

The Distinguished Life of Hugh Henry Brackenridge

..by Richard R. Gideon

In July of 1794 a powerfully built Scottish immigrant made his way from Pittsburgh to attend a meeting at Mingo Creek, Pennsylvania. His objective was to become a moderating voice of reason in a room filled with budding revolutionaries. In later years historians would record this meeting as one of a series of acts collectively known as the Whiskey Insurrection or Whiskey Rebellion, the first real test of the authority of the newly created Federal government. The Scotsman's name was Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a self-made man and product of early American intellectualism. Among his friends were James Madison, William Bradford and Philip Freneau, the latter a collaborator on a book called "*Father Bombo's Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia*" and a patriotic poem called "*The Rising Glory of America*." Father Bombo, a satire based on a feud between rival clubs at Princeton University, is now recognized as the first novel written in America. In later life Brackenridge would write his masterpiece, a work called "*Modern Chivalry*." Described as a comic narrative, a combination of Don Quixote and Tom Jones, *Modern Chivalry* became a staple of 19th Century American literature. Mark Twain called the book "a classic." But then literature was only one area of accomplishment for the Honorable Mr. Brackenridge.

Beginnings

Hugh Henry Brackenridge was born in Scotland in 1748. His parents immigrated to York County, Pennsylvania, when Hugh was five years old. Unlike many a poor farmer's son, Hugh was a natural scholar. He received his early education in part from the local country school, but mainly from a Presbyterian clergyman of the region who tutored him in Latin and Greek. He progressed so well that he became a Maryland schoolmaster at the age of 15. Five years later he entered the College of New Jersey's (Princeton) class of 1771. At college he was said to possess a "booming voice" and "fierce countenance," and could use his fists with great skill. But Brackenridge was also possessed of a flare for oratory and quick wit, and an intimacy with classical writing. At graduation Brackenridge read his co-authored "*Rising Glory of America*" poem. The poem was later published to favorable reviews. After graduation Brackenridge trained for the ministry, taught school, and became headmaster in a Maryland academy. When the Revolutionary War broke out Hugh became an Army chaplain, and was known for preaching fiery, patriotic sermons. But in 1778 he decided that his services to America would be better applied in the media, and he started the *United States Magazine* in Philadelphia. It did not succeed. In later years Brackenridge would look on his services to the Revolution in philosophical terms, saying that he felt he could do more off the field of battle than on. Once again he turned to education, this time earning a law degree.

In 1781, noting that Philadelphia had its share of distinguished lawyers, Brackenridge decided that his future was in the west, and in those days that meant the tiny hamlet of

Pittsburgh. Consisting of about forty log houses, Pittsburgh was at the confluence of two large rivers, the Allegheny and the Monongehela, that combined to make the mighty Ohio, a trading route of great importance. Brackenridge quickly established his law practice and was elected to the State legislature. Surveying the region he concluded that what Pittsburgh needed was information and education. In 1786 he convinced Philadelphia printers John Scull and Joseph Hall to join him. The young men carried their printing equipment over the Allegheny Mountains, establishing the first printing press in Pittsburgh; *The Pittsburgh Gazette*. By the next year Brackenridge had founded an academy that would eventually become the University of Pittsburgh. The Gazette of September 2, 1786, records a typical Brackenridge sentiment: "I do not know that the legislature could do a more acceptable service to the Commonwealth than by endowing a school at this place."

