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## Editor's Table: Review of Sawyer's Life of Randolph

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# EDITOR'S TABLE.

## SAWYER'S LIFE OF RANDOLPH.

"The Lion was dead that received the kick."

No man ever lived whose biography was more likely to excite a general interest and to be well received by the public than Randolph of Roanoke. The profound silence of the press on that subject is a curious fact. It is understood that considerations of delicacy may have restrained his near relations pending the controversy arising out of his will. The question of his sanity is one on which it would have been wrong to preoccupy the public mind; and no biographer could, in justice to him, have been silent on that subject. His other near friends may be supposed to have been restrained by the same consideration.

But why was not his life written by others? Lord Byron was hardly dead before the Dallas's and Leigh Hunts, &c., &c., were seeking to make a profit of the little intercourse with him which he had unadvisedly permitted. Why did nothing of the sort happen in this case? The answer is to be found in the delicacy which always has distinguished Virginians. They felt that it was due to Mr. R.'s friends to decide whether the veil should be drawn aside from his private life. Of the hundreds, therefore, who might have made entertaining books of reminiscences from the conversations of a man whose words were, by turns, prophecy, poetry and epigram, not one has published a line. A Mr. Jacob Harvey, an Irishman, entertained the public with such scraps as a short acquaintance enabled him to collect. His account is probably as faithful as he knew how to make it. But Mr. H. had not the faculty to preserve the very words of Mr. R., and many of his anecdotes are, therefore, deficient in accuracy in this important point. There was a tone in his style of conversation as well known to his friends as his voice, and, missing that, they always know that the *very words* imputed to him, were never spoken by him. With this exception, and that of a small volume of his letters, nothing concerning him has ever, until now, been given to the public. In Virginia nothing at all.

It remained for a citizen of another State, a stranger and an enemy, to interrupt, with his idle gossip, this funereal silence, and to make a market of his pretended knowledge of Mr. R. by vending it at a distance from those who could have told his bookseller that he knew nothing of his subject. His means of knowledge are paraded on the title page, where he announces that he was for sixteen years the associate of Mr. R. in Congress. But he presently makes known that he was politically opposed to him; and all who know Mr. R. know that to be so, at that time, was to be cut off from all intercourse with him. Hence, Mr. S. himself tells no more of his own personal knowledge than what passed at their first meeting. Giving him credit for intending to tell the truth, this fact may be taken, as he tells it, for what it is worth: and this is precisely as much as the public can safely take on the authority of Mr. Sawyer. The rest of the work is made up of a very unskilful digest of the contents of the papers of the day, and a collection of idle tales, of which not one in ten has any foundation in truth. In many passages the work may be truly characterised in the lan-

guage of indictments as a "false, scandalous and malicious libel." Let us take a few examples.

At p. 26 Mr. R.'s change of political position is said to have grown out of a certain presidential message of January 17, 1806. Now there was neither then, nor at any time, any such message as is there spoken of.

At p. 47 there is a most indecent anecdote, in telling which Mr. S. affects accuracy, and corrects some other writer. Here he introduces a female name. It is well for him, that, as no such thing ever happened, there was no such lady as he speaks of. If there were, and she had a relation in the world with the spirit of a man, Mr. S. would be most deservedly punished.

At p. 41 Mr. R. is represented as courting popular favor after his defeat in 1813, by Mr. Eppes, and the arts used by him are detailed. Every man, woman and child in Mr. R.'s district knows that his demeanor was never so high and haughty as at that time; that there was no such partizan as is there mentioned; that his deportment toward all to whom the description could apply was absolutely repulsive; and that the disgusting hypocrisy of frequenting Baptist meeting houses to conciliate that sect, and making a display of religious zeal was never heard of there.

We instance these things as not resting on private knowledge, but on notoriety. They manifest a reckless disregard of truth, which makes it superfluous to contradict calumnies, the refutation of which must depend on testimony of a more precise and personal character.

Mr. S.'s disregard to truth is strikingly manifested in his neglect to inform himself of particulars which he might have learned from the most authentic sources. Mr. Randolph's brothers, Dr. Brockenbrough and the Messrs. Leigh are known men, and Mr. S. could have reached either by letter. Had he done this, would he have called Mr. R. the nephew of Edmund Randolph, and represented him as a member of his family, as at p. 10? Would he have represented Mr. R.'s mother, at p. 9, as removing to Williamsburg with her husband, when she was already dead? These are things of small consequence in themselves. But to speak of them without resorting to the means of knowledge at hand, shows an utter disregard to the first duty of an historian.

What we have said, founded on no particular knowledge, but on a notoriety so great, that each point we have touched on is probably known to 10,000 persons, as certainly as man can know that of which he was not an eye witness, is enough to satisfy the public that in purchasing the work in question, they may get gossip for their money, they may get calumny, but they will certainly not get an authentic biography of John Randolph.