Thomas H. Benton

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

SENATOR BENTON,

IN CONNECTION WITH WESTERN EXPANSION.

By JESSIE BENTON FRÉMONT.

When, in the opening of the war of 1812, my Father, under General Jackson, marched from Nashville to defend the lower Mississippi, he made two discoveries which gave new form to his own life and largely moulded the fate of our Western country to its ocean boundary.

The first, on which depended the other, was, that it lay within the power of his own will to regain health and live; the other, that until then his mind had been one-sided, and that there was a West as well as an East to our country. This march revealed to him the immense possibilities and future power of the then recent "Louisiana purchase;" and his mind gained the needed balance against the exclusively English and seaboard influences to which he had been born and in which he had been trained.

Quick to see and to foresee, and equally steadfast in living up to his convictions, his decision was made then; to leave inherited lands, family friends, and an already brilliant position in the law, and devote himself to the new West. To its imperial river—the Father of Floods—he became captive, and to it and the lands it drained he gave life-long, faithful, and accumulating service and homage. My father was so proudly and thoroughly American that his departure from all the influences that had created and until then governed his thoughts shows the power of innate force against inherited and educated influence.

Born of English parentage on the English seaboard; brought up in English and intensely colonial-royalist surroundings; trained by a scholarly

Englishman to English thought and aims; and with his profession of the law keeping his mind down to a habit of deference to precedent and safe usage, my father had reached his thirtieth year before he discovered himself. With the great river and his instinct of what the West must become, came to him the resolve which governed all his after life; and, by the happy chance which made me the connecting link, this resolve was continued and expanded through that of Mr. Frémont. And so the two lives became one in the work of opening out our Western country to emigration and secure settlement, and in the further acquisition of Pacific territory which "gives us from sea to sea the whole temperate zone," and brings to our Pacific ports, across our continent, that long-contested-for India trade.

In the Park at Saint Louis stands a bronze statue of my father, and upon its pedestal, below the hand which points WEST, are his prophetic words:

"THERE IS THE EAST;
THERE LIES THE ROAD TO INDIA;"

words which, when spoken by him, had made men smile significantly to one another; too much dwelling on this idea had—they thought—warped his mind. "They who listened said, This man is mad; now they asked, Hath he a God?"

Anyone can grasp prepared results. The mind that can see, prepare, and concentrate chaotic and antagonistic conditions, so that a great result becomes inevitable, is rarely the one to wear the laurels of completed success. Moses led the children of Israel to the Promised land, but he did not enter there and rest. The heat and burden of the day were for him; the fruit was for those whose doubts and discords had made his heaviest burden.

It is the formation phase of this western expansion of our country, of much that shaped our present national greatness, of which I am able to tell from my own home knowledge—what one might name the fireside history of the great West.

It is only in connection with this side of his long useful public life that I here speak of my father; but to appreciate his departure from all that had governed his thought and action before he gave in his adhesion to the West, it is needed to know what were those restraining influences from which his own far-sighted mind, and his own will, lifted him into the higher and broader outlook for our future as a completed nation.

His father, English and of reserved and scholarly nature, was out of his element in the new Republic, having come to it from his student-life as private secretary to Governor Tryon, the last of the royal governors of North Carolina. His natural preference was for settled usages and a life confined

to his family and his cherished library. This was in five languages, and he was at home in all five, Greek and Latin and French and Spanish; while the English portion was rich in fine editions of the best works. Shakspere, Don Quixote, and Madame de Sevigné we read in the originals as my grandfather and father had, from this treasure for a new country.

Governor Tryon had also brought over in his suite a chaplain, a man of high character and of the same cultivated mind as my grandfather. In the increasing and angry agitation of the coming separation from the mother-country, these two men, already close friends, found in each other increasing harmony of feeling and mutual support. It soon came to be the strongest earthly support to my grandfather.

He had married into another English family of colonial governors, as my grandmother, Anne Gooch, was the only child of a younger brother of Sir William Gooch, who replaced Lord Dunmore as deputy-governor in his absence from his post in Virginia. New York had a more "loyal" atmosphere than Richmond, and both Lord Dunmore and Governor Tryon were chiefly there during the closing period of English rule. Their official families bore for them the brunt of the rising storm, and, like true men, became only the more devoted to their country, for which they suffered.

With the end of colonial rule came the end of scholarly rest and seclusion for my grandfather. The need for larger provision for many young children turned him westward, and leaving them in their North Carolina home, he led a surveying party of sixteen men, the first to make surveys in Kentucky.

