GEORGE WALKER’S SATIRE ON AMERICA

BY HUGH MACMULLEN

Among the numerous satires written in the late eighteenth century to counteract the Jacobins and the arch-fiend William Godwin, certainly none is more amusing than George Walker’s The Vagabond, published in 1799, with an American edition printed in the following year from the English fourth for West, Greenleaf, and John West, booksellers of Boston. Though not a great satire, mocking at the fundamental weakness of man, The Vagabond does rise above mere political pamphleteering. It has a grasp of social problems, a gentle humor, and a good story, not despicable qualities surely in a book issued in a partisan conflict; and deserves to be remembered with another novel, much like it in quality, Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s Modern Chivalry.

Despite the fact that the satire was directed chiefly against Godwin, Hume, and their followers, Walker introduces his opinions on many subjects, among which is the United States. His characters, “new philosophers” or Jacobins, finding that England is too firmly established and too honestly governed to give them sufficient opportunities for revolution, set sail for the Western Republic where they hope to discover ample room for freedom and licentiousness.

The author’s purposes in bringing his scene to this country would seem to be three; to discourage prospective English emigrants, to show that, even in a republic, men could not subscribe to a Godwinian program, and to make sport of the primitivists who longed for the savage state. That these various aspects of his satire would produce a rather inconsistent point of view is true. In one place we find him painting poverty and disease rampant in Philadelphia, at the same time that he is making the citizens of the city as eager for the inequality of property as any English nobleman and the women as virtuous as the English girl. Nevertheless it is not difficult to distinguish between these various intents and from them to deduce the attitude of an intelligent English reactionary to the struggling offspring of the Empire in its second decade of existence.

In fulfilling his first purpose, Walker uses Philadelphia and
Kentucky as his main examples, mentioning Washington but in passing—". . . the streets are all laid out in right angles, upon paper. The number of workmen and mechanics employed in building this magnificent city is truly astonishing, they amount to nearly one hundred and fifty. . . . I can assure you what I tell you of Washington is literally true, and more than that, it never will be finished, on account of the local and multiplied inconveniences around it."

He postulates, rather shrewdly, at the beginning of his American section, that the country is manifestly not desirable as a home, for "Do you think it is natural for a man, who has discovered a treasure, to call all the world to share it with him? This very reason ought to deter people, if they were not mad; they might be certain, if America was that happy land held out to them by designing men, all the vagabonds in Europe would not be invited to its bowers." With such a premise we are ready for the sad—and sometimes untrue—picture, which he offers as Philadelphia: ". . . they arrived at Philadelphia, and rejoiced at the prospect of having reached a place where truth and justice had erected the standard of reason. Frederick was surprised to find the renowned city not so large as that part of Mary-le-Bone which is built; but consoled himself with the loss of one of the finest cities in the world, as he could look over the ground where it was to stand."

Nor did closer inspection prove more pleasant:

As they passed along the streets, they were hooted by the children, and called Vagabond English, with other opprobrious names. "This is very strange," said Frederick. "I thought the Americans made no distinctions of country; but we are only strangers yet—they will respect us when they know us better."

They procured lodgings at an extravagant rate, and calling for refreshment, received some very coarse cakes, wretched butter, and salt meat, for in summer no fresh meat will keep a day. . . .

"Things are not quite as they should be even here," said the Doctor.

"What do you mean by that?" said an American waiter.

"Do you mean to stigmatise Congress?"

"Heaven forbid," replied the Doctor. "I should like to speak to your master about my baggage."

"My master! I don't know such a man. Do you think I am a slave?—I am a republican, a free-born American."
But who are you? some lousy, beggarly emigré, come here to cut wood and hew stone for us.”

Doctor Alogos looked in silent amazement. Frederick was rising to kick the republican downstairs; but Stupeo observed that this was the genuine blunt spirit of freedom; that, like Spartans, the Americans took perfect liberty of speech.

“But they do not seem to allow it to others,” said Laura.

Think of the germs of the thousand travel-books written by disgruntled foreigners in this short passage! Nor are the criticisms without foundation if we remember the high cost of living in Philadelphia of 1790, and the vexatious behaviour of the servants recited by Miss Replier, including the young girl at the Marshall home who persisted in staying out all night.

Several other criticisms of the city have a familiar ring.

The heat was extremely intense, so much so, that the whole company confined themselves within doors. . . . Laura amused herself at the windows: to her it had an air of novelty to see every third person a black; but she was astonished to see the people labouring notwithstanding the violent heat, which was almost suffocating to those who remained inactive; and the swarms of mosquitoes were to Englishmen a perfect plague.

The departure of the philosophers is hastened, however, by the sound of rumbling carts carrying off “some dozens in a day” dead from yellow fever (a detail which would seem to place the action of the scene in the fall of 1793, despite the fact that Walker says peace had only recently been signed, and two of the characters had just previously passed through the Gordon riots of June, 1780). So having purchased a plot of land in Kentucky, which they subsequently discovered had been sold twice before, they set out over the great road for Fort Pitt, leaving the city of Franklin and Rush, famed for its elegance and its society—details which the satirist does not care to record.

