**“The Mississippi was a virgin field”: Reconstructing the River Before Mark Twain, 1865-1875**

In the decade after the Civil War, in the years before Mark Twain made the river his own, the Mississippi was a vital site and symbol that gained a renewed place in American literature and culture. At the moment that Americans turned to their landscape with renewed interest, the river encapsulated the often contradictory tensions and trends running through the nation at this peculiarly pivotal moment. Representations of the river across a variety of media – from travel accounts to popular prints – helped to foster a nascent sense of reunion. Recently a major battlefield, the post-war Mississippi became an important route to the defeated South, and a conspicuous location in the pioneering internal travel accounts that proliferated during Reconstruction. Frequently, its waters were freighted with a spirit of nostalgia for life – particularly Southern life – before the war. At the same moment, the Mississippi became a fertile environment for an array of pioneering writers who profoundly implicated the river in the early development of a realist aesthetic. Many of them, like John Hay and William Dean Howells, were intimately involved with Twain during this period. Throughout, bolstered by national interest in steamboat races and other important events in the life of the river, the Mississippi also became characterised as a space of white male power and play, and by a style of rugged and capable masculinity best encapsulated by the figure that Twain embodied and would soon frequently evoke: the Mississippi steamboat pilot. In short, just before Twain made his major interventions in its imaginative life, the river performed a great deal of cultural work as the nation reordered itself in the wake of the war.

Mark Twain, however, told a rather different story. In October 1874, he wrote to his friend and editor William Dean Howells in an excited mood. Howells had asked him to contribute something for the January edition of the *Atlantic*, having just agreed to publish Twain’s first story for the magazine in the November issue. At first, Twain had declined: his new house was full of carpenters, he told Howells on October 3, and he couldn’t concentrate on work. It wasn’t long before he had a very significant change of heart, writing to Howells on October 24:

I take back the remark that I can’t write for the Jan. number. For Twichell & I have had a long walk in the woods & I got to telling him about old Mississippi days of steamboating glory & grandeur as I saw them (during 5 years) *from the pilot house*. He said “What a virgin subject to hurl into a magazine!” I hadn’t thought of that before.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What resulted from this correspondence became “Old Times on the Mississippi”, a series of seven articles for the *Atlantic* based on Twain’s antebellum experiences learning to pilot a steamboat in the late 1850s. Though Twain had already used the river briefly in his writing, most notably in the steamboat race section of *The Gilded Age* (1873), these articles represented his first sustained meditation on the Mississippi, pointing the way to the other major river works that would soon follow.

Decades later, he was still echoing the sense of discovery and ownership contained within his letter to Howells. In 1895, during his post-bankruptcy lecture tour around the world, Twain was prompted by a journalist in Winnipeg, “you doubtless consider the Mississippi your real field of work? You are, so to speak, the prophet of the Mississippi.” His response was unequivocal:

Yes, and the reason is plain. By a series of events – accidents – I was the only one who wrote about old times on the Mississippi. Wherever else I have been some better have been there before and will come after, but the Mississippi was a virgin field. No one could write that life but a pilot entered into the spirit of it [...] Here then was my chance, and I used it.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the intervening decades, Twain’s claims to the river’s imaginative conquest, and his happy adoption of the dual roles of prophet and pioneer, have largely gone unchallenged. Despite the work that has recently been done to read Twain in comparison with his comparison, and back into the contexts from which he emerged, our understanding of Twain’s relationship with the Mississippi retains a resilient patina of exceptionalism. As Edwin Cady put it, for his contemporaries in the Gilded Age as much as for us now, “Clemens owned the river.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Yet far from being a “virgin field” (and even ignoring the profoundly fertile life of the river in pre-war American culture), the postbellum Mississippi was a very prominent and multivalent symbol long before Twain made the subject his own. Indeed, in 1874, when Twain began to fully assert his claims to the river’s imaginative copyright from the apparently privileged viewpoint of “the pilot house”, he was surrounded by a wide variety of his contemporaries who had already done much in the previous decade to create a receptive cultural climate for his particular visions of the Mississippi. Walter Blair recognised many years ago that when Twain finally turned to the river in earnest, “he had gravitated toward a popular subject”, not broached a new one.[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet the implications of that statement still require significant elaboration. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to reconstruct the meanings of the Mississippi in American literature and culture in the years following the Civil War. What did the Mississippi mean to Americans when they turned to Twain’s *Atlantic* articles?

**1. “Even the Mississippi seems to realize her rule is over”**

The Civil War changed life on the Mississippi profoundly. In the antebellum years, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 description of the river in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had been emblematic of the river’s primary associations. It was, of course, the artery of slavery, carrying a “fearful freight” – “the tears of the oppressed, the sighs of the helpless, the bitter prayers of poor, ignorant hearts to an unknown God” – to the slave markets of New Orleans. But for Stowe, as for many others, the Mississippi was also powerfully symbolic of America’s national spirit, and was still a source of patriotic pride. “What other river of the world,” Stowe wonders, “bears on its bosom to the ocean the wealth and enterprise of such another country?” Indeed, the “turbid waters” of the Mississippi – “hurrying, foaming, tearing along” – were “an apt resemblance of that headlong tide of business which is poured along its wave by a race more vehement and energetic than any the old world ever saw.” Not for the first or last time, the “heavily-laden steamboat” was posited as a powerfully representative ship of state.[[5]](#footnote-5)

But in the post-war years, the Mississippi’s value as a symbol of “wealth and enterprise” was diminishing rapidly. Even before the war suspended the river’s commercial activities, the steamboat trade was under pressure from the burgeoning force of the railroads – what Louis C. Hunter described as “the beginning of the trend which within a few years was to relegate steamboats to a minor role in the economic life of the West.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Post-war, that transfer of power intensified quickly: the total mileage of America’s railroad network more than doubled from 1865 to 1873.[[7]](#footnote-7) Symbolically and commercially, America was now riding on rails to the West. In Richard White's terms, “railroads defined the age”, just as the rise of the steamboat had helped to define the antebellum years.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A vital moment in this regard was James Buchanan Eads’ construction of a bridge over the Mississippi at St Louis. Eads – visionary engineer, entrepreneur, and one of the most celebrated river characters of the post-war period – had established his reputation on the Mississippi in the pre-war decades. Starting as a steamboat’s mud clerk in the late 1830s, he moved to the construction and operation of salvage boats and diving-bells on the river, hauling up cargoes from sunken steamboats. During the war itself, he gained a national profile building iron-clad gunboats that helped to secure the river for the Union. Then, from 1867 to its official opening on July 4th 1874, Eads was the mastermind behind the construction of a brick and steel bridge – pioneering in its methods and materials – over the Mississippi River at St. Louis. As Christopher Morris explains, the triumphant symbolic value of this achievement was profound:

He accomplished this feat five years *after* the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. For five years West and East remained divided not by mountains or deserts or plains, but by a mile-wide ribbon of water.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It was, unreservedly, a marvel of the age: an awestruck correspondent for the *New York Times* described the structure as “without doubt, the eighth wonder of the world.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Walt Whitman, in St. Louis in 1879, was equally entranced, noting in *Specimen Days & Collect* (1882), “I have haunted the river every night lately, where I could get a look at the bridge by moonlight. It is indeed a structure of perfection and beauty unsurpassable, and I never tire of it.” [[11]](#footnote-11)

