FRENCH TRAVELERS IN THE OHIO VALLEY
1788-1792
MARTIN GALVIN

AMERICA'S enormous promise and her most bitter exactions in human pains have always seemed to combine most dramatically at the frontier, the edge of time and place between what is and what is to be. In the late 1780s, Pittsburgh and its surrounding western country was such a place. To it came the solitary woodsman, the farmer and his family, the craftsman, the disenchanted, the adventurous, men of the recent American Revolution, and occasionally men of, or from, the tumult of the French Revolution.

Expressed in letters and articles written for the French reading public, the views these French travelers had of the frontier offer a perspective to the scant history of that time and place, and an affirmation that the Pittsburgh area epitomized the singular possibilities of America and the harshness of her requirements. For the Pittsburgh of the 1780s, as Charles Dickens wrote in a different context, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Three such French travelers, in particular, have left observations of the American frontier and accounts of their sojourns in the western country in the period 1788-1792. Jean Pierre Brissot de Warville, most widely known of the three, who one critic has observed was "already an authority on American matters," 1 traveled extensively in the new nation to gather information for his Nouveau Voyage dans les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique Septentrionale, fait en 1788.2 Antoine Saugrain, "an enthusiastic naturalist," 3 and a doctor who later would introduce vaccine to the people of St. Louis, arrived in the Ohio Valley in 1787 "voyager dans le Kentucké et le long de l'Ohio" 4 for the purpose of conducting studies of the flora and fauna of the area. Finally, the

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—Editor

1 H. Fouré Selter, L'Odyssée Américaine d'une Famille Francaise (Baltimore, 1936), 8.
3 Warville, Nouveau Voyage, 1: 376.
4 "to journey through Kentucky and the length of the Ohio," ibid., 377.
Marquis Claude Lezay-Marnézia, a visionary emigré associated with the *Compagnies de l'Ohio et du Scioto*, arrived in Pittsburgh in 1791 to acquire property and to find a place "to live in peace and prosperity, in the exercise of quiet virtues and in the bonds of a gentle brotherhood."  

H. Fouré Selter, a twentieth-century student of these eighteenth-century French travelers, has noted both the importance of their writings and the problems of the historian who attempts to recount their adventures.

Perhaps the day will come when the vivid odyssey and misfortune of these victims of the American dream will be written in detail. Till now, it has been the subject of a number of fragmentary and necessarily incomplete studies because authentic and original documents are most rare. They wrote little, these Frenchmen of the eighteenth century who, at the height of the Revolution, went to search the banks of the Ohio and the American wilderness for a place more suitable to the disposition of their spirits. However, they have not lived in vain. They have, for their part, contributed to the development of the West. Those among them who survived malaria and fevers are scattered in all of the Ohio Valley and their blood is mixed with the blood of the American pioneers.

Brisson Warville's work contains two letters about the western frontier, one describing the adventure of Dr. Saugrain and one offering "a portrait of the American pioneer, destined without doubt to change the face of this part of the world."  

The Saugrain account will be treated separately, using the doctor's own correspondence; but the pictures that Warville sketched of the independence of the inhabitants of the Pennsylvania forests are perceptive and poignant reminders of the harsh vitality of those rough and solitary lives.

The American of the forests enjoys hunting and prefers the rural life. He farms only what he needs, in order to obtain the benefits of the outdoors. He loves adventures and can easily be seduced by the pictures of far-away advantages and more beautiful countries. He enjoys war; he will go to wage it in Canada or in Louisiana with the greatest pleasure. Nevertheless, he doesn't bind himself for more than one year, because he is a husband and father, and he likes his home life during certain times of the year.

The American of the forests is gallant, fearless, contemptuous of death, contemptuous of Indians. He sleeps alone tranquilly in the middle of the forest, even though he might be surrounded by its denizens.

