

INTRODUCTION

For Americans who had lived through the Civil War, April 14, 1865 began as an extraordinary day. In addition to being Good Friday, it marked the fourth anniversary of the attack of Fort Sumter, the first military engagement of the war. But this year it was part of a weeklong victory celebration, for General Lee had surrendered to General Grant at Appamattox just five days before (on Palm Sunday). By midnight, however, the day was marked forever by a single tragic event: President Abraham Lincoln had been mortally wounded by an assassin while watching a play at Ford's Theatre.

Walt Whitman maintained that the assassination overshadowed the entire four years of civil strife.¹ Indeed, the impact of this mad act has proved so sweeping that many of the important individuals and events surrounding it have been eclipsed. Prominent among them is the play which the President was enjoying when John Wilkes Booth delivered his mortal wound. To most modern-day readers *Our American Cousin* is little more than a title and its author, Tom Taylor, simply a forgotten name. In spite of that fact, Taylor's play was one of the most popular and durable in the nineteenth century repertoire.

From its New York premiere in 1858 forward, it consistently delighted and amused American and British audiences, and it continued to do so long after the ill-starred Washington production. Its basic plot of a cloddish American thrust among his aristocratic English kin contained elements that reflected the expansionist mood of nineteenth century America. These characteristics, often found in melodramas of the time, included love-at-first-sight, the punishment of a deceitful villain, selfless sacrifice, and a happy-ever-after ending. But unlike many such plays, *Our American Cousin* features several characters of unique distinction. In addition to the "cousin," Asa Trenchard, there is the shrewd but engaging Florence Trenchard and the pompous aristocrat Lord Dundreary, whose fame became part of theatrical folklore.

The sudden fusing of this farcical comedy with tragedy, which underscores the ironic history of both the assassination and of *Our American Cousin*, began with two chains of events on April 3, 1865--events that initially seemed unrelated. On that day Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, was evacuated by its government. It was an inevitable prelude to General Lee's surrender at Appamattox, (which would occur six days later). In Washington the news of General Grant's victory over Lee created a mood which contrasted markedly with the sombreness of Holy Week. The President was hailed and congratulated on all sides. On Tuesday evening he spoke from an open window at the White House to tumultuous applause and joyful band music. On Thursday evening, April 13, the euphoria of victory was repeated when the city became "one blaze of glorious light"² from a fireworks display and from the upturned gaslights in many public buildings. In the upper windows of the War Department reflectors, activated by the beams of calcium torches, proclaimed "GRANT."

April 3 had likewise marked the arrival of the popular comedienne Laura Keane in Washington. Having toured widely during the war years, she was beginning a two-week engagement with the Ford's Theatre stock company. She was to play roles in English classics such as Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*--parts for which she was well known on the theatrical circuit. But she was perhaps more celebrated for her portrayal of Florence Trenchard, the female lead in Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*, which she had played "upwards of 1,000 nights."³ She had also been the first producer of the play, and still retained ownership. The Ford's production of April 14 was to be her final Washington performance. It would also be her "benefit" (i.e. she would receive a share of the gate as a bonus).

Facts concerning the Lincolns' decision to attend this production of *Our American Cousin* are incomplete and at times contradictory; however, certain key points in the process are well documented. On April 13 General and Mrs. Grant arrived in Washington in mid-afternoon. Their destination was Philadelphia, but the General needed to confer with Secretary of War Stanton. The Grants' unexpected appearance at the Willard Hotel caused a flurry of excitement. The visit was also an apparent surprise to the Lincolns, who hurriedly made plans to honor the general. At some point between the Grants' arrival on April 13 and

mid-morning of April 14, the President invited the General and his lady to attend the theatre with him and Mrs Lincoln. Apparently the President offered the invitation because the hostility between the First Lady and Mrs. Grant was long-standing, and had erupted publicly just a few days before at City Point, Virginia.