When A. S. Twombly went to visit the bridge for *Scribner’s Monthly* in 1871, however, he struck a different note. He immediately discerned “a certain poetic sadness [...] a sentiment excited by the contrast between the present and the past” accompanying the “admiration” which the construction inspired. As Twombly saw it, he was witness to a profound shift in power from the (feminised) river – “the mistress of the West” – to the railroad “that to-day flings chains about the captive queen of rivers, and, like Augustus, hopes to lead the Cleopatra of the West in triumph.” Part of the reason for the river’s subjugation was the reorientation of national life itself: “Westward flows the stream of human life on this continent. No highways leading north or south can possibly compete in the race for fortune with those tending towards the setting sun.” For Twombly, therefore, “Even the Mississippi seems to realize her rule is over”:

Within a year the Mississippi will be at the mercy of her conquerors. She may grind her sands in rage, and lash her sides in wrath, but never again can she be called, in the old sense, the autocrat of western prosperity. The spirit of Stephenson, rather than of Fulton, must hereafter guide that vast empire to its destiny of wealth and power.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Yet the river and the steamboat were also gaining a new symbolic value, as was its role connecting North and South. The nostalgia inherent in Twombly’s lament for the river would be a vital aspect of its new place in the national imagination. This shift in the Mississippi’s meaning was vividly discernible in a series of images of the river released by the popular New York printmaking firm of Currier and Ives in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The most iconic of these numerous river pictures were the work of one artist, Frances Palmer, a British immigrant. Her name may never have been as famous as Stowe’s, but her work was almost as ubiquitous: “It is likely that during the latter half of the nineteenth century more pictures by Mrs. Fanny Palmer decorated the homes of ordinary Americans than those of any other artist, dead or alive.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Like Stowe, Palmer had never seen the Mississippi itself, but her imagined depictions of life on and along its waters must be counted as some of the most influential renderings of the river at this pivotal moment. Palmer’s stock-in-trade, before and after the war, were iconic steamboat prints – images like *A Midnight Race on the Mississippi* (1860), *“Wooding Up” on the Mississippi* (1863), *The Champions of the Mississippi* (1866) and *“Rounding a Bend” on the Mississippi* (1866).[[14]](#footnote-14) These are dramatic and exhilarating imaginings of American industrial might: the sublime craft fill the frame, dwarfing even the giant river (apparently rendered according to an Old World scale), reinvigorating the significance of the steamboat as a powerful symbol of national confidence whilst simultaneously projecting a deep nostalgia for a Golden Age that was fast slipping away.

At the end of the war, Palmer moved away from that formula, producing two diptychs that used the river to tell a more complicated story. A month before Lee’s surrender at Appomattox in 1865, Currier and Ives released Palmer’s *The Mississippi in Time of Peace* and *The Mississippi in Time of War*.[[15]](#footnote-15) In the first image, the viewer is presented with a vibrant scene of antebellum river-life: as the setting sun bathes the landscape in golden light, the river is crowded with steamboats, flatboats and other craft; plantation houses are visible on the bank. The second image is an extraordinary evocation of war, devastation and death. Night has fallen, and a fearsome Union ironclad now commands the middle of the river. It is in the process of systematically destroying everything from the former scene – steamboats burn, flatboats sink, plantation houses crumble. The Mississippi has become a river of fire. If the image lays the blame for the war at the door – or the river – of the South, it also arguably contains within it a nostalgic glance backwards to the antebellum plantation.

From fire to flood: the same nostalgia can be read in the second pair of Palmer’s prints, *“Low Water” in the Mississippi* and *“High Water” in the Mississippi*, both released in 1868.[[16]](#footnote-16) While this time the destruction on display is ostensibly natural, it is difficult not to see the river’s floodwaters as an allegory for the destruction of war. In *Low Water*, Palmer sketches another plantation idyll: the viewer is drawn to the jollity of the slave cabins in the foreground, evidently inspired by both Stowe and the minstrel stage. After the deluge – or, we might say, after the war – the destruction of the plantation landscape means that the same slave family from the first image has been cast out of its former happy home, and is now drifting into an uncertain future. The imagined Mississippi of Frances Palmer, displayed in homes throughout the nation, was prescient in its sympathies and its symbolism: others would soon turn to the river as an escape into an imagined and idealised pre-war South.

In 1870, the famous steamboat race between the *Robert E. Lee*, built in 1866 for John W. Cannon, and the *Natchez*, built for Thomas P. Leathers in 1869, crystallised many of the issues nascent in both the interpretation of Eads’ bridge and Palmer’s prints. The race provided a potent spectacle that was followed throughout America. Cannon and Leathers were both famous figures on the river and had a notoriously fraught personal history. In November 1868, for example, the Cincinnati *Daily Gazette* reported a “personal encounter” between the pair in New Orleans about a business matter.[[17]](#footnote-17) Almost as soon as the *Natchez* was ready to work the river, newspapers began to stoke the rivalry between the two men. Such provocation finally brought about a contest: the *Natchez* and the *Lee* both set outfrom New Orleans, bound for St. Louis, on June 30. America was watching. Excitement was most profound in the cities along the Mississippi which had a vested interested in the competition. The race was front page news in New Orleans, where the *Picayune*, with correspondents on both boats and pundits providing commentary, eagerly declared, “Never before in New Orleans has there been such excitement regarding a steamboat race [...] Every whisper is caught up, iterated and reiterated until the wildest rumors as to the positions of the two steamers are circulated and received as truth. Enormous sums of money have been staked.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Spectators came out in their thousands along the river, and many more followed along at home. The event was “reported throughout the country in one of the most extensive telegraphic accounts of any nonpolitical event prior to that time.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The *New York Times*, one prominent example of many, provided regular updates about the progress of the “Mississippi Steamers Testing Their Powers” from points all along the river.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The men at the centre of the competition received as much attention as their boats, as exemplified by the vignette captured by the admiring correspondent for the Memphis *Avalanche* on board the *Lee*:

The engineer, of course, was at his post with corrugated brow and compressed lip, a flat eye sharply set and a hand oily and bony, but steady as if its nerves were made of steel [...] Then the pilot was away aloft looking ahead with practiced and steady vision, and guiding the rapid course of the boat with confident and artistic touch. Capt. Cannon [...] spares not his oaths, but his voice is not loud nor his talk voluble. He wants to win the race.[[21]](#footnote-21)

