A Hungarian Traveler in Pennsylvania

Alexander Farkas de Bölön’s “Journey in North America,” 1831

The "literary discovery" of America by Europeans is an exciting topic. Like European immigration to America, it has both a qualitative and a quantitative aspect. Until recently, the former has been symbolized by representatives of western Europe; in other words, the western European visitor’s view was naturally more significant than the eastern European immigrant’s outlook. Frenchmen and Englishmen and western Germans almost monopolized literature on America until about 1848. Their writings, especially those of the English visitors, viewed this country in the first fourscore years of her existence with "utilitarian inquiry and tory condescension," as Mr. Nevins so aptly calls it.¹

It was, of course, self-evident that the "inquiries" and "condescensions" of the western European should be rather comparative than pragmatic in their method. Western Europe then labored under the spell of progress and enjoyed the seemingly natural state of being the center of all that was worth while in human culture and civilization. It was also natural that the eastern European immigrant could not view America with the critical smugness of a Mrs. Trollope. To him this country was the place of liberty, freedom. The chiaroscuro contrast between his dark memories and the newly given opportunities of the new fatherland excluded any negative, or even objectively comparative, criticism. Thus we find but broken and insignificant attempts of works on an intellectual level by eastern Europeans, which describe the United States in her early decades. Later, eastern European intellectuals looked with increasing interest upon America

¹ Allan Nevins, American Social History as Recorded by British Travellers (New York, 1923). 64
as a political ideal, but before 1848, there are scarcely any of their writings which go beyond the plane of mere description.

Yet, when de Tocqueville began to gather his observations carefully and pondered upon the American democratic experiment, an eastern European counterpart of his traveled through the United States, doing the same. A Hungarian traveler, Alexander (Sándor) Farkas de Bölön spent a few months in America in 1831. Three years later, he published a book, entitled Űtazás Észak-Amérikában (A Journey in North America). No English translations of this most important volume have ever appeared. A well-written, yet short piece about the Journey by Zsombor Szász was published in the now unfortunately defunct Hungarian Quarterly which reproduced certain important passages. Nevertheless, the volume’s significance demands a full translation, especially today when relations between America and eastern Europe are of great importance indeed.

Here we shall attempt to reproduce the most important parts of Alexander Farkas de Bölön’s Journey dealing with the state of Pennsylvania and especially with Philadelphia.

Farkas de Bölön was the prototype of the Transylvanian intellectual. He was born in 1795, was a Unitarian, and became interested in political ideas in his early youth. Around 1815, he undertook several literary ventures, wrote poems, and translated a few writings of Goethe and Madame de Staël. The romantic fragrance of his day touched him too; like so many young men of his age, he toyed for a while with the idea of joining the exotic Russian Imperial Army. Then he changed his mind, and after 1825, he merged his interests in social studies. Thus he became one of the many thousand idealists in Hungary’s “Reform Generation.” When the project of his journey came, his mind was keen and mature. In 1830, he was asked by a Transylvanian aristocrat, Count Francis Béldi, to accompany him, as secretary, during a journey to Paris, London, and North America.

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3 All excerpts from the Journey, rather liberally translated by this writer, are reproduced from the second edition: Sándor Bölöni Farkas, Űtazás Észak Amérikában (Kolozsvár, ifjabb Tilsch János, 1835).
5 Ibid.
The two departed late in 1830, and traveled through Germany and France. They spent a few months in Paris, then left for London in March, 1831, by way of Belgium and Holland. On April 18, 1831, they arrived in the English capital. On July 27, they sailed for America on the packet *Columbia*. Among other travelers, they met Audubon on the boat. The two Hungarians arrived in New York on September 3, and departed from the United States again on November 23, 1831.

