

The Writings of Dan De Quille

A Preliminary Catalog of Sources

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Introduction

Dan De Quille, *nom de plume* of William Wright (1829-1898), was born in Ohio and emigrated via Iowa and the gold mines of California to Virginia City, Nevada, to become a journalist whose writings have transcended the era of the Comstock Lode. His mining reports in the local press and in the prestigious trade journals of the day were respected by period investors and promoters alike and are considered primary reference sources by historians today. He authored the *History of the Big Bonanza*, which has become an essential reference on the Comstock Lode, two mining-related pamphlets and hundreds of stories that were published in the lay press and in some of the prominent literary periodicals of the day.

Scattered through the pages of those early publications and extant manuscripts are specimens of his pathos, humor, social commentary, hoaxes and his experimentation with religious and supernatural subjects, which he developed into novellas. This latter body of work has attracted the attention of bibliographers over the past sixty years, resulting in the publication of four single-title editions and six anthologies; representative pieces also have been published in three other miscellaneous collections. These include volumes edited and introduced by Basso (1981, 1987, 1988), Berkove (1988, 1990, 1994, 2006), Dwyer and Lingenfelter (1990), Emrich (1950), Lingenfelter (1963), Lumis (1946), and Rawls (1980). Several of these renaissance volumes deserve special note.

The first is James J. Rawls' *Dan De Quille of the Big Bonanza* (1980). This edition stands out for several reasons: its content is based upon original De Quille manuscripts in the Bancroft and California Historical Society libraries. Rawls notes that manuscript versions vary considerably from those published in the periodicals of the era. Also included are reproductions of little-known drawings by De Quille of characters with whom he had contact. The collection is also esthetically pleasing, a production in the long tradition of the Book Club of California. Beautiful typography and tasteful embellishments compliment De Quille's work.

Three volumes are the efforts of tireless De Quille bibliographer Lawrence Berkove. His editions of De Quille novellas, *Dives and Lazarus* (1988) and *The Sorceress of Attu* (1994), are based on previously unpublished manuscripts and are introduced by Berkove's trademark literary scholarship. Both titles have supernatural themes. His *The Fighting Horse of the Stanislaus* (1990) features nearly three dozen De Quille classics of a variety of genres. Again, his introductions and head notes augment the literary landscape of De Quille.

Another special addition to the revival of interest in De Quille's work is that of veteran Nevada journalism historians Richard A. Dwyer and Richard E. Lingenfelter. *Dan De Quille, the Washoe Giant* (1990) offers an extensive anthology of De Quille's work; the extended bibliography is a welcome contribution.

De Quille's Nevada career spanned nearly four decades between 1861 and 1897, the early part of which included working along side Mark Twain on the celebrated *Territorial Enterprise* before Twain became famous. Comparisons of the works of the two writers have been inevitable and fall

into two schools: earlier observers, including Wells Drury (1936), Richard Lillard (1944), Paul Fatout (1964), George Lyman (1934) and Alf Doten (1899), have commented quite favorably on De Quille's work ethic while later academicians have been more conservative in their evaluations of his body of work.

Among the latter is Lawrence I. Berkove, professor emeritus of English and American literature at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has devoted years to the study of the De Quille phenomenon and has authored numerous articles on the subject and has edited several editions of De Quille's writings since 1985.

Berkove (1985) notes, "... some of [De Quille's] contemporaries even thought him a better writer than Twain. With hindsight, we know this ... opinion was extravagant. In fact, the inevitable comparison of De Quille with Twain is probably one of the causes for his present obscurity, for De Quille at his best is clearly no match for Twain at his best... If, however, De Quille is compared to the local color authors who created and shaped the material and traditions of American folk literature and the tall tale, then he shows up very favorably.

"This capacity of De Quille to pass beyond routine, reportorial journalism and to write more freely and creatively — what I would call literary journalism — is, paradoxically, the most permanently interesting feature of his writing but also the least well known."

In his *Sagebrush Anthology* (2006), Berkove revives the century-old concept of the "Sagebrush School of Journalism," which suggests geographical parameters influenced the practitioners of the craft. The concept was set forth by Ella S. Cummins in her *The Story of the Files* (1893):

Sagebrush school ? Why not ? Nothing in all our Western literature so distinctly savors of the soil as the characteristic books written by the men of Nevada and that interior part of the State where the sagebrush grows.

There is something in that region of high altitudes, grey alkali, grey sagebrush, grey rocks, spring freshets and glorious sunsets that has always precluded the possibility of taking up the pen to write of dukes, duchesses, heather-blooms and English uplands, or of scenes of New England, or anywhere else under the sun's shining save of that weird, fascinating, ugly land in which they dwelled.

Berkove refines his description of the "Sagebrush School" as that in which writers share a love of the "Nevada experience," a sort of provincial approach, albeit "Sagebrushers" exhibited a range of literary styles: irony, subtlety and wit. He reiterates his opinion that De Quille's writing was inferior to Twain's: "Indeed, he may be the most accomplished Western writer after the long-established triumvirate of Twain, Ambrose Bierce and Bret Harte."

Cheryll Glotfelty, associate professor of English, University of Nevada, Reno, also employs geographical parameters in her assessment of Nevada writers, not so much from a point of view of influence as from one of obscurity. In the introduction to her anthology of diverse Nevada literature, *Literary Nevada* (2008), she likens the inaccessibility to regional literature to the depictions of the Nevada landscape on early maps — *incognita*, but perpetuates her premise of obscurity, in the case of De Quille, by selecting two pieces from his widely circulated *History of the Big Bonanza* for inclusion in her survey while offering only a cursory reference to his broader body of work.

Perhaps the most balanced of the recent assessments is found in the introduction to Dwyer and Lingenfelter (1990). The editors leave "the real Dan De Quille ... to speak for himself," a sentiment expressed forty years earlier by Duncan Emrich (1950).

This catalog has been compiled from microfilm files of early journals, secondary sources and holdings in public and private collections.

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(EDITOR’S NOTE: The following citations are of the publication of Dan De Quille’s stories in the periodical press of the day. Many stories were “picked up” or reprinted by other journals of the day, with and without changes to titles and/or content. The following citations included these without regard to their nature. Reprints in recent editions are cross-referenced in brackets. Story titles followed by asterisks are serials.)

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