Gullible's Travails in Academia

Lynn Turner's Presidential Address to Phi Alpha Theta

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During all of the twenty-two years of my college teaching, I waited in vain for one of my students to turn in a paper which would be exciting because it explored some new frontier of history, or broke through one of the old barriers that circumscribe our discipline. To make a twenty-two year story short, no such good fortune ever came my way. The papers my students prepared were competent, workmanlike, even in many cases well-written, but none of them was ever, in itself, an adventure.

I used to discuss this disappointing facet of our academic life with my colleagues, both within and without the historical profession. Whether they taught Biology or French or Philosophy they usually assured me that their student productions were equally barren of anything that would alleviate the drudgery of a paper-reading evening. This, I should say, was true until I became a college president and thus removed myself, in their eyes, beyond the pale of respectability. Since then, it has been difficult for me to exchange confidences of any kind with members of a college faculty.

There was, however, one exception to this dull state of affairs -- an English professor on the faculty of one of the institutions where I formerly taught, whose disdain for professional historians, based upon his opinion of their literary abilities, was exceeded only by his own remarkable skill in imitating them. Since, in his superior way, he was willing to tolerate a conversation with me now and then, I mentioned to him one day my disappointments with undergraduate research papers, and asked him if he ever received an English theme in the least way extraordinary.
"Oh, quite often," he answered immediately. He seemed faintly amused at my astonishment.

"Perhaps the subject of English literature stimulates the creative faculties more than does an excursion into history," he continued.

To this subtly barb I could think of no adequate rejoinder, so I simply said, "I'm very curious. Will you let me see the next such paper that turns up in your classes?" This, I thought, would call his bluff. But he replied immediately. "Indeed I will. You will probably not have long to wait."

I thought that this would end the matter, but within a month the English professor was back in my office with a manuscript in his hand, and the customary air of detached superiority on his face.

"Here is an example of what you asked to see," he proclaimed. "It turned up in my class in Eighteenth Century English Prose." I glance at the neatly typewritten title.

"Gullible's Travails in Academia," I read aloud. "Very clever. Looks interesting, at any rate. Who wrote it?"

"I can't answer that question, for the simple reason that I don't know," he answered without hesitation. "It was laid on my desk this morning together with a dozen other papers of similar size and weight. The curious thing is that it seems to be an extra. There are twelve students in the class, but this is the thirteenth paper. As you see, it is entirely typewritten, so there is no possibility of identifying the handwriting. But then, this is the kind of thing that makes teaching English literature exciting."

With this parting shaft, he left my office and gave me an opportunity to read the manuscript. Here is an exact, unexpurgated copy.

"I am a lineal descendant of the man whom Dean Jonathan Swift made immortal as Lemuel Gulliver, but whose real name was Samuel Gullible. Of course, most of my ancestor's family believed that he invented those weird stories about his travels to excuse himself for his long absences from his
wife and children, and furthermore, that Dean Swift distorted poor, simple Samuel's tales in order to vent his own spleen against Whigs, Dutchmen, women, and his fellow clerics. In fact, no person in our family ever knew how my ancestor Sam Gullible's manuscripts ever fell into Jonathan Swift's hands; all they knew was that even before old Samuel died the malicious dean robbed them of a fortune by publishing the tales and making them the laughing stock of England.

It may have been this inherited resentment against an ancient theft that aroused my interest in early eighteenth century literature, and particularly in the works of Jonathan Swift. I determined, for one thing, to find my ancestor's original manuscripts if I could, and to republish them without the Swiftian encrustations, thus restoring Gullible's Travails, properly so called, to their original character -- that of a moderately imaginative eighteenth century fabrication, rather than what Swift had made them -- a vehicle for crude political propaganda.

