

## “LIKE THE BRAND WHITLOCK WE ONCE KNEW? HELL, NO.”

By JOYCE CHENOWETH

**I**N THE EARLY 1900's Brand Whitlock wrote groundbreaking political novels dealing with life as he had learned it during years spent as legislative reporter for the *Chicago Herald* in Springfield, Illinois, and as the reform mayor of Toledo, Ohio. In 1913 he took a diplomatic post as Minister to Belgium to have more time for writing. That plan went awry when, six months after he arrived in Brussels, the German army marched into the country. When he returned to writing after the war, he had lost touch with the realities. The books written prior to 1913 were published by Bobbs-Merrill; his postwar work was published by D. Appleton and Company of New York. Somehow the years and Belgium changed Brand Whitlock: the sincere social critic became a conservative, middle-aged diplomat ambitious for fame.

### I

Whitlock began with Bobbs-Merrill in 1901. His short stories in magazines had come to the favorable attention of W. D. Howells. Howells arranged for the Harpers to read the manuscript of Whitlock's first novel; but, as Whitlock wrote to Octavia Roberts, they "wanted it all written over into a romantic novel—think of it!" Eventually, it was submitted to another publisher:

I sent it off at once to Bobbs-Merrill; they published *Knighthood*, *Alice of Old Vincennes*, *Lazarre*, etc., you

know, and are the most "hustleful" publishers in the country. My friends in New York, Mr. Howells included, thought I would be fortunate if they took it. One day, the middle of November, the bluest day I ever knew, up to a certain hour in the afternoon, my nerves, every one, were vibrating like tuning forks, and I thought I was going to die, I received a telegram from Bobbs-Merrill—they took the book. I was too ill to go to them, so they sent a man here, a delightful man, Mr. Howland, who was so enthusiastic about the book that I began, I fear, all at once to take myself pretty seriously. Well, we signed the contract, and the book is to come out in the Spring . . . . The name, *For Congress*, Jerome R. Garwood, they do not like, and I do not like it very well myself. They wish me to get another name. Could you think of a few for me? I have considered several others, for instance, *Houses of Clay* (see Job 4:19) and then *The Thirteenth District* (Allan Nevins, ed., *The Letters and Journals of Brand Whitlock: The Letters*, p. 35).

*The 13th District* was published by Bobbs-Merrill in the spring of 1902 and scored an immediate success. The *Chicago Inter-Ocean* (April 6, 1902) said "The Thirteenth District' is a worthy addition to the list of American political novels and ranks with the best of its kind." The *Chicago Tribune* (May 10, 1902) thought that:

Mr. Whitlock might have made a stronger story, perhaps, had he not made the story hinge upon such a constant succession of Congressional campaigns, but this fault is a minor one. The story is one of the best and strongest of the year, and it is important also in the fact that between the lines the reader can discern the promise of stronger and better work to come—and when better and stronger work than *The 13th District* comes it will be good to look upon.

The *New York Times* (May 17, 1902) was less kind: "The immorality of betraying the man who has betrayed the public to send you to the Legislature or the State Senate

or to Congress is the lesson it teaches, if it teaches anything besides the cheap, venial and vulgar methods of our public men." The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* (April 24, 1902) saw both good and bad:

As Mr. Whitlock puts good, strong work and plenty into his study of a contemptible man; his invective is forcible, his dialect oaths original, his contrasts of character well marked, he displays first hand knowledge of the machinery of nominating and elective bodies, and his rectitude of judgment is rigid. But the novel does not interest, the character of Garwood has no surprises, and is neither dependent upon nor developed by circumstances.

The novel sold 5,563 copies the first year, earning for its author \$834.60 in royalties. A second novel, *Her Infinite Variety*, did better, selling 9,512 copies the first year and earning \$1,426.80 in royalties. But *The Happy Average*, Whitlock's next novel, sold only 3,079 copies the first year, netting \$461.85 in royalties.