During these eighty-one days, Bölöni and Béldi journeyed a great deal. After having spent considerable time in New York, they visited Sing Sing, Peekskill, West Point and Albany. Traveling north through the Erie Canal, they went to see the Shakers and Methodists around New Lebanon, and crossed into New England at Pittsfield. Then, having descended to Boston, they visited Charlestown, Auburn, and Cambridge in that neighborhood. From there they continued northwards, and traveling through New Hampshire, Concord, and Burlington, they reached Canada. Having visited Montreal and Quebec, the travelers sailed west on the St. Lawrence to Kingston, whence they crossed the lake, and stopped at Queenstown and Buffalo. From there they traversed Lake Erie to Dunkirk, New York, and Erie, Pennsylvania. Going west, they entered Ohio and re-entered Pennsylvania again at Beaver, visiting Economy and Pittsburgh, and journeyed through the Alleghenies to Baltimore. From there they took an excursion to Washington, where they were received by President Jackson. After paying homage to Mount Vernon, the travelers went back to Baltimore, and then spent ten days in Philadelphia before returning to New York, whence they sailed.

Farkas de Bölöni's first reference to Pennsylvania occurs in Chapter X, when he describes his visit to the Massachusetts State Penitentiary at Charlestown. There he dwells at length on the penitentiary system of Pennsylvania, comparing this with the procedure introduced in Auburn, New York. He writes as follows:

> In Pennsylvania it was Penn and his Quaker friends who stood against capital punishment. They intended to introduce a milder and more opportune method... yet, the English parliament forever raised objections to their conditions. After the Revolution, the philanthropic disciples of Penn rose again and due to the magnani-

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6 *Journey*, 108–121.
amous proposals made by Franklin, Bradford and Lowndes, the greater part of capital punishments have been abolished and such were upheld only for deliberate murder and poisoning. Corporal punishment and other external humiliations—which not only humiliate but render the forces of the soul really obdurate—have been substituted by compulsory labour.

Pennsylvania took this fortunate initiative [1793] and other states also accepted this procedure. At the same time, this subject became the topic of most interesting discussions among the different states. Not only the administrations of states and cities but also other associations . . . among them the Quakers in first place, scholars and private individuals conceived the problems and important scientific treatises were published. The psychological exposure of sin and error, the different actions of human soul on different cultural levels, the measures of punishment and their results, the moral standing of men and the methods and means of improvement became themes of most important philosophical dissertations. During these fervent discussions and deliberations, many experiments have been undertaken by the prisoners themselves. The very great expenses did not restrain the efforts of the philanthropic societies. These works constitute an invaluable collection for the science of the human soul . . .

Later in the chapter there follows a detailed description of what Farkas de Bőlön calls "the Pennsylvania method of confinement." His information here derives from a publication which he modestly cites in a footnote: "Letter from Edward Livingston to Robert Vaux, on the Pennsylvania system of Prison Disciplin [sic]. Philadelphia 1828."

The two articles which hitherto appeared on Farkas de Bőlön in the English language,⁷ do not fail to draw a comparison between him and de Tocqueville, yet it has been overlooked that by sheer coincidence Farkas de Bőlön actually met de Tocqueville! In his further description of the Charlestown penitentiary, he writes: "... Mr. Gray, the director of the penitentiary was already awaiting us. We met here two gentlemen on commission from France, whose government sent them here to examine the American penitentiaries and their methods for possible adaptation in France."⁸ It is almost certain that these two gentlemen were Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont who visited Auburn at the same time, early in October, 1831. This being the only reference to the "French gentlemen" in the whole volume, it is not unnatural that neither Szász nor Pivány discovered this interesting coincidence. The author himself could not, of course, have been aware of the presence of

⁷ Szász, and a dissertation by Eugene Pivány, Hungarian-American Historical Connections (Budapest, 1927).
⁸ Journey, 111.
his great colleague, whose *Démocratie en Amérique* appeared in 1835, during the year when the second edition of the *Journey* was published in Hungary.⁹ (It may be worth mentioning that a translation of de Tocqueville appeared in Hungary as early as 1845, and met with widespread interest.)

A few weeks later Farkas de Bölön entered the state of Pennsylvania from the north. Count Bélardi and he sailed on Lake Erie from Buffalo to Dunkirk, New York. There they hired conveyance and rolling through Fredonia, Portland, and Westfield, entered Pennsylvania at Erie.

