THE HUDIBRASTIC ATTACK ON WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA POLITICS, 1798-1804

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But chiefly Hudibrastic writers,
For they are found most valiant fighters,
And wondrous deeds perform sometimes,
By means of their satirick rhymes;
Let these attack your honest foes
With literary bangs and blows
Expose their weakness and their folly,
Their character, and name too fully,
And if they have no faults or vice,
You then must make it up with lies . . .

The Western Pennsylvania political scene at the beginning of the nineteenth century fell under the ire of two Federalist poets of Connecticut. Richard Alsop and Theodore Dwight, New England gentlemen both, were part of that younger generation of Hartford Wits whose literary forebears had made a notorious practice both of flaunting the Federalist banner and of attacking populism ("mobocracy") in Hudibrastic couplets of uncontrolled venom. Alsop and Dwight followed in these satiric footsteps, and in two numbers of The Echo they felt called upon to answer certain political "sounds made by H. H. Brackenridge." In their later poems, however, these Wits did not confine their attacks to Brackenridge alone, but they enlarged their canvas to include scurrilous pictures of Albert Gallatin, Thomas McKean, and even the entire citizenry of Western Pennsylvania. This paper will attempt to evaluate the historical basis for these New England attacks in the light of a more

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1 *The Massachusetts Centinel*, April 25, 1787.

2 John Trumbull, Joel Barlow, Lemuel Hopkins, and David Humphreys collaborated on *The Anarchiad* (1786-87), a work inspired primarily by Shays' Rebellion. The evils of populism are portrayed in often abusive poetic diction. See Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago, 1943), and A. C. Ravitz, "*The Anarchiad and the Massachusetts Centinel*," in *Boston Public Library Quarterly*, 97-102, April, 1952.

3 *The Echo, with Other Poems*, 32 (New York, 1807). This is a collection of poems written by Alsop and Dwight, with negligible aid from a few of the minor Wits, which first appeared in issues of the *American Mercury* in the years between 1791 and 1805. The above-mentioned two satiric attacks are quoted in Claude M. Newlin, *Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge*, 127-128, 199-200 (Princeton, 1932).
objective analysis of the contemporary political situation in Western Pennsylvania—a situation antithetical to the Wits' New England brand of “tie-wig” Federalism.

In “The Political Green-House,” for the year 1798, Alsop and Dwight painted this chaotic panorama of the political heavens in Western Pennsylvania:

Behold! along yon western plains,
Where wild Misrule with Mischief reigns,
Behold that dark Intriguer steer
A devious course, through Faction's sphere!
Not yet matur'd to Freedom's sun,
His seven short seasons scarcely run,
The brogue still hobbling on his tongue,
His brows with rank rebellion hung,
See him with brazen forehead stand,
Among the fathers of the land,
With daring voice her glory mar,
And gash her face with many a scar.
Ye heirs of Penn's undying name,
Where is your spirit, where your shame!
Rouse from your base degenerate state,
And chase this hireling from his seat.4

This poem appeared on January 1, 1799, and each reference has a specific denotation. Any member of the Federalist party in 1798 would have been quick to agree that Western Pennsylvania was in a state of political anarchy, “Misrule,” and “Mischief.” The “dark Intriguer” is Albert Gallatin, who in 1798 was successful for the third time in capturing from his Federalist opponent John Woods the congressional seat for Allegheny and Washington counties. There was little “intrigue” on the part of Gallatin in this election; there was, however, a good deal of political manipulation on the part of Hugh Henry Brackenridge, who not only attacked Woods but also urged the candidacy of one Presley Neville, a rather weak politician. This device split the Federalist party vote and insured the election of Gallatin. One Federalist noted the strategy and clamored: “Woods and Neville he pitches to the devil . . . Gallatin is his man. . . .”5 Brackenridge's maneuvering, however, brought results, and because of Gallatin's subsequent election the versatile Hugh was looked upon as leader of the Republican party in Western Pennsylvania.

4 The Echo, 242.
5 Russell J. Ferguson, Early Western Pennsylvania Politics, 146, 148 (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1938).
Gallatin’s victory vexed Alsop and Dwight, and their reference to “his seven short seasons,” bears this explanatory footnote: “By the Constitution of the United States, no foreigner can be elected a Representative in Congress, until he has been seven years a citizen of the United States.” Gallatin, who was born in Switzerland and spoke French, was the target of Federalists because of his “ambiguous citizenry,” despite the fact that as early as 1786 he had taken the “oath of allegiance and fidelity to the Commonwealth of Virginia.” At a time when Federalists, outraged over the release of the XYZ Documents, were agitating for a war with France, Gallatin believed that America had “nothing to fear but foreign war,” and he “preferred enduring almost any injuries rather than resort to that measure.” Federalist opponents referred to him as “the wily Frenchman,” and Abigail Adams in her letters designated this anti-Federalist as “Gallitan [sic], the sly, the artful, the insidious Gallitan. . . .” On another occasion she observed that “The Jesuit Gallatin is as subtle and as artful and designing as ever. . . .” This vilified gentleman actually was ejected from his congressional seat in 1794 because of his “questionable” citizenship, although “there never was a doubt that Mr. Gallatin was eligible to the Presidency.” Alsop and Dwight in their poem charged Gallatin with marring the country and with “gashing” the face of liberty; obviously, they were merely parroting the congressional echoes of unjust Federalists.

