

Maurice Thompson's Primitive Baptist Heritage

Walter L. Fertig*

In one of the earliest directories of Montgomery County, a most interesting and most unreliable volume, the *People's Guide* of 1874, one C. L. Canine of Brown Township gets considerably more space than anyone else. After his name appears this passage in square brackets: "This man claims to be liberal in his political views, and believes in progression generally. He also claims that he is persecuted for telling the truth and being the friend of old Thompson." In a snide tone the compiler added, "If we knew who 'Old Thompson' is, or was, we might help our friend.—Writer."¹ But "writer" simply revealed an outsider's ignorance. "Old Thompson" was certainly known to more people than C. L. Canine: two of his sons were in the *Guide* as Crawfordsville lawyers.² Indeed this strange entry indicates the low estate to which the patriarch of a very interesting family had fallen. "Old Thompson" was Grigg Matthew Thompson, eldest son of Wilson Thompson who had been one of the most eloquent and influential Primitive Baptist ministers of the Middle West.³ Born on the Missouri frontier in 1811 to a father of genuinely heroic proportions, Grigg Matthew was fated to spend his life defending a creed which, by the time he became one of its greatest champions, was already a quaint anachronism. He was the father of Maurice and Will Thompson—lawyers, railroad engineers, archers, fledgling poets—a couple of dashing young ex-Confederates who had captured as wives two daughters of John Lee, prominent railroad entrepreneur, and who were running as fast as they could away from their Primitive Baptist heritage toward fame and fortune in Methodist-Presbyterian bourgeois gentility.⁴

So far as he is known today at all, Maurice Thompson is remembered as the author of *Alice of Old Vincennes* (1900), as a patron saint of archery clubs, and perhaps to a few readers who still relish Meredith Nicholson's *The Hoosiers* as second only to Lew Wallace among the group of writers making Crawfordsville an "Athens of Indiana." His staying power as writer and thinker has proved to be minimal indeed, although at the time of his death in 1901 his canon of poetry, novels, and literary criticism was very

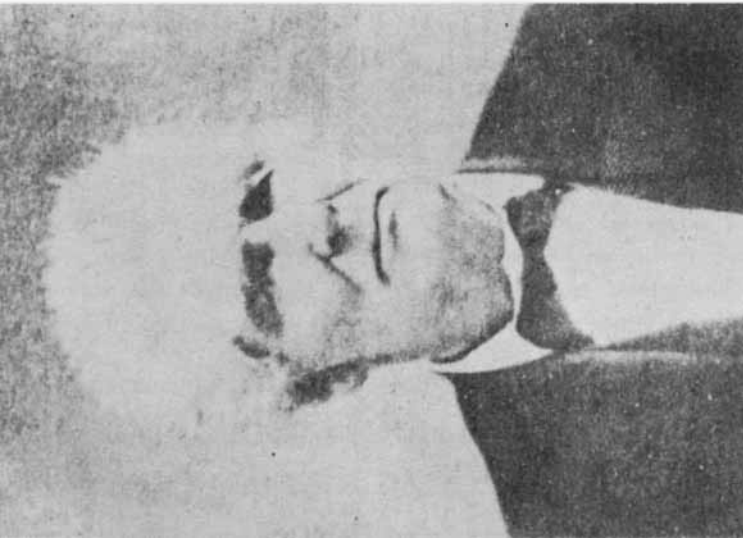
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¹ *The People's Guide: A Business, Political and Religious Directory of Montgomery Co., Ind.* (Indianapolis, 1874), 254.

² "Thompson, J. N." [error for "J. M.," i.e. "James Maurice"] and "Thompson, W. H.," *ibid.*, 188.

³ In addition to the *Autobiography* noted below, the best of the very meagre accounts of Wilson Thompson's life are in R. H. Pittman (ed.), *Biographical History of Primitive or Old School Baptist Ministers of the United States* (Anderson, Ind., 1909), 266-67; and William T. Scott, *Indiana Baptist History, 1798-1908* (Franklin, Ind., 1908), 67-71.

⁴ On Maurice Thompson, see Frank H. Ristine, "James Maurice Thompson," *Dictionary of America Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943), XVIII, 460-61; and Otis B. Wheeler, *The Literary Career of Maurice Thompson* (Baton Rouge, 1965). For both Will and Maurice Thompson, see Dorothy Ritter Russo and Thelma Lois Sullivan, *Bibliographical Studies of Seven Authors of Crawfordsville, Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1952), 173-288. Grigg Thompson is in Pittman, *Biographical History*, 267-68.



