

Order versus Nihilism: Joseph Glover Baldwin and the Projection of Whig Sympathies into the Body of Southwestern Humour

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Abstract

Southwestern humour is an exuberant body of writing which emerged in the literature of the American South in the early 1830s and fell a casualty to the Civil War. Its emergence was generated by a multiplicity of social and political changes, mainly the westward movement of the Southern frontier and the fact that the South, as a collective entity, was becoming increasingly conscious of itself and its social institutions, particularly slavery. Following the establishment of the Democratic party by Andrew Jackson in the second half of the 1820s, the South started to be under increasing pressure regarding slavery. Trying to avenge himself against an alleged “dirty bargain” which saw him lose the 1824 presidential elections, Jackson, a Tennessee slaveholder and national hero who had successfully fought the British, the Indians and the Spanish, shrewdly promoted himself as a supporter of the common man. He led Jacksonian Democracy, which won him the following race for the White House.

With the help of his “Kitchen Cabinet,” Jackson devised a plan to democratise capital. By doing so, he wanted to respond to the “aristocratic parasites” who accused him and his wife of lechery. He replaced gold and silver currencies with rags (paper money), withdrew the federal funds from the Central Bank of the United States and deposited them in various state banks, mainly under the direction of supporting Democratic bankers. His controversial financial actions destabilised the national economy and disrupted the harmony of traditional social values all over America after raw

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inflation had taken hold and furnished a fertile ground for speculation, larceny and a full tide of litigation. Consequently, Southern aristocrats and planters supported Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, who decided to form an opposition and organised the Whig party in 1834 in order to fight what they called the “tyranny” of “King Andrew I” and his “unconstitutional behavior.” The conflict between the Whigs and Democrats, which sharply escalated in 1837 as the country started to suffer a severe economic depression, reached fever pitch in the early 1850s and culminated in the Civil War.

This essay examines the work of one Southwestern humorist who embraced Southern Whiggery, Joseph G. Baldwin. An old-fashioned Virginian lawyer, Baldwin migrated to the Old Southwest in pursuit of fortune and became an Alabama planter by marriage and proslavery Whig. He wrote his books in the early 1850s in an attempt to exert influence on public matters and shout for his disintegrating party’s defence of slavery and obsession with order. His gentlemanly writing style, content and arrangement of sketches can be seen as Whiggish devices employed to fictively impose order on the 1830s and ’40s lawless Mississippi and Alabama frontiers. However, on a deeper level, they constitute the waning politician’s last plea for striking a national compromise between the conflicting parties one decade before the Civil War.

Keywords: Literature, southwestern humour, Baldwin.

Essay

The author of *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*,¹ Joseph Glover Baldwin (1815-1864), has long been underrated and considered “an overlooked personality in Southern life” (Farish 1935, p.41), despite the fact that he was a very successful jurist and *the* most accomplished figure in the literary school of Southwestern humour. The truth remains that none of the Southwestern humorists, and possibly nineteenth-century American writers, was a more avid reader or more consciously literary than Baldwin. Although the vast majority of the Southwestern humorists

¹ Baldwin, J. G. (1853). *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi; A Series of Sketches*. New York: D. Appleton and Company. The edition used in this essay is (1987). Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, which contains a significant “Introduction” and “Notes” by James H. Justus. Subsequent references will indicate *Flush Times* in the text.

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embraced in the 1830s and '40s the recently established Whig party in order to oppose Jacksonian Democracy, none of them surpassed Baldwin in defending Southern Whiggery and its support of slavery and obsession with order. None of his fellow humorists showed more clearly the hybrid nature of Southwestern humour – Baldwin always mixed humour, journalism, social history, personal nostalgia, memoir, law life, literature, essay, and frontier tall tale. He focussed more on stylistic attributes to be found in the eighteenth-century British essay and in Washington Irving, such as the gentlemanly style which employs an encyclopaedic knowledge, a moral, patronising tone, and a pedantic language full of references and allusions to a diversity of real and literary characters. On no other occasion in his masterpiece *Flush Times* is this more obvious than in the introductory paragraph of the first sketch, “Ovid Bolus, Esq., Attorney at Law and Solicitor in Chancery”:

And what history of that halcyon period, ranging from the year of Grace, 1835, to 1837; that golden era, when shinplasters were the sole currency; when bank-bills were “as thick as Autumn leaves in Vallambrosa,” and credit was a franchise,—what history of those times would be complete, that left out the name of Ovid Bolus? As well write the biography of Prince Hal, and forebear all mention of Falstaff. In law phrase, the thing would be a “deed without a name,” and void; a most unpardonable *casus omissus* [case of omission] (Baldwin 1987, p.1, Baldwin’s italics).

