

MORGAN NEVILLE EARLY WESTERN CHRONICLER

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MORGAN NEVILLE was the first notable writer of fiction to be born west of the Alleghenies. Son and grandson of Revolutionary heroes and friend of Lafayette, he was the first man to edit a daily newspaper west of Philadelphia and the first to bring into real prominence the new western humor which was later to culminate so grandly in Mark Twain; yet when he died, on March 1, 1840, the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, of which he had once been editor, failed even to note his demise. That obscurity has become even blacker with the intervening years until today Neville's name does not appear in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and literary historians dismiss him with scant credit as the "pioneer in what may be called the 'Mike Fink' school of short fiction."²

The reasons for Neville's obscurity are obvious. He was not a prolific writer, few of his fugitive pieces have survived, and the less than a handful of sketches that remain are brief and discursive. Nevertheless, short narrative bits like the "Last of the Boatmen" and "Reminiscence of Pittsburgh" with its charming portrait of the Chevalier du Bac do not deserve to be forgotten; they retain a freshness of observation that belies their age. It is to gather together what fragments of Neville's life remain that this paper has been written.

Morgan Neville was born in Pittsburgh on Christmas Day, 1783. He came from a family long important in the annals of western Pennsylvania. His grandfather, General John Neville, served as commandant of Fort Pitt, distinguished himself in the Revolution, and later settled in Pittsburgh, where as a prominent Federalist he served the government in various capacities and was one of the local figures in the Whiskey Re-

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² Fred L. Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story*, 60 (New York and London, 1923).

bellion of 1794. Colonel Presley Neville, General Neville's son, also fought in the Revolution and acted as aide-de-camp to Lafayette. After the war he occupied a house on Water Street in Pittsburgh and fulfilled various civic duties. He was inspector of the Allegheny County militia, member of the legislature, real estate agent, surveyor of Allegheny County. Like his father he was a staunch Federalist, who it was said abhorred the Democrats "as so many imps of hell."³ Obviously Morgan Neville's heritage was an unusual one; the descendant of such celebrities could hardly escape a public career of some kind.

As a boy Neville attended the famous Pittsburgh Academy, the ancestor of the University of Pittsburgh. Here he was taught the classics by James Mountain and mathematics by the Reverend John Taylor, a well-known early scholar who instructed at the academy from 1801 to 1807. Morgan's father was one of the trustees of the school, and a younger brother, Fayette, was also a student there. Tuition was two dollars a quarter. Among Morgan's classmates were Henry M. Brackenridge, son of the author of *Modern Chivalry*, and John I. Scull, son of the founder of the *Pittsburgh Gazette*.⁴

Brackenridge has left some interesting recollections of these early school days. To him Neville was an indubitable genius: "his accomplishments in everything which can form a perfect gentleman leave him no superior in this country, and few equals."⁵ Once he and Neville danced a hornpipe together for the edification of the rest of the students. More important in the way of entertainment, however, was a Thespian Society, organized about 1810 with Brackenridge and Neville in the leading roles. The group presented popular comedies and musicals, which contemporary travelers praised highly, and donated the admission charges anonymously to various charities.⁶

Another incident of Neville's school days very nearly had serious repercussions. In 1806 the name of Aaron Burr was one to conjure with

³ Charles W. Dahlinger, *Pittsburgh, A Sketch of Its Early Social Life*, 105, 131, 144 (New York and London, 1916).

⁴ Agnes L. Starrett, *Through One Hundred and Fifty Years: The University of Pittsburgh*, 34-37 (Pittsburgh, 1937).

⁵ Henry M. Brackenridge, *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West*, 55 (Philadelphia, 1868).

