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WILLIAM COWPER BRANN'S "GREAT WORLD-TRAIN"

by George E. Knight

In an editorial entitled "A Pilgrimage to Perdition," written in 1890, William Cowper Brann, owner-editor of the Waco, Texas *Iconoclast*, defended journalistic realism by contrasting it with the immoderate public optimism of Sir Edwin Arnold, author of "The Light of India." Arnold recently had proclaimed, via *The New York Times*, that "the course of mankind is constantly toward perfection." "I believe in humanity," he avowed, "and I believe in the world's great future." "The trend of human events," he insisted, "emphasizes the truth of this statement, for though we may be horrified today by reading of a brute who butchers his wife, those events should not shake our faith." "If we look at the matter philosophically," he reasoned, "we will see that they are a diminishing series, and that the world is growing grander and nobler."

Sir Edwin's pollyannaism sounded naive to a case-hardened journalist like Brann. He began his riposte with characteristic directness: "Sir Edwin," he said, "is a palace-car passenger on the great world-train, and knows little of the perils of the track. His coach rolls smooth and he takes his ease and indulges in optimistic normalizing, while those who serve him look Death in the Face so frequently that they learn to mock him." But "it has been my lot," he said, "to look at life from the cab windows, from the point of view of a man with the grimy hand and the soiled jacket." "[And whereas] Sir Edwin knows all about the beauty, wealth and success which make earth a paradise for the few," he added, "I know something of that hideousness, poverty and despair, that make it a Purgatory for the many." And in an accusatory tone, he rebuked Sir Edwin for his seeming ignorance of the real world, saying, "If Sir Edwin had explored the infernal vortex beneath his feet he would not talk so complacently of the 'trend of human events.'" Then, with his argument growing in severity, he addressed Sir Edwin's thesis with the acerbity of a street savant. It is Brann at his best.

"Come with me," he dared, "and I will show you thousands of families in this city alone [Houston, Texas] who have not had in six months as good a meal as could be picked out of your garbage barrel... ." He offered to present on demand "hundreds of families that sleep this winter on the bare floors of filthy tenements or huddle like swine on an armful of foul rags and straw... ." He told frighteningly of "delicate women and children dying for lack of proper warmth and nourishment," and of the "hundreds of men who regard it ... a godsend to get arrested that they may have shelter from the piercing winds of the night." He closed with words intended to silence even the most vociferous optimist: "Put your head into a 10-cent lodging house if you want to get some new ideas regarding the 'trend of humanity.' Glance into a low groggery – but one of several thousand in this great city – and size up the gang before being too sure that a pessimist is simply a person troubled with a superabundance of black bile!"

This piece alone, written when he was an editorial writer for the Houston

Post, exhibits the intensity and the conviction with which Brann approached his work. It also embodies the spirit of his "great world-train" philosophy, coupling emotionalism with harshness and sentimentality with contempt in a effort to supplant immoderate public optimism with sobering realism. A brief account of Brann's formative years will explain his ambivalent nature.

Brann was orphaned at the age of two when his mother died from an undiagnosed illness in 1858. His father, a bereft and penniless Presbyterian minister named Noble Brann, left him with the William Hawkins family of Humboldt Township, Illinois, before exiling himself to a lifetime of servitude to the Indian nations of Oklahoma.

Brann was a precocious child who, although he reached only the third grade in the Humboldt school, became an able reader and a promising writer. Hawkins obviously encouraged his children, including young Brann, to enrich their minds through reading. After all, such history-making events as the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's assassination, and the great Western migration captured the nation's headlines during this time, and probably were topics of conversation in the Hawkins household. Via the popular newspapers and magazines of the day, every young person in late-Victorian America learned of the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, the exploits of the Robber Barons, and countless other contemporary happenings. Perhaps it was the romantic lure of such exciting and distant events that caused young Brann to run away from the security of the Hawkins home. In 1868, the same year that U.S. Grant was inaugurated president, Brann collected his few possessions and scurried into the darkness and away from the only home he had ever known, never to return.

