# The Mystery of Metropolisville

(1873)

A Novel By

## Edward Eggleston

A Review and Reconsideration By

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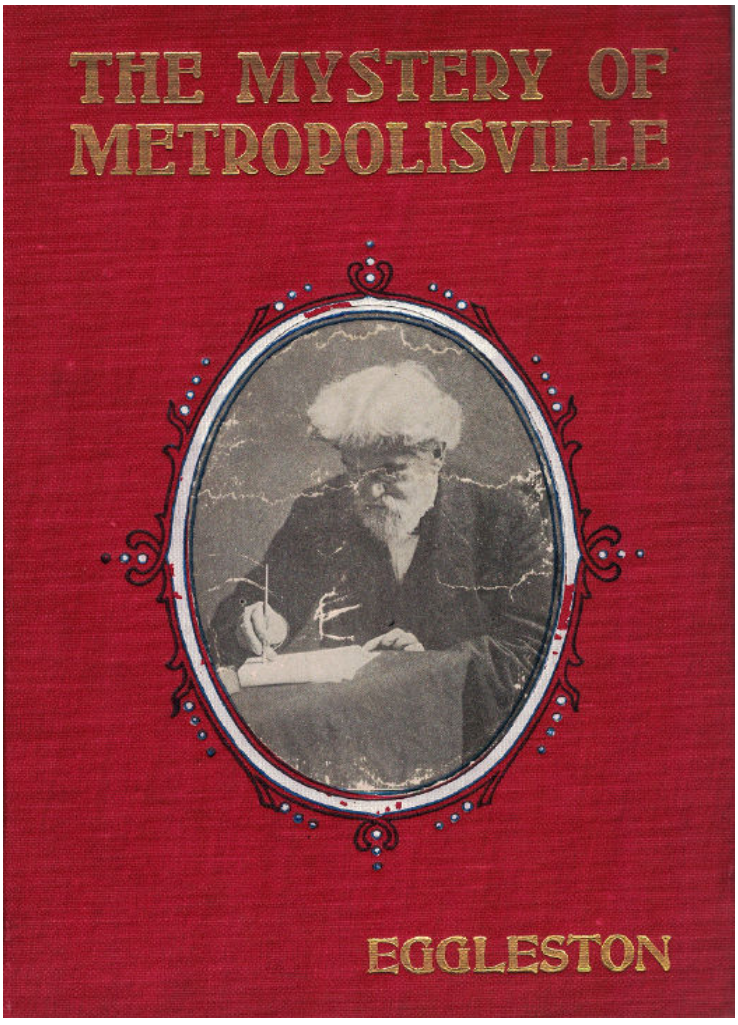