At this point the known details become confusing. A new play, *Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp*, was being presented at Grover's Theatre (the National Theatre) and C.D. Hess, the theatre manager, had sent the Lincolns an invitation on the 13th for the following evening. According to Leonard Grover, the proprietor, Lincoln sent back a handwritten note accepting the invitation for himself and his son, Tad. He did this early on the morning of the 14th.⁴ *Our American Cousin*, announced as Ford's production for the 14th, was an old play, one which had been produced in Washington several times over the last few years, and Lincoln had probably seen Laura Keene in the leading female role the last time it was given.⁵ However, before 10:30 a.m.--in advance of an 11:00 a.m. Cabinet meeting--Lincoln dispatched a messenger to Ford's for the purpose of reserving the State Box on the second tier for the Lincoln-Grant party, as General Grant had verbally accepted the invitation. Why Lincoln changed his mind and decided upon *Our American Cousin* at Ford's over *Aladdin* at Grover's remains a puzzling question. Perhaps he thought a play about a rough-and-ready American would be more appealing to a conquering hero than one dealing with Oriental exoticism. Perhaps it was the combined appeal of a celebrated actress, a popular play, a farewell performance, and a benefit. But this is only speculation.

It is certain, however, that the idea seemed ill-fated from the outset. Grant, always ill at ease at public functions, desired to complete his business as soon as possible and continue on his journey. Although he had initially accepted the President's invitation, he formally regretted early on Friday afternoon and left Washington soon thereafter with Mrs. Grant.⁶ Over the next few hours several other invitations were politely declined. Lincoln "felt inclined to give up the whole thing,"⁷ but this was not easily done. Announcements of the Lincoln-Grant appearance had been made in the afternoon editions of two newspapers. Mrs. Lincoln felt that cancelling would further disappoint a public already denied the opportunity to see Grant. At the last minute two guests were added, Major Henry R. Rathbone (the President's military aide) and his fiance, Miss Clara Harris (daughter of Senator Ira Harris of New York, who held the Senate seat vacated by William H. Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State).

Once the State Box was reserved, theatre personnel responded appropriately. The partition separating two small boxes on the second tier was removed, creating a single, more commodious space. James T. Ford, the business manager, borrowed flags from the Treasury Department, which were attached to the front of the box, festooning a gilt-framed print of George Washington. Furniture was set in place, the major piece being the President's trademark, a high-backed rocker with arms rests. H. Polkinhorn, a local printer, interrupted the running of handbills to include part of the lyrics to a new song, H.B. Phillips' "Honor to Our Soldiers," for which William Withers, director of the Ford orchestra, had written music.⁸ Laura Keene had lent her personal piano for the singing of this patriotic number, and she would decide when it would be performed.⁹ Since Grant was expected, Ford's normal capacity of 1,700 would doubtlessly be swelled to 2,300 or perhaps even more. This meant adding several hundred straight-back chairs.

At about 3:00 p.m., as rehearsals were completed and as stage carpenters were storing scenery, a familiar visitor arrived at Ford's. A popular actor and a congenial colleague, John Wilkes Booth frequented both Ford's and Grover's theatres, as each gave him freedom of the house. He routinely received his mail at Ford's when he was in Washington and he could, and frequently did, walk into either establishment at any time he pleased. Everyone from managers, to actors, to stage hands knew him, and his visits to Ford's were often followed by drinks at Peter Taltavul's Star Saloon, which adjoined the theatre building.

But Booth's appearance on this Good Friday afternoon was no ordinary social call, nor was it his first that day--or his last. It was, however, a crucial visit for, although brief, it enabled him to complete the final details in a long and erratic scheme which involved an undetermined number of people. For more than a century and a quarter historical analysts have argued whether John Wilkes Booth was the mastermind of a small conspiracy to murder Abraham Lincoln or the instrument of a larger, more elaborate plot orchestrated by the Confederate government. In 1988 an imposing new study, some ten years in the

making, appeared, arguing persuasively for the latter possibility.¹⁰

Whatever its provenance, Booth's plan to assassinate Abraham Lincoln on Friday, April 14 was not perfected until that very day. This is verified by the fact that on the previous evening, after learning that the Acting Manager of Grover's Theatre was to issue the President a special invitation for the 14th, Booth dispatched a messenger to purchase a nearby box for him. During the forenoon of April 14, he went to Grover's himself (doubtlessly to advance plans for his attack), only to find that Lincoln had regretted the invitation.