In pursuing this purpose, I have examined every known collection of Swiftiana in Dublin, Oxford, and London, without finding a trace of my ancestor's manuscripts. However, in some of Swift's unpublished correspondence with Stella, I discovered an obscure reference which led me to believe that Sam Gullible's son, Clumglum, may have recovered the manuscripts from Dean Swift before he emigrated to Virginia in 1730. I also knew that members of this collateral branch of the Gullible family had served in Virginia's detached militia during the American Revolution and been paid in western land scrip with which they bought an estate in the Virginia Military Bounty lands and settled near Chillicothe, Ohio. This led me to a search of various miscellaneous collections in the archives of the Ohio historical Society, and ultimately I found here at my front door the manuscripts for which I had ransacked Europe in vain.

Suffice it to say that my suspicions were confirmed by study of the manuscripts which were almost illegible and in the utmost confusion. I immediately saw that Swift had not only distorted and
rewritten great patches of the material, but he had re-organized it with little regard for its original purpose. my determination to publish an accurate edition of Samuel Gullible’s narrative is stronger than ever, but I realize that the work will be long and tedious. In the meantime, however, I want to bring the world’s attention to a very large portion of the original manuscript which Dean Swift utterly ignored in his freehanded treatment of my ancestor’s work. consequently, I hereby offer, without editorial notes or comment, the first published edition of -

"An Account of Samuel Gullible’s Fifth Voyage, being a Flight in Great Travail on the Island of Laputa and a Sojourn among the Academicians."

I will not conceal even from myself the fact that the contempt which I felt for my fellow-Yahoos after my enforced return to England from the felicitous land of the Houyhnhnms was eventually returned with compounded interest. My wife and children suffered my aversion during five years of patient bewilderment, but in the end they lost their taste for this kind of forbearance and began to berate me for my misanthropy. My situation at home thus became intolerable, and I took to spending most of my time in long rambles out of doors, into the deepest woods and the most desolate moors where I might escape, if only for a brief moment, my hated fellow-men.

One autumn day, when I was thus wandering in most dejected state upon the empty waste, I was astonished to see what appeared at first to be a species of flying saucer approaching rapidly from the east at a great height in the sky. As it neared my station it began to descend, and I soon recognized it as the island of Laputa, which I had visited on my third voyage, but what this flying metropolis was doing so far from its native empire I could scarce conjecture. The object of its flight was evident enough, however, for as soon as it became stationary over my head, two muscular soldiers in the black uniform of the king’s guards spring to a lowered ladder, clambered swiftly down and seized me roughly before I could cry out.
My apprehensions at this singular treatment were no allayed by the guards' rude commands to ascend the ladder and the immediate resumption of flight as soon as I had gained the verge of the island. Its slopes were deserted and I was hurried silently through empty streets to the king's palace. My guards delivered me to a servant who conducted me in the same silence to an antechamber of the throne room and left me there alone. During all this space of time, I sensed a receding motion of the island at great speed and thought that I should probably never see England again.

Presently, there came into the chamber my old friend, the Lord Munodi, whose hospitality I had so much reason to remember from that period more than twelve years past when he had entertained me on his estates in Balnibarbi. Although he greeted me affectionately and explained that he was now the prime minister of the country, he lapsed immediately into a deep absorption. His manner seemed to indicate that some great disaster had brought him into this post, but he would tell me nothing more.

At length I was ushered into the throne room, where I looked about in vain for the king. Lord Munodi led me, rather, to one side of the great chamber where a council of the principal nobles of the kingdom was assembled. I could readily see that a great change had taken place in their nation, and they now proceeded with many expressions of grief to narrate the story to me. Some four years after I had departed from Lagado, one of the projectors in the Grand Academy who had been engaged in spinning air in a great circular tube, had discovered a substance in his tube which, when combined with another chemical, produced an explosion far greater then had ever been made before with mere gunpowder. This so excited the public curiosity that he had been ordered to gather larger quantities of the two repellent substances and give a public demonstration of his new explosive in an open field some distance from Lagado. On the appointed day, a great concourse of people had gathered to witness the experiment, and even the king had hovered over the spot in his flying island, so great was his interest in this new thing.
The projector, whose name was Oppenferm, had been too busy with his experiments to come to the field, but sent an assistant who brought the two chemicals together. Immediately there had been a tremendous explosion, accompanied by a glare of light and a searing heat which roasted alive all the people who had gathered in the field. A great cloud of poisonous dust had risen from the explosion and enveloped the flying island of Laputa, even though its pilots moved it as quickly as they could from the place. It was this poison which occasioned the death of the king and nine-tenths of the remaining people of Laputa, to say nothing of the thousands of those below on Balnibarbi who were maimed and crippled, and the hundreds of acres that were laid waste.