The Indian, so often the nemesis of the American farmer and hunter, so often a cause of excruciating tension on the frontier and
of bitter political accusations and counteraccusations between the national capital and the western country, received an objective treatment in Brissot Warville's account, with due recognition to William Penn's earlier portrait:

If you want a portrait of the Indians, read the one that has been written by Penn (see Letters to his Friends, Vol. 6, p. 48); he is quite accurate. Strong, well-proportioned, agile, black, because they darken themselves, they have small, black eyes like the Jews (Penn believed they were descended from them); they rub their bodies with grease, in order to protect them from the heat and the cold. Their language is noble, precise; they love their children, are generous, brave, full of good times, hospitable; they are irritable, cruel, when they are offended. One can accuse them of being overly shrewd, tricky, untrustworthy, robbers, gluttons, and vindictive to excess. The wars, smallpox, liquors, still-births of their young women, and the misery of a nomadic life diminish their population continually.10

While part of Brissot Warville's description of the Indian is complimentary to their character, the experience reflected in the writing of Antoine Saugrain clearly described some of their less attractive qualities. With true scientific detachment, Dr. Saugrain recounted a recurring nightmare in the American frontier experience: an Indian attack. His account of the event has been saved and reprinted in Selter's study, L'Odyssée Américaine d'une Famille Francaise.11

Selter, in his introduction to the notes and letters of the family, judged the writing and observations of the doctor to be of more value in understanding the western frontier than Brissot Warville's account, despite the latter's reputation and more polished language.

The young French scientist was far from having the marvelous style of his famous successor, but he is certainly more truthful. It is from him and not from the author of Journey in America that we are able to get exact accounts on the condition of the country, the perils of the route, the Indians waiting on the banks of the river, ready to ambush isolated travellers, and the sufferings and ordeals that faced the bold pioneers who ventured down the "beautiful river" around the year 1790.12

With his fellow scientist, M. Piqué, Saugrain had developed a plan not only to examine the natural phenomena of the Ohio Valley, but also "they had the intention to investigate whether it was possible to establish a town in that part of the American continent for some French families who desired to settle there." 11

The two men arrived in Philadelphia from Paris in the summer of 1787. By the time they had reached Pittsburgh, "the winter detained

10 Ibid., 428.
11 This work, previously cited, contains various documents of the Saugrain family, including, on pp. 37-70, the journal of Dr. Saugrain.
12 Selter, L'Odyssée Américaine, 10.
13 Warville, Nouveau Voyage, 1: 377.
them there. The cold was excessive that year. The Ohio froze, which happens rarely."  

14 Selter described the way Saugrain and the other members of his expedition benefited from the apparent adversity of the Pennsylvania winter: "He profited from his forced stay in the Pittsburgh area by examining the mines of the region; he discovered that one could extract as much iron, copper, and silver from downstream as from upstream."  

15 The two scientists also carefully recorded the results of experiments conducted in a rough laboratory they had set up: "He determined the specific weight of the different species of wood in the region and the amount of potash that these kinds of wood could contain."  

16 Finally the weather moderated and the scientists, now joined by one of their friends, the Frenchman, M. Raguet, who had been living in Virginia, and David Pierce, an American, set out on their long-anticipated expedition of discovery which was to end so tragically. Selter has condensed Dr. Saugrain's journal entries of the adventure that the four explorers had as they journeyed down the Ohio:

They left Pittsburgh on March 19; stopped in Wheeling, in Muskingum, and in Limestone. The afternoon of the 24th, they saw a canoe filled with Indians. The friends of Saugrain, faithful to the theories of Rousseau, wanted him to prove that civilization had not yet spoiled the natural goodness of the Redskins. In order to show their good intentions, they attached a white handkerchief next to their flag as a sign of peace; but, alas! they were quickly deceived. Attacked by those whose friendship they were trying to gain, Raguet was wounded in the arm by a musket-ball and drowned in trying to escape by swimming to shore; Pique was put to death and scalped in front of Saugrain, who was waiting to undergo this same fate himself; but D. Pierce and he succeeded in escaping. After having wandered three days in the woods, they were rescued by an American boatsman who, finding them starved, weak, and sick, took them on board and on Saturday, the 29th, dropped them off at Louisville where the first care was given them.

17 Saugrain's account itself is an even more graphic description of the minutes of terror when the Indians attacked, including the doctor's own efforts at self-defense: "... one of them prepared to enter our boat; since the wretched person held a knife in his hand, I presumed, with good reason I believe, that he did not have honorable intentions; I took a pistol and shot two bullets into his stomach."  

