THE HISTORICAL WRITINGS AND THOUGHT OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN PERRY

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Greenville, S. C. Unionist and Reconstruction Governor Benjamin Franklin Perry has long had recognition as a political figure; he deserves consideration as a historical writer. The fact was hard to appreciate until the Reprint Company's 1980 publication of *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin Perry* in three volumes edited by Stephen Meats and Edwin Arnold for the South Caroliniana Series under the general editorship of James B. Meriwether.

The deversity of the original places of publication of, and of the topics treated in, these writings had obscured the focus and significance of Perry's historical contributions. Unlike his friends William Gilmore Simms and William Henry Trescot of Charleston, Perry never wrote a book-length historical work. Neither did he do the manuscript research those men did. He was more a journalist, writing on the basis of interviews and personal knowledge of his subjects. To call him a historian might seem misleading, therefore. Yet some of his work has continuing value, unlike most journalism.

To assess the value requires first understanding of the context in which Perry wrote, Perry's motives for writing, his methods, habits, preconceptions and preoccupations, his sense of his diverse audiences, and his understanding of the functions of history. Like any writer, Perry was a person of his times and place (whether defined geographically, culturally, socially, economically, or politically). He also was a man engaged heavily in public life, and his engagements focussed his attentions and directed his energies. He was not an ivory tower scholar. He had no formal training as a historian, but rather reflected on historical subjects in the course of his work as editor, lawyer, jurist, and politician. How and why he reflected as he did are as interesting as what he thought.

A. Background

At Perry's birth in 1805, large-scale cotton culture was only fifteen years old in the United States, itself scarcely more than twenty years old. However, the U. S. was already the preeminent world exporter of the raw fiber, and South Carolina produced the great majority of the U. S. crop, shipping principally to Britain. Though still grown primarily in the low-country, cotton was spreading into the upcountry. Revolutionary War soldier Wade Hampton, perhaps the richest planter in the South, had begun planting cotton near Camden, S. C., in the middle of the state, in 1799, after purchase of three modified cotton gins—machinery patented just six years earlier, in 1793, by Eli Whitney.

As cotton spread into the upcountry, so did slavery. By 1810, some 36% of upcountry households were slave-owning. The percentage was lower in Pendleton and Greenville Districts. Yet the people of these districts shared characteristics with those of Abbeville, Edgefield, Laurens, and others in the upcountry further to the south and east, where cotton culture would penetrate heavily. Like the people of these less mountainous or hilly districts, white as well as black, Pendletonians and Greenvillians came to South Carolina principally by way of the wagon roads down from Pennsylvania and Virginia through North Carolina. Most did not come up from Charleston, though Perry's father and uncle had.

For many of these Pennsylvania and Virginia families, South Carolina proved to be only another stop in the continual, restless pursuit of lands and opportunity. Already in the 1790's, many upcountry settlers, most of whom had been in the area no more than thirty years, were moving west, through Georgia. For instance, Horse Shoe Robinson, the celebrated S. C. blacksmith-soldier of the Revolution, ended up in Alabama, near Tuscaloosa. Making that possible was the Louisiana Purchase effected by Thomas Jefferson in 1803, just two years before Perry's birth. So strong was the pull of this new land that South Carolinians were 80% more likely to emigrate than Americans as a whole. Indeed by 1860, better than two out of five South Carolinians did not live in their native state. The

percentage of emigrants from the Pendleton-Greenville areas was probably considerably higher. Like many other South Carolina political and cultural leaders of his day—Hugh Swinton Legare, James Henry Hammond, William Gilmore Simms—Perry repeatedly deplored this draining off westward of South Carolina's population and talent. In his eyes, the westward movement retarded his state's growth and destabilized society.

