

Humanizing the Other
Mark Twain and the Struggle Against Imperialism Part 2
By Philip Chin

Mark Twain experienced great success in the 1870s and 1880s with “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” as well as with works like “Roughing It” and the “Innocents Abroad.” He even became the publisher for the “Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant.” In 1884, former President Grant lost his entire fortune in a Wall Street investment firm that his son had gotten him involved with that turned out to be a Ponzi scheme. Later that same year, he was also diagnosed with terminal cancer. Grant decided to write his memoirs about his experiences in the Mexican War and the Civil War in the hope that sales of his memoirs would keep his family out of bankruptcy after his death. Grant chose Samuel Clemens, an old acquaintance, to publish his memoirs. The manuscript was completed just days before the former president died in 1885. Clemens’ innovative marketing and sales tactics led to stupendous sales and profits, making the book one of the biggest American bestsellers of the century. Charles L. Webster and Company, the publishing company that Clemens co-owned with his nephew by marriage, paid the Grant family \$450,000 in royalties (by economic status measure this would be equivalent of about \$119 million in 2014 dollars). The publishing company share of profits was likely nearly the same.

President Grant’s involvement in failed investments and brush with bankruptcy paralleled the path that Samuel Clemens would take. Clemens was a serial investor, most of which failed and cost him even more money. His golden touch in publishing also failed when “The Life of Pope Leo the XIII” by Father Bernard O’Reilly was published, but failed to sell more than 200 copies in 1887. Clemens had felt sure that Catholics everywhere across America would buy the book and had printed too many copies in anticipation of sales which never came. Samuel Clemens publishing a book about the leader of the Catholic Church, and his company being forced into near bankruptcy by that effort, was ironic considering the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic beliefs he’d expressed since the 1850s.

By 1891, the family decided to close their house in Hartford, Connecticut and move to Europe for the cheaper prices and to seek the treatment of European doctors and health spas for the age ailments that Clemens and his wife were starting to suffer. Their daughter, Jean Clemens, also needed treatment for her epilepsy. Sanctuary from the constant embarrassment of meeting his creditors was also probably a politely unstated reason as well.

The most damaging investment happened from 1880 to 1894, when he put his money into the development of the Paige Compositor, a type-setting machine. The mechanically complex machine with over 18,000 parts was not only prone to breakdowns because of

its complexity, but also needed constant trial and error adjustments to work correctly. Only two models were ever built. Clemens not only invested most of his book profits into the venture, but also a substantial portion of his wife's fortune as well. The total sum lost was \$300,000 (about \$79 million in 2014 dollars). The invention of the simpler linotype machine in 1884 and the widespread adoption of that technology meant that Clemens lost his entire investment.

By 1894, the financial situation had become so dire that the publishing house folded in bankruptcy. Later that year, Samuel Clemens was forced to declare personal bankruptcy, owing a debt of around \$100,000 (about \$26 million in 2014) to 96 creditors. The rights to his previously published works were transferred into his wife's name to protect them from creditors. She'd loaned \$60,000 of her own money to her husband and it was thus argued that she was the chief creditor and should hold the copyrights until such debt was repaid. Their house in Hartford was also in her name.

Under personal bankruptcy protection at that time, all debts were rendered null and void. There was no further legal obligation for Clemens to pay, but he publicly announced that as a matter of honor he would pay back everything that he owed. How was he to do that? He was in ill health much of the time and could only find it in himself to write commentaries that he was commissioned to write by New York newspapers about what he was experiencing in his European travels. He was lauded everywhere he went, being personally received by such luminaries as Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and the Prince of Wales in England, but refused the offers of numerous wealthy admirers to pay his debts.

