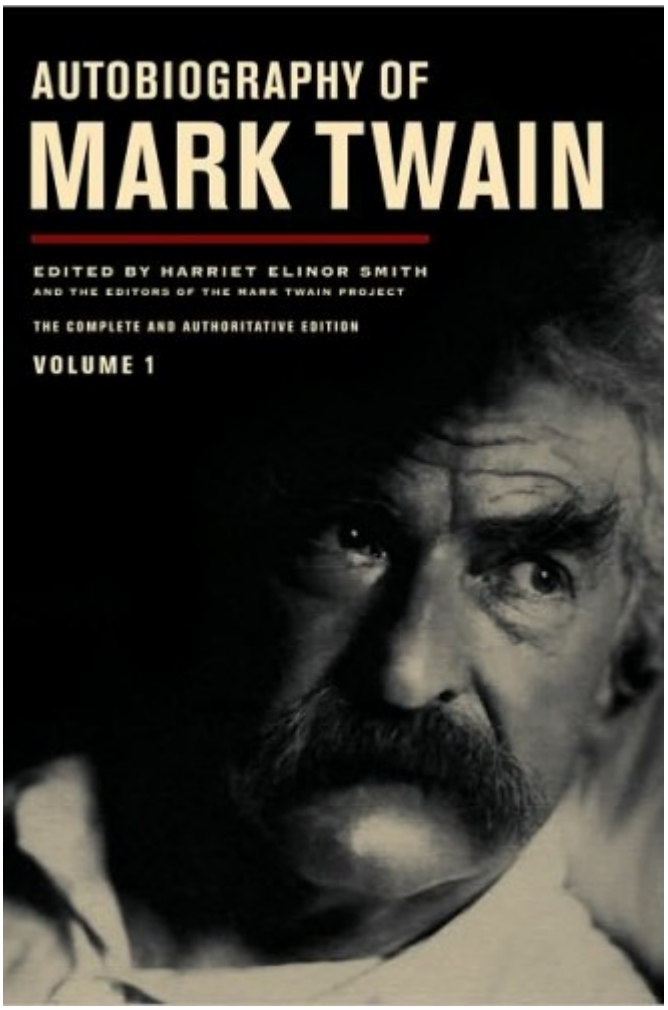
Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 1

reviewed by Harold K. Bush in the May 31, 2011 issue

In Review



Autobiography of Mark Twain

Edited by Harriet Elinor Smith et al
University of California Press,

To commemorate the 100-year anniversary of Mark Twain's death, a crack team of editors at the massive Mark Twain Project at the University of California-Berkeley, headed by Harriet Elinor Smith, has produced the first of three volumes of the definitive *Autobiography of Mark Twain.* It quickly rose to the top of the best-seller lists. Such sales figures for an author deceased for a century are impressive, especially considering the numerous dismissive and even cutting reviews this edition has received (most notably, perhaps, one by Garrison Keillor in the *New York Times*).

Almost immediately after the release of the first volume of the *Autobiography,* a new version of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* was issued. Edited by the esteemed Twain scholar Alan Gribben, this controversial version excises all uses of the word *nigger* (well over 200) and replaces them with the term *slave*. Charges of censorship and co-optation made headlines, local and national news programs clamored for sound bites from literary experts, and Stephen Colbert raised an eyebrow, peered into the camera and intoned with mock seriousness: "Who knows what other words it contains that are OK now, but that someday might be offensive?" This firestorm of protest and hand-wringing ensued just as the initially triumphant sales of the *Autobiography* began to wane, and for at least another few weeks rancorous debates about Mark Twain's achievements raged on.

Issues of censorship and artistic integrity aside, one is struck by the sheer weight of the man whom many have considered, both during his lifetime and for the century since, to be the quintessential American author. Fascination with Mark Twain continues unabated. His own trickery in demanding that this autobiography remain under cover of darkness until a century after his demise did what he expected it to do: it raised the level of public interest. Twain still sells big in postmodern America; somewhere he must be smiling.

Many have been surprised to learn, however, that much of the material in this first volume of the long-awaited edition of the *Autobiography* has already appeared in earlier editions, including the best and most recent: Michael Kiskis's 1991 volume *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography,* which republished chapters that appeared in the *North American Review* during Twain's lifetime. (This will not be the case with the next two volumes.)

Still, this first of a projected three volumes of Twain's *Autobiography* is noteworthy on several counts. Surprisingly, Twain dictated most of it to a stenographer over a

period of about four years, often while the literary lion lounged in bed in his white pajamas. These dictations often have the homey and comfortable sound of an elder statesman whiling away the hours with pleasant reminiscence. After many false starts, Twain had concluded that this was the best way to produce his autobiography. (The details of that process are discussed in an excellent, very long introduction that—for scholars at least—is worth the price of admission.)

Though a great deal of the *Autobiography* proper has appeared elsewhere, much new material is found here as well. A visit to the archives at Berkeley will prove to anyone that there is still a good amount of unpublished material for Twainiacs to scavenge, the way Bob Dylan fans sift through bootleg recordings for undiscovered new melodies.

