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Prologue

AT SIX O'CLOCK in the morning of the eighteenth of February 1835 a small party of weary travelers arrived at Orange Court House, Virginia. After a brief rest and breakfast at noon, two of the group boarded the carriage that would take them across five miles of very poor road to their destination. It was a beautiful day, with hints of an early spring everywhere; the patches of snow left under the fences and on high ground were melting quickly. Although the travelers would soon discover that the people at the inn in Orange had cheated them and ignored the wishes of their host that a messenger be sent immediately for his own carriage, they later made light of the incident. Harriet Martineau proudly recalled that "this was the only occasion but one, in our journey of ten thousand miles in the United States, that we were overcharged," adding that "the undercharges, where any literary reputation is in the case," had been "more numerous than can be reckoned."

After a wintry month in the capital city of Washington, the young Englishwoman's first glimpses of Montpelier were exhilarating. The road was "one continued slough up to the very portico of the house," but the dwelling stood on "a gentle eminence, and is neat and even handsome in its exterior." Stretching behind the house were a lawn and woods that must have been pleasant in summer. From the front there was "a noble object on the horizon" that could be admired at any season. "The shifting lights upon these blue mountains," Martineau recalled, "were a delightful refreshment to the eye after so many weeks of city life as we had passed."

She found her host confined to a single room of the mansion. He had suffered so grievously from rheumatism the previous winter that he dared not venture far from the easy chair in which he sat until ten o'clock each night. Although he appeared "perfectly well" during her visit, Madison complained to Martineau that he was deaf in one

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Excerpt
More information

ear and that his sight, which had never been acute, now prevented him from reading as much as he would like. Her initial view of the invalid found him in his chair, with a pillow behind him; his "little person" was "wrapped in a black silk gown," with "a warm gray and white cap upon his head" and "gray worsted gloves" on his hands. His voice, though, was "clear and strong, and his manner of speaking particularly lively, often playful." Martineau had no difficulty recognizing him from the engraving she had seen. His face was smaller, and of course older, but he seemed not to have lost any teeth, and "the form of the face was therefore preserved, without any striking marks of age." It was, she remarked, "an uncommonly pleasant countenance."

At thirty-two, Martineau was more than a half-century younger than her host. She had physical handicaps of her own. Severely hard of hearing, she had to be spoken to through the ear trumpet that vanity had prevented her from using until just recently. She was a woman of great physical as well as intellectual vigor, however. During her two years in the United States she stoically endured the most daunting hardships of travel – by stage, by canal barge, by Mississippi riverboat, by railway, and on horseback – across the vast and often primitive landscape of Jacksonian America. Her energetic presence impressed many, including the Madisons. She was "so interesting," Dolley Madison wrote to a friend a month after she left them, "that we hastened to procure her books and are now reading her Political Economy so handsomely Illustrated." Martineau's *Illustrations of Political Economy*, published not long before she had embarked for America, had caused a sensation among English readers. After three days of spirited conversation with the author, Madison apparently wanted a look for himself.

Martineau's impressions of Madison, in turn, only enhanced her prior admiration. She worried, at first, that she was imposing on the old man and would tire him out. "In perpetual fear of his being exhausted," she made polite efforts to afford him the rest he would obviously need: at the end of every few hours of conversation she left her seat by the arm of his chair and went to the sofa by Mrs. Madison on the other side of the room. "But he was sure to follow," she reported, "and sit down between us; so that, when I found the only effect of my moving was to deprive him of the comfort of his chair, I

