Edward Noyes Westcott's David Harum: A Forgotten Cultural Artifact

Brian G. Ladewig

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Courier by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
Benjamin Spock: A Two-Century Man  
By Bettye Caldwell, Professor of Pediatrics,  
Child Development, and Education,  
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences  
While reviewing Benjamin Spock’s pediatric career, his social activism, and his personal life, Caldwell assesses the impact of this “giant of the twentieth century” who has helped us to “prepare for the twenty-first.”

The Magic Toy Shop  
By Jean Daugherty, Public Affairs Programmer,  
WTVH, Syracuse  
The creator of The Magic Toy Shop, a long-running, local television show for children, tells how the show came about.

Ernest Hemingway  
By Shirley Jackson  
Introduction: Shirley Jackson on Ernest Hemingway: A Recovered Term Paper  
By John W. Crowley, Professor of English,  
Syracuse University  
For a 1940 English class at Syracuse University, Shirley Jackson wrote a paper on Ernest Hemingway. Crowley’s description of her world at that time is followed by the paper itself, which he finds notable for its “attention to the ambiguity surrounding gender roles in Hemingway’s fiction,” as well as its “intellectual command and stylistic ease.”

What’s in a Name? Characterization and Caricature in Dorothy Thompson Criticism  
By Frederick Betz, Professor of German,  
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale  
By the mid-1930s the journalist Dorothy Thompson had become “sufficiently important for writers and cartoonists to satirize her.” They gave her a multitude of labels—zoological, mythological, and otherwise—which Betz surveys herein.
The Punctator's World: A Discursion (Part Nine)
By Gwen G. Robinson, Former Editor,
Syracuse University Library Associates Courier
In the writing of authors Henry James, Robert Louis Stevenson, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, E. E. Cummings, Ezra Pound, George Orwell, and Ernest Hemingway, Robinson traces the development in the twentieth century of two rival styles, one “plaindealing” and the other “comlected.” In the “literary skirmish” between the two, the latter may be losing—perhaps at the expense of our reasoning powers.

Edward Noyes Westcott's *David Harum: A Forgotten Cultural Artifact*
By Brian G. Ladewig, Secondary-School Teacher,
West Irondequoit, New York
The 1898 novel *David Harum* occasioned a major transition in the publishing industry and, over a period of forty years, profoundly influenced American culture. According to Ladewig, the middle class saw in *David Harum* a reflection of itself.

Marya Zaturenska's Depression Diary, 1931–1932
Introduction by Mary Beth Hinton, Editor,
Syracuse University Library Associates Courier
Selections from a diary kept by the poet Marya Zaturenska reveal her struggles as a mother, a wife, and an artist during the Great Depression.

News of Syracuse University Library and of Library Associates
Post–Standard Award Citation, 1996, for Mark F. Weimer
Recent Acquisitions:
- Margaret Bourke-White Negatives of Olympic Athletes
- The Geography of Strabo
- Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
- Materials from the Albert Schweitzer Center
- Albert Schweitzer: A Message for a New Millennium
Library Associates Program for 1996–97
Edward Noyes Westcott’s *David Harum*: A Forgotten Cultural Artifact

BY BRIAN G. LADEWIG

David Harum, Banker, is a national type. Nothing like him is to be found in any other country. . . . The book is national, patriotic, wholesome, and above all, hopeful and truthful. Its worth lies more in its humanity than in its humor.

—Forbes Heermans, 1900

Surprisingly, the third-best selling book of the nineteenth century is an almost entirely forgotten novel. It has not been the object of academic scholarship, and most likely it never appeared on a high school or college syllabus. Edward Noyes Westcott’s *David Harum: A Story of American Life*, published in 1898, exceeded 100 printings in thirty years and sold more than 1,190,000 copies. The story of how *David Harum* became a book and rose to such heights of popularity is as interesting as the book itself.

Edward Noyes Westcott (1846–1898), a lifetime resident of Syracuse, New York, made a comfortable living as a banker and commodities trader. He took up writing only when, in 1895, tuberculosis forced him to give up the day-to-day grind of his professional life. Though Westcott claimed that his book was a fictional account of fictional characters, he conceded in a letter to his editor that “I have lived with and among the people I have written about. My father was born and raised on Buxton Hill, and a great many of David’s peculiar figures and sayings were constantly cropping out in his, my father’s, diction.”