⁶ Starrett, *Through One Hundred and Fifty Years*, 40.

in the Ohio Valley, and the fabulous scheme of the great adventurer excited interest all along the river. One of the refuges open to Burr was the island on which Harman Blennerhassett had erected his feudal estate, an island some fourteen miles below Marietta. In December of 1806 Burr lay in hiding at the mouth of the Cumberland River with a small group of armed men, waiting for a convoy of men and supplies to be assembled on Blennerhassett Island. It is recorded history that that convoy never arrived at its destination, having been prevented from doing so by a detachment of Virginia militia which raided and looted the island. What is less well known is that Morgan Neville was one of a party of fifteen youths who left Pittsburgh on December 13 to join Burr's party. Landing at Blennerhassett Island they were immediately captured by the aforesaid militia and were detained until December 17, when the commander, Colonel Hugh Phelps, arrived. He released them and provided both the youths and Mrs. Blennerhassett transportation to the mainland. Neville himself recorded certain fragments of his experiences in this filibustering expedition. The militia apparently lived riotously during their commanderless period, breaking into the Blennerhassett caches of meat and whiskey, bayonetting the furniture, and shooting holes in the ceilings of the mansion. When the negro servants refused to serve the soldiers, they were ignominiously penned up in the washroom.⁷

Various other incidental facts about Neville's early life have been preserved. On January 8, 1806, he was second to Thomas Stewart in a duel in which Stewart killed Tarleton Bates. Two years later Neville was admitted to the bar. On March 6, 1811, he married Nancy Barker of Pittsburgh. In 1818 he was cashier of the Farmers' and Mechanics' Bank; from 1819 to 1822 he was sheriff of Allegheny County; and during the years 1819 to 1824 he was captain of the Pittsburgh Blues, the local militia. Moreover, he was one of the trustees of the infant Western University of Pennsylvania, incorporated in February, 1819.⁸

⁷ Starrett, *Through One Hundred and Fifty Years*, 42. An interesting summary of Harman Blennerhassett's story appeared in *Time*, November 18, 1935.

⁸ Leland D. Baldwin, *Pittsburgh, The Story of a City*, 180 (Pittsburgh, 1937); William H. Venable, *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley*, 373-375 (Cincinnati, 1891); William H. Egle, *Pennsylvania Genealogies; Scotch-Irish and German*, 483 (Harrisburg, 1886); J. Cutler Andrews, *Pittsburgh's Post-Gazette*, 61, 107, 108, 114 (Boston, 1936).

The most interesting part of his later years in Pittsburgh, however, relates to Neville's newspaper career. On August 9, 1816, John Irwin Scull took over the editorship of the *Pittsburgh Gazette* and changed it from a weekly into a semiweekly issue of four pages. Scull had been Neville's classmate in the Pittsburgh Academy. The paper which he thus acquired had been founded by his father on July 29, 1786, and was the first newspaper to be published west of the Allegheny Mountains. For two years John Irwin Scull ran the paper alone; then, in 1818, he sold a half interest to Morgan Neville, who for some time thereafter bore most of the heavy editorial duties. Neville's editorials, according to the historian of the *Post-Gazette*, were brilliantly written despite a certain tendency toward the sophomoric. Moreover, they showed the capacious mind and liberal point of view of their writer and they won the signal honor of being occasionally noted in the Washington press.

The two youthful journalists did not succeed very well, however, and soon the paper had debts in excess of four thousand dollars. In 1820 the firm of Scull and Neville was dissolved and the paper sold to the printing establishment of Eichbaum and Johnston. Neville remained as editor until 1821. One result of the change in ownership was particularly unfortunate, for the originally simple title of *Pittsburgh Gazette* was metamorphosed into the ponderous *Pittsburgh Gazette and Manufacturing and Mercantile Advertiser*.⁹ Under Neville the policy of the paper was nationalistic, no doubt a result of his family's staunch Federalism. Thus the sight of emigrant boats on the shore of the Monongahela moved him to sketch prophetically the development of the wilderness to the west. The ruddy cheeks and masculine vigor of the newcomers excited his admiration:

May all their anticipations be realized! May the deep forests of the west possess no gloom for them! and may a few years of intrepid industry enable them to enjoy what was formerly the boast of the English yeomanry, roast beef and plumb pudding, undisturbed either by the frequent tax gatherer, or the brawling orators of reform.

