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The Little Colonel:
A Phenomenon in Popular Literary Culture

By Sue Lynn Stone McDaniel

The influence of children's writers upon the early perceptions and world views of their readers is difficult to measure. Women's historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg characterized nineteenth-century children's literature as teaching girls that "their greatest happiness lay in an unending routine of caring for the needs of others."¹ Southern women's historian Anne Firor Scott has recalled regretting as a child that she had not been born in slavery times after reading a book entitled *The Little Colonel*.² Its author, Annie Fellows Johnston, published a series of twelve novels between 1895 and 1912 which influenced thousands of other readers to emulate the main character, Lloyd Sherman, and her chums. Several generations of impressionable young readers idealized the Old South and accepted the selfless values which Johnston taught through the Little Colonel series.

Johnston saw her own personal experiences as being an integral part of her creative process. Born in Evansville, Indiana, in 1863, she credited her mother with instilling in her a love for books. Learning to read at the age of five, Johnston held her book in one hand, clutched her mother's skirts in the other, and trailed her mother around the house while she did housework. "I was fain to prove the truth of Scripture," Johnston later commented, "that 'he may run that readeth.'"³

¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), 213. Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, all citations of published works are to those by Annie Fellows Johnston.

² Anne Firor Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible* (Urbana, Ill., 1984), 243.

³ *The Land of the Little Colonel* (Boston, 1906), 3, 38-39 (hereafter LLC); "Once in Old Kentucky," *Saturday Review of Literature* (November 15, 1930), 347; Dorothea Lawrance Mann, "The Author of the Little Colonel Series," *Publisher's Weekly* (October 24, 1931), 1925; Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, *The Junior Book of Authors* (New York, 1935), 206.

Having always wanted to author a book, Johnston's mother valued writing as a gift which should be nourished; she encouraged Johnston to cease her household duties and take up her pen whenever she felt the urge to be creative. During her adolescence, Johnston explored the world of available books, including her father's theological collection and her church's library. At the age of sixteen, she coauthored with her sister a poem which was published in *Gems of Poetry*. Her first literary earnings totaled seventy-five cents for the poem "Apple Blossoms," published in a high-school newspaper.⁴

After attending a district school and studying one year at the State University of Iowa, Johnston taught school, worked in an office, and traveled in New England and Europe. Perhaps it is not surprising that having been reared in a world filled with family, she chose to marry her second cousin William L. Johnston in 1888. When he died four years later, he left her with three stepchildren. Economic necessity thereafter forced her to develop her writing talent in earnest.⁵

In 1893, she published her first book, entitled *Big Brother*, based on a summer she and her sister Albion spent in Iowa. Not until her visit to Pewee Valley, a community east of Louisville where her stepchildren had previously lived with their aunt, did she find the inspiration for her most memorable character, the Little Colonel. Johnston's depiction of Pewee Valley as the prototype for the land of the Little Colonel admitted her preference for days long past: "I felt as if I had stepped back into a beautiful story of antebellum days," she later wrote. "Back into the time when people had leisure to make hospitality their chief business in life, and could afford for every day to be a holiday."⁶

⁴ "Old Kentucky," 347; Kunitz and Haycraft, *Junior Book of Authors*, 206; Cale Young Rice, "Annie Fellows Johnston," in E. A. Alderman et al., eds., *Library of Southern Literature*, 17 vols. (Atlanta, 1923), 17: 325.

⁵ *LLC*, 82-89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89, 85.

Johnston described her creative process as having three sources: the state of Kentucky, her imagination, and her memories. One biographer noted: “By drawing on her own idealized childhood and the scenes and people she loved, she created a glamour about her characters which charmed her youthful readers.”⁷ Ironically, Johnston, writing at the dawn of a new century, beckoned her readers back to idealized antebellum days. The continuing popularity of the books in effect shouted the reluctance of her readers to march boldly into the twentieth century.

Other contemporary writing echoed Johnston’s themes. In *Social Life in Old Virginia* published in 1898, Thomas Nelson Page’s description of an antebellum Virginia matron differed little from the saintly women found in the land of the Little Colonel:

Her life was one long act of devotion, – devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children, devotion to her servants, to the poor, to humanity. Nothing happened within the range of her knowledge edge that her sympathy did not reach and her charity and wisdom did not ameliorate. . . . The training of her children was her work. She watched over them, inspired them. . . .⁸

Indeed, Johnston’s land of the Little Colonel perpetuated the ideals of southern patriarchy of the 1850s. Mary Ware’s description of Kentucky “as a place full of colored people and pretty girls and polite men” supports historian Anne Firor Scott’s recent analysis:

“Motherhood, happy families, omnipotent men, satisfied slaves – all were essential parts

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3; Verne Lockwood Samson, “Annie Fellows Johnston,” in Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20 vols. (New York, 1933-36), 10: 138.

⁸ Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia* (New York, 1898), 38-42

of the image of the organic patriarchy.”⁹

In the land of the Little Colonel, blacks were faithful, superstitious, musically inclined, and beloved servants. On several occasions, they responded to Lloyd in a style typical of plantation lore. A representative description notes that “two or three darkies, with banjoes and mandolins . . . added to the general festivities by a jingling succession of old plantation melodies.”¹⁰ They were also referred to as “Sambo” and “pickaninnies.”¹¹

Throughout the series, blacks never rose in social status from the servants’ cabins to which Lloyd’s grandfather, Colonel Sherman, consigned them in the first volume.¹² Prior to attending the wedding of a black couple, Lloyd explained the bond between their families: “You see, Sylvia’s grandfather was the MacIntyre’s coachman befoah the wah, and her mothah is our [cook] old Aunt Cindy. She considahs that she belongs to us and we belong to her.”¹³

An admirer wrote to Johnston of the similarity between the land of the Little Colonel and her own childhood memories, including her typical southern planter’s home and her old Mammy.¹⁴ One of Johnston’s most popular characters, Mom Beck, brought to life the black mammy for thousands of impressionable young readers at the same time that Lily H. Hammond was calling for the burial of the black mammy in her book, *In*

⁹ *The Little Colonel: Maid of Honor* (Boston, 1906), 53; Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, 184.

