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CHARLES W. CHESNUTT: TAR HEEL AND SOUTHERN AUTHOR¹

by

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It is not my purpose to contend that Charles W. Chesnutt was a great writer who deserves our persistent attention and high acclaim. It is clear to all that Chesnutt's place is among the second rank of American prose writers, even though his best work admirably rewards one's attention and received substantial and encouraging praise from respected critics of his own times. Instead, my purpose is to call attention to the curious fact that Chesnutt is very seldom treated as a Southern writer and, by focusing on his "Southernness," to contend that such a situation inappropriately does a disservice to Chesnutt, to his fiction and its concerns, to the South, and to the integrity and accuracy of histories of Southern literature.

Ironically, Chesnutt has been included in many of the accounts of North Carolina writing even though he has usually been omitted in accounts of Southern writing which do include others whose works are less distinguished; and the State of North Carolina has erected an historical marker honoring him in Cumberland County.

Chesnutt's mother and father were both North Carolinians who had moved to the then Northwest in 1856 in order to escape the oppressiveness of the Southern slavery system. Therefore, Charles' birthplace in 1858 was not the South, but Cleveland, Ohio.² However, after the Civil War, Charles' father felt a strong pull to return to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where Charles' grandfather still lived; and the Chesnatts did move back to Fayetteville in 1866. So for seventeen years, from 1866, when he was eight years old, until 1883, when he was twenty-five, Charles W. Chesnutt lived in the South, growing up, serving his apprenticeship years of life, going to school, working, marrying, and beginning a family. During these important, formative years Chesnutt sank deep roots into the South, roots which were to live and to nourish his ambition, concerns, spirit, conscience, manners, his understanding of life, and (most important here) his writing for the rest of his life.

However, it is important to remember that the experiences of this particular young Southerner were distinctly different from those of most other young Southerners who were to become writers, for he was a Negro and these were the days of Reconstruction. It is also important to remember that these experiences did not keep Chesnutt from developing a deep and very real love and respect for the South and its best aspects, a love and respect which therefore even demanded of him that he use his abilities and the understanding gained from his particular experiences to do what he could to try to help the South.

From the biography which Helen Chesnutt wrote of her father, we learn a good bit about his experiences as a young man in North Carolina and how these affected him.

She reports: "Charles was learning all that could be taught him in . . . School. After school he helped his father in the store . . . and reflected upon everything he heard. The store was the natural meeting place for all the people of the neighborhood." [P.5]

Young Charles not only absorbed such raw materials for his future fiction, but his eager mind also devoured all the books and formal instruction he could obtain, early giving rise to dissatisfaction with what was available to him in this regard in North Carolina, which would ultimately lead him to move from the South in search of better opportunities and less restricted cultivation for both himself and his family. However, long before that difficult decision was forced upon him, at age fourteen Chesnutt began helping to teach in the Howard School in Fayetteville; and at fifteen, he moved to Charlotte, where he taught and became principal of a school, also teaching in surrounding North and South Carolina counties during the summer months. After three years in Charlotte, he returned to Fayetteville to take a position in the new Normal School which the state had just established to train teachers for colored schools. While there, he married one of his fellow teachers; and soon his old ambitions and frustrations, abetted by his new family responsibilities, burned stronger than ever.

However, his firm intention to leave was postponed by his becoming principal of the Normal School, a post which he held until, at the end of the spring term of 1883, he found that he could finally take shorthand at the rate of 200 words per minute and should be able to use this self-taught skill to support a family well while he attempted more literary pursuits in his spare time. Taking his fate in his hands, Chesnutt resigned as principal and left for New York, soon moving on to Cleveland, the city of his birth, where he began to establish himself and where his small family joined him almost a full year after he had set out from Fayetteville. He was to live in Cleveland until his death in 1932, constantly enhancing a well deserved reputation as stenographer, author, court reporter, lawyer, interested and prominent citizen, and model husband, father, and host. Here he was able to enjoy the greater degree of freedom, equality, and cultivation which had not been possible for him in the South.

However, Chesnutt remained in touch with the South through correspondence, reading, visitors, and a few visits there; and he remained in touch because he wanted to. There can be no doubt that he had strong opinions about the South and the Negro which he felt to be quite personal and which he tried to keep up-to-date so that they could be used in any way possible to help to improve the situation in the South. He was always delighted to make the acquaintance of or to have a compliment from other Southern writers who were also interested in a more realistic and/or critical presentation of the South, and especially of the Southern Negro.

