

WILLIAM JOSEPH SNELLING AND THE EARLY NORTHWEST

To most people of Minnesota, the name " Snelling " connotes a military reservation at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. A few may remember that there was a Colonel Josiah Snelling, after whom the pioneer fortress was named, but probably not many recall the name of Joe Snelling, the colonel's eldest son, whose short tragic life and even shorter literary career were intimately connected with the early history of this region. Information about his life is at best sketchy and often uncertain.¹

William Joseph Snelling was the only son of Colonel Snelling's first marriage, to one Elizabeth Bell of Boston. Josiah Snelling was only twenty-two years of age at the time of his marriage and had not yet become first lieutenant. Soon after the birth of the boy, in north Boston on December 26, 1804, his mother died and he was left in the hands of relatives. For a while he attended a private boarding school taught by Dr. Luther Stearns, a broad-minded and cultured gentleman who must have been partly responsible for Joseph's later attitudes. At the age of fourteen young Snelling received a cadet's appointment to West Point. But he seems to have conceived an aversion to military discipline from the first; at all events he stayed barely two years, his name appearing for the last time on the West Point register for 1820. Just what he did immediately after this is not known, though there is a casual reference to his activities as a trapper at St. Louis.²

¹ The author's manuscript thesis, " William Joseph Snelling: A Sketch of His Life and Character " (Columbia University, 1927) is the only biography known.

² *Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809*, 485 (Boston Registry Department, *Records Relating to the Early History of Boston*, vol. 30—Boston, 1903); Warren Upham and Mrs. Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies*,

While Joseph was pursuing the education that ended in his distasteful stay at West Point, his father led such a life as army men love to record. He was a veteran of the battles of Tippecanoe and Brownstown; after Detroit fell he was a prisoner of war until he was exchanged, when he was stationed at Plattsburg for a while. In June, 1819, he was sent as colonel of the Fifth United States Infantry to St. Louis, where he stayed all winter. The following summer he started up the Mississippi to relieve Colonel Henry Leavenworth of his command at Fort St. Anthony. He took charge of this military outpost in August, 1820, and without delay began the construction of the fort afterwards to bear his name.⁸

It is highly probable that when Joseph left West Point in 1820, at the age of sixteen, he fell in with friendly Sioux Indians who practically adopted him; for this is the only time he could have made the "winter's residence" with the Indians which Keating mentions. Early in the spring, according to Edward D. Neill, he brought one of the Sioux chiefs to visit his father's command at Fort St. Anthony: "On the twenty-eighth of May, 1821, under the guidance of Joseph, the son of Colonel Snelling, the great Yankton chief Wahnatah, came down from Lac-qui-parle on his first visit to the garrison." Joseph had evidently become one of the Indians during these months on the Mississippi plains. He must have gained their confidence — as he certainly gained a knowledge of them and a sympathy with their ways — to have persuaded the big

1655-1912, 722 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 14); *Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography* (New York, 1888); United States Military Academy, West Point, *Official Register of the Officers and Cadets*, 1819-40; *The Boston Herald and Its History*, 17 (Boston, 1878); William J. Snelling, *The Rat-Trap, or Cogitations of a Convict in the House of Correction*, 21 (Boston, 1837); Charles Brooks and James M. Usher, *History of the Town of Medford, Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, 460 (Boston, 1886).

⁸ Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858*, 56-58 (Iowa City, 1918); Edward D. Neill, *Fort Snelling, Minnesota, While in Command of Colonel Josiah Snelling, Fifth Infantry*, 8 (n. p., n. d.).

chief to trust himself to a white boy's guidance and visit Colonel Snelling in his fortress. It must also have been something of a triumph for Joseph, who had failed to get recognition from West Point, to receive the approval and trust of a strange nation and to return with their representative to his father's command. We shall see later that Joseph was far from indifferent to his father's opinion of him. As to his father, it is significant that "except when he had been drinking too much, he was a favorite with the troops."⁴ This comment and certain stories of the colonel's severity with subordinates suggest that William Joseph probably had an interesting time at Fort Snelling.