¹⁰ *The Little Colonel in Arizona* (Boston, 1905), 89.

¹¹ *The Little Colonel Stories* (Boston, 1899), 24; *The Little Colonel's Hero* (Boston, 1903), 187; *The Little Colonel's House Party* (Boston, 1900), 139; *Arizona*, 257.

¹² *Little Colonel Stories*, 25.

¹³ *Maid of Honor*, 242.

¹⁴ Tempie E. Rogers to Annie Fellows Johnston (hereafter AFJ), November 14, 1906, Johnston-Bacon Papers, Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana.

Black and White: An Interpretation of Southern Life.¹⁵

Yet many of Johnston's contemporaries seemed to feel perfectly comfortable with the world she created. Describing the author as possessing "a rare gift in producing little stories in the nature of allegories full of spiritual significance and beauty," the Boston *Transcript* hailed her as "the most gifted and the most helpful of the present-day writers for young people."¹⁶ In an essay in the December 1913 issue of *Saint Nicholas*, a colleague from the Louisville Author's Club praised Johnston for teaching "us to dream big dreams, and then to do the littlest task in the cheerfulest spirit."¹⁷ In the introduction to Johnston's autobiography, *The Land of the Little Colonel*, Alice Hegan Rice wrote:

Hundreds of thousands of girls have met their own problems in the problems of their favorite heroines. They have seen the first perplexities of life faced beautifully and spiritually; they have seen that stupid little word 'duty' glorified into something fine and noble; they have seen the small and seemingly insignificant things of life take on a new and beautiful dignity.¹⁸

Johnston's friend thus identified the greatest value which Johnston herself placed on her work. Responding to criticism that her novels had too much "heart interest," which had resulted in their being removed from libraries in Boston and Pittsburgh, Johnston told a gathering at an annual meeting of the American Library Association in Louisville:

15 Lily H. Hammond, *In Black and White: An Interpretation of Southern Life* (New York, 1914).

16 *LLC*, advertisement in endleaves.

17 Margaret W. Vanderhook, "Beloved Writer of Books for Young Folk," *Saint Nicholas* (December 1913), 130.

18 Alice Hegan Rice, "Introduction," *LLC*, x.

For over twenty years I have been receiving letters from the girls of America, and because of these intimate self-revealing little confessions I have tried to put into my books a certain point of view - and that is a normal outlook on school-girl love affairs. . . . I contend that a girl's book of fiction should help her meet the problems that she is encountering right now in her school days, and my letters show that the question of Prince Charming is one of the most vital she has.¹⁹

Johnston explained further that awkward boys with apples were hardly recognizable to girls having only adult fiction and fairy tales at their disposal.²⁰

Thousands of letters to Johnston from readers of all ages amplified the professional community's opinion of her influence. In a letter to Johnston, one Chicago adolescent declared: "I know a great many girls who take the 'Little Colonel' for their model and seek to copy her."²¹ A New Yorker professed: "You will never know how much higher I have tried to build since your books have come to us."²² A girl from Washington, D. C., told Johnston that she believed authors had the right to know their books' influence. But no one more earnestly expressed the readers' gratitude than a twelve-year-old Tennessean:

I learned to love and appreciate my own mother more[,] to love my little chums more, to see the beauty even, in the tall oaks and locusts, and listen to their voices, as I read deeper and deeper into the heart of those books. . . . In fact, where is the

¹⁹ *New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, July 10, 1921.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*; M. Walker, Chicago, to AFJ, n.d., Johnston-Bacon Papers.

²² Edith S. Radley, New York, to AFJ, January 31, 1909, *ibid.*

little girl that doesn't aspire to higher ideals, when they read your books?²³

Despite Johnston's perpetuation of an idealized Old South, many of the lessons the turn-of-the-century author taught still find merit in current literature. A review of the legends contained in the series illuminates Johnston's most persuasive texts. In "The Legend of the Three Weavers," the Little Colonel's father cautioned his daughter against marriage to an unfit sailor. A wise girl does not decide to marry any gentleman whose character does not measure up to a silver yardstick containing three notches, he declared. A suitable prince is clean, honorable, and strong.²⁴ "The Legend of Camelback Mountain" taught Mary Ware to acquire knowledge from every experience of human weakness and human need and in that knowledge to gain the quick insight and deep comprehension necessary to understand people. Later in the same volume, Mary learned the "Lesson of the Bees": by sealing up whatever has no right in your life's hive or whatever is spoiling your happiness, you can fill your days with other interests.²⁵

In *Mary Ware: The Little Colonel's Chum*, the protagonist faced the devastation of her brother's paralysis. A tale entitled *The Jester's Sword* brought Mary comfort. Within the volume she found a quotation which her boarding school principal had used in trying to console her. Madame Chartley called it one of life's greatest tests: "To renounce when that shall be necessary, and not be embittered!"²⁶ Rising above his disfigurement, the jester had learned to endure his sufferings one hour at a time. He focused on bringing cheer to others and, in that way, found it for himself, taking the motto "to ease the burden

²³ Ellen Middleton Young, Washington, D. C., to AFJ, January 24, 1915, *ibid.*; Elizabeth Mynderse Preston, Tennessee, to AFJ, May 29, 1914, *ibid.*

²⁴ *Maid of Honor*, 151.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

²⁶ *Mary Ware: The Little Colonel's Chum* (Boston, 1908), 230, 235.

of the world!”²⁷

In *The Little Colonel's House Party*, the Little Colonel's friend Betty Lewis told the story of “The Road of the Loving Heart,” in which Robert Louis Stevenson served as a friend and wise counsel to the Samoan chiefs. Their gratitude led them to call him Tusitala and to build for him a jungle path which they called “the road of the loving heart.” Through his story, the Little Colonel and her chums were instructed that “fame dies, and honours perish, but ‘loving-kindness’ is immortal.”²⁸