Brann, then aged twelve, spent the next nine years living alone and working in small towns in Illinois, Missouri, and Texas. Because he was tall for his age, and astute, he was seldom out of work. He worked as a bellhop, a painter's helper, a grainer, a railroad brakeman, and a semi-professional baseball player before finding his niche in life when he became a printer's devil for a weekly newspaper in Rochelle, Illinois, a small town about seventy-five miles west of Chicago.

From the beginning, the newspaper trade exercised Brann's agile mind and vented his creative energies. He applied himself dutifully and advanced from printer's devil to street reporter in only two years. By the time he was twenty-two, he had advanced to the position of editorial writer.

During this time, American newspapers were known more by the personalities of their editorial writers than their banners or mastheads. Melville Stone, for example, was the Chicago Daily News in 1876. William Nelson was the source from which the Kansas City Star drew its brilliance. And Henry Grady, by the sheer force of his mind and his dominant personality, made the Atlanta Constitution "The Voice of the South" in the 1880s.

Then as now, newspapers had to compete in the journalistic marketplace with the popular magazines of the day. Magazines were formidable rivals, for they, too, included lively and highly personal editorials. And like newspapers, they furnished their readers with a great variety of timely topics. The Postal

Act of 1879 helped newspapers and magazines alike by promoting reading nationwide, especially in the less literate South. This act, which made bulk rates available to the publishing trades, enabled the nascent American print media to flourish during the Gilded Age and thereafter.

During this period the leading magazines of the Progressive Era came into being. Munsey's, for instance, was founded in 1889 by Frank A. Munsey, a staunch practitioner of "personal journalism." Samuel S. McClure, a free-thinking ex-newspaperman, established McClure's Magazine in 1893. These and other publications, including the popular newspapers, were mass circulated before the turn of the century. Many of them embodied the reformer spirit and worked to expose a multitude of social, political, and economic abuses in American life. After 1900, Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell, John Spargo, and other "muckrakers" made maximum use of these powerful reform vehicles. Their provocative articles, many of which were in series, exposed certain iniquitous sources then threatening the nation.

Steffens, Tarbell, Spargo, and other muckrakers of the Progressive period were not the first journalists to rake social and political muck from the streets, factories, pulpits, and statehouses of mainstream America. To be sure, other equally resourceful and dedicated journalists preceded them. In fact, on the eve of the Progressive Era, in the waning years of the Gilded Age, numerous obscure but effective journalists, such as Brann, labored without fanfare to stimulate the mass demand for reform in American society.

On the whole, newspapermen such as Brann were street-tough and savvy to their environment. At some time during their early careers, most of them had been subjected to daily doses of murder, rape, armed robbery, and other types of social debauchery. It is no wonder that most were hard-cases, pessimists, or at best, realists. Brann believed himself to be of the latter sort.

The decades of the 1870s and 1880s helped develop Brann's realist mindset. In these decades the last great Indian battles were fought in the American West, including the Battle of the Little Big Horn; the cattle industry arose from its cradle in south Texas and spread northward at an unprecedented rate; gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and Colorado was admitted to the Union as the thirty-eighth state. This world-in-transition paralleled Brann's formative years in the newspaper trade. Too, it introduced him to new ways of thinking about society, politics, race, business, and religion. Social Darwinism, especially the type then being espoused by William Graham Sumner, reshaped the patterns of American thought and changed forever the habits and mores of a once moralistic society. The Gilded Age was unquestionably a challenging time for Brann. It was also a time of personal loneliness for him. He longed for a companion with whom to share his promising life.

In 1877, at the age of twenty-two, Brann won the hand of Miss Carrie Bell Martin, the auburn-haired daughter of an Iowa physician. Carrie gave Brann the settled homelife of which he had deprived himself as a youth. She gently burred the rough edges off of an otherwise course product of the streets. In many ways Carrie reclaimed Brann from the clutches of his untoward

circumstances, from his rambling course, and from a life style that encouraged him to sample life's wine and vinegar from the same jar. She made of him a responsible person, a person who willingly learned to be a player as well as a spectator in life's bitter-sweet charade. And it was she, more than anyone else, who encouraged him to educate himself through reading and to nurture his almost total recall. With her aid and encouragement, he broadened his horizons by dedicating himself to relentless self-study.