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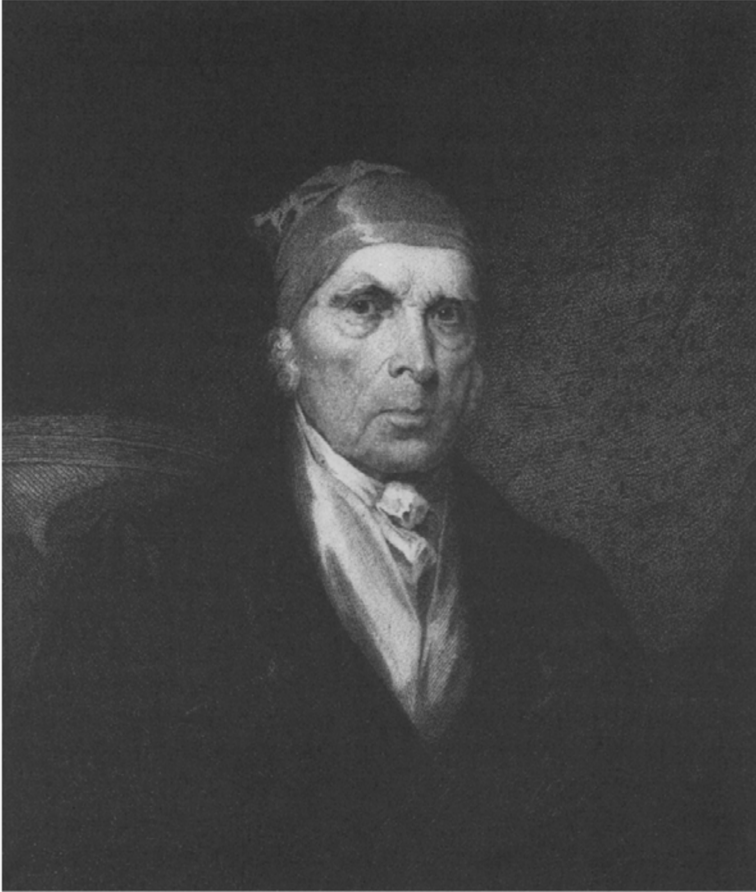

James Madison as Harriet Martineau saw him. Engraving by T. B. Welch, from a drawing by J. B. Longacre taken from life at Montpelier, July 1833. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

returned to my station, and never left it but for food and sleep, glad enough to make the most of my means of intercourse with one whose political philosophy I deeply venerated." "There is no need," she insisted, "to add another to the many eulogies of Madison."

By Martineau's own account she was overwhelmed by the

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Excerpt
More information

seemingly inexhaustible energy of her host, whose "relish for conversation could never have been keener." On the morning of the second day of her visit, she wryly noted, "the active old man, who declared himself crippled with rheumatism, had breakfasted, risen, and was dressed before we sat down to breakfast." He talked for several hours about past American presidents and living politicians. When his letters and newspapers were brought in, "he gayly threw them aside, saying he could read the newspapers every day, and must make the most of his time with us." Often Madison's talk was stimulated by current issues and crises. Martineau listened eagerly to "his luminous history of the nullification struggle" and "his exposition, simple and full, of the intricate questions involved in the anomalous institution of the American Senate." Glancing at the newspapers, which were "full of the subject of the quarrel with France, the great topic of the day," Madison gave a thorough account of the relations between the United States and that country. The present quarrel was absurd, he admitted, but he was apprehensive that it might issue in a war. "He said it would be an afflicting sight if the two representative governments which are in the van of the world should go to war; it would squint towards a confirmation of what is said of the restlessness of popular governments." After all, "if the people, who pay for war, are eager for it, it is quite a different thing from potentates being so who are at no cost."

The conversation was by no means restricted to politics and current events. Madison spoke eagerly on a subject that had long intrigued him: the size of Roman farms. He analyzed the population theories of T. R. Malthus and William Godwin. He spoke his mind on the subject of education, recounting a discussion he had once had with Robert Owen about the role of women in the British reformer's experimental communities. He mused "about what would eventually become of all existing languages and their literature; declaring that he had little hope of the stability of languages when terms of even classical derivation are perpetually changing their meanings with time." He discussed his taste in poetry. During all their conversations, Martineau observed, "one or another slave was perpetually coming to Mrs. Madison for the great bunch of keys; two or three more lounged about in the room, leaning against the doorposts

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More information

or the corner of the sofa; and the attendance of others was no less indefatigable in my own apartment."