18 This action started a general round of gunfire and mayhem which finally ended with the capture of Pierce and Saugrain and the deaths of the other

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14 Ibid.
15 Selter, L'Odysséé Américaine, 9.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 10.
18 Saugrain, quoted in ibid., 38-39.
two Frenchmen, Piqué and Raguet. Saugrain's journal records the details of Raguet's death by drowning and Piqué's murder:

As he had a broken arm and didn't know how to swim, I think that he drowned, preferring, he told me, "to be drowned rather than to be scalped by the Indians." I had not yet reached the land when I saw Mr. Piqué and two Indians who were waiting for me; and, I no sooner got my footing on shore than they seized me and tied my arms behind my back with garters that had served to hold up their leggings. They had no sooner finished tying me than I saw one of the two that held me go up to Mr. Piqué, throw him to the ground, and, after opening his clothes and removing his shirt, the Indian stabbed him four times one next to another, and scalped him and put his hair in a wallet that Mr. Piqué had had in his pocket. 19

Finally, and again demonstrating disinterested scientific observation and detachment despite the recent unpleasantness with the Indians, Saugrain wrote to Brissot Warville about the flora and fauna of the Ohio Valley. The report, in fact, seems positively biased toward the idyllic land these Frenchmen hoped to find and settle; Warville described its contents in a letter to some friends in France:

He communicated to me the different observations that he had made. The Ohio Valley had seemed to me the richest, the most fertile land that he had seen. The growth of vegetation there was one of great richness and of an incredible variety. One found there the most beautiful trees of an infinitely varied species. There one sowed hemp and tobacco to dry the land up, to impoverish the land too rich in sugar, in order to prepare the land to produce corn. The maize there grew to an exceptional height; the cattle there had an extraordinary heftiness; even in the winter they were found to feed on a sort of cane or reed, well-softened, that pierced through the snow and that the sun produced in abundance. The winter there never was too cold to prevent the animals from going out in the fresh air. 20

Selter, perhaps recognizing the incredulity with which such glowing reports might have been received by Saugrain's French friends, as well as by the twentieth-century reader, hastened to add: "The descriptions and reports of Brissot Warville confirmed these accounts and verified their authenticity." 21

Claude Lezay-Marnézia, the third of the French travelers who wrote about the frontier around Pittsburgh, was both a pragmatist looking for a quick profit and a visionary looking, as Saugrain before him, for the promised land where men who were politically or morally disenfranchised from revolutionary France could live in harmony with nature. In his Revue de Paris article, "Les Emigrés Français en Amérique," H. M. Carré described the man and the land speculation

19 Saugrain, quoted in ibid., 40.
20 Warville, Nouveau Voyage, 1: 381-82.
21 Selter, L'Odyssée Américaine, 19.
that brought him on his exploratory visit to the head of the Ohio River. "Lezay-Marnézia, a French nobleman, and delegate to the National Assembly, estimated that one could make a considerable fortune at the Scioto." The marquis as a man of business, however, was second to the marquis as visionary, especially in his search for suitable land: "He looked chiefly for a favorable environment for his religious, moral or social speculations." 22 Apparently, this messianic fervor of the marquis led to some excesses:

The Marquis of Marnézia, we are told by his son, was an "enthusiast" and a poor administrator. I should add: a mystic and naive. In enlisting his colonists, he required letters of confession from them, that they would know how to correct themselves better; in enlisting the women, he preferred the large, hefty ones.23

In his Notice Biographique sur le Comte de Lezay-Marnézia, Louis Spach remarked that Lezay-Marnézia "was an innovator. Well before the Revolution he abolished forced labor, demanded the elimination of feudal taxes and an equal distribution of public funds among all the social classes." 24 Spach also noted his democratic temperament: "He was one of the first to resign from the Chamber of the Nobles in order to join the Third Estate." 25 But he apparently tired of the chaos of the Revolution and decided to travel to the New World "with friends of France, that they might establish a truly patriarchal government there." 26

The letters which Lezay-Marnézia wrote back to his friends in France detailing his search for the proper place to establish this new regime, concentrate primarily on his observance of the lands and the people of the Ohio Valley. The preface to these Lettres Ecrites des Rives de l'Ohio is a commentary on the French reading and writing public. He here established both the singular importance of America to Frenchmen and the difficulty of understanding the new nation from afar. In the letters themselves, which purport to give a balanced view of the New World, he weighed the negative and positive qualities of frontier life and of its inhabitants, and the structure of the government found in Pennsylvania with that of more "civilized" countries of Europe.

