DAVID BRUCE, FEDERALIST POET OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

By Harry R. Warfel

I, far owre th' Atlantic's wave,
A thoughtless multitude amang,
Frae mad Democracy to save,
Pur out my unavailing song. (1)

In these lines David Bruce, Scotch-Irish immigrant poet, sums up the results of five years' endeavor to convert by means of verse, the leaders of the Democratic-Republican party. Penned in 1799, these lines, further, express the whole sentiment of the decadent Federalist party, for immediately after the election of John Adams to the Presidency in 1796, the Federalists as a party rapidly disappeared. But this Shelleyan despair is not caused by the diminution of the strength of the party; it is caused by the reckless abandon with which the entire populace of the nation seemed, to Bruce, to be following the leadership of notoriously traitorous demagogues, men who had gone into the state and federal offices for the gains, financial and political, accruing from such service. Songs, fables, and Hudibrastic couplets are used by this evangelical Scots-Irishman to lampoon and condemn the Democratic-Republicans, Anti-Federalists, Jacobins, and Small Federalists, and their leaders. The men gibbeted include Thomas McKean, Governor of Pennsylvania, 1799-1808; Albert Gallatin, Representative of Pennsylvania in Congress and later Jefferson's Secretary of Treasury; Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Judge of the State Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, author of "Modern Chivalry," an amusing satire on American life in the style of Don Quixote, and of "Western Incidents", an attempt to exculpate his connection with the Whiskey Insurrection; Alexander J. Dallas, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania; Tench Cox, traitor in the Revolution and later a state officer under McKean; William Findley, Member of Congress, and other men of importance at the time.

Few details of the life of David Bruce have come down to us. Both the title page and the "Note by the Editor,"

(1) "Paddy's Advice."
John Colerick the printer, give Scotland as the birthplace of our poet, but in two distinct places Bruce indicates that he is a son of Erin, a descendant of Scotch forefathers:

I aften wish, when in my mirth  
My guitcher [grandshire] ne'er had crost the firth  
That rows its flood between the earth,  
O' the twa island;  
Ware that the case, I'd had my birth  
I' the Scots Highlands.  

—To Aquae Vitae. p. 16

Ware na I sure yer' nae the same,  
I wad hae trow'd ye came frae hame,  
From Londonderry or Colrain.  

—To Aquae Vitae.

Bruce published all his verses under the pseudonym of “The Scots-Irishman,” and the facility with which he uses the Scots dialect proves his affinity to that people. We may safely assume, therefore, that early in the eighteenth century the grandparents of the poet crossed into Ireland. The motive for and the time of this migration cannot be learned either from the extant records of the Shire of Caithness, from which Colerick said Bruce came, or the section of Ireland to which Bruce refers.

Colerick says that Bruce’s father was a farmer and respected citizen in Caithness, but this return to the paternal county could not have been made before the boy David was in his teens. Evidence of this appears in “To Whiskey,” page 12:

When fou [ full] o' thee on Irish grun' [grounds],  
At fairs I've aft' had muckle fun.

Here is certain evidence that the poet spent his early life in Ireland, to the age at least when he was allowed to attend fairs and imbibe with young men of his own age. The ‘Muckle fun’ indicates a love of wanton sport and boisterous humor which undoubtedly clung to him throughout his life. It is quite evident from his autobiographical statements in his poems to whiskey that he was a typical country lad, easily inflamed by the brag and challenge of his fellow rustics.
If the boy did leave Caithness for America in 1784, the family must have returned to Ireland during the time the boy was in his teens. Altho Bruce explains the use of the pseudonym on the ground that the preponderance of Scots and Irish in his community would tend to give his views a more welcome acceptance, it is possible that he was closely connected to the Irish through his mother. The bitter hatred between the Scots and Irish at this time, however, weakens the value of this hypothesis.

Whether Bruce grew up in Scotland or Ireland, he enjoyed few opportunities for study in the private or public schools of the time. Before 1800 few schools existed for the lower gentry, and these were usually poor in accommodation and weak in instruction force. (2) Parochial schools were slowly being established and at one of these the boy may have had some training. That he had been founded well in the elements of English, his prose and verse are faultless in grammar, is no evidence of schooling. Like many of the famous men of the day, he was probably led to an appreciation of, and sincere interest in, the published literature of the day, and from these he gathered his knowledge of the great men of the past and the contemporary leaders. Proof of this is found in his elegiac verses to Robert Burns:

A Muse, dear shade, for thee prepares
This wreath—herself unknown—
Like thee self-taught, she pours her notes
The lonesome dale along.

His reading appears to have been mainly of a literary character. Shakespeare, Milton, Parnell, Gay, Swift, Ramsay, and Burns were certainly his favorites, for he speaks of or quotes from them. His distaste of and aversion for, religious controversy, not only kept him away from the church in these years, but also prevented his reading of the many religious tracts and sermons published in his day. Grounded in the English classics, he set out to emulate them.

Of the first ten years' experience of Bruce in America, practically nothing is known. Colerick says that he settled

(2) Gunn, *Rise and Spread of Education*, p 184,
in Bladensburgh, Prince George County, Maryland, in 1794. It is very likely that his father was with him for Crumrine (3) says that William Bruce, father of the poet, was later associated with Sheriff Matthew Ritchie in the sale of land. David, no doubt, assisted his father, and at this time laid the foundation of his expert knowledge of real estate.

Some time before 1795 David Bruce moved into Pennsylvania, the issue of December 22, 1795, of the Western Telegraphe and Washington Advertiser having published his advertisement announcing “That he has moved his store from John Baventon's Mill (now Bavington, Washington County), upon Raccoon, to George Burgett's new town upon said creek. He is now opening at the above place a larger assortment of dry goods, etc.” From this time until the publication of his Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, in 1801, we can follow the thoughts, if not the actions, of the poet by the frequent publication of his verses in the Western Telegraphe.

Although he may have composed poems before he moved to Burgettstown, there are no traces of them. Unfortunately, the books, manuscripts, and personal belongings of Bruce were removed by a Mrs. Smith, in whose care they were placed, to Beaver County, Pennsylvania, and no trace of them has been found since. (4) Whatever they were, they would aid immensely in the reconstruction of the isolated life of this unique westerner. It must be reasonable to assert that he had practiced no short time before he was able to turn out a piece of verse so excellent in its imitation of Milton as his picture of the French Revolution, “The Land of War”. This poem is placed first among his verses, and as the succeeding poems are printed in the order of their composition and publication, “The Land of War” was probably the first product of his imagination that he wished to give to the world.

“The Land of War,” a blank verse, classified description of the horrors of that tremendous conflict, is really a

(3) Crumrine, History of Washington County, p. 917.
(4) Ibid. p. 918.
fervent prayer that some helmsman may be found to steer the French nation into the port of peace. Within forty-three lines, he paints with broad strokes a terrible picture of the devastation and bloodshed caused by "war's terrific clangor." Not only does Bruce grasp the heightened style, vivid, accurate diction, and powerful imagery of Milton, but also the classic formulae by which epic poets are guided. He begins with an invocation:

Come Fancy, spread thy daring wings, and o'er
The surging deep, far from the tranquil scene
Waft me, to yonder land, where peace dwells not.

Fancy here is used in the eighteenth century meaning of imagination and his invocation of the muse is in accord with the usage of the imitators of the machinery of the classics. Just as Horace begged Calliope to "descend from Heaven" and as Milton, though more sincerely than Horace, called upon Urania to transport him from Hell to Heaven, so Bruce seeks aid in order that he may be able to describe faithfully that which he has not seen.

Then follows a picture of the ravaged land and a personification of the war:

Here savage war around th' insulted coasts
Howls horrible, and on the frontier stalks
With giant stride, or where yon river winds
Thro' clustring vineyards and thro' wall-girt towns
Its mazy course, affrighted at the shock
Of mighty hosts conflicting on its banks.

Likewise revenge, discord, faction, power, and famine are personified in that somewhat vaguely definite way Milton uses in "Paradise Lost." The quoted lines will serve to indicate the success with which Bruce imitated the Miltonic tone and line.

