

**USING MUSIC TO ENLIVEN THE AMERICAN HISTORY CLASSROOM:  
LOOKING AT THE POST-CIVIL WAR YEARS  
THROUGH THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF HENRY CLAY WORK**

Eric Juhnke  
Briar Cliff University

In my early years in teaching during the mid 1990s, I became excited about the potential use of music in the classroom to enliven my teaching. I learned that popular culture was not only fertile ground for historical study but also an effective tool in aiding students' understanding of the past. As George Lipsitz has explained, students might not know American history, but they know Hollywood movies, television shows, and top-40 hits.<sup>1</sup> Thus, when used effectively, clips from Charlie Chaplain's *Modern Times*, the sitcom *Leave it to Beaver*, or the Beatles' *White Album* help introduce issues of mechanization, postwar conformity, and the counterculture in terms students can comprehend.

As part of my own effort to bring popular culture into the classroom, I began mining the music libraries for contemporary songs to use in my United States since 1865 survey course. One early experiment was to play period music during the first five minutes of class to attract attention and stimulate participation for the lessons that followed. From there I began organizing mini-lectures and discussions around songs and artists to match the topics and themes of the course.

I was eager to find music for the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. First-year college students, I have found, know little about this tumultuous period in which the Union remained fragile, former slaves adapted to freedom, southern whites adjusted to a new order, and Congress and the President struggled for power. Lessons on Reconstruction also help introduce students to the interpretive nature of history. Was this the torturous "Age of Hate" that threatened destruction for the South? Was it a grand experiment in racial equality? Was it conservative or revolutionary? Or was it the beginning of Modern America?

Sources of popular culture provide one means to explore these questions and introduce students to the complexities of Reconstruction. During the late 1990s, I attended an OAH Conference in San Francisco, where, at a "Focus on Teaching" session, Eric Foner recommended that teachers use D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* to stimulate classroom discussion on Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Available in many library and video store collections, this silent film classic illuminates the harsh racial

---

<sup>1</sup>See George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), xii-ix.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Foner, "Major Themes, Issues, Interpretations of the Reconstruction Era," Workshop on Teaching the Reconstruction Era, Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, San Francisco, April 19, 1997.

climate of the day and justifies the Ku Klux Klan's efforts to redeem the South from the evils of Radical Republicanism.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nast's political cartoons on Reconstruction, published in *Harper's Weekly*, offer another opportunity to reach students, who enjoy deciphering Nast's coded criticisms of Andrew Johnson and his supporters.<sup>4</sup> To this list, I would like to add the music of Henry Clay Work.

My interest in Henry Clay Work, a prominent composer of popular music during the 1860s and 1870s, does not derive from any particular expertise in nineteenth-century American history. Nor am I an authority on music or songwriters. Rather I got acquainted with Work and his music because I wanted to become a better teacher and saw in his music a way to make the post-Civil War years a livelier time for my students.

In his book *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, Charles Hamm noted that the end of the Civil War marked a turning point in American music. During the war, Hamm explained, songs had reflected the pathos of the age, "the military and political events, the heroes and villains . . . , the patriotic fervor and pride of both sides, [and] the tragedies and heartbreaks of civilians and soldiers alike." Americans looked to music to unleash their wartime emotions. But after 1865, Hamm said, composers largely ignored postwar problems of race, region, and politics. Perhaps emotionally drained by the "fever pitch" of war, Americans now favored themes of nostalgia, comedy, and love over political and social turmoil. "In deliberately turning away from contemporary issues," Americans, Hamm declared, "made popular song something it had never been before—escapism."<sup>5</sup> While this might have been the post-war trend, composer Henry Clay Work, for one, did not evade key political and social issues. Instead he "watched the news dispatches," "kept his songs topical," and took on contemporary controversies over Andrew Johnson, race relations, temperance, and the treatment of Native Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the Pennsylvanian Stephen Foster, whose sentimental songs of the antebellum slave culture confused many who mistook him as a native southerner, it was hard to mistake Henry Clay Work's frame of reference. Born in Middletown, Connecticut, in 1832, Work drew inspiration from his father, Alanson, an outspoken "anti-slavery agitator" who had served three years in prison for his involvement in the

---

<sup>3</sup>See Melvyn Stokes, *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>See Morton Keller, *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), Thomas Nast, *Cartoons and Illustrations* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1974), and Albert B. Paine, *Thomas Nast: His Period and His Pictures* (Princeton: Pyne Press, 1974).

<sup>5</sup>Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 253-254.

<sup>6</sup>Edwin Tribble, "Marching Through Georgia," *The Georgia Review*, 21 (December 1967), 425.