About noon Harry Ford, treasurer of Ford's Theatre, was standing at one of the front entrances (which faced 10th Street) as Booth walked down from the corner of F Street. The two began to talk and joke, and Booth sent a theatre worker inside for his mail. It was during this conversation that he learned, from Ford, that Lincoln planned to attend the evening performance of *Our American Cousin*. Booth did not leave the theatre immediately. Instead, he went upstairs.

Ford's Theatre was a relatively new building, having opened on August 27, 1863. Since that time Booth had come to know it well--as an actor on its boards, as a friend to its various personnel, and as a frequenter of its interior. It was a small building, measuring only 72 by 110 feet, but it contained various levels, which denoted several categories of seats. The President would occupy the State Box on the second tier, near the dress circle. A small staircase ascended from the left of the downstairs lobby to the second tier. Here an outside door led into an alcove from which one gained access to the boxes.

In addition to knowing the interior configuration of Ford's, Booth knew the play which would be presented there in a few hours. The historian Jim Bishop has constructed a plausible account of Booth's thoughts as he considered how to integrate the design of the theatre and the play into his diabolical scheme:

He was acquainted with almost every line of *Our American Cousin*. In the box, with no gas lights on, he was cloaked in daytime gloom and he sat watching, thinking--who knows? He looked from the ledge of the box to the stage, and he knew that he had made bigger leaps in *Macbeth*. He could not plan to run back through the dress circle because, the moment the act was accomplished, it could be expected that the people in the theatre would be in bedlam. Besides, he would have to stab the guard outside the little white door in case of challenge. It was better to stick to the original idea, to jump to the stage, run across toward the Green Room, and out the back door. If he had a horse there, waiting, escape could be fairly easy.¹¹

Some forty-five minutes after Booth talked with Harry Ford in front of the theatre, he was seen by Harry's brother, James, on the corner of 10th and E, bound for C Street and Pumphrey's livery stable. When Booth returned to Ford's at 3:00 p.m., just as the rehearsal for *Our American Cousin* was concluding, his plan was all but formed. There remained only the arrangements for securing the horse he had rented from Pumphrey's. This was easily achieved with the aid of some of his stage-hand friends.

Perhaps the key to the success of Booth's scheme was its simplicity. It called for no alteration in the normal course of life, and it aroused no suspicions. No one at the theatre would be surprised to see him during a performance. There was nothing unusual about leaving a horse in the public alley at the rear. Moreover, he had determined that the play itself afforded an ideal moment for making his move. There was a point in Act III, Scene 2 when a single actor would be on the stage, at far left. This is the scene in which the "American Cousin," Asa Trenchard, exposes the hypocrisy of Mrs. Mountchessington and her daughter. They exit, and he calls after them. This moment, one of the funniest in the play, always drew prolonged laughter. Tonight it would be his moment. Still, he would have to act quickly and decisively and, to some extent, trust luck. What of the guard usually posted outside the alcove door? Would he be in place tonight? Booth must wait. Meantime, he would let events evolve naturally.

And so they seemed to do. Between 5:00 and 6:00 p.m., Booth brought the lively mare from Pumphreys and left her in a stable he rented behind the theatre, according to plan. A little past 7:30, following several last-minute delays, the Lincoln carriage left the White House. At 7:45 the performance began

with an orchestral overture. After stopping for Major Rathbone and Miss Harris, the carriage arrived at the theatre about 8:30. By this time the play was well into its lengthy first scene. Florence Trenchard (Laura Keene), Lord Dundreary (E.A. Emerson), and Mrs. Mountchessington (Mrs. Muzzy) were on stage engaging in an absurd game of word-play. It proved an ideal moment for the clever actress to interpose an announcement of the President's arrival.

"That wath a joke, that wath," Dundreary lisped. "Where's the joke?" Florence asked, and Mrs. Mountchessington answered, "No." "She don't see it," began Dundreary. Florence quickly interrupted with an ad-libbed, "Anybody can see *that!*" and pointed to the Presidential box. William Withers struck up "Hail to the Chief," and there was vigorous applause. Again, in Act II, Scene 2, another opportunity for an ad-lib line presented itself, when Dundreary attempted to seat the "delicate" Georgina just outside the dairy. "I am afraid of the draft here," she said. He replied, "Don't be alarmed, for there is no more draft." Once more the applause was "long and loud."¹²

About 9:00 p.m. Booth appeared at the rear door of the theatre, leading the mare he had rented. He asked Ned Spangler, a stage hand, to hold the horse for him. Spangler could not leave his post; instead he had J.L. DeBonay, another stage-hand, summon "Peanuts" Burroughs (a youth who ran errands at the theatre) to hold the reins. Booth then asked DeBonay if he could pass across the stage. This was during the "dairy scene," which is set deep, leaving no room to cross behind the scenery. DeBonay crossed under the stage with Booth on the basement level. Then Booth exited the theatre and, through a passageway alongside, went out to 10th Street. He entered the Star Saloon and had a shot of whiskey.