Brian Ladewig received a master’s degree in English from Syracuse University in 1995. He is currently teaching English at the secondary level in West Irondequoit, New York.

© Copyright 1995, 1996, Brian Ladewig

1. *The Criterion*, April 1900, clipping from Onondaga Country Public Library, Syracuse, N.Y., hereafter referred to as “OCPL.” Many clippings on *David Harum*, the novel, can be found in OCPL’s Local History/Special Collections Department.
2. Westcott to Ripley Hitchcock, 19 January 1898, Ripley Hitchcock Papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Citations for material gathered from this repository will hereafter be attributed to “Columbia.”
In the extant correspondence between Westcott and his daughter Violet, there is no indication that he thought of himself as a “writer,” nor that he was undertaking a new vocation. Two years before *David Harum* was published, he wrote to her, “The work has filled up a good many hours which would otherwise have been very dreary, and given me some amusement; but that’s all there is to be said about it.” Having sent the manuscript to the first of several publishers, Westcott wrote a month later, “I have not really the smallest expectation that anything will result except the return of the MS. in about two months or more, but I thought the experiment was worth trying.” After receiving his first rejection, Westcott wrote, “I think I will not press further at present upon a depressed and overcrowded market.” Needless to say, Westcott overcame his initial disappointment, and he sent the manuscript to six more publishers before it was accepted in December 1897 by D. Appleton & Company of New York.

Ripley Hitchcock, the Appleton editor who accepted the untitled manuscript for publication, did so on the condition that it undergo numerous and substantive revisions. Westcott responded, “Whatever may have been my reasons for the arrangement of the book as it is, and I had them, they must go down before the opinion of one whose judgment like yours is worth a ‘whole theater of others.’” However, Westcott noted, “I should be heartily glad to follow your suggestions with regard to the cutting and reconstruction of the book, but it is quite out of the question for me. The excision of thirty odd thousand words would involve a practical rewriting of the whole thing and would be a task of almost as much magnitude as the original construction and if anything of even greater perplexity.” Westcott closed the letter by writing, “I should say that the manuscript might be cut down, say ten thousand words, without leaving very conspicuous gaps or rugged edges, but if much more than that is required ‘David’ must go on to the shelf, or into the fire. If it were to be published even without much delay, it would in all probability be posthumous. I have had the fun of writing it anyway and nobody will ever laugh over it more than I have. . . .” Unfortunately, Westcott’s dire prediction came true; he died six months before his book appeared in print. Before his death, however, Westcott agreed to have the book revised by Hitchcock.

3. Westcott’s correspondence relating to the writing of *David Harum* has been collected in *The Teller* (New York: D. Appleton, 1899), 72. This excerpt comes from a letter dated 15 August 1896.
5. Westcott to Violet, 9 November 1896, *The Teller*.
cock, who transformed a promising manuscript into a best-selling piece of popular American fiction.

Hitchcock reorganized it, moving five chapters from the middle of the book to the beginning. He cut almost thirty thousand words, strengthened the now-secondary love story, and shifted the focus of the story to the character of David Harum, thus changing the entire emphasis of the novel. Finally, he revised the whole so that it read more smoothly and gave the book its title and subtitle.  

The novel tells the story of an “old country banker, David Harum: dry, quaint, somewhat illiterate, no doubt, but possessing an amazing amount of knowledge not found in printed books, and holding fast to the cheer-

7. The most reliable account of the editorial work done by Hitchcock can be found on a single typed page, written by Hitchcock’s wife, which is inserted into a first edition copy of the novel (Columbia). The typed page is a transcription of a handwritten account which appears on the first few pages of the same book.
ful belief that there is nothing wholly bad or useless in this world."8 In an act of compassion, David Harum takes as his apprentice a young, broken-hearted, and somewhat misguided fellow, John Lenox. David teaches him valuable lessons in business and life. As a result, Lenox establishes himself professionally and wins the heart of the woman to whom he was previously an unsuccessful suitor.