Current events, history, philosophy, and the Greek and Roman classics headed his list of favorite subjects. He became versed in the works of John Milton, William Shakespeare, John Locke, Thomas Paine, and others. His knowledge of the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible grew vast. His vocabulary became inexhaustible and precision-honed. His unique blend of acquired knowledge and street savvy, when combined with his satirical wit, developed into literary genius before he was thirty. Of course, the term *literary genius* connotes a strong, individualistic writing style, which Brann certainly possessed. But to understand why his style was applauded worldwide, one must know more about his "great world-train" philosophy – "the stare 'em down-and-tell 'em straight" mindset of one who sees life not from the parlor car windows but from the locomotive cab windows.

In a short piece about harshness, he wrote, "People frequently say to me, 'Brann, your attacks are too harsh. You should use more persuasion and less pizen.'" His reply was, "Perhaps so; but I have not yet mastered the esoteric of choking a bad dog to death with good butter."² To drive home his point, he advised his well meaning critic to "Never attempt to move an ox-team with moral suasion, or to drown the cohorts of the devil in the milk of human kindness. It won't work."³

Brann's style supports all evidence that he was, from center to circumference, a journalist of the hard-school. "He attacked real persons. He uttered his own ideas freely. He set little or no restraint upon his pen." Those he shocked with world-train realism and iconoclastic verve, he later charmed with satirical wit or moved to tears with emotional portrayals of real life situations. "If he lacked polish," a critic said, "he escaped narrowness in his self-education. What his writing lost to good taste it gained in honesty and vigor. His meaning was always clear – pungently and provocatively clear."⁴

Unfortunately, these qualities did not always endear Brann to his publishers. Many of them found him hard to work with, claiming that he was too independent. In 1883, perhaps for this reason, Brann was released from the weekly newspaper in Rochelle. Bolstered by Carrie's faith in his genius, Brann sought editorial work elsewhere. Immediate success was not forthcoming. In fact, his career remained in a downward spiral for several years, a situation which forced him to move his growing family from town to town in search of editorial work. He and his loved ones grew accustomed to musty old boardinghouses and used clothing shops during this time of lingering poverty. Between 1883 and 1894 Brann worked for several newspapers, including the St. Louis Globe-Democrat, the Galveston Evening Tribune, the Galveston News, the Houston Post, and the San Antonio Express.

Tragedy befell the Brann family in 1890. During his abbreviated stay at the Houston Post, his thirteen-year-old daughter, Dottie, committed suicide after an emotional disagreement with him about the attention she was receiving from a boy in the neighborhood. She took a bottle of morphine pills that she found in the communal bathroom at their boardinghouse. A neighbor lady witnessed the child's self-destruction. Unwittingly, she watched Dottie "walk to the wood house in the back yard and drink water from a glass into which she emptied something. [Then] the little one went to the hammock and laid herself down as if to take a nap."

Bereaved and guilt-ridden, Brann found consolation only in Carrie and in his writing. By day, he buried himself in work at the Post; at night, he spent tortuous hours at his writing desk in an effort to retain his sanity. Carrie later told friends that "Harry," her nickname for Brann, never got over losing Dottie and that "he became not more tolerant of human weakness, but less – he took on a holy mission to right wrongs."

In 1891, with money he had earned lecturing, Brann moved his family to Austin, Texas, where he made a failed attempt to start his own newspaper, the Austin Iconoclast. In 1893 he was offered an editorial post at the nearby San Antonio Express. It, too, was of short duration; he was asked to depart the Express after an irate subject beat him severely, and publicly, for libeling him in an editorial. His self-esteem was diminishing rapidly when the Waco Daily News, one of the most progressive newspapers in the state, offered him a position on its editorial staff. Brann wasted little time in accepting the job. To acquire the money for the move to Waco, Brann sold his letterpress to an Austin friend, William Sydney Porter, for \$250. Porter later became famous as O. Henry.

