

JAMES BUCHANAN, THE SQUIRE IN THE WHITE
HOUSE*

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Although the passing of time and sectional bitterness has somewhat blurred the picture of Buchanan as President, one has but to turn the pages of old newspapers and letters to find in their forgotten leaves very definite pictures and sketches of our fifteenth executive. Some are by enemies, some by friends, but all vivid.

The Squire of *Wheatland* had become the Squire in the White House.

"Alas, for the new President and his Cabinet!" wrote a friendly lady correspondent,

If they have not grown an inch taller in the last two months, they are certainly a year older! Little did they dream, when they first dove their heads to the bottom of government affairs, that they would come up with a care lodged in every wrinkle. It is whispered that the President declares with a melancholy shake of the head, that "he has not time to say his prayers." We think this distinguished gentleman would be justified in adopting the necromantic formula of the enchantress Queen in the Arabian Nights. Let him take a little water in his hand, as Mrs. Hemans once advised in a similar dilemma, and throw into the face of each, saying as he does so, "Quit the human form which thou disgracest, and assume that of an ox;" we have no doubt some insufferable men would thus be got rid of, and some very good oxen joined to society.¹

* Although Pennsylvania has been found marching under the Republican banner in National elections for over half a century, the fact still remains that her old President was an ante-bellum Democrat. In these days when that party is once more in power at Washington it may be of interest to recall through the eyes of forgotten contemporaries the far off days when the Favorite Son of the Keystone did the honors in the White House. Editor of the *Magazine*.

¹ Windle, Mary, *Life in Washington*, pp. 142, 143.

A more careful and industrious man never occupied the white House. To this, friend and foe alike agreed. Said the *New York Times*, rabid national Republican paper (1859):

Never has there been in the White House a more laborious occupant; he reposes no confidence even in cabinet officers, but insists on first reading every paper which they put before him for signature. He seldom leaves the home for exercise or air, but spends twelve or sixteen hours daily in discharging drudgeries which might better be left to the care of subordinates in the departments.

A very hostile and sarcastic Douglas correspondent in a caricature discussed the same point:

To give J. B. his due, we must acknowledge that he is industrious and trouble-seeking to a miracle. His suspicious nature will not confide the opening of his letters to any other hand; and at present (1860) when stacks of anonymous letters are reaching him from all parts of the country, denouncing his Postmasters and Custom-House officials as secretly working for the National Democratic candidates, while pretending to support Breckinridge and Lane, the mere daily duty of opening and reading the mail becomes in itself a heavy tax. The Cabinet officers are his servants, J. B. insists, and not his advisers. . . .

Perhaps no President ever occupied the White House who enjoyed the indirect method more than Buchanan. "Buchanan is the cleverest man in his party, Van Buren not excepted," his friend, Letcher of Kentucky, had said years before Buchanan reached the Presidency.

Both in political and social matters Buchanan was ever a lover of intrigue. Men of both parties, friend and foe alike, recognized this trait, sometimes to their cost. Jefferson Davis, chief speaker of the administration, in the fight against Douglas declared Buchanan "a gentleman of the old school fond in moments of leisure of harmless intrigue and ladies' gossip."²

Douglas was quoted in an exasperated moment in the

² Craven, *Prison Life of Jefferson Davis*.

Diary of a Public Man as saying that craft was the very air Buchanan breathed. James G. Blaine, politically opposed to Buchanan and his party, gave him credit for cleverness in handling the Senate when he submitted the Oregon treaty to that body for advice in 1846. Senator Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina, champion of Douglas, declared that Buchanan exemplified the remark that "Pope was so insincere that he took tea by strategem", and that the President was possessed of great cunning coupled with an extraordinary capacity for personal intrigue.³ Black declared that Buchanan brought his strong traits of stubbornness and craft into his struggle with secession. He could have added, as did some of Buchanan's Philadelphia friends, into his cabinet relations of that troubled period. Pollard, a Southern enemy in his *Life of Jefferson Davis*, admitted that he drew the wind for the sails of Senator Keitt and other Southern ultras by his seemingly complacent attitude in early November, 1860.⁴ Trescott, assistant Secretary of State, in early December of 1860, likewise found him "cold and calculating—with a habit of indirectness that at times almost became falsehood and a wariness that sometimes degenerated into craftiness. . . ."⁵

This trait may have been caused by Buchanan's having been brought up in a semi-isolated region in his early childhood. Joined to these circumstances was perhaps a native shyness, plus sensitiveness to hurting the feelings of others. And in addition was the early training and warning of a successful and shrewd Scotch father who wrote in Buchanan's college days, "The more you know of mankind, the more you will distrust them. It is said that the knowledge of man-

³ *Selections from the Speeches of Thomas L. Clingman*, p. 508.