Hitchcock's editorial role was significant not just because it resulted in *David Harum*'s immediate popularity, but because it constituted a major turning point in the history of American fiction publishing. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, American publishers (at that time publishers were also editors) either accepted or rejected manuscripts based on the standards of the house. They did not suggest revisions that went beyond copy editing or matters of grammar; that is, until Hitchcock, while working with Westcott on *David Harum*, realized that his experience and insight with regard to the literary marketplace could be used to produce a more salable commodity. Based on his success with *David Harum*, Hitchcock took a similar approach to the work of other authors, including Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser.9 As competition in the book selling industry increased, other editors adopted Hitchcock's approach. In fact, the editorial practices that he pioneered with *David Harum* have shaped the production of American literature ever since.

The arrival of *David Harum* in the literary marketplace in September 1898 was celebrated with quiet praise from a few reviewers. But to the surprise of publishers, the novel's sales were brisk: the entire stock of 1,500 copies sold within a matter of weeks at $1.50 each. This was a remarkable rate of sale considering that *David Harum* was placed in the hands of book traders without benefit of advance advertisement. Publishers would not risk the added costs of advertising should the novel merely break even, or, as was the case with so many "first time, no name" novels, result in a financial failure.

A book dealer in Syracuse recalled seeing Westcott’s name in a publisher’s catalogue and was surprised to note that “[D. Appleton & Co.] had neglected to send sample copies to the trade in Syracuse before publica-

9. Hitchcock's editing of works by Crane and Dreiser has become notorious among textual scholars who have been at pains for years to restore the texts Hitchcock “corrupted” with his editorial license. A dichotomy continues to exist between literature as a sacred and unalterable art form and literature as a commodity that can be adapted endlessly to the anticipated tastes of consumers.
tion; and no advance editorial copies were received by the local papers for review.”10 Out of a sense of loyalty, the book dealer ordered twenty-five copies, and when they arrived, he took one home to see what his “long time friend, Mr. Westcott” was doing in the novel writing business. He writes, “It was along toward morning before I finished it and the next day the book was recommended to everyone who came into my shop. If anybody hesitated about purchasing it, we simply said: ‘Take it along, look it over and if you don’t like it bring it back.’ ” By the week’s close, the book dealer wired the supplier for an additional 350 copies. Amazed at the book’s success, the supplier gladly filled the order. Throughout March and April 1899, six months after the book’s release, the average rate of sale was 1,300 copies per day, and the publisher could hardly keep up with booksellers’ demands for the novel. These statistics reveal the extent of David Harum’s popularity; but to understand why the American public found the novel so entertaining and relevant we have to turn from the story of the book to the story in the book.

David Harum is the middle-class, horse-trading banker of a small town in a rural region that, as Westcott noted, “should be described as northern central New York.”11 David has subtle wisdom and a rich sense of humor. Although he has a reputation as a “hard sell,” he is both equanimous and scrupulous in all of his dealings. He speaks in a boisterous, rural dialect, for example: “A reasonable amount of fleas is good for a dog—they keep him f’m broodin’ on bein’ a dog.” Or, in a matter-of-fact horse-trading vein, he would say, “Do unto the other fellow the way he’d like to do unto you—an’ do it fust.”

What David Harum lacks in formal education, he makes up for in common sense. He is a turn-of-the-century combination of the “homespun” philosopher and the well-respected middle-class businessman. Though it may appear that David’s dual nature as horse trader and banker is an unlikely, and even a fantastic, mix of qualities, it is exactly this dual nature that made him so endearing to the middle-class American reader.

On the one hand, David Harum is a successful businessman. He exemplifies the industriousness through which middle-class Americans could better themselves socially and economically. On the other hand, Harum, the savvy horse trader, exhibits an “old world” wisdom that is distinct from his capacities as a businessman (though his skills in business contribute to his discerning ability as a horse trader and vice versa). He em-

10. Undated, untitled newspaper clipping, OCPL.
bodies the values of the rural past from which he and his middle-class readers had come. Yet the two aspects are in perfect harmony.

