

# The People.

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ARTICLE

## ARTEMUS WARD.

### His Place in American History as an Agent of Civilization.

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*By Daniel De Leon.]*

We are told that the first weapon that suggested itself to the human mind against intellectual oppression was the Fable. That idea was of Grecian birth, in the days of “the Tyrants.” America gave birth, under somewhat similar conditions, to another idea, that of the Joke. It may at first sight seem absurd to speak of intellectual oppression in America, enough to breed resistance, and thereby to breed its own weapon of attack. Yet the fact remains. Intellectual oppression is not brought on by governmental censorship only. Public opinion may be equally tyrannical. If public opinion is founded on superstitions, the tyranny under which it can hold those not agreeing with it, is one as intellectually painful as the Tsar’s knout is physically painful. Such public opinion, based on national vanities and national superstitions, was a Tyrant that once held sway in this country. To oppose him soberly, or even by serious satire, was equal to ostracism. American genius assailed the Tyrant by laughing him down—cracking seemingly inoffensive jokes at his idols. These were the conditions that caused to spring up in America a branch of literature hardly known in other countries; and hence the matchless line of American humorists, whose writings have all the pungency of satire, and yet are clothed in the motley garb of the clown.

Of this list of jokers, or “jokists,” as Artemus Ward called them, with the intentional purpose of rendering their work all the more effective by giving them a trivial and therefore seemingly inoffensive title, the first of all, both in point of time and of merit, was Charles Farrar Browne, better, in fact universally, known as Artemus Ward.

The birth, youth and life of Artemus Ward coincided with that period of our

country's existence that may be compared with the boyish period of a future robust man. The boy precursor of such a man feels in his bones the germs of his coming strength, in his brain the germ of his coming intellect, and in the beat of his pulse the elasticity that will in his manhood years give him swing and daring. But his experience is small; his store of knowledge smaller. Hence his poise is that of almost unbearable vanity. What he does not know he thinks not worth knowing; everything that is his—family, toys, books—he takes to be the best on earth; in his mind, he is the centre of the universe; possibly the peer of some, but certainly the superior of most. These were the marked characteristics of our country, especially between the thirties and the seventies. It was during this period, and in such national surroundings, that Artemus Ward was born, grew, and looked upon the world. His countrymen were filled with the vain glory of robustuous boyhood: A fetich veneration for “The Flag” held the public mind in ignorance of sociologic laws, without a due appreciation of which that well-rounded information, requisite for mental development, is impossible; ancestral vanity, all the sillier and perverser for being wholly unfounded, threatened to fossilize the nation's marrow; national boastfulness at the “business success” of the business class shut their eyes to all perception of economics, and dried up the well-springs of study; and, finally, as a result of all this, jingo patriotism spread its evil roots and exploited the nation's credulity. Artemus Ward's keen eyes pierced the situation. Even if serious and elaborate articles, calling attention to these evils, did not bring down upon the head of the rash writer the execration of his fatuous fellow citizens, such writings could have done little good. In the rush and the bustle of vigorous national youth, stimulated by unprecedented opportunities, our people had no stomach for long or systematic reading. Nothing could answer but the lightest of literature, in the lightest of garbs; the arrow had to be sped and steadied by the softest of feathers. Artemus Ward launched his Jokes.

Cervantes gave the coup the grace to another social and intellectual malady—Knight Errantry and its vicious literature. But writing for the staid, steadier, older civilization of Spain in particular, of Europe in general, he undertook a long continuous story, that has kept the world in a roar ever since. Artemus Ward, writing for and amidst a sprightlier, younger and more mercurial people, uttered himself in short, loose, disconnected articles, romances and lectures. The four leading defects above enumerated—flag bigotry, ancestral pretensions, business conceit and jingoism—were the cardinal vices that his jokes riddled with merciless humor. At a time when Gen. John A. Dix's order, “Any man who pulls down the American flag, let him be shot down on the spot,” threatened to turn the people into flag maniacs, and to render them the victims of a horde of miscreants, Artemus wrote his inimitable account of a fraudulent showman, who, being detected, declared indignantly that the man who caught him swindling should be locked up for “treason to the flag.” The absurd heraldic claims and pretensions of ancestry, that were then innocently rampant, Artemus brought down by

a number of stories that struck home, and left nothing of the sanctity and veneration with which the “original settlers” were sought to be clad by the generation of fifty years ago: the stories about his “Uncle Wilyim” and “Abijah Ward,” one of his “Pilgrim-Mayflower ancestors,” are masterpieces of rollicking satire. His Romance in Two Chapters,” entitled “William Barker, the Young Patriot,” punctured and let all the wind out of the mischievous bubble of “patriotism,” which a perverse bourgeoisie was exploiting for its own private profit, and to the country’s undoing. Finally, Artemus was a far seeing sceptic on the “business merits” of the “successful business man”; he saw through the fraud; a score of stories and allusions unmask “successful business,” and show it to be grounded on, born of cheating.

But it was not these leading vices only that he thrashed. His masterliness in his special field appears in nothing more strikingly than in the fact that each of his little productions is a veritable pin-brush or a broadside. The slashing wit and humor does not wait for the wind-up sentence. Behind every word, frequently even in the spelling of these, lurks a joke, grinning broadly and hitting hard all the innumerable lesser vices that are twigs and offshoots of the four principal trunks upon which his sharp axe was plying, and his ample hose was playing.

To-day none any longer entertains or repeats the views that Artemus pilloried except those natives whose very lives and interests expose their viciousness, or those grovelling ludicrous immigrants, who are so weak of mind, and so bereft of all self-respect as to delight in appearing “More Parisian than the Parisians,” reminding one of the apostate Jews one reads of in history, who endangered their health by an excessive diet of pork, in their anxiety to conceal their extraction.

Artemus Ward’s works are an invaluable aid to the knowledge of the intellectual development of the population of the United States. How much that development owes to Artemus Ward is yet hard to tell. Certain it is that, but for him and the school of writers that he founded, the American nation would not now be, as it is, on the high road to the broadest philanthropy, the soundest sociology, and the benignest policy of national and international politics.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.

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