The year after he came to the fort young Snelling set out in company with Joseph R. Brown, a frontiersman and local celebrity, to explore "the rivulet that supplies the cascade of Minne Ha-Ha, as far as Lake Minne Tonka."⁵ It is to be regretted that his writings contained no detailed description of this region so rich in Indian folklore. It was the work of another, Thurlow Lieurance, to immortalize Lake Minnetonka, and the legend of Minnehaha Falls has become famous through other mouths.

On July 2 and 3, 1823, the government exploring expedition under Major Stephen H. Long, including Thomas Say, Samuel Seymour, James E. Calhoun, and William H. Keating, arrived at Fort Snelling, where it was to receive provisions and guidance before continuing further. Here the explorers met the Italian traveler Giacomo Constantino Beltrami, who had arrived in May on the "Virginia," the steamboat which caused such a great sensation among the Indians. This exiled gentleman found association with the Snellings very pleasant. He

⁴ William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, etc., Performed in the Year 1823*, 1: 314 (Philadelphia, 1824); Neill, *Fort Snelling*, 10. The quotation is from Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 58.

⁵ Edward D. Neill, *History of Minnesota from the Earliest French Explorations to the Present Time*, 331 (Philadelphia, 1858).

could speak no English, but Mrs. Snelling seems to have taken advantage of his knowledge of French, with which she was likewise conversant, to talk with him; she also took a few lessons in Latin. As Beltrami was also planning to penetrate the interior, the Snellings prevailed upon him to accompany the Long expedition. Joseph, who was a licensed Indian trader, volunteered to go along as assistant Sioux interpreter, a position for which his life among the Sioux fully qualified him. The chief guide and interpreter was Joseph Renville, a *coureur de bois*. Snelling's services seemed quite acceptable when the party started out from the fort.

For one reason or another, Long and Beltrami did not achieve anything approaching harmony in their relations. Keating speaks of Beltrami simply as "an Italian" and Long seems to have regarded him as an unwelcome interloper. Meanwhile the expedition found that food supplies were getting low, and Major Long decided to send some of the soldiers back to the fort, for they were too few to afford adequate protection against a horde of Indians, yet too many for a peaceful expedition. At Pembina Snelling and three soldiers also left the party and returned to the garrison; Beltrami, by this time greatly exasperated, sold his horse and decided to make his own way through the woods with two Chippewa and one of the *bois brûlés*.⁶

Joseph Snelling, who had been placed in charge of the troop escort, was considerably more in sympathy with Beltrami than with Major Long. In his account of the circumstances resulting in his departure, Beltrami says:

⁶ Keating, *Narrative*, 1: 290, 312, 314, 336; Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 160, 162; Neill, *Minnesota*, 342, 349; Giacomo Constantino Beltrami, *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America, Leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River; with a Description of the Whole Course of the Former, and of the Ohio*, 2: 199-201, 301-304, 312, 369 (London, 1828); "Auto-biography of Maj. Lawrence Taliaferro" in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 240.

I cannot but gratefully acknowledge the kindness felt for me in this situation by colonel Snelling's son, who shewed the most friendly concern and apprehensions for me. He also left the Major at the same time, not without violent altercation, and went back to Fort St. Peter, by way of lake Traverse. He quitted me in tears, exclaiming, "What will my father say?"

A glimpse of the sensitive nature of young Joseph is revealed in this incident. His life with the Indians had not hardened him emotionally and his sense of justice was as keen, as bitter may we say, as it had been and was to be. It is clear enough that he was concerned about his father's opinion of him, and possibly the memory of West Point made him wish to redeem himself as a frontier officer.

Fort Snelling was at this time a small kingdom in itself, completely isolated, its walls "rather erected to keep the garrison in, than the enemy out." Colonel Snelling was of course absolute monarch and, as has been observed before, was considerate and intelligent when not under the influence of drink. The ever-present disciplinary problems of a permanent military outpost he managed with a good deal of tact. The troops were kept busy with small farming, which brought other rewards than the grumbling of the soldiers, who thought "shooting and stabbing at \$8 a month" more dignified than using a hoe. This method of provisioning a camp, while it kept the men occupied much of the time, nevertheless left garrison life a pretty dull routine.