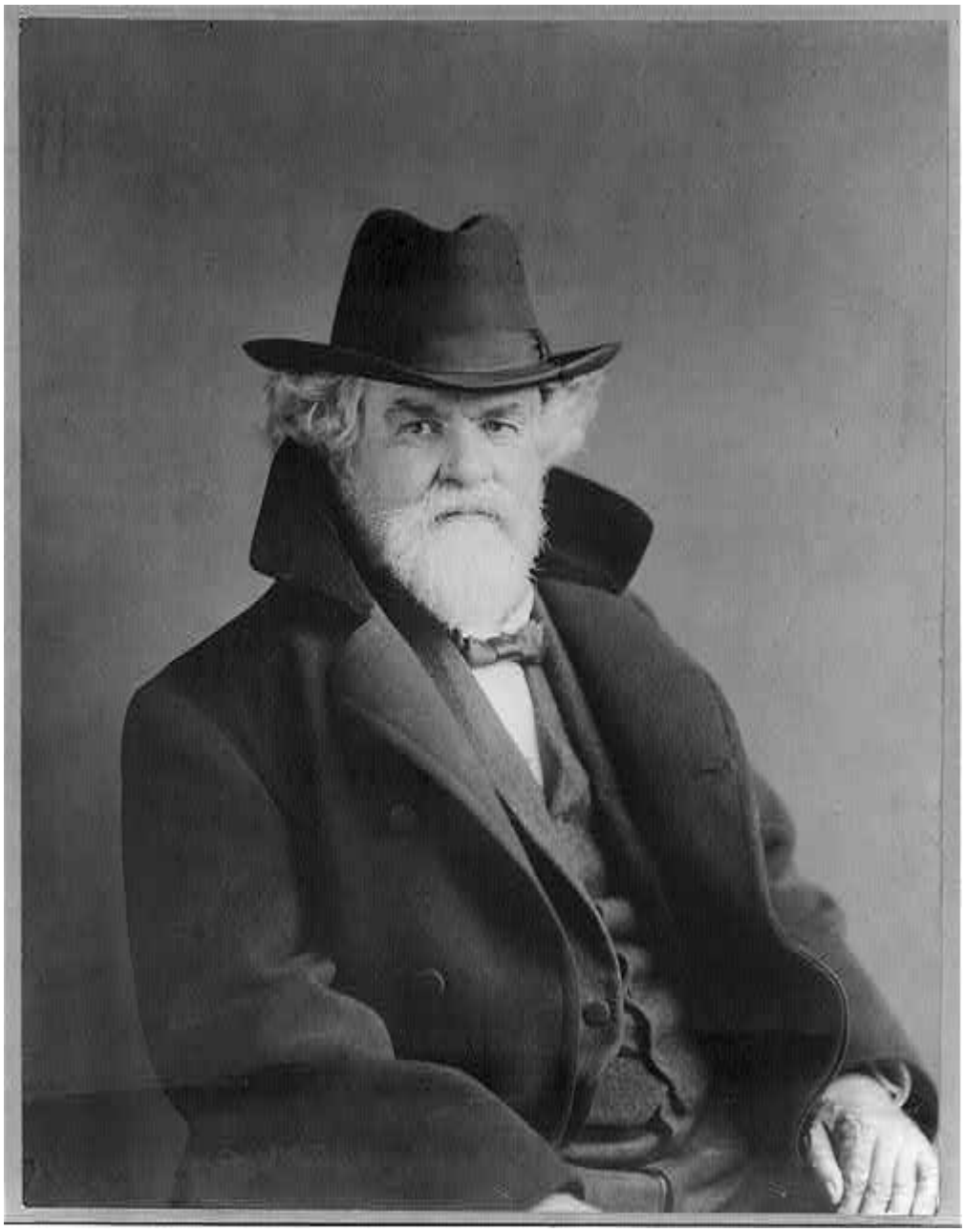

**Edward Eggleston**
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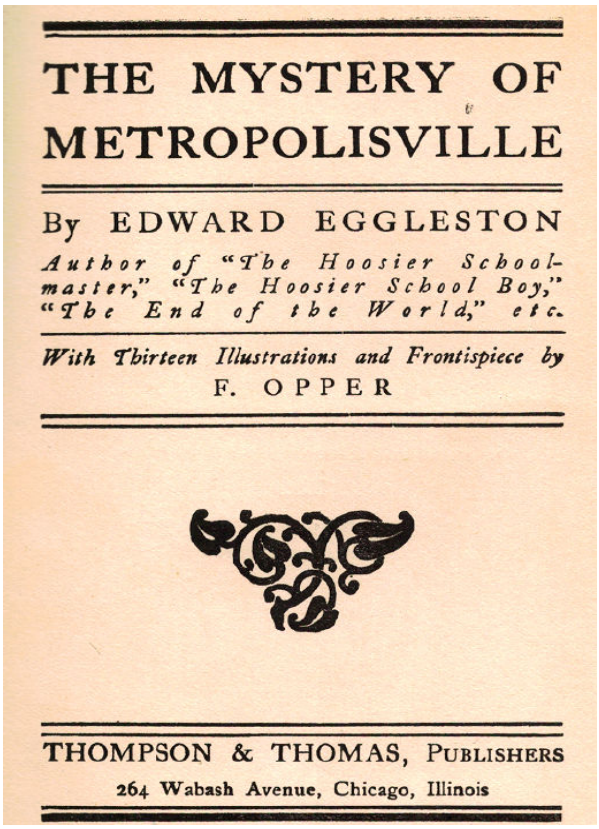
Readers of the Minnesota Legal History Project may be forgiven if they have never heard of the nineteenth-century fiction writer, social historian, and Methodist minister Edward Eggleston (1837-1902), let alone his obscure novel *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (1873). I am a critic specializing in early to nineteenth-century American literature and I was not familiar with him either. Although further research indicates that neither Eggleston nor his novel has been completely neglected by historians and literary scholars, no one has adequately analyzed how closely Minnesota's legal and penal systems underpin *The Mystery of Metropolisville*.



THE MYSTERY OF METROPOLISVILLE

By EDWARD EGGLESTON

*Author of "The Hoosier Schoolmaster," "The Hoosier School Boy," "The End of the World," etc.*

*With Thirteen Illustrations and Frontispiece by* F. OPPER

THOMPSON & THOMAS, PUBLISHERS

264 Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

Title page of *The Mystery of Metropolisville* [2]

