

NEW INTRODUCTION

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Andrew Carpenter Wheeler's first novel, published in 1890, *The Toltec Cup*, is full of mysteries and misunderstandings that make it a great-great-grandfather of novels and movies like *The Da Vinci Code*, *National Treasure*, and *The Name of the Rose*. But perhaps most interesting to today's readers are the novel's remarkable depictions and connections with New York City and its people.

The Toltec Cup is a sprawling tale of conspiracy and love triangles. At the center is a mysterious silver cup covered in hieroglyphs that goes missing just days after its owner's death. John Wilder, a New York Metropolitan Police inspector, grows suspicious when someone offers a huge reward for the cup's return. Wilder discovers that the owner didn't unintentionally kill himself, as he had been told. Who, after all, accidentally stabs himself through the heart—twice? Wilder traces the reward to Colin Carteret, an artist engaged to the murdered man's daughter, but Carteret swears he'd never heard of the cup until he saw the reward posted in the paper. Together, the men follow the cup's trail to one of New York's slums, a beautiful young woman, Manuella Castleton, and a syndicate that believes that the cup will lead to an extraordinary buried treasure.

Andrew Carpenter Wheeler was already famous as the theater and music critic "Nym Crinkle" when he wrote *The Toltec Cup*. Born in New York City in the 1830s, Wheeler started as a journalist at the *New York Times*, who memorialized him in 1903 as "An aggressive and original writer."¹ Wheeler was for a time editor for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* and worked during the Civil War as a war correspondent, covering pivotal and bloody battles in Tennessee, including the battle of Pittsburgh Landing, also known as Shiloh. After the war, he adopted the Nym Crinkle pen name and became a contentious but thoughtful critic. In his second stint at the *New York World*, under Joseph Pulitzer, he became one of the highest paid journalists in the city. Wheeler may have enjoyed arguing more than having a consistent opinion, but, in the words of one theater historian, in an age when "Most critics were hacks[,] Wheeler took his work very seriously."² In addition to writing about theater, Wheeler also wrote *for* it. While most of his efforts appear to have been unsuccessful, he seems to have collaborated anonymously in two successful melodramas, *The Still Alarm* and *Blue Jeans*, both of which were eventually turned into silent films.

The Toltec Cup announces from its two subtitles that it sits between genres. The original subtitle on the book's title page reads *A Romance of Immediate Life in New York City*. And certainly a love triangle between Colin, Rose (his fiancée), and Manuella plays a significant role. But the idea of "romance" excludes the detective plot that holds the book together. This tension is compounded by the second subtitle, which appears on the novel's cover: *A Tale of the Here and Now in New York City*. But readers who expected the "here and now" to be New York City in 1890 would have been mistaken. Instead, Wheeler set his novel some thirty years earlier, from the summer of 1862 through the summer of 1863, culminating in the secessionist and racist violence popularly known as the New York City Draft Riots. Both the "*Here and Now*" and "*Immediate Life*," of the subtitles are best understood figuratively.

One of Wheeler's acquaintances reported that Wheeler was aiming for "old-fashioned plot, intrigue, and varied movement," such as one would find in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.³ As Wheeler writes in the novel's dedication, he wanted to see whether "the elements of familiar life all around us" could hold something as interesting as "the far off golden afternoons of Boccaccio or the silver nights of Scheherazade." The novel indeed delivers an incident-filled, exotic adventure, but sets it in mundane New York with mundane New Yorkers. They are not princesses and knights in shining armor, even if the novel sometimes jokingly describes them that way.