⁴ Pollard, pp. 56-58.

⁵ Quoted in Lewis Einstein's sketch of Lewis Cass in *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*, VI. 302.

kind and the distrust of them are reciprocally connected.'"⁶ Thus did the father instill into a naturally trustful boy a warning that became according to Trescot,

a cynical estimate of men the result of long party experience and all this justified in his own eyes by the fact which nobody can dispute who knows him, that he really had no ulterior selfish purpose—that he wished to serve his country and was a man in his individual relations of perfectly clean hands.

This trait so important in Buchanan's political life was more often used in matters of method than of principles. Buchanan was outspoken on the main units of his political faith. I believe that his party loyalty and his ability to get along with leaders in his early years, plus his instinct for handling men were as great if not greater sources of his political success than his habit of craftiness.

A little further on the writer quoted above sketches Buchanan at his desk:

Bright and early each morning Mr. Buchanan is up and at work, retiring each night to bed by about half after 9 o'clock. [This statement is not entirely correct as business and state functions often kept Buchanan up until a later hour]. Breakfasting at 7 A. M. our beloved and illustrious enters his office by 8—said office being a large second-floor room, to the left of the Presidential mansion as you enter. There is a large waiting room outside of this, but few are the men who wait there now. This waiting room has a worn and not particularly clean carpet; old mahogany furniture, with old fashioned horse-hair coverings; dusty walls, and a few dusty busts of former Presidents; a few dusty prints of the "Signers," and a very dilapidated copy of the Declaration in a soiled sandalwood frame.

The President's inner-room or office, in which he receives his Cabinet has a carpet to correspond with that outside. For the rest, there is a large table placed up between the two windows; there are bookcases well filled with calf-bound books, round two of the walls; there is an immense bellrope dangling down over the President's head; there are a few leather-bottomed arm chairs; a wicker scrap-basket beside Mr. Buchanan's seat; a bust of poor Pierce staring down from a bad eminence on his

⁶ Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, I. 6.

still more unfortunate successor, and at the table, hard of work—up to his elbows in papers, and up to his neck in political mischief—sits the Old Public Functionary! He is arrayed in a long dressing gown and slippers, holds an unlighted cigar in his mouth, and has a peculiar nervous twitching always to the left, as if some unseen spirits were plucking him on that side by the sleeve and whispering distasteful counsel. . . .

The rest of the picture is indeed unfriendly and for the most part untrue. It was nevertheless typical of the Douglas editorials and articles of the day. "As cold in heart as the coldest oyster in Virginia's fundom; as polished in manner (when he so pleases) as the surface of Lake Mahopac, frozen solid under a night of calm; as false to friends as the treacherous beacons set up by the wreckers of Barnegat; such as we have known him, we have described him, and such is the only true portrait now in existence of James Buchanan."⁷

On Sundays Buchanan observed his life-long custom of attending church. We are told it was his custom to attend the nearest Presbyterian church. Miss Pryor described his appearance:

We attended Dr. Gurley's church and found that the President also had taken a seat in that church. Our own was near the door, and for many Sundays before I knew him, I was interested in seeing him enter the church and walk briskly up to his pew near the pulpit (while the bell was ringing), buttoned in his broadcloth coat, wearing no overcoat in the coldest weather. Immediately after the benediction he would walk rapidly down the aisle, the congregation standing until he passed. Miss Lane attended St. John's church, and the President was accompanied only by his secretary, Mr. Buchanan Henry. After I knew him quite well, I always spoke to him when he passed me near the door, and I sometimes ventured, "A good sermon, Mr. President!"; he never failing to reply, "Too long, Madam, too long."⁸

In spite of his minute attention to State, President Buchanan still continued his daily religious devotions including the perusal of the Bible and Jay's Exercises, his favorite book of sermonettes.