"The Land of War" is the only poem in the volume definitely Miltonic in expression, but we are constantly aware of the fact that he sat at the great master's feet and studied his methods. Here and there occurs an epithet or
an allusion which savors undoubtedly of the great Puritan. But from this time onward Bruce, in form, manner, and diction, imitates the author of that widely known pastoral drama, "The Gentle Shepherd," Allan Ramsay. In the forty poems that follow the Miltonic exercise, nearly all are definitely modelled upon the work of Ramsay. The few exceptions would be the songs, set in Burns' form, or the octameter couplet satires in the manner of "Hudibras," "Peter Pindar" (Doctor John Wolcott), or "McFingal." As Ramsay wrote in all of these forms and achieved no little success in each, it is difficult to tell to whom to credit the stronger influence. First of all, however, Bruce admitted his discipleship to Ramsay, and we can grant quite fairly the poetic kinship of the two. Bruce's reading of the other poets' works would naturally leave an impression upon him, and traces of their influence are certainly evident. But in the large, Ramsay is the chief model. Although Bruce looked to England for his models and sought perfection by imitating them, he was not servile in his imitation, for the feverish anger which caused, and the white heat in which he wrote, his poems melted the shackles of restraint that bind a novice in poetry.

The second poem in the volume is a sketch in imitation of the prevailing descriptive poetry of the time, of Thomson and Ramsay. Although the poem lacks naturalness and ease and is somewhat stilted in expression, it does not descend much below the work of the early romanticists. There is in it that straining for splendor and that studied avoidance of the description of the commonplace which gave Wordsworth, by contrast, his great vogue. Poetic diction, which the great nature poet so roundly condemned, is here in abundance. Although we may doubt the accuracy of the poet's perception and although we may smile at the dazzling brilliance thrown over the earth, the poem remains a very readable example of the new nature poetry. This picture of the setting sun is typical:

Now o'er th' broad horizon's verge the downward sun
Hangs his broad orb. His yellow radiance tips
The trees with gold, illumes the hills green tops,
And, from yon lucid streams resplendent throws
A blaze of trembling glory on the eye;
Beneath that tuft of lofty trees, which crown
Yon gentle eminence, he sinks: and now
He disappears, t'enlighten Indian worlds.

Casting aside the formality of a serious copy-book poet, Bruce next writes three happy verse epistles to an elderly gentleman who has surprised his friends by planning to take a wife. In these three poems Bruce attains the direct manner and jocularly satiric tone which he adopts in the bulk of his later verse. "On the Marriage of a Friend" is concerned with the inevitable question a bachelor asks an apostate:

But say, my friend, can we now sit
And set afloat the social spirit,
Perhaps to a late hour;
And will not angry madam knit
Her brows and look right sour?
The box that holds the drops of life,
Which I can open with my knife,
Can we now taste with freedom,
Or do you think that this new wite
Won't teach us better breeding?

Here, for the first time, Bruce uses the measure which Ramsay, and Burns later, popularized. Here is the ease, the lilt, and the carelessly happy accuracy of phrasing which make these poems still delightful to read. In technique, rhyme, especially, Bruce is frequently very weak. The idea comes first, and the structure second. At times his iamb carouse along in drunken unforgivable reeling, and his rhyme is as forced as the inebriate's attempts to walk a straight line.

The second of this group, "An advice to Old Bachelors," was evidently addressed to the recipient of the preceding poem. If his friend is wise, he will forego matrimony. But if his headstrong inclination forces him, let him take a grave and prudent dame who has seen at least thirty winters. She will need no tedious courtship,

No playing, toying, ogling, sighing,
No whining, languishing, and dying,
No coaxing, flatt'ring, vowing, swearing,
She'll take your word at first hearing;
No poring on her eyes and features,
Like antiquary on old letters,
Vainly labouring to find
The hidden meaning of her mind.

If you will wed, take an OLD MAID.

The pictures in this poem of the gossips, the coquettes, and the old maids are incisive and humorous, and although the studied conceit of Addison's "A Coquette's Heart" is absent, the effect is much the same. An excellent picture it must be of the treatment Bruce, a confirmed bachelor, received at the hands of his neighbors. The interesting preface to the poem by a "Reader" in the May 9th, 1797, issue of the Western Telegraphe, deserves a place here.

