HENRY MARIE BRACKENRIDGE
AND HIS WRITINGS
JOHN FRANCIS McDERMOTT

OF ALL the commentators on the western country perhaps the most understanding was Henry Marie Brackenridge. In him a native curiosity and sympathy were reinforced by a knowledge of the West gained from three periods of residence there occupying not less than six full years during the course of twenty-five years.

His background was unusually cosmopolitan and intellectual. His father was Hugh Henry Brackenridge, A.B. and A.M., Princeton College, sometime chaplain in the Revolutionary army, editor, lawyer, satirist, politician, the classmate of James Madison and Philip Freneau. The extent, variety, and quality of the father's knowledge is made clear by the lists of books that he assigned to his son to read. Pittsburgh was in good part settled by former Revolutionary officers, and the Federalists were strong in the town. On the other hand, Brackenridge, Sr., was a Jeffersonian in politics and a vigorous fighter for his ideas. Among his friends were Lucas, Audrain, Marie, and other Frenchmen of Pittsburgh, and Albert Gallatin, as well as many of the Scotch-Irish stock from which he himself had sprung. Young Brackenridge had for godmother Ma-

1 Mr. McDermott is assistant professor of English at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. He is preparing for publication a two-volume edition of Henry Marie Brackenridge's writings on the western country and would welcome any corrections or additions to the biographical sketch and list of writings here presented, especially copies of letters written by Brackenridge. Ed.

2 For the life of Henry Marie Brackenridge, the primary sources are his own works; most of the material here, unless otherwise identified, is drawn from the Recollections and other of his writings. In addition to these, a free use has been made of Claude M. Newlin's excellent Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge (Princeton, 1932) and of his sketches of both father and son in the Dictionary of American Biography. A brief critical estimate of the elder Brackenridge will be found in Vernon Parrington, The Colonial Mind, 390–395 (Main Currents of American Thought, vol. 1—New York, 1927).
dame Marie of Pittsburgh. From the very beginning, then, he had contacts with different nationalities and different points of view.

When the boy was little more than five years of age, his father decided that he should learn French by living among French people; consequently he sent him in care of Jean B. C. Lucas, a Norman settled near Pittsburgh, to Ste Genevieve in the far distant Illinois country. Here he was placed by his temporary guardian in the care of the family of Vital Beauvais, a family among the oldest in that region. He went to school among French children and forgot his native language. After a residence of nearly three years, he was called for once more by Lucas who was to take him back to Pittsburgh. But he was ill on the way, and his experience of the French people was prolonged for about a year during which he lived in Gallipolis with Dr. Antoine Saugrain, later a resident of St. Louis. Here again he lived as a member of a French family. When he arrived home at last he was still some months from his tenth birthday. Surely an unusual life for a little American boy! The important thing was that because his experience had been a pleasant one he was to grow up with the idea that the French, too, were people.

His father, though not without affection for the boy, was a stern man and a strict disciplinarian intellectually. Perhaps he expected too much of ten years. Certainly he submitted his son to a severe course of reading, the details of which may be found in the Recollections. If reading could broaden the mind, Henry Marie would not lack breadth. Eventually, after a period in the Pittsburgh Academy, of which his father was one of the founders, young Brackenridge studied at Jefferson College for a short time. The father was not interested in formal education, in de-

1 A year or two ago there appeared in the New York Times a picture of the restored fort at Harrodsburg, the caption of which referred to this place as the "first white settlement west of the Alleghenies," and the same statement has been made elsewhere. As this place was established in 1774 it may be either that many people are ignorant of the age of various western cities including Detroit, Mobile, New Orleans, and St. Louis, as well as a number of smaller places, or else that they do not consider the French as white people. It is simply another indication that the French in the Mississippi Valley were and still are regarded as foreigners even though they were in that region for more than a hundred years before the purchase.
grees; he simply wanted his son to learn, to know. Henry Marie read law presently, was admitted to the bar in Baltimore, and practiced there and in Somerset, Pennsylvania.

