

## AATF BOOK CLUB SELECTION 2007

### ALFRED MERCIER'S *L'HABITATION SAINT-YBARS*

Among all Louisiana writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alfred Mercier felt most deeply the call of naturalism. A doctor and writer whose career represents the culmination of Louisiana Creole literature, Mercier was born June 3, 1816 in McDonogh, LA, just across the river from New Orleans near present-day Algiers. After spending his youth traveling in Europe where he frequented progressive and Romantic circles, Mercier returned to New Orleans. There, he made his living thanks to medicine and became involved with the literary scene of New Orleans. The period after 1873 is particularly fecund for Mercier, the man of letters. He published several novels: *Le Fou de Palerme* and *Lidia* (1873), *La Fille du prêtre* (1877), *Johnelle* (1891), and *Hénoch Jédésias* (1892). His "Étude sur la langue créole en Louisiane," the first systematic analysis ever undertaken of Creole, served as a study for his masterpiece *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* (1881). This *récit social*, whose subtitle is *Maîtres et esclaves en Louisiane*, may be considered the first novel in American literature which clearly owed a debt to French naturalism. The setting of Mercier's novel is a typical plantation of the period, and the reader is cast into the daily routine of a young Creole boy named Démon, who seems destined to a life of ease but who has inherited a dark and brooding nature. The entire story pivots around a love affair between Démon and a young orphan, who discovers belatedly that she is the product of black and thus "tainted" blood. Both characters carry, hidden within their beings, the seeds of their double suicide, and their inevitable tragedy is nurtured by the environment in which they live. Mercier develops his characters as they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, and chance.

The work's naturalist affinities did not go unnoticed in New Orleans' literary circles of the period. In his review of the novel, Paul d'Abzac stated:

*Les Créoles de la Louisiane sont des Français modifiés, au physique et au moral, par le climat, par le contact des anglo-saxons et surtout par l'institution de l'esclavage. Il est intéressant de savoir ce que sont devenus, sous cette triple action, les hommes de notre race, jusqu'à quel point les faits et les choses ont pesé sur eux, comment ils ont réagi sur le milieu où ils vivaient et l'ont modifié à leur tour. (2)[...] L'auteur, qui est médecin, décrit avec un excès d'exactitude. Quand les Saint-Ybars seront passés à l'état de document humain, selon l'expression mise à la mode par*

*M. Zola, cette tache légère deviendra une qualité pour ceux qui voudront reconstruire notre Louisiane française, sur laquelle on a si peu écrit.*

Mercier's work echoed deeply among the Creole writers of New Orleans. George Dessommes, a fervent naturalist, penned his *Tante Cydette* in 1888; Sidonie de la Houssaye presented her series of hereditarily enhanced seductresses, *Les Quarteronnes de la Nouvelle Orléans*, during the 1890s; and in 1894 Kate Chopin offered her short story "La Belle Zoraïde," reproducing letter for letter a Creole song transcribed by Mercier in his *Habitation Saint-Ybars* and, indeed, retelling Mercier's story about an old Creole woman who believes that the two rag dolls she carries are her living children. It is important to note that Chopin was living in New Orleans throughout this period and moved to St. Louis in 1884. Thus, as a Creole woman interested in letters, she would have been familiar with the literary scene of New Orleans and could not have failed to have read Mercier's novel.

*L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* is one of the most intensely bilingual books in all American literature. Indeed, Mercier's systematic use of Creole offers great insight into the richness and diversity of American Francophonie and suggests a variety of ways in which the book might be profitably studied:

1. What does the word "Creole" mean? What are the most notable differences in Creole and French, and how does Mercier use the two languages in the novel? In the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Creole" was used to refer to a person of European descent who was born in the New World. What then, is a "Creole of Color"? How does Mercier use Creole to express his abolitionist beliefs in the chapter entitled "Mamrie"? What is the significance of the fact that a slave teaches a lesson about liberty to her young master in Creole? Many students use the words "Creole" and "Cajun" indiscriminately. It would be helpful to introduce them to more correct appellation, "Cadien." Most French speakers in Louisiana today are descendants of the Acadians who were driven from Canada in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and who settled in south central Louisiana. Their experience in Louisiana is vastly different than that of the Creoles of New Orleans. An excellent discovery activity would be to have students do Internet searches for these expressions and to report their findings to the class.

2. Discuss the role played by Mamrie as an avenging angel in the chapter en-

titled "Tragédie." How does Mercier's representation of this major African-American character compare with other examples drawn from the literature of the period.

The existence of numerous American novels written in languages other than English may surprise many readers who discover this material for the first time. The existence of these relatively unknown works suggests several approaches:

1. Why is none of this material included or even mentioned in the majority of courses devoted to "American" literature? Does American literature only include the English language literature of the U.S.?

2. An interesting approach would be to have students read Kate Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde" and compare the work to the chapter in Mercier's novel "Man Sophie et ses deux petites filles." What conclusions can be drawn from these parallels? Why is it that Kate Chopin is known and yet her French-speaking counterparts have never been accepted into the canon of American literature?

The novel is available on-line at [www.centenary.edu/editions], by contacting the bookstore of Centenary College of Louisiana by e-mail at [bookstore@centenary.edu], or by phone: (318) 869-5278, or fax: (318) 869-5295.

Dana A. Kress

Centenary College of Louisiana

#### Selected Bibliography

- Absac, Paul d'. *Excursions en Louisiane: Les Saint-Ybars, par M. Alfred Mercier*. Nouvelle-Orléans: Franco-Américaine, 1882.
- Allain, Mathé, ed. *Louisiana Literature and Literary Figures*. Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, vol. 17. Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2004. F366.L89 vol. 17.
- Ancelet, Barry Jean, Edwards, Jay D., and Pitre, Glen. *Cajun Country*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- Bell, Caryn Cossé. *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997.
- Brasseaux, Carl A. *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803-1877*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992.
- Campbell, Donna M. "Naturalism in American Literature." *Literary Movements*. 04/18/06. [www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/

natural.htm].

Chopin, Kate. "La Belle Zoraïde." The text of this work and an excellent overview of Kate Chopin may be found on-line at "Kate Chopin: A Re-Awakening," a PBS program originally broadcast on 06/23/99 [[www.pbs.org/katechopin](http://www.pbs.org/katechopin)].

Hamel, Réginald. *La Louisiane créole littéraire, politique et sociale: 1762-1900*. 2 vols. Montréal: Éditions Leméac, 1984.

Kein, Sybil, ed. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana Free People of Color*. Baton Rouge, 2000.

Mercier, Alfred. *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*. Shreveport: Les Cahiers du Tintamarre, 2003.