This was a blow from which Balnibarbi had not soon recovered; in truth, many people continued to perish for months thereafter from the slow effects of the poison dust, which caused the bones to soften and the body to become disfigured. The projector, Oppenferm, was thrown into prison by the authorities who reasoned that his invention of this lethal gas, even if accidental, made him the most dangerous threat to the existence of his fellow creatures. Others argued, however, the Oppenferm was truly a public benefactor, having discovered a means by which the Laputians could rain destruction on any earth-dwellers who chose to defy them and thus conquer the world. The partisans on either side of this question had become so absorbed in their disputes that they neglected families, business, and social life. Activity in the kingdom had come to a standstill -- that is, except for the production of the destructive chemicals, which had proceeded steadily, to the peril of the people, because no one had the courage to order it stopped.

When this crisis had developed to a point which threatened the very existence of the kingdom, Lord Munodi and a few other conservative grandees had quietly taken over control of the flying island and with it the government of Balnibarbi. Lord Munodi now explained that it was at his instance that the Grand Council had decided to come for me, convinced that I alone could help them to arrive at a
solution of the problems which imperiled their civilization. The reason for this, Lord Munodi explained, lay in the things I had told him about my country during my former visit. Since we were governed by a Parliament which debated at greater length than even the people of Balnibarbi but finally always muddled through to a conclusion, they decided that I might find a way to end their contentions.

Being an Englishman, I readily agreed to assume the role of arbiter, but first insisted, of course, that I should examine all the legal precedents which might have any bearing on the case of Oppenferm. Lord Munodi was much puzzled by my stipulation, since the courts in Balnibarbi kept no records, it being their belief that a judge was more likely to be prejudiced by reading how another judge had decided a different case than by confining his attention to the merits of his own. The Laputians, in fact, had little concern with the past and seldom kept or consulted records of any kind save for those involving immediate business or recent events. Lord Munodi thought that the only persons to whom I might go for this kind of information were the Archeographers.

I desired to be taken to these people at once, and was therefore lowered to the ground in the capital city of Lagado near to the Grand Academy where I was told that I would find them. This somewhat astonished me since I had spent much time traversing the Academy during my former visit to Lagado without once ever hearing of these same Archeographers. My conductor, however, assured me that this was not remarkable, since the Archeographers were the most inconspicuous of all the members of the Academy, being regarded with scorn by their fellow Academicians and finding it difficult to secure money with which to carry on their researches. They were housed, he told me, in a neglected part of the Academy buildings, midway between the mathematical Projectors on the one side and the Projectors in speculative learning on the other, since no one, least of all the Archeographers themselves, could agree as to which side they properly belonged. With that explanation, I was conducted into the dimly lighted and dusty area in which the Archeographers carried on their business.
The first door I opened admitted me into a very large chamber where the Archeographers, or chroniclers as we should call them in England, were producing the books of history which would go to the markets for public sale. The manner of producing all the historical works was the same; it was done upon a most remarkable set of machines. When a book was to be commenced, the scholar in charge took down from the surrounding shelves all the volume that had already been written on the subject as well as a few which had no particular relevance. He would then set his apprentices to copying paragraphs from these books on long cards. these were then place in a machine which punched holes in them according to set patterns. When a great pile of these pierced cards had been assembled it was place in another machine; one of the apprentices pressed a button and immediately, with a loud whirring noise, mechanical fingers plucked up the cards and slid them down a chute where they fell rapidly into separate compartments according to the was they had been punched. The apprentice then took up the cards from the first compartment and place them in still another mechanism beside a similar stack of cards on which were printed chapter titles, footnote references, maps, illustrations, and such stock phrases as "the road to," "the rise of," "it is interesting to note that," "the causes," "the consequences," "it is presumed that," "this leads us to conclude," "the evidence is not clear," and "on the other hand." At a given signal this machine began to shuffle the two stacks of cards as our gamesters in England do when they play at whist, and after it had formed them into one deck again, it proceeded to copy in order the extracts on each succeeding card. When finished, this narrative formed the first chapter of the new book, and so the following chapters were made until the whole was finished, bound together, and ready for the market.

