

BOOK REVIEW

“The Adventures of Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass.” By Mark Twain.

Edited by Charles Honce. Forward by Vincent Starrett.

A Note on “A Celebrated Village Idiot” by James O’Donnell Bennett.

Limited edition of 500 copies. Privately printed by Keokuk Public Library, 2007.

Hardcover, xxiv + 59 pages. \$49.95

If you are interested in purchasing a copy of this book, please call the Keokuk Public Library at (319) 524-1483 to check for availability.

Reviewed for the Mark Twain Forum by:

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Before Mark Twain:

Sam Clemens presents Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass

Sam Clemens the printer would have loved this book. The typeface was composed by hand on a Linotype machine, and the book was printed on a Heidelberg Windmill 10 x 15 Letterpress printing press, then hand-bound. The volume was originally published in 1928, and this fund-raising project for the Keokuk Public Library now can boast five hundred facsimile copies, individually numbered. The only change to the 1928 edition is the addition of what is said to be the earliest painting of Sam Clemens as a young man, an artifact owned by the library.

Sam Clemens the yarnspinner would have appreciated the cover, which lists “Mark Twain” as the author of “The Adventures of Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass,” because it presents a manifestly anachronistic lie: there was no Mark Twain when Sam Clemens wrote the three mock travel letters in late 1856 and early 1857 for the “Keokuk (Iowa) Daily Post.”

Sam Clemens the professional writer of comic sketches, tales, travel books, and novels might not be so pleased, however, to see in print some of his earliest efforts to participate in the uncouth and irreverent tradition of American democratic humor. On his way to Brazil to make his fortune with the newly-discovered coca plant and its magical medicinal qualities, Clemens was barely twenty-one years of age when he scribbled the letters. As part of his efforts to fund his journey, Clemens probably arranged to write for the “Post” as he worked his way down river from Keokuk. Sam never got any closer to

Brazil than New Orleans, where he abruptly decided that steamboat piloting, not raising coca, was the job he truly wanted.

The Snodgrass letters hold some interest for students of Mark Twain, especially when they consider his relationship to earlier, antebellum comic writers. Their format as parodic travel letters and their presentation of a country clodhopper link the Snodgrass letters with an important strand of nineteenth-century comic writing that had started with Seba Smith's Jack Downing letters in 1833 and that, by 1857, included the Pete Whetstone letters (Charles F. M. Noland), the Major Jones letters (William Tappen Thompson), the first series of the Biglow Papers (James Russell Lowell), and the Philander Doesticks letters (Mortimer Thomson). On the horizon was Charles Farrar Browne with his Artemus Ward letters. Started in January 1858, Browne's series of mock letters from a traveling showman would make him the most famous, best known, and best paid comic writer and mock lecturer in the United States, a model that Clemens would consciously imitate in the 1860s when he had invented Mark Twain and was still tinkering with the elements of his comic creation. These examples made the comic genres of the mock letter to the editor and the mock travel letter preferred vehicles for displays of rustic wit and backwoods storytelling as well as for excursions into political and social satire.

For all their historical interest, the comic qualities of the Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass letters are, for the most part, predicable and thus less than riveting. Snodgrass presents the classic profile of an ignorant lout from the hinterlands, foolishly vain about himself and his hometown, Keokuk, as he travels to other cities. In the first letter, he attends a production of Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" and makes such a disruptive spectacle of himself that a policeman ejects him from the theater. His antics include playing a tune on his comb because he thought his musical talent superior to what he was witnessing on stage. He keeps a "dierrea" for his journey and reveals his ignorance about trains--the duties of conductors as well as the features of steam engines. He puts on airs when he arrives in Chicago because his countrified morality transforms the city into the gateway to hell. He routinely flaunts the stereotypical pugnacity of the frontier's lower orders as he casually exhibits his bigoted attitude toward the Irish, Germans, Jews, and women.

There is slapstick when Snodgrass falls on a fat Irishwoman in a railroad car and she stuffs him under a seat. There is satire about municipal bureaucracy when he visits Cincinnati. There is a hint of Tom Sawyer when Snodgrass complains about ticket policy on the train as he trades his "yaller ticket for a red one, which wasn't Sunday school fashion, where you get ten red tickets for one of tother color" (27). Clemens's rendition of country dialect suggests the mixed quality of the letters, Snodgrass displaying Crockett-like phrases such as "drat my buttons" (26), but also using words like "magnanimous" and "superfluous." Snodgrass at times can also sound like Jack Downing, noting that the plotters against Julius Caesar "laid their heads together like as many lawyers when they are gettin ready to prove that a man's heirs ain't got any right to his property" (10). However, the letters sustain no satiric point of view comparable to the Downing letters, their comic qualities instead a farrago of dialect spellings, obvious puns, wild jokes, and outlandish situations.