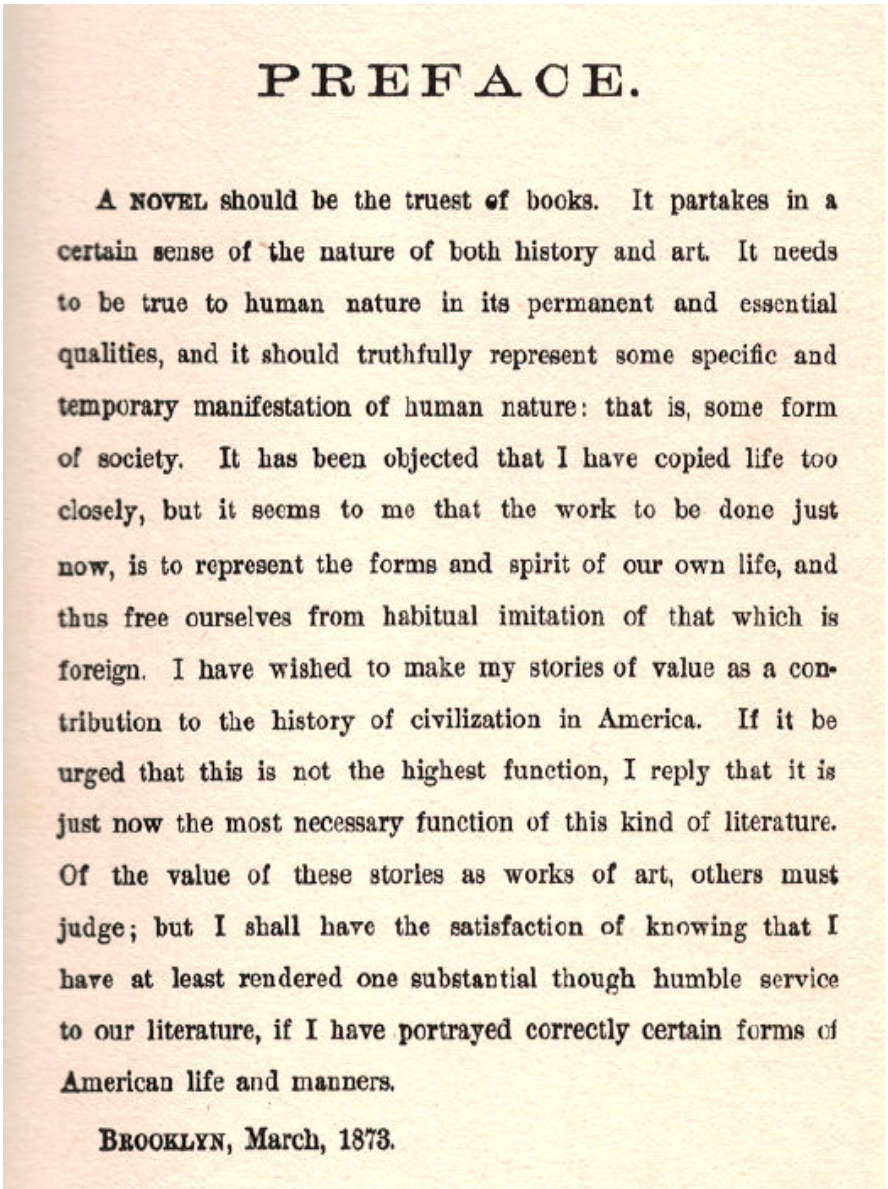
First, a word about Eggleston himself. Born in Indiana in 1837, Edward Eggleston came to Minnesota as "a sickly youth of eighteen" hoping that the clean air and wholesome environment touted by state boosters would help his health.[3] Whether it was the climate or his increased physical activity, life in Minnesota suited him, and while he lived there only from 1856 to 1866, these formative years launched his career as a well-regarded Methodist preacher and a gifted writer. Eggleston found it difficult to negotiate his two competing vocations and eventually made writing and editing his primary profession, though he sometimes returned to short-term preaching gigs and various odd jobs to pay the bills. As his commitment to a literary life intensified, he moved to larger urban centers such as Chicago and New York to nurture his talent and find outlets for publication.

Some of Eggleston's earliest compositions involved lectures, articles, and books for children. However, he soon began to cultivate a wider audience and to create longer texts. He scored a major hit in 1871 with *The Hoosier School-Master*, his first, most popular, and still his best known novel.[4] *The Mystery of Metropolisville* was Eggleston's third fictional work, and he published several more novels after it. But during the last decade of his life he preferred to write history. Two key books in the series "A History of American Life in America" are particularly noteworthy for their scope: *The Beginners of a Nation* (1896) and *The Transit of Civilization* (1901).[5] Summarizing Eggleston's contributions to American culture, his biographer William Peirce Randel called him "an American pioneer in both literary realism and social history."[6]

Eggleston drew on his first-hand knowledge of Minnesota in several short publications. For example, during 1865 to 1866 he published fourteen stories about Native Americans in Minnesota for the children's magazine *Little Corporal*.[7] In 1862, while he was minister of the Jackson Street Church in St. Paul, he conducted funerals for casualties of the US-Dakota War and considered writing a book-length history of the war. That never materialized, but he did compose two articles about the hostilities: "An Incident of the Indian Massacres of 1862," published in 1864, and "The Siege of Fort Ridgely," which remains unpublished.[8] Other work with a Minnesota connection includes two apparently fact-based stories, "The Gunpowder Plot" (1871) and "The-Man-That-Draws-the-Handcart" (1894).[9]