And he did. The *Robert E. Lee* was victorious, arriving in St. Louis on the morning of July 4, roughly three days and eighteen hours after its departure. At the banquet thrown in honour of Cannon and Leathers at the Southern Hotel in St. Louis – complete with “sugar representations of the Natchez and the Lee” and with Robert E. Lee’s daughter in attendance – the spectre of the railroads still loomed large. One speaker, praising the achievements of the boatmen, declared: “the Mississippi river is one of the most difficult to navigate, but the contest between the Lee and Natchez had demonstrated that, troublesome as it was, it could [...] be navigated successfully in competition with railroads.”[[22]](#footnote-22) While that boast might have sounded relatively hollow, less empty was the claim made by another speaker that “a million people had thronged the banks of the river to witness the great struggle, and forty millions of people have since become conversant with the result.”[[23]](#footnote-23) These extraordinary statistics were followed, not incidentally it seems, by a plea for “never ending harmony between the North and South” – as if the excitement generated by a race between two Southern steamboats pointedly named for people and places of the Confederacy could, like the Mississippi itself, act as a bond between old enemies.[[24]](#footnote-24)

On some level, it clearly did. The race generated sufficient widespread appeal for Currier and Ives to release a number of prints commemorating the event, the most famous of which, *The Great Mississippi Steamboat Race*, was a reworking of Frances Palmer’s 1860 image, *A Midnight Race on the Mississippi*.[[25]](#footnote-25) The stars and stripes now flew conspicuously from the *Robert E. Lee*. A contemporary gloss for these machines in the Mississippi Valley’s garden might be found in a breathless meditation on the race and the river published in the St. Louis *Republican*, a telling blend of the pastoral and the industrial:

The Mississippi [...] yellow as liquid gold, sweeps through the heart of a rare garden such as earth can not match [...] Along the borders of this paradise [...] the Lee and the Natchez fly onward like uncaged eagles [...] Night and day, day and night, the tireless muscles of steel and steam toil on, struggling for final victory [...] If song and story, marble and canvas have given deathless fame to the Olympic games of Greece and the gladiatorial shows of Rome, some small meed of praise may surely be awarded to these marine athletes racing on the Mississippi for the laurel crown.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Even those who were less enamoured with the event provided other clues to its appeal. The *New York Times*, though following the race closely, took time to criticise what it described as “a revival of the criminal practice of steam-boat racing, once so prevalent upon Western rivers.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The hint of nostalgia embedded even within this lament highlights the degree to which – as with the Eads’ bridge and Palmer’s pictorial river – a retrospective quality underpinned this moment. These icons of industrial power, burning brightly for one last time, were inevitably fading into history, increasingly valuable as symbols of myth rather than modernity. In turn, the river was becoming a place of imaginative escape and adventure, of masculine endeavour, and a gateway to burnished memories of flush times before the Civil War – all of which have implications for *Old Times on the Mississippi.*

**2. “Countless Rhines and many Danubes”**

The river’s numerous appearances in postbellum travel writing added their own nuances to these tropes. The Mississippi had, of course, been a prominent location in antebellum travel accounts of America, particularly those written by European travellers who often found little to love in its waters. Perhaps most famously, it had been the nightmarish “foul stream” of Dickens’ *American Notes* (1842).[[28]](#footnote-28) The post-war decade, however, saw a distinct shift in the nature of internal tourism, and in the reputation of the Mississippi. In deeply influential publications like *Picturesque America* (1872, 1874) and Edward King’s account of *The Great South* (1875), the river would be aesthetically rehabilitated, imbued with a new romance, and deeply entangled in the reconciliatory motivations that underpinned such projects.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the river featured prominently in the pioneering journeys of Northern journalist-travellers touring the defeated South in 1865 and 1866. The recent conflict indelibly coloured their accounts: “Descending the Mississippi,” declared John Trowbridge (later, a friend of Twain’s), “the first point of interest you pass is Davis’s Bend, the former home of the President of the Confederacy [...] now used as a Home Farm for colored paupers.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Since the primary concerns of these travellers were political and sociological, the river had a vital role to play in their accounts. The cabin of a Mississippi steamboat provided these observers with a crucial contact zone in which they could study the defeated enemy. “I made the acquaintance of all sorts of Southern people,” Trowbridge declared about his time on the river, “The conversation of some of them is worth recording.”[[30]](#footnote-30) What he and his colleagues heard was not always edifying. Trowbridge’s description of his unreconstructed fellow travellers was particularly condemnatory:

[T]he majority were Mississippi and Arkansas planters going down the river to their estates: a strongly marked, unrefined, rather picturesque class, — hard swearers, hard drinkers, inveterate smokers and chewers [...] How shall I describe the conversation of these men? Never a word did I hear fall from the lips of one of them concerning literature or the higher interests of life; but their talk was of mules, cotton, niggers, money, Yankees, politics, and the Freedmen's Bureau.[[31]](#footnote-31)

While Whitelaw Reid (another future friend of Twain) echoed such judgements during his account of the South, the social space provided by a journey on the river provided him with moments that were more reconciliatory: “On a Mississippi steamboat, one evening,” he described, “I encountered an intelligent, substantial-looking Arkansas planter, hirsute, and clad in Confederate gray [...] I soon discovered that the companion, with whom I was passing an idle evening in talk about planting and politics, was the Rebel General, E. C. Cahell [...] He was giving the free-labor experiment a fair trial; and risking upon it pretty nearly all he was worth.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

It would, once again, be the spirit of reunion, embryonic in Reid’s text, which would frequently come to dominate travel accounts of the river. As Nina Silber has described, the post-war decade was the moment during which tourism became “a mass industry”, and “tourism and reconciliation often went hand in hand.”[[33]](#footnote-33) These journeys were accompanied by a new proliferation of travel accounts: as Richard Brodhead has highlighted, the “great staple” of post-war journals, “the virtually mandatory item in their program of offerings,” was “the short piece of touristic or vacationistic prose, the piece that undertakes to locate some little known place far away and makes it visitable in print.”[[34]](#footnote-34) And the South featured heavily in both developments: for Sue Rainey, such accounts “anticipated the return of a recovering South to national life”, since American readers “wanted information about a region that had been largely off limits for more than a decade, but which held special attractions.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

The Mississippi was deeply involved in these trends. Evidently, the river could and did incarnate the idea of reunion. A contributor to the *Ladies’ Repository* in March 1873 caught this mood: “The Mississippi River,” she explained, “is not, to a reasoning mind, merely a stream of water […] It may be regarded as a sign, given by the Creator, that the people inhabiting this country should always be one nation. It is a symbol stamped into the surface of the earth, and its import to the American people is UNION *and* PEACE.”[[36]](#footnote-36) A journey from North to South along the Mississippi – whether real or textual – could provide a similarly unifying panorama of American life and landscape at this pivotal moment. But at the same time, it was one that still recognised and enshrined regional differences; most often, the river really featured as a route to a South more imaginary than geographical.

