

Is he dead?

A hundred years on, Mark Twain needs to be rescued and restored to his place among the historians of America

SUSAN GILLMAN

Mark Twain

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Edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin

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April 21, 2010, was the hundredth anniversary of Mark Twain's death. The famous fact of Halley's Comet coming in 1835 and 1910, and framing the span of Twain's life, means that we are marking the years of both his birth and his death, but do we know what we are celebrating? "Twain 2010" (www.marktwaincountry.com/Twain2010), the "go-to site for all things Mark Twain during the year 2010", includes a petition drive "respectfully requesting Pres. Obama to designate 2010 'the Year of Mark Twain'". The calendar of events, hotels, restaurants and outdoor activities announces: "Twain enthusiasts across the globe are gearing up for 2010, the centennial year of Mark Twain's death!" Among the events planned to take place in Mark Twain Country were, on April 21, a performance of *Mark Twain Tonight!*, Hal Holbrook's award-winning one-man show at the Clemens Center, and on April 24, a "burial reenactment" at Woodlawn Cemetery in Elmira, NY, where Clemens is buried in the Langdon/Clemens family burial site, which featured a funeral procession complete with horse-drawn carriages and vintage cars. The community was invited to participate as "mourners": some may "wish to join in the spirit of this historic reenactment by wearing black and carrying a black umbrella – it rained the day Clemens was buried!"; the first seventy-five "mourners" to arrive at the Woodlawn Cemetery gate that morning were promised a Twain 2010 commemorative black umbrella. The first 125 were to receive a copy of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

All of this is completely consonant with the over-the-top spirit of the Mark Twain industry, a cycle of continual commemoration in the form of multiple editions and centenaries. The Library of America volumes here (*The Mark Twain Anthology* and the collection of travel writings) represent the barest tip of the Twain iceberg. No one was more eager to build this monument than Clemens himself who towards the end of his life recalled his own letters written to his major correspondents so that he could leave a complete record of all his writings. Indeed, the Mark Twain Papers housed at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley are today a repository not only of manuscripts, letters, diaries, multiple published editions but also of ephemera such as menus, steamship tickets and even a Mark Twain doll. In short, Mark Twain, who incorporated his own publishing company, the Mark Twain Company, and went bankrupt in part because he chose to invest with the inventor of the wrong kind of mechanized typesetting (it was Mergenthaler's linotype, not Paige's machine, that revolutionized book publishing), would have been greatly pleased by today's successful mass market-

ing of his books and his image in the twenty-first century.

Still, there are limits. How many "complete", "definitive" editions can we produce and read? There are three main editions. First

there was the Author's National Edition, *The Writings of Mark Twain*, twenty-five volumes published in 1920 by P. F. Collier & Son Company of New York. Each book has facsimile writing under the signature of Mark Twain, which reads: "This is my authorized Uniform Edition of all my books, Mark Twain". Next, in 1969, came the ongoing series *The Works and Papers of Mark Twain*, a projected seventy volumes published by the Mark Twain Project/University of California Press and supported in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). These scholarly editions of Twain's published and unpublished writings are accompanied by the inexpensive *Mark Twain Library*, which "offers for the first time popular editions of Mark Twain's best works just as he wanted them to be read". Three of these popular volumes were planned for each year ("until the Library is complete"), and the series logo is a memorable image of Huck, silhouetted from behind, running away. What could be more apt? Alongside this still ongoing series, the University of California Press introduced in 2003 a new series, *Jumping Frogs: Undiscovered, rediscovered and celebrated writings of Mark Twain*. Finally, now there is also the Library of America (LOA): a non-profit publisher, founded in 1979 with seed money from the NEH and the Ford Foundation, self-described as "dedicated to preserving America's best and most significant writing in handsome, enduring volumes, featuring authoritative texts". Each volume comes with a testimonial to the durability of the acid-free paper and the pledge, "Library of America editions will last for generations". New volumes of Mark Twain's writings are still being released in 2010 (the collection of the late travel writings under review includes two complete books, *A Tramp Abroad* and *Following the Equator*, as well as several shorter pieces). With "all Mark Twain, all the time", it is not easy to see why we also need the "new" twenty-nine-volume *Oxford Mark Twain*, originally published in hardback in 1996, which consists of unaltered facsimiles of the first American editions of his works, albeit with new introductions, afterwords, notes and essays on the illustrations. The rationale is, of course, the centennial. (Unfortunately, Oxford University Press gets it wrong, and the Editor's Note printed in all twenty-nine volumes reverses the birth and death dates: "the year 2010 marks the Centennial of Mark Twain's birth and the 175th anniversary of his death".)

