

Chicago's Pop Fiction writers in the Gaslight Era

The true detective novels published in Chicago in the waning decades of the 19th century are not now well-remembered; the writers of these mystery stories and crime novels were not well-known even at the time a reader could still smell the ink from the recently printed book. There was a small but very active community of popular fiction wordsmiths living and working in Chicago during the 1880's. They were the creators of the hundreds of novels in the Globe, Pinkerton and Mooney & Boland Detective series. Yet there doesn't seem to have been much curiosity in their own time to know who they were and what motivated them to write. Chicago newspapers ignored them, as well, even though in some cases there might have been an interesting story going untold. The standard histories of Chicago always ignores this era probably because the literary historians who author the histories don't think highly of this popular fiction literature.

In part, author anonymity was an aspect of the popular fiction publishing business. Many of these mystery stories were written by "Frank Pinkerton," or "Detective Murray," or simply by "a Chicago detective" or a "Chicago Reporter." The publisher may not have wanted the readers to know who wrote the book. Authors usually received a flat fee to write a book, not royalties, and not with the protection of a multi-book contract. An author with celebrity would cost more than an author with talent so why increase your upfront cost by promoting the writer with an author credit? Still there were some authors who did receive credit under their actual name.

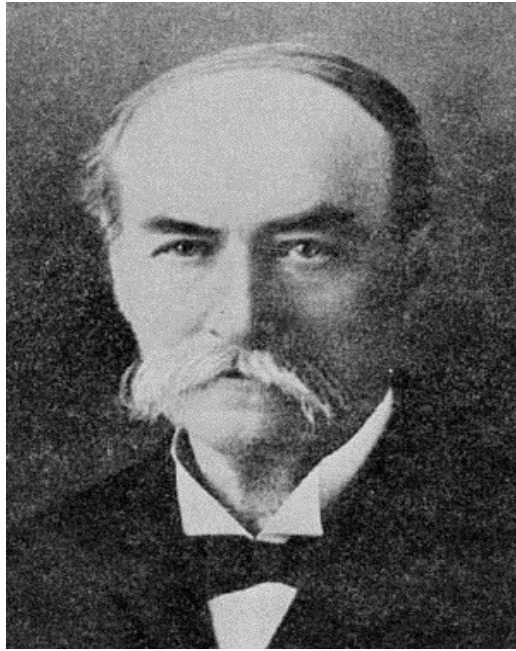
Of the unknown number of published mystery writers from this era in Chicago, there is some stretchy information on a handful of the most successful, or at least some of the more prolific.

Among the first, if not the first, Chicago writers of fictional detective stories, was Emma Murdoch Van Deventer, which is an irony in itself. Mystery or crime fiction is considered the province of male writers. Historically, men have been the predominant consumers of crime fiction, yet some women have been very successful in the genre. Agatha Christie is near the top of the profession. Still, Van Deventer published under a male pseudonym, Lawrence L. Lynch, so the reader was not aware it was a woman author. Van Deventer's first novel, *Shadowed by Three*, in the Lakeside Series came out shortly after Allan Pinkerton's memoirs became bestsellers in the 1870's. Her last novel, *A Blind Lead*, was issued by Laird and Lee in 1912. Over a near four decade career, she is credited with over two dozen novels in the detective mystery genre. Certainly, publishers like Rand, McNally and Laird and Lee would not have continued to publish

her work if they did not sell. Yet so little was ever written about her. Census records indicate there was a woman of that name in far west suburban Marengo who was married to a doctor and that this must be Lawrence L. Lynch.