But he was restless and dissatisfied. In the spring of 1810, at the age of twenty-four years, he went down the Ohio on his second trip to the West. He stopped again at Gallipolis and was disappointed to find his friends gone. He went ashore at New Madrid. He journeyed on to Ste Genevieve and was happy to renew his acquaintance with members of the Beauvais family, who received him delightedly. A little later he set out for St. Louis, for he had determined to establish himself in the practice of law there. He attended court in the territorial capital and followed the court in its circuit of Ste Genevieve and Cape Girardeau and New Madrid.

Business, however, was not too pressing, and Brackenridge found time, during the winter months of 1810–11, to write a series of articles for the St. Louis paper on the Louisiana Territory. He was not so bowed down with labor that he felt it necessary to refuse the invitation of Manuel Lisa to go up the Missouri with a trading expedition in the spring of the new year, and he detailed his experiences in a journal of the trip. On the twenty-seventh of June the editor of the Louisiana Gazette, Joseph Charless, announced, "We this week finish Mr. Brackenridge's Sketches, and cannot but regret the loss of his literary contributions. Mr. B. is now making a tour of the N. W. and Western borders of Louisiana and will perhaps visit the city of Mexico, and return by the province of Texas to New Orleans. We understand he intends to publish the results of his travels." This was premature and a bit inaccurate. Brackenridge returned down the Missouri and on his arrival in August denied that he intended to publish an account of his tour. He had left St. Charles with Lisa on April 2 and was again in St. Louis on August 2, for on that day he dated a letter to the editor in answer to Charless' note of June 27:

I cannot but feel gratified, by the flattering terms, in which you speak, of the hasty and imperfect essays of mine, published in your paper, on the topography of this territory; but I have read with regret, in the same paragraph,
a statement of my having sat out on a journey to the westward, with the intention of visiting the city of Mexico, and of publishing the result of my travels, on my return to my own country. It is true, I have more than once expressed an opinion, that such a tour, in case of the independence of the Mexican colonies, & of an amicable intercourse between them and the United States, would be highly interesting: but having devoted myself to a different pursuit, and besides feeling deficient in the qualifications which a person undertaking such a tour ought to possess, I never had any serious thought of it. You will forgive me for troubling you upon a subject which can be of no public interest, but which, if passed by in silence, would place me in a disagreeable embarrassment with respect to my acquaintances, who may suppose I have left the U. States. An excursion which I had made up the Missouri has doubtless given rise to the idea. It had been my intention to have descended the Mississippi last spring, in order to settle myself in my profession in the lower country, but circumstances preventing, I postponed it until fall, and in the mean time, was induced to accompany Mr. Manuel Lisa, to the Mandan villages, from whence I returned a few days ago in company with Mr. Bradbury, who had ascended the river for the purpose of pursuing his researches on the natural history of the country.

In 1814, however, Brackenridge did add to his Views of Louisiana the Journal in question. On this second visit he was in upper Louisiana for a year and a half and he made a good impression on the French there. Among other letters of introduction to people in New Orleans he bore one from Charles Gratiot of St. Louis to Poydras in which the former asked that the young man be assisted in establishing himself in his profession in the southern city and declared that "il n'est pas sans capacité & tres recommendables pour ses bonnes moeurs.":

One paragraph from the Views of Louisiana will illustrate as well as any the sympathy of his approach, the shrewd understanding of the French character, and the avoidance of harsh and righteous judgment on the French people that was typical of this writer. He declared:

Their amusements, were cards, billiards, and dances: this last of course the favorite. The dances, were cotillions, reels, and sometimes the minuet. During

4 Louisiana Gazette, June 27, August 8, 1811. This paper was founded in 1808 as the Missouri Gazette, but Charless, the editor and owner, a little later changed its name to Louisiana Gazette and then once more reverted to the old title. The list of articles that Brackenridge wrote for this weekly newspaper will be found in the bibliography that follows this sketch.

5 November 3, 1811, in Gratiot Letterbook (Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis).
the carnival, the balls follow in rapid succession. They have a variety of pleasing customs, connected with this amusement. Children have also their balls, and are taught a decorum and propriety of behavior, which is preserved through life. They have a certain ease and freedom of address, and are taught the secret of real politeness, self-denial; but which by the apes of French manners, is mistaken for an affected grimace of complaisant regard, and a profusion of bows, scrapes and professions.6

In such an interpretation Brackenridge showed a knowledge of the French that was entirely lacking in most Americans.