But *The Mystery of Metropolisville* is Eggleston's only novel set in Minnesota, and it contains recognizable and realistic (up to a point) characters and incidents. As scholar John T. Flanagan says, Eggleston's aim "was to sketch the land mania that had seized the people of the Northwest in 1856 and especially to portray the shyster lawyers and the land sharks who battened on the gullibility and cupidity of the immigrants."[10] Work like this established Eggleston's reputation as a regional writer, that is, someone who grounds his/her work in a specific time and place. As such, he contributed to the late nineteenth-century reaction to Romanticism labeled Realism. More prominent realistic American writers than Eggleston included Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Henry James, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Kate Chopin. Eggleston clearly

wanted to create realistic works (even if he wasn't always successful), and he articulated some of his premises in the preface to *The Mystery of Metropolisville*:



# PREFACE.

A NOVEL should be the truest of books. It partakes in a certain sense of the nature of both history and art. It needs to be true to human nature in its permanent and essential qualities, and it should truthfully represent some specific and temporary manifestation of human nature: that is, some form of society. It has been objected that I have copied life too closely, but it seems to me that the work to be done just now, is to represent the forms and spirit of our own life, and thus free ourselves from habitual imitation of that which is foreign. I have wished to make my stories of value as a contribution to the history of civilization in America. If it be urged that this is not the highest function, I reply that it is just now the most necessary function of this kind of literature. Of the value of these stories as works of art, others must judge; but I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that I have at least rendered one substantial though humble service to our literature, if I have portrayed correctly certain forms of American life and manners.

BROOKLYN, March, 1873.

In line with his opening statement that "A NOVEL should be the truest of books," Eggleston vowed to make his "stories of value as a contribution to the history of civilization in America," rather than to reproduce fanciful and unrealistic texts which he saw as un-American imitations of European literature.

*The Mystery of Metropolisville* is loosely structured around a series of episodes featuring the hero, Albert Charlton, and in that sense it is among other things a coming-of-age novel. But there are so many digressions that John T. Flanagan observes, "Even as an experienced novelist, Eggleston did not shine in the construction of plots."[11] Part of the problem may have been that what became a novel was initially serialized and probably written in short bursts. However, instead of ultimately weaving these disparate strands into a cohesive whole, Eggleston allowed his text to lurch from one incident to another. On page one hundred and twenty four, concerned that readers would be wondering what the "mystery" of the title could possibly be, Eggleston felt the need to pen an awkward authorial intrusion asking them to be patient! Indeed, the mystery is not clarified until two-thirds of the way through.

The story begins in the 1850s with the idealistic, bookish, but naive Albert Charlton traveling to Metropolisville, having left college without obtaining a degree. This is his first visit to Minnesota where his widowed mother, recently remarried to the land investor Mr. Plausaby, has moved with his beloved sister, Katy. On the stagecoach Albert overhears other travelers discussing property investments, such as the moneylender Mr. Minorkey, who is accompanied by his pretty but vapid daughter, Helen. The stagecoach driver, Whisky Jim, becomes Albert's friend and plays a significant part in the unfolding plot. He cautions Albert to be honest but pragmatic in this frontier community, because "'Taint no land of idees. It's the ked'ntry [country] of corner lots.'"[12] From early on the novel presents several potential but unsuitable romantic pairings, such as Albert and Helen

Minorkey and Katy and the arrogant, foppish Smith Westcott, chief clerk of a local store.

Albert's stepfather, Mr. Plausaby, is a shameless but successful con man whose salesmanship is well described in the chapter "Corner Lots."[13]