If the West loomed large on Perry's horizon, however, it did not hold him captive. When he read to his wife before breakfast, he turned to Europe and the classics—Virgil, Milton, Pope—and also to such contemporary writers as Byron and Bulwer. This list and Perry's responses to the works on it show a conventional Victorian. True, Perry was born in the backwoods of Carolina only a generation after the lands there had been vacated by the Cherokees, and his formal education did not extend much beyond a brief stint in an academy in Greenville, then a village only one step from the frontier. Nevertheless, he belonged to the Atlantic culture uniting England and the U. S. His reading and ambition helped him establish the bond. So did his marriage to the daughter of an established Charleston family and his political connections with men as diverse as John Quincy Adams, the former U. S. President from Massachusetts, and Joel Roberts Poinsett, the European-educated diplomat and Secretary of War from South Carolina. His work as a lawyer and journalist further strengthened his urban, middle-class orientation. Though born in rural circumstances, he was no rustic. If he spoke on occasion before the Pendleton Agricultural Society, he more often spoke before colleges and academies—more about culture than about agriculture. He saw civilization grounded in education and industry (that is, hard work), not in the Jeffersonian yeomanry or its upscale planter equivalent. In this, he was only reading from his own life and from the lives of such friends as William Gilmore Simms—men who, like Perry, saw their country and themselves gradually earning the right to seats among the civilized and cultured. The standards were Old World; the presumption was New.

To see Perry as a Westerner looking East and, in the process

embracing Victorian mores in Victorian terms is not enough. Neither is it sufficient to add that he was also an upcountryman. One must also remember that Perry shared with his home districts a strong Unionist outlook in politics and, consequently, from the late 1820's until 1865, was embroiled in political controversy. The threat and, then, the consequences of the breakup of the Union dominated his political life and thought. No other questions loomed as large or recurred as often. Few men in nineteenth-century South Carolina became more identified with a cause or an issue. Only James Louis Petigru of Charleston was as notable Unionist over the entire course of events from nullification to secession, but Petigru largely dropped out of politics after the 1830's, while Perry continued.

B. Historical Thought and Method

His unionism not only provided Perry with a constant refrain in his speeches and writings before the Civil War, but it also was a prime motive of those addresses and articles. In part, history served to bolster his case. Had not the fragmentation of ancient Greece and modern Italy and Germany invited the depredations of petty despots? In part, history served to remind one of what Americans had in common. Had not New Englanders and Southerners alike fought the Revolution and had not the states then more-or-less simultaneously given up a part of their individual sovereignty in order to effect a national union and a greater good? Furthermore, had not this union resulted in moments of rebelliousness in Massachusetts and Kentucky as well as in South Carolina, and had not these other states benefited by their resistence to the secessionist impulse?

History did not teach the same lessons to everyone, of course. In the nullification controversy and again on the eve of secession, radical Nullifiers or Disunionists cast themselves as revolutionaries faithfully carrying the torch of 1776; they cast the Unionists as tories. However, this polarity in perspectives was less important than the shared desire to find lessons in the behavior and experiences of the Revolutionary generation.

By the early 1830's, Benjamin Franklin Perry and other South

Carolinians had numerous reasons thus to look back searchingly at their past. The last of the state's founding fathers were going to their final rewards. The prosperity, which had made South Carolina the richest of Britain's mainland North American colonies and then the wealthiest state in the Union, was seemingly dying as well, victim of a series of recessions, growing western competition in the cotton market, and burdensome federal taxes favoring northern industries at the expense of southern agriculture. The political harmony which the state had worked so diligently to restore in the wake of the Revolution also appeared to be a thing of the past, killed by the fierce debates within the state over whether or not South Carolina should nullify those obnoxious taxes, defying the federal government their fathers had labored so hard to create.

Things were very different from just a few years before, when the Marquis de Lafayette had visited the state. Then there had been an orgy of reminiscence and celebration among people ostensibly united by pride in their heritage. The five years following Lafayette's visit, however, had shattered this apparent unity. History had become a battle ground. At the same time, it was fast disappearing, or so the deaths of the founding fathers suggested. Concern about this second point moved the Charleston Library Society to appoint a committee to investigate how to collect and preserve documentation for the state's history. Authors also began collecting traditions and reminscences of the Revolution. In the mid-1830's, as Perry was publishing his "Revolutionary Incidents" in the Greenville *Mountaineer,* William Gilmore Simms and John Pendleton Kennedy were offering fictionalized accounts incorporating similar incidents.

