

Ogle's Omnibus of Lies

ON DECEMBER 4, 1839, Whig politicians assembled at the new Lutheran church in Harrisburg intent upon finding a victorious candidate for the impending Presidential canvass of 1840. Three days of frenetic negotiation resulted in the rejection of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, the acknowledged party leaders, in favor of a somewhat dubious military hero, a figurehead less encumbered by embarrassing political ideas, William Henry Harrison of Ohio. "GRANNY'S GOT IT!" proclaimed gleeful Democratic headlines the morning after the nomination, for knowing Locofoco leaders viewed the aging Cincinnatus from North Bend as a highly vulnerable nominee. "Give him a barrel of hard cider, and settle a pension of two thousand a year on him," advised a tactless correspondent of the *Baltimore Republican*, "and my word for it, he will sit the remainder of his days in his log cabin by the side of a 'sea coal' fire, and study moral philosophy."¹

Astute Whig managers quickly exploited these Democratic aspersions, which implied a certain superiority to "hairy headed patriots" on the great frontier. In a cozy drawing room on the banks of the Susquehanna one January evening, Thomas Elder, a Whig banker, and Richard S. Elliott, a Harrisburg editor, planned the first log cabin and hard cider transparency, concluding cynically that "passion and prejudice properly aroused and directed, would do about as well as principle and reason in a party contest." Within a month, the welkin rang with shouts for "the Log-Cabin and Hard-Cider Candidate," and cabins, coons, and cider were established as symbols of a resurgent Whiggery. There remained the engrossing task of stereotyping reigning Democrats as palace dandies of "King Matty" Van Buren, an undertaking obligingly accomplished by Congressman

¹ *Cleveland Weekly Advertiser*, Dec. 26, 1839; *Baltimore Republican*, Dec. 11, 1839, correspondence signed "Z" (John de Ziska).

Charles Ogle of Somerset, Pennsylvania, in a memorable diatribe on "The Regal Splendor of the Presidential Palace."²

Congressman Ogle obtained the floor of the House of Representatives on April 14 to discuss a \$3,665 appropriation for the improvement of the White House, and his ensuing tirade became the keynote of the campaign. Ogle, a relatively obscure back-bencher, had been nurtured in the Anti-Masonic school of demagoguery under the able tutelage of Thad Stevens, who took the young aspirant into his law office and guided him through his bar examinations and his introduction to politics. Inspiration for the speech on "Regal Splendor" probably came from New York's Jolly Drummer, Thurlow Weed, who advised Congressman Francis Granger in March that news of White House expenditures would make engrossing campaign material. Former President John Quincy Adams had been reproached for buying ivory billiard balls and for furnishing the East Room; was not "Sweet Sandy Whiskers" (Weed's favorite designation for Van Buren) as vulnerable to such criticism? Granger no doubt gave Weed's suggestion to his Anti-Masonic colleague, who apparently had the perfect prescription for Whig campaign medicine.³ An embellished description of White House life made a heady political tonic for readers in log cabins on the frontier.

Enraged Democrats described Ogle's harangue as a "shameless electioneering trick." For "three mortal days," according to the *Globe*, "Mr. Ogle detained the public business with his 'Omnibus of Lies.'" Accurately sensing the bitterness of depression times which followed the Panic of 1837, the Anti-Masonic Congressman speculated whether the people would "longer feel inclined" to support their "*chief servant*" in a "*PALACE as splendid as that of the Caesars, and as richly adorned as the proudest Asiatic mansion.*" Although he professed to be loath to discuss topics "involving personal rather than political considerations," Ogle felt "con-

² Richard Smith Elliott, *Notes Taken in Sixty Years* (St. Louis, Mo., 1883), 120-121. Charles Ogle, born in Somerset, Pa., in 1798; admitted to bar; practiced in Somerset; elected as Whig to the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Congresses (Mar. 4, 1837-Mar. 3, 1841); re-elected to the Twenty-seventh Congress, but died in Somerset, May 10, 1841, before Congress assembled. *A Biographical Congressional Directory, 1774-1911* (Washington, D. C., 1913), 897.

