

The Proctor Interlude in St. Joseph and in America: Astronomy, Romance and Tragedy

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By the mid-1870s Richard Anthony Proctor, having risen to prominence in English scientific circles, began visiting America on lecture tours devoted largely to his astronomical studies. Though almost totally forgotten now, except in specialized writing, Proctor loomed large in his time, and in the scientific efflorescence for which it is remembered. It seems likely that modestly informed Americans had greater awareness of him than of the figures who now dominate the historical reconstructions. Darwin, Huxley and Spencer were afar. Americans such as Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray spoke and wrote for students and specialists. For over a decade Proctor took his lecture messages to such places as Des Moines, Iowa, Waterville, Maine, Glasgow, Missouri, and Bloomington, Illinois — with featured performances in Boston and New York City well covered by major newspapers. He was indeed a popularizer, moving from the intricacies of astronomy to such things as the aleatory aspects of whist, poker and horse-race betting.¹ Moreover, he had an arresting romance leading to marriage with an American woman, followed by a few years residence in a thoroughly American community. At the height of his powers he died suddenly in near sensational circumstances. His daughter Mary continued his work in professional and, more fully, in popular terms, even to children's literature.

One does well to begin with 1874, as Proctor opened and closed the year by gaining the attention of thoughtful readers in this country. On January 4 the *New-York Times* carried a small news item titled "Reception to Richard A. Proctor," Secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society. Some eighteen hundred tickets to the "pleasant" evening event had been "disposed of," and that number did not include an array of American eminences gathered for the occasion. The reception committee included President F. A. P. Barnard of Columbia College, Professor Henry Draper and Edward L. Youmans, leaders in the country's scientific and educational realms. The aged literary figure, William Cullen Bryant, presided over the evening's program. This account ended with the dates of Proctor's six New York City lectures later in the month.²

On the last day of 1874 readers of the *Times* got a less cordial view of Proctor as he presented himself "before the bar of public opinion in America" in a letter to the editor written from London on December 12.³ Readers of another American publication, *The Atlantic Monthly*, had ample preparation for what now gained greater currency via the *Times*. In its September issue that Boston periodical contained a "Review of Recent Literature" that ranged widely over a dozen works — not much related one to another, and including two of Proctor's. The unidentified reviewer, after acknowledging the "great services" Proctor had done for "the literature of science," slipped into disparagement verging upon venom. The review contended, in effect, that Proctor wrote about himself and about the alluring peripheries of science; and he wrote to make money. Some of his work was "amusing;" much of it was "trash." He had descended from high scientific endeavor into efforts to be popular — and to sell lectures and books. An early use of a line from Lewis Carroll came in the reviewer's assessment of Proctor. "For him the time is always come

'— to talk of many things:
Of chalk and cheese and sealing-wax,
Of cabbages and kings;'"⁴

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Two months later the *Atlantic Monthly* carried a letter of remonstrance from Proctor and a not very repentant response to it from the still-unidentified reviewer. Proctor had the pleasure of noting, among other things, that the reviewer had commented on a book which, though announced, had not yet been finished let alone published. "Cannot your critic wait even till a work is written, before denouncing it?" The reviewer's response referred to that as "an undoubted slip" and offered an apology for it while otherwise holding fast to the original assessments in the review.⁵

Then came Proctor's appeal before "the bar of public opinion," as he put it at the beginning and the end of his long December 31st letter on the editorial page of the *New-York Times*. Among other things, Proctor refused the apology for the "undoubted slip," as the reviewer had rather insolently explained it by the fact that Proctor's books resembled one another so much as to be "like the parts of a Waltham watch, "warranted mutually interchangeable." Proctor understandably dismissed that effort by the reviewer in terms such as these: "If a person detected in the act of stealing my purse were to offer an apology, I could not accept it, even though he said, "that was an undoubted slip," and explained that "a striking resemblance had caused him to mistake my pocket for his own."⁶

Proctor had full acquaintance with controversy, but his reputation in America seems to have been largely genial and positive. He appeared as one who could render intricate and imponderable matters in understandable terms, and that may, of course, have fueled suspicion of him in scientific circles. Also, ventures into the imponderable could trigger waggishness, and the generally sedate editorial pages of the *New-York Times* often succumbed to the temptation. In December, 1875, when Proctor was again regaling New Yorkers, an editorialist offered friendly but satirical thoughts regarding Proctor's views in a piece titled "Dead Planets." "It was hardly kind in Prof. Proctor," it began, "to announce so abruptly as he did the other evening, that our ancient and popular satellite, the moon, is dead." Some musing about pleasant associations, especially in the minds of the young and romantic, moved to the conclusion that the astronomer "might have broken the news in a more gentle and sympathetic way."⁷

This editorial essay then turned to another Proctorian contention, a “confident prediction,” that the earth is also “doomed,” whether by what was coming to be called entropy, or by catastrophe. The catastrophic interpretation often took a form associated with Proctor, and he became somewhat renowned or notorious for it. In fact, as the *Atlantic Monthly* reviewer had put it in acerbic terms, Proctor, as popularizer, did unburden himself of thoughts regarding sea monsters, the meaning of the pyramids, and other matters on the margins of science. And so, to genuine and serious approval there was added some flippancy and caricature.⁸