"Plausaby Selling Lots,"
*The Mystery of Metropolisville*, p. 47

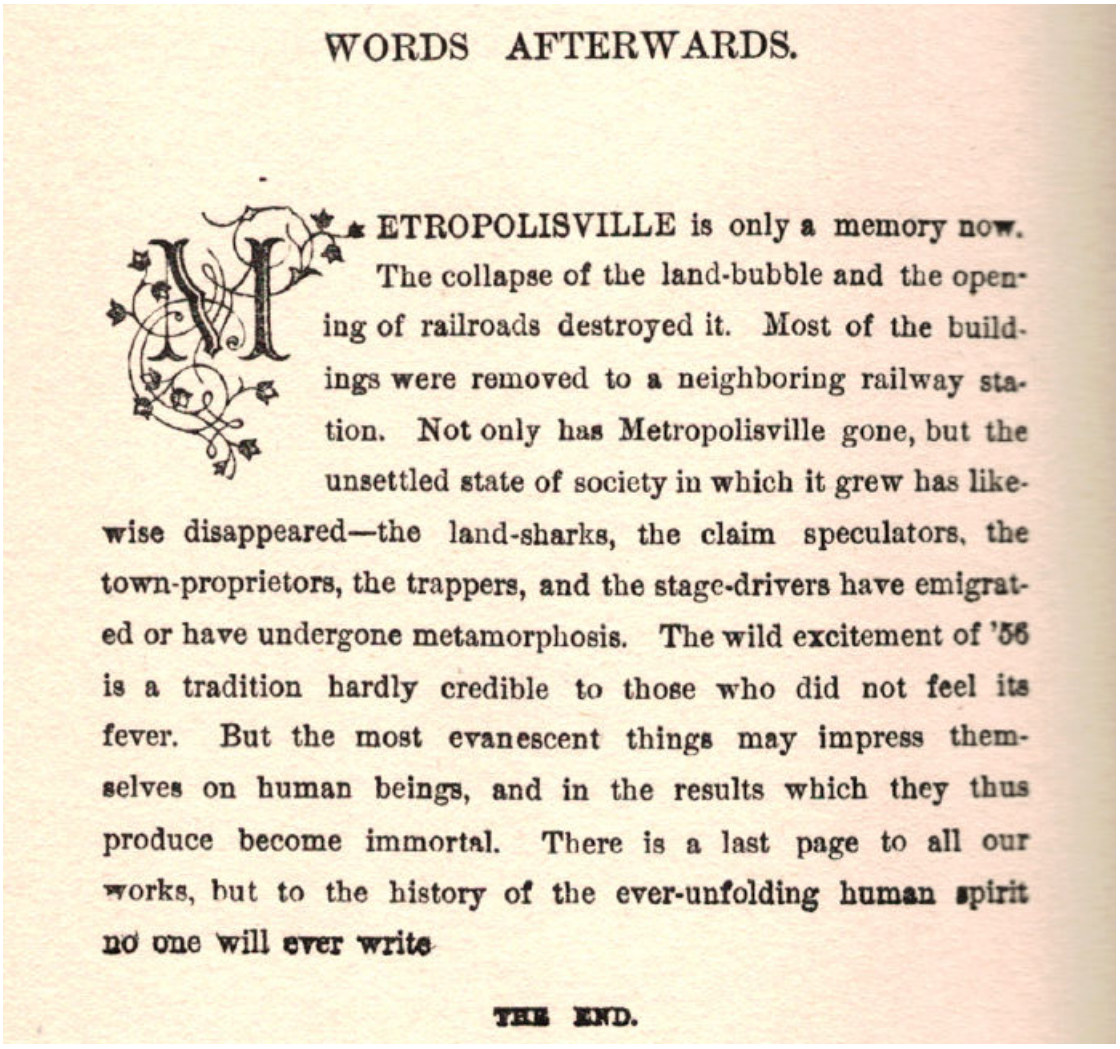
His shenanigans form the basis of the plot, leading one critic to observe, "The hinge on which Metropolisville turns is speculation in land, with all of its questionable practices—claim jumping, buying up of half-breed [sic] scrip, artful dodges to capture the county seat, and diddling of newcomers."[14] He has married Albert's mother to gain access to the $10, 000 her first husband left her, and he

also manages (i.e. speculates with) the funds of his late wife's niece, Isabel Marlay, who lives with the family.

The plot turns melodramatic when Katy drowns in a tragic accident and Albert, who has become postmaster of Metropolisville through Plausaby's influence, is arrested for allegedly intercepting a land warrant mailed to Smith Westcott. The "mystery" of the title concerns why Albert pleads innocent but refuses to say anything in his own defense when the evidence against him is so damning. His first lawyer, Mr. Conger, suggests various subterfuges to help his case, but Albert will not agree to them and says, "'I don't to get free by playing tricks on a court of law. . . . I will not degrade myself by evading justice with delays and false affidavits. If you can do anything for me fairly and squarely, I should like to have it done.' 'Scruples, eh?' asked Mr. Conger in surprise. 'Yes, scruples,' said Albert Charlton. . . ."[15] Albert's second lawyer is more professional, but with nothing to go on he cannot successfully plead the case, so Albert receives a ten-year prison sentence at Stillwater for mail fraud. Helen Minorkey dumps him, but Isabel Marlay, who loves Albert, continues to believe he is innocent. Through her intervention and the help of the prison chaplain, Rev. Lurton, the truth is finally revealed. The land warrant that Albert used to pre-empt his claim had a specific number, but incontrovertible evidence exists that this claim was mailed to Smith Westcott, who never received it. Plausaby had forced his wife to steal the land warrant and give it to Albert, who kept her secret until she confessed to Rev. Lurton on her death bed. So Albert nobly went to prison rather than implicate his mother. Mrs. Plausaby dies, the disgraced Mr. Plausaby skips town, Smith Westcott

fades from the scene, Albert is released from prison, and when he belatedly realizes Isabel Marlay's worth, he proposes to her. Furthermore, what's left of Mrs. Plausaby's investments reverts to Albert, her immediate heir. His own land claim comes through legitimately, and he finds himself wealthier than he imagined.

The novel's afterword sounds a somber note about the boom and bust times of Minnesota's early white settlement.



WORDS AFTERWARDS.

