

MAPK TBEH

1601: CONVERSATION
AS IT WAS BY THE
SOCIAL FIRESIDE IN THE
TIME OF THE TUDORS

Марк Твен

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Mark Twain

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INTRODUCTION

“Born irreverent,” scrawled Mark Twain on a scratch pad, “ – like all other people I have ever known or heard of – I am hoping to remain so while there are any reverent irreverences left to make fun of.” – [Holograph manuscript of Samuel L. Clemens, in the collection of the F. J. Meine]

Mark Twain was just as irreverent as he dared be, and 1601 reveals his richest expression of sovereign contempt for overstuffed language, genteel literature, and conventional idiocies. Later, when a magazine editor apostrophized, “O that we had a Rabelais!” Mark impishly and anonymously – submitted 1601; and that same editor, a praiser of Rabelais, scathingly abused it and the sender. In this episode, as in many others, Mark Twain, the “bad boy” of American literature, revealed his huge delight in blasting the shams of contemporary hypocrisy. Too, there was always the spirit of Tom Sawyer deviltry in Mark’s make-up that prompted him, as he himself boasted, to see how much holy indignation he could stir up in the world.

WHO WROTE 1601?

The correct and complete title of 1601, as first issued, was: [Date, 1601.] ‘Conversation, as it was by the Social Fireside, in the Time of the Tudors.’ For many years after its anonymous first issue in 1880, its authorship was variously conjectured and widely disputed. In Boston, William T. Ball, one of the leading theatrical critics during the late 90’s, asserted that it was originally written by an English actor (name not divulged) who gave it to him. Ball’s original, it was said, looked like a newspaper strip in the way it was printed, and may indeed have been a proof pulled in some newspaper office. In St. Louis, William Marion Reedy, editor of the St. Louis Mirror, had seen this famous tour de force circulated in the early 80’s in galley-proof form; he first learned from Eugene Field that it was from the pen of Mark Twain.

“Many people,” said Reedy, “thought the thing was done by Field and attributed, as a joke, to Mark Twain. Field had a perfect genius for that sort of thing, as many extant specimens attest, and for that sort of practical joke; but to my thinking the humor of the piece is too mellow – not hard and bright and bitter – to be Eugene Field’s.” Reedy’s opinion hits off the fundamental difference between these two great humorists; one half suspects that Reedy was thinking of Field’s French Crisis.

But Twain first claimed his bantling from the fog of anonymity in 1906, in a letter addressed to Mr. Charles Orr, librarian of Case Library, Cleveland. Said Clemens, in the course of his letter, dated July 30, 1906, from Dublin, New Hampshire:

“The title of the piece is 1601. The piece is a supposititious conversation which takes place in Queen Elizabeth’s closet in that year, between the Queen, Ben Jonson, Beaumont, Sir Walter Raleigh, the Duchess of Bilgewater, and one or two others, and is not, as John Hay mistakenly supposes, a serious effort to bring back our literature and philosophy to the sober and chaste Elizabeth’s time; if there is a decent word findable in it, it is because I overlooked it. I hasten to assure you that it is not printed in my published writings.”

TWITTING THE REV. JOSEPH TWICHELL

The circumstances of how 1601 came to be written have since been officially revealed by Albert Bigelow Paine in ‘Mark Twain, A Bibliography’ (1912), and in the publication of Mark Twain’s Notebook (1935).

1601 was written during the summer of 1876 when the Clemens family had retreated to Quarry Farm in Elmira County, New York. Here Mrs. Clemens enjoyed relief from social obligations, the children romped over the countryside, and Mark retired to his octagonal study, which, perched high on the hill, looked out upon the valley below. It was in the famous summer of 1876, too, that Mark was putting the finishing touches to Tom Sawyer. Before the close of the same year he had already begun work on 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn', published in 1885. It is interesting to note the use of the title, the "Duke of Bilgewater," in Huck Finn when the "Duchess of Bilgewater" had already made her appearance in 1601. Sandwiched between his two great masterpieces, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, the writing of 1601 was indeed a strange interlude.

During this prolific period Mark wrote many minor items, most of them rejected by Howells, and read extensively in one of his favorite books, Pepys' Diary. Like many another writer Mark was captivated by Pepys' style and spirit, and "he determined," says Albert Bigelow Paine in his 'Mark Twain, A Biography', "to try his hand on an imaginary record of conversation and court manners of a bygone day, written in the phrase of the period. The result was 'Fireside Conversation in the Time of Queen Elizabeth', or as he later called it, '1601'. The 'conversation' recorded by a supposed Pepys of that period, was written with all the outspoken coarseness and nakedness of that rank day, when fireside sociabilities were limited only to the loosened fancy, vocabulary, and physical performance, and not by any bounds of convention."

"It was written as a letter," continues Paine, "to that robust divine, Rev. Joseph Twichell, who, unlike Howells, had no scruples about Mark's 'Elizabethan breadth of parlance.'"