Buchanan was also an impatient sitter. His nephew says he did not like to sit for his portrait. He had quite

⁷ Political propaganda by an editor for the Douglas faction of the party. Taken from Meig's letter book, Library of Congress.

⁸ Mrs. Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War*, p. 47.

a bit of trouble with Healey over his official portrait. He did not like it. When Congress did not care to buy it because of political hostility, he hated to buy it. In recent years Miss Lane presented a better likeness to the government.

His exercise, when he had time to take any, was vigorous walking on Pennsylvania Avenue. His Douglas caricaturist wrote, "He tolerates no intimate associate or walking companion."

No figure in American history could present a more attractive picture than Buchanan's niece, Harriet Lane, who acted as Mistress of the White House during his administration. It is not too much to say that the Executive Mansion never had a more gracious or charming hostess.

Mrs. Pryor gives her memories of Miss Lane:

It cannot be said that his niece, Miss Harriet Lane, although universally admired, was a popular woman. She lacked magnetism. She followed a prescribed rule of manner from which she never deviated, no matter with whom she was thrown. This was, perhaps, fortunate. Always courteous, always in place, silent whenever it was possible to be silent, watchful, and careful. She made no enemies, was betrayed into no entangling alliances, and was involved in no contretemps of any kind.

Meanwhile a personal friend and admirer, wrote in 1857,⁹

We attended the first [reception] given by Miss Lane, and we think Mr. Buchanan most fortunate in having so interesting a relative to do the honors of the Executive Mansion. Miss Lane is a blonde, with violet eyes, softened beautiful as a dream. Her manners are self-possessed enough to warrant admiration, even if her position were less distinguished.

Mrs. Pryor writes further:

She was very handsome, a fair, blue-eyed, self-contained young woman. She was dignified—as indeed all women had to be, in gesture at least, when they wore great hoops! The "curtsy" was a perilous duty. "How does she do it? She never makes a cheese

⁹ Windle, Mary, *Life in Washington*, p. 144.

of herself," said one, looking on at a morning reception. Miss Lane's courtesy was the perfection of deference and grace. And she had exquisite taste in dress. She never wore many ornaments, many flowers, nor the billows of ruffles then in fashion. I remember her in white tulle, with a wreath of clematis; in soft brown or blue silk; in much white muslin, dotted and plain, with blue ribbons in puffs on skirt and bodice.

She was very affable and agreeable, in an unemotional way—the proper manner, of course, for her. I imagine no one could take a liberty with her then, but I risked the experiment some years ago when we spent a summer together at Bar Harbor. A handsome widow, with silver hair, she was even more distinguished than she had been in the White House. I recalled, to her genuine amusement, two incidents of her life there. When she took her place as mistress of the Executive Mansion, the President had given her but one rule for her conduct; never under any circumstances to accept a present. "Think of my feelings," she had said to me, "when the lovely lacquered boxes and tables the Japanese Embassy brought me were turned from the door, to say nothing of the music-boxes and these fascinating sewing machines they have just invented."

The same author described social life at the White House:

The reign of the "afternoon tea" was not yet—at least not in Washington; but entertainments included morning receptions, evening receptions, dinners, musicales, children's parties, old-fashioned evening parties with music and supper, and splendid balls. So many of these were crowded into a season that we often attended three balls in one evening.

Dinners at the White House were much less elaborate in their appointments than were dinners at the homes of the wealthy Cabinet officers and Senators. Mr. Buchanan set an example of Republican simplicity. Few flowers were placed in the drawing rooms. In the centre of the Blue Room there was a divan surrounding a stand of potted plants and surmounted by a small palm. The dinner table was not ornamented with flowers, nor were bouquets at the covers. A long plateau, a mirror edged with a hunting scene (gilt figures in high relief), extended down the middle, and from the centre and at the two ends rose epergnes with small crystal dishes for bonbons and cakes.

"At the official dinners in the White House, and few others are given," wrote the pro-Douglas correspondent,

Mr. Buchanan shines to great advantage—dividing his civilities equally between all his guests. A large experience of public men and measures in many lands, supplies him with an inexhaustible repertory of personal anecdotes; he amuses, without ever boring or seeming too loquacious; and there is an odd vein of bitter humor running through all his veins, such as we can imagine (after reading Lord Orrery's letters to his son, Hamilton Boyle), must have pervaded the conversation of Dean Swift. . .