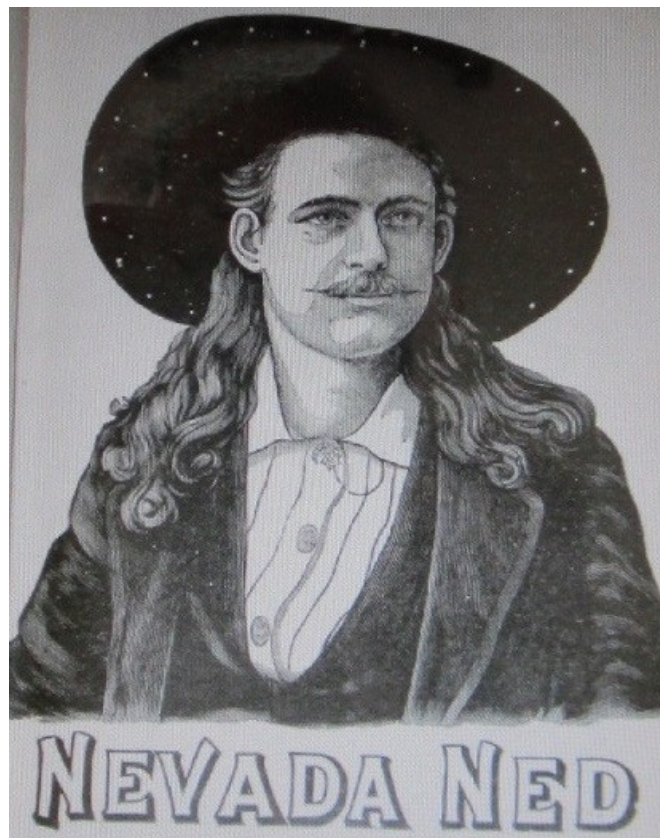
She was not the first American woman author of a detective or mystery novel but she wasn't far from it. Metta Victoria Fuller, a writer of dime novels for a New York fiction factory, wrote *The Dead Letter* in 1863 which is usually deemed the first female authored American detective novel. While Van Deventer wasn't the first, she was the most successful female writer of the late Victorian age. Van Deventer wrote over a dozen novels over nearly four decades under the Lawrence L Lynch pen-name and probably many more under publisher owned pseudonyms in the Pinkerton Detective Series for Laird and Lee and in the Globe Detective Series for Rand, McNally. Yet so little is known about Van Deventer that some bloggers have questioned whether perhaps Van Deventer is a pen-name also and that Lynch was a real person. What is known is that from the beginning of the American true detective genre coeval with Emma Van Deventer, Chicago has been resident to woman authors who have been successful in a male dominated market. It is a Chicago literary tradition.

Little more is known about John W. Postgate who had books published in the Globe, Pinkerton and Mooney and Boland detective series, many under his own name and probably many more under publisher owned pen-names. He may well have authored more detective novels than any other Chicago writer of the era. Postgate was something of a contradiction. While he wrote detective mysteries, his own passion seems to have been for the Bard. Postgate was a scholar of Shakespeare and occasionally traveled the lecture circuit pontificating on subjects such as Shakespeare's take on temperance. When the market for detective novels declined in Chicago at the turn of the century, Postgate wrote several books about Shakespeare including parodies of *Falstaff* and the *Taming of the Shrew*. While his detective novels seem lost in the fog of history, his Shakespeare thesis's and parodies have better stood the test of time. His Shakespeare books were reprinted by several publishers and his parodies have been converted into digital form for kindles. You are more likely to find one of Postgate's original Shakespeare books on the internet auction sites than his Pinkerton detective novels.



James M. Merrill

One of the most prolific writers of Chicago begot detective stories was James Milford Merrill who never published under his own name. He had as many as eight pseudonyms but most frequently used “Morris Redwing” for his Chicago novels. Merrill also was often published by the New York fiction factories for shorter dime novels. Merrill was born in the Muskegon, Michigan area before the Civil War when some of the Indian tribes that managed to avoid President Jackson's forced expulsion from the Eastern United States still hunted and fished. Merrill claimed to have spent his childhood playing with the Indian children. Several of his Pinkerton novels are set in frontier Michigan even when they have a Chicago detective as a protagonist. Merrill started working in Chicago for the *Weekly Novelist*, a short-lived fiction magazine published in Chicago for several years in the 1880's. He also published some stories in the *Chicago Ledger* a mail-order magazine that had a large circulation in the Midwest.



While most of the authors of the Chicago true detective stories existed in obscurity, the one exception to the norm was a national celebrity: Nevada Ned which was the stage name of Doctor N. T. Oliver which was the assumed name of the Reverend E. O. Tilburn. In reality, Tilburn was not an actual Reverend but his father was and Tilburn had gone to Yale to follow in his father's footsteps but found the stage his true calling, not the pulpit. Tilburn became a traveling thespian and suffered the travails of an uncertain boxoffice as many of his profession often did. At his nadir he had to borrow money for a train ticket back to his home in Philadelphia or walk home. Yet he must have had a stage presence because he was soon in demand by patent medicine peddlers who needed a performer to draw a crowd to them so they could convince the locals that they were in grave danger if they didn't have a "liver belt" to relieve the pain that they were not aware was going to afflict just about everyone.

Tilburn soon became the pitchman of his own show under the name Doc. N. T. Oliver and he sold various products country people probably weren't aware that they could obtain elsewhere for less money. As Tilburn's celebrity grew, he was invited to join two businessmen, John Healy and Charles Bigelow, in a new venture selling products as real Indian medicines. Most existing patent medicines were liniments, like Hamlin's very popular Wizard Oil, while they would produce a tonic, which they called Sagwa, based on the native herbs and traditional formulas used by the Kickapoo Indians. Tilburn would be the operating partner who produced the show while Healy & Bigelow were the

financiers and manufacturers. Tilburn let his hair grow, called himself Nevada Ned, even though he had never been within half a continent of Nevada, and taught himself how to shoot a gun for an act. While he never was as good as Annie Oakley, he did become a pretty good sharpshooter.