I learned in later visits that there were several levels of Archeographers. Although none of them was held in much esteem outside and their books sold but few copies in comparison with those written by cooks or fishermen, some chroniclers earned a little money from the booksellers while others had to hire publishers to print their works. The latter prided themselves on being "ethical" practitioners of the
archeographer’s art. They enclosed the major portion of their books in quotation marks, and put long diversions into footnotes. They also went through their manuscripts carefully with a pair of scissors and cut out every word of fewer than four syllables. The more successful chroniclers, on the other hand, illustrated their works with portraits of the most celebrated ladies from the theaters of Ladoga and were not reluctant to let imagination supply the want of fact when their narratives would otherwise suffer.

The only Archeographers to grow rich from the sale of their books were those who brought out very cheap editions on a poor quality of paper, and took all the clothes off the actress whose figure graced the covers.

I discovered that the young Archeographers who had just entered into the profession were laudably ambitious to bring themselves quickly to public notice, and since their system of producing books gave no vent to originality, they had recourse to two other methods, either of which, if skillfully executed, soon brought them to the top of their profession. The easier of these methods was to choose the most famous and respected of the older Archeographers -- one preferably with many books to his credit -- and to denounce him as a great liar. The more eminent the victim of this attack, the greater was the likelihood of its success. It was a device well calculated to attract attention. Once this object was accomplished, the younger chronicler would drop the attack and prove to all his new admirers that he was safely conservative; his reputation and fortune were then secure.

The other method of gaining recognition was more difficult but also more ingenious. It had been discovered by a young archeographer who noticed, as indeed many had before him, that the style of clothing and hairdressing favored by the female sex in Balnibarbi went through a regular cycle of change every thirty years, so that mothers found their daughters wearing the same kind of garments that they remembered their own mothers to have worn. The clever young scholar reasoned that styles in the art of chronicling also underwent cycles, but since it was a much less lively art then that of the costumer,
the rate of change would be only half as fast. Accordingly, he read the histories of sixty years earlier and wrote a new one exactly like them. It was hailed as a pioneer work and became an instant success.

These archeographers of Balnibarbi and of all the neighboring kingdoms have an interesting custom of gathering together once a year in a building far too small to hold them all and filling the air with tobacco fumes while they gossip like ladies-in-waiting at the queen's court. A few of them, more earnest or more innocent than the rest, congregate in small chambers which are completely inadequate for the purpose, to read essays which are not quite long enough for books or entertaining enough for the corridors. Most of the audience regard this performance with rude indifference, but a few who have a reputation as critics to maintain attack the essays savagely, while would-be apprentices who wish to draw attention to their availability seize the occasion to make speeches which have no discernible connection with the subject of the essays. These gatherings usually reach their climax in a great dinner at which the archeographers gulp down rich foods which they cannot afford to buy at any other time, and listen to a colleague whom they have chosen to be the Chief-Archeographer-Plenipotentiary for one year try desperately to say something that has not already been said by all of his predecessors.

Although the mathematical Projectors of the Academy were generously subsidized by the government, and also by the farmers and manufacturers of Balnibarbi who expected their enterprises to benefit by the experiments of the projectors, no one had much interest in paying the archeographers for what the outside world regarded as useless researches. Therefore, the archeographers of the Academy earned their bread by teaching the history of their country to the young Balnibarbians, for which they were paid salaries considerably lower, indeed, than those paid to mathematics and music instructors, but enough to maintain them in genteel poverty. Most of them regarded this chore with distaste and little enthusiasm since it took them away from their book-making machines. This spirit readily communicated itself to their pupils and made the study of history the most unpopular requirement of
the schools. This, added to the fact that the parents of the students had also in their day been taught to consider history a dull employ accounted for the low esteem in which both the subject and its devotees were held in this kingdom.

