A Glimpse of the Life and Letters of Henry Marie Brackenridge

William F. Keller

Your speaker is here tonight in behalf of Henry Marie Brackenridge, a vice president of a predecessor of this society of the same name, that of 1858-1860. Indeed, had I not been assigned the subject of his life and letters, I would surely adopt the role of an impassioned advocate, for as late as 1952 a reputable historian contributed an astonishing bit of misinformation to the collection of calumnies and untruths that have always prevented a due recognition of Henry Marie’s achievements.

Warren S. Tryon has compiled and edited an impressive three-volume work, entitled A Mirror for Americans. In the third volume—The Frontier Moves West—he devoted one section to what he labeled “An Early View of the Missouri Country, 1810-11,” printing several of the most vivid passages from Henry Marie’s writings. This is all well and good—a fitting tribute. But in the introduction to his selections, Professor Tryon wrote about Henry Marie as follows: “By profession he was a lawyer and, sufficiently active in public and political matters,

1 An address delivered at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 18, 1953. In it Dr. Keller draws upon some of the results of his studies in the preparation of a much more extended work on the same subject to be published in the not distant future as part of the University of Pittsburgh-Buhl Foundation cultural history project. Except as otherwise noted, his references here are to the Henry Marie Brackenridge Letterbook on file in the Darlington Library at the university.—Ed.

achieved the no mean distinction of incurring the hostility of both John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. The former dismissed him as 'a mere enthusiast,' and the latter was the subject of an attack by Brackenridge in *Letters to the Public*.

Henry Marie did incur the wrath of Andrew Jackson; he never incurred the hostility of John Quincy Adams. On November 2, 1818, Adams called on President Monroe and subsequently recorded the gist of the conversation in his diary. “I found him,” wrote Adams, “in some displeasure at having learnt that the late Commissioners to South America, Rodney and Bland and Graham, are so far from agreeing in the report they are to make, that probably no two of them will agree upon the same . . . Rodney, the President hinted, is under the influence of Brackenridge, the Secretary to the Commission, who is a mere enthusiast, and so devoted to South America that he has avowed the wish to unite all America in conflict against all Europe.” There you had President Monroe hinting to Secretary of State Adams. Monroe was perhaps annoyed with Henry Marie, definitely not hostile. Tryon thus misread the evidence, attributing Monroe's sentiments to Adams. Two years before Andrew Jackson died, he called our hero “that worthless lying scamp Bra[c]kenridge.” The distinction between momentary irritation and downright hostility is obvious. Incurring the enmity of two presidents instead of one, however, unquestionably makes a better story.

A good part of his long life, Henry Marie had to contend with calumny—and he lived to be over eighty-four. His dynamic intellect and driving energy enabled him to overcome successfully a serious inferiority complex. Charles Dickens as a boy saw the plight of his father in Marshalsea debtors' prison and vowed that such a calamity would never befall him. The triumph of Dickens, Edgar Johnson, his most recent biographer, attributes largely to this “Challenge of Despair.”

The force inspiring Henry Marie likewise derived from youthful experience.

Life was far from idyllic at the forks of the Ohio, and in western Pennsylvania generally, when he was born in 1786. Social relationships involved whiskey drinking, ill-tempered “politicking,” and family feuding. At an early age, Henry Marie became aware of the enmity existing between his father and “the Neville connection.” The Whiskey Rebellion, of course, symbolizes this rugged state of society.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge vigorously defended his conduct in the affair, but for the son the defense of his father became almost an obsession, the psychological basis of which I shall not endeavor to analyze here. What interests us is the fact that years later Henry Marie engaged in a bitter and prolonged controversy with Neville B. Craig concerning the role of the elder Brackenridge in the insurrection. The honor of the respective families was at stake, at least in the minds of the adversaries.

Henry Marie attempted to vindicate the actions of his father in an unsigned article, the well-known “Biographical Notice of H. H. Brackenridge, Late of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania,” which appeared in the January, 1842, issue of the Southern Literary Messenger. With this declaration of faith the son ended his account: “Such was Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a man but imperfectly appreciated in his own day, because like others of an original cast of intellect, he was ahead of the age; but whose fame is destined to increase, as it becomes more removed from the times in which he lived.” Would such an assertion go unchallenged?