A more detailed account of dinners of state probably from the pen of a political opponent is as follows:¹⁰

The hour is generally fixed at 6 o'clock, P.M., the time when millions are taking their supper. You receive a card about the size of an ordinary playcard, and if you are invited by the President the dimensions of the card are double, and generally reads as follows:

"The President requests the honor of your company to dinner, on Friday, April 6, at 6 o'clock P.M. An early answer is requested."

If you go to the President's, you are expected to dress in your best clothes, and to wear white gloves. You are introduced into the small reception room, where you find the President, Miss Lane, Mrs. Judge Roosevelt, James Buchanan, Jr., and the rest of the household. After being duly presented to them, you wait the arrival of the other guests. The private secretary, Mr. Buchanan, Jr., quietly informs you that you are to escort to the dinner such a lady, whom he now introduces to you, and the lady in your company is presented to another gentleman, who is to be her companion during the feast. The hour having arrived, the company move into the large drawing room, where they are dazzled by the gorgeous display of plate and gaslight, and see a number of graceful waiters, also in white gloves, whose business it is to attend to the guests. The President takes his seat not at the head of the table, but on the side, exactly midway, Miss Lane, acting as his vis-a-vis. You find your name beautifully written on a card laid upon the plate, before the seat you are to occupy, and the entertainment begins. The cooking is generally French cooking, the wines costly and rare, and you will soon have an opportunity of hearing the "great man" talk. . . . You need not be informed that Mr. Buchanan is one of the most delightful diners in the world. He has a fund of small talk for the ladies, a variety of old-fashioned anecdotes, and, as he is by no means sparing of the juice of the grape, he grows more easy, and more affable, and more agreeable as the repast goes

¹⁰ *Portsmouth Transcript* (Virginia).

on, calling out one after the other of the company, and paying compliments to the ladies, occasionally taking wine with them. You never ask the President to take wine with you, but wait to be invited by him. After remaining in this delightful society for several hours, at a given signal from the President the company rise, return to the reception room, where they are served with coffee and liqueurs, or, if they prefer it, with brandy, after which you take your leave, and go home to remember the hospitalities you have enjoyed. Some of these dinners are dull and stately enough, but I have known them to be as delightful as the most genial could desire.

As in *Wheatland*, Buchanan's tactful ways in social matters extended to children. Mrs. Pryor relates the following incident:¹¹

The glass dishes of the epergne contained wonderful "French kisses"—two-inch squares of crystallized sugar wrapped in silver paper, and elaborately decorated with lace and artificial flowers. I was very proud at one dinner when the President said to me, "Madam, I am sending you a souvenir for your little daughter," and a waiter handed me one of these gorgeous affairs. He had questioned me about my boys, and I told him of my daughter, Gordon, eight years old, who lived with her grandmother. "You must bring her to see Miss Harriet," he had said—which, in due season, I did; an event with its crowning glory of a checked silk dress, white hat and feather, which she proudly remembers to this day. Having been duly presented at court, the little lady was much "in society" and accompanied me to many brilliant afternoon functions.

She was a thoughtful listener to the talk in her father's library, and once when an old politician spoke sadly of a possible rupture of the United States, surprised and delighted him by slipping her hand in his and saying, "never mind! United will spell Untied just as well" . . . a little mot which was remembered and repeated long afterwards.¹²

Mr. Buchanan's kind notice of her is gratefully recollected. It was said that he was influenced by the Southern Senators and Representatives. I only know he was most kind to us, and I refuse to believe we were of consequence enough to make this kindness a matter of policy. I would fain think he really liked us, really desired to add to our happiness.

¹¹ Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War*, p. 51.

¹² Pryor, *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 53.

