

Tom Hunter, Novelist

Part II of "The Man Who Became President"

by Ruth Limmer

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In archival terms, "papers" can refer to many things: old report cards, snapshots, soiled lecture notes. . . . Even tie pins and locks of hair have found their way into the "papers" of people distinguished enough for a library to accept their leavings.

Thomas Hunter left no such harvest when he died in 1915. Or, if he did, generations of archivists have neatened things up. Apart from a daughter's scrapbook, now fragile with age, the Thomas Hunter Papers contain only manuscripts, most of them neatly tied with string and encased in oak-tag envelopes.

Within those envelopes are novels with names like *The Irish Rebel*, *The Mixed Marriage*, *The Greek Cross*, *Pelayo*, and *The Family Jewels*.

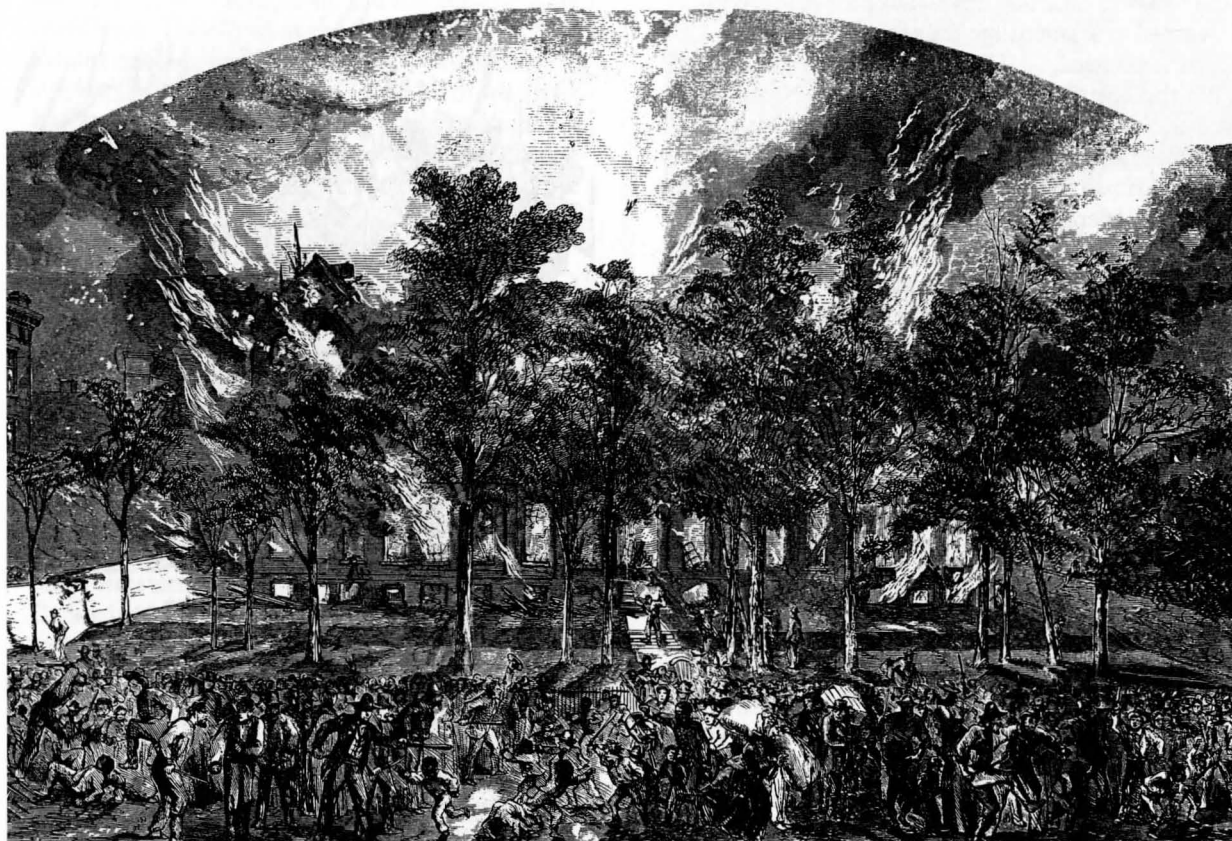
Why should these old manuscripts arouse our curiosity? Because they were written by the same man who abolished corporal punishment in the schools of the city, who founded New York's first high school for working men, who established the first free public kindergarten in the United States, and who created and led what was to become Hunter College, once the largest college for women in the world.