A perceptive reader of Craig’s monthly publication, The Olden Time, a repository of documents concerning the colonial history of the Pittsburgh region, might have surmised what was in the offing. For in the last issue ever published (December, 1847), and admittedly out of chronological order, the editor introduced materials relating to the Whiskey Rebellion, with this acidulous comment: “Some other accounts heretofore published are, in fact, excuses or defences, prepared by persons more or less closely implicated in the criminality of the transactions narrated; and, of course, partake more of the character of the advocate than of the historian.” Pittsburgh’s battle royal had now begun in earnest.

7 Neville B. Craig, The Olden Time, 2:547 (Pittsburgh, 1846-48).
In 1851, Craig published his *History of Pittsburgh*; and in treating the insurrection, he borrowed liberally from Alexander Hamilton's report on the affair and from Richard Hildreth's *History of the United States*—all in all, a thoroughly Federalist, anti-Brackenridge version of the proceedings. Henry Marie forthwith wrote a rejoinder, printed in the *Daily Commercial Journal* of Pittsburgh, and then tirelessly continued the argument in eighteen more articles in the same paper. To its heated columns Craig also resorted, defending his views in five numbers. Henry Marie replied in ten numbers; and as Craig himself later described the matter: "I added a rebutter, as the lawyers style it, of four numbers. I then thought that the controversy was ended; I even hoped so. Both H. M. Brackenridge and myself have passed beyond our three score and twelfth years, and might, as well as ought to, be thinking of something else than such controversy." But Henry Marie was not! Seven years after the end of the journalistic battle he published a large, documented, 336-page volume entitled *History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Commonly Called the Whiskey Insurrection*, 1794. It was to be Craig, however, who had the last word, for he promptly counterattacked with a small book of only eighty-odd pages but having the pretentious title, *Exposure of a Few of the Many Misstatements in H. M. Brackenridge's History of the Whiskey Insurrection*. Thus the conduct of Hugh Henry Brackenridge in the proceedings of 1794 had been the subject of contention, increasingly acrimonious, for seventeen years.

The denouement of this situation was surprising—and appropriate. At the height of the controversy, Pittsburgh celebrated the centennial of the taking of Fort Duquesne. As part of the ceremonies, the stage manager of the Pittsburgh Theater read a poem called "Suc-co-tash," which William H. Denny had composed in honor of the occasion. This was the first stanza:

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO! what sylvan beauty
Did Nature on this almost island crowd;

8 For the newspaper phase of the controversy, see the files of this daily for the winter of 1851-52.
9 Both books were published in Pittsburgh in 1859. It was in the latter (p. 10) that Craig, as quoted above, recalled his vain hope that his "rebutter" articles would end the controversy.
Where Art now, from her altars grim and sooty,
"Doth overcome us like a winter cloud."

And the fourth stanza went like this:

But long ago the picture was defaced;
The trees are gone—the green round hill is level;
And hardly can the outlines be retraced,
By those old scene-restorers, Brack and Neville.

One hopes that Denny's motive was to effect a rapprochement be-
tween the two tired war horses. Denny soon published his poem; and
in doing so, he provided a footnote to explain the reference to "BRACK
and NEVILLE": "Judge Brackenridge and Neville B. Craig, whose
example in furnishing to history, what is most wanted, local and per-
sonal details, from private and family papers, journals, letters and tra-
ditions, ought to have been followed by others, who, in some instances,
by neglect, indifference or casualties, have lost the means of making
similar contributions."10 The compliment implied was deserved and its
expression felicitous.

Besides inspiring the composition of "Suc-co-tash," the centennial
led to the formation of the third Historical Society of Western Pennsyl-
vania by history-conscious Pittsburghers and their friends in the area.
At a meeting in January of 1859, when the organization of the society
was completed, three men were chosen as vice-presidents representing
Allegheny County. The names of two of them—as you can now easily
guess—were H. M. Brackenridge and Neville B. Craig. Although the
advent of the Civil War brought a quick end to the meetings, I see no
reason why you cannot claim these two upholders of family honor as
former vice-presidents of your own society—and it is never too late to
commemorate the positive, productive, and humorous side of their cele-
brated debate.

