



A French Humorist Visits Minnesota

JOHN T. FLANAGAN

THE LATE nineteenth century was the heyday of the lecture platform in the United States. Neither before nor since has the public flocked so willingly to gather up the pearls of wit or wisdom flung casually or vigorously from every imaginable kind of rostrum. In the days when radio and television were unknown, the pulpit was declining in influence, and the newspaper was exercising only a sporadic effect, it was the platform sage who came into the most intimate contact with the people. Philosophers like Ralph W. Emerson, temperance polemicists like John B. Gough, emancipated slaves like Frederick Douglass, literary celebrities like George Washington Cable and Mark Twain, evangelists like Dwight L. Moody — all came to the lyceum in an effort to entertain or persuade large audiences, and often of course to replenish a lean purse.

These speakers were Americans who had won their place by professional competence and who frequently held their audiences by rhetorical power. In such circumstances it is all the more remarkable that one of the great successes of the period was gained by a Frenchman, and by a Frenchman, moreover, who ventured to compete with native entertainers on their own ground. Certainly a Minnesota newspaper paid a singular compliment to Paul Blouet when it asserted that of all foreigners he approached most closely to the American humorist.¹

Today the name of Leon Paul Blouet is relatively unfamiliar, but in the last decade of the nineteenth century it was well known in England and the United States, not to speak of his native France. For Blouet, using the pseudonym of Max O'Rell, had undertaken long lecture tours in the English-speaking countries and had also written several volumes of sharp comments on his travels which achieved a rather wide

Mr. Flanagan, a professor of English at the University of Illinois, is well known for his work in the field of midwestern literature. He has contributed numerous articles to Minnesota History and to other regional journals.

circulation. Born in Brittany in 1848, Blouet in his early maturity entered the army and served as an officer in the Franco-Prussian War. Mustered out because of wounds sustained in that conflict, he migrated to England where he worked for many years as a teacher and as a correspondent for French journals.²

It was during his English residence that he began to develop his faculty for perceiving national differences which he described both humorously and with acerbity in his books. *John Bull et Son Île*, published in 1883, and subsequent volumes extended his reputation until, in the autumn of 1887, he was emboldened to go to the United States. A lecture tour which kept him busy for six months introduced him to audiences from Boston to Florida and as far west as Chicago. In 1890 he repeated his tour, this time enlarging his itinerary to include Canadian cities, the Middle West, and the Ohio Valley. One result of this second visit was *Un Français en Amérique*, published in 1891, perhaps his most widely read book, in which he followed a long nineteenth-century tradition of European comment upon American manners and customs.³ Blouet began a third tour in 1893 which was to have carried him throughout the English colonies, but ill health compelled him to relinquish this plan. In 1902 he settled in Paris as the French correspondent for the *New York Journal*, and the following year he died.

IT WAS DURING his travels in 1890 that Blouet visited the Twin Cities. Under the direction of the famous impresario, Major James B. Pond, the Frenchman began his tour in Tremont Temple, Boston, on January 6 with a lecture entitled "A National Portrait Gallery of the Anglo-Saxon Races." Some 2,500 people heard his remarks. Varying his material by topical allusions but seldom altering his chief thesis, he addressed enthusiastic audiences in New York, Buffalo, and Pittsburgh. Gradually working his way westward, he spoke in Chicago, and on February 18 he arrived at St. Paul to pay, as he remarked, "a professional visit to the two great sister cities of the north of America."⁴

¹ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, February 19, 1890.

² For biographical information on Blouet, see *Encyclopaedia Americana*, 4:118 (New York, 1964); *Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplement 1901-1911, 1:183 (London, 1939); *Larousse Du XXe Siècle*, 1:738 (Paris, 1928).

³ The English version, *A Frenchman in America* (New York, 1891), bore the subtitle *Recollections of Men and Things*.

⁴ *A Frenchman in America*, 214.