Mostly, good nature informed these treatments of the visitor, and Proctor reciprocated by saying kind things about this country, as perhaps he had done in that appeal to “the bar of public opinion in America.” Early in 1875, for example, the *New-York Times* happily quoted a letter Proctor had written to the *Times* of London praising the American Signal Service for its accuracy of weather forecasting. That letter concluded with an urging that Great Britain devise “some such system¹/₄ as America has successfully employed for some years.”⁹ Later in the decade Proctor defended Thomas A. Edison’s tasimeter, hastily devised to gauge coronal heat during the eclipse of 1878. Here again, Proctor went on record, in a letter written from Hartford, to praise work that had been done “on this side of the Atlantic.”¹⁰

Six months before that the *New-York Times* quoted another Proctor letter, one announcing that he would return to America soon rather than waiting until the time of the 1882 transit of Venus. That letter to a New York friend — both reported and quoted — told of unhappy matters also. “Domestic affliction” had entered the astronomer’s life, and he sought rest and solace. Recently, his work had become “a source of pain rather than of satisfaction.” The forty-two year old scientist told his friend of his intention to ease his sorrows by continuing west rather than, as in previous American visits, going west one season and returning east the next. Perhaps the eternal quest for surcease can be seen in his projected course to California, and then on to New Zealand and Australia.¹¹

That voyage afar seems to have figured as a key determinant in Proctor’s casting his lot more fully with America, that being his acquaintance with and marriage to a young widow from St. Joseph,

Missouri, Mrs. Sallie D. Crawley. At least, that is the version that appeared in "Prof. Proctor's Romance" in early 1881.¹²

In its column titled "Heraldings" the *St. Joseph Herald* in early May offered this observation: "Richard A. Proctor is back again in our midst and this time it is for business."¹³ Farther down among that day's "Heraldings" came word of the marriage that afternoon. The fuller account of "Prof. Proctor's Romance" appeared in another *St. Joseph* newspaper a couple weeks earlier, and it had the sub-heading, "A Double Death the Means for Linking Two for Life."¹⁴

It seems that the eminent astronomer had come to town a few weeks earlier and had taken quarters at the Pacific hotel. Some supposed that a minor injury he had suffered in an accident on the *St. Joseph and Hannibal* railroad kept him in town. Such was not the case, and there followed the story of the "double death" and the "linking" that ensued.

Apparently in 1879 a young *St. Joseph* couple, Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Crawley, launched upon a quest for better health for the husband. At about the same time Mr. and Mrs. Proctor left Liverpool on a like mission, Mrs. Proctor's health being the cause for concern. Both couples made their way to Australia, and there they came to know each other. Sadly, the ill Mr. Crawley and the ill Mrs. Proctor died there in 1880. What then transpired remained in the realm of "conjecture only," but later developments on the part of the survivors "warrant the impression that before they parted they learned to look upon each other with favor, and doubtless with adoration and love." The "great and learned Professor" had "wooed and won the *St. Joseph* lady," and the formalities were coming here in early May, 1881.¹⁵

The bride had entered the world as Sallie D. Thompson, daughter of prominent city figure Charles M. Thompson, and niece of M. Jeff. Thompson, onetime Confederate general. At the time of her second marriage she had reached her mid-twenties, while her second husband had reached age forty-four. The Reverend James Runcie married them at Christ Church, and they left town that evening, with plans to sail for England in June. The *St. Joseph Gazette*, while offering a shorter account of the unusual circumstances that had brought the two together, mused at some length in a separate piece on the editorial page.

The story of love that found its climax in the wedding yesterday afternoon, although somewhat romantic, yet has at bottom a real affection and that sound sense which has made Prof. Proctor a good American, coupled with the dignity that will make Mrs. Proctor an Englishwoman after a Briton's own heart.¹⁶

Later in the essay, the editorialist turned to a theme that many, W. D. Howells notably included, treated in that era.

This marriage differs in some respects from the most of the English-American matches. There is no millionaire connected with it. Mrs. Proctor has only her beauty and worth as a dowry, and Prof. Proctor, although he has been very successful as an author and a lecturer, is by no means one of the rich men of the world. Yet no more distinguished Englishman ever married an American lady, nor did a more worthy lady ever marry a distinguished Englishman.¹⁷

Others failed to keep a straight face, and even some Missourians seemed unawed by the apparent addition of a distinguished person to the state's population. Morrison Munford's strongly Democratic *Kansas City Times* reacted to the marriage by recalling, not very clearly, Proctor's theory regarding a vagrant comet and the "world-destroying cataclysm" it might cause. This editorial went on to say that Proctor had "promptly verified his own prediction by marrying a St. Joseph girl. No more midnight star-gazing and mooning around for Richard."¹⁸

That item appeared in the regular editorial section, and Eugene Field, then at the *Times*, chimed in with related thoughts in his section of the editorial page. Field too had gone to St. Joseph for a wife, and he and Julia Comstock had been married some eight years before in the same church and by the same clergyman. It pleased him to toss barbs at the town he had called home for a while, "the village up the creek," as he called it here in May, 1881.¹⁹ Three days later the death of a New Yorker by suicide in the Buchanan county seat begot Field's assessment that the act was caused by the man's "inability to get out of town."²⁰ More balance, perhaps creditable to wife Julia, came in this item a week earlier: "Prof. Proctor, the eminent astronomer, showed his good taste in going to St. Joseph for a wife. A further indication of his good taste was his immediate departure from the town with his newly-made wife."²¹