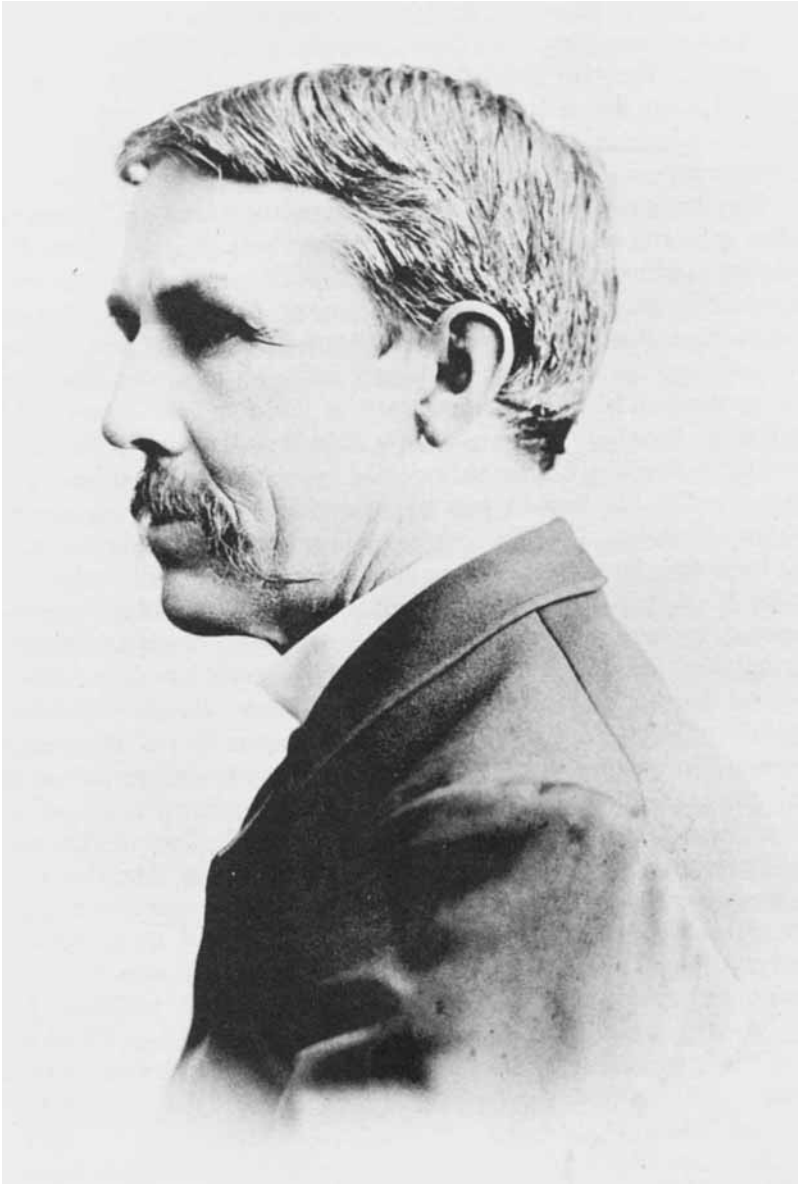
GRIGG MATTHEW THOMPSON

Reproduced from R. H. Pittman (ed.),
*Biographical History of Primitive or
Old School Baptist Ministers of the
United States* (Anderson, Ind., 1909).



WILSON THOMPSON

Reproduced from *The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson*
(Cincinnati, 1867).



MAURICE THOMPSON

Courtesy Lilly Library.

highly regarded. As a cultural phenomenon, Thompson is much less simple and much more important than his current reputation would indicate. From one point of view, he is a classic example of the mindless genteel, of the self-satisfied Victorian mentality. And yet, against the background of his family, he can be seen as he apparently saw himself: an energetic and progressive force in a progressive community. An exploration of this paradox is the purpose of this paper.

