

JOAQUIN MILLER

NEWSLETTER

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Happenings

Favorable book reviews of William Sullivan's *A Deeper Wild* continue to accumulate. Michael O'Rourke's new screenplay *In the Land Where Acorns Dance* was read by 15 actors from Ashland to an enthusiastic audience of 212 at the September Harvest Festival for the benefit of the Talent Historical Society (Oregon). MO (Michael O'Rourke at e-mail www.walkingquaker@earthlink.net) is shopping this play around and already thinking of doing more Miller as MO, like many of this generation, have found in Miller a reality of his times not portrayed by other more academically acclaimed authors of his day. MO, like most of us, found the real JM by accident. MO was interested in the Modocs and so bought LAM only to find it wasn't about the Modocs but the Wintu. MO is now working on a play about JM's youth. Burns and Mainwaring are working on another screenplay about Miller's time in London. Scott McKeown has been back in Canyon City doing more work on his Miller documentary. This generation is finding JM despite the academic Joaquin Miller blackout of the past sixty or so years.

Editorial Comment

Yes, "We have come a long way baby!" From George Washington's youthful mea culpa "I can not tell a lie" to President Clinton's "I did not have sex with that woman" covers a sea change in social mores. Joaquin Miller's life and writing covered much of this period and JM managed to be politically incorrect at all points along the way. Fortunately today some young scholars are beginning to look into the real history of JM and his times. This for them is a truly gut-wrenching experience. They begin their judgements within the framework of social prejudices taught them in the last thirty or so years. Then they 'come a cropper' of historical facts that tell them that such and such really happened and that the things and people JM wrote about were facts and his fictions were thinly veiled interpretations of how he and sometimes others saw the truth of the situations in which they found themselves living. His poem *Columbus* is an excellent case in point. Marberry says it was written

to celebrate the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 but Mrs. Leslie was reciting it in San Francisco in 1892 and others have her using it on lecture tours in the 1880s. Surely had JM envisioned *Columbus* becoming a staple recitation piece in schools until the 1930s he would have charged Mrs. Frank Leslie more than \$50.00 for writing this poem. But for her, his friend and his publisher, he dashed off *Columbus* catching in it the essence of what *Columbus* meant to people of JM's time. JM had walked across the plains, lived in the wilderness, mined both gold and adversity and knew the travails of everyday life. He also had been one of the first to write in LAM in 1873 and in his 1881 *Shadows of Shasta* of the "dreadful history we are making in how we treat the Indians." But in *Columbus* he sang of the important lesson in Columbus's explorations that no matter what conditions prevail one must "Sail On, Sail On!" to succeed. JM's own life had taught him this.

This is the sense of the poem that made it so popular in its day. This sense of "Sail On, Sail On," is what brought tears to the eyes of a group of Bohemians raising funds for San Francisco's 1906 earthquake victims in 1907 at the rebuilt Fairmont Hotel. Joaquin Miller was the last presenter and as he recited *Columbus* the audience rose reciting it with him. They too were rebuilding their lives and their city from ashes and devastation. They were proving that they too could "Sail On, Sail On!" In the 1930s teachers began dropping the study and recitation of Columbus from their curriculae. Academia was beginning to discover Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) who wrote and made available in 1566 *The Apologetic History* in which he told of the atrocious mistreatment of the native peoples by Columbus and the Spaniards in the conquest of the Americas. It wasn't until 1822 that this was translated into French and later into English. Slavery had been a fact of life, even amongst native peoples, practically since the beginning of time. Slavery wasn't abolished in the United States until 1863. Joaquin Miller had been secessionist in his political thinking during the 1860s, yet became famous for his exposure of Indian genocide. He wrote: "It is impossible to write with composure or evenness on this subject. One wants to rise up and

crush things.... We are making dreadful history, dreadfully fast. How terrible it will all read when the writer and reader of these lines are long since forgotten! Ages may roll by. We may build a city over every dead tribe's bones. We may bury the last Indian deep as the eternal gulf. But these records will remain, and will rise up in testimony against us to the last days of our race." Surely JM was walking in the footsteps of Bartolomé de las Casas. Yet, it is doubtful he had ever even heard of him, of his life, his diaries, or his histories. Even if he had, JM would not have chosen the theme of atrocity to celebrate the discovery of America.