The story of Sir Ederyn the Trusty was perhaps the most powerful lesson Johnston gave her readers. Ederyn preferred death to being unfaithful. His motto “I keep the tryst!” helped Lloyd, Betty, and their chums to make the right decisions many times during their adolescence. The girls daily found ways to apply portions of the tale to menial tasks and bitter disappointments.”²⁹

The lessons taught by the allegories were reinforced by events the Little Colonel, Mary Ware, and their chums experienced throughout the series. But just as powerful – and, unfortunately, often objectionable to modern tastes – were the lessons which Johnston interwove with the narrative. For turn-of-the-century girls, the overwhelming message of marriage and motherhood permeated the series. In the land of the Little Colonel, “the happiness written for you in the stars” could best be found in acquiring the right husband. Although Betty Lewis was encouraged in her writing and Joyce Ware in her career as an artist, Lloyd Sherman's goal of contentment was obviously the author's preference. Through Lloyd's father's response, Johnston summarized her lesson: “Contented people are the most comfortable sort to live with, and such an ambition as

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 230, 236-61.

²⁸ *House Party*, 210-12, 236-37.

²⁹ *The Little Colonel's Christmas Vacation* (Boston, 1905), 73-79, 84, 207.

yours will do more good in your little corner of the world than all the books you could write or pictures you could paint.”³⁰

Lloyd’s grandfather supported similar notions when he said of the Little Colonel that her “gift of observation amounts to a talent, and she has it in her to make herself not only an honor to her sex, but one of the most interesting women of her generation.”³¹ He advised her to devote all her energies to accomplishing a single goal rather than the “modern girl” approach of pursuing a dozen fads. Lloyd considered it a great compliment when her friend Rob Moore told her that “when it’s a question of honor, you measure up like a man!”³²

In *The Little Colonel: Maid of Honor*, four girls discussed the possibility of a girl’s “prince” being “success” rather than a man. Joyce Ware believed that if she struggled for years, making the most of her artistic talent, perfect happiness could be found through recognition as a great artist. Because Lloyd never had aspired to a career, her final assessment that her marriage was better than all the books anyone could ever write was consistent with Johnston’s message that marriage and homemaking were more valuable to society than women’s aspiring to careers.³³

Throughout the series, Lloyd’s mother and Mary’s mother were role models. In the second volume, two of the house-party guests suffered from being motherless children. Upon hearing Mrs. Sherman’s “straightforward words of warning,” Eugenia desired “to grow more like the gentle woman beside her, sweet and sincere, unselfish and

³⁰ *Arizona*, 311-12.

³¹ *Maid of Honor*, 275.

³² *Ibid.*, 280, 294-95.

³³ *Ibid.*, 190-91; *Mary Ware’s Promised Land* (Boston, 1912), 170.

helpful.”³⁴ In the last volume, the value of a mother’s love and training was restated.

Mary realized that it was her mother,

who had lifted their life out of the ordinary by the force of her rare personality.

Through all their poverty and trouble and hard times she had kept fast hold on her early standards of refinement and culture. . . . [It was] not so much by what she said as what she was. One felt her hopefulness, her serenity of soul, as one feels the cheer of a warm hearthstone.³⁵

Madame Chartley provided a similar role model, “not so much for the fine ladies she . . . made them with her high-bred ways and ideals, but for the example she has set in that . . . no matter in how small a duty, she has never once failed to keep the tryst.”³⁶

Modern readers find a glimmer of progressive ideas in Johnston’s narrative. In *The Little Colonel at Boarding School*, she graphically described the desperate plight of poor mountain whites. One cabin was depicted as “clean, but so pitifully bare of all that is bright and comfortable.”³⁷ Slum lords who prospered while their tenants sickened and died amid unclean and dangerously unstable living conditions became a focus in the last volume of the series, *Mary Ware’s Promised Land*. Johnston used Mary’s friend Phil Tremont as spokesman for her concerns. Phil wondered if Mary’s “association with a woman like Mrs. Blythe, one who made addresses in public” might have resulted in her possessing “strong-minded, women’s rights notions [which would] detract from her

³⁴ *House Party*, 215, 236. See also *The Little Colonel’s Holidays* (Boston, 1903), 177; *The Little Colonel’s Knight Comes Riding* (Boston, 1907), 69.

³⁵ *Promised Land*, 65-66.

³⁶ *Christmas Vacation*, 119.

³⁷ *The Little Colonel at Boarding School* (Boston, 1903), 243.

feminine charm.”³⁸ Mary even renounced her betrothal to keep tryst with her duty of fighting for better housing. But, ever the proponent of marriage, Johnston had Mrs. Blythe herself convince Mary that little Mary Ware could not be as influential as Mrs. Phillip Tremont.³⁹

The evils of gambling and alcoholism were described in *The Little Colonel in Arizona* and *The Little Colonel's Holidays*. Although the gambler eventually repented and became a suitable candidate for marriage, the alcoholic's sins were paid for by his innocent daughters, one of whom died in a rather poignant scene.⁴⁰ At her deathbed, her sister calmly said: “She's so safe, now. No matter what happens, the saloons can't hurt her, now. There'll be no more hungry days, no more beatings. . . .”⁴¹

Consistent with Johnston's sense of her own writing mission, her books preached against reading novels that taught false ideas of value and measurement. The Little Colonel recalled reading a novel in boarding school that had seemed lovely and romantic, and had thrilled them for days. Later she realized it was actually “sentimental, melodramatic, [and] trashy.” Mary Ware later confessed to her brother that she had read a book which her mother would have taken away because of the word “novel.” She confirmed Lloyd's analysis, adding: “Our ideas of society were so crude and funny then. . . All we knew about it we gathered from that book.”⁴²

Johnston also covered a multitude of minor points, including the importance of good manners, letter-writing, frugality, patriotism, patience, sympathy, and industry. Although helping those less fortunate was a common theme, the Little Colonel learned a

38 *Boarding School*, 101, 242-45, 276; *Promised Land*, 248.

39 *Promised Land*, 294-95.

40 *Holidays; Arizona*, 245-49, 300-302; *Promised Land*, 304.

