

Thomas Nelson Page Biography

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Biography

The American fiction writer, essayist, and diplomat Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922), a typical Southern aristocrat, did much to cultivate the popular conception of antebellum plantation life.

Born at Oakland, Va., on an ancestral plantation, Thomas Nelson Page came from a line of leaders in tidewater Virginia: governors, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, army officers, planters, and slaveholders. Page attended Washington (later Washington and Lee) University, then won a law degree from the University of Virginia. He entered law practice in Richmond.

As early as 1877 Page was publishing dialect verses, but it was not until 1884 that he published his first story, "Marse Chan," in the *Century*--"the first Southern writer to appear in print as a Southerner," said a contemporary, one whose stories "showed with ineffable grace that although we were sore bereft, politically, we now had a chance in literature, at least." "Marse Chan" and the stories that followed romantically pictured life on antebellum plantations. Page, often using Negro dialect, set his stories in a glamorous world where "Ole Massa" and "Mistis" and "Mah Lady" rule benevolently over faithful and contented slaves. "For those who knew the old (Hanover) County as it was then, and who can contrast it with what it has become since," Page said, "no wonder it seems that even the moonlight was richer and mellower 'before the war' than it is now." Northerners as well as Southerners enjoyed reading about a region quite different from the uneasy industrialized and urbanized postwar North.

Page's stories were collected in volumes, including *In Ole Virginia* (1887) and *Bred in the Bone* (1924). Novels, similar in setting and theme, include *Two Little Confederates* (1888), a juvenile, and *Red Rock* (1894), picturing the Reconstruction South. Nonfiction works, which urged a more sympathetic understanding of the South, include *Social Life in Old Virginia* (1897) and *The Negro: The Southerner's Problem* (1904).

In 1886 Page married Anne Bruce, who died 2 years later. In 1893 he married Florence Lathrop Field. That same year he abandoned the law for writing and moved to Washington, D.C., where he lived until 1913, when he was made ambassador to Italy. He served with distinction until failing health caused him to resign in 1919; he published *Italy and the World War* in 1920.