It was suggested to Clemens that he should undertake a paid lecture tour across the United States to make money. Clemens hit on a different idea. He'd perform the lectures, but only as part of a world tour, the experiences of which he'd write about as he'd done for his book, "The Innocents Abroad," back in 1869. In 1895, he contacted Robert Sparrow Smythe, an Australian newspaper editor and lecture tour organizer, to start setting up such a tour in the Pacific. Coincidentally, Smythe's letter suggesting just such a tour passed by Clemens' letter in transit. The Clemens family left Europe and returned to America. Samuel Clemens, along with his wife and one of their three daughters, Clara, began their trip around the world with lectures across the United States then in Vancouver, Canada. A stop in Hawaii had been arranged, but it had to be canceled because of a cholera epidemic. The tour took him across the British Empire, through Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, India, and South Africa, places chosen so that the lectures by Mark Twain could be delivered in English. The tour enabled Clemens to see imperialism in action.

The triumphant tour was hailed widely when they reached Australia. Mark Twain entertained excited and packed houses despite reoccurring bouts of painful carbuncles that put him to bed for a week at a time. In Chapter 19 of his book, "Following the Equator," he conveyed a very pointed message about colonialism.

In that garden I also saw the wild Australian dog—the dingo. He was a beautiful creature—shapely, graceful, a little wolfish in some of his aspects, but with a most friendly eye and sociable disposition. The dingo is not an importation; he was present in great force when the whites first came to the continent. It may be that he is the oldest dog in the universe; his origin, his descent, the place where his ancestors first appeared, are as unknown and as untraceable as are the camel's. He is the most precious dog in the world, for he does not bark. But in an evil hour he got to raiding the sheep-runs to appease his hunger, and that sealed his doom. He is hunted, now, just as if he were a wolf. He has been sentenced to extermination, and the sentence will be carried out. This is all right, and not objectionable. The world was made for man—the white man.

The accompanying illustration conveyed the real message Mark Twain was trying to send. The picture shows an exemplar of colonialism, a bearded white man wearing a monocle and wielding a revolver, cigarette nonchalantly dangling from his mouth, standing triumphantly. A skeleton wielding a scythe stands behind him with the admonishment, “THOU SHALT NOT KILL!” Around the white man lies a desolate landscape with a dead rhino and elephant visible. In the background a corpse lays facedown wearing a Native American headdress. Another corpse lays on his back in the foreground armed with a distinctive Zulu assegai and shield from South Africa. The caption of this bleak picture is, “THE WHITE MAN’S WORLD.”

Later on, Clemens recounts another Australian tale about how whites treated the Australian Aboriginals, “A squatter, whose station was surrounded by Blacks, whom he suspected to be hostile and from whom he feared an attack, parleyed with them from his house-door. He told them it was Christmas-time—a time at which all men, black or white, feasted; that there were flour, sugar-plums, good things in plenty in the store, and that he would make for them such a pudding as they had never dreamed of—a great pudding of which all might eat and be filled. The Blacks listened and were lost. The pudding was made and distributed. Next morning there was howling in the camp, for it had been sweetened with sugar and arsenic!”

Twain’s commentary was savagely sarcastic:

The white man's spirit was right, but his method was wrong. His spirit was the spirit which the civilized white has always exhibited toward the savage, but the use of poison was a departure from custom. True, it was merely a technical departure, not a real one; still, it was a departure, and therefore a mistake, in my opinion. It was better, kinder, swifter, and much more humane than a number of the methods which have been sanctified by custom, but that does not justify its employment. That is, it does not wholly justify it. Its unusual nature makes it stand out and attract an amount of attention which it is not entitled to. It takes hold upon morbid imaginations and they work it up into a sort of exhibition of cruelty, and this smirches the good name of our civilization, whereas one of the old harsher methods would have had no such effect because usage has made those methods familiar to us and innocent. In many countries we have chained the savage and starved him to death; and this we do not care for, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death by poison is loving kindness to it. In many countries we have burned the savage at the stake; and this we do not care for, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death is loving kindness to it. In more than one country we have hunted the savage and his little children and their mother with dogs and guns through the woods and swamps for an afternoon's sport, and filled the region

with happy laughter over their sprawling and stumbling flight, and their wild supplications for mercy; but this method we do not mind, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death by poison is loving kindness to it. In many countries we have taken the savage's land from him, and made him our slave, and lashed him every day, and broken his pride, and made death his only friend, and overworked him till he dropped in his tracks; and this we do not care for, because custom has inured us to it; yet a quick death by poison is loving kindness to it. In the Matabeleland today—why, there we are confining ourselves to sanctified custom, we Rhodes-Beit millionaires in South Africa and Dukes in London; and nobody cares, because we are used to the old holy customs, and all we ask is that no notice—inviting new ones shall be intruded upon the attention of our comfortable consciences. Mrs. Praed says of the poisoner, "That squatter deserves to have his name handed down to the contempt of posterity."

