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A COMPANION TO

*A*MERICAN
*F*ICTION

1865–1914

EDITED BY ROBERT PAUL LAMB AND G. R. THOMPSON

 **Blackwell**
Publishing

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*In loving memory of
David Lamb and Lena Siegel Lamb
and
Raleigh Harmon Fosbrink and Virginia Thompson Fosbrink*

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	x
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
Editors' Introduction <i>Robert Paul Lamb and G. R. Thompson</i>	1
PART I <i>Historical Traditions and Genres</i>	13
1 The Practice and Promotion of American Literary Realism <i>Nancy Glazener</i>	15
2 Excitement and Consciousness in the Romance Tradition <i>William J. Scheick</i>	35
3 The Sentimental and Domestic Traditions, 1865–1900 <i>Gregg Camfield</i>	53
4 Morality, Modernity, and “Malarial Restlessness”: American Realism in its Anglo-European Contexts <i>Winfried Fluck</i>	77
5 American Literary Naturalism <i>Christophe Den Tandt</i>	96
6 American Regionalism: Local Color, National Literature, Global Circuits <i>June Howard</i>	119

7	Women Authors and the Roots of American Modernism <i>Linda Wagner-Martin</i>	140
8	The Short Story and the Short-Story Sequence, 1865–1914 <i>J. Gerald Kennedy</i>	149
PART II	<i>Contexts and Themes</i>	175
9	Ecological Narrative and Nature Writing <i>S. K. Robisch</i>	177
10	“The Frontier Story”: The Violence of Literary History <i>Christine Bold</i>	201
11	Native American Narratives: Resistance and Survivance <i>Gerald Vizenor</i>	222
12	Representing the Civil War and Reconstruction: From Uncle Tom to Uncle Remus <i>Kathleen Diffley</i>	240
13	Engendering the Canon: Women’s Narratives, 1865–1914 <i>Grace Farrell</i>	260
14	Confronting the Crisis: African American Narratives <i>Dickson D. Bruce, Jr.</i>	279
15	Fiction’s Many Cities <i>Sidney H. Bremer</i>	296
16	Mapping the Culture of Abundance: Literary Narratives and Consumer Culture <i>Sarah Way Sherman</i>	318
17	Secrets of the Master’s Deed Box: Narrative and Class <i>Christopher P. Wilson</i>	340
18	Ethnic Realism <i>Robert M. Dowling</i>	356
19	Darwin, Science, and Narrative <i>Bert Bender</i>	377
20	Writing in the “Vulgar Tongue”: Law and American Narrative <i>William E. Modellmog</i>	395

21	Planning Utopia <i>Thomas Peyser</i>	411
22	American Children's Narrative as Social Criticism, 1865–1914 <i>Gwen Athene Tarbox</i>	428
PART III	<i>Major Authors</i>	449
23	An Idea of Order at Concord: Soul and Society in the Mind of Louisa May Alcott <i>John Matteson</i>	451
24	America Can Break Your Heart: On the Significance of Mark Twain <i>Robert Paul Lamb</i>	468
25	William Dean Howells and the Bourgeois Quotidian: Affection, Skepticism, Disillusion <i>Michael Anesko</i>	499
26	Henry James in a New Century <i>John Carlos Rowe</i>	518
27	Toward a Modernist Aesthetic: The Literary Legacy of Edith Wharton <i>Candace Waid and Clare Colquitt</i>	536
28	Sensations of Style: The Literary Realism of Stephen Crane <i>William E. Cain</i>	557
29	Theodore Dreiser and the Force of the Personal <i>Clare Virginia Eby</i>	572
	<i>Index</i>	587

Illustrations

5.1	The textile workers' strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts	106
6.1	Internal improvements	126
10.1	Chinese workers building the Central Pacific Railroad	209
10.2	The revolution in agriculture	214
11.1	Chief Tatanka Iyotanka of the Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux	232
12.1	A new kind of bondage	255
15.1	Jewish immigrants on Hester Street in New York City	302
16.1	The noonday shopping crowd on State Street in Chicago	334
18.1	"Yearning to be free"	368
24.1	"Huck and Jim in their final years"	489
25.1	The Dean of American letters	510
27.1	Edith Wharton and the new woman author	550

All captions and accompanying text are by the editors.

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Editors' Introduction

Robert Paul Lamb and G. R. Thompson

I

In 1865, after four years of bloody civil conflict, the federation of states begun three-quarters of a century earlier was at last indisputably a nation. The triumph of the American experiment, far from inevitable at the start of the war, came at a cost of 620,000 dead and 375,200 wounded, which was over one-third of all combatants and 3.2 percent of the nation's entire population. Slavery was abolished, westward expansion intensified, and stability brought capital investment, rapid industrialization, the growth of railroads linking the nation, the rise of great cities, and an influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and Asia that led to a hitherto unimaginable cultural diversity. Between 1860 and 1920 the national population more than tripled, from 31,443,000 to 105,710,000. From 1860 to 1900, the urban population of the entire nation increased fourfold, from six million to twenty-four million, as displaced rural populations from both home and abroad settled in urban areas. During those four decades the population of New York City rose from 1,080,330 to 3,437,202, and Chicago, with 109,000 residents on the eve of the war, became the nation's second largest city with a population of 1,698,575. By the start of the Great War in 1914, the United States had evolved from a loosely knit union of local economies, cultures, and peoples into a modern nation-state and global power, and "the American Century" had begun.

