HUGH HENRY BRACKENRIDGE AND THE ORDER OF THE CINCINNATI

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The Society of the Cincinnati had been under attack long before the relatively mild strictures of Hugh Henry Brackenridge appeared in Modern Chivalry in 1792. Before its first general meeting at Philadelphia in May, 1784, the Order of the Cincinnati had already aroused much adverse criticism in the newly established United States.1 Aedanus Burke, a member of the Supreme Court of South Carolina, had written a pamphlet,2 first printed in Charleston on October 10, 1783, under the pseudonym Cassius; the epigraph of the pamphlet was "Blow ye the Trumpet in Zion," and Burke proceeded to sound the alarm against the dangers he saw in the organization. It was his attack upon the aristocratic tendencies of the hereditary order which focused the attention of the American people upon the supposed dangers inherent in the Society.3

The Society of the Cincinnati was formed in April, 1783, by officers of the Continental Army at the suggestion of General Henry Knox.4 It was founded for fraternal, patriotic, and allegedly non-political aims. George Washington was its first president; however, Washington was evidently drafted for the office and knew little about the organization or the duties of his position.5 He apparently was never the prime mover of the Society, for when he was reelected to the presidency of the order in 1786 he accepted only on condition that he be excused from performing the duties of office.6 He continued to serve as the Society's president until his death in 1799. Washington is

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2 Full title: Considerations on the Society or Order of Cincinnati Lately Instituted By the Major Generals, Brigadiers, and Other Officers of the American Army. Proving that it Creates, A Race of Hereditary Patricians, or Nobility; and Interspersed with Remarks on its Consequences to the Freedom and Happiness of the Republic.
3 McMaster, I, 173-175.
4 Henry Knox, 1750-1806, U.S. Secretary of War (1785-94).
6 Writings, XXIX, 457.
acknowledged by Burke in his pamphlet as being innocent of any ulterior motives in regard to the Cincinnati.  

When Washington accepted the presidency of the order he scrupulously attempted to discover the public's opinion of the Cincinnati. Thomas Jefferson's reply to Washington's request for his opinion of the Society candidly stated his objections to the hereditary nature of the order, its unnatural division between the civil and military, and the ulterior ends to which it might be directed. In another letter to Washington written in 1786 Jefferson observed that "I have never heard a person in Europe, learned or unlearned, express his thoughts on this institution, who did not consider it as dishonourable and destructive to our governments . . . ."  

In a letter to Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., written in April, 1784, the month before the first general meeting, Washington urged that only men of integrity and ability be sent to the convention in order to convince the people that their fears were ill-founded. He suggested that the Society yield to public opinion by removing its objectionable features. In the circular letter composed by Washington and adopted by the convention in May, 1784, Washington advised the State Societies of the Cincinnati to approve his motion to strike out all political tendencies, do away with the rule of hereditary membership, allow no more honorary members, refuse money from foreign members, and turn over the funds of the local societies to their respective state legislatures. The various State Societies, in which the real authority was vested, reacted to the circular letter differently, the New England states, in which the Federalists had complete control of the order, being somewhat unsympathetic, the Middle and Southern states, in which the Republicans were more numerous, proving more amenable.  

While a student at Princeton, which he entered in 1786, Brackenridge was a member of the American Whig Society rather
than the Cliosophic, or Tory Club. Other American Whigs were James Madison, Philip Freneau, and Light Horse Harry Lee. Aaron Burr, who later had the somewhat dubious honor of belonging to both the Order of the Cincinnati and the Tammany organization, switched his allegiance in 1771 from the American Whigs to the Cliosophics. Both Burr and Hamilton were members of the Cincinnati. When Hamilton was killed by Burr in their famous duel, his remains were buried with military honors under the auspices of the Cincinnati, of which he was then president. In Burr's darkest hours the Cliosophic Society, by this time a Federalist organization, remained loyal to its member.

Though neither the Society of the Cincinnati nor the Tammany Societies admitted to having been formed for political reasons, they soon became associated with the Federalist and the Republican parties, respectively. The Tammany Societies were just a few among many democratic clubs springing up throughout the United States at that time. Another democratic club was the Mingo Creek Society of the United Freemen, which was mentioned by Brackenridge as the cradle of the Whiskey Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania. Brackenridge is not known to have been a member of such societies, though he evidently sympathized with them.