One of the most influential postbellum publications in this regard was the *Picturesque America* project – first a series of articles in *Appletons’ Magazine* in 1870, later collected in two richly illustrated volumes in 1872 and 1874. An enormously popular set of publications (Rainey suggests that as many as one million copies were sold through subscription), they did much to precipitate the postbellum vogue for American scenes.[[37]](#footnote-37) *Picturesque America*, significantly, featured two separate chapters on the Mississippi. In his essay on the Upper Mississippi above St. Louis, Rodolphe E. Garczynski – after a nod to Eads’ bridge, “magnificent [...] one of the largest and handsomest in the world” – waxed highly romantic about the river’s place in the national imagination.[[38]](#footnote-38) “In the description of American scenery,” he declared, “the Mississippi River, as of royal right, claims a leading place. It is our Nile, our mythic stream.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Sounding a nationalistic note in opposition to both lingering European visions of the river and the contemporary vogue for European travel, Garczynski staked a claim for American scenery along the Upper Mississippi:

This [...] place ought to be visited by every painter and poet in America, and should become the headquarters of everyone who loves the scenery of his country, during the summer months. It is a grief that Americans should wander off to the Rhine and the Danube when, in the Mississippi, they have countless Rhines and many Danubes.[[40]](#footnote-40)

His exhortations had been anticipated by the first tourist guide to the river above St. Louis, published in 1866, which rhapsodised about its “varied beauties of the most romantic and picturesque character.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

The Lower Mississippi, described in an essay by Southwestern Humorist Thomas Bangs Thorpe, was a different story. Thorpe’s vision was firmly regional, rather than national. He asserted that the apparent “sameness and monotony” of much of the Lower Mississippi actually belied a profound and “mysterious interest [...] a sort of awe which it is difficult to define or account for.”[[42]](#footnote-42) In elucidating and shaping that enigmatic appeal, Thorpe’s text exemplified much travel writing about the South at this moment. To borrow Silber’s terms, the Lower Mississippi of *Picturesque America* becomes a typically Southern space of “leisure, relaxation and romance”, a place marked out by “distinctive” scenery and landscape, and the “familiar features of the antebellum legend” of the South.[[43]](#footnote-43) The exotic and the romantic are privileged. “The magnolia-tree, in full blossom,” he writes, in a typically lush passage, “with the Spanish moss enshrouding it in a gray, neutral haze, makes a superb picture.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The residences visible from the Mississippi, until recently the landscape of slavery, become intoxicating Edenic spaces: “On these old plantations [...] [h]edges of jasmine lead up the door-ways of the planters’ residences, and vie in fragrance with the flowing pomegranate and night-blooming cereus [...] At nightfall [...] the atmosphere predisposes to lassitude and dreamy repose.”[[45]](#footnote-45) For Thorpe, as for others, the Mississippi was a gateway to a deeply nostalgic and romanticised South loaded with Lost Cause associations.

However, the renewed appeal of a journey along the Mississippi was not simply located in the diverse – mainly Southern – sights and scenes along its banks. Life on board a Western steamboat, particularly life amongst the men who worked on those boats was a topic of fascination in the early 1870s. It was a theme that provided travellers with a unifying figure that, at least ostensibly, transcended some of the dichotomies and regional differences that were attached to the river itself. When George Ward Nichols headed “Down the Mississippi” for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1870, he felt so confident in his readers’ knowledge about life on the river that he began his description of steamboat design with an acknowledgment that he was “At the risk of telling many [...] readers what they will know as well as I.”[[46]](#footnote-46) But he made no apologies for devoting space to another topic. “The mention of the officers who control the movements of the boat is necessary to our narrative,” Nichols asserted, before outlining the complex racial and gendered hierarchies of a steamboat:

They are the captain [...] then there are the two pilots; the clerk, to whom we all go for everything we wish; two mates, of whose harsh voices and terrible looks we have more fear, probably, than the forty or fifty dark-skinned deck-hands, toward whom they are usually directed; there are the engine-drivers, coal-heavers, cooks, waiters, barbers, porters, laundresses, and last, but not least, Spencer, our good-natured, handy, irrepressible cabin-boy, who is blacker than darkest night.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Though “all the incidents which go to make up human life and society are represented on this steamboat of ours”, the real point of interest for Nichols was clear. “Of all that belongs to life on our great Western rivers,” he outlined, “the business and experiences of the pilots interest me most. Truly, must he be a man of rare and natural gifts of memory of localities, quick observing comprehension, a sure hand, rapid judgement, determination of will, iron nerve, even temper, and good habits.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

This appreciation is developed further in conversation with the boat’s pilot, who attempts to provide Nichols with some instruction in the mysteries of his profession: “‘Well, it’s sort of instinct [...] I can tell something by the color of the water, something by its motion, and something in the habits of the beast; and between ’em all I manage to find my way.’”[[49]](#footnote-49) In his account of “A Western-River Race” for *Appletons'* in 1872, Thomas Cooper de Leon was equally fascinated with his boat’s pilot - “a rough old river-dog, weather-beaten, battered, and grim – a man with a huge thirst carefully controlled, and an amazing aptitude for destroying […] tobacco” – and with his turns of phrase: “‘D--nation! I'll overstep her yit, or *bust!*’”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The work which best exemplified the Mississippi’s role in post-war travel narratives was also the most influential travel account published in the immediate postbellum period. What’s more, it drew a clear line of connection between the river and Mark Twain, just before Twain explored and exploited that apparently “virgin subject” himself. Edward King’s *The* *Great South* began life as a series of sketches for *Scribner’s Magazine* in July 1873, before being collected in a single volume in 1875 – by Elisha Bliss’ American Publishing Company, Mark Twain’s publisher at that moment. The Mississippi – both as conduit and subject – was given significant space in King’s text, organising much of his time in the South. Throughout, it provided King with “a perpetual succession of novel episodes.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Deep in Louisiana, the river transported him to a Southern reverie that outstripped even Thorpe: “Some evening, just as sunset is upon the green land and the broad stream, you stand high up in the pilot-house [...] You may almost believe yourself removed out of the sphere of worldly care, and sailing to some haven of profoundest peace.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Like Nichols, what King also implicitly underscored, characteristically adopting what Silber terms “the picturesque formula” when writing about black Americans, were the racial hierarchies that underpinned the privileged view from the pilot house:[[53]](#footnote-53)

Down below, the firemen labor at the seven great furnaces, and throw into them cords on cords of wood, tons on tons of coal; the negroes on the watch scrub the decks, or trundle cotton bales from one side of the boat to the other, or they lie listlessly by the low rails of the prow, blinking and shuffling and laughing with their own rude grace. Above, the magic perfume from the thickets filled with blossoms is always drifting, and the long lines of green islets bathed by the giant stream, pass by in rapid panorama.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The *Westminster Review*, at least, had issue with *The Great South*’s depiction of black Southerners, discerning in both artist and author “a patronizing observation of him as a creature scarcely on a par with themselves.”[[55]](#footnote-55) But his portrait of the pleasures of river travel, particularly his sense of the river as a magical passage to a lost South, was undeniably influential, at home and abroad.

