

# **AMERICA MOVED: BOOTH TARKINGTON'S MEMOIRS OF TIME AND PLACE, 1869–1928**

(BOOTH TARKINGTON & JEREMY BEER)

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A hundred years ago, Booth Tarkington was probably the most famous and successful author in America. But today, even in Indiana, his birthplace and the state with which he is forever associated, and where I live, Tarkington is forgotten. Purdue University has a dormitory, Tarkington Hall, at which my late father was a faculty advisor. Pathetically, the Hall's website says of Tarkington only that he was "a Purdue student of two years who as an alumnus, made multiple generous donations to Purdue." Time has left Tarkington behind. Perhaps this is fitting, though, because he was entranced and bound by nostalgia, an understandable but ultimately pointless guiding principle.

If you have heard of Tarkington, who was born in 1869 and died in 1946, it is most likely because in 1942 Orson Welles made a movie of one of his most famous works, *The Magnificent Ambersons*—a movie that is doubly remembered both because it was directed by Welles and because the studio butchered his work in post-production (though the cut version is still regarded as a great movie). That book is one of three books in Tarkington's Growth Trilogy, centered around how industrialization and modernization overtook Indianapolis, changing it from a sleepy provincial town to a chaotic, crowded, soot-covered metropolis. (The other two books in the trilogy are *The Turmoil* and *The Midlander*.) The theme of such modernization, and variations on it, dominated Tarkington's life, and much of his voluminous output of fiction.

Given Tarkington's modern-day obscurity (the last biography published on him came out in 1955), Jeremy Beer has done us a service by republishing Tarkington's autobiographical works, along with adding notes and other explanations that help us understand Tarkington and his time. Beer is himself from Indiana and has a keen interest in the state (he recently published a book about Oscar Charleston, an also once-famous Indianapolis baseball player from the era of the Negro Leagues). Beer's book actually contains two separate autobiographies. The first is Tarkington's "official" autobiography, *The World Does Move*, which covers roughly the period 1895 to 1928, when it was published.

The second is a collection of articles, under the collective heading "As I Seem to Me," serialized in 1941 in the *Saturday Evening Post* and never before published as a book. These articles cover Tarkington's earlier life, up until 1899, when he finally succeeded in publishing his first book, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, which put him on the map and led to a long career in the public eye, including being one of only a handful of authors to win two Pulitzer Prizes for novels (back when the Pulitzer meant something).

In his Introduction, Beer contrasts the modern treatment of Tarkington with that accorded the nasty Theodore Dreiser, also an Indiana native, whose life precisely overlapped that of Tarkington. Now, I had barely heard of Dreiser, but apparently he is famous. Beer counts up the many ways in which Dreiser is still highly honored today, honors the like of which Tarkington receives none. Dreiser was a card-carrying Communist, an unrepentant Stalinist, who wrote dreary books that were praised for "daring" and "realism" because they portrayed American life as filthy and unpleasant. The Left has always pushed such books, because as part of their quest to remake society, it is always necessary to portray the existing society as terribly deficient. Thus the Left, dominant in American literary circles after 1920, resented and loathed Tarkington because he was happy—in his childhood, in his life, and in his country—and he portrayed that happiness in his works. Of course, for the completely uneducated chattering classes of today, Dreiser is now also forgotten, replaced by men of even lower quality, such as Henry Rogers (the absurd and evil race scammer who goes by the name Ibram Kendi). By the 1940s, therefore, the received opinion of the ruling classes was that Tarkington was representative of backwards America, meaning the America that did not want to buy into the new left-wing ruling class changing America, and was therefore to be ignored.

That his enemies cast him down is not to say that Tarkington or his autobiography is without faults. Tarkington seems to have been the type of genial man who objects to much happening around him but never stoops to fight for what he wants, and instead retreats into areas of less conflict. (He greatly admired Wendell Willkie, for example, thus showing deficiency of judgment, and the alignment one would expect, with another weak man who would not fight for an actual political principle.) Perhaps indicative of this, a good deal, probably most, of

Tarkington's autobiography is focused on his childhood. (No surprise either, some of his most famous works center around childhood, notably the *Penrod* books, which my mother read to us as children and are very funny books I recommend to all.) These childhood memories are of some interest, and it is well known that the very old often fall back into that world of early memory. But his old age is not why Tarkington talks about childhood. He wasn't that old when he wrote these autobiographical works. Rather, whatever the emotional highs and lows of childhood, it is a simpler time, and Tarkington was, I think it fair to say, obsessed with how simpler times are better times.

