1835

Letters from New England – No. 3

Lucian Minor

Repository Citation

Minor, Lucian, "Letters from New England – No. 3" (1835). Faculty Publications. 1558.
https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1558

Copyright c 1835 by the authors. This article is brought to you by the William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository.
https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs
For the Southern Literary Messenger.

LETTERS FROM NEW ENGLAND.—No. 3.
BY A VIRGINIAN.

Pittsfield, Mass., July 26th, 1834.

One means by which Prussian tyranny sought to break down the spirit and health of Baron French, during his long and rigorous imprisonment at Magdeburg, was to have him roused by a sentinel, every fifteen minutes of his sleeping hours. You can form a lively conception of the efficacy of the plan, if you have ever been compelled by exhausted nature to woo her "sweet restorers" in a stage-coach, over a very uneven road; but what think you of doing it outside, on the driver’s seat? Instead of tea this morning, the waiter called me at one; when I had not slept a single wink—("sleepless myself; to give my readers sleep.")— Sickened by the motion of the close and crowded coach, I presently mounted beside the driver; where drawiness soon overcame me. So, tying one arm with my handkerchief to the iron on the stage roof, I took, for about two hours, such slumber as was permitted by the bearings of our vehicle, on a billy road; such slumber, as one might enjoy while tossed in a blanket, or "upon the high and giddy mast," rocking his brains, "in candle of the rude imperious surge." On fully awaking, almost an hour before sunrise, I found we were ascending a mountain (part of the Green Mountain,) by a gentle slope of three or four degrees, continuing for six miles. The scenery, wildly picturesque in itself, bursting thus suddenly upon the view, was particularly striking. Indeed, no day of my tour has presented a greater number of boldly beautiful landscapes. "That I never try to spread these beauties upon my page, you must ascribe to the fear that they would but "evanesce" in the endeavor, and by no mean to any profound contemplation—unapprehensive, you know according to Dr. Beattie, for

"the benignant stare
Of charms which Nature to her votary yields;
The warbling woodland, the resounding shore;
The pomp of graves, and garland of fields;
All that the glad ray of morning lights,
And all that echoes to the song of even;
All that the mountain’s sheltering brow affords,
And all the grand magnificence of Heaven—"

I most devoutly worship them all. But humbler themes both hold and demand my pen. It is a New England custom, to bury all the dead of a township, or of a certain subdivision of it, in a common grave yard; usually, not within any village, and apart from any church. This yard is enclosed with a wall; and every grave is marked by a stone (commonly hewn marble,) with a neat and simple inscription of name and years, supplying "the place of fame and glory." By a sort of tacit consent, each family is allowed to cluster its dead together in a separate portion of the ground; sometimes in a conspicuous vault, marked with the family name. The curious may at any time find an hour’s amusement—aside from the more serious thoughts proper to the place—in reading, on the tombstones, the surnames common and peculiar to New England, and the Christian names—mostly scriptural—betaking for the original and enduring view of Puritanism. A southerner naturally wonders why the grave yards are without the villages. To an inquiry of mine into the reason, a "safe female (evidently far wiser than her husband, who was also in company,) answered, that it was "to accommodate those who live at a distance." How it did this—or how, if the distant on one side were accommodated, those on the other were not equally accommodated—my sage instructress did not expound. The village itself (at least its ordinary nucleus, the meeting-house) is usually central to the town, for the equal convenience of all. It seems more probable that health, and the reader’s command of space, influences the location of burying grounds.