His observations in the preface about the distortions in the French press regarding conditions on the frontier are interesting because they

23 Ibid.
25 Spach, quoted in ibid., 314.
26 Spach, quoted in ibid., 315.
shed some light on his own writings about America, and, incidentally, because similar distortions were almost daily fare for contemporaneous American readers:

Certain writers, exaggerating enthusiasts or systematic authors, have taken the colors which Milton used to paint the earthly paradise in order to paint all of America; they have described the inhabitants as so many perfect Spartans. The others, critics as unjust as they are exaggerated, wanted to make us think that this immense continent, abandoned by nature had been condemned to an eternal infancy, had only enough strength to produce weak, cowardly and degenerated animals.27

The imbalance of these writers is made more serious for Lezay-Marnézia by the glib quality of the popular press and the outright errors to be found in some books about a country which he believed Frenchmen should not only know but love as being another center for the freedom of the common man. In fact, he argued that the two countries, despite the distance that separated them, were equally hospitable to Frenchmen of his ilk. Inherent in his argument, one may assume, was his belief that the land that he had seen in the Ohio Valley could be successfully promoted for both financial and ideological considerations. He commented about the typical French citizen of the time:

It has now become quite hard to get him interested in writings which do not bear a very direct relationship to his present concerns. The more he reads newspapers, the less he reads serious works; nevertheless, of all countries, North America is the one that ought to be the least alien to Frenchmen, and yet, perhaps, it is the one that they know least. The books dealing with America mislead more often than they clarify; we are indebted to them for more errors than truths.

Separated by immense distances from the Americans, the French were brought closer to her by powerful common interests. In helping to break America's chains, the French have become very aware of the challenge of gaining an equal freedom for themselves; but they have taken different ways to arrive there. It behooves us to judge which way is best. Time alone will tell.28

In his letters Lezay-Marnézia tried to project an honest view of the America he saw from the banks of the Ohio, but his positive bias toward the frontier demonstrated in the first pages of his long letter to Monsieur Jacques Bernardin Henri de Saint-Pierre established the prevailing tone of the entire book. America was a world of vast possibilities, especially for the war-weary Frenchman; the Ohio Valley was the best of all possible places in that world for the ideal of America to merge with the social and philosophical ideals of the Compagnies de l'Ohio et du Scioto. To Saint-Pierre he wrote: "I

28 Ibid., v-vi.
have come to expect from America a soft and peaceful haven, taking possession of a large piece of land that I have acquired on the Ohio River's banks, a river well meriting the name 'beautiful river,' that the bounty of the country has given. I have begun to yield to the seductive idea that I would finish my life here working for the interests of a successful colony."  

It was this seductive idea and the merits of the land that he saw everywhere around him that led him to try to change Henri de Saint-Pierre's apparent preference for more southerly lands as the site of the proposed colony. For Lezay-Marnézia the climate and soil of the western frontier were eminently suitable for sustaining a vigorous, moral, and industrious people. His arguments about the enervating effects of a too-indulgent climate on human affairs and about the relative insignificance of the creative life are particularly notable aspects of his preoccupation with the virtues of the rigorous life. They suggest the fervor of the zealot in their tone and spirit.

The rich banks of the Amazon, that you seem to prefer, seem to me less able to satisfy your expectations than the fertile banks of the Allegheny and the Monongahela, at the point where they form the Ohio from their united waters. Of all the places in the two worlds, I don't think there is a site more fertile than the one that these two rivers enclose. If shepherds such as those of Theocritus and Vergil ever existed, it would surely be on these happy shores. The southern countries, whatever advantages they may have, have inconveniences that I regard as horrible, and that one can not know too well how to avoid. Abundant to an excess in superfluous things, they are little able to produce the necessities. They give lavishly of exquisite odors and delicious fruits, yet will not yield corn and more useful grains. Demanding very little work of man, they permit him a contemplative or a voluptuous life; isolation increases inactivity and forces him to find pleasure in the illusions of a too-ardent imagination, in the pleasures of the senses, or in sleep. This country [the Ohio Valley] will be inferior, perhaps, in erotic poets, in extravagant romantic writers, in visionary fakirs, and in ballad writers; but this is a soil that does not enervate; one, instead, that fortifies its inhabitants without toughening them like the harsh climates of the North; this is what you must choose, Sir, to establish your colony.