Almost a year and a half later a wag in Sedalia again hearkened to the Proctor prediction that “the end of the world is at hand.” “The new comet is to do the work by falling next year into the sun. It should be remembered, however, that Mr. Richard Proctor has recently married the second time, and is, therefore, naturally inclined to take a gloomy view of the situation.”²²

The *St. Joseph Gazette* had probably launched upon a vain exercise earlier that year in writing about “THE DEADLY COMET,” especially about “A Mistake Regarding Prof. Proctor’s Prediction.” To correct the mistake this piece quoted extensively from one of the astronomer’s books.²³ Whatever the particulars of the prediction, Proctor, now spending even more time in America, continued to get attention, acclaim and a fair amount of chiding in his adoptive land.

For those who did not read Missouri papers, the *New-York Times* kept an eye on Proctor at least through the early 1880s. Two weeks after the *St. Joseph Gazette* sought to undo the mistake noted above, the *Times* carried a long editorial, “Proctor’s Comet,” deftly blending thoughtful depiction of a scientist’s views with arch venture into parody. Proctor and others theorized that the comet of 1880 was identical with that of 1843 and of 1668, and in its dramatically altering course it might well hit the sun in its 1897 return, with almost instant destruction of life on earth. Then whimsy took over, even to comic reference to a notoriously cold personage of the era.

The heat developed by its collision with the sun will evaporate the sea, melt the icebergs, and make any possible fire-proof safe red-hot; and though there is just a possibility that persons who at the time of the collision happen to be in the immediate neighborhood of Mr. Charles Francis Adams may survive the catastrophe, even this can give little comfort to the millions who, according to Prof. Proctor, must prepare to be burned in the Spring of 1897.²⁴

In June, 1883, the *Times* reported Proctor’s turning his attention from some “heavenly bodies” to others. He had, with “great fearlessness and originality,” unburdened himself of thoughts on women’s dress. An enthusiasm once turned to the stars now focussed on the dangers of corsets while championing the “divided skirt.” “The transit of a young lady clothed in a “divided skirt” over a stone wall is watched by him with as much interest as if he were observing the transit of Venus across the sun...” According to this account,

the ladies of his family robustly responded to freedom from the corset, and the unnamed Sallie, yelling down the stairway late at night to dislodge Richard from his calculations, did so with voice resounding considerably farther over the St. Joseph neighborhood than theretofore.²⁵

The ladies of the Proctor household — wife Sallie and daughters by the first marriage, Mary and Agnes — took up abode in St. Joseph probably in 1884. Proctor's lectures continued, as did his occasional shows of combativeness as well as the generally pleasant treatments of him in national newspapers. If the *New-York Times* turned attention to him less frequently and with a bit more bite, that may have involved the fact that Proctor had come to using the *New-York Tribune* more fully as conveyance for his views. In Proctor's early American years the *Tribune*, more than the *Times*, conveyed lengthy, verbatim accounts of his lectures, and it allowed him to amplify his evolutionary views. Gradually, the *Tribune* became something of a sounding board for him.

At the end of 1882 Henry Draper, son of John W. Draper and an important figure in astronomy for his successful application of photography, died at age forty-five. Proctor liked and admired this American who was almost exactly his age. So, when the *Tribune* carried some remarks of E. L. Youmans regarding Draper's death and containing some perhaps ill-considered allusion to Proctor, the editor received a letter from Proctor, then in England. It included a correction of Youmans, with the hope that he had been misquoted. Proctor again noted "with what warmth and zeal" he had "applauded" the work of Draper and other Americans, and he obliged the *Tribune* with some of his own words published in *Knowledge* when the sad news about Draper reached England. Below Proctor's letter, the editor's response ended with these words: "'What a man writes can be taken literally; what anybody else says he said should always be construed with liberality.'"²⁶ So much for the sometimes touchy Proctor's reaction to Youmans' ill-thought comparison.

Three and a half years later, when Proctor and his wife encountered difficulties on a return trip from England, he let the world know in another letter to the *Tribune*. "Professor Proctor Narrates His Exasperating Experience" moved to this, "'Moral for transatlantic travellers: Never trust the National Line with the storage of

goods.” That traveller resolved never “under any circumstances” to deal again with that line.²⁷ Early in 1885 another long letter from the astronomer rebuked the Reverend T. De Witt Talmage for spreading among the ill-informed “the idea that evolution means infidelity.”²⁸

On at least one occasion Proctor, during his St. Joseph stay, became a direct contributor to the *Tribune*. For several Sundays in early 1885 that paper carried his views on whist, in the first of which he noted that he had previously done such writing for the English periodical, *Knowledge*. There, he had written as “Five of Clubs;” now he wrote as Richard A. Proctor. Here as elsewhere, he insisted — naturally and perhaps defensively — that people immersed in one area of activity could indeed turn to ancillary or unrelated matters. Whist, he contended, served admirably as relaxation. The even greater scientific game, chess, which Proctor loved even more, often became wearying rather than relaxing because of prolonged periods of intense concentration.²⁹ One might suppose that Proctor had found a subject fairly outside the realm of contention, but not so. His second essay brought “An Attack On Professor Proctor’s Game” from a member of a whist club in Troy, New York.³⁰