As a journalist (he edited the *Mountaineer),* Perry was predisposed to look for colorful personal anecdotes. The anecdotes need not have a political moral, but they often did. For instance a number of the "Revolutionary Incidents" pointed up the horrors of civil war. Other anecdotes, whether drawn from the Revolution, classical Greece, or contemporary Europe, did not carry such freight.

Perry had several further motives to record history. He

wanted to memorialize friends and admired figures, whether acquaintances or not, and he wanted to set the record straight about events and people he either knew or had special information on. Too, he simply needed to fill space in his newspaper or had to find suitable topics for discourse in academic settings and on patriotic occasions. Personally interested in history, he naturally drew on that perspective and his special knowledge. Also aware that he had rubbed shoulders with many of the American greats of his and his father's day, he in effect was placing himself in history by writing about historic figures he had known.

In writing about these figures, Perry had frequent recourse to his diaries and letters, meticulously kept over a life time. There he jotted stories heard about significant individuals as well as incidents and encounters of his own. Many of these stories he heard while riding circuit as an attorney or on trips to Columbia, Augusta, the Virginia springs, Washington, and Boston, to serve in the legislature or in Congress, to visit family, to pursue a case, or simply to vacation. Other information he gleaned from wide reading in biographical literature ranging from Plutarch to his own day. Perry read so, because he thought reflection on accomplished lives led to accomplishment, and he was interested in the impact of character on events. Without Thomas Carlyle's vehemence or eloquence, he nevertheless shared the romantic English conservative's beliefs that history is the sum of men's lives and that heroic events such as the American Revolution are the products of heroic individuals such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington.

Perry also jotted notes with the eye of a politician. He identified influential people among those he encountered and tried to keep himself informed about these neighbors as well as about distant movers and shakers. His diaries and letters to his wife, then, were a convenient repository of useful information about people potentially important to him. In deciding what might be useful to remember, Perry also exercised his journalistic judgement. He wanted telling details, not just summary judgements. Such details enlivened conversations with colleagues and, eventually, could be (and were) strung together

in newspaper and journal articles as well as public addresses.

Perry pillaged his diaries, letters, and reading repeatedly, often using the same anecdote again and again. A story good enough to use once was good enough to reuse. This was especailly so if the telling anecdote helped illustrate or drive home a favorite moral or home truth. For instance, Perry told both the Philophrenian Society of Walhalla Female College and the "Young Gentlemen of the Literary Societies of Furman University" that "Governor Hayne, one of South Carolina's most eminent sons, and called by his cotemporaries 'the Prince of common sense,' once said to me, that 'the first two requisites in the choice of a wife, were *good health* and *good temper.*'"

If Perry repeated certain points again and again and, in the process, sometimes used the same ancedotes, it was in part because certain things mattered especially to him, but also because he understood certain occasions to call for certain sentiments or kinds of observation. He never tired of urging the utility of reading biography rather than sentimental fiction. He as frequently reiterated his belief that men and women had separate spheres. He often repeated, too, his conviction that, while the Ancients—especially the Greeks—were preeminent in certain of the arts and rhetoric, the Moderns were the Ancients' superiors in religion, science, government, and treatment of the fair sex. In addition, he seemed always careful to leave the question of natural evolution alone, preferring, as he said, to limit his discourses to the six thousand years of recorded history. Perhaps the points that recurred most often, however, were the emphasis on the relationship of character to conduct and on the noble heroism of the United States' and South Carolina's founding fathers.

In making these and other points, Perry was never content to present the evidence and draw his inferences. When he was not simply recounting an incident or memorializing a friend, he proceeded didactically, making assertions and, then, almost incidentally, illustrating them. History was used by him literally as philosophy teaching by example. His wide reading in classical and modern European history furnished his philosophy with the

exempla he felt it needed. Quite rightly, he did not claim mastery of any history, just a nodding acquaintance with major lines of development. This was not modesty; Perry was firm in his convictions and easy in his assumption—some might say, presumption—that history naturally would bear him out.

