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A EUROPEAN COMMENTARY ON KENTUCKY AND KENTUCKIANS, *CIRCA 1825*

BY ALBERT J. SCHMIDT

TODAY when the American tourist is a familiar though not always appreciated figure on the European scene, we often forget that a century or so ago just the reverse was true. The sophisticated European traveler often digested hastily primitive America and then hurried home to write what was often an uncomplimentary book about it.

The American experiment with democracy most fascinated these visitors, but they rambled at great length about manners, customs, and institutions insofar as they differed from their own. Some, like Tocqueville, showed sound judgment and keen insight in interpreting the American character and development. Others were little more than gossips. Many—especially those who passed beyond the Alleghenies into the Ohio and Mississippi valleys—were not only niggardly with compliments but were sharply critical of the uncouth ways of the American frontiersmen. The nasty habit of tobacco chewing, the unsatisfactory accommodations at inns or on river boats, the general illiteracy or lack of culture, the murders and eye-gougings, and the inhumanity of slavery all received emphatic censure. Then, too, Americans were constantly in a hurry in their search for material profits; the dollar was their God. The frontiersmen especially were rated the greatest lot of braggarts who ever lived. More than one visitor was driven to consternation by hearing a Kentucky farmer discourse not only upon the merits of American institutions but the inevitable decay of European as well.

On the other hand Americans tired of the criticism which flowed so freely from these European travel books. Cutting it was indeed when Sydney Smith asked in the *Edinburgh Review* who read an American book. When Martineau, the Trollopes, Dickens, and Lyell voiced their criticism—granted, there was a wealth of

difference in the legitimate criticism of Dickens from the unqualified and foolish generalizations of Mrs. Trollope—Americans were stung to the quick.

Charles Sealsfield (1793-1864)¹ was one European who, though critical of many aspects of American culture, became sufficiently endeared to it to become an American citizen. Actually Sealsfield stands apart from the usual run of European—especially English—tourists who wrote about America. Although never a permanent resident in the United States he made numerous trips to this country and lived for extended intervals in Kittanning, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh.

Sealsfield was an Englishman by name only. Born Karl Anton Postl in Moravia, he tired of the monastic life which had been prescribed for him. Quite mysteriously he disappeared and was never heard of again. Not even Prince Metternich's shrewdest police spies found a trace of the renegade monk. In the early 1820's, less than ten years after the disappearance of the monk Postl, a Charles Sealsfield was traversing the United States. Only years later when Sealsfield's will revealed that Postl and Sealsfield were one and the same was the outside world the wiser.

Charles Sealsfield traveled through the Ohio and Mississippi valleys during 1823 and in late 1825 or early 1826. Several years later he was again in the southwestern part of the United States, presumably once more by the Ohio and Mississippi. Although he retired to Switzerland in the early 1830's, he returned to his adopted country again in 1837, 1850, and 1853. A prolific writer, Sealsfield wrote of much more than his travel experiences. He has usually been credited with having originated an innovation in fiction writing—the ethnographical novel. In his novels Sealsfield made the people, not the individual, the hero. His biographer charges that "to transfuse the freshly pulsating blood of the transatlantic Republic into the senile veins of the Old World, to acquaint his countrymen with the spirit of true liberty he considered his sacred duty, a duty which he felt obliged to take upon himself as a mission entrusted to him by a higher power."² If we may accept this judgment

¹Cf. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVI, 532-33. (Hereafter cited *DAB*.)

²Leo Smolle, *Charles Sealsfield* (Vienna, 1875). Quoted from *DAB*.

of Sealsfield, we discern one of the distinctive features differentiating this visitor from others who wrote of America. Sealsfield sought to praise the liberty and individualism which he found in America; others, conservative, outspokenly criticized these same democratic processes.

Writing anonymously until persuaded by his publishers to identify himself, Sealsfield did so on the occasion of the release of his complete works, 1845-47. Of course the name he revealed was Sealsfield. The stuff of which Sealsfield's novels were written was the fruit of his American experience. He once wrote a two-volume novel championing the cause of the American Indian, a decidedly unpopular creature during the early nineteenth century. Easily discernible from the brief excerpt following was his dislike for slavery. Sealsfield was evidently a very humane sort of individual. Even his criticism of slavery and the uncouth habits of Kentuckians, he mel-
lowed with generous compliments about the land he saw.