If not all Americans could accept his views on whist or poker, it seems likely that nearly all could read with satisfaction his long letter written from St. Joseph in July, 1886, titled in the *Tribune*, “Froude On America.” English historian James Anthony Froude had recently published *Oceana* which treated British territories with some thoughts on the United States. The astronomer waited only until his second sentence to note the “fatal fault” that Englishmen exhibited in writing about America, a fault that only Frances Trollope had shown as extremely as had Froude. It perhaps befit a man of science to call attention to that “readiness to pronounce judgment on insufficient evidence.” Proctor then cited instances of Froude’s judgments on American waterways, scenery, climate and even American character — all based on a straightway railroad trip from San Francisco to Chicago.³¹

It pleased the astronomer to note that he had seen “more of America than most Americans.” He had, he estimated, visited five hundred towns around the country, staying in some for weeks at a time. “And I have been for more than two years a householder in Missouri.” But the astronomer shrank from the audacity of the his-

torian; even if, added to his own experiences, Proctor had engaged in “the most anxious and arduous study of the age of the Tudors,” he could not have assayed conclusions “having one-hundredth part of the generality” of those offered by Tudor historian, Froude.³²

Late in his letter Proctor adduced one last of Froude’s offences, one involving regional matters. He cited the historian’s contention that the northern states produced good men, quoting him as follows: “Finer *men* are to be found nowhere upon the earth.” Froude’s qualifier followed, and Proctor described it as applying to “the whole of the United States.” In America men work as they do, according to Froude, “because work alone can make life tolerable on such a soil and in such a climate. The sense of sunny enjoyment is not in them. They feel the dignity of freedom, and the worthiness of moral virtue. But of beauty the sense is latent, if it exists at all.”³³

Five weeks later Proctor wrote from his Missouri home to correct one of his detractors, Hubert Anson Newton of Yale, on the subject of “Comets and Meteors,” especially their origins. Before moving to the “facts” of the matter, “First” to “Sixthly,” Proctor had this to say about the scientific paper that had criticized him: “I first note that no other theory is attacked, for no other theory exists.”³⁴

Early the next year, while in New York City, he wrote to the *Tribune* to have his say in the debate over Monday editions, the ending of which might insure a more proper Sabbath. “Residing as I do in a Western city,” he noted, “where the two leading papers, tolerably high-priced for their value,” afforded him “a tolerably clear idea of the moral significance” of the day of rest for newspaper people. The “souls of the printers” may be enhanced, but those of the newsboys and others who distribute papers may go to “the wheresoever fate takes them.” Though respecting those who themselves abstained from work, Proctor had no patience for those who would impose their ways on others.³⁵

Shortly thereafter, calamity overtook the Proctors. The chiding, geniality and outright humor suddenly had no place. Richard had five children by his first marriage, and three had come to that “Western city.” The union with Sallie D. Crawley had brought two more. A few weeks after the astronomer had had his say on “the civil and even pagan origin” of the Sabbath, Richard and Sallie lost those two children, one of five years the other of seven months. Within a

month's time both died of diseases, and went to rest in St. Joseph's Mount Mora cemetery.³⁶

Not long thereafter the Proctors left for Marion County, Florida, and that proved a disastrous move. A newspaper account explained that Missouri weather did not agree with Proctor, but it seems likely that the deaths of the children had quite as much to do with the relocation.³⁷

Anyway, their ill fortune had not run its course. In September, 1888, Richard left the Florida location for New York City, with departure planned for a European lecture tour. He arrived in the city a sick man, one whose symptoms and the fact that he had come through a yellow-fever area aroused misgivings. The final illness and death of the fifty-one year old astronomer came in medical isolation. Yet another debate centered on Richard A. Proctor — had he in fact died of yellow fever, thus perhaps endangering others. The debate went unsettled, but Proctor went, in sealed casket and without ceremony, to a grave on the untended peripheries of Brooklyn's Greenwood cemetery.³⁸

In his one-time hometown, the *St. Joseph Daily Herald* wrote lengthily of him on September 13, 14 and 16 — front-page account with photographic likeness, editorial page assessment and long feature piece of reminiscence. The last has greatest interest, focussing as it did on his "eccentricities." "He had few friends, because few men could appreciate him. He took offence readily because he was not a student of men, but of nature." Yes, his father-in-law allowed, he had "many peculiarities." He stayed at his studies and rarely walked the few blocks from 13th and St. Francis to downtown. When he did so, he invariably left without a coat. If the weather was bad he bought one, likely learning later that it did not fit. As father-in-law Thompson put it, Proctor had thus gathered enough coats "to start a jobbing house." Sallie's father also told of Proctor's "passionate fondness for whist," and that he would await Thompson's return of an evening, however late. "Well I have been waiting for you," he would say, "let's have a rubber before we go to bed."³⁹

