

A EUROPEAN COMMENTARY ON KENTUCKY AND KENTUCKIANS, CIRCA 1825

BY ALBERT J. SCHMIDT

TODAY when the American tourist is a familiar though not always appreciated figure on the European scene, we often forget that a century or so ago just the reverse was true. The sophisticated European traveler often digested hastily primitive America and then hurried home to write what was often an uncomplimentary book about it.

The American experiment with democracy most fascinated these visitors, but they rambled at great length about manners, customs, and institutions insofar as they differed from their own. Some, like Tocqueville, showed sound judgment and keen insight in interpreting the American character and development. Others were little more than gossips. Many—especially those who passed beyond the Alleghenies into the Ohio and Mississippi valleys—were not only niggardly with compliments but were sharply critical of the uncouth ways of the American frontiersmen. The nasty habit of tobacco chewing, the unsatisfactory accommodations at inns or on river boats, the general illiteracy or lack of culture, the murders and eye-gougings, and the inhumanity of slavery all received emphatic censure. Then, too, Americans were constantly in a hurry in their search for material profits; the dollar was their God. The frontiersmen especially were rated the greatest lot of braggarts who ever lived. More than one visitor was driven to consternation by hearing a Kentucky farmer discourse not only upon the merits of American institutions but the inevitable decay of European as well.

On the other hand Americans tired of the criticism which flowed so freely from these European travel books. Cutting it was indeed when Sydney Smith asked in the *Edinburgh Review* who read an American book. When Martineau, the Trollopes, Dickens, and Lyell voiced their criticism—granted, there was a wealth of

difference in the legitimate criticism of Dickens from the unqualified and foolish generalizations of Mrs. Trollope—Americans were stung to the quick.

Charles Sealsfield (1793-1864)¹ was one European who, though critical of many aspects of American culture, became sufficiently endeared to it to become an American citizen. Actually Sealsfield stands apart from the usual run of European—especially English—tourists who wrote about America. Although never a permanent resident in the United States he made numerous trips to this country and lived for extended intervals in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh.

Sealsfield was an Englishman by name only. Born Karl Anton Postl in Moravia, he tired of the monastic life which had been prescribed for him. Quite mysteriously he disappeared and was never heard of again. Not even Prince Metternich's shrewdest police spies found a trace of the renegade monk. In the early 1820's, less than ten years after the disappearance of the monk Postl, a Charles Sealsfield was traversing the United States. Only years later when Sealsfield's will revealed that Postl and Sealsfield were one and the same was the outside world the wiser.

Charles Sealsfield traveled through the Ohio and Mississippi valleys during 1823 and in late 1825 or early 1826. Several years later he was again in the southwestern part of the United States, presumably once more by the Ohio and Mississippi. Although he retired to Switzerland in the early 1830's, he returned to his adopted country again in 1837, 1850, and 1853. A prolific writer, Sealsfield wrote of much more than his travel experiences. He has usually been credited with having originated an innovation in fiction writing—the ethnographical novel. In his novels Sealsfield made the people, not the individual, the hero. His biographer charges that "to transfuse the freshly pulsating blood of the transatlantic Republic into the senile veins of the Old World, to acquaint his countrymen with the spirit of true liberty he considered his sacred duty, a duty which he felt obliged to take upon himself as a mission entrusted to him by a higher power."² If we may accept this judgment

¹Cf. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVI, 532-33. (Hereafter cited DAB.)

²Leo Smolle, *Charles Sealsfield* (Vienna, 1875). Quoted from DAB.

of Sealsfield, we discern one of the distinctive features differentiating this visitor from others who wrote of America. Sealsfield sought to praise the liberty and individualism which he found in America; others, conservative, outspokenly criticized these same democratic processes.

Writing anonymously until persuaded by his publishers to identify himself, Sealsfield did so on the occasion of the release of his complete works, 1845-47. Of course the name he revealed was Sealsfield. The stuff of which Sealsfield's novels were written was the fruit of his American experience. He once wrote a two-volume novel championing the cause of the American Indian, a decidedly unpopular creature during the early nineteenth century. Easily discernible from the brief excerpt following was his dislike for slavery. Sealsfield was evidently a very humane sort of individual. Even his criticism of slavery and the uncouth habits of Kentuckians, he mel-
lowed with generous compliments about the land he saw.

Sealsfield first wrote the story of his American experience of the 1820's in German—*Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, nach ihrem Politischen, Religiösen, und Gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse Betrachtet*. In 1828, the year after its publication in Germany, this work was translated into English and published in two parts. The selections below have been extracted from the second part, *The Americans As They Are: Described in a Tour through the Valley of the Mississippi* "by the author of *Austria as it is*." The book deals with the author's travels from Cincinnati to New Orleans. The particular volume from which this commentary on the trip from Cincinnati to Louisville was taken is in the rare book collection at the State University of Iowa.

