

# Literature of the Brandywine

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

EDGAR ALLAN POE lectured before the Wilmington Lyceum on November 24, 1843, brought there probably by his friend and occasional companion in bohemianism, Dr. John Lofland, "the Milford Bard." Walt Whitman may have rattled down in the cars from Philadelphia. But Poe, who wrote so well of the Wis-sahickon, probably never saw the Brandywine except from a railroad bridge, nor does it appear in Whitman's catalogues of rivers. Only one man of letters of eminence was bred on its banks, and none with a presumptive claim to lasting reputation.

Nevertheless, there is a literature of the Brandywine, which has a curious consistency. The idyllic meadows of the Chester County stream, and the rock and forest intervals of this middle river, and particularly the wild gorge above Wilmington, have caught the fancy of many writers, but nearly always with one of two results. The idyllic Brandywine has caused sentiment fairly to gush from the medium-calibered poetic mind; the tumultuous rapids and rocky bluffs of the river in its wilder passages have most unfortunately stimulated the romantic imagination of novelists, and bred hermits, Indian maidens, endangered heiresses, mysterious strangers, and fabulous adventures, usually by moonlight. The idyllic, which is sincere but mild, and the romantic, which is not too sincere and usually melodrama, are the qualities characteristic of the literature of the Brandywine.

In East Brandywine township, well up in the Forks and above Downingtown, is Corners' Ketch, the birthplace in 1822 of a once glamorous star of American art, Thomas Buchanan Read, poet, painter, and patriot. In reverse order, and restating the credentials of this Chester County boy who got to "know everybody" abroad and at home, Read was an excellent propagandist for the North in the Civil War, when he stirred martial enthusiasm by reading his patriotic poems, a painter of reputation now almost forgot-

ten, and the author of at least two poems which seem likely to persist. How we used to declaim his "Sheridan's Ride" in school, with its refrain "And Sheridan twenty miles away"! It is, I believe, quite unhistorical, but did wonders in establishing a reputation for the northern cavalry which was so often and so decisively beaten by the Confederates. And no reader of anthologies has missed "Drifting," Read's nostalgic lyric of Italian beauty:

My soul to-day  
Is far away,  
Sailing the Vesuvian Bay;  
My winged boat,  
A bird afloat  
Swims round the purple peaks remote.

The American poet of Read's day simply had to have purple peaks, and crags. If he could not go abroad for them, he inserted them at home.

Read had a nice gift for rhythm, particularly in his lyrics. But one has only to read his long pastorals, which often touch on Brandywine scenes, or his semi-epics, to understand what I mean by saying that the Brandywine seemed to breed sentimental romance. Of course, it was a period in which sentiment ran easily in America except in Concord and in Walt Whitman, and an American time when to be imitative of the flourishing English writers was so common as to be undetected, even by the imitators themselves. These belligerently patriotic Americans, such as Read and Bayard Taylor, were either unashamed or, more probably, unconscious, of their literary colonialism. In any case, the blend of sentiment with the second-hand fermented badly.

Read began with a novel, "Paul Redding, A Tale of the Brandywine," published in Boston in 1845 and now a collector's item. It is a melodrama salted with humor, which is American in so far as its inspiration comes from Washington Irving. It is a wild tale in the taste of the sentimental Annuals of the period, of a repentant murderer and a wandering heir. The novel

owes nothing to the Brandywine, except a romantic central scene of wild woods and cliffs visited at night and some pastoral description. But there is a bit of incorporated verse which is, I think, the best poem yet written on our river:

Not Juniata's rocky tide  
That bursts its mountain barriers wide,  
Nor Susquehanna broad and fair,  
Nor thou, sea-drinking Delaware,  
May with that lovely stream compare  
That draws its winding silver line  
Through Chester's storied vales and hills,  
The bright, the laughing Brandywine,  
That dallies with its hundred mills.

These quotable lines, with their excellent epithets for both the Delaware and the Brandywine, are worth all the prose of the novel.

But romance ran away with this patriot when he chose for the theme of what was evidently meant as a national epic the Battle of the Brandy-

*From the drawing by Thomas Benton*



wine, used as the center and climax of his "The Wagoner of the Alleghenies."