The precise title of my paper is "A Glimpse of the Life and Letters
of Henry Marie Brackenridge." I shall interpret the word "Letters" to

10 William H. Denny, Suc-co-tash. Written on the Occasion of the
Centennial Celebration of the Evacuation of Fort Duquesne, 18
(Pittsburgh, 1858).
mean primarily his Letterbook, which is a collection of 125 documents in possession of the Darlington Memorial Library of the University of Pittsburgh. These fascinating and important manuscripts were obtained from Mrs. Frank Painter, the great-granddaughter of Henry Marie.

The documents are haphazardly bound together, many of them in poor condition, with tears, fraying edges, and fading script. Part of my work is the preparation of the manuscripts for publication, thereby making them readily available to anyone interested. Several individuals have already utilized a few of the letters relating to Henry Marie's South American mission in 1817-18; but unhappily for them, they had to work from a microfilm copy, a process which must have been laborious and disheartening. Dr. N. Andrew N. Cleven was such a person; before your society nearly twenty years ago, he read a paper entitled "Henry Marie Brackenridge, Diplomat," and subsequently published it in Pennsylvania History. Another such person was Laura Bornholdt whose monograph, Baltimore and Early Pan-Americanism, was printed in the Smith College Studies in History in 1949. The great mass of the material in the Letterbook, however, remains unpublished.

Transcribing these documents was a difficult task, for it involved the deciphering of much illegible script. It was an exciting process too.

There was one letter, in particular, which caused me considerable anguish—that of Baron Alexander von Humboldt to Henry Marie, dated Potsdam, May 24, 1857. The handwriting was in French, and so minute and crabbed that a magnifying glass hardly helped at all. Apparently, the letter contained about 250 words. The process involved finding French words of what appeared to be the proper size—the catch, of course, was that the words must also be meaningful when translated. Eventually only seventeen spaces were left; and then Professor Blossom L. Henry, who teaches French at the university, enthusiastically tackled the problem, successfully filling in the gaps. What did the German scholar say to Henry Marie in the year of 1857? This renowned naturalist and explorer, so familiar with the antiquities of Central and South America, praised the research which Henry Marie had done on the ruins of the ancient civilizations of the American Southwest. "Your observations," wrote Humboldt, "are full of sagacity and

11 Pennsylvania History, 5:213-222 (October, 1938) .
of historical impartiality." His remarks indicate that he had read with discernment Henry Marie's pamphlet, *Early Discoveries by Spaniards in New Mexico*, published that same year by Henry Miner & Co., No. 32 Smithfield Street, Pittsburgh.

Let me interpolate at this point. Hugh Henry Brackenridge's son was no flash-in-the-pan genius—no prodigy who quickly and dismally burned out. No evidence offers better proof than that of Henry Marie's continuing interest through the years in the ancient remains which he observed in his wanderings. In 1813, forty-four years earlier, he had written a long letter to Thomas Jefferson on the subject of the population and tumuli of the aborigines of North America. So impressed was the Sage of Monticello that he was instrumental in obtaining the publication of the document in the *Transactions* of the American Philosophical Society in 1818. When Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis published their classic account of the *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* in 1848, a work issued under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, they acknowledged a debt to the researches of Henry Marie in this field of study. Is it not interesting that Mr. Frank Squier of New York City, the nephew of E.G., has furnished me with a photostat of a letter which Henry Marie had written the uncle from Tarentum in 1858, and which is the counterpart of a lengthy letter from E.G. to Henry Marie, dated New York, January 22, 1858, and bound into our Letterbook? E.G. Squier's letter—this is the document in the Letterbook—begins as follows: "I have obtained through Mr. Miner, a couple copies of your interesting Memoir on the 'Early Discoveries of the Spaniards in N. Mexico,' & quite agree with you in all that you say on the subject." Are you now able to understand why Van Wyck Brooks, the dean of our present literary historians, could describe Henry Marie as "a man of all but universal cultivation and curiosity?"  

