

THE VOLUNTEER
— or —
THE MAID OF MONTEREY.
A TALE OF THE MEXICAN WAR

By NED BUNTLINE

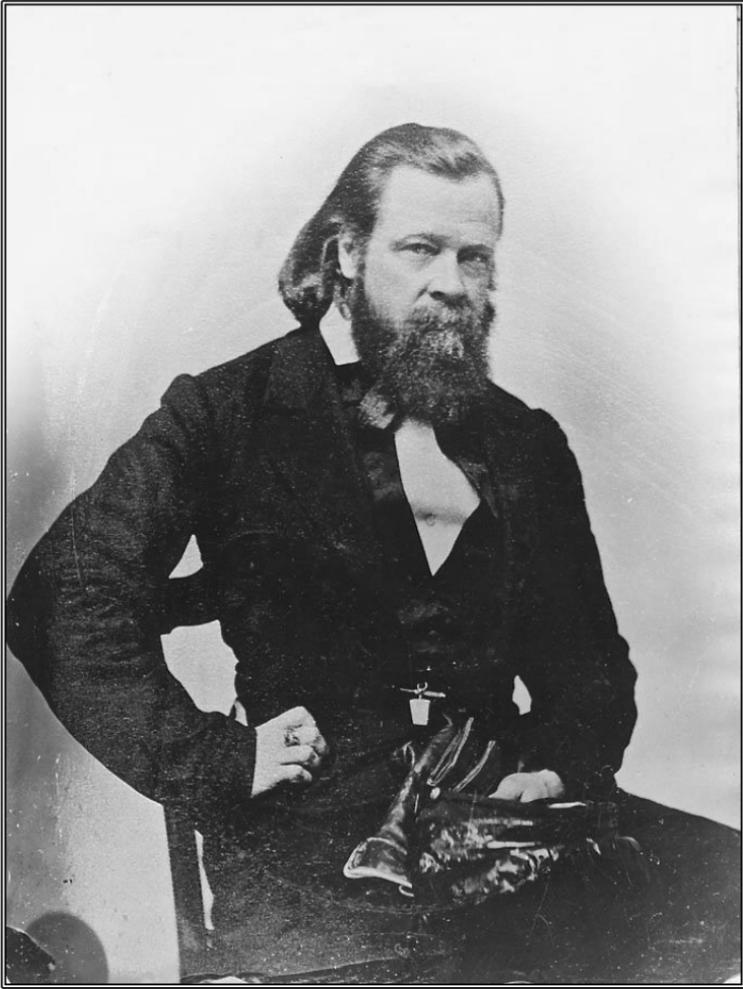
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Ned Buntline c. 1870
Courtesy of Adirondack Experience

Ned Buntline: A Brief Biography

By Mark Metzler Sawin

NED BUNTLINE is one of the most influential, prolific, successful, and forgotten authors of nineteenth-century America, and there is good reason for this. He was not one of the writers literary scholars labeled as “canonical.” Ned Buntline wrote for the masses, not for the elite, and thus the gatekeepers of American literature saw his works as ephemeral and unimportant. Consequently, university libraries and cultural archives rarely preserved his works within their collections—indeed many of his novels are now lost to history. This omission obscures Buntline’s contributions to the literary development of his era—the one literary scholars call the American Renaissance. But if readership and popularity count for anything, then Buntline is every bit as important as his hallowed contemporaries, for Americans bought and read far more copies of his works than those of Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, Thoreau, and Whitman combined. Buntline also helped pioneer many of the genres that became staples of American literature: his “city mystery” books launched the crime noir novel; his *Ned Buntline’s Own* newspaper pioneered tell-all reporting and scandal-as-reform exposés that dominate “reality” media today; and his stories and plays largely created the Western, turning William Cody into Buffalo Bill and sparking America’s obsession with the “Wild West.” His writing also instigated class-based riots in New York and St. Louis, helped found the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party, influenced migration through Western boosterism, and helped drive the Temperance

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movement. In sum, his influences on the literary, cultural, and political trends of America were huge. This essay briefly lays out the remarkable life of this forgotten figure and asserts Ned Buntline's rightful place in the pantheon of American authors.