41 *Holidays*, 229.

42 *Mary Ware in Texas* (Boston, 1910), 123-24; *Boarding School*, 160, 272-73; *Knight Comes Riding*, 71-75.

difficult lesson when trying to do a good deed for a woman her family identified as “po’ white trash.” Charity, she discovered, must not be wasted on individuals who do not appreciate your benevolence.⁴³

Throughout the series, talismans served as useful reminders and comforters. Beginning in the first volume, little Lloyd found inspiration in an object. She held tightly to her mother’s glove to help her “homesick soul to be brave and womanly.”⁴⁴ The second volume, *The Little Colonel’s House Party*, included Tusitala rings, which each of the four girls wore as “a helpful reminder” of Robert Louis Stevenson’s example that a noble life would never be forgotten.⁴⁵ Lloyd counted the Red Cross on her dog’s grave as another talisman “to remind her that only through unselfish service to others can one reach the happiness that is highest and best.”⁴⁶ In *The Little Colonel’s Christmas Vacation*, Lloyd strung a rosary of pearls, adding a pearl “every night [as] a visible token that she had tried to live that day through unselfishly and well, – that she had kept tryst with the duty of cheerfulness which we all owe the world.”⁴⁷

A series of proverbs interwoven in the series would appeal to modern-day readers. Such statements include “I only mark the hours that shine,” “Love can always find a way,” “Strive till you overcome,” and “Let us be inflexible, and fortune will at last change in our favor.”⁴⁸ Yet, the modern reader balks at a return to an idealized Old South unacceptable to late twentieth century society. Herein, perhaps, lies the principal reason that the Little Colonel series no longer holds the place in American girls’ hearts which it

⁴³ *Christmas Vacation*, 292-312.

⁴⁴ *Little Colonel Stories*, 72-73.

⁴⁵ *House Party*, 240, 246. See also *Holidays*, 89, 108, 115, 121-22; *Boarding School*, 67, 71, 185; *Christmas Vacation*, 329; *Maid of Honor*, 70, 188.

⁴⁶ *Hero*, 272.

⁴⁷ *Christmas Vacation*, 92-94, 298, 329. See also *Knight Comes Riding*, 121-22; *Maid of Honor*, 70.

⁴⁸ *Maid of Honor*, 101; *Hero*, 202; *Knight Comes Riding*, 201; *Promised Land*, 58.

once claimed.

But in the first third of the twentieth century, Johnston's influence was widespread. Although the majority of her readers were young females, Johnston received letters telling her of the diversity of her audience. In 1908, for example, a fifteen-year-old correspondent from Chicago declared: "As a rule I usually read boys books but the 'Little Colonels' are Queen of them all."⁴⁹ Male family members often enjoyed the Little Colonel series as well. The father of three New York girls included the Knight's motto in a 1906 sermon for his congregation. In 1931, a Texan wrote to Johnston: "For quite a long time I have been a reader of your very charming books, and have passed them on to my nephews and nieces. . . . In all of your books there is a fine wholesomeness that we do not find in many volumes of this present day."⁵⁰

Mothers frequently shared their daughters' love for the series. A Vermont letter informed the author: "Mother enjoys them fully as much as I do and she never lets me read one till she can read it with me."⁵¹ Many women wrote personal notes of thanks to Johnston for the influence her books had on their children. The grateful governess of a seven-year-old child identified the series as "the means of a very great change in our little Katherine."⁵² A blind adult whose eighty-five-year-old mother read to her wrote that they were as eager as children for each new volume to be published.⁵³

⁴⁹ "M.J.M.," Chicago, to AFJ, January 3, 1908, Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁵⁰ Dan G. Fisher to AFJ, February 18, 1931, Dan G. Fisher Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman; Elizabeth Farnham, New York to AFJ, February 18, April 22, 1906; Mary Booth Shawn, Missouri, to AFJ, February 3, 1903; Teddy Shawn, Missouri, to AFJ, January 22, 1905; Edith Roberta Fleming, Kentucky, to AFJ, May 7, 1910, all in Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁵¹ Frances H. Tenney, Vermont, to AFJ, February 8, 1909, Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁵² Mary C. Trink, Michigan, to AFJ, March 4, 1905; Gertrude Gibson Haskell, Michigan, to AFJ, February 22, 1903; Mary Booth Shawn to AFJ, February 3, 1903; Farnham to AFJ, February 1906; Noemie LeBourglois, Louisiana, to AFJ, January 24, 1908; Rogers to AFJ, November 14, 1906, January 21, 1907; Mary Kline, Kentucky to AFJ, January 21, 1907, *ibid.*

⁵³ Margaret A. Emerson, New York, to AFJ, April 1, 1910, *ibid.*

Many educators and librarians valued Johnston's work. In some cases, teachers read the Little Colonel books to their students. A librarian in Brooklyn told of the Little Colonel's popularity, while others wrote to Johnston of the difficulty of finding her books in their public libraries because they were always checked out."⁵⁴

Literary colleagues joined others in praising the Little Colonel series. In expressing her own admiration of Johnston's work, the wife of the president of *The Dixie Home* shared a compliment from one of that magazine's readers: "She [Johnston] is to my little ones, just what Louisa Alcott was to me."⁵⁵ The writings of Cale Young Rice, a Louisville playwright and author, indicate how well-respected Johnston was among her peers. The members of the Author's Club, a Louisville group of women writers, valued Johnston for her humor and imagination. Johnston frequently spoke to various literary groups and became vice president of the League of American Pen Women in 1922.⁵⁶

Nowhere is Johnston's popularity and influence more evident than in her fan mail. Letters postmarked from across the United States, Canada, India, China, and Japan testified to her readers' devotion. Several correspondents spoke of having all of the Little Colonel books, "worn from use" and read numerous times. Declining to use public transportation, one little girl in Birmingham walked to and from school in order to save enough money to purchase the books. For some girls, Christmas was not complete without the latest Little Colonel volume.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Jean H. Love, Illinois, to AFJ, March [?], 1905; Marion Seymour, San Antonio, to AFJ, June 3, 1907; Hazel Elizabeth White, New York, to AFJ, October 10, 1907; Rogers to AFJ, January 21, 1907; Anna S. DePree, Michigan, to AFJ, February 21, 1906, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Maude McIver Rountree, Birmingham, to AFJ, February 5, 1907, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Rice, "Annie Fellows Johnston," 327; C. Y. Rice, *Bridging the Years* (New York, 1939), 48; Louisville *Courier-Journal*, May 12, 1922.