Another type of problem encountered, a rather frequent and annoying one, was the illegibility of certain signatures in the Letterbook. Who was the writer of a particular document? One long and chatty letter addressed to Henry Marie bore the date U.S.S. Franklin, Gibraltar, July 5, 1819. The document itself was easy to copy; the signature, an entirely different matter. It looked like "William Malen." But who

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was he to be writing in such familiar terms to Henry Marie? "I have frequently thought, tho' I am doubtless presumptuous, that you and I were formed by nature to act together," wrote this person, obviously a friend. He offered some pointed advice also: "Your book I shall wait for with impatience, and I will repeat to you what I have often said, that you should not write it with too much precipitation, one good and well written book is worth a thousand hasty ones." "From what you have done," he added, "I conjecture that you might with care and patience immortalize your name." In effect, his admonition meant: "Henry Marie, relax!" The book in question, by the way, proved to be the famous two-volume *Voyage to South America, Performed by Order of the American Government, in the Years 1817 and 1818, in the Frigate Congress*, written in a few months—truly an astonishing feat.13 But this correspondent remained distressingly incognito to me. Then one day I received four photostats of letters from the Shaler Papers deposited in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; one was a letter which Henry Marie had written to his boon companion of the Louisiana days—William Shaler, now, in 1819, the American diplomatic and consular agent to the Barbary States on the North African coast. Henry Marie's letter prompted the reply which is in the Letter-book and part of which I have just read to you. Thus by chance was the problem solved.

The correspondent's identity and the date of writing could not be readily determined for several of the letters. This presented a more difficult problem than that evidenced in the Shaler example. The date of a certain letter seemed to be quite plain—November 28, 1819; the signature appeared to be either "Jas. Porter" or "Jos. Porter." But the analysis of internal evidence in a document can often provide a solution to such a problem. Let me read a good part of the letter to you:

Your son will find food for his antipathy in my second volume, which goes to the printer this week. I go dead against Jackson on every controverted point—from the Six militia men to the comedy of Callava in the Calaboose. It was both just and necessary to set forth the good deeds & traits of Jackson in a bright light. But after the 8th of Jan—1815, there is little brightness in his career. Among the "casualties" of the battle, there was one not mentioned in the official report, namely, the Commanding General lost his head.

Your Insurrection is to me a light in a dark place. It is curious, interesting & picturesque, and draws the veil from a region little

13 Baltimore, published by the author, 1819.
known to us here. I have read about a third of the book so far. I cannot write much. Jackson summons me.

Here undoubtedly was a biographer of Jackson writing to Henry Marie. The correspondent must be James Parton, who was the greatest of the Jackson biographers,\(^{14}\) considering the obstacles which he had to surmount in his work. But alas! Parton, presumably writing in 1819, had not yet been born. A solution to the authorship of the letter was at hand, for what had appeared to be "Porter" could now look convincingly like "Parton," were it not for the date. What had happened was simply this: at the moment he wrote Henry Marie in 1859, Parton was busy relating in his second volume the events of 1819 as they concerned Jackson's career and quite naturally he misdated the letter.

About the time of his writing to Henry Marie, Parton had just finished paying him a splendid compliment in this second volume. The biographer related how Jackson and Henry Marie had met while both were on their way to Pensacola in 1821, where the general was to accept the surrender of Florida from the Spanish as the result of the Treaty of 1819. Jackson had enlisted this accomplished Pittsburgher in his service as a secretary and translator and had soon appointed him mayor of the town. Parton then informed his readers of the fact that most of Jackson's dispatches and proclamations signed by him as governor of Florida had actually been written by Henry Marie. "In after years, we may add," wrote Parton, "Mr. Brackenridge became Judge Brackenridge, and a member of Congress, and he still lives, in honorable retirement in his native State, to serve the reader of these pages by contributing to them from the stores of his well-filled memory."\(^{15}\) How could any author acknowledge a feeling of indebtedness more graciously than that?