Here he describes the city first, then dwells at length on the subject of religious freedom¹⁰:

The city . . . has not many buildings of great significance. But the European traveller is attracted by the fact that in this little city inhabited by 6,000 people, many religions have their churches established. We spent a Sunday there and I remarked with admiration the zeal and industry and religious competition with which each citizen hurried to service. On Sunday . . . almost nobody may be found home.—And this is for us even more admirable, as in America there exist no positive laws or festive mandates or orders or compulsory means or opiates which would compel someone to attend service. . . . And if we add—what is unimaginable from a European viewpoint, dangerous . . . and leading to indifference—that there is no state religion here . . . while in any European country, two of the existing religions are enough to embitter the other's life, the number of different and independent sects here is appalling. . . .

There follows a statistical table describing the religious affiliations of the American population reproduced from an almanac published in 1831. He continues then¹¹:

And this number is yet not the last word and as time passes, new sects are formed. . . .

I visited a few churches in Erie. . . . I did not have ample time to listen to the sermon of each priest. The only thing which attracted me was that under such strange circumstances of religion, and speaking in a European manner, among so many illegal religions, one can see such multitudinous congregations and pious worshippers. . . . The priests often conclude their sermons with this prayer: “Our Lord, help us preserve our religious and political liberties! And give power to our brethren abroad to gain these for themselves and possess freely the rights which Thou hast given unto them.”

⁹ The last edition of the *Journey* was published in January, 1944, by the Officina Press in Budapest, which indicates the relative liberty that Hungarian culture enjoyed during the last war, at least until March, 1944.


This is indeed a different picture from what Mrs. Trollope depicted in the same year:12

My honest conviction is, that the standard of moral character in the United States is very greatly lower than in Europe. Of their religion . . . without any uncharitable presumption, I must take permission to say, that both Protestant England and Catholic France show an infinitely superior religious and moral aspect to mortal observation, both as to reverend decency of external observance and as to the inward fruit of honest dealing between mind and man. . . .

Later, Farkas de Bölön translates a passage of President Monroe’s message to Congress dealing with religious liberties.13

From Erie, the travelers hired a coach for Fairview, Ohio, but it broke down at Springfield, Pennsylvania. Thus, involuntarily, Farkas de Bölön witnessed a county election there. Erie County was electing a sheriff, an auditor, a commissioner and an assemblyman:14

The voters stood in groups before the assembly house. Some of their carts stood on the street, their horses were harnessed to the carts or to the garden fences, like at our . . . county elections; and we expected to see and hear just the same things as what used to happen at home. But, even after three hours’ waiting, nothing happened. No noise, no heated arguments . . . no fights.15 . . . Every voter entered the voting room in a rigid manner, when his name was called, he coolly dropped his slip into the ballot box. Thus the grand act was performed! yet, this was the most important function of republican government! they elected administrators on whom the happiness or misfortune of the country and of the state depended now for a year. . . .

There then follows a dissertation on political liberties:16

In a republican and constitutional state, the law of elections is the cornerstone on which the existence of government and the most important part of human freedom hinges. Rome and Greece fell because the electors have been restricted to a certain class, the influence of the people has been excluded and temporary officeholding has been abolished. To the builders of the American constitution, these historical points were great lessons. . . . In America . . . government exists by the people and people do not exist merely for the government’s sake.17 . . . As for the American, the election of officers . . . is a constant duty, he is used to looking at himself as an active part of his nation’s administration and this becomes part of his flesh and blood. Each of them regards the cause of his nation as his own. . . .

12 Frances Trollope, Domestic Manners of the Americans, quoted in Nevins, 178–179.
13 Journey, 219.
14 Ibid., 221.
15 County elections in Hungary at that time were of a rather rowdy character.
16 Journey, 223.
17 The original Hungarian sentence, impossible to translate literally because of its archaic style resembles the Gettysburg Address even more closely: “mert itt az igazgatás a’ nép csinálmányja, ’s nem a’ nép az igazgatást.”
A detailed description of the electoral procedure follows, after which Farkas de Bölön extols the freedom of the press, which throughout the book remains one of his favorite subjects. The travelers finally proceeded into Ohio. After three days, they re-entered Pennsylvania at Beaver. From there they went to Economy to visit the Harmonites, the religious co-operative society of Rapp. A chapter explains in detail the economic experiments there, and records a conversation with Rapp, who said among other things that he “. . . did not maintain a high opinion on Owen.”