This national narrative of progress contained within it other, very different narratives. The Native population of the continental United States, which estimates place as high as five million people in 1492, and which had dwindled to 600,000 by 1800, would reach a low point of 250,000 in the 1890s. The history of Natives between 1864 and 1890 was marked by broken treaties, forced relocation, the near-extirmination of their primary source of sustenance (the bison population was reduced from roughly ten million to about one thousand in a mere two and a half decades), and unprovoked assaults – euphemistically called "Indian Wars" – on peaceful civilians by federal

troops, from the barbaric Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 to the slaughter of three hundred men, women, and children at Wounded Knee in 1890. The four million African Americans freed from a life of hereditary chattel slavery in 1865, after a glimpse of freedom and citizenship during twelve years of Reconstruction, were condemned to a new kind of bondage in the era of Jim Crow: a period of segregation, political and legal disenfranchisement, sharecropping, economic privation, vagrancy laws, convict labor, and such terrorist tactics as mutilations, immolations, and lynchings. In the 1890s alone, an average of eighty African Americans were lynched every year, many of them in public spectacles attended by white families.

To say that the 14 million immigrants who came to America between 1860 and 1900 fared better is not to say much. Unlike the midcentury immigration from Ireland, these “New Immigrants” were peoples who hailed from non-Anglophone cultures: Italians, Jews, Poles, Russians, Greeks, Bohemians, Turks, Austro-Hungarians, Chinese, Japanese, and others. For the most part herded into squalid urban ghettos in a land whose language and culture they did not understand, they endured overcrowding, poverty, disease, crime, lack of economic opportunity, and hostility from nativist groups (i.e. “native-born” whites). The anti-Catholicism of the antebellum period shifted to anti-radicalism, with the already established white citizens viewing the new immigrants as infected with unwelcome European ideologies such as socialism and communism, and blaming them for urban problems and labor unrest.

America’s glowing cities, so well showcased by such public events as the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876 and Chicago’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, were an indication of the nation’s newfound self-confidence and expansive attitude, an attitude nicely captured in the opening chapters of Theodore Dreiser’s 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*. The overall quality of life, in terms of life expectancy, education, and consumption of consumer items, rose remarkably during this period. For example, illiteracy was halved, from 11 percent to 6 percent in the white population and from 80 percent to 45 percent among African Americans. And in the first 14 years of the twentieth century, deaths caused by diseases dropped by almost a half. But never before had there been such huge disparities of wealth, nor had the nation ever seemed so sharply divided into haves and have-nots. These contrasts were particularly evident in the big cities. By 1890, 9 percent of the population owned 71 percent of the nation’s wealth, and roughly 40 percent of all Americans lived below the poverty line. Thus progress and poverty went hand in hand, as reflected in the radically different fictional worlds of, say, Henry James and Edith Wharton, on the one hand, and Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair on the other. It was perhaps symbolically apt that the 1893 Exposition, with its acclaimed model “White City,” took place during the worst depression the nation had hitherto seen, with over 150,000 businesses becoming insolvent and nearly one-fifth of the nation’s workforce unable to find employment.

America’s great industries – steel production, petroleum, the railroads, electricity, textiles, meatpacking, the automobile, and toolmaking, to name but a few – grew to such an extent between 1865 and 1914 that they changed almost every facet of

national life. As industrialization made all sectors of the American economy less labor-intensive, the value of production per agricultural worker rose by 43 percent between 1870 and 1900, while the value per worker in manufacturing and mining increased by a remarkable 76 percent. The revolution in agricultural production meant that the nation could feed itself, and sell its produce throughout the world as well, with fewer people engaged in farming. In 1870, 52 percent of American workers were farmers, but by 1890 they were outnumbered for the first time by workers in manufacturing and mining, and by 1900 agricultural workers made up only 40 percent of the labor force. During that same period from 1870 to 1900, farm products, despite their increase, dropped from 53 to 33 percent of the nation's commodity output, while manufacturing and mining rose from 35 to 58 percent. As agriculture itself became big business with larger economies of scale, Jefferson's dream of a nation of yeoman farmers faded and, with the country's ten largest cities producing nearly 40 percent of the manufactures, the excess rural population went off to the cities in search of jobs.

