

## Maurice Thompson as a Spokesman for the New South

Walter L. Fertig\*

There is as yet no general agreement on whether the reconciliation between North and South after 1876 was triumph or tragedy, progress or reaction. By examining the work of an Indiana writer who tried to dramatize this reconciliation and guide public opinion to its support, this paper will try to contribute a mite to an understanding of the reactions to the issues compromised after 1876, principally the relationships between victors and conquered and between Negroes and whites.<sup>1</sup>

Literary history has long since shown how a major contribution toward effecting the compromise was made by southern writers like Thomas Nelson Page who responded to the call of Joel Chandler Harris in the *Atlanta Constitution*. In 1882, Harris had as many sympathizers in the North as in the South when he wrote:

In the whole history of politics there is not a parallel to the terrible blunder committed by the Republican leaders in inaugurating, after the war, their Southern policy. It was a policy of lawlessness under the forms of law, of disenfranchisement, robbery, oppression and fraud. It was a deliberate attempt to humiliate the people who had lost everything by the war, and it aroused passions on both sides that were unknown when the war was in actual progress. It banished for years the hope of reconciliation, delayed the natural progress of the country, and put an end, for the time being, to commercial prosperity in both sections. . . . History will justly charge to this policy all the demoralization at the South and the desperate efforts to resist it.<sup>2</sup>

The partisan approach developed under this kind of analysis was subtle and attractive. It included loyalty to the union of the states, and a confession that secession and slavery were

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\* Walter L. Fertig is professor of English and chairman of the English Department at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.

<sup>1</sup> For general background see C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, La., 1951). On the Compromise of 1877 see Woodward's *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston, 1951), 3-203. For a discussion of reconciliation, see Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (Boston, 1937), 100-03.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Collier Harris (ed.), *Joel Chandler Harris, Editor and Essayist: Miscellaneous Literary, Political, and Social Writings* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1931), 64-65, quoting *Atlanta Constitution*, January 20, 1882.

wrong. The Confederate soldiers were national heroes, who died, just as the Union heroes had died, in a great trial of honor—a sort of ordeal by divine fire—after which the judgment of God for union and against slavery was final.

These “reconstructed” sentiments were accompanied, however, by a deep nostalgia for the Lost Cause, and particularly for the supposedly idyllic life on the prewar plantation. Southerners filled their stories with whimsical and lovable slaves, with southern belles of surpassing beauty, charm, and goodness, and with dashing knights in the armor of the old gentry. The clear implication was that, although slavery was legally wrong, the society which included slavery was right, and that the New South should be essentially a rebirth of the Old South. By the early 1880’s publishers of northern magazines and books had completely capitulated to the fiction based on this thesis. When Thomas Wentworth Higginson—rabid abolitionist and commander of Negro troops during the war—read Thomas Nelson Page’s famous story about “Marse Chan,” the northern ex-fire-eater broke down and cried at the old Negro’s grief over the death of his master in the war to sustain slavery.<sup>3</sup> *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been more than answered.

A most interesting and perhaps influential contribution to this southern literature was made by a solid citizen of Crawfordsville in the very early days of the compromise, before Harris and Page had made themselves widely heard. People who recognize the name of Maurice Thompson at all usually associate it with the euphonious title of a book they have not read—*Alice of Old Vincennes*<sup>4</sup>—and do not realize that Thompson was one of the most distinguished intellectuals in the golden age of the Athens of Indiana. By the time of his death in 1901, Thompson was a very capable writer in many forms—novel, poetry, and especially literary criticism. Near the beginning of his literary career he had wrestled in his first two novels<sup>5</sup> with the problem of reconciliation as it touched him personally, and his personal problem may have been the crucial one. Although the problem seems to have

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<sup>3</sup> Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature, 1607-1900* (Durham, N.C., 1954), 702.

<sup>4</sup> Indianapolis, 1900.