METROPOLISVILLE is only a memory now. The collapse of the land-bubble and the opening of railroads destroyed it. Most of the buildings were removed to a neighboring railway station. Not only has Metropolisville gone, but the unsettled state of society in which it grew has likewise disappeared—the land-sharks, the claim speculators, the town-proprietors, the trappers, and the stage-drivers have emigrated or have undergone metamorphosis. The wild excitement of '56 is a tradition hardly credible to those who did not feel its fever. But the most evanescent things may impress themselves on human beings, and in the results which they thus produce become immortal. There is a last page to all our works, but to the history of the ever-unfolding human spirit no one will ever write

THE END.

*The Mystery of Metropolisville*, p. 320

If frontier life featured "the land-sharks, the claim speculators, the town-proprietors" and other unstable characters, then social progress and civic responsibility required places like Metropolisville to undergo "metamorphosis" or fail. At the novel's end, it is principled people such as a chastened Albert, Isabel, and Whisky Jim who exemplify the true American character based in hard work and Christian values (hence the presence and influence of Rev. Lurton) rather than naked capitalism.[16]

I am aware that this basic plot summary makes the novel sound more romantic than realistic. It's true that the love stories veer towards sentimentality, but Eggleston tried to tether down the story through real-life incidents, setting, characterization, and legal know-how. For example, the town of Metropolisville is based on Cannon City, "the boom town where Eggleston spent most of his first short visit to the Territory."[17] Also, the section of the novel where the county seat is illegally removed from Perritaut to Metropolisville (thus making land more valuable there) has its basis in fact. In 1855, the county seat of Rice County moved from Cannon City to Faribault.[18] And for details on Katy's drowning Eggleston drew on an accident he had seen in Cannon City.[19] Moreover, he possessed first-hand experience of the prison at Stillwater because he had served as a chaplain there. Not only did this experience enable him to depict prison life, he apparently based the figure of Rev. Lurton on himself.[20]

One of the ways that Eggleston tried to make characters speak somewhat realistically was to reproduce local dialect and speech patterns as accurately as he

could. This is most evident in dialogue involving Whisky Jim and George Gray, a local hermit in love with Katy who is also a (terrible!) poet. Still other characters exhibit verbal mannerisms that Eggleston tried to recreate. The best example is how Smith Westcott speaks and laughs. Just about every time he appears he utters some version of "'By George! He! He! He!'"[21] Unfortunately, even if some of the characters' dialogue is grounded in true Americanisms, the people who utter it are so two-dimensional that the final effect is unconvincing and often irritating.

But Eggleston was determined to base his plot on the very real issue of pre-emption, a term that recurs frequently throughout his novel. As early as page twenty-three, while describing the town of Red Owl through which Albert passes en route to Metropolisville, Eggleston says, "Here and there Charlton noticed the little claim-shanties, built in every sort of fashion, mere excuses for pre-emption. Some were even constructed of brush. What was lacking in the house was amply atoned for by the perjury of the claimant who, in pre-empting, would swear to any necessary number of good qualities in his habitation." So what exactly was pre-emption?

In the nineteenth century, "pre-emption" referred to the right of an individual settler to buy public land at a minimum price, in return for making good-faith improvements and living on and developing it. But because it was open to exploitation from the very beginning, the Preemption Act of 1841 was passed specifying the criteria by which an individual could pre-empt. The Act was supposed to close some of the loopholes by which speculators and investors could

circumvent the original intent of pre-emption. However, unscrupulous people like Mr. Plausaby and Smith Westcott found ways around the Act too. The MLHP has reproduced the text of the Act as well as a useful summary originally published in 1859 in a local Minnesota newspaper, presumably to help ordinary folk understand the Act's basic provisions.[22] Some of the pre-emption criteria that play a part in *The Mystery of Metropolisville* include the following: the pre-emptor can use pre-emption only once; he (and pre-emption was mostly made by a male head of household) cannot already own 320 acres within the United States; he must live on and genuinely improve the land; he must be over twenty-one; and he must not pre-empt with any speculative intent.

For example, Mr. Plausaby advises Albert to pre-empt even though he is not quite twenty-one because he has ways of finessing this problem. Using Plausaby's voice, Eggleston writes, "The spirit of the law was the thing to be looked at. The spirit, not the letter. Not the letter at all. The spirit warranted Albert in pre-empting."[23] Yet Albert sees through his step-father's wiles and refuses to play ball, "'You want me to swear that I am twenty-one when I am not, to bribe the receiver, and to take a claim and all the improvements on it from a sick man?' said Albert with heat."[24]

Another example concerns the odious Smith Westcott who is able for a short time to jump Whisky Jim's land claim on the grounds that he does not live on the land. But Whisky Jim is no fool; he hires a lawyer and offers him part of the claim as a fee, which is worth more than the fifty dollars with which Smith