The couplets of the Connecticut gentlemen then assault verbally the citizens of Western Pennsylvania and charge them with being in a “degenerate state.” They conclude by calling Gallatin a “hireling”; he is a hireling of the French republic plotting damage to America where he is little better than a foreigner; he is also a hireling of one Hugh Henry Brackenridge whose political chicanery placed this “daring intriguer” in a position of satanic power. Gallatin’s attitude toward a foreign conflict eventually prevailed; thereupon the disappointed Wits searched for new targets.

6 The Echo, 242.
7 John Austin Stevens, Albert Gallatin, 25 (Boston and New York, 1883).
8 Henry Adams, Life of Albert Gallatin, 200 (New York, 1943). Italics in the above quotation are mine.
9 Newlin, Brackenridge, 203.
11 Adams, Gallatin, 120.
With Gallatin thoroughly abused, Alsop and Dwight next turned their attention to the administration of Pennsylvania's governor Thomas McKean. In the "Triumph of Democracy" (1801) the poets blasted the "mob" which will invariably

Raise knaves and blockheads into place,
And brand our name with foul disgrace.

"Democracy," to the Wits, meant license for the populace to run wild; and as this activity was sure to disturb the peace of the "rich and well-born," every local Federalist felt obligated to oppose most strenuously any democratic encroachment on "true law and order." The political scene in Pennsylvania epitomized that inferno which democracy creates:

In Pennsylvania where M'Kean
Extends his mild and gentle reign,
Where birds, of every name and feather,
Flock, and at times get drunk together
Tench Coxe, from his interior draws
His weekly Tape-worm in the cause . . .
Thou too, O Tench! as times come round,
Beneath the gallows may'st be found . . .
Nor Coxe alone this state can boast—
Dallas commands a numerous host . . .
Judge Brackenridge, great sire of laws!
Turns Jew to aid the Christian cause.
But chief Duane amid the throng,
Demands the notice of our song . . .
Duane, more famed than all the gang.

Brackenridge is further graced with this footnote:

Brackenridge is one of M'Kean's Judges. He has lately set up a printing press at Pittsburgh, for the purpose of moulding the people of that state to the manners and morals of their Governor. Brackenridge's partner in the printing office, is one Israel, a Jew, to whose religion the Judge is said to be strongly disposed to become a proselyte, in hopes to have a double chance for safety, viz. both as Jew, and Gentile.12

The facts are these: Thomas McKean was elected governor of Pennsylvania in 1799, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge had supported him though Brackenridge himself was defeated in his quest for a seat in the state legislature. A "jollification dinner" to celebrate the Republican victory was held at the tavern of Captain Smur in Pittsburgh; Hugh Henry Brackenridge served as toastmaster for the affair. This banquet evoked from the Wits their sardonic phrase "get drunk together"—typical frontier democratic behavior. McKean's friends and advisors, Tench Coxe, Alexander Dallas (Secretary of the Commonwealth), and William Duane, a leader in "the radical wing of the Republican party," all come in for abuse.13 Indeed, these anti-Federalists are slated for the

12 The Echo, 274-276, 280.
13 Newlin, Brackenridge, 207, 208, 247; Ferguson, Politics, 153.
gallows, according to the Hartford Wits, for leading the destructive “mobocracy” into byways of social degeneracy.

Brackenridge is taken to task for his “conversion.” He sponsored young John Israel, editor of the Tree of Liberty, in the Tree publishing venture; and both were accused of “infidelity” and “Jacobinism” for using a biblical motto atop the anti-Federalist paper, as they had thereby placed “the Holy Bible on a level with a French ballad.” Of great significance is the fact that only two months after the founding of the Brackenridge-Israel sheet every Democratic Republican was elected to the state office which he sought. Obviously, the propagandizing of the partners had been effective, and Federalists were left members of a rapidly expiring faction in Pennsylvania as well as in New England.

With “Sketches of the Times” (1804), the Connecticut Wits perpetrated their final attack on Western Pennsylvania politics. They lamented:

Poor Pennsylvania sweats amain,
Beneath the rod of Tom M'Kean.
This rich, this proud, degraded state,
Is hastening onward to its fate.
Here foreign rogues of every tongue,
Like Pharaoh's frogs by thousands throng;
On posts of honour fix their eyes,
O'erpower the good by fraud and lies,
Drive Justice from her sacred seat,
Tread Law and Order under feet;
By falsehood fire the rabble rude,
And loose the dogs of war and blood.
No kingdom underneath the sun,
No state, nor nation but our own,
E'er spread such tempting lures, or gave
Such rich rewards to every knave.

