

Loom

By Kevin Gallagher

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Review by Dennis Daly

In the pre-dawn hours of August 21, 1863, during the American Civil War, William Quantrill led his infamous raid on Lawrence, Kansas, murdering at least 185 men and boys. The Confederate irregulars rode into the city, about 400 strong, with lists of their intended victims. Once there many of them simply shot any male that they could lay their hands on. Northern abolitionists, who largely populated Lawrence, were the hated targets. This attack culminated years of strife in pre-war "Bleeding Kansas" between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces, as well as the strange lead-up to this discord rooted in New England's textile industry decades earlier.

Kevin Gallagher, in his new book *Loom*, searches through these Massachusetts mill roots and unmasks the little-known unholy alliance between capitalists of the North and slavers of the South. Gallagher does this by resurrecting a public genre of narrative poetry and then uses it to impart prosaic information (in this case history) with an effective didactic force. Aside from mnemonic considerations, verse employed in this way by a skilled poet can effectively direct emphasis and insert emotion like no prose piece can. And Gallagher is nothing if not a skilled poet.

Pirating the Power Loom opens the poet's collection by recalling Francis Cabot Lowell's momentous foray into industrial espionage. Cabot memorized the design of the power loom used in English factories and, with his partners Nathan Appleton and Paul Moody, established his own manufacturing facilities in Massachusetts. Here Lowell details his theft,

*I stole their designs with my own two eyes.
I smuggled them to Boston in my mind.*

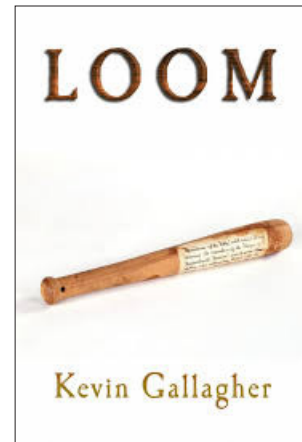
*Exporting designs meant jail in Britain.
Workers of looms weren't allowed to leave.*

*So I snuck into Manchester myself.
I made it back two days before the war.*

I saw iron cards and spinning jennys!

Not too different from the way other industrial countries have stolen manufacturing secrets from the United States. You can also feel the larcenous excitement in Lowell's words.

When New England's cotton industry took off it triggered some unintended consequences. Although the international slave trade had officially



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ended in 1808, slavery within the country was still legal, although a dying institution. Cotton plantations in the South needed workers and a multiplication of existing slaves through breeding seemed the answer. Gallagher's piece *Breeding Negroes* captures the banality of these evil times perfectly. Consider this observation,

*There's a cotton nigger
for you!*

*Genuine! Look at his toes!
Look at his fingers!*

*There's a pair
of legs for you!*

*He's just as good
at ten bales*

*as I am for a julep
at eleven o'clock!*

Among the textile captains of New England the Lawrence family positioned itself in the first rank of importance. They founded the mill city of Lawrence Massachusetts and nurtured strong connections with the Southern plantation system. Amos A. Lawrence, known as the Prince of the Cotton Whigs, directed the second generation of the family business. Gallagher chronicles a business tour of southern plantations that Lawrence took as a young man in a poem entitled *Goodwill Tour—The Prince's Diaries*. Lawrence observes that not all is well in Georgia,

*The countryside is very beautiful.
The ladies are pretty and polite.*

*What I had imagined as the Southern
planter is an exceedingly rare sight.*

*Some days when it is hot as hell
every man is burning for a fight.*

*I am finding it very different here.
Shake hands and try not to stare.*

Years later the case of fugitive slave Anthony Burns affected this same Amos Lawrence greatly. Burns was captured in Boston and, after a violent attempt to free him by an angry abolitionist mob, the authorities returned Burns, under very heavy guard, to his "master." Lawrence renounced his family's ties to the Northern mill/Southern plantation system and became an activist with a vengeance. In his poem, *The Stark-Mad Abolitionist*, the poet lets Lawrence speak for himself,

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*I put my hands in my face and I wept.
I went to bed an old-fashioned conservative,
I woke up a stark-mad abolitionist.*

*Look what you've done. I can do nothing less.
You've given me a new purpose to live.
I put my hands in my face and I wept,*

*Then I put myself into his footsteps.
Burns is a hero, not a fugitive.
I am a stark-mad abolitionist.*

I will see to it that we free Kansas.

When the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed the US Congress in 1854, the Missouri Compromise was overturned and the game changed. Now popular sovereignty would determine whether new states were slave or free. Amos Lawrence pushed his new abolitionist agenda by bankrolling anti-slavery settlers and building up cities such as Lawrence Kansas—appropriately enough, named after him. In one of my favorite pieces, Gallagher versifies a letter from Amos Lawrence to President Franklin Pierce, another New Englander. Lawrence states his position,

You have a problem with the settlers

*from the "free States" opposed
to the introduction of the slave trade.*

*I note that you have now forced those settlers
to the conclusion that if they be safe*

*they must defend themselves out there.
I too have come to the same conclusion.*

*I have therefore rendered them assistance
By furnishing such means of defense.*

The pro-slavers fought back by harassing and attacking the new settlers. Lawrence countered, fighting fire with fire. In Gallagher's poem *Farmers Turned Soldiers* Lawrence explains,

*To protect your freedom I send John Brown.
He has the look of a determined one.
When farmers turn soldiers they must have arms.*

*This is a simple case of right and wrong.
I send Sharps rifles so the ruffians run.
Never again shall they burn down your barns.*

You must defend yourselves. Sound the alarms!

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Amos A. Lawrence, like others on the wrong side of history, realized his mistakes, albeit a bit late. And, as often happens, shame and guilt bred brutality or at least the promotion of brutality in the person of Lawrence's surrogate, John Brown.

Brown met terrorism with terrorism. At Pottawatomie Creek he slaughtered five individuals with pro-slavery ties. None of them, however owned slaves. The bleeding of Kansas had begun in earnest. Quantrill's villainous exclamation mark on this matter waited for the cover of civil war.

Poetry collections this provocative and informative are rare. Gallagher's Loom demands a large readership. I predict he'll get it—and deservedly so.