Up near St. Louis, after a mandatory visit to Eads’ bridge (“He knows the Mississippi as well as any one can know that most capricious and uncertain of streams”), it was the men in the pilot house that captured King’s attention.[[56]](#footnote-56) Travelling on the *Great Republic* – “a floating palace” – he ascended to the steamboat’s sanctum sanctorum. “The pilots,” King described, “perched in their cosy cage, twisted the wheel, and told us strange stories [...] They are men of great energy, of quaint, dry humor, and fond of spinning yarns.” One ex-pilot was singled out by King for particular comment:

The genial “Mark Twain” served his apprenticeship as pilot, and one of his old companions and tutors, now on the “Great Republic,” gave us reminiscences of the humorist. One sees, on a journey down the Mississippi, where Mark found many of his queerest and seemingly impossible types.[[57]](#footnote-57)

This prominent allusion to Twain’s life on the river was originally published in *Scribner’s* in October 1874, the very same month that Twain wrote to Howells pitching “Old Times on the Mississippi” for publication in the *Atlantic*.[[58]](#footnote-58) Whether or not King directly inspired Twain – and it seems highly implausible that Twain would not have been aware of this reference to his steamboating past – it certainly helped to establish his authority in relation to the river in the literary marketplace. Moreover, King’s account, and others, enshrined the steamboat pilot as a rugged, garrulous, capable icon of white Gilded Age masculinity, pointedly perched at the top of a racial hierarchy. When Twain came to the river as a subject in late 1874, at the high tide of its postbellum status, he also moved to enshrine himself as an embodiment of these tropes.

Even if Twain didn’t take this hint himself, others might have done. In early December, apparently unaware of Twain’s forthcoming series for the *Atlantic*, Twain’s old California friend William Wright (better known as Dan De Quille), wrote “Pilot Wylie”, what he described as “a Mississippi river sketch” which also mentioned Mark Twain by name as a steamboat pilot.[[59]](#footnote-59) It was reprinted in the *Hartford Daily Courant* on February 8 1875, and may well have inspired Twain’s own memories of Pilot Wylie in “Old Times on the Mississippi.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

**3. “Natives of the same vast Mississippi Valley”**

Neither was Dan De Quille the only one of Twain’s close associates to write the river at this moment. The members of an informal, influential and intertwined Midwestern literary coterie, incorporating and surrounding Mark Twain at this moment – men who had also grown up around and longside the steamboat trade – were also turning to the Mississippi as both setting and subject for pioneering stories and poems that were pushing towards a new concern for verisimilitude. Indeed, the river arguably became a space that telegraphed in and of itself a certain set of literary values. As in contemporary travel sketches, the river’s masculine steamboat avatars loomed large. At the heart of this group, both editor and author, was William Dean Howells. In ways that have seldom been acknowledged, the Western Rivers were at the heart of Howells’ own life and work. As he himself pointed out in *My Mark Twain* (1910): “We were natives of the same vast Mississippi Valley; and Missouri was not so far from Ohio but that we were akin in our first knowledges.”[[61]](#footnote-61) As Edwin Cady put it, in the only sustained consideration of this aspect of Howells’ life, work and context, “Howells knew steamboating [...] River experience played a role in the drama of his inner life. He wrote, early and late, a definite if small corpus of river literature.” [[62]](#footnote-62) As editor, he would encourage a variety of writers – Twain included – to push towards a new realist aesthetic using the Mississippi itself as both backdrop and theme.

The Western Rivers bookended Howells’ own career. In 1858, recovering from one of the periodic nervous episodes that afflicted his younger years, Howells took passage on one of his uncle’s steamboats and travelled down the Ohio to St. Louis, publishing nine letters describing the journey in the *Ashtabula Sentinel*. On the Mississippi, he evinced a distinct preference for the river of his youth: “None of the lovely hills that make the upper Ohio so gloriously picturesque, are to be seen; and for miles and miles, the eye rests only on broad expanses of river, terminating in thick, unwholesome looking forests.”[[63]](#footnote-63) What captured his attention, though, was slavery: “The first thing for which I looked about me with interest,” he wrote upon his arrival in St. Louis, “was some indication that I was in the metropolis of a slave state.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Elsewhere on the river, looking towards the Kentucky shore, he described “many cabins of Uncle Tom.”[[65]](#footnote-65) This journey and these observations undoubtedly fed into the poem that provided Howells’ with his debut in the *Atlantic* in 1860: “The Pilot’s Story” was a melodramatic and romantic tale, consciously echoing Longfellow’s *Evangeline* (1847), narrated by a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi. A planter gambles away his slave mistress who is also mother to his children. Seeking to avoid her fate, she leaps to her death in the river, leaving both the pilot and the Mississippi haunted by her memory and their complicity in her death:

“This is the place where it happened,” brokenly whispered the pilot.

“Somehow, I never like to go by here alone in the night-time.”

Darkly the Mississippi flowed by the town that lay in the starlight [...]

All was serene and calm, but the odorous breath of the willows

Smote like the subtile breath of an infinite sorrow upon us.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Though the river shifted from the centre of Howells’ creative vision, the Mississippi was still a presence in his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey* (1871). Involved in a steamboat accident on the Hudson River during the course of his honeymoon, Basil March comments flippantly, “They manage better on the Mississippi and both boats often go down without waking the lightest sleeper on board.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Closer to the end of his career and life, Howells would return to the Western Rivers in a variety of autobiographical works, even featuring the Mississippi in one of his last stories, the enigmatic “A Tale Untold” (1917).[[68]](#footnote-68) Before receiving Twain’s pitch in October 1874, Howells was well primed by both deep life experience and his own writing career to understand the potential value of the Mississippi as an imaginative space. He was certainly not alone.

Of the other “natives of the same vast Mississippi Valley” turning to the river at this moment, the work of John Hay – writer, journalist, statesman, diplomat – arguably did the most to establish the place of the Mississippi in postbellum literature, particularly its role in the development of an early realist aesthetic. Hay had grown up (close to Twain) along the river in Indiana and Illinois –– and the Mississippi took a central role in his pioneering work in the post-war decade. It provided, for example, the antebellum setting for Hay’s melodramatic short story dealing with the unfinished business of slavery. “The Foster-Brothers”, published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1869, saw an escaped, now passing, slave and his erstwhile master meet unexpectedly in a river town, before meeting their end in the Mississippi itself: “the foster-brothers went to the bottom locked in each other’s arms.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

It was Hay’s poetry, though, that had the most profound effect on post-war literature. The pioneering vernacular verses in Hay’s *Pike County Ballads* (1871) were extremely popular and deeply influential. As editor and writer George Cary Eggleston remembered decades later, they “were under discussion everywhere. Phrases from them were the current coin of conversation. Critics were curiously studying them as a new and effective form of literature.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Of all Hay’s ballads, none was more famous than his portrait of a steamboat man, “Jim Bludso (of the Prairie Belle)”, first published in the *New York Tribune* on January 5 1871 and reprinted widely thereafter. The poem tells the sentimental-realist story of a steamboat engineer who “weren’t no saint”:

And this was all the religion he had –

To treat his engine well;

Never be passed on the river;

To mind the Pilot’s bell.

As the narrator explains, “All boats has their day on the Mississip”, and when the “Prairie Belle” explodes while racing on the river, Jim acts with immediate heroism, sacrificing himself to save others: “‘I’ll hold her nozzle agin the bank / Till the last galoot’s shore.’” “He weren’t no saint,” the narrator concludes in the poem’s most famous stanza:

But at jedgement

I’d run my chance with Jim,

‘Longside of some pious gentlemen

That wouldn’t shake hands with him.