Underground Railroad and later co-authored a popular anti-slavery tract about his experience.<sup>7</sup> As a young man, Henry Clay Work began to develop his song-writing talent as a typesetter in the printing trade. His trademark style involved lengthy contemplation before setting his thoughts directly to type in a finished score.

While employed as a printer at the Root and Cady publishing firm in Chicago in 1862, Work presented one of his pieces entitled "Kingdom Coming," to boss George Root, an accomplished composer himself. The song was "elegant in manuscript," Root recalled years later, "full of bright, good sense and comical situations in its 'darkey' dialect—the words fitting the melody almost as aptly and neatly as Gilbert fits Sullivan—the melody decidedly good . . . and the whole exactly suited to the times."<sup>8</sup> Written from the perspective of a plantation slave, "Kingdom Coming" describes the scene as the Union Army approached. "De Massa run? Ha, ha! De darkey stay? Ho Ho!" declares the slave. "It mus' be now de kingdom comin, an' de year ob Jubilo." In a matter of months, the song sold 75,000 copies. It later became a favorite among black troops, as well as liberated slaves, who used it to serenade Robert E. Lee's mansion after his surrender at Appomattox.<sup>9</sup>

Work realized similar success writing abolitionist songs, including several in black dialect, and patriotic tributes to the Union effort. In late 1862, he composed "Grafted into the Army," a comedic tune with veiled criticisms of the draft as well as the use of substitutes by wealthy northerners. Three years later, Work released "Marching through Georgia," composed in honor of General Sherman's march to the sea. Arguably the most famous war-song ever written, it became a standard at political conventions, veteran reunions, and military parades in the post-war era. By 1890, Sherman had heard the song so often that he remarked, "If I had thought when I made that march that it would have inspired anyone to compose such a piece, I would have marched around the state."<sup>10</sup>

After the war, Work entered the fray between Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, and the Radical Republicans in Congress over reconstruction in the South. The song, "Andy Veto" was Work's response to the President's repudiation of a bill to

---

<sup>7</sup>See George Thompson, *Prison Life and Reflections: A Narrative of the Arrest, Trial, Conviction, Imprisonment, Treatment, Observations, Reflections, and Deliverance of Work, Burr, and Thompson* (James M. Fitch, 1847). While in prison, Alanson Work received a letter of support from a promising young lawyer from Springfield, Abraham Lincoln. See W. Ward Loper, "The Life of Henry Clay Work: A Native of Middletown, Connecticut, and Author of 'Marching through Georgia,'" Middlesex County Historical Society (no date), 2.

<sup>8</sup>George F. Root, *The Story of a Musical Life* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 137.

<sup>9</sup>Kent Bowman, "The Muse of Fire: Liberty and War Songs as a Source of American History," Dissertation (North Texas State University, 1984), 282-283.

<sup>10</sup>Bowman, "The Muse of Fire," 290. See also, Tribble, "Marching Through Georgia."

extend the Freedmen's Bureau, designed to assist former slaves and refugees in the South. Work poked fun at Johnson, who after Lincoln's death had encouraged Radical Republican designs to provide greater civil rights for former slaves, when he likened himself to Moses:

Moses can't afford to let his people vote;  
Darkey's, he's your Moses!  
He must watch his little flock, his own scapegoat,  
For, darkeys he's your Moses!  
Thinking of you brings him wakeful nights, you know;  
You might up and take your "civil rights," you know,  
And make a "war of roses" with the whites, you know;  
So, darkeys, he's your Moses!<sup>11</sup>

Months later Work completed, "Who Shall Rule this American Nation," which again attacked President Johnson and urged support for the Radicals' reconstruction program. "Who shall rank as the family royal? Say, boys, say! If not those who are honest and loyal?" the song asked listeners. "Then shall one elected as our servant, In his pride, assume a regal sway? Must we bend to the human dictator? Say, boys, say!" Work dedicated this musical critique of President Johnson to U.S. Senator Lyman Trumbull, a moderate Republican from Illinois who joined the Radical camp in 1866.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Trumbull would become one of only seven Republicans in the Senate to break ranks with the Radicals and vote to acquit Johnson during his impeachment trial a year later.

Work's remaining years echoed the turmoil of the times. In 1867, his wife of nearly a decade became schizophrenic and entered an asylum. Soon thereafter, Work lost two of his three children to illness. His finances deteriorated as well when an investment in a fruit farm in Vineland, New Jersey, collapsed during the depression of 1867. Dejected, Work sought release through his music, but a persistent bout of writers' block limited his productivity. He found a muse in 1868 when he fell in love with eighteen-year-old Susie Mitchell of Philadelphia. But, although the two maintained a tender relationship through letters, Susie never committed herself to Work, who remained married to his estranged wife.