³ *Globe* (Washington, D. C.), Nov. 2, 1840; Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *Thurlow Weed, Wizard of the Lobby* (Boston, 1947), 112; *Congressional Globe*, 26 Cong., 1 Sess., VIII, 327, 331, 337; Charles Ogle, *The Regal Splendor of the President's Palace* (Boston, 1840).

strained by a sense of duty" to enlighten his fellow countrymen on "the magnificent splendor" of the President's palace and "the pompous ceremonials that 'hold sway' at his republican court." Amid fisticuffs and turmoil on the House floor, Thad Stevens' virulent apprentice itemized the furnishings and accommodations of the White House right down to the last chamber pot.⁴

Mr. Ogle described the "palace" grounds and gardens as "perhaps not less conspicuous" than those of kings "in many of the royal capitals of Europe." He assured his fellow members that the President's garden, "in all its arrangements and beauties," was in "perfect keeping with the sumptuous and magnificent palace." He complained that "the PUBLIC GARDENER AND THE HANDS UNDER HIM" were paid to "*pick up the falling leaves*, and pluck up by the roots the xanthium spinosum and rumex acetosella, or, according to vulgar 'lingo,' burdock and sheep sorrel." Face-tiously, he pointed out certain "refinements" suggested by those who had recently visited the Palace at Versailles: "Parian marble balustrades," "jets d'eau," statues of "the Loves and Graces" and of "jolly Bacchus and the Bacchantes." Still more appropriate as an ornament, said Ogle, would be a "*bronze colossal equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson with the little Kinderhook magician mounted on behind him.*"

The plain-living Whig from Pennsylvania noisily declaimed his disdain for the effete tastes of those charged with the palace landscaping. "Rich coats of white and red clover and luxuriant orchard grass" were apparently repugnant to the jaded eyes of Jacksonian Democrats. "To gratify the refined taste of an exquisite with 'sweet sandy whiskers,' " continued Ogle in an undignified reference to the President, "[there must be] undulations, 'beautiful mounds and other contrivances' to ravish his exalted and ethereal soul." Consequently, a number of "clever sized hills" were constructed, "every pair of which . . . was designed to resemble . . . AN AMAZON'S BOSOM, with a miniature knoll or hillock on its apex, to denote the n—ple." Venomously, he charged that "thousands of the People's dollars" had been thrown away on such "silly fancies," which were "better adapted to please the sickly and vicious taste of palace dandies, than to gratify the simple eye of plain, republican freemen."

⁴ *Ibid.*

The obscene landscaping thus carefully scrutinized, the prying Keystone Congressman invited his auditors to consider the palace interior and the "twenty thousand dollars" which had been spent in 1837 for furniture. "Mr. Chairman," challenged the Whig "Slang-whanger" dramatically, "how do you relish the notion of voting away the **HARD CASH** of your constituents, of your farmers, mechanics, and poor laborers, for **SILK TASSELS, GALLON, GIMP, AND SATIN MEDALLION**, to beautify and adorn the '**BLUE ELLIPTICAL SALOON**'?" "Suppose sir," he continued, his eyes closely focused on the coming elections, "after you shall have turned to the charming prairies of Illinois, some plain, honest republican '*Sucker*' should inquire what use a real genuine, hard-handed, locofoco Democrat like Mr. Van Buren can have for *silk covered pillows, footstools, and TABORETS*. . . . How would you reply to that honest *Sucker's* interrogatory?"

Certainly no true Locofoco Democrat would countenance such foppery! The Red Fox "can't have the '*right stripe*,'" Ogle punned in a heavy-handed reference to the President. "Why, sir, he loves tassels, rosettes, and girlish finery almost as much as a real 'Bank Whig' loves 'hard cider.'" No Democrat with the interests of American workers at heart would purchase French comfortables, French bedsteads, and "**ROYAL AND IMPERIAL WILTON**" carpets at the hands of foreign artisans "whilst our **OWN 'CUNNING WORKMEN**' almost perish for lack of bread." Not unmindful of the votes of unemployed Pennsylvania factory laborers, Ogle continued his series of rhetorical questions: "Has he no American patriotism . . . to shield American mechanics from this direct insult to their skill? . . . Is this the policy that Mr. Van Buren proposes by which we are to protect *domestic industry* from *foreign competition*? . . . What will the American wool grower say to this plan? How will the American weaver relish that?"

