



Quelle

Rezension der „Encyclopedia Americana“, in: *New-England Magazine* Vol. 2, Issue 5, May 1832, S. 438–440¹

On former occasions we have expressed our approbation of the plan of this popular work, and our satisfaction with the general execution. The present volume, just issued from the press, contains, among the additions by the American editors, biographical notices of James Monroe, Gen. Richard Montgomery, Gen. Daniel Morgan, William Morgan, Robert Morris, Gouverneur Morris, Gen. William Moultrie, William Vans Murray, James Otis, Robert Treat Paine, Theophilus Parsons, and C.W. Peale (the founder of the Philadelphia Museum.) It is to be regretted that the department of American Biography presents generally only a few meager details. We are aware it may be replied, that elaborate and minute details are inconsistent with the plan, and are unavoidably excluded by the prescribed limits of the work; but, we rejoin and say, that the work is overloaded with exceedingly uninteresting and tiresome particulars in the lives of many Europeans – persons who possessed very little claim to remembrance on account of any peculiar excellence or deformity of character, and, to American readers, for whom the present work is expressly intended, they are, of all subjects the most indifferent. Thus, Montgomery, the hero of an American War, occupies about a third as much space as Paganini, the wonderful Genoese fiddler. (By the way, this American addition to the German original ought to have been accompanied by Mr. Heinrich's representation of Paganini's incantation, as a frontispiece.) So, to those eminent lawyers, Robert Treat Paine and Theophilus Parsons, less than a page each is assigned, while more than four times that space is allowed to the Duke of Otranto, [Who is the Duke of Otranto? What's he to an American reading and working population? or they to him?] and various individuals of the Royal House of Orleans, of all of whom American readers care little or nothing. What is it to us, that such persons ever existed as hundreds and thousands that figure in English Encyclopedias and Biographical Dictionaries? Not even their names do we meet in any other work, and conjecture would be puzzled to assign any reason why they are placed here.

We were a little surprised to perceive that no notice is taken in this department of the present volume of two clergymen, who, not many years since, filled a large space in the public vision – the Rev. Jedidiah Morse of Charlestown, and the Rev. John Murray of Boston. The former was a most industrious compiler of books in history and geography; and, notwithstanding the more profitable labors of his successors have in some measure obscured his fame, at least one generation of Americans have been under obligations of no trifling amount to his exertions. The latter was the founder (we presume it is not assuming too much to say it) of the religious sect of Universalists – a sect that is daily and hourly increasing. He was a man of respectable and varied talents – a scholar, and an eloquent and powerful preacher – and if the last named attributes were not so peculiarly his as to entitle his name to be recorded in our American Encyclopedia, the circumstance of his being the first man who ventured to preach and advocate publicly the doctrines now so widely dispersed, and accepted by so many thousands of Christians, one would suppose would have been sufficient to claim a notice. The Universalists of America probably think themselves as important and respectable a sect, as the Muggletonians of England, and Murray as celebrated a man as Muggleton.

In running our eye over the names of persons distinguished by a notice in this volume, it was arrested by one of great fame – i.e. a name which every body has heard, – but as to the individual

¹ Die Rezension bezieht sich auf: *Encyclopaedia Americana*, a popular Dictionary of arts, sciences, literature, history, politics and biography. On the basis of the 7th edition of the German Conversations-Lexikon, hg. von Francis Lieber, 13 Bde., Philadelphia 1829–1832. Transkription durch Anne Lammers (Themenportal Europäische Geschichte).

who once owned it, we apprehend few readers ever knew an thing of him beyond what they may have read, in his own book of travels, when they were of an age to wonder at his wonderful exploits. We transcribe this article for the amusement and instruction of such of our readers as may not see the Encyclopedia – not doubting that the account is authentic.