Sealsfield first wrote the story of his American experience of the 1820's in German—*Die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika, nach ihrem Politischen, Religiösen, und Gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse Betrachtet*. In 1828, the year after its publication in Germany, this work was translated into English and published in two parts. The selections below have been extracted from the second part, *The Americans As They Are: Described in a Tour through the Valley of the Mississippi* "by the author of *Austria as it is*." The book deals with the author's travels from Cincinnati to New Orleans. The particular volume from which this commentary on the trip from Cincinnati to Louisville was taken is in the rare book collection at the State University of Iowa.

After a stay of six days in Cincinnati I departed; crossed the Ohio in the ferry boat, and landed in the state of Kentucky, at Newport, a small country town of Campbell county. It contains, besides the government arsenal for the western states, a court-house, and about 100 buildings, scattered irregularly upon the eminence. From thence to Bigbone lick,³ the distance is 23 miles; the country is more hilly than on the other

³Big Bone as it is called today is in the southwestern part of Boone County.

side of the river; it is, however, fertile, the stratum being generally limestone. The growth of timber is very fine; the trees are beech, sugar-maple, and sycamore. The contrast between Ohio and Kentucky is striking, and the baneful influence of slavery is very soon discovered. Instead of elegant farms, orchards, meadows, corn and wheat fields carefully enclosed, you see patches planted with tobacco, the leaves neglected; and instead of well-looking houses, a sort of double cabins, like those inhabited in the north of Pennsylvania by the poorest classes. In one part lives the family, in the other is the kitchen; behind these, are the wretched cabins of the negroes, bearing a resemblance to pigsties, with half a dozen black children playing about them on the ground. . . .

The road from Bigbonelick is, for the distance of ten miles, dreary and the country barren. I arrived late at a farmhouse, of rather a better appearance, where I intended to stop the night. The first night's lodging convinced me but too plainly, that the inhabitants of this state, justly called in New York, half horse and half alligator, had not yet assumed a milder character. The farmer, or rather planter, was absent with his wife; and his brother, who took care of the farm, was at a horse race; an old man, however, with his daughter, answered my application for lodging, in the affirmative. I was supping upon slices of bacon, roasted corn bread, and some milk, when the brother of the farmer returned from the races with his neighbor. Both had led horses besides those on which they rode. Before dismounting they discharged their pistols. Each of the Kentuckians had a pistol in his girdle, and a poniard in the breast pocket. Before resuming my supper I was pressed to take a dram. With a quart bottle in one hand, and with the other drawing the remains of tobacco from his mouth, in rather a nauseous manner, the host drank for half a minute out of the bottle; then took from the slave the can with water, and handed the bottle to me, the mouth of which had assumed, from the remains of the tobacco, a brownish colour. The Kentuckian looked displeased when I wiped the bottle. I however took no notice of him, but presented it, after having drunk, to his friend. We sat down.

"How far are you come to day?" asked the landlord.

"From Cincinnati."

"You don't live in Cincinnati, I guess, do you?"

"No, sir."

"And where do you live?"

"In Pennsylvania."

"A fine distance!" exclaimed my host. "I like the people of Pennsylvania better than those G—d d—d Yankees, but still they are no Kentuckians." I gave my full and hearty assent.

"The Kentuckians," continued my landlord, "are astonishingly mighty people; they are the very first people on earth!"

"Yes, sir."

"They are immensely great, and wonderfully powerful people; ar'nt they?"

"Yes, sir."

"They are ten thousand times superior to any nation on earth."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you like Kentucky?"

"Very well, sir; I travelled through it four years ago. . . ." [The Kentuckians then proceeded to discuss a recent brawl.]

"Oh, certainly—it was a mighty fine sport; I would not for the world have missed it. G—d d—n! Dick is a fine gouger—the second turn—John down—and both thumbs in his eyes.—I presume you have races in Pennsylvania?" turning to me.