For the officers there was not even this occupation. Most of them were young West Point graduates, men of some taste themselves, whose wives were women of no little charm and intelligence. To quote from the reminiscences of one who lived at the fort at this time:

The society at the Fort at that period was of the most select and aristocratic. Many of these ladies would have shone in any circle. Their households in the garrison were attractive places, and showed evidences of wealth and good taste. . . . When

Gen. Scott visited the Fort in 1826 there was a great striving to do him honor. . . . All the officers and their wives were present at his reception in full dress.

In speaking of the difficulty in getting changes of wardrobe from the world of civilization, the writer shows how completely isolated was this country, which soon assumed all the peculiar virtues and vices of a highly centralized aristocracy. "Such close confinement," says another writer, "was tolerable when the garrison was composed of congenial spirits, but occasionally it brought about dissensions and quarrels."

In the summer the officers spent much of their time hunting, and picnics with the ladies were not infrequent. But in the winters, which were severe, everyone was cooped within the fort; though there was a good library, which some enjoyed a great deal, social pastimes naturally came into prominence. Dances, *soirées*, and amateur theatricals expressed something of the higher developments of mixed social life. But unfortunately among the men card-playing and drinking bouts made for a questionable conviviality and fellowship. Gossip, small jealousies, and petty intrigue crept into social relationships. "We of the garrison," runs a letter written in February, 1842, "are as usual at this season rather dull, stale & unprofitable — small parties for Tea are a good deal the fashion, & tattle is used as formerly."⁷

Then, too, certain notions of honor in vogue among military men made for an aristocratic peevishness. It is not surprising that duels were frequent. William Joseph was involved in one of these in 1826, when "a certain young officer challenged Colonel Snelling, and upon his refusing, his son . . . accepted and was slightly wounded." Apparently his wound

⁷ Beltrami, *Pilgrimage*, 2: 369; Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 76-101; Mrs. Ann Adams, "Early Days at Red River Settlement and Fort Snelling, 1821-1829," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 99. These reminiscences were dictated to J. Fletcher Williams, who edited them for publication.

was not serious, and no one has taken the trouble to state the exact cause of the quarrel. There were several duels that year, all of little importance.⁸

The best available account of Joseph's life at the fort is that given by Mrs. Joseph Adams, then Barbara Ann Shadecker, a girl of about thirteen, who lived with the Snelling family and helped with the care of the children. Mrs. Adams has this to say of Joseph:

Colonel Snelling also had a son, by a first wife, who lived with us a part of the time. He was then (1823) about twenty years old. . . . They called him "Jo" usually. Mrs. Snelling did not seem to have any great fondness or respect for him, and perhaps with good reasons; but the Colonel was greatly attached to him, and would do anything for him. . . . Jo. somewhat resembled the Colonel in person, but his hair was darker. The Colonel's hair was quite red. He was also slightly bald. From this peculiarity the soldiers nick-named him, among themselves, the "prairie hen." Once Jo. told his father of this. The Colonel laughed at it as a good joke.

Mrs. Snelling's feeling toward her stepson is about what one would expect. Joseph and his father appear to have had a mutual affection and probably understood each other pretty well. Mrs. Adams also states that Joseph had led a "rather ungoverned life for some years" and that he and a son of Major Thomas Hamilton, another officer stationed at the fort, had committed some breach of discipline while at West Point and had been sent home. This statement is not supported by any official account.

Mrs. Adams likewise tells the story of what appears to be Joseph's first marriage:

Jo. Snelling married, while quite young, a French girl from Prairie du Chien, very handsome, but uneducated. They lived in a sort of hovel for awhile, and, owing to cold and privation during the ensuing winter, the poor girl took sick and died.