“Flush Times” is a phrase coined by Baldwin himself in reference to the “general spirit of speculation and the conduct of business on credit in the years just *prior* to the national economic collapse of 1837” (Justus 1987, p.xxv). The entertaining description of the “Flush Times” era (1835-1837), besides the early comparison between Ovid Bolus and Shakespeare’s comic character Falstaff, creates a humorous, albeit gentlemanly, tone. It also generates a nostalgic impulse which, deriving power from the narrator’s obvious monetary interest in the period, sets itself strongly against the more serious impulse of narrating social history. In *Flush Times*, Baldwin uses the services of an authorial persona as genteel narrator and social historian. Through this fictive persona, Baldwin extensively employs and tirelessly sells his encyclopaedic knowledge of history, law, literature and languages. He occasionally uses legal Latin in an attempt to indicate his aristocratic Virginian background and legal education, and prove his membership of the Alabama plantation class to which the freshly licensed lawyer lifted himself shortly after migrating from Virginia in 1835 to the

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rawer Old Southwest. It was the allure of fortune that drew the twenty-year-old to the recently opened areas on both sides of the Mississippi River, then known as the “Southwest.”

Baldwin was only twenty-one when he first showed an interest in politics and delivered his first speech in support of the Whig party, which was organised by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster in 1834 to oppose the controversial economic practices of Democratic President Andrew Jackson (Watson 1992, p.259). Baldwin’s marriage in 1840 to the daughter of a noted Alabama judge and planter was actually a cleverly taken step that lifted him to the plantation class, established him as a respected attorney, and got him elected as a Whig member of Alabama legislature in 1843. The political recognition he received continued to be local until he was elected a delegate to the Whig National Convention of 1848, which met in Philadelphia to name the Whig candidate for the presidency. Although Baldwin left Alabama with Henry Clay in mind, he and other Alabama delegates eventually changed their minds and voted for Zachary Taylor, due to reasons of expediency and availability. The all-of-a-sudden “fully *whigged*” Taylor won the South the presidential elections of 1849 (McMillan 1959, p.370). The honour Baldwin received from his delegation increased his Whig prestige, and in 1849 he was nominated the Whig candidate for Congress.² However, his loss to his Democratic opponent by only a narrow margin disheartened him a great deal and proved to be *the* turning point in his personal life and professional career. He could not easily reconcile himself to his first political disappointment, which was amplified by Taylor’s death after one year in service. Baldwin’s consequent actions were marred by instability, rashness and lack of concentration. In 1850 he dissolved a fourteen-year successfully running partnership, drawn by a more lucrative one. Dissolving partnerships became a pattern in 1853, one year before Baldwin permanently left Alabama for California, following the outbreak of the Kansas-Nebraska conflict which instantly resulted in the disintegration of the Whig party. It should be emphasised, however, that Baldwin had been trying between 1850 and 1853 to compose himself and consciously deal with his Congressional loss as the end of his political career in Alabama. He did not manage to do so until he eventually decided to find other mediums through which he could

² The *Mobile Weekly Advertiser*. (1849). June 12th, as cited by McMillan (1959, p.367) said of Baldwin: “Mr. Baldwin is one of the first men of his age in the State. Shrewd, intelligent, and powerful in debate ... We rejoice at his nomination and trust he may be elected. No man in this State is more worthy of a seat in Congress than ‘Joe Baldwin.’” See also Garrett, W. (1872). *Reminiscences of the Public Men in Alabama for Thirty Years*. Atlanta.

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exert influence on public matters and continue promoting himself as a fervent defender of Southern Whiggery. He realised that nothing would better serve his purpose than reaching the peak of his legal profession – to which he now devoted all his time – and reviving his interest in writing, a pastime he had adjourned fifteen years before.

Baldwin did have a quick and decent return to writing although he wrote “in haste, under the pressure of professional engagements and amidst constant interruptions” (Baldwin 1987, p.vi).³ He did not bother to look for subject matter because the chaotic *Flush Times*, which he had experienced firsthand upon his arrival on the Southern frontier fourteen years before, had all but passed, consequently lending themselves to Whig analysis and agenda. Desiring that their memories not be lost and aspiring to be “the Macaulay of his age” (Current-Garcia 1952, p.123),⁴ Baldwin decided to recreate the moment in writing, motivated by his Whig sympathies, personal nostalgia, and the interest of a social historian who adopted the republican belief that history is the great source of political wisdom (Grammer 1993, pp.10-11). Thus, in 1850 he began to pen his experiences in the legal profession as humorous autobiographical and pseudo-biographical sketches, historical essays, short anecdotes, and serious biographical essays on leading Whig politicians. Seventeen of these items were among the twenty-six pieces collected in *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*, a hodgepodge now considered “the most heterogeneous single work of Southwestern humor [which] documents the fitful and often futile attempts of lawyers and, to a lesser extent, politicians to impose order upon a chaotic frontier” (Flora & Mackethan 2002, p.847). *Flush Times* ended up the most richly textured volume and the last significant example of the Whig manner in Southwestern humour. The memoir truly deserved to have been considered a classic a few decades after its publication.