"Yes, sir."

"And fighting and gougings?"

"No, sir." With an expressive look towards his neighbour, he continued: "Yes, the Pennsylvanians are a quiet, religious sort of people; they don't kill anything but their hogs, and prefer giving their money to their parsons." The evening passed in these and similar conversations, of which the above are mere specimens; and it was eleven o'clock before the interesting pair separated. . . .

I stopped at a farm fifteen miles from my former night's lodging. The landlord was mounting his horse for Newcastle;⁴ his wife sat in the kitchen, surrounded by eight negro girls, all busy knitting and sewing. The girls seemed to be in excellent spirits, and were tolerably well dressed; the house rather indicated affluence, though it was far from possessing the order and cleanliness of a few of only half its value in Ohio. It was a simple brick house; but constructed without the least attention to the rules of symmetry. The fields were in a very indifferent state. Behind the dwelling, were seen some negro infants at play, while an old negro woman was preparing my breakfast. The family had thirty-five slaves, both young and old, forming a capital of at least 10,000 dollars. . . . I was allowed to take my breakfast, when some yells and hallooing called us to the door. A troop of horsemen were passing. Two of the party had each a negro slave running before him, secured by a rope fastened to an iron collar. A tremendous horsewhip reminded them at intervals to quicken their pace. The bloody backs and necks of these wretches, bespoke a too frequent application of the lash. The third negro had, however, the hardest lot. The rope of his collar was fastened to the saddle string of the third horseman, and the miserable creature had thus no alternative left, but to keep an equal pace with the trotting horse, or to be dragged through ditches, thorns, and copse-wood. . . . "Look here," said Mrs. Forth [the landlord's wife], calling her black girls, "what is done with the bad negroes, who run away from their good masters!" With an indifference, and a laughing countenance, which clearly showed how accustomed these poor children were to the like scenes, they expressed their sentiments at this disgusting conduct.

The road from Mr. Forth's plantation runs a considerable distance along ridges, descending finally into the bottom lands along the Ohio. These are exceedingly fertile. . . . I crossed the Ohio at Ghent, in Kentucky, opposite to Vevay, in Indiana.

Vevay, in Indiana, became a settlement twenty years ago, by Swiss emigrants, who obtained a grant of land, equal to

⁴The reference here is to New Castle in Henry County, south of Carroll County in which Ghent is located.

200 acres for each family, under the condition of cultivating the vine; they accordingly settled here, and laid out vineyards. The original settlers may have amounted to thirty; others joined them afterwards, and in this manner was founded the county town of New Switzerland, in Indiana. . . . They have their vineyards below the town, on the bank of the river Ohio. . . . The town is on the decline; it has a court-house, and two stores very ill supplied. The condition of these, and the absence of lawyers, are sure indications of the poverty of the inhabitants, if broken windows, and doors falling from their hinges, should leave any doubt on the subject; they are, however, a merry set of people, and balls are held regularly every month. In the evening arrived ten teams laden with fifty emigrants from Kentucky, going to settle in Indiana. . . .

My landlord assured me that at least 200 waggons had passed from the Kentucky side, through Vevay, during the present season, all full of emigrants, discouraged from continuing among these lawless people.

The state of Indiana, which I had now entered, begins below Cincinnati, running down the big Miami westward to the big Wabash, which separates this country from the Illinois. . . . Like the state of Ohio, it belongs to the class coming within the range of the great valley of the Mississippi. . . . It declines more than Ohio. . . . Two ridges of mountains, or rather hills, traverse the country; the Knobs, or Silver-hills, running ten miles below Louisville, in a north-eastern direction, and the Illinois mountains appearing from the west, and running to the north-east, where they fall to a level with the high plains of Lake Michigan. These hills have a perfect sameness. . . . This state, though not inferior to Ohio in fertility, and taken in general, perhaps, superior to it, has one great defect. It has no sufficient water communication, and thus the inhabitants have no market for their produce. There is not in this state any river of importance, the Ohio which washes its southern borders excepted. A scarcity of money therefore is more severely felt here, than in any other state of the Union. This want of intercommunication, added to the circumstance that the state of Ohio had already engrossed the whole surplus population from

the eastern states, had a prejudicial effect upon Indiana, its original population being in general by no means so respectable as that of Ohio. In the north-west it was peopled by French emigrants, from Canada; in the south, on the banks of the Ohio, and farther up, by Kentuckians, who fled from their country for debt, or similar causes.