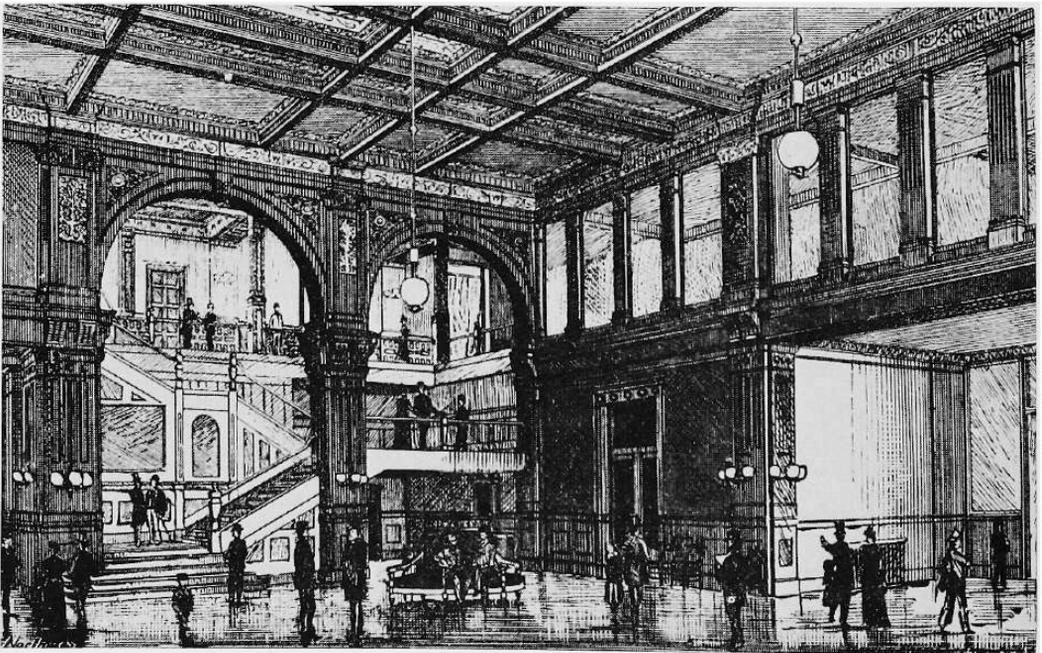


It did not take the visitor long, however, to perceive that the vaunted “sisterliness” was highly superficial. His earliest comments relate to the municipal friction that he observed. Minneapolis and St. Paul, he declared, “are near enough to shake hands and kiss each other, but I am afraid they avail themselves of their proximity to scratch each other’s faces.” He also appended a typical anecdote to substantiate his charges of mutual jealousy — a jealousy, incidentally, which he found characteristic of a great many American cities which were geographically juxtaposed: “St. Paul charges Minneapolis with copying into the census names from tombstones, and it is affirmed that young men living in either one of the cities will marry girls belonging to the other so as to decrease its population by one. The story goes that once a preacher having announced, in a Minneapolis church, that he had taken the text of his sermon from St. Paul, the congregation walked out *en masse*.”⁵ It is not hard to understand after such stories that American audiences were frequently beguiled into believing that they were hearing a genuine native humorist.

More seriously, Blouet was pleased with the appearance of the Twin Cities. In the published account of his tour he remarked that both Minneapolis and St. Paul “are large and substantially built, with large churches, schools, banks, stores, and all the temples

*The grand stairway and lobby
of the West Hotel
as they appeared in 1887*

⁵ *A Frenchman in America*, 215.



that modern Christians erect to Jehovah and Mammon." Moreover, he had praise for the hostleries in which he stayed, the Ryan Hotel in St. Paul and the West Hotel in Minneapolis. The latter particularly impressed him, and he compared it favorably with the outstanding caravansaries of the country.⁶

Even his arrival at a time when the thermometer registered thirty degrees of sub-zero temperature did not disconcert him. For Blouet like other foreign observers attributed the energy and prosperity of the Yankee to the bright and bracing climate of North America.⁷ He remarked: "The air here is perfectly wonderful, dry and full of electricity. If your fingers come into contact with anything metallic, like the hot-water pipes, the chandeliers, the stopper of your washing basin, they draw a spark, sharp and vivid. One of the reporters who called here [Minneapolis], and to whom I mentioned the fact, was able to light my gas with his finger, by merely obtaining an electric spark on the top of the burner. When he said he could thus light the gas, I thought he was joking."⁸ He also professed that he did not mind the cold and informed a reporter in St. Paul that professionally an arctic climate suited him admirably as it induced more people to come to hear him.⁹

