

HUGH BRACKENRIDGE

THE BATTLE OF BUNKERS-HILL

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(1748-1816)

The battle of Bunker's Hill was an event which stirred whatever dramatic activity there was in America at the time of the Revolution. Therefore, a play written on the subject should not be omitted from a collection supposed to be representative of the different periods in American history and in American thought. The reader has an interesting comparison to make in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's play, which the title-page declares is "A dramatic piece of five acts, in heroic measure, by a gentleman of Maryland," and a later piece entitled "Bunker Hill, or the Death of General Warren," written by John Daly Burk (1776-1808), who came to America because of certain political disturbances, and published his drama with a Dedication to Aaron Burr (1797), the year it was given in New York for the first time.¹ It will be found that the former play is conceived in a better spirit, and is more significant because of the fact that it was written so soon after the actual event.

It is natural that Hugh Henry Brackenridge should have been inspired by the Revolution, and should have been prompted by the loyal spirit of the patriots of the time. For he was the stuff from which patriots are made, having, in his early life, been reared in Pennsylvania, even though he first saw the light near Campbeltown, Scotland, in 1748. His father (who moved to America in 1753) was a poor farmer, and Hugh received his schooling under precarious conditions, as many boys of that time did. We are given pictures of him, trudging thirty miles in all kinds of weather, in order to borrow books and newspapers, and we are told that, being quick in the learning of languages, he made arrangements with a man, who knew mathematics, to trade accomplishments in order that he himself might become better skilled in the science of calculation.

At the age of fifteen, he was so well equipped that he was engaged to teach school in Maryland, at Gunpowder Falls, some of his pupils being so much larger and older than he that, at one time, he had to take a brand from the fire, and strike one of them, in order to gain ascendancy over him.

At eighteen, pocketing whatever money he had saved, he went to President Witherspoon, of the College of New Jersey, arranging with that divine to teach classes in order that he might afford to remain and study. While there, among his classmates may be counted James Madison, future president of the United States, Philip Freneau, the poet, and others of later note. Aaron Burr was a Junior at the time of Brackenridge's graduation, as was William Bradford. Though he was on intimate terms with Madison, he was much more the friend of Freneau, the two writing together "The Rising Glory of America." Should one take the complete piece, which was read by Brackenridge at Commencement, and mark therein that part of the poem composed by Freneau, and included later in Freneau's published works, one might very readily understand that Brackenridge was less the poet, even though in some ways he may have been more versatile as a writer.

This piece, "The Rising Glory of America,"² is representative of a type of drama which was fostered and encouraged by the colleges of the time. We find Francis Hopkinson, in the College of

¹ Burk wrote another play, "Female Patriotism; or, The Death of Joan d'Arc," given a New York production in 1798. An interesting letter from Burk to J. Hodgkinson, who produced his "Bunker Hill," is to be found in Dunlap's "The American Theatre" (London, 1833, i, 313). The play has been reissued by the Dunlap Society (1891, no. 15), and edited, with an introduction by Brander Matthews.

² Philadelphia: Printed by Joseph Cruikshank, for R. Aitken, Bookseller, Opposite the London-Coffee-House, in Front-Street./

Philadelphia, writing various dialogues, like his "Exercise: Containing a Dialogue [by the Rev. Dr. Smith] and Ode, sacred to the memory of his late gracious Majesty George II. Performed at the public commencement in the College of Philadelphia, May, 1761." Yet Hopkinson was one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence!

What says Abbé Robin, viewing Harvard in 1781:

Their pupils often act tragedies, the subject of which is generally taken from their national events, such as the battle of Bunker's Hill, the burning of Charlestown, the death of General Montgomery, the capture of Burgoyne, the treason of Arnold, and the Fall of British Tyranny. You will easily conclude that in such a new nation as this, these pieces must fall infinitely short of that perfection to which our European literary productions of this kind are wrought up; but, still, they have a greater effect upon the mind than the best of ours would have among them, because those manners and customs are delineated, which are peculiar to themselves, and the events are such as interest them above all others. The drama is here reduced to its true and Ancient origin.