Again:

The West is no longer inhabited by a set of Bedouin Arabs, or hunters who are not sufficiently important in the scale of society, and only intended by

⁹ Andrews, *Pittsburgh's Post-Gazette*, 60, 61.

nature to purchase from the eastern merchant with what little money they can scrape together by laborious enterprize. We must also be attended to. We have the population, and we possess the will to demand consideration.¹⁰

The *Gazette* with Neville at the helm championed a first-class turnpike from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh as well as improved navigation facilities on the Ohio River between Pittsburgh and Wheeling. Above all, the *Gazette* upheld the creed of mercantilism. It was militant in its crusade for a national bank and it argued strongly for the development of manufactures with adequate tariff protection.¹¹ The Pittsburgh of the early thirties revealed that Neville's Federalistic principles had not been defended in vain.

In 1824 Morgan Neville left Pittsburgh for Cincinnati. The reasons for his abrupt departure from the city in which the Neville name had been prominent for three generations are not clear, but the supposition is that financial reverses and depreciated credit had hurt Neville's pride. As he later told Lafayette, he had spent most of his possessions in redeeming his father's obligations. In Cincinnati he became secretary of an insurance company and founded and edited for a little less than a year the *Cincinnati Commercial Register*, the first daily paper west of Philadelphia. In addition, he gathered a good private library, which later formed the nucleus of the library of the Ohio Mechanics' Institute.

William H. Venable, that valuable historian of the early culture of the Ohio Valley, is the source of a revealing anecdote of the closing years of Neville's life. When Lafayette visited Cincinnati in 1825 his first inquiry concerned the son of his old aide-de-camp. Learning that Morgan Neville was ill with the ague, the marquis immediately went to his bedside. After a little talk with the invalid, he asked:

"Well, Neville, what are your circumstances?"

"Not good, general," was the reply. "I spent every thing I had to pay my father's debts."

Lafayette then called for a pen, wrote an order on the United States Bank for stock worth four thousand dollars, and gave it to Neville. Neville himself never used the marquis' gift, but when he died almost penni-

¹⁰ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 29, 1818, November 20, 1820, quoted in Andrews, *Pittsburgh's Post-Gazette*, 89-90.

¹¹ Andrews, *Pittsburgh's Post-Gazette*, 92, 98, 99.

less on March 1, 1840, his family inherited the stock that the Frenchman had so magnanimously presented to him.¹²

It has been claimed that Morgan Neville was the first man who succeeded as a poet in Pittsburgh. At any rate his verses began to appear in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in 1818 and are there embalmed for the curious eye. The following lyric will indicate, however, that not much need be said of the editor's poetry:

YOUTH AND FANCY

Thy visions, oh Fancy! are dear to the heart,
While life's ardent morning is passing along,
And we feel, with delicious emotions, the art,
Which music and poetry blend in their song.

Oh! then the warm soul is alive to each story,
That love's joyous magic to memory can bring,
And lists to the proud tale of valour and glory,
Which high sounding chivalry wakes from the string.

Sweet period of confidence, feeling, and truth!
Alas! that its brightness should leave us so soon!
That the freshness, which breathes round the dawning
of youth,
Like the dews of the morning, should vanish ere noon!

But, ah! chill experience still sheds o'er our way,
The poison of doubt, and suspicion, and sorrow;
And the warm, trusting heart, that is happy to-day,
May be frozen by cold disappointment to-morrow!¹³

On the other hand, his prose sketches, while not free from the sentimentalism and didacticism of the age, are remarkably fresh in observation and vigorous in style.

One of the most interesting bits from Neville's pen is the portrait of the Chevalier du Bac, which has been reprinted under the title "Reminiscence of Pittsburgh."¹⁴ The French Revolution had sent various aris-

¹² Venable, *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley*, 373-375; Egle, *Pennsylvania Genealogies*, 483; Starrett, *Through One Hundred and Fifty Years*, 63.

¹³ *The Western Souvenir, A Christmas and New Year's Gift for 1829*, 212 (edited by James Hall—Cincinnati, n.d.).