The Brann family, which now included Billy, age two, and Gracie, age seven, arrived in Waco in the summer of 1894. They took up residence in a modest boardinghouse on Austin Avenue, not far from the Daily News. Brann started his new job with a renewed determination to be the best editorial writer he could be. After only a few months on the job, however, it occurred to him that his present editorials were no less strictured than those he had written for the Houston Post and the San Antonio Express. His ambition to publish his own newspaper resurfaced and occupied his every thought, leaving him no choice but to resign from the Daily News and follow his destiny.

Once free of officialism, Brann concentrated on printing the truth as he saw it. So with the ardent pen of a Thomas Paine, the love of truth of a Socrates, and the energy of a man possessed, he launched the successful but short-lived Iconoclast – his "great world-train" embodied – which was, in effect, a just manifestation of himself. But unlike literal trains, Brann's worthy vehicle operated free of restrictive rails. Brann could pilot it anywhere he pleased, and he did. Its most frequent stops, to continue the simile, were in the metaphorical cities of Shysterville, Politico Junction, and Amen Corners, U.S.A., communities that he knew to be rife with cheats, fools, and hypocrites.

The denizens of Shysterville, for example, kept Brann forever miffed. He waxed often and eloquent about the lawyers who resided there. To him,

Shyesterville lawyers were the seed germs of "rightful injustice" and should be culled from the ranks of rightminded legalists.

In the Gilded Age, and perhaps throughout American history, unscrupulous lawyers were perceived in the public eye as men whose temperament, training, and ambitions made them virtual cannons in the arsenals of big business and politics. Most attorneys of this ilk willingly served the uncharitable and amoral plutocrats who exploited John Q. Public as chance permitted.

Brann sometimes colored his denunciations of shyster lawyers with satirical wit. For example, he identified the villainous shyster as "The little tin-horn attorney whose specialties are divorce cases and libel suits," and as those who incite "good-for-naughts to sue publishers for \$10,000 damages to 10-cent reputations." He described them as those who are alternately ready "to shield Vice from the sword of Justice as to defend Virtue against stupid Violence." He saw them as being "for sale to the highest bidder," and as men who kept "eloquence on tape for whoever cares to buy." The nation's legal latches, he thought, would "rob the orphan of his patrimony on a technicality or brand the Virgin Mary as a bawd to shield a blackmailer." And about their sanctified positions as court officers, and their assumed immunity under the law, he said, "More's the pity! But its some satisfaction to believe that, if in all the great universe of God there is a hell where fiends lie howling, the most sulphurous section is reserved for the infamous shyster – that if he cannot be debarred from the courts of earth he'll get the bounce from those in Heaven."

Brann's readers loved what they read in the *Iconoclast*. They did not mind in the least that his beloved newspaper – his "great world-train" – was the vehicle of his personal protests against the negative elements of a rapidly changing society. They did not want to be deceived from reality and he obliged them. He and the *Iconoclast* were, vicariously, *their* mouthpiece in the flush face of threatening change. So great was Brann's national appeal by 1897 that the paid circulation of the *Iconoclast* reached 100,000, a figure which equaled or surpassed the circulation figures of most of his contemporaries.

Another stop frequented by Brann's "great world-train" was Politico Junction, U.S.A., a peculiarly sordid place where all the citizens had the last name, *Me*, and who, with but few exceptions, fit the description of "They." Brann, forever the opportunistic publicist, made much journalistic capital from roasting this desperate lot and the calling they professed. Charles Carver, author of *Brann and the Iconoclast*, however, takes the opposite view. He thinks that politicians and politics were near the end of Brann's preferred topics and that the *Iconoclast* devoted little space to political issues. According to Carver, "Brann's interest in political questions of the day was as dispassionate as that of a poet or a priest ... because [he] was a social satirist [and] preferred to ridicule Mrs. Grundy rather than President Cleveland."