In Pittsburgh, Farkas and Béldi met again two Transylvanian friends traveling independently, Baron Farkas de Wesselényi and Paul Balog. A detailed passage is devoted to the geographical situation of the city, including a statistical table reproduced from the *American Almanac*, which portrays the fantastic increase in the population of Pittsburgh from 1800 to 1830. Farkas de Bölön concludes:

> The inhabitants . . . were increased by Englishmen, Scotsmen, Irish and Germans, yet all these . . . Americanized themselves rapidly. In a country, where the law does not dissect society into different classes, where everybody enters life with the same rights, there, in the name of freedom, everybody baptizes himself as the child of that fatherland and learns the language quickly, also changing his name, in order to be a good citizen.

> The center of Pittsburgh does not resemble the pleasant, joyful and original colours of other American cities. It rather looks like Manchester or Birmingham in England, there is eternal smoke of coal over the city; the houses and the tremendous factories are wrapped in smoke; in the streets and on the wharves a tumult of . . . carts; everywhere scenes of loading and unloading; iron foundries and the hammering of factories present the everyday picture.

He goes on to describe machinery in Pittsburgh factories. The four Hungarians then decided to travel to Maryland. They set out from Pittsburgh and went through the Alleghenies, bypassing Walkenburg [?], Howardsburg [?], Adamsburg, Greensburg, Youngstown, Ligonier, Stoystown and “Bloody-Rum.” In many of these places, decades later, their compatriot immigrants came to settle. After some time spent in Washington and Baltimore, he and Béldi decided to visit Philadelphia.

They were not the first outstanding Hungarians connected with this city. The founder of Germantown, Pastorius, was a pupil of

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18 *Journey*, 224.
Tobias Schumberg, a native of Hungary.\textsuperscript{20} A Hungarian teacher, Isaac F. Sárosy joined Pastorius in Germantown around 1695, and left again in 1697. Wissahickon's John Kelpius was a Saxon from Transylvania. Farkas de Bölön and Bélòdi arrived by steamboat and canalboat from New Castle. (He enjoyed the canalboats, in contrast to Charles Dickens, who described them as "a perfect storm and tempest of spitting.") Farkas de Bölön looked forward to his visit to Philadelphia, a city which even Frances Trollope and Captain Marryat admired, and which was called "handsome" by Dickens.\textsuperscript{21} Even so, Farkas' description is overflowing with enthusiasm. A whole chapter is devoted to Philadelphia,\textsuperscript{22} where he and Bélòdi spent ten memorable days:

Many travellers write and say that Philadelphia is the most beautiful city in the world. I heard this exclusive praise also in Europe about so many towns that, although I expected Philadelphia to be beautiful, I did not imagine that after ten days' residence there, I should admit that the city is really one of the most lovely.

First day we walked through the streets and inspected the most important parts of the city. The more parts we visited, the more my admiration increased. . . . I thought that I walked in the Athens or the Rome of the classic ages.

He explains the plan of the city and describes the . . . trottoirs, of a special and exquisite beauty, kept graciously clean by the owners of the houses, just as the floor of a pompous palace would be. Most of the houses are built of white marmor or granite. Shining brass railings on the doorsteps' fences. All these excellent buildings and the unique handsomeness everywhere please the viewer's eye beyond expression.

Apart from private homes, about two hundred public buildings and churches add to the beauty of Philadelphia and almost every one of them has something worthy to see. First in beauty is the Bank of the United States, built in accordance with the laws of purest Greek style. . . . Another Greek building is Girard's Bank, built of granite, with Corinthian columns and the Bank of Pennsylvania, with an Ionian colonnade.

In the center of the city there stands the House of the States.\textsuperscript{23} . . . This house is of historical importance and kept in great reverence. . . . Behind it a public promenade, the garden of Independence . . . and Washington square. City Hall, the universities, colleges, the theatre, churches, hospitals, etc. are each a beautiful example of architecture and unsurpassed by any of the cities in the United States.

