Charles Major: Hoosier Romancer

*Howard G. Baetzhold**

The novel *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, first published in 1898, won for its author, Charles Major, a Shelbyville, Indiana, lawyer, nationwide recognition as a writer of historical romance. Major's first book, it was destined to become a best-seller and to remain high on the best-seller lists for fifteen consecutive months. In scarcely more than a year it reached a sale of over 200,000 copies.[1]

Charles Major was born in Indianapolis, July 25, 1856; thirteen years later his family moved to Shelbyville. In secondary school there he developed the interest in English and history which later exerted so extensive an influence on his activities. He was a member of the first class to graduate from the Shelbyville High School, that of 1872. "His class oration was notable, and many persons predicted a bright future for him," one biographer has written.[2] After three years at the University of Michigan, apprenticeship in his father's law office, and admission to the bar in 1877, he remained a practicing lawyer in Shelbyville for the rest of his life. Always active in public affairs, he held a number of notable positions. He was elected city clerk in 1885 and a member of the Indiana state legislature for one term in 1886. He never again chose to run for a political office, although he was a prominent Democrat in what was a reliably Democratic county. He helped to organize and was a director of the Shelbyville Building Association and was a trustee of Purdue University from 1902 until his death in 1913. His wife, Alice Shaw, was a Shelbyville girl, whom he married in September, 1885, and who, from all reports, proved an ideal helpmate for this quiet and studious man.[3]

He indeed studied much, and was a serious enough student to send to England on many occasions for pertinent books and

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* Howard G. Baetzhold is assistant professor of English at Butler University. This article is based on a speech given at the May 8, 1954, meeting of the Indiana Historical Society, at Shelbyville, Indiana.

[1] Charles Major, *When Knighthood Was in Flower* ("200th Thousand" ed.; Indianapolis, 1898), title page verso; *The Bookman* (New York, 1895-1933), IX (1899), 192, 288, 384, 480, 568, X (1899-1900), 96, 192, 288, 408, 508, 604, XI (1900), 100, 196, 292, 404.

[2] Jacob P. Dunn, *Memorial and Genealogical Record of Representative Citizens of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1914), 201.

[3] *Ibid.*, 200-204; *The Trustees and Officers of Purdue University* (Lafayette, Indiana, 1940), 227-228.

materials not available in this country. His special interest was English and French history of the Renaissance, and he perused carefully many diaries, memoirs, and state papers, especially of the Tudor age in England. He believed that the original sources of history—the chronicles, memoirs, and letters—yielded the essential life of a period and its people, and that the author who wished to impart historic atmosphere to his work should acquire an intimate knowledge of the conditions prevailing at the time of which he meant to write. Thus when he came to write his first book, he brought to his work a mass of accurate historical knowledge.[4]

During the remainder of his life after the publication of *When Knighthood Was in Flower* Major devoted most of his spare time to writing and chiefly to historical novels. Since the works were done in leisure moments, his completion of nine books in the relatively short space of fourteen years is a noteworthy achievement.

What exactly first led Major to attempt the novel is not known. Out of his reading of history had come a desire to recreate historical persons, but the project was begun just for his own pleasure and with no particular thought of publication. Once he had started trying to recreate characters, however, the desire to weave a complete tale around them followed swiftly.[5]

The story of how the idea for *When Knighthood Was in Flower* came to Major reveals his method in applying history to romance—or *vice versa.* According to an account by an English critic, James Milne, quoted by Jacob P. Dunn, Major's reading of François Pierre Guillaume Guizot's *History of France* provided the first suggestion in a mere reference to the fact that when Mary Tudor married Louis XI of France, she was in love with Charles Brandon, a handsome favorite of her brother, Henry VIII. A short while thereafter, in the 1548 edition of the English historian Edward Hall's chronicle, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies York and Lancaster,* which was first published in London in 1542, Major noticed another brief mention that after the death of

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[4] Charles Major, "What is Historic Atmosphere?" *Scribners* (New York, 1887-1939), XXVII (1900), 753-761; William M. Hepburn, "The Charles Major Manuscripts in the Purdue University Libraries," *Indiana Quarterly for Bookmen* (Bloomington, 1945-), II (1946), 78, 80.