The trip west they found as expensive and uncomfortable as did all other travellers of the day—“Every article as they passed along the road was exorbitantly dear, seventeen dollars [another point for setting the time after 1792] being charged for a common dinner for themselves and their horses; but what more astonished them,
was the impertinence of the inn-keepers. . . .” Nonetheless, “As they advanced over the mountains to Fort Pitt, they were charmed with the scenery, and the majestic river Ohio, down which they sailed, between extensive savannas and high-towering forests, where scarcely the beams of day, much less the foot of man, ever penetrated.”

But Kentucky afforded no perfect escape to these people, nourished on Gilbert Imlay—he who was Mary Wollstonecraft’s first husband and the father of the unlucky Fanny—and his romantic account of Kentucky. “Being arrived at Lexington, the metropolis of the finest country in the world, they were a little surprised at sight of about thirty ill-looking wooden houses, but they had seen so many wonders in the new world, that they were not altogether confounded, and Stupeo declared that he was delighted at the prospect of coming nearer a state of nature than they had even hoped or expected.”

Purchasing another plot of land, they retired to the wilderness where “neither milk nor butter were procurable at any price, and they were under the necessity of drinking spirits and water, which threw them all into slight fevers.” They were unequal to felling trees, became ill with the ague from ploughing the virgin soil which “being composed of rotten vegetable substance, was loaded with febrile particles and noxious vapour.” Their charming farm they called CLARENS, remembering their Rousseau!

Not being made of pioneer stuff, the philosophers eventually returned to England, after a series of amazing adventures, convinced at least that the limited monarchy found in “this little plot, this England” was the only rational form of government; and Walker rests his case, confident that his reader will eschew emigration from thence forward.

The second of the purposes is ably covered by a scene with the landlord of the Philadelphia inn at which the travellers are stopping:

“Very true,” replied the Doctor, “liberty sweetens every thing, and it is a glorious epoch in the annals of man, that property ceases in this great western continent to influence the actions of men.”

The landlord gazed with surprise. “Property,” said he, “is the only stimulus to commerce—commerce is the support of arts and sciences, and no man will be above trade. . . .”
"Where in the world," said the Doctor, "shall we find the genuine principles of liberty and equality?"

"As to liberty," said the American, "every man has liberty to follow any trade he pleases, and to vote for the Congress, if he is a naturalized citizen; and as to equality, we have no titles except 'squire,' but for equality of property, as some of our own people would like it, it is a mere fire-fly of a dark evening."

All of which would be a blow to a Godwinite.

Citizen Common, the man who fraudulently sells the philosophers their domain in Kentucky, boasts of the great public roads and canals which intersect the country, presumably a reference to the activities of the Bank of Pennsylvania.

"Why are these roads?" said Frederick, "You ought to throw every impediment in the way of commerce—it is thence arises all our evils."

"That is very true, sir, but in this country to talk disrespectfully of commerce is high treason: we are a commercial people. By means of these roads and canals, we have peopled the great wilderness, and planted settlements where only rattlesnakes used to bask..."

The old American boast is present here in eighteenth-century satire, but it is a boast directly antithetical to the idealist philosophy of the Godwinian school.

And the rest of their American experiences bear out these examples. The travellers are properly horrified by the presence of law and lawyers in Kentucky; are aghast at the necessity for manual labor. Even the licentiousness, ascribed to the Jacobins, is not allowed for when Frederick proposes bundling to the servant maid at the inn, she tartly replies, "If you insult me, our Matthew shall bundle you into the Delaware." But then Pennsylvania has always been suspicious of New England customs.

The third purpose, to contravene the believers in the Noble Savage, is achieved by calling attention to the brutality of the Indians, as well as the impossibility of an intellectual life being led in the pioneer simplicity of CLARENS. The travellers meet with incest, violence, and theft among the Indians. Two illustrations should serve to show how the philosophers had their opinions changed. "They lay down upon some long grass in an Indian en-
campment; their weariness caused them to sleep particularly sound, 
and they were not a little amazed to find in the morning most of 
their clothes stolen, with two of their fowling pieces.” And sec-
ondly, after the party has fallen prey to a hostile tribe, Stupeo, one 
of the philosophers, is burned to death, a man “who, while he lived, 
endeavoured to kindle the world, and set society in a flame, but 
expired himself in the midst of a blaze.”

So we see that George Walker in The Vagabond used American 
material as a means for satirizing the revolutionary philosophers 
of England. In so doing, he gives us a summary of his party’s views 
of the United States as a country poorly settled, uncomfortable for 
living, menaced by Indians, devoted to commerce, with an im-
pertinent serving-class. Parts of this picture remain today in the 
European mind, and the book, therefore, apart from its intrinsic 
merits, is of interest as one of the first pieces of fiction in a long 
line devoted to satirizing certain American attributes, true or 
ascribed as the case may be.