Chesnutt's second *Atlantic Monthly* story, in 1888, attracted the favorable attention of George Washington Cable, with whom Chesnutt shared many convictions and interests. Their correspondence and friendship flourished, and Chesnutt offered his assistance in the work of the Open Letter Club, a project of a number of Southerners to help the race situation by making more readily available various clarifying "information of every sort, and from every direction, valuable to the moral, intellectual, and material interests of the South."⁸ Cable encouraged Chesnutt in writing fiction and offered him good advice and criticism.

Another Southern man of letters who encouraged and helped Chesnutt very much was Walter Hines Page, who also felt a sympathetic interest in what Chesnutt was trying

to do. Page's position with Houghton, Mifflin and Company was several times beneficial to Chesnutt's early literary career as he submitted stories for *The Atlantic Monthly* and proposals and copy for books; but Page helped only when he deemed the quality of the work submitted justified his doing so, often offering good editorial and critical advice. Chesnutt was delighted to learn eventually of Page's having been reared very near the site of his own boyhood and the setting of most of Chesnutt's fiction and of their having mutual concerns about, understandings of, and interests in the South. It was Page who passed on to a grateful Chesnutt, James Lane Allen's praise of one of his stories. Throughout Chesnutt's career as writer of fiction, Page was his always interested and helpful friend.

Chesnutt consciously wrote stories of the South which he intended to be more realistic and better than those of others using similar subject matter, and he purposefully dealt with topics regarding the race problem in the South, such as miscegenation, which he felt other Southern writers were avoiding or were mistreating. If he could not write realistically, he preferred not to write at all; and what he knew best was the South.

When he was fourteen, Chesnutt wrote his first story, which was published in a small Negro weekly newspaper; and the urge to write was whetted as he became more aware of what others were doing in the field of fiction concerning the South and the Negro. His journal entry for March 16, 1880, concerned Albion W. Tourgée, also a native of Ohio, who had become a Superior Court Judge in North Carolina during the Reconstruction period. The entry read in part:

Now, Judge Tourgée's book [*A Fool's Errand*] is about the South — the manners, customs, modes of thought, etc., which are prevalent in this section of the country. Judge Tourgée is a northern man who has lived in the South since the war, until recently. He knows a great deal about the politics, history, and laws of the South. He is a close observer of men and things, and has exercised this faculty of observation upon the character of the southern people. Nearly all of his stories are more or less about colored people, and this very feature is one source of their popularity . . . And if Judge Tourgée, with his necessarily limited intercourse with colored people, and with his limited stay in the South, can write such interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man, . . . if he possessed the same ability, write as good a book about the South as Judge Tourgée has written?⁴

A few months later, when he made his journal entry for May 29, 1880, he began: "I think I must write a book."⁵ That same entry spoke not only of using Southern materials gathered from his rich experience of living in the South, but also of a purpose for his writing which showed his concern for improving the South and all her people, including both colored and white.

Chesnutt's first real break as a writer came with the acceptance in 1885 of one of his stories for publication by the new McClure newspaper syndicate, the first in the United States, providing publication in New Haven, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. From this point on, he was to publish at least forty stories and many articles in over twenty different magazines and newspapers, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Overland Monthly*, *The Outlook*, *Family Fiction*, *Puck*, *The Critic*, and *The Southern Workman*. The majority of both his stories and his articles dealt with Southern subject matter and Southern concerns. Even though his periodical publications gave Chesnutt his first

national attention as a writer and continued to be of importance, it is through his five books of fiction that I want especially to focus on him as a Southern writer.

Chesnutt's first book, *The Conjure Woman*, was published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1899. All seven of the stories in the book have a Southern setting and use Southern materials in depth. Indeed, they are nothing, if not Southern. All of them are told in dialect by Uncle Julius, a former slave who uses his stories of conjuring among the Negroes around antebellum Patesville, North Carolina (based on Fayetteville), to help achieve his own desires or to enforce his contentions. However, each of his stories is enclosed in an envelope structure by which it comes to the reader through a Northerner who has moved to and has bought the old plantation where Julius had worked as a slave and where he still lives after the war has given him his freedom. Through the comments of the Northerner we also occasionally get his views on the South.

Walter Hines Page was not surprised at the success of the book, for he had earlier written to Chesnutt of the conjure stories: "... I know of nothing so good of their kind anywhere."⁶ In fact, in retrospect they seem to have been almost too successful, and Chesnutt is known too often by these stories alone. The fact that this was the only one of Chesnutt's books to be republished (in 1929) until this year and that these are the stories that are usually used for anthologies of local color material (when Chesnutt is represented at all) have helped to lead too many people into a somewhat flippant and wrong evaluation of Chesnutt's fiction. It is true that his first fame came from these and that his interest in them and their subject matter continued (as witness his article in *Modern Culture* in May, 1901, on "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South"). However, his fiction progressed from the conjure stories to something better and more worthy of consideration.