Carter's analysis is inaccurate. It is obviously based on an inventory of titles and not on article content. Neither is it based on a sure understanding of Brann's political interests, a fact which wrongly bespeaks his journalistic prowess. After all, the period of Brann's most compelling work paralleled the

political chicanery of the second Grant Administration and the flagrant and widespread political hypocrisies of the Gilded Age. Brann was too good a journalist not to reap such a harvest.

In fact, Brann's powers of observation had long been focused on the ironies of the American political system. As a street reporter in Rochelle, St. Louis, and elsewhere, he had observed the workaday activities of local Republicans as they struggled to build the foundation for a central government with national authority. In numerous articles written between 1880 and 1898, he publicly scrutinized the politics of the day. In such socio-political articles as "Grover's New Girl," "Slippery Bill McKinley," "Politicians and Pensioners," and "Gold, Silver and Gab," Brann informed his readers of the nation's political climate. More than once he opined about the busy Republicans who, throughout the period, thrashed the Democrats repeatedly at all levels of government, greatly weakening the donkey's resolve toward state's rights, decentralization, and limited government.

Political claptrap was as prevalent in the Gilded Age as it is today. Then, as now, politicians promised their constituents *parfume* but delivered essence of offal. This kind of public fraud outraged Brann, and he worked diligently for its eradication. His plan was two-fold: kick-start the moral motors of the pie-counter politicians by exposing their self-serving actions in public print; and, incite the readership of the *Iconoclast* to resounding anger, reaction, and the ultimate denouement of the politicians cited.

The success of Brann's efforts to keep politicians dutiful to their constituents cannot be determined, but he never stopped trying. Consider the message he so forcibly imparted in "The Age of Consent." It is emblematic of a time in American history when such statutory protections as legal age were not sufficiently guaranteed to its citizens by law; a time when Robber Barons, with their batteries of lawyers and their private police forces, used and abused the wards of their powers; a time when abject poverty abounded amid full employment; a time when working men, women, and children spent twelve to sixteen hours a day at their work stations, earning starvation wages and harboring no hope of social or financial betterment. Those victims of Progress who turned to their democratically elected representatives for redress of their grievances – as the Bill of Rights so encourages – most often met with political stone-walling from politicians in the service of unprincipled businessmen.

Throughout the 1890s, mothers nationwide feared for the well being of their young daughters. Brann shared their fears and sought to protect children by attacking the public miscreants who continued to support inadequate legal age legislation on behalf of their patron saints. In "The Age of Consent," he exclaimed, "What is the record of the American legislatures about this important matter? Most of them fixed the age of consent at ten years. Think of it, ye men with daughters completing their first decade!" Fixing blame, he added, "The men chosen by popular vote to make laws for a people boasting of their enlightenment, declared that a girl scarce old enough to prepare her trundle-bed or dress her dolls, was amply qualified to pass upon the most momentous question that can confront her between the cradle and the grave!"

Passionately, he told of the plight of countless American mothers, saying, "for ten years the ladies, supported by public opinion, the pulpit, and the press, have attempted to secure legal age protection for their little daughters." And fearful that the nation's political sycophants might miss his gist, he added, "I cannot understand why the legislature of any state should decline to protect little school girls in every possible manner, unless it be dominated by lecherous demons more utterly depraved than those that inhabit the amen-corner of hell."¹⁰ In this matter and others, Brann the realist viewed the equality-under-the-law precept as only so much "fctid wind." Of this he once said, "The popularity of the myth that all men are equal can be explained only by the widespread prevalence of inequality."¹¹

The fact is, Brann looked upon the whole political process as being ill-conceived and inherently divisive. He thought political parties were unnecessary and dangerous to republican forces of government. In an article about this subject, entitled "Political Parties," he addressed a statement made by George Washington during the Federalist period. He said, "The prediction of Washington has been fulfilled – partisan politics has become the curse of this country."