C. Assessment

On this level of casual usage, Perry's history is not illuminating to the modern historian except as an index of his culture and thought. More useful as history are his sketches of the often influential people he had known and of the Revolutionary War in his part of the state. The utility of the biographical sketches generally is less in new information — though often there are nuggets — than in the perspective of one mportant public figure on other important public figures of his ay. This was recognized by Lyman C. Draper, the founder and ecretary of the Historical Society of Wisconsin. It was Draper vho suggested to Perry that he "ought to write a sketch of Henry Clay, to accompany those . . . [he had] written of he great comtemporaries in the United States Senate, Webster, Calhoun, Benton, Crittenden, and Hayne." Perry agreed, although he had "never had the pleasure of meeting . . . [Clay] in private or public life," the way he had Clay's compeers. Drawn largely from Daniel Mallory's two-volume 1843 edition of the *Life and Speeches of Henry Clay,* the sketch does not help the Clay student; however, as Draper suggested, it does round out Perry's estimates of his great contemporaries in the U. S. Senate, thus giving an important Deep South Unionist's view of the major figures in the debates leading ultimately to secession.

The editors of Perry's writings have made it easy to identify roughly the degree of personal knowledge Perry had of the figures on whom he wrote. For instance, they indicate that there are nine letters from S. C. Chief Justice Benjamin Faneuil Dunkin, a long-time Perry colleague, in the Perry Papers at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. There also are six letters from Judge Bayliss John Earle; one from U. S. Secretary of State Edward Everett; five from state representative Simeon Fair, and so on. Clearly, Perry had a

wide network. Often his acquaintance with an individual was small. Yet that fact does not necessarily diminish the interest of his *Reminiscences of Public Men*. The meaning of a Daniel Webster to someone on the periphery of Webster's field of acquaintance can be telling, especially when the man on the periphery is someone of the secondary, but nonetheless important position, both ideologically and politically, of a Benjamin Franklin Perry.

Perry's "Revolutionary Incidents" have value for another reason. In them, Perry recounted much oral history which otherwise would have been lost. Even when he told familiar tales, his version sometimes differed in details or tone from other versions in print. These differences reflect not only Perry's political beliefs and historical judgements, but also his personal relationships.

The complex connections between these beliefs, judgements and relationships is best illustrated by the case of the Cunningham family. Two or three years before Lafayette's triumphal 1825 visit to South Carolina, Robert Cunningham of Laurens District, a wealthy planter, veteran of the War of 1812 and friend of John C. Calhoun, retired from the state House of Representatives rather than continue to suffer the mortification of being shunned by some legislators because of his father's, uncles' and a cousin's loyalist activity during the Revolution. A strong supporter of the Unionist cause, Cunningham would become a political ally and friend of Perry. However, this did not keep Perry from writing scathingly of the infamous depredations of Robert's cousin, "Bloody Bill" Cunningham, in one of his "Revolutionary Incidents." On the other hand, he advised Robert to defend his family name against the bitter—and Perry thought unwarranted—attacks on his father and uncles, honorable men of character and means who had not deserved obloquy for their loyalism.

Ultimately, Robert's daughter, Ann Pamela, took up the challenge, writing a full-scale *apologia*. Perry advised her and helped her find materials. Friendship and a sense of fair play were reason enough, but not his only reasons. He also wanted to see loyalists and upcountrymen get more as well as more

equitable attention from historians. Like Robert, he had smarted from the charges of toryism levelled at Unionists by Nullifiers in the early 1830s. Like Ann Pamela, he had noted the inadequacy of treatments of the upcountry chapters of the war by historians.

Perry did what he could to rectify the situation. It was not much. He was too busy to pursue history systematically. Judge John Belton O'Neall of Newberry, the Rev. Alexander Gregg of the old Cheraws, and others did more. But this is not to belittle Perry's contribution or concern. Perhaps no finer tribute could be given than that penned by Ann Pamela, future creator of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union and, so, preserver of George Washington's plantation home for posterity. In mid-1843, she wrote Perry: "I had designed to give the [history] books *only* the hasty perusal *necessary* to aid me in my present business" but ended up being surrounded by them whenever able." She added: "I owe *you* much of the present gratification[.] the desire to know—to investigate—to render justice . . . ." That says it precisely: at their best, Perry's writings also show a sense of curiosity, attentiveness to detail, and fairness or judiciousness.