⁵⁷ The extant portion of Johnston's fan mail, 1903-17, at the Willard Library, Evansville, Indiana, includes letters from four foreign countries, twenty-seven states, and the District of Columbia. Letters cited in this article include the major city or state of the correspondent in order to indicate the geographical

Johnston found that her audience could be demanding at times. Many readers sought details not outlined in the Little Colonel series. Fan letters rendered pleas for more. When Johnston attempted to conclude the series in 1907 with Lloyd's wedding, twenty-three Boston children signed a petition asking for a sequel which told of Lloyd's married life and children. The author responded to the tremendous number of inquiries concerning a small period missing in her depiction of the Little Colonel's adolescence by writing *Mary Ware: The Little Colonel's Chum*.⁵⁸

A number of youngsters formed Little Colonel clubs. One Kansas City club consisted of three boys and two girls, ages thirteen to sixteen. In an Order of Hildegard in Chicago, the fourteen-year-old girls designed and painted letter paper and used gilt stars for seals. Tusitala rings, symbolic of the road of the loving heart, were worn by girls of all ages – by those whose letters were written in pencil because they were too young to be “allowed to use ink,” as well as by college girls.⁵⁹

Having been inspired to do good works, some children presented the play *The Rescue of the Princess Winsome* to raise funds for charitable groups. A school of expression, utilizing a cast of thirty-eight members and elaborate costumes and settings,

breadth of Johnston's audience. Morrison to AFJ; Tenney to AFJ, February 8, 1909; Isis Knotts, Iowa, to AFJ, July 7, 1910; Marguerite Nicholson, Indiana, to AFJ, October 27, 1907; Anita Latady, Birmingham, to AFJ, July 7, 1910; Anna E. Felch, Michigan, to AFJ, March 31, [1905]; Clara Severance Chase, Montana, to AFJ, June 9, 1910; Evelyn McIntyre, San Francisco, to AFJ, June 6, 1909; Katharine E. Blake, Minneapolis, to AFJ, July 5, 1906, Johnston-Bacon Papers; Rice, “Johnston,” 328; Vanderhook, “Beloved Writer,” 130.

⁵⁸ Knotts to AFJ, July 7, 1910; Latady to AFJ, July 7, 1910; Jean H. Love, Illinois, to AFJ, March [?], 1905; Alma and Christel Crawford, Indiana, to AFJ, July 2, 1908; Margaret I. Scudder, South India, to AFJ, January 16, 1908; Hilda Greenleaf et al., Boston, to AFJ, [1910], Johnston-Bacon Papers; *Mary Ware*, preface.

⁵⁹ MacIntyre to AFJ, June 6, 1909; Isabel Warren Fuller, Virginia, to AFJ, June 6, 1905; DePree to AFJ, February 21, 1906; Teddy Shawn to AFJ, January 22, 1905; Theresa M. McDonnell et al., Philadelphia, to AFJ, 1905; Lillian M. Wayman, Chicago, to AFJ, July 5, 1905; Anthony _____, Missouri, to AFJ, December 25, 1908, Johnston-Bacon Papers; Elizabeth Steele, “Mrs. Johnston's Little Colonel,” in Ray B. Browne et al., *Challenges in American Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1970), 222; LLC, 130-31; John Wilson Townsend, *Kentucky in American Letters, 1784-1912* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1913), 167.

played to a full house in one of Cincinnati's largest downtown theaters. In Philadelphia, the drama met with similar success and additional funds were raised by raffling Little Colonel books. Telling Johnston that her friends, ages twelve to fourteen, desired to rent a hall and perform a play for the benefit of the poor, a California reader implored the author to write another play because *The Rescue of the Princess Winsome* had been given locally the previous year.⁶⁰

In 1909, L. C. Page and Company marketed *The Little Colonel Good Times Book*, in which girls could record their own pleasant happenings just as Mary Ware had done in the Little Colonel series. From keeping her journal, Mary learned that despite the bleakness of the present, good times always return. Having received a *Good Times Record* for her eleventh birthday, a Bowling Green, Kentucky, child understood the volume's purpose, but remained faithful to recording her life accurately when she wrote the next afternoon: "There is something I must put down that isn't good times at least for me."⁶¹ At play, children frequently pretended themselves or their paper dolls to be Lloyd Sherman and her chums. By 1910, the author's stepdaughter had designed paper dolls with photographed faces of the main characters.⁶²

Modern readers are fascinated by the impact these books exerted when they were published. That Johnston's representation of young Kentucky girls influenced their expectations and activities is evident in the correspondence received by Frances Jewell, a

⁶⁰ Virginia Clipper, Ohio, to AFJ, January 2, 1910; Dorothy E. Erskine, Indiana, to AFJ, January 5, 1910; Henry Barr Ingle, Philadelphia, to AFJ, March 8, 1910; Evelyn Vosburgh, California, to AFJ, [1908?], Johnston-Bacon Papers; *LLC*, 131.

⁶¹ *Promised land*, 304; Gladys Wilson, "Annie Fellows Johnston and the Little Colonel Books" (Master's thesis, Western Kentucky University, 1936), 22-23; "Good Times Record of Marjorie Elizabeth Clagett, Bowling Green, Ky.," May 21, 1911, Marjorie Clagett Collection, Manuscripts, Department of Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University. See illustration.