Had David been a farmer/horse trader, he would have been, at best, a character trapped in the nineteenth century, whose appeal would have been limited to middle-class readers nostalgic about their rural past. Likewise, the casting of David Harum solely as a banker or commodities trader would have rendered him inaccessible to middle-class readers who had not yet attained such economic success and social independence. As a character who is successful in both roles, David Harum provided a model against which the middle class could compare its changing social and cultural roles; in his character the qualities of the middle class, past and future, could be celebrated, thus affirming readers’ identities as workers, consumers, and citizens.

Ripley Hitchcock, some years after the novel appeared, remarked that “David Harum still remains the great story of American life. It belongs to that school of fiction which subordinates plot to the realistic portrayal of character.” To the reading public David Harum, the character, embodied qualities that were regarded as distinctly American: common sense, soberness of mind, and sound moral judgment. Nicholas Murray Butler, who was closely associated with the book industry around the turn of the century, saw Americans as conservative and loyal to native institutions. He claimed (ca. 1908) that the “ninety millions of American people are at bottom a single and recognizable type” that was “seen at its purest and best in any one of the hundred or more small cities and towns in the Middle West.” Similarly, George Horace Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, said (ca. 1926) of the middle-class American that he “has gained a fair degree of material success,” but is not given to “bookishness and ripe culture. . . . Successful money-getting calls for soberness of living and evenness of mentality. . . . Nothing succeeds like common sense and common sense is an expression of sound morals.”

12. Of course, novels that portrayed the rising businessman solely in the context of white-collar professionalism were being written around the turn of the century. Notable among these is Dreiser’s *The Financier*. However, sales figures suggest that such novels were not nearly as popular as *David Harum*, nor did interest in them endure for some forty years.


came, for middle-class American readers, a looking glass that reflected their own cultural and social experience. 16

16. An early review of *David Harum* notes that he is “a character entirely unlike those we have had from Dickens, Thackeray, Charles Reade, or any of the English school [all of whom were known for their crafting of memorable characters]. He is distinctively American . . . and those of us who are at all familiar with country people and the lives they live will recognize old friends and their doings somewhere in the book.” (*New York Times Saturday Review*, 15 October 1898, 684, col. 1).
David Harum might have won the hearts of the American reading public on his own. However, his character is further developed as he interacts with John Lenox, a culturally refined young man who typifies a well-bred, well-mannered, high-society fellow from the affluent and cosmopolitan city of New York. Shortly after the novel begins, Lenox encounters a number of personal and professional setbacks; and with the hope of starting anew, he ventures into a rural setting in central New York to take a position as a bank clerk in a rural town, a situation that stands in sharp contrast to the comforts of his familiar and worldly New York City. Through perseverance and hard work, Lenox finds a place for himself in Homeville and earns the respect of the townspeople and of his employer, David Harum. Lenox meets hardship, responds to opportunity, and overcomes obstacles before finding his place in the world.

The early expositional sections of the book, those which cast the characters and their backgrounds, establish an important difference between Harum and Lenox. As discussed above, David Harum is, in an educative and financial sense, middle class. Lenox, on the other hand, comes from a privileged background, being well educated and groomed for participation in high culture. With these two social and financial strata represented, Westcott plays on his readers’ sensitivity to their own place within the social and cultural system. The theme of class differentiation becomes increasingly important because it is Lenox, the well-bred “privileged” individual, who comes under the tutelage of Harum, the middle-class sage. For middle-class readers David Harum was a working-class hero who could “teach that city slicker a thing or two.” With all of his refinement and etiquette, Lenox was to learn weightier lessons about living than would have been possible in the staid and restrictive environment from which he came. It is for this reason that Hitchcock, despite being a man in

17. An early review of *David Harum* provides an insightful character description of John Lenox. It reads, “John K. Lenox of New York City [is] a young man whose father represents hundreds of men to-day who are successful in business themselves, but whose sons are allowed to drift with the tide. They rise and fall with it. They are educated, no matter how unconscientiously, into thinking that the world was created only that they might enjoy it: They go here and there, they are club members, they study a little, perhaps, in Europe, drawing on their respective fathers for allowances. But they are themselves financially helpless. They earn nothing and lack the ability to earn anything” (*New York Times Saturday Review*, 15 October 1898, 684, col. 1). For those who held such a perspective, Lenox's success under Harum was a proclamation that middle-class values can succeed where those of high culture failed.
the business of selling literary wares, noted that "the success of the book is less literary than, as one reviewer said, 'a success of humanity.' "