About 10:00 p.m., after having looked into the lobby several times, he entered the theatre through one of the front doors. James E. Buckingham, the doorman, automatically extended his hand for a ticket. "You don't need a ticket, Buck,"¹³ Booth replied. He then proceeded up the stairs to the dress circle (Buckingham remembered that he was humming a tune), well aware that the third act--his act--was under way. Booth's luck continued there. The guard who normally occupied the chair outside the alcove back of the boxes was not in place. Now he needed only to pass unnoticed through the outer door, secure it behind him with a bar, slip into Box 7, and wait.

Booth's moment was approaching. Dundreary was now alone on the stage, near the left exit, calling after Augusta and Mrs. Mountchessington (who had just insulted his manners):

'...Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Wal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal--you sockdologizing old man-trap....'

The audience responded predictably to the comeuppance given the two fortune hunters; even Mrs. Lincoln's laughter was observed--at the very instant that a sharp, pistol-like report was heard. Dropping the single shot deringer, Booth hissed in measured tones to the occupants of the box: "sic semper tyrannis" ("thus always to tyrants").¹⁴ Major Rathbone was the first to grasp what had happened. He lunged for Booth, who deflected the attack with a long Bowie knife, stabbing Rathbone twice.

Still taking advantage of the surprise and bewilderment, Booth jumped the eleven feet from the box to the stage--his almost perfect escape foiled when he caught his spur in one of the Treasury Flaps, which caused him to land unevenly and fracture the tibia of his right leg. Before crossing the stage to the right exit, he uttered the final words he would proclaim from the stage: "Revenge for the South!" He now crossed the stage--a distance of about forty feet--swept past Laura Keene, who was standing beside the prompter's box, and rushed down the broad right passageway to the rear door. On his way he passed orchestra leader William Withers who, annoyed over over Miss Keene's decision to postpone "Honor to Our Soldiers" until the end of the performance, was standing in the passage on stage right. Booth slashed Withers twice. He then bolted out the door, kicked aside "Peanut" Burroughs, mounted, and rode off into the night.

The sequel to these events is well known. Panic reigned in the theatre as frantic efforts were made to save the President. Once the building was cleared, Lincoln was moved directly across 10th Street to the Petersen House, where he died the following morning at 7:22 a.m.

Booth, of course, fled immediately. His path carried him across the Navy Yard bridge and into Southern Maryland. Before being apprehended and shot on the morning of April 26 on the Garrett farm in Caroline County, Virginia (near Port Royal) he had crossed two broad rivers and spent many days hiding in the Maryland swamps. On July 7 four other individuals, convicted of conspiring with him, were hanged in Washington.

But long before this--well before the body of the slain President was laid to rest on May 4 in Springfield, Illinois--the enormity of the tragedy and its permanent effects had manifested themselves. In the generations that have followed the shadow of the tragedy has grown longer and darker, obscuring the light-hearted farce which added pleasure and humor to the last minutes of Lincoln's life.

What was the true nature of this play--its plot, its major characters, its themes? What was its stage history, both before and subsequent to the fated Washington performance? Who were the actors who shaped its success? Who, for that matter, was Tom Taylor, whose name occupies such an obscure niche in American history? These are but a few of the questions, the answers to which form a fascinating chronicle.

II

Tom Taylor (1817-1880), the son of a prosperous brewery executive, was born near Sunderland, on the northeast coast of England. After completing a B.A. (with honors) at Glasgow University and an M.A. at Cambridge, he tutored at Cambridge for two years before being named to a professorship in English literature at University College, London, in 1845. While performing his academic duties he read law at the Inner Temple, contributed to popular journals, and began writing for the stage. By the late 1840s his professional involvements included practising law, positions in public health and sanitation, art criticism (for the *Times* and the *Graphic*), biography, writing for the satirical magazine *Punch*, and playwriting.