⁶² Trink to AFJ, March 4, 1905; Margaret J. Morrison, New York, to AFJ, February 12, 1905; Marion Knowles, New York to AFJ, November 19, 1907, Johnston-Bacon Papers; Wilson, "Johnston and the Little Colonel Books," 23; Steele, "Mrs. Johnston's Little Colonel," 223.

young Bluegrass girl who later married University of Kentucky president Frank McVey. Responding to an invitation from Jewell, then sixteen, a Lexington chum confided: “To go to a house party has been one of my chief ambitions ever since I read the Little Colonel Books.”⁶³

When *The Little Colonel’s Knight Comes Riding* was published, four girls commented to Jewell about Lloyd Sherman’s choice of husbands. Careful not to reveal the name prematurely, one correspondent included her reaction in an enclosed envelope marked, “To be read after the letter.”⁶⁴ She described the groom as one “who is perfectly dear, and who, when held up to the silver yardstick, not only met its three requirements, but went far beyond.”⁶⁵ Another chum offered Jewell her criticism of the latest volume: “I liked the book ever so much but I don’t believe it comes up to the standard of her other books,” she declared. “There is no old legend in this but we have some of all that have been in the other books.”⁶⁶

The letter penned by Jewell’s cousin provides the modern reader with insight into the concern some contemporaries expressed about Johnston’s powerful influence on impressionable young readers. From her room at Science Hill Academy in Shelbyville, she wrote: “I am simply desperately crazy about it. Honestly after I got through it I didn’t feel like I was even respectable. Did you ever read anything as perfectly sweet.”⁶⁷

Johnston learned of Lloyd’s influence on Michigan girls through her fan mail. In describing to Johnston her 1902 house party, the daughter of the president of Michigan Seminary exclaimed that “one of the nicest times I ever had was suggested by one of your

⁶³ Josephine Farrell to Frances Jewell, August 3, 1905, Jewell Family Papers, Special Collections, M. I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

⁶⁴ Florence Rogers to Frances Jewell, November 5, 1907, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Lulie Logan to Frances Jewell, November 5, 1907, *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Louise Cromwell to Frances Jewell, November 2, 1907, *ibid.*

books.”⁶⁸ Another coed confessed: “When ‘The Little Colonel at Boarding School’ came out it made me wild to go to boarding-school too.”⁶⁹ At a masquerade party at the Michigan Seminary, one girl mimicked Lloyd Sherman’s idea in “Two Little Knights of Kentucky” and dressed as the Queen of Hearts.⁷⁰

Johnston’s books comforted many children during extended illnesses. A five-year-old’s bout with typhoid was made easier by the entertaining books. After her daughter’s death in 1910, a Montana mother expressed her appreciation to Johnston for having created the land of the Little Colonel, which mother and daughter loved. A North Carolina mother, unable to afford anything but the necessities for a daughter who had been “ill with throat trouble, for nearly three years,” requested that Johnston send her copies of any Little Colonel book other than the three they already owned and read frequently. Johnston responded by sending *The Little Colonel’s Holidays* and *The Little Colonel’s Hero*. A patient recovering in a Michigan sanitarium perhaps spoke for many afflicted children when she wrote of her nine-month illness, during which she often passed time by recalling the quotation, “It is but one hour at a time that I am called upon to endure.”⁷¹ She added that, when her condition had improved enough to permit her to read, “all mother needed to do when I became restless was to bring me a ‘Little Colonel’ book and I would be perfectly happy for several hours.”⁷²

Whether they were sick or well, America’s youth devoured Johnston’s work. In 1924, a survey of the most popular children’s books gave awards to *The Little Colonel’s Hero* and *The Little Colonel’s House Party*. At Johnston’s death in 1931, the sales of the

⁶⁸ Muriel Gray, Michigan, to AFJ, February 25, 1903, Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁶⁹ Anna Felch, Michigan, to AFJ, March 31, [1905], *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Gray to AFJ, February 25, 1903, *ibid.*

⁷¹ Hanna Ruth, Illinois, to AFJ, March 10, 1915; Chase to AFJ, June 9, 1910; Mrs. A. R. Parler, North Carolina, to AFJ, December 10, 1901; Anna A. Whitlark, Michigan, to AFJ, January 8, 1910, *ibid.*

⁷² Whitlark to AFJ, January 8, 1910, *ibid.*

least popular volume of the Little Colonel series had reached 81,000 and the most popular 136,000.⁷³ As late as 1954, Johnston's stepdaughter received a letter from Betty Evenson of Wyoming, who wrote that she had just finished reading the series aloud to a niece and young friend. Evenson was elated to "see a couple of modern hard-boiled seventeen-year-olds bawling over the same things that I bawled over when I was a very unsophisticated [*sic*] and countrified seventeen."⁷⁴

Print was but one medium of popularity for Lloyd Sherman and her chums. In 1935, Shirley Temple brought the Little Colonel to the silver screen in a motion picture which premiered in Louisville. *The Louisville Times* reported:

Proof that interest in Annie Fellows Johnson's [*sic*] 'The Little Colonel' has not declined with the years was offered Friday when thousands of children from dozens of communities near Louisville came on interurbans, in private conveyances and in school busses to see what Hollywood has done to one of the most lovable characters created by a Kentucky author. . . .

The paper noted that "the attendance record of the house was broken" by a crowd "estimated at something like 15,000."⁷⁵

Designers opened a line of Little Colonel fashions for girls aged two through twelve. A New York hotel presented a Little Colonel fashion showing. Macy's opened a Little Colonel Shop. While newspapers and magazines devoted columns and photographs

⁷³ Rowland Stockk, "The Little Colonel Lives On," *The L. and N. Employees' Magazine* (January 1956), 37; Mann, "Author of the Little Colonel Series," 1925.