In the receiving line the President and his niece were equally at home. A guest recorded such an event as follows:

As the President stood receiving, we had an opportunity to inspect his face, by the strong light of the chandelier. It was the first time we had steadily contemplated him since his inauguration, and we were forcibly struck with the havoc which those few short months had effected in his appearance. There is a cast of care and anxiety in his face that it is impossible to see without perceiving that his life is a harassing one.¹³

Public receptions must have been a great bore after the first half-hour. One in 1858 is described as follows:

Well-to-do merchants, clerks in the worst stages of dandyism, snug government clerks, and old world-worn politicians were admitted to the "Executive presence" by hundreds. Our public men seem to think it an enviable post to be President; and yet had some of these ambitious aspirants seen that distinguished gentleman last evening, they would have thought him an object of sympathy. The people—the dear people—reminded us of so many vultures gathered together; and bound, as the President is, to the stake of "public life," he had no means of evading their beaks and claws. There ought to be a wall built up to defend him against incursions of such hordes of people—such masses of human beings. In the presence of the head of the nation all seem as if they have a right to be listened to; and as if to repay themselves for insignificance elsewhere, they beset him before, behind, and around in a way that might exhaust the patience of any human being less patient. We should not wonder if the distinguished gentleman should go into a rapid decline, to be ordered to a milder climate as a sole chance of escape; indeed, we wonder he does not at once commence milk diet and Iceland—For ourselves, we should not blame Miss Lane if she were to have incendiaries during some temporary absence of her uncle, and put an end to his sufferings.

Did Buchanan derive much satisfaction for being President? He referred to the office as a "crown of thorns" just before he was nominated, and he certainly found it one. On the other hand, in looking back upon it, was fairly well satisfied with things up to Lincoln's election, and as for the rest he believed he did as well

¹³ Windle, Mary, *Life in Washington*, pp. 305-307.

as anybody could in the same unfortunate circumstances.

At certain times, however, he was very tired of his task. What appeal the office had for him was in the prestige it brought and the opportunity it would bring him to do something great and noble for his country. Thus he would go down in history as a great and good statesman and patriot.

The *Times* correspondent quoted him in 1859 as follows:

Two old men, myself and Lewis Cass, if we live so long, will quit this city on the sixth of March, 1861, with much lighter hearts and less burdens than we bore with us in coming here.

To Mrs. Polk whom he invited to visit Washington, he wrote in like vein:

I am now in my 69th year¹⁴ and am heartily tired of my position as President. I shall leave it in the beginning of March, 1861, should a kind Providence prolong my days,¹⁵ until that period, with much greater satisfaction than when entering on the duties of the office. . . .

But Buchanan's enemies then and since have failed to believe him. A few weeks before the above letter the *Tribune* correspondent had pleasantly referred to the President then enjoying a few days vacation as that hoary old cheat now plotting at Bedford (Pa.) has a rod in pickle for those who may refuse to aid his plan and for such the proscriptions will be more unrelenting than ever.¹⁶

A good account of what Pennsylvania's Favorite Son thought of his duties is well delivered in his brief address before a group of editorial visitors who called upon him at the White House in 1860:

Sir: I am most happy to greet you and this large assemblage of the gentlemen of the press, especially as you are accompanied by so many ladies, who never come to trouble me, but always to

¹⁴ Buchanan to Mrs. Polk, 19 September, 1859, Moore, X. 332.

¹⁵ The reference to Providence in the manner indicated above was habitual and does not imply he was in bad health.

¹⁶ *New York Tribune*, July 27, 1859.

cheer and delight me. (Applause.) I give you all a hearty welcome to this house. You have pleased to call it a palace, but it is, indeed, the house of the people, and the President is only the servant of the people, but he is the servant of no other power upon earth. (Loud applause.) The President is elected by the people of the United States, the Senators are chosen by the legislatures of the States of this Union, and the members of the House of Representatives by the peoples of those several States, but the President is elected by the whole people of the United States, and to them alone is he responsible, under the Constitution.¹⁷ (Prolonged applause.) Any encroachment upon his just constitutional rights, come from whatever quarters it may, is therefore, an encroachment upon the rights of the people themselves. (Repeated bursts of applause.)

The duties of the President are severe and incessant. I shall soon retire from them, and if my successor shall be as happy on coming in as I will be on going out, he will be one of the happiest men in the world. (Laughter.) It is remarkable, however, that, notwithstanding the toils and troubles of the presidential office, there are plenty of distinguished gentlemen ready enough to come in; and representing all the different isms known to the country. (Laughter.) Nevertheless I am confident that the prevailing isms will be the wish of the American peoples to preserve and cherish the Constitution as it is and the Union. (Loud applause.) My life, in the course of nature, can not be long, but I should not desire to draw a single breath beyond the existence of this, our beloved Union. (Deep sensation and silence.)