The nineteenth century theatre for which Taylor wrote was characterized both in England and America by a multitude of dramatic forms--tragedies, histories, melodramas, farces, burlesques, dramatizations of popular fiction--many of which achieved contemporary success but are forgotten today. Nevertheless, most of Taylor's plays were popular on the stage, and his years as a playwright were pivotal ones for Victorian drama. His first efforts--*Cinderella*, a burlesque, and *A Trip to Kissingen*, a farce--were produced in 1844; his last, *Love or Life*, in 1878, two years before he died. Having begun his theatrical career at a rather low point in English drama, he ended it on the eve of a theatrical revival. Within two decades following his death in 1880, the British stage would be revitalized by such works as Henry Arthur Jones's *Saints and Sinners* (1884); Sir Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Profligate* (1889) and *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893); Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) and *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895); and George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (1894) and *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898).

Taylor's productivity (more than seventy-five plays in thirty-five years!) seems little short of amazing, given his other professional accomplishments. Still, his only play to achieve international fame and enduring celebrity (relatively speaking) was *Our American Cousin*. Moreover, as a scholar of his work has observed, even this distinction "was due only slightly to the work of its author and almost entirely to chance and to the performance of Edward Askew Sotherton as Lord Dundreary."¹⁵ It also seems ironic that Taylor's best-known play should have been written so early in his career (1851). However, irony informs much of the history of *Our American Cousin*.

III

Taylor seems to have gotten the idea for his play from the large number of Americans--an estimated 50,000--attending the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1850-51.¹⁶ Having a keen ear for unusual language and a reputation for incorporating it into drama, he was one of the many in his country to be captivated by the expressions of these colorful Yankee visitors. Judging from the Americanisms found in *Our American Cousin*, he was struck by the use of "guess" and "calculate" (for the more proper British "suppose"); personal epithets such as "old shoat" and "old hoss"; and droll colloquial verbs such as "make tracks" and "skedaddle."

Although seeing these "foreigners" at first hand was a novel experience for the English, it was also something of an anticlimax, for the Americans and their ways had been a favorite subject of travelling British authors for almost half a century. Between 1836 and 1860 alone some two hundred such books were published.¹⁷ One of the most celebrated was by Mrs. Frances Trollope (mother of the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope). Her *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) went through four editions in the year of its appearance alone, and figured in debates on the first Reform Bill, which Parliament passed that year. Another popular example was Charles Dickens' *American Notes* (1842), based upon his observations during a much publicized tour of the United States. Both of these commentators painted a largely negative, and occasionally critical, picture of American life. Others were more positive, if perhaps not so sharply observant. Among them were Harriet Martineau, whose *Society in America* appeared in 1839, and Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, whose *Travels in the United States in 1849 and 1850* was published in 1851, during the Crystal Palace Exhibition. Mixed opinions notwithstanding, the British in 1851 were intensely curious about the distinctive character of this still evolving nation.¹⁸

Given the various Americans known to the English in the 1850s, one may logically ask which "type" Taylor intended in creating his "American cousin," Asa Trenchard. The Yankee was certainly prominent in his mind. Asa hails from Brattleboro, Vermont and exhibits certain traits of the stage prototype. He is plain of speech and at times awkward and unrefined in manner. Moreover, his bumpkin-like exterior belies a native shrewdness which is quick to penetrate sham and duplicity in certain of his cultural "superiors."¹⁹ However, as Mrs. Mountchessington observes in Act II, Scene 1,

...We must study him. I think if you read up on Sam Slick a little, it might be useful, and just dip in to Bancroft's *History of the United States*, or some of Russell's *Letters*;²¹ you should also know something of George Washington, of whom the Americans are justly proud.

In other words, Asa seems to have been intended to convey a general impression of an American, in a play representing national cultures rather than regions.