After long quoted passages from Thompson, the essayist ventured on his own to say a bit about the perhaps more important fact that Proctor had been "a prolific contributor to the newspapers," evidently more than those New York City ones adduced earlier. Here too peculiarity entered the picture by way of Proctor's "execrable"

chirography that begot a “perfect abhorrence” in printers “throughout the country.” Then came an anecdote regarding his writing for the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. That “perfect abhorrence” triggered a protest meeting in the “chapel,” and an emissary carried the message of ire to John B. McCullagh, the fabled “Little Mack.” He politely requested Proctor to use better paper and a more legible hand, only to beget Proctor’s huffy response that their engagement should be ended.⁴⁰

The “execrable” hand served as photographically-reproduced illustration for this piece, and that Proctor note served as another instance of the astronomer’s touchiness. “Little Mack” was not the only one to exhaust Proctor’s patience. He had been writing a series of essays on English history and religion for the *Herald*, when, sad to say, one of them aroused the ire of Irish-American readers, so much so that the paper ended the arrangement with Proctor. A year later when earthquake struck South Carolina, a *Herald* man solicited the scientist’s views on the matter. That elicited the curt note, reproduced here, wherein Proctor wrote to “preclude the possibility” of his offering thoughts “on any subject” to the *Herald*. That begot the aforementioned rumor that his dudgeon at the St. Joseph newspaper begot the Florida move.⁴¹

The Proctor story did not end at that hastily-chosen and ill-suited grave. On the sad side, the story came in 1890 that the son, Richard, a sometime bookkeeper in St. Joseph, had slipped into insanity, perhaps moved in that direction by deaths in the family.⁴² More comforting developments came three years later. Proctor’s daughter Mary had been teaching at the Young Woman’s Institute in St. Joseph. Whatever that teaching involved, Mary had inherited her father’s fascination with astronomy. In 1893 Chicago’s Mrs. Potter Palmer approached the thirty-one year old St. Joseph woman with a proposal that she lecture on astronomy at the women’s building at the world’s fair.⁴³

Mary Proctor did just that, more than once, and on one occasion she pleaded with American astronomers to arrange for a proper grave and monument for her father. Philadelphian George W. Childs, master of funerary poetry, championed the movement and underwrote it heavily himself. In October, 1893, Proctor’s remains, after five years in untended, unmarked peripheries, were removed to suitably prominent place in the famed Greenwood cemetery. Words

of praise for Proctor came from, among others, Herbert Spencer, and they graced the monument. Words of spiritual solace came, interestingly enough, from the Reverend T. De Witt Talmage. The one-time object of Proctor's ire superintended at this re-burial ceremony.⁴⁴ In whatever oblique way, that betokens a religious aspect of the scientist's reputation in America. A Catholic during the years of his first marriage, Proctor gravitated away from that faith. With what motivation, one wonders, did a St. Joseph newspaper quote the *Catholic Mirror* of Baltimore regarding Proctor's having "turned his back to the church" out of mistaken regard for science. "Of what use," it concluded rhetorically, "was all Prof. Proctor's science as he lay helpless in the grasp of the yellow fever fiend?"⁴⁵

A century later it probably lies beyond one's ability to correlate this with Talmage's involvement at the re-burial; but the Proctor story did have a religious dimension, usually low-keyed. In 1875 he had sought to clarify, doing so in the *New-York Times* and the *New-York Tribune*. In May the *Times* re-printed a letter Proctor had written to the *London Daily Telegraph* regarding the story that he had declined a position at a Catholic university. The proper explanation, he wrote, involved the fact that he would accept *no* institutional connection. He would pursue his studies entirely as he saw fit. As to his scientific views, he expressed puzzlement that anyone could be in doubt. How, he wondered, could anyone who heard or read his New York City lectures of a year before "for a moment misunderstand my position with regard to the doctrine of evolution, which, using the word in its most general sense, is in our day the touchstone of science."⁴⁶

Typically, he elaborated in a letter to the *Tribune* written from Boston later that year. Above this letter the editor included this in the headlines: "Relation Of The Evolution Theory To His Religious Belief." Proctor sought to be brief but these were intricate matters. He took pains especially to disabuse people of the notion that there had been some recent, considerable alteration in his outlook. That was simply not the case. He was a scientist and his outlook had remained consistent regarding "biological evolution as well as cosmical evolution." Here too he cited his own speaking and writing, including his review of Darwin's *Descent of Man* in *The Observer*. He then put the matter in logical form. At least in part that involved

what he presented as the fact that religionists had concluded that he could not accept both their religion and his science — his science being “the doctrines of evolution and the conservation of energy.”⁴⁷

At his death in 1888 and at his re-burial in 1893, Richard A. Proctor came much to the attention of his adoptive land. Then for about a dozen years, Mary Proctor’s activities assured that at least some would continue to remember. She became a fixture in the American and the English astronomical communities. As had her father, she did a bit — by lectures and general writing — to popularize that scientific field. Certainly as early as the world’s fair summer she presented her thoughts in a St. Joseph newspaper, with two installments titled, “Popular Science.”⁴⁸ In later years, as at the time of the 1905 Martian eclipse, she wrote lengthy commentary for the *New York Times*.⁴⁹ Beginning in the 1890s and continuing long thereafter, Mary Proctor wrote children’s books such as *Stories of Starland* (1898) while pursuing a career in sophisticated science.⁵⁰