He seen his duty, a dead-sure thing,–

And went for it thar and then:

And Christ aint a goin’ to be too hard

On a man that died for men.[[71]](#footnote-71)

The fame of “Jim Bludso” travelled far and wide, and was clearly influential in its depiction of life and men on the river. In his account of “A Western River-Race”, for example, de Leon noted that the “rough old river-dog” piloting the boat, “was cast rather in the Jim Bludso mould.”[[72]](#footnote-72) One prominent fan was George Eliot who, at a literary gathering, apparently declared “Jim Bludso” to be “one of the finest gems in the English language”, before reciting it from memory, “the tears flowing from her eyes as she spoke the closing lines.”[[73]](#footnote-73)

Mark Twain, too, was paying attention. He wrote to Hay immediately after the poem’s publication with, in Hay’s words, “generous commendations” – but also to let him know, as Hay put it, “that I was all wrong making him an engineer, – that only a pilot could have done what I represented him as doing.” Hay replied agreeably and enthusiastically to Twain, “I think the pilot is a much more appropriate and picturesque personage and should certainly have used him except for the fact that I knew Jim Bludso and he was an engineer and did just what I said.”[[74]](#footnote-74) The quibble evidently lingered, however. In correspondence with George Cary Eggleston – himself an Indianan – after the turn of the twentieth century, Hay was still defending his decision to make Jim Bludso an engineer. Eggleston, however, responded by telling Hay a story about a similarly heroic pilot that he had heard from the lips of one particularly notable figure from the river, closing the circle between life and art: “The details of the story were related to me by Captain John Cannon, of the steamer ‘Robert E. Lee,’ and the weather-beaten old navigator was not ashamed of the tears that trickled down his cheeks as he told the tale.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

Another Eggleston – Edward, brother of George Cary – would also turn to life on the river for subject matter in the post-war decade. Edward Eggleston is now best remembered for *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871) – an enormously popular and influential novel dealing with antebellum life in Indiana. As Mark Storey describes, it is also a text that, deeply expressive of its moment, “sits uneasily between the sentimentality of popular fiction and the emerging self-consciousness of literary realism.”[[76]](#footnote-76) His next book, *The End of the World* (1872) devoted significant attention to the nature of antebellum life on the Western rivers.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The book’s noble German hero August Wehle – disappointed in love, racially abused, and falsely accused of robbery – decides, as one character puts it, “to take to steamboat life in hopes of havin’ your sperrits raised by bein’ blowed up.”[[78]](#footnote-78) In many ways, August’s luck does not improve on the river. Employed as a “‘striker,’ as the engineer’s apprentice was called”, he first makes good progress, allowing Eggleston, echoing the ethos of Jim Bludso, to meditate on his new position:

The alarm-bell rang in the engine-room, and Wehle stood by his engine [...] There is something fine in the faith with which an engineer obeys the bell of the pilot, not knowing what may be ahead, not inquiring what may be the effect of the order, but only doing exactly what he is bid when he is bid.[[79]](#footnote-79)

But Eggleston’s picture of life on the river is ultimately a bleak one: gamblers operate on August’s steamboat. He tries to break up their dishonest game, and ultimately saves one of them from a lynching. His reward is to be unjustly fired, not knowing that one of his captain’s “perquisites” was “a percentage of the gamblers’ gains [...] and he was not the only steamboat captain who profited by nice little games in the cabin upon which he closed both eyes.”[[80]](#footnote-80) Reviewing *The End of the World* for the *Atlantic*, Howells particularly approved of the “great reality in the characters,” singling out “the gamblers on the river-steamboat” and the boat’s “‘mud-clerk.’”[[81]](#footnote-81) Twain, again, was paying attention too, at least to Eggleston’s success. While trying to drum up some favourable reviews for *The Gilded Age* in 1873, Twain bristled at the praise being lavished on Eggleston. He clipped one notice which referred to Eggleston’s books as “literary events” and “the success of genuineness”, and sent it to Whitelaw Reid, then editor of the *New York Tribune*, with certain passages scornfully underlined, noting that Eggleston’s latest novel was “an absolutely worthless book.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Another voice – forgotten now, but very significant to Twain and his circle in the early 1870s – was also developing its own very particular vision of the river at this moment. Ralph Keeler lived a life almost unrivalled for its unlikely twists and turns. Born in Ohio, orphaned at the age of eight, and passed between relatives “very much as wood is loaded upon Mississippi steamboats,” Keeler ran away from home at the age of 11.[[83]](#footnote-83) Thereafter, he scraped together a meagre existence as a cabin boy on Lake Erie steamboats before discovering a modicum of fame, if not much fortune, as a “juvenile prodigy of jig-dancing and negro-minstrelsy”, travelling the Mississippi on a showboat.[[84]](#footnote-84) Giving up the stage to pursue his education and travel in Europe, he then spent time in San Francisco, where he first met Twain, and started writing. Then, like Twain, he moved east, working and writing for a variety of literary publications. Twain remembered in his autobiography that their friendship grew greatly at this moment: “Ralph Keeler was pleasant company on my lecture flights out of Boston, and we had plenty of good talks and smokes in our rooms.”[[85]](#footnote-85)

In the late 1860s, encouraged and mentored by William Dean Howells, Keeler’s autobiographical accounts of his many and varied adventures started to appear in the pages of the *Atlantic*, collected in a single volume, *Vagabond Adventures*, in 1870. It was a work suffused with his experiences of both steamboat life and life on the Mississippi – experiences that differed, in many ways, from other visions of the river circulating at this moment. Keeler enthused about his “early love of” and “boundless affection for [...] steamboats”, though his time as a cabin boy was largely marked by hardship, seasickness and exploitation.[[86]](#footnote-86) More agreeable was his time on the famous *Floating Palace* showboat*.* As Keeler put it, “Some unexpected thing was always happening [...] We saw, indeed, a great deal of wild life [...] for we steamed thousands of miles on the Western and Southern rivers.”[[87]](#footnote-87) In marked contrast to the developing sense of the Mississippi as a space of masculine mastery, Keeler introduced his readers to an eccentric and anarchic cast of men, women and children. The showboat’s makeshift family – “strange contrasts in human nature”, as Keeler put it – was marked out by “a spirit of bohemianism [...] a touch of hearty, reckless good-nature.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

Reviewing the book warmly for the *Atlantic*, Howells noted, “That company on the Floating Palace is one that is charming to know through him.” Keeler was poised to paint the river again. On May 6 1871, Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s illustrated journal *Every Saturday* announced the beginning of a major new series: “Special Artist and Correspondent Mr. A. R. Waud and Mr. Ralph Keeler [...] shall begin a series of Sketches [...] entitled ON THE MISSISSIPPI, which will give, in a more graphic manner than has ever been attempted before, the various features of scenery, life, and character along this great national highway.”[[89]](#footnote-89) Over the next six months, Keeler and Waud fulfilled that brief, relating their experiences along the river up to St. Louis in lushly illustrated articles.