Blouet gave his first Minnesota lecture at the People's Church in St. Paul, February 18, 1890. His subject as usual was "A National Portrait Gallery of the Anglo-Saxon Races," in which he paid his respects, sometimes politely, sometimes maliciously, to the French, English, Scotch, and Americans (one of his peculiarities was his consistent omission of the Irish). Advertisements had billed him as "the great French wit and satirist" who "will give an amusing talk," and a rather large audience braved sub-zero weather to hear Blouet analyze racial types. After the lecture the humorist was guest of honor at a dinner at the Minnesota Club, a function attended among others by Messrs. Hiram F. Stevens, Christopher D. O'Brien,



*The Ryan Hotel,
built in 1884 and
razed in 1962*

*St. Paul's Minnesota Club
in the late 1880s*



⁶ *A Frenchman in America*, 35, 216. According to the *Minneapolis Tribune* of February 20, 1890, Blouet occupied room number 208 in the West Hotel, the one always reserved for Thomas Lowry when the municipal traction magnate was in the city. The lecturer compared the West Hotel with the Grand Pacific Hotel in Chicago, the Windsor in Montreal, and the Cadillac in Detroit.

⁷ *A Frenchman in America*, 216. See also Blouet's earlier book, written in collaboration with Jack Allyn, *Jonathan and His Continent*, 249 (New York, 1889).

⁸ *A Frenchman in America*, 219.

⁹ *St. Paul Dispatch*, February 18, 1890.

Edwin W. Winter, George H. Moffet, Delos A. Montfort, Ambrose Tighe, and Eugene V. Smalley (who had introduced the lecturer to the audience).¹⁰

THE PRESS REPORTS of Blouet's talk were uniformly flattering. According to the *Pioneer Press* the Frenchman succeeded where hundreds of foreigners had failed. "His satire, while biting, is honest, good-natured and devoid of offense. John Bull, Sandy McDonald, the typical Frenchman and Brother Jonathan were each and collectively whipped with a lash of small, tingling cords." Blouet centered most of his remarks on John Bull, and John, said the St. Paul reporter, "being the tougher, is the better able to sustain the onslaught." The Scot, on the other hand, was celebrated for his wit, his shrewdness, and his common sense.¹¹

The *Globe* critic, while praising the lecturer for his attractive delivery and impervious good humor, pointed out that much of the material was anecdotal. Typical of Blouet's sallies was the remark that the Scots were so thrifty that the Jews could not make a living north of the Tweed: they came, they saw, they left. But the reviewer also commented on the speaker's disparagement of the Yankee. For Blouet declared that Jonathan (his generic name for the American) was not a gentleman: he was talkative as a child, he was inquisitive beyond the pale of good manners, he chewed tobacco, and—*horresco referens*—he spat! The lecturer hastened to add that the uncanny accuracy with which Jonathan found the brass cuspidor partly atoned for the offense of expectoration!¹²

Blouet met the reporters who trooped to the Ryan Hotel to interview him with all the insouciance of his race. In return he was described as a dapper Frenchman who wore his monocle with the ease of long habit.¹³ Furthermore, "The famous satirist is fairly bald and wears a beard which, only a fringe at the sides, tapers into a slender imperial at the chin. He



Jonathan: "What yearly income does your books and lectures bring in?"

¹⁰ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, February 19, 1890.

¹¹ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, February 19, 1890. The perennial appeal of such comparisons can be seen in the contemporary popularity of various books by the French wit and satirist, Pierre Daninos. See, for example, *Les Carnets du Major W. Marmaduke Thompson* (Paris, 1954); *Le Secret du Major Thompson* (Paris, 1956); and *Un Certain M. Blot* (Paris, 1960). The second of these books is set partly in New York and contrasts French, English, and American social customs.