I am much pleased to see this meeting of so many of the editorial fraternity. It can scarcely fail to be salutary to ourselves in many respects, and among its beneficiary effects, it will doubtless tend to relieve your mutual relations and discussions of that needless asperity which has sometimes characterized the press. While you are free, bold, and firm in expressing your conviction and maintaining your principles, there is surely no necessity for acrimonious assaults upon those to whom you are opposed. In connection with this point I am reminded of an anecdote which perhaps, I ought not to relate. (Cries of Tell it, sir! Go on.) While I was minister to England a distinguished nobleman once said to me, Mr. Buchanan if I were to judge from your newspapers, I should infer that the different candidates for the presidency were the greatest rascals in America. (Laughter and cheers.) I replied that it did look so, but in reality it

¹⁷ This is probably a reference to attacks made upon him in 1860 by the Covode committee engineered by John Forney once his friend, but now a bitter political and personal enemy.

was only a way we had of talking about each other at election times. (Hearty laughter and applause.)

The president concluded by expressing again a cordial welcome to his visitors and wish to take each by the hand. The ladies and gentlemen were then severally presented, and many pleasant words of kindness and good humor were interchanged. This interview was universally pronounced to be one of the most agreeable incidents of the excursion, and the ladies especially were earnest and fluent in their praises of the affability and courtesy of Mr. Buchanan.

Perhaps the best pen portrait of Buchanan as President was penned by the editor of the *York Press* (Pennsylvania) in 1868 entitled:¹⁸

MR. BUCHANAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Said Jefferson Davis, during his confinement at Fortress Monroe, speaking to his medical adviser, Dr. Craven, "Buchanan approached more closely, as President, to my idea of the head of a Republican Court, than any ruler we have had since Washington. He had the high-bred courtesy—the dignified, commanding manners of the best class of what are called gentlemen of the old school. He was fond, too, in moments of leisure, of harmless intrigue and ladies gossip." This is the judgment of a man bitterly hostile to Mr. Buchanan for many reasons—some personal, some political—all, however, taking their date from the months immediately preceding the rebellion, when strange to say, while the Democratic President was, by the showing of the Black Republicans, plotting the overthrow of the Union, every Southern Senator and leader, conspicuous in the secession movement, not only denounced him in public speeches, but dropped social intercourse with him.—Conspicuous among this soured and savage company was Jefferson Davis.—Hence his testimony, although it relates only to the exterior dignity with which Mr. Buchanan administered the courtesies and hospitalities of his great station, has an interest and value not weakened by any suspicion of partiality in the witness.

When Mr. Buchanan was inaugurated as President he was sixty-six years old, lacking one month. His mind and body were as vigorous as they had ever been. His great frame—his massive head which needed not the help of the white hair that covered it to make it reverend in men's eyes; his face, cast, like his form, in colossal mould, marked and adorned by the lines of thought but untouched by the wrinkles of decay; combined to make up a

¹⁸ Buchanan Scrap Book, H.S.P., from the *Press*, York, Pennsylvania, June 19, 1868.

figure so vast, impressive and majestic that no man who ever stood before him, even for a brief moment, failed to be awed by his presence. You felt that you were in the company of a great man. It would have been impossible to disguise him as a common person. Tailor and barber combined, or even ragman, could not have compassed such a work. Whenever he travelled and wherever, multitudes who had never seen him and were ignorant of his name and fame, stopped to gaze at that wondrous figure and to look into that odd, great face. Now that the grave has closed over his dust, we can, using the language not of poetry only, but of literal truth, exclaim

“He was a man, take him for all in all
We ne’er shall look upon his like again.”

No American citizen of any school of politics, could help feeling a certain instinctive and honorable pride, when he saw the throng at a New Year’s reception—the ambassadors of the world’s kingdoms and empires arrayed in their costly and glittering uniforms—and contrasted with the most imposing of them the Chief Magistrate of his own country habited in simple black, and dispensing the courtesies of his station in a fashion which united perfect simplicity of speech with a lofty courtliness of manner such as we associate only with a great sovereign.

