

# Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN  
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—Cicero

## T.R. vs. the Dictionary

From boyhood, Theodore Roosevelt had been a notoriously bad speller; so as President he simply rewrote the rules of orthography—until a swarm of spelling bees stung him back to his senses.

The Spelling Reform Association had been founded in 1886 by Melvil Dewey, a dozen years after he had immortalized himself in the nation's libraries by siring the decimal cataloging system. America's spelling reformers wanted to simplify and rationalize our lexicon, for reasons ranging from the anti-colonialist (why shackle ourselves with sense-defying British spellings?) to the ridiculously practical: Lopping off superfluous letters would shorten books and save ink and paper, claimed the champions of "simplified spelling." Moreover, American school-children could shave a full two years off their studies if liberated from spelling drills.

Defenders of traditional spelling occupied the high ground of poetry and custom, while the reformers trotted out efficiency, that god of turn-of-the-century progressivism. The ensuing debate wended its way down colorful byways. The simplified spellers brandished a finding of an underemployed worker at the U.S. Pension Office, who had counted 1,690 different spellings of the word "diarrhea" in pension applications. To this, the mossback Librarian of Congress Ainsworth R. Spofford replied, "Is there any phonetic system which could bring about a uniform spelling of that word?"

The game was really afoot when the spelling reformers found a sugar daddy in the person of Andrew Carnegie. The philanthropic steel titan counseled a name change for the organization ("reform" scares people, he insisted), and so the Spelling Reform Association became the Simplified Spelling Board. It was studded

with such eminences as Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia, David Starr Jordan of Stanford, Mark Twain, and William James.

In March 1906, the SSB released a list of 300 words crying out for orthographic reform. Some of the recommendations had already slipped into accepted usage: "honor" without the *u*, "center" instead of "centre," "axe" with the *e* chopped off. But others looked bizarre: The SSB suggested replacing the "ed" in such words as "kissed" and "missed" with a *t*. "Purr" would lose an *r*, and such words as "dullness" and "fullness" would be stripped of an *l*. "Through" would become "thru," and "thoroughly" would shrink to "thoroly." It all seemed so...mechanical. Rather like a metric system for words.

Literary critic Brander Matthews, chairman of the Simplified Spelling Board, called this "simplification by omission." And he had a friend in the White House. So in August 1906, with characteristic impulsiveness, President Roosevelt directed the Government Printing Office to adopt simplified spelling in all publications of the executive department. His order was not "far-reaching or sudden or violent," averred Roosevelt, but only a modest effort "to make our spelling a little less foolish and fantastic."

It may have been the worst miscalculation of T.R.'s career.

The press heaped ridicule upon the Rough Rider, who had a self-deprecating sense of humor but did not much like to be deprecated by others. The *Baltimore Sun* asked how the President's surname would be rendered in the new spelling: "Rusevelt" or "Butt-in-sky"? In best conspiracy-sniffing fashion, the *Rochester Post-Express* declared, "It is a scheme financed by Carnegie, backed by certain large publishing interests, and designed to



carry out an immense project for jobbery in reprinting dictionaries and school books." Abroad, observers wondered just what had happened to the unruly and libertarian Americans. "Here is the language of 80 million people suddenly altered by a mere administrative ukase," marveled an English paper. "Could any other ruler on earth do this thing?"

In the end, the Supreme Court refused to follow the President, as did the House of Representatives, which voted 142-24 to overturn T.R.'s order. The President withdrew his spelling edict and admitted defeat in this "undignified contest." In a letter to Brander Matthews he attempted to shift the blame, asserting that "the one word as to which I thought the new spelling was wrong—thru—was more responsible than anything else for our discomfiture."

Unbowed, Roosevelt vowed to use simplified spelling in his own correspondence, and he did so fitfully. Discussing his Presidential legacy, he wrote to a friend, "I have succeeded in getting thru some things that I very much wisht, altho not always in the form I most desired."

Roosevelt's crusade was carried on for some years by the *Chicago Tribune*, bastion of Midwestern Anglophobia, which between 1934 and 1975 used such spellings as "autograf," "ameba," "burocrat," and "rime," until finally its editors decided that enuf was enough.

—Bill Kauffman

# Booktalk

## VIRGINIA WAS FOR LOVERS

By Bill Kauffman

*Unwise Passions: A True Story of a Remarkable Woman—and the First Great Scandal of Eighteenth-century America*

By Alan Pell Crawford

Simon & Schuster, 333 pages, \$27.50

How Nancy Randolph, “the fetching daughter of one of the greatest of the great planters,” became “the Jezebel of the Old Dominion,” a woman variously accused of adultery, infanticide, murder, prostitution, and miscegenation (and that’s just what her family said about her), is the subject of Alan Crawford’s entertaining and often poignant new book.