Taylor's protagonist may be short on refinement, but he is decidedly understanding and big-hearted. These traits are emphasized when he lights a cigar with the document entitling him to an English estate in order that Mary Meredith, who has been disinherited in his favor, may succeed to it. In depicting the extremes of cultural naivete and basic goodness in a single character, Tom Taylor unwittingly foreshadowed the "international" theme which later would be popularized in the work of Mark Twain, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. For example Asa's natural impulse to do the "right thing" by renouncing his legal rights can be compared with the actions of Henry James's Christopher Newman in *The American* (1877). This fictional protagonist of a later generation likewise commits to flames a document which would gain him personal benefits. Both in Taylor's play and in James's novel the selfless act is carried out in a European setting by one whose provincialism has been criticized by various members of a culture which, while ostensibly more "sophisticated," is apparently less vigorous and more corrupt. There is, however, an interesting difference in the two cases. Christopher Newman is the creation of a novelist born in the United States; Asa Trenchard, that of an English playwright. One is therefore impressed by Taylor's balanced treatment of the American character.

IV

Still, it was for the American actor Joshua Silsbee, celebrated for his role in *The Forest Rose* and playing Yankee parts at the Adelphi Theatre in London in the early 1850s, that Taylor created the part of Asa. Upon completing the play, Taylor sold it (for 80 pounds) to a producer named Benjamin Webster late in 1851. By now the "Yankee mania" was subsiding, and Webster developed misgivings about producing it. So when Silsbee left England for America Webster gave him the script, along with the American rights. Silsbee carried it with him on tour, and even had it rehearsed. However, at the time of his death a few years later, it had not been acted.

Upon learning of Silsbee's death, Taylor asked John Chandler Bancroft Davis, a correspondent for the London *Times* in New York, to seek an American purchaser. Davis approached Lester Wallack, manager

of a theatre on Broom Street in New York. Wallack took the play to Laura Keene, a popular actress, manager, playwright, and producer. He thought that Joseph Jefferson, who was then rehearsing for Keene's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, might be ideal as Asa Trenchard. Keene was not immediately impressed but, on the advice of her business manager, John Lutz, she bought the play for \$1,000. Shortly thereafter, her Shakespearean production was delayed by scene builders and painters, and she reconsidered *Our American Cousin* as a stop-gap production until her Shakespearean set was finished.

Thinking it a weak play and therefore in need of her best talent,²² Keene turned to her Shakespearean company to cast the parts. For the lead she predictably chose Jefferson, who accepted. Casting the minor roles proved more difficult. The actor she chose for Binny, the butler, flatly refused. Another problem part was Lord Dundreary, for which she approached Edward Askew Sothorn, a young English actor in the company. After reading the role, which consisted of only forty-seven lines, he declined. In desperation, she appealed again. Sothorn's response, as later reported, was, "...If you will let me 'gag' [the part] and do what I please with it, I will undertake it, though it is pretty bad."²³ According to the same report, Keene replied, "Do anything you like with it, only play it."

The production of *Our American Cousin* which opened at Laura Keene's theatre on October 18, 1858 varied significantly from Taylor's original intentions. It was opening some seven years after the events which had occasioned its composition. It was being presented on a foreign stage--in the country, ironically, which had inspired its comic premise. Moreover, Taylor's script (which has not survived) was apparently a melodrama, a popular genre of the period. Melodrama generally features a romantic plot and exaggerated action, which appeals to emotions rather than to intellect. These elements are inherent in the basic situation of an American bumpkin in an English drawing room; in undoing the evils of a villainous lawyer; in the raucous drunken scene in the wine cellar; and in the happy-ever-after ending of paired lovers, righted wrongs, and solved problems. Such, however, was not the play which evolved from the initial production.

When Keene gave Sothorn permission to "gag" the role of Lord Dundreary no one--least of all Sothorn--could have foretold either the extent of his improvisations or the impact they would have on the play and its audiences. In his comprehensive study of Taylor's theatrical career, Winton Tolles has given a detailed account of these innovations:

...At first Jefferson was regarded as the stellar performer; but as the play ran on week after week Asa Trenchard became commonplace, and Lord Dundreary, with his well-bred air married to a vacant stare, his bland and hopeless stupidity mingled with an astonishing shrewdness, and his absurd mannerisms and inane lines, became the great attraction. As Sothorn added 'gags' and 'business' [ad-lib performances], the part increased in prominence until it all but dwarfed the remainder of the play.