Before he finished with it, that publicly supported institution—to begin with no more than a high school and training ground for elementary school teachers—was chartered to give bachelor degrees in arts and in science and had educated most of the female teachers and probably all of the female principals in New York City. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that Hunter's theories on education underlay the teaching received by almost everyone educated in the public schools of this city from the end of the nineteenth century through World War I. And because institutions change very slowly, perhaps we can extend the date through to World War II.

In other words, Thomas Hunter had *influence*. And yet, instead of publishing books on educational theory and, like John Dewey, becoming a national force, he wrote novels, all but one of which were destined to remain unpublished. How can we not be curious to learn more?

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There's no need to reevaluate the standing of such of Hunter's contemporaries as Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James in light of these rediscovered manuscripts. Even so, he was not totally unskilled as a novelist. He had a satirical gift



The burning of the Colored Orphanage during the Draft Riots of 1863.

New York Public Library

for names (Professor Blow, President LeGrand, Miss Ringland) and he worked hard to characterize through physical description. And given that New York was a city of immigrants, it was not unreasonable for him to have exercised his pen on accents. For example: "The Oirish wor always doown on informers, the bloody spalpeens!"; "My good fren has a right of free speech in dis guntry, and you must not gut him off"; "All de money in de worl' could nebber git him inter dacen' 'ciety"; "Hexcellent, ma covey, yer worthy o' the hedication I gave ye."

His ear, especially for Irish accents, was pretty good, but pleasure in such dialogue is an acquired taste. More enjoyable is the delight he took in attack. Give him a fool or a knave, and he was instantly on his—and often her—case. In the original novel from which he developed his play, "Laura Lindsay: The School Teacher," one of the greater fools says, about one of the heroes, "From his appearance, I should judge he is an infidel. All infidels wear long hair and beards." In another chapter, Hunter has Laura tease her father with: "You may turn Moslem or Mormon, policy shop-keeper or pawn-broker, and there is some hope of saving your soul, but once turn ward politician and you are utterly lost. You might as well sell yourself to Satan and have done with it."

Laura's father, whose mysterious past forms part of the plot of the novel, is emphatically not a ward politician. When we first meet him, he is an out-of-work carpenter who lives with his daughter in a four-story tenement on Seventh Street between First and Second Avenues. On the walls of their humble, spotlessly clean home are "four small steel engravings of literary characters mounted in narrow oak frames, instead of gaudy, bright, red and yellow pictures of saints and angels." The Lindsays are, of course, sterling folk: honest, dignified, and, by definition, the possessors of educated tastes. Hunter was neither the first nor the last novelist to work in stereotypes.

But the choice of stereotypes tells much about the author. In Thomas Hunter's case, virtue was associated with Teutonic heritage, rejection of wealth, privacy even to the point of withholding essential information from one's family and closest friends, and a stubborn adherence to principle. Hardly disreputable—except, as we examine it today, for that preference for Teutons, which was strengthened by his study of phrenology.

Hunter explains that he was both young and impressionable when, "Thinking that this so-called science would assist me in knowing the hearts and minds of my pupils, I read everything concerning

the subject I could lay my hands on." And having "learned to differentiate the races to which my pupils belonged, . . . I had arrived at the conclusion that the Teutonic race, which included North Germans, Scandinavians, Danes, British and Irish, was the most intellectual." In descending order of ability came Spanish Jews, followed by English Jews; then, all below average, Italians, Bohemians, and Russian Jews; and finally Negroes.

But after more experience with the boys at the grammar school where he first taught, he formed a different conclusion, which he italicized: "*the children whose ancestors have enjoyed freedom and education for many generations possess the greatest [mental] capacity.*"

About Blacks as students, Hunter was no more enlightened than most educators of his time, but where it mattered most he did not act on his prejudices. When the first "colored girls" passed the Normal College's entrance examination in 1874¹ — the year in which the legislature required the admission of qualified Blacks — he insisted that they were "entitled to all the rights and privileges of the College."

According to his autobiographical account, he decided to separate this group of eight into different class sections. When two of the thirty-five instructors objected to having Black girls in their classes, Hunter determined to teach them a lesson: "I picked out two of the blackest and enrolled them in the sections of the malcontents."

