GEORGE ALFRED TOWNSEND—AN AMBITION
AND A REPUTATION

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There are several good reasons why it is proper that George Alfred Townsend (1841-1914) should become the subject of a reconsideration. Or perhaps from the outset he should be called by his familiar pen-name "Gath," self-devised from his initials plus a terminal letter "h" and so recalling the ancient Philistine city which David adjured should not be told. The identification of Townsend with the Philistines, it happens, is remarkably appropriate, but let not the story be anticipated.

The gift in 1945 to the University Library by the late Robert H. Richards, Esquire, of a rich collection of Townsendiana called for a fresh inquest upon Townsend. Meantime, the Townsend legend, which in terms journalistic had never quite expired on the national scene, took new life from the republication by the University of North Carolina Press in 1950 of Townsend's best book, The Campaigns of a Non-combatant, under the more attractive title Rustics in Rebellion, a title which Townsend had given to one of the chapters. The Rustics received most favorable notice and Chapel Hill was commended for its service in making available again a graphic and quite revealing account of the War in Virginia in 1862, a document that apparently had slipped almost completely from notice. Such a successful and deserved revival was bound to raise the question of other possibly neglected items in the Townsend portfolio. It would appear that there are none.

Quite apart from this flurry, Gath's local reputation, conceived

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1 Samuel II, I, 20.

2 Campaigns of a Non-Combatant and His Romantunt Abroad during the War, New York, 1866.

3 Rustics in Rebellion, A Yankee Reporter on the Road to Richmond, 1861-65, with an introduction by Lida Mayo, Chapel Hill, 1950.


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in more purely literary terms (and that is emphatically the way that he would have wished it) has required re-estimate just because it has remained fairly green. Marylanders from whose stock Townsend sprang and to whom really he belonged, have not it seems been willing to take him very seriously—in spite of the grandeur of his Gapland adventure—or perhaps because of it. In fact, Townsend has served Baltimore much as the Jersey Devil formerly served Philadelphia, a recurring cause for sensationalism and hilarity. But in Delaware—the state of his nativity if not of his heritage; the state which he re-discovered sentimentally only in his middle years (although it must be admitted that Delaware became the object of his last somewhat ridiculous literary “crush”)—in Delaware, he has been remembered chiefly for his The Entailed Hat and to a less degree for his Tales of the Chesapeake. In this remembrance there is something of a freakish irony because both volumes are actually Pennsular rather than Delawarean, or in other terms, Delawarean only fractionally. Nevertheless, The Entailed Hat early achieved and has held in the local literature a place something like that of the Iliad in the larger world as a grand primal book of which one knows at least by hearsay, a veritable cornerstone of the literary foundation. One wonders whether it was the exiguity of local writing that made Delaware grapple to her bosom the writer who complimented her by writing somewhat about her. Would the Delawareans have been less fond if they had realized that their Mr. Townsend was equally profuse in his compliments to any region upon which his eyes had lighted, or might light? In any case, from Delaware’s point of view, Townsend has become peculiarly “Delaware’s own.” In psychology, as in fact, here is matter for an accounting.

Further, there is the puzzle of the man himself—a strange dichotomy. A most successful journalist—a Lowell Thomas or a John Gunther, an Alsop or a Lippmann of yesteryear—deserving perhaps in the history of his profession as lasting a place as that ephemeral profession affords, he was impelled increasingly by a vaulting ambition to be something more, to make for himself a name in pure literature as novelist and poet. His effort and failure

6 See: Poems of the Delaware Peninsula, [Wilmington, 1913].
seem somehow to raise more than a personal question. Journalism and literature: are they relative or absolute incompatibles? And perhaps not of least interest is the question of the man and his time. Given a different cultural bed to fertilize his talents, could Townsend have achieved some part of his dream? Vain troubling question! Over against it, Gath stands as a magnificent representative man, a splendid specimen of his time. Whatever that time did to him, he came to embody it perfectly and to express it equally well in its harsh colors, its gaudy passions and its immense certainty. Under that aspect alone he would deserve study; perhaps in the end it may prove to be the only way that one can look at him to find any significance.

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George Alfred Townsend was born at Georgetown, Delaware, in 1841. His father Stephen, who was originally a carpenter, and who in late middle life became a physician by study at the University of Pennsylvania, was at that time a Methodist minister. The Methodist pastoral relationship then was a true itinerancy, entailing strenuous and often discouraging labor among scanty preaching stations, and offering but the most meager stipend. The preacher’s personal sacrifice necessarily became that of his whole family, nor was their comparative poverty offset by any social advantage. Townsend’s harsh background is to be emphasized because it was formative for him. In one sense, it became that from which he fled—the escape in him is very important. One can imagine him resolving to get clear; happily for him his flight needed not to be so desperate as that of his elder brother who followed Walker, the filibuster, to Nicaragua, to die there in the jungle. Certainly much of Gath’s later delight in the flesh pots must have derived from his conscious triumph over puritanism and austerity. Yet in another sense, his familial background always remained for him the “golden legend.” For his father as parent and as priest he always expressed the sincerest admiration and on several occasions he kindled to his best in verse and essay about him. Of his mother he has less