The state thus became the refuge of adventurers and idlers of every description. A proof of this may be seen in the character of its towns, as well as in the nature of the improvements that have been carried on in the country. The towns, though some of them had an earlier existence than many in Ohio, are, in point of regularity, style of building, and cleanliness, far inferior to those of the former state. The wandering spirit of the inhabitants seems still to contend with the principle of steadiness in the very construction of their buildings. They are mostly a rude set of people, just emerging from previous bad habits, from whom such friendly assistance as honest neighbours afford, or mutual intercourse and good will, can hardly be expected. The case is rather different in the interior of the country, and on the Wabash, the finest part of the state, where respectable settlements have been formed by Americans from the east. Wherever the latter constitute the majority, every necessary assistance may be expected.

Madisonville, the seat of justice for Jefferson-county, on the second bank of the Ohio, fifty-seven miles above its falls, contains at present 180 dwelling-houses, a court-house, four stores, three inns, a printing office—with 800 inhabitants, most of them Kentuckians. . . .

The road from Madison to Charleston, leads through fertile country, in some parts well cultivated. The distance from Madison is twenty-eight miles. It is the chief town of Clark county, and seems to advance more rapidly than Madison, the country about being pretty well peopled, and agriculture having made more progress than in any part of the state through which I had travelled. I found it to contain 170 houses and 750 inhabitants, five well stored tradesmen's shops, a printing office, and four inns. The town is about a mile distant from the river, on a high plain. . . .

From Charleston to Louisville, the distance is fourteen miles. The lands are fertile. Several very well looking farms show a higher degree of cultivation, especially near Jeffersonville. There the road turns into an extensive valley formed by the alluvions of the Ohio. Jeffersonville, the seat of justice for Floyd-county, three quarters of a mile above the falls of the Ohio, was laid out in 1802, and has since increased to 160 houses, among which are a bank, a Presbyterian church, a warehouse, a cotton manufactory, a court-house, and an academy, with a land office for the disposal of the United States' lands. The commerce of the inhabitants, 800 in number, is of some importance, though checked by the vicinity of Louisville, and by the circumstance, that the falls on the Indiana side are not to be approached, except at the highest rise. Two miles below this town, is the village of Clarksville, laid out in 1783, and forming part of the grant made to officers and soldiers of the Illinois regiment. It contains sixty houses and 300 inhabitants. New Albany, a mile below Clarksville, has a thousand inhabitants, and a great deal of activity, owing to its manufactory of steam engines, its saw mills, and the steam boats lying at anchor and generally repairing there. It is a place of importance, and though hitherto the resort of sailors, boatmen, and travellers, who go down the river in their own boats, it is annually on the increase.

The Ohio is generally crossed above the falls at Jeffersonville. The sheet of water dammed up here by the natural ledge of rocks which forms the falls, expands to 5,230 feet in breadth. The falls of the Ohio, though they should not properly be called falls, cannot be seen when crossing the river, and the waters do not pour like the falls of Niagara over an horizontal rock down a considerable depth, but press through a rocky bed, about a mile long, which spreads across the river, and causes a decline of twenty-two feet in the course of two miles. When the waters are high, the rocks and falls disappear entirely. Seen from Louisville at low water, they have by no means an imposing appearance. . . .