The Rev. Joseph Twichell, Mark's most intimate friend for over forty years, was pastor of the Asylum Hill Congregational Church of Hartford, which Mark facetiously called the "Church of the Holy Speculators," because of its wealthy parishioners. Here Mark had first met "Joe" at a social, and their meeting ripened into a glorious, life long friendship. Twichell was a man of about Mark's own age, a profound scholar, a devout Christian, "yet a man with an exuberant sense of humor, and a profound understanding of the frailties of mankind." The Rev. Mr. Twichell performed the marriage ceremony for Mark Twain and solemnized the births of his children; "Joe," his friend, counseled him on literary as well as personal matters for the remainder of Mark's life. It is important to catch this brief glimpse of the man for whom this masterpiece was written, for without it one can not fully understand the spirit in which 1601 was written, or the keen enjoyment which Mark and "Joe" derived from it.

"SAVE ME ONE."

The story of the first issue of 1601 is one of finesse, state diplomacy, and surreptitious printing.

The Rev. "Joe" Twichell, for whose delectation the piece had been written, apparently had pocketed the document for four long years. Then, in 1880, it came into the hands of John Hay, later Secretary of State, presumably sent to him by Mark Twain. Hay pronounced the sketch a masterpiece, and wrote immediately to his old Cleveland friend, Alexander Gunn, prince of connoisseurs in art and literature. The following correspondence reveals the fine diplomacy which made the name of John Hay known throughout the world.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, June 21, 1880.

Dear Gunn:

Are you in Cleveland for all this week? If you will say yes by return mail, I have a masterpiece to submit to your consideration which is only in my hands for a few days.

Yours, very much worried by the depravity of Christendom,

Hay

The second letter discloses Hay's own high opinion of the effort and his deep concern for its safety.

June 24, 1880

My dear Gunn:

Here it is. It was written by Mark Twain in a serious effort to bring back our literature and philosophy to the sober and chaste Elizabethan standard. But the taste of the present day is too corrupt for anything so classic. He has not yet been able even to find a publisher. The Globe has not yet recovered from Downey's inroad, and they won't touch it.

I send it to you as one of the few lingering relics of that race of appreciative critics, who know a good thing when they see it.

Read it with reverence and gratitude and send it back to me; for Mark is impatient to see once more his wandering offspring.

Yours,

Hay.

In his third letter one can almost hear Hay's chuckle in the certainty that his diplomatic, if somewhat wicked, suggestion would bear fruit.

Washington, D. C. July 7, 1880

My dear Gunn:

I have your letter, and the proposition which you make to pull a few proofs of the masterpiece is highly attractive, and of course highly immoral. I cannot properly consent to it, and I am afraid the great many would think I was taking an unfair advantage of his confidence. Please send back the document as soon as you can, and if, in spite of my prohibition, you take these proofs, save me one.

Very truly yours,

John Hay.

Thus was this Elizabethan dialogue poured into the moulds of cold type. According to Merle Johnson, Mark Twain's bibliographer, it was issued in pamphlet form, without wrappers or covers; there were 8 pages of text and the pamphlet measured 7 by 8 1/2 inches. Only four copies are believed to have been printed, one for Hay, one for Gunn, and two for Twain.

"In the matter of humor," wrote Clemens, referring to Hay's delicious notes, "what an unsurpassable touch John Hay had!"

HUMOR AT WEST POINT

The first printing of 1601 in actual book form was "Donne at ye Academie Press," in 1882, West Point, New York, under the supervision of Lieut. C. E. S. Wood, then adjutant of the U. S. Military Academy.

In 1882 Mark Twain and Joe Twichell visited their friend Lieut. Wood at West Point, where they learned that Wood, as Adjutant, had under his control a small printing establishment. On Mark's return to Hartford, Wood received a letter asking if he would do Mark a great favor by printing something he had written, which he did not care to entrust to the ordinary printer. Wood replied that he would be glad to oblige. On April 3, 1882, Mark sent the manuscript:

"I enclose the original of 1603 [sic] as you suggest. I am afraid there are errors in it, also, heedlessness in antiquated spelling – e's stuck on often at end of words where they are not strictly necessary, etc... I would go through the manuscript but I am too much driven just now, and it is not important anyway. I wish you would do me the kindness to make any and all corrections that suggest themselves to you.

"Sincerely yours,

"S. L. Clemens."

Charles Erskine Scott Wood recalled in a foreword, which he wrote for the limited edition of 1601 issued by the Grabhorn Press, how he felt when he first saw the original manuscript. "When I read it," writes Wood, "I felt that the character of it would be carried a little better by a printing which pretended to the eye that it was contemporaneous with the pretended 'conversation.'

"I wrote Mark that for literary effect I thought there should be a species of forgery, though of course there was no effort to actually deceive a scholar. Mark answered that I might do as I liked; –

that his only object was to secure a number of copies, as the demand for it was becoming burdensome, but he would be very grateful for any interest I brought to the doing.