8 Dictionary of American Biography, XVIII, 616.
9 See Ruthanna Hindes, George Alfred Townsend, One of Delaware’s Outstanding Writers, Wilmington, 1946, p. 14, for Townsend’s own diary entry bearing on this family tragedy.
to say: she was, however, a Millbourne, and it was her family name, which he valued no less than that of Townsend, that he bestowed upon the hero of *The Entailed Hat.*

In short, Townsend had been among, and of, God’s people in his youth; and this conviction and pride he never lost. Obsolete, ignorant, and wild perhaps, his people had been on the Peninsula as long as any—a pure English stock. Beside them there existed, better known, an ancient aristocracy of blood and land, of houses and slaves, of wealth and culture—but by the same token, these were an effete, decadent folk, their pristine virtue lost to them through their very advantages. Thus Townsend compensated for, and over-compensated for, the sense of social inferiority which he undoubtedly felt in boyhood. Therefore, he became the foe of slavery and no friend to disunion when the war came between the states. Therefore, he became the romantic genealogist, ever seeking out a worthy ancestry—not among the “first families” but among the people who settled the woods and islands, the swamps and sandy shores, who listened to the preaching of Asbury and of Coke, and in whom, by their need itself, the sinew and intelligence of the race had been kept alive. So much his earliest years gave to Townsend; his warm emotion kept it as a sacred commitment forever.

In 1851 the Reverend Mr. Townsend was assigned to Newark, Delaware, from Chestertown, Maryland; and George Alfred transferred to the Newark Academy from the preparatory department of Washington College. Of his life and progress during his two years in Newark nothing of any seeming significance appears. However, in 1868, when he had become a somewhat famous man, Townsend was invited to make the commencement address at Delaware College. The well-known “Commencement Poem” contains a general description of the local scene. Because Townsend was a man of prodigious memory, his details can be accepted as accurate as well as amusing. Perhaps a few lines may not come amiss. They are pleasant and may serve to give a notion of Townsend’s verse in not his worst style.

My hasty muse, rouse up and once more show
The scenes in Newark twenty years ago!

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11 See the Introduction to *The Entailed Hat, or Patty Cannon’s Times, A Romance,* New York, 1884: “He turned to the name of a maternal ancestor of whom grand tales had been told him.”
The morning prayer, the bell’s boom strong and sweet,
Swung down the one aisle of the village street,
“Day-scholars” hurrying on foot, in gigs,
Professors smoothing out their hairs—or wigs,—
The shy new student who can eat no pittance,
Mocked by the old boy spending his remittance;
That marvel of all Freshmen in their turn,
The one queer boy who came to school to learn;
That other wonder, whom the mass insist
To be, sans peur, the College humorist:
An idle, jolly, impecunious elf,
Who jests on everything,—except himself;
And, greater than all favorites of renown,
The boy whose pretty sister lives in town;
In all his woes rose dozens of redressers,
He was a favorite,—even with professors.

At Summer noon the lanes and fields are seen,
To fill with urchins hastening to “The Green.”
Proud swimmer he, whose shy probation o’er,
Disdains less fathoms than the “Sycamore,”
Or nudis verbis whitely stands revealed
Poised on the “Deep Rocks”—as he calls it “peeled,”—
And palms clasped à la mode, head foremost goes
To fetch up stones, while small boys tie his clothes.

Meantime the lovelorn student roams behind,
And carves his torment on the beech tree rind,
And to the dear initials makes his moan—
A bolder student slyly adds his own.\(^{12}\)

Gath’s formal education was completed upon his graduation in
1860 from the Central High School in Philadelphia. Because by
1856 his father had worked city-ward to a church in the com-
paratively urban district of Kensington, Townsend could attend
the high school at the effort of a daily walk of several miles. The
high school had been established on strictly classical lines in 1836;
the B.A. degree, too, which Townsend received indicates a classical
curriculum, but nothing of this appears in his scrappy descriptions
of his student days. Because he never mentions a subject or a
teacher, the impression is that he did not regard his schooling as
important. Nevertheless, he was apparently being quite busy in
a practical way, as the following quotations reveal:

\(^{12}\) “Poem Read before Delaware College, Newark, Delaware, Commencement,
1868,” *Poetical Addresses*, New York, 1881, pp. 29-30. Townsend either mistook
the date or spoke before the Newark Academy because the college was closed
between 1859 and 1870.
While at the highschool, at the age of sixteen, I published a little magazine for an advertising personage.

At fifteen years I could write verses at will when a subject was given out for composition . . . during the hour.

My first publication was in a public school journal. 13

From the time the first piece appeared in print I was captive completely to the writing propensity.

My intention had been to be a literary man. 14

These last statements suggest romantic improvements on the fact in the light of his later career. More convincing is the statement: "At nineteen years of age, I had not the least idea what profession I should adopt. The night before I made my speech as a bachelor of arts, a person stepped up to me and asked if I had any definite purpose. . . . He was empowered to offer me a situation on a newspaper." He adds that it was "like the gates of heaven opening." 15 In another place he states simply that "public speeches and writings I had made for the three years previous brought me employment at once." 16 Speeches and writings: these had been his irons in the fire; his "activities" as we would call them today—practical gambits to student leadership and perhaps a little money, and they paid off in a connection. There is some evidence that Townsend had been a troublesome figure in the school with his paper promotions. 17 On the other hand, there is no evidence of that modesty and blushing embarrassment that he later claimed had kept him away from the hard men of the press. 18 Generally it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for an introvert to become an extrovert—and America's "oldest special correspondent" was an extrovert. Again, the difference is romance.