Whether a pseudo-event or not, the centennial gives us a motto: in the service of our nation's literary heritage, publish everything, all the time. Nothing too small or too scrappy! Recycling is OK too, as three examples from the Mark Twain canon show. "The Mysterious Stranger" was posthumously published in 1916 by Twain's biographer Albert Bigelow Paine, who cobbled together a bogus version of that story, resurrecting Huck and Tom, this time adventuring with Satan in medieval Austria. Paine's "Mysterious Stranger" was not Twain's; it consisted instead of the unfinished "Chronicle of Young Satan", with an ending edited and tacked on that Paine "found" among Twain's papers and originally intended for another version of the story, "No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger: being an ancient tale found in a jug and freely translated from the jug". In 1969, the University of California Press published a scholarly edition, *Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, including all the texts, copiously annotated and footnoted. They published it again in 1982, as part of the Mark Twain Library Series, in a popular version of the scholarly edition: *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger*, which, according to the series editors, "frees the novel from interference and presents it for the first time as the author would have published it had he lived to do so". Not for the first or the last time, the dead author lives again, authorizing his works and speaking to us through the



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Lewis Carroll's first and most famous illustrator, John Tenniel, was immediately recognized as the perfect whimsical fit for the author's creations. But the relationship between the two was principally a commercial one. Tenniel was already a highly paid political cartoonist when Carroll commissioned him to illustrate *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1864, and the author found himself out of pocket when the artist objected to the poor reproduction

of his work in the first printing, which Carroll duly withdrew. Tenniel charged more to illustrate the sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, and even wrote to Carroll suggesting that he drop an episode from the book. The original of that letter, reproduced in facsimile by Carroll's nephew in 1898, has long been thought lost. Its reappearance at Bloomsbury Auctions last week produced a sale figure that would have impressed Tenniel. It fetched £51,240.

conditional mood. Other “undiscovered, re-discovered and celebrated writings” (to use the title of the *Jumping Frogs* series) published during the heyday of the 1980s included further adventures of those irrepressible boys in the Mark Twain Library editions of *Tom Sawyer Abroad* and *Tom Sawyer, Detective*. Then in 2003, the three-act play *Is He Dead?* appeared as Number 1 of the *Jumping Frogs* series, “finally available to the wide audience Mark Twain wished it to reach”, which was produced on Broadway, directed by Michael Blakemore, in 2008. It may come as no surprise that the play raises comic questions about fame, greed and the value of art; it concerns the painter Jean-François Millet, who, as an impoverished artist in Barbizon, France, with the help of his colleagues stages his death in order to increase the value of his paintings. Twain wrote the play in Vienna in 1898, a few years after he had completed a round-the-world lecture tour to recoup his bankrupt finances. (He went bankrupt in part because his lavish Gilded Age lifestyle, including a Hartford mansion complete with every new gadget and invention possible, proved to be difficult to sustain through the sometimes equally speculative business of writing.) If Twain’s most enduring invention was himself, as so many readers have intuited, it entailed a lifelong dependence on that identity, along with the need to outrun his own potential obsolescence. Mark Twain would never outlive his fame as long as he could keep rediscovering and updating the image that made him famous.

A centennial also thrives on discoveries, even as it creates doubts about its enduring “newness”. A good deal of attention was paid to the word “discovery” in 1992, the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the New World. In 1894, Twain himself had weighed in with an entry written for “Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar”, dated “October 12, The Discovery. It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it”. Both anniversaries, the 500th Columbiad and this 100th commemoration of Mark Twain’s death (as well of course as the 175th anniversary of his birth and the 125th of *Huck Finn*), are case studies of the many ways in which attempts to publicly acknowledge historical events can become complicated. After 1992, Columbus no longer “discovered” America but rather encountered or conquered the Americas. As for Twain, now a trusted benchmark of both American popular culture and academic scholarship, he is aptly characterized as “Nuestro Mark Twain”, our Mark Twain, by José Martí, the Cuban poet and patriot, whose short essay, waxing eloquent on *Connecticut Yankee*, appears in *The Mark Twain Anthology*. Martí’s “nuestro” sounds the right plural note for Twain who, like the Whitmanian poet of “Song of Myself”, sings, “I am large, I contain multitudes”.