## II

Whitlock's greatest success came in 1907 with *The Turn of the Balance*. It sold 11,432 copies the first year, earning \$1,639.80. The involved plot primarily concerns a youth from a poor but honest German family who returns home from the army and drifts into crime. After a year in prison, Archie comes back, only to be persecuted by the brutal detective who had arrested him before. The detective finally is shot and killed by Archie, and the trial forms the center of the book. Each juryman is characterized, especially pompous, pious Broadwell, the foreman. Archie's electrocution is described in precise detail.

The *New York Evening Sun* could not approve the novel: "Its logic is sophomoric, its dialogues wooden, its



climaxes vague and unclimactical, and its thieves' talk unintelligible and, therefore, apparently good dialect." The *Sun's* point about dialect is sound. When Whitlock's thieves talk, it is often impossible to tell what they mean. The *New York Herald* (March 16, 1907) obtusely headlined its review: "Mayor of Toledo Writes Satire on Society and Politics." *The Churchman* (May 11, 1907), published by the Protestant Episcopal Church, called the novel a "powerful but rather indiscriminate indictment of the way society treats its criminals and dependents." Perhaps it was peeved by the clergyman in the book.

The March, 1907, number of *The Reader*, a literary magazine published by Bobbs-Merrill, advertised *The Turn of the Balance* with a picture of the author which it said "looks like an Ogallalla squaw." The copy exulted over "a book of the scope, breadth, and humanitarian impulse of Dickens" and "a great drama made out of the stuff of actual life." The same issue carried a "review" of the book by David Laurance Chambers, Bobbs-Merrill editor, and an article by Brand Whitlock, entitled "Thou Shalt Not Kill." The article argues for the abolition of capital punishment on theological and humanitarian grounds, but from a lawyer's point of view. Whitlock fought long and hard to abolish capital punishment in Ohio. In 1906 and again in 1912 he introduced bills into the legislature abolishing the death penalty; both failed.

Chambers' enthusiam knew no bounds:

To find another who might have written this book one must look to the masters. Surely it is beyond the range of other Americans, and as surely there is no man in England to whom it might be attributed. There was a man in France; one thinks naturally of Zola, but of a Zola with a great tenderness and without sensualism. There is a man in Russia;

one thinks instinctively of Tolstoy—of a New World Tolstoy, whose ideals are under the rein of an American practicality.

The book, he said, "brings terrible charges against society. It charges society with making the reformation of a criminal impossible and absurd." Chambers' words were strangely echoed by the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books* (March 9, 1907): "This book is a sweeping arraignment of American modes of administering justice. It brings terrible charges against society. It charges society with making the reformation of a criminal impossible and absurd."

*The Turn of the Balance* was attacked by judges, prison officials, politicians, and even one convict as untruthful. It was charged with exaggerating a few injustices into an indictment of the whole judiciary and penal system. These attacks Whitlock refused to answer publicly, but in a long letter to Chambers he detailed the sources of his information, including a visit he himself made, accompanied by Mrs. Whitlock, to the Ohio State Penitentiary at Columbus. Mrs. Whitlock was unable to complete the tour, being of faint heart and sensitive stomach. Bobbs-Merrill published a pamphlet, for distribution to booksellers and other interested parties, entitled *Has Brand Whitlock Told the Truth?* It contained forty-eight statements "For" and twenty-three "Against." These came from senators, congressmen, judges, prison officials, ministers, literary people, and convicts. A federal district court judge wrote, "The author has no words of condemnation for the saloons, the breeders of crime . . . and he seems to have taken pride in displaying his personal and intimate knowledge of their slang language, which it is better for the youth of our country never to know." A U.S. circuit court judge declared:

That our institutions have produced as high a type of civilization as the world has ever known is the best answer to such a hopeless view as Mr. Whitlock takes. The teaching of the book is evil and its circulation can only tend to increase the feeling of the criminal classes that they are unjustly dealt with and strengthen their attitude of resistance to the law and its enforcement.

