

CAPTAIN MARRYAT AT OLD ST. PETER'S

The obscurity that now shrouds the name of Captain Frederick Marryat is a good illustration of the rapidity with which literary prestige can evaporate. In the middle of the last century Marryat's reputation was wide and seemed secure. Hailed as a master of ocean narrative in the bold manner of Smollett and bringing to his work as rich and as varied an experience on the high seas as even Joseph Conrad could claim, the captain produced book after book which satisfied a large audience. But there was something lacking. At the height of his fame the old sea dog discovered that he was losing his command over material which for a number of years had proved a very bonanza to him. Perhaps, as Poe remarked unkindly, it was only Marryat's essential mediocrity asserting itself. At any rate the captain found his audience vanishing, and abandoning his forte with the facility of a veteran skipper tacking before the wind, he turned to the production of juveniles. Today his name is associated less with the honest attempts to recreate the sea atmosphere which were baptized *Peter Simple* and *Mr. Midshipman Easy* than with such exemplary children's stories as the *Settlers in Canada*. And the literary historian is only too willing to relegate Marryat's name to a footnote.

But in 1837-38, when the captain was emboldened by curiosity and an empty purse to pay a visit to North America, he was a great literary lion who expected a favorable reception. The United States had not proved especially amenable to the strictures of his predecessors. The books of Mrs. Trollope and Harriet Martineau, to mention no others, had provoked a storm of hostility and derision, until it came to pass that every literary foreigner who set

foot on the soil of the New World was suspect. Thus Marryat discovered that the Americans, though they might read his books, were under no compunction to esteem his person, and his resultant pique may well account for the fact that he was remembered by various observers as a surly, ill-tempered Briton. At any rate, as the captain remarked in his *Diary*:

They [*the Americans*] had no right to insult and annoy me in the manner they did, from nearly one end of the Union to the other, either because my predecessors had expressed an unfavourable opinion of them before my arrival, or because they expected that I would do the same upon my return to my own country.¹

Nevertheless, Marryat was quite correct in observing the feeling of distrust and antagonism which greeted him when he disembarked at a New York pier on May 4, 1837 — a feeling which was in no way helped by the great panic which followed Jackson's second administration.²

Ostensibly the captain had been drawn to America to see how democracy was functioning among the insurgent offspring of the country whose sword he bore. But wherever he went he took notes, observed as widely as he could, and if possible refused what hospitalities were tendered him so that he would not be obligated to his hosts and thereby prevented from speaking his mind. His tour of the continent embraced a large part of the United States and included sojourns in several sections of Canada. He visited all the large cities of the East and Middle West, making speeches in a good many and being introduced to such celebrities as Charlotte Cushman, the actress, Governor Mason of Michi-

¹ Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America*, 1:14 (London, 1839). Marryat wrote two series of American diaries; all citations in the present article are to the first series. The actual diary of Marryat's trip ends at page 214 of volume 2, the rest of the work being devoted to long, rambling essays about American institutions. The portion of the diary that deals with Minnesota has been reprinted, with a brief introduction, in *MINNESOTA HISTORY*, 6:168-184 (June, 1925).

² Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat*, 2:3 (London, 1872).

gan, Henry Clay, and many others.³ But the journey which is of special interest to residents of the Northwest did not begin until the spring of 1838.

Having chosen the Great Lakes route to the West, Captain Marryat boarded the "Michigan" at Windsor, Ontario, and traveled by water as far as Green Bay. It had been his intention to take the usual route thence via Chicago and Galena to St. Louis, but at the Wisconsin post he chanced to meet a detachment of troops bound for Fort Winnebago and decided to avail himself of the opportunity to go overland. The route led along the Fox River to the famous portage. At Fort Winnebago Marryat took a keelboat and descended the Wisconsin River as far as Prairie du Chien, where it meets the Mississippi. There once more luck favored him, and he was enabled to join General Henry Atkinson, then on an inspection tour of frontier posts, and to continue his journey up the Mississippi by steamboat. On June 13, 1838, the "Burlington" under Captain Throckmorton reached the wharf at St. Peter's, as Mendota was then called, and as Major Lawrence Taliaferro noted in his journal, among the passengers was the famous novelist, Captain Marryat.⁴

Despite his extensive traveling on the North American continent, the Briton was not unimpressed by the beauties of the great river. At Prairie du Chien he had noticed the "beautiful clear blue stream, intersected with verdant islands, and very different in appearance from the Lower Mississippi, after it has been joined by the Missouri." He had also appreciated the bold bluffs of the valley and the majesty of Lake Pepin, while to the Wisconsin territory in general he had ascribed the finest soil and the most salubri-

³ Arno L. Bader, "Captain Marryat in Michigan," in *Michigan History Magazine*, 20:169 (Spring and Summer, 1936). An article in which the same author traces Marryat's American tour, "The Gallant Captain and Brother Jonathan," appears in the *Colophon*, 2:114-129 (New Series — Autumn, 1936).

