Before the "Yellow Peril"

American novels of Chinese immigration, invasion

by Kevin Jenks

Nearly a century before the publication of Jean Raspail's *Camp of the Saints,* and almost two decades before America and Europe were gripped by that general anxiety at rising East Asian power known as the "Yellow Peril," several fictional depictions of Chinese invaders, either as swarming immigrants displacing American workers, or as conquering armies, or both, warned Americans to reform their immigration laws and build up their military defenses — or face defeat and dispossession in North America.

The three works of popular fiction considered here — Atwell Whitney's *Almond-Eyed*, Pierton Dooner's *Last Days of the Republic,* and Robert Woltor's *A Short and Truthful History of the Taking of Oregon and California* — were published between the years 1878 and 1882 in San Francisco, in other words at the temporal and geographical epicenter of the political struggle against Chinese peasant

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immigration.

The novels are of two different genres, the earliest adhering closely to the conventions of Victorian popular fiction, while the latter two, admonitory chronicles of looming political and military catastrophe, foreshadow such classics of science fiction as

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H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and of dystopia, or counter-utopia, as George Orwell's *1984,* not to mention a slew of novels of Asiatic invasion that followed after the turn of the century.

While it is not in the compass of this article to describe the reception or specific literary or political impact of the three novels considered, or to consider in depth the domestic and foreign political developments which helped mold them, these novels may provide some insight into how fears of alien immigration and racial peril produced a literary response, using old forms or

shaping new ones, and aimed at influencing the broad public attitudes. While none of these works can compare in fictional mastery and literary import to *The Camp of the Saints*, they did express and quite possibly contributed to a popular mood that very shortly was able to achieve a virtual end to the mass immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States for nearly a century.

The three novels in question have been studied, unsympathetically, by William Wu, in *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850-1940*, but neither he nor various other literary and biographical sources consulted provided any but the sketchiest information on the authors. It is not unlikely that one or more of these writers was using a pseudonym.

The earliest of them is Atwell Whitney's *Almond-Eyed: The Great Agitator: A Story of the Day.* While the edition consulted was on crumbling paper, paper-bound, with the first fifteen or so pages missing, and consequently lacking title page, publisher, or publication date, it may be assumed that this version is identical to the edition cited by Wu, published in San Francisco by A.L. Bancroft in 1878.

The book is a novel of its day, sentimental and arguably naive, with a style and structure common to thousands of such novels. A competition between a maverick

but pure-hearted hero and the dissolute scion of the local captain of industry for the hand of the virtuous daughter of the practical working widow is central to the plot; the drawings of several of the characters, which accompany the text, are no less generic.

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What sets *Almond-Eyed* apart from its contemporaries, of course, is the threat posed by a large population of immigrant Chinese laborers. The novel's action is set for the most part in the fictional California city of Yarbtown, which serves as a microcosm for the immigration controversy roiling the West Coast at the time of the book's publication. Yarbtown is a company town dominated by one Deacon Spud, who looks to the Chinese as a source of cheap labor, with the enthusiastic moral support of the town's most prominent church, a Presby-terian congregation over which he has a dominant influence.

The story line develops the struggle of white working man Job Stearns to rally Yarbtown's whites against the economic and moral threat posed by the Chinese, and to win the hand of the fair Bessie Caldwell, who is alternately courted by the dastard and wastrel Simon Spud, Deacon's son and heir.

As Wu points out, the Chinese who threaten Yarbtown's equilibrium remain faceless. While the title "Almond Eyes" clearly refers to Ah Ching, most rascally denizen of Yarbtown's Chinatown, even he is scarcely characterized, other than as the protege of Yarbtown's doting do-gooders and a henchman of the scheming Simon Spud. The Chinese political activity implied in the subtitle goes unrecorded: in the novel, the almond-eyed Ah Ching's "agitating" is confined to roistering with young Spud in the gambling dens and brothels of Chinatown.

In fact, any agitation done is that by Stearns, the clean-limbed, wise, virtuous and tenacious defender of Yarb-town's working folk. No mere unionizing prole, Stearns is knowledgeable enough to keep Deacon Spud's books, imagina-tive enough to call for worker's cooperatives to combat the flood of cheap Chinese labor and industry, self-restrained enough to draw back from initiating violence, and a church-going Christian (until his expulsion from the congregation on trumped-up charges brought by Simon Spud) who is saintly enough to nurse the plague-ridden (thanks to the fetid Chinese quarter) elder Spud after he has unjustly fired him.

Throughout, the focus of *Almond-Eyed* is away from electoral politics, the courts, and acts of violence (which occur, but are condemned) against the Asian immigrants, and toward economic organizing and social persuasion, frequently of women, as the means of combating the Chinese. When Stearns intervenes to save a Chinese woman who is about to be murdered by Ah Ching, and finds himself tried on false charges for assaulting the evil Chinese, his tribunal is not the law court, but the church. His warnings against the Chinese economic threat are directed not just to white male farm and industrial workers, but to their womenfolk, who likewise feel the pinch of Chinese competition in their work as laundresses, seamstresses, and the like. And *Almond-Eyed* is as much, if not more, concerned with the challenge to morals posed by the immigrants as by their threat to public health and economic well-being: prostitution, gambling, and an opium den which succeeds in luring in Yarbtown's high-schoolers figure promi-nently.