The transformation of Lord Dundreary from a minor role in a mediocre drama into one of the most celebrated comic parts of the nineteenth century theatre was accomplished by a great character actor, not by accident, but by a conscious and shrewd attention to details of dress and manner, by the interpolation of numerous lines illuminating the eccentric and foolish character of the nobleman, and by studied and earnest effort. Sothorn's make-up in the part was eccentric, but faultless and striking. In addition to the ankle-length coat, he adopted peg-top plaid trousers, a flowing cravat, long weeping whiskers, and a monocle. His speech was characterized by a quaint lisp and stutter...In rewriting the part, Sothorn introduced practically all the lines which, when accompanied by the perfectly expressed mannerisms, sent audiences into paroxysms of laughter. The twisted aphorisms known as 'Dundrearyisms', such as 'birds of a feather gather no moss', created a vogue for this type of witticism. Equally popular were the absurd riddles which Dundreary continually propounded. Perhaps the most celebrated of Sothorn's additions to the text was the letter from Dundreary's brother Sam, 'the immortal Sam who never had a 'uel'. The reading of this letter used to leave playgoers absolutely sore with laughter.²⁴

T. Edgar Pemberton, Sothorn's biographer, quotes a contemporary review which gives perhaps the most revealing analysis we have of Dundreary and his brand of humor.

The type itself is new. It is the elaboration of a negation. Dundreary is an intellectual nonentity. It is as if the actor had set about to show us the rich fullness of a vacuum. But even a vacuum becomes eloquent when all the faculties of the artist are directed upon it...Mr. Sothorn conceived the idea of an elegant ass, perfect in all his imperfections, rich in the absence of brains, coherent in his incoherency, and polished in the proof of his stupidity....²⁵

As originally conceived, Dundreary had served as a minor farcical element in a melodrama. The expansion of that role resulted in the entire play taking on an aspect of farce, where action and dialogue are light and fanciful, and where conflicts do not threaten serious consequences. It is true that Sir Edward Trenchard is under siege from his creditors, but it is also obvious, early on, that the deviousness of Coyle, his nemesis, has been discovered by Asa, and that this rough-and-ready American has both the ability and the heart to set matters straight. Thus the building "crisis" can be discounted, as the primary focus becomes the zany verbal antics of Dundreary and the budding love between Asa and Mary Meredith.

The farcical aspect represents only one dimension of the play, however, and even after its expansion some of the original elements remained. One, described in Joseph Jefferson's *Autobiography*, offers particular insight into Taylor's original intentions:

It was the opportunity of developing [the] attitude of early love, particularly love at first sight, that attracted me to the 'Cousin'. Simple and trifling as it looks, Mr. Tom Taylor never drew a finer dramatic picture. The relation between the two characters was perfectly original. A shrewd, keen Yankee boy of twenty-five falls in love at first sight with a simple, loving, English dairymaid of eighteen. She sits innocently on the bench, close beside him; he is fascinated and draws closer to her; she raises her eyes in innocent wonder at this, and he glides gently to the farthest end of the bench. He never tells her of his love, nor does she in the faintest manner suggest her affection for him; and though they persistently talk of other things, you see plainly how deeply they are in love....²⁶

Originally scheduled for a two-week run, *Our American Cousin* ran for 140 nights. Audiences and reviewers were enthusiastic. Soon a production in German opened in New York at the the Stadt Theatre in the Bowery; it was but one of many subsequent continuations and adaptations. Even piracies of Keene's production began appearing. Her exclusive rights to the script having been challenged in a law suit²⁷ (which she won), her legal challengers--Wheatley and Clarke of the Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia--sent stenographers to her performances. They took down the script in short hand, along with "every movement, every 'gag'"²⁸ and mounted their own production. Two Boston producers did the same.

The play was not produced immediately in England, however. Not until November 16, 1861 did a production open in London (at the Haymarket Theatre, with Sothorn playing Dundreary). The initial response was disappointing. Had it not been for the urgings of Charles Mathews, a well known comic actor, it would have closed after a few performances. Then London audiences awoke suddenly to Dundreary's humor, and the play continued for more than 400 nights, a record for the London stage. Again its influence exceeded the theatre proper. English shops began doing a brisk business selling Dundreary shoes and other articles of clothing, as well as false whiskers and monocles. Pamphlets "dealing with the imaginary doings of Dundreary under every possible condition and in every quarter of the globe"²⁹ were said to be sold by the thousands on street corners. The shuffling gait which Sothorn introduced into the role--based apparently upon dance steps in minstrel shows--was soon adopted as a popular dance known as the "Dundreary hop."