<sup>5</sup> *A Tallahassee Girl* (Boston, 1882), and *His Second Campaign* (Boston, 1883).

been solved in the second novel, Thompson kept returning to various aspects of it throughout his career. Like many of his contemporaries, he may never have solved it to his complete satisfaction.

The outlines of Thompson's life help to explain his inner, personal complications. His father had been a strong-minded, strong-bodied Baptist minister who was living at Fairfield, Indiana, when James Maurice Thompson was born in 1844. Some ten years later the family was settled in Georgia where the Thompsons had acquired a plantation and lived as back-country aristocrats. Thompson's early education included some tutoring in the classics and liberal arts. But the family may have felt insecure in these years. They were never firmly established Southerners. Young Thompson served three years in the Confederate army, but after the war he could find no future for himself in the South. After some experience in the law and in engineering, he went to Crawfordsville in 1868. Beginning as a railroad engineer, he married the boss's daughter and established himself quickly. In the early seventies he turned to the law and politics. As a stump speaker for the Democrats, he shared in the triumph when Samuel J. Tilden carried Montgomery County and Indiana in 1876, and he served a single term in the state legislature in 1879-1880.<sup>6</sup> But neither Tilden nor Thompson carried the city of Crawfordsville, and here again he was partly an outsider, a dedicated if not genuine Southerner who had had the bloody shirt waved in his face by General Lew Wallace himself. The border-state atmosphere of his adopted home seems to have generated alternating feelings of acceptance and rejection in Thompson, feelings somewhat awkwardly reflected in his autobiographical novel *A Banker of Bankersville*.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, Thompson was of two minds about many things when he was writing his first novel, *A Tallahassee Girl*, in 1881.<sup>8</sup> He was proud of his financial success in

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<sup>6</sup> Frank H. Ristine, "James Maurice Thompson," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943), XVIII, 460-61.

<sup>7</sup> New York, 1886.

<sup>8</sup> Published anonymously in James Osgood's *Round-Robin Series*, the book proved to be quite popular. An eleventh edition appeared in 1893; 100,000 copies had been sold by 1900, and it was still in print in 1928. See Dorothy Ritter Russo and Thelma Lois Sullivan, *Bibliographical Studies of Seven Authors of Crawfordsville, Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1952), 185-87.

engineering and the law, and he wanted very much to be a money-making writer. Yet he was emotionally attracted to the aristocratic tradition of the southern gentleman. Furthermore, he had not quite decided in 1881 whether the election of Rutherford B. Hayes over Tilden was a blessing or a disgrace to the country. He still tended to think it was a disgrace, remarking early in the novel that the Florida capitol was "the scene of the memorable 'count,' so disastrous to one party, so valuable to the other, and withal so disreputable to both."<sup>9</sup> Thompson is not bitter—the novel is full of magnolias and mockingbirds and the magic of the Old South. But it is not satisfactory as a reconciliation novel, simply because Thompson was not yet quite sure how reconciliation would come about, or whether, in the last analysis, it was really possible.

The basic pattern is simple, and obvious in its application. A northern newspaperman and novelist, a veteran of Chickamauga, comes south about ten years after the war to fulfill his destiny, which is to write the novel he feels compelled to write about the aftermath of the great conflict. He meets the inevitable Thompson heroine—charming, innocent, ravishingly beautiful, irresistible in every respect—and falls in love. Because the Girl is too young to remember the war, she is the ideal person to affect reconciliation. But she is instinctively loyal to her ruined family. Her older brother, Victor, was also at Chickamauga, where he was permanently crippled by none other than the northern suitor for his sister. The recognition scene between the maimed martyr of the South and the healthy, sturdy Northerner is tense and manfully courteous on both sides. At the end of this meeting,

Cauthorne and La Rue exchanged very few more words. They could find no ground upon which to base a conversation. By a tacit recognition of the hopelessness of the situation they separated, the stalwart Northerner going thoughtfully towards the house, the shattered Southerner hobbling deeper into the gloom of the grove,—one to chafe and agonize over the fatality which had ordered this dark discovery; the other to bend his gloomy eyes upon the life in the hereafter, where the crutch and the disfigurements of wounds are unknown, and where the dark mysteries of our earthly afflictions burst into the fragrant blooms of heavenly delights.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *A Tallahassee Girl*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-49.

