Albion Winegar Tourgee (1838-1905), also wrote under the pseudonym Henry Churton, was an American soldier, Radical Republican, lawyer, judge, novelist, and diplomat. A pioneer civil rights activist, he founded the National Citizens Rights Association and litigated for the plaintiff Homer Plessy in the famous segregation case Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, in April of the same year he enlisted in the 27th New York Infantry. In 1863, Tourgee was captured at the Battle of Stones River and was held for six months as a prisoner-of-war in Libby Prison in Richmond, Virginia, before his release and parole. After the war, Tourgee established himself as a lawyer, farmer, and editor in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he and his wife moved so he could live in a warmer climate better suited to his war injuries. In 1881, he moved to Mayville, New York, near the Chautauqua Institution, and made his living as writer and editor of the literary weekly Our Continent until it failed in 1884. His works include: Toinette (also titled: A Royal Gentleman) (1874), Figs and Thistles (1879) and Bricks Without Straw (1880).

The era of Reconstruction in the aftermath of the Civil War remains one of the most controversial periods of American history, furiously argued over to this day, and A Fools Errand is one of the most valuable windows into it that we moderns, and especially the general reader, have access to, giving us an account of those times straight from the horses mouth.

Tourgeé was right in the middle of the events he describes, as one of the bitterly (and often unfairly) derided carpetbaggers in North Carolina, where he held various public offices, principally as a judge. A Union soldier, he settled there in 1865 with all kinds of high hopes for the rebuilding of the defeated South. Fourteen years later he returned North, utterly defeated and disillusioned.

All his and his fellows work had been thwarted by a ruthless and efficient terrorist campaign, enjoying the near-total support of the local (white)
community, and which the authorities in Washington were quite unable, and, as things dragged on, increasingly unwilling, to combat in any effective way.

In some ways this book has an oddly modern sound, perhaps reflecting the fact that much of the story remains so relevant today. Tourgeé’s observations on his heros (and by implication his own) resolution to enlist in 1861 display a dry cynicism worthy of the 21st Century, while this heros letter to a northern Senator complains of the mishandling of the reconstruction programme in terms which anticipate later criticisms of another reconstruction following the fall of Baghdad.

It is interesting to note Tourgeé’s complaints about the persistent tendency, even in the North, to romanticise the southern cause. He grumbles that before long, at this rate, men will be ashamed to admit that they ever fought for the Union. And this was written in 1879, over 60 years before Gone With The Wind and even 35 years before Birth of a Nation. Clearly the will to sympathise with the fallen foe (once they were safely defeated) began far earlier than most people realise.

Yet he himself can show, if not sympathy, then at least understanding of the feelings of those who so brutally destroyed his work. One of the best things about the book is its ability, much rarer now in an age which takes colour-blind democracy for granted, to get inside the heads of those who rejected it - who saw themselves (and were seen by many others) as serving an honourable cause, though by the most dishonourable methods.

Tourgeé gives a vivid illustration of the levels of resistance which even a totally defeated society can bring to bear against the efforts of well meaning outsiders, even when the latter are backed by seemingly overwhelming force. At one point (Ch XXI) with an eerie topicality, he equates the depth of Southern commitment to white supremacy with the zeal of Islam, and when (Ch XLV) he speaks of north and south as convenient names for two distinct, hostile and irreconcilable ideas.- two civilisations he again anticipates the language of the war on terror. One recalls those lines of Kiplings

And the end of the fight is a tombstone white with the name of the late deceased
And the epitaph drear A fool lies here, who tried to hustle the east.

Substitute south for east and that pretty well sums it up. But perhaps there is another (middle) eastern example in our own day for those with eyes to see it.

This book is Tourgeé’s retrospect on that part of his life. Sadder but infinitely wiser, he calls himself a Fool for his youthful aspirations, yet one somehow feels that that he retains a sympathy for that young idealist, and
deep down still thinks the young Tourgéé (alias Comfort Servosse) a better
man than his world-weary older self. I am reminded of the survivor from
World War One, who dedicated his memoirs With deep emotion, to the
man I used to be.

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