⁷⁴ Betty Evenson to Mary Johnston, April 24, 1954, Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁷⁵ *Louisville Times*, February 23, 1935.

to the latest fad, store advertisements were covered with Little Colonel merchandise. “Little Colonel, Incorporated” granted licenses to twenty-five manufacturers to make “Little Colonel” clothing and other merchandise. In 1935, the Louisville *Herald-Post* announced that factories were producing dresses, coats, hats, shoes, tooth brushes, pocketbooks, handkerchiefs, jewelry, dolls, toys, watches, clocks, and games.⁷⁶ Since that time, thousands of young boys and girls have visited Johnston’s Pewee Valley home, “The Beeches,” which appeared in the series as “The Locusts.”⁷⁷

Another point of interest to modern readers is the series’ accurate portrayal of turn-of-the-century life for many affluent children. Frances Jewell’s correspondence from her Pennsylvania boarding school and Vassar College mirrors Johnston’s descriptions. Homesickness, charitable club activities, the emphasis on clothing, the giving of tokens of friendship and flowers, the admiration for upperclasswomen, concern about poor mountain whites, the importance of education and social etiquette, letterwriting, and social drinking were issues common for both the Little Colonel’s chums and Frances Jewell’s friends.⁷⁸

Although one does not find any references to Annie Fellows Johnston or the Little Colonel in her extant memory books and correspondence, Melville Wortham Otter of Louisville recorded a childhood closely akin to that experienced by Lloyd Sherman and Frances Jewell. Born in 1899, Otter was concerned about the conditions in the Appalachian mountain settlement schools which *The Little Colonel at Boarding School* depicted. In 1914, she wrote of attending Cora Wilson Stewart’s lecture on Moonlight

⁷⁶ Louisville *Herald-Post*, April 13, 1935.

⁷⁷ Kentucky Work Projects Administration, *Biographical and Critical Materials Pertaining to Kentucky Authors: Biography Series*, 3 vols. (Louisville, 1941), 2: 187; Rice, *Bridging the Years*, 49; Louisville *Courier-Journal*, August 7, 1969, October 27, 1974; “The Magnetism of Pewee Valley,” *Southern Living* (October 1970), 20.

⁷⁸ Jewell Family Papers.

Schools at the Women's Club. Two months later, she added: "I'm just dippy for the class to have a play for the benefit of the mountain school."⁷⁹ Otter also wrote frequently of crushes on teachers. When told that Miss Cornell would be informed of her students' affection for her, Otter declared: "We are thinking of committing [*sic*] suicide. I think the Ohio [River] is the best place!!!!!!"⁸⁰ Otter's accounts of class plays, benefits, social events, clothing, etiquette, clubs, commencement activities, her teachers, and her pressing desire to attend a particular boarding school make her another witness to the accuracy of Johnston's depiction of early twentieth-century life.⁸¹

Science Hill Academy correspondence testifies to the accuracy of Johnston's portraits of many boarding school teachers. Located in Shelbyville, this academy educated hundreds of girls from across the United States. "My days there left a great impression on me and have influenced all my days since then" wrote one alumna.⁸² Students admired their teachers' example and strictness. Alumna Mary Jane Mills described one Science Hill teacher as having "a heart of gold under that gruff exterior."⁸³ Each year Science Hill offered two scholarships to Kentucky mountain girls, Upon leaving, one recipient wrote: "I have beautiful examples of unselfishness, . . . moral

⁷⁹ Melville Wortham (Otter) Briney 1914 Memory Book, March 11, May 30, 1914, Melville Wortham (Otter) Briney Papers, Manuscripts Department, Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter Briney Papers). Although she did not mention Annie Fellows Johnston, Melville's interest in literature is apparent in her descriptions of her trip to Cabbage Patch and her visits with Alice Hegan Rice, Cale Young Rice, and Charles Neville Buck. On October 22, 1914, she noted that Mary Johnston had sent an autographed copy of *Lewis Rand* for their Cabbage Patch bazaar.

⁸⁰ Melville Wortham (Otter) Briney 1912-1913 Memory Book, 45, Briney Papers. Emotional interaction between late nineteenth-century women is often misunderstood by late twentieth-century readers. For further information, consult Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 53-76.

⁸¹ Melville Wortham (Otter) Briney Memory Books, 1912-1913, 1914, 1915-May 1916; Melville Wortham Otter to Mother, April 10, 1917, all in Briney Papers.

⁸² Annie Lee Turner to Juliet Poynter, May 15, [n.y.], Science Hill Academy Papers, Manuscripts Department, Filson Club. See also Lulu Sutherland Hahn, "A History of Science Hill Academy" (Master's thesis, University of Kentucky, 1944).

⁸³ Mary Jane Mills to Juliet Poynter, June 14, 1934, Science Hill Academy Papers.

courage, and dear Science Hill to influence my life.”⁸⁴ The missing ingredient in Johnston’s composite of the boarding school teachers were those women, such as Emma Williard of Troy Female Seminary, who encouraged self-respect and self-support, all the while assuring her midnineteenth-century students that marriage was not essential to a useful life.⁸⁵

Other sources also confirm the historical reality of a world similar to that of the Little Colonel. Keeping a diary of her last year at St. Mary’s College in Indiana, Cora Miller recorded adolescent activities and concerns in 1907 and 1908 quite similar to the Little Colonel’s experiences. During their daily walks the female students at Potter College for Young Ladies in Bowling Green, Kentucky, and the Lebanon College for Young Ladies in Lebanon, Tennessee, were not supposed to acknowledge the presence of any male passersby. Students attending the Lebanon College for Young Ladies had to receive, at their home addresses, letters from the male students of Cumberland University, also located in Lebanon.⁸⁶ When characterizing her preparatory school in Massachusetts, Johnston’s cousin told of strict rules, their admiration of classmates and teachers, difficult courses, and the students’ fear of overextending.⁸⁷

On November 14, 1906, a fifty-six-year-old admirer wrote to Johnston: “It seems quite wonderful to me, and would to you, could you know of the many little incidents all

⁸⁴ Glow Francis to Mrs. Poynter and Sisters, June 7, 1925, *ibid.*; *Cincinnati Post*, March [8?], 1937; Hahn, “Science Hill Academy,” 126-29.

⁸⁵ Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, 82.