New York City is so important to the novel that it is almost a character itself. Even when the story takes the train to the suburbs, Manhattan's gravitational pull is obvious. The setting in bucolic Westchester, for instance, is mainly along the Croton Aqueduct, Manhattan's essential fresh water source, and the plot turns in part on details of the aqueduct's basic maintenance. *The Toltec Cup's* New York is a dynamic, changing landscape, and Wheeler takes pains to describe places such as the Gas House District, the Bowery, Union Square, Harlem, and the Meatpacking District as well as their diverse people. This is a New York that was already disappearing for Wheeler's contemporaries in 1890 and is largely gone for us. In fact, it was already disappearing in the novel itself. When Manuella's grandfather secretly buries the cup near Turtle Bay Cove (roughly where United Nations Headquarters now stands), there's nothing there but a brewery and some goats grazing around the rocky outcroppings. When he returns a few weeks later, the place is already transformed. Builders have excavated the spot and are putting up more tenements and brownstones for the city's floods of newcomers. The place the man knew has vanished with the cup.

Wheeler's vision of New York as a place means that even mundane details carry significance for its detective plot. The layout of apartments in a tenement

house in the Gashouse District matter enough that the novel provides a floor plan. (This inclusion is especially interesting when one remembers that in 1890 Jacob Riis included a floor plan for Lower East Side tenements in his groundbreaking photo essay about Manhattan's slums *How the Other Half Lives*.) The floor plan makes clear that the details of New York living matter: it matters that guests must ascend the steps to go through the front door of Mrs. Hannige's boarding house but that unwanted guests can coax their way in through the servant's entrance below street level to interrogate unsophisticated but honest maidservants. It also matters that Mrs. Hannige's house is on 15th Street, across from the Century Club, whose building is still there today, though the club long ago moved. The facticity of the novel led some reviewers to identify it as a fourth genre: the roman à clef, satirizing prominent New Yorkers of the day. To read this novel is to be a little like a tourist, led on an adventure through an 1860s New York City by an 1890s New Yorker, a writer with a journalist's precise eye but also with a native's great fondness for his always-changing city.

Wheeler's celebrity as Nym Crinkle seems to have been enough that publisher Lew Vanderpoole paid him a \$10,000 advance. The sum was outlandish even for Gilded Age New York—the equivalent of almost \$300,000 in 2021—and may have been a sales gimmick. (The information in fact comes from an advertisement for the book.⁴) And it may also be a fabrication, as Vanderpoole was as much a con man as a bookman. Three years before, Vanderpoole had sold *Cosmopolitan* what he claimed was his translation of a supposedly unpublished novel by George Sand, *Princess Nourmahal*. *Cosmopolitan* paid Vanderpoole some of the fee but demanded to see Sand's manuscript before they began printing. Vanderpoole claimed she was a relative of his and that he had translated her work from memory. *Cosmopolitan* had him arrested, but the charges were dismissed on a technicality. His case was widely and gleefully reported. A newspaper in Kinderhook that used to employ Vanderpoole noted, "Unless [he] has acquired a knowledge of French since he left here, he knows nothing of the language."⁵ Vanderpoole, undaunted, later published the novel under George Sand's name.

Vanderpoole had financial problems often. Four years after the publication of *The Toltec Cup*, in 1894, Vanderpoole attempted to borrow £1,000 from the son of the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales. Vanderpoole claimed he had four million francs tied up in a French bank until the next year and needed money to bribe the bank into early access. When his lie was discovered and he was arrested, Vanderpoole objected, "I have received no money. He [the Lord Chief Justice's son] has not lost anything. Why should I be locked up?"⁶ Vanderpoole then tried to shift blame, claiming he was working on behalf of someone else. New York City has a reputation for attracting and perhaps

nurturing a type of bamboozler with big dreams, fast talk, and questionable morals. Vanderpoole seems to have been one of them.

As a journalist and dramatist with extensive connections, Wheeler must have known of Vanderpoole's character. Perhaps Vanderpoole, having convinced an investor that Nym Crinkle's name would create an immediate bestseller, really did offer a huge sum to publish *The Toltec Cup*. Perhaps Wheeler welcomed the risk of publishing with Vanderpoole, given that his best theatrical successes to date, such as *The Still Alarm*, had been lowbrow. Given Vanderpoole's own fortune hunting and his ability to create mysterious sources who disappear when needed, it might be there was no more perfect publisher for *The Toltec Cup*.