Westcott originally bribed the attorney. Smith Westcott then gets the upper hand for a while and tells Katy, "'Goin' to pre-empt in a few days, Katy. Whisky Jim come plaguey near to gittin' that claim. He got Shamberson on his side, and if Shamberson's brother-in-law hadn't been removed from the Land Office before it was tried, he'd a got it. I'm going to pre-empt and build the cutest little bird's nest for you.'"[25]

Later, after Smith Westcott is disgraced, Whisky Jim is able to reclaim his land. But not before Plausaby cajoles his wife into stealing Smith Westcott's documents and blaming the theft on Albert. Why did Plausaby do that? He did it because Albert refused to support Plausaby's machinations in moving the county seat and others were listening to Albert. If the county seat stayed in Perritaut, Plausaby stood to lose money from his land speculation. At first Plausaby maneuvered to get Albert out of the county to visit a distant cousin until after the election. When that did not work, Plausaby relied on Albert's decency in not exposing his mother and going to jail in her stead.

*The Mystery of Metropolisville* also contains a subplot involving what was known in the nineteenth century as "Half-breed scrip." According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Website, "Under the provisions of treaties signed in 1863, mixed blood Red Lake and Pembina Chippewa Indians were entitled to scrip, which could then be exchanged for 160-acre allotments of land in North Dakota and Minnesota which had been ceded to the tribes. Scrip was issued between 1867 and 1882."[26] Three decades earlier, in 1830, the Treaty of Prairie du Chien

specified the boundaries of a so-called "Half-Breed Tract" round Lake Pepin, though it was rescinded in 1850. But back to the novel. Katy is not only pursued by Smith Westcott; she also catches the eye of a property investor named Dave Sawney, described as "large, lymphatic, and conceited."[27] Katy is not interested in him, so he makes moves to marry the mixed blood daughter of a wealthy French settler named Mr. Perritaut and perhaps claim "Half-breed scrip" through her (it's not overtly specified). Mr. Perritaut also offers Sawney a dowry/bribe of $10, 000 so he will influence voters to retain Perritaut as the county seat. Sawney is prepared to go ahead but balks at the marriage contract's stipulation that any children be brought up Catholic, and on that basis he bows out!

Apart from including information about shady if not illegal land claims, the *Mystery of Metropolisville* may interest readers of MLHP for its references to the state penitentiary at Stillwater, where Albert is incarcerated for a while. By 1853, the purpose-built prison included a three-story prison house, a workshop, and an office.[28] Conditions were harsh, as indicated by these details, "Regulations required that the inmates be kept busy from sunrise to sunset, with thirty minutes allowed for each meal. Conversation was never permitted. As punishment for unruly conduct or disobedience, there was first a bread-and-water diet in solitary confinement and, as a last resort, twenty lashes a day for five days."[29] But because the prison was chronically underfunded, security was spotty and escapes were common.[30] In fact security was so lax that the US government instituted a lawsuit against several prison officials which prodded the territorial legislature to convene a grand jury investigation in 1857 that included the warden and deputy warden.[31]

The sections on the prison appear late in Eggleston's novel, and although he possessed first-hand knowledge of the conditions there, he did not spend much time describing them, probably because he realized it was time to wind down the story. This is what he says about convict life,

> There is little to be told of the life in the penitentiary. It is very uniform. To eat prison fare without even the decency of a knife or fork—you might kill a guard or a fellow-rogue with a fork—to sleep in a narrow, rough cell on a hard bed, to have your cell unlocked and to be marched out under guard in the morning, to go in a row of prisoners to wash your face, to go in a procession to a frugal breakfast served on tin plates in a dining-room mustier than a cellar, to be marched to your work, to be watched by a guard while you work, to know that the guard has a loaded revolver and is ready to draw it on slight provocation, to march to meals under awe of the revolver, to march to bed while the man with the revolver walks behind you, to be locked in and barred in and double-locked in again, to have a piece of candle that will burn two hours, to burn it out and lie down in the darkness—to go through one such day and know that you have to endure three thousand six hundred and fifty-two days like it—that is about all. The life of a blind horse in a treadmill is varied and cheerful in comparison.[32]

Albert, of course, is a model prisoner who uses his time to reflect on his life and adopt the Christian values of the benevolent chaplain, Rev. Lurton. Albert exhibits such good behavior that when he is pardoned, the "firm and kindly" prison warden exclaims, "'I never was so glad at any man's release.'"[33]

John T. Flanagan concludes that *The Mystery of Metropolisville* possesses "the faults which Eggleston never completely eliminated from his writing—didacticism, rambling structure, characters which lack passion and blood," but, he adds, "as a reflection of frontier conditions it is as truthful an account of early Minnesota as *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* is of early Indiana."[34] For people interested in legal matters, the novel offers insights into the land grab mania of mid nineteenth-century Minnesota as well as conditions in the Stillwater Prison.