One knave richly rewarded was Hugh Henry Brackenridge, who was appointed justice of the supreme court by Governor McKean. The state of Pennsylvania is further shown as having been victimized by anti-Federalism and doomed by democracy. The Wits eloquently express the contempt which they felt for the populace; “foreign rogues,” “rabble rude,” and “knave” are epithets flung at the electorate. Their venom, however, is understandable. Federalist fortunes were now at their lowest ebb in Western Pennsylvania, and the party in general was in its deep twilight stage. Certainly, the Connecticut Wits could take no joy from this situation on the Pennsylvania frontier, where perhaps hopes for a Federalist renaissance had been entertained. Indeed, the

14 Newlin, Brackenridge, 215. This attack appeared originally in the Pittsburgh Gazette, August 23, 1800.
15 Ferguson, Politics, 163.
16 The Echo, 301.
despondency of leaders in the Federalist party was so great that they “did not attempt to nominate candidates for all offices in 1803.” The “democracy of hell” had usurped the law of the land.

Nevertheless, the Wits had invective enough remaining for a final blast at Gallatin, then Secretary of the Treasury:

What stupid Fed’ralist shall dare,  
Wolcott with Gallatin compare?  
Roll’d on his tongue, our language mends,  
He holds finance at finger’s ends;  
And while his former Whiskey neighbors,  
Reap the rich harvest of his labours,  
Pour down dog-cheap th’ enlivening rill,  
All hot, and luscious from the still;  
Yet still our patriot merchants pay,  
And save our Treasury from decay.19

Gallatin’s roguish friends of the Whiskey Insurrection now reap the profits earned by industrious Federalist merchants. Surely, this is adding insult to injury.

One significant Hudibrastic poem emanating from Western Pennsylvania reflects the section’s awareness of and attitude toward Federalist antagonism. This work, however, is solidly encased in some eight hundred pages of prose. Brackenridge, in the 1793 edition of Modern Chivalry, wrote a poem entitled “Cincinnatus” in which he bitingly scathed Federalism by means of a satiric attack on the Society of the Cincinnati, a predominantly Federalist organization of ex-army officers.20 The author narrates a tale of how a “Cincinnat” came to town proudly wearing his insignia to mark him off from the common people. A curious crowd of people gathered to observe this phenomenon, and the Cincinnati explained the meaning of his badge to them:

But ’tis an eagle of the air,  
And emblematical of power,  
As having dominion of the lower,  
Fowls of the stock-yard and grove;  
And hence becomes the bird of Jove . . .21

17 Ferguson, Politics, 174.
18 Vernon L. Parrington. The Connecticut Wits, 465 (New York, 1926). This quotation is taken from “American Antiquities No. XI,” one of the papers comprising The Anarchiad.
19 The Echo, 302.
20 Brackenridge facetiously attributes the poem to an unknown Scotch poet named Sanders M’Comas.
21 This and the following quotations are from Brackenridge, Modern Chivalry, a reprint edited by C. M. Newlin, pp. 174-175, 177, 185-186, 193, 195 (New York, 1937).
One citizen in the audience raised an objection in stating that there

Are many others that have fought,
And taken the Hessian by the throat,
And may deserve more solid praise,
Than wearing that small thing of brass . . .

A near-by clergyman chimed in to call the harassed Cincinnati an "idolater" for worshipping at the shrine of his bauble. But the crafty gentleman countered all arguments by spouting standard Federalist philosophy:

Because there must be low and high
And what is better born and bred,
'Tis reasonable should be the head . . .
So, it is reasonable, there should,
Be a distinction of the brood;
And those who have but little sense
And lower quality of brains,
Should occupy a sphere beneath.

The Cincinnati then vigorously berated a militia-man who insisted that all veterans deserve a token of recognition:

To have insignia at your breast!
As well might an irrational beast,
The horse that draws artillery gun . . .

Pandemonium soon ensued, and the brave Cincinnati was forced to flee for his life. He encountered in his flight a cavalcade of knights who would listen to his tale and sympathize with the aim of the Society of the Cincinnati: to "restore the days of yore." The Cincinnati deemed it far more preferable "to joust" with the aristocratic knights than "with the rabble of mankind in their prejudices."

The purpose of Brackenridge's satire is all too apparent, and he sums up his vital points in a brief prose addition:

For it [Society of the Cincinnati] must naturally evaporate in a few years, the spirit of the times being wholly changed, from what it was in the days of chivalry, and not capable of supporting an ex- crenscence which has no natural root or foundation in the opinion of the people.

Both the crude poetry and the concise prose summary stand as forceful antitheses to the points set forth both by the earlier Connecticut Wits and by Alsop and Dwight.
The Federalist poetic assault on Western Pennsylvania politics, then, was motivated by profound fear of a usurping of the rights and privileges properly due the "socially desirable" by unruly citizens of the frontier. The rollicking couplets which the Wits wrote expressed the frenzied palaver of an expiring "tie-wig" brand of Federalism so dear to these poets. By 1824 the Federalist party was defunct; thus, the satire which they had hurled at the opposition went for nought. The frontier democracy in Western Pennsylvania with its conglomeration of "rogues, knaves, and rascals" well survived the bombardment.