The Pittsburgh area, for Lezay-Marnézia, was the golden mean between the harshness of areas farther north, especially French Canada, and the self-deluding fertility of the lands to the south. Though the syntax is a little ambiguous about the place references, perhaps because of the haste or general casualness of letter writing, even then, it is clear from other comments in his letter that Lezay-Marnézia favored the Ohio Valley. "Conduisez, Monsieur, à la tête de l'Ohio, entre l'Aleghani et la tranquille Monogahela, seulement

29 Ibid., 11-12.
30 Ibid., 39-40.
cinquante familles,” he wrote to Saint-Pierre, and we will settle there “an isolated area in the immensity of the American continent, still almost a wilderness, on the banks of rich rivers, on a rich soil, capable of great variety because nothing has yet been tried, in this mild and healthful climate.”

The land was not without faults for Lezay-Marnézia, however. He also warned Saint-Pierre of the areligious attitude of the time generally, finding it particularly evident among the isolated mountain people of the western country. Also, he vividly detailed the harsh reality of life on the frontier:

The inhabitants of the United States, scattered in the mountains, almost without communication with one another, show almost too clearly that they are able to become human beings alien to all belief and able to sink to the depths of degradation.

More isolated than the savages, who live in tribes, each family of these inhabitants is alone, without industry, without morals, and nearly without clothing. Animals are less deprived of resources than they are. When they are not successful in the hunt, they maintain their miserable existence with a few boiled potatoes, that they eat without salt. In a cabin, firmed only from the trunks of trees, roughly placed on top of one another and barely covered with bark, a dying man was seen in the arms of a young woman who was about to open his vein with scissors, hoping to save his life. Where is misery such as theirs to be found?

Emigrating from the anarchy of revolution-ridden France, Lezay-Marnézia and his friends were understandably concerned about social order and organized government. His observation about the state of affairs in the Pittsburgh area was probably colored by that preoccupation; nevertheless, his comments suggest some advantages and disadvantages of the frontier environment. Indirectly, his comments further reveal one reason why the independence of the frontiersman from government control was a natural concomitant of the rigorous, isolated life. While Lezay-Marnézia considered that the laws of Pennsylvania were excellent, he also judged, “The executive power is almost without force here, because of the difficulty of controlling such a widely dispersed population.” This was a fact that undoubtedly occurred to Alexander Hamilton several years later when the federal government suppressed the Whiskey Rebellion. The possibility of anarchy, however, in this loosely controlled state, was lessened, ironically enough, by the very rigors of existence on the frontier:

31 "Lead, Sir, to the head of the Ohio [River], between the Allegheny and the quiet Monongahela, only fifty families," ibid., 41.
32 Ibid., 38.
33 Ibid., 68.
34 Ibid., 94.
It is sufficient to say that the government control, so necessary to civilized countries, is essentially absent from this one. If this area was inhabited by a more mobile people, a more passionate one, or one less protected from the temptations of wealth and the misery to which that gives birth, it would soon be a prey to civil disorders and to even greater misfortune.35

Ultimately, for Lezay-Marnézia as for Dr. Saugrain before him, the magnificent possibilities of the new land far outweighed any of the considerable inconveniences of life on the frontier. A catalogue of the area’s virtues is contained in this description which he sent to his friends in France:

It is a place without excessive heat or extreme cold, irrigated by two superb rivers that border the rich prairies, separated by mountains from whose hills flow a number of streams, varied by the plains which are not very large but of a lavish fertility and by some charming valleys. Almost without attention, the animals, like the plants, are superb and prosper beyond your wildest dreams. This country will provide all the needs and the reasonable demands of the men that you will lead here.36

The letters and journals of these Frenchmen reveal many of the same attractions of the Ohio Valley that lured settlers by the thousands throughout the 1780s and 1790s. The qualities of the frontiersmen, the rigors of life in the wilderness, the richness of the land, all contributed to the spirit of the western country. The volatile society produced by the mixture of danger and great expectations expressed itself through the fierce independence of its citizens, individually and collectively. The French settlers joined those other members of the new Republic in fulfilling Warville’s prophecy that the Americans settling the Ohio Valley were indeed “destinés sans doute à changer la face de cette partie du monde.” 37

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 40.
37 “destined without a doubt to change the face of this part of the world.” Warville, *Nouveau Voyage*, 2: 427.