Friends of Liberty and Friends of Order

History records that men of integrity always get themselves into situations that test their character. Brackenridge's test would come during the height of the Whiskey Rebellion, but the groundwork was laid when he was a student at the College of New Jersey. During his undergraduate days he became a Whig, joining Freneau and Madison in forming the American Whig Society. He later became a Democrat-Republican in the Jefferson mold. His democratic leanings served him well on the frontier and carried him to the state assembly. But Brackenridge ran into trouble when he announced his support for the adoption of the Federal Constitution. Western Pennsylvania farmers and frontiersmen, a hardy stock of mostly Scots-Irish and other Celtic breeds, had a deep distrust of central governments. Many of them were Revolutionary War veterans. Their fight had been for an autonomous Commonwealth, not a reworked Province in what they saw as a new aristocratic nation. Among educated Westerners the idea of a Federal bureaucracy seemed akin to trading English tyranny for American. Even some national leaders were uneasy; Thomas Jefferson insisted on a Bill of Rights as his price for supporting the new constitution. But here we find the earliest examples of a paradox that is still with us: In a republic, can the government become distinct from the people? Those who were in favor of limited central government were called the "friends of liberty," and those who were in favor of a strong central government were called the "friends of order." Constitutional framers tried to balance the will of the people with what they perceived as the good of the people; the new Federal government was a Republic in one sense, and a Democracy in another. This balancing act effected tension in the one group of men most susceptible to it; the wealthy, liberal politician. Thomas Jefferson knew the tension. A wealthy Virginia landowner and slaveholder, his liberal political leanings cost him a personal struggle that never abated. May just "anyone" hold public office? Is the collective opinion of the public always justified? If democracy requires education is it wise to free the slave before you educate him? For the 18th Century mind these were heady questions. And while Jefferson was a "liberal" by the standards of his day, he opined that the rule of a mob was as bad as the rule of a single tyrant. Brackenridge shared many of Jefferson's opinions. A supporter of French democracy, he nonetheless abhorred the excesses of the French Revolution. But once convinced of a

subject Brackenridge was outspoken and uncompromising. He had lost his bid for re-election because he followed his conscience. And some say he was in danger of losing his life when he tried to be a moderating influence during the Whiskey Rebellion.

Whiskey and Taxes

The Whiskey Insurrection, or Rebellion, is probably the most under-studied event in American history. Although some very good books have been written on the subject, it remains an enigma in the minds of most Americans. High School students, if they study it at all, are usually told that the rebellion was started by ignorant farmers to protest a federal excise tax on their Whiskey, and there is a great amount of truth in it. But like the "Civil War" some 70 years later, the excise tax was but one of several inflammatory causes of the rebellion. Other factors were the new government's seeming inability to deal with raiding Indians, navigation rights on the Spanish controlled Ohio river, and the desire of some western Pennsylvanians to create a new State – or Republic – called Westsylvania. And while George Washington concentrated his tax enforcement efforts in western Pennsylvania, the protest encompassed a much larger territory, extending as far South as Georgia, and west into Kentucky.

It is not the purpose of this article to delve into the details of the rebellion other than to offer a bit of background in which to understand Brackenridge's role in it. Once the Federal constitution was ratified and put into operation the newly minted central government assumed the Revolutionary War debts of the States. In order to retire this debt a series of taxes was proposed, including an excise tax on distilled spirits. The tax would be collected at the source on the capacity of the still. Large Eastern distilleries made almost no protest about the new tax, but western farmers cried foul. The tax was seen as unequal, disproportionate, and punishing the small, cash poor distiller-farmer, who found it easier to raise money by selling whiskey than to transport grain across the Allegheny Mountains. It didn't help matters that the tax was the brainchild of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton made no secret of his desire for an aristocratic form of government, complete with King. Although he supported the American Revolution he found much to admire in the English system of government. He was a businessman, with a businessman's eye for accounting and order, and he subscribed to the Hobb's school of political thought. Hamilton put the new American government on sound financial ground, establishing the full faith and credit of the United States. Looking back over 200 years some would say he accomplished all of this at the expense of the "small businessman;" a charge that has survived to this day. He was not popular in the woods.

Like many of his contemporaries, Brackenridge opposed the excise tax, but was equally opposed to a violent confrontation with federal authorities. Other Western leaders, such as David Bradford and James Marshall, did not share Brackenridge's caution. Nearly all parties agreed that the government's policy of calling tax delinquents to trial in Philadelphia was wrong. The "excise man" became obnoxious to the countrymen. In July of 1794 a local Revolutionary War hero, James McFarlane,