[5] Donald Jones, "First Author's Night in Indiana Honored Charles Major at The English," Indianapolis *Star,* June 20, 1937.

Louis XI, Mary had written to Brandon, saying that if he wished to marry her, he should come to Paris without her brother's consent rather than take the chance of Henry's forbidding the marriage. Out of these two relatively minute details, then, and with the aid of his wide knowledge of the period in general, Major wove the story that was to prove a best-seller.[6]

Whatever his original intention, Major did submit the book to Harper and Brothers. Unfortunately for them—as it later turned out—Harper's rejected it. But not long thereafter, Lee Burns, then a salesman for the Bowen-Merrill Publishing Company of Indianapolis (now Bobbs-Merrill), stopped in Shelbyville to try to sell Major a set of law books. Major's sales resistance was high and no law books were sold, but in the course of the conversation Burns learned that Major had a manuscript which Harper's had rejected. Major wondered if Bowen-Merrill might possibly consider it. The result was that Lee Burns took the manuscript to Indianapolis to the publishers. John J. Curtis, at that time head of the publishing end of the firm, read the book and liked everything but Major's original title, *Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk*, which he felt was hardly suggestive of a colorful and exciting tale of sixteenth-century love at the court of Henry VIII. This problem apparently disturbed him a great deal, but one day he found a solution in the opening lines of "The Gentle Armour," a poem by the early nineteenth century romantic writer, Leigh Hunt:

> There lived a Knight, when Knighthood was in flower
> Who charmed alike the tilt-yard and the bower.

Thus when the book appeared in the summer of 1898, it bore its now well-known title.[7]

As in many of the books of the day, the subtitle is also interesting and expressive of the contents of the work. The title page reads: "When Knighthood was in Flower/or/The Love Story of/ Charles Brandon and Mary Tudor/ the King's Sister, and Happening in the Reign of/ His August Majesty, King Henry VIII/ Rewritten and Rendered into Modern English from/ Sir Edwin Caskoden's Memoir/ by Edwin Caskoden." As may be seen, the name Charles Major did not

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[6] Dunn, *Memorial and Genealogical Record*, 206.

[7] Anton Scherrer, "Our Town," Indianapolis *Times*, April 23, 1938.

appear on the title page. At that time many authors, especially of historical novels, employed pseudonyms. Even so well known a writer as Mark Twain chose to remain anonymous in his *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), although part of his desire was to insure that the book would be taken seriously rather than be regarded as a humorous work because of its author's reputation. Just as Twain's book pretended to be a translation by one John François Alden of a memoir left by the personal secretary of Joan of Arc, so Major's author was Edwin Caskoden, who wrote the story supposedly based on the memoir of his ancestor and namesake, Sir Edwin Caskoden, Master of the Dance to Henry VIII.[8]

The book's success was immediate and immense, and the identity of its author did not long remain hidden. It was considered most remarkable—and indeed it was—that an amateur could have written so popular a work. During much of 1899 it was one of the three most popular novels sold and for the first six months of 1900 continued among the top five best-sellers.[9] Besides its financial success as a book, *When Knighthood Was in Flower* brought further profits when it was dramatized, first as a play, then as a comic opera, and finally as a motion picture.

The account of how the novel came to be dramatized is well worth the retelling. Soon after its publication, a New York theatrical producer wrote to Major, pointing out the excellent dramatic possibilities of the work and requesting permission to produce it as a play. While he was still considering this proposition, Major received a telegram from none other than Julia Marlowe, the great Shakespearean actress. It read: "I want the dramatic rights to When Knighthood was in Flower." Impressed enough to travel to St. Louis to see Miss Marlowe, Major still was wary about allowing his novel to be put on the stage. But what chance would any man have had against the charms of a Julia Marlowe? After talking to her and seeing her performance in *As You Like It*—as her personal guest, of course—he was so impressed by her acting, to say nothing of her beauty, that he was completely won over. He later said that until he saw Miss Marlowe in *As You Like It* he had not cared about

[8] Major, *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (Indianapolis, 1898), title page, 3.