Of course, there is always some chance in these things; and happily for journalism and for Townsend the press had found a likely candidate. Within two years, in spite of all the mighty forces of Philadelphia nepotism, "people brought in who felt important and looked important," he was "in request" as an editor at fifteen

15 "Recollections and Reflections," loc. cit.
17 Hindes, op. cit., p. 13.
dollars per week, all ready to try New York. Within four years, after a more heady success, he would be ready to try literature. And at the time he would begin to develop the romance of his literary consciousness, carrying it back to his thirteenth year, from which time “never for a whole day was I out of sight of the writing purpose and occupation”; 19 back to his eleventh year and the discovery of art through the color books offered for sale in a market, possibly in Wilmington; 20 back to his mother reading poetry to him; 21 back to fiction enjoyed in strange houses whilst his father ate with hospitable church members; 22 and so establishing his literary right in terms of a call almost like that of a prophet or an evangelist.

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In 1862 Townsend went as a special correspondent for the New York Herald to the war in Virginia. He went in a special, privileged capacity. Scharf has described him as “the youngest and most cultivated of the correspondents.” 23 He witnessed the great preparations making against Richmond, had entree everywhere, lived familiarly among the officers and proved himself a shrewd observer with a true “camera eye.” He contracted Chickahominy fever, yet was able to scoop McClellan’s defeat in the dreadful “Seven Day’s Battles”; then departed mysteriously from the scene for Europe. He explains only: “I gratified a desire I had entertained of visiting Europe.” 24 Perhaps he was piqued because, as he explained, “we were not allowed the use of our names and I might as well have thrown the account [of the battles] in the James as to expect any good from it myself.” 25 Or again there may have been trouble with General McClellan; he records that the commander once ordered his arrest for disobedience 26 and again he hints at incurring McClellan’s displeasure for his not giving him play in his dispatches. 27 Or perhaps his bout with the fever had disabled him for the field. Or perhaps he had suffered a repulse

21 Dedication, Poems of the Delaware Peninsula.
22 See “Preachers’ Sons in 1849,” in Tales of the Chesapeake.
25 “Recollections and Reflections,” loc. cit
26 Campaigns of a Non-Combatant, Chapters IV and V passim.
to his affections in Philadelphia—although this supposition must follow on a very skittish clue. In any case his two years abroad remain a strange interlude, although not without their fruitage. "How could I travel abroad and pay my expenses?" he asks—an odd question for a young American at that season, especially one not disaffected, who had recently enjoyed a position of privileged freedom as a paid spectator of the national struggle. Obliquely, he seems to call himself a Northern truant. Yet again he speaks of himself as "the first of the War Correspondents to go abroad," as though he went in the path of duty; and in another place he speaks of a lofty desire "to compare my countrymen with the men of Europe."

In England when his attempt to lecture in Lancashire on the American war failed, as it soon did, he fell back on London, "wishing myself back in the ranks of the North, to go down in the frenzy rather than to drag out a life of civil indigence." However, a comfortable success as a miscellaneous writer came quickly. Then after nine months, tiring of the "insular metropolis," he found the "continent close and beckoning." "For another year I roamed among her cities, as ardent and errant as when I went asfield on my pony to win the spurs of a war correspondent." By this time Townsend apparently was living, in spirit as in place, far from the family parsonage. London in its heavy way had been attractive to him; how much more so Paris. He discovered there Bohemia, his favorite country.

His little volume Bohemian Days hints at his associations at this time. The impecunious exiles of the Confederacy were a gay, silly, rakehelly lot. Townsend has etched their disintegration with sentiment and humor. He speaks of his sketch "The Rebel Colony in Paris" as "perhaps the only souvenir of refugee and skedaddler life abroad during the war," and he may be right. A second tale, "Married Abroad," "about a young Northern truant," a de-

30 Preface to Bohemian Days, New York, 1880.
31 Preface to Campaigns of a Non-Combatant.
32 Preface to Lost Abroad, Hartford, 1870.
34 Bohemian Days, loc. cit.
scription that perfectly fits himself, relates a romantic friendship with a little grisette. “Little Grisette” too is the title of a kind of nostalgic ballad, perhaps Townsend’s favorite among his own compositions which he was given to reciting (teary-eyed, surely) in assemblies of his men friends for years—his old reliable: “Little Grisette, you haunt me yet. . . .” 35 Interestingly, it prefaces “Married Abroad.”