Sothorn's influence did not stop there. In the absence of a copyright law forbidding such practices, he

expanded the play to four acts and titled it *Dundreary*. He listed Taylor as the author, but noted that "The Character of Lord Dundreary [was] Written and Created by Mr. Sothern." He also wrote (sometimes with collaboration) shorter "after-pieces" such as "Dundreary Married and Settled" and "Dundreary a Father." Although he called them "wild whimsicalities,"³⁰ which were little more than burlesques of Taylor's original characters, they underscore the ongoing popularity of the role. He even wrote a comedy about Dundreary's brother Sam, titled *The Hon. Sam Slingsby*, which likewise attracted admirers.

V

The burgeoning Dundreary role was not the only change associated with *Our American Cousin*. In the words of Joseph Jefferson, "the success of the play proved the turning point in the career of three persons--Laura Keene, Sothern, and myself."³¹ E.A. Sothern was to play Dundreary in both America and England until his retirement in 1880. Although he created other notable characterizations, in the public mind he remained Dundreary until the end. Starring in Keene's production led to Jefferson's taking the play, and his role, on tours of America and Australia. The role of Florence Trenchard was equally good for Laura Keene who, according to Jefferson, soon "began to twinkle with little brilliants [jewels]; gradually her splendor increased, until at the end of three months she was ablaze with diamonds."³²

Although Keene apparently tired of the part before the end of the first season, she continued to play it until the end of her career. After terminating her management of the New York theatre in 1863, she toured much of the eastern United States during the remaining years of the Civil War, and it was these travels which brought to her to Washington in the spring of 1865. Her connections with *Our American Cousin* following the assassination appear somewhat equivocal. Although some accounts tell of her bravery in attending the wounded President, the trauma of the assassination was greater than she reckoned at the time. She did give the play many times during her remaining eight years of touring (she died in 1873); however, it was said that "she never made, or could bear to hear, the slightest allusion to that moment...."³³

E. A. Sothern played Dundreary until the year before his death in 1881. Thereafter his son, E. H. Sothern, continued to act the role. He opened a four-act revival at the Lyric Theatre in New York on January 27, 1908.³⁴ Although this production met with luke-warm reviews, Sothern played the role as late as 1915. Thereafter the play became a kind of relic, seldom read and even less frequently performed.

John Wilkes Booth's use of the theatre, which he knew so well, to stage his own tragedy is one of history's bizarre ironies. But if the play was superseded by real life, it still offers modern readers an artistic creation rather than merely historical window-dressing. Critics should ask: Is its humor still fresh, its satire still poignant to generations far removed from its original audiences by time, social change, and technological advance? Can the vast numbers who travel to foreign countries today be interested in the dramatized confrontation of two cultures who find each other so strange? And can they laugh, as did their counterparts of a century and a quarter ago, at Dundreary's skewed witticisms?

The answer to these questions is "yes," for several reasons. First, altered though British and American cultures may be, each retains a sense of pride in its unique past. Second, despite their shared experiences during the twentieth century, considerable cultural differences remain. The play continues to remind the modern American reader of these distinctions, while reinforcing a sense of pride in the national character. Even a modern English reader stands to receive a certain sense of affirmation from *Our American Cousin*. For, despite initial expressions of cultural superiority, the English in the play are quick to recognize the generosity of the American visitor and to judge him on the basis of principles rather than manners. And finally, one may be gratified by a theatrical piece which, although farcical and exaggerated, and not nearly so lofty as the tragedy which overshadows it, reaffirms such timeless values as simple justice, understanding, and love.

And so, on this 125th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, we offer *Our American Cousin* for reevaluation and appreciation. Ford's Theatre performed Phillips and Withers' "Honor to Our Soldiers" for the first time during the spring of 1990; now the play is available in a convenient and newly edited format. Perhaps the deepest irony is that the president who was best known and loved for his wit, who

balanced America's darkest hour with optimism and humor, met his death in a moment of laughter; a moment that began the tragedy of Reconstruction and suffering that would persist for a century to come.

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