¹⁴ Originally published in the *Cincinnati Chronicle and Literary Gazette* of January 8, 1831, this article was reprinted in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of April 5, 1831 (which is here quoted), and *ante*, 5:287-293 (October, 1922).

tocrats to the new world and some of these *émigrés* wandered as far as Pittsburgh. Among them was the Chevalier du Bac, proprietor of a confectionary shop. "The articles, and the only ones, by the way, entitling the chevalier's establishment to this attractive name, were the kernels of hazelnuts, walnuts and peach stones, enclosed in an envelope of burnt maple sugar, *fabricated* by the skilful hands of the chevalier himself." The French exile was a popular man in the gauche western town. He had a monkey, Pug, and a dog, Sultan, who aided him in detecting counterfeit money. "Allons, Sultan," he would say, "tell dese good ladie de good moneye from de counterfeit."¹⁵ Then the monkey would grin and scratch, and Sultan would smell the coins. Crowds came to M. du Bac's trading place, impelled thither by his animals and by a wonderful Dutch clock that had white and red figures on its face; before it struck, the clock played a waltz. It did not take long for the suave and amiable chevalier to accumulate a small fortune. Eventually he emerged from his business with about fifteen thousand dollars, a tidy sum for one who had come penniless to Pittsburgh.

In the late 1790's western Pennsylvania was honored by a visit from the Duc d'Orleans (later Louis Philippe, king of France, 1830-48) and his two brothers, the Duc de Montpensier and the Comte de Beaujolais. M. du Bac, very excited, proposed to General John Neville that he, as a distinguished Pittsburgh citizen, should entertain the French nobles. At first Neville refused. But du Bac insisted. "Mais mon General . . . ils sont dans la plus grande misere, et ils ont ete chasse, comme nous autres, par ces vilains sans culottes." Obviously, the general could not be inhumane.

So it was that Morgan Neville, grandson of the host, met three great French gentlemen. The duke he described as sitting pensively staring at the fire, the while he entertained the visitor by reading *Télémaque*; Montpensier he later forgot, but Beaujolais, tall, graceful, and pleasant, he liked and remembered well. Years later when news of Beaujolais'

¹⁵Brackenridge differs with Neville as to the details of M. du Bac's establishment. Instead of the monkey, Brackenridge asserted the animal was a raccoon, which frequently tried to escape. Boys would invariably try to warn the chevalier of the danger, but he would merely reply with petulance, "Late eem go—late eem go." *Recollections*, 66, 67.

death in Sicily came to the Neville house, there was sorrow in the family circle. As for the Chevalier du Bac, he removed to Philadelphia and upon the restoration of the Bourbons returned to France. But the country he found was not the land of his youth. Napoleon had changed all that, and as M. du Bac sadly wrote back to his democratic friends in America, the guillotine had drunk the blood of all his family save himself. Du Bac died in Bordeaux, almost alone.

Another sketch of Neville's that has survived is entitled "Poll Preble; or, The Law of the Deer Hunt. A Sketch on the Ohio."¹⁶ Western in substance and setting, it includes a vigorous portrait of a frontier ferry tender and huntress; but much of the tale is given over to a conventional courtship, with long-winded family history, verbose courtesy, and females ever ready to fall weeping into each other's arms. Neville begins his tale by describing the background, the Ohio Valley in fall:

Our climate knows no spring; but our beautiful autumn compensates for this; our October is superior to a European May. The rich hills that border the Ohio for nearly its whole length, are then covered with a foliage distinguished by as great a variety of colours as the richest gardens of the Old World. The red leaves of the gum, the yellow and brown tints of the maple, the still darker crimson of the scarlet oak peculiar to the west, contrast magnificently with the green of the white oak, the last to burst forth in the spring, and the last to fall in the autumn. When this mass is tipped by the evening sun of an Indian summer darting its subdued rays through the mild mist of that singular season, the effect is beyond description beautiful, and exquisitely calculated for the indulgence of poetical melancholy.