LOUISVILLE

The road from the landing-place to Louisville, leads through one of the finest and richest alluvial bottoms on the

banks of the Ohio. They are here about seventy feet above the level of the water, and sufficiently high to protect the town from inundation, but there being no outlets for stagnant waters and ponds, epidemic diseases are frequent. A lottery is now established for the purpose of raising the necessary funds for draining these nuisances. Louisville extends in an oblong square about a mile down the river, and may be considered as the natural key to the Upper and Lower Ohio, and the most important staple for trade on this river, not excepting the city of Cincinnati. The commodities coming during the summer and autumn from southern states are landed here. Travellers who arrive by water, whether from the north or south, engage steam boats at this place either for New Orleans or for Cincinnati. These advantages made the inhabitants less desirous of having a canal, notwithstanding the solicitations of the states watered by the Ohio. The Congress has, at last, interposed; the canal is now contemplated. Probably this undertaking, in which not only the Upper states of the river Ohio, but the Union at large, are very much interested, is already commenced. By means of this canal, steam vessels will be enabled to avoid the falls, and to proceed to the upper Ohio at every season of the year. It is to be two miles and a half long; to open at the mouth of Beargrasscreek and to terminate at Shippingport. The highest ground is twenty-seven feet; upon an average twenty feet; and it is of a clayey substance, bottomed upon a rock. The expenses are estimated at about 200,000 dollars, a trifle compared with the object to be accomplished.

Louisville, the seat of justice for Jefferson county, in Kentucky, in $38^{\circ} 8'$ north latitude, is about half the size of Cincinnati, and lies 105 miles below that city, by the Kentucky road through Newcastle, and 125 miles by the Kentucky and Indiana road. It is 1500 miles northeast of New Orleans. The town is laid out on a grand scale, the streets running parallel with the river, and intersected by others at right angles. The main street, about three quarters of a mile long, is elegant; most of the houses are three stories high; those of the other streets are of course inferior in size. The number of dwelling houses amounts to 700, inhabited by 4,500 souls, exclusive of travellers and boatmen. Louisville has no remarkable public buildings; the

court-house and the Presbyterian church are the best. Besides these, the Episcopalians, Catholics, and Unitarians have their meeting houses. There are now three banks, including a branch bank of the United States, an insurance company, and four newspaper printing offices. A quay is now constructing which will greatly contribute to the security of the middle part of the town, opposite to the falls. The manufactories of Louisville are important; and the distilleries and rope walks on a large scale. Besides these there are soap, candle, cotton, glass, paper, and engine manufactories, all on the same principle, with grist and saw mills. The commerce of Louisville is still more important. Of the hundred steam boats plying on the Mississippi and Ohio, fifty at least are engaged during six months in the year in the trade with Louisville. They descend to New Orleans in six days, returning in double the time. Though the town is but half as large as Cincinnati, the credit of the merchants is more substantial, and the inhabitants are in general more healthy. Luxury is carried to a higher pitch than in any other town on this side of the Alleghany mountains. Here is the only billiard-table to be met with between Philadelphia and St. Louis. The owner has to pay a tax of 563 dollars—an enormous sum.

Notwithstanding the circulating library, the reading-room, and several houses where good society is to be met with, Louisville is not a pleasant town to reside in, owing to the character of the majority of its inhabitants, the Kentuckians. Louisville has an academy, but sends its youth to the college at Bairdstown, thirty miles to the southwest, where lectures are given by some French priests. Below Louisville, are the two villages of Shippingport and Portland; the former is two miles from the town, with 150 inhabitants, the latter at the distance of three miles, with fifty inhabitants, mostly boatmen and keepers of grog shops, for the lowest classes of People. The environs of Louisville are well cultivated, Portland and Shippingport excepted, the inhabitants of which are said to extend their notions of common property too far. Behind Louisville the country is delightful; the houses and plantations vying with each other in point of elegance and cultivation. The woods have greatly disappeared, and for the distance of twenty miles, the roads are

lined in every direction with plantations. This town holds the rank of the second order in Kentucky, a country which, in latter times, has obtained a renown of somewhat ambiguous nature. It extends to the south, from the river Ohio, to the state of Tennessee, having for its eastern boundary the state of Virginia; and to the west, the river Mississippi, which separates it from the state of Missouri. It extends from $36^{\circ} 30'$ to $39^{\circ} 10'$ north latitude and from $4^{\circ} 78'$ to $12^{\circ} 20'$ west longitude. It embraces an area of 40,000 square miles. Though under a southern degree of latitude, it enjoys a moderate temperature, which is also less variable than in the more eastern states. The two great rivers of the Mississippi and the Ohio, forming the boundary of this state, secure to it no inconsiderable trade.