## Notes

[1] Image information below from the Library of Congress. Note that the image cannot have been "created" in 1912 since Eggleston died in 1902. The date 1912 either refers to its first publication or is a mistake. Possibly the correct date of creation might be 1902, the year he died. See http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002705850/

- Title: Edward Eggleston, 1837-1902
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- Collections:
  - Miscellaneous Items in High Demand

[2] *The Mystery of Metropolisville* was first serialized in *Hearth and Home* from December 7, 1872, to April 26, 1873. It then appeared as a separate book. Edward Eggleston, *The Mystery of Metropolisville* (Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1873). It is available online without charge at Project Gutenberg and Google Books (the latter in facsimile). See http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/12195 and https://books.google.com/books?id=4S-6ANLcta4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=google+books+mystery+metropolisville&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjnrOK636nkAhUFKKwKHYHqAXIQ6AEwAHoECAMQAg#v=onepage&q&f=false

[3] William Peirce Randel, "Edward Eggleston's Minnesota Fiction," *Minnesota History* 33.5 (Spring 1953): 189. This article, and Randel's book-length study of Eggleston, *Edward Eggleston* (New Haven, Connecticut: College and University Press/Twayne, 1963), provide in-depth information on the author. John T. Flanagan's article "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 18.4 (Dec. 1937): 347-70, also provides details on Eggleston's sojourn in Minnesota.

[4] Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier School-Master* (New York: Orange Judd, 1871).

[5] Edward Eggleston, *The Beginners of a Nation: A History of the Source and Rise of the Earliest English Settlements in America with Special Reference to the Life and Character of the People* (New York: Appleton, 1896) and *The Transit of Civilization from England to America in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Appleton, 1901).

[6] William Peirce Randel, *Edward Eggleston*, "Introduction," [1].

[7] Randel, "Edward Eggleston's Minnesota Fiction," 190.

[8] Cited in Randel, "Edward Eggleston's Minnesota Fiction," 191.

Edward Eggleston, "An Incident of the Indian Massacres of 1862," *Ladies' Repository* 24 (December 1864). "The Siege of Fort Ridgely" is presumably in the Edward Eggleston Papers (1804-1939), #110, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. See http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM00110.html

[9] Cited in Randel, "Edward Eggleston's Minnesota Fiction," 192-93.

See Edward Eggleston, "The Gunpowder Plot," *Scribner's Magazine* 2 (July 1871): 252-59, and "The Man-that-Draws-the-Handcart," *Harper's New Monthly* (February 1894): 466-75.

[10] Flanagan, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," 368.

[11] Flanagan, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," 368-69.

[12] Eggleston, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 21.

[13] "Corner Lots" is included in several anthologies of Minnesota literature, including *The North Country Reader*, ed. Jean Ervin (1979; St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000): 118-22.

[14] Ervin, *The North Country Reader*, 15.

[15] Eggleston, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 238.

[16] In "The Country of Corner Lots: *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, the Single Tax, and the Logic of Provincial Realism," Bruce Levy argues that the novel does not exhibit the kind of provincial realism that its author strove for. See *American Literary Realism* 30.2 (1998): 77-94.

[17] Randel, *Edward Eggleston*, 100.

[18] Flanagan, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," 368.

[19] Randel, *Edward Eggleston*, 102.

[20] Randel, *Edward Eggleston*, 102.

[21] Eggleston, *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 69.

[22] See http://www.minnesotalegalhistoryproject.org/assets/Preemption%20Act%20of%201841.pdf for the text of the Pre-Emption Act of 1841 (posted November 2009 and reformatted March 7, 2012) and a much more reader-friendly summary as originally published in *The Belle Plaine (Minnesota) Enquirer* on May 19, 1859, and titled "The Pre-emption Law" at http://www.minnesotalegalhistoryproject.org/assets/Pre-emption%20article%20(1859).pdf (posted April 10, 2010).

[23] *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 91.

[24] *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 93.

[25] *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 177.

[26] See "Indian Records Never Out of Date," issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs on November 22, 1970, and accessible at https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/indian-records-never-out-date

[27] *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 125.

[28] See James Taylor Dunn, "The Minnesota State Prison during the Stillwater Era, 1853-1914." *Minnesota History* 37. 4 (December 1960): 138.

[29] Dunn, 139.

[30] Dunn, 139.

[31] Dunn, 140.

[32] *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 257.

[33] *The Mystery of Metropolisville*, 298.

[34] Flanagan, "The Hoosier Schoolmaster in Minnesota," 369.

# Biographical Profile

Zabelle Stodola (who also publishes under her full professional name, Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola) is Professor of English, Emerita, University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She received her PhD from Penn State University in 1980. She has published six books with trade and academic presses and numerous articles focusing on early to nineteenth-century American women writers and on the Indian captivity narrative. Her most recent book-length publications are *The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) and, with co-editor Carrie R. Zeman, *A Thrilling Narrative of Indian Captivity by Mary Butler Renville: Dispatches from the Dakota War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012). In 2018 she wrote a "Reconsideration" of Margaret Culkin Banning's 1936 novel *The Iron Will* for the MLHP.

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