On March 20, 1823, the man who became “Ned Buntline” was born Edward (“Ned”)¹ Zane Carroll Judson in the Catskill Mountains of New York. He spent an idyllic childhood hunting and fishing there, and later in the even more remote mountains of Wayne County, Pennsylvania where his father, Levi Judson, served as principal of the rural Beech Woods Academy. But then in 1832, after passing for the bar exam, Levi moved the family to Philadelphia to begin practicing law and so Ned could advance his own studies to join him in the legal profession. A country-boy at heart, Ned felt stifled by the congestion of their new urban home and balked at the confined life of an attorney. This soon led to a series of family fights that culminated in Ned running off to sea when he was just twelve years old. He spent the next six years on merchant vessels and then as a midshipman for the U.S. Navy, patrolling the Caribbean and Florida coast during the Second Seminole War. In December 1841, during a shore leave in Florida, he married one of his shipmate's sisters, Severina Tecla Marin, a celebrated beauty from a Cuban family.²

Six months after his marriage, eighteen-year-old Ned resigned from the navy and headed for New York, hoping to make a living with his pen—while in the navy he had sold a story to New York's prominent *Knickerbocker* magazine. Surviving records don't reveal what they did that next year, but in the fall of 1843 Ned did

¹ This essay will use “Ned” throughout to avoid switching between his real surname, Judson, and his more commonly used pseudonym, Ned Buntline.

² The majority of the information for this sketch come from three works: Frederick Pond's hagiographic biography, *Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline”* (New York: The Cadmus Bookshop, 1919); Jay Monaghan's dated but authoritative *The Great Rascal: The Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1952); and, T. M. Bradshaw's informative recent sketch, *Ned Buntline: So Much Larger than Life* (Stamford, NY: CreateSpace, 2019). Except where otherwise noted, the information here comes from these three texts.

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manage to sell a three-part “Sketches of East-Florida” series to the *Knickerbocker*, though without an attributed byline.³ This earned him some cash, but not enough to support them, and so in December he moved to Pittsburgh, where his father had become a well-respected businessman and attorney.

Ned took on a series of business ventures, working on a steamboat chugging up and down the Ohio river and later partnering with an architect and engineer as a draftsman.⁴ Still wanting to be a writer, in May 1844, with his father’s support, he launched a publication that introduced the world to his nautical nom de plume, *Ned Buntline’s Magazine*. This endeavor lasted just two issues, but it did gain him a foothold in the larger literary world as the *Knickerbocker* published a “Ned Buntline” story and its editor, Lewis Gaylord Clark, was impressed enough with his work to throw his support behind Ned’s magazine. This small victory gained him two new literary partners, Lucius A. Hine and Hudson Kidd, and together they launched the *Western Literary Journal and Monthly Review*. Initially published in Cincinnati in November 1844, by early 1845 they renamed it the *South-Western Literary Journal* and expanded its operation to include offices in both Cincinnati and Nashville. Ned’s nativist family never accepted his Cuban bride, so he and Severina followed the business, moving first to Cincinnati in August 1844, and then on to Nashville by year’s end.

³ See “Sketches of East-Florida. Number One. ‘Officer of the Night.’” *Knickerbocker* 22 (Oct. 1843), 323–328; “Sketches of East-Florida. Number Two. My Last Night on Guard.” *Knickerbocker* 22 (Nov. 1843), 446–451; “Sketches of East-Florida. Number Three. Saint Augustine: The First Look.” *Knickerbocker* 22 (Dec. 1843), 560–567. Though these are unattributed, a note from the journal of one of Ned’s friends in Pittsburgh, William Allen, from December 3, 1843 notes that Ned had written these pieces. See Dennis M. Larsen, “Ned Buntline and the Allen Family of Pittsburgh,” *Dime Novel Round Up*, Fall 2015, 110–111.

⁴ George and William Allen’s journals reveal that Ned moved to Pittsburgh by December 1843 but without Severina, bringing her in only a few months later for fear that his anti-Catholic father would reject her, which he largely did. Ned went on several trips with the Allens aboard the steamboats *Cicero* and *New Hampshire*, see Larsen, 111. For Ned’s work as a draftsman see ad for “A. E. Drake, E.Z.C. Judson Civil Engineers, Architects, Draughtsmen and Conveyancers” *Pittsburgh Daily Post* (June 19, 1844), 3.

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Ned edited the *Literary Journal* under his own name, E. Z. C. Judson, but also contributed stories to it as Ned Buntline. Because of the reputation he gained as a *Knickerbocker* author, he was the face of the publication and so spent his time promoting it, traveling up and down the Cumberland and Ohio rivers, collecting subscriptions and stories at every steamboat wharf and small town along the way. This soon caused a rift between him and his partners, however, for while they sought to produce a high-brow literary publication, Ned's exposure to the large and growing reading public in America's hinterlands caused him to rethink what it meant to be a successful author. He became enchanted with the more provocative (and lucrative) writing style of the emerging sensationalist writers such as George Lippard and Joseph Holt Ingraham—authors the *Literary Journal* mocked in its pages.