Much of the published discussion surrounding *David Harum*’s appearance in the literary marketplace was concerned with the "true identity" of David Harum. Several articles were published, both in the *New York Times* and in the local Syracuse newspapers, charging that David Harum was not a fictional character created by Westcott’s imagination, but that he was modeled directly after David Hannum of Homer, New York. In fact, Arthur T. Vance went so far as to publish a book in 1900 titled *The Real David Harum*, in which he points out numerous similarities between Westcott’s character and David Hannum. Westcott’s sister felt compelled, on behalf of her brother, to respond to these charges by publishing an "official" defense, which stated that "no character in my brother’s book was drawn from life. David Harum may be called a composite photograph." It was even rumored that Rudyard Kipling had pseudonymously written the novel in an attempt to create the definitive American character. Though the rumor was later dispelled, this sort of ongoing discussion about *David Harum* further increased public interest in the novel.

Of course, *David Harum* was not without its detractors. Some critics, writing out of the high Victorian tradition that was gradually being replaced by a less restrictive form of realism, attacked the novel for its "unrefinedness" and its appeal to “baser human interests.” One critic, writing for the *New York Times* in December 1899, made clear his allegiances to the edicts of high culture when he wrote, “To people whose affection for the horse is abnormal, who delight in rural dialect and ‘country talk,’ often coarse and vulgar, and whose ideas of fun are realized in a circus clown, people, in short, never conspicuous for much refinement, ‘David Harum’ is, perhaps, a treasure and a delight .... Popular taste is not always refined.” Nonetheless, *David Harum* remained a viable cultural and literary commodity that was regarded by the middle-class readership as a celebration of the values and ethics from which they came; the values they could take with them as they, like David Harum, made a place for themselves within an industrializing post-Victorian American society as a new class of citizens and consumers.

No less interesting is the rhetoric employed by the novel’s advocates.

---

The following excerpts from published articles gathered under the title “Their Idol Assailed” respond to the charge that *David Harum* was perfectly unrefined, utterly uncouth, and unqualified to be called literature.

Ignorant we may be, in comparison with the higher “culture” of modern critics, vulgar in appearance, like our fellow backwoodsmen, not unused to the backwoods’ dialect of our farms and districts; but not vulgar in our feelings, not coarse in our spiritual hopes and aspirations.

“When Alma dwelt in Mardi his mission was with the destitute,” and doubtless the cultured. When God came down from the heaven He chose His disciples from the lower classes. Like our folks, those disciples were “country people,” not agreeable to look upon, not fitted for cultured society. However, one thing stands out from their history—“the common people heard Him gladly.”

—L. G. Moereau

David’s character remains with me as a landmark in the desert—a spring of refreshing [sic], where I set up an altar and give thanks for a strong and manly character. His inward life is saturated with the essence of truth and justice, love and loyalty; while he turns to his fellows a genial friendliness. The very force of his character conquers one and converts one into an admirer.

And is it not inspiring and ennobling to see a soul cleave its way through every difficulty and disadvantage of circumstance, surmounting every difficulty, standing at last full fledged, unmaimed by the conflict, master of the situation?

I am reminded there are varieties of vulgarity. It has been said by one: “I do not forgive the failure to know a fine character and to entertain it with thankful hospitality. When at last that which we have always longed for has arrived—then to be coarse, then to be critical, and treat such a visitant with the jabber and suspicion of the streets argues a vulgarity—that seems to shut the doors of heaven.”

—Susanna Morrison

A righteous voice has launched a learned and scholarly bull of
excommunication against the public idol, harmless "David Harum."

—E. Gunderman

It should be noted that these responses were written by educated people, all of whom asserted their allegiances to the shared cultural, social, and moral values of the rural lower and middle classes. In defending David Harum, they are defending middle-class American culture.

