GLIMPSES OF THE "HEROIC AGE":
WILLIAM DARBY'S LETTERS TO
LYMAN C. DRAPER

J. Gerald Kennedy

In the final paragraph of "The Wedding," a short story published in a Philadelphia monthly in 1836, a writer signing himself "Mark Bancroft" painted this affecting picture of a homestead near Washington, Pennsylvania, which had been abandoned by a pioneer family: "Drawn away by that infatuation which places paradise on the outer verge of civilization, the father, son, and uncle sold their sweet home, and plunged into the deep west, and became utterly lost, long years lost to all my inquiries, and the last time I passed the once Osborne cottage, I found the house disfigured by waste and neglect; the orchard trees were decayed or dead, and the stumps of the fine sugar maple shade trees, only stood monuments of barbarism — weeds and briars covered the garden." ¹

Set in the 1790s, the story depicted a period of transition in the Pennsylvania border country, the decade in which the growth of new towns and the cessation of Indian hostilities effectively closed the era of frontier settlement and prompted restless folk like the fictional Osbornes to push farther into the wilderness. Creating a bittersweet conclusion to an otherwise humorous tale, the final lines epitomized the relentlessness of historical change, for the ruined cottage implicitly represented a prior attempt to secure happiness "on the outer verge of civilization." The passage expressed a private nostalgia as well, because the author, William Darby (1775-1854), had thirty-seven years earlier been caught up in the same "infatuation," leaving his home and family in Washington County to follow the wave of westward migration. Though his subsequent experiences carried him far from the banks of Chartiers Creek and transformed the backwoods farmboy into a nationally-known geographer and man of letters, the author of numerous guidebooks, gazetteers, and travel narratives, Darby retained a deep attachment to the border country and its his-

¹ Casket (July 1836).
This preoccupation brought him back to the area repeatedly in his later years and compelled him to meditate on the scenes of his youth, much as the narrator of "The Wedding" pondered the neglected cottage. The frontier epoch, moreover, became one of his favorite subjects as a writer: it inspired many of the narratives which he began to publish in 1829 in the Casket and the Saturday Evening Post; it furnished the theme for numerous essays in the Washington, D. C., National Intelligencer between 1830 and 1852; and it formed the dominant concern of his correspondence with the historian Lyman C. Draper between 1845 and 1850. These letters, never before reprinted, reveal the nature of Darby's commitment to the "Western Country" and its history through vivid recollections of what he persistently called the "Heroic Age."

During the summer of 1845, Darby learned of Draper's ambitious investigation of western history through a common friend, Colonel Samuel H. Laughlin, with whom Darby worked at the Federal Land Office in Washington. Then nearly seventy years old and living in virtual obscurity, the geographer welcomed Draper's request for his memoirs, and he hastened to assure the historian of both his willingness to contribute "memoranda" and his qualifications for the task:

You do me no more than justice when you suppose that I take a deep interest in whatever relates to the Great West. In fact all my other thoughts are incidental; the West is the home of my imagination and warmest recollections and aspirations. I was not born in the West, but taken there when a child not seven years old. With my parents, brothers and one sister, an infant, I reached where Washington in Pennsylvania now stands, on Christmas day, 1781. I was living about two miles from that village when the Moravian Indians were massacred, 1782, and when in the same year the disastrous campaign under Crawford and Williamson was made. Young as I was the incidents were too heart moving and impressive to be forgotten.¹

³ Darby's major publications were A Geographical Description of the State of Louisiana (Philadelphia, 1816), The Emigrant's Guide to the Western and Southwestern States and Territories (New York, 1818), A Tour from the City of New York, to Detroit (New York, 1819), and View of the United States, Historical, Geographical, and Statistical (Philadelphia, 1828).