The story has features of a family novel by Mann or Galsworthy, with a first generation in a strong, primitively heroic mold and a third generation completely alienated, looking back from a position of bemused apostasy. This paper's main concern is with the generation between, a stratum often weak and unimpressive, shuttling between two worlds, with periods of tremendous energy and faith and periods of doubt, despair, and near-paralysis. The epic of the first generation is *The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson*,⁵ for a century a favorite testament of the Primitive Baptists. The book's long passages of Primitive Baptist rhetoric and polemic make it hard going for most readers today, but it is in part a fascinating story of pioneer heroism and spiritual integrity. In 1894, Maurice Thompson, the grandson, picked up this book and, for a pleasant hour or so, read it as he read Walter Scott and *Robin Hood*, as a tale of heroism and romance. The reading triggered some personal memories of the grandfather, "straight, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lion faced," with a "voice that might have jarred and tumbled the walls of Jericho." Maurice also remembered how the old Olympian had a way of "grabbing me with his iron hands; and after he had flung me on high he would jounce me with his big knee, much to the danger of my bones."⁶ This passage, which reads like a memory of being in the hands of a god or superman and barely escaping with one's delicate life, has arresting psychological overtones, not relevant enough to pause upon here. Maurice Thompson, however, has almost nothing to say about his father or, for that matter, about any of his blood relatives except his brother Will and his grandfather. He tried to slip his Primitive Baptist heritage completely except as a remote, quaint, perhaps embarrassing, even terrifying old family tradition. From the way Maurice treats them, it is hard to believe that Wilson Thompson lived until 1866, preaching his last sermon in the town of Wabash, Indiana, a month before he died;⁷ and that Grigg Thompson lived until 1888, fighting the good fight until the end.

A full treatment of the first generation in the Thompson family would make a significant study of pioneering. After years of itinerant preaching and wandering in Missouri, Kentucky, and Ohio, Wilson Thompson settled in the Connersville, Indiana, area about 1834 when he was in his middle forties. He still preached in many churches and was often minister to several at one

⁵ Wilson Thompson, *The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson . . .* (Cincinnati, 1867). This work was republished in 1962 by Elder Edgar T. Aleshire, Springfield, Ohio, and Elder Lasserre Bradley, Jr., Cincinnati, Ohio. Citations in this paper refer to the 1962 edition.

⁶ Maurice Thompson, "A Christian Silhouet of 1812," *The Independent*, XLVI (June 21, 1894), 768.

⁷ See the final chapter, "Last Ministerial Labors and Death," written by one of Thompson's children, in Thompson, *Autobiography*, 332-43.

time. In counties adjacent to Fayette, Rush and Franklin for example, he was long remembered as an oracle from afar, called in to revitalize flagging faith with thunderbolts of oratory.⁸ The founder and gigantic pillar of a church, he also had the power to split and destroy a church when his commitment called for it.⁹ Thompson had also been a leader in secular life, serving two terms—1837 and 1841—in the House of Representatives of the state legislature.¹⁰ And, as his grandson Maurice related the family tradition, he was once “defeated by a few votes” when he ran for representative to the national Congress.¹¹ Alas, this legend breaks down; the record shows that in the election of 1843, Wilson Thompson got exactly fifty-two votes out of more than eight thousand cast in the Fourth District, all from Union County, perhaps all from one rebellious congregation.¹² But surely Maurice Thompson was not the first poet to distort his account of the heroic age of his ancestors.

Wilson Thompson's stature among Primitive Baptists, even those who opposed his views, was not, at any rate, a product of latter-day distortion. His books on doctrine and his long articles in Primitive Baptist periodicals, usually expounding in an earthy and yet highly eloquent rhetoric some complicated interpretation of a passage from scripture, were sought after and reprinted, sometimes long after his death.¹³ He was doctrinally a primitive among primitives. To Primitive Baptists generally, most churches professing Calvinism had compromised on predestination and were therefore impure. In 1845, Wilson Thompson detected such an impurity in his own church and proceeded to lead a militant minority in the furious Anti-Means controversy, which actually got into Rush County court when the contending parties fought over the title to a church property. The full report of this trial, in which Thompson was a principal witness, reveals every detail of Primitive Baptist faith, liturgy, rules of decorum, church government, and, of course, the flinty and litigious temperaments of the church leaders. The “means” people said

⁸ See Thomas Goodwin, “Early Religious Movements in the Whitewater Valley,” in J. H. Beers, *Atlas of Franklin County, Indiana* (Chicago, 1882), 73.

⁹ At Big Cedar Grove in Franklin County, Wilson Thompson was remembered as a sower of doubt and discord in the 1840's. See August J. Reifel, *History of Franklin County, Indiana, Her People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis, 1915), 441-42.

¹⁰ *Indiana, House Journal* (1837), 167, and *passim*; *Indiana, House Journal* (1841), *passim*, especially the report of Thompson's committee to investigate the sale of state bonds, 612-14.