Munchhausen, Jerome Charles Frederic von, the original of the well-known narrator of wonders, was a German officer who served several campaigns against the Turks in the Russian service. He was a passionate lover of horses and hounds; of which, and of his adventures among the Turks, he told the most extravagant stories; and his fancy finally so completely got the better of his memory, that he really believed his most improbable and impossible fictions, and was very much offended if any doubt was expressed on the subject. In relating these monstrous lies, his eyes would shine and start out of his head, his face became flushed, the seat rolled down from his forehead and he used the most violent gestures, as if he were really cutting off the heads of Turks, or fighting the bears and wolves that figure in his stories. Having become acquainted with the poet Burger at Pymont, and being pleased with his society, Munchhausen used to relate those waking dreams to him; and the poet afterwards published them, with his own improvements, under the title of *Wunderbare Abenteuer und Reisen des Herrn Von Munchhausen*, translated from the English, London (Gottingen,) 1787. A part of them had already appeared in the third volume of the *Deliciae Academicæ* (Heilbronn, 1665) under the title of *Mendacia Ridicula*. The wit and humor of the work gave it great success, and it was translated into several foreign languages. When it appeared in England, the British reviewers labored to show that it was satire upon the ministry. Munchhausen was very angry at the liberty thus taken with his name, and Burger became involved in some difficulties in the consequence. An enlarged edition was published by Schnorr, in four volumes (Gottingen, 1794-1800.) Munchhausen, when quite advanced, married a very young wife, who, to the astonishment of every one, presented him with a son, the consequence of which was a suit prosecuted by his relations after his death, in 1797, in support of their claims to his estate.

We are glad to perceive, that the compilers have taken great pains to improve other departments of the work. The statistical facts that are placed under the heads of the several states in our Union, are of great value, and must have been procured, in some cases, at much expense of time and labor. We notice in the present volume a very interesting and satisfactory account of the state of New-York, and it causes some regret that the descriptions of other states are not equally copious.

The article on the Netherlands comprises a great mass of information, which, at the present time, is peculiarly acceptable and interesting; and much will be expected from the sequel to this article, which is promised in the concluding volume of the work.

We have observed, that the editors, in their zeal to bring every thing (at least every thing American) within the shortest possible limits, occasionally epitomize rather more than is justifiable, if they wish to be distinctly understood. Thus, of the Palmetto, it is said – “Before the leaves are developed, they are folded like a fan; at their base, and in the centre of the stem, are three or four ounces of a white, compact and tender substance, which is eaten with oil and vinegar, and somewhat resembles the cabbage in taste, but is neither nutritious, nor peculiarly agreeable, and, moreover, is attended with the destruction of a vegetable, which has, perhaps, been a century in growing.” What is it, that is attended with the destruction of a vegetable? The “white, compact, and tender substance?” The writer says so, but we apprehend that he does not mean so. We mention *this* an illustration of our general remark at the beginning of this paragraph, because it is the last occurrence of objectionable obscurity (not to say absurdity) in composition, that we have observed. Similar errors have been noticed in former volumes.

We think there is another mistake committed by the editors. The work professes to adapt itself to popular wants and to common understandings, and to be prepared peculiarly with a view to the accommodation of those classes of the community which are not *scholars*, in the technical acceptance of that term. It should then be encumbered with as few technical and foreign words as possible. But in many of the articles such words are used to an extent that is almost ludicrous, and renders the description of an ordinary and well-known object nearly unintelligible. Take, for an example, the following: - “The root is biennial and fleshy; the stem herbaceous, upright, striated, rigid

and branching; the leaves pinnate, alternate, and sheathing at the base, composed of oval, slightly lobed, and incised leaflets.” Could any reader but a professor of botany, suppose that this was a description of that common esculent vegetable, a PARSNIP? or “*Parsnep*”, as it is spelled in the Encyclopedia. Take another example. “The leaves are alternate, simple, either entire, or more commonly, incised, or lobed. The flowers are monoecious, inconspicuous, and the sterile ones are disposed in loose aments. The fruit consists of an ovoid nut, included at base by [in?] the cup-shaped, persistent involucre.” This may be an accurate *scientific* description; but would one reader in ten for whom this work is intended, – and to whom the publishers look for remuneration for their great outlay of capital – conjecture that such a congregation of hard words describe the foliage and fruit of no rarer a vegetable than a *common oak tree*? There is an abundance of this sort of matter in the Encyclopedia, that we feel obliged to confess, (shame on our ignorance!) looks very much like quackery. While we are engaged in the small business of picking up small faults, we observe in the page from which the last quotation was taken, the words “fifteenth,” and “pinnatifid,” which we presume are the property of the proof-reader.

The Encyclopedia is susceptible of much improvement in the mode of arranging the subjects, as any one, who examines it, may perceive. Let him look for information on a given subject, and ten chances to one he does not find it; but the chances are equally numerous that, in looking for something else the next day or the next week, he stumbles upon the very thing he first sought for in vain.

After all, these imperfections, though they might have been avoided, lessen the value of the work but little in comparison with the advantages that may result from the diffusion of so great an aggregate of information and knowledge at so cheap a rate.

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Auf diese Quelle bezieht sich ein einführender und erläuternder Essay von Prodöhl, Ines: Die "Encyclopedia Americana" und die Crux transnationaler Enