Brockden Brown and the Jefferson Administration

Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810), the Philadelphia novelist and editor, has long held the title of "first professional man of letters" in America.¹ His full-length novels, particularly Wieland, Edgar Huntly, and Arthur Mervyn, reveal a concern with American themes and backgrounds as well as the influence of the contemporary European fantasy-and-horror school. Among his tracts, Alcuin was the first and it remains the best known. Its plea for social, economic, and political equality for women and its bitter denunciation of the Constitution have been largely responsible for Brown's reputation as one of the prominent radicals of his day.²

Alcuin was the most significant of Brown's writings in 1797. Published in March of that year, it expounded not only the author's views on woman's role in society but also his radical tendencies in politics,³ including his stand on the issues involved in the Federalist-Republican debate of the time. The author, employing dialogue form, protests against the conservative character of the American Constitution and expresses disappointment that the principles of the Declaration of Independence were not explicitly incorporated in the fundamental law of the land.


³ The first and second parts of Alcuin were published in a separate tract by T. and J. Swords, while the third and fourth parts, a Utopian speculation of society in the Godwinian tradition, are found in Dunlap's biography.
The tract centers upon a conversation between Alcuin, a staid schoolmaster, and a Mrs. Carter, a "talented widow," who espouses women's rights. On being asked if she is a Federalist, Mrs. Carter replies that while she prefers order to violence and union to war and dissension, yet, "if that title be incompatible with a belief that, in many particulars, this constitution is unjust and absurd, I certainly cannot pretend to it." Among her specific criticisms, Mrs. Carter emphasizes the several minorities in the republic which lack the right to select their representatives, making particular mention of minors, women, the poor and Negroes. She continues:

When all these are sifted out, a majority of the remainder are entitled to select our governor; provided, however, the candidate possess certain qualifications which you will excuse me from enumerating. I am tired of explaining this charming system of equality and independence. . . . I am a woman. As such, I cannot celebrate the equality of that scheme of government which classes me with dogs and swine.  

Brown's denunciation of the Federalists in Alcuin reveals him as a radical of the Jeffersonian stamp, and it is at this point in his career that his views appear to approach most closely those of the Republican leader. After 1798, however, his political philosophy underwent a transition that has been generally overlooked. The promising period of his New York sojourn, of his close friendship with Elihu Hubbard Smith, the Connecticut poet and doctor, and of his lofty efforts to make his literary career financially successful, gave way to the years of his Philadelphia mercantile partnership, of living in the shadows of Joseph Dennie's circle, and eventually of earning a living as a "mere scrivener." Brown, the youthful disciple of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the spinner of romances and Utopias of the 1790's, had become the caustic critic of Jefferson's Administration by the early 1800's.

Before tracing the steps that marked Brown's conversion from radicalism to the anti-Jeffersonian camp, several reasons might be suggested for the change. First, his association with the Friendly Club in New York brought him under the influence of such staunch

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4 C. B. Brown, Alcuin, (New York, 1797), 51.
5 Ibid., 59.
Federalists as James Kent, William Johnson, and John Wells. Brown’s views on society were exposed to the continuous scrutiny of the “disputatious” Kent. The mercantile interests of the Brown family must also have exerted their influence on its rebellious member.

Other reasons suggest themselves for the change in Brown’s views at the end of the century. His disappointment over the lack of acceptance of his novels deterred him from continuing along those lines. Had his novels been more popular, he might have had this incentive to continue preaching his brand of philosophical radicalism. The loss of Elihu Hubbard Smith, his closest friend, also was instrumental in weakening the ground on which he stood in 1798. His experiences during the yellow fever epidemic of that year enfeebled him physically and perhaps sapped the energy he needed to conduct a literary crusade for Godwinism in America. Finally, the man grew older and evidently less responsive to radical ideas.

Although a supporter of Jefferson in the 1790’s, Brockden Brown’s personal contacts with the Virginian were slight. Brown wrote him a long letter on December 25, 1798, stating his reasons for writing Wieland and asking for an indication of approval. “After some hesitation, a stranger to the person, though not the character of Thomas Jefferson, ventures to intreat his acceptance of the volume by which this is accompanied.” The elaborate complimentary phrases, the allusions to Jefferson’s intellectual abilities, indeed the entire letter, reveal Brown’s admiration for the man. The tardy reply from Monticello was polite and brief. The disappointed Brown could evidently expect little from his idol.

By 1803, there had come a marked change of heart. Jefferson had been president two years; Brown, slipping slowly into obscurity, was struggling to help his brothers keep their mercantile partnership from

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7 The Friendly Club was one of the important literary societies in New York during the 1790’s. Its membership was representative of all the major interests in the city—the mercantile class, the legal profession, the sciences and arts were included. Typical of the literary organizations of the day, the club met every Tuesday evening to read papers and discuss subjects ranging from speculative philosophy to local politics. An account of some of these societies will be found in Eleanor B. Scott, “Early Literary Clubs in New York City,” American Literature, V (1933), 3–16. See also Dunlap, I, 57.


9 Dated January 15, 1800.
bankruptcy. His novels financially unsuccessful, his efforts at magazine editing a failure, he turned to pamphlet writing. In a series of three tracts the Philadelphia novelist best exhibited the shift in his political views. Written between 1803 and 1809, these pieces, each of some ninety pages in length, touch upon three of the principal issues of the Jefferson administration—the Louisiana Purchase, the abortive British Treaty of 1806, and the Embargo—and provide us with a firsthand account of Brown's opinion of Jefferson's policies.

The first tract, *An Address to the Government of the United States, on the Cession of Louisiana to the French*, was written more than a month before Monroe sailed for negotiations in France, and was published early in 1803. With nationalistic fervor, Brown expressed impatience with Jefferson's plan for the purchase of New Orleans alone and prodded the administration to acquire the entire Louisiana area.

Brown goes about his task in a curious manner. Addressing himself to Congress in humble tones, he speaks of a document written by a "French Counsellor of State," presumably to Napoleon, which is of grave importance to the United States. He proceeds to give the substance of this mythical document, putting into the lips of the fictitious Frenchman some of the arguments about Louisiana popular at that time. The advantages of the region are summarized; its economic wealth is described in detail; and its strategic importance in time of war is duly stressed. Concluding that the area would be valuable to France, the French Counsellor considers the objections of Spain and England to the plan and, after dismissing them, proceeds to the possible objections of the United States. To the foreigner, the political conditions in America serve France's interests well, and he is led to conclude that "opposition is the least to be dreaded from those who have the most reason to oppose us."

It is at this point that Brown puts his most eloquent words into

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10 Brown's editorship of the *Monthly Magazine and American Review* in New York lasted less than two years. In 1803, he launched the *Literary Magazine and American Register* in Philadelphia, but was forced to suspend it four years later.

11 The full title is rather long: *An Address to the Government of the United States, on the Cession of Louisiana to the French; and on the late Breach of Treaty by the Spaniards: including the Translation of a Memorial, on the War of St. Domingo, and the Cession of the Mississippi to France, drawn up by a French Counsellor of State* (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, 1803).

12 Ibid., 61.
the mouth of his French Counsellor. Deriding the democratic nature of the republic, the Frenchman writes:

They call themselves free, yet a fifth of their numbers are slaves. . . . They call themselves one, yet all languages are native to their citizens. All countries have contributed their outcasts and refuse to make them a people. Already there are near twenty states, each of which is governed by a law of its own. . . . They are a people of yesterday. . . . Their people are the slaves of hostile interests; blown in all directions by forward passions; divided by inveterate factions, and the dupes and partizans of all the elder nations by turns. 13

Carrying the theme further, the pamphlet speaks of Americans as a “nation of pedlars and shopkeepers” whose ruling passion is money, and asserts that no sense of personal or national dignity will be allowed to interfere with that primary desire. The disputes over the Constitution, the Whisky Rebellion, and the animosities between parties are cited to back up these charges. The lack of a spirit of national glory is stressed, and the shortcomings of the President and his assistants are described at length. The Frenchman concludes that it would be a simple matter for France to handle any objections of the Administration in regard to Louisiana.

After some seventy-five pages in this vein, Brown reverts to the first person and begins his reply to the argument he has just presented. In vigorous terms he issues the call for a strengthened sentiment. He asks:

Is our country, its rights, its honors, its prosperity, no dearer to us than any foreign land? . . . Is our government a tottering fabric which the breath of foreign emissaries can blow down at their pleasure? Has corruption made such strides among us, that the purse-holders of France can purchase our forbearance, when our nearest interests, our most manifest honor are assailed? 14

After dwelling at length on the reasons why the government should step in and exert the natural right of America to the western Mississippi basin, Brown stresses the need for immediate action. The closing of the port of New Orleans to American transshipments emphasizes the gravity of the situation. The western peoples will not wait much longer. It is the duty of Congress to “seize the happy moment” and acquire Louisiana for the United States. The belligerency of the closing lines contrast oddly with the pacifist sentiments

13 Ibid., 62, 63.
14 Ibid., 77.
of a few years before: “The iron is now hot; command us to rise as one man, and STRIKE!”

In his second pamphlet, printed three years later and dealing with the subject of our diplomatic relations with Great Britain, Brown took a more decided stand on the Jeffersonian Administration, openly criticizing the President and his policies. In the preface to his work, the author assesses the members of the Cabinet. He considers Gallatin “an efficient man of real talents,” but admits that he did not approve of his appointment. Madison has genius but is “somewhat slow,” a “man of feeble mind,” too much given to following Jefferson without using his own judgment. For Jefferson, Brown reserves the choicest of his criticisms: “Like others who have fallen into the idle habit of questioning established truth, his faculty of weighing evidence is impaired.” Further on, he attacks Jefferson for relying on “reason” for the defense of nations, the solving of political and social problems, and the perfecting of society. “Mr. Jefferson,” he observes, “has also the misfortune to be a schemer, perpetually occupied with some strange out-of-the-way project. . . . He labours also under such defect of mental vision, that he seldom sees objects in their natural state and true position.” Brown seems to have forgotten that he, too, was a child of the Enlightenment, that he, too, played with fanciful schemes for improving man’s condition, that he, too, constructed intricate Utopias far more extreme than anything dreamed of by Jefferson!

If Brown is critical of the Republicans in power, he is even more vehement in his views on the workings of the Administration itself. “The gentlemen in power,” he remarks, “used formerly to insist that republics should have no secrets. Times have changed, and they have changed with the times. We have secrets in abundance. Indeed, we have little else.”

Brown then proceeds to outline the provisions of the British

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15 Ibid., 92.
17 Ibid., XI.
18 Ibid., XIII.
19 See Dunlap, II, for an example of Brown’s Utopias, a mythical island in the Mediterranean named Carsol.
Treaty and to compare it with the Jay Treaty, pointing out that the Jeffersonians, after violently opposing the earlier agreement with Great Britain, have had little success in removing its defects. He puts it in these words: "In these circumstances it might be asked, if our rulers have remedied (in 1806) the evils which (in 1794) they imputed to their predecessors as criminal neglect."21

Brown makes much of his account of the stipulations involved in the treaty's acceptance. He also points out the obvious disadvantages to American trade that the treaty fails to remove, and shows that the negotiators conceded points which legally were not, or should not have been, at issue. By comparing the old treaty with the new, article by article, he illustrates in what ways American commerce in the West Indian trade would be placed in a poorer position under the agreement of 1806 than formerly. Furthermore, he attempts to point out the injustice in the clause dealing with indemnities, bringing to bear his legal training to reveal the incongruities in the treaty's wording. In his conclusion, Brown reiterates that the treaty fails to resolve the main points of contention between Great Britain and the United States, and calls on all Americans to unite in their opposition to the Convention, to "suspend the rage of party strife," and to think first of the interest of their country.

In all probability, the treaty in question would have been rejected even if Brockden Brown had not written his pamphlet.22 His work was important, however, in crystallizing sentiment against the agreement and in lucidly pointing out that the two main features of Madison's instructions, namely, the ending of impressment and of the condemnation of American ships with their cargoes, were not incorporated in the signed treaty. In this respect, Brown contributed in no small measure to strengthening the opposition.

The most controversial aspect of Jefferson's presidency was, without doubt, the embargo. That Brown was vitally interested in the course of this legislation and in subsequent public reactions to it can be seen in the voluminous references to the subject in his journals. Indeed, from the day of its enactment, on December 22, 1807,

21 Ibid., 43.
22 Jefferson, disappointed at the results of the negotiations, refused to submit the treaty to the Senate for ratification. See Edward Channing, A History of the United States (New York, 1927), IV, 362.
through the year 1808, he copied into his notebooks more newspaper articles on that bill than on any other subject.23

A study of these newspaper clippings is interesting for its disclosure of the kind of material Brown thought important enough to copy word for word for later use in making his own analysis. Very little of what he collected was favorable to the Jeffersonian Administration. The few quotations that are not highly critical of the bill are written in tones of cautious optimism, stressing the need for the unity of Americans in troubled times. Brown included no articles defending the embargo or the position taken by the Administration.

The nature of Brown's newspaper reading at this time is also revealing. There are a number of quotations from the Boston Gazette.24 The New York Commercial Advertiser is also quoted frequently, as are the New York Gazette and the Charleston Courier. If we accept the thesis that the press was the most influential molder of public opinion in the embargo period and that the majority of important newspapers were opposed to its enactment,25 then the viewpoints formed by Charles Brockden Brown were sustained particularly by those organs most outspoken in their criticisms of Jefferson's restrictions on commerce.