⁸ Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 102; Adams, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 98.

The present author knows of no other version of the matter than this one told by a serving girl whom Mrs. Snelling had probably set completely out of sympathy with "Jo" and his doings. After his wife's death, he "returned to Fort Snelling and thence went to lake Traverse, where he was engaged in the Indian trade." Mrs. Adams dismisses him with somewhat the same dispatch as did the Boston literary historians who disliked his fiery pen: "He subsequently went to Boston, married again there, and died a few years later."⁹

Clearly Joseph was at the fort in 1826, when he fought the duel, whatever may have been the state of his health before or after his wound. His marriage is more difficult to date; it may have been in 1822, before the expedition of Major Long, when he would have been eighteen years old; or it may have been in 1824, when he would have attained the age of twenty.

The years 1826 and 1827 were made vividly exciting by Indian troubles. A detailed narrative of these, the authorship of which has been attributed to William Joseph Snelling, has been published in the *Annals* of the Minnesota Historical Society for 1856 and in the *Wisconsin Historical Collections* under the title "Early Days at Prairie du Chien and the Winnebago Outbreak of 1827." The article recounts the progress of the Chippewa-Sioux feuds during these years and the vain attempt of the government to make a treaty between the tribes, and it includes many pointed comments on the blundering policy of the government and the tardy nature of American justice as administered to the Indians. The narrative is spirited and clear, much in the style of his later work, *Tales of the Northwest*. There is a description of a horrible instance of Sioux treachery, in the murder of several Chippewa by their Sioux guests under the very walls of the fort. One Khoyapa (Eagle's Head), an old Sioux prisoner, proves his word of honor by going out to get the culprits. Toopunkah Zeze, the chief murderer, is described thus:

⁹ Adams, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 96.

He was in the bloom of youth, not above twenty, at most, six feet high, and formed after Nature's best model. Stain the Belvidere Apollo with walnut juice, and it will be an exact likeness of Toopunkah Zeze. . . . The Chippewas would see that a warrior was about to die.

His companion exemplified the notion that physical deformity and cowardice go together, for he had a harelip and was a "villainous looking fellow; such a man, indeed, as a despotic sovereign would hang for his countenance." Later, true to type, the harelipped Indian pleads for his life while the noble-appearing Toopunkah Zeze boasts of his manhood, which had been proved by shooting one unarmed man and a woman. In spite of the horrible murders he had performed with such satisfaction, Toopunkah Zeze, as described by Snelling, is a likable and appealing personality. This anomaly of Indian character Snelling later emphasizes even more in his *Tales of the Northwest*.

The subsequent trouble with the Winnebago, which assumed rather serious proportions, is described in detail. There is a clear, if not vivid, account of an attack on two keel boats moving up the Mississippi; of the massacre of one Methode and his family by an unsuccessful Winnebago war party; and of the Red Bird uprising, which began with the murder of a farmer, Registre Gagnier, and ended with a second attack on the Fort Snelling supply boats as they were descending the river. These keel boats were on their way to Fort Snelling with provisions from Prairie du Chien when signs of hostility were first noted. They were then unarmed and Snelling denies that any indignities were offered the Indians with whom they came in contact, as was charged by some. Above the mouth of the Black River the boats were ordered ashore by Sioux warriors, who crowded on board. Then says Snelling: A passenger who was well acquainted with the Dakotas, observed that they brought no women with them as usual; that they were painted black—which signifies either grief or hostility; that they refused to shake hands with the boatmen; and that their

speech was brief and sullen. He instantly communicated his observations to Mr. Lindsay, who commanded the boats, and advised him to push on, before the savages should have discovered that the party were wholly unarmed.

Snelling does not state that he himself was "the passenger" acquainted with the Sioux, nor that he had a rather active part in getting the Indians off and in the subsequent exciting events.