It was a grossly unimaginative act in terms of the girls themselves, and one can imagine their sufferings, but it proved Hunter meant business, as he had meant it earlier in his career when he enrolled a young Black in an all-white class of the Evening High School which he headed. When the commissioner in charge of the school ordered him to dismiss the fellow, Hunter refused; "I would rather resign," he told the commissioner, "than turn the young man out."

No one today can read all of Hunter's remarks on Blacks with equanimity, and there is no doubt that he felt Teutons to be *the* superior breed, but he was capable of learning from experience. When the youngsters in his classes proved him wrong, he ceased to believe in phrenology. And we can assume he wasn't lying when he said, later, that he "had great sympathy for the oppressed races, the Poles, the Hungarians, the Irish, and the Negroes."

But there is no need to make assumptions. We have his novel touching upon the Draft Riots of



Rioters marching down Second Avenue.

1863 to test the degree and quality of his sympathy. For background, let us begin with a paragraph from an 1896 textbook, *Readings in the History of the United States*, "for use in the schools," by Thomas Hunter, PhD. LL.D.

On the 13th of July a riot took place in New York which lasted four days. Whether this was a spontaneous rising of the poorer classes against the draft, because the wealthy could escape it by paying into the treasury the sum of three hundred dollars, or whether it was concocted and carried into execution by rebel [i.e. Confederate] emissaries, has never been clearly ascertained. It is more than probable that the persons who attacked and burned the offices of the provost marshals were honestly opposed to the draft; but after it began, the thieves and burglars who abound in all great cities emerged from their cellars and garrets, and commenced their work of pillage, destruction, and murder. They cut the telegraph wires, destroyed railroads, set fire to the colored orphan asylum and several private houses, killed negroes, wherever encountered, in the most barbarous way, hanging some of them to lamp posts. Before the riot was suppressed many lives were lost and two million dollars worth of property was destroyed. This riot was the most disgraceful event of the Civil War.

"The Family Jewels," the novel partially set against a background of the Draft Riots, is typical of Hunter's fiction: it contains dastardly villains, smooth villains, drunkards and thieves, withheld secrets, assumed identities, coincidences enough to choke a horse, a love interest, and a few utterly noble characters — in this case, the Abolitionist

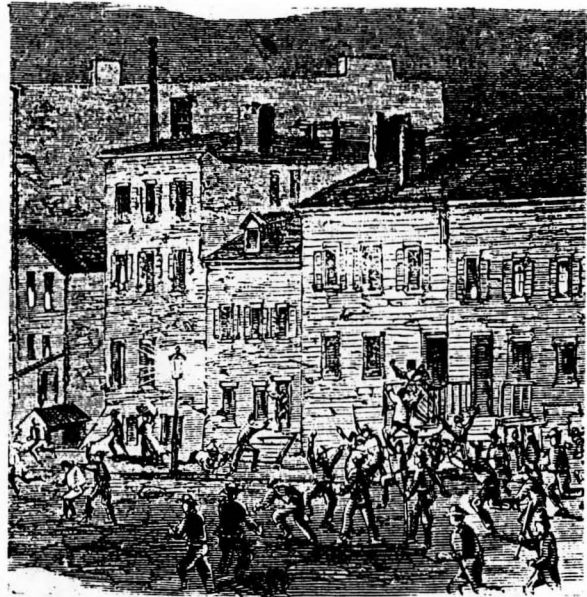
1. A discrepancy exists. In his autobiography, Hunter cites 1874 as the year that Blacks were first admitted to the College, and eight were; but the record shows that the *very* first Black students — nine of them — had been admitted the previous year.

hero, Dr. Charles Ringwood, and the heroine, Kate Middleton. They meet at the home of the Doctor's distant relative, one Philip Crosbie, a handsome stockbroker married to Kate's aunt, with whom Kate and her vain and foolish mother have come North to stay after the heroic death, in the Confederate Army, of Kate's father. Before they ever arrive at the Crosbie home, their trunks are stolen by a red-haired thief named Dick Espy. In those trunks young Dick finds the Middleton family jewels, which he sells to a fence on Maiden Lane. With the money he receives, Dick dyes his hair black, changes his name to Augustus Adolphus Ogilby, sets himself up as a "swell," and begins to make his fortune by playing the stock market at Crosbie's brokerage.