¹¹ Maurice Thompson to William Baskerville, March 19, 1887, William Baskerville Papers, Special Collections and Archives, Joint University Libraries, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹² Dorothy Riker and Gayle Thornbrough (comps.), *Indiana Election Returns, 1816-1851* (*Indiana Historical Collections*, Vol. XL; Indianapolis, 1960), 106. Thompson was one of four candidates on the ballot. He seems to have run as an independent.

¹³ The most comprehensive background work on anti-missionism is Bryan Cecil Lambert, “The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800-1840” (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, University of Chicago, 1957). Also helpful were: John F. Cady, *The Origin and Development of the Missionary Baptist Church in Indiana* (Franklin, Ind., 1942); Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia, 1950), especially 286-97; William Warren Sweet (ed.), *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists, 1730-1830* (Reprint, New York, 1964), especially chapter 3; and Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (2nd. rev. ed., New York, 1961). Titles of Wilson Thompson's books are mentioned in Pittman, *Biographical History*, 267. His articles appear continually in the Primitive Baptist periodical *Signs of the Times*, especially volumes IV through XXVII (1836-1859).

in effect that the gospel and the preached word were means to salvation. To Wilson Thompson this was cheating: no means whatever were effective in salvation. The gospel and the ministers' preaching were for the "comfort and instruction" of God's chosen. If a man felt he was chosen, he could present himself before the already-chosen for examination. If they decided he was indeed chosen, he was offered the right hand of fellowship and partook of the comfort and instruction.¹⁴ Such extreme predestinarianism, particularly when it was combined with the Baptist insistence on complete separation of church and state, came very near making superfluous any church organization or activity whatsoever. Indeed the activity that separated the Primitives from the main body of the church in the 1820's and 1830's was an effort usually thought of as representing the energy and courage of frontier Christianity at its best—the missionary movement. A crucial moment in Wilson Thompson's career came when he was on his way to Fort Wayne to join Elder Isaac McCoy's mission to the Indians.¹⁵ "Who hath required this at your hand?" demanded a voice in the woods.¹⁶ From that moment Wilson Thompson was a strong anti-missionist. The Primitives could also find no scriptural authority for Sunday Schools, Bible Societies, or colleges to train preachers to preach an obvious and unequivocal gospel.¹⁷

What seems to be merely stubborn obtuseness in this doctrine made much frontier sense. The Baptists as a whole believed and practiced a radical democracy—the Primitive Baptists a little more so. Many of the Primitives even turned their backs on the all-conquering bourgeoisie. They would not be governed by the tyranny of unrestricted fellowship and the economics of city life. They were nearly all independent farmers, true Jeffersonian agrarians who lived out near the county line. The monstrosity of large organization was to be feared continually. There was nothing wrong with being a missionary if one felt called to be one. What was wrong was taking hard-earned money from God's people to support a missionary society with offices in Philadelphia. Temperance was fine if God called one to temperance, but God would put into the hands of no man such corrupting power as a sackful of offerings for the support of a temperance society with headquarters far removed from the surveillance of the contributors. There was even nothing wrong with a minister's being educated—as Wilson Thompson seems to have been—if by chance God called an educated man to the ministry. But the idea of taxing churches for the support of Franklin College, where money might disappear in many mysterious ways, was an idea demanding suspicion. These were very logical deductions of Primitive Baptist Protestantism.

¹⁴ George C. Clark, *Means vs. Anti-Means; or the Trial of the Baptist Church Case in the Rush Circuit Court* (Rushville, Ind., 1846). Thompson's testimony is on pages 24-30.

¹⁵ McCoy was by far the most prominent and heroic of the early Baptist missionaries in Indiana. His famous decision to devote his efforts to the Indians was made in 1817. See Cady, *Missionary Baptist Church in Indiana*, 84-92.

¹⁶ Thompson, *Autobiography*, 199-200.

¹⁷ The germinal statement is in the famous "Black Rock Address" of Elder Samuel Trott (1832), quoted and discussed in Lambert, "Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists," 368.