After a stay of six days in Cincinnati I departed; crossed the Ohio in the ferry boat, and landed in the state of Kentucky, at Newport, a small country town of Campbell county. It contains, besides the government arsenal for the western states, a court-house, and about 100 buildings, scattered irregularly upon the eminence. From thence to Bigbone lick,³ the distance is 23 miles; the country is more hilly than on the other

³Big Bone as it is called today is in the southwestern part of Boone County.

side of the river; it is, however, fertile, the stratum being generally limestone. The growth of timber is very fine; the trees are beech, sugar-maple, and sycamore. The contrast between Ohio and Kentucky is striking, and the baneful influence of slavery is very soon discovered. Instead of elegant farms, orchards, meadows, corn and wheat fields carefully enclosed, you see patches planted with tobacco, the leaves neglected; and instead of well-looking houses, a sort of double cabins, like those inhabited in the north of Pennsylvania by the poorest classes. In one part lives the family, in the other is the kitchen; behind these, are the wretched cabins of the negroes, bearing a resemblance to pigsties, with half a dozen black children playing about them on the ground. . . .

The road from Bigbonelick is, for the distance of ten miles, dreary and the country barren. I arrived late at a farmhouse, of rather a better appearance, where I intended to stop the night. The first night's lodging convinced me but too plainly, that the inhabitants of this state, justly called in New York, half horse and half alligator, had not yet assumed a milder character. The farmer, or rather planter, was absent with his wife; and his brother, who took care of the farm, was at a horse race; an old man, however, with his daughter, answered my application for lodging, in the affirmative. I was supping upon slices of bacon, roasted corn bread, and some milk, when the brother of the farmer returned from the races with his neighbor. Both had led horses besides those on which they rode. Before dismounting they discharged their pistols. Each of the Kentuckians had a pistol in his girdle, and a poniard in the breast pocket. Before resuming my supper I was pressed to take a dram. With a quart bottle in one hand, and with the other drawing the remains of tobacco from his mouth, in rather a nauseous manner, the host drank for half a minute out of the bottle; then took from the slave the can with water, and handed the bottle to me, the mouth of which had assumed, from the remains of the tobacco, a brownish colour. The Kentuckian looked displeased when I wiped the bottle. I however took no notice of him, but presented it, after having drunk, to his friend. We sat down.

"How far are you come to day?" asked the landlord.

"From Cincinnati."

"You don't live in Cincinnati, I guess, do you?"

"No, sir."

"And where do you live?"

"In Pennsylvania."

"A fine distance!" exclaimed my host. "I like the people of Pennsylvania better than those G—d d—d Yankees, but still they are no Kentuckians." I gave my full and hearty assent.

"The Kentuckians," continued my landlord, "are astonishingly mighty people; they are the very first people on earth!"

"Yes, sir."

"They are immensely great, and wonderfully powerful people; ar'nt they?"

"Yes, sir."

"They are ten thousand times superior to any nation on earth."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you like Kentucky?"

"Very well, sir; I travelled through it four years ago. . . ." [The Kentuckians then proceeded to discuss a recent brawl.]

"Oh, certainly—it was a mighty fine sport; I would not for the world have missed it. G—d d—n! Dick is a fine gouger—the second turn—John down—and both thumbs in his eyes.—I presume you have races in Pennsylvania?" turning to me.

"Yes, sir."

"And fighting and gougings?"

"No, sir." With an expressive look towards his neighbour, he continued: "Yes, the Pennsylvanians are a quiet, religious sort of people; they don't kill anything but their hogs, and prefer giving their money to their parsons." The evening passed in these and similar conversations, of which the above are mere specimens; and it was eleven o'clock before the interesting pair separated. . . .

I stopped at a farm fifteen miles from my former night's lodging. The landlord was mounting his horse for Newcastle;⁴ his wife sat in the kitchen, surrounded by eight negro girls, all busy knitting and sewing. The girls seemed to be in excellent spirits, and were tolerably well dressed; the house rather indicated affluence, though it was far from possessing the order and cleanliness of a few of only half its value in Ohio. It was a simple brick house; but constructed without the least attention to the rules of symmetry. The fields were in a very indifferent state. Behind the dwelling, were seen some negro infants at play, while an old negro woman was preparing my breakfast. The family had thirty-five slaves, both young and old, forming a capital of at least 10,000 dollars. . . . I was allowed to take my breakfast, when some yells and hallooing called us to the door. A troop of horsemen were passing. Two of the party had each a negro slave running before him, secured by a rope fastened to an iron collar. A tremendous horsewhip reminded them at intervals to quicken their pace. The bloody backs and necks of these wretches, bespoke a too frequent application of the lash. The third negro had, however, the hardest lot. The rope of his collar was fastened to the saddle string of the third horseman, and the miserable creature had thus no alternative left, but to keep an equal pace with the trotting horse, or to be dragged through ditches, thorns, and copsewood. . . . "Look here," said Mrs. Forth [the landlord's wife], calling her black girls, "what is done with the bad negroes, who run away from their good masters!" With an indifference, and a laughing countenance, which clearly showed how accustomed these poor children were to the like scenes, they expressed their sentiments at this disgusting conduct.