Several of his later songs related to his infatuation with Susie Mitchell, but others indicated his continued social consciousness. One of Work's greatest post-war hits was "Come Home, Father," a piece he had actually composed years before. The song

---

<sup>11</sup>Benjamin Tubb, Public Music Domain "Henry Clay Work," [www.pdmusic.org/work.html](http://www.pdmusic.org/work.html).

<sup>12</sup>Bertram Work, *Songs of Henry Clay Work*, Reprint (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1974), 108-110.

describes a young girl's heart-rending plea for her father to come home from the tavern to care for her sickly brother Benny, who dies before the night is through.

Father, dear father come home with me now!  
 The clock in the steeple strikes one;  
 You said you were coming right home from the shop,  
 As soon as your day's work was done.  
 Our fire has gone out, our house is all dark  
 And mother's been watching since tea,  
 With poor brother Benny so sick in her arms,  
 And no one to help her but me.

Benny's last wish was for a good night kiss from his father who never arrives. Root and Cady's house magazine promised a free copy of the song for anyone who could read the lyrics without weeping. According to the editors, only ten subscribers of an estimated 10,000 claimed a free copy. Burlesque performers often parodied the maudlin song. However, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement, organized amidst the wave of nativism and reform of the mid 1870s, adopted "Come Home, Father," as its official anthem.<sup>13</sup>

During the late 1860s, Work turned his attention toward the western United States, where railroads, warfare, and the elimination of the buffalo had decimated Native Americans. In the "Song of the Red Man," Work sympathized with their plight, yet resigned himself to the inevitable. Observing the onslaught of whites into the plains, the "Red Man" sings:

They came! They came! Like the fierce prairie flame,  
 Sweeping on to the sun-setting shore:  
 Gazing now on its waves, but a handful of braves,  
 We shall join in the chase nevermore  
 Till we camp on the plains where the Great Spirits reigns,  
 We shall join in the chase nevermore.<sup>14</sup>

To emphasize the point, an illustration on the song sheet cover depicted a lone Indian gazing down from atop a butte upon a frontier town below. After traveling to San Francisco by train a year later, Work composed, "Crossing the Grand Sierras," a tribute to the same railroad industry that he had lamented in "Song of the Red Man." An apparent convert to manifest destiny, Work now wrote "We sing a wond'rous story, No

---

<sup>13</sup>Bertram Work, 54-56; Dena Epstein, *Music Publishing in Chicago before 1871: The Firm of Root & Cady* (Detroit: Information Coordinators, Inc., 1969), 52.

<sup>14</sup>Tubb, [www.pdmusic.org/work.html](http://www.pdmusic.org/work.html).

nation sang before! Continental Chorus, That echoes either shore: We sang it on the summit! We sing it on the plain! We've clim'd the Grand Sierras with Lightning Palace Train."<sup>15</sup>

After years of inactivity, Work in 1876 released what became his most popular song, "Grandfather's Clock," which eventually sold nearly one million copies of sheet music. A quaint story of an old man's relationship with his loyal clock that only required winding once a week, "Grandfather's Clock," spoke to Americans' desire for stability in an era marked by the boom and bust cycles of the post-war industrial economy. In Work's lesser known sequel to "Grandfather's Clock," a saddened grandson returns to find his grandfather's house inhabited by strangers and the old clock replaced with a newfangled "vain, stuck-up thing on the wall."<sup>16</sup>

By 1876 Radical Reconstruction was largely over and home rule returned throughout the South. Still, Work maintained his commitment to racial justice. No doubt disturbed by the North's failure to sustain black rights in the South, Work voiced his disappointment with the song, "Used-up Joe." Its subject Joe was a former slave and Civil War veteran for whom Reconstruction had brought nothing but grief. Challenged by indebtedness, racism, and industrialization after the war, Joe lost everything, including his limbs. Now elderly, alone, and infirm, Joe ponders repeatedly in the song's chorus how "things will meander away," a lament likely shared by many southern blacks with dashed hopes over land reform, equal rights, and political participation.<sup>17</sup>

Although Work earned \$5,000 in royalties from "Grandfather's Clock," the money failed to sustain him throughout his remaining years. In 1882 Work moved to a small town in upstate New York, where he tinkered with mechanical experiments and hoped in vain to recreate his song-writing success. His appearance aroused excitement among locals, who urged Work to perform his songs at various social gatherings. "It is really surprising to find that I have excited so much curiosity and interest, not only among romantic young women, but of all classes," Work wrote Susie Mitchell, now Susie Scupham, in 1883.<sup>18</sup> But his celebrity on the national scene had long since passed. A year later, Work suffered a heart attack and died without fanfare at the age of fifty-one.