I am sorry to hear her say that. I myself blame him for one thing, and severely, but I stop there. I blame him for, the indiscretion of introducing a novelty which was calculated to attract attention to our civilization. There was no occasion to do that. It was his duty, and it is every loyal man's duty to protect that heritage in every way he can; and the best way to do that is to attract attention elsewhere. The squatter's judgment was bad—that is plain; but his heart was right. He is almost the only pioneering representative of civilization in history who has risen above the prejudices of his caste and his heredity and tried to introduce the element of mercy into the superior race's dealings with the savage. His name is lost, and it is a pity; for it deserves to be handed down to posterity with homage and reverence.

The chapter concludes with the bitter observation, "There are many humorous things in the world; among them the white man's notion that he is less savage than the other savages."

Samuel Clemens reserved particular contempt and hate for Cecil Rhodes, the British imperialist who played a central role in extending British control over Southern Africa and expansion of the exploitative diamond mine industry in South Africa. Rhodes was also the founder of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) that would later extend racist policies so far in the 20th Century that it would even embarrass apartheid South Africa. Rhodes plotted and financed violent incidents between the British and the Boer settlers, Dutch colonists who resented British rule, and black South Africans, in order to create a pretext for military intervention that would force the expansion of British imperial rule.

The great bulk of the savages must go. The white man wants their lands, and all must go excepting such percentage of them as he will need to do his work for him upon terms to be determined by himself. Since history has removed the element of guesswork from this matter and made it certainty, the humanest way of diminishing the black population should be adopted, not the old cruel ways of the past. Mr. Rhodes and his gang have been following the old ways.—They are chartered to rob and slay, and they lawfully do it, but not in a compassionate and Christian spirit. They rob the Mashonas and the Matabeles of a portion of their territories in the hallowed old style of "purchase!" for a song, and then they force a quarrel and take the rest by the strong hand. They rob the natives of their cattle under the pretext that all the cattle in the country belonged to the king whom they have tricked and assassinated. They issue "regulations" requiring the incensed and harassed natives to work for the white settlers, and neglect their own affairs to do it. This is slavery, and is several times worse than was the American slavery which used to pain England so much; for when this Rhodesian slave is sick, super-annuated, or otherwise disabled, he must support himself or starve—his master is under no obligation to support him.

The reduction of the population by Rhodesian methods to the desired limit is a return to the old-time slow-misery and lingering-death system of a discredited time and a crude "civilization." We humanely reduce an overplus of dogs by swift chloroform; the Boer humanely reduced an overplus of blacks by swift suffocation; the nameless but right-hearted Australian pioneer humanely reduced his overplus of aboriginal neighbors by a sweetened swift death concealed in a poisoned pudding. All these are admirable, and worthy of praise; you and I would rather suffer either of these deaths thirty times over in thirty successive days than linger out one of the Rhodesian twenty-year deaths, with its daily burden of insult, humiliation, and forced labor for a man whose entire race the victim hates. Rhodesia is a happy name for that land of piracy and pillage, and puts the right stain upon it.

Clemens memorable insult about Cecil Rhodes is still quoted today. It looked forward to Rhodes being hanged for his crimes, "I admire him, I frankly confess it; and when his time comes I shall buy a piece of the rope for a keepsake." Rhodes would die in 1902 of a heart attack, one of the richest men in the world. He was mourned and publicly honored across the British Empire, and is still remembered for the Rhodes Scholarship he founded and financed.

