

A SCOT IN THE STATES 1828-1831

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NOTORIETY has clouded whatever claim to fame James Stuart might have had. Bred in the staid traditions of the Scots law, with a comfortable competence to insure him against the buffets of the world, he might have grown old as yet another Writer to the Signet.

But when most men are mellowing, that is, in their late forties, James Stuart was precipitated out of the comfortable groove in which he might have run his allotted span. He was of liberal leanings and had spent his heyday in some vigorous campaigning against the all powerful Dundas family, who controlled Scottish public life a hundred and fifty years ago. His enthusiasms brought him no reward. He was omitted from the list of Justices of the Peace when he was forty, and a series of press attacks on his personality appeared in the *Edinburgh Beacon* and the *Glasgow Sentinel*. So bitter were they that Stuart challenged the writer to a duel. The writer was revealed as the son of the great biographer Boswell, accepted the challenge, and was killed. Stuart was tried for murder and acquitted.¹

But in a highly civilized society that deplored the duel, not even Stuart's acquittal could hide the fact that he had killed someone, and since that someone was a Tory writer and the Tories were in power, Stuart's public life suffered an even greater eclipse. He retired to his estates for six years and then decided to visit the United States of America, where he remained for three years. In his travels, he kept a day by day journal of all that he saw and did, which was published as *Three Years in North America*. Its success was remarkable. It ran to three editions in two years, and its pro-American bias was deemed so virulent that two army officers wrote a pamphlet to contradict him.

The book completely rehabilitated Stuart. It was published on his return, and he became editor of the *Courier*. Four years later, he returned to Scotland in virtual triumph, this time as one of His Majesty's Inspectors for Factories, with the whole of Scotland and Ireland under his charge. This post he held for thirteen years, till he died in 1849.

Three Years in North America was a much needed corrective to the recent works of Captain Basil Hall and Mrs. Frances

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(1) The basis for the duel scene in Sir Walter Scott's *St. Ronan's Well*.

Trollope. Indeed Stuart went to great pains to follow in their footsteps, observe what they had done, and to point out where they had erred. It so impressed young Richard Cobden that he wrote: "It is probably the best book on America because it is the most matter of fact and impartial of all the writings on that country". Equally strong was the adverse comment of George Grote, the Vice-Chancellor of London University, who wrote in the flyleaf of his own copy: "No, Mr. Stuart, whatever the merit of your book may be, you are not an impartial writer and I hardly know how to trust you." There is a reason for both these opinions. Cobden liked Stuart's book because it afforded plenty of ammunition for the Radicals in their crusade for sweeping away the aristocratic encumbrances that hampered the development of the new industrial community, whereas Grote could not forgive Stuart's apparent condonation of slavery.

The percipient Cobden was nearer the truth. *Three years in America* is far superior to Mrs. Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Professor McCourt has well told the story of the frustrated Cincinnati Bazaar keeper and the "savages" who checked her career and ambitions. Similarly, the well known journal of Captain Basil Hall and the published letters of his garrulous wife reveal the acid criticism of the over civilized and slightly myopic traditionalist. Neither the Halls nor Frances Trollope should be allowed even to masquerade as typical British observers of the time. That James Stuart was himself infected with a bias is true, but it was a healthy one, and he was not ashamed to commend openly features of the contemporary pattern that appealed to him.

One can see in his pages how he impressed even the Americans themselves. For instance, he was travelling in a stage coach full of Kentuckians who were all discussing their hopes that slavery would be soon ended, when the conversation turned to questions of health. Stuart's opinions on the subject so impressed one fellow traveller that the latter slipped a pencilled note into Stuart's hand

requesting me to let him know if I was acquainted with any remedy for a local complaint, which he mentioned, and which gave him great pain. In my reply, written in the same way, I told him I was ignorant of any remedy to which he could immediately have recourse, but I knew that the frequent use, for the purpose of ablution, of an implement, which I specified, and which was to be found in almost every bedchamber in France

and now very generally in Britain, was the preventive uniformly approved by the faculty. He seemed surprised when he perused my note, and, at our first stopping place, inquired eagerly what it was that I had recommended. I found on explaining that he had never even heard of the implement to which I had alluded, and, of course, could not comprehend what I meant. The practice of travellers washing at the doors, or in the porticos and stoops, or at the wells of taverns and hotels once a day, is most prejudicial to health; the ablution of the body, which ought never to be neglected, at least twice a day in a hot climate, being altogether inconsistent with it.

This common touch, which enabled him to plumb the life history of everyone he met in the course of a quick conversation, has resulted in scores of interesting vignettes of people of all stations in life. After interviewing President Jackson he recorded in his book:

The president has very little the appearance or gait of a soldier as I have been accustomed to see them. He is extremely spare in his habit of body—at first sight not altogether unlike Shakespeare's starved apothecary—but he is not an ungentle man in appearance; and there are marks of good humour, as well as decision of character, in his countenance.

James Stuart had not been an officer in the Fifeshire Yeomanry for nothing, and found that his military bearing was of great value when he visited the South and found all the rooms booked at Charleston. Talking to a Mrs. Street,

I pressed my suit so long and earnestly that she at last became propitious, and told her husband, who happened to come in at the moment, what she had done, but she was persuaded I was at least a colonel.

The following day, an hour before breakfast, as Stuart was looking from the window of the room he had just acquired from this lady, he saw her

give a young man,—a servant, such a blow behind the ear as made him reel, and I afterwards found that it was her hourly and daily practice to beat her servants, male and female, either with her fist, or with a thong made of cowhide.