[9] See citations to *The Bookman*, note 1.

having his novel put on the stage. The play was dramatized by Paul Kester and opened in St. Louis on the evening of November 26, 1900, with Julia Marlowe as Mary Tudor. The first New York production was the fourteenth of the following January. On December 17, 1900, the play opened at the English Theatre in Indianapolis where it was received with enthusiasm. On that night, in response to the vigorous demands of the audience, Major appeared on the stage and spoke briefly.[10]

Some 10,000 persons must have seen the play in the course of one week at the English, for a total of $12,000 passed into the box office till during the period and the top-priced seat was $1.50. Shelbyville—as was proper—turned out in fine style to honor its native son with the first of many so-called "author's nights" in Indiana. Five hundred of his loyal townsmen chartered a special train for the occasion, and accounts of the performance indicate that the audience was spellbound. One lady reported that she had lost a diamond ring which, as she put it, she had been "twiddling." And another said she was so entranced by the play that she lost her pocketbook containing her return ticket to Shelbyville.[11]

What I wish to discuss here, chiefly, are Charles Major's works and his place in American literary history. As indicated earlier, he wrote nine books in all. Second in popularity to *When Knighthood Was in Flower* was *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall,* published in 1902, which also enjoyed a large sale and a successful run as a play. Set in the time of the trouble between Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots, the book recounts the trials and tribulations of the high-spirited Dorothy Vernon in her—we shall have to say it—pursuit of Sir John Manners, the dashing son of her father's long-time enemy. Not that Sir John was actually unwilling, of course, but there were many family complications. *Dorothy Vernon* was followed in 1905 by *Yolanda, Maid of Burgundy,* a tale of sixteenth century France, and then in 1909, 1910, and 1912, respectively, came *A Gentle Knight of Old Brandenburg,*

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[10] Major, *When Knighthood Was in Flower* ("Julia Marlow" ed.; Indianapolis, 1901), Maurice Thompson, "The Author and The Book," epilogue 7-8; *ibid.*, "The Play," xv; Indianapolis *Sentinel,* December 18, 1900.

[11] Scherrer, "Our Town," Indianapolis *Times,* April 25, 1938; Jones, "First Author's Night in Indiana," Indianapolis *Star,* June 20, 1937.

which dealt with the period of Frederick the Great's boyhood; *The Little King,* which was concerned with the childhood of King Louis XIV of France; and *The Touchstone of Fortune,* which chronicled some of the activities at the court of Charles II, England's "Merrie Monarch."

Meanwhile, however, Major combined his interest in the past of Europe with a concern for local themes. Among his lesser-known novels was *A Forest Hearth.* Published in 1903, and his fourth book in point of chronology, it tells of Indiana pioneer life in the 1830's. But probably best-remembered and best-loved of his books with Indiana settings are *The Bears of Blue River* (1901) and that series of adventures related by one Thomas Andrew William Addison, better known as *Uncle Tom Andy Bill* (1908). These exciting stories are complete with all of the action, suspense, and danger dear to the hearts of boys everywhere. They describe how Balser Brent, the precocious thirteen-year-old hero, his younger brother Jim, and their friend Tom Fox, in *The Bears of Blue River,* and Balser and Tom Andy Bill Addison, in *Uncle Tom Andy Bill,* battle bears, wolves, and even the elements for their very existence. Few Hoosiers are not familiar with these stories.[12]

In all fairness, it must be said that rereading these boys' books is something of a disappointment of the sort that is experienced when one revisits a house in which he lived as a child. Everything seems different somehow—smaller, and not so glamorous as he had remembered. But there is no doubt that for years to come most boys—and many girls, too— will thrill to the bravery and the hairbreadth escapes of these young heroes.