The road from Mr. Forth's plantation runs a considerable distance along ridges, descending finally into the bottom lands along the Ohio. These are exceedingly fertile. . . . I crossed the Ohio at Ghent, in Kentucky, opposite to Vevay, in Indiana.

Vevay, in Indiana, became a settlement twenty years ago, by Swiss emigrants, who obtained a grant of land, equal to

⁴The reference here is to New Castle in Henry County, south of Carroll County in which Ghent is located.

200 acres for each family, under the condition of cultivating the vine; they accordingly settled here, and laid out vineyards. The original settlers may have amounted to thirty; others joined them afterwards, and in this manner was founded the county town of New Switzerland, in Indiana. . . . They have their vineyards below the town, on the bank of the river Ohio. . . . The town is on the decline; it has a court-house, and two stores very ill supplied. The condition of these, and the absence of lawyers, are sure indications of the poverty of the inhabitants, if broken windows, and doors falling from their hinges, should leave any doubt on the subject; they are, however, a merry set of people, and balls are held regularly every month. In the evening arrived ten teams laden with fifty emigrants from Kentucky, going to settle in Indiana. . . .

My landlord assured me that at least 200 waggons had passed from the Kentucky side, through Vevay, during the present season, all full of emigrants, discouraged from continuing among these lawless people.

The state of Indiana, which I had now entered, begins below Cincinnati, running down the big Miami westward to the big Wabash, which separates this country from the Illinois. . . . Like the state of Ohio, it belongs to the class coming within the range of the great valley of the Mississippi. . . . It declines more than Ohio. . . . Two ridges of mountains, or rather hills, traverse the country; the Knobs, or Silver-hills, running ten miles below Louisville, in a north-eastern direction, and the Illinois mountains appearing from the west, and running to the north-east, where they fall to a level with the high plains of Lake Michigan. These hills have a perfect sameness. . . . This state, though not inferior to Ohio in fertility, and taken in general, perhaps, superior to it, has one great defect. It has no sufficient water communication, and thus the inhabitants have no market for their produce. There is not in this state any river of importance, the Ohio which washes its southern borders excepted. A scarcity of money therefore is more severely felt here, than in any other state of the Union. This want of intercommunication, added to the circumstance that the state of Ohio had already engrossed the whole surplus population from

the eastern states, had a prejudicial effect upon Indiana, its original population being in general by no means so respectable as that of Ohio. In the north-west it was peopled by French emigrants, from Canada; in the south, on the banks of the Ohio, and farther up, by Kentuckians, who fled from their country for debt, or similar causes.

The state thus became the refuge of adventurers and idlers of every description. A proof of this may be seen in the character of its towns, as well as in the nature of the improvements that have been carried on in the country. The towns, though some of them had an earlier existence than many in Ohio, are, in point of regularity, style of building, and cleanliness, far inferior to those of the former state. The wandering spirit of the inhabitants seems still to contend with the principle of steadiness in the very construction of their buildings. They are mostly a rude set of people, just emerging from previous bad habits, from whom such friendly assistance as honest neighbours afford, or mutual intercourse and good will, can hardly be expected. The case is rather different in the interior of the country, and on the Wabash, the finest part of the state, where respectable settlements have been formed by Americans from the east. Wherever the latter constitute the majority, every necessary assistance may be expected.

Madisonville, the seat of justice for Jefferson-county, on the second bank of the Ohio, fifty-seven miles above its falls, contains at present 180 dwelling-houses, a court-house, four stores, three inns, a printing office—with 800 inhabitants, most of them Kentuckians. . . .

The road from Madison to Charleston, leads through fertile country, in some parts well cultivated. The distance from Madison is twenty-eight miles. It is the chief town of Clark county, and seems to advance more rapidly than Madison, the country about being pretty well peopled, and agriculture having made more progress than in any part of the state through which I had travelled. I found it to contain 170 houses and 750 inhabitants, five well stored tradesmen's shops, a printing office, and four inns. The town is about a mile distant from the river, on a high plain. . . .