Once in New Orleans he settled down to the study of Spanish law. He added chapters on Louisiana to his articles on Missouri and presently published them as Views of Louisiana. He was soon busy with legal work in that state. He assisted in framing the legislative act for the judiciary system of Louisiana, he served as deputy attorney-general and as district judge. He did not, however, remain long in the South. He returned to Baltimore, practiced law there, became a member of the Maryland legislature, and in one interval of six weeks, at the request of a publisher, wrote his History of the Late War, first published in 1816, and issued in a revised edition the next year. In 1817 he published also his pamphlet, South America, a Letter on the Present State of That Country to James Monroe, in which he urged recognition and recommended a policy that was later worked out in the Monroe Doctrine. As a result of this work he was made secretary of a commission that was sent to study conditions in South America. On his return he published his Voyage to South America, and he continued to serve in the Maryland legislature.

Though Brackenridge professed to be no author, though he looked with some contempt upon writing as a career, his first book was excellently received. He had every encouragement to continue. In chapter 27 of his Recollections he tells with some pleasure that during the course of publication of the original articles in the Gazette Jefferson had requested of him all the numbers then published and to be published. Other scattered references will indicate the interest Brackenridge’s work aroused. Joseph Herzog, a merchant of Philadelphia, asked his nephew and part-

6 Views of Louisiana, 187 (1814 edition).
ner in St. Louis, Christian Wilt, to dispatch "with the first goods you send on, the series of statistical papers published by your printer on Louisiana." In the South a little later John Winship wrote to a friend: "If I could obtain 'Sketches of Louisiana by Wm Breckenridge' I know it would be an acceptable present to you—This author is a young man of talents, information & great excentricity. He knows the country from actual observation. He speaks the French Spanish English & Indian, & has devoted years to his favorite pursuits."

Another writer in the same field, William Darby, whose *Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana* became a standard work recognized as of the first excellence, was hearty in his acknowledgment of Brackenridge's work. In the preface to his book, Darby said:

Many works have been written upon Louisiana, containing but little matter that can either instruct or amuse. One, however, possesses both those requisites in an eminent degree. Mr. Breckenridge wrote from personal observation, unshackled by preconceived opinions in religion, politics, national distinctions, or physics:—This enlightened young man described men as he found them, represented objects without distortion; and as far as his descriptions extend may be considered correct, chaste, and natural. If Mr. Breckenridge had accompanied his work with a map correctly drawn from actual admeasurement and observation, he would have left but little for his successors to execute, in giving to the literary world a clear, comprehensive, and finished picture of Louisiana.

Is it any wonder then that the return of Brackenridge to the West should be hailed in such terms as those used by the editor of the *Saint Louis Enquirer* of October 7, 1820? He wrote:

It is stated that Hugh M. Breckenridge Esquire, formerly of Pittsburgh, is now on his way to Missouri, and means to settle in this State and follow the practice of the law. Mr. Breckenridge was in this country some eight or nine years ago, and by his writings contributed to make known abroad the high character of Missouri. In the short space of his absence he has seen much of the

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7 May 13, 1811, in Herzog Letterbook (Missouri Historical Society).
8 Winship to William Plumer, Jr., Natchitoches, March 20, 1814, in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 11:573 (March, 1925). Though Winship has both author and book misnamed, he no doubt refers to Brackenridge and his *Viesus*. The copyright entry date for the book is November 24, 1813.
In the month of November Brackenridge arrived for his third period of residence in the central part of the Mississippi Valley. His notice in the town papers announced that as an attorney at law he "may be consulted at his Office in the buildings of Mr. Buseron, a few doors from Main-street. He will attend the courts of St. Charles, and Edwardsville, in the state of Illinois, &c. &c." Timothy Flint, who was in St. Louis about this time, describes a young lawyer who may well have been Brackenridge: "There was a young gentleman, Mr. B., who gave strong promise of future excellence. He was the only member of the bar, whom I heard plead, that showed in his manner the fruit of classical taste and discipline. He was happy in his arrangement and choice of words, and concise and condensed; and had a suavity in his manner. But these things were too often thrown away upon the jury in a region, where noise and flourish are generally mistaken for sense and reason."

But Brackenridge, however well received, however many friends he found, was still restless and uncertain. When Paxton published his directory of St. Louis in the spring of 1821, Brackenridge was listed as "attorney at law, north B. above Main," but in the Saint Louis Enquirer for July 7, 1821, a list of unclaimed letters as of June 30 includes the name of Brackenridge.

This time on leaving St. Louis he went to Florida, another new territory offering promise. On the way he fell in with Andrew Jackson,

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1 The variations on a name in this editorial are rung by the editor himself. No doubt had he had more space he might have found more.

11 Saint Louis Enquirer, November 18, 1820; Missouri Gazete, November 22, 1820.

12 Timothy Flint, Recollections of the Last Ten Years... in the Valley of the Mississippi, 184 (Boston, 1826).
the newly appointed governor, and Brackenridge accepted a position as secretary and translator to Jackson. Soon after their arrival in Florida, however, he was made a judge in the territory, and he remained in Florida in that capacity until 1832 when Jackson removed him from office. His own side of his quarrel with Jackson Brackenridge presented in his *Letters to the Public*, in which he attacked Jackson bitterly.

The remainder of his life, for present purposes, can be told briefly. In 1827 he married Caroline Marie, the daughter of his godmother, and through her he came into fortune. With the exception of membership on a commission provided for in the Mexican treaty of April 11, 1839, and of the serving of a term in Congress, in 1840–41, he devoted his time to private pursuits—the practice of law, the care of his estate at Tarentum, northeast of Pittsburgh, and his literary labors. He died on January 18, 1871.

A LIST OF THE WRITINGS OF HENRY MARIE BRACKENRIDGE


4. “Sketches of the Territory of Louisiana.” This series of sketches appeared in various issues of the *Louisiana Gazette*. The editor’s note reads as follows:

The Editor having been much solicited by private letters, from his friends, in various parts of the United States, for information respecting this Territory, has taken this method of satisfying their queries by a general description. The publication of it, will be gratifying to publick curiosity, and afford useful information, to such as may be desirous of emigrating. The Editor is indebted for these sketches to the pen of H. M.
Brackenridge, Esq. We consider it a tribute, due to Mr. Brackenridge, to say, that the fullest reliance can be placed upon the accuracy and impartiality of his descriptions.

Following is a list of the sketches:

Sketch, in *Louisiana Gazette*, January 31, 1811. This sketch is introductory; the author indicates briefly the extent of the Territory and announces his purpose "to state facts unadorned; he does not wish to amuse, merely, but to give information."

"Rivers—Face of the Country, &c.," in *Louisiana Gazette*, February 7, 14, 1811.

"Soil—Climate, &c. From New Madrid to the Missouri," in *Louisiana Gazette*, February 14, 1811.


"Political Divisions of the Territory, Inhabitants, Settlements," in *Louisiana Gazette*, March 7, 14, 1811.

"Towns and Villages," in *Louisiana Gazette*, March 14, 21, 1811.

"Manners and Customs of the Ancient Inhabitants—Government—Historical Epocha—Comparison between Their Situation under the Former and the Present Governments," in *Louisiana Gazette*, April 4, 11, 1811.


The above sketch continued, and subtitled: "Indian Nations of the Missouri," in *Louisiana Gazette*, April 25, 1811.


A letter from Brackenridge to Charless dated August 2, 1811 (quoted in the foregoing sketch of Brackenridge) appeared in the *Louisiana Gazette* of August 8, 1811.

See also no. 6.

5. "On the Population and Tumuli of the Aborigines of North America. In a Letter from H. H. [sic] Brackenridge to Thomas Jefferson." This letter, which is, of course, by H. M. Brackenridge (cf. *Recollections*, 1868, p. 254), is dated Baton Rouge, July 25, 1813, and was read by Jefferson at the meeting of the American Philosophical Society on October 1, 1813.
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(the Proceedings of the society gives October 2 as the date of the meet-
ing). It was published in the Transactions of the society for 1818, new
series, 1:151-159. The Bibliothèque Nationale and the Missouri His-
torical Society at St. Louis possess separates of this title.