After this outburst against Van Buren's alleged preference for foreign products, Ogle asked the Speaker's permission to conduct the members of the House on a fanciful tour of the great "Court Banqueting room." With a great display of mock disappointment, the homespun Anti-Mason warned his colleagues that the President's table was not "provided with those old and unfashionable dishes, '*hog and hominy*,' '*fried meat and gravy*,' '*schnitz, knep, and sourcroust*,'

with a mug of *'hard cider.'* " "No, sir, no," he continued. Such "substantial preparations" were looked upon by "*gourmands, French cooks, and locofoco Presidents*" as "exceedingly vulgar" and fit only for "Bank Whigs." The true, orthodox, genuine Locofoco, said Ogle, furnished his table "*in massive gold plate and French sterling silver services, blue and gold French tambours, compotiers on feet, stands for bonbons, with three stages, gilded French plateaus, garnished with mirrors and garlands, and gaudy artificial flowers.*"

At this point in Ogle's discourse, Representative Waddy Thompson of South Carolina yielded to an impulse to pun. Of course the service was of gold and silver, he interrupted. "This, you know," said the South Carolinian in a studied reference to the Independent Treasury proposal, "is a gold and silver Administration." When Whig laughter had subsided, Ogle pursued his demagogic questioning: "Mr. Chairman, don't you think that one of your plain republican '*Suckers*' would feel 'kinder queer like' to be placed at the President's table, before these democratic '*Tambours* with three stages,' and '*Compotiers on feet*'?" "My constituents," Ogle concluded, "would much rather face the grizzly bear . . . than sit down before these '*Tambours*' . . . for *five consecutive hours*—the period usually required by Kings and democratic Presidents to masticate a state dinner."

Concluding his fanciful description of Presidential dining habits, the brash Quaker State politician proceeded to take up even more intimate details of "palace life." Four mirrors costing \$2,400 provoked a prolonged series of exclamations. "What," asked Ogle derisively, "would the frugal and honest '*Hoosiers*' think were they to behold a *democratic peacock*, in full court costume, strutting by the hour before golden framed mirrors, **NINE FEET HIGH and FOUR FEET AND A HALF WIDE?**" "Why, sir," exclaimed the aroused demagogue, "were Mr. Van Buren to dash into the palace on the back of his '*Roanoke*' race horse, he could gaze at and admire the hoofs of his charger and his own crown at the same instant of time." Ogle reminded his listeners that while the mounted Magician thus preened himself he was earning \$2.81 an hour. If he lingered five hours over a state dinner, he rose fourteen dollars and five cents richer than when he sat down. After sleeping eight hours, the Magician awakened \$22.48 "better off than before he closed his eyes."

The climax of this three-day harangue came when Ogle revealed that a bath tub had been installed in the White House. Apparently Sweet Sandy Whiskers was not content to bathe, as John Quincy Adams had, in the turbid waters of the Potomac. Only a President with the tastes of an Oriental autocrat would demand so extravagant a luxury as a bath! But the Pennsylvania politician was "not a little surprised" to find Mr. Van Buren "the first President" to discover "the pleasures of the warm or tepid bath" as "the proper accompaniments of a palace life." A President with tastes so effete might indeed supply his toilet with "Double Extract of Queen Victoria"!

In his summation, Congressman Ogle opposed the appropriation "for '*alterations and repairs* of the President's house,' because," as he charged in a final bit of *argumentum ad hominem*, "the money may be expended in the erection of a *throne* within the 'Blue Elliptical Saloon,' and for the purchase of a *crown, diadem, sceptre*, and *royal jewels*, with as little impropriety as former appropriations . . . have been expended. . . . And thus this democratic *President*, although deprived of the *title* of royalty, will be invested, not only with its *prerogatives*, but with its *trappings* also."⁵