At this point, while not wishing to penetrate the secrets of the private life, one feels that Townsend was living loosely. An earlier ballad “Little Bow Belle” from London gives the same impression: 37 the little girl of the streets may throw herself into the Thames, but the man had been so handsome! One remembers the old rule against kissing and telling. The matter together with the boast and the maudlin sentiment makes a nauseous combination. Morals apart, one canot help setting Townsend down as “no gentleman,” one whose insensitivity is destined to make him outrage good taste constantly. In 1870 he did a very bad novel out of this same experience, Lost Abroad. In its preface he speaks “of wanderings, not of the wisest kind, but self impelled, and in the remembrance happy.” This is the language of the prodigal who has somewhat come to himself. Actually the change was permanent. It was in Europe that Townsend settled into that pattern of thought and feeling, vulgar and brash, that was to be characteristi-cally his; a pattern incidentally quite fit for roaring New York and corrupt Washington in the coming years.

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The conclusion of the Civil War found Townsend in full career. Returning to the battlefields in 1865, and allowed then to use his own name, he “saw Grant and Sheridan close out the war.” “Within a few weeks I had the reputation I should have had in 1862,” 37 he tells us. The assassination of President Lincoln and the hunting down and conviction of Booth and his fellow conspirators provided almost immediately another great assignment, which Townsend accomplished with gusto and finesse.38 He came into demand as

35 Ibid., pp. 93-95.
36 The New York Citizen, September 7, 1867.
a lecturer; and he loved to talk. He went abroad again to report the Austro-Prussian war and the Paris Exposition. "In 1867," he says, "I concluded to go to Washington and study the government." Seven years there gave "a certain satiety" and "an appetite to go to New York and see how men became rich." After that he lived in New York and "kept one hand on Washington"—really he lived in both places—until in 1884 he began the creation of his barony Gapland in western Maryland—Gapland which was to be his Abbotsford, his Fonthill, his Twickenham. Meantime there was much to do. He went to Europe six times, crossed the continent thrice, was in all the states and territories. And regularly he dictated not less than two columns a day—this for forty years—four thousand words a day, for a total of more than fifty million words. His peak of output was twenty-one columns per week. His engagements were mostly to the West, the Chicago Tribune and the Cincinnati Enquirer being his most regular contractors. But there is scarcely any exaggeration in Scharf's words that "he has been engaged by every journal of means and enterprise in the land." Townsend himself loved to cast the total list of the papers in which his work had appeared. His annual income reached about $50,000. He was in truth "the great special correspondent"—the man who knew, the interpreter, an influence. He claimed "to have given the newspaper aid which defeated the ... scheme [to impeach President Johnson]." More modestly he numbered himself among "the interpid, original, well-informed men" who had revolutionized journalism through special correspondence.

Such labors called, of course, for an extraordinary method if they were to be performed at all. "I found that I could dictate.... I have talked nearly the whole of my correspondence. In transferring the strain from the eye and the hand to the head another species of oppression comes: my relief has always been to make

41 The Literary World, November 1, 1884.
42 The Nation, April 13, 1914.
43 Scharf, op. cit., loc. cit.
44 Hindes, op. cit., Appendix, p. 55.
45 The Literary World, November 1, 1884.
a journey into some open country. One detects a prideful note in this. Happily, a better account has been left us by one of his amanuenses.

George Alfred Townsend, better known as Gath, very rarely attempted to write anything himself, relying entirely upon stenographers. . . . I found him the most rapid dictator. He would dictate his two column *Cincinnati Enquirer* letter at the rate of 175 words per minute, and would scarcely stop a moment from the beginning of the letter to its completion. He never seemed lost for a word or expression, nor would he revise anything he dictated. When Mr. Townsend wrote a novel, he dictated the whole of its matter to a stenographer. He made the remark that his writings were very much better when dictated, as they flowed more clearly from his mind; that they were more natural, and did not appear labored or stilted.49

It was this method that enabled Townsend to do his daily work which also enabled him to try for a place in the kingdom of literature. Townsend, an extroverted bludgeon of a man, weighing 220 pounds,50 desired in turn many things for himself; and generally what he desired, like many another, he got. In the course of time he acquired connoisseurship in food, drink, houses, bric-a-brac; why not then in books, which too are an accoutrement of worldly elegance? He achieved reputation as a correspondent, lecturer and bon vivant; why not then as a man of letters? For his completion it must have seemed necessary.

For the practical purposes of his profession, Townsend had begun to collect books as early as his Philadelphia period; 51 eventually he boasted a collection of more than five thousand volumes.52 There can be no question that he became a widely read and well-informed man; nor was he without literary reference. He shows familiarity with the best writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scott and Dickens undoubtedly influenced his literary method; and he knew his American contemporaries and made a marked effort to associate himself with those he admired. The great point is that at a fairly early date along his road Townsend decided

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50 The Author, July 15, 1889, reprinted from Frank Harrison's Shorthand Magazine.
51 "Recollections and Reflections," p. 517.
52 The Baltimore Sun, loc. cit.
that he must become a writer of a purer and higher sort than he
was in daily practice—that he must become this in justice to his
abilities, of which he had come to entertain a most favorable view.
The transformation of the journalist into the man of letters can
have presented no difficulties in his eyes, involving, as it appeared,
merely the exercise of the skill in which he was most facile, with
some difference of intention and application, of course, but essenti-
ally the same process. That there might be a great gulf fixed
which he might not be able by any industry to pass over, this
he did not perceive, nor ever would see.