⁴ Marryat, *Diary*, 2:42, 54, 78. The Taliaferro Journals are in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

ous climate in America. Indeed, Marryat's comments on the weather have considerable interest. The most unusual factor which he observed about the American climate was its changeability, not only the obvious seasonal alterations but rapid shifts of heat and cold within the twenty-four hour span. He writes:

When I was on Lake Superior the thermometer stood between 90° and 100° during the day, and at night was nearly down to the freezing point. When at St. Peter's, which is nearly as far north, and farther west, the thermometer stood generally at 100° to 106° during the day, and I found it to be the case in all the northern States when the winter is most severe, as well as in the more southern.

Furthermore, he declared that the winters in Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin "are dry and healthy, enabling the inhabitants to take any quantity of exercise, and I found that the people looked forward to their winters with pleasure, longing for the heat of the summer to abate." Marryat's final estimate of the American climate was unfavorable, since he held that it enervated the body and demoralized the mind. But he was inclined to make an exception of the Northwest despite its meteorological extremes. The only insurmountable obstacles he found to his enjoyment of the upper Mississippi Valley were mosquitoes and snakes.⁵

At St. Peter's Marryat was the guest of Henry H. Sibley, then the resident agent of the American Fur Company, who later became the first governor of the state of Minnesota. A mutual friend at Green Bay had given the captain a letter of introduction to Sibley, thus assuring the visitor a hospitable reception. It reads as follows:

GREEN BAY May 21st 1838

DEAR HEN

I take great pleasure in introducing to you Capt Marryatt, who is now on a visit to your place. Any attention you can pay him will be both pleasant to yourself & gratifying to me

Yours truly

CHAS. R. BRUSH⁶

⁵ *Diary*, 2:69, 72, 75, 79, 125; 3:255, 263, 270. There are numerous references to both insect and reptile pests scattered throughout the *Diary*.

⁶ Sibley Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

To Sibley, of course, distinguished guests were nothing new. Among others, he had entertained George Catlin, the painter, John C. Frémont, and Joseph N. Nicollet, all of whom were sincerely grateful to their host. Marryat, too, expressed his appreciation of Sibley's courtesies, but there is reason to suppose that Sibley found him a rather arrogant and uncongenial visitor.

Almost the first thing that impressed the captain was Fort Snelling itself and its formidable site. The fort, he wrote in his *Diary*, "is about a mile from the factory [*Mendota*], and is situated on a steep promontory, in a commanding position; it is built of stone, and may be considered as impregnable to any attempt which the Indians might make, provided that it has a sufficient garrison." He also remarked the great sweep of prairie almost immediately behind the post. On the day following the arrival, General Atkinson's party visited the Falls of St. Anthony and the neighboring lakes, and it seems likely that Marryat was a member of the expedition. At any rate, he early expressed his disappointment upon seeing the famous cataract: "The Falls of St. Anthony are not very imposing, although not devoid of beauty." He estimated the fall at thirty-five feet, and declared that with the rapids below, the river descended probably a hundred feet, certainly not a grand spectacle to one in whose memory Niagara was still fresh. On the other hand, he thought that the large masses of rock piled indiscriminately lent a certain picturesque charm to the scene.⁷

But the captain was a good deal more interested in the inhabitants than he was in the scenery. As a naval officer he had sailed most of the seven seas and had come in contact with a majority of the races of man, but the Indian was still relatively unfamiliar to him and proportionately fascinating. Thus he noted almost at once that the Sioux were

⁷ *Diary*, 2:80, 81; Taliaferro Journal, June 14, 1838.

the first red men he had seen in the primitive state (which may be interpreted to mean the first red men he had seen sober!). He recorded in his *Diary* that the Sioux were divided into six or seven tribes and numbered about thirty thousand individuals. Soon after his arrival at St. Peter's he made an excursion to Lake Calhoun to visit Cloudman's village. There he was surprised to learn that the Sioux had "fixed habitations as well as tents; their tents are large and commodious, made of buffalo skins dressed without the hair, and very often handsomely painted on the outside." Even more amazing to the captain was the relative cleanliness of the interior of the lodges. He also remarked with great interest that a missionary residing at the village—the Reverend Jedediah D. Stevens—had begun to teach the braves agriculture with some success.⁸