6. Views of Louisiana; Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri
River, in 1811. Pittsburgh, Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum, 1814. In the
preface to this volume Brackenridge writes that after his arrival in New
Orleans in December, 1811, he met “with one of the publishers of this
work, Mr. Cramer, and proposed to him the publication of the essays be-
fore mentioned, with the journal of my voyage up the Missouri; to which
he assented, on condition that I would extend it, and add something rela-
tive to the state of Louisiana.” Brackenridge gathered up the contribu-
tions to the Louisiana Gazette (see nos. 1, 2, 3, 4), rewrote them, added ma-
terial, and appended his journal.

This book was reviewed in the North American Review, 4:112-128,
and in the Edinburgh Review, 32:231-248 (July, 1819). In his Recol-
lections, 253 (1868 edition), Brackenridge refers to a review in the Lon-
don Quarterly; this journal was not then published. Probably he referred
to the Quarterly Review of London, but this compiler has not found any
review of his book in volumes 10 to 24 inclusive of that publication. Of
these last two reviews, he says, “An extract from it in one of them, relat-
ing to Colonel Boon and his companions settled around him in the
Missouri wilderness, gave the hint to a beautiful passage in the Don Juan
of Lord Byron.” The passage in Don Juan is probably that in canto 8,
stanzas 61-67, but there is nothing in the Edinburgh Review article to
justify Brackenridge’s statement.

A German translation of the Views was published at Weimar, in 1818.
This did not include the journal, nor all the material of the original
Views.

See also nos. 7 and 9.

7. Journal of a Voyage up the River Missouri; Performed in Eighteen Hun-
dred and Eleven. Second edition, revised and enlarged by the author,
Baltimore, Coale & Maxwell, 1815. The Library of Congress and the
Bibliothèque Nationale have copies with the 1815 imprint. Other copies
of this second edition bear the date 1816. This work was first published
in 1814 with the Views of Louisiana (see no. 6). It is here reprinted separately, rewritten and slightly enlarged.

This Journal has been reprinted in Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., Early Western Travels, 1748–1846, 6:21–166 (Cleveland, 1904). Thwaites used an 1816 copy.


Translations into Italian: Milano, N. Bettoni, 1821. 3 vols.; Firenze, L. Marchini, 1824. 4 vols. in 2; Firenze, Tipografia Formigli, 1825.

All the editions described here are listed in the Library of Congress catalogue.

Brackenridge (in the letter to Walter Forward printed in Recollections, 1868, p. 275–286), gives an account (p. 281) of the writing of this History:

My finances began to run low, without certain supply from stated salary or profession; and the dark cloud of debt began to show itself at a distance. One of my bookseller friends made me a proposal, which I was tempted to accept, although it put my mental powers to a severe trial. He was desirous of getting up an early history of the war, so as to meet the fall sales, and offered me six hundred dollars for one, provided it could be written and put through the press in six weeks. He procured for me all the requisite documents, files of papers, pamphlets, official reports, etc. Having procured a suitable place (a kind of garret), I set to work. I read and arranged in the daytime, and then wrote at night. My task was thirty pages of foolscap, which I had ready in the morning with the corrected sheets (sixteen pages octavo) when the printer’s devil paid me his visit.
The task was accomplished within the time, but the consequences were
terrible... it was long before I recovered entirely from this overexertion.
I realized a handsome sum for so short a period of labor. Two thousand
copies, being the first edition, disappeared almost immediately. Another
edition of four thousand was called for, for which I received half the
amount I got for the first.

See also no. 22.

9. *Views of Louisiana; Containing Geographical, Statistical and Historical No-
tices of That Vast and Important Portion of America.* Baltimore, Schae-
ffer & Maund, 1817. This is a second edition of no. 6, revised, rearranged,
and partly rewritten, and published without the journal.

The only copies that this compiler has seen, or seen referred to, of this
issue have been as described, but there is little question that there must
have been an issue of the new edition in 1816. On Saturday, June 8,
1816, the chapter on levees from this work appeared in *Niles’ Weekly
Register*, 10:336-338, and the revised text of the so-called 1817 edi-
tion, not that of the 1814, was followed. The new edition, therefore,
must have been issued before this date.