"The following has lately come into my hands.—The character it appears under need not alarm the ladies.—There is nothing in it to outrage Modesty, nor even in the smallest degree to offend Delicacy.—No one has a higher respect for the amiable part of our species than the Author; and if any thing in these lines may be considered as a reflection on the sex, let it be remembered that it is only the sillier part of them which is alluded to."

"To My Friends," which appeared first in the Western Telegraphe under date of January 10, 1797, is an attempt to explain the contentment our bachelor author enjoyed in the solitude of the Western Pennsylvania hills, without a wife to aid or distract him. As this poem gives the best picture, even if some of it is apocryphal, of the taste, ambitions, and home life of Bruce, it will not be amiss to quote at length from it.

Thus I, content with small estate,
Desire not to be rich or great;
The stately dome I covet not,
I live as warm in humble cot,
No costly furniture at all,
Nor pictures on the mud-daub'd wall;
"A vulgar taste," you'll say, no doubt—
No, Friends,—I've learned to live without.
Two wooden chairs are all I've got,
With bottoms made of splits of oak,
The one to seat myself upon,
The other for my neighbor John,
When he comes in both cold and thirsty,
And wishful looks for dram of Whiskey;
A trunk to hold my Sunday clothes in;
A bed, *sans* curtains, to repose in;
A table to lay books or meat on;
A desk for papers, and to write on;
A three-legg'd stool is all does follow,
Which I call tripod of Apollo,
Because, forsooth, on it I sit
To write at desk, in scribblin set.
Thus I have gi'en a faithful list
Of all the chattels I'm possest,
And think myself as well supplied
As any fancy son of pride,
Who'n tables, chairs, and fine book-cases,
His empty merit vainly places,
And thinks himself so much the greater,
Because his rooms are lin'd with paper,
Whose dainty food wou'd not go down,
Unless he eats with silver spoon.

But no, me thinks, I hear you cry,
"Sure you must *want* good company,
"The sweet society of friends,
"Where genuine pleasure only reigns,
"Where minds with minds congenial mingle,
"And every kind affection kindle;
"Sure those who *feel not* as you do
"Cannot be company for you!"

There's Pope and Swift, Parnel and Gay,
Can there be better friends than they?
Companions boon, both wise and witty,
Can tell a joke, or sing a ditty,
And, what in them I still like better,
They plague me not with noisy chatter,
But always speak or hold their tongue,
Just as I wish it to be done.—

He anticipates the suggestion of the necessity of a
wife to love and comfort him.
No restless wife to mar my nap,
No sticking elbows in my back.
Nor bauling children to distract.
Some tell me, that a wife will tease
A drowsy soul, much worse than fleas;
Nor is it for a night or two,
But it's the same the whole night thro'—
If so—pray do not counsel evil—
Good stars! a wife wou'd be the D——l;
Besides, the muses haunt my dreams,
Who wou'd change them for mortal queens?
Now, read these lines, and make this comment,
That, in the Mind lies all enjoyment,
And every state of life's the same
To him, who h's learnt his wants t'restrain.

One hesitates to destroy this romantic picture of the home life and interests of the author by dissecting it. The fact is, it must be taken with the other autobiographical references as the only accurate, or nearly accurate, pictures we have of the poet. The home in which Bruce lived in Burgettstown was destroyed many years ago, and, as previously stated, his literary remains and personal belongings were lost as early as 1879. We must believe, I think, that Bruce lived in a very humble home, modeled upon those of his Scotch highland ancestors. Rude and crude though his cottage was, he peopled it with creations far more entertaining and interesting than those in the mansions of the wealthy.