In 1870, on the publication of Poems, he might have taken
warning. Townsend’s deprecat ing admission concerning his Poems,

They were not grand, I know,
Idle pictures shaped by weary quill,
Yet these crude fancies pleased me,
Feeling them my own.53

did not save him from the critic’s question whether his experiences
had not “spoiled a fair poet.” The question is hard to get over,
and the adjective “fair” with the right intonation upon it becomes
positively discouraging. Nor was there any salve in the remarks
that “nearly all the pieces are up to average magazine level,”
and that “they are so much better than we had a right to expect
from a voluminous newspaper correspondent.”54 “They do not
impress you with any giant strength,” wrote another, making his
careful verdict and conceding only that “they are genuinely his
own . . . and will please many a reader, we trust.”55

When in 1880 the Tales of the Chesapeake appeared, the same
sort of reception occurred. The volume was described as “amusing
fictions [written] in Western newspapers over the signature of
Gath.” Among the verses, only one was found lyric. The verses
on Sir William Johnson were noted as “cheap and unworthy”; the
stories as ranging from “excellent to commonplace.” “Clever-
ness” was discovered to be “offset by bad taste and lack of
training.”56 Most significantly again came the pronouncements:

53 See “My Rhymes,” envoi to Poems of George Alfred Townsend, Washington,
1870.
54 The Overland Magazine, April. 1870.
56 Scribner’s Magazine, October, 1880.
“He should have heeded the [literary] call earlier,” and “He has not come off unscathed by the press.” 57

In short, the critics early and late had got Townsend pretty well measured; in a tasteless era, they still could not become enthusiastic over the self-appointed literary candidate. The Entailed Hat was found on its appearance to exhibit an excess of blood and violence “that reduced portions to the level of a highly blooded novel.” 58 Although it was inevitably dubbed “Hawthornesque,” its “realisms” and “great brutality” were duly noted. 59 Indeed, in view of its scenes “that make the cheek blush and the blood curdle,” the opinion was expressed that Harper’s was a courageous house to publish it. The title was found “petty and feeble” and “the English occasionally very bad.” 60 The response was the same, if not worse, to Katy of Catoctin. It was found “to exhibit the coarseness that disfigures all Townsend’s writings”; as for the title: “the foolish Katy title affords a clue to the lack of taste and judgment.” 61 “Much [that was] crude and grotesque” was found by another reviewer, but “pardonable because of enthusiasm, sincerity and patriotism.” 62 But still unkind and things were said (true insights!): “A valuable concise history [of John Brown and his raid, of Booth and his conspiracy] might have been made by leaving out the story altogether”; and to the same effect: “The best of Gath’s romance being the matter of history and the poorest barely worth the effort of imagining, Katy can hardly be said to fill a want either in history or fiction.” 63 And again returns the basic question: “... whether journalism has had anything to do with blunting his natural powers as a novelist?” 64 “Voluble,” “over elaborate,” “bettering the fact with too many words,” “bulky” are the small shot with which the critics peppered him.

Against this barrage Townsend could master only the blurbs which he assiduously sought from his friends or which he was able to extract from the courtesy notes of the great answering his com-

57 The Nation, March 18, 1880.
59 The Literary News, June, 1884. The Critic and Good Literature, May 17, 1884.
60 The Literary World, May 17, 1884.
61 The Critic, January 29, 1887.
62 The Literary World, June 22, 1887.
63 The Critic, loc. cit.
64 The Literary News, January, 1887.
plimentary copies. Of the former, let General John W. Creswell of Elkton, Maryland, once Postmaster-General of the United States be quoted: "The author has the fruitifying, teeming mind kept in continuous activity by the inspiration of genius; a vivid and exhaustless imagination, coupled with a rare command of the most apt and telling language. I am confident that he will live to wear the laurels which the world gladly concedes to a great writer." 65

Among the less tractable "bringers of quotes," John Greenleaf Whittier wrote: "While fighting with the wild beasts at Philadelphia like Paul at Ephesus, I knew something of the real kidnaping schemes in Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. I thank thee and congratulate thee." 66 The old lion is evidently interested more in his own activity than in Townsend; in fact, if the adjective "real" is emphasized, his statement becomes almost disparaging.

There is no evidence that Townsend learned anything from the critics' strictures. Certainly he went on writing as though unnoticing. Really, however, he was very thin-skinned. Accordingly, he is found in 1884 going out of his way to return thanks for one favorable notice. To him American criticism is "Bluebeard's chamber." It is his notion that "the press should be literature's best recruiting station, and the press would be richer for the refine-ment of such contact." Further he has become a man of doctrine: "Timid and imitative romances are foreign to our genius. The strong life of the country has already made a literature without any classical antidote." 67 To the same effect he was to write in the New York Herald with a sharp inexactness: "The novel of decorative art is a passing courtesan. The novel of nature and feeling will cast away its [the decorative novel's] finery in the rag bag and make carpet of it." 68 Particularly sensitive to the libel that The Entailed Hat had made a long round of the publishers before finding acceptance, he concluded with the grand self-justificatory statement: "While I wrote the book I was also furnishing three million words a year to the daily and serial press and sometimes I felt that I was doing this gratuitous task in the ink of my own blood. Never once did the idea of any pecuniary compensation cross my mind." 69