Interestingly, many of the defenses of David Harum (and therefore of the lower and middle classes), contain religious rhetoric. It is quite remarkable that David Harum should be likened to a cultural savior who provided for the middle and lowers classes what Christ provided for the meek and destitute: faith and hope in their present condition based on the model that his—or His—life provided. Susanna Morrison, quoted above, even weds Harum’s “strength and manliness” to his sense of “justice and virtue,” converting readers into admirers (and, carrying the Christ-comparison to its conclusion, into followers). For her David Harum is a model of rugged individualism, as well as a cultural hero and savior of the common American citizen. While one could elaborate even further on the rhetoric that cast Harum as spokesperson for a class of Americans, suffice it to say that the advocates of David Harum understood the novel to serve a far greater function than mere entertainment. As one critic wrote, “Few, very few, of the novels today may be regarded as fit text books for use in the practical schools of everyday life. However, we may safely classify David Harum with the happy few.”

An analysis of the cultural work being done through this “popular entertainment” cannot be limited solely to a consideration of the “character story” in book form. In fact, the true “incarnation” of David Harum occurred when the novel was adapted by Ripley Hitchcock and his wife, Martha, as a stage performance. The title role was played by William H. Crane, one of the best-known comedic actors of the early twentieth century. Running from 1900 to 1903 on Broadway, then touring throughout the country for the next twelve years, David Harum reached an even broader audience and was appropriated by the public as a piece of American folklore. In fact, it was even scripted as a silent film, starring William

23. L. G. Moereau even goes on in this same response to quote a lengthy passage from Barbey d’Aurevilly, in French.
24. Unattributed, undated, untitled newspaper article, ca. 1900, OCPL.
H. Crane, becoming the ninth play to be adapted for that new medium of middle-class entertainment.

The challenge in bringing David Harum, the character, before the people was to preserve the “Everyman” quality about him and yet to render him accurately and realistically as an individual man. In an essay that appeared in the *Metropolitan Magazine* around 1900, William H. Crane spoke to this challenge:

> Within a short time of taking up the study of David Harum I threw aside all idea of delineating an individual whom I might imitate, and confined myself to the book and to the development of a type that would appeal to and enlist the smiles and tears of a mixed audience, or, to use a better term, a human crowd. If David Harum were to be a success, I realized that my listeners must laugh when he laughed, and furtively brush away a tear in unison with him.

> It was extremely difficult to obtain the effect I wanted to produce, for it is to be remembered that “David Harum” is the record of a commonplace country life as seen through the eyes of a jolly, laughing old man, at once tender and obdurate, a sort of human paradox. The situations are not dramatic or stirring. They are simply the lights and shadows of an ordinary day passing over the quiet by-ways of a little village.

> I was not satisfied with the results of my work upon the company during our initial rehearsals. I could not imagine where the fault lay. . . . Suddenly the idea came to me, . . . one should not laugh at David Harum, but with him.25

Implicit in Crane’s observations is the realization that the audience should see in Harum what they saw or wanted to see in themselves. Indeed, for middle-class American theatergoers, David Harum represented the best of both worlds: success in the business of getting ahead in an industrializing society, but also a celebration of the values that defined their shared tradition as middle-class Americans.

The first ten years of the century witnessed unprecedented rates of industrial and technological evolution, bringing greater opportunities for employment and significant wage increases. From all accounts, *David Harum* continued to do well as a book, as a play, and as a silent film until

1911. By that time Crane had stopped touring as the inimitable David Harum to pursue other projects. Although the play continued to draw crowds with other characters in the title role, it had become somewhat commonplace and was being overshadowed by newer, more modern productions. By 1915 the revenues of the stage production had slowed to a trickle, and interest in the play was diminishing. The American public sought out new venues, productions, and books (of which there was no short supply).

Nevertheless, *David Harum*, though temporarily put aside, was not to be forgotten. By 1919 a revival of the play was being organized; its “second life” was being orchestrated, and not simply for the entertainment dollar it could attract. That year Helen Sargent Hitchcock, Ripley Hitchcock’s second wife, wrote to William H. Crane, “It is a time—after the pangs of this horrible war—that we want a refreshing play, native of the soil.” 26 Whereas the first incarnation of *David Harum* provided a means of unifying the middle class under a banner of both business ambition and rural values, the new incarnation was to serve a broader purpose of inculcating faith in an American ethos.