Brann insisted that "Party names are not the badges of American, but of partison slavery." He presented an illuminating example of the underlying meaning of the common exclamations, "I'm a Republican," and "I'm a Democrat": "It means that should a majority of the partisan organization with which one is allied, decree that white is black and the urine of a skunk is sweet incense, he should accept the fiat and devote his best energies to the promulgation of the folly!"¹²

Brann often attacked the split-tongue crows who flocked to the state capital in Austin. More than once he attempted to scatter them with loud noises. He was especially critical of Texas' Governor Charles Culberson. He distrusted Culberson immensely and let it be known via a whistle-blast from the Iconoclast. He wrote, "A man who can run with the hare politically while holding with the hounds personally, is almost too versatile to be virtuous."¹³

Perhaps Charles Carver should reconsider his statement that "Brann's interest in political questions of the day was as dispassionate as that of a post or a priest." The opposite is evidentially true, for although much of Brann's political satire was masked in social, economic, and religious contexts, it was nevertheless present and remains a major characteristic of his work.

Amen Corners, because of its proximity to the offices of the Iconoclast, was another frequent stop for Brann's "great world-train." In fact, it was at Amen Corners that it derailed for the first and only time, "frogged" from its track by the collection of hypocrites who resided there, hypocrites who could not, within the dictates of their isms, tolerate the religious freedom Brann so ably purported.

Brann was the nemesis of counterfeit clergy everywhere, especially those whose personal agendas for the wholesale redemption of mankind included the usurpation of its religious rights. For this reason, many of his remarks about the "professional godly" were designed to provoke while others were

intended to incriminate. He greatly resented the fact that this camouflaged breed operated with impunity among the bona fide flocks.

One Baptist minister invoked Brann's special contempt. His name was T. DeWitt Talmadge, a hell-fire and brimstone specialist whose published sentiments were syndicated in more than 3,500 newspapers throughout the South. Talmadge labeled Brann "The Apostle of the Devil" for publicly criticizing his far-flung and off-Broadway type crusades. Much to Talmadge's displeasure, however, Brann wore the stigma like the Medal of Honor, turning its malicious inference into rhetorical capital. Thereafter, Brann chidingly referred to himself as "The Apostle," as did his closest friends and associates. On one occasion Brann charged Talmadge with being a religious faker and offered a \$10,000 bounty to "any man who will demonstrate that T. DeWitt Talmadge ever originated an idea – good, bad or indifferent."¹⁴

Reverend M.D. Early, superintendent of Baptist Missions for the State of Texas, also drew a whistle-blast from the Apostle. In "Brother Early's Bazoo," an article about the foreign mission fake, Brann wrote. "It has been estimated by men who have spent much time abroad, that it costs \$14,000 to convert a Buddhist to Protestant Christianity, and nearly double that to pull a Mussulman loose from his prophet. . . . Yet while we are peddling high-priced saving grace in pagan lands, our own country is cursed with godless heathen and reeking with crime, and in the garrets of our great cities starving mothers give the withered breast to dying babes." "Our theological exportations," he exhorted, "belong to the same class with Early – men who condemn without investigation; who consider that in the little knots on the end of their necks God has cached all the wisdom of the world." But in fact, he added, "They are the intellectual heirs of those . . . who condemned Christ unheard, poisoned Socrates on idle supposition and refused to even consider the Copernican theory."¹⁵ Why did Brother Early receive such a roasting from Brann? Because the week before, Early had "insisted that he had never read a copy of the Iconoclast and would not do so, yet he declared it awfully immoral."¹⁶

Certain religious publications of the day also raised Brann's ire. One was the Texas Baptist Standard. This popular monthly magazine had, in Brann's opinion, crossed the line separating gospel from commercial vulgarity. It had accepted morally repugnant advertising for publication in its issues, a practice which Brann viewed as mammonistic and hypocritical. In an article entitled "A Brotherly Rebuke," Brann directed his criticisms of the magazine's advertising policy to the editor himself, the Reverend J.B. Cranfill.

"It grieves me to note," he said, "that the purveyors of 'panaceas' for private diseases regard the religious press as the best possible medium of reaching prospective patrons." He referred here to the Standard's advertisements for syphilitic nostrums, lost manhood restorers, abortion pills, and so forth. "It shocks my sense of propriety," he scolded, "to see a great religious journal . . . like the Texas Baptist Standard flaunting, in the middle of a page of jejune prattle about the Holy Spirit, a big display ad for the "French Nervo Pill – guaranteed to re-stallionize old roues--."¹⁷ This article infuriated Cranfill, but the indignant minister-editor turned the other cheek and said

nothing in the magazine's defense.