In the course of writing *Flush Times*, Baldwin accumulated huge debts and held fictive dialogues with his proslavery Whig fellows in Southwestern humour. By building on their numerous and various literary efforts and consciously altering them in a way that involved his legal perspective

³ The context is a sneaking apology Baldwin made in his “Preface” to *Flush Times* for not having enough time or opportunity to correct and revise “many errors and imperfections of his work.”

⁴ This description was made in a letter which Baldwin’s brother and biographer Cornelius sent from New York City to Baldwin’s wife, dated 21 July 1854. The reference here is to Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1st Baron Macaulay (1800-1859). For more information, see “Notes to the essay” at the end.

and Republican vision, Baldwin endeavoured to avoid being classified as another rollicking frontier humorist. This is manifest in his historical and nostalgic motifs, his moralistic tone, his self-satire and comedy of frustration, his opening up to the vernacular, his pecuniary interest in the “Flush Times,” his fanaticism about slavery, and his comic depiction and treatment of the Old Southwest as a social and legal circus. In attempting to capture the idiosyncrasies of a region undergoing the toilsome transformation from mayhem to civilisation, Baldwin produced a riveting memoir of a lawless and colourful era in American history, painting a “gallery of daubs” (Baldwin 1987, p.284): dishonest lawyers, unlettered judges, incompetent prosecutors and ruthless confidence men. He also raised intriguing questions of identity and verisimilitude, which enhanced the book’s immediate appeal. It remains true that the popularity of the collection is mainly attributable to the success of the authorial narrator, who undoubtedly has the most complex and powerful presence in *Flush Times*. His elegance and sophisticated allusiveness, besides the moral transformation he achieves by the middle of the book, serve as a kind of redemption for the “Flush Times” and his dubious involvement in it. It is interesting to observe how Baldwin introduces and treats his authorial persona. In the pseudo-biographical sketch “My First Appearance at the Bar,” Baldwin’s persona, who is shown as an enthusiastic young lawyer, draws himself as a butt of court humour and is meaningfully introduced at the end of the sketch as a sugar planter named J.C.R. (Baldwin 1987, p.46), a set of initials Baldwin never accounted for. He concludes the sketch by describing with tongue in cheek how he reluctantly started taking part in the collective chaos, following an irrelevant embarrassing situation in court, which revealed his dubious involvement in writing a love poem and sending it to a sweetheart.⁵

⁵ Baldwin’s persona says:

Reader! I eschewed *genius* from that day. I took to accounts; ... got me a green bag and stuffed it full of old newspapers, carefully folded and labelled; read law, to fit imaginary cases, ... dunned one of the wealthiest men in the city for fifty cents; sold out a widow for a twenty dollar debt, and bought in her things myself, publicly (and gave them back to her secretly, afterwards) ... looked wise and shook my head when I was consulted, and passed for a “powerful good judge of law;” confirmed the opinion by reading, in court, all the books and papers I could lay my hands on, and clearing out the court-house by hum-drum details, commonplace and statistics, whenever I made a speech at the bar—and thus, by this course of things, am able to write from *my sugar plantation*, this memorable history of the fall of *genius* and the rise of solemn humbug! J.C.R. (Baldwin 1987, pp.45-6, Baldwin’s italics)

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It was in 1852 that Baldwin sent to the prestigious magazine *Southern Literary Messenger* his first sketch, which he made the opening sketch in *Flush Times* a year later, “Ovid Bolus, Esq., Attorney at Law and Solicitor in Chancery.” The title character is introduced as a handsome lawyer who had many vices, but the leading one that gained him most notoriety was the fact that he “was a natural liar, just as some horses are natural pacers, and some dogs natural setters” (Baldwin 1987, p.3). Bolus, the Whiggish persona/historian continues, was a “great *Lyric* artist” (Baldwin 1987, p.14), who lived and moved in a sphere of poetry and “had long since settled all disputes with *his* conscience ... A lie never ran away with him, as it is apt to do with young performers: he could always manage and guide it; and to have seen him fairly mounted, would have given you some idea of the polished elegance of D’Orsay, and the superb *ménage* of Murat” (Baldwin 1987, p.15). Clearly, Bolus’s lying is dignified by contrasting him to young passable liars and, more importantly, bestowing elegance on his art via connections made to widely celebrated artists.