It was not just the war that created a need for models of American national pride. In the same letter cited above, Hitchcock notes that throughout the war years stage productions had used bawdy material of “suspect moral value” for easy profits. Of the class of theatergoers supplying the demand for this type of “stage folly,” Hitchcock writes to Crane, “Theirs is the type of mind to whom most of the managers are catering—to this lowest class” (H. S. Hitchcock’s strikethrough). 27 Although Mrs. Hitchcock retracted it, the crossed-out phrase indicates that by 1919 the large middle class had become a social and cultural strata unto itself, and its independence from the upper class was as important as its distinction from the lower class. Hitchcock goes on to say, “These managers lost sight of the majority of people who want clean plays.” 28

It was clear to H. S. Hitchcock that *David Harum*’s appeal could and would transcend the different perceptions of the generations if given the chance. She writes:

> When a [dramatic] revival is given entire families go, the old folks at home who cannot endure the present productions, and as, in all past generations, they feel that their world is [was?] never so

28. Ibid.
wicked, and those fathers and mothers, who only go to good plays[,] live for months afterwards renewing once again their past pleasures.

But the world is not so wicked, the majority of people are good and respond to the good in other men. I know too, that young people will welcome “David Harum”, which their parents have read and seen and talked of.29

Such concern for the younger generation had not been present in any of the rhetoric surrounding David Harum just twenty years before. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, David Harum took on a national importance as one of many efforts toward instilling values in a new generation and reaffirming, for young and old, the values that made them American. Lawrence Levine, a noted social and cultural historian, observed this trend when he wrote that, in “the immediate aftermath of the First World War . . . Americans did not abandon their old verities and values but reasserted them with renewed vigor.”30

H. S. Hitchcock astutely predicted that a revival of David Harum would have a nationalizing effect on an increasingly diverse population. As a number of historians have noted, there was, after World War I, considerably less tolerance for ethnic diversity than there had been even during the Progressive Era. There were widespread campaigns to ensure the homogeneity of American social and cultural life for fear that “a house divided against itself will surely fall.” Hitchcock writes in her appeal to Crane, “The slogan of today is Americanization. In every city, town and village the Community spirit is bending every effort to make Americans of the Foreigners from all over the world who are making their homes here. . . . Does it not seem a more fitting time than ever to put ‘David Harum’ on the stage?”31

David Harum, with William H. Crane again in the title role, toured the country for nearly a year, filling playhouses with an eager audience. Through careful management and with different dramatic companies, Mrs. Hitchcock was able to keep it on the touring circuit well into the early 1920s. Insofar as David Harum, the character, represented the middle-class American ideal, both prosperous and full of integrity, he became

31. See n. 27.
a benchmark by which foreigners—or, as David Harum called all non-Americans, “Dutchman”—were to be socialized and subsumed into the American fold. Clearly, David Harum was no simple form of entertainment, nor a trivial type of commercialized escapism. David Harum, along with other forms of “mass entertainment,” helped define the social and cultural awareness of its American audience.

The third incarnation of David Harum would not occur until some fifteen years later, after the American public had witnessed both the frenzy of unprecedented prosperity and the shock of near economic ruin. In 1934, five years after the great stock market crash, David Harum was immortalized in a talking motion picture, and the character was played by Will Rogers. It is evident that David Harum’s arrival on the “silver screen” was carefully calculated for the effect it would have on an American movie-going audience. As Lawrence W. Levine said of the films of Frank Capra and other filmmakers during the 1930s, “They brought nineteenth-century small-town values and expectations to bear on a crisis involving twentieth-century modern bureaucracies.” Levine makes no specific mention of David Harum, but this nineteenth-century novel was easily adaptable to the context of socially conscious filmmaking during the Great Depression. Though billed as an “Old Time Comedy,” David Harum was offered to the American people as a serious tonic, one intended to restore optimism, a sense of pride, and a faith in American character where faith in the American dollar had failed.