These and other features, which link *Almond-Eyed* to any number of "romance" and "gothic" novels, modern-day soap operas, and so forth, identify it as a book directed chiefly at women readers. Its publication in 1878, at a time when women couldn't vote in U.S. elections, suggests that there was a market for a more feminine version of the diatribes of Denis Kearney and other advocates of Chinese exclusion, and possibly for an appeal to the power of womanly persuasion.

Almond-Eyed concludes with mixed auspices. Job Stearns gets the girl, and (true to his irenic

nature) reaches a legal settlement with Simon Spud, who retires to Nevada to set up a whiskey mill and poker game. While the money enables Stearns to set up and manage factories whose white American workers will not be displaced by low-wage Chinese competition, the novel ends by jarring the reader back to the present:

> *The stream of heathen men and women still comes pouring in, filling the places which should be occupied by the Caucasian race, poisoning the moral atmosphere, tainting society, undermining the free institutions of the country, degrading labor, and resisting quietly, but wisely and success-fully, all efforts to remove them, or prevent their coming. Good people, what shall be done?*

In contrast to Whitney's work, Pierton Dooner's *Last Days of the Republic* might be said to be scarcely a novel at all, but rather a combination of a political and economic treatise on the rise of Chinese immigration from 1850 to 1880 (the year the book was published), and a chronicle of Chinese infiltration, then invasion and conquest, in the three decades to come. The author, writing from his imaginary retrospective vantage point early in the twentieth century, is at pains to describe his work as predictive and scientific ("the data of thirty years of observation and experiment"), rather than mere futuristic fantasy.

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The first four chapters of *The Last Days of the Republic*, then, lay the groundwork for what is to come. In the form of a learned historical essay, not without stylistic elegance, *Last Days* provides an intelligent and informed account of Chinese immigration and settlement in the U.S. up to 1880, with sophisticated discussions of how party politics frustrated a unitary national response to a threat greatly magnified by capitalist greed.

Dooner acutely observes and distinguishes every thread of the pro-Chinese sentiment. Here is his gloss on the opposition of New England's Congressmen to the Fifteen Passenger Bill of 1879, which aimed at limiting Chinese immigration and was vetoed by President Hayes:

> *Puritanical New England was loud in her denunciation of the measure. She wanted half the Chinese Empire transferred to America, to give occupation to her missionary heroes, and furnish cheap labor for her factories; added to which was that human fervor that was loud in proclaiming that America, her laws and her policy, were forever dedicated to the elevation of*

the benighted and the oppressed of all lands.

As does *Almond-Eyed, The Last Days of the Republic* condemns anti-Chinese violence, but it also praises Denis Kearney's efforts to channel white workers' discontent into a Chinese exclusionary political movement. Yet Dooner allows himself a liberty that is not found in *Almond-Eyed* (which in any case avoids any foreign implications of the Chinese immigration): he describes the immigration of Chinese coolies from 1850 on as part of a conscious scheme of the Manchu imperial court to begin the conquest of America. For this, any more than for a Chinese drive to dominate the world, he is able to offer no solid evidence.

Such, however, is the premise from which the rest of *Last Days* is spun. Presented as a deduction based on observed historical repetition and the laws of progress, and a threnodic account of the step-by-step evanescence and defeat of the American Republic, the book likely resonated for unlearned, but self-improving readers of nationalistic bent — indeed the sort of audience Denis Kearney and Henry George used to hold forth before at the workers' lyceums in San Francisco.

The futuristic portion of *Last Days* is notable for its step-by-step articulation of the Chinese design for subversion and conquest: first immigration, then naturalization; attainment of economic and political control,

piece by piece, of states, and regions, then the climactic uprisings and invasion.

As foreshadowed in the opening chapters, white American resistance, lamed by sectional, factional, and class divisions, is always too little and too late. Here is not the place even to outline the successive and prolonged convulsions by which white workers were driven to emigrate from the West Coast; by which African-Americans, recently freed in the South only to be replaced by coolies, began "fast striding toward extinction"; by which the American working class became prey to an immiseration hardly dreamed of by Marx; and by which the Manchu-deputized leaders among the immigrants gained a political, legal, and economic stranglehold over much of America, and, aided by the coolies, who constituted a vast, secret militia, were able to abet the Chinese armies which invaded at the turn of the century and replaced the United States of America with the Western Empire of his August Majesty the Emperor of China and Ruler of All Lands. "Thus passed away the glory of the United States, at the dawn of the Twentieth Century."