Nathaniel Evans also wrote dialogues, performed at the public Commencements in Philadelphia, like the one on May 17, 1763. We have already noted that "The Prince of Parthia" was written as a college play. "The Military Glory of Great Britain" was also prepared as an entertainment by the graduates of the College of New Jersey, held in Nassau-Hall, September 29, 1762, with the authorship unknown. It was a type of play which tempted many men, who later tried their hand at more important dramatic work.

Another interesting title of the time ran as follows:

An/Exercise,/containing/a Dialogue and Ode/On the Accession of His present gracious Majesty,/George III./Performed at the public Commencement in the College of/Philadelphia, May 18th, 1762./Philadelphia:/Printed by W. Dunlap, in Market-Street, M,DCC,LXII./

In order to understand the spirit which prompted both Brackenridge and Freneau, one needs must turn to an account of the latter's life, and learn therefrom certain facts concerning the early college spirit of Brackenridge, which was ignored by his son in the only authentic record of his life we have.

From Freneau we understand, for example, that, as early as June 24, 1769, a certain number of students banded themselves into an undergraduate fraternity, called the American Whig Society, the chief members of that association being Madison, Brackenridge, Bradford, and Freneau himself. There is a manuscript book in the possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, originally owned by Bradford, and containing some of their later poetical tirades. It is called "Satires against the Whigs," and is composed of ten pastorals by Brackenridge and a number of satires by Freneau. It is strange that the intimacy between Brackenridge and Freneau did not lead to their rooming together while at College, Brackenridge giving way to James Madison. But we do know that the two were very intimately associated in early literary work, and, in the manuscript book just mentioned, there is contained the fragment of a novel written alternately by the two, and called "Father Bombo's Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia."

Then followed "The Rising Glory of America," which, when Brackenridge graduated, September 25, 1771, was announced on the program of events – afternoon division – as being entirely by himself. This must have been an oversight, inasmuch as Freneau had more than a mere hand in the execution of the piece, and inasmuch as we possess Brackenridge's own confession "that on his part it was a task of labour, while the verse of his associate flowed spontaneously."

The college life of the time was not devoted entirely to literary creativeness or to political discussions. There is published an address by President Witherspoon to the inhabitants of Jamaica (1772), in which he outlined the course of study to which the students were subjected. It indicates, very excellently, the classical training that Brackenridge, Freneau, and Madison had to undergo. In fact, we find, on Commencement Day, Freneau debating on "Does Ancient Poetry excel the Modern?" and throwing all his energy in favour of the affirmative argument. And Brackenridge, selected to deliver the Salutatory, rendered it in Latin, "De societate hominum." (See *Pennsylvania Chronicle*; John Maclean's "History of the College of New Jersey," i, 312; Madison's correspondence while a student; also Philip Vickers Fithian's *Journal and Letters: 1764-1774. Student at Princeton College: 1770-1772. Tutor at Nomini Hall in Virginia: 1773-1774. Ed. ... by J. R. Williams. Princeton, 1900.*) The Princeton historian points to this class of 1771 as being so patriotic that a unanimous vote was taken to appear at graduation in nothing but things of American manufacture.³

This much we do know regarding the early life of Brackenridge: that he was always pressed for money, that it was his indefatigableness and thirst for knowledge which carried him through the schools of the time, and through college.

His son even confesses that his father was obliged, on one occasion, to write an address which one of the students had to deliver, and to receive in payment therefor a new suit of clothes!

It was after his graduation that Brackenridge tutored in the College for a while, meantime taking up a course in theology. After this, he accepted a position as teacher in a school on the eastern shore of Maryland, because the "Academy" offered him a most flattering salary, and he could not reject it, however much he may have been interested in his college work. No sooner was he established there than he wrote to his friend, Freneau, inviting him to take the second position in the Maryland Seminary. This position was accepted by Freneau, who wrote to James Madison on November 22, 1772, mentioning therein that Brackenridge was at the head of Sommerset Academy, to which he himself had come on October 18th of that year, and where he was teaching the young idea and pursuing at the same time his theological studies.

As illustration of how much Freneau was at heart in tune with the work, we note that he says, "We have about thirty students in this Academy who prey upon me like leeches."