In fiction and legend, the Primitive Baptist is sometimes caricatured as a "hard-shell," hard-drinking, gospel-shouting misanthrope.¹⁸ But very few frontier Protestants of whatever sect were permanently depressed or bigoted by a grim theology. Grigg Thompson's granddaughter remembered the "booming, contagious" laughter which accompanied the droll stories he told about his experiences as a backwoods preacher.¹⁹ Primitive Baptist association meetings were week ends of big picnics and big arguments, in addition, of course, to much praying and preaching. And then there was the continually lusty, enervating battle of wits and Biblical learning with the other sects on the frontier. The camp-meeting revivals were more spectacular, but some glamor and certainly much heat could be generated by Primitive Baptist debates with such subtle enemies as the Campbellites—to say nothing of the voluble Methodists. Such was the Primitives' taste for vigorous argument that worthy opponents could be cultivated as friends. In T. S. Stribling's novel *The Forge*, old Jimmy Vaiden is a hard-shell Baptist whose best friend is a Methodist circuit rider primarily because Jimmy could get into good arguments with a Methodist. Jimmy didn't like the Campbellite preacher because Jimmy's simple mind couldn't find enough difference between hard-shell doctrine and Campbellism to argue about.²⁰ But to Primitives like the Thompsons, the Campbellites and even wayward preachers of their own church, such as the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarians,²¹ were the most challenging opponents. When this combativeness was followed by splits in the church, by splits in the splits, and by congregations reduced to a few old faithfuls with almost complete alienation of the younger generation, the Primitive church began to lose its vitality.

Grigg Matthew Thompson, as a young man, had seen his father standing tall as a civic leader and pillar of the church. Thirty years later, after many wanderings and troubles, Grigg himself is "Old Thompson," something of an embarrassment to his friends the Canines and something of an oddity to his own children. He did not always act heroic, but he did not quit until he died. Somehow, it is hard to dismiss him the way his son Maurice dismissed him.

When Grigg Thompson brought his family to Montgomery County, Indiana, in 1868, they were coming back to the North after fourteen years of widely varying fortunes in the hill country of northern Georgia. In the middle fifties, Grigg Thompson, with his wife and children, had moved from Kentucky to the Cherokee Hills of Gordon County in Georgia, apparently with an idea of establishing some roots and comforts, as Wilson Thompson had in Fayette County, Indiana. Ten years earlier, the violent split in his father's church

¹⁸ See, for example, "Old Uncle John Olive," in Joseph G. Baldwin, *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (New York, 1891), 318-23.

¹⁹ Jessie Thompson Ballard, "Pioneer Georgia Preacher," *Atlanta, Ga., Journal*, February 4, 1934.

²⁰ T. S. Stribling, *The Forge* (Garden City, N.Y., 1931), 4-6, 238.

²¹ The doctrine of "two-seeds-in-the-spirit," a crude explanation of the relationship between God and the devil (both of whose seeds are implanted in man), was developed by the famous Daniel Parker, an extreme and eloquent anti-missionist who exerted a great influence in southern Indiana and Illinois in the 1820's and 1830's. See Cady, *Missionary Baptist Church in Indiana*, 50-57.

during the Anti-Means controversy probably revealed to Grigg that the Primitive Baptist cause in Indiana was doomed.²² Gordon County perhaps looked like a good place for a new start. During the Civil War the Thompsons seem to have lived in or near Calhoun, the county seat; and Thompson's leadership of the nearby Harmony Church from 1861 to 1868 was long remembered as a golden age. "Old members recall," writes the county historian, "that on a memorable Sunday, forty-six adherents of the faith were admitted into the church after baptism by immersion in Town Creek nearby."²³ Calhoun also has a legend that Thompson and "a gentleman of opposite faith once exploited their religious dogmas in the local assembly room for an entire week, the debates continuing from morning until night with large audiences in attendance and unabated interest."²⁴ A conscientious Primitive might have winced at that word *exploited*, but it has an ironic appropriateness.

Gordon County was not in the center of Sherman's path, but it was close enough. The war apparently knocked the Thompsons out financially. When they first went to Georgia, they had the means (perhaps inherited by Mrs. Thompson, a member of the Jäger family of Fayette County) to acquire at least temporary title to two small farms. In the census of 1860 Thompson listed real estate worth \$1,600 and personal property worth \$800, a modest holding, but far above average for Gordon County.²⁵ (The slave schedules list no slaves belonging to Thompson.) When the Thompsons came north in 1868, they apparently had nothing. The family split up, Grigg, Mrs. Thompson, and the youngest child going to live among the Canines in Brown Township. Maurice and Alice Thompson lived on the Lee place near Smartsburg.²⁶ Maurice's father-in-law, John Lee, was a prominent Democrat but not yet a railroad magnate. Lee's father, however, had been a Primitive Baptist elder and a leader of the Crawfordsville church from its beginning