65 Harper's Magazine, October, 1884.
66 Ibid.
67 The Literary World, January 28, 1884.
69 The Literary World, loc. cit.
Thin-skinned though he might be, Townsend neither ceased writing nor wrote better nor declined into an untimely grave. The Peninsular *Entailed Hat* was matched by *Katy of Catoctin* for western Maryland (a novel first contemplated he tells us as he stood beside Lincoln's bier in the White House); and then the National Novels like Scott's *Waverley* became a rising inspiration, one for each state. Mrs. Reynolds and Hamilton was botched up for Pennsylvania out of early Republican history, displaying Franklin, Washington, Hamilton (Townsend’s great hero), Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and the famous Dr. Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen, to name only a few of the male *persona*, against the background of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania frontier as far as Pittsburgh where the Whiskey Rebellion was being put down—all this business replete with as many by-plays, cabals, intrigues and almost-fatal assignations as a restoration playwright or eighteenth-century novelist could invent. Other National Novels were either written and not published, or merely projected: New York and North Carolina probably being the intended or actual victims.

I am now describing Townsend at the height of his literary activity when he was at once most stodgy and most imitative of the bad models of his bad time. His obsession with intrigue would alone provide a rough index to this dependence. His drama, *President Cromwell*, which he wrote upon an ill-advised suggestion and which he dedicated to the President of the United States, develops about the absurdity of Charles II conniving at (and almost succeeding in) marrying Oliver Cromwell's daughter. His *Columbus in Love* shows Christopher Columbus winning the love of Beatrice Enriquez, who could have been King Ferdinand's mistress, but who preferred to give herself to Columbus yet refused marriage with him because of the most delicate scruples for his welfare. Indeed, it may be said of Townsend that truly his last state was worse than his first.

70 "An Interviewer Interviewed," p. 634; also, the preface to *Katy of Catoctin*, New York, 1886.


72 *President Cromwell*, A Drama, New York, 1885.

After the appearance of *Poems of Men and Events* the final contemporary estimate was put upon Townsend by Montgomery Schuyler, who undertook to demonstrate him as a "neglected poet." It is significant that the very effort at establishing Townsend should have emphasized wholly non-literary values: he was a "national spokesman," reflecting "popular optimism" and "the new national consciousness"; and so he might be likened to Kipling! However, even this honor was to be his by default, since "the competition...[was] not exacting." Indeed Townsend could well pray to be delivered from this too frank friend, who went on to point out his "ineptitude for publication," "his ephemera" emanating from unknown publishers (only Harper and Doubleday had handled him among the great houses, each once). He was denominated "a profuse improvisatore for the newspapers," "the daily domineerer," whose temptation was "still to make copy." Further, he was indicted for "progressive carelessness," "felicity marred by blemish," and "a variety too near miscellany." He was allowed to have "poetic ideas but without form." In general it was opined that "his journalism and literature have rubbed off on each other." So much quotation may be justified because these thoughts seem all quite sound—except that Townsend had poetical ideas. Of course it is an irony that they were extended to him in praise rather than in scorn.

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The real nugget of truth was, of course, Townsend's representative character. His rudimentary qualities were confidence and energy: they were of the time, and they were his. Perhaps a word more about them is in order.

It is generally acknowledged that men do not become more idealistic and kindly as they grow older. Townsend, the young war correspondent of 1862 or even of 1865, with his alert, candid eyes and quick sympathies, was a far more ingratiating figure than the dean of correspondents who, noting that he had been "skeptical and scornful" (his names for his youthful idealism and sensibility), says: "I became a constructive writer holding that what the country did was, on the whole, wise"; or who says again:

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74 *Poems of Men and Events*, New York, 1899.
GEORGE ALFRED TOWNSEND

"Instead of the newspaper vocation having destroyed my faith in men and affairs, I believe that all men who are successful have both merit and justification."  

He thought of himself as a moderate Republican; his party was better than the Democrats "because the worst about the Republican party is always known."  

His interest in real estate was accurate and indefatigable.  

At long last, he could see no connection between speculation and morality, and could praise Jay Gould as a "pure intellect."  

Complacency and spiritual ossification could hardly go farther.

On the other hand, in his profession first and last Townsend was both honest and competent. Whether one reads his account of the hunting down of John Wilkes Booth or the super-Corinthian account of the pomp of Cleveland’s first inaugural or his description of industrial Pittsburgh in winter, one notes the skilled hand at work. Even in his worst moments, among the romantic fakery of Lost Abroad, when he uses, for filler, some actual reporting, as of the new Alpine railroads and tunnels immediately there comes a refreshing straight-forwardness to his style. Or look into his most popular book, The New World Compared with the Old, a compilation that one feels was put together with paste pot and shears; still it is a solidly informative book, in a style balanced to its matter. A brief passage from The Campaigns of a Non-Combatant, his earliest and, after all is said and done, his best book, may illustrate the satisfying virtues of his plain and honest competence.