The finest of Madison's characteristics, Martineau believed, was "his inexhaustible faith" that "a well-founded commonweath" might be immortal, "not only because the people, its constituency, never die, but because the principles of justice in which such a commonwealth originates never die out of the people's heart and mind." This faith "shone brightly" through the whole of his conversation, except on the subject about which he talked most. "With regard to slavery," she noted, "he owned himself almost to be in despair." Martineau recorded in some detail her host's reflections on this topic, one on which she had quite emphatic opinions of her own. She reported that Madison acknowledged "without limitation or hesitation" all the evils with which slavery had ever been charged; he remarked, for instance, that "the whole Bible is against Negro slavery; but that the clergy do not preach this, and the people do not see it." Martineau was obviously impressed by the sincerity of Madison's antislavery convictions and by the depth of feeling that his remarks conveyed. No doubt his descriptions of the suffering and injustice, drawn largely from personal observation, were vivid and concrete.

But the young Englishwoman was utterly at a loss to understand why Madison advocated the solution to the problem of slavery that he did, and why he refused to acknowledge its impracticality. What mitigated his despair was the American Colonization Society, an organization committed to removing free blacks from the United States and colonizing them in Africa. Much to Martineau's consternation, Madison believed that colonization offered a gradual, long-term, but potentially feasible means of eradicating slavery in the American republic. Martineau said that he gave no reason why the blacks could not remain where they were, once they ceased to be slaves. She was unable to fathom the logic behind his assumption that "the negroes must go somewhere" and that Africa was "their only refuge." Clearly, Martineau objected to colonization on both moral and practical grounds. The facts were there for everyone, including Madison, to see. As he admitted when speaking of his own slaves, there was a prevalent "horror" among the blacks of going

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Excerpt
More information

to the new colony of Liberia, which appeared to her "decisive as to the unnaturalness of the scheme." Moreover, in eighteen years the Colonization Society had removed fewer than three thousand persons from the United States, while the annual increase of the slave population was more than sixty thousand. "How such a mind as his could derive any alleviation to its anxiety from that source," Martineau could not discern. In the end she could attribute Madison's incongruous naiveté and poor judgment only to "his overflowing faith."

Martineau's description of her encounter with Madison was brimming with undisguised reverence. Here was a man inspired by what she described as "the true religion of statemanship, faith in men, and in the principles on which they combine in an agreement to do as they would be done by." After observing her venerable host, she offered the thought that this "political religion" was indeed a form of personal piety, for it had the effect "of sustaining the spirit through difficulty and change, and leaving no cause for repentance, or even solicitude, when, at the close of life, all things reveal their values to the meditative sage." Crippled with rheumatism, confined to a single room, often deeply troubled by what he read in the newspapers and confronted in his everyday experience as a slaveholder, the Sage of Montpelier "reposed cheerfully, gayly, to the last, on his faith in the people's power of wise self-government."[1]

In the spring of the year following Martineau's visit, Madison's health grew worse. Unable to walk, he spent much of his time recumbent; he had to be carried from his bed to the sofa to receive

1 This extended description of Harriet Martineau's visit to Montpelier and her impressions of Madison is based on the chapter entitled "Madison" in Martineau's *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London and New York, 1838), I, 189–198. My portrait of Martineau is derived principally from two biographical works: R. K. Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (New York and London, 1960) and especially Valerie Kossew Pichanick, *Harriet Martineau: The Woman and Her Work, 1802–1876* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1980). The quotation from Dolley Madison is from her letter to Ann Maury, March 31, 1835, in the Manuscripts Division of the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia.

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Drew R. McCoy
Excerpt
More information

Harriet Martineau, c. 1835. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

company. Paul Jennings, the Montpelier slave who was Madison's body servant, recalled nevertheless that "his mind was bright, and with his numerous visitors he talked with as much animation and strength of voice as I ever heard him in his best days." By June, however, matters had taken an ominous turn. The mere dictation of a letter became a vexing and painful ordeal. Jennings had shaved Madison every other day for sixteen years, and was present at his bedside on the morning of June 28. Another slave, Sukey, brought him his breakfast as usual. When he seemed unable to swallow, his