Unlike popular opinion of today, which vilifies Columbus for his treatment of the natives, JM chose to celebrate the thing that made Columbus important in history, his sense of "On, Sail On!" JM's early work set down his own yardstick for the judgement of his fellow man and this occasion was no different. Remember it was JM who wrote:

In men whom men condemn as ill
I find so much of goodness still.
In men whom men declare divine
I find so much of sin and blot
I hesitate to draw the line
Between the two, where God has not.

(*Songs of the Sierras* (London 1871): 299)

Too bad that teachers and scribes today are no longer so evenhanded. How unfortunate for those who are interested in JM's views of his times that they are scoffed at for studying JM because it is politically incorrect to have anything to do with Columbus. For those of you who want to set another student right on this period in history you might suggest the original Bartolomé de las Casas *History of the Indies* Translated and Edited by Andrée Collard, New York, Evanston and London: Harper & Row 1971 (A Torchbook Library Edition). Despite de las Casas's later excoriation of Columbus for his treatment of the native peoples, he had this to say: "I think Christopher Columbus was the most outstanding sailor in the world, versed like no other in the art of navigation, for which divine Providence chose him to accomplish the most outstanding feat ever accomplished in the world until now [1566] (1971: 17)." This "indescribable service to God and to the whole world which Christopher Columbus rendered at the cost of such pain and dangers, such skill and

expertise, when he so courageously discovered the New World Is there anything on earth comparable to opening the tightly shut doors of an ocean that no one dared enter before? And supposing someone in the most remote past did enter, the feat was so utterly forgotten as to make Columbus's discovery as arduous as if it had been the first time (1971:35)."

Today Robert J. Chandler (RJC), in an e-mail exchange re JM and Columbus, wrote: "In the poem, I think Miller was extolling Columbus as he would himself—following his dream or passion. For Columbus, the new way to the Indies in spite of obstacles—"Sail On, Sail On!"; for Joaquin, the muse of poetry, and through it, interpretation of truths to the world. If everyone could do it, everyone would, and no one would remember C or J." RJC 10/2/00.

The Internet

JM may have pooh-poohed his brother George's invention of an airplane about the same time as the Wright brothers but JM understood the undersea cable that connected Europe to America and he truly must be applauding the Internet which is again connecting him with the people. JM was dumped from school curriculae about the same time as phonics. Both seem to be making a comeback. The public who read JM in the newspapers and magazines of his day lives again today in its grandchildren and great grandchildren who by increasing numbers are discovering JM by accidental hits on, for example, *Making of America*. Here you can find JM's compassionate line "A weakness for the weaker side," from his *Walker in Nicaragua* and JM's sexy "Sweet as the presence of woman is, /Rises and reaches and widens and grows" from his *Sunrise in Venice* in John Greenleaf Whittier's *Songs of Three Centuries* published in 1883.

Publications and Comments

Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission's President, David Milholland, in writing of Oregon's fragile 150 year old culture says, "Early Oregon poet Joaquin Miller, derided by some as a braggart and a Confederate, wrote brilliantly in defense of native peoples and a still undefiled natural world (*Heritage* Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2000): 3)."

Robert J. Chandler (RJC) has come up with a gem of a keepsake limited edition entitled *Joaquin Miller in 1863 the Sphinx Speaks!* privately printed

for members of the Roxburghe and Zamorano Clubs:: August 2000. RJC has read and filled in the historical blanks for us in the Sept. 3rd, 1863 letter that Joaquin wrote to his brother John from San Francisco. This letter is one of those that lets us into the real life and mind of JM. RJC's Keepsake also gives space to a poem by Minnie Myrtle, *Rose* published in *The Golden Era* of June 14, 1863.