Although some fastidious members of Ogle's party were offended by this blatant demagoguery, Whig newspaper accounts of the "omnibus" speech were unrestrained in their praise. It was published serially and given front-page emphasis in leading Whig papers; eventually, it was translated into German; and Whig speakers traveled with the English version in their saddlebags, for it served as a most convenient source of political ammunition. *Niles' Register* claimed that the "mingled humor and denunciation" of the Pennsylvania Anti-Mason "enchained the attention of the House and produced loud and frequent bursts of merriment." The Frankfort, Kentucky, *Commonwealth* proclaimed that it was "high time to put a stop to this aping of the 'twenty-seven governments of Europe,' and this shameful expenditure of public money." The editor, Orlando Brown, tauntingly asked Democrats to request "the privilege of using the 'finger glasses' " which had been bought with public money. "It will cool you after a hard day's work at 25 cents a day," he assured them, "thus to moisten the tips of your fingers. You have no idea of the luxury of the things." "Mr. Van Buren was in such a

⁵ *Ibid.*

rage at reading Mr. Ogle's speech," said George D. Prentice of the *Louisville Journal*, "that he actually *burst his corset*."⁶

Democratic papers at first ignored Ogle's "Omnibus of Lies," and even the official *Congressional Globe* passed over the prolonged remarks with a very brief summary in the running account of Congressional activities. The Washington *Globe*, in a brief news item, claimed that an apprentice of the infamous Thad Stevens had delayed Congress with "vapid attempts" to change "the celebrated Biddle CHAMPAGNE into *hard cider*," and to demonstrate that "the marble palace in Chestnut Street is neither more nor less than a *log cabin*!" By midsummer, however, it was necessary to reply at greater length, for the alleged revelations of "palace life" had created a storm of indignation in the country. "There is not a decent Whig," editorialized the *Globe*, "who does not in private express unmeasured disgust at the low, mean, unscrupulous falsehoods of that dirtiest of all Federal tools, OGLE." Yet, discouragingly enough, presumably respectable Whigs persisted in "spreading the ordure of this degraded creature throughout the country." Thomas Ritchie, editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, likewise was shocked by those who stooped "so low" as to "re-echo" the "slang" in this "shameless speech." The Lexington *Kentucky Gazette* looked into Ogle's allegedly unsavory past and found him to be "a fit tool to do the dirty work of the Whig party." "His genius," said the *Gazette* condescendingly, qualifies him for "head waiter at the White House."⁷

Unfortunately for the President, only a few Democratic papers troubled themselves to re-establish the son of an impoverished Dutch tavernkeeper as "the artificer of his own fortunes"—"most emphatically a man of the people, plain and unostentatious in his manners and celebrated for his courtesy and dignity." Instead, Locofoco editors concentrated their attentions on the "Gentleman from Penn-

⁶ *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D. C.), June 30, July 2, 4, 21, 23, and 25, 1840; *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, Aug. 3, 1840; *Northwestern Gazette & Galena Advertiser* (Galena, Ill.), July 24, 1840; *Spirit of '76* (Nashville, Tenn.), July 22, 1840; *Log Cabin* (New York), July 11 and 18, and Aug. 1, 1840; *Niles' Register* (Baltimore), Apr. 18 and 25, 1840; Charles Ogle, *Rede über die Königl. Pracht und die Verschwendung im Präsidenten-Palast* (Philadelphia, 1840); *Frankfort Commonwealth* (Frankfort, Ky.), July 28 and Aug. 4, 1840; Prentice quoted in the *Daily Political Tornado* (Columbus, Ohio), Nov. 5, 1840.

⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 26 Cong., 1 Sess., VIII, 327, 331, 337; *Globe*, Apr. 17, July 28, Aug. 14, and Sept. 8, 1840; *Richmond Enquirer*, July 31, 1840; *Kentucky Gazette* (Lexington, Ky.), Aug. 6, 13, and 20, 1840.

sylvania" and his "no less than FIFTEEN FORGERIES."⁸ The vehemence of their denials testified to the effectiveness of Ogle's "contemtable" diatribe.