But while his social duties as President were performed by Mr. Buchanan with an ease and dignity which he owned partly to nature and partly to his long training among the great, he was probably the most laborious, painstaking, unwearying public servant that ever sat in the Executive chair. He loved society, but he loved business better. He cared little for official parade—much for official duty. He rose early in the morning and had dress and breakfast despatched by half past seven o’clock.—

Then he went to work—not to the kind of work, however, which some simple people fancy is a President’s chief function—the portioning out of spoils, and the talking of politics with party leaders in view of a possible re-election. Affairs of State—the serious business of the nation—its finances, its military and naval needs—its relations with foreign powers—these were the subjects to which he applied himself with conscientious devotion. Yet he had an alert and inquisitive eye, which took in the least things as well as the greatest. He exercised a supervision over the domestic policy of his cabinet officers in their various departments—over their choice of subordinates and their methods of doing business, which was at times extremely distasteful to the able and self reliant men by whom he was surrounded. Indeed he was something of the disposition of Frederick the Great, who did not suffer the planning of a campaign, the conclusion of a peace or the outbreak of a war to disturb his reckoning of the butcher’s and baker’s accounts, and his tally of the

wine bottles uncorked in his palace. In a public man this attention to details, within bounds, is a virtue—in excess it is a vice and a most vexatious and belittling one. Mr. Buchanan did not altogether escape it, partly because of a natural habit of mind, and partly because his own experience in public affairs was so much larger than that of any of his Cabinet, save General Cass, that he could not resist the disposition to help others do what he had done so often and so well himself. He dispatched all the serious business of the day before his dinner hour, which was five o'clock, although sometimes, when pressed with cares he dined later. He took great enjoyment in this meal, ate heartily, drank temperately, but with great zest, his glass of wine, and protracted the sitting with cheerful conversation, anecdote and repartee. He was then ready to receive his friends, as he sat in his easy chair and smoked his one daily cigar. In those evening hours he was the most charming of men. His conversation sparkled with humor. It was delightful to hear his reminiscences of his life in Europe, and of the great men of the past at home; his lively and sometimes sarcastic comments on current topics. He was especially agreeable in the society of ladies and was fond of their company. He had the dainty taste in gossip attributed to him by Jefferson Davis, which craved eagerly and keenly enjoyed the chat of society in a metropolis where chat is a little spiced with scandal. But he was scrupulous in speech as much as any man that ever lived—"he spake no slander, no, nor listened to it"—the gossip to which he inclined was of the light and humorous kind—not the malicious and false. Hence he was the delight of all young ladies who visited his bachelor court. Their natural speech was the pleasantest of talk in his ears.—He regarded an evening spent among them as the most innocent close for a day of hard work.

At ten o'clock precisely he withdrew and went to bed.

In that age of yesterday, named by the late Professor Parrington the period of the Romantic Revolution in America, few public men were allowed to escape a romantic setting. In Buchanan's case a youthful romance had ended in the sudden death of his betrothed. In later years his constancy was given full scope by a lady journalist of the day. For her our only bachelor president was a subject of a romantic moment. We would not have the "gentle reader" become melancholy for Buchanan had plenty of ladies' company both at *Wheatland* and Washington. Indeed the fair sex were prone to seek his genial companionship. But it is at the

same time to be noted that his blighted love affair seems to have withered his inclination to what he termed "romantic love."

There is much that enlists interest in the character and antecedents of this venerable man. He has, through a long and distinguished career, kept his fidelity to a memory and a grave. There has been one brief, exquisite episode in his life which can never return. For him there has been no second mine of fine gold. In his envied abode the gardens at this cheerless season wear a summer aspect, creeping evergreens clothing their colonnades with verdure; yet, spite its summer beauty, it is a "drear, single man's home." To him "public life" with its stern business and heavy cares is the all in all. During his long life fair faces may have pleased his fancy, or qualities of mind attracted his admiration; but in his heart a spirit sits throned who forever bends down to listen, to watch those who would approach him, and bar them out with whispers of sorrowful comparison. When the cares of station press heavily upon him; when friends he had valued distrust him; and when he vainly struggles to avoid approach, ah; then an angel from serener worlds, with white calm feet, and floating, moveless wings, unheard, its solemn presence only known by a soft halo on surrounding things, comes at his bidding, and summoning his soul to leave the jarring tumults of the earth, flings wide oblivion's undreaded gates. And so to peace and silence leads the way.¹⁹

¹⁹ Mary Windle, *Life in Washington*, pp. 305-307.