In Twain’s case, however, literary critics often continue to resist the unruly American multiplicity, offering instead one-dimensional portraits of “my Mark Twain” that flatten out the contradictions and sing one note. The subfield of biographical criticism, for obvious reasons particularly dominant in Twain studies, likes a slice-of-life approach, studying in detail one facet of Twain’s career. In part this is because we are lucky enough to have full-scale biographical



“Tom Sawyer whitewashing a fence” by Worth Brehm (1910) from an edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

studies of great sensitivity and insight (Justin Kaplan’s *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, 1966, has never been equalled for economy, elegance of argument and critical empathy). One result is the large number of works on the “late Mark Twain”, the supposed sad, eccentric and lecherous white-haired and white-suited old man, with a school of young girls he called his “Angel-Fish” trailing in his wake. Hamlin Hill’s *Mark Twain: God’s fool* (1973) is the first and best of the “final-days” works, a humane and thoughtful assessment of the difficult circumstances of the author’s personal life, balanced against the output – outpouring, some would say – of writing during this last period. Even such enjoyable and measured treatments as Laura Skandera Trombley’s *Mark Twain’s Other Woman: The hidden story of his final years* (2010), which deals with the relationship of the author to Isabel Lyon, his secretary and housekeeper during his last decade, was headlined in the *Los Angeles Times* “Mark Twain’s last rant is put into perspective”. Neither Peter Messent nor Harold K. Bush, Jr subscribes to that Mark Twain, but their books typify the narrowed, single-lens approach to the life and writing. *Mark Twain and Male Friendship: The Twichell, Howells and Rogers friendships* (288pp. Oxford University Press. £32.50 (US \$49.95). 978 0 19 539116 9) works from the presumption that a cultural history of male friendship in nineteenth-century America can be deduced from Twain’s relationships with three friends. While the connections to the “larger social order” and “larger social dynamic” are “suggestive”, as Messent says, the status of Mark Twain as a biographical subject and a case study for literary history is a fascinating and underexplored aspect of this biographical study. Like Messent’s book, which seems sometimes to be in flight from its own biographical grounds, Harold K. Bush’s *Mark Twain and the Spiritual Crisis of his Age* (340pp. University of Alabama Press. \$47.50; distributed in the UK by

Eurospan. £39.50. 978 0 8173 1538 2) approaches Twain as a litmus test for “his age” with the implied equals sign of the “and” as the tell-tale symptom of a tenuous historical link. (Every chapter title in the book uses a version of the formula, including “Mark Twain’s Roots”, “Mark Twain’s Wife”, “Mark Twain’s Civil War”, and finally “Mark Twain’s Grief”.) The contribution of Bush’s book is to have recovered a neglected aspect of Twain’s persona, his faith, his religious values, his view of theological issues – in short his spirituality, registered through the moral language and cultural traditions of nineteenth-century evangelical Protestantism on which he drew.

What is missing in the Twain biographical imperative is a historical consciousness, a theory of history itself. Where in all of these “undiscovered, rediscovered and celebrated writings” can we find the elements that made Mark Twain important: his engagement with history and with language? Of the major US authors of the late nineteenth century, none is more identified with the struggle to claim the national memory of slavery than Mark Twain. *Huckleberry Finn* represents his masterpiece; it is a still controversial experiment, taking on the vernacular voices (and bad grammars) of the South, black and white. *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, his so-called “flawed” text, is a detective novel set in the pre-Emancipation South, and his travel narratives, ranging from the early autobiographical *Innocents Abroad* to the late *Following the Equator*, to the time-travelling *Connecticut Yankee*, all interweave the contexts of ancient and modern empires, historical and mythic, with the texts of US slavery. At the same time we have to account for Mark Twain’s anomalous place as our most “American” of writers: the national icon who spent so much time abroad, in international travel and self-exile, the celebrity who espoused more than a few unpopular positions, the author of *Huckleberry Finn*, in the critic Jonathan Arac’s terms, our idol

and target. Not least of the contradictions is Twain’s famous difficulties with endings (symptomatic, or even constitutive, of a nexus of larger historical problems with locating the “end” of slavery). These help to reveal the continuities in historical consciousness between the canonical texts of slavery and the later outpouring of writings on the politics and economics of slavery, race and empire around the world. Mark Twain’s history of slavery is a moving target that will not stand still but keeps reappearing and begs for updating, confronting Twain and his readers in different, unexpected generic and geographical locations, and leaving provisional the outcome of history itself.