Brann publicly defended the rights of all faiths to exist, a personal liberty too often ignored, he felt, by the brethren of Amen Corners. When the world renowned Jew-baiter, Herr Dr. Altwardt, spoke in Waco late in the 1890s, Brann attended the lecture. Afterward, he wrote, "The Herr Doktor can tell [us] nothing about the Jew ... that we do not already know. We have neighbored with him for 200 years or more, and feel fully competent to estimate him without the adventitious aid of a strolling mountebank, who could never have landed in this country had it been necessary to produce a certificate of good character from a respectable source."

"The Jew," he explained, "is a good citizen. He is seldom a crank. He is never a fanatic. All his influences are cast upon the side of law and order." "Alwardt," he scorned, "belongs to that class of pestiferous busy-bodies and fat-headed fanatics who make dangerous agitation their occupation and thrive upon the misfortunes of their fellows." "Let the Herr Doktor gnaw a file and work his jaws until he foams with anti-Semitic fury," he concluded, "[for] he is harmless as Bottom imitating the king of beasts, and the American Jew is sufficiently intelligent to ... enjoy the frantic genuflections of this imported pismire."¹⁸

Brann's words seldom rang hollow when uttered in defiance of the breed of religious bigots and self-appointed demigods who peopled Amen Corners. Unfortunately for Brann, this pernicious lot had the capacity for violence, especially when confounded by his resounding logic and angered by his public disclosure of their socially damaging hypocrisies.

History records the interaction of violence between Brann and his adversaries. Such will not be reiterated here. Suffice it to say that by mid-1897, two hostile groups existed in Waco: the local Baptist, including those at nearby Baylor University, and the supporters of Brann and his "great world-train," the Iconoclast. Men on both sides carried firearms and threatened to use them against their enemies.

At four o'clock in the afternoon on April Fool's Day, 1898, Brann and his business manager, William Ward, left Laneri's, one of Waco's busiest saloons, and walked south on Fourth Street toward the Cotton Belt Railway depot. As they neared Banker's Alley, a shot rang out, then another, and still another. Brann was knocked forward by the first bullet; his hat flew from his head and into the gutter. He groped awkwardly, instinctively, for his own weapon. Feeling the cold steel of the pistol in his hand, he wheeled and pointed it at the wild-eyed man who continued to shoot him from a distance of about ten feet. Briefly, through the gunsmoke, he saw William Ward attempt to wrest the barking revolver from the shooter's hand, only to be wounded himself. After an interminable instant, Brann's large calibre pistol responded – once, twice, three times. and more – striking his attacker in the upper torso and sending him to the sidewalk in a staggering sprawl.

Horrified, Brann continued to snap the trigger even after the gun's cylinder was empty. His face registered disbelief and shock. He slumped to one knee and gazed quizzically at his assailant, who writhed in agony nearby.

A heavy silence suddenly descended upon the fight scene. The gunbattle had ended as quickly as it had begun.

A stern voice pierced the stillness – “Come along, Mister Brann.” It was Sam Hall, a well-known Waco policeman. Hall seized Brann by the arms, lifted him to his unsure feet, and hurried him several blocks to City Hall. En route, Brann told Hall that he had been shot but that he knew not where. His shoes were full of blood by the time they reached the City Hall steps. Inside, two local physicians, Dr. J.W. Hale and Dr. M.L. Graves, urgently examined his body for bullet wounds. They quickly discovered that he had been struck three times, with the critical wound in the upper back.¹⁹ While a police sergeant telephoned ahead, one of the doctors asked Brann if he wanted to be taken home; the answer registered clearly in the dying man’s eyes.