Compared to other accounts of the river at this moment, Keeler’s description of the Mississippi was far more concerned with the tensions, racial and political, that ran along its length. As in Reid and Trowbridge’s earlier accounts of the river, Keeler highlights its recent status as a battlefield. The “monotony” of the Lower Mississippi, he avers, is only alleviated by the “interest [...] lent [...] by the late war.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Though there are moments of picturesque description (“the beautiful Spanish moss, of whose exquisite grace there is no danger of saying too much”), his tone throughout is ironic rather than romantic.[[91]](#footnote-91) Unlike many of his contemporaries, Keeler certainly does little to valorise the various steamboatmen they encounter. A day trip to report on a break in the levee near New Orleans during a flood, for example, ends in farce: “We had not been long under way on our return down the river when we learned that the crew of our little stern-wheeler had [...] so far succeeded as to get hopelessly drunk.” An engineer on another boat “attracted our attention by getting his overalls afire.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

The same lightly sardonic approach to life on the river is discernible in an article from the middle of the series entirely devoted to “A Day on a Mississippi Steamboat.”[[93]](#footnote-93) An amalgam of Keeler and Waud’s experiences on a variety of different boats, including the famous *Natchez* and *Robert E. Lee*, the sketch takes the reader on a tour of steamboat life that candidly acknowledges the discomforts as well as the pleasures of a trip on the river. In Keeler’s hands, it is a veritable Vanity Fair – “Perhaps two out of the two or three hundred will be reading; the rest gossip and smoke and flirt” – from breakfast until night fall.[[94]](#footnote-94) He seems most fascinated by the boat’s “stalwart” black roustabouts: “They love, worship, nothing so much as the fastest boat [...] If they fight it is nine times in ten in support of the opinion that the Lee is faster than the Natchez, or that the Natchez is faster than the Lee.”[[95]](#footnote-95) He is no less charmed by a begging “ex-Confederate soldier, who won my sympathy and my dollar by displaying to me the havoc made upon his person by Northern arms.” Even after it emerges that his wounds had nothing to do with the war, Keeler admires “the generosity and impudence of the man.”[[96]](#footnote-96) It is, perhaps, the closest that he comes to the spirit of reunion.

The peak of Keeler’s friendship with Twain came just after his return from the river, while “On the Mississippi” was still being serialised in *Every Saturday*. It can, at the very least, be assumed that the river featured prominently in the “plenty of good talks” the men shared in late 1871. Their influence is arguably immediately discernible in a letter Twain wrote to his wife Olivia on November 27 that year, about his future plans: “when I come to write the Mississippi book, *then* look out! I will spend 2 months on the river & take notes, & I bet you I will make a standard work.”[[97]](#footnote-97) A decade later, Twain would seek out Keeler’s *Every Saturday* articles when writing *Life on the Mississippi* (1883).[[98]](#footnote-98)

Nor was Keeler the only old steamboat hand who turned his hand to irreverent portraits of Mississippi life. John Henton Carter, a St Louis journalist better known as Commodore Rollingpin because of his time as a cook on a Mississippi steamboat, was also a friend of Twain’s, and spent decades writing about the river. For many years, from 1872 onwards, he produced *Commodore Rollingpin’s Almanac*, what Lee Ann Sandweiss describes as “an annual of river folklore, humorous sketches, and stories” that sold fifty thousand copies a year at its peak.[[99]](#footnote-99) In 1874, just before Twain’s own turn to the river, Carter published *Commodore Rollingpin’s Log*, a collection of comic sketches and poems that dealt with a variety of aspects of life on the Mississippi. Carter’s renditions of the river – evidently indebted to the world of Southwestern Humor and the poetry of John Hay – were more anarchic than Twain’s “Old Times on the Mississippi” would be: his steamboatmen fight, gamble and generally like to “go on a spree.”[[100]](#footnote-100) He was capable of flights of fancy, too: in “Rollingpin’s Travels”, for example, he embarked on a tour of the “Mississippi River in the Year 2000”, and dreamt of a time when the river’s influence and power would be renewed: when “trans-continental packets [...] eight hundred feet in length” would leave St. Paul bound for Liverpool, when the river would have a “uniform depth of twenty feet of water”, and when the “days of bridges” would be long gone, the railways banished to tunnels underneath the river – a very different kind of river paradise compared to that of his contemporaries.[[101]](#footnote-101) When composing *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain would reach for Carter’s work too.

**4. “There is a world of river stuff to write about”**

The first instalment of “Old Times on the Mississippi” appeared in the January 1875 issue of the *Atlantic*, and the imaginative life of the river was changed forever. Those who knew both Twain and the Mississippi lined up to congratulate him. John Hay’s response, on December 18, was immediate, unequivocal and typical:

It is perfect—no more nor less. I don’t see how you do it. I knew all that, every word of it—passed as much time on the levee as you ever did, knew the same crowd & saw the same scenes,—but I could not have remembered one word of it all. You have the two greatest gifts of the writer, memory & imagination. I congratulate you.[[102]](#footnote-102)

His childhood friend and fellow steamboat pilot Will Bowen agreed: “Those river articles are delightful.”[[103]](#footnote-103) Howells’ uncle, Alec Dean, another former steamboat pilot, read Twain’s articles “with a keen appreciation.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Howells had, of course, been effusive in his own praise and support from the beginning of the project. “The piece about the Mississippi is capital,” he asserted after he received the manuscript of the first instalment, “it almost made the water in our ice-pitcher muddy as I read it.”[[105]](#footnote-105) “**All** that belongs to the old river life is novel and is now mostly historical,” he declared, by way of encouragement.[[106]](#footnote-106) “You’re doing the science of piloting splendidly,” read another letter, “Every word’s interesting. And don’t you drop the series till you’ve got every bit of anecdote and reminiscence into it.”[[107]](#footnote-107) The only problem for Howells was that the series was almost too popular: meeting with “instant appreciation” it was swiftly reprinted around the nation, from coast to coast, which meant the *Atlantic*’s “subscription list was not enlarged in the slightest measure.”[[108]](#footnote-108)

Of course, it is unsurprising that the series elicited such a reaction: it met a postbellum reading public that had been well conditioned to appreciate tales of life on the Mississippi by a tangled matrix of sources: by accounts and interpretations of steamboat races and bridges, by a multitude of influential travel sketches and popular prints, and by pioneering works of regional literature. Consciously or not, “Old Times on the Mississippi” echoed and amplified some of the most important tropes that those diverse texts helped to establish. From the very title of the series, nostalgia was central to Twain’s vision. “After all these years,” he described early in the first instalment, in one of the most celebrated moments of his entire career, “I can picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then: the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer’s morning.”[[109]](#footnote-109) The steamboat trade, too, is bathed in that light. Twain hastens its death, unambiguously consigning its “glory” to the “dead and pathetic past”, blaming the war and “the railroads intruding everywhere.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Even when he dwells on the reliably popular subject of steamboat racing – “royal fun” – and explicitly references the recent competition between the *Natchez* and the *Robert E. Lee*, it is only to denigrate it in comparison to antebellum achievements: “This last is called the fastest trip on record. I will try to show that it was not.”[[111]](#footnote-111)