When the keel boats started back down the river the crews were armed, by order of Colonel Snelling. This step evidently made possible William J. Snelling's literary career. The historian Edward D. Neill gives the following brief but significant account of what happened:

They were attacked by some Winnebagoes, maddened by liquor obtained from Joseph Rolette. Joseph Snelling . . . who was a passenger on one of the boats, in a letter to his father, said that the front boat, which was a few miles in advance of the other, was attacked in the evening, and pierced with hundreds of bullets. The Indians then boarded the boat, and attempted to run her ashore, but by signal bravery of the crew they were driven off. The rear boat was also attacked, but after several rounds were fired, they desisted.

Snelling continues with the story of how Prairie du Chien was terrified at their arrival, but omits that he was placed in charge of the garrison until help arrived from Fort Snelling.¹⁰ While there is no conclusive proof of Snelling's authorship of this article, its style and obvious omission of any reference to him have left students in little doubt of the matter.

These events all occurred in the last year of Joseph's stay at the fort. In 1827 the colonel and his family moved to St.

¹⁰ *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 5: 123-153 (Madison, 1868); Minnesota Historical Society, *Annals*, 1856, p. 121-138. The article is also published, in abridged form, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1: 439-456. It first appeared in an "eastern periodical"; it was published anonymously, but its style bears "conclusive evidence" that Snelling was the author. Neill's account of the encounter with the Winnebago appears in his "Occurrences in and Around Fort Snelling, from 1819 to 1840," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 2: 117.

Louis; during the next summer, on August 20, 1828, Colonel Snelling died suddenly in Washington, where he had gone on business.¹¹

Meanwhile Joseph had gravitated to Boston and had begun his completely different, though no less adventurous, career as a metropolitan journalist. At this point the Minnesota historian might properly take leave of him. It would be unfair, however, not to notice his importance as a writer and social historian of his period. He began publishing almost as soon as he went east, most of his works being of a controversial or satirical nature. He was fiercely independent and spent most of his time crusading against vice, stupidity, and social oppression. No cause was so thoroughly lost as to be disregarded by him: he railed against past injustice and crying social evils; he feared neither law nor law-breaker, however firmly entrenched; he was sued for libel, wounded by an assassin, and once thrown into prison.¹² His chief organ in his warfare against political corruption was the *New England Galaxy*, which he edited throughout 1833. In this short time he actually succeeded in driving out a nest of gamblers in the face of passive opposition from the police.¹³ Many of his works were printed under assumed names and others were anonymous.¹⁴ Some were frankly potboilers.

¹¹ Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 58.

¹² The prison term was only an indirect result of his crusading. See his *Rat-Trap*.

¹³ The *Galaxy* files for this year, in the Boston Public Library, are in bad shape. Most of the information used here has been obtained from reprints: *Expose of the Vice of Gaming, As It Lately Existed in New England, Being a Series of Essays Originally Published in the New England Galaxy* (Boston, 1833) and *The Trial of W. J. Snelling for Libel on the Honorable Benjamin Whitman, Senior Judge of the Police Court* (Boston, 1834).

¹⁴ For this reason he is often credited with the authorship of many works he could not possibly have written. Such a one is the *Autobiography of Makataimeshekiakiak, or Black Hawk*, edited by J. B. Patterson in 1833, when Snelling was in Boston.

Snelling's pen was a terrible weapon, but it was not always wielded in social controversy. His *Truth: A New Year's Gift for Scribblers* is a terrific, though beautiful, verse satire on many of the poets of his time:

Moths, millers, gnats, and butterflies I sing;
Far-darting Phoebus lend my strain a sting;
Much courted Virgins, long enduring Nine,
Screw tight the catgut of this lyre of mine.