Among the prominent Federalists in Western Pennsylvania was the powerful "Neville connection," a group related to one another by blood and marriage and which included among its members General John Neville, who served under Washington in Braddock's expedition and who acted as commandant at Fort Pitt during the first two years of the Revolution. He was a member of the Order of the Cincinnati in Virginia and continued until the end of the War. He transferred in

14 Brackenridge's time at Princeton is well covered by Martha Conner in her "Hugh Henry Brackenridge at Princeton University, 1768-1771," WPHM, X (1927), 146-162.
16 Loc. cit.
17 Several Tammany Societies were founded in various American cities after the American Revolution. Of these, only one has survived: the Society of St. Tammany, or Columbian Order, founded in New York City on May 12, 1789, by an ex-soldier named William Mooney. Its activities at first mostly social, ceremonial, and patriotic, the Society became a leading political force, furthering reforms in behalf of the common man, though increasingly controlled by men of privileged classes.
18 Link's monograph, Democratic-Republican Societies, provides not only a thorough coverage of such societies but also an excellent bibliography.
19 Ibid., 147.
20 Ibid., 16-17.
1784. He was a delegate to the Pennsylvania Convention which ratified the federal Constitution. From 1792 to 1795 he was an inspector of survey for the collection of the whiskey tax. In later years he lived near Pittsburgh, where he entertained Louis Philippe, then the Duc d'Orleans and later king of the French (1830-48), and his two brothers, the Duc de Montpensier and the Comte de Beaujolais. This writer has discovered no proof, but there is presumptive evidence that General Neville was an extreme Federalist, who perhaps entertained aristocratic if not monarchical sentiments, which some Federalists possessed; and who was perhaps one of the causes of the popular fear that the western lands, of which he owned a considerable amount, were about to be put under a feudal system. Other members of the "connection" were the General's son, Colonel Presley Neville, and Neville B. Craig, who published a history of Pittsburgh in which he is said to have maligned the character of Brackenridge. Moreover, Brackenridge is said to have been at odds with the "Neville connection" before the Whiskey Insurrection began. Craig, incidentally, belonged to another organization which Brackenridge satirized, the American Philosophical Society.

Brackenridge first mentions the Order of the Cincinnati in his novel, *Modern Chivalry*, when Captain Farrago decides to stay at an inn where an officer belonging to the Cincinnati is also stopping. The landlady mistakes the eagle which appears on the medal of the Cincinnati for a goose, and apologizes to the officer for being asked to slay a bird which the officer apparently reveres. The officer later relates the incident involving a clergyman who mistook the eagle for a graven image. Captain Farrago then states his sentiments re-

22 See John Fiske, *The Critical Period of American History 1783-1789* (New York, 1888), 119, where he refers to the fear that members of the Cincinnati would acquire western land, import German peasants, and establish a feudal system. In order to forestall any such movement, it was provided by Congress that in any new states formed out of the western territory no person holding a hereditary title should be admitted to citizenship.
24 Loc. cit.
25 *Modern Chivalry* is a satirical and picaresque novel which pictures backwoods life and expresses moderate democratic views. The episode with which this paper is concerned occurs in Part I, Book V, 69-75, in Claude M. Newlin's New York edition of 1937. All page references to *Modern Chivalry* in this paper are to the Newlin edition.
garding such societies: they foster exclusiveness; they allow men of questionable character to ride on the coat-tails of those of sterling character, instead of standing on their own merit; and they seldom promote the general good.

The officer is on his way to deliver an oration before the Cincinnati of his state, and when Captain Farrago learns of this he delivers a short discourse on the art of writing orations. He begins by stating that he does not see any particular use in the institution of the Cincinnati, unless perhaps the occasional delivery of an oration contributes to the development of eloquence. He even has his doubts about this, for the subject of American Independence is a vast one and most such orations are usually abstract discourses which degenerate into commonplace. Moreover, an oration should persuade the judgment or affect the passions, but these orations of the Cincinnati are delivered before those whose judgments are already persuaded, those whose affections are already gained. The officer is intimidated by Captain Farrago’s strictures and hesitates to recite his oration. The oration he delivers is a short one, and I believe contains within it much of Brackenridge’s criticism of the Cincinnati. The officer refers to the “particular achievements of each officer,” for if one does not credit all who contributed to the cause there will be little purpose in making such a speech. This I interpret as Brackenridge’s view, which he reiterates later in the conversation between Farrago and the officer as well as in the long versified version, “M’Comas’s” Hudibrastic Cincinnatus, that the short-term officers, the militia, the enlisted men, and the noncombatants who had contributed in their various ways, should not be discriminated against by exclusion from the Cincinnati. Brackenridge scores a palpable hit on the rule of hereditary membership when the officer in his oration declares that “the fame of a soldier none but himself can enjoy, there can be no heir or devisee of his property.” Much better to have died than to “languish with sickness in a bed in calm life, where relations standing round, wish the departure of the shade, and gape for the possession which he leaves behind.” Gouverneur Morris, who hankered after membership in the Cincinnati for over 20 years and who purchased the Cincinnati medals from the estates of Chevalier de Luzerne and John Paul Jones