A state supreme court judge called upon the author "to write a sequel to his book blazing the way to a practical and humane solution of the problems that he deals with that have vexed mankind since the beginning of time."

Not all members of the judiciary were outraged, however. The Chief Justice of the U.S. Court of Claims wrote:

*The Turn of the Balance* is a piece of realism fresh from a heart that beats with sympathy for those who have little chance in life. . . . The author . . . cries out against the rigor of the criminal law that takes little or no account of the motives or past environment of those charged with crime. It is a lamentable fact that where one has been found guilty of crime the attitude of society toward him lessens if it does not take away hope.

A U.S. circuit judge pointed out that "there is need of reform all around, not only in the law, but in its administration, and if *The Turn of the Balance* impresses that upon the people, it may do good."

Clarence Darrow, whom Whitlock credited with having "first opened my eyes to the truth about 'crime' and 'criminals,'" wrote: (*Letters*, p. 78)

If only the judges would read it, if only the lawyers who have not yet become mere soulless machines would read this book, it would do something at least to soften and nullify the effects of the cruelest, most heartless, misery-breeding fetish that the cumulated ignorance and brutality of the ages have developed—the law and the courts!



An "anonymous ex-convict" stated, "The conditions in prisons are true as described by the author. . . . I have experienced many of the punishments mentioned in the book. The others I know to be true. Any man who has served time in Columbus, Jackson, Michigan City, and most of the other prisons can say the same if they are truthful." However, the warden of the penitentiary at Michigan City said, "If such a prison exists in this day, it ought to be named and its management investigated and reformed." The warden of the Ohio State Penitentiary at Columbus denied all: "If *The Turn of the Balance* pretends to be based on facts, and where in the chapters it refers to the penitentiary, if it means this institution, it is a tissue of falsehoods, and is evidently written by a prejudiced mind." However, Perry D. Knapp, Toledo's Chief of Police, backed up Whitlock: "I advise people who doubt its truthfulness to visit court rooms, police stations and penitentiaries and familiarize themselves with the work of these places, and I am sure they will have no reason to doubt Mr. Whitlock's story."

The opinion of Convict #2656 of the Iowa State Penitentiary differed from that of "anonymous ex-convict":

Seasoned though I am to vice and degradation, my better nature revolted from the gruesome baseness of the stuff. . . . Now if *The Turn of the Balance* affects me—a low-grade criminal—to the vomiting point, figuratively speaking, what, think you, will be its effect on folk whose sensibilities are delicate.

The Inspector of Police in New York City angrily wrote: "If the object of the author . . . is to convert people to anarchy, then I would say his work is a success." But New York's Police Commissioner, Theodore A. Bingham, reported, "*The Turn of the Balance* is all true, ghastly

true. It will certainly give true information to those serious enough to wish to know."

Opinions cited from lights of the literary world were unanimously favorable. Upton Sinclair pronounced it

. . . an extraordinary piece of work. It is simple and natural, as true as life itself, and yet irresistible in its grip upon the reader. I know of nothing with which to compare it except Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, and it is a greater book than *Resurrection*.

Jack London described it as "a splendid book, [which] displays a noble and sympathetic understanding of society, of men and women, and of the mental processes of men and women. It is strong, and it is true. The truth of it makes one weep." Dr. B. O. Flower, editor of *The Arena*, called it "as true to present-day conditions as were the great works of Charles Dickens, which uncovered the evil conditions of London in the nineteenth century." Flower said, "It is a book that would have made glad the heart of the Golden Rule Mayor of Toledo, the noble predecessor of Mr. Whitlock, and he who reads the last pages of *The Turn of the Balance* will realize how deeply the life, example and teachings of Samuel M. Jones have been impressed on the life of the author of this powerful novel."