By the summer of 1845, Ned abandoned the *Literary Journal* and launched his own fly-by-night publication, *Ned Buntline's Own, or, The Weekly Yarn* which was filled with sensational stories and tell-all accounts of gamblers, scam artists, confidence men, and corrupt officials. It brazenly proclaimed itself "devoted to doing GOOD, making FUN and MONEY, and intended to aid its proprietor, projector, and sole contributor, in the singular and most unworldly object of paying HIS DEBTS."⁵ The *Knickerbocker* also continued to publish his stories, and Ned capitalized on the fame they generated, cultivating his roguish reputation as the adventurer-turned-author, Ned Buntline. His swaggering persona impressed and amused the rough-and-tumble population up and down the Cumberland River, but it also earned him the ire of the area's leading citizens, who often found themselves mocked and exposed in the pages of his paper. This soon led to trouble.

By late 1845, Ned and Severina were living in rented rooms in Smithland, Kentucky, where Ned could more cheaply and easily produce his paper, but early in the new year, on January 22, 1846, Severina, whose isolation and ill health were exacerbated by her often-absent husband, died. Ned was wracked by guilt, but was soon pulled from his grief by another shock—members of Nashville's business community accused him of seducing the wife

⁵ See announcement in *The Baptist* (Nashville, TN: Nov. 8, 1845), 4.

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of a well-respected Nashville citizen, Robert Porterfield. Ned swore his innocence but Porterfield, enraged by the accusations, attacked him. The flurry of pistol fire that followed left Porterfield dying with a bullet lodged above his right eye. Ned pled self-defense, but the hearing was interrupted when Porterfield's brother entered the courthouse with pistols blazing. Ned fled across the street to the City Hotel, and in a desperate attempt to escape, he tried to climb down from its third-story balcony, but he slipped and broke his hip on the flagstones below. He was taken to the jail for his own safety, but that night a mob that included several prominent citizens overpowered the jailor and pulled Ned from his cell, slung a noose around his neck, and ran him up an awning post. Remarkably, the rope snapped and he survived. The story of this would-be lynching was quickly splashed across the pages of the nation's newspapers and further solidified Ned Buntline's larger-than-life literary persona. In the following months he capitalized on this, publishing his four-part "Life Yarn" in the *Knickerbocker* as he moved to Philadelphia, New York, and then Boston, where he threw himself into the mass-production story paper industry that was then just emerging. In 1847 alone he published multiple stories and a dozen novels via five different publishers and established himself as one of the leading figures of the sensational press that catered to the tastes of America's rapidly growing working public.⁶ And though he most often wrote as "Ned Buntline," to avoid contract disputes over "exclusive" writing deals he signed with various publishers, he also published under a variety of other pseudonyms in the following years, including "Charley Carey," "Frank Clewline," "Charlie Bowline," "Edward J. D. Hendiboe," "Capt. Cleighmore," "Henry Edwards," "Edward Minturn," and as "An Old Hunter."⁷ By the

⁶ For a full account of the events surrounding his lynching and subsequent move to Boston see Mark Metzler Sawin, "The Lynching and Rebirth of Ned Buntline: Rogue Authorship during the American Literary Renaissance," *Text Matters* 9, No. 9 (Nov. 2019): 167–184.

⁷ In an interview late in his life he also claimed to have written under the names "Clew Garnet," "Reckless Ralph," "Sherwood Stanley" and as the female author "Julia Edwards." See W. A. Croffut, "A Visit to "Eagle's Nest," and a Glimpse at the Life of a Remarkable Man." *Detroit Free Press* (Sunday, June 28, 1885), 4.