³ Darby to Draper, Aug. 1, 1845, Vol. 8, Pittsburgh and Northwest Virginia Papers, Draper Manuscript Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. All subsequent citations from Darby's correspondence derive from the same volume of the Pittsburgh and Northwest Virginia Papers at the historical society.
Though he could not have participated in the campaign of 1782 (and saw only the bloody results of two later incidents), Darby's early experiences brought him in contact with many of the leading figures of border history. He told Draper: "You will of course see I could be only a spectator and a very young one also, of the most trying scenes... But on the other hand, mixing with the actors personally whilst the events were recent, and memory active, I seem now to see their faces and hear their voices." 4 Thus his principal contribution to Draper's research consisted of notes and personal glimpses of the fabled "hunter-warriors" of the period. Darby regarded such men as the Wetzel brothers and Samuel Brady as epic heroes, explaining their real significance to the historian:

Speaking of the Wetzels and Capt. Samuel Brady you remark that many fabulous acts were attributed to them which they never performed. True. But, the Value of such men as Jonathan Zane, Lewis Wetzel, Henry Jolly, Samuel Brady, and many more, of the heroes of those days of danger and blood, was not made up of what they did, in accidental cases to form and adorn a Tale, but in their watchfulness and in the fact, that their names were known and terrible to the savages. It is no risk to assert that for many years of their lives, these brave men were sword and shield to a very extensive frontier. 5

Darby conceived it as his responsibility to correct the popular view of certain figures and to preserve the names of other, lesser-known heroes.

Clearly, Brady and Lewis Wetzel were the foremost Indian fighters of whom Darby had firsthand knowledge. Border historian Wills De Haas once wrote of Brady: "No man stood higher in the esteem of the hardy settlers, and no name could inspire more of confidence and of safety, than that of Samuel Brady. During the whole of the fierce, protracted, and sanguinary war which ravaged the frontier settlements of Virginia and Pennsylvania, from 1785 to 1794, no man could so quiet the trembling and fear-stricken settlers as Captain Brady." 6 Noted for his fearlessness and his use of Indian disguises, Brady had established his fame as a scout under Colonel Daniel

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 History of the Early Settlement and Indian Wars of Western Virginia... Previous to 1795 (Wheeling, 1851), 380-81.
Brodhead during the early 1780s. It was probably upon his return from a reconnaissance mission for Brodhead that Brady’s path first crossed that of young William Darby. The details of the encounter, indelibly etched in Darby’s memory, provided a vignette for Draper:

Brady, and his chosen companion John Williamson (Brother of Col. David Williamson), went into the Indian Country, on one of their Scouting expeditions, and the Report reached Washington Pennsa. that they were both killed, tho’ neither were even wounded. Andrew Swearingen [was] then residing in that town and his Neice Mrs. Brady an inmate during her husband’s Absence. The fearful news of his death reached Washington at the moment and carried desolation into the Swearingen Family. My mother, and the Aunt of Mrs. Brady were using all their efforts to calm the distress of the young and devoted wife. Boy as I was my feelings were most powerfully excited, and I now seem to behold and share the scene. When all was in a condition which you are more able to conceive, than I am to describe, the front door was darkened, and by the stalwart form of Brady. The suddenness of the change was really oppressive to all, but almost too much for his young wife.

Interestingly, Darby’s account retained all of the naive awe of the boy who witnessed Brady’s dramatic return. His unexpected use of the words “darkened” and “oppressive” perhaps referred unconsciously to the scout’s formidable reputation as an Indian killer.

Though this proved to be his only glimpse of the hero, Darby heard many reports of Brady’s deeds during the geographer’s residence in Wheeling between 1793 and 1796. In a subsequent letter to Draper, he described another episode and included a verbal sketch of Brady and his wife:

When Samuel Brady relieved Mrs. Humphreys and killed one of her Captors I was living at Wheeling. The circumstances were very simple. The Indians, two, I think had made their inroad, and recrossed the Ohio somewhere above Wheeling. Mrs. Humphreys was riding one of her own Horses. Brady I think was alone, had been scouting into the Indian Country and was returning, when he spied the Indians. I am unable to say whether he knew Mrs. H.

7 Ibid., 382-83.
8 Darby to Draper, Apr. 10, 1850.
or not. He knew she was a captive and that was enough for Brady, to whom Odds was nothing, and a ball was the first hint the Indians received and Brady and Mrs. H. came home safe — the year 1794.