\textsuperscript{20} Pivány, 15-16.
\textsuperscript{21} Nevins, 126 ff.
\textsuperscript{22} Journey, chap. XXVII (323-337).
\textsuperscript{23} Independence Hall.
In other American cities interest is monopolized by trade and politics. Philadelphia sought fame by favouring the sciences and philanthropic institutions. The noble competition in sacrifice by the Philadelphians is almost unbelievable. Their philanthropy seems to be born with them; they sacrifice their own with admirable zeal. Each day we visited a few of the charity institutions but to call on all of them would require months. There are more than 160, that is one hundred and sixty associations for the development of sciences, for protection of the suffering and other public needs. Some of these aim to promote collaboration in trade, mutual understanding and assistance to foreigners and new immigrants.

Religious and moral societies are also great in number. There are also 25 associations which, avoiding religious discrimination, aim at the promotion of religious thought, moral ideas, education and the Bible.

Yet, in the first place there are the different scholarly societies of Philadelphia. It seems that this city is the center of academic erudition and the cradle of science. Perhaps nowhere else are books sought as much as here. Apart of every home having a library; excluding the small and large collections of schools, clubs and institutions, the city has 64 public libraries, open to everyone, with 64,000 volumes. Added to these are innumerable reading rooms for newspapers. In 32 printing shops here, 50 newspapers and periodicals appear. The most important of the academic associations is the “American Philosophical Society” founded by Franklin in 1743 with its famous library. The rooms of the building are always open for reading and conversation. Foreigners are willingly introduced. Meetings are held every first and third Friday of the month. Papers presented and discussed there are published yearly. There are other associations also, promoting again other branches of knowledge.

Most of the societies aim at the promotion of education. Perhaps nowhere has this subject been dealt with, with more of a philosophical aspect and with more success than in Philadelphia. Yet these societies went beyond theories and produced admirable results in practical life. Excluding those greater schools, where every science is being taught, there is special attention directed to the aim that in the whole city every child should be able at least to read and write. To teach the poor is the aim of other associations, according to whose reports, 5,083 children received free education in 1831.

The foreigner is especially attracted by the fact that all these institutions do not depend on government influence and subsidies but exist by private enterprise and voluntary donations. Indeed important lessons are these for a European commentator! yet, this is but a direct result of the simple principles of the law. The government here has but one aim: that every person should receive equal protection under the established law—thus, it remains to the citizens to mould their own position.

Farkas de Bölön here comments shortly on Colbert and “laissez nous faire.” A paragraph is devoted to his encounter with a German-Hungarian immigrant. He then returns to the descriptive part of his narrative and writes about the Philadelphia Museum, “... founded by a Mr. Peale, like the one in Baltimore. But this is the richest one
in the country." The water works also met with his admiration: 
"As the town grew, the need for water increased. Already Franklin 
advised and introduced different processes . . . but the costly ex-
periments did not meet all aims. Finally, with great cost, the 
present works were constructed. . . ."

On a Sunday, he visited the churches. Among them, it was a 
Quaker (which he consistently misspelled as "Quacker") congrega-
tion which "... like in England, attracted my attention and 
esteem." A two-page description of the service follows in minute 
detail. These are his conclusions:

Among the religions in England and America, it is impossible not to esteem the 
Quakers. Public opinion reveres their honesty in the first place. The word of a 
Quaker is sacrosanct. ... In charity, in promotion of public welfare and financial 
sacrifice, the Quakers are first. ... They live in uniformity, they do not know 
rank, convention rules and they do not promote systematic theorizing. Most of them 
are educated intellects. ... 

Walking on the streets, I entered a few other churches, as here also, Sunday is 
devoted only to worship. Philadelphia is the home of many religions. . . . 

There follows a statistical table of churches in Philadelphia, "and all 
these live in perfect peace next to each other. . . ."