Here is some of the very best writing (or dictation) Twain ever produced. He said bluntly that he wished to "speak from the grave," and his self-imposed quarantine served a specific purpose: he wanted to speak freely and honestly, and he believed that the only way to do so would be if the product remained under wraps until long after the actors had passed away. Not all of the *Autobiography* is gentle or pleasant; a great deal of venom and bitterness is in the mix, along with the good cheer of picnic lunches and the pleasant ramblings of spring mornings with his good friends.

Given these juxtapositions of mood, many readers have commented on the inconsistencies of Twain's autobiographical meanderings—the grand unevenness of the work as a whole. Its style and content are indeed outlandish, and Twain's theory and method of autobiography are audacious. But it is precisely in its audaciously chaotic nature that the book illustrates the critical sensibilities that always characterized Twain's view of the world.

Perhaps Twain's method is best captured in words to Twain from his friend John Hay, former secretary to Abraham Lincoln and the author of a ten-volume biography of the slain president. As Twain recounts it, here is Hay's theory of autobiography:

> Each fact and each fiction will be a dab of paint, each will fall into its right place, and together they will paint his portrait; not the portrait he thinks they are painting, but his real portrait, the inside of him, the soul of him, his character. Without intending to lie he will lie all the time . . . consciousness in twilight; a soft and merciful twilight which makes his general form comely, with his virtuous prominences and projections discernible and his ungracious ones in shadow. His

> truths will be recognizable as truths, his modifications of facts which would tell against him will go for nothing, the reader will see the fact through the film and know the man. There is a subtle devilish something or other about autobiographical composition that defeats all the writer's attempts to paint his portrait *his* way.

In these remarks we might notice a fundamentally modernist, or even postmodernist, vision of the self: impressionistic, built on both truth and vague recollection, some of which is admittedly false. Such impressionistic qualities define this volume.

It was during these dictation sessions that Twain revealed some of his most intimate secrets regarding his views of God, religion and the followers of Jesus. Questions about Twain's religious belief and practice have become a major concern among Twain scholars over the past decade and are not easily resolved here. But if one attempts conclusions on the basis of this volume alone, it is obvious that Twain's reputation as an old man shaking his fist at God has much basis in the ragings of his final days.

Twain derides the oddities of his brother Orion's constantly shifting evangelicalism; he critiques preachers and missionaries of the era for their greed and hypocrisy; he chides Christians for their ignorance of science and astronomy; and he interrogates a variety of biblical tales and doctrines in a manner faintly reminiscent of the German higher critical stance, which had become all the rage in American theology at the end of the 19th century. One refrain that turns up several times is the story of his young daughter Susy imploring him to explain the meaning of all the evil in the world: "What is it all for?" she asked. Twain tried to respond but failed: "There was nobody then who could answer it; there is nobody yet." It is evidence of a growing nihilism, with echoes of the Nietzsche he had begun to read in his latter years.

Twain also has some choice words for a variety of American political figures, including the carry-a-big-stick president Teddy Roosevelt, whom he called "one of the most impulsive men in existence. . . . He flies from one thing to another with incredible dispatch." Twain had little patience with Roosevelt's warmongering, or for the "yellow journalism" of the likes of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal,* which spurred the nation to many long years of war; or for the grim work of Roosevelt's "assassins," such as General Leonard Wood, whose gruesome annihilation in 1906 of a group of 600 Moro tribespeople in the Philippines made

national headlines.

For the anti-imperialist Twain, the unprovoked and unnecessary Moro massacre seems to have been the final straw. He called it "incomparably the greatest victory that was ever achieved by the Christian soldiers of the United States," a remark lathered in ironic revulsion. While this was not precisely a critique of religion per se, Twain cagily understood that these foreign policy decisions were founded on America's sacred image of itself and were frequently prosecuted by people professing to be followers of Jesus.

None of this is anything new to Twain scholars, but some readers might be surprised, even shocked, by the sheer vitriol of a number of Twain's explosions and lengthy diatribes. On the other hand, the tenderness with which he describes his dead daughter Susy, his dead wife Livy, and his old friends like Joe Twichell and David Gray ("great, and fine, and blemishless in character, a creature to adore") reveals the romantic sympathies still at play in his old broken heart, like sparks in a fire banked for the next morning. This text confirms that Twain is a gigantic puzzle, that all attempts to cage and domesticate the wild beast prove unworthy of the man. Again, in John Hay's memorable words, "There is a subtle devilish something or other about autobiographical composition that defeats all the writer's attempts to paint his portrait his way." In his use of Hay's insight, Twain admits to the limits of his own perception.

And so the enigma of Mark Twain recedes even further into the ooze of history. As William Dean Howells said about his good friend, he was the "Lincoln of our literature." Howells's remark captures his friend just as Twain might have wanted to be perceived: as iconic, mysterious and contradictory.