“Ovid Bolus” is the best chosen name for the best-known and most versatile character Baldwin ever created in *Flush Times*. The forename is a conscious allusion to the Roman poet Ovid – an attempt to establish that this quintessential fraud is a master of metamorphoses. The surname, which implies a throw of the dice in Latin, conjoins verbal excess (hyperbole), gambling and speculation (Schmitz 1977, pp.473-4).⁶ Although Baldwin’s is a didactic form of humour, his authorial persona regards his dangerous con artist humorously. The narrator is not only hideously fascinated by the financial boom of “Flush Times” but also charmed by Bolus’s artistry. However, at one point in the sketch, the prevailing humorous tone of admiration suddenly turns into one of scorn and moralising which, though conveyed under a veil of humour, succeeds in anticipating a moral ending to the sketch. This is when the narrator relates an incident in which Bolus stole a tract of land worth \$1600 merely by means of law and without employing his genius.⁷ Despite this volcanic moral eruption, Baldwin’s

⁶ The narrator makes it clear that Bolus was an established gambler, who used to get people to play by giving them the chance to win at the beginning (Baldwin 1987, pp.8-9).

⁷ The narrator says:

One thing in Ovid I can never forgive. This was his coming it over Ben O. I don’t object to it on the score of the swindle. That was to have been expected. But swindling Ben was degrading the dignity of the art. True, it illustrated the universality of his science, but it lowered it to a beggarly process of mean deception. There was no skill in it. It was little better than crude larceny. A child could have done it; it had as well been done to a child. Fie! Bolus, Monroe Edwards⁷ wouldn’t have done that. He would sooner have sunk down to the level of some honest calling for a living, than have put his profession to so mean a shift (Baldwin 1987, pp.10-11).

narrator continues to regard this frontier liar with ambivalence because the likes of Bolus had to lie in order to vanquish the cruel reality of existence which marked the early days on the frontier (Schmitz 1977, pp.474, 478). On one occasion, he subconsciously attempts to do Bolus some justice.⁸ Baldwin's humorous treatment of Bolus is largely a cover for his emotional engagement; the writer sympathises with his character and still remembers how shrewdness was a prerequisite to live in the "Flush Times" society.

We are told that despite all his vices, Bolus always succeeded in drawing the new country's loose population around him "as the magnet draws iron fillings" (Baldwin 1987, p.7). This is because his lying is not only lingual; he acts lies as well, taking advantage of his charming figure, striking conviviality, fluent diction, humour, shrewdness, Homer- and Ariel-like ubiquity,⁹ and free-handed manner, which impress the population "as the bounty of Caesar the loafing commonalty of Rome" (Baldwin 1987, p.7). Nothing, the Whiggish authorial voice continues – beginning to intimate solutions – could stop Bolus from having golden days in the so-called 'society' around him:

What pious joy it gave him to see the days of the good Samaritan return, and the hard hand of avarice relax its grasp on land and negroes, pork and clothes, beneath the soft speeches and kind promises of future rewards—blending in the act the three cardinal virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity; while, in the result, the chief of these three was *Charity!* (Baldwin 1987, p.5)

Baldwin's intricate, richly decorated style enables him to construct the sketch skilfully and draw Bolus as a very complex character, a medium which is cleverly and carefully charged with a multiplicity of symbolic, historical, religious and political significances. Metaphorically speaking, Bolus is intended to stand for the figure of Raw Inflation which took hold of the national economy prior and during the "Flush Times" and subsequently led to the financial panic of 1837, which made the nation suffer a severe economic depression. This was the result of the controversial fiscal actions

⁸ Baldwin's narrator says:

Dickens and Bulwer can do as much lying, for money too, as they choose, and no one blame them, any more than they would blame a lawyer regularly *fee'd* to do it; but let any man, gifted with the same genius, try his hand at it, not deliberately and in writing, but merely orally, and ugly names are given him, and he is proscribed! Bolus heroically suppressed exultation over the victories his lies achieved (Baldwin 1987, pp.17-18).

⁹ The narrator says, "Ovid had already possessed the faculty of ubiquity. He had been born in more places than Homer. In an hour's discourse, *he* would, with more than the speed of Ariel, travel at every point of the compass" (Baldwin 1987, p.8).

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President Andrew Jackson executed during his two terms (1829-1837). The Whigs, as Baldwin attempts to demonstrate in *Flush Times*, were particularly incensed by Jackson's decision to "democratize capital" (Baldwin 1987, p.82) by replacing gold and silver currencies with rags (paper money) and placing federal funds in the vaults of so-called pet banks, mainly under the direction of Democratic bankers, rather than with the more reliable Bank of the United States.¹⁰ Jackson also launched, in 1832, a forceful war against the Second Bank of the United States, which he accused of servicing the "aristocratic parasites" only.

