BOOK REVIEWS


This volume is a rewarding slice of a rich and exhilarating period of American life and the story of one of the finer men of an era.

Henry Marie Brackenridge was an illustrious son of a noted father, Hugh Henry Brackenridge—poet of the Revolution, literary light of early Pittsburgh, and a prominent figure in the Whiskey insurrection. The son was, if anything, more noteworthy than his father in every respect save perhaps as a literary figure, and even in this field he was not without merit. Henry Marie was one of the better representatives of an age when men could be democrats and aristocrats, intellectuals and still politicians. He was a lawyer, publicist, jurist, essayist, legislator, poet, explorer, diplomat, author, congressman, linguist, bibliophile, naturalist, historian, anthropologist, forester, and city planner. While not of the stature of a Jefferson or a John Quincy Adams, he was equally a man of parts. Dr. Keller has recreated for us this cosmopolitan intellectual who was raised in half a dozen homes and whose career took him from Pittsburgh to residence, at one time or another, in Saint Genevieve, Missouri; Gallipolis, Ohio; Butler, Carlisle, Somerset, Philadelphia and Tarentum, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Washington, St. Louis, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Pensacola, Rio De Janeiro, Buenos Aires and Montevideo—not to mention a dozen Indian villages in the far west! One wonders at first why such an interesting American has waited so long for a biographer; the answer is, perhaps, that the job was so big. Brackenridge was a complex character who engaged in many pursuits in widely scattered locales over a long period of time, leaving behind a dismayingly large mass of written material. Dr. Keller has done a prodigious amount of research with patience and sound understanding of the historical context.

We meet some fascinating characters in this intensely individualistic period—a Pennsylvania mountaineer who kept a rattlesnake in his hat and made a living robbing bee trees; a riverboat captain who challenged to a "duel" by laying two butcher knives at his opponent's feet; and an Indian chief whose "witchcraft" very successfully destroyed his enemies. (It turned out the Indian had got some arsenic from the whites and became a Blackfoot Borgia!) The best sections of the book,
understandably, are those based on the autobiographical material Brackenridge left. Perhaps interest will be revived in his writings by this volume.

There are the inevitable minor factual and editorial slips. On p. 56, Jefferson's party in the 1790's is referred to as the Democrats, a term not yet in use; on p. 150, Negro is not capitalized. Brackenridge's wife remains a shadow to whom less attention is devoted than is afforded to half a dozen minor characters. Much of the quoted material is in such fine print as to be tiring to the eyes.

The major shortcoming of the book, however, is proportion. Of 379 pages of narrative, 342 are devoted to the first 42 years of the subject's life, and 37 pages to the second 42 years. Brackenridge's service as a congressman gets only a paragraph (p. 360) and his term in the Pennsylvania legislature, only a sentence (p. 364).

Despite these flaws, the reader will enjoy this sound and spirited account of a versatile western Pennsylvanian.

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This little volume has no illustrations, no index and has a meagre bibliography. It is also about thirteen relatively inconspicuous figures in American historiography. Yet it is greatly worth while. The publishers state that it "is a by product of his researches in American history." Somewhat obviously it is not based on thirteen extended researches on the biographies of these "unusual" Americans. But the grasp on the milieu by the author is clearly apparent. He has thought analytically and spoken boldly not only about the thirteen individuals but about the society and politics of their day.

Justification for this book review is found in the examination of p. x2, "Contents," organized as follows: "The Taint of Treason; John Fries; Harman Blennerhasset"; "Two Travelling Men; John Ledyard; Edward Bonney"; "A Brace of Villains; Simon Girty; John A. Murrell"; "Limited Utopias; John Humphrey Noyes; James Strong"; "Fairly Respectable Rebels; Clement T. Vallandigham; Jacob Corey"; "Freedom Road; Nat Turner; Elijah Lovejoy"; "And A Miracle Man; Phineas