Indeed, though Stuart goes to great pains to contradict both Basil Hall and Frances Trollope in most of their impressions, he himself recorded things that did not please him. There was the incessant chewing and spitting "carried to such a height

that it was difficult to escape from their effects", and there was the incessant substitute for the watercloset, "which is universally in bad order wherever one travels in the U. S. A." To him, however, these were the minor irritations. What is significant is the extremely favourable impression he derived from American political and social institutions, and the overt advocacy of similar measures for Great Britain.

Viewed in this light, *Three Years in North America* becomes extremely effective political propaganda for the Liberal Party in England, and its place at the head of the long stream of exhortations to "watch America" is clear. It explains Cobden's enthusiasm, and the banning of the book by the governing body of the Mechanics Institute of Lincoln. It was political propaganda in its most subtle form, a systematic comparison of the institutions of one country with those of another, with all the glamour of the West thrown over it. The theme was one that later generations of Liberals were to use with good effect to secure the social reforms needed in Great Britain.

Whenever Stuart heard of a Scotsman in the neighbourhood, he went to see him, and sketched a brief pastiche of his history. He slyly records:

The Scotch are preferred to other foreigners in public employment on account of their sobriety, the Swiss and Germans as landed proprietors, but neither the English, nor especially the Irish, can withstand the demoralizing effect of cheap spirits.

His Scots accent earned him many a travelling companion. He was secretly rather proud of it, noticing that "the Somerset dialect is more unintelligible than any other in the U. S. A." Everywhere he went he had an eye for the Scots who had been driven from their native heath by the political outlook, and records their subsequent success. The postmen of New York; the superintendent of the public nursery at Mount Vernon; the superintendent of a farm at Mount Ida, Troy; Kennedy the Paisley Radical, whose brother was a senator for Maryland; Jonathan Eliot the historian; and many landowners of the Middle West, in Illinois especially—all their case histories are recorded with great fidelity. Yet though he seems anxious to show what rich material has been driven to America by the hostile political atmosphere of home, he can record with homely pride that Mrs. Carroll, in founding her public reading rooms in New Orleans, chose the *Scotsman* of Edinburgh as her only British newspaper.

All the contemporary social experiments made in the States

he judiciously appraised. The State prison at Auburn should be imitated in Great Britain,

for in what country are there so many convicts in reference to the population, where they are maintained at so great expense to the state, and where has so little yet been done towards accomplishing the great end of punishment, the diminution of offences by the terrors of punishment or in promoting the reformation of the offenders?

Considering that New South Wales, the hulks, or prisons of the type immortalized by Dickens were the order of his day in England, the suggestion was not ill founded. But especially interesting is his account of the English settlement of Flower and Birkbeck at Albion in Illinois. Stuart met the Flowers and wrote a lively account of their situation. Flower earned a name as a philanthropist by lending money at ten per cent, and fed his pigs on peaches, apples and Indian bread. It was here Stuart tasted the best wine yet, and to his surprise saw the only egg cups of his visit. So impressed was he with Illinois that he declared that "no part of North America is so much to be recommended to emigrating farmers as the State of Illinois". Robert Dale Owen's activities also come under review, but Stuart's account seems to be a second-hand one.

Through the whole work shine the convictions of the politician. He was vastly impressed by the fact that John Jacob Astor would not regard his property as more secure if he were allowed to send members to Congress, or to the State Assembly. He admired "the order and regularity which pervade their universal suffrage and annual elections" and frequently throughout the book avowed that

the example of the United States proves that there is no risk in bestowing the right to vote in elections on all persons, not incapacitated by crime, who have been well educated.

The full significance of these opinions can be realized only when the contemporary state of Great Britain is considered. Only in the year this book was published the vote had been conceded to the middle classes after intense agitation. Universal education, rate supported and free, had to wait another fifty-nine years, and universal male suffrage for forty-three. As the mob were breaking the windows of the Duke of Wellington in London, Stuart was writing:

In the present state of the world, the universal education of the people of England would tend more to the stability of the government and to dissipate those feelings of apprehension

which are entertained respecting the influence of demagogues on the lower class than any other measures which could be devised.

Far from finding the Americans like savages, he writes of them as a people worthy of respect:

This great country contains an infinitely greater number of gentlemen than any other country which exists, or has ever existed, on the face of the earth.

The ungentlemanly conduct of the British Army in burning the Library of Congress he deplures, together with other delinquencies. Indeed, as one reads his sane and balanced account, the aristocratic prejudices of other English travellers who still regarded the North American continent as "colonial" seem obsolete even then, and far from typical.

Three Years in North America should be reprinted. It is a good travel book—the account of Stuart's journey up the Mississippi has all the realistic detail of a film script, while his numerous case histories of the people he met would be an invaluable quarry for the social historian. The promise of his preface, "to expose the mistakes of some late writers, who seemed to have visited these States under the influence of strong prejudices and preconceived opinions", is amply fulfilled, and it is a pity that the subsequent attacks upon his historical digressions (so dear to all writers of the period) should have blinded the industrious Doctor Thwaites to its merits, for it should have been included in his great series of reprints of *Early American Travel*.

With the centenary of Stuart's death almost upon us, the book has one further merit for his biographer, since its liberal outlook goes far to rebut the charges made against Stuart after his return that he was (of all things!) a reactionary. When he was Inspector of Factories from 1836-49, Stuart was constantly rebutting charges that he was pandering to the manufacturers, not enforcing the acts, and setting his superintendents to watch assemblies of working men. Though he rebutted these charges, his rebuttals are couched in the stiff formal language of his annual reports, which are themselves hidden among the sheaves of dusty bluebooks. On the other hand, his opponents' charges live in the words of orators like Fielden, who, though a noted factory reformer, seems to have been misinformed on this question. Stuart's liberalism cost him dear throughout his life, and it seems that even the historians, who should redress the balance, have somewhat inadvertently ignored him.