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end of 1848, Ned moved to New York, and after marrying Annie Abigail Bennett, the daughter of a wealthy English immigrant, he relaunched *Ned Buntline's Own* as the self-proclaimed voice of New York's working men. Swapping the editorial "we" for the blunt and personal "I," he spoke directly to the masses in columns filled with sensational stories and pointed political commentaries that were often reprinted across the nation. Ned's pirate tales so inspired young Missouri native Samuel Clemens that he, too, adopted a nautical pen name, Mark Twain, and eventually incorporated Ned's characters into his own novel of boyhood bravado, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Along with Philadelphia's George Lippard, Ned also pioneered the "city mysteries" genre, which explored the secret underworld of America's urban jungles. He dedicated his ostensibly reform-minded five-part novel, *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, to the clergy of the metropolis, encouraging them to reform the politicians, gamblers, and houses of prostitution that he exposed in titillating detail. His thrilling tales, set on the very streets his urban readers walked each day, gained him a huge audience, and he used this fame to promote working-men's organizations and a variety of populist political causes.

By 1849, Ned's rhetoric had grown so aggressive and persuasive that he whipped up the class-based Astor Place Riot that caused thousands of dollars of damage and left twenty-five dead. For this he was sentenced to a year of hard labor in New York's notorious Blackwell Prison—a personal hardship for sure, but one that grew his reputation as a radical political rabble-rouser. His release was marked by a massive parade through downtown Manhattan, and he immediately returned to his inflammatory rhetoric, first in support of filibustering efforts in Cuba, and then by focusing on St. Louis, where his anti-immigrant incitements turned its 1852 mayoral race into yet another violent riot that ended in his arrest. With a militantly anti-Catholic agenda and the constant cry of "America for Americans," Ned became the public face of the secretive anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Know-Nothing political party. That his deceased first wife was Catholic and his divorced second wife was an immigrant (Annie left him after the

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Astor Place Riot) didn't bother him. Nor did his scruples prevent him from marrying and abandoning at least three other women (Margaret Ann Watson in Missouri, Lovanche Swart in New Jersey, and Jewish immigrant Ione Judah in Massachusetts) while crisscrossing the nation spewing his nativist rhetoric.⁸

But by 1856 the Know-Nothing party fell apart over the issue of slavery and Ned was largely blamed, condemned by its Southern members for his abolitionist sentiments. Feeling burned by the heat of the political spotlight and recognizing that his heavy drinking often left him reeling out of control, he fled to the rural recesses of the Adirondack mountains in the fall of 1856 to regroup and reform. Though largely hidden from public view, his charisma continued to attract attention, and soon he was known as one of the best sportsmen in the nation, a reputation that compelled his city-dwelling acquaintances to come visit his mountain lake abode. He spent five years in this rural retreat, during which time he married two more times (Eva Gardner in 1859 and Catherine Myers in 1860) and built a rustic paradise centered around his ramshackle cabin, "Eagle's Nest," from which he hunted, fished, and entertained. To support himself, all he needed was pen, paper, and a post-office—between 1856 and 1861 he earned a prodigious living, cranking out three or four serialized novels per year for the *New York Mercury*, one of the nation's leading story papers.

When the Civil War broke out, Ned very publicly joined the Union effort and spent two years as a soldier, but in name only as his constant absences and illnesses allowed him to wield his pen while never drawing his sword. The tumultuous months after the war were hard on him, however. He moved back to New York City, and its temptations soon left him perpetually drunk and lurching from one scandal to the next. He was then legally married to four women in multiple states and was occasionally living with

⁸ There is some evidence that suggests that Buntline also married a woman named Maria Cordova in either New Orleans or Texas in the early 1840s. See "Death of Ned Buntline's Wife: A Curious Career" in *Memphis Daily Avalanche* (Oct 27, 1867), and *The Home Journal* (Winchester, TN: Nov. 14, 1867), 1. See also Julia Bricklin's interesting but largely undocumented article, "The Many Wives of Ned Buntline" *Wild West* (Feb. 2019).

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two of them (Catherine Myers and Lovanche Swart) in the New York metropolitan area, but he spent most of his time dwelling in a debauched state in the tiny office of his once-again relaunched newspaper, *Ned Buntline's Own*.

Out of control, Ned recognized he had to reform; he threw himself into Temperance lecturing beginning in 1866, using his reckless life as a cautionary tale. His charismatic personality quickly made him a popular speaker, and by 1868 he was touring across the West and up and down the California coast as a heroic tea-totaling lecturer and booster of Western settlement. During a trip back across the plains to the East coast in 1869, he met the handsome guide William Cody, whom his next novel introduced to the world as *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*. Over the next few years, through several more novels and a raucous traveling show starring Cody as “Buffalo Bill,” and himself as the pioneer “Cale Durg,” Ned helped launch a global obsession with America’s “Wild West,” a temporal space his sensational stories largely created.

