

The True Authorship of “The Rag-Picker; Or, Bound and Free”

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In my independent study of elusive 19th-century author, mystic and activist Mathew Franklin Whittier, the younger brother of John Greenleaf Whittier, I encountered several instances in which his anonymous work has been misattributed. My reassignments of these works to Mathew’s pen are interconnected. To assert one, I must refer to another; thus, the case must be taken as a whole. Here, I will draw out one of these instances as an example.

I have concluded that Mathew began ghost writing for Francis A. Durivage as early as 1835, beginning with a “Popular Cyclopedia of History.” Mathew then ghost wrote at least three popular novelettes for Durivage: “Angela; Or, Love and Guilt” (1843), “Edith Vernon: Or, Crime and Retribution” (1845) and “Mike Martin: Or, The Last of the Highwaymen” (1845).

Extrapolating from copious circumstantial evidence, I derived a hypothetical scenario. In 1848, Durivage, accompanied by a wealthy partner, George P. Burnham, approached Mathew with the offer to purchase rights to certain unpublished works in his portfolio, going back to the early 1830’s. They presented Mathew with a bogus contract which, being gullible and trusting, he signed without scrutinizing. He had signed over carte blanche rights to his entire portfolio! Durivage and Burnham proceeded to publish every scrap, including pieces Mathew had no intention of ever publishing, dividing it between them. Durivage adopted Mathew’s own favorite expression, “The Old ‘Un,” while Burnham, pretending to be Durivage’s protégé, signed as the “Young ‘Un.” This ruse was an attempt to explain how two different men could write in identical styles.

The portfolio consisted of two genres: humorous sketches, replete with dialect and based on real-life anecdotes; and foreign adventure tales, similar to the novelettes Mathew had ghost written for Durivage. Durivage predominantly chose the adventure stories; while, perhaps being offended due to his French ancestry, assigning most of the sketches containing French dialect to Burnham. *However*, the fact that Burnham claimed authorship of at least one of the adventure tales;¹ while Durivage claimed at least one of the French dialect sketches,² indicates that *both* men were, in effect, claiming expertise in *both genres*—a dubious claim given their sparse literary track record.

Durivage and Burnham published the entire portfolio beginning in 1849, primarily in the “Flag of Our Union” and in “Gleason’s Pictorial,” both owned by Frederick Gleason in Boston.. Then, they published compilations in book form, including under the mockingly ironic titles of “Stray Subjects Arrested and Bound Over. Being the Fugitive Offering of the ‘Old ‘Un’ and the ‘Young ‘Un’” (1849), and “Gleanings from the Portfolio of the ‘Young ‘Un’” (1849), as well as “The Three Brides, Love in a Cottage, and Other Tales.”³

Mathew didn’t publicly challenge his persecutors. However, on the basis that “the best revenge is success,” in 1850 he sold a full-length novel to Frederick Gleason entitled “The Mistake of a Lifetime: Or, the Robber of the Rhine Valley.” He negotiated (probably, through an agent) for \$3,000 plus royalties, adopting the pseudonym “Waldo Howard.” It sold extremely well, both in

serial and book form, although the critics mocked Gleason for being duped by what they took to be fledgling author.

One story which Durivage appropriated from Mathew's portfolio, "The Great Pagoda Hen," signed "By the Old 'Un," concerned the "hen fever"—poultry farmers' obsession with an exotic, albeit worthless, oriental breed of chicken. Mathew frequently wrote of scams as a genre of *cautionary tales*, intended to warn as much as to amuse. Note that this one was signed with *Durivage's* pseudonym, being published in the June 10, 1854 edition of the "Flag of Our Union."

In 1855, Burnham published a book entitled "The History of the Hen Fever: A Humorous Record." Then, in the March 31, 1855 edition of the Portland "Transcript"—a literary paper Mathew had published in for many years—appeared his unsigned review of this book.⁴ He writes:

Judging from the newspaper notices of this book, some people have found it very amusing, but we confess we have not been able to get up a good honest laugh over it. The author is certainly in a very good humor, as he can well afford to be with \$30,000 in his pocket, as a result of his unscrupulous activity in filling the poultry yards of the country with those unprofitable monsters termed "Cochin Chinas" and "Shanghaes." He chuckles over his gains and his victims with great glee, but the joke seems to us to border a little on the dishonest. The infatuation of the victims of the hen fever was certainly very absurd, and one can but be amused at their extravagance, but the humor of the book is very coarse and *slangy*, while its morality is more than doubtful.

In other words, whereas Mathew wrote the story on which this book is based (claimed, not by Burnham, but by Durivage) to *expose* the scam, Burnham actually *ran* the scam himself, publishing a humorous book about his exploits. Clearly, this negative review would have angered Burnham. Thus, we have established *motive* for the crime he was about to attempt.