According to Brackenridge's son, whose *Memoir of his father* is published in the 1846 edition of "Modern Chivalry," there must, however, have been in this part of Maryland a polished social atmosphere, which gave ample opportunity for the wit, the scholarship, and the conversational and social powers of Brackenridge to develop.

For the students of Sommerset Academy, Brackenridge wrote his play, "The Battle of Bunkers-Hill,"⁴ and though there is no record of this piece having been actually presented, it is generally agreed that the Principal wrote his drama as an exercise for the pupils to perform. It was published anonymously, the fashion of the day which has led to many disputes, – for example, as to the authorship claims of John Leacock and Mrs. Mercy Warren. Royall Tyler was likewise diffident about letting his name appear on the title-page of "The Contrast."

When published in 1776, Brackenridge's piece was dedicated to Richard Stockton, and its tone and temper are thoroughly indicative of the spirit that must have dominated all his writings while at College.

The year 1776 marks Brackenridge's severance from teaching work. He soon after went to Philadelphia with his small fortune of one thousand pounds, and continued his efforts to make a livelihood by editing the *United States Magazine*, which afforded him an opportunity of airing his

³ The students of Princeton have not revived the "Battle of Bunkers-Hill," but they point still with some pride to the ivy which was planted by the class of 1771.

⁴ The/Battle/of/Bunkers-Hill./A Dramatic Piece./of Five Acts./in Heroic Measure. /By a Gentleman of Maryland./ – Pulcrumque mori succurrit in armis./Virgil./ – 'Tis glorious to die in Battle. – /Philadelphia:/Printed and Sold by Robert Bell, in Third-Street./ MDCCCLXXVI./

patriotic views, and gave him the added pleasure of inviting his associate, Freneau, to become one of the leading contributors. The following year, even though he had never been ordained in the Church, Brackenridge, nevertheless, a licensed divine, enlisted as Chaplain in the Revolutionary Army, and there are extant a number of vigorous political sermons which it was his wont to deliver to the soldiers – the same fiery eloquence seen in his "Eulogium on the Brave Men who fell in the Contest with Great Britain," delivered in 1778.

Some time elapsed while he travelled hither and thither with a bible in his saddle-bags, according to description, and then Brackenridge took up the study of law, inasmuch as his very advanced views on religious questions would not allow him to subscribe to all the tenets of his Presbyterian faith. This drew down upon him the inimical strictures of the pulpit, but marked him as a man of intellectual bravery and certain moral daring.

Having completed his law reading in Annapolis, under Samuel Chase, afterwards Supreme Court Judge, he crossed the Alleghanies, in 1781, and established himself in Pittsburgh, where he rapidly grew in reputation, through his personal magnetism and his undoubted talents as a lawyer. He was strictly in favour of the Federal Constitution, and those who wish to fathom his full political importance should not only study his record as Judge of the Supreme Court of the State of Pennsylvania, when he was appointed by Governor McKean, but, more significant still, the part he took in the Whiskey Insurrection, which brought him in touch with Albert Gallatin. In accord with the temper of the times, he was a man of party politics, although he never allowed his prejudices to interfere with his duties on the bench. As a Judge, his term of office ran from 1800 to the day of his death, June 25, 1816.

Mr. Brackenridge, besides being the author of the dialogue and play mentioned, likewise wrote several other dramas, among them being a tragedy, "The Death of General Montgomery at the Siege of Quebec" (1777), and a number of Odes and Elegies. The historical student will find much material relating to Brackenridge's political manoeuvres, in his book on the Western Insurrection; but probably as an author he is more justly famous for his series of stories and sketches published under the title, "Modern Chivalry" (1792), and representing a certain type of prose writing distinctive of American letters of the time of Clay and Crawford. These impressions were later added to. It is a type to be compared with the literary work done in the Southern States by J. J. Hooper, Judge Longstreet, and Judge Baldwin in ante-bellum days.

Among Brackenridge's other works may be mentioned:

An account of Pittsburgh in 1786. (*Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 29, 1786. Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh: *Monthly Bulletin*, 1902, v., 257-262, 288-290, 332-335.)

The Adventures of Captain Farrago. Philadelphia, 1856.

The Adventures of Major O'Regan. Philadelphia, 1856.

Gazette Publications. Carlisle, 1806.

Incidents of the Insurrection in the western parts of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, 1795.

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