The Toltec Cup received some reviews as vicious as a theater critic with enemies ought to expect. One writes of Wheeler: "A failure as an author, he is, of course, an excellent critic, as he has written so many poor things himself that he recognizes one the moment he sees it."⁷ But other reviewers praise *The Toltec Cup*'s depictions of New York, which "show a remarkable power of description. . . . The conditions of tenement house life, the party at Dr. Follen Sanger's in Gramercy Park, the anti-war meeting at Brannagan Hall, are well described. The local scenes, as the terrace in Nineteenth Street, are drawn with great skill."⁸ Another reviewer compared Wheeler's sketch of the poor favorably to those by Dickens.

Nevertheless, *The Toltec Cup* was probably not the hit Vanderpoole and Wheeler hoped for. Two years later, Wheeler's second novel, *The Primrose Path of Daliance*, received almost no notice. Wheeler kept writing theater reviews as Nym Crinkle for a few more years (his legal name appears under the pen name on both novels), then retired it. When he returned to writing essays and novels, he adopted a new, more secret alias, J. P. M. or J. P. Mowbray, taken from his second wife, Jennie Pearl Mowbray, who claimed coauthorship many decades later. Doubleday brought out his final novel, *The Conquering of Kate*, in the month after he died.

Some sources claim that Wheeler is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. But while Wheeler's daughters from his first marriage, Grace and Minnie, are buried there, Wheeler is in fact buried next door, as it were, in an unmarked grave in a lot owned by Eliphalet Wheeler, his father, in the Old Dutch Burial Ground in Sleepy Hollow.⁹ It is hard not to take this fact as emblematic. In his day, Wheeler was one of the most prolific and widely read writers, and his death attracted national notice. Today, few know of him and fewer read him. *The Toltec Cup* is now a rare book, nearly impossible to find. Now, thanks to SUNY Press, it is available to anyone with an interest in nineteenth-century New York, in Andrew Wheeler, in Nym Crinkle, or in Lew Vanderpoole.

A few warnings. As might be expected for a novel of this age, this book contains casual racism, antisemitism, bigotry, and sexism. In my view, it is

much less than one might expect, and the narrative is rather soundly on the side of inclusiveness. It uses the word “nigger” once (chapter sixty), putting it on a placard carried by a mob who are decidedly *not* the good guys. The novel describes two murders in explicit but not extensive terms (chapters four, six, and fifty-eight), an abduction (chapter thirty), and rioting leading to violent deaths (chapter sixty).

The text of this edition has been silently and lightly emended to correct obvious typographical errors.

NOTES

1. “Death of Andrew C. Wheeler,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1903, 9.
2. Thomas K. Wright, “Nym Crinkle: Gadfly Critic and Male Chauvinist,” *Educational Theater Journal* 24, no. 4 (December 1972): 370–82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3205931>. Citation is to p. 382.
3. B. B., “Highways and By-Ways,” *The Epoch* 7, no. 170 (May 8, 1890): 219–20. Citation is to p. 220.
4. In *The Critic*, July 19, 1890, i.
5. “Lew Vanderpoel’s Case,” *Philmont Sentinel* (Philmont, New York), October 19, 1887, 1, col. 2 (an unsigned article quoting an article from *Kinderhook’s Rough Times* [Kinderhook, New York]).
6. “Events in the Old World,” *The Sun* (New York), August 19, 1894, 1, col. 2.
7. H. B. S. “The Toltec Cup,” *America: a Journal for Americans* (Chicago) 4, no. 20 (August 14, 1890): 556.
8. “The Toltec Cup,” *Book News* 9, no. 98 (October 1890): 54. The article reprints a review that appeared in the Philadelphia Press.
9. Jim Logan, Superintendent, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, email messages to Erick Kelemen, February 5, 2021, and January 13, 2022.