Baldwin, who shared with many contemporary historians and politicians the belief that the actual effect of President Jackson's banking policy was to destabilise the nation's currency and to provide help and comfort to bankers friendly to Jackson, soon embraced the Whig party, which formed in 1834 in order to fight what Henry Clay and his followers called the "tyranny" of "King Andrew I" and his unconstitutional behaviour. Jackson did remove the federal deposits from the Central Bank and distribute them in various state banks. By doing so, he broke forever the periodic solidity and careful balance, and disrupted the harmony of traditional social values all over America after Raw Inflation had taken hold and furnished a fertile ground for speculation, fraud and a full tide of litigation (Schmitz 1977, pp.474-5). Thus, somewhere between 1835 and 1837, the Jacksonian mistake/lie as Baldwin and others saw it, created Ovid Bolus, who symbolises not only Jacksonian Inflation but also the existence of numerous parties in the 1830s and the tragic impact this had had on 1850s America.

Schmitz (1977, p.474) has rightly argued that although Baldwin was harshly critical of Jacksonian politics, he appears to have been seduced by the very things he condemns in the sketch: flushed prose, flush times, the Jacksonian mistake and the lie. Baldwin does look divided against himself in attacking Jacksonian inflation; his language appears to be lenient to some extent. However, he never takes in his book a conciliatory line toward the figure of Jackson and the Abolitionist North. Following his Whig fellow in Southwestern humour Johnson Jones Hooper, Baldwin establishes connections between his confidence man's fornication and Jackson's conduct, so that Bolus's lying be seen as the epitome of Jacksonian speech (Schmitz 1977, p.478). First, he uses Bolus to mock the

¹⁰ Anon. (2001). Jackson, Andrew. In: Menon, L. (ed.) *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, The World English Edition*. Volume 1 [CD-ROM] Redmond: Microsoft Corporation.

North for its relentless support of the Abolitionist movement. Baldwin's narrator says, "[Bolus's] bills at the groceries were as long as John Q. Adams' Abolition petition, or, if pasted together, would have matched the great Chartist memorial" (Baldwin 1987, pp.7-8). In the same context, the only time Bolus is seen to be genuine about something is when the Whiggish narrator recounts an incident in which Bolus truly demonstrated a profound, unmoved loyalty to the Southern Cause. We are told that Bolus once courted a girl whom he wanted to marry but broke up the match when her father, an old sea captain from Boston, Massachusetts, insisted on Bolus's setting his slaves free and taking five thousand dollars apiece for the loss. But "Bolus's love for the 'peculiar institution' wouldn't stand it. Rather than submit to such degradation, Ovid broke off the match, and left Sallie broken-hearted" (Baldwin 1987, p.10). It should be emphasised that Baldwin was similar to Hooper in being a proslavery Whig and planter, who thought of slavery as a prerequisite to maintain order in what both writers saw as a feudal society in the South.

Baldwin's forceful diatribe against Jackson climaxes in "Ovid Bolus" when the Whiggish persona ironically elevates Bolus to the prestigious national level to which Jackson had risen after successfully fighting the British, the Indians and the Spanish. Bolus, we are told, established himself in national and international politics and conflicts: "The Florida war and the Texas Revolution, had each furnished a brilliant theatre for Ovid's chivalrous emprise ... He was intimate with all the nobilities of the political circles" (Baldwin 1987, pp.9-10). Having endowed Bolus with Jackson's national celebrity, Baldwin starts to treat his elevated character as Jackson's peer. As a result, Bolus's lies are successfully juxtaposed with Jackson's and his deputy Martin Van Buren's conduct. In other words, Baldwin is attempting to spotlight the basis on which Jacksonian Democracy was engineered and founded. In what can be seen as the climactic incident in the sketch, Bolus is shown to have visited Cuba and fallen in love with Jackson's niece after he had been invited by her brother, an intimate friend whom Bolus had met at a Kentucky Catholic college and whose life he had saved from a mob in Louisville. The careful reader soon realises that the actual purpose of sending Bolus to Cuba is to establish a connection between Bolus's art and Jacksonian Democracy in order to denote the falsity of Jackson's and Van Buren's Democratic pretensions:

There was a history to the commonest articles about [Bolus]: that book was given him by Mr. Van Buren—the walking stick was a present from Gen. Jackson ... the cigars, not too fragrant, were a box sent him by a schoolmate from Cuba, in 1834—*before* he visited the Island ... The Don had a

sister of blooming sixteen, the least of whose charms was two or three coffee plantations, some hundreds of slaves, and a suitable garnish of doubloons, accumulated during her minority, in the hands of her uncle and guardian, the Captain General (Baldwin 1987, pp.11-12).