Robert Woltor's *A Short and Truthful History of the Taking of California and Oregon by the Chinese in the Year A.D. 1899* (published, like *Almond-Eyed,* by A.L. Bancroft, in 1882) is in a similar vein to Dooner, with an outright Chinese invasion prepared for by a deliberate influx of coolie immigrants secretly loyal to the emperor. Broadly comparable to *Last*

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Days and to *Almond-Eyed* in its analysis of the rise of the Chinese immigrant threat, *A Short and Truthful History* sacrifices comprehensiveness and a final evocation of American ruin in favor of the specific menace in California, which flowers in a rising of the Chinatowns coincident with the treacherous capture of the local military leadership by a visiting Chinese flotilla. In short order the Chinese subdue California and Oregon (in a bit of explicit irony rare to any of these books, a Chinese commander tells U.S. officers: "The Americans must go," echoing Denis Kearney's most famous pronouncement). As the book ends, Woltor (styled "A Survivor" on the title page) reports that Chinese and American armies are massing for a struggle which will decide the fate of the white man on the North American continent.

Like *Almond-Eyed,* both these books are devoid of recognizably human Chinese antagonists, merely assigning names to a few faceless princes and generals, none of whom attains to anything approaching the personality of even the fiendish Dr. Fu Manchu (to name only the most prominent of a subsequent genre of Chinese villainy). No matter —

neither work has any white characters of note or substance either.

What to make of these two odd works? For their "futurism," they are generally classified as a species of science fiction, the "invasion novel," which is held to have been initiated by the Englishman G.T. Chesney. A colonial officer concerned by his country's unpreparedness, Chesney described in *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) a successful Prussian invasion of England, appealing to non-specialist readers through the fictional form and drawing the sensation-minded and sentimental by his depiction of England laid low by secret weapons. (This genre, which continues today in such recent exemplars as John Milius's movie of Soviet conquest "Red Dawn," quickly branched out into a pronouncedly science fiction genre of alien invasion, typified by H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* published in 1898.)

Unlike the rising, newly unified Germany, the Chinese empire circa 1880 — ruled by a decadent and unpopular dynasty, reeling from decades of external strife, and prey to the depre-dations of various colonial powers — posed no serious threat to any Western nation. Indeed, so disproportionate are the scenarios of conquest offered in *The Last Days* and *A Short and Truthful History* to the discernible power relationships between China and the U.S. that one is tempted to search elsewhere than in the strictly strategic realm for elucidation.

Perhaps these two novels are better described as what novelist John Gardner called "social

science fiction," in an afterword to a later novel of Asiatic invasion of America, Floyd Gibbons's *The Red Napoleon* (1929). Such works depict future worlds, generally marked by struggle between races, classes, or (as in *The Red Napoleon*) both. Often admonitory, pessimistic, dystopian, or some combination of the three (George Orwell's *1984* is perhaps pre-eminent among examples), fiction of this type has served to map out anxieties about the present and fears about the future, as well as to present programs for reform to a wider and less learned audience.

Of interest regarding each of the three novels considered here is the pessimism which, to a greater or lesser extent, informs each. One can surmise, particu-larly regarding Whitney's and Woltor's books, that this pessimism brooded over more than just the influx of Chinese coolies in California. However improbable the specter of Chinese invasion and conquest, there was beginning to arise among Americans and Europeans an anxiety as to the non-white, colonial, Asian and even African threat to first, white rule; then, to white power; finally, to white survival.

This anxiety, at the apex of white world power, at the height of England's Victorian Era and America's Gilded Age, was still uncommon among the elite as well as the rank and file. Yet men like Dooner and Woltor could point to increasing unrest, uprising, and revolt against the West, from the Sepoy rebellion to Little Big Horn, in the 25

years preceding 1880. That there was a new sense of economic and even biological competition, is patent in *The Last Days of the Republic* (anticipating Brooks Adams's *Law of Civilisation and Decay* by some 15 years); that the Asians, at least, were capable of acquiring and using Western science, technology, and industry to fashion a terrifying military threat is not denied by either Woltor or Dooner.

None of the works considered here can be classed for either literary mastery or hard-eyed acuity with Jean Raspail's *Camp of the Saints*. In his novel of "immigration and invasion," Raspail has produced an X-ray of the Western soul that is at once repulsive, terrifying and beautiful. Further, Raspail's genius is prescriptive rather than admonitory: his novel, read creatively, is a course in the sort of spiritual restoration that will save the West, if anything can. Whitney, Dooner, and Woltor, in their novels, could only warn.

But warn they did, and warn not simply the scholar or the judge or the learned businessman or senator: they aimed their books at a broad spectrum — which included shopkeepers, farmers, laborers, draymen, in short much of the middle and working classes, including (above all in Whitney's case) women. And, whatever the weight of their role, their warnings bore fruit: in 1882 the United States largely solved its coolie immigration problem.

Whatever the literary shortcomings of *Almond-Eyed, The Last Days of the Republic,*

and *A Short and Truthful History of the Taking of California and Oregon in the Year A.D. 1899,* their authors might say, our books came first — and by God, they worked!   □

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