It was with difficulty that I could make my way along the narrow corduroy, for hundreds of wounded were limping from the field to the safe side, and ammunition wagons were passing the other way, driven by reckless drivers who should have been blown up momentarily. Before I had reached the north side

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77 Ibid., p. 638.  
78 The Argonaut, March 25, 1877.  
79 For an example of this interest, see "Johnny Bouquet’s Walks" in the Tribune for July 24, 1881.  
80 "Jay Gould," The Forum, September, 1886, pp. 87-95.  
82 "The Inauguration," Harper’s Weekly, March 14, 1813.  
83 The New World Compared with the Old, Hartford, 1869, p. 294.  
84 Lost Abroad, Hartford, 1870; see the chapter "Balooning on Wheels."  
85 Campaigns of a Non-Combatant, pp. 157-158.
of the creek, an immense throng of panic-stricken people came surging down the slippery bridge. A few carried muskets, but I saw several wantonly throw their pieces into the flood, and as the mass were unarmed, I inferred that they had made similar dispositions. Fear, anguish, cowardice, despair, disgust, were the predominant expressions of the upturned faces. The gaunt trees, towering from the current, cast a solemn shadow upon the moving throng, and as the evening dimness was falling around them, it almost seemed that they were engulfed in some cataract. I reined my horse close to the side of a team, that I might not be borne backward by the crowd; but some of the lawless fugitives seized him by the bridle, and others attempted to pull me from the saddle.

"Gi' up that hoss!" said one, "what business you got wi' a hoss?"

"That's my critter, and I am in for a ride; so you get off!" said another.

I spurred my pony vigorously with the left foot, and with the right struck the man at the bridle under the chin. The thick column parted left and right, and though a howl of hate pursued me, I kept straight to the bank, cleared the swamp, and took the military route parallel with the creek, toward the nearest eminence. At every step of the way I met wounded persons. A horseman rode past me, leaning over his pomme, with blood streaming from his mouth and hanging in gouts from his saturated beard. The day had been intensely hot and black boys were besetting the wounded with buckets of cool lemonade. It was a common occurrence for the couples that carried the wounded on stretchers to stop on the way, purchase a glass of the beverage, and drink it. Sometimes the blankets on the stretchers were closely folded, and then I knew that the man within was dead. A little fellow, who used his sword for a cane, stopped me on the road, and said—

"See yer! This is the ball that jes' fell out o' my boot."

He handed me a lump of lead as big as my thumb, and pointed to a rent in his pantaloons, whence the drops rolled down his boots.

"I wouldn't part with that for suthin' handsome," he said; "it'll be nice to hev to hum."

Someone has spoken of this ability as Townsend's "informative power." He did possess it—let that be said in fairness—and coupled with his interests it did give him the character of a kind of representative man of his time. But that too is the limit of the honor due him. Who can account for the urgency of will that carried him beyond that verge? For Townsend, by reason of the native coarse-
ness of his nature, was forbidden ever to become an artist. He was fanciful, national, impatient, conceited. And he was vulgar. The first qualities governed his operation, but the last produced his tone—and it was low. Even in his Campaigns there was ogling and tentative love play with hoydens that made the "stately" mansions of Virginia less stately. The sentimental eroticism of Bohemian Days, suggesting coy confession, has already been noticed. This element became a standing cause of offense. His story of the young man who cheated his lustful and avaricious father of his bride and his story of the Peeping Tom in the summer hotel are tales better forgotten. In his verses he offends still more. The "Magdalene of The Capitol," wherein a camp-follower rehearses her life among the senators, representatives, and delegates before dropping dead in a senator's office, is only less offensive (and laughable) than "Cloture," an account of embraces beginning in the Senate gallery and continuing in a public cab. These compositions are horrifying; for those who have read them they will put Townsend out of court entirely. More curious are other verses like those in "At Leipsic," about the girl

Whose arm is large as country hams,
Skinned white, with reddish fleshing

and those in "The Peach" about the girl who like the fruit is to be bitten "now that she is mine to bite." Such delectable bits may well deserve the consideration of the psychologists.

As a quite typical example of Townsend's male grossness, a little from one of his Johnny Bouquet papers may warrant attention.

At Binghampton a young woman shaved me. Slipping into the room, allured thereto by the striped pole protruding from the doorway, I saw a black-eyed damsel... She was applying the lathering brush to a ragged bearded son of the Susquehanna for the last time, and I heard his bristles rattle under the scrape of the steel. The effect of his matted head resting there with her arm around it and her long sentient fingers plying the knife, was that of some woodland nymph vigorously pruning down a brush heap in which lay a wolf...
When my turn came she gave a half glance out of those smouldering orbs . . . the fluttered flatterer covered me with soft soap . . . a hardly audible laugh was overhanging me . . . like a miniature reaping machine driven through the buckwheat by a gypsy fairy, the razor came onward toward the corners of my mouth, circumnavigated the chin, descended into the pucker thereof, and went up the other side of the face with the confidence and cleanliness of machinery. Then my chin was elevated so that I could not see the charming motive power in the glass and she stuck a milk white napkin in my throat and put her thumb and finger around my Adam’s Apple. Immediately it became apparent how Eve robbed that celebrated tree.