Already his health was giving way under the inroads of pulmonary disease, which at that date was accepted as a death-sentence, and submitted to as inevitable. Doubtless the survey-work in the open air, the change of thoughts, and a new aim in life gained for him a reprieve, and he persevered until he had secured large landed property, but soon after his return to North Carolina died there, asking of his faithful friend, the chaplain, that overlooking care for his family which he could no longer give them. And faithfully was this charge kept.

It is from my father himself that I know what followed.

He was but eight years of age then, and there were six other children. He had not seen his mother during her long illness after his father's death, and when at length he was taken in to her he was struck with awe and terror. In place of the young mother he knew, with bright brown hair crowning her stately head, and health and animation lighting her blue eyes, he saw a thin, white-faced, white-haired woman, who put his hand on that of a baby-girl, and told him that he was now the head of the family, the eldest son, and must be her help in taking care of the others.

"When I came out I rushed into the grove, and there, with cries and tears, *I made war on myself* until I could accept that ghost in place of my own mother."

There the chaplain found him. He had looked for him there, I am sure. Knowing the boy's vitality, his strong affections, and his powerful, self-reliant will, he must have felt that it was only to Nature he would turn in this his first contest with the inevitable.

Coming back from chapel the Sunday following this memorable day, the chaplain led him by the hand through the grove, and taking a little Greek Testament from his pocket, read to him a verse, making him repeat it correctly as he pronounced it after him, then giving him the meaning, and so continuing the oral lesson until they neared the house. It was the Sermon on the Mount, and his first lesson in Greek was the blessing on "they that mourn," with its promise that "they shall be comforted."

These lessons in Greek, and in Latin also, were continued faithfully by the true friend. Fair instruction, of the ordinary kind, was given him at a good college school; but his true education was from the chaplain, from his mother, and through the fine library of his father. From its great folios of "English State Trials" my father had his first law lessons, his mother interesting him in them by choosing the narrative portions, and giving him the needed links of information, then drawing from him his impressions in discussion on the readings. The wise mother made these readings a reward, and prevented any undue influence of such large ideas by encouraging the wholesome out-door life which the four brothers, with horse, dog, and gun, made for themselves.

The moulding influence of this uncommon woman was too life-long and ennobling for her to be omitted from a just account of my father. From her example and her teaching he was trained to industry, to truth, courage, and justice—a good woman's sense of justice, which includes mercy; which causes justice to be thorough by making action follow conviction;—to that moral courage which sustains and defends conviction; above all to the succor and protection of the weak and oppressed. Those who know my father's public life will recognize these underlying forces.

In the brief memoranda for a biographical notice made by himself when nearing his certain and painful death; in recalling what then seemed best worth recording, there comes first the grateful tribute to his Mother. Then, the fact that, when in the Legislature of Tennessee, he had been the author of "a *humane law*, still on her statute-books, giving to slaves the full benefit of jury trial which was the right of white men under the same accusation." This originated in the case of a slave-woman accused of murder, for whom he volunteered as counsel, and defended her successfully on arguments which Maudsly has put in use to-day.

In his young time, in a Southern country, this was a brave outcome of the active sense of justice which a woman had taught him to feel for all women, even those "despised of men."

When he was sixteen they removed to Tennessee, to their large landed property near Nashville, which the father's forethought had secured for his young family. There they commenced cotton-planting. My Father and his three brothers, with the head-negroes, went out one fine night to make a final survey of the ripened crop which lay white and beautiful in the moonlight. The next day found it blackened by frost, and with it withered all the plans founded on its sale. This decided my Father against planting, as "a pursuit of which he could not influence the results."

And he turned to the study of law, keeping at the same time an active supervision of the estate, the family, and the safety of their little colony. For from the southern border of "the Widow Benton's estate," through to the Gulf of Mexico, was unbroken and warlike Indian territory. And leading directly through their lands was the war-trail of neighboring Indian tribes.

He was admitted early to practice, and soon had the friendship of General Jackson among other important settlers. Later, when a member of the General Assembly of the State, he was the author of the Judicial Reform Act, by which the administration of justice was relieved of much delay, expense, and inconvenience to all concerned. This too, came from the home readings and discussions, and was an effort to combine justice with law.

Then came the war of 1812, when, enlisting under Jackson who was major-general of the Tennessee militia, he made the march to the defence of the lower Mississippi which was to radically alter his plan of life, and lead to great good for our whole country.