The day after the Ogle "omnibus," Representative Levi Lincoln, a forthright Massachusetts Whig, took issue with his unscrupulous fellow partisan. Moved by an inherent sense of decency, the former governor of the Bay State protested against the "unwarranted and undignified attack" on the Chief Executive. Lincoln pointed out that less money had been spent under Van Buren for the upkeep of the White House than under any other President. Never, he said, had Van Buren requested "a single article of furniture." In fact, the President had "invariably expressed reluctance to have anything expended for that object." Democrats eagerly seized upon these words as a conclusive refutation of Ogle's calculated misrepresentations, but Lincoln's fellow Whigs were embarrassed by the honesty of this artless Yankee, who sincerely hoped for Harrison's success by honorable means. Horace Greeley, for example, ignored Lincoln's statement and editorialized against "the Artful Dodgers" who forged "a pretended speech of Mr. Lincoln." The opportunistic editor of the *Log Cabin*, like most of his eager compatriots, disclaimed the facts for fear of weakening the strongest campaign medicine concocted for untutored voters. When Ogle received a unanimous renomination, Greeley jeered unashamedly: "The ten thousand-dollar mirrors in the White House doubtless gave back a very disagreeable reflection."⁹

Other Whig "Slangwhangers" in Congress attempted to improve on Ogle's prescription for a vote-catching elixir, but without success. Representative Edward Stanley of North Carolina ranted about the expenditure of \$218 for horse chestnut trees for the United States Mint, and Representative George N. Proffit of Indiana roused himself for a frenzied attack on those who spoke disparagingly of "the Western People."¹⁰ But such outbursts were mere imitations. Elliott and Elder, with the help of unsuspecting Democrats, had contributed

⁸ *Globe*, Aug. 14, 1840.

⁹ *Congressional Globe*, 26 Cong., 1 Sess., VIII, Appendix, 701-703; *Rough-Hewer* (Albany, N. Y.), July 30 and Aug. 13, 1840; *Globe*, July 30, 1840; Emory Washburn, "Memoir of the Hon. Levi Lincoln," in Massachusetts Historical Society *Proceedings*, 1869-1870 (Boston, 1871), 70; *Log Cabin* (New York), Aug. 8 and 29, 1840.

¹⁰ *Spirit of '76* (Nashville, Tenn.), July 8, 1840; *Congressional Globe*, 26 Cong., 1 Sess., VIII, Appendix, 730-735; *Log Cabin* (New York), Aug. 22, 1840.

the log cabin stereotype of Old Tip; and Ogle had added the dandified version of Van Buren. Whigs thus could interpret the contest as a conflict between the simple and the aristocratic ways of life. They were ready to translate the issue in the most flamboyant terms: the log cabin versus the palace; hard cider versus champagne; Old Tippecanoe versus Sweet Sandy Whiskers.

Congress adjourned on July 21, 1840, and its members eagerly exchanged the sweltering heat of Washington for the fervid atmosphere of the stump. Already the people were chanting:

Let Van from his coolers of silver drink wine,
And lounge on his cushioned settee,
Our man on a buckeye bench can recline,
Content with hard cider is he.

Throughout the summer and fall, Whig managers conducted Saturnalian conventions, cabin raisings, and barbecues in honor of "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." When voters went to the polls in November, they gave Old Tip a 143,000 majority in an unprecedented total vote of 2,400,000. Ogle's constituents returned him to Congress, and his home county contributed a 3 to 1 margin for the Log-Cabin Candidate. Disgruntled Democrats claimed that they were beaten by "mere men of straw," "raked and scraped from the sewers, jails and penitentiaries." Whigs proclaimed salvation from "weak and wicked rulers," and everyone welcomed the post-election calm. "The 'long agony' is now over," sighed the relieved editor of *Niles' Register*, "and the community is quieting down."¹¹

¹¹ *Niles' Register*, Nov. 14, 1840, and Jan. 2, 1841; *Globe*, Nov. 9, 1840. Congressman Ogle did not live to take his seat in the Twenty-seventh Congress. He died of "consumption" at his residence in Somerset on May 10, 1841, "in the midst of those constituents of whom he was so proud, and who loved him so well." On June 2, 1841, Congressman James Cooper of Pennsylvania declaimed a eulogy in the House which acclaimed Ogle as "the youngest and strongest amongst us" who "fell in the very spring of his promise." *Congressional Globe*, 27 Cong., 1 Sess., X, 12; *Niles' Register*, May 22 and June 19, 1841.

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