Whitlock had expected the criticism he got and was gratified, as he wrote to Clarence Darrow, by the sources of what was adverse. In a letter to William C. Bobbs, informing him that the manuscript was on its way, he had explained what from the start he tried to accomplish in *The Turn of the Balance*:

Primarily, I have told this perhaps depressing story purely for the sake of telling a story, that is, with an artistic purpose and with all the art I can command; and secondarily, I have tried to tell the story so the reader, if he has



any powers of deduction and is given at all to the fatal habit of thinking, may draw certain conclusions as to the stupidity and inefficacy—to use no harsher terms—of our so-called criminal system. I hope that the reader may see that our system is no system at all, but a crude, blundering, vicious, capricious, and almost wholly accidental expression of the primitive brute passion of revenge that is still in the hearts of men and society. My hope is that in some small measure this book may serve to accelerate the moral impulse that just now is quickening the social conscience (*Letters*, pp. 60-1).

### III

Bobbs-Merrill published five more books by Whitlock during his tenure as Mayor of Toledo: *The Gold Brick* (1910) and *The Fall Guy* (1912); two volumes of short stories; and *On the Enforcement of Law in Cities* (non-fiction, 1913). None was an outstanding success. It is unlikely that the publishers or the author expected high sales of a nonfiction work, but *On the Enforcement of Law in Cities* was the last Whitlock book that Bobbs-Merrill was to publish. In May, 1913, he wrote to William C. Bobbs to discuss the book publication of reminiscences which had been appearing in the *American Magazine*. Whitlock explained that Mr. Howland had written him some time before to ask for the book. Since that time there had come offers from Macmillan, Appleton, and Henry Holt. He had, however, told them all:

That you had always published my books and that I wouldn't do anything that would seem in the least disloyal to you, or to our friendship, and that before I did anything at all in the matter I would have to take it up with you. . . . These other publishers have all said that they thought a book of this sort would do better under their imprints, because they didn't exclusively publish fiction, and they make

a great deal of the English rights. I wish, my dear Will, that you would tell me frankly what you think I ought to do in this matter (*Letters*, pp. 170-71).

Six months later Whitlock wrote to Rutger B. Jewitt, editorial head of D. Appleton and Company, concerning a novel then in the planning stage: "I am quite sure it would interest you." He had evidently decided by this time to give Appleton the book of reminiscences which came out in 1914 as *Forty Years of It*. Friends were by this time trying to secure a diplomatic post for him. He had announced a decision not to run again for mayor in order to devote more time to writing, and he agreed that a quiet diplomatic post would help. On December 2, 1913, he was appointed by President Wilson as Minister to Belgium. As Allan Nevins wrote in his introduction to *The Letters of Brand Whitlock*, "He went to Brussels as Minister, to find in . . . its assured peace [which] was guaranteed by treaties among all of its neighbors, the serenity, repose and leisure which imaginative writing requires." Unfortunately, the Minister had scarcely had time to adjust to this new life when the German army marched into Belgium. Brand Whitlock distinguished himself throughout the war by service to the Belgian people and received their country's highest decorations when the war ended. Literary work was laid aside during these years of crisis.

His new experiences, however, provided him with material for another nonfiction book: *Belgium, A Personal Narrative*. Placing the manuscript was entrusted to Curtis Brown, a leading London literary agent.

An aggrieved Bobbs wrote to Whitlock on December 24, 1917:

I know that you would not have arranged for the publication of your book without offering it to us, and I realize

that you would not have approved Curtis Brown's action unless you thought he had offered it to us. I want you to know, therefore, that the first knowledge we had of it was from the magazine announcements, that the manuscript was not offered to us at all, and that if it had been, we should not have allowed any financial consideration to take it away from us.

But the reply on February 6, 1918, was diplomatic:

The task of writing it was so great, and the details of international publication so complicated that I had to put it into the hands of an agent, and so Curtis Brown disposed of it as you know. He mentioned your name among those publishers whom he expected to consider or approach but I had left it all with him. Please don't bear me any grudge.