The foregoing comments concerning the Humboldt letter, the Shaler letter, and this Parton letter should indicate some of the problems which had to be solved in order to complete the process of transcribing the Letterbook. The next step was the typing of the documents individually, followed by their arrangement in a chronological order. The time span is significant, for the first letter is dated 1816; and the last, 1858—countless facts bearing on forty-two years of Henry Marie's life consequently stand revealed.

\(^{14}\) Life of Andrew Jackson, 3 vols. (New York, 1861).
\(^{15}\) Parton, Life of Andrew Jackson, 2:615-616.
For the historian of Pittsburgh, of western Pennsylvania, or of the United States, the Letterbook is a treasure chest; for the biographer of Henry Marie—there never has been one until now—it is the key to an understanding of the man himself and of his amazing achievements.

His biographer, however, must supplement the manuscripts in this collection with materials drawn from a variety of other sources in order to illumine all the phases of that long career—from his birth in 1786 to his death in 1871, at the home of his daughter-in-law, Mrs. P. S. Brackenridge, No. 65 Grant Street. He was then the oldest native-born citizen.

In his Recollections of Persons and Places in the West, Henry Marie related the incidents of his youth—the astonishing voyage down river to Ste. Genevieve as a mere child; his life with the Beauvais family; the return to Pittsburgh and the rigorous training for the law under parental supervision; the fruitless attempt to establish himself in Baltimore; and finally the trip back to Louisiana, ending in a romantic reunion with his godparents. He also mentioned his sojourn in St. Louis, where he had written a series of articles, descriptive of the region, for the Louisiana Gazette in the winter of 1810-11. At this point the fascinating Recollections tell us no more.

But in 1811, Henry Marie had a rare adventure—he journeyed up the Missouri River with the fur-trading expedition of Manuel Lisa. The voyage to the Mandan villages was actually a race between their party, representing the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, and a rival expedition under the leadership of Wilson Price Hunt, the associate of John Jacob Astor in the Pacific Fur Company. The whole thrilling story, including the role of Henry Marie, Washington Irving immortalized in his Astoria. Moreover, our hero kept a journal of the voyage!

In New Orleans a few months later, Henry Marie met Zadok Cramer of Pittsburgh. The publisher suggested that the essays in the Louisiana Gazette and the journal might well make an interesting book, if revised, enlarged, and printed together. The result was the volume entitled Views of Louisiana; Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811, published by the firm of Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum in Pittsburgh in 1814. It was inevitable that some errors

16 Astoria; or Anecdotes of an Enterprise beyond the Rocky Mountains (Author's revised edition, New York, 1865).
would appear in this pioneering work, mistakes which distressed the author. There was one person in the United States to whom Henry Marie felt an explanation was due—that man was none other than Thomas Jefferson. Can you imagine my excitement a month ago as I sat in the Library of Congress and read a letter written by Henry Marie to the ex-President, dated Baton Rouge, La., May 30, 1814? There it was, the autograph letter signed, in Vol. 201, pp. 35786-35787, of the Thomas Jefferson Papers. "My essays were hastily written, and in irregular desultory manner, often in the bar room of a country tavern, or in a boat as I passed along, and not composed in privacy and retirement," the young author apologized. "They were printed at the distance of two thousand miles from me, the manuscript forwarded by mail generally as it was written." Henry Marie had much more to say. But try to imagine his thoughts as he penned his closing sentence: "I contemplate passing through Virginia this coming Autumn or the Spring following, and hope to have it my power to [pay] my respects in person at Monticello." Monticello, you see, was like a magic magnet which drew the talented from all the world. Neither Thomas Jefferson nor Henry Marie Brackenridge were common men, but they had much in common.