The Battle of the Brandywine was a dramatic and spectacular contest, as battles go, but it was a stern business of surprise and defense and improvised tactics, and the confusion of near demoralization. Though Lafayette, when wounded, told Washington that he was glad of it, the mood was decidedly not romantic on either side. The Americans were panicky; the British were after a "hell of a fine country." But in Read's alchemic glass the colors change to the glammers of the days of chivalry. His poem deals largely with the Tory inheritance of grandeur in "Berkeley's Hall," a Jacobean manor on the Brandywine. And his battle is keyed to all the panoplies of glorious, and medieval, war.

The shrewd Hessian, General Knyphausen, knowing from the cannon fire to the north of him that Sullivan was outflanked, sent his regiments through the ford to strike at Proctor and Wayne. It was a tough crossing of infantry, but becomes in Read a knights' combat in midstream:

Anon was heard the opening war  
Which called us to the bristling shore;

And now the fearful scene was won  
Where deadly gun replied to gun, . . .  
While in the stream, with plunge  
and splash,  
Though thrice our numbers on us  
poured,

We dealt the thick foe crash for  
crash,  
And strove to hold the ford.

Now was the time you should have  
seen  
Bold Ringbolt with his towering  
mien;  
Have heard his voice, have seen his  
blow  
Which drove the heavy weapon home,  
Each stroke of which unhorsed a  
foe,  
And sent him reeling red below.

British as well as Americans were subject to this kind of chivalric dream; but the British army at least kept it in the realm of pure fancy. Next year, at Philadelphia, the officers of the army staged a so-called *Mschianza*, at Mr. Wharton's country place, in honor of General Howe's retirement and departure for home. There knights tilted, if they did not use broadswords as in Read's battle, and Tory belles looked on.

In Read's fight at the ford, the "banner boy," with his sacred standard, goes down. The Stars and Stripes, according to tradition, was first unfurled on September 3rd, in a preliminary to the Brandywine battle, at Cooch's Bridge in Delaware; but by the 11th of the month the flag has acquired a "banner boy," who is avenged by Ringbolt on the trooper who trampled him

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down. Ringbolt hews him "wellnigh from throat to mane":

The hour was loud, but louder still  
Anon the rage of battle roared  
Its wild and murderous will;

From Jefferis down to Wistar's  
ford,

From Jones to Chads the cannon  
poured,  
While thundered Osborne Hill.

Here Sullivan in fury trooped,  
There Weedon like an eagle  
swooped, . . .

And once or twice our eye descried,  
Mid clouds a moment blown aside, . . .  
The *Jove* of battle ride!

And every eye new courage won  
Which gazed that hour on Washing-  
ton.

In all this rhetoric, it may be said that only the last two lines have any true reference to reality.

"Sleets of lead," "sheets of flame," "hot hail" hiss and roar in "clouds of sulphur," until the day is lost. Yet, in spite of his clichés, and his loose imitative language, Read has a narrative movement and often an idyllic charm which will explain why, when read aloud, his poetry was so successful.

THE earliest appearances of the Brandywine in what might be called literature are in William Cobbett's justly famous book "Rural Rides" (1830), and in James Kirke Paulding's "Koningsmarke: The Long Finn" (1823). Cobbett, after settling down to a brilliant career in politics and humanitarianism, recorded his rural journeyings through England in one of the really good travel books of English literature. His references are to the valley of the Middle Brandywine, not Wilmington, and for the sake of faraway comparison only. Paulding, satirist and poet, followed the trail of his friend Irving in writing "Koningsmarke," a burlesque novel of the Dutch, Swedes, and English on the Delaware, with its best chapter an account of Indian warfare vaguely suggested by the fishing quarrels on Brandywine. An attempted rebellion among the Swedes is its historical source, but it has no historical value. Far less pointed than Irving's "Knickerbocker History," it need scarcely be mentioned in this narrative, except for a hermit of homicidal tendencies who, characteristically, inhabits the wilds of what Paulding seems to have intended to be the lower Brandywine.

With the publication in 1846 of "Blanche of the Brandywine; or September the Eleventh, 1777," written by the successful American novelist, George Lippard, who was born at Chester Springs near the Brandywine, we get a full-size attempt to immortalize the river in literature. And, in-

(Continued on page 42)

# The Fragments of Genius

**MARK TWAIN IN ERUPTION.** *Hitherto Unpublished Papers by One of America's Greatest Writers. By Mark Twain. Edited with an introduction by Bernard DeVoto. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1940. 402 pp., with index. \$3.75.*

Reviewed by NORMAN HOLMES PEARSON

A LOT of Christmas trees will have be-ribboned copies of "Mark Twain in Eruption" tucked away under their green branches. At any rate they ought to have, if all's right with the season, for there is hardly an American who would not write an enthusiastic thank-you-for-the-gift to "Aunt Harriet," to "Hal," or to "Guess Who." The book contains a little of every part of the real Mark Twain. The moods of "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," "Huckleberry Finn," and "The Mysterious Stranger" are all here, with much too vigorous a force to leave the reader with only a sense of nostalgia. The book is exhilarating reading, and there are sections which will find their way alongside the best that Mark Twain wrote.