In October of 1855, Mathew anonymously published a 431-page social reform novel entitled "The Rag-Picker; Or, Bound and Free," through Mason Brothers in New York. It addresses such social ills as poverty, alcoholism, child abuse and debtors' prison.⁵ Then, about mid-way through the narrative, he tackles the issue of slavery, including a depiction of the Underground Railroad. William Lloyd Garrison reviewed the book in the Oct. 12, 1855 edition of "The Liberator":

We have read this work, which claims to be 'a record of facts' by an eye and ear-witness, with thrilling interest, at a single sitting. It deserves to be placed in the same category with 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' though not so exclusively devoted to delineations of the slave system at the South. What higher panegyric can we bestow upon it? Its dedication is as follows:—"To my Sister; the firm and unwavering friend of oppressed humanity, and of the poor, the unfortunate, and the erring, every where." Who is this sister, and who the author? Each one is left to guess—we know not. 'In the humble hope that good may result from this effort, that the unfortunate may find a word of consolation within its pages, and that it may serve in some measure to urge the friends of freedom and reform to more earnest and constant endeavors for the improvement and weal of suffering humanity among us, the work is submitted, in trust and good will, by

the author.’ We can add nothing more, this week, except to express the hope that it will be circulated and read until the last victim of intemperance is rescued, and the last slave in our land set free. The extract from it on our last page, ‘The Escape for Liberty,’ will whet the appetite of the reader for all that remains.

The dedication was written to Mathew’s sister, Elisabeth Whittier.⁶ Mathew had spent two summers in 1846 and 1847 (with an abortive third attempt in 1848) under cover as a reporter for the New Orleans “Daily Delta,” during which time he attended a slave auction and wrote a scathing two-part exposé about it for the June 19 and July 4, 1848 Boston “Chronotype,” under the pseudonym “Grapho Mania.” In his final remarks, he indicates he has both observed slavery first-hand, and has interviewed slaves:

In closing this sketch allow us to say that we have seen slavery in every form. We have conversed with slaves, slave owners, slave speculators—and those who would have nothing to do with slaves.

Thus, Mathew would indeed have been able to write “The Rag-Picker” from personal knowledge. By contrast, George Burnham was probably a racist. I say this because included in Mathew’s stolen portfolio were one or two very early sketches which, today, would be deemed racist. He would have been embarrassed by them in 1848—but *Burnham chose to publish them*.

Other than the works which Burnham published under the pseudonym, “The Young ‘Un,” and the “Big Bear of Arkansas” series which he may have plagiarized from another source, I know of nothing which suggests he could write a book which Garrison would favorably compare with “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” It is all based on Burnham’s failed attempt to associate his name with the book in the press. It appears that after “The Rag-Picker” was released, Burnham appears to have purchased a book seller called “Federhen & Co.,” making it “Burnham, Federhen & Co.” In December 1855, he advertised the book as his own in the Boston “Herald.” The Boston “True Flag” announced him as the mysterious author on Dec. 22, 1855:

“*The Rag-Picker*.”—The mystery enshrouding the authorship of this anti-slavery novel, from the press of the Mason Brothers, has been at length cleared up, and George P. Burnham, Esq., is announced as the author. The volume in question is worthy “a local habitation and a name.” The story is interesting and graphically told.

I found no other indications of Burnham’s supposed authorship. However, the error was subsequently recorded as fact in the “History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts,”⁷ by D. Hamilton Hurd, then in “American Fiction, 1851-1875”⁸ by Lyle H. Wright. Accordingly, acquisitions librarians associated Burnham’s name with the book.

Thus, scam becomes rumor, which becomes fact. “The Rag-Picker” was an impactful novel of profound historical significance, which has been overlooked because it has been mistakenly attributed to a scam artist, instead of to an author with an august, if almost entirely hidden, literary legacy.

Footnotes:

- 1) "Nell Noel: The Lightkeeper's Treasure," serialized in "The Flag of Our Union," beginning in the Dec. 9, 1854 edition, and then published in book form (undated).
- 2) Durivage, Francis A., *Zat Is My Trunk*, in "Stray Subjects, Arrested and Bound Over," 1848[?], pp. 50-51.
- 3) The story, "The Three Brides," which bears evidence of Mathew's authorship and yet an uncharacteristic touch of cruelty, appears to have been reworked by Durivage or someone he hired for that purpose.
- 4) My reasons for identifying this review as Mathew's would take us too far afield in this paper, but I state it with a high degree of confidence based on 11 years of studying more than 2,300 of his works.
- 5) Mathew had a long history of writing on similar subjects, including a book entitled "The Debtors' Prison: A Tale of a Revolutionary Soldier" published in 1834, which scholars have mistakenly attributed to Asa Greene.
- 6) The name of Mathew's younger sister is traditionally spelled "Elizabeth," but I have determined from original letters, written by her and to her by Mathew, that the correct spelling of her name was "Elisabeth."
- 7) Hurd, Hamilton D., "History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts," Vol. I, 1899.
- 8) Wright, Lyle H., "American Fiction, 1851-1875, A Contribution Toward Bibliography," 1957, revised 1965. Indiana University online bookmark
<http://purl.dlib.indiana.edu/iudl/wright/VAC5957>.