Buck, Boodle, Citizen, Farmer Bean, and Bondsman; and "realistic characters," seemingly drawn from Terrill's contemporaries—Watkins, Blakeman, and Ben Harrison.

The theme of Terrill's *Purgatory* is clear enough. The Oklahoma Territory is being despoiled by dishonest men who are misusing the law to rob the honest settlers of their just claims, and only the rule of righteous force can stop them. His flights of rhetoric, however, and his central action are somewhat confusing, not only because he frequently sacrifices meaning for rhyme and meter, but also because he works through indirection. Seemingly his loose association of the events of the play would have made more sense to Terrill's neighbors in 1907. But all the modern reader knows is that an injustice has been done by men who possess not a single virtue.

What the play lacks as serious drama, however, is compensated for by the worth of the document as an artifact of minor historical interest. Terrill was one of the most active, and most interesting, of the minor figures in the first days of the Oklahoma settlement. Although, as yet, little serious attention has been given to his part in that history, it is quite obvious that neither Rock's glowing tribute nor Peery's slashing attack can be taken as an accurate account of the man and his role. *Purgatory*, oddly enough, can be used to support both views. It shows Terrill as a man whose convictions are strong. It also shows him as a man whose convictions are without restraint, a man capable of taking the law into his own hands, both the law of the land and the literary laws that govern the nature of drama.