Nancy’s fortune, both good and ill, flowed from her bloodline. “Only a Randolph is good enough for a Randolph,” went a Virginia adage, and the resultant intermarriage and madness and mossy languor rivalled Poe’s House of Usher. Nancy’s saturnine sister Judith married cousin Richard Randolph, a dreamy young laird with antislavery convictions, and Nancy soon came to live with them on a plantation felicitously named Bizarre.

Richard and his brothers acted as young men sometimes will when a pretty 18-year-old girl whose motto is “I must be sought” drops into the house. Nancy “liked to use such words as ‘tautology’ and ‘éclaircissement,’ and she sometimes used them properly,” writes Crawford, but she seems not to have learned the meaning of “chastity,” for an ominous swelling of the belly soon distended Nancy’s pleasing form.

On a visit to a cousin’s plantation,

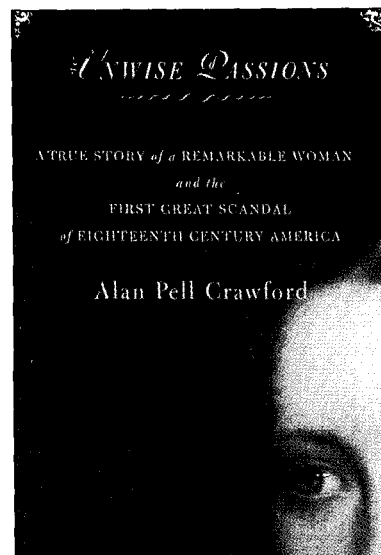
Nancy woke the household with her nighttime screams; the ladies rushed to her door and managed but a peek at blood-stained sheets before their ministrations were discouraged by Richard. Rumors spread immediately through the network of slaves that “the corpse of a white baby” had been found buried nearby.

In such circumstances, tongues will wag, and Richard was arrested for “feloniously murdering a child said to be borne of Nancy Randolph.” He was tried before a packed Cumberland Court House in April 1793, with Randolph testifying against Randolph.

Richard’s defense was conducted by an Old Dominion dream team of Patrick Henry and John Marshall, and despite abundant evidence of displays of public affection between Nancy and Richard that transcended the usual in-law pecks on the cheek—and despite the revelation that Nancy had discussed abortifacients with Patsy Jefferson Randolph, Thomas Jefferson’s daughter—the charges against Richard were dismissed. Whereupon the defendant stiffed Patrick Henry for his legal fee, and Henry had to sue to get paid.

After Richard’s death, Bizarre would be managed by his brother Jack Randolph, who had been kicked out of William and Mary for duelling over the correct pronunciation of a word. Jack won, wounding the “fleshy portion” of his foe’s backside and leaving us to imagine what the swordplay must have been like between two duelists with skill more mouseketeer than musketeer.

Black Jack of Bizarre eventually became the legendary Virginia statesman John Randolph of Roanoke. He was a habitual opium user, a bachelor who seems to have



nurtured a crush on Andrew Jackson. (Crawford has unearthed a letter in which Randolph suggests “Greek love” to a no doubt dumbfounded Old Hickory.)

Crawford describes Jack Randolph in Congress: “He would saunter into the House chamber and nonchalantly drape his long legs, encased in sleek white riding boots, over the bench in front of him. He would study his gloves or gaze at the ceiling or peruse a book of verse or even affect sleep. Sometimes he had his dogs with him, and he would pay more attention to them than to his colleagues.” When roused, he was viciously effective at the forensic arts, and detested and feared by his many adversaries. (Of one, he memorably eulogized, “Like rotten mackerel by moonlight, he shines and stinks.”) Randolph was a choleric champion of liberty—and a bitter enemy of his sister-in-law Nancy, whom he accused not only of murdering her infant but of killing Richard, being the “concubine” of a slave, and general whoring.

Jack Randolph was not the sort of man you’d choose for an enemy. He once said of his political opponents: “It is a mere waste of time to reason with such persons. They do not deserve anything like serious refutation. The proper arguments for such statesmen are a strait-waistcoat, a dark room, water, gruel, and depletion.” There were no bygones in Jack Randolph’s world. He kicked Nancy out of Bizarre and hounded her with poison pen for the rest of his wormwood life.

But Nancy had pluck, and luck. She