Bolus is then tactfully brought to the scene to reveal the truths which the Democratic politicians had hidden from the nation in being slaveholders and launching needless wars in the name of national security.¹¹ In a similar way, when Bolus suddenly puts an end to his quickly developing relationship with Jackson's niece by pretending to be a passionate Protestant who is never willing to convert to Catholicism, he echoes Jackson's pretension in being a Democrat who could never be a slaveholder. The connection is achieved skilfully by Baldwin, who cleverly hides his satire on Jackson and Van Buren under the cover of a tale about love and courtship in Cuba, which is in itself another attack on Democratic expansionism.

Having fulfilled his political agenda in bringing Bolus face-to-face against Jackson in Cuba, the Whig writer realises the necessity of taking immediate action against Bolus, who remains a dire threat to the increasing stability in the frontier society. Baldwin seems to have strained and taken great pains to find a stylistic way that could enable him to symbolically impose order upon the chaotic Mississippi and Alabama frontiers and inventively loosen, to some extent, the tie of admiration that has occasionally brought his narrator so close to Bolus. It should not be forgotten that in addition to being a planter and Whig politician, Baldwin was, by the time he wrote the sketch, a very successful lawyer, for whom it was very necessary to maintain order and punish such hopeless flouters as Bolus. It is, then, not strange that Baldwin finally chooses to intensify and artistically blend his Whiggish tone and moral sensibility, and project into the sketch his legal verdict. This explains why toward the end of the sketch moral/Whiggish statements suddenly exist in profusion, gaining dominance over the humorous tone of admiration. For example, the Whiggish historian records that no matter how dull and lazy people are anywhere, they are destined to get sharp enough

¹¹ Schmitz (1977, p.479) argues:

Baldwin is brutally specific in attacking this lie. It is the felonious (symbolic) possession of Alabama and Mississippi by the dictate of paper that does such violence to the land, sends whole nations of Indians "howling into the Western wilderness to the friendly agency of some sheltering Suggs duly empowered to receive their coming annuities and back rations" and opens a consternating chasm between what is and what is said. But tall talk, the pursuit of a lie under difficulties, is in some sense a commentary on this lie, a magnification of an already inflated tale.

after a while “to whatever concerns their bread and butter” (Baldwin 1987, p.18). Given this and the fact that Bolus continues to violate natural and moral laws, his art, we are eventually advised, was destined to be discovered, although the handsome lawyer was never “destitute of the tame virtue of prudence” (Baldwin 1987, p.13).¹²

In revealing the reality about Bolus’s art, Baldwin sets the stage for himself to pose as a judge of law and deliver his verdict, which entails banishing outlaws the likes of Bolus as remotely as possible from every society striving for order. This judicial treatment becomes a pattern in the book when Baldwin arrives at the same verdict in another sketch depicting the nihilistic life and adventures of a more wicked con artist, “Simon Suggs, Jr., Esq.; A LEGAL BIOGRAPHY.” Given Baldwin’s involvement in the judicial system, it seems appropriate that he concludes his sketches by sending such unmanageable characters away to unmanageable frontier places – Bolus is banished to the foot of San Seba mountains, and Suggs Jr. to Rackinsack, Arkansas, which is described in the 1853-set sketch as “a community of litigants” and “bright land, of murders and felonies innumerable” (Baldwin 1987, pp.132-3). However, Baldwin’s humorous indulgence and nostalgic tone help give the impression that it is Bolus and Suggs Jr. who have decided on their voluntary exile. The writer’s irony suddenly sharpens toward the end of “Ovid Bolus,” but he simultaneously endeavours and succeeds in sustaining the decorum of the sketch. His mocking farewell to Bolus involves another effort at mythicising the confidence man, who is likened to Charles II in being polite and considerate about the feelings of his friends, whom he spared the pain of a parting interview (Baldwin 1987, p.19).

It is ironic that Baldwin was totally marginalised, while Bolus became the centre of literary and critical attention. Nevertheless, the concluding paragraph of “Ovid Bolus,” which carries equal weight with the opening one, reminds us of the established writer Baldwin was, knitting together

¹² The narrator says:

Alas! for the beautiful things of Earth, its flowers, its sunsets—its lovely girls—its lies—brief and fleeting are their date. Lying is a very delicate accomplishment. It must be tenderly cared for, and jealousy guarded. It must not be overworked. Bolus forgot this salutary caution ... The denizens of this degenerate age, had not the disinterestedness of Prince Hall, who cared not how many fed at his cost;” they got tired, at last, of promises to pay. The credit system, common before as pump-water, ... began to take the worldly wisdom of Falstaff’s mercer, and ask security; and security liked something more substantial than plausible promises (Baldwin 1987, p.18).