Probably about the time of her father’s re-burial Mary Proctor took up residence in New York City, and by the mid-1890s all of the other Proctors had left St. Joseph. Her younger sister Agnes taught music in Kansas City for a while, and in later years lived with her husband in Washington, D. C. Young Richard, whatever his mental condition, moved to Denver, and his brother John, who had taken charge of Richard in the 1890 difficulty, was in Portland, Oregon. Their step-mother Sallie married yet again, apparently living out her years with her husband in Belfast, Ireland.⁵¹

In one of those newspaper essays of 1893 Mary Proctor, legatee of the once-renowned Richard A. Proctor, told of observing over several weeks a bright star in the constellation, Aquila, “from the front porch of my home on North Sixth street” in St. Joseph.⁵² Her many years of endeavor in the science her father had taught her to love, and perhaps as well her efforts to explain those things to youngsters, account for the fact that there is a Mary Proctor crater on the moon.⁵³ That would have pleased her father, and it likely would have pleased those people in St. Joseph who had known, then admired, then probably lost track of that talented young woman who had, with her family, once graced their community.

A monument in Greenwood cemetery and a monument on the moon serve as remembrancers of the Proctors. The sometimes-em-

battled Richard brought high-level and understandable astronomy to the highways and by-ways of this country — from Steinway Hall in New York City to a lecture hall at the University of Missouri and to less prepossessing settings in towns around the country. When Mary and Agnes were still in school in England, before their move to America, their father sometimes described his travels in letters. He wrote one aboard a train bound for Cedar Rapids, Iowa — he seems to have called it Michigan, but content makes it almost certainly Iowa. “I am quite well considering the journeys I have had to make and their nature.” Dubuque and Iowa City gave way to Illinois’s Rock Island, Frederick and Fulton in this uninspiring account, but the “worst trials” came at Mount Vernon, Iowa. A long tramp through the snow to unheated lecture hall set the stage for going hungry after the performance. After the sorry details of Mount Vernon father Proctor addressed a daughter this way: “Well you think now that my long story is over. “Far beyond, “oh my child!”” And so he continued.⁵⁴

In another letter, this one from Bloomington, Illinois, Proctor offered one of his own assessments of humble America, and it brings to mind his criticism of J. A. Froude, the historian. “They go to bed at nine here. Dear, primitive people they are.”⁵⁵ It has a condescending ring, but Proctor was an urbane man, one who worked, by the telling of all, late into the night. And he did bring astronomy to those “dear, primitive” people. Among the commendatory letters to Proctor here in 1893 came one from Elisha Gray, now remembered for his patent battle with Alexander Graham Bell. Gray concluded that “in his line” Proctor had been a “genius” — “that he did a great work in popularizing the science of astronomy, and that he lived in closer touch with the people than any other astronomer of his time.”⁵⁶

Late in 1875 a *New-York Times* reviewer assumed a weary tone at the beginning of comment on yet another book by Proctor: “This is getting serious. Mr. Proctor’s books come so fast that no moderate-sized library will be able to hold them in the course of another year or two.” The genial words that followed extended “grateful recognition,” especially for making “difficult questions easy to be understood by the common mind.” The last sentence returned to the tone of the opening: “But he is knocking at one’s door so often now that

we shall be obliged to leave word for a year or two, "Not at home."⁵⁷

The chiding tone appeared very frequently in discussions of Proctor, but a *New-York Times* editorial some five years later combined treatment of his stunning efforts with somber wonderment. This writer opened with the understated observation that Proctor could find no fault with this country "for its lack of interest in science." Far from it. Then, from whatever source, came specifics regarding Proctor's recently-completed 1879-1880 American lecture swing. – 186 lectures from October to May, with twenty-two of them in New York and Brooklyn. "Away from this vicinity," the editorialist noted, "his chief successes were in the West." This writer put gross receipts for the tour at fifty thousand dollars, "with a clear profit to Proctor of some \$15,000." With that out of the way the editorialist turned to Proctor the "prodigious worker." Even on lecture tour, for example, he contributed to English and American publications. He was, of course, "in his prime" at age forty-three, and he kept in "superb physical condition." So, he seemed "insensible to fatigue." The assessment closed with a question: "But how much longer can he keep it up?"⁵⁸

Into discussions of Proctor and his contemporaries there came such freighted terms as amateur, popularizer and professional. Those words did not always have full aptness, serving tendential purposes rather too frequently.⁵⁹ Historians might contemplate the case of John Fiske, an American writer and lecturer whose endeavors resemble Proctor's. His travels around the country — more focussed or limited than Proctor's — involved treatments of scientific philosophy and then history, and they came at a time when the line was being drawn more distinctly between the realm of the amateur and the realm of the professional. Fiske's reputation has not worn well in this century. Henry Steele Commager, however, once celebrated him as that "magnificent amateur," that "peripatetic chair of history and philosophy" whose efforts enhanced the subjects he treated.⁶⁰ Though now largely forgotten, Proctor recently received a like accolade from Michael J. Crowe. In a brief encyclopedia entry Crowe generalized in a way comparable to what Commager said about Fiske, and in a way that seems in keeping with the public attention Proctor received in America. "In the English-reading world from 1870 to 1890, Richard Proctor was the most widely read writer on astronomical sub-

jects.... Rarely has astronomy had a more eloquent, effective, and sober advocate and expositor.”⁶¹ Fairness requires one to add that Americans, while heeding that “eloquent, effective and sober” expositor, managed to impose some wry and whimsical constructions upon his messages, much as Proctor recognized they were wont to do.