¹² *St. Paul Daily Globe*, February 19, 1890.

¹³ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, February 19, 1890.

talks with a French accent, although a resident of London for seventeen years.”¹⁴

In conversation with his interviewers Blouet seemed unwilling to admit that a book might eventuate from his current lecture tour. He praised American means of transportation as more comfortable and more economical than European and remarked that he had often, on his travels throughout the United States, been mistaken for a drummer. But his Gallic wit never failed him, and to the inevitable question of what *line* he carried, he always replied, “French goods!”¹⁵

A reporter from the *Minneapolis Tribune* who interviewed him at the West Hotel found him amiable and witty but extraordinarily sensitive about his hat, which he customarily wore indoors to ward off chills.¹⁶ He told his interviewer that he did not dislike reporters save when they annoyed him about his head-gear, adding: “Some times they come in and ask me if I have anything to say. And then they sit down and fold their arms and think I must wind myself up and then talk like a machine, so.” Whereupon he gave a vivid physical demonstration of his point, turning an imaginary crank in his side.¹⁷

He then praised the Americans for their friendliness and warm sympathy. “But,” he said, “America to the traveler is a feeling of monotony. There are long streets and square blocks in your cities, but all alike. The telegraph poles stand just so on all the streets, and overhead there is the web of wires.”¹⁸

Blouet’s Minneapolis lecture was as well received as that in St. Paul. According to the *Minneapolis Journal*

¹⁴ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, February 19, 1890.

¹⁵ *St. Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, February 19, 1890.

¹⁶ *St. Paul Daily Globe*, February 19, 1890.

¹⁷ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 20, 1890.

¹⁸ *Minneapolis Tribune*, February 20, 1890.



Blouet's impression of American newspaper reporters as caricatured in his book, A Frenchman in America

of February 21, 1890: "Blouet has all the wit and grace that one expects in a Frenchman, and is a clever critic of manners. He has learned one trait of the American people by heart, and that is their good nature. He has found out that an American audience will pay money to hear themselves talked about, even though they are made ridiculous." The reviewer observed further that the lecturer had seen America only superficially — that his comments were limited to the railroads and streetcars and to the travelers met en route, but that whatever Blouet had perceived he reported with singular vivacity. Thus, "The American was the only man under the sun in his estimation who can play poker and swear a blue streak one hour, and sing gospel hymns with just as much gusto the next hour. Foreigners were adepts in one or the other, but never in both."

Blouet also praised the gallantry toward women which had made the American world famous and declared that although the United States was as yet a youthful nation and its typical citizen probably not yet born, the time would come when it would exercise an influence unparalleled by that of any other nation.¹⁹ Apparently whatever umbrage might have been taken at Blouet's censure of American manners was dispelled by his practised compliments and invariable amiability.

PAUL BLOUET was the only professional humorist imported by Major Pond in his long career of catering to American audiences, and Pond remarked astutely that the Frenchman lost some of his favor by writing several rather acidulous books on the sights and persons he had observed.²⁰ Despite Blouet's inveterate good nature and jocularity when on the lecture platform, he was unable or unwilling to expunge completely from his writing his Gallic barbs. His wit flashed with a rapier's speed amid the peccadilloes of Anglo-Saxon humanity and flicked the quiddities of Briton, Scot, Gaul, and Yankee. It was, as a consequence, not surprising that a raw spot should be exposed now and then by the swordsman's skill. The American public, perhaps remembering the savage indictment administered by Frances Trollope a half



In England



¹⁹ *Minneapolis Journal*, February 21, 1890.