Indeed the whole attempt of the whites to civilize the red men evoked Marryat's wrapt attention. During his stay at St. Peter's Joseph Renville came to the agency with a large band of Indians, some of whom, Marryat claimed, fraternized with him. "These warriors of Mr. Rainville's [*sic*] were constantly with me, for they knew that I was an *English* warrior, as they called me, and they are very partial to the English." Furthermore, these Indians from Lac qui Parle had been partially civilized, said the captain, and "they are all converted to Christianity." Partly through Renville's assistance and partly through the labors of two missionaries, this band of Sioux had achieved a certain level of literacy and their language had been roughly confined within the limits of the English alphabet. Marryat himself possessed an elementary spelling book and a catechism in the vernacular. Certainly one of the most vivid pictures the captain limns has for its subject a Sioux warrior with a copy book:

It was really a pleasing sight, and a subject for meditation, to see one of these fine fellows, dressed in all his wild magnificence, with his

⁸ *Diary*, 2:81-84.

buffalo robe on his shoulders, and his tomahawk by his side, seated at a table, and writing out for me a Sioux translation of the Psalms of David.⁹

During Marryat's stay at St. Peter's, Renville's Indians performed a dance close to the factory, donning for the occasion all their tribal regalia. The captain was particularly interested in the elaborate costumes of the dancers and could not rest content until he himself owned one. His desire was all the more eager in that he had seen Catlin's collection of Indian curios only to discover that the painter lacked one of these ceremonial outfits. The dress in question included a kilt of fine skins, beautifully ornamented with quills and feathers, garters made from the tails of animals, and a headdress to which both the eagle and the ermine had contributed. The Indians, understandably, did not wish to part with such a costume and even Renville's intervention did not produce the desired gift. Finally, according to Marryat, a presentation was made at which Renville served as interpreter. Speeches were made in which the Sioux declared that their only reason for conferring so unusual an honor on a visitor was the nationality of that visitor, that they remembered the English and the good quality of their rifles and blankets, and that they wished to prove their respect for an English warrior. Marryat, never notable for his tact, replied that he appreciated the gift deeply, the more so that it had been refused Americans who had previously solicited it. Furthermore, he said:

I am very glad that you do not forget the English, and that you say they kept their word, and that their rifles and blankets were good. I know that the blankets of the Americans are thin and cold. (I did not think it worth while to say that they were all made in England.) We have buried the hatchet now; but should the tomahawk be raised

⁹ *Diary*, 2: 89-92. Taliaferro noted in his journal for Sunday, June 17, that the Reverend Stephen R. Riggs preached at Fort Snelling and "we were entertained with divine songs by the Indians of Lac qui parle. These wild savages sung correctly & in good time to the astonishment of the audience of whites." It may well be that Marryat was in the audience that Sabbath.

again between the Americans and the English, you must not take part with the Americans.¹⁰

Fortunately there were no serious repercussions to so ill-advised a speech. The chronic restlessness of the tribes in the fur area was not greatly increased by Marryat's inflammatory eloquence, and he himself proved to be the chief sufferer. For, although Marryat had undoubtedly intended to see more of the Northwest than the military post and the fur agency, the Indian agent was quickly informed of the seditious speech "and it was delicately intimated to the captain that his exploration of the country closed at Fort Snelling."¹¹

During the course of his stay Marryat was entertained socially by the officers of the post and was well initiated into the amenities of garrison life. For Major Joseph Plympton, then the commanding officer, he had special esteem, but he also met during his sojourn such transient celebrities as Jack Fraser, the half-breed, and the well-known nimrod, Captain Martin Scott, of whose exploits he has left a long account in his diary. Indeed his picture of Fort Snelling in 1838 is rather a pleasant one:

Fort Snelling is well built, and beautifully situated: as usual, I found the officers gentlemanlike, intelligent, and hospitable; and, together with their wives and families, the society was the most agreeable that I became acquainted with in America. They are better supplied here than either at Fort Crawford or Fort Winnebago, having a fine stock of cattle on the prairie, and an extensive garden cultivated for the use of the garrison.¹²

Marryat found that the principal amusement of the fort was the chase; game, of course, was plentiful and within easy reach and the officers were well supplied with good dogs.