1. Here and elsewhere in this essay, one feels tempted to relate this interest in the aleatory to the aleatory aspects of Darwin’s version of evolution. The relation seems reasonable, but it will not be pursued here.

As an instance of Proctor’s absence from standard accounts, one might cite John Lankford’s *American Astronomy: Community, Careers, and Power* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Proctor was, of course, only marginally a part of *American* astronomy, and he hardly fit any social-scientifically recognizable community. Still, Proctor’s last book, published posthumously with completion done by A. Cowper Ranyard, *Old and New Astronomy* (1892), could have had a small place in Lankford’s chapter, “The New Astronomy: Identity and Conflict.”

2. *New-York Times*, January 4, 1874, 5.

3. *Ibid.*, December 31, 1874, 4.

4. “Recent Literature,” *Atlantic Monthly* XXXIV (September, 1874), 364-65.

5. “Recent Literature,” *Atlantic Monthly* XXXIV (December, 1874), 750-51.

6. *New-York Times*, December 31, 1874, p. 4. As an aside, Proctor expressed the suspicion that the reviewer was not an American. That almost surely adverts to Proctor’s controversy with John Norman Lockyer. See A. J. Meadows, *Science and Controversy: A Biography of Sir Norman Lockyer*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1972), pp. 96-103. On p. 96 Meadows refers to Lockyer’s and Proctor’s “mutual inclination towards pugnacity.” Five days after printing Proctor’s letter, the *New-York Times*, January 5, 1875, 4, carried a long editorial, “Critical Honesty,” that generally supported Proctor.

7. *New-York Times*, December 20, 1875, 4. For announcement of the lecture series at Steinway Hall, see *New-York Times*, December 13, 1875, 7.

8. *New-York Times*, December 20, 1875, 4.
9. *Ibid.*, January 22, 1875, 5.
10. *Ibid.*, December 8, 1879, 5.
11. *Ibid.*, July 12, 1879, 5.
12. *St. Joseph News*, as printed in the *Columbia Missouri Statesman*, April 22, 1881.
13. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, May 3, 1881.
14. *St. Joseph News*, as printed in *Columbia Missouri Statesman*, April 22, 1881.
15. *Ibid.* A variant and somewhat leaner account appeared in the *St. Joseph Daily Gazette*, May 4, 1881.
16. *St. Joseph Gazette*, May 4, 1881.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Kansas City Times*, May 7, 1881.
19. *Ibid.*, May 9, 1881.
20. *Ibid.*, May 12, 1881.
21. *Ibid.*, May 5, 1881.
22. *Sedalia Dispatch*, as printed in the *Columbia Missouri Statesman*, October 27, 1882.
23. *St. Joseph Daily Gazette*, March 2, 1882.
24. *New-York Times*, February 16, 1882, 4. This was not the first attention the *Times* had paid to Proctor's cataclysmic contention. On January 2 and 3, 1877, it first quoted very lengthily (p. 3) from a Proctor essay in the *Echo*, of London, and then on the next day an editorial, "Solar Insecurity," (p. 4) elaborated, seriously and waggishly.
25. *New-York Times*, June 3, 1883, 6.
26. *New-York Tribune*, January 3, 1883, 5.
27. *Ibid.*, July 12, 1886, p. 3.
28. *Ibid.*, January 14, 1885, p. 3.
29. *Ibid.*, February 5, 1885, p. 5.
30. *Ibid.*, February 19, 1885, p. 5.
31. *Ibid.*, August 16, 1886, p. 6.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.* Proctor's citations from *Oceana: or, England and Her Colonies* (London: Longmans, Green, 1886, New Edition) are accurate and come from pages 320-23. Those passages may not, however, accurately represent the overall spirit of Froude's assessments of things American.