Chesnutt's second book of fiction was another collection of stories, published in 1899 as *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*. Chesnutt had already shown his interest in the problems of the Negroes of obviously mixed blood, especially those of very light color (as he was himself); and he thought their problems to be very complex and full of pathos for both the Negro and the non-Negro. All of the stories of his new book dealt in one way or another with such problems of the color line; and although only six of the nine stories have definitely Southern settings, all but one deal with problems clearly identified by Chesnutt as having their roots in the Negro's unfortunate situation in the society of the South.

Most Southern reviews did not favor the book. However, they were more than offset by the many favorable reviews, which usually especially praised Chesnutt's skillful presentation of the Negro in other than primarily comic or pathetic stereotypes and his making his Negro characters of real interest as human beings. Foremost among the critical pieces praising Chesnutt was that of William Dean Howells in *The Atlantic Monthly* of May, 1900, in which Howells gave high praise to the realistic aspects of Chesnutt's fiction, pointing out that he was doing so not because Chesnutt was Negro, but because he was a good writer.

The House Behind the Cedars, Chesnutt's first novel, was published by Houghton, Mifflin in 1900. In this novel Chesnutt once more focused on the fictional Patesville, North Carolina; but this book dealt with the problems of the South in a much more realistic and

straightforward manner than had the conjure stories set in the same locale. The subject of the book is the difficulties brought about by miscegenation for its sibling products, John and Rena Walden, the children of a colored woman and a wealthy and cultured white man, who had good intentions toward his children but who died before carrying them out. Walter Hines Page knew well the area of the North Carolina setting of the story and wrote to Chesnutt: "I congratulate you on the local color and the accuracy of your description of the town and country. You seem to have caught the very spirit of the whole community. Then, too, the story of Rena herself is most admirably and dramatically unfolded."⁷

Chesnutt's next novel was definitely the direct result of his strong and quite personal interest in what had been taking place in North Carolina, and especially in the race riot in Wilmington in 1898. Chesnutt received information about the Wilmington troubles in letters from friends and relatives who lived there. In addition, during a Southern reading and lecturing tour in February, 1901, Chesnutt visited Charlotte, Fayetteville, and Wilmington, where he gathered more information for the novel he had already begun with the expressed hope of helping the position of the Negro in the South.

The Marrow of Tradition was published in October. It is a story which much more than Chesnutt's previous books put the white light of his criticism directly and strongly on the Southern white populace of the times. In this book the focus is more interracial. Its setting is contemporary Wellington, a thinly disguised Wilmington; and the main characters are white, with a focus on them because of their misguided attitudes and actions toward their fellow citizens who are colored, especially a well educated Negro doctor and his family. The simmering cauldron of Wellington is finally brought to a tragic boil by a political situation made intense by the fact that the Negro population outnumbered the white. The majority of the reviews in this country and abroad were favorable; and some saw the novel as a modern *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in importance, pointing out its realistically treating head-on a new subject for fiction, the problems of the cultivated Negro in the South.

However, the controversy stirred up by *The Marrow of Tradition*, especially among Southern reviewers, probably generated more heat than light. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chesnutt's next book was rather different — just as concerned for the South, but less intense and harsh, and not only revealing problems, but also proposing solutions for them. This last book, his fifth volume of fiction and his third novel, was *The Colonel's Dream*. Chesnutt had been disillusioned about the South's apparent lack of progress, but he still had faith in and hope for the land of his youth, as is reflected in the dedication for what was to be his last book.

To the great number of those who are seeking, in whatever manner or degree, from near at hand or far away, to bring the forces of enlightenment to bear upon the vexed problems which harass the South, this volume is inscribed, with the hope that it may contribute to the same good end.

If there be nothing new between the covers, neither is love new, nor faith, nor hope, nor disappointment, nor sorrow. Yet life is not the less worth living because of any of these, nor has any man truly lived until he has tasted of them all.

This could also stand as a summary dedication to Chesnutt's whole literary career. Note that the focus is on the South and its people as a whole, not just on the Southern Negro.