One of the objects that have struck me most pleasingly, is the Liberty Pole, in almost every village. Its use is to hoist a flag upon, on the Fourth of July, and other festal days. It figures exquisitely in "McFingal!"—that best poem of its length, that America has produced; so often quoted for Huldhers, and so inadequately honored, not only in the south, but here, in its native north. Do take down the book, or, if you have it not, go straight and buy it; turn to the second or third cento—I forget which—and be grave if you can, while you read how the Tory hero "fierce sallied forth" attended by

"His desperate clan of Tory friends:
When sudden met his angry eye
A pole ascending thro’ the sky—"

the ceremonies of its raising and consecration; the attack, not nearly alone, of the hero upon it; his inglorious discomfiture; his wailing flight,

"With legs and arms he worked his course,
Like rider that omits his horse!")

his fall, and decoration with tar and feathers; the hoisting of the tory constable by a rope fastened to his waistband,

"Tell, like the earth, as stretched on tender,
He hung selfbalanced, on his centre"

where, as Stomets (according to a witty conic poet of his day) got himself awung in mid air to clear his perceptions,

"Our culprit sprints in punter sky,
With like advantage raised his eye;
And looking forth in prospect wide,
His tory errors clearly spied."

I had enjoyed so many a laugh at the whole scene, that when a Liberty Pole was first shown me (at Hartford) by an interesting fellow tourist, it required all my pluck to refrain from clapping my hands with pleasure.

Albany, July 27.

It was nearly eleven—two hours later than usual—when we arrived last night. A series of little casualties delayed us: a thunder storm, quite as magnificent as most that we have in Virginia, only our thunder and lightning are far superior; a tree, of eight or nine inches diameter, blown across the road by a semi-tornado that accompanied the cloud; and divers other detentions. The storm met us near the top of a mountain, upon the line of Massachusetts and New York; obliging us to halt, and fend off the rain as best we might, by buttoning down the curtains. The descent hitherward, winds, for perhaps a mile, along the steep mountain side; commanding a fine view of the pretty village of Lebanon, and its prettier valley. Near Lebanon is a settlement of Shakers. The only incivility I have
yet experienced from a stage driver, was a few miles this side of Lebanon; when, availing myself of a brief halt at a hotel to get some refreshment, I received an indistinct notice that the stage could not wait: and a 

minuio or two after, some one called to me, "you are left, sir!"—On going to the door, sure enough, the horses were in a sweeping trot, twenty or thirty yards (or, as they say here, four or five rods) off. I soon overtook them; and was admitted, the driver snarlingly grumbling at the unreasonableness of expecting him to wait all day. He was sour by being so late. And whoever considers how nice a point of honor—aye, and of duty, and interest—it is with that fraternity to be punctual, will not blame him very severely. They have been civil and obliging to me; the one by whom I slept yesterday morning, was even kind.

So well established is this good character of New England stage drivers, that ladies often travel by stage for scores of miles, with no other protector. And the driver does protect them, vigilantly. Every way, however, the freedom with which females trust themselves abroad there, and in the south, is remarkable, wherever. I have seen handsome young ladies, of refined appearance, driving in a chaise, with no male attendant, to a town seven or eight miles from their home. And such things are of every day occurrence, attracting no especial notice. This freedom arises, I believe, from several causes. It is unquestionably owing, in part, to the sober, honest, and peaceful habits of the people, and to the continuity, that any wrong or insult offered to a female, would be promptly resented and punished; as in Ireland, under the reign of Brien the Brave, a beautiful damsel, richly attired, could walk alone, safe and fearless, from end to end of the kingdom.* Contiguity of residences aids this effect. Then, in the country villages of the north, there are many more ladies than gentlemen, from the emigration of the latter westward, and from their resorting to the maritime cities and to the ocean, for trade and seafaring employment. Besides, New-Englanders have less time for pleasure than we have; and no Virginian will deny that "to tend the fair" is a pleasure. But the freedom of female movements is partly attributable also to the prevalence, among (New England men, of a less tender and obsequious manner at least, towards the fair sex, than southerners habitually show. They do not practise those minute, delicate attentions—that semi-adoration—ingrained in the very constitutions of our well bred men. (Not dandies—I speak of men.) Indeed our claims to superiority may be pushed still further. In affability to inferiors, our northern brethren are decidedly behind us.