Many travellers made the remark that Philadelphia is a city of Quaker taste and 
the Quakers being of sourly moral character, this influences social life and reduces it 
to a certain rigid uniformity. I did not have the occasion, during our short stay, to 
be acquainted with the inner characteristics of home life . . . but I found it indeed 
true that if someone looks forward to a big city with sensual pleasures, the glitter 
of the salons, and the delights of society, he may easily find it boring in this city.24 
Philadelphia is certainly not a city of pleasure. But he who pursues intellectual 
delights, will find inexhaustible sources of that here.

One day we visited the States’ Mint, where we noticed that during the different 
manipulations with gold and silver, nobody is exercising control upon the other. In 
Europe, all sections are being watched by at least three persons in order to prevent 
theft. "We believe in our men," said the Director at our admiration, "... our 
confidence obliges them to be honest. . . ."

After ten days in Philadelphia, the two Hungarians were embarr-
sassed to read in the Pennsylvania Inquirer a journalistic report 
transmitted by the London Courier describing "Cruelties in Hun-

24 Miss Martineau regarded Philadelphia as snobbish: "The ladies of Chestnut Street had 
nothing to do with the Arch street ladies." Nevins, 136. Farkas de Bölön had no letters of 
introduction to Philadelphia homes.
Thus, "... we considered a thousand doubts; we imagined the events with all their unfortunate consequences; the pleasures of our journey were disturbed. We decided to shorten our travels and leave Philadelphia—where my nostalgic sighs will indeed drift back forever!" They left on the steamship Trenton up the Delaware. From the city of Trenton they continued on land to Raritan and then to New York. They sailed for Le Havre on November 23.

Scarcely did Farkas de Bölön settle down again after his homecoming in the spring of 1832, than he started to write his book. The manuscript was completed by May, 1833.

The volume has certain deficiencies. Farkas de Bölön's English was limited and there are many misspellings of names. Hence, it is questionable whether the literal reproduction of important conversations may be regarded as entirely accurate. There is also a certain religious intolerance to be observed; he, a Transylvanian Unitarian, sometimes reveals a slightly noticeable anti-Catholic bias. Of course, the main point against the writing may be raised in regard to its almost complete lack of negative criticism. Farkas de Bölön's unbounded admiration presents a curious contrast to the descriptions of contemporary French and especially British travelers. However, he was studious enough to read, learn, and reproduce the most important of contemporary writings; statistical tables and factual illustrations are abundant throughout the volume; important works as that of Levasseur,26 the description of Captain Basil Hall,27 and aristocratic critiques, such as the account of Duke Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar,28 are not only referred to, but also receive detailed mention.

The elements of objective interpretation were perhaps missing; however, the book performed a historic mission. It brought America home to Hungary, at the tide of Hungary's Reform Age. The volume

25 A cholera epidemic raged in northern Hungary in 1831. Several minor peasant rebellions occurred. These were exaggerated by the foreign press which erroneously saw in them an equal of the great revolutions of 1830, and of the 1831 Polish revolution.
27 Basil Hall, Travels in North America, in the years 1827 and 1828 (Edinburgh, 1829).
28 Travels through North America, during the years 1825 and 1826. By His Highness Bernhard, Duke of Saxe-Weimar Eisenach (Philadelphia, 1828).
was acclaimed with unusual fervor, and within a year, a second
dition followed. Farkas de Bölön continued for a long time to be the
topic of important discussions. The giants of Hungary’s Reform Age,
Széchenyi and Wesselényi, wrote to the author and emphasized the
“incomparable importance” of his oeuvre. Kossuth also read the
Journey, and it made a deep influence on him. The importance of the
volume went far beyond being but a link in the chain of Hungarian-
American relations. Interest in America did not wane, and mutual
sympathy arose to a climax during and after 1848–1849. But Farkas
de Bölön did not live those exciting days. He died on February 2,
1842.

It is certainly paradoxical that more than a century ago, Farkas de
Bölön’s enthusiastic description of America in Jackson’s day could
appear and arouse so many ambitions striving to create a Hungarian
democracy. Then, “tyranny” in Hungary did not interfere with such
a publication, yet today, a similar writing could not appear in
Hungary’s “democracy.”

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