Walter Hines Page had left Houghton, Mifflin and Company to help form Doubleday, Page and Company; and he actively sought Chesnutt's new book for his firm, which published it in September, 1905. Chesnutt was realistic enough to know that social and economic changes require not only effort and will, but also time. This novel is about a dream which for the moment fails — that is, within the plot of the novel; but by posing it, Chesnutt was suggesting a practical and desirable dream for the future of the South also. The setting is again southeastern North Carolina, but in a different community this time, which he called Clarendon and which was also patterned after Fayetteville. Chesnutt's approach to the problem of Clarendon is forthright and economically sound, but it is also loving and sentimental. Again all of the major characters are white, and Chesnutt is just as much concerned about them and their places in the South as he is about the Negro characters in the novel. Unfortunately, Colonel French finds that his sound analysis and willingness to invest his own energy and capital in Clarendon are not enough to bring his admirable dream to fruition, because he cannot dispel the greed and prejudice which keep alive there various socio-economic evils. Although the Colonel finally abandons Clarendon in disillusionment, Chesnutt ends the novel with hope for the future.

I believe that this novel, more than any other of Chesnutt's fiction, shows his love and genuine concern for the South and her people. Especially good are its backward glimpses of the old, but non-plantation, South and Chesnutt's thorough understanding of the economic plight of the entire region around Clarendon (that is, of the non-urban South at the turn of the century). However, the Southern reviewers lambasted Chesnutt again, as if the sting of *The Marrow of Tradition* had infected them too much to allow any praise of Chesnutt's work. He was not being heard by those whom he most wanted to reach, and he virtually ended his literary career.

I believe that Chesnutt deserves the honorable label of "Southern Writer" because of his biography, his concerns, his intentions, the things which influenced and motivated him most, his subject matter, and his writings themselves, especially his five books of fiction, and among them especially his three novels. Chesnutt was not a major writer, but why has he not been claimed by the South along with the many even less illustrious Southern writers who have been claimed, including some with fewer reasons to be called Southern than his? There are probably many answers to that question, but among them must certainly be his race and the realistic and critical boldness of most of his subject matter in the eyes of much of the South, despite the benevolent intentions behind it. At any rate, the fact remains that he has been so ignored, except for an occasional inclusion here and there, and then usually only as one whose conjure stories show some North Carolina folklore and local-color, never with emphasis on his novels or whole career.

I have not put my emphasis on Chesnutt the leader in a national cause, the realistic writer per se, the outstanding American citizen, the delightful human being, all of which the record shows him to have been; but I have emphasized Chesnutt the North Carolinian and Southern writer, which the record also shows him to have been. I believe that he was a Southern writer in the best sense of that term — one concerned for the South, and not one merely exploiting it. In that regard I know of the works of no other author which Chesnutt's works remind me of more than those of William Faulkner — not in quality, breadth of scope, or method, but in intention, concern, and boldness of theme. There is

cause to, and we should, claim Chesnutt as a Southern writer — not to limit him, but to understand him even better.

1. This article is a considerably abbreviated and slightly adapted version of a paper entitled "Charles W. Chesnutt As Southern Author," read first at the Southeastern American Studies Association meeting held at the meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in Charlotte, Nov. 12, 1966, subsequently printed in the Spring, 1967 issue of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, and then read in slightly adapted form, but in full length, before the luncheon of Beta Phi Mu Fraternity Oct. 26, 1967, at the conference of the North Carolina Library Association in Charlotte.

2. My primary source of biographical material concerning Chesnutt has been the fine biography of him written by his daughter, Helen M. Chesnutt: *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1952).

3. Quoted in Helen Chesnutt, p. 43.

4. Helen Chesnutt, pp. 19-20.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

6. Helen Chesnutt, p. 92.

7. Helen Chesnutt, p. 138.

PRESERVING THE PAST FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

by

NANCY ROBERTS

I feel that it is a singular privilege to be invited to talk to you today. Not only have I been told that this is a most stimulating group, but I believe this group has the potential to be highly influential in the development of our state's human resources. We are often told of the importance of school and home to the future citizens of North Carolina. I think our librarians should certainly be included along with these two influences.

Some of you are interested in library administration, some in the field of reference material, others in book selection. The importance of all three fields in developing good libraries is so interrelated that I hope I can make at least a few comments encompassing the role of each.

In doing our North Carolina books, my husband and I owe a great debt to those of you who are in reference work. Your help on innumerable occasions has led me to the discovery of North Carolina folklore sources such as the Frank C. Brown collection, the WPA Writers' Project material, and many other resources. However, I do not plan to enumerate a list of folklore sources with which you are far more familiar than I. I can only say that your enthusiasm and help in tracking down background material has been invaluable to me on countless occasions and that without your help my own books could not have been written.

I am sure that your guidance has also successfully led thousands of other library users down trails of intellectual exploration. While the facts you are daily engaged in finding for these people may never reach publication, there is no way of estimating the personal help and enrichment you are in a position to give.

Those of you who plan a career in administration, I think, have a real challenge before you. It is not only the challenge of finding personnel who share your desire that the library serve the general public as well as writers and researchers, but in order to operate