After this excursion into scene painting we are introduced into the hut of Gad Doolittle, a tenant farmer who resembles a squatter, where the protagonist passes the night. For breakfast Gad serves his guest fat pork, corn bread, and weak tea sweetened with black maple sugar. Following this repast the guest goes to Preble's ferry to be taken across the Ohio River by Poll herself. Poll is pictured as a buxom and intelligent frontier girl who manages the dugout which serves as a ferry with all the dexterity of a voyageur. Later we meet Poll once more, this time as the heroine of a deer hunt. A number of buckskin-clad hunters, each equipped with rifle and scalping-knife (to skin the deer), congregate to drive the ani-

¹⁶ *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1839*, 68-100 (edited by Eliza Leslie—Philadelphia, 1838).

mal towards the river, where others are waiting in canoes to dispatch it by bullet or blade. Hounds start several deer from their coverts, and one fine stag breaks immediately for the water. Instantly several paddlers pursue it, but watchers on the shore are startled to see Poll Preble in the van, pushing her frail craft forward with utmost speed. For a moment the animal holds his advantage. Then Poll darts close enough to grasp the horns of the swimming stag and, while lifting the antlers, calls to her lover on shore to put a bullet through the deer's head. For the foremost of the hunters is just behind and the law of the chase stipulates that anyone who participates in the kill is rightfully entitled to a portion of the carcass. Although this incident is not the climax of Neville's tale, it is by far the most vivid portion. The rest of the story recounts the anemic courtship of George Howard and Gertrude Peyton (both the offspring of Revolutionary veterans), their marriage, and their formation of a home in Cincinnati. We learn no more of Poll Preble, the most striking character in the sketch, beyond the fact that she married her lover and became a farmer's wife rather than a ferry tender. Gad Doolittle was later appointed justice of the peace and became a warm partisan of Andrew Jackson.

Finally, there is the tale that really justifies Neville's reputation in his own day and that remains a landmark in early western fiction, "The Last of the Boatmen."¹⁷ For in fifteen pages the author succeeded in characterizing memorably the keelboats and their crews that once dominated the Ohio River from Pittsburgh southward, and at the same time penned a remarkable portrait of that greatest of all the bullies and rafters who once ruled the western rivers—Mike Fink.

The setting of the story is a steamboat trip that Neville took from Cincinnati to Pittsburgh. A discussion of the various kinds of boats precedes the narrative so that the reader is introduced to keelboats, flatboats, barges, and finally steam craft. Then Neville sees Blennerhassett Island and recalls several youthful visits there (including the escapade which involved him with the military). The time of the year is spring and the author introduces considerable local color: birds such as the cardinal and catbird, trees such as the buckeye, maple, and cottonwood. Yet such in-

¹⁷ *The Western Souvenir*, 107-122.

terpolated phrases as "feathered tribe," "floral kingdom," and "rich livery of summer" suggest that Neville had read the eighteenth-century landscape school too well.

As the steamboat pulls into shore Neville suddenly becomes aware of a keelboat crew on the bank. A loud voice startles the passengers, and Mike Fink looms into view. The portrait which follows deserves quotation: "Although at least fifty years of age, his hair was as black as the wing of the raven. Next to his skin he wore a red flannel shirt, covered by a blue capot, ornamented with white fringe. On his feet were moccasins, and a broad leathern belt, from which hung, suspended in a sheath, a large knife, encircled his waist." Mike Fink was a personage, worthy of the pencil of Salvator Rosa. Big and handsome, a combination of Apollo and Hercules, he was called the "Snapping Turtle" of the Ohio and, later, "The Snag" of the Mississippi. He belonged to a class of men whose period of prosperity coincided with the earliest river traffic; the steamboat killed their means of livelihood and drove the picturesque river rowdies to the streams farther west. But in their day these boatmen were a singular crew of rough and coarse animals who existed on whiskey, burned meat, and half-baked bread and who performed prodigies of strength and skill on such rations.