The heroine marries her southern suitor, leaving the mystified and frustrated Northerner to his empty success as a writer. To see the flower of the postwar South is to love her completely. But the best the most sympathetic Northerner can do is to sing her praises and go disconsolate home. Indeed, the Tallahassee Girl has gently repulsed two northern suitors, one of whom even her father is inclined to favor. In the future, however, is some hope for partial reconciliation. Her husband is an enlightened Southerner who believes that the old-time rebelliousness must go and that the Negroes must be not only free, but educated.

Thompson's attitude toward the Negro is clearly set down in this first novel, and his point of view did not change from one end of his career to the other. The Negro is basically and eternally different from the white man, and all proposals for the betterment of the Negro are to be based on this axiom. The best Negroes are the pure blacks; "jet black" and "black as Erebus" are complimentary epithets. The great sin of interracial copulation has produced in the light Negro a man destined to give nothing but trouble, psychologically and physiologically a misfit, a neurotic.<sup>11</sup> For the pure Negroes there is hope for a very gradual development along certain lines. As makers of policy and leaders of a community, they have no real potential whatever. They are created to be ruled and to make their contribution to society in their own way, primarily as servants and entertainers. Not that they are incapable of heroic action. The protagonist of *A Tallahassee Girl* is saved from death in the Florida swamp by the patience and fidelity of a Negro family who nurse him to health through a prolonged attack of yellow fever. But this is the devotion and heroism of natural-born slaves.

Thompson's contribution to the suffrage question is the offhand suggestion that the Negro would forget to vote if you did not remind him. And, of course, to remind him is to force him to do something he does not want to do and cannot do to any purpose. At one point in the novel Thompson

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 313. Thompson reiterated this theory and many of the others discussed here throughout his career. Perhaps the fullest exposition was in "The Intellectual Future of the Negro," *The Independent*, XLIII (April 16, 1891), 550. By 1891, Thompson had been a literary editor of this New York weekly for two years. He had been a regular contributor since 1884.

paints this striking picture: "By the side of the carriage-way, between the house and the gate, a negro girl, about fourteen years of age, lay asleep, her face in a hot space of sunshine, her body and feet in the shade. She was as happy as a princess in a palace on a bed of down, fanned by perfumed attendants. She grinned lazily, half waking, as they passed."<sup>12</sup> This vignette is apropos of nothing in particular in the development of the story, and might be passed over as simply a bit of ornamentation. But it is certainly symbolic of Thompson's feeling about the Negro—a childlike, tropical animal, happy to bask in the warmth of the sun without a care or responsibility in the world. Trying to make him the equal of the white man is to go against nature and to endanger his happiness.

Ten years later Thompson was writing in the *Independent* much the same way. Slavery had indeed been "hideous," but "in the South it showed in the aggregate its most liberal and temperate phases of oppression." Slavery had indeed been "evil," but it gave rise to some of the most picturesque, romantic phases of life and experience that have come to mankind since the days of chivalry."<sup>13</sup> In other words, slavery in the abstract is bad, but southern slavery was beyond and above such abstract judgment. Years later, *Alice of Old Vincennes* closed with the same idea. Although the historical setting antedates the Civil War period, the heroine Alice—a reincarnation of the matchless beauties of the earlier books—marries a southern gentleman and lives happily ever after on a Virginia plantation, where the slaves "worked and sang by day and frolicked by night."<sup>14</sup> Thompson's last word on the slavery question sounds exactly like his first one.

In spite of these quite commonplace views on the race question, however, Thompson could still claim to be a progressive American. Soon after *A Tallahassee Girl* was finished he seems to have made up his mind that reconciliation was fully possible. In his next novel, *His Second Campaign*,<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *A Tallahassee Girl*, 208.