²² From census reports and other scattered sources came the following vital statistics on the Grigg Thompson family: Grigg married Diantha Jaegger April 7, 1831, in Fayette, County, Indiana. The family remained in the area of Fayette and Franklin counties until 1841 or 1842, during which time at least three children were born—Minerva (1832), Mariah (1839), and James Madison, later "Maurice," a modification made in the 1860's, (1840). In the early 1840's there was a move to Missouri where Mary (1843) and Will H. (1846) were born. Between 1846 and 1849, the family moved to Fleming County, Kentucky, where Thomas P. (1849), and Diantha (1854 or 1855) were born, in addition to a son, Grigg, born in October, 1850, who lived only one year. Soon after the birth of Diantha came the move to Gordon County, Georgia. Diantha was still living with her mother and father when the family came back to Indiana. Thomas has been tentatively but almost positively identified as living in 1870, with his wife, on the farm of Henry Talbot two miles southwest of Crawfordsville. In June of 1868, Maurice married Alice Lee. Will married Alice's sister Ida Lee about 1870. The two brothers set up as lawyers in Crawfordsville about 1871. These facts are at variance with many sources at many points, including the date of Maurice Thompson's birth, which he himself placed in 1844. But this is contradicted by four successive census reports (1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880). Many questions about the family remain unanswered.

²³ Lulie Pitts, *History of Gordon County, Georgia* (Calhoun, Ga., 1933), 275.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 456.

²⁵ U.S., Eighth Census, Georgia, National Archives, Washington, VII, 344. The material cited here and in other footnotes referring to census reports is taken from the original census returns and cannot be found in the published volumes.

²⁶ U.S., Ninth Census, Indiana, Montgomery County, XXVII, 17, 145, microfilm copy, Genealogy Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis.

until his death in 1848.²⁷ Lee never gave up his membership in the old church. Although Maurice Thompson seemed to forget about it later, the original anchors of his family in Montgomery County were dirt farming and the Primitive Baptist church, not the railroad building, the law practice, the poetry, the friendship of Lew Wallace, or any of the other more genteel and prosperous connections of later years.

Union Church in Brown Township, where Grigg Thompson deposited his letter, had been started in 1826 at the house of patriarch Ralph Canine, born in 1789 and still a decade away from his death. His sons J. J. Canine and Thompson's "friend" C. L. Canine were well-to-do farmers and church leaders, J. J. being perennial clerk of the congregation.²⁸ Another son, William Canine, had become a Republican and listed his wealth at \$50,000 in 1870.²⁹ Thompson was still a great preacher and a good neighbor, but he was definitely down on his luck. His family was breaking up, and no more than one of his sons had stayed with the church. There is evidence to suggest, however, that during his first year or two in Brown's Valley, Thompson was a moving force of some power, first for construction and later, as one might expect, for destruction.

Not, of course, that anything like the triumphs of Harmony Church in Gordon County, Georgia, was in the offing. The Union group was small and static. Twenty-five or thirty people attended the monthly meetings, and months went by without the acceptance of a new member. Thompson was never the titular leader of the church. He was elected assistant to Elder J. J. Goben, the regular preacher, at the end of 1869 and was continued in that office a year later.³⁰ He preached and prayed frequently in these first two years; but at the very meeting where his assistantship was continued at the end of 1870, he was accused by James Long of "disorder" for taking part in an ordination at a church not in fellowship with Union. The congregation completely exonerated Thompson,³¹ but one of those unhealable splits had opened. One cannot help suspecting personal, temperamental animosities revealed only obliquely by the church minutes. J. J. Canine, clerk of the congregation, brought up the "disorder" charge again in October of 1871; and this time, in spite of his earlier "exoneration," Thompson had to ask forgiveness for making an error. The forgiveness was granted and the charge quashed forever, which may mean simply that Thompson still controlled some votes.³² But three months later Elder Goben was elected preacher by "private ballot," and the position of assistant preacher was not filled.³³ Finally in October, 1872, a new charge was brought by Ralph Canine himself, a charge com-

²⁷ *Crawfordsville Journal*, September 29, 1923. This information was included in the report of a speech by M. M. Canine at the centennial of the Crawfordsville Primitive Church.

²⁸ The Minute Book of Union Church is in the private possession of Mr. Clair Wilkinson of New Market, Indiana, who kindly loaned it to the author.

²⁹ U.S., Ninth Census, Indiana, Montgomery County, XXVII, 11.

³⁰ Union Church Minute Book, December 25, 1869, and December 24, 1870.

³¹ *Ibid.*, January 21, 1871.

³² *Ibid.*, October 26, 1871.