The nation's industries quickly consolidated into larger and larger entities, monopolies and consortia run by interlocking directorates. Headed by powerful men dubbed the "Robber Barons," abetted by friendly courts and an even friendlier Congress, and supported by federal troops, state militias, and private armies of hired thugs, these conglomerates came close to taking over the nation, presenting the sort of threat of concentrated power that Americans had feared since the years preceding the American Revolution. But as big business became dominant, labor began to organize itself to fight against the abuses of lock-outs, "yellow dog" contracts (forbidding employees to join a union), scabs, blacklists, court injunctions, company towns and stores, wages in the form of scrip rather than money, arbitrary wage cuts, child labor, 12- to 14-hour work days, dangerous working conditions, and physical coercion. From the mid-1870s to 1914, there was a major strike every year in America, and the strife was so intense and extensive that one social historian has referred to it as "the other civil war." The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was the first nationwide strike in American history: protesting drastic cuts in barely subsistence wages and a rise of serious injuries and deaths in the workplace, not only the railroad workers themselves, but also farmers, craftsmen, coal miners, and the unemployed brought the nation's railroads to a standstill. By the conclusion of the strike, which involved some hundred thousand workers, one hundred people were dead and a thousand had been imprisoned. In 1886 alone there were roughly fifteen hundred strikes, affecting half a million workers. Between one and two thousand strikes took place every year during the 1890s, together involving nearly three-quarters of a million workers. Labor strikes were usually accompanied by violence, with workers carrying personal weapons on one side, and well-armed state militia, National Guards, federal troops, local police, and hired Pinkerton guards on the other. In many cases the violence amounted to authorized murder, as in the "Ludlow Massacre" in Colorado in 1914. When coal miners employed by John D. Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel and Coal Company struck because they were forbidden to join the United Mine

Workers of America, they were evicted from their company-owned shacks and moved their families into tents for shelter. On the morning of April 20, in a premeditated attack, company guards and state militia doused the tents with kerosene, set them ablaze, and sprayed the area with machine-gun fire, killing 20 people, including two women and 11 children. The perpetrators were never punished, and the miners who survived were subsequently arrested and blacklisted. The emergence of mass society during this half century of American history was indeed a period of striking achievement – there is no gainsaying that fact; but it was also a time of tragedy.

As one might expect, literary productions in this period of upheaval and transformation were rich in cultural representations and far more diverse than they had been during the relatively culturally homogeneous antebellum years. A partial list of authors who wrote important fictional narratives during these years is impressive: Harriet Beecher Stowe (born 1811), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (b. 1825), John William De Forest (b. 1826), Rose Terry Cooke (b. 1827), Lew Wallace (b. 1827), Helen Hunt Jackson (b. 1830), John Esten Cooke (b. 1830), Rebecca Harding Davis (b. 1831), Louisa May Alcott (b. 1832), Horatio Alger (b. 1832), Lillie Devereux Blake (b. 1833), Artemus Ward (b. 1834), Frank Stockton (b. 1834), Mark Twain (b. 1835), Augusta Jane Evans (b. 1835), Bret Harte (b. 1836), Thomas Bailey Aldrich (b. 1836), William Dean Howells (b. 1837), John Burroughs (b. 1837), Edward Eggleston (b. 1837), Henry Adams (b. 1838), John Muir (b. 1838), Albion Tourgée (b. 1838), Constance Fenimore Woolson (b. 1840), Ambrose Bierce (b. 1842), Sidney Lanier (b. 1842), Henry James (b. 1843), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (b. 1844), George Washington Cable (b. 1844), Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen (b. 1848), Joel Chandler Harris (b. 1848), Sarah Orne Jewett (b. 1849), James Lane Allen (b. 1849), Mary Noailles Murfree (b. 1850), Edward Bellamy (b. 1850), Lafcadio Hearn (b. 1850), Kate Chopin (b. 1851), Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (b. 1852), Grace King (b. 1852), Thomas Nelson Page (b. 1853), Harold Frederick (b. 1856), L. Frank Baum (b. 1856), Alice Brown (b. 1857), Henry Blake Fuller (b. 1857), Gertrude Atherton (b. 1857), Charles Waddell Chesnut (b. 1858), Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (b. 1859), Hamlin Garland (b. 1860), Owen Wister (b. 1860), Abraham Cahan (b. 1860), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (b. 1860), Henry Harland (b. 1861), Edith Wharton (b. 1862), O. Henry (b. 1862), Geneva Stratton-Porter (b. 1863), Richard Harding Davis (b. 1864), Sui Sin Far (b. 1865), George Ade (b. 1866), David Graham Phillips (b. 1867), Finley Peter Dunne (b. 1867), W. E. B. Du Bois (b. 1868), Mary Austin (b. 1868), Charles Alexander Eastman (b. 1868), Robert Herrick (b. 1868), Booth Tarkington (b. 1869), Frank Norris (b. 1870), Stephen Crane (b. 1871), Theodore Dreiser (b. 1871), James Weldon Johnson (b. 1871), Winston Churchill (b. 1871), Paul Laurence Dunbar (b. 1872), Sutton Elbert Griggs (b. 1872), Zane Grey (b. 1872), Willa Cather (b. 1873), Gertrude Stein (b. 1874), Ellen Glasgow (b. 1874), Zona Gale (b. 1874), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (b. 1875), Zitkala Ša (b. 1876), Jack London (b. 1876), Upton Sinclair (b. 1878), James Branch Cabell (b. 1879), and Ernest Poole (b. 1880). These authors documented the myriad ongoing changes in American society; they preserved in their works the vanishing worlds of their