Under Oliver's direction, Healy & Bigelow dispersed several dozen troupes across the country selling Sagwa and putting on a show. It was Vaudeville, circus and Las Vegas style dazzle all meant to befuddle the local yokels to buy Sagwa, Sagwa Salve or Sagwa Worm Killer. Oliver would claim that Buffalo Bill Cody often came to their show to seek ideas for his own Wild West show that ran for decades.

Sometime in the early 1880's, Oliver moved his family to Chicago where he was responsible for managing over thirty traveling shows that crossed the Midwest. For a time, Nevada Ned took a hiatus from his own performances to rest. One historian proffered that Sagwa contained cocaine and that Nevada Ned had become the world's first Sagwa addict. Howbeit, during his hiatus Nevada Ned wrote his first novel based on some of the mythology he had developed for his wild west medicine shows and Rand, McNally published the book in its Globe Detective series. It must have done well because William Henry Lee noticed Tilburn's abilities and began to use him as a writer for the Laird & Lee Pinkerton Detective series. Over the decade Tilburn would have at least ten novels issued by Rand, McNally and Laird & Lee under his Nevada Ned pen-name; but more importantly, he would tell a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post* years later that it had been he and Postgate who wrote many of the anonymous novels attributed to a "Chicago police detective."

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the strategy of Chicago's true detective story publishers to use current newspaper headlines as a source for a detective novel than Tilburn's experience with *The Great Cronin Mystery, or the Irish Patriot's Fate by a Chicago Detective*. In early May of 1889, the newspaper headlines blared the news that the body of Doctor Patrick H. Cronin had been found stuffed in a Lakeview sewer. The story was going to have intense international attention for months. Doctor Cronin was young, handsome and famous. He had an office in the Chicago Opera House building and a practice at the Cook County Public Hospital and he was a leader in the Irish independence movement. Apparently the Irish are a pugnacious tribe. Cronin had enemies; he had even told newspaper reporters earlier that he would be assassinated so the actual event was no surprise, but it was so undignified. Chicago murder victims were expected to be found floating in the Lake or the River not stuffed into a suburban sewer. Chicago's detectives were on the case and every journalist in town followed the detectives. Nevada Ned soon received a telegram from Laird & Lee wanting to know if he could write a 60,000 word mystery story based on the Cronin murder case in seven days?

Tilburn completed the mystery story in four days. (He still had his Kickapoo show to do each night or the book would have been completed sooner.) Tilburn used newspaper reports to set the events then came up with a fictional denouement to the murder. Neither did Laird & Lee waste any time with original illustrations; they purchased woodcuts from the Chicago newspapers and used them. When the book was released the publisher would assert: "In placing this volume before the public the publishers feel it is their duty to announce that it is not a work of fiction. It is rather a book of reference, issued for the purpose of giving a truthful account of the greatest crime of the age." Yet the first line of the *reference book* was: "I am a Chicago detective!" Of course, that was hardly truthful as the author was not a detective but a medicine show pitch man and a reformed Sagwa addict. Nevertheless, fueled by the intense interest in the investigation, arrest and trial of three accused men, the book was a major bestseller for Laird & Lee for several years.

(For those interested in *The Great Cronin Mystery, or the Irish Patriot's Fate by a Chicago Detective*, the University of Illinois, Urbana scanned their copy into various digital formats which are available for free viewing at openlibrary.org)

Tilburn became a valuable asset to Laird & Lee for more than detective stories and crime novels. Laird & Lee was a diversified publishing house that issued many reference and textbooks. For many publishers, the anchor of their houselist are the cookbooks. Fiction is perishable while cookbooks are long-lived. And so it was for Laird & Lee; they issued several cookbooks, which seemed to have been well-accepted in the market, authored by Jennie A. Hansey which was a pseudonym for Jennie Adrienne. Eventually, Laird & Lee decided to offer books with both cooking and medical advice and who better to offer medical advice than America's premier quack doctor, Doctor N.T. Oliver. Hansey and Oliver co-authored several Laird & Lee books with titles longer than some encyclopedias like *Lee's priceless recipes: a valuable collection of tried formulas and simple methods for farmers, housekeepers, mechanics, manufacturers and all people in every department of human endeavor*.

Nevada Ned was more than the writer of popular fiction, he was an authentic character in American popular culture. The medicine shows and their colorful pitchmen are almost as forgotten as the true detective novels that Tilburn wrote. Tilburn, Merrill, Van Deventer and Postgate probably wrote more detective stories than any other but there were more of which even less is known. Symmes Jelley using the pen-name Le Jemlys wrote the majority of the Mooney & Boland detective stories and an Allan Graves wrote several Pinkerton detective novels. No doubt, there were even more whose books have completely disappeared. Anonymous authors of a forgotten era in American popular fiction.