34. *New-York Tribune*, September 20, 1886, p. 5. Proctor elaborated his views in "Origin of Comets and Meteors," *The Popular Science Monthly*, XXXI (May, 1887), 50-60.
35. *New-York Tribune*, January 27, 1887. This letter was written in New York City, the day before it was published.
36. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, March 24 and April 19, 1887.
37. *Ibid.*, September 13, 1888.
38. *New-York Times*, September 13, 1888, p. 1, September 15, p. 2, September 17, p. 1, September 18, p. 8, and March 2, 1889, p. 2.
39. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, September 16, 1888.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.* This series with the offending content may have been that written over the *nom de plume*, Finis, in early 1885. Whoever their author, such items appeared on January 29 and February 5, 19 and 26. Proctor did oblige *North American Review* with four and a half pages of comment on "The Great Earthquake and the Chances of Future Destructive Earthquakes in the United States," CXLIII (October, 1886), 406-410.
42. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, April 7, 1890 and *St. Joseph Daily Gazette*, April 7, 1890. These two accounts — "WANDERED AWAY" and "A MYSTERY" — seem peculiarly out of keeping one with another. The *Gazette* had shorter items on the situation on the 8th and 9th.
43. *New-York Times*, September 9, 1894, p. 18. "An Interesting Career" treats Mary Proctor's entrance on the lecture scene.
44. *St. Joseph Daily Gazette*, October 4, 1893. This long account came from New York, and one supposes that Mary Proctor may well have prepared it.
45. *St. Joseph Weekly Gazette*, September 27, 1888. That same issue reprinted "HIS LAST PAPER," that being an historical account that Proctor had written about yellow fever.
46. *New-York Times*, May 18, 1875, p. 5. It should be noted that Mary Proctor, the ancillary part of this story, was raised by a Catholic mother and educated at a Catholic institution.
47. *New-York Tribune*, November 11, 1875, p. 5. Eighteen days later the *Tribune*, November 29, 1875, p. 10, carried a long account of a Boston lecture Proctor had given. Again combining what appears to be verbatim content with commentary, it stated in introduction that, "Little in this was startling, except the prophecy that theologians might some day be found not only reconciling Genesis with Dar-

winian theories, but showing that the biological discoveries of the present day are fresh evidences of the inspiration of the Scriptures.” Some of this material “grated upon the ears of many hearers.”

48. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, August 20 and September 3, 1893. A like item on August 6, 1893, was the printed version of an address delivered at the women’s building at the world’s fair on July 20.

49. *New York Times*, April 16, 1905, III, 4, May 7, 1905, III, 3, June 25, 1905, IV, 1.

50. (New York: Potter & Putnam Company, 1898).

51. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, October 4, 1893. At this time Agnes was still in college in Clinton, Missouri. “Astronomer Proctor’s Daughters,” *New York Times*, December 26, 1894, p. 6 placed Agnes in Kansas City. As perhaps befit a step-parent, Sallie slipped from view and into discrepant accounts in sources. I incline to the view stated in Chris. L. Rutt (comp. and ed.), *History of Buchanan County and the City of St. Joseph and Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Company, 1914), pp. 679-80. In treating the family of Charles M. Thompson, it told of Sallie, “(formerly the widow of the famous astronomer, Richard A. Proctor) who is the wife of Dr. Smyth, of Belfast, Ireland.”

52. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, September 3, 1893.

53. Robert S. Richardson, *The Star Lovers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 174 and photo at figure 73b.

54. *St. Joseph Daily Herald*, October 4, 1893.

55. *Ibid.* Here again, one assumes that Mary Proctor provided these letters.

56. *Ibid.* One assumes too that Mary had a hand in assembling the various letters of tribute, including one, interestingly, from James A. Froude. Shortly after Proctor’s death the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* carried a long piece titled “POPULAR TEACHERS. Men Who Have Imparted a Knowledge of Science to the Masses.” After calling attention to the comparative novelty of the “popularizer,” the essay briefly described such individuals as Michael Faraday, John Herschel, John Tyndall, T. H. Huxley and R. A. Proctor. Followed in the series by his one-time nemesis, Joseph Norman Lockyer, Proctor received praise for having “kept abreast of all the latest developments in astronomy, and [having] placed them, whether in periodicals, books or on the platform, before a larger audience than any other scientist

of his day could command.” As re-printed in the *St. Joseph Weekly Herald*, October 4, 1888.

57. *New-York Times*, December 14, 1875, 2.

58. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1880, 4.

59. For some very recent thoughts on the amateur in astronomy, see Timothy Ferris, “Annals of Astronomy: Seeing in the Dark,” *The New Yorker*, August 10, 1998, 55-61.

60. Henry Steele Commager, “John Fiske: An Interpretation,” Massachusetts Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 66 (1936-1941), 339, 343.

Beyond the writings discussed here — writings in some way related to the American public arena — at least a couple of Proctor’s works should be mentioned, and they, too, may have made some public impression. Of his books, *Other Worlds Than Ours* (1870), appeared in over two dozen editions, English and American, into the early twentieth century. As was the case with an American edition of 1904 (New York: J. A. Hill and Company) that work was packaged with some of his lighter essays. Also in 1904 an American edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Akron, Ohio: The Werner Company) contained the near-eighty page Proctor essay on astronomy that graced the ninth and tenth editions of the English publication, mid-1870s to 1910-1911 when the eleventh edition, with much briefer essay on astronomy, replaced it.

61. Michael J. Crowe, “Proctor, Richard Anthony (1837-1888),” in John Lankford (ed.), *History of Astronomy: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1997), 416-17.

Perhaps the most attention Proctor has received in modern scholarship came in Crowe’s *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate 1750-1900: The Idea of a Plurality of Worlds from Kant to Lowell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). In it, “Proctorian pluralism” involved the view pointing “not to widespread planetary life but rather to life as a development on comparatively few, although possibly numerically many, planets.” 457-58, and elsewhere. However intriguing, this specialized wonderment did not seem to loom large in Proctor’s reputation in late nineteenth-century America.