Work's career is important because his work mirrored the times in which he lived. Unlike other composers, who retreated from the political, social, and economic

---

<sup>15</sup>Bertram Work, 146-153.

<sup>16</sup>Tubb, [www.pdmusic.org/work.html](http://www.pdmusic.org/work.html).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Henry Clay Work to Mrs. S.R. Scupham, 18 February 1883, The Letters of Henry Clay Work, Music Division, Library of Congress, ML 95.W784.

controversies of the age, Work used them as inspiration. He was, according to one music historian, "the ultimate composer of quintessentially realistic popular song during the 1860s and 1870s."<sup>19</sup> Of course, Work's point of view did not represent the sentiments of the entire nation. Still, his popularity and stature as a musical activist make his song-writing career an ideal case study for investigating the post-Civil War era in the classroom.

Fortunately, for educators interested in highlighting Work's career, there are numerous online resources and sound recordings available for classroom use. Although the Library of Congress' Music Division holds Work's voluminous correspondence with Susie Mitchell, its American Memory collection is more useful and accessible. This online resource contains digital reprints of song sheets, including illustrated covers, for several of Work's most famous tunes.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Tubb, the recent editor of the *Complete Songs and Choruses by Henry Clay Work*, also administers a website, Public Domain Music, that contains biographical information on Work as well as lyrics and piano recordings for eighty compositions.<sup>21</sup> Individual sound recordings of Work's songs are available on several compact disks and LP's featuring the music of the Civil War and the Gilded Age. The LP, *Who Shall Rule This American Nation: Songs of the Civil War*, represents the most comprehensive sound collection of Work's music with fifteen songs.<sup>22</sup>

Work's songs, biographical material, and song sheet illustrations can be adapted to various lesson plans for the post-Civil War era. In my American survey course, I play and present the lyrics of Work's 1866 song, "Who Shall Rule This American Nation," to reinforce a lecture on the politics of Reconstruction. This fast-tempo, catchy song generates discussion on northern concerns about the leniency of Johnson's reconstruction plan, the growing rift between the President and Congress, and the rise of the Radical Republicans in the 1866 midterm elections. For students reared in an age of MTV, compact diskettes, and MP3s, it is also worthwhile discussing how Work's songs, disseminated primarily through the sale of sheet music, became popular hits as compared to music today. For a more in-depth group exercise, I hand out song sheets, including illustrations, from a handful of Work's tunes and Thomas Nast illustrations with instructions for students to analyze the meaning of the texts as a

---

<sup>19</sup>Jon Finson, *The Voices that Are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 56.

<sup>20</sup>For analysis of Work's correspondence with Susie Mitchell see Richard Hill, "The Mysterious Chord of Henry Clay Work," *Notes*, 10 (March/June 1953), 211-225; 367-390; The Library of Congress American Memory, [memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html).

<sup>21</sup>Tubb, [www.pdmusic.org/work.html](http://www.pdmusic.org/work.html).

<sup>22</sup>Henry Clay Work, *Who Shall Rule This American Nation: Songs of the Civil War Era LP* (Nonesuch Records, 1975).

window into changing popular attitudes of the post-war Era. In the future, I hope to incorporate Work and his music into more directed lessons on such topics as westward settlement, Native American policy, and the Temperance Movement.

My course evaluations reflect students' appreciation for incorporating music into the classroom, including the songs of Henry Clay Work. A recent student commented that he "enjoyed [Work's music] because it was interesting ... to listen to the songs and lyrics from HCW's perspective and how he viewed the era and then expressed it in his songs."<sup>23</sup> Another shared that the songs "helped me get a better understanding of that time period." The student added that "the songs were also a different way for me to learn. [I]t can be boring when all it is lecture, so when a professor does something unique like this, it makes the class more enjoyable and helps ... student[s] absorb the information better."<sup>24</sup> Of course, not every experiment with music realizes such dividends. I have learned, for example, that the use of music in the classroom is much more effective when students can read the lyrics while listening to the song. But with minimal effort, teachers of the post-Civil War era can enrich students' understanding of history with the help of the music of Henry Clay Work.

---

<sup>23</sup>American History to 1877, Student Evaluations, spring term 2006.

<sup>24</sup>Studies in American History II: Civil War and Reconstruction, Student Evaluations, winter term 2007.