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favorite niece, Mrs. Willis, asked: "What is the matter, Uncle James?" Jennings recalled his master's response: "Nothing more than a change of *mind*, my dear." With that, Jennings added, "his head instantly dropped, and he ceased breathing as quietly as the snuff of a candle goes out."[2]

2 Jennings's recollections of Madison's final months and the death scene are recorded in Paul Jennings, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison* (Brooklyn, 1865), 18–19. It should be noted that the document was edited by "J. B. R.," who acknowledged in the preface that he recorded Jennings's recollections "in almost his own language." I have corrected a typographical error in the original. Additional information about Madison's last days has been drawn from an extract from a letter written by his brother-in-law, John Payne, on June 20, 1836, printed in the *National Intelligencer* on July 2, 1836.

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1. The Character of the Good Statesman

IN THE SPRING of 1817, when James Madison quit public office for the last time, he behaved as if he were beginning rather than ending a career. Making the first leg of his journey home from Washington by steamboat, a novel means of approaching Montpelier, he was accompanied by a young writer from New York with an endearing blend of wit and patriotism. During their brief voyage down the Potomac River, James Kirke Paulding recalled, the elder statesman was "as playful as a child"; talking and jesting with everyone on board, he resembled "a school Boy on a long vacation."[1] Perhaps Madison savored memories of his first journey along the Potomac, on horseback, almost fifty years before, when an eighteen-year-old youth bound for college in Princeton, New Jersey, had confronted poor roads and seemingly countless ferries. What proved to be Madison's final passage through this area was a telling measure of the changes he had witnessed in his lifetime, and no doubt the convenience and excitement of traveling by steamboat buoyed the old man's spirits. But his good cheer also surely reflected the happy condition of his country after a crisis-ridden term as chief executive that had nearly issued in disaster. As Henry Adams observed three-quarters of a century later, with a characteristic touch of irony, "few Presidents ever quitted office under circumstances so agreeable as those which surrounded Madison."[2]

Most of Madison's countrymen in 1817 would probably have shared Adams's judgment but missed the irony. An old friend and neighbor, Francis Corbin, welcomed Madison home in words that

1 Ralph L. Ketcham, ed., "An Unpublished Sketch of James Madison by James K. Paulding," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 67 (1959), 435.

2 Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (New York, 1889–1891), IX, 103.

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More information

appear to have caught the sentiments of a wider citizenry: "Long may you enjoy, in health and happiness, the well earned and truly legitimate plaudits of a grateful Country, and that sweetest of all consolations, an approving conscience." Corbin had served with Madison in the Virginia House of Delegates during the pivotal and trying years just after the Revolution. At the Richmond convention of 1788 they had joined hands to win the difficult struggle to secure the commonwealth's ratification of the Constitution. Now, in April 1817, Corbin assured Madison that his recent tenure as President was the glorious capstone to an illustrious career. "The End," he exclaimed, "has indeed crowned the Work!"[3]

Few historians today would take seriously, much less share, Corbin's flattering assessment of his friend's eight years in the White House. Scholars generally agree that Madison achieved greatness much earlier in his career, especially in the late 1780s and early 1790s when he did more than any other individual to create and secure a republic that would, with amendments and a rather momentous interregnum in the 1860s, endure for the next two centuries. From there, convention has it, his career went into decline. Riddled with diplomatic blunders and other grievous errors of judgment, Madison's presidency was characterized by something close to colossal ineptitude in leadership, constituting a profound embarrassment to him and to the government he administered during the War of 1812. The British invasion and burning of Washington, D.C., in August 1814 and the near collapse of that government marked the appropriate nadir of a failed administration. Writing in 1938, for instance, Edward M. Burns leveled a withering blast. As chief executive, Madison "added nothing to his reputation"; in fact, his record was one "of treason to his own ideals, of humiliation and failure."[4]

Some of Madison's biographers have tried to soften this harsh view, but with little success. Certainly Madison's popularity after the war – what Ralph Ketcham has described as "the adulation

3 Corbin to Madison, Apr. 29, 1817, James Madison Papers, Library of Congress, series one (microfilm).

4 Edward McNall Burns, *James Madison: Philosopher of the Constitution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1938), 19.

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