Brann was laid gently in the bed of a hastily commandeered delivery wagon that stood waiting in front of City Hall. His coat was rolled up and placed beneath his head as a pillow. Then the wagon lurched from the curb and raced pell-mell down the brick street toward The Oaks. Brann’s beloved new home on South Fifth Street.

Concerned neighbors watched as the policemen and doctors carried Brann into The Oaks and placed him in his own bed upstairs. One of the doctors talked briefly with Carrie. Then, silently, the official party left the house and returned to the delivery wagon. They had to make their way through a large crowd that had gathered on the front lawn.

Brann regained consciousness when Carrie’s reassuring hands began to stroke his beaded brow. He asked her about William Ward and she assured him that his friend had suffered only a hand wound during the fracas. She also told him what the police sergeant had told her about the gunbattle: that the shooter was an East Waco man named Tom Davis and that his condition was critical; Brann’s return fire had struck him four times. Carrie would not know until the next day that Davis, like Brann, was a devoted family man, and that he died in great agony on April 2 in the Pacific Hotel. His wife and children attended him until the end. Only later would the world surmise that Tom Davis, a religious zealot and an aspiring local politician, killed Brann to win political favor in the Waco Baptist community.

Brann lingered at death’s door throughout the night of April 1. Carrie remained at his bedside all the while, vigilant of his every move. Billy and Gracie slept fitfully in a wing-back chair nearby. Brann awoke a final time at 1:30 A.M. on April 2. He passed away shortly thereafter.

Figuratively, the Iconoclast died with Brann. After a failed attempt to continue its publication, Carrie sold it to F.M. Marple for a thousand dollars.²⁰ Marple removed the once proud gazette to Chicago where he hoped it would enjoy immediate success. He was mistaken; it failed miserably. Without Brann to stoke it, his “great world-train” steadily lost steam until its income from subscriptions and newsstand sales could no longer support its publication and it shuddered to a halt for all time.

More, however, remains of William Cowper Brann than a meaningful grave marker in Waco’s Oakwood Cemetery. The particulars of his life reveal

a being of rare personal and professional qualities. His legacy, despised in certain quarters even today, is rich in the intellectual tradition and the American experience. He dared to remain in control of his moral self at a time in American history when rampant change insinuated an opposite course of action.

Brann, in characteristic gadfly-like fashion, cautioned his readership against compromising their morals and ethics in favor of material gain and other false rewards. Often right and sometimes wrong, this man with the "grimy hand and the soiled jacket," peering ever outward from the cab window, insisted that rationalized conformity to irrational change leads to moral and ethical indecision and unwitting hypocrisy. He understood the vulnerability of the late nineteenth-century mindset, and he freely used his "great world-train" to warn a susceptible public of the dangerous excesses of a rapidly changing world.

NOTES

¹William Cowper Brann, *Brann's Scrap-Book*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 1970), p. 51.

²Charles Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast* (Austin, 1956), p. 134.

³E. Haldeman-Julius, "Brann, Who Cracked Dull Heads," *Little Blue Book*. 1287 (May, 1928), p. 12.

⁴John R. Whitaker, "W.C. Brann, His Life and Influence" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Texas, 1938), p. 9.

⁵Carver, *Brann and the Iconoclast*, p. 24.

⁶Carver, p. 28.

⁷William Cowper Brann, *The Writings of Brann the Iconoclast with a Foreword by J.D. Shaw* (New York, 1938), p. 103.

⁸Carver, p. 130.

⁹Brann, *Writings of Brann*, p. 39.

¹⁰Brann, *Writings*, p. 39.

¹¹Haldeman-Julius, *Little Blue Book*, p. 64.

¹²William Cowper Brann, *The Complete Works of Brann the Iconoclast* (New York, 1919), p. 300.

¹³Brann, *Writings*, p. 428.

¹⁴Carver, p. 43.

¹⁵Brann, *Writings*, p. 375.

¹⁶Brann, *Writings*, p. 375.

¹⁷Carver, p. 47.

¹⁸Brann, *The Complete Works*, p. 24.

¹⁹Carver, p. 182.

²⁰Whitaker, "W.C. Brann, His Life and Influence, pp. 96-97.