As Oliver Wendell Holmes observes, the satire has lost interest for most readers because so many of its victims are no longer known. Some of his judgments, however, are still significant. Whittier is severely criticized, Bryant praised to the skies, and Longfellow mentioned as a young upstart.¹⁵

But he was not always satirical. His *Tales of the Northwest; or Sketches of Indian Life and Character*¹⁶ is a collection of stories based on Indian and frontier tradition, which he picked up as he traveled about from trading post to Indian lodge. Four of them, "Charles Hess," "The Bois Brule," "La Butte des Morts," and "Pinchon," deal with white men in contact with the Indians; the other six tales are of Indian life almost untouched by white customs. In most of these stories is an intrinsic beauty that will afford entertainment and delight even to the reader not primarily interested in the western Indian. The author states in his introduction that the "object of this work is to give to the public a knowledge of the character and habits of the aborigines." This knowledge, he affirms, can be acquired in only one way:

¹⁵ *Truth, A New Year's Gift for Scribblers* (Boston, 1831). A second edition, published in Boston in 1832, bore the shorter title *Truth: A Gift for Scribblers*. There is little difference in the texts. For Holmes's comment see *A Mortal Antipathy*, 3 (Boston, 1885).

¹⁶ Published in Boston in 1830 by "a resident beyond the frontier." Though the book is anonymous, there is not a doubt of Snelling's authorship. It was at once assigned to him, praised by his friends, and attacked by his enemies. Nathaniel P. Willis' nasty little epigram "Smelling Joseph" and his "Northwest Tales" is an example. It appears in a footnote to the second edition of Snelling's *Truth*, 12.

A man must live, emphatically, *live*, with Indians; share with them their lodges, their food, and their blankets, for years, before he can comprehend their ideas, or enter into their feelings. Whether the Author has so lived or not, the reader must judge from the evidence of the following pages.

No doubt Joseph Snelling understood the Indian, as he surely had an opportunity to do. He entertained no illusions concerning the "noble savage," and he maintains that the Indians are no different from their white neighbors except in so far as circumstances have changed their ways. "The heart of man beats neither slower nor faster under a blanket than beneath a coat or waistcoat," he writes, though "their passions, when excited, are more furious than ours, because unrestrained by principle; and explode with more violence because they are instructed from early childhood to repress and conceal, till it may be safe to indulge them." Snelling qualifies his remarks by saying that "the key to much that appears strange in the character of the aborigines may be found in one word; inconsistency." One can never predict the future conduct of an Indian, he declares, on the basis of his past actions.

The first sketch, "The Captive," is based on a striking instance of this fact. An Indian youth, Harmless Pigeon, shoots two sleeping men whom he is serving as guide, merely on impulse and because he has never before killed a man. The story contains two other incidents. The second, a tale within a tale, tells the tragic love story of an Indian girl and her French sweetheart; and the third, which names the sketch, deals with the fate of an old Indian hostage who, fearless of death, cannot endure captivity.

"The Hohay" is an Indian tale describing a more or less common occurrence: the warfare of two peoples over a woman stolen from another tribe by her lover. Beltrami tells the same story, setting it down merely as a tradition of the Assiniboin.¹⁷ Both authors are reminded of the similarity of

¹⁷ *Pilgrimage*, 2: 209.

the tale to that of Helen of Troy; but Snelling makes a fascinating romance out of it, while Beltrami mentions it only as an interesting bit of lore.

The tale of "The Devoted" throws some light on Indian ideas of retribution and shows why the government was making a mistake in offering the usual delayed justice to Indian homicides instead of offering immediate execution or pardon, as was expected by the Indians.

The present writer has found no other version of the next story; according to its author it is from purely Indian sources. If this is true, here is a peculiar instance of romanticism in Indian tradition and of idealism in Indian character. Payton Skah, a great hero, has a truly romantic attachment for his wife, Tahtokah, who is carried off during a raid by a hostile nation. Payton Skah not only takes terrible vengeance, but nearly pines away in loneliness for his lost sweetheart. When he does remarry, at the instigation of his relatives, he finds his second wife to be untrue to him. Instead of killing his rival, the hero offers him all his goods and goes among the enemy tribe to "throw away his life." His foes so admire his courage that they accept him as one of them. There, too, he finds his lost wife, who is restored to his arms, and the reconciliation brings about a peace between the nations.