Samuel Brady was a spare, well-made, brown skinned and very active man. Mrs. Brady was rather small very delicate, indeed might be regarded beautiful. Of their Courtship I never knew ought — Swearingen’s opposition, if he made any, must have arisen from Brady’s unsettled character and situation.9

However unremarkable in its details, the scout’s rescue of Mrs. Humphreys illustrates one of the unstated roles of the hunter-warrior: to safeguard white women against captivity and sexual degradation by the Indians. But here Darby hinted that even the chivalric Brady had a wayward streak which might have disconcerted a prospective father-in-law.

The extent of Darby’s contact with Lewis Wetzel seems less certain. In a narrative entitled “The Hunter’s Tale” (Saturday Evening Post, December 17, 1831), the author romanticized Wetzel’s woodcraft and claimed that he had been well acquainted with the “gallant, brave, and generous hunter-warrior.” Indeed, he seems to have been familiar with the whole Wetzel family, but while he numbered Martin Wetzel (eldest of the five brothers) among his “intimate friends and acquaintances” at Wheeling, Darby made no such claim about Lewis, referring to him only impersonally in his letters to Draper. At the same time, Darby felt obliged to furnish the historian with anecdotes about Wetzel which came from one of the geographer’s former students in Wheeling. Thus Darby transcribed this rustic account of an unspectacular but representative display of Wetzel’s prowess, as told by Lewis Bonnet, Jr.:

In the fall of the same year [1785?] my father had gathered his corn crop into a heap or pile as it was called, in order to collect the neighbors to husk it out as it was then a custom with the first settlers. In the evening the Express came and stated that a party of Indians had crossed the Ohio river. This fact was made known by a line of Scouts or Spies that was kept under pay along the River. Peter Crow was at our husking, as so was my Cousin Lewis Whetzel. My Father immediately sent them two off, to

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9 Darby to Draper, Dec. 4, 1850. Mrs. Brady was the daughter of Captain Van Swearingen.
warn the settlers up Wheeling Creek, and in the mean time, telling not to keep the road farther than to the first ford, and to cross there and go on the hills, as in all probability the Indians would waylay the road and catch them. Peter Crow replied, that he would give one a shot before they caught him. Lewis added, "They must catch me before they get me, and in case they follow me, I'll make it a dear job to them—"

The two then went on, and crossing the creek near the House of our nearest neighbor, Henry Jolly by name, who had come to the Husking with all his family. The Indians had been at the house, and not finding the inmates, took the road down towards our house. Near a branch which put into the Creek, Peter espied the savages coming. It was a bright moon shine night. Peter whispered to Lewis, "There are the Indians." Lewis replied in a low tone, "Jump behind that tree on your right" (a White Hickory). Lewis got to a sugar tree on the left. But the Indians saw them in their movements to the trees, and immediately fired. Peter also fired. Lewis reserved his shot for a chase, as he expected one; but the Indians broke, ran and crossing the creek, they were heard running through the water by our two heroes. Lewis halloed to them, to stand their ground and not run like Cowards. They were five in number. The two came back to the husking to relate the news, but we were all housed; for the report of the guns soon sent us all from the Corn pile.10

Whatever its dramatic shortcomings, Bonnet’s narrative provides a graphic sense of the climate of violence in which the pioneers lived. Wetzel’s decision to save his bullet for a chase testifies to his coolness as a scout; his ability to shoot and reload on the dead run in fact constituted the basis of his legendary reputation. This tactic enabled Wetzel to take on several Indians at a time and dispatch them individually during a protracted race through the forest.11 In another letter, Bonnet furnished Darby (and Draper) with a chilling body-count of Indians slain by Wetzel and his brothers:

Lewis Whetzel was at the head of all the rest, for to my certain knowledge, he had killed Twenty-two Indians; four or five of

10 Darby to Draper, May 21, 1847. The spelling of the scout’s last name was something of a puzzle to both Bonnet and Darby. For a clarification, see De Haas, History of the Early Settlement, 416.
11 See De Haas, History of the Early Settlement, 348-49.
their scalps hung in my father's up chamber room, when I went to school to you in Wheeling. Martin often told me, that he thought he had killed Eleven, but that he was sure of nine. Jacob killed seven, and John five. George shot three dead, before he received his mortal shot himself, on the same morning.

