

1836

Liberian Literature

Lucian Minor

Repository Citation

Minor, Lucian, "Liberian Literature" (1836). *Faculty Publications*. 1318.
<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1318>

LIBERIAN LITERATURE.

We are perfectly serious in speaking of *Liberian Literature*. Yes—in Liberia, a province on the coast of Africa, where, thirteen years and a half ago, the tangled and pathless forest frowned in a silence unbroken save by the roar of wild beasts, the fury of the tornado, the whoop of the man-stealer, or the agonizing shrieks of his victims on being torn from their homes to brave the horrors of the Middle Passage and of the West Indies—in Liberia, the English language is now spoken; the English spirit is breathed; English Literature exists; and with it, exist those comforts, virtues, and pleasures, which the existence of Literature necessarily implies. Plantations—farm-houses—villages, built of brick, stone, and wood—glass windows, carpeted floors, papered walls, and neat if not elegant furniture—well-supplied tables—stores, filled with various merchandize—churches, where neatly dressed throngs devoutly send up the note of praise—bands of infantry and artillery, properly organized, armed, and trained—schools, in which hundreds are inducted into the pleasant pathway of knowledge—and (the most expressive sign of all) a *NEWSPAPER*, filled with instructive and entertaining matter—all these, amid an industrious and thriving population of three or four thousand, have taken place of the savage forest and its unlovely concomitants. What heightens—indeed what constitutes the wonder—is, that the main operatives in this great change are not white men. The printer and the editor of the newspaper—the merchants—most of the teachers and all the pupils—the owners and cultivators of the farms—the officers and soldiers in the military companies—the throng in the churches—are all colored people, except some score of whites, whom the climate, generally fatal to white men, spares yet awhile, as if in gratitude for their benefactions to Africa.

What we especially had in view, however, when we began this article, was neither rhapsody nor dissertation upon the march of Liberia to prosperity and civilization—unparalleled as that march is, in the annals of colonization—but a notice (a *critical notice*, if the reader please) of the aforesaid newspaper; by way of *instancing* the literary condition of the settlement. Cowper calls a newspaper, “a map of busy life—its fluctuations, and its vast concerns:” and indeed we can imagine no surer index to the moral and intellectual character of a people, than the ‘folio of four pages,’ which periodically ministers to, and constantly takes its tone from, their prevailing tastes, tempers, and opinions.—We have before us half a dozen numbers of the “*LIBERIA HERALD* ;” coming down to No. 4, of the sixth volume, dated October 31, 1835, whence we learn that it has existed for more than five years. It is printed on a sheet as large as many of our village papers, and larger than several which we occasionally see.

Its contents (considering where, and by whom they are selected, composed, and printed) are in the highest degree curious and interesting.

The *shipping list* for August, exhibits eleven arrivals, and six departures—that for April, five arrivals, and three departures—for February, 1835, six arrivals, and four departures—for October, three arrivals, and two departures. In the August number, are four distinct paragraphs, each mentioning a ship arrived with emigrants to the colony.

A striking feature in the Herald, is the great quantity of original matter which it contains—either editorial, or communicated. The number whence the above quotation is made, has four columns of editorial articles; and three sensible communications from correspondents—one of them detailing the murderous attack of the natives, in June last, upon the new settlement at Edina. Another tells of an excursion, on which we dare say it will please our readers to accompany the “peregrinator.” If he does twaddle, he twaddles to the full as agreeably as many correspondents of American newspapers, and more usefully.

“*For the Liberia Herald.*”

“Mr. Editor: I was induced, a few days since, by special invitation, to visit Caldwell. The occasion was one of the most honorable: the interchange of conjugal vows; the celebration of the nuptials of a couple, who conscious of mutual affection, made their offering at the hymeneal altar. The ceremonies were performed at 7 o'clock, P. M.; after which, the company (small but agreeable) enjoyed the flow of soul and social innocent merriment, until 9, when the happy pair returned, and the company dispersed. I repaired to Mr. Snetter's quarters, where I obtained lodging, comfortable in itself, but rendered much more so, by his peculiarly agreeable manners. After breakfast, on the ensuing day, we peregrinated the settlement. Mr. Jameison's farm particularly attracted my attention. The quantity of land he has under cultivation, as also the advanced state of the produce, equally excited astonishment. He has potatoes, cassada, beans, peas, and rice, &c., growing with a luxuriance that I never before witnessed in this country. The cultivation of the latter article has not been much attended to, until lately; its culture has been supposed to be attended with so much difficulty and labor, as to deter from the attempt. The apprehension however, was groundless, and the perseverance of Messrs. Palm and Nixon, has given us evidence, in the most extensive field of rice ever before cultivated in this country, that the difficulties are such only as attend every experiment where there is the want of resolution to undertake it. The settlement of Caldwell is assuming the feature of a regular, farming village. The Agency Farm under the management of Mr. Snetter, is in forward condition.

Yours, &c.