In their middling and lower classes, no and in the lower tier of their upper classes, this short-coming is particularly discernible: and extends even to their deportment towards equals. Clowns and servants—I beg pardon—"help"—seem not to expect, or to relish, the courtesy which, in the Old Dominion, every true gentleman pays to the poorest man. Soon after entering the country, I found it necessary, if I would have respect from them, to oblate much of the respectful address, which habit had rendered essential to my own comfort. Can these deficiencies of manner—supposing them to exist—and

my belief of them is confirmed by that of others—be ascribed to the utter proscription of duelling—that venerated nurse of courtesy? I should rather attribute them to three other causes. First—a dislike to outward displays of emotion; a hard-featured sternness of soul, which, content to feel kindly and deeply, and to act kindly too in things of solid import, forgets or disdains the petty blinishments of manner, as idle forms, often the offspring of deceit, and unworthy of a mind bent upon substantial good. This estimable, but unamiable trait—derived purely from his sire, John Bull—makes Jonathan disdained on a superficial view. But those who consider him with candid attention, and bearing in mind the true saying of honest Kent, that

"They are not empty-hearted, whose low sound Reverb no hollow sound—"

perhaps find the ugly iron casque stored with the richest jewels. Second—a less creditable cause; applicable only to the imputed want of courtesy towards inferiors)—The employment of whites, as servants. A master cannot treat these as his equals: it is utterly incompatible with the relation. His demeanor towards them, he naturally extends to their kindred, and to their class; that is, to all the poor around him. According to that general principle of divine wisdom and goodness, which, by a conspicuous proof of good and evil, equals every human lot, the blighting curse of slavery seems to carry this mitigation along with it—a more delicate and scrupulous regard, in the free, to even the minute gratification of their fellow-free. Hence—and from their greater leisure to cultivate manner—chiefly arises, we may suppose, the superiority of slave-holders in the several points of politeness. Just so, according to Montesquieu, good-natures characterize a monarch. Those who can see in this, a recompenoe either for a privation of the glorious right of self-government, or for the unmeasured ills entailed by domestic slavery upon a community, are welcome to the consolation.

Third—(applicable, like the last, only to intercourse with inferiors)—the system of electioneering practised in the northern states. Ungle and public opinion allow no man to declare himself a candidate for office. His doing so, would be political suicide. He must be nominated by a caucus—or convention, as "sara polite" now require it to be called. The convention is got up in this wise: One, or two, or three, tolerably influential men, having a friend whom they wish to exalt, call a private meeting of those over whom their influence especially is, and after insinuating his merits into the minds assembled, get a resolution passed, for a general caucused, of the whole party, in the town, or election district. All who were at the private meeting, bestir themselves diligently to congregate at the caucus, such persons, chiefly, as they, or some of them, can control: and in this they are so successful, that a nomination there, of the individual designated by the first movers of the scheme, is almost sure to result. This nomination goes abroad, as made by a meeting of the people; and unless some more skilfully conducted or powerfully headed counter movement take place, our candidate may count with reasonable certainty upon his election. Such is the machinery by which aspirants get themselves hoisted into office; as explained to me by one familiar with it—who had actually profited by it more than once—and who owned that it was rather a shrewd

* See T. Moore's Irish Melody.  

"Rich and rare were the gems she wore."
feature in the politics of his country. All aspirants, therefore, (and in our country, how few are not—

scored they that) pay court, not to the people at large, but only to the known leaders of the cause.

Contending the passive verbs and puppets, they re-

gard only the hand that works them. Thus the com-

monwealth, losing their importance in elections, lose their

strongest hold upon the civility of their superior. I

need not run out the process. "We're well, if depriva-

tion of law, and smiles, and kind words, are all that the

manner suffer by the cannon system. But, by run-

dering them "insignificant in the body politic," that system

threatens popular government itself with overthrow.

I wish, I long, to see our fellow Virginians enjoy our

brother of the north in many things: but this system,

may they show as the cholera! May they always ad-

here to their own frank and manly plan, of having the

candidate appear before them, and face to face declare

his sentiments and manifest his ability to defend the

great interests with which he asks to be entrusted!