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his moral and lawyerly sensibility, proslavery Whig sympathies, nostalgic and historical impulses, didactic humour and encyclopaedic knowledge of history and literature:

Poor Ben, whom [Bolus] had honoured with the last marks of his confidence, can scarcely speak of him to this day, without tears in his eyes. Far away toward the setting sun he hied him, until, at last, with a hermit's disgust at the degradation of the world, like Ignatius¹³ turned monk, he pitched his tabernacle amidst the smiling prairies that sleep in vernal beauty, in the shadow of the San Seba mountains. There let his mighty genius rest. It has earned repose. We leave Themistocles¹⁴ to his voluntary exile (Baldwin 1987, p.19).

The gentlemanly style, content, language and judicial treatment which Baldwin employs and demonstrates in "Ovid Bolus" and subsequent sketches in *Flush Times* can be thus seen as Whiggish techniques employed to fictively impose order on the 1830s and '40s chaotic Mississippi and Alabama frontiers. However, on a deeper level, they constitute the waning politician's last plea for striking a national compromise between the conflicting Democratic and Whig parties ten years before the Civil War. The conflicted, heterogeneous sketches we are offered by Baldwin's narrator in *Flush Times* denote the author's unusual eloquence and uncommon subtlety of mind. Not only did they capture the anxiety felt by many sons of the plantation class in the "Flush Times,"¹⁵ they

¹³ For information on St Ignatius of Loyola (Spanish Inigo de Oñez y Loyola) (1491-1556), see "Notes to the essay" at the end.

¹⁴ For information on Themistocles (527?-460? bc), see "Notes to the essay" at the end.

¹⁵ This sense of anxiety and restlessness is strongly felt in the conflicting comments which the Whiggish narrator/planter (J.C.R.) makes about the period throughout the book. For example, the "Flush Times," which is described as "jolly times" in "The Bench and the Bar" (Baldwin 1987, p.52) and as an "abundant harvest" in "The Bar of the South-West" (Baldwin 1987, p.239), paradoxically becomes "the reign of humbug, and wholesale insanity" in "How the Times Served the Virginians" (Baldwin 1987, p.91) and a period that unjustifiably furnished a "criminal docket" as illustrated in "The Bar of the South-West." In the latter sketch, J.C.R. becomes his creator's mouthpiece when the Whig author/judge ventures into one of his most volcanic moral eruptions in the entire book:

What country could boast more largely of its crimes? What more splendid role of felonies! What more terrific murders! What more gorgeous bank robberies! What more magnificent operations in the land offices! Such McGregor-like levies of black mail, individual and corporate! Such superb forays on the treasuries, State and National! Such expert transfers of balances to undiscovered bournes! Such august defalcations! Such flourishes of rhetoric on ledgers auspicious of gold which had departed for ever from the vault! And in INDIAN affairs!—the very mention is suggestive of the poetry of the theft—the romance of a wild and weird larceny! What sublime conceptions of super-Spartan roguery! Swindling Indians by the nation! (*Spirit of Falstaff, rap!*) Stealing their land by the township! (*Dick Turpin and Jonathan Wild! tip the table!*) Conducting the nation to the Mississippi

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also brought together many traditional subjects of Southwestern humour. In “Memoir of Jo G. Baldwin,” Cornelius wrote that had his brother lived another decade, he would have documented the Civil War.¹⁶

To conclude, *Flush Times* is meant to express a serious message through the device of humour; it is only ostensibly a humorous description of legal and financial conditions on the frontier. The imminent crisis of the Union was very much on Baldwin’s mind whilst writing his 1853 book. Thus, by attempting to fictively create a stable, orderly society in the 1830s and ’40s Alabama and Mississippi frontiers, the Whig author was calling for self-control in the early 1850s and making an urgent plea for national pacification at such a pressing time in American history. To achieve this, he applied his Whiggish viewpoint to these humorous accounts, “placed his faith in the well-to-do gentleman, a pillar of law and order, rather than in the unruly common man” (Watson 1992, p.259), and underscored the vital part which social institutions (family, church and school) could play in inculcating order. Moreover, he posed as a judge of law, employing a motif of exile, a just punishment for the violators of order, and repeatedly hailing the containment of social anarchy in Tennessee and Alabama. It is crystal clear that Baldwin firmly believed in the power of classical language to construct a strong argument, to define and determine the nature of things and to question and establish the facts, but this belief is “at once everywhere stated and dismayed” (Schmitz 1977, p.478) due to his ambivalence about what he was writing about. He largely succeeded in recording the victory of civilised society over disorder, yet that success was not unambiguous because his persona – and subsequently Baldwin himself – appear to have been tempted by the financial chaos which Jackson’s “mistake/lie” had brought about.

river, stripping them to the flap, and bidding them God speed as they went howling into the Western wilderness to the friendly agency of some sheltering Suggs duly empowered to receive their coming annuities and back rations! What’s Hounslow heath to this? What Carvajal? Who Count Boulbon? (Baldwin 1987, p.238).