²⁰ J[ames] B. Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius: Memories of Famous Men and Women of the Platform and Stage*, 235 (New York, 1900).

century earlier, was not always ready to accept such treatment with complacency.²¹

The lyceum phenomenon represented by Blouet is today obsolete. Certainly the partial reporting of speeches by newspaper, radio, and television has made it inadvisable for any platform celebrity to tour the country and deliver the identical lecture from every rostrum. But in 1890 the lecturer found it needless to vary his remarks other than topically, with the result that the press reports of his lectures include the same anecdotes and the same inferences. The reader of Blouet's books, too, will find that he was not averse to dwelling on similar ideas in successive volumes. Such matters as the insolence of American reporters, the liveliness and inaccuracy of American journalism, the annoying curiosity of strangers whom one encountered while traveling, the phenomenal rapidity of city growth in the United States, the Yankee's consummate contempt for distance — these subjects constantly arrested Blouet's attention and formed the nucleus for a string of illustrative stories.

These stories did not lack point, for, as Pond well said, Blouet was the "heroic mirth provoker of his time." To realize the peculiar flavor of his humor, one has only to examine the illustrations in his volume, *A Frenchman in America*.²² One series depicts the typical English, French, and American married couple: the English lord and master stalks into a room with force and emphasis, his mate almost hidden behind his ample figure; the French couple glide along together with perfect mutual sympathy and understanding, each holding the other's hand; but the American wife brushes vigorously forward with a swish of her Victorian skirts while her husband trudges meekly in train.

Blouet's remarks were obviously based on swift, often incomplete observation of men and manners as the traveler was catapulted about America in the Pullman cars which he so much admired; and too often, as the *Minneapolis Times* noted, they were bounded by the streetcar and the cuspidor.²³ Blouet had the flair of

²¹ See Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). The writer of the sketch of Max O'Rell's life in the *Dictionary of National Biography* remarked that the Frenchman followed in the path of Voltaire and Taine, that he was a tolerant and shrewd observer, mixing flattery with his criticism.

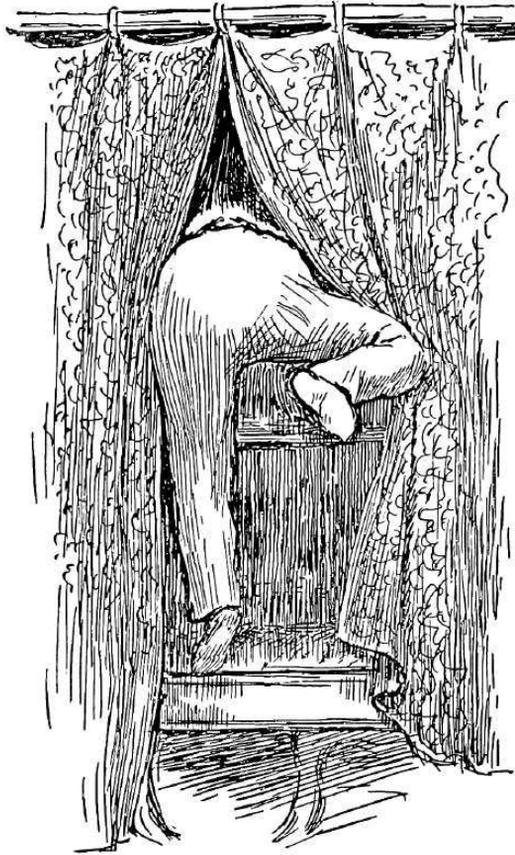
²² Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius*, 235. The illustrations were the work of the American commercial artist, E. W. Kemble.

²³ *Minneapolis Times*, February 21, 1890.

In France



In America



The Pullman car

the trained journalist for the picturesque, for the eccentric, for the high lights, regardless of whether they were representative. Indeed, he himself was often the best example of the false practices of which he accused American reporters.

Twin City audiences seem to have appreciated Blouet's sallies even if they did not value his social criticism too highly. The articulate, witty Frenchman, renowned equally as raconteur, soldier, and journalist, was a pleasant contrast to the usual midwestern platform fare, and as an entertainer he occupied a niche only a few steps below that of the already immortal Mark Twain. Blouet received no more significant compliment than that which classified him as *almost* a native humorist.

ALL CARTOONS used with this article are from Blouet's book, *A Frenchman in America*, which is cited elsewhere. The pictures on pages 14 and 15 are from the *Northwest Magazine* of March, 1885, April, 1887, and February, 1888.



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