While talking of manners, it would have been reas-

onsorable to speak of the superfluous insincerities, com-

monly ascribed to the Yankees. I have seen no trace of

the fault: not even so much as our own people sometimes

above. While on foot, in the country, I was some-
times asked where I was from; but it was always where

the question was suggested and justified by the course of

conversation, or by the tenor and number of my own inquir-
es; or to furnish a starting place for our collo-

quy—a platform whence to toss the ball of discourse

never, in a manner least abrupt or offensive. Among

the better classes, such as are casually met in stage-
coaches and hotels, there was all the delicate forbear-

ance in this respect, which marks true politeness everywhere.

Again—Our brother Jonathan is reputed, with us, a

great sharper. Yankee tricks, and Yankee knavery, are

ideas inseparable from the word Yankee. Now my

own experience does not enable me to add a single one to the catalogue of anecdotes, by which that character-

istic is supposed to be proven. Not a single cheat—

not a single trick—was practised upon me during my

sojourn in Yankee land: unless, indeed, it was so

narcotically done, as to have been hit into imperceptible to

me. The fact is, our ideas on this point are derived almost entirely from those detectable samples of hom-

easty, yelped "Yankee peddler," who for many years have

so thwarted over the south: a mere, by whom deeds, as I recollected, almost entirely from those delectable samples of hon-

pilgrims...

The music struck me as particularly fine.

I doubted not that it was an organ; till, looking up to the galle-

ry, there sat a gentleman scraping away with might

and main upon a viola, and another upon a bass viol: accompanied by a flute, and an admirably toned choir.

Our amusements were terribly in Panderus: but it was

nothing to the deep, non-thematic abstraction with which some "ones guilt" folks of my acquaintance (not of yours) would have beheld this uncommon mode of

"hymning the great Creator." Even me, it affected

very singularly: I thought of the war-look-dance in

Kirk Alleyway; of Auld Nick in shape of "towails
tyke, black, grim and large," whose province it was to

gin them music, how

"He screwed the pipes and part them skirl,

Till roof and rafters o' did din."

While "horns pipes, bits, strings and reeds, ran

life and mingles in their heads:"

"We made an horrible and awful

Which even to name was unlawful"

and I did not know what catastrophes might ensue, from the profusion. Happily, however, none occur-

red.

In the formalities of piety, the descendents of the

Filipinos are radically changed from the puritanical strictness of their forefathers. The quaint names, in-

deed, are retained; but the straight-forwardness they im-

ply is gone: you find Leah, or Ann, upon near ap-

proach, to be as arch a lass, and Jerusalem, or Timothy, as

merry a girl, as any Sally, or Betty, Tom, or Bob,

south of the Potomac.

No one in Massachusetts is any longer compelled by

law to pay for the support of religion, its temples, or

its ministers. The law, requiring the citizen to do so,

only letting him choose the sect or the minister to whom

his contribution should ensure, was repealed last year.

Each religious society—answering to congregation with

us—has a seat of corporate faculty, involving the power to

tax its members for church expenses, and to coerc

payment by distress if its be withheld. Even this is a

strike towards hierarchy from which our forefathers have

shrunken ever since 1783; and which our people will pro-

ably never permit.

I must say more to you, of the goodly land I have

all, on a working day, did not meet my view during the

(nearly) four weeks of my stay; except funerals. The

people seem to think both parts of the third com-

mandment alike binding: "Six days shalt thou labor!

as well as "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

Dancing is by no means proscribed, or unusual. It is

taught at many or most of the high female boarding

schools. Even in Connecticut, "junketings" are not

unfrequent, lively enough to have pleased our venera-

ble Pendleton, yet "soberly" enough conducted, to

have suited Lady Grace. At New Haven, within bow-

sot of Yale College, a dance was kept up for two suc-

essive nights till eleven or twelve o'clock, in an apart-

ment just across the street from my lodging. True, I

have seen no match for my father's friend and mine,

Dr. If ****, who, since the birth of his seventh grand-

child, has so often realized that pleasing traits in the

picture of French rural life—

"And the gay grandmam, skilful in gentle lore,

Has frisked beneath the bougher of these scores;"
just left. My having quitted it, need subtract nothing from the credit attached to my observations: for I shall touch no topic, which is not as fresh in my mind, and as susceptible of truthful representation, as if the local scene itself stretched around me. Adieu.