³³ *Ibid.*, December 23, 1871.

pounded of an old heresy and personal pique: "for saying to me that he did not believe in any Jesus only in purpose then when I talked to him about it afterwards he said to me he never said it." The charge was taken up and sustained after "a good deal of conversation," and Thompson had to make a lengthy explanation. "What I said in my sermon was not in reference to Brother Canine," he insisted, trying to separate the personal from the doctrinal. He had "axt" Brother Canine if he could do anything to satisfy him, to which Canine had replied that it must come before the church. The peroration of Thompson's explanation before that body speaks for itself:

As for the conversation between Brother Canine and myself and my saying that I did not believe there was any Jesus untill he was Born of the Virgin Mary I have no recollection of any sutch conversation I cannot say that we never did talk on that subject for we have had many conversations that I cannot now recollect what was our topic of conversation. But I am sure that Brother and Sister Canine misunderstood me or . . . I in some way spoke unguarded and in a way to Misrepresent My own faith for I have never believed preached or written anything of the kind but all ways to the reverse. . . . the cause of Christ and the feelings of my Brethren are Dearer to me than all things else and for that cause and their feelings I am ready to do anything that is right and just.³⁴

The loophole in the final sentence does not destroy the tone of earnest sincerity, but there are squirming and defensiveness here too. In May of 1873 Thompson requested a letter of dismission, and the church replied by handing him his old letter back.³⁵ John Lee, now president of the Logansport, Crawfordsville, and Southwestern Railroad, entered the argument on Thompson's side from Walnut Creek Church³⁶ and was seconded by C. L. Canine, now very close to the awkward moment when he made his statement to the *People's Guide*.³⁷ From C. L. Canine, the church of the Canines promptly withdrew the right hand of fellowship.³⁸ In the summer of 1874 nine members withdrew from Union Church in protest against the treatment of Thompson, including one Thomas Thompson and his wife Delia, probably Grigg Thompson's son and daughter-in-law.³⁹ C. L. Canine and some of the other separators were reinstated later,⁴⁰ but the Thompsons disappeared from the church records forever.

Such detailed accounts of Grigg Thompson's career are available only at widely spaced intervals, but this scene may very well be representative—a period of success followed by a period of wrangling, doubt, despair, and disintegration. A church was split, a family was divided, and the preacher had to move on, alone. Twenty years earlier, Grigg Thompson had written, to a Primitive Baptist periodical, letters full of fear, depression, and remorse

³⁴ *Ibid.*, October 26, 1872. Although the minutes indicate that this was a signed statement, the handwriting is that of the clerk; and one cannot know how much of the "flavor" of the passage is to be credited to Thompson.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, May 24, 1873.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, June 21, 1873.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, December 27, 1873.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, April 25, 1874.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, June 27, 1874.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, February 26, 1876.

for his role in the divisive controversies of the church.⁴¹ In 1880, on the other hand, Elder and Mrs. Thompson were living with their now successful son Maurice on East Main Street in Crawfordsville, and one might think the preacher had finally retired to the comforts of the bourgeois world.⁴² Six years later, however, he appears far away in Missouri and Texas, fighting the old war on one of the few fronts left. At the age of seventy-five he entered into the lists for the nineteenth and presumably last time against one of the old enemies, an experienced Cambellite debater who, although he was a younger man, had one more official debate to his credit than Thompson had. The proposition affirmed by Thompson has a familiar ring: "The giving of Spiritual or eternal life to a sinner dead in sins, is the work of God, independent of the written word of Scriptures." This the Cambellite, one Wilmeth, denied. It was the old Means versus Anti-Means argument once again. The country had been shaken by Civil War, Reconstruction, the Greenbackers, and the Haymarket Riot; but the eternal questions were inexhaustible and the debates went on forever. The reporter of this Last Tournament says, "It was unanimously admitted by all, except the Campbellites, that Brother Thompson sustained his proposition by Bible testimony and weight of argument, and defeated Wilmeth . . . breaking the backbone of Campbellism and literally demolishing this miserable modern system of materialism."⁴³

Earlier in the same year Thompson had shown the old fire in a long letter to a new Primitive Baptist paper being published in Greenfield, Indiana, by one of his nephews. A quotation from this letter makes a good closing cadence here, not only because it is one of Thompson's last statements, but because it is essentially and necessarily typical of so many others.