When we first meet Dick in his new guise, he is taking lessons in proper English from a polysyllabic tutor he calls "Mounseer" Oreille (O'Reilly), in fact the private detective John Stillwater, who will trail Dick with Javert-like persistence through the remainder of the novel. Dick/Gus is nobody's fool; he distrusts the tutor because (a) he's a wretched teacher and (b) his fees are exorbitant. Soon enough he discharges Stillwater and goes into society trying (and failing) to disguise his uncultured background from such as Kate, who meets him at Crosbie's summer home. (Will Crosbie's plan to marry him to Kate succeed? Worry not; she not only sees through to Dick's lowly origins but also suspects him of stealing the trunks.)

Though a conscienceless child of the slums, Dick is naturally intelligent, abstemious, reticent, and has visions of finer things. Dick is one of two almost complex personalities (the other is his mother), and when Hunter is not being censorious toward him, he shows him a certain affection, attributing his sins to societal neglect and a lack of moral training rather than to natural depravity. Crosbie, on the other hand, is an unmixed villain. Money is Crosbie's god, and to get it he has cast off one wife (Dick's mother!), has bigamously married an heiress, and is now making himself romantically agreeable to the new wife's sister in hopes of obscuring his own thievery and acquiring still more money. (Criminals in Hunter's view come in two sizes: small ones like Dick, whose petty thievery runs afoul of the law, and great ones like Crosbie—or Napoleon, for that matter—who stand beyond the law because they make it.)

The ins and outs of the plot are tedious in the extreme, and they do not stop until page 395 when Dick, having spent a year in Sing-Sing, is pardoned, and he and his mother are set up in a "large profitable business"; Crosbie, now bankrupt and revealed as Dick's father, has committed suicide; and Kate is on her way to marrying Dr. Charles Ringwood.