10. “Letter to the Editor of Niles Weekly Register,” dated Baltimore, June
This letter was occasioned by the printing of the chapter on levees from
the *Views* (see no. 9). Revised slightly, this letter was reprinted as an
appendage to the chapter on levees in the 1817 issue of the *Views*, p.
316-323.

11. “The Florida Question Stated,” in *The American Register or Summary
Review of History, Politics, and Literature*, 1:128-148 (Philadelphia,
Robert Walsh, ed., 1817. 2 vols.). In the letter to Forward (Recollec-
tions, 1868, p. 278) he refers to his “statement in ‘Walshe’s [*sic*] Regis-
ter,’ of the question of the boundaries of Louisiana, under the treaties be-
tween the different nations, who, at various periods, in succession, were
the owners of the province.”

Monroe... by an American.* Washington, office of the National Regis-
ter, 1817. 52 p. Brackenridge, then waiting to go to South America as
secretary to a government commission, wrote to Forward (Recollec-
tions, 1868, p. 285): “I have just published, in pamphlet form, an anonymous
letter, addressed to Mr. Monroe, on the subject of the recognition of the independence of the South American States, which is the great question of the day. In this I have availed myself of the extensive course of reading which my present opportunities have afforded me.”

This pamphlet was published in London (Ridgeway, Booth, 1818. 72 p.); and was translated into French by the Abbé de Pradt. For more about the European reception of the pamphlet, see Recollections, 286–288 (1868 edition).


14. Speech on the Jew Bill in the House of Delegates of Maryland, 1818. In Recollections, 293 (1868 edition), Brackenridge says, “This speech was published in pamphlet form by the Jews of Baltimore, and widely circulated.”

The implication is that the speech was published shortly after delivery.

See also nos. 19 and 34.


See also no. 16.


18. A Eulogy, on the Lives and Characters of John Adams & Thomas Jefferson, “delivered at the Courthouse in Pensacola, on Tuesday, 15th August,
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Reprinted as noted in no. 19.  


"Western Antiquities, Communicated in a Letter to Thomas Jefferson," July 25, 1813 (p. 192-205).  

"Letter on the Culture of Live Oak, to the Secretary of the Navy," June 1, 1828 (p. 206-225).  

"Report Adopted by the City Council of Baltimore, on the Subject of the Defence, &c." (p. 226-236).  

For the article on antiquities, see also no. 5; for the speech on the Jew Bill, see also nos. 14 and 34.  


Another edition, signed H. M. Brackenridge, enlarged and corrected, Pittsburgh, Johnston & Stockton, 1835. The Library of Congress catalogue says that this is not an abridgment of the larger history (no. 8), but a summary.  

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It is stated that there are editions dated 1836, 1838, and 1840. For the 1868 edition, see no. 34. This autobiographical work covers Brackenridge's life from birth (1786) to May, 1810.


30. Mexican Letters Written during the Progress of the Late War between the United States and Mexico, "by B. H. M. Brackenridge [sic]: now collected and republished, with notes and corrections, to be completed in two numbers." No. 1, Washington, printed by R. A. Waters, 1850. 85 p.


32. History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Commonly Called the Whiskey Insurrection, 1794. Pittsburgh, printed by W. S.
Haven, 1859. Copies in Mercantile Library, Public Library, and Missouri Historical Society, all of St. Louis.


34. *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West.* Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1868. Second edition, enlarged. 331 p. No. 23, reprinted entire, forms the first nineteen chapters of this edition. The remaining ten chapters present the details of Brackenridge's life in upper Louisiana in 1810 and 1811, and of a return visit ten years later. The appendix contains the following items by Brackenridge:


"Speech on the Jew Bill, in the House of Delegates of Maryland, 1818" (p. 288–317). See nos. 14 and 19. In the *Recollections* this speech is introduced by an exchange of letters: "Letter from Judge Young on the Jew Bill," Greensburg, January 13, 1819, and "Reply of H. M. Brackenridge," Annapolis, January 2, 1819. There is an obvious error in the dating of one of these letters.