The Church of Christ is to hear him in all things and to be prompt in executing the laws of his kingdom. Errors permitted to exist in it will eat as doth a canker, and spread as a vile leprosy, until the whole body becomes a filthy cankerous, stinking corpse. This loathsome and deadly disease may start in a society to raise money for the poor and the preacher, or to employ an evangelist to visit the destitute churches, or for a church college, or a church publishing house, and as it advances, like the same thing started about one hundred years ago, you will bring the church in union with more than a score of humanly devised institutions, and Christ and his laws will be forgotten by the ministry, and you will hear nothing from your pulpits but these societies lauded as the most efficient means of grace ever invented, and your money demanded to sustain them; and to get this money your church house, erected for God's service, will be turned into a place of speculation and money-gathering, and tea parties, strawberry and ice-cream feasts, oyster suppers, tableaux, and festivals. All these must be practiced under the sanction of the church, and taught and encouraged by the ministry. This is no painted picture, but a simple statement of facts that can be witnessed in the sect that was driven from the church by her *non-fellowship* resolutions. . . .⁴⁴

⁴¹ *Signs of the Times*, XVI-XX (1848-1852), *passim*. These letters also contain biographical material. See also Pittman, *Biographical History*, 267-68.

⁴² U.S., Tenth Census, Indiana, Montgomery County, XXIV, 329, microfilm copy, Genealogy Division.

⁴³ *The Primitive Monitor*, I (September 15, 1886), 859-60.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, (January 15, 1886), 53.

"Non-fellowship" as a positive concept, as an antidote to the latitudinarianism and the endless "activities" of a modern church, may have a certain limited appeal even today; but not to very many good Christians, not even to Primitive Baptists. The concept had if anything less appeal in 1886.

Two years later, Grigg Thompson suffered a fall from his horse and died soon after in or near Ashland in central Missouri. By this time, Maurice Thompson had passed beyond a profitable career in the law and a modest success in politics as a Democrat, including a term in the state legislature (1879) and an appointment as a state geologist in 1885. He had to his credit five novels and many poems, stories, and articles. He was an established midwestern virtuoso, both as naturalist and as defender of bourgeois idealism. Literature was now the center of his activity; and he had been for some time a regular contributor to the *Independent*, a New York periodical in which eventually appeared more than two hundred of his articles, stories, and poems. He no longer spent the damp winters in Indiana. He and his wife cut short their winter sojourn at Bay St. Louis, Louisiana, to bring the old warrior back to be buried in Crawfordsville.⁴⁵ Maurice had only a dozen years left to him, and a proposed autobiography never got written.⁴⁶ Instead there is *Alice of Old Vincennes*, not lacking in attractiveness of its own, but not showing any particular spiritual courage or intensity. There is also this, however:

A critic who has fallen in love with Tolstoi and Zola is driven to argue *ad hominem*, and this is why Mr. Howells feels bound to apotheize Tolstoi and uphold his theory of abject poverty and non-resistance of evil. Mr. Howells' whole doctrine is that mediocrity is all of human life that is interesting—that a mild sort of vulgarity is the one living truth in the character of men and women. His criticisms are written to insist upon the commonplace as the one desirable element in fiction. It is to clinch and illustrate this doctrine that he approves Tolstoi's course in putting his daughters out to work in the fields with peasants, and putting himself at the shoemaker's bench in order, as he says, to be like Christ. Realism must go to this length, or it must fall. If the picturesque, the lofty, the soul-stirring, in short, the ideal must be driven from fiction, then the low, the coarse, the vulgar, the commonplace, and at last the immoral must take its place. . . . These critics . . . have the notion that to be a Christian one must wear brogans No. 10 and refuse to live on a carpet. Indeed, realism, no matter what turn it takes, ends in abject vulgarity.⁴⁷

Grigg Thompson would have had very little idea of what his most famous son was talking about here; and he might not have appreciated the observation that as literary criticism, this sounds Primitive, if not Paleolithic. But he might have recognized the fire and conviction, and he might have applauded the crescendo of indignation. When Maurice Thompson got mad, he too could speak in a voice capable of tumbling the walls of Jericho.

⁴⁵ Crawfordsville *Weekly Review*, March 17, April 7, 1888.

⁴⁶ Maurice Thompson to William Baskerville, March 19, 1887, Baskerville Papers.

⁴⁷ Chicago *Times*, August 14, 1887, Supplement, 1. Many similar passages from Maurice Thompson's literary criticism could be cited. His literary biographer has called his criticism the *locus classicus* of genteel conservatism. See Wheeler, *Literary Career of Maurice Thompson*, 58-92, 137-39. For an account of Thompson's clash with William Dean Howells, see Edwin H. Cady, *The Realist at War* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1958), 32-34.