A NOTE ON LONGSTREET'S RANSY SNIFFLE AND BRACKENRIDGE'S MODERN CHIVALRY

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Of all Judge Longstreet's creations, Ransy Sniffle of "The Fight" must be the most memorable. The physical description of Sniffle, which Longstreet gives in detail, is obviously based on close observation of the Southern poor white or cracker. A "sprout" who has "fed copiously" on red clay and blackberries and now has an "abdominal rotundity," "fleshless and elevated shoulders," Sniffle has a large and flat head, sunken eyes, small limbs with large joints, a gaunt frame, and disproportionately large hands and feet. The foregoing may in fact be a sketch of a particular cracker, for Longstreet said that he had used "real people" in Georgia Scenes.¹ The inspiration to endow Sniffle with a love for "witnessing, fomenting, or talking about a fight" as well as the felicitous choice of name, however, may have come from an earlier American book.

That book, Modern Chivalry (1792-1815), like Georgia Scenes was written by an aristocratic observer of common life, a man also fated to become a judge, Hugh Henry Brackenridge. Sniffle's presumed ancestor is one Will Snickley, whose joy in life was serving as second in duels he himself precipitated, although he was not a fighter. If he was not "valiant himself," however, he "could be the cause of valour in other men."² His forte was to egg other men on into duels, then serve as second. Thus Brackenridge's contemptible second, Snickley, shares with Longstreet's Sniffle a singular similarity not only of name but also of desire to see other men mangle each other. At the same time, each also avoided direct involvement in martial enterprise.

Modern Chivalry was a highly popular book in the first half of the nineteenth century and it would be an unusual circumstance had Longstreet not read it. The similarity of names and character in this pair certainly suggest that he had read the book. Furthermore, there

¹ In the preface to the first edition of Georgia Scenes, reprinted in the 1897 Harper and Brothers edition. See page 67 of the 1897 edition for the description of Sniffle.
are several reasons why he would have enjoyed Brackenridge's novel. As already noted, each was an aristocratic and keen observer of lower forms of American life, one on the Pennsylvania frontier, the other in Georgia. Secondly, each was of an ironic turn of mind. Perhaps most importantly, each wrote realistic fiction, reproducing real experiences, employing the actual language of his subjects, delighting at times in minute detail, and indulging himself in cruel irony, as in the comic description of Sniffle and analogous ones by Brackenridge.

Of even more interest than the sameness of temperament shared by the two authors, nevertheless, is the differences in their art. Though he enjoyed lampooning the likes of Snickley, Brackenridge was mainly interested in driving home a moral — that duels are evil, as are those who promote duels cowards. In fact, he soon lost interest in Snickley. Longstreet, on the other hand, gave a fascinating picture of Sniffle, a clay-eating poor white who might have stepped out of Cash's Mind of the South a century later, before mentioning Sniffle's passion for starting fights. His pitiful body is ironically and pitilessly described. The calves of his legs, for instance, give "the appearance of so many well-drawn blisters." His surname suggests a sickly person who is ever sniffling back draining mucus, and his given name, Ransy, connotes smelliness as well as generally-poor condition. Like Snickley, Sniffle also implies general inferiority.

Before even mentioning Sniffle's greatest desire, to see Billy Stallings and Bob Durham fight, Longstreet has therefore developed a pitiful, grotesque, contemptible character and bestowed upon him a name that humorously complements his physique. He has also prepared us to understand why Sniffle, who is only "five feet nothing" and weighs but ninety-five pounds "at the height of blackberry season," would so delight in watching others fight. Living in a heroic, violent society and yet destined to be but an observer, or even worse, an object of ridicule among men who lived for their primitively-conceived honor, Sniffle has become as it were a voyeur of fisticuffs.

Although like Brackenridge Longstreet certainly concerned himself with social criticism and laughingly drew his moral, his basic interest was people and the observation of their conduct. In this regard it is instructive to observe two of America's first local colorists dealing with common subject matter. In other parts of Modern Chivalry Brackenridge does forget his moral long enough to write comic prose, but as a rule didacticism guides his pen. Longstreet retains the moral comment — perhaps to satisfy his readers, perhaps himself — but it never interferes with his humor. Still, he must have learned much from
Modern Chivalry. Indeed, the seed of an idea from that novel apparently found fecund soil in his imagination, developing as it did into a convincing scene from low life and leaving us a memorable character — Ransy Sniffle, that miserable, scrofulous bit of human flotsam who never seemed alive except when he was witnessing a fight.