Henry Marie soon returned to Pittsburgh, there to find himself received as a man of note. Cramer undoubtedly had discussed Brackenridge's activities in Louisiana with mutual friends; and, of course, his firm had published the Views, which was attracting wide and favorable comment. This was the situation on Saturday morning, February 18, 1815, when an extra express rider, who was on his way to Erie and Detroit, galloped into town, bringing joyous news. His orders from the postmaster general in Washington read as follows: "Peace is concluded with England—dispatches are now forwarded by you of great importance, and I request you to exert yourself to carry them expeditiously." There was also the equally glorious information of Jackson's defeat of the British at New Orleans. The dispatch carrier galloped on, leaving the townsmen agog. As part of the celebration, Mrs. Barrett of the Pittsburgh Theater recited an "Ode on Jackson's Victory, 8th January, 1815," a poem composed by H. M. Brackenridge, Esquire. The War of 1812 was over.17

17 Pittsburgh Commonwealth, February 18, March 4, 1815.
But Henry Marie was restless, and he went to Baltimore after the
death of his father during the next year.

The absence of his spirited friend depressed Walter Forward. How
do we know? He wrote Henry Marie, his letter being the first docu-
ment in the Letterbook, when its contents are arranged in chronological
order. "What a damn'd thing it is that a person must wait so long upon
fortune," lamented the future Secretary of the United States Treasury.
"'Here am I' plodding along as usual, only I study less than formerly
& sometimes think about despairing. Business I have enough, but it
has no pleasures for me. Chaff without wheat. . . . I wish you were
here to feed my ambition. I am too great a lover of ease & not sufficiently
patient of labor. I resolve & re-resolve & yet do nothing. What is a
mere living, or even wealth—the chance of eating loads of provisions
or drinking the sea, or riding in a coach with a black bear on each horse.
Then to die & rot like a fat hog, remembered only by the sty & trough
left behind. I load myself with permanent reproach, & still cant mend.
Writing to you does a little good. I summon fresh resolution denounce
myself as the most sluggish tame rascal on earth, swear an oath to do
better, then put up my pen, loll again on 'Lethe's wharf' & thus the
years roll away."

No less a person than Forward's mentor, Henry Baldwin, was the
writer of the second letter in the Letterbook, and none other than James
Ross was the correspondent responsible for the fifth. The contrast be-
tween the two documents is intriguing. Note, for example, the spirit
which each one manifests. Baldwin's letter, dated October 28, 1816, is
businesslike at the beginning and then quickly becomes informal,
friendly. He wanted to know if Henry Marie had ever seen a "tall
yankee" named Elisha Brown in Baltimore. This fellow was probably
operating a grocery or liquor store there. With that request made, Bald-
win continued in this tenor: "We are knocking away here [Pittsburgh]
very much in the old style nothing new or interesting occurring Times
hard business dull and money scarce—I have turnd fool in my old
age and been elected to Congress and what seems a little surprising by
a majority of 803 votes who would have expected this a[fter] the vio-
ience of party which has been thrust upon me." The chill of unfriend-
liness pervades the letter which Ross wrote Henry Marie on February
15, 1817. A month earlier Henry Marie had asked him for any mate-
rials which he might possess and care to contribute to a proposed biography of Hugh Henry Brackenridge. "I have a lively recollection of his wit, of his playful fancy, of his eloquence when roused by a subject that touched him, and of the felicity of thought and expression which so strongly marked his character," eulogized Ross, adding, "but I cannot recall any particular specimen, nor give an authentic report of any argument; conversation, or literary disquisition which would explain or illustrate the structure of his mind." Why? The main reason was this: "During the last eighteen years, I saw him but seldom, & then only under the restraint & circumspection of political estrangement, so that it is impossible for me to give even a tolerable sketch, when a perfect delineation, an exact likeness, must constitute the principal value of the memoir, when given to the world." Polite, even graceful was Ross's manner of expression, for he was a sophisticated man; but contribute material for such a biography he would not.