Their father, my Uncle, was John Whetzel, and was also killed by the savages.

The Brothers Whetzel

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Indians Killed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Martin</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Jacob</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>John</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>George</td>
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How richly these brave men deserve the gratitude of the present generation of their country men, and of posterity.

Lewis Bonnet.

Interestingly, fifty years after the end of Indian hostilities along the Upper Ohio, Bonnet still (in 1846) viewed the collective slaughter of the Wetzels as a magnificent achievement. Darby seems to have shared this attitude, for in "The Hunter's Tale" and subsequent published references to Wetzel, he suppressed the commonly-known fact that the scout's craving for Indian blood amounted to a mania: Wetzel became a fugitive from justice in 1789 after he assassinated an Indian chief who had come to Marietta for a peace parley.

Since Brady and Wetzel were already celebrated figures when Darby began to collect his memoranda for Draper, the geographer felt perhaps a greater obligation to preserve the names of lesser-known heroes. During his residence in Wheeling, he had even lived with one of these men, the veteran soldier Henry Jolly. Darby described Jolly as "one of the most efficient of the Warrior pioneers of West Virginia," noting that he had served in Colonel Daniel Morgan's rifle corps during the campaign of 1777 and that he had aided in the capture of General John Burgoyne at Saratoga. The man whom Darby considered one of "the bravest of the brave" met his wife-to-be under strange circumstances:

On the occurrence of one of those Savage alarms, which so often spread desolation, a Mr. Howell and family, took refuge in the

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12 Darby to Draper, June 19, 1846.
13 Darby to Draper, Aug. 1, 1845, June 19, 1846.
Fort at Wheeling Forks, but imprudently leaving the shelter too soon, was about a mile or so up Little Wheeling and where the National Road now runs, surprised by savages, part of the family murdered, one son made prisoner, and one Daughter left for dead, being both tomahawked and scalped. She, however, survived her wounds, and became Henry Jolly’s first wife. Henry, and Lewis Bonnet, were the men who carried her into the Fort. These two men, were then, with Lewis Wetzel and Jonathan Zane, the Heroes of West Virginia.14

Bonnet and Zane were two others whom Darby hoped to see enshrined by Draper as champions of the West. Bonnet, the father of Darby’s former pupil, had participated in numerous scouting missions, and in “Mark Lee’s Narrative” (Saturday Evening Post, May 24, 1834), the author depicted this “really brave and disciplined man” as the sage commander of a militia troop. Citing the testimony of Captain Jolly, Darby wrote to Draper: “Henry Jolly, a most competent Judge in the case, times out of mind, expressed in my hearing, that Lewis Bonnet, was amongst the most cool and determined brave men he ever knew.” 15 Jonathan Zane, one of four brothers who established the Wheeling settlement, had earned a reputation as perhaps “the most experienced hunter of his day in the west.” 16 In “Mark Lee’s Narrative,” Darby judged Zane and Lewis Wetzel to be “the two most eminent Scouts in North Western Virginia.” Though Darby did not recount any of Zane’s adventures in his memoranda, the frontiersman’s name was mentioned frequently as one of the true heroes of the border country.

In recalling the names of such men, Darby obviously hoped to influence Draper’s portrayal of western history by expanding the list of recognized champions. In only one instance, however, did he actively seek to correct a prevailing historical interpretation. The object of his solicitude was Colonel David Williamson, the leader of the Washington County militia which in March 1782 bludgeoned to death (with tomahawks and mallets) more than ninety Moravian Indians living along the Tuscarawas River in Ohio. Even during an epoch of ongoing conflict, the atrocity shocked those in the settlements, for the Moravians were known to be a peace-loving people. The burden of