“Well, Tucker [foreman of the printing shop] and I soaked some handmade linen paper in weak coffee, put it as a wet bundle into a warm room to mildew, dried it to a dampness approved by Tucker and he printed the ‘copy’ on a hand press. I had special punches cut for such Elizabethan abbreviations as the a, e, o and u, when followed by m or n – and for the (commonly and stupidly pronounced ye).

“The only editing I did was as to the spelling and a few old English words introduced. The spelling, if I remember correctly, is mine, but the text is exactly as written by Mark. I wrote asking his view of making the spelling of the period and he was enthusiastic – telling me to do whatever I thought best and he was greatly pleased with the result.”

Thus was printed in a de luxe edition of fifty copies the most curious masterpiece of American humor, at one of America’s most dignified institutions, the United States Military Academy at West Point.

“1601 was so be-praised by the archaeological scholars of a quarter of a century ago,” wrote Clemens in his letter to Charles Orr, “that I was rather inordinately vain of it. At that time it had been privately printed in several countries, among them Japan. A sumptuous edition on large paper, rough-edged, was made by Lieut. C. E. S. Wood at West Point – an edition of 50 copies – and distributed among popes and kings and such people. In England copies of that issue were worth twenty guineas when I was there six years ago, and none to be had.”

FROM THE DEPTHS

Mark Twain’s irreverence should not be misinterpreted: it was an irreverence which bubbled up from a deep, passionate insight into the well-springs of human nature. In 1601, as in ‘The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,’ and in ‘The Mysterious Stranger,’ he tore the masks off human beings and left them cringing before the public view. With the deftness of a master surgeon Clemens dealt with human emotions and delighted in exposing human nature in the raw.

The spirit and the language of the Fireside Conversation were rooted deep in Mark Twain’s nature and in his life, as C. E. S. Wood, who printed 1601 at West Point, has pertinently observed,

“If I made a guess as to the intellectual ferment out of which 1601 rose I would say that Mark’s intellectual structure and subconscious graining was from Anglo-Saxons as primitive as the common man of the Tudor period. He came from the banks of the Mississippi – from the flatboatmen, pilots, roustabouts, farmers and village folk of a rude, primitive people – as Lincoln did.

“He was finished in the mining camps of the West among stage drivers, gamblers and the men of ‘49. The simple roughness of a frontier people was in his blood and brain.

“Words vulgar and offensive to other ears were a common language to him. Anyone who ever knew Mark heard him use them freely, forcibly, picturesquely in his unrestrained conversation. Such language is forcible as all primitive words are. Refinement seems to make for weakness – or let us say a cutting edge – but the old vulgar monosyllabic words bit like the blow of a pioneer’s ax – and Mark was like that. Then I think 1601 came out of Mark’s instinctive humor, satire and hatred of puritanism. But there is more than this; with all its humor there is a sense of real delight in what may be called obscenity for its own sake. Whitman and the Bible are no more obscene than Nature herself – no more obscene than a manure pile, out of which come roses and cherries. Every word used in 1601 was used by our own rude pioneers as a part of their vocabulary – and no word was ever invented by man with obscene intent, but only as language to express his meaning. No act of nature is obscene in itself – but when such words and acts are dragged in for an ulterior purpose they become offensive, as everything out of place is offensive. I think he delighted, too, in shocking – giving resounding slaps on what Chaucer would quite simply call ‘the bare erse.’”

Quite aside from this Chaucerian “erse” slapping, Clemens had also a semi-serious purpose, that of reproducing a past time as he saw it in Shakespeare, Dekker, Jonson, and other writers of the Elizabethan era. Fireside Conversation was an exercise in scholarship illumined by a keen sense of

character. It was made especially effective by the artistic arrangement of widely-gathered material into a compressed picture of a phase of the manners and even the minds of the men and women “in the spacious times of great Elizabeth.”

Mark Twain made of 1601 a very smart and fascinating performance, carried over almost to grotesqueness just to show it was not done for mere delight in the frank naturalism of the functions with which it deals. That Mark Twain had made considerable study of this frankness is apparent from chapter four of ‘A Yankee At King Arthur’s Court,’ where he refers to the conversation at the famous Round Table thus:

“Many of the terms used in the most matter-of-fact way by this great assemblage of the first ladies and gentlemen of the land would have made a Comanche blush. Indelicacy is too mild a term to convey the idea. However, I had read Tom Jones and Roderick Random and other books of that kind and knew that the highest and first ladies and gentlemen in England had remained little or no cleaner in their talk, and in the morals and conduct which such talk implies, clear up to one hundred years ago; in fact clear into our own nineteenth century – in which century, broadly speaking, the earliest samples of the real lady and the real gentleman discoverable in English history, – or in European history, for that matter – may be said to have made their appearance. Suppose Sir Walter [Scott] instead of putting the conversation into the mouths of his characters, had allowed the characters to speak for themselves? We should have had talk from Rebecca and Ivanhoe and the soft lady Rowena which would embarrass a tramp in our day. However, to the unconsciously indelicate all things are delicate.”

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