RJC also identifies a Sunday, August 16, 1863 poem *Under the Apple Tree* written by "EGO" as being by Joaquin Miller. Thanks for yet another alias for our collection! RJC quotes the editor's suggestions as to how the poem should be improved to meet his concept of poetry. You might not agree. You might see the makings of the man JM was to become and the first hints of his disillusionment with his Minnie Myrtle.

Under the Apple Tree

One might have deemed 'twas Daphne free
By spring's soft kiss, regretting Love
That once she scorned, the blushing tree
So feigned the che[e]k it blossomed above;

As, standing 'neath the Apple tree,
Which seemed a halo 'round her form;
She strained her vision to the sea
That throbbed as with her heart forlorn.

For ocean's breast the treasure bore,
Whose other self was in her own;
But tides that sobbed upon the shore,
Brought not pearls by Love up thrown.

She stood where oft before she'd stood,
With one beside her, young and strong;
But something in her pensive mood,
Betrays the fears her bosom wrong.

It was their trysting tree, I knew
Which round her now its beauty shed;
Where he had said - ah! false or true -
He'd come when next it blossomed.
So she had watched the Apples tinge
With kisses from the ardent Sun;
And Autumn's leaves of sunwrought fringe,
Like butterflies, fall one by one.

Her tree, snow-bloom'd on moon-lit nights-
When Earth's cold breast the lily wore;

Whose pistils are the Northern Lights,
Whose petals came as if before.

They'd bloomed in some celestial bower.
And vied with Angel's shining brows,
In token that its living flower
Should bring to fruit his tender vows.

She plucked a spray in Love's dear name,
Its flowery language soothed her heart;
And in its idiom seemed to say,
To whisp'ring zephyr ne'er impart

The loving secrets thou has heard;
Tell not the busy-body Bee,
Nor yet the prying Humming-bird;
But guide him by thy sweets to me.

The grass the Apple-blossoms strew,
"False! false!" the wind that plucks them gasps,
But lips that meet her own say "true!"
As true the arm her form that clasps.

Each kiss upon her lips that fell,
Seemed all the blossom's sweets it bore;
The Bees had wrought content, and well
The seasons long for smaller store.

The Apple-blooms, their sweets distill'd,
Sweet incense fit for Love's pure shrine,
As Eden's groves of 'erst they fill'd,
Ere Guile assumed Love's robes divine.

EGO

Collector's Corner

R. & R. Enterprises (www.rrauction.com) in Bedford N.H. recently sold for \$51.75 ALS, one blue page, 5.5 x 8.5, personal letterhead June 14, illegible year.

Belated Holiday Greetings

I thought to do a couple of paragraphs on Christmas and JM only to find enough material for a book to sort out the garbled reporting errors. June 25, 1898 *The New York Times* interspersed its editorial comments with some quotes from his "Daily Life in a Klondike Cabin" published in *Land of Sunshine* Vol. 9, no 1, (June 1898): 16-23. *The Times* wrote: "It was Christmas Eve, eternal night almost, and there were festivities when the new

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year came, and one solace was a copy of the *New York Times*, and the party smoked pipes and talked art and literature and Mr. Joaquin Miller says: 'I don't know that I ever spent a pleasanter New Year's.' "

JM wrote in his own story: "As for the holidays, we keep them here in our Klondike cabins as religiously as anywhere in the world. The Elks gave a grand ball in Dawson, Christmas eve, for the benefit of the Sisters' Hospital and all the best people were there; admission one-half ounce -- and the results were great. We saw the old year out and the new year in here in our cabin at the head of newspaper row. We had with us *Harper's Weekly*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald*, [and] the *Chicago Tribune*. We talked art and literature and drank good tea. Our wildest dissipation was pipes; and that was all; yet I don't know that I ever spent a pleasanter New Year's eve."

Now JM's story didn't italicize these papers and so we will never be sure whether he meant that he and his cabin mate had with them the newspapers or the reporters from these newspapers, or possibly both. So we begin our New Year 2001 with yet another Miller mystery.

*In men whom men condemn as ill
I find so much of goodness still...*
Joaquin Miller