The triumphant world tour and sales from "Following the Equator" insured that Samuel Clemens was out of debt by 1898. What is interesting to note is that his condemnation of imperialism up until that time mainly cited European examples of colonial excess against the natives. He was less emphatic about his increasing doubts about the American treatment of Native Americans. He believed that Americans had created and inherited an anti-colonial attitude from the American Revolution that was reflected in foreign policies if not their domestic policies.

It was in France in 1898 that Clemens received news of the increasing tensions between the United States and Spain that would eventually break out in the Spanish-American War. When invited to a Parisian observation of Decoration Day by American diplomats (now called Memorial Day) he wrote, "I thank you very much for your invitation and I would accept if I were foot-free. For I should value the privilege of helping you do honor to the men who rewelded our broken Union and consecrated their great work with their lives; and also I should like to be there to do, homage to our soldiers and sailors of today who are enlisted for another most righteous war, and utter the hope that they may make short and decisive work of it and leave Cuba free and fed when they face for home again."

He expressed similar hopeful sentiments when writing to a friend whose son had enlisted in the United States Army, "I have never enjoyed a war, even in history, as I am enjoying this one, for this is the worthiest one that was ever fought, so far as my knowledge goes. It is a worthy thing to fight for one's own country. It is another sight finer to fight for another man's. And I think this is the first time it has been done."

In his view the Spanish American War was being fought by the United States to liberate foreign people from Spanish colonial oppression and Catholic enforced backwardness. The war would give them the chance to choose their own leaders and government. By 1900 though, it had become clear that the United States was planning to hold onto its

conquests in the Philippines and convert them into a colonial possession. Clemens wrote to a friend, “Apparently we are not proposing to set the Filipinos free & give their islands to them; & apparently we are not proposing to hang the priests & confiscate their property. If these things are so the war out there has no interest for me.”

He arrived back in the United States in October 1900 and gave an interview to the New York Herald which was printed with the title, “MARK TWAIN HOME, AN ANTI-IMPERIALIST.” He described how he’d felt when he’d left the United States nine years before and his conversion into an anti-imperialist.

I left these shores from Vancouver, a red-hot imperialist. I wanted the American eagle to go screaming into the Pacific. It seemed tiresome and tame for it to content itself with the Rockies. Why not spread its wings over the Philippines, I asked myself? And I thought it would be a real good thing to do.

I said to myself. Here are a people who have suffered for three centuries. We can make them as free as ourselves, give them a government and country of their own, put a miniature of the American constitution afloat in the Pacific, start a brand new republic to take its place among the free nations of the world. It seemed to me a great task to which we had addressed ourselves.

But I have thought more, since then, and I have read carefully the treaty of Paris, and I have seen that we do not intend to free, but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem.

We have also pledged the power of this country to maintain and protect the abominable system established in the Philippines by the friars.

It should, it seems to be, to be our pleasure and duty to make those people free and let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way. And so I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.

He became more and more outspoken against imperialism after this, his tone and rhetoric becoming increasingly bitter. He believed that America had turned its back on the ideals upon which the American republic had been founded. His disgust was that of a betrayed true believer. He spoke out in support of the Boers in South Africa fighting against the British Empire as well as supporting the Boxer rebels in China fighting against the Americans among others. The Boxer Rebellion was the only time that troops from the United States, the British Empire, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Japan, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire fought on the same side in any war.

In the unlikely forum of a meeting of the Public Education Association at the Berkeley Lyceum in New York City in November 1900, Clemens delivered a speech entitled, “I Am a Boxer.”

I don't suppose that I am called here as an expert on education, for that would show a lack of foresight on your part and a deliberate intention to remind me of my shortcomings.

As I sat here looking around for an idea it struck me that I was called for two reasons. One was to do good to me, a poor unfortunate traveler on the world's wide ocean, by giving me a knowledge of the nature and scope of your society and letting me know that others beside myself have been of some use in the world. The other reason that I can see is that you have called me to show by way of contrast what education can accomplish if administered in the right sort of doses.