Entertaining as these books have been to generations of Indianians, however, it is Major's historical novels that place him in closest touch with American literary movements. The historical novel was by no means a new genre in American literature in the 1890's, having been popular ever since the works of Sir Walter Scott had taken the country by storm in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, to

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[12] *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (New York, 1902); *Yolanda, Maid of Burgundy* (New York, 1905); *A Gentle Knight of Old Brandenburg* (New York, 1909); *The Little King* (New York, 1910); *The Touchstone of Fortune* (New York, 1912); *A Forest Hearth* (New York, 1903); *The Bears of Blue River* (New York, 1901); *Uncle Tom Andy Bill* (New York, 1908).

be followed by James Fenimore Cooper's widely-read works in the 1820's, '30's, and '40's. But, during the 1870's and '80's the star of the historical novels and romances waned as the works of the so-called realists began to capture the public's fancy—especially those of William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, though the latter's *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) was directly in the historical tradition. The works of Henry James, too, though they did not become anything resembling best-sellers, had a great influence on subsequent writing. Thus, as the trend toward realism increased, the vogue of romance declined, though, of course, it never died, nor ever will.

But in the late 1890's came an extraordinary resurgence of enthusiasm for romances in general and the historical novel in particular. Indiana's Maurice Thompson, author of the very popular *Alice of Old Vincennes* and noted critic of the period, wrote of this phenomenon in May, 1900: "Just how deep and powerful the present distinct movement toward a romantic revival may be no one can tell. Many facts, however, point to a veering of popular interest from the fiction of character analysis and social problems to the historical novel and the romance of heroic adventure. We have had a period of intense, not to say morbid, introversion directed mainly upon diseases of the social, domestic, political and religious life of the world. It may be that, like all other currents of interest when turned upon insoluble problems, this rush of inquiry, this strain of exploitation, has about run its course. . . . Great commercial interest seems to be turned or turning from the novel of commonplace life and the story of the analysis of crime and filth to the historical romance, the story of heroism and the tale of adventure. People seem to be interested as never before in the interpretation of history."[13]

Paul Leicester Ford, author of *Janice Meredith* (1899) thought, in 1897, that there seemed to be a revival of interest in American history and that novelists were being quickly responsive to it.[14] Perhaps the interest in the American past led to similar enthusiasm for the past of Europe. Among the leading literary influences of the movement were Robert

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[13] Maurice Thompson, "The Prospect in Fiction," *The Independent* (New York, 1848-1928), LII (1900), 1182.

[14] Paul Leicester Ford, "The American Historical Novel," *Atlantic Monthly* (Boston, 1857-), LXXX (1897), 728.

Louis Stevenson, whose adventure novels, many of which had historical backgrounds, had become extremely popular, and Anthony Hope Hawkins, who under the pseudonym of Anthony Hope had penned the widely-imitated *Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) and its sequel *Rupert of Hentzau* (1898), which inspired in America works like George Barr McCutcheon's *Graustark* (1901). The popularity of the historical romance became so widespread that it became subject to parody, and George Ade's *The Slim Princess* (1907) poked delightful fun at the type. Gelett Burgess, of "I never saw a purple cow" fame, also wrote humorously about the "Costume School" of novelists, as he chose to term them. After describing the famous magazines of the day as "filled with swords and smoke," he went on to indicate the nature of the tales and to name some of the writers and their works:

> Then, O what sight for reader's eyes!
> Wide ranged the battle of the Books
> Of France and many foreign nooks,
> Of kings and castles, knights and rooks,
> Of famous men, their manners, looks
> Proposals and replies.
> Amid the scenes of tumult, high,
> They saw Johnston's editions fly.
> And Winston Churchill's novel bright
> With Leicester Ford's was in the fight,
> Although against them tried
> Full many a gory story dark
> To reach the Hundred-Thousand mark.
> Booth Tarkington's *Monsieur Beaucaire,*
> With *Knighthood Was In Flower* was there,
> And dozens more, beside.[15]