It is not just a journey into the past. At moments, “Old Times on the Mississippi” has the quality of a contemporary travel account, offering its readers a voyage along the river that is, on occasion, more picturesque than it would be again in Twain’s work: “the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun.”[[112]](#footnote-112) It is implicitly reconciliatory in tone, since it offers readers a journey into an imaginary South stripped of political anxieties, old and new: slavery and the steamboat’s role in the domestic trade is all but invisible in these sketches. Twain’s black steamboat colleagues appear only in vanishing and undifferentiated glimpses of “half-naked crews of perspiring negroes.”[[113]](#footnote-113) In common with other river works produced at this moment by Twain’s acquaintances, it is also ambiguous in its generic qualities. While striving for an apparent verisimilitude in his account of certain aspects of the trade and, in particular, the vernacular possibilities offered by the river – “I wished I could talk like that,” his narrator declares after a typically rich outburst from one of his river colleagues – Twain dwells heavily on the idea that piloting “was a romantic sort of occupation.”[[114]](#footnote-114)

Above and beyond these other important thematic concerns, what “Old Times on the Mississippi” took as its central theme, in common with much other commentary on the river in the post-war decade, was the men who worked it. Twain’s encomium to the steamboat pilot picks up the postbellum fascination with the steamboat worker as an icon of American masculinity and enlarges that idea to extraordinary dimensions. Twain’s pilot is a powerful and multiple figure. In his description of the steamboat hierarchy, he is adamant that the “Pilot was the grandest position of all.”[[115]](#footnote-115) A pilot’s ability to memorise the river, we are told, “is about the most wonderful thing in the world.”[[116]](#footnote-116) Piloting is both a “wonderful science” and “a very high art.”[[117]](#footnote-117) In the instalment subtitled “Official Rank and Dignity of a Pilot”, the hyperbole reaches a telling crescendo: Twain declares that an antebellum steamboat pilot “was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth.” While “every man and woman and child has a master, and worries and frets in servitude [...] in the day I write of, the Mississippi pilot had *none*.” He was “an absolute monarch who was absolute in sober truth and not by a fiction of words.”[[118]](#footnote-118) And he was also a wonderful storyteller: “all pilots are tireless talkers, when gathered together.”[[119]](#footnote-119)

Though later, particularly in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Twain’s thoughts on the significance and meaning of experience would change, at this moment its value was pushed aggressively to the fore. His extraordinary aggrandisement of the pilot was, inevitably, also the aggrandisement of Mark Twain. Echoing his earliest thoughts on the series to Howells about the “virgin subject” of the Mississippi, he told readers in the fourth instalment: “I feel justified in enlarging upon this great science for the reason that I feel sure no one has ever yet written a paragraph about it who had piloted a steamboat himself, and so had a practical knowledge of the subject.”[[120]](#footnote-120) In a letter to Howells he also reiterated his claim to his central theme:

Any muggins can write about Old Times on the Miss of 500 different kinds, but I am the only man alive that can scribble about the *piloting* of that day –& no man has ever tried to scribble about it yet. Its *newness* pleases me all the time.[[121]](#footnote-121)

Responding to the praise of Howells’ Uncle Alec, Twain again asserted his special status: “There’s something charming about the lonely sublimity of being the prophet of a hitherto unsung race [...] I haven’t any rivals; my people will have to take me or go prophetless.”[[122]](#footnote-122)

When other members of that “unsung race” did begin to put pen to paper themselves, they were often swift to point out that their “prophet” might not always have been a true one. According to fellow pilot Emerson Gould, for example, “it is very apparent [...] that Mr. ‘Twain’ [...] magnified the authority he possessed as a pilot very largely.”[[123]](#footnote-123) Clearly, however, there were deeper significances to the appeal of Twain’s performance, which also picked up on ideas that had been implicit in other portraits of the pilot and the river in the preceding years. For Howard Horwitz, Twain’s “romance of the free and independent pilot” was “an exercise in historical fantasy, its aesthetic values deriving from an idealized vision of free enterprise and *laissez-faire* property rights” in opposition to “the corporate trend the railroad typified and accelerated.”[[124]](#footnote-124) And as Lawrence Howe has suggested, Twain’s investment of the “riverboat pilot that he had aspired to be” with a quality of “epic identity” was related, on some level, to his desire “to embody personally the idea and experience of America.”[[125]](#footnote-125) Though his understanding of that pose would shift, its expression in “Old Times” was a vital stage in Twain’s development as a writer, and his – and our – wider understanding of the river. Another effect of this performance was to enshrine the idea that the view of the Mississippi from Twain’s pilot house was the only view that mattered. Everything else – the rich, multifaceted and often conflicting portrait of the river that had built up over the last decade – was simply the work of “muggins”. In large part, it was a claim that stuck.

Such postures certainly struck a nerve in his immediate group. As Edgar J. Burde has asserted, during the composition of this series, “The river of the Mississippi steamboat pilot gave Clemens a metaphor [...] of writing.”[[126]](#footnote-126) This was a significant discovery, for himself and others. Michael Davitt Bell has argued that Howells’ support for a certain kind of literary realism was linked to his anxieties about the gendered status of literature in its relationship to “the world of men’s activities”: “The problem, for Howells as for many of his contemporaries and successors, was that the ‘artist’ was by accepted definition *not* a ‘real’ man.”[[127]](#footnote-127) As Brodhead has described, this was also the moment of emergence for an “idealized” image of the writer as a “single-minded devotee of a highly specialized craft whose work derives value from its mastery of its art.”[[128]](#footnote-128) Twain’s simultaneous performance of the roles of pilot and author in “Old Times on the Mississippi” – and his apparent equation, on some level, of the acts of piloting and writing – spoke directly to those ideas, providing himself and others with a model amalgamation of apparently contradictory worlds. So compelling did Howells find the juxtaposition that when asked about his own writing habits in 1886, he replied with a very pointed image: “I work like a pilot on a Mississippi river steamboat, with certain landmarks to shape my course by; I keep a phrase, and attitude, a situation in mind, from the beginning, and steer by those successive points to the end.”[[129]](#footnote-129)

Twain’s own sense of his river material developed as the series progressed. At points, he thought he was writing a book, declaring on January 26 1875, “I propose to stop in September with the ninth chapter, & then add fifty chapters more & bring the whole out in book form in November.”[[130]](#footnote-130) Before long, he was trying to encourage Howells, John Hay and James Osgood to accompany him on a river voyage – indeed, a “bender” – to New Orleans.[[131]](#footnote-131) Neither the return to the river nor the book would come to pass for a number of years, but that didn’t matter. “Old Times on the Mississippi” had opened the floodgates. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was near completion, and other river works would follow. Like the Mississippi itself, Twain’s conception of the river would constantly shift course. But in May 1875, with “Old Times on the Mississippi” near its end, at least one thing was clear. Twain wrote to Howells on May 22, still enthused about his “virgin subject”, “There is a world of river stuff to write about.”[[132]](#footnote-132) But then and later, he was not the only one to make that discovery.

1. With thanks to Peter Messent, Lawrence Howe, Tim Youngs, and David Peters Corbett.

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