Though for this and other reasons relationships between the firm and Whitlock had become less than cordial, in late February or early March, 1920, editor Howland wrote Whitlock to suggest a new edition of *The Turn of the Balance*. Whitlock replied on March 10: "I am delighted with the thought of a new edition of *The Turn of the Balance*. . . . I think probably before it comes out I ought to look it over and change a word or two, here and there. . . . As to the preface, I am willing to adopt any suggestion you may make." But changing a word or two turned out to be a bigger job than Whitlock had supposed. On January 22, 1923, he wrote Laurance Chambers that he hoped to return the corrected copy in a few days. On the same date he told Howland: "Of course if I were to write the story now, I should write it altogether differently if I were to write it at all." If he successfully resisted temptation, it was no doubt due at least partially to lack of time. As he wrote to Howland again on November 20, 1923:

If I had it to do now, I should write it in a different way, but of course I had to decide, and wisely too, that the



thing is done and must stand for good or ill as it is. I therefore only made a few corrections, cutting out some opinions that time had softened and turning a phrase here and there a little differently, but respecting the whole.

In March, 1923, the re-cemented friendship suffered a fatal crack. As Howland wrote to Whitlock, Mr. Bobbs brought "bad news from Summit," where Mr. and Mrs. Whitlock stayed during a trip home to the United States. Evidently Bobbs had visited the Whitlocks and learned that Appleton was to publish Whitlock's new novel, *J. Hardin & Son*. When finally, on November 9, 1923, the corrected copy of *The Turn of the Balance* arrived, Chambers wrote to ask Whitlock: "Aren't you going to supply a preface?" Whitlock did write a preface which arrived at Bobbs-Merrill on June 25, 1924, barely in time to be included in the new edition. (The manuscript of the preface is in the Bobbs-Merrill collection.)

The *Chicago Continent* (December 25, 1924) commented on the new edition that the book "must be still regarded as one of the greatest novels this century has produced." *The Churchman* (December 20, 1924), in an observation which must have cut Howland to the heart, wrote: "Its literary style is very boyish compared to Mr. Whitlock's recent novel *J. Hardin & Son*." W. T. DeWolfe in the *Toledo Bee* (September 20, 1924) declared:

We are of the opinion that Brand Whitlock has the ability to write the great American novel if there is such a thing. We doubt if he will. For it must be a book that will appeal to a great many persons, and must be couched in the simple language of the "plain people." And there has been so much water passed under the bridge and over the dam since those delightful "The Turn of the Balance" days.

DeWolfe had written to Howland on September 12, 1924:

In those days Brand Whitlock was writing real stuff, as he did in "The Thirteenth District." No straining for effect, no plain attempt to use big words, no "titivation," nor "ineluctable," nor "exiguous," as show up in the new preface—just plain English. In his last novel, . . . "J. Hardin and Son," I picked out a list of 100 words of that class that, I believe, not one in a thousand would understand. Brand can write like the devil, but he isn't going to write the great American novel of which I believe he is capable until he buries his flair for "high Brow" and comes to earth to us "ordinary brows" with two dollars in our hands.

Howland replied:

You are dead right about Brand, I am sorry to say. Between us, Belgium has worked an amazing change in him. He has lost the common touch, been completely de-democratized, politically, socially, and literarily. I wouldn't confess this to anybody else in the world, for I love Brand, just the same. But his chance of writing the great American novel is, I'm afraid, gone forever. He won't be able to bury his flair for highbrow stuff, and the longer he stays away from Toledo the less likely is the interment to occur. What a pity it is. He writes me: "I am delighted with the looks of the book and feel you have done me proud indeed; your introduction was quite charming and ever so stylish." I ask you, does "ever so stylish" sound like the Brand Whitlock we once knew? Hell, no.

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