Oh, he was not naïve. Certainly, many of his works (he wrote both novels and plays, with the latter seeming to be really his first love) deal with adults as adults, accepting adult responsibilities. But the reader certainly feels, and often, that Tarkington himself would rather have stayed a child. His childhood was golden, despite economic lows experienced by his lawyer father (he lost most of his assets in the Panic of 1873, and had a slow uphill climb to recovery). Still, his family's social position was quite secure. His mother's brother was Newton Booth, sometime senator from California (he had moved there from Indiana in 1850) and once spoken of as a likely Presidential contender. Tarkington's uncle passed through Indiana often, and his presence is very distinct in these pages. Tarkington also knew, as social acquaintances and family friends, the future President Benjamin Harrison and the also-once-famous Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley, who courted Tarkington's sister. Thus, although Indianapolis was still, by East Coast standards, a very small town, Tarkington was effectively a big fish.

He dropped out of high school, almost by accident and without bothering to tell his parents. When they found out, they simply sent him east, to Phillips Exeter, to finish school. Upon return to Indiana, he followed a girl to Purdue, but found out that he was merely one of many competitors for her affections, and so transferred to Princeton, which he greatly enjoyed (though he notes that the better classes on the coast looked down on his Indiana origin, and tactfully ignored it—even today a feeling of inferiority is the dominant characteristic of the “elite” in Indiana, though being elite here is like being the world's tallest midget). He spent the next several years living at home, unsuccessfully submitting written pieces to various organs, and finally (with some

help from his sister, not a shrinking violet) got his novel *The Gentleman from Indiana* published by McClure's. From there he went from success to success, lionized in all quarters. The end, more or less.

Among many anecdotes and reminiscences, however, we don't really get an understanding of Tarkington, or an understanding of how he views himself. Usually he refers to himself in the third person, and anything touching too closely on his adult life tends to shade to the cryptic. Perhaps confessional autobiography wasn't yet the norm, or maybe it just wasn't his style. Much of what Tarkington says about himself as an adult revolves around his early attempts to engage in literary activities. Nonetheless, we do get some interesting slices of life of turn-of-the-century America. These include the vogue for Spiritualism, something of great interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Tarkington's family participated in seances of various types and he was intrigued, but naturally, at no point do we get any indication of what his own religious beliefs were. He also mentions the pandemic of 1889, the Russian Flu, which modern research suggests was actually a coronavirus, quite similar to the Wuhan Plague in that it killed mostly old people and those with other comorbidities. You will not be surprised to know that in that less fearful time, society did not grind to a halt.

What characterizes Tarkington's autobiography overall is nostalgia. This comes out in two forms. The first is hatred of industrialization, bigness, and aggressive business, exemplified by the automobile. Tarkington, most of all, detests the smoke and soot that characterized the new Indianapolis (perhaps why in later life he spent a great deal of his time in rural Maine). He doesn't like machines at all; at one point he points out that in his grandparents' childhood, machines were not much more common than they had been in Rome, "virtually they lived in machineless country and were the sturdier and happier for the self-reliance and consequent independence of life and thought thus granted them." He compares the disappearance of the Indianapolis of his childhood to the disappearance of Punic Carthage. It's not just the soot, though. It's all the new technology, from X-rays to the telephone. He hates every bit of it.

The second form of Tarkington's nostalgia is that he casts a shimmering glow around the society that industrialization destroyed. "I hear again my sister singing on the summer nights of long ago and think of the good world we had then. Ah yes, it was the Golden Age!" We are

treated to a great many descriptions of the people, the buildings, the streets, all better than “now.” He also describes a society with much social pressure. “There was a tremendous universal respect for respectability. People who did not abide by the rule of the church and the law of the land were not within that respect, and, unless they were very powerful and adroit, they were outcasts if their disobedience became known.” For Tarkington, of course (and for me), this was positive, not negative as many might have it today.

Above all, Tarkington desired “restfulness,” which might be defined as the sum of these two forms of nostalgia. He quotes an old man railing against the automobile, “Restfulness will have entirely disappeared from your lives; the quiet of the world is ending forever.” Repeatedly Tarkington notes how America is at peace, ever since the Civil War, and what conflict there was elsewhere in the world was not impinging on America. Along similar lines, Tarkington was very focused on place, and each person finding his place. His philosophy was to achieve the opposite of what Robert Nisbet said, “rootless men always betray.” His belief seems to have been that once every person finds his place, society has reached its final goal.