<sup>13</sup> "A Noble Negro," *The Independent*, XLIII (July 16, 1891), 1046-47.

<sup>14</sup> *Alice of Old Vincennes*, 418-19.

<sup>15</sup> Like *A Tallahassee Girl*, the novel was an anonymous item in the *Round-Robin Series*. For bibliographical data and an interesting letter from Thompson to Lew Wallace about the mixed reception of the book, see Russo and Sullivan, *Bibliographical Studies of Seven Authors of Crawfordsville*, 187-88.

we find the plot and atmosphere of *A Tallahassee Girl* all over again, but with some important modifications. The heroine is liberated soon after the war from the tragedy of her family's ruin by going to live with an aunt who has married out of the plantation gentry to a progressive railroad financier. The aunt takes the Girl on a trip to Chicago, where the heroine is fascinated by the excitement of business and industrial progress. She is also attracted to a young Union veteran, now an up-and-coming corporation lawyer, who is, of course, immediately ensnared. The confrontation scene in this novel is much more heart-rending than in *A Tallahassee Girl*. On Sherman's march through Georgia, our hero had bayoneted a young woman heroically defending her home. The home was the Girl's, and the young woman was the Girl's sister. Nevertheless, the northern lawyer defeats no fewer than three southern suitors for the hand of the heroine, and the maimed sister is superhumanly tolerant and willing to forgive. Thus, in the most difficult of circumstances, reconciliation has been effected by surpassing love and understanding, and the Flower of the South has come to see that the future lies with the expanding and industrious North.

From this emotional acceptance of reconciliation Thompson soon made a natural transition to the theme of the basic heroism of both sides in the Civil War. In a poem called "To the South," he wrote:

With each fierce battle's sacrifice  
I sold the wrong at awful price  
And bought the good, but knew it not.<sup>16</sup>

When the southern soldier finally could realize in what way he had "bought the good" by fighting for the Lost Cause, he was ready to accept reconciliation. Perhaps the fullest development of the theme comes in a long poem, "Lincoln's Grave,"<sup>17</sup> which he read before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard in 1893. He begins with a personal question, by now strictly rhetorical:

May one who fought in honor for the South  
Uncovered stand and sing by Lincoln's grave?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *The Independent*, XXXVI (September 1, 1884), 1153.

<sup>17</sup> Cambridge, Mass., 1894. Pages unnumbered.

<sup>18</sup> Stanza I.

He admits having been a rebel and having felt a "thrill divine" when he answered Georgia's call for men. He recalls the excitement of combat, and still feels

the breath  
Of courage that did hurl me through the fray,  
And strand me by the ramparts of the North!<sup>19</sup>

The crucial test was whether the soldier fought with a clear conscience for what he thought was right. If he did, he is a national hero, for he is now aware of how the country gained, in the Civil War, the unity and strength to carry Freedom to the rest of the world. Abraham Lincoln is described as possessing a supernatural sympathy and tolerance which enabled him to live "on both sides of every aspiration," and see

how men could differ and be right,  
How from all points the waves of truth are driven  
To one last destination;  
How prayer that battles prayer with awful might  
Eternally tempestuous rolls to heaven.<sup>20</sup>

In these attitudes of Thompson can be recognized familiar ideas about the Negro and about the mystical union of Blue and Gray. Conservative and conventional as these ideas sound today, such thinking represented progress to Thompson, as well as a sometimes painful but thoroughgoing adjustment of his personal conflict. He is worth studying briefly, not because his ideas are important or profound in themselves, but because we can see those ideas developing in the dynamics of a difficult situation. In his day, Thompson could call himself a progressive, a champion of Tilden and reform. He was not a radical or original thinker, but he helped haul down the bloody shirt, and he tried to tell embittered Southerners how the Civil War could be interpreted as a blessing in disguise. Unless the Compromise of 1877 comes to be labelled a work of unmitigated evil, Thompson deserves recognition as something more than a one-book author.

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<sup>19</sup> Stanza VII.

<sup>20</sup> Stanza XXIII.