26 Modern Chivalry, Part I, 172-195.
27 One of the rules of membership for the order required three years’ active military service in the regular army.
29 Ibid., 235.
almost before the corpses had grown cold, should have taken this to heart.

The officer’s address to the dead heroes, in which he generously consigns them to happiness either in the Christian heaven or the pagan Elysium, is in marked contrast to the view in Theodore Dwight’s Oration delivered before the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati at New Haven in 1801. This was delivered after the Jeffersonian Republicans had taken control of the government. It is an oration in which there is nothing but Federalist venom for the Republicans, identified first with the Jacobins and then with the powers of Darkness, and in which the Federalist party, the Connecticut clergymen, the mercantile interests and the Order of the Cincinnati are all claimed as the Children of Light. This oration by Dwight is also significant because of its attack upon what he refers to as one of the favorite doctrines of the Jacobins, the constant warfare between the wealthy and the indigent. It was one of Brackenridge’s cardinal tenets that, if anything could keep the republican experiment in America from degenerating into an aristocracy on the one hand or a rule by the mob on the other, it was a healthy and necessary tension between the wealthy few and the masses. In his oration Dwight charges the Republicans with grasping after power and lucrative positions while the Federalists are depicted as “eagerly endeavoring to save their constitution, and country.” Brackenridge’s whole book is concerned with the search for fit candidates for public office, and his nonpartisan conclusion is that those fit for office are either men of good sense or men of education and literary talents.

Captain Farrago finds fault with the medal, because it has depicted upon it an eagle grasping the lightning of Zeus. This I believe is Brackenridge’s insight that the eagle’s control of the lightning is emblematic of the officers’ wish to retain power. Moreover, Brackenridge suggests that the motto of the Society should be Victor ad aratum.

30 Theodore Dwight, 1764-1846, brother of Timothy Dwight, was, like his brother, one of the Connecticut Wits. A Yale man and a conservative political leader, he was a director of the Eagle Bank and bitterly opposed the chartering of Republican banks.

Full title: An Oration Delivered at New Haven on the 7th of July, A.D. 1801, Before the Society of the Cincinnati, For the State of Connecticut to Celebrate the Anniversary of American Independence. Contrast with the Reverend James Campbell’s Oration in Commemoration of Independence (Philadelphia, 1782), which was published at the request of the Pennsylvania Society of the Cincinnati.

31 Dwight, 23.

32 Ibid., 3.
redit rather than *Omnia reliquit servare rempublicam*, because the noteworthy deed of Cincinnatus, according to Brackenridge, was not in having left everything to assume power in an emergency but rather in having returned to his farm after he had served his country. The medal also showed an armed Cincinnatus attacking an unarmed Britannia. This is perhaps again emblematic: the United States freed itself from British power, which should perhaps have been represented by the lion, rather than from the British cultural tradition, which was represented by Britannia.

In conclusion, Brackenridge was not favorably disposed toward the Cincinnati partly because of his democratic views; partly because he, like Jefferson, Mirabeau, and Aedanus Burke, saw in the organization certain tendencies alien to the republican experiment; and perhaps partly because of his personal clash with the aristocratically inclined, Federalist, Neville “connection.” Brackenridge, however, did not regard the Society as a dangerous threat to the new republic, because, in his opinion, it could do little harm, and was merely the indulgence of a whim. Likewise, he did not approve of admitting foreign members to the Society, but here again he did not particularly care. He felt that “the order would never come to any great head, as long as there was no opposition given. For this is necessary to keep active attachment to what is arbitrary, and founded, not in utility, but in caprice.”

Brackenridge’s view proved to be right, for though Tammany Hall has had an active though infamous political history, the Order of the Cincinnati, still with us today, made a negligible impact upon American politics after the initial controversy died down.

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33 *Modern Chivalry*, Part I, 75.