The productions of this beautiful country might, if properly cultivated, become inexhaustible sources of wealth and prosperity to its inhabitants; tobacco is a staple article, excelling in quality even that of Virginia, if properly managed: cotton thrives well in the southern parts of the state. Corn yields from forty to ninety bushels; wheat from thirty to sixty; melons, sweet potatoes, peaches, apples, plumbs, &c., attain a superior degree of perfection. One of the principle articles of trade is hemp, the culture of which has been brought to a high state of improvement; it constitutes one of the chief articles of export to New Orleans. Kentucky has not such extensive plains as Ohio, but is equally fertile, and less exposed to bilious and ague fevers. The stratum, which is generally limestone, is a sure sign of inexhaustible fertility. Hills alternating with valleys form landscapes, which though consisting of native forests, are in the highest degree picturesque. There are parts about Lexington and its environs, which nothing can exceed in beauty of scenery. Even Louisville, with its three islands, the majestic Ohio, and the surrounding little towns, possesses charms seldom rivalled in any country. Kentucky is, without the least exaggeration, one of the finest districts on the face of the earth. The climate is equal to that of the south of France; fruits of every kind arrive at the highest perfection; and it would be difficult to quit this country, did not the character of the inhabitants lessen one's regret at leaving it. But notwithstanding these natural advantages, the population has not increased

either in wealth or numbers, in proportion to the more recent state of Ohio. The inhabitants consist chiefly of emigrants from Virginia, and North and South Carolina, and of descendants from backwood settlers—a proud, fierce, and overbearing set of people. They established themselves under a state of continual warfare with the Indians, who took their revenge by communicating to their vanquishers their cruel and implacable spirit. This, indeed, is their principal feature. A Kentuckian will wait three or four weeks in the woods, for the moment of satiating his revenge; and he seldom or never forgives. The men are of an athletic form, and there may be found amongst them many models of truly masculine beauty. The number of inhabitants is now 57,000, including 15,000 slaves. Planters are among the most respectable class, and form the mass of the population. Lawyers are next, or equal to them in rank, no less than the merchants and manufacturers. Physicians and ministers are a degree lower; and last of all, are those mechanics and farmers not possessed of slaves. These are not treated better than the slaves themselves. The constitution inclines towards federalism, landed property being required to qualify a man for a public station. Ministers, of whatever form of worship, are wholly excluded from public offices. Kentucky is not a country that could be recommended to new settlers; slavery; insecure titles to land; the division of the courts of justice into two parts, furiously opposed to each other; an executive,⁵ whose present chief is a disgrace to his station, and whose son would be hung in chains, had he been in Great Britain; the worst paper-currency, &c., are serious warnings to every lover of peace and tranquillity. We abstain from farther particulars, as our purpose is to give a characteristic description of the Union, which would assuredly not gain by a faithful representation of the state of things in this country, during the last ten years. The Desha family, the emetic scene, the proceedings of the legislature, and of the courts of justice, Sharp's death,

⁵The Kentucky governor noted here by Sealsfield was Joseph Desha (1768-1842). Desha, one of the lesser War Hawks during the period of the War of 1812, served in the national House of Representatives from 1807-1819 before his election as governor of Kentucky in 1824. He endured much criticism for pardoning his son Isaac B. Desha, a convicted murderer. (Cf. *DAB*, V, 254-55.)

&c., are facts which belong rather to the history of the tomahawk savages, than to that of a civilised state. Passions must work with double power and effect, where wealth, and arbitrary sway over a herd of slaves, and a warfare of thirty years with savages, have sown the seeds of the most lawless arrogance, and an untameable spirit of revenge.

The literary institutions, the Transylvanian university of Lexington, and the college of Bairdstown, have hitherto exercised very little influence over these fierce people. But a still worse feature observable in them, is an utter disregard of religious principles. Ohio has its sects, thereby evincing an interest in the performance of the highest of human duties. The Kentuckian rails at these, and at every form of worship; certainly a trait doubly afflicting and deplorable in a rising state.