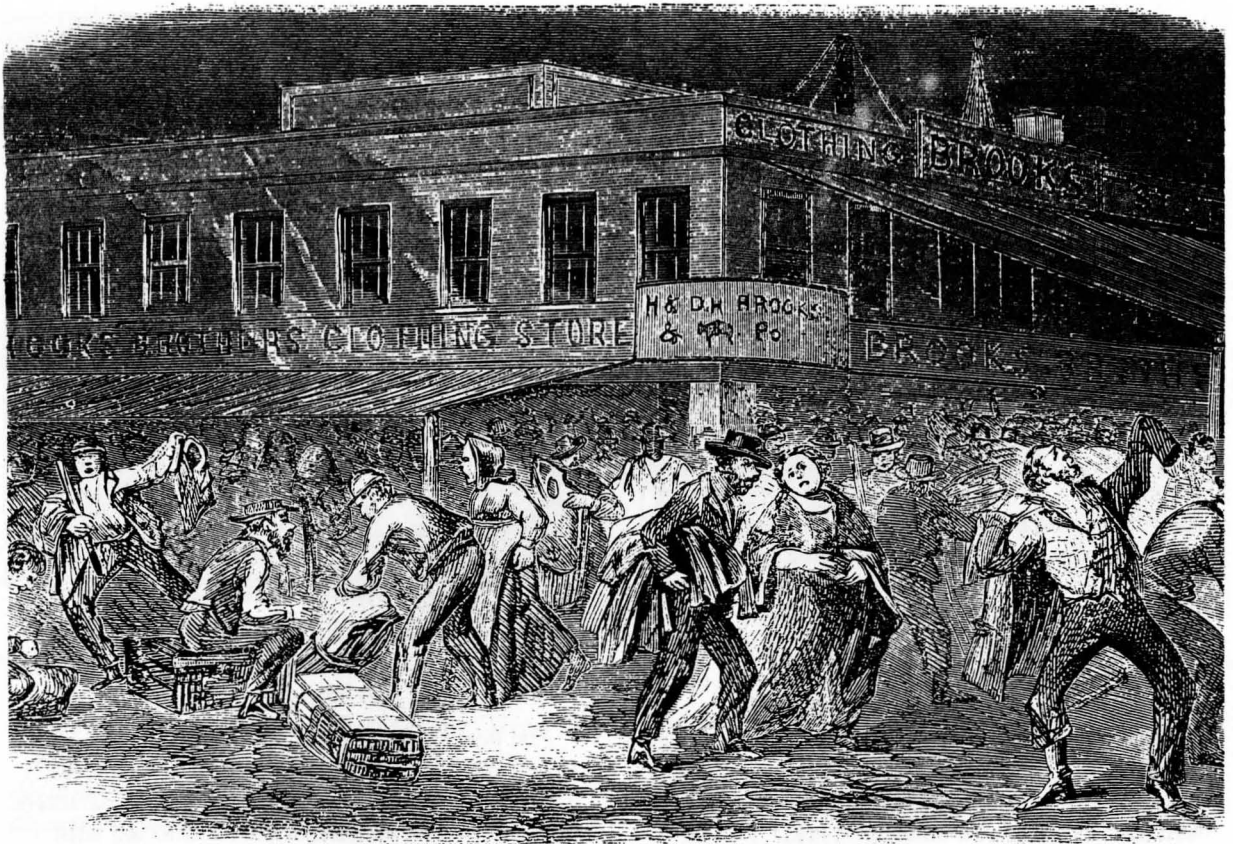


The Negro Quarters in Sullivan Street during the riots.

And how do the Draft Riots fit into the plot? Well, in fact they don't, but they are there nonetheless, absorbing the attention of a second set of characters, who by sheerest coincidence are connected with the first. The leader of one of the marauding bands, out for plunder, is Dick's stepfather. The Confederate agent who comes North to instigate the riots by arousing anti-draft and anti-Negro resentments employs Kate's alcoholic husband to further his conspiracy. (Oh yes, Kate had made an early marriage to a dissolute Southerner, thought but not *proved* to have been killed at the Battle of Chancellorsville; that is why she could not accept Dr. Ringwood's first proposal of marriage.) Et cetera, et cetera.

Is this novel worth reading? Alas no. Unconvincing, melodramatic, repetitive, and sentimental, "The Family Jewels: A Tale of the New York Riots of '63" is without value as literature. Equally sad, it gives little evidence of Hunter's having been an eye-witness to the riots themselves. Only his account of the burning of the Colored Orphanage seems to derive from his presence at the scene. Certainly the description of the fire has an immediacy that nothing else in the novel does.

Soon the red-forked flames shot out of every window, as if they were living things. Determined to destroy whatever they touched, they crept along the cornice; they danced about the roof; and through the windows, they could be seen keeping up an infernal riot, jumping up and down, running here and there as if to find some spot that they had not yet destroyed. Then the roof fell in with a great crash, and for a moment it seemed as though the fire had been extinguished; but only for a moment.



The sacking of Brooks Clothing Store.

A great volume of black smoke ascended in spiral curves and intensified the darkness of the night. But the flames soon mastered the fallen debris, and shot up higher and fiercer and more triumphant than ever. The heavens were painted a yellowish red. The rioters were awed into silence by the beauty of the scene. Spectators from the neighborhood stood unmolested outside of Alling's lines,² looking at the conflagration with mingled emotions of fear, anger, and pleasure—fear for the result, anger at the outrage, and pleasure at the sight of a great fire. Perhaps it would be better to call it fascination, for there is always a feeling at a great conflagration similar to that of the bird that is charmed by the beauty of the snake. — In less than an hour the building—the refuge of poor helpless colored children—was one black mass of smoking ruins, and the mob dispersed, some to seek rest in cellar and garret and others to continue their work of robbery and destruction.

2. Alling is the previously mentioned Confederate whom Hunter depicts as the instigator of the riots. He is shown to be a brave, honest man whose "cause was wicked *ab initio*, . . . Human slavery was a crime against nature, and, therefore, every act in favor of its extension and perpetuity was sinful. But there were millions born in the South who sincerely thought slavery a Divine institution . . . and Alling belonged to this class."

Here, as rarely elsewhere, Hunter's prose comes alive with convincing detail. He could have been one of those spectators. But his descriptions of other skirmishes during the riots, and of their root cause—Southern conspirators stirring up ignorant workingmen—lack credibility. Moreover, to explain the riots as the result of outside agitators on the one hand and "criminal scum" on the other suggests a willful blindness to actual conditions in the city in those years, when rioting was a commonplace and unskilled laborers—men, women, and children—lived in near destitution. At 1 death for every 35 in the population, the New York City death rate in the 1860s was the highest in the Western world. The staples available to the poor in the city were usually adulterated when not actually poisonous. Two-thirds of the city lacked sewers; garbage and human excrement mingled with the water supply. Housing conditions were appalling, and in the poorest ward of the city, as many as 290,000 people were crowded into one square mile; in the East End, London's notorious slum, the comparable figure was 175,816. Added to all this was the fact of inflation. By July 1863, wages had risen 12 percent over 1860, but retail prices had gone up by 43 percent—this at a time when a seamstress might

earn 17¢ at the end of a fourteen-hour day and \$300 was more than most laborers' yearly wages.