Doubtless, in leaving North Carolina, his mother had had fresh grief in parting from all the visible memories of her happy time. But she was not of the women who vainly look back, or make their lament aloud; the one blow that struck the color from her life, as from her hair, killed all personal interest in living; leaving her only for duty and protecting love for her children. This, and the many cares of a Southern household of old days, the newer conditions of the large estate, and the obligations of neighborhood in a new country, she was faithful to.

But there came a time when her love and protection could not avail her children. They all grew up apparently full of health and fine promise; but five of the eight died, as their father had died, of rapid consumption. "The Grave of the Three Sisters" is still a known landmark near Nashville, although a great tree has grown up in the enclosure, and partly uprooted

its stone walls and the family grave-stones; the burial-place of their slaves —hard-by, as was the custom—remains comparatively undisturbed.

When my father found himself on the same sad downward road—when constant fever, the hacking cough, and restless nights and days without energy admonished him that his turn had come, he felt despair. "If it had been a battle I would have had a chance, or even in a desperate duel, but for this there was no chance. All was fixed and inevitable."

The war coming then he hailed the occasion to end his life in action rather than in the slow progress of a fatal illness.

As we have seen in our late war, whole neighborhoods of young men went out together, and distinctions of private and officer were only used when on duty. "Sam" Houston was a corporal in the regiment of which my father was colonel, and when they were in the Senate together the ex-President of Texas often signed himself "*Your friend and old sub-altern.*"

Some of the young men were not so practised in walking as my Father, and he lent them his horses, himself going on foot. Of course they carried but little baggage, and he supplied the want of fresh clothing by constant baths in the running waters of streams by the way, drying the skin in sunshine. This, with the abundant exercise which opened the pores and threw off fevered conditions, the sleep in open air, the simple regular food, all combined to bring about such changes that hope came to him. His own observations taught him how to follow up these indications of possible health; and, in brief, seventy years ago my father found for himself the way out of inherited conditions of pulmonary disease by the same means so successfully ordered in our present time—open air, night and day; abundant perspiration from steady exercise; bathing and rubbing, always if possible in sunshine; always, all the sunshine possible; simple food regularly taken; and "*to forget yourself in some pursuit.*"

All his life my father needed to keep as close to these rules as circumstances permitted. The continued use of his voice in speaking in public was prepared for by silence for days previous and was almost sure to be followed by flecks of blood from the throat, but his self-control gained him the superb health which was so great a factor in his usefulness.

The English did not come so soon as they were looked for, and when General Jackson returned to Tennessee my father applied for active service, and was commissioned by President Madison a Lieutenant-Colonel of the regular army (39th Infantry) and was sent to Canada on his first duty.

What he saw there of the antagonism of French and English added to his interest in the people of the "Louisiana purchase," whose French settlers were both grieved and angered by their abrupt transfer to their traditional enemy; for they cared little about other differences where language, laws, and religion were those they were accustomed to hate as "English."

When peace was declared my father resigned from the army and established his new home at Saint Louis. There was no further change. The winter home was in Washington, where his thirty years in the Senate made a home of our own a necessity. But my grandmother remained at the Saint Louis house always; with her own old servants and some young grandchildren—children of another son whose health could not brave the Saint Louis winters—beautiful and unusually fine children who gave young life about the house before our day, and of whom one has always been like a dear elder sister. When I was in England in '51, my father in writing to me of the death of my only brother, says—"Your cousin Sarah has been constantly with us. Her face, always lovely to me, has been that of an angel."

While in the army my father made the friendship with General James Preston of Virginia which led to what he held to be the crowning good fortune of his life—his marriage to my mother, who was the niece of General Preston. It was his singular good fortune to have both in his mother and his wife friends and sharers in his largest ideas, while every soothing charm of a well-ordered home came as second nature from my mother's influence. To him home brought the strength of peace and repose, and he never suffered the outside public atmosphere of strife to enter there.

"Peace and honor charmed the air."

And in its warmth long-closed memories bloomed anew. Some trouble in tuning a guitar was making one of my sisters impatient, "Bring it to me," spoke my father from his table covered with books and work. We looked on while with strong but light and skilful touch he turned the pegs, and tuned it perfectly, trying a few chords. The sight of "Father playing the guitar" made an outcry from the youngest, but we elder girls felt we must not speak; when he himself, handing it back, and doubtless seeing some pitying tenderness of look in us, said gently—"I often tuned their guitar for my sisters, and sang with them"—and to one of us, "*You* are like the youngest." Of his brothers we had had many and many a hunting story, and knew their dogs by name, and the gray horse which must have had a troubled life among them, but of the sisters this was all he ever said. But we knew they made the hidden source of his unfailing gentleness to all women. My grandmother lived to past eighty, in fullest clearness of mind sharing and aiding her son's life; and except for his needed absences in Washington they had no separations. They rest together near Saint Louis by the Great River—mother and son—and around them are their children to the third and fourth generations.