In 1874, having recently turned fifty years old, Ned finally settled into a relatively respectable gentleman’s existence back in his childhood hometown of Stamford, New York, which was then becoming a resort town—the “Queen of the Catskills.” He built a huge house of his own design with his eighth and final wife, Anna Fuller, who bore him two more children—he had at least five others by his various other wives. In the decade before his death in 1886, he earned a handsome salary by churning out another fifty novels. But being “Ned Buntline” necessitated an extravagant lifestyle, and by the time the marching bands and fireworks that marked his massively attended funeral were over, his estate was in ruins.

From 1846, when he began writing for popular audiences, to the time of his death forty years later, Ned Buntline wrote nearly 170 novels, primarily for the mass-market story papers. During this time he did what few authors had done before—he made a living, and a very good one, solely by his pen. This was something most

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of his canonized contemporaries never achieved. And in terms of direct public impact, there is no comparison—Buntline sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It was his words, not theirs, that America's masses consumed. By the 1870s, when he settled down and dedicated himself solely to writing, \$20,000 of ink poured from his pen each year—more than forty times the average salary of the thousands of working men and women who eagerly consumed his works.

Ned Buntline averaged writing four books a year, and though he wrote some long novels, most were in the fifty- to seventy-thousand-word range. Typically, his tales were serialized in a story paper at the rate of two to three chapters per week over the course of eight to twelve weeks. Once completed, they were re-released as ten-cent “dime novels” consisting of one hundred densely packed pages wrapped in sensationally illustrated paper covers. During his career, Ned wrote roughly 250,000 words per year; but like most writers, he wrote frantically when inspired by the muse or crunching deadlines, followed by fallow periods of no writing at all. During the mid-1850s, when he was busy with political activities, he wrote only four books in as many years, but at other times he wrote a book a month and more than a million words in a single year.

Ned was often quoted as saying of his writing: “I never lay out a plot in advance. I shouldn't know how to do it, for how can I know what my people may take it into their heads to do?” He explained: “First I invent a title, and when I hit on a good one I consider the story about half finished. It is the thing of prime importance.” His method necessitated only a pen, ink, and a bound sheaf of pages. Once the title was inscribed at the top, he said, “I push ahead as fast as I can write, never blotting anything I have once written, and never making a correction or modification.”⁹

Though certainly overstated, this was, in general, his writing process. Contemporary literary critic Leon Mead noted that Ned was capable of writing excellent prose and was keenly aware of the

⁹ See Will Wildwood “Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline, Part II.” *Wildwood's Magazine* 1, no. 3 (July 1888), 130.

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unsophisticated nature of his daily outpouring of words. He explained that Ned “did not very highly prize” most of his works “for intrinsic merit,” but literary merit also wasn’t his goal. He believed that “Buntline’s tales stand by themselves as a distinct class of literature,” and that “they cannot be compared with the so-called refined novel” because his “methods of work were inspirational, else how could he have weaved his thrilling plots as he wrote, without previous deliberation.” When it came to Buntline, he concluded, “what Goethe says about literary style is essentially true; ‘style is the man himself.’”¹⁰

Reflecting on his own career, Ned bluntly told a reporter, “In my own case I found that to make a living I must write ‘trash’ for the masses, for he who endeavors to write for the critical few, and do his genius justice, will go hungry if he has no other means of support.” He further noted, “I might have paved for myself a far different career in letters, but my early lot was cast among rough men on the border; they became my comrades, and when I made my name as a teller of stories about Indians, pirates and scouts, it seemed too late to begin over again. And besides, I made more money than any Bohemian in New York or Boston.”¹¹

Ned Buntline’s tales were written in rapid response to America’s constantly changing concerns and obsessions. They were fast and fun to read, selling well because they both echoed and explained their era. As such, Ned Buntline’s pervasive voice illustrates and explains the social, cultural, and political movements of the mid-nineteenth century. His words are the zeitgeist of the time—a window into the lives of the people who so readily consumed them—and in this way his works are *the* literature of their time.

¹⁰ Quoted in Fred E. Pond, *The Life and Adventures of “Ned Buntline.”* (New York: Camdus Book Shop, 1919), 106. As a young writer, Leon Mead knew and admired Buntline; he later became a literary scholar, writing *How Words Grow: A Brief Study of Literary Style, Slang, and Provincialisms* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902).

¹¹ Quote in William Henry Venable, *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley: Historical and Biographical Sketches* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1891), 294–295; and in Pond, 106–107.