⁸⁶ “Transcription of Miss Cora Miller’s Diary From Her Last Year At St. Mary’s College, St. Mary, Indiana, 1907-1908,” Manuscripts Department, Filson Club; *1903 Catalogue of the Lebanon College for Young Ladies*, Stockton Archives, Cumberland University, Lebanon, Tennessee; *1907-08 Catalogue of the Lebanon College for Young Ladies*, *ibid.*; interview with Prudie Armstrong Dickson, Lebanon, Tennessee, January 10, 1985, *ibid.*; Sara Tyler, “Potter College for Young Ladies,” Manuscripts, Department of Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University.

⁸⁷ Katharine Adelheid Fellows, Massachusetts, to AFJ, January 22, 1911, Johnston-Bacon Papers.

through *The Little Colonel* books, that really appear as a part of my life.”⁸⁸ Many other correspondents attested to memories of similar settings. Portraying themselves as “southern girls and about the age of your heroine in the *Little Colonel* Series,” two readers told the author that her volumes “constantly call to mind our old Virginia home, Locust Grove, and the good times we use [*sic*] to have.”⁸⁹ Like many other fans, they included their picture in the letter.⁹⁰

Even the incident of the attempted elopement and its resulting publicity presented in *The Little Colonel at Boarding School*, which left Lloyd and her friends feeling disgraced, has a more dramatic Bowling Green counterpart. In 1901, newspapers in Bowling Green, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Louisville carried wildly exaggerated accounts of an attempt by five Bowling Green youths to sneak five Potter College students out of their dormitory by ladder between midnight and 1 a.m. and escort them to a “duck supper.” Publicity of this kind was damaging to both the school’s reputation and that of the young ladies involved; as one Cincinnati newspaper intoned, “The whole affair has been kept a profound secret, and every effort has been made to suppress it.”⁹¹ When a friend married a divorced man across the Ohio River in 1913, Melville Otter wrote: “It is strange how your idols fall because I always thought thought [*sic*] she was so adorable.”⁹² Thus, Johnston’s depiction of the despair experienced by the *Little Colonel* and her friends was consistent with contemporary sources.

If Johnston required additional information to give clarity to her mirror of society,

⁸⁸ Rogers to AFJ, November 14, 1906, *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Mary and Elizabeth Taliaferro, Illinois, to AFJ, July 31, 1905, Johnston-Bacon Papers. See illustration.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* See also Janet D. Hepburn, Indiana, to AFJ, April 7, 1907 and other references in Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁹¹ Louisville *Courier-Journal*, April 5, 1901; Cincinnati *Enquirer*, April [?], 1901; St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, April [??], 1901.

⁹² Melville Wortham (Otter) Briney 1912-1913 Memory Book, 53, Briney Papers.

her readers were more than willing to come to her assistance. A resident of Wellesley, Massachusetts, invited the author to visit, noting “there are many fine situations, and a great deal of material can be had in such a life for story writing.”⁹³ The Michigan Seminary president’s daughter typed a descriptive three-page letter about school life in response to Johnston’s query for details on school pranks.⁹⁴

On a few occasions, Johnston’s fan mail brought requests that she base new stories on her readers’ lives. From North Dakota came an appeal for the author to write a story about four girls and seven boys, ages fourteen to sixteen, who called themselves “the Bunch.” A Kansas City lad described the members of his Little Colonel club, included the romantic pairings, and offered to supply any additional details which Johnston might require for her plot. In childlike sincerity, he concluded: “P.S. Donald is a Christian Scientist so please don’t offend him.”⁹⁵ Drawing upon both her own experiences and those of her devoted audience, Johnston recorded life as she knew it and provides modern readers with insight into the lives of upper-middle-class youths of the turn-of-the-century American South.

Reflecting on the popularity of Johnston’s Little Colonel books, a Louisville *Courier-Journal* contributor commented in 1969 that the books were received with “a kind of religious fervor.”⁹⁶ Johnston’s work was valued by her contemporaries not simply as entertainment, but because her readers were “inspired to emulate the integrity of her characters, who lived in a world where good intentions prevail and where simple virtues

⁹³ Luah M. Butler, Massachusetts, to AFJ, February 5, 1907, Johnston-Bacon Papers.

⁹⁴ Gray to AFJ, February 25, 1903, *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Vera Kelsey and Margaret Williams, North Dakota, to AFJ, January 14, 1906; Teddy Shawn to AFJ, January 22, 1905, both in *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Louisville *Courier-Journal*, August 7, 1969.

are glorified.”⁹⁷ Although Annie Fellows Johnston aspired early in life to write adult fiction, she concluded that the loyalty of her audience could not be found elsewhere. By 1929, she wrote that the personal rewards of her work had led her no longer to regret not achieving a grown-up novel.⁹⁸

Although modern readers question many of the values taught by Annie Fellows Johnston in the Little Colonel series, the impact of the literature on numerous turn-of-the-century children and succeeding generations cannot be doubted. Late twentieth-century readers find in the land of the Little Colonel an idealized view of the antebellum South, where blacks preferred the role of faithful servant, young girls prepared themselves for the role of wife and mother, and married women had leisure to make every day a holiday.

All of Johnston’s references to the “New Woman” who had emerged in American society in the 1880s and 1890s devalued her worth. Rather than advocating the right of women to a career, a public voice, and power, Johnston championed the traditional feminine role. The Little Colonel series is an excellent example of literature that discouraged competition in fields previously defined as masculine, encouraging girls to be “coquettish, entertaining, nonthreatening and nurturing.”⁹⁹ Although successfully pursuing her own writing career, Johnston ironically advocated the perpetuation of nineteenth-century traditional roles in an idealized world. As the rise of the “New Woman” found multitudes of southern women fearful that such change would threaten the stability of the home, Johnston’s influence was profound, as thousands of readers

⁹⁷ Samson, “Annie Fellows Johnston,” 138; Mann, “Author of the Little Colonel Series,” 1927; Farnham to AFJ, February 1906.

⁹⁸ *LLC*, 133.

⁹⁹ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 176, 212.

found comfort in her land of the Little Colonel.¹⁰⁰ Faithful to her chosen task and responsibility, Johnston wrote: “No page that I have ever written was begun without a prayer that it might . . . be taken, blessed and used.”¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Scott, *Making the Invisible Woman Visible*, 219.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*