But the worst, in the end, is not to be found in any sexual context. The humor of the question whether if Shakespeare had been a mother and borne thirty-seven children he (or she) would have done more good to the world than by his plays, may be an open one—this in a special article. But the account in the same article of the midnight death of a child in Dickens’ most excruciating manner stands beyond extenuation—not only artistic but ethical—when one perceives that Townsend is making cheap copy out of the death of one of his own children, his daughter Ella, who lived but three months. For this man evidently there were no sacred events, no inviolable places of the heart; all was capable of just becoming copy. Accordingly, one is not surprised to learn that during the years of Gapland, he lived alone in the Den, while his wife lived apart in the Hall.

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There is an activity known as flogging a dead horse, which is generally to be refrained from. Nevertheless it must be said that Townsend was no poet; and this denial is to attack him upon the point of his greatest vanity, for did he not speak of “Poesy” as “Pharaoh’s daughter lifting him up” from the reeds of journalism? He was the writer of hundreds of verses, three volumes of them: Poems, Poems of Men and Events, and Poems of the Delaware Peninsula, not to count the incidental poems scattered elsewhere. Poems was the most carefully done, embraced a large

91 The Spirit of the Times, December 22, 1877.
92 See Hindes, op. cit., p. 50, for the Townsend “family tree” and chronology.
93 The Baltimore Sun, loc. cit.
94 Preface, Poems of Men and Events.
number of subjects, many drawn from his European travels, and was mildly descriptive and reflective in the manner which Long-fellow had made popular. *Poems of Men and Events* tended to be topical, patriotic and contemporary, making up a kind of versified scrap book of celebrations of personages like James G. Blaine, Senator Conkling, Presidents Garfield, Hayes, and Johnson, Secretary Seward, President Van Buren, Horace Greeley—to list one run of names. Again the names become wildly heterogeneous: DeWitt Clinton, Poe, Byron, John Jay, Linnaeus, William Penn, Daniel Defoe. Apparently Townsend could whip up a verse at the conventional “drop of a hat”; and for years he had gained practice by the writing on request of occasional verses to be read at dedications, memorials, conventions. Whether it was the Friends of Old Drawyers, or the postmen’s convention in Chicago, it was all one—Chicago would get, of course, a poem on the Great Fire. We know from his expressed regrets that Townsend destroyed much prose—Pegasus was always galloping away farther than publishers were willing to follow. But there is no evidence that he scratched any verses. *Delaware Poems* which he wrote in hospitals, and which received a poor publication by the assistance of Mr. Samuel Bancroft, Jr., the Wilmington mill-owner, exhibits his verse-scribbling mania in its last fury. Certainly this was a book not needful; what it represented to Townsend it would be hard to say, but one cannot help feeling that for him it had some pitiful personal significance. Its harsh, strumming, doggerel verses that cover Delaware and its history county by county, pieced out with some old numbers like the dark adumbration of “Queen Christine” and the sloppy epic of “Herman of Bohemia Manor,” furnish no pleasure. Its essential triviality and contemptible style may be represented fairly by one brief item, “Old Depot Lunch.”

The girl that never before I knew,  
She smiled at me o’er her oyster stew;  
A little cup custard lit my eye,  
To her oystery palate I smiled reply;  
We ate, we looked with our eyes goo-goo,  
The little cup custard and the oyster stew.

Ill, with money gone, Townsend was still in his own sight a great man, an important literary figure. He had built for himself

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96 See the correspondence upon this business in Hindes, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-67.
a mausoleum at Gapland with "Gath" carved over its portal; it is now empty and ruinous. He had obtained contributions for a War Correspondent's Memorial at Gapland and built and dedicated it with a poem by himself; it still stands as a hideous curiosity in the charge of the National Park Service. He had portraits painted and wished to bequeath his likeness to the State of Delaware. Altogether he was considerate of his fame and planned for its perpetuation. But most of all he must have looked to the preservative of his books. "Fame is the spur," but with Townsend that spur had not been the "last infirmity of noble mind." So all was in vain. Townsend's literary reputation actually was as ramshackle as the dozen crazy houses that he built over the landscape at Gapland; and time that proves all things has already proved it.

Nevertheless, his literary ghost still blows about. It should be laid to rest. In the quest for a local literature, in the scholar's industry, even anxiety, to elaborate the full picture of our national literature, the requirement of literary values for literary qualification must not be relaxed. Townsend may properly belong to American social history. He bore a conspicuous part in his time. In several respects he was an "outsized" person. He was colorful, if unsympathetic; a dynamo of energy; an extraordinary recorder of the daily commonplace. But for us his overweening literary ambition and the romance he made of it can be only a psychological vagary. Accordingly then there should be no temptations to award him the honor that his contemporaries withheld, nor even to lend assistance to his expiring legend. Any attempt to do so would only stultify its sponsors in the end. Nor can the harsh conclusion be escaped by a critical see-sawing upon such ambiguous terms as "quasi-literary" or "infra-literary." Not all print is literature and even a remembered book or two is no title to immortality, or even to a large respect. This is the judgment that George Alfred Townsend will, it seems certain, have to abide.

97 "War Correspondents' Memorial (at Gapland, Md., 1896)," with tipped-in photograph, Poems of Men and Events, pp. 213-215.
98 Letter from Senator H. A. Richardson reproduced in Hindes, op. cit., p. 66.