14 Darby to Draper, Aug. 19, 1845. Darby was mistaken about the name of the family, which was Grice. For another account of the massacre, see De Haas, History of the Early Settlement, 311-12.
15 Darby to Draper, June 19, 1846.
16 De Haas, History of the Early Settlement, 337.
guilt fell upon Williamson, who was, as Darby noted in “The Moravian Indians” (Casket, May 1833), “held up to infamy as a monster.” Later historians assessed the blame more cautiously; Alexander S. Withers, in his Chronicles of Border Warfare (1831), observed that Williamson had not actually passed the death sentence upon the Indians but instead allowed his troops to make the decision for themselves. Withers's account implies, however, that Williamson had shirked his responsibility at the crucial moment due to sensitivity about previous criticism of his leadership.17

Darby came to Williamson's defense for undeniably personal reasons: after the Indian wars, the veteran became an intimate of the Darby family, and his kindness made a lasting impression upon the geographer. As a magazine writer and newspaper correspondent, Darby defended Williamson in print on several occasions; for example, in “Reminiscences of the West” (Casket, December 1834), he asserted: “This man was really anxious to save the Moravians, and had their fate depended on him, not a drop of blood would have been shed. He was as most militia officers ever are, utterly powerless to stem the violence of men they nominally command.” With his first letter to Draper, Darby took up Williamson's cause again, no doubt believing that the historian held it in his power to fix the final judgment upon the gruesome event. After listing the “heroes of those days of danger and blood,” the geographer added: “I ought to join with these I have mentioned, the name of David Williamson, but after 1782, his services were paralysed by most unjust calumny. In advance of what I intend to give you more in detail, let me here state, that Col. Williamson, so far from instigating the murder of the Moravians on the Tuscarawas, went out to save them — but of this more anon.” 18

This was indeed the first of several appeals by Darby for justice in the case of Williamson. He subsequently pleaded:

But my dear Friend, your book will stand as authority, and therefore, the statements must decide in all future time, the character of the actors; therefore most anxious are all the friends of Col. David Williamson, that you vindicate him also. As one of his friends, I ask nothing for him but truth. My mother was the person who as far as her means allowed, contributed to solace the last days of this abused man. Speaking of Col. Williamson

18 Darby to Draper, Aug. 1, 1845.
this very day, Mrs. Cruger most emphatically pronounced the entire innocence of the man. I myself knew and intimately knew the family and can safely say, I never did know one other more human, generous and less liable to injure others wilfully.  

Darby also encouraged the historian to visit Williamson's daughter, Mrs. McNulty, then (in 1845) still living in Washington County, Pennsylvania; he later "rejoiced" to learn that the historian had in fact called upon the daughter of "the cruelly persecuted David Williamson." But Draper seems to have remained unconvinced, for several years thereafter he pressed the geographer for an explanation of the aforementioned claim that Williamson had gone out to "save" the Moravian Indians. Darby replied:

True to the Letter, I remember this matter the more perfectly, as first I remember the event, and heard it repeatedly through many following years, and never heard it denied. It was articles of clothing belonging to murdered persons, found in the Moravian Towns, which exasperated the men, and rendered all command or remonstrance unavailable, which produced the massacre. The poor Moravians were between two bodies of enemies. They said that the Articles were left by the Warrior Indians — but the natural result followed; and David Williamson was powerless to save. In after life I knew both the Williamsons, and more kind and humane men never breathed.

Darby never knew whether his campaign to vindicate Williamson had succeeded; he died four years later, still awaiting the appearance of Lyman C. Draper's never-to-be-published history of the West. Like his recollections about other hunter-warriors, his remarks about Williamson were ingenuous and unashamedly biased. They reflected his underlying conviction that all of the men who once patrolled the frontier deserved to be revered as heroes. He had no developed theory of heroism; it was enough that men like the Zanes, the Wetzels, and