While writing about the myth that disillusionment with failed American institutions was a localized phenomenon, limited to the Midwestern Regionalists or the Southern Agrarians, Levine notes that “the films of the 1930s remind us that similar laments could be found in the mass culture of the Great Depression. A significant number of the decade’s films were concerned with restoration, as if something had been removed from American life.” Again, it is plain to see how David Harum became a natural choice among filmmakers as a “classic” that could be drawn out of the nineteenth century and brought to bear on the twentieth-century state of “modern decay.” If something had been removed or lost in the lives of Americans, as Levine suggests, then David Harum would, by example, encourage Americans to reinvest their faith in human industry and the once-bold and self-affirming national character. The following excerpt from a retrospective article, written by H. S. Hitchcock in 1938 for

---

32. Levine, Unpredictable Past, 250.
33. Levine, The Unpredictable Past, 248.
the *New York Times*, places David Harum, the idealized nineteenth-century character, in the context of twentieth-century social reality. She writes:

David Harum [was] not so much created as crystallized out of the native American consciousness. In essence—though he does not wear a chin beard or a stove pipe—David Harum is Uncle Sam himself.

In other words, though the rustic arena has been contracted by the march of civilization and the rustic idiom in which David’s shrewdness is wrapped has lost its familiarity, if not its savor, to many city-bred Americans, the combination of gifts which made Harum a popular character is still a typical combination. It is the combination which makes for success today. It consists in having a head for business, a knack for using it, and a gift for the gab which is at once accessory to the main chance, weighted with a true sense of values and armed with humor. The cracker-barrel sage is not essentially changed by becoming the sidewalk philosopher; the born trader is not shorn of his cunning by transferring his activity from the horse market to the stock market.34

The message was not that Americans should return to the rustic past of a now-distant nineteenth-century society, but that the values defining the American consciousness of that age, as embodied by David Harum, should be appropriated and brought to bear on the present (1938) predicament of modernity.

Though the centers of urban industry represented progressivism and a sense of advancement at the turn of the century, during the depression the cities came to represent urban corruption and institutional failure. Levine writes, “Throughout the films of the Depression it was the city, as representative of modernity, that corrupted the traditional dream and fouled the promise of America; the city that spawned the amoral men and fallen women of the gangster films; the city that formed the backdrop for the glittering but empty antics of glamorous men and women of the decade’s screwball comedies.”35 Just as these films critically depicted the moral and institutional decline that beset the depression years, *David*

“Mis’ Cullom, I want to tell ye a little story.”
Photogravure by B. West Clinedinst.
Harum offered a subtle commentary on the decadence of the 1930s by standing in contrast to it.

Finally, and perhaps most profound in its influence, David Harum spoke to the interests and needs of common Americans, whose faith in a capitalist system had failed them. Other films of the depression era focused on the banking crisis as the definitive event of the depression and the decade of the 1930s. Levine notes, “In American Madness (1932) . . . Capra told the story of Tom Dixon, a banker who championed the average depositor in a manner that buttressed traditional values. ‘Let’s get the right kind of security,’ he tells his directors. ‘Not stocks and bonds and that zigzag up and down. Not collateral on paper but character. Character! It’s the only thing you can bank on and it’s the only thing that’ll pull this country out of the doldrums.’”\(^{36}\) One scene in David Harum that undoubtedly stirred the depression-era audience shows Harum calling an old widow (“Mis’ Cullom”), who had been repeatedly late on her mortgage payments, into his office on Christmas day. As if reminiscing, David tells her a long story about the kindness her husband had showed to him as a child, and in an unexpected gesture of charity, he repays the good will shown to him by burning the mortgage in the stove, thereby releasing the old widow from the burden she could not carry. For audiences in the 1930s, David Harum’s kindness and good will must have been even more profoundly stirring than it had been to an earlier generation, which enjoyed relative prosperity and the sense that the future held unbounded promises.

Clearly, David Harum, as a novel and in its other manifestations, has had a significant influence on American culture. Moreover, the book occasioned a historical transition in the publishing industry, through which editors assumed a new role in shaping American literature. Finally, and by no means the least of its achievements, David Harum is a richly amusing portrait of life in a small town. David Harum, with his wit and wisdom reveals a keen understanding of human nature that is as pertinent today as it was nearly a hundred years ago, when he observed, “The’s as much human nature in some folks as th’ is in others, if not more.”

---

36. Levine, Unpredictable Past, 249.