The story of Charles Hess is fairly well established as a fact, but Snelling makes him an heroic figure. Here he discusses rather fully the peculiar attraction of frontier life that made men of culture foresake more civilized places, an attraction which Snelling himself must have felt in great measure. Certainly he spent much of his time among the Indians and at least once made a brief and pitiful attempt at frontier home life. This tendency of the whites to lapse back into savagery and enjoy its very rigors is a favorite theme of Snelling's; he refers to it especially in the introduction to "The Bois Brule," and "Pinchon" as a whole is an illustration.

The dramatic significance of the life of Charles Hess is portrayed in a very brief but climactic manner. Without apparent haste, Snelling gives in these few pages a picture of the wild but peculiarly wholesome life that made Hess a ruddy old man tramping the plains with his Indian wife and children. Here is an almost Whitmanesque hero, reveling in his intellectual isolation and touches of earthly companionship. Then follow the Sioux raid and the hideous death of his family while Hess is off hunting. The picture of Hess, revenge and pride abandoned, begging his surviving eldest daughter of the chief who killed his wife and other children, is most effective. Snelling compares him with Priam on his knees before Achilles begging Hector's body.

"The Bois Brule" is by comparison with the others the weakest of the tales. It occupies more than a third of the volume and seems to have been planned as a novel. Though it contains interesting passages, it fails miserably as a whole. The present writer cannot help thinking that it was planned and conceived when Snelling was very young and was filled in later when his creative powers exceeded his faculty for self-criticism. There is, however, no proof of this. The general style is insipid and weakly sentimental, but some of the digressions are interesting, none more so than the grim incident of the second chapter in which Roy, the *bois brûlé*, narrowly escapes falling victim to the cannibalistic appetite of a fellow *coureur de bois* while they are out on a long voyage together. Snelling states that it was not unusual for trappers to eat each other when provisions were a bit low. The episode bears comparison with a similar, non-fictitious account in his *Polar Regions of the Western Continent Explored*.¹⁸ The "Bois Brule" eventually

¹⁸ *The Polar Regions of the Western Continent Explored, Embracing a Geographical Account of Iceland, Greenland, the Islands of the Frozen Sea, and the Northern Parts of the American Continent*, 457 (Boston, 1831). This is one of Snelling's educational series, most of which appeared under the pseudonym of "Solomon Bell."

resolves itself into a series of stories of frontier life, very loosely connected and not all well done.

The tale called "Weenokhenchah Wandeteekah" is a tragic Indian romance that seems to be a part of the legend of the Falls of St. Anthony. Keating tells nearly the same story in connection with a spirited description of the beautiful cascade.¹⁹ Like the story of "The Lover's Leap," the legend deals with suicide for love. Snelling's version is beautifully told; particularly notable is the contrast between the realistic scenes of Indian family squabbles and the sublime mystery of the falls and their tragedy. "The Lover's Leap" is equally good. Beltrami tells this story also and relates that he met an old chief who was the father of the unfortunate maiden who hurled herself over the rock.²⁰ The two versions differ as to names and details but are essentially the same.

In "La Butte des Morts" Snelling's dramatic power, so apparent in "Charles Hess," is again evident, reinforced by an ironic sadness over the fate of the Sac village quickly and unjustly demolished. The narrative seems to be founded on a combination of Indian tradition and recorded fact. Whatever the source, the tale as told here is a spirited thing. The opening description of the site, desolate as its desolate name; the re-population of the village by the author, with a picture of the Sauk taking tolls from French traders; the grim generalship of Sieur Moran, the French leader; the massacre of all the Indians in the village; then the lapse into the mournful tone of "La Butte des Morts" again — it is all as artistic as it is convincing.²¹

"Pinchon" is the bold bad man of the *Tales*, a kind of evil Paul Bunyan of the early trappers. He appears as a great blond Norman giant famous among the Indians for his feats

¹⁹ *Narrative*, 1: 283-300.

²⁰ *Pilgrimage*, 2: 184-186.