The captain concluded his account of his Minnesota visit

¹⁰ *Diary*, 2:113-115, 117.

¹¹ Lawrence Taliaferro, "Auto-biography," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:240.

¹² *Diary*, 2:92-94, 101-112.

with a discussion of the arms and appearance of the Sioux brave and of the strange division of labor which entailed upon the woman all the duties of cleaning and preparing game, cutting fuel, and moving the lodge. He commented on the great accuracy and power of the Indian archers and claimed that one celebrated chief had actually killed two buffalo with one arrow. The physical perfection of the red men also impressed him, although he thought that in proportion to their bodies their arms were small and slight. Finally, on leaving St. Peter's, he again remarked on the fine qualities of the Sioux and declared that, considering humanity as a mass, the Indians were "the most perfect gentlemen in America."¹³

Exactly when Marryat left Minnesota is uncertain. By early July, however, he was in St. Louis, as in a speech which he made later at Cincinnati he referred to his presence in the Missouri metropolis on July 4 and to a demonstration in which he saw himself paraded in effigy with a halter around his neck. Obviously he departed before he had originally planned to leave, since in a letter to Sibley, written from Lac qui Parle several weeks after the captain reached St. Louis, John C. Frémont refers to Marryat and alludes to a contemplated excursion into the Sioux country in which Marryat was to have been accompanied among others by Sibley and Captain Scott. The letter has an interesting sidelight, too, in that Frémont intimates that Marryat may have had the desire to emulate Cooper and to write a narrative of the West based on his own experiences.¹⁴

As the recipient of many kindnesses during his stay of about a fortnight, however, Marryat was not ungrateful and he spoke sincerely of "my kind host, Mr. Sibley" and of his pleasant stay at the factor's house. There are, more-

¹³ *Diary*, 2: 122, 123, 125.

¹⁴ Marryat, *Life and Letters*, 2: 47; Marryat to Sibley, July 6, 1838; Frémont to Sibley, July 16, 1838, Sibley Papers.

over, at least two letters extant in which he sent his regards to Sibley and discussed the fulfillment of one or two commissions with which he had been burdened. The first, written apparently shortly after his arrival in St. Louis, reads as follows:

ST. LOUIS July 6th/38

MY DEAR SIBLEY

I have procured you the *Kreosote* [*whisky*] in this town I send it to you by mail through Dousman that you may not be without it. No news here, except that they hanged me on the 4th of July, but that appears to be my fate as I go along I am waiting here for a day or two to see if the Antelope will return — after which I go on to Philadelphia. I will write again by then — of course you know that the treaty is ratified & the Palmyra has the goods. Commend me to Major Plympton, Smith [*ms. illegible*]

Ever yours in haste

F MARRYAT

What an Awful pen!¹⁵

Almost four months later Marryat again wrote to Sibley, probably the last time that he corresponded with any resident of Minnesota. The letter, dated at Philadelphia on November 4, 1838, informed his erstwhile host that his own plans had been disrupted because of the pertinacity with which the Southerners had attacked him. He wrote that he had been corresponding with the American Fur Company at St. Louis and that the agent there had promised him to get "some skins & other things worth having that might arrive by the Antelope." He instructed Sibley to

¹⁵ *Diary*, 2:125. The letter is in the Sibley Papers. The reference to being hanged in effigy suggests that Marryat had not yet lived down the unpopularity which was his portion after he participated in the suppression of the Canadian insurrection late in 1837. As a result of public utterances in which he praised the English attack on and burning of the American vessel "Caroline," he was condemned throughout the land and his books were publicly burned in several places, including Detroit. See Bader, in *Michigan History Magazine*, 20:170-175. The treaties negotiated with the Sioux and the Chippewa in 1837, by which the large delta between the St. Croix and the Mississippi became white man's country, were ratified by the Senate on June 15, 1838, and are referred to by Marryat as "the treaty." See William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:160 (St. Paul, 1921). The "Antelope" and the "Palmyra" were river steamboats, the first owned by the American Fur Company.

keep whatever curios he had picked up for Marryat until a good opportunity of remitting them came along.¹⁶ Furthermore, the captain commented on the rancor borne him by the natives of the Ohio Valley and "how anxious they were to *lynch me*." Perhaps it was for this reason that he told Sibley that he had made a small collection of bowie knives! Alluding to his friends at Fort Snelling, Marryat asserted that he had written to Captain Scott but had received no answer, and then informed Sibley that he had procured a set of De Tocqueville which he was sending back to St. Peter's. The letter concludes: "Remember me to Major Plympton & family Capt Scott Smith & all the rest. I am very sorry that I stand no better chance of seeing you again—but who knows?"¹⁷ Before his signature Marryat gave his London address. There is no record that any of his Minnesota acquaintances ever used it. For although Marryat left St. Peter's feeling apparently that he had had a pleasant sojourn and that he carried away with him the sincere good wishes of his hosts, there is no doubt at all of the opinion entertained of him by the men who had associated with the captain. In fact their unanimity of impression is striking.