was killed during a confrontation at the "plantation" of General John Neville (*a parishioner of OSL*). The General, a Virginian, friend of George Washington, and the local excise tax collector, was confronted by an "extra-legal" group of local militia at his home on Bower Hill, seven miles Southwest of Pittsburgh. McFarlane was shot when he ventured towards the house under what was understood by the militia to be a "flag of truce." Outraged, the militia burned down Neville's home and most of the slave quarters. Shortly after McFarlane's death the "revolutionaries" met at Mingo Creek to plan their next move. Asked to attend this meeting by Neville's son, Brackenridge listened to the various harangues, and then decided to advise the assembly as a lawyer. He said that while their actions at Bower Hill might have been morally right, they were legally wrong, and the actors had therefore committed treason; there was nothing to stop President Washington from calling out the militia against them. He advised the group to apply for amnesty, as they had no chance against the larger, more powerful Army that would surely come from the East. The assembly did not like what they heard, and Brackenridge made a hasty departure. He would appear at other meetings and gatherings, always trying to calm the passions of the people while agreeing with their objections to the tax. He put his classical education to great use, as when he convinced a muster of rebels to march through Pittsburgh in a show of discipline rather than marching to Pittsburgh to burn it down. He had adopted the "King Richard II" principle of centuries past.

Washington did indeed send the militia - almost 13,000 in fact; as many men as he had commanded in the Revolutionary War. But by the time Washington's "Watermelon Army" arrived in western Pennsylvania the population had sufficiently cooled and was tractable, and many of the leaders of the Rebellion had moved farther west. Unfortunately, one of the big losers in the Whiskey Rebellion was lawyer Hugh Henry Brackenridge, who had lost the support of the local population, and lost luster in the eyes of the Federal government. But any defect in his public life was more than compensated by his literary feats.

Tom, Dick and Harry of the Woods

In 1792 the first installments of *"Modern Chivalry"* appeared in Philadelphia. Brackenridge developed the theme of the book from previous writings and his experiences in western Pennsylvania. The book centers on the character of Captain John Farrago and his servant Teague O'Regan. Brackenridge himself said that the work had "no point," calling it "a book without thought, or the smallest degree of sense...useful to young minds, not fatiguing their understandings, and easily introducing a love of reading and study." Reviewers of the time described it as the modern equivalent of Don Quixote, written, as Brackenridge himself said, for "Tom, Dick and Harry of the woods." It is in some ways very much like a Louis Carroll work, with much nonsense counterpoised with good sense. Captain Farrago is forever extracting Teague from situations beyond the "bog-trotters" abilities, and offering good but unsolicited advice to all those he encounters. It is a genuinely funny, dry-humor book of remarkably sound observations. Contained within its pages is the desire of a man to see his fellows elevated from their pitiable conditions to take their places in

representative democracy. Here is but a small sample: *"There are but two characters that can be respectable as representatives of the people. A plain man of good sense, whether farmer, mechanic, or merchant; or a man of education and literary talents. The intermediate characters, who have neither just natural reflection, nor the advantage of reading, are unnatural, and can derive no happiness to themselves from the appointment; nor can they be of use to the commonwealth."*

As later volumes of *Modern Chivalry* made their appearance Brackenridge drew upon his experiences in the Whiskey Rebellion to form such characters as Traddle the weaver, an unflattering caricature of political opponent William Findley. He continued to write new volumes when he moved from Pittsburgh to Carlisle in 1801. Appointed a State Supreme Court judge, Brackenridge used the book to attack the economic policies of Jefferson and his Treasury Secretary, Albert Gallatin. In 1815 a six-volume set of *Modern Chivalry* appeared. In the last of the books Brackenridge took shots at everything from evolution to the quality of officers in the War of 1812. New additions were in the works when Hugh Henry Brackenridge, friend of both order and liberty, died on June 25, 1816.

Epilog

The works of Hugh Henry Brackenridge are not easy to find. They generally must be special ordered, and some of his writings are out of print altogether. Modern readers may find the early American English a bit hard to grasp, but a bit of effort in this regard will be rewarded with the pleasure one receives in the knowledge that he or she is dealing with a classic. Brackenridge was a household name for 100 years, and then his light diminished into relative obscurity. It's time to re-illuminate this most remarkable "Westsonian."

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About the author:

A former teacher and broadcaster, Richard R. Gideon is a vexillologist, and owns Richard R. Gideon Flags. His interest in history was kindled many years ago as the result of tracing his family tree. Extending back to 1767 in America, his relatives fought in both the American Revolution and the Whiskey Rebellion. He and wife Katherine live in Mt. Lebanon Township, in the "State of Westsylvania."

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