When Neville saw Mike Fink, the boatman was about to engage in a typical backwoods exhibition, shooting for a quart of liquor. Putting a tin cup on his brother's head, Mike walked thirty yards away, then turned, shot carefully, and knocked the cup to smithereens. The ball pierced the target barely two inches above the man's skull. A carousal followed such a feat, of course, but when the time for departure arrived the keelboat crew swung down the river, Mike himself wielding the stern oar and chanting:

Hard upon the beech oar!—
She moves too slow!—
All the way to Shawneetown,
Long while ago.

Not many years later, Neville remarked, Mike and the remnant of the boatmen moved to the Missouri where they continued their perilous trade, ranting, drinking, toiling; but the feat that the author had seen

performed Mike tried once too often. Striving to knock the cup off a man's head, following a brawl in which all the contestants had become tipsy, Mike fired too low and killed his man. Suspecting treachery, a friend of the victim shot Mike before he could reload. And with Mike Fink's death, as Neville wrote, the Spirit of the Boatmen expired.¹⁸

A careful search of old newspapers and annuals would undoubtedly reveal more of Neville's work, fugitive as most of it was. But it is extremely doubtful whether anything remains that surpasses "The Last of the Boatmen" in realism and vividness. For after all it is Neville's picture of Mike Fink in his river setting which has preserved his name. One can only wish that the author had seen fit to record more of the figures and background that he could picture so indelibly.

In his own day Neville was reasonably well known in the upper Ohio Valley. Brackenridge's tribute has already been quoted. James Hall was glad to print several of Neville's contributions in the first of the western annuals, *The Western Souvenir*. Mary Russell Mitford reprinted "The Last of the Boatmen" in her *Lights and Shadows of American Life* (volume 3—London, 1832), and considered the tale the best of those she had chosen to present to English readers. But later critics and anthologists have been less kind. Coggeshall and Duyckinck ignored Neville, and Griswold mentioned him only in passing allusions.¹⁹

More recent critics have voiced a few tributes, but even they are guarded and laconic. Pattee felt that Neville deserved great credit as a pioneer in western fiction despite his prolix style and his structural amorphousness. To Dorothy Dondore, "The Last of the Boatmen" is the classic of all the tales that celebrate Mike Fink's exploits. Edward Park Anderson observed that Neville's work was both skillful and urbane and that it marked the author as a definite forerunner of Mark Twain. Dahlinger and Baldwin are inclined to dismiss Neville politely as a man of

¹⁸ This incident is the climactic event in John G. Neihardt's poem, *The Song of Three Friends* (New York, 1919).

¹⁹ William T. Coggeshall, *The Poets and Poetry of the West* (Columbus, Ohio, 1860); Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck, *Cyclopadia of American Literature* (New York, 1856); Rufus W. Griswold, *The Prose and Prose Writers of America* (Philadelphia, 1847).

undoubted ability who never quite lived up to his potentialities.²⁰ Perhaps the most gracious estimate is a short paragraph in a biography of Mike Fink, the only full length portrait of that "ring-tailed roarer." For it was Morgan Neville, the authors declare, who first lifted the story of the last of the boatmen from camp fire and saloon atmosphere into the realm of polite literature and thus gave impetus to a grand accretion of legend.²¹

And so Neville seems destined to be remembered as the Boswell of Mike Fink. In many ways he exemplified the literary faults of his day, verbosity, stiffness, sentimentality, affectation. But he had also an eye for realistic detail, a feeling for local color, and if he never pictured life as adequately as we might desire, he at least captured some of its more vivid aspects. It is indeed unfortunate that the first literary man born west of the Alleghenies has left so little behind him, but one suspects that the sketch of Mike Fink will be remembered at least as long as the military exploits of his gallant forbears.

²⁰ Pattee, *Development of the American Short Story*, 60; Dorothy A. Dondore, *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America*, 234 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1926); Edward P. Anderson, "The Intellectual Life of Pittsburgh, 1786-1836," *ante*, 14: 302, 303 (October, 1931); Dahlinger, *Pittsburgh*, 48, 49; Baldwin, *Pittsburgh*, 262.

²¹ Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine, *Mike Fink: King of Mississippi Keelboatmen*, 253 (New York, 1933).