The author had a more personal contact with the effects of the embargo on Philadelphia's economy than his newspaper reading. His financial condition, always far from opulent, was particularly unsteady during this period. Then too, the discontent among his fellow merchants must have affected his views somewhat. Whether he witnessed the gathering of angry, penniless sailors on January 16, 1808, we do not know, but one of his notebooks carries what appears to be an eye-witness account of that event. And, needless to say, he had the same evidences of trade stagnation before his eyes that are to be found in many contemporary accounts.26

23 These notebooks form part of the Charles Brockden Brown Manuscript Collection in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
24 For instance, an item entitled, "To the Farmers, Mechanics, and Merchants of New England—the Embargo, Ruin to you ALL," Boston Gazette, January 7, 1808. Other quotations in similar vein were taken from the same newspaper on January 27 and February 2, 1808.
26 John Lambert's account of grass growing on the New York wharves is the classic example. See Travels Through Canada and the United States of North America (London, 1815), II, 64, 65.
By the end of 1808, Brown had collected sufficient material to undertake his analysis of the embargo. Once more he chose the pamphlet as his weapon, and his style is much the same as in his previous efforts. A comparison of this essay with his notebooks for the year 1808, shows how fully he utilized the voluminous newspaper accounts with which he had familiarized himself.

After a short explanatory preface, Brown proceeds to criticize the embargo. Addressing himself to the drafters of the law, he asks if they expect to obtain from Great Britain by impotent force what they could not by peaceful persuasion. “Our embargo,” he remarks, “is a project for forcing a concession from her; . . . strange would it be, if her pride would allow it to be wrung from her by punishments of this nature.” After laying bare the incongruities of the act, he attempts to show that the injuries the embargo will inflict on Great Britain will be neither great nor permanent.

Turning his attention more closely to the effects of the law at home, the pamphleteer pictures in eloquent words the decline in shipping, the hardships of starving sailors and other laborers whose work depends upon commerce. Nor are the depredations to trade the only objection. He cites incidents of the evasion of the law, of the futility of its enforcement, of the large amount of smuggling. He summarizes this section of his attack in these words: “A year has passed away since our embargo was imposed. The good we expected . . . must now be hopeless to all. It has done nothing but evil. . . . That all our sufferings should have been incurred for nothing.”

This is but one part of the argument. Brown next criticizes the principle upon which the trade restrictions were based. Its purpose reveals “a narrow, selfish, depraved and unfeeling” system of political justice in that the intention of the act is to impose economic hardship on foreign peoples. How can a law be good, he asks, when one of its ends is the forcing of starvation, poverty, and economic dislocation on other lands? “But history is nothing more than a tissue of such cases,” he contends, and if America is less harmful than others

27 An Address to the Congress of the United States, on the Utility and Justice of Restriction upon Foreign Commerce. With Reflections on Foreign Trade in General and the Future Prospects of America (Philadelphia, 1809).
28 Ibid., 9.
29 Ibid., 25.
in its international justice, it is because she is younger than other nations. All of which leads him to a bitter prophecy: "We shall become more conspicuous as we grow older and stronger. Meanwhile the motives and ends of the Embargo may serve to show what we shall do when we are able."30

Although Brown is outspoken in his criticism of Jefferson throughout his pamphlet, he goes further than merely stating that the embargo is useless and pernicious. America must discover other means of protecting her commerce, her shores, and her honor. Domestic business must be encouraged if she is to be a thriving nation. A literary or political independence without a prosperous trade is useless. He hopes that foreign wars need not grow out of foreign commerce, "that we may once more stand on the brink of war, and yet escape it,"31 but declares that trade itself must not be sacrificed.

Finally, reverting to the note struck in his Louisiana pamphlet, Brown concludes with another passage expressing his expansionist sentiment. North America, he remarks, because of its internal wealth and population, its favorable climate, and its fertile soil, is destined to hold one people, speaking one language, under one mode of government and one system of laws. Brown’s vision of the future is given in these terms: "The present limits of our territory are not immutable. They must stretch with our wants. The South sea only can bound us on one side; the Mexican gulph on the other; the polar ices on the third."32

Whatever the significance of this work, it is important to note that Brown helped perpetuate some exaggerations in writing of the embargo’s hardships on American society. By accepting and using the propaganda in Federalist newspapers and by excluding, in his search for materials, sources with the opposite bias, he conveyed impressions of American society in 1808 that, according to Edward Channing, had "no foundation in fact, so far as the truth is known or could be known to any one who made them."33

This pamphlet, almost the last publication of Charles Brockden

30 Ibid., 40.
31 Ibid., 79.
32 Ibid., 80.
Brown,\textsuperscript{34} presents a rare combination of persuasive style, richness of detail, vocal patriotism and distorted judgment. His early legal training and the experience he gained in the mercantile partnership with his brothers equipped him with a wide variety of useful information for the penning of just such an attack. In his first pamphlet, Brown chided Jefferson for what he did not do; in his second, he criticized the President as an individual; in the third, he condemned the focal point in the foreign policy of the Administration. By 1809, Jefferson’s ardent admirer of a decade before had come full circle.

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\textsuperscript{34} Brown wrote the preface to his \textit{Address to Congress}, January 3, 1809; the fifth volume of his \textit{American Register} was printed in the spring of that year.