More curious still was the fact that although the archeographers were paid for teaching, the rate of their wages and the ranks to which they were promoted depended upon the quantity of printed works which they produced; the consequence was that they neglected their teaching and spent every moment outside their classrooms at the Academy library. And since the Headmasters had no time to read all the books produced by their subordinates, and indeed little desire to do so, they judged them by their weight and number rather than their contents. The shrewder archeographers soon learned that the title of a short essay occupied as much space in their annual reports as the title of a long book, and that they might compose a dozen of the former in the time it would take to put together one of the latter. They accordingly began to write many essays, which created a problem since not even the booksellers wanted these productions on their shelves. One of the chief archeographers solved this difficulty by inventing a periodical in which the essays could be printed. The journal was then distributed to the archeographers themselves, and by this device they were enabled to pay for the publication of their own works without intolerable costs. As this device became more popular, virtually all the archeographers turned to it and began to write and submit essays at a furious pace. Soon there were too many for the periodical, so another journal was begun, and then another, and presently there were almost as many periodicals as there were archeographers, and no one had any trouble getting his essays published. This proved to be a happy solution of the problem. The multiplicity of periodicals was not embarrassing, since they did not have to be read and they made excellent fireplace combustibles after a sufficient number had accumulated. The writers of the essays could report long lists of published works, and the headmasters had only to bring out their rulers and measure the length of these lists in order to know what wages and promotions to recommend for each of their teachers. None of this activity,
I soon concluded that my labor would be wasted in reading the books of these archeographers for the legal history of Balnibarbi, when they took all of their matter from other men's books, so I inquired as to the origin of these older volumes on the shelves of the library. Although the most successful archeographers copied their own works, or those of each other, some occasionally made use of a book which came from a workroom on a lower level of the Academy, called the Primus. The distinguishing characteristic of these books was that they were declared to be original, either because they were the first to be written about a particular subject, or they reproduced the records in which that subject was mentioned.

The Primus was not one large hall, but was divided into a labyrinth of small cell-like chambers, each barely large enough to contain a table, a chair, and several shelves of books. In each cell, almost buried in dust and barely visible in the dim light, sat a pale and wasted figure, wearing large spectacles and poring over musty notes. These were the scholars who supplied the materials from which the archeographers in the upper level assembled their books. It hardly needs to be said that they received little recognition and virtually no wages for their work. Indeed, so detached were they from the world of daily affairs that they would have had no conception of how to spend the latter, nor any particular use for the former.

Since it was the business of these scholars to supply the basic facts of history, I believed that here I would find the precedents I needed for a decision in the case of Oppenferm; therefore, I was much interested in the means by which they made their discoveries. I found them agreed on one thing -- they did not consult written records since these were no to be trusted. Scribblers for the gazettes, letter-writers, journal-keepers, amanuenses, clerks of the courts, monkish chroniclers, secretaries to
Parliaments, scribes and poets were all unconscionable liars. The art of writing, and still more of printing, they said, had been invented to conceal the truth rather than preserve it; therefore, in order to eliminate all possibility of bias, error, deception, and misunderstanding from history, the scholar must depend on oral testimony, heard with his own ears. To my objections that this present, they replied that, on the contrary, they had means to obtain oral testimony from the actors themselves in any period of their history.

It will be remembered from the account of my third voyage, that I had already found in that part of the world a few individuals from every generation who were endowed with immortal life. These Struldbruggs, as they were called, could be brought in and interviewed, about the scenes which they had witnessed during their early years, and if they had been important actors in these events, so much the better. All the scholar had to do was to write down their answers. Furthermore, if any doubt arose afterward about the integrity of the scholar himself, as had often been the case in England when a hack writer collaborated with a great lord in bringing out his memoirs, scholars a century later had only to call in the same old Struldbrugg and ask for his story again.