There are other letters, equally entertaining, which also relate directly to the history of Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania. In this category belongs a good part of the Brackenridge family correspondence contained in the Letterbook. Let us sample one item, a letter which William H. Brackenridge wrote to his half brother Henry Marie in 1819. William stated that he was still practising law in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and serving as county prosecutor besides, and that their brother Alexander was now deputy attorney general for Allegheny County, a post paying a thousand dollars a year. At this point in his letter, William undertook to enlighten his correspondent on the subject of Pennsylvania politics. Although every politician in the state was self-seeking in his opinion, William insisted that he was not one of them. "I call myself a Democrat! because it is the ruling party, it is the strongest party, the state I live in democratic the county I live in is democratic, so that it is necessary I should take some name, and why not that of Democrat?" he asked. William wanted to impress Henry Marie, who was so worldly-wise; but, at the same time, he desired his older brother to realize a significant change in their relations. "I discover in your letters to me (when you do write) that you write as if you were writing to a child, in the same style precisely, trifling circumstances which you think will suit my taste,—but that taste has altered since you last saw me, and I wish you hereafter to write to me as to one, who has left
off his boyish tricks,” William demanded. “I now consider myself a man, (at least I wish to be considered as such) and shall endeavor to behave as a man through life.”

Henry Marie’s half sister Cornelia was no longer a child either but a young lady. In her charming letters there always appeared a dominant refrain: “Brother, when are you going to marry?” Her wish eventually came true, when he married Caroline Marie, formerly of Pittsburgh. That he became a kindly father is attested by the letter which he wrote to his son Benjamin Morgan in 1841, and which is in the Letterbook.

In this collection many letters are from persons who loom large in the history of the United States. Forward, Baldwin, and Ross, of course, are important from both local and national standpoints. But some of the correspondents represented by their letters here belonged to the first rank of leaders on the American scene—men like John Quincy Adams, Thomas H. Benton, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, James Gadsden, William Henry Harrison, Andrew Jackson, John Marshall, Caesar A. Rodney, Richard Rush, and Roger B. Taney. The contents of the documents prove that Henry Marie played no insignificant part in the determination of American affairs, in spite of the fact that he never held a post in the highest order of government service, with the exception of his seat in Congress. Certain letters in the collection evince the fact that his interests lay also in fields other than the political.

There can be no doubt, therefore, about the value of the Letterbook both to the historian and the biographer. For the latter especially, the documents contain clues which guide him to new sources of information. Slowly and patiently he must process this raw material and then utilize it with the full play of his imagination. The life of Henry Marie Brackenridge will not admit of a humdrum treatment.

This son of Hugh Henry Brackenridge was a thinker and a doer. He was never “a mere enthusiast” as Monroe had characterized him to Adams; he was instead an advocate whose argument usually proceeded from careful observation and sound judgment.

Shaler, who wrote that engaging letter from Gibraltar, obviously had discovered Henry Marie’s greatest failing, particularly as an author—a tendency to be precipitate in thought and action. But paradoxically, the trait, easily explained by the biographer, was really a blessing.
Henry Marie's legacy to Pittsburgh and the nation is consequently a collection of literary works most unusual for its size and its variety. The biographer, of course, must compile a bibliography and then analyze each and every production of Henry Marie's scintillating pen. At this moment I venture to predict that whenever given the opportunity, our schoolchildren will read the Journal or the Voyage or the Recollections at least as avidly as, for example, Robert Louis Stevenson's Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes. The three writings of Brackenridge just mentioned not only were acclaimed at the time of their publication but are likewise praised today. He wrote much more than already indicated in this paper, a good deal of the material being rare and inaccessible to the public. From 1814, the year in which the press of Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum issued the Views of Louisiana, until his death after the Civil War, Henry Marie was a potent cultural force in western Pennsylvania, his influence being felt all the way from Tarentum, the town which he laid out, to Pittsburgh, and on to Canonsburg, the site of Jefferson College.

Other places such as Baltimore can rightfully claim Brackenridge as a valued resident, although not as a native. In that commercial city on the coast he tried in vain to establish a law practice; but there he wrote his History of the Late War, between the United States and Great-Britain, a work frequently republished and also translated into foreign languages; and there, too, he became a member of the first literary society founded in that community—the Delphian Club. There, in Baltimore, he published his Voyage to South America. There, in Baltimore, the citizenry elected him a representative to the House of Delegates in Annapolis, where he labored valiantly for the passage of a bill which would have enfranchised the Jews of Maryland. This grateful people printed his speech on the subject in the form of a pamphlet.18