The interest of Bruce in American politics was first evidenced by his poems on the Whiskey Insurrection of 1794. Having moved only recently into the disaffected territory, he sought by light satire to indicate the utter silliness of opposing the government. The first poem on the subject, "To Whiskey," is of interest, further, because it marks a departure in American literature from the old methods. For the first time a writer used his native dialect to convey his philosophy to his emigrant compatriots. Bruce says that he used the dialect and signed this and future poems with the pseudonym, "The Scots-Irishman," in order to secure a readier hearing and acceptances of his doctrine and also to prove that the Scots-Irish were not unanimous, as it was generally supposed, in their approval of the insurrection.
To strengthen his conclusion, the Scots-Irishman pictures the many good qualities of liquor and minimizes the bad. By its stimulating and strengthening power it has cleared the forests, mowed the hay, cut the grain and threshed it. Further, who does not know its rare qualities at a wedding, gossiping or fair? Why then should anyone refuse to pay the slight tax levied upon this kind friend?

Then foul befa' the ungratelu' deil
That wou'd begrudge the pay right weel,
For a' the blessings that ye yiel
In sic a store;
I'd nae turn round upo' my heel
For saxpence more.

This poem was copied, as was the general newspaper custom at that time, in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, and was answered in the same dialect by Hugh Henry Brackenridge under the pseudonym of “Aqua Vitae.” Bruce is accused of being among those who caused the disturbance in 1794 by meeting at Braddock’s Field and attacking General Neville, the revenue collector. Brackenridge describes quite vividly, what seems to be, his reflections upon his part in the rebellion when he says:

It was a kittle [ticklish] thing to take
The government sae by the neck,
To thrapple every thing and break
Down rule and laws;
And make the public ship a wreck,
Without guid cause.

That Brackenridge knew the name of his opponent in this literary joust is evident from these lines:

But wha'ist o' ye mak's the verse,
Sae very kittle and sae terse,
That in the Gazzat gies me [Aqua Vitae] praise?
They say 'tis Bruce.

Bruce is delighted with the answer and in his reply says that nothing ever made his heart leap with delight and pride as this recognition by a fellow poet. But he denies complicity in the plot:
But I maun tell ye, my auld chiel,
I'm nane o' thae wha play'd the deil,
And lowpt [leaped] and jumpt out o' a' reel,
And brak the law.

Had Bruce known the name of his poetical correspondent, there is every reason to believe that he would have added here more than the mere statement "As you did!" It was not until 1798 that Bruce recognized a cunning duplicity in this leading politician.

His own drinking, Bruce says, was never fettered by religious or political connections, and he, therefore, never hesitated to drink openly. The struggle is then decried because it has broken the peace of the valley in which he has been so happy. He reminds his correspondent of the peace of Scotland, and, incidentally, takes a left-handed crack at the Anti-Federalists, whose chief inspiration was the French Revolution:

Ye ken fu' well that Scottish chieals
Are nane o' thee wanrestfu' deils,
Wha wish to keep the world on wheels
Aye turnan round;
And maun be aft laid by the heels
To keep 'em down.

In biting sarcasm Brackenridge reminds the Scots-Irishman of Pythagoras' belief in metamorphosis, a belief in which he had put no stock before his time. Now, however, the old theory is proved true. Bruce, he finds, is Allan Ramsay degenerated into a rough, dull, shrill, reminiscence of his former greatness. Bruce passes off the attack by praising Ramsay:

His sungs will be the warld's delyte
Till wit and sense gang out o' date;
There's naething I can say or write
Sic fame will win;
I'm nae mair than a bletherskyte
Compar'd wi' him.

Receiving no answer, the Scots-Irishman writes "A Complaint—To Aqua Vitae." The main part of the poem relates an experience he had with a young lady of Borrows-
town whom he visited while under the influence of whiskey. In his anguish and remorse he begs Aqua Vitae:

O! dinna leave me thus distrest,
But come and bring yer pow'rful drappy,
And try to slock my lowan [flaming] breast,
And drown my sorrow in a nappy [drink of liquor].