19 Darby to Draper, Jan. 1, 1846. Darby talked with Mrs. Lydia Cruger, a longtime resident of Wheeling, during one of her visits to Washington, D. C.
20 Darby to Draper, Feb. 4, 1846.
21 Darby to Draper, Dec. 4, 1850. The Moravians were indeed caught between two enemies, the Delawares and the white men. See Randolph C. Downes, Council Fires on the Upper Ohio (Pittsburgh, 1940), 272.
22 Though he published a few minor works, Draper's main contribution to western historiography was his collection of letters, documents, and diaries now housed at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
the Williamsons had risked their lives to combat the Indian enemy. Darby did not question the motives of the men he called heroes, nor did he inquire far into the consequences of their violence, for he had learned about these defenders of the West while his family huddled in Jacob Wolf's blockhouse fort during an Indian attack in 1782. As an old man, Darby remembered the "Heroic Age" as a period in which men and issues of right and wrong were both simpler; contrasted against the petty wrangling and political scheming which divided the nation's capital in the 1840s, the border wars seemed to the geographer a chapter from an unwritten epic—not a halcyon age, to be sure, but an era of unaffected valor and courageous suffering. The geographer's wistfulness for the past expressed itself frequently in his letters: "Sixty years have made their changes, on man and nations, since those days of peril. The brave and tender brothers who avenged their Sister's Blood, where are they? Where are indeed, the Whetzel's, Crows, Woods, Zanes, and the other champions of that great age of Heroism! Their shades seem to pass before me, for many, many of them I'll forget—in death, Death only." 24

Darby's eagerness to perpetuate the names of western heroes also sprang, in part, from a lurking desire to be counted among the number himself. Though he confessed to Draper that he had been a mere youth during the "days of peril," he tended nevertheless to think of himself more and more as the last survivor of that epic period. His seemingly playful references to himself indicate a deep-seated wish to be associated with the hunter-warriors of old. Recalling his participation in an unsuccessful attempt to found a settlement where Zanesville, Ohio, now stands, Darby mused: "We old warriors are delighted to clutch the pen and in fancy return to the battlefield." 25 Though the geographer saw some military action during the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812, he of course played no role in the Indian wars to which this statement seems to refer. Further identifying himself as a frontiersman, Darby closed another letter by reminding Draper that he (the historian) deserved "the gratitude of the surviving pioneers who encountered, braved and suffered the manifold hardships and dangers of a savage wilderness, one of whom has now the honor to subscribe Your Friend, William Darby." 26 Speaking of his 1850

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23 See Darby's autobiographical letter, which spoke of the attack, in De Haas, History of the Early Settlement, 327-29. Darby also defended Williamson in the same letter.
24 Darby to Draper, Apr. 10, 1847.
25 Darby to Draper, Aug. 19, 1845.
26 Darby to Draper, Jan. 1, 1846.
lectures on the early settlers, the geographer proclaimed: “I'll forget the Pioneers when I forget my own Parents, my Brothers and Sisters, and myself, for such we all were.”27 Eager to secure a place in Draper’s history, Darby finally enlarged his conception of frontier heroism to include all the generations which helped to convert the wilderness into a cultivated garden, and he depicted himself — with some justification — as one who had participated in this general experience.

Repeatedly, the geographer urged Draper to get on with his great work, “the History of the Heroic Age.” In what proved to be his last letter to the historian, Darby exhorted: “As the Oldest Living man whose memory mingles with the Great Band, in their name I say, haste and place those names on a Tablet durable as their services were deserving.”28 Through Draper’s planned volume, he hoped not only to gain immortality himself but also to relive the past and rejoin departed friends: “It will bring home to my recollections, Days and Scenes, I could not wish should ever again be realized; yet there is an inescapable pleasure in their mental re-enactment. I seem to pass into the society of beatified Spirits — we seem to rejoice together on our escape from the stormy Ocean the dangers of which we have escaped forever.”29 As he approached his seventy-fifth year, Darby’s thoughts turned frequently to the days of his youth, which, it seemed, he might somehow recover through Draper’s book. There he also hoped to discover a portrait of himself as a young man, perhaps transformed by the historian’s generosity into a hero. Like the narrator at the close of “The Wedding,” however, he sensed the irretrievability of the past. The conclusion of his 1836 tale served as a prophetic metaphor for Darby’s final years: he literally became that solitary figure brooding over the desolate cottage and decaying trees — the consciousness of age and death — and musing upon the disappearance of the border heroes, those unforgettable men who had become utterly lost, long years lost to all his inquiries.

27 Darby to Draper, Dec. 4, 1850.
28 Ibid.
29 Darby to Draper, Apr. 10, 1850.