Indeed, Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass's behavior creates a large distance from Major Downing's civic morality and eironic presentation. Nor does Snodgrass portray the rough-and-tumble morality of Sut Lovingood scourging his community with practical jokes. Instead, Snodgrass by the third and last letter embodies a much more cynical view of the common man in frontier environments. In this final installment, Snodgrass's vanity reveals his darkest side. Accosted by a young woman who pretends to know him and who asks him to hold her basket for a moment, Snodgrass stands in the street waiting for her return while fantasizing that her attraction for him is such that soon he will meet her father, who, rich and respectable, will beg Snodgrass to marry his daughter. The woman never returns, and Snodgrass eventually discovers that the basket contains a baby.

Chagrined that he will be noticed with his squalling burden by passersby on the street, he returns to his hotel room to make a plan. His concern with what others think is again highlighted when he crams the basket under his bed and covers it with clothes to prevent the servant girls from seeing it. The next day he is discovered trying to "poke the dang thing through a hole in the [river's] ice" (47). The letter ends with him in court, implying in his sign-off to the editor that he will write again. Apparently, Clemens never bothered to fashion a conclusion to the misadventure, or to imagine other incidents for Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass.

Attempting to drown a baby as though it were an unwanted kitten has no precedents in antebellum comic writing. The risqué quality of "Nettle Bottom Ball; or, Betsy Jones' Tumble in the Mush Pan" (John Robb) or "That Big Dog Fight at Myers's by 'Obe Oilstone'" (Phillip January), which feature, respectively, female and male nudity, or the scatological joke at the end of the celebrated backwoods sketch, "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (Thomas Bangs Thorpe), simply are not emotionally anywhere near the neighborhood. Also pale by comparison is the comic violence of Sut Lovingood's yarns or even the grotesque tales about the swamp doctor, Madison Tensas. Like a black hole at the center of a galaxy, the scene with Snodgrass and the baby swallows every particle of comic light-heartedness.

However, as an example of over-the-top comic violence, the scene is far from the last Clemens will write. For instance, as Mark Twain he will imagine disfigured and maimed children in "Those Blasted Children" (1864), will wish for a double-barreled shotgun to blast into "a million fragments" a member of the cabinet of the Hawaiian king, Kamehameha V (1866, "Letters from Hawaii"), and will claim to have calmed himself at the end of a diatribe against the trials and tribulations of traveling in Europe by destroying a beggar and eating "the friendless orphan" (1869, "The Innocents Abroad"). Perhaps the climax to such dark imaginings is the ending of "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut" (1876), which features the numerous bodies of tramps Mark Twain has supposedly murdered, stacked in his basement like cordwood. Maybe the scene is reprised in the raft passage excised from "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", with the tall tale of the murdered baby in the barrel that haunts its killer.

Though Snodgrass ready to drown a baby is extreme even in this catalog, it suggests that early and late, Sam Clemens stood ready to indulge a horrific brand of comic presentation.

In addition to the letters, this new edition from the Keokuk Public Library features a Foreward that presents the letters as curiosities, as museum pieces, and a note to close the volume, entitled "A Celebrated Village Idiot." Written by James O'Donnell Bennet, a well-known reporter for the "Chicago Tribune" (apparently the piece originally appeared in the "Tribune"), the note sketches the eccentricities of Orion Clemens that were still orally circulating in Keokuk in the early twentieth century.

All the elements of "The Adventures of Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass"'s contents provoke curiosity. The book's manufacture elicits admiration. For collectors of Mark Twain memorabilia, the book offers a must-have opportunity. For Mark Twain scholars, the book offers an opportunity to contemplate the comic talent of Sam Clemens in a derivative yet raw stage, wherein one can nevertheless glimpse the future.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER: Jim Caron has published essays on the tall tale, laughter and evolution, antebellum comic writing, George Washington Harris, Frank Norris, Hunter Thompson, Bill Watterson, Charlie Chaplin, and Mark Twain. His book "Mark Twain, Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter" will be published this summer by the University of Missouri Press's series, "Mark Twain and His Circle."