The inventor of a literary vernacular and of unfinished histories for the nation could not have imagined a more ideal group of readers than the “great writers” assembled in Shelley Fisher Fishkin’s *Mark Twain Anthology: Great writers on his life and works*. This Library of America compendium features writers from around the world as critics, reflecting a trend in American literary history of going back to its writerly roots and bringing in fresh perspectives. *The Mark Twain Anthology* reprints the introductions by well-known writers to the Oxford Mark Twain (edited by Fisher Fishkin) and adds new contributions by writers from Russia, China, France, Argentina and elsewhere. Readers should not expect to find in these selections the Chinese view of Twain, or the Russian, but rather some idiosyncratic and often surprising takes on his work. Lao She’s speech in Beijing commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Twain’s death in 1960 reminds us that the anti-imperialist Twain, “Exposer of the ‘Dollar Empire’”, celebrated in China (and generally ignored in the US at this time), was accompanied by the father of modern Chinese literature Lu Xun’s Twain: the author of “Eve’s Diary” (1906), a portrait of “an American girl at that time”, which, Lu Xun says, could be “the portrait of all women”. Lu Xun concludes his “short introduction” to the Chinese translation: “it wouldn’t have been any better if Eve have kept her diary in Chinese”. As the one-and-a-half-page extract from this preface suggests, many of these short snippets lack context. The highlights are the essays by José Martí, Leslie Fiedler and Norman Mailer. Mailer’s “Huck Finn, Alive at 100”, a fake review, was written in 1984 on another anniversary occasion, when Twain’s novel was coming under siege in schools for its racist language. Mailer pretends that the book, by a “modern young American working in 1984”, shows a masterful use of all the great modernists, from Hemingway to Joseph Heller, and he claims that reading the book makes him as a fellow author feel “competitive, critical and finally excited”. Seemingly sidestepping the controversy created by *Huck Finn*, Mailer stepped right into the racial hornet’s nest with his phrase “Nigger Jim”, which Fishkin notes was used by Hemingway, Ralph Ellison and others but never by Mark Twain. African American parents who in 1984 were worried about the reading aloud by teachers and students in classrooms of the word “nigger”, which is used many times in the novel, would surely not be comforted. Both “Nigger Jim” and “Huck honey” (the title of Fiedler’s wonderful essay of 1948 on Jim and Huck)

Continued on page 7

Continued from page 5

are still with us. Those apocryphal Twainisms just won't go away. Despite the fact that neither "Huck honey" nor "Nigger Jim" ever appears in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, both phrases continue to circulate. Scholars may tear out their hair over it but Mailer, Ellison and others collected in *The Mark Twain Anthology* keep the phrases alive.

"Is he dead?" is almost a refrain in Twain's writing, the equivalent of being "sold down the river" in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), his novel of black and white twin babies exchanged in the cradle, neither saved from the fatality of master-slave birth. We find variants of "Is he dead?" throughout Twain. The "pilgrims" in *Innocents Abroad* (1869) continually ask their native guides telling local histories, "Is he dead?" and, on hearing "yes", lose all interest in the subject. Tom Sawyer stages his death and gets to attend his own funeral. The play *Is He Dead?* echoes *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1909), in which Twain maintains that Shakespeare was a false claimant to the bard's legacy. (Erica Jong says in her introduction that this was really about Twain's own claims to immortality.) And then there is Twain's famous line (variously circulated): "the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated". As we return to and repeat his words, it is a joint venture in which we, author and readers together, bring him back to life, again and again.

That there are so many rumours of a death foretold and so many Twainian personas may seem not to augur well for a unified, global interpretation and presentation of his life and writing, especially since many of the interpretations are exclusive of others. Moreover, it is always risky to try to account for the greatness of a "great man". One critical approach, obvious to anyone looking at the works under review here, is to shy away from the iconic texts, not to say the icon himself, and to concentrate instead on the so-called minor or lesser works as a way of rethinking the divide in Mark Twain studies between the personal and literary successes of his early and middle age and the later "failures". It is a division that is still largely (erroneously, unfairly and inexplicably) assumed in academia and is popularly purveyed (by the Ken Burns documentary of 2001, among others). To speak of Twain's career in terms of the fate of humour, as James Cox did so movingly and persuasively in 1966, is not wrong. But the biographical dominance of the court jester become sad, white-haired, old man does a terrible disservice: it sanitizes and neutralizes Mark Twain, freezing him in an interminable moment. He becomes a national icon with his various imperfections reduced to one great wart: a death mask, not only farcical but also tragic.

So let us agree not to force Mark Twain just yet into the procrustean bed of the tragic humorist: the much-visited grave of our national icon. We should let him live where he belongs – not among the icons or the targets, the jesters and the sad old men – but in the ranks of the historians whose histories are unfinished, provisional, open to change, and who insist on the responsibility of actors in the present to act on behalf of the past which they have yet to redeem. Early or late, canonical or maverick, undiscovered or rediscovered, Twain is the writer of our histories.