Your worthy president said that the school pictures, which have received the admiration of the world at the Paris Exposition, have been sent to Russia, and this was a compliment from that Government -- which is very surprising to me. Why, it is only an hour since I read a cablegram in the newspapers beginning "Russia Proposes to Retrench." I was not expecting such a thunderbolt, and I thought what a happy thing it will be for Russians when the retrenchment will bring home the thirty thousand Russian troops now in Manchuria, to live in peaceful pursuits. I thought this was what Germany should do also without delay, and that France and all the other nations in China should follow suit.

Why should not China be free from the foreigners, who are only making trouble on her soil? If they would only all go home, what a pleasant place China would be for the Chinese! We do not allow Chinamen to come here, and I say in all seriousness that it would be a graceful thing to let China decide who shall go there.

China never wanted foreigners any more than foreigners wanted Chinamen, and on this question I am with the Boxers every time. The Boxer is a patriot. He loves his country better than he does the countries of other people. I wish him success. The Boxer believes in driving us out of his country. I am a Boxer too, for I believe in driving him out of our country.

In December 1900, Clemens was invited to deliver a dinner speech welcoming a young Englishman, Winston Spencer Churchill, the future British Prime Minister, at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. Churchill had gone to the Boer War in South Africa as a war correspondent, fought against the Boers, been captured, and sent to a prisoner of war camp. His daring escape from the camp, through hundreds of miles of enemy territory, and back to British lines through neutral Portuguese territory reads like an adventure novel. His account of the experience appeared in newspapers around the world. Churchill parlayed that worldwide fame into his first successful run for a seat in Parliament. He'd been invited to the United States to deliver a series of lectures on his adventures and agreed in order to raise money to secure his financial position and support future political campaigns. His appearance wasn't popular among anti-imperialist Americans and those opposed to the British Empire, in particular the Irish Americans who came out to demonstrate in every city but Boston. The mayor of New York City and the president of Princeton University both requested that their names be removed from the event program. In this context, the selection of Samuel Clemens, an increasingly strident and public anti-imperialist, to make the welcoming speech was bizarre.

Samuel Clemens' speech was probably not very well received by Churchill, highlighting both American hypocrisy over immigration policy against the Chinese, but also the new (and shameful in Clemens' view) equality between the United States and Britain as imperialist powers:

For years I've been a self-appointed missionary to bring about the union of America and the motherland. They ought to be united. Behold America, the refuge of the oppressed from everywhere (who can pay fifty dollars' admission); any one except a Chinaman; standing up for human rights everywhere, even helping China let people in free when she wants to collect fifty dollars upon them. And how unselfishly England has wrought for the open door for all! And how piously America has wrought for that open door in all cases where it was not her own!

Yes, as a missionary I've sung my songs of praise. And yet I think that England sinned when she got herself into a war in South Africa which she could have avoided, just as we sinned in getting into a similar war in the Philippines. Mr. Churchill, by his father, is an Englishman; by his mother he is an American, no doubt a blend that makes the perfect man. England and America; yes, we are kin. And now that we are also kin in sin, there is nothing more to be desired. The harmony is complete, the blend is perfect.

Gamely, Churchill delivered his lecture, part of which even praised the fighting qualities of the Boers. His talk was generally well received by the audience. Even at this early stage in his career, Churchill was already an excellent public speaker. In his closing remarks, the New York Times reported that Clemens said, "I take it for granted that I have the permission of this audience to thank the lecturer for his discourse, and to thank him heartily that, while he has extolled British valor, he has not withheld praise from Boer valor."

In private conversation afterwards, Clemens argued with Churchill, who wrote about the experience thirty years later:

Of course we argued about the war. After some interchanges I found myself beaten back to the citadel "My country right or wrong." "Ah," said the old gentleman, "When the poor country is fighting for its life, I agree. But this was not your case." I think however I did not displease him; for he was good enough at my request to sign every one of the thirty volumes of his works for my benefit; and in the first volume he inscribed the following maxim intended, I daresay, to convey a gentle admonition: "To do good is noble; to teach others to do good is nobler, and no trouble."

In January 1901, Samuel Clemens became the vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League based in New York. In February 1901, his most famous and controversial anti-imperialist work, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" appeared in the North American Review magazine.

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