These poems are interesting, not only because of the support Bruce gives the Excise Law, but mainly because we see here the sparkling of a new facet in that versatile genius, Brackenridge. A collaborator of Freneau in the writing of college odes, the author of some of the earliest American dramas, of a history of the Whiskey Rebellion, of a satiric novel, Modern Chivalry, editor of the United States Magazine, and partner in a newspaper, Brackenridge touched more fields of literature than any of his contemporaries. At the same time he was a successful lawyer, a leader in the insurrection, and a skillful politician. For his service in the last field, he was rewarded by Governor Thomas McKean with a place on the bench of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. A comprehensive biography of Brackenridge would be the best political history of early western Pennsylvania, and it is to be regretted that this work has not been completed. (5)

As soon as the death of Robert Burns (July 21, 1796) was chronicled in America, Bruce wrote a beautiful elegy to the memory of the laureate of the Scotch Highlands. Both as a sympathetic appreciation of the man and his works and as an example of the simple elegy, this poem rises very high and approaches the heights. Notable in its sweetness and lyric movement, it is in its unimbellished, wild flower beauty, a worthy tribute to Burns. The first three stanzas are given here:

Soft may thy gentle spirit rest,
Sweet poet of the Plain!
Light lie the green turf on thy Breast,
Till its illum'd again.

(5) The editor has introduced a history seminar on this topic in the University of Pittsburgh. It is hoped a “comprehensive bi-ography of Brackenridge” may be the result.
What tho' neath Labour's rustic hand
Thy early years were bred,
And pinching poverty pursu’d
Thee to thy dying Bed—
Yet Heav’n, sweet Bard! on thee bestow’d
A boon beyond all name,
And bounteous, lifted up thy soul
With its own native flame.

A second poem, “Verses on Reading the Poems of Robert Burns,” is really an attack upon the low professional standards in America. The opening lines are in praise of Burns’ work.

Your verses, Robert, short an’ lang,
Hae a’ the grace an’ pow’r of sang,
Sae sweet in hamely phrase:
Just like your ain bra’ bonny Jean,
Sae gracefu’, simple, tight and clean,
Clad in her ilk-day claiths.

“Death and Dr. Hornbook”, Burns’ excellent satire on schoolmaster John Wilson, reminded Bruce of the condition of the professions in America. The professional quacks have had no training, for

Ance are can bleed a horse or mare,
He sets up for physician.

Divinity and Law are no better:

It’s just to jimp frae cart or pleugh,
To Bar or Pulpit fit enough
For Pleading or for Preaching!

But, what had maist employ’d your vein,
An, faund ye ay the readiest game,
Wad be our politicians;
They swarm like flies, an’ bizz an’ sting,
An’ dab their snouts in ilka thing,
Without leave or license.

It makes na whare the deil they come frae,
Ance they set foot up’ the countrie,
They’re fill’d wi’ inspiration:
Their depth of knowledge, many fathoms,
Dings [excels] that o’ Washington an’ Adams
To guide an’ rule the nation!
Certainly Bruce had no very high opinion of some of the lesser leaders of the nation and the democracy which produced them. Although he here seems to strike mainly at the enemies of the established government and of Washington and Adams, he is actuated by a deeper feeling. Throughout his verses he strikes at the indiscriminate elevation of ordinary people to the highest offices. His was not a belief in pure democracy; rather, it was in a sort of benevolent tyranny in which highly educated and specialized citizens governed for the benefit of all. The Jeffersonian doctrine was anthema to him, and he ridiculed it frequently in song and fable. But, as we shall see in his "Political Opinion," the Scots-Irishman was more interested in an honest, happy well-organized, peaceful government than he was in the mould into which the government was poured.

The passing of the heroic Washington from the Presidency, Bruce thought, brought too few commendatory verses from the American people. The great leader was one of the superior men meant to govern and Bruce felt that his place could never be filled. The state of literature in the West is hinted at in the letter Bruce sent to the Western Telegraphe with his eulogy. "As I have seen nothing in the poetic way on the retiring of the beloved Washington, that it may not be said the muse were entirely silent on the great occasion, I send you the following lines. I could wish, however, that these ladies had not been so sparing in contributing their mite, or had inspired some of their more favored sons to deliver it:- The subject is certainly worthy of their highest flights and most exalted strains." (6) Typical of the five panegyric stanzas is:

His manly policy will learn
Ambitious Pride the rage t'restrain,
Nor more the peaceful world to stain
With blood of human kind.

Unparallel'd on History's page
His name will shine from age to age,
The Hero, Patriot, and Sage,
In happy union join'd.

(6) The Western Telegraphe, April 4, 1797.

(To be continued in the October Issue)