L. R. J.”

But the greatest curiosity in this August number, is a *critique* upon Miss Fanny Kemble's Journal. Yes, reader—think of Mrs. Butler, and all the “terrifying exactions” of her redoubtable book, subjected, on the very margin of Guinea, to the criticism of an African Editor, who treats her as unceremoniously, if not as justly, as any critics on this side of the Atlantic, or on the north side of the Mediterranean. Imagine him in his elbow chair at Monrovia, his broad nose dilating and his thick lips swelling with conscious dignity, while he thus passes judgment upon one who perhaps would hardly suffer him to clean her shoes. The errors of spelling and syntax (the unsexing of the authoress included) are doubtless attributable to the printer: but there are some queer expressions, which seem the editor's own, and which are rather characteristic of African magniloquence.

“*Francis Ann Butler.*—To the politeness of the supercargo of the Brig *Eliza*, we have been indebted for a peep at the Journal of Miss Kemble, or as announced by the title page, *Francis Ann Butler*. From the celebrity of the tourist, we had anticipated much; but a perusal of the book treated us to a most vexatious disappointment. On the literary merit of the work, we do not feel ourselves competent to decide. But as it is an immunity allowed ignorance, to admire where it cannot comprehend, we avail ourselves of the privilege, and put in our share of admiration at the bold and beautiful figures which adorn the pages; such as “*Miniature Hell* ;” “*ghastly smiles of the Devil* ;” “*Blue Devils*,” &c. These are certainly beauties of which we had no conceptions, until we got hold of the work. We may be allowed to say, as we pass, that they are not

exactly in unison with that soft and tender delicacy, of which our imagination had composed the fair sex, of the higher order. We regret much that the work is not accompanied by a Lexicon, adapted to the style. The want of one has deprived us of much gratification; as doubtless the excellences of the work is locked up in such words as "daudle," "twaddle," &c., which are to us "daudles" indeed, or in plain English, unexplorable regions. Such works may be of utility in communities, where there is sufficient discrimination to separate the little grain from the redundancy of chaff, without being choaked [choked] by it, but we can see no earthly advantage to us in reading them.

"We will venture to say, however, that if the notes are by the same hand, the authoress possesses a pretty considerable share of what may be called sound discriminating judgment on some particulars."

One number of the Herald contains some very sensible observations (editorial) upon the "*Relations between France and the United States*;" in which the probability of war is spoken of, and its occurrence earnestly deprecated. The danger from it, to Liberia, is considered: fears having been entertained by some, lest France might involve that colony, as she once did the British settlement at Freetown, in her quarrel with the mother country.

"The case, however," says the editor, "is not exactly parallel: Freetown and the whole colony of Sierra Leone, ever since their establishment, have been under the British flag, and as such, considered a member of the British empire—and therefore, its destruction, it might be argued, was perfectly in unison with the established principles of war. Ours is an experiment for political existence;—having a distinct and peculiar flag, owing allegiance to no government, but to that which is represented by the flag that floats over Liberia.

"We recollect having read, that at the time the great Navigator Captain Cook, was on his voyage of discovery, war broke out between England and France, and it was requested that Capt. Cook, should the enemy fall in with him, be allowed an unmolested passage. The French king replied, that he warred not on science, nor with the principles of humanity; and that an expedition undertaken for the benefit of all, should never meet obstruction from the flag of France."

A paragraph in the same number, announcing the organization of a Court of Appeals, with appellate jurisdiction in cases where the sum in dispute exceeds \$100, expresses the orthodox republican sentiment, that "Laws are made for the benefit of the poor, as well as the rich; and in legislating, the former should be more especially kept in view."

And in the next column is mentioned the establishment, at Caldwell, of a *FIFTH Baptist Church* in the Colony.

Another number states important and cheering facts in regard to the progress of *TEMPERANCE*. *Five hundred and three persons had signed the pledge of total abstinence from the use or sale of spirits, in the space of one month.*

"So great an influence have these Societies exerted upon the community at large, that a sight of the liquid death has become rare.

"To Liberia's honor be it trumped, that for *ten* gallons sold in the Colony four months back, there is not *one* now. There are a few that advocate the cause of alcohol; but they cannot support their opposition long. Public opinion is issuing her imperious edicts, and every opposer will soon be awed into silence."

From the October number we extract the following item.

"*Sabbath School*.—On Sunday the 19th Instant, a Sabbath School was opened in the Second Baptist Chapel: 33 children and 3 adults presented themselves, and had their names registered as scholars. Suitable books, such as would enable us to arrange the children in classes, are very much wanting. As it

is, each having a different book, we are obliged to hear them singly, which makes it extremely laborious, and precludes the possibility of more than one lesson each, during the hours of school."

We would gladly copy a perspicuous and rational account which is given in several chapters, of the *climate and seasons of Africa, the soil of Liberia, and the method of clearing lands*; besides many other sensible and interesting articles, which say a great deal for the editor, correspondents, and readers, of the Herald: but we have so far exceeded the space we had allotted for this subject, that we must here close our remarks.

No one can read the Liberia Herald, without not only wonder, that so much intellect should emanate from such a source, but the strongest persuasion, that a colony, which in so brief a time has given such striking evidences of advancement in whatever distinguishes civilized from savage man, *must succeed*.