Whatever its cause, then, the historical romance was the reigning literary form in America between the years, roughly, 1896-1902. And of course the work of Charles Major was part and parcel of this movement. His own words, in the person of Edwin Caskoden, introducing the Caskoden family and presenting the alleged backgrounds of the story, describe very accurately the chief attributes and purposes of the majority of books of this period. In defending his repetition

[15] Gelett Burgess, "The Flodden Field of Fiction," *The Bookman*, XII (1901), 470-471.

of a story "so well known to the student of English history," Major has Caskoden say: "But it is of so great interest, and is so full, in its sweet, fierce manifestation, of the one thing insoluble by time, Love, that I will. . . rewrite it from Old Sir Edwin's memoir. Not so much as an historical narrative, although I fear a little history will creep in, despite me, but simply as a picture of that olden long ago, which, try as we will to put aside the hazy, many-folded curtain of time, still retains its shadowy lack of sharp detail, toning down and mellowing the hard aspect of real life—harder and more unromantic even than our own—into the blending softness of an exquisite mirage."[16]

During the years indicated, novels of this sort flowed from the presses. Fred Lewis Pattee has listed thirty-one volumes as being the best of them. Many favorites may be recognized, for a number have lasted beyond their brief heyday:

1896 *King Noanett,* Frederick J. Stimson
Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc, Mark Twain

1897 *The Choir Invisible,* James Lane Allen
Soldiers of Fortune, Richard Harding Davis
Hugh Wynne, S. Weir Mitchell

1898 *The Adventures of François,* S. Weir Mitchell
When Knighthood Was in Flower, Charles Major [Indiana]
Red Rock, Thomas Nelson Page
Prisoners of Hope, Mary Johnston
Via Crucis, F. Marion Crawford

1899 *To Have and to Hold,* Mary Johnston
Janice Meredith, Paul Leicester Ford
Richard Carvel, Winston Churchill

1900 *In the Palace of the King,* F. Marion Crawford
Monsieur Beaucaire, Booth Tarkington [Indiana]
Alice of Old Vincennes, Maurice Thompson [Indiana]
Eben Holden, Irving Bacheller
The Heart's Highway, Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman)
The Duke of Stockbridge, Edward Bellamy

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[16] Major, *When Knighthood Was in Flower,* 4.

1901 *The Tory Lover,* Sarah Orne Jewett
D'ri and I, Irving Bacheller
The Crisis, Winston Churchill
Graustark, George Barr McCutcheon [Indiana]
Cardigan, Robert W. Chambers
The Cavalier, George Washington Cable
Lazarre, Mary Hartwell Catherwood

1902 *The Virginian,* Owen Wister
The Conqueror, Gertrude Atherton
The Battleground, Ellen Glasgow
The Valley of Decision, Edith Wharton
Audrey, Mary Johnston[17]

Besides showing Charles Major in the forefront of this movement, the foregoing list also reveals a fact of general interest to Hoosiers. Of the twenty-five authors of the thirty-one books, no less than four, as indicated in brackets, were Indianians. No other single state could claim as many. New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Virginia were represented by three each, but Indiana topped them all.

It is common knowledge that the literary output of Indiana has long been a source of admiration and wonder. And not without cause. A study has been made of the ten best-selling novels during each year from 1900 to 1940, in which the books were scored ten points for the number one best-seller, nine points for the second best, eight for the third, and so on. The birthplace of each author was ascertained and the states credited with the scores of the authors born in them. Indiana garnered 213 points, second only to New York, which had a score of 218. From there the points diminished rapidly to Pennsylvania's 125, Virginia's 102, and Kentucky's 94.[18]

George Ade once attested to Indiana's renown in literature with his version of an often-repeated story. The famous Chautauqua circuit lecturer, Opie Read, appearing in Fort Wayne, opened his evening's entertainment with a remark that he was well aware of the literary propensities of Indi-

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[17] Fred Lewis Pattee, *The New American Literature, 1890-1930* (New York, 1930), 90-91.