¹⁶ As cited in (Current-Garcia 1952, p.141), Cornelius wrote in his unfinished “Memoir”:

And had [Baldwin] lived, what better subject could he have desired for his philosophic mind and graphic pen than the tremendous war between the United States and the Confederate States, in its causes and its consequences, not yet half-developed, with its grand battles and romantic episodes, and with our illustrious chieftans, Davis, Lee, Jackson, Johnson, Stuart, as central figures?

Notes to the essay

1 - Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1st Baron Macaulay (1800-1859): British historian, essayist and statesman, best remembered for his five-volume *The History of England*. Macaulay's vast wealth of material, his use of vivid details and his brilliant, rhetorical, narrative style combined to make the *History* one of the greatest literary works of the 19th century, though criticised for its Protestant and Whig bias.¹⁷

2 - Monroe Edwards (1808-1847): an accomplished Texas slave smuggler, forger and swindler. He became involved in smuggling slaves to Brazil from Africa and soon made a profit of \$50,000. Through his mistress's husband, a Mexican official, he obtained a large land grant in Brazoria County. He called his property Chenango Plantation and used it as a base for continued slave smuggling to Texas from Cuba. Christopher Dart, who later bought a half interest in Chenango, also joined Edwards in financing the smuggling of slaves. On March 2, 1836, Edwards took about 171 slaves up the Brazos River and drove them overland to Chenango, where they were to be kept for sale after the Texas Revolution ended. When Dart began pressuring him to sell the slaves and split the profits as they had agreed, Edwards conceived a different plan. He altered a letter signed by Dart so that it seemed to be a bill of sale to himself. Dart, of course, cried foul, and filed a civil suit. Although Edwards retained two distinguished lawyers, the forgery was discovered during the trial in Brazoria. Dart obtained judgment in 1840 for more than \$89,000 plus interest and court costs. In addition, Edwards was indicted and jailed. After making bond on the criminal charge, Edwards fled to Europe, where he posed as a wealthy veteran of San Jacinto and an abolitionist. He left Europe after a threat of exposure by the Texas envoy to England and returned to the United States, where he engaged in several large-scale forgeries. He was finally arrested and placed in the Tombs prison in New York. His trial was a celebrated one, with lengthy reports of each day's testimony printed in the New York *Daily Tribune* and other newspapers. Edwards again retained celebrated lawyers but was found guilty. He was sentenced to Sing Sing prison. After an escape attempt in 1847 he was severely beaten by prison authorities and died.¹⁸

¹⁷ Anon. (2001). Thomas Babington, 1st Baron Macaulay. In: Menon, L. (ed.) *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, The World English Edition*. Volume 1 [CD-ROM] Redmond: Microsoft Corporation.

¹⁸ Jones, M. B. (n.d.). Monroe Edwards. In: *Handbook of Texas Online in TSHA Online: Texas State Historical Association* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/EE/fed7.html> [Accessed: 24 January 2008]

3 - St Ignatius of Loyola (Spanish Inigo de Oñez y Loyola) (1491-1556): Spanish ecclesiastic who founded the Society of Jesus, the Order of the Jesuits. Loyola entered military service under Antonio Manrique de Lara, duke of Nájera, and was seriously wounded in 1521 at the siege of Pampeluna (now Pamplona). While recovering, he read a book of lives of the saints, with the result that he resolved to devote himself to a spiritual life. In 1522 Loyola retired to a cave near Manresa, in Catalonia, and lived and prayed in great austerity for ten months, after which he undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.¹⁹

4 - Themistocles (527?-460? BC): Athenian general and statesman who commanded the Athenian fleet at the Battle of Salamis against the invading Persians. The battle resulted in a crushing defeat for the Persians, and Themistocles was acclaimed one of the foremost men of his time. However, Themistocles eventually became less popular, his embezzlement and arrogance provoking the anger and resentment of the citizens. He was ostracised in 471 and retired to Argos, subsequently gaining favour at the court of Artaxerxes I, king of Persia. The town of Magnesia was appointed to supply him with bread, Lampasacus with wine, and Myus with other provisions. He lived at Magnesia until his death. In spite of the conclusion to his career, Themistocles was a statesman of outstanding ability, and his strong naval policy laid the foundations of the Athenian Empire.²⁰

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¹⁹ Anon. (2001). St Ignatius of Loyola. In: Menon, L. (ed.) *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, The World English Edition*. Volume 1 [CD-ROM] Redmond: Microsoft Corporation.

²⁰ Anon. (2001). Themistocles. In: Menon, L. (ed.) *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, The World English Edition*. Volume 1 [CD-ROM] Redmond: Microsoft Corporation.

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