

Mark Twain's Legacy of Ambivalence toward the French

Mark Twain and France: The Making of a New American Identity

by Paula Harrington and Ronald Jenn. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 244 pp., USD\$50.

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Mark Twain and France, another title in the University of Missouri's sizeable Mark Twain and His Circle series, attempts to more fully answer the question of why Twain expressed, as some critics have said, a conspicuous level of "free floating" (111) disdain toward France throughout most of his career. Authors Paula Harrington and Ronald Jenn, U.S. and French scholars, respectively, do not deny this disdain existed, but they do temper it by unpacking Twain's numerous commentaries on his European antagonists in a study that combines biography with close reading of his fiction and nonfiction.

France served as a touchpoint in the development of Twain's authorial voice, and Harrington and Jenn trace a shifting, rather than fixed, relationship between the two, an interaction that has heretofore "lurked in the shadows of Twain scholarship" (3). Twain's attitude "softened" over the span of his career, Harrington and Jenn argue, as "he moved from using France" as an adversarial "foil" by which to establish his own—and "America's"—identity early in his career, to finding in France figures that seemed to resonate with U.S. values (5). Twain ultimately used the French as a "catalyst" or "cultural palimpsest" that allowed him to "build a modern American sense of cultural self" and establish his own voice in the process (7). As such, within the span of Twain's career, readers might see a "contradictory mix of interest, imitation, exasperation, mockery, scorn, influence, and denial of influence" (55).

The Missouri of Mark Twain's childhood held only vestigial remnants of its earlier status as a French colony, and the book's first chapter, which covers the period 1835–1860, explores the effect of that historical shift on Twain's education and early career as a newspaper reporter and steamboat pilot. Francis Parkman's view of U.S. history, which exuded antipathy toward the French, was particularly influential in Twain's early thinking and writing, especially in *Life on the Mississippi*, and the historian's perspective left Twain open "to articulate and validate" his own biases (26).

Harrington and Jenn move to the 1860s in chapter two, "Leaving the River," when Twain left Missouri and, like so many other young men of the era, went West.



During his sojourn in California as a reporter, he observed the wave of French immigrants to the West, byproducts of the French February Revolution of 1848 and the 1849 Gold Rush. His depictions of the French during this time feature their supposed immorality, but, as always, Twain uses their behavior as a foil to what he saw as more admirable U.S. qualities. After all, he would argue, the U.S. citizens were not responsible for Mardi Gras or the cancan. Twain's use of the French during this period is strategic, the authors note: He "inserts fake Frenchness when he wants to associate it with loose morals but removes real Frenchness when it connotes good character" (43). Similar attitudes appear in Twain's 1866 reporting from Hawaii (then called the Sandwich Islands) in 1866 as he contemplated the European colonial threat.

The third chapter focuses on 1867–1869, when Twain, then a reporter for the *Alta California* newspaper, first stepped foot in France during an expedition to Europe and the Middle East, a young writer out to prove himself just as the United States seemed set to prove itself to the Old World. The trip yielded material that would ultimately appear in *The Innocents Abroad*, the book that brought the author his first notable success and placed him face to face with his cultural foil. Part travel narrative, part imaginative work, *The Innocents Abroad* was influenced by a burgeoning wave of U.S. tourism, and the sometimes-opinionated guide books for travelers to Europe provided fodder for Twain's own commentary on French culture.

The fourth chapter, "Jumping the French," spans 1870–1878 and brings together a sharply-worded, mock "war report" on the Franco-Prussian War; a "Map of Paris" that was a parody of military maps published in newspapers (82–91); and "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," whose insufficient translation into French spurred an ongoing "cultural skirmish" (15) after Twain published a parody of the translation and retranslation of his own work, remarkably titled "The 'Jumping Frog,'" in English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil" (92).

The early months of 1879 are the focus of chapter five, "Paris from the Inside," a period during which the entire Clemens family resided in Paris while Twain worked on *A Tramp Abroad*. Harrington and Jenn highlight the compositional history of this narrative with an eye toward Twain's revisions of the manuscript and his unpublished chapters, which included some of his harshest words about the French. The most compelling addition to Twain scholarship here is an investigation of one of Twain's albums, a *carte de visite* featuring the images of well-known French figures with annotations in Twain's own hand. The published and unpublished narratives of this time period once more serve as "prompts" for Twain, a way to "elevate America and its culture" by using the foreign nation as a counterpoint (110). He creates "an inverted scale of civilization" in these writings, "with the French falling at the bottom" (127).

Chapter six, covering 1880–1892, argues that Twain's feelings about the French "softened as he became more famous and successful"—as stated in the Introduction—and as he established a successful reputation (139). An unpublished manuscript about a boat trip down the Rhône River, "The Innocents Adrift," the unfinished manuscript for which was titled, *Floating with the Current (Down the Rhône)* (14,

146)—exemplifies this shift, Harrington and Jenn contend, especially in comparison to a heavily edited recounting of the trip published by one of his trip companions. Here, too, readers see a relatively moderated attitude toward the French that would ultimately find fruition in his portrayals of Joan of Arc and Émile Zola. No longer did he instinctually regard the French as hopelessly inferior to U.S. citizens. Rather, he began to recognize nuance and complexity, a shift that “inaugurated his change of literary direction in the final decade of the nineteenth century” (158).

The final chapter, “Coming to Terms,” considers the Clemens family’s most extended period of residence in France between 1893 and 1895, during which Twain “unabashedly” immersed himself in French literature (163). Twain was witness to a riot following the assassination of the French President Marie François Sadi Carnot and, less violently, the participant in yet another cultural skirmish, this time with author Paul Bourget. However, his relationship with France found its final iterations in *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, which “melds French and American identities” in its construction of the French heroine and which Twain regarded as his finest work (167). Joan emerges as a “‘rugged individualist’” of the Western U.S. character type, and Twain positions her as a kind of “‘Americanized’” woman “for his American audience” (16). Twain’s play *Is He Dead?* features French and U.S. characters acting “together as co-conspirators in an international campaign for justice,” which gives readers further evidence for Twain’s reconciliation with France (16).

Harrington and Jenn punctuate their stylistically accessible study with an array of illustrations, as well as a useful, annotated timeline detailing Twain’s numerous sojourns in France. Though Twain scholars are the most natural academic audience for this book, those who are interested in the history of European-U.S. cultural relationships will find value in the volume as well. The work is thoroughly researched and clearly the most detailed survey of Twain’s relationship with the French, but readers would have benefitted from a more detailed discussion of *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, which is surprisingly brief. Additionally, a summarizing chapter or afterword that situates the study within the broader landscape of Twain scholarship would have provided fitting closure.

Nevertheless, *Mark Twain and France* leaves readers with a more comprehensive picture of how Twain constructed an image of the U.S. that resonated both at home and abroad, and how the French were instrumental in the “tricky process of American identity-construction” in the nineteenth century (13). Throughout his career, Twain’s “feelings about the French” proved “complex”; they “arose from a number of factors, and served a variety of purposes” (10). Ultimately, Harrington and Jenn untangle that complexity convincingly.