²¹ A reprint of this sketch and a discussion of its historical accuracy appear in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 5: 95-103.

of strength, cunning, and cruelty. The manner in which Snelling deals with this traditional "hero" is more detached than that of most of his narratives.

This little volume of *Tales* has never been as popular as it deserves to be. While it cannot be declared a work of genius throughout, all the stories have considerable charm and some portions achieve the dignity and effectiveness of poetry. In an extensive criticism of the book in the *North American Review* for July, 1830, a reviewer says:

Considering the circumstances under which it was prepared, we look upon it as one of much promise. The descriptions of nature, both living and inanimate, have a striking air of truth and fidelity, and the style of execution is marked throughout with great freedom and power. . . . There are no doubt obvious symptoms of immature taste, and a too rapid preparation; but these are defects that are naturally and easily corrected when there is talent at bottom.

"The Bois Brule," which is cited as an example of this immature taste, stands no higher in the estimation of the reviewer than in the judgment of the present writer. The Indian characters are compared with those of Cooper's novels, to Cooper's disadvantage. "Payton Skah" is considered one of the best of the tales and is quoted as an illustration of Snelling's style. There is also some sprightly comment on "Weenokhenchah, Wandeteekah," the first portion of which is summarized and the rest quoted.

Among Snelling's other writings of particular interest to the Minnesota historian are two very unpretentious pieces: "A Night in the Woods," which appeared in the *Boston Book* for 1836, and "The Birth of Thunder," a poem which has been preserved in Rufus W. Griswold's *Poets and Poetry of America*.²² The former tells of the author's adventures during a winter evening when he was lost on the plains. After having

²² *The Boston Book, Being Specimens of Metropolitan Literature*, 40 (Boston, 1836); Rufus W. Griswold, *Poets and Poetry of America*, 468 (Boston, 1842).

killed a buffalo late in the day, he loses his flint and is left fireless with only the dead buffalo between him and the bitter cold. He skins the animal and wraps himself in the heavy pelt, which freezes over him. He is attacked by buffalo fleas and horrible dreams assail him, in which the naked buffalo comes back to demand his skin and dances about with thousands of his fellows, while other demon forms of wolves and ravens come to haunt the sleeper. In the morning he is released by an Indian and finds he has indeed been visited by both buffaloes and wolves. The whole is a masterpiece of fantasy, told in a vivid manner with a strong dash of humor, which is, for once, without the melancholy bitterness generally characteristic of Snelling's work.

In "The Birth of Thunder" Snelling preserves another Indian legend, this time in highly romantic verse. A short excerpt from the beginning will offer a fair conception of its spirit and movement:

Look, white man, well on all around,
 These hoary oaks, those boundless plains;
 Tread lightly; this is holy ground:
 Here Thunder, awful spirit! reigns.
 Look on those waters far below,
 So deep beneath the prairie sleeping,
 The summer sun's meridian glow
 Scarce warms the sands their waves are heaping;
 And scarce the bitter blast can blow
 In winter on their icy cover;
 The Wind Sprite may not stoop so low,
 But bows his head and passes over.

 Those lakes, whose shores but now we trod,
 Scars deeply on earth's bosom dinted,
 Are the strong impress of a god,
 By Thunder's giant foot imprinted.
 Nay, a stranger, as I live, 'tis truth!
 The lips of those who never lied,
 Repeat it daily to our youth.

This poem needs no apology. One wishes that Snelling had written more like it. Though the influence of the Romantic poets is marked and often prevails over the Indian tone, here is at least something that stirs with a peculiar life that Joseph Snelling and the prairies gave it.

As much may be said of all the work of this obscure author. He is most at home among the frontiers of Indian tradition and legend and he has registered at first hand the impressions a sensitive nature received of those early days when the Sioux Indians were still a nation unto themselves. As a literary man William Joseph Snelling appears remarkable not so much for what he did as for what he barely missed doing. There are passages throughout all his work that make the reader wonder greatly that so strong, so decided, and so genuine a personality could have been so completely covered by the obscurity that shrouds most of his contemporaries.

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