I know of a turkey hen that tried during several weeks to hatch out a porcelain egg, then the gobbler took the job and sat on that egg two entire summers and at last hatched it. He hatched out of it a doll's tea set of fourteen pieces, and all perfect except that the teapot had no spout on account of the material running out. Carlyle said, "a lie cannot live." It shows that he did not know how to tell them.

Bernard DeVoto has given us some extremes of what he calls Mark Twain's "eruption," plus a good deal in between. He knows his business. Mark Twain has been a profession for Mr. DeVoto for a good many years. Now "having shouted louder than anyone else for the privilege . . . of examining the Mark Twain manuscripts," as he once said, he has them all to himself. "Mark Twain in Eruption" is a continuation of "Mark Twain's Autobiography," and its selections are exclusively from the material which Albert Bigelow Paine rejected in the first editing. That the rejections were not always wisely made, Mr. DeVoto pleasantly indicates.

Theodore Roosevelt and Andrew Carnegie stumble into the literature of American humor, impelled by the full brunt of Mark Twain's boot. He remarks on Roosevelt's hunt for a bear: "I am sure the President honestly thinks it was a bear, but . . . it even left a cow track behind, which is what a cow would do . . . if it knew a President of the United States was after it." And the deftness with which Twain manipulates a long passage describing an altercation between Roosevelt and a "nature fakir" is a superb example of his particular wit. "Wild creatures often do extraordinary things. Look at Mr. Roosevelt's own performances." It is hardly necessary for a reader even to have heard the name of Carnegie to recognize that we now have a new American Geronimo (not Mr. Eliot's parched old man, but the bumbling figure of Molière's comedies). "If I were going to describe him in a phrase I think I should call him the Human Being Unconcealed. He is just like the rest of the human race but with this difference, that the rest of the race try to conceal what they are and succeed, whereas Andrew tries to conceal what he is but doesn't succeed." The process by which Carnegie exposes himself is the proper nightcap for Christmas, or any other exhausting day.

Mr. DeVoto, in piecing together the fragments which make up "Mark Twain in Eruption," has gone about to "make a book which, I thought, would interest many people and add much that was characteristic and something that was new to our picture of Mark Twain." Where Paine decorously ob-

served the original cut and condition of the autobiography, Mr. DeVoto has trimmed and darned. The result is to Mark Twain's advantage. What might at first thought be considered a breach of editorial responsibility is in reality its very assumption. What is wholly admirable, Mr. DeVoto is explicit in detailing his editorial practice—a new and welcome procedure in editing Twain. That much fine and characteristic writing has been added to the body of Mark Twain's work will be obvious to everyone. That which is "new to our picture" will be chiefly found in relation to Mark Twain's view of the social and political conditions of his age. His concern with the process by which monarchy is to be developed out of democracy (a development which seemed to him bitter but inevitable) throws important light upon "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," and others of his later writings. That Mr. DeVoto himself was perhaps the first to emphasize this focus may explain his editorial predilection for chapter and verse to substantiate the view. It is a view, incidentally, which Mr. DeVoto re-sketches in his introduction to the volume, an introduction which is at the same time Mr. DeVoto's best writing on Mark Twain and one of the most lucid sketches on him we have.

Broad previous hinting by Mr. DeVoto had promised much. If the volume disappoints, it is not on its own terms, as a continuation of the "Autobiography," but on grounds which Mr. DeVoto admits in his preface: that the "Autobiography" is hardly the most significant of Twain's writing, and that the real history of Samuel Clemens is not to be found there but in the more symbolical accounts of his "Huckleberry Finn," and "The Mysterious Stranger."

Mr. DeVoto has, however, given us much to be grateful for. In an unpublished letter, Clemens once wrote: "So long as I continue to dig \$70,000 a year out of Harpers on magazine stuff and old copyrights you will always find me acting respectable." "Mark Twain in Eruption" is not quite respectable; but Mark Twain is still with Harpers, and there will evidently still be royalties.



From "Mark Twain's America"