There is truth here, but this raises the crucial question—can you run a successful “restful” society, one that looks only backward in this fashion, or at least not forward? It is no doubt true that a slower, more leisurely-paced society can be much a happier one. But the truth is we don’t get to choose; such a society can only develop organically, and even in American history, it has been very rare that America could have been considered restful, or that most people maintained a sense of place for more than a generation or two. In reality, if a society is not moving forward, accomplishing some set of goals, it is stagnating (or failing), which is usually quickly fatal, at least in the West (some Asian societies, notably China, as well as some in the ancient world, such as Egypt, managed to not move forward for millennia). Thus, the state of restfulness is a chimera, an unobtainable goal—maybe not in the next life, but certainly in this one. One might say that state is still worth striving for. But that is wrong, because doing so denies reality, and tries to force reality into an ideological mold—usually a characteristic of the Left, but not solely a vice of the Left, as Tarkington’s obsession confirms.

The search for restfulness is only one form of nostalgia, of course. More broadly, nostalgia is not appreciation of, or even love for, the past, but the belief that it can be restored and re-lived. Nostalgia is crippling in the face of the enemy, and every society for which one might be nostalgic has many enemies, driven by greed and envy. Yet, though this is obvious, even today, nostalgia is the dominant characteristic of far too many on the Right, which is one reason the Right has been completely ineffective for many decades.

The most glaring example of this is zombie Reaganism, which thankfully seems to be reaching the end of its shelf life, but has been enormously destructive over the past thirty years. Many years ago, the late 1980s and early 1990s, I involved myself in what was called the “conservative movement.” For example, I attended events hosted in Mecosta, Michigan, at the home of Russell Kirk, talking of the “permanent things” and “prudence.” When I look back, I see that nostalgia, slightly disguised, suffused everything we did. We thought we were forging the future, but we were musing by candlelight about pleasant irrelevancies as our enemies, bound by a vision of the future in which nostalgia was wholly absent, stole a march, many marches, on us. And the result has been that nothing we wanted came to pass, and everything we did not want was shoved down our throats.

The Right talent of a generation was thus essentially wasted through nostalgia. That’s changing, but far too slowly—many fat, useless grifters such as Jonah Goldberg and Rich Lowry, along with the institutions they serve, exist by scraping off Boomer (and, to a certain degree, Gen-X) nostalgia, so they are desperate to keep the Right mired in nostalgia. I expect, however, very soon an entirely new set of Right talent will replace what is thought of today as the “mainstream” Right, most of whom are Judas goats of one stripe or another. This will be, or already is, a lively ferment—I sometimes wonder what Russell Kirk would have made of Bronze Age Pervert. I’d like to think he would be intrigued, amused, and see virtue in BAP, overriding his concern that Edmund Burke was not his guiding light. After all, Burke admitted that sometimes a society was too far gone for incremental change to be the solution; my guess is that if Kirk were presented with the world of 2021, he would agree, and be open to far more aggressive action than he was while he was alive.

So let's stipulate that nostalgia isn't going to work out for the Right, or for America. This does not mean what could generically be called small-town virtues, and small-town living, are not indeed the future of many of us. This could happen through a mechanism similar to that outlined in John Michael Greer's *Retrotopia*—collapse, with many choosing to live simpler lives on an older pattern, within a framework of a larger nation. But more likely it could happen as a combination of the past and the future (likely also after collapse), where people choose to lead lives of direct human interaction, no longer wholly intermediated by machine, even as they take advantage of some benefits of technology and rockets thunder overhead. "Self-reliance and consequent independence of life and thought" do not require that we all work the land with our own hands, nor that we reject machines. I'll never think much of nostalgia, but maybe as things slide downwards toward chaos and rebirth, in some ways part of the world Tarkington loved will ultimately be recovered, but with confidence, not nostalgia.

Now, if you will excuse me, I am going to pour a drink for myself and my wife, and we are going to watch *The Magnificent Ambersons*. One wonders what Tarkington would have thought of the ability to view nearly any movie at any time. He probably would have viscerally recoiled, and perhaps it is corrosive, allowing too much private gratification, and too easy gratification, both of which erode a society's fiber. Yet streaming of films does not have the huge drawbacks of much other technology, and allows worthwhile cultural enrichment not otherwise possible, so in this, as in most else, I will not follow Tarkington's prescriptions.