Other scholars, however, insisted that no reliance was to be put in the memory of the Struldbruggs, and they developed a superior system, which was, unfortunately, more expensive and beset with great difficulties. This was to journey to the distant island of Glubbdubdrib and prevail upon the Governor of the Sorcerers there to call up the spirits of those actors in earlier events whom they desired to interview. This would seem to have been an infallible system since I had learned in my own visit to that island that the shades told the truth in every respect. Unfortunately, the sorcerers of Glubbdubdrib were willing to use their powers over the underworld in behalf on only the most eminent scholars from the Primus, and even then only after the payment of a heavy fee. The spirits, furthermore, were somewhat erratic, answering the summons of the sorcerers only when they felt disposed to do so,
and being obliged to submit to an interview concerning any given event with which they had been connected only once. This made it impossible for other scholars to confirm or re-examine the report which the favored historian brought back from an interview with any spirit, and led naturally to doubts about its integrity. What was even more discouraging, I learned that the statements made by the shades to mortal men were of a Delphic character and often meant something quite different from the meaning which the human brain imparted to them. Who can tell, for example, what the spirit of Galileo meant when it declared that it regarded the experiment made with dropping iron balls from the bell tower of Pisa as a matter of the utmost gravity. Thus it will be seen that much more of the history of Balnibarbi depends upon the memories of her unsung Struldbruggs than upon the testimony of her most eminent dead heroes.

My own dilemma illustrated perfectly the difficulties to which these methods gave rise. I desired my Conductor in the Academy to call in a Struldbrugg who had been a judge in his early life that I might question him about the cases he had adjudicated. Unfortunately, I learned that none of the Struldbruggs had ever been a judge, except one of the very oldest ones who had been chosen an arbitrator between contestants over property rights in the very earliest days of Balnibarbi's history, before a legal code had developed. The Balnibarbians had learned from this experience never again to appoint a Struldbrugg to judicial office, since the tenure was for life and this old fellow had been embarrassing the courts of probate for two thousand years with his antiquated ideas. Nor did the other technique prove to be any more productive. At a very considerable expense I made another journey to Glubbdubdrib and called up every notable judge that I could remember and who would answer my summons, from Solomon to Lord Coke, but to no purpose. They were willing enough to talk about their own cases but had no patience to listen to mine, declaring that it was nolle prosequi, or outside their jurisdiction, or some such excuse. When I asked for the most famous judge in Balnibarbi's history to appear before me, there came a deaf old ghost who said that he could not remember a single one of his cases, since all Balnibarbian judges
erased from their minds every memory of a trial as soon as it was over, so there would be no residue to prejudice their judgment in the next case.

These experiences made me despair of finding the information I needed from the historians of the Academy in order to decide the fate of Oppenferm and determine the future of the infernal substance that he had discovered. In the meantime, alarming reports were reaching us that the stock of deadly chemicals was growing beyond the capacity of any warehouse to contain them, and that several young projectors wished to experiment with them in their own way. Finally, I came to the sad conclusion that the archeographers of Balnibarbi could offer no solution for the terrible problems of their country, and that every day I spent in their midst increased my personal danger. In spite of my friendship for Lord Munodi and many other good men there, I determined to escape from their doomed continent while there was still an opportunity. Accordingly, I disguised myself as a sailor and made my way to the port of Maldonado where I found a ship sailing directly for Japan, from whence I intended to travel to Holland as I had done before.

When my ship was a day's sail from Maldonado, we heard behind us an enormous explosion, accompanied by a blinding flash of light and a wave of heat which caused the very sea to boil around us. At the same time, back in the direction where lay the metropolis of Lagado, there arose a great mushroom of smoke and purple colored dust into the sky, as if the whole continent below were disintegrating. I stood stunned upon the deck, realizing that I was the last man who would ever visit Balnibarbi, with its flying island of Laputa, its ghostly island of Glubbdubdrib, its great metropolis of Lagado, its Mathematical Projectors, and in the center of it all, but buried far below its ruin, the Archeographers who probably, until the very end, did not know what had happened in the outside world.