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who had been Marryat's host at Mackinac in the summer of 1837, described the Englishman as one of Smollett's sea captains, "a perfect sea urchin, ugly, rough, ill-mannered, and conceited beyond all bounds." Schoolcraft had gone to considerable trouble to show his guest the beauties of the island and as a result had seen a great deal of Marryat. To the famous scientist and explorer Marryat's "manners and style of conversation ap-

¹⁶ Marryat took back to London with him various curiosities, some of which caused a mild sensation. As his biographer remarked, "the bowie-knives were harmless enough, but the skins with which his rooms were literally hung, the chairs covered, and the floors carpeted, were very much the contrary. They had never been properly dressed, and, in plain English, they were *tenanted*, and strongly required a visit to the furrier." Marryat, *Life and Letters*, 2:79.

¹⁷ Sibley Papers.

peared to be those of a sailor, and such as we should look for in his own Peter Simple." The captain seemed obtuse, ill-informed, and uncommonly disputatious.¹⁸ Somewhat the same view was expressed by Major Taliaferro who, as we have seen, was infuriated by Marryat's disregard for convention and common decency in his intercourse with the Sioux. To the distinguished Indian agent at St. Peter's, Marryat was "a rough, self-conceited John Bull," and the implication in the portrait is that the territory was far better off with the departure of "Snarleygow or the Dog Fiend" or, rather, its author.¹⁹ Finally, there is the verdict of Sibley, who had perhaps the best opportunity, through constant association with his English visitor, to judge the man. Marryat, he said, was his guest at Mendota for several weeks.

He had little of the gentleman either in his manners or appearance, nor can reliance be placed upon his statements of facts in his printed works. Like Featherstonhaugh, he was a thorough aristocrat in feeling, and like him, he manifested anything but friendship for the United States and its institutions.²⁰

It is obvious that Marryat made a distinctly unfavorable impression during his visit to the Northwest. Not only was he a literary celebrity who had not been lionized in the way he had expected, but the limitations of his own temperament were such as to irritate almost everyone with whom he came in contact. Marryat had entered the navy as a lad desperately in need of discipline. He found the school of experience a hard one and one not calculated to refine what was by nature rough and coarse. Furthermore, the navy in his day was the navy depicted by Melville and Dana, with flogging and hard drinking alike rampant. Marryat worked his way up through the ranks to the position of captain, no

¹⁸ Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, 562-564 (Philadelphia, 1851).

¹⁹ Taliaferro, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6:240.

²⁰ Henry H. Sibley, "Reminiscences, Historical and Personal," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 1:482.

mean achievement for one with his antecedents. But, like his own Midshipman Easy, he remained essentially what he was at the beginning, truculent, opinionated, invariably convinced of his own knowledge and position.

Hardest of all for his associates to stomach, perhaps, was his calm assumption that aristocracy was *ipso facto* superior to democracy and that Americans were little more than prodigal children who had deserted the maternal home. For although Marryat professed himself to be impartially interested in the workings of the democratic system, he was constantly comparing and contrasting institutions to the inevitable disadvantage of the United States. Thus, after careful analysis he found that American schools and American legislative bodies, American police and American architecture, were definitely inferior to their English counterparts. The surprising thing is that in his famous *Diary* he repressed any great display of hostility or resentment for the undoubted slights he had suffered, but instead maintained throughout a tone of remarkable good nature.

Minnesota has had many foreign visitors, from Groseillers to Hugh Walpole, but it is doubtful if any one of them had so rough and vigorous a personality as that of Captain Frederick Marryat. The mere fact that he rubbed such honest and blunt men as Taliaferro and Sibley the wrong way adds an element of interest to his reminiscences. It is a pity that he was not allowed to penetrate farther than Fort Snelling. A novel about the Sioux in the style of Marryat's sea narrative embroidered with his cherished puns would indeed be something to add to the literature of the Northwest.

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