Saint Louis was in 1817, when my father established himself there, only a village in numbers, but it had a large and stirring life and great interests which found their outlet and pathway to the sea down the Mississippi. It was like a port on the border of its vast dimly known Indian country, with its business extending deep into Mexico and through to Sonora and the Gulf of California; and across the Rocky Mountains into Oregon to the Pacific Ocean. The armed caravans of merchandise crossing this dangerland encountered not only the perils from savages intent on plunder, but the jealous capricious interferences of Spanish policy; while the small army of hunters and trappers and traders and *voyageurs* belonging with the American Fur Company had in addition to the Indians to meet the covert but powerful hostility of the Hudson Bay Fur Company, and consequent collision with English policy. The whole condition of loss to us and increasing gain and strength to England coming from the joint-occupation of the Columbia; the resulting loss of life and driving out of the American Fur trade; the increasing settlements of English subjects fostered by their government and encouraged to hold the land made the situation my father found governing Saint Louis.

Fresh from his military life he found himself confronting English aggression in another form. The little French town so far in the centre of our continent found itself direct heir to the duel of a century between England and France for the New World and the Asiatic trade, and, France having withdrawn, was meeting the added resentment of English feeling against her late subjects, who now replaced France in that contest. The few years intervening between his arrival among them and his being sent in 1821 to represent them as their first Senator, gave my father time to learn fully their interests, and the sources of information were unusual and each of the highest value.

The venerable General Clarke, who had under Jefferson first explored Oregon and the Columbia, was ending his days quietly but in large usefulness in Saint Louis. He was the chief Superintendent of all western Indians, a post in which his experience and high character gave the best results to the Indians as well as to our Government. Much of what now belongs with the Indian Bureau and Department of the Interior was thus in his control, even the making of treaties. General Clarke had married a connection of my mother's, and there was a family and neighborly intimacy between the two homes. All that one mind can take from that of another who has had the advantage of *seeing*, my father gathered from General Clarke in regard to his exploration. And of the evils growing out of the permitted joint-occupation; a permission fast growing into a right of possession, and already harassing and excluding American settlers.

The headquarters of the Fur Company were with the Chouteaus, an old French family who had come up from New Orleans for this business sixty years before, and remained there; overseeing, themselves and through younger branches, the ramified increasing business which enriched them and gave profitable employment to so many adventurous men. From these all—the heads of the House to the last arrived *voyageur*—my father eagerly and perseveringly gleaned information, and gained grounds for his maturing resolve to carry out Jefferson's plan of overland communication with the Asiatic countries, and to hold for ourselves the port on the Pacific which was its key; and for this to end the impossible condition of combined use of our Oregon territory. Mr. Jefferson had scorned this idea when applied to the Mississippi. He would not even refer to the Senate the treaty containing this provision. What would the English not have made of "*treaty-rights*" for "*free navigation of the Mississippi and access to it through the territories of the United States*" which was their renewed attempt at Ghent in 1814.

From the Père Marquette through to Father de Smet, the missionary priests of the Catholic Church had a great part in opening up our western Indian country, and creating centres of order and good influence wherever they founded their missions. The transfer of Louisiana had been followed by the watchful care of their Church, which did not abandon its Spanish and French people to the new conditions, but sent to them clergy of high dignity and governing minds who made for them new importance and enlarged advantages. Special attention was given to establishments for education. Bishop Du Bourg brought over five Sisters of the Sacred Heart from the famous mother-house in Paris where the daughters of royalty are sent for training. These ladies were of noble families, and their gentle, refined manners, their pure French and accomplishments, gave to the young girls of Saint Louis the same advantages they would have to-day at the Sacré-Cœur in Paris. My father, who comprehended the power of education and promoted it in all forms, was glad to use this rare advantage for his young niece. There was an odd reason for his constant pleasant intercourse with the Bishop aside from public causes.

Those about M. Du Bourg were, like himself, French. He needed to acquire fluent English for all uses, and for use from the pulpit. It was a point of honor among the older French not to learn English—many never did so at all—"*Je suis Français de France et je parle ma langue*," they would say, ignoring the need for the other language and looking down with reprobation on their descendants born and living contentedly under "foreign" rule, and speaking English. The older people never reacted from the shock of anger and pain which came to them, as their simple annals record, "*on this 9th of July*, 1803, *at 7 p.m.*," when they learned—