In a city prone to rioting – it has been explained that there were no other ways for the poor to express their anger³ – it seems unlikely that Confederate agitation was needed to arouse mob passions against a draft that the rich could avoid by employing a substitute or paying a \$300 exemption fee. Moreover, this first federal draft in the nation's history had as its purpose the fighting of a war that was not especially popular among the city's laboring class. And why ever should it be? Why should the immigrant poor care about freeing slaves or limiting States Rights?

Contemporary scholarship tells us what any competent novelist would have known: that motives, whether of people or mobs, are always mixed. But Tom Hunter clearly enjoyed the idea of conspiracy: it gave him opportunity to revel in descriptions of clandestine meetings and the ruffraff who attended them. And so, thrust into an implausible story of the theft of family jewels are Rebel conspirators, skulduggery plotted in waterfront dives, and gentry under attack by the undeserving poor.

Yet I suppose that Hunter was also demonstrating that lack of education led to criminality and that an upbringing in the slums made brutality and vice inevitable. The honest workingman might, just might find himself in opposition to the draft, but he would *never* join a plundering mob.

So it is the worst guys who hunt down Negroes and it is the best guys who rescue them, even when the particularized Negro under attack, one of Dick's allies, is a professional thief – and not just a thief but a man who has knifed his wife in a moment of jealousy. Dick tenderly nurses Mrs. Jones (thus proving he is not beyond redemption), and Dr. Ringwood attends her at risk of his own life. And when the pogrom against Blacks intensifies, the noble Doctor helps the Joneses escape to New Rochelle.

It becomes clear that while Hunter believed Negroes to be inferior, he really did feel sympathy for them – which, by the evidence of his novels, is more than he felt for that other despised minority, the Jews, three of whom turn up in "The Family Jewels." One, the "shameless hussy" daughter of a pawnbroker, is Dick's first girlfriend. The second is the "miserable go-between" on Maiden Lane who buys the Middleton jewels and, Dick insists, cheats him of \$5000. The fence goes to jail at the novel's end, and Hunter intimates that because it requires

no courage, receiving stolen goods is a far more contemptible act than stealing itself. The third Jew is the only one we see – and hear – in action. Mr. Abrahams is a repellent little "Hebrew" who watches the stock ticker in Crosbie's office and, rubbing his dirty hands together, says things like, "Shentlemens, de shorts is runnin' to cover an' no mistakes. Shentlemens, you'd better git on de 'long' side of de market."⁴

Can we infer from this and other moments in the novels that Hunter harbored both anti-Semitic and racist sentiments? Certainly. But to what end?

It would appear from an inspection of registers from 1870 to 1906 that President Hunter employed few or no Jews on his faculty. It's even likelier that he employed no Blacks whatever. Par for the course, nationwide.

But from the first days of the Normal College, Hunter admitted students solely on merit, even insisting that names never appear on the entrance exams. And the record shows over and over that he took active, honest pride in a student body composed of rich and poor, Black and white, Jew and Gentile. And that was revolutionary in the extreme.

From this distance, the perpetuation of such a student body – probably the only one in America apart from that at the all-male College of the City of New York – removes the worst sting from its president's novelistic bigotry. Along with the founders of CCNY, Thomas Hunter forged a model for public higher education in a democracy. It is enough.

One thing only needs to be added. Picture the novelist at work. Upright, bearded, eyes gleaming, Tom Hunter is approaching the end of "The Family Jewels." But before he knots up the last lines of the plot and allows everyone who deserves it to live happily ever after, he sets the heroine a question. What will she do now that her dissolute husband lives and her money is gone?

What indeed? Hunter dips his steel-nibbed pen into the inkpot and sees to it that Kate Middleton rises to the occasion: "I!" she says, "Oh! I shall follow the vocation of all ruined greatness; – I shall teach school."

You have to love a novelist capable of that. □

3. I have relied heavily on Adrian Cook's *The Armies of the Streets: The New York City Draft Riots of 1863* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974) for most of the facts and sociologic interpretations.

4. To be fair, Hunter despised *all* players of the stock market. "The finest school of lying in the world is the Stock Exchange," he wrote, "and it has its recitation rooms in brokers' offices."