18 Sketch of Proceedings in the Legislature of Maryland, December Session, 1818, on What is Commonly Called the Jew Bill; Containing the Report of the Committee Appointed by the House of Delegates "To consider the justice and expediency of extending to those persons professing the Jewish Religion, the same privileges that are enjoyed by Christians:" together with the Bill Reported by the Committee, and the Speeches of Thomas Kennedy, Esq. of Washington County, and H. M. Brackenridge, Esq. of Baltimore City (Baltimore, 1819).
containing in addition the committee report, the bill itself, and the address of Thomas Kennedy, and then circulated it throughout the state. I have visited the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore in order to study the contents of this pamphlet. In the preface I found this statement: “The speeches of Messrs. Kennedy and Brackenridge appeared . . . in the Maryland Herald and in Niles’ Register—that of the former gentleman embraces the subject theologically, the latter politically.” To make this speech took courage; for, in doing so, Henry Marie had taken an unpopular position, the side of the persecuted. In this instance, he was the zealous advocate.

But enthusiasm was the keynote of his entire career. It mattered not what his precise occupation at the moment happened to be—practising oratory in a secluded spot, formulating the ordinances of government for Pensacola, superintending the live oak reservation at nearby Deer Point, preparing a eulogy on Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, or striving to administer impartial justice as a commissioner on the Mexican Claims Commission. Note the ring in the following statement made by Dr. William Baldwin, surgeon of the U.S.S. “Congress,” to his friend Dr. William Darlington: “I cannot, however, but add, that this mission to South America will derive a great deal of its importance from the talents, acquirements, and indefatigable exertions of Mr. Brackenridge,—of whom I have spoken in my former letters. He has taken up the cause of the South Americans with a zeal which does equal honor to his head and his heart.”

Henry Marie, in fact, recognized tyranny wherever he saw it—whether in Maryland, where the Jews lacked the vote; or in South America, where the colonists of decadent Spain aspired to freedom. When the Voyage to South America was published, the author had to know Jefferson’s opinion of it. Caesar A. Rodney, one of the commissioners to the southern continent, undertook to perform the office of forwarding a copy to his old friend at Charlottesville, a young man at the age of seventy-six who still had the University of Virginia to build. Promptly to Rodney came a reply, dated Monticello, January 2, 1820, a letter incomparable because of the majesty of its thoughts:

Dear Sir

Yours of Dec. 19, is received. a letter from an antient friend and fellow-laborer in good works is like refreshing showers to a thirsty plant. When the pleasures of prospect are shut up to advanced life, those of retrospect are it's remaining comfort, and the times into which we fell, and the scenes and trials we have gone thro' together, afford abundant matter to employ retrospect, and to rekindle the memory of very cordial and affectionate sentiments. your letter has awakened these recollections, but they must not make me forget the duty of thanking you for mr Brackenridge's book: and altho South America is a matter of prospect and for the new generation only, yet the old may indulge a little peep into futurity, and some curiosity respecting it's destinies. this book is the more acceptable as I never read a word in the newspapers of what they pretend to be passing in those countries, unless it be sanctioned by government, or by a responsible name. ignorance is preferable to error, and he who has no ideas is less distant from truth than he who has false ones. the former has only to learn; the latter to unlearn, to retrace and obliterate his steps & set out anew. I have begun to read the work, and already percieve an impenetrable mist dissipating and clearing off. I do sincerely wish our brethren there may acquire self government. but I fear they have much to go thro', and much to unlearn before they get into the right tract. I think, with mr Brackenridge, that 'a people must be educated and prepared for freedom.' this will require the period of one generation at least, during which they must expect hard domestic probation as well as some interruptions of foreign conflict. but these are not for my time; and, from an old man, they can recieve no aid but his prayers. those on your own behalf are offered up sincerely that you may be happy while you live, and live as long as you wish. 

TH: JEFFERSON

In some mysterious way the ideas of the Sage and his admirer from Pittsburgh live on and wonders perform: witness our revengeless administration of conquered Japan and West Germany. Like Jefferson and Brackenridge, we now think that "a people must be educated and prepared for freedom."

20 In the Rodney Collection at the Historical Society of Delaware, Wilmington.