[18] R. E. Banta, comp., *Indiana Authors and Their Books* (Crawfordsville, Indiana, 1949), xi. Banta quotes the revised version of a study made by John H. Moriarity, "Hoosiers Sell Best," *Indiana Quarterly for Bookmen,* III (1947), 8.

anians and a request that those in the audience who were authors stand up so that he might see them. He was slightly taken aback when everyone rose. Everyone, that is, except one elderly gentleman. When Read had recovered somewhat from his shock, he expressed interest in the fact that there was at least one Hoosier who was *not* an author.

"Oh no," one man spoke up, "he writes too. He's just deef and didn't hear your question."[19]

To return to the historical novel—strangely enough, this "Indian Summer of Romance" came to a rather abrupt end shortly after 1902, a fact which accounts for the relative lack of success of Major's later books. Its sudden cessation is not easily explained. There is no doubt that it had been sustained by the Spanish-American War, which many saw as a gallant struggle by the oppressed Cubans to rid themselves of the burdensome yoke of the wicked, though still glamorous, Spanish—a war fought partly in the romantic Caribbean, the fabulous Spanish Main of pirate days. And after the war the spirit lingered, with heroes being sought in the novels after the heroes of the actual conflict had faded away. "In 'When Knighthood Was in Flower' or 'Monsieur Beaucaire' or 'To Have and to Hold' the hero could hold at bay two or three of the best swordsmen of the land and win the beautiful heroine in the end."[20] And great was the appeal thereof. But the era ended swiftly, and historical romances vanished from the best-seller lists almost overnight. Perhaps as valid an explanation of the phenomenon as any is that suggested by Pattee, who observes that upon the succession of Teddy Roosevelt to the presidency and the resulting widespread popularity of the latter's philosophy of "the strenuous life," the nation's reading habits were abruptly changed. The term "mollycoddle" came into vogue to describe anyone who was not entirely "manly" in his outlook and activities.[21] Thus perhaps the reading of historical romance became, or was considered to have become, the province of the "mollycoddle," with the result that even women forsook the costumed heroes of the romances for the brawnier heroes of writers like Jack London.

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[19] Howard Peckham, "What Made Hoosiers Write?" *American Heritage* (Brattleboro, Vermont, 1947-), II (1950), 24.

[20] Pattee, *The New American Literature,* 92.

[21] *Ibid.,* 93.

Nevertheless, Charles Major's works will be long remembered in American literary history. To be thoroughly honest and objective, however, we must admit that, dear as they are to the hearts of Hoosiers, their place has not been determined by intrinsic literary merit. They have the characteristics of the historical novels of the time—overly rhetorical and bombastic language; heroes possessing impossible skill, bravery, and foresight; plots determined largely by coincidence. Modern critics do not always deal kindly with Major. One contemporary scholar writes: "Although his importance may be said to be entirely in the historical field, Major made no real contribution to the development of the historical novel created by Scott and Americanized by Cooper. He had their faults but seldom possessed their powers."[22] But the books do tell an exciting story, and Major certainly holds his own in the genre with his contemporaries—writers like Maurice Thompson, George Barr McCutcheon, and the early Tarkington.

All in all, then, Charles Major's fame will rest chiefly on his having been an integral part of the turn-of-the-century heyday of historical romance. Indeed, his two most popular books can be said almost to mark its boundaries, since *When Knighthood Was in Flower* appeared in 1898, just as the movement was getting well under way, while *Dorothy Vernon* was only slightly less a success in 1902, the year that seems to have marked its close. Thus, no literary discussion of these years is complete without reference to Charles Major. And more than any other single title, *When Knighthood Was in Flower* has become typical, and even symbolic, of the unusual renaissance of romance.

In summary, I shall simply borrow the words of William M. Hepburn, Librarian Emeritus of Purdue University, who in 1946 wrote of Charles Major: "All things considered, it would seem that he well deserves a place in the Hoosier Hall of Fame."[23]

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[22] Donald A. Roberts, "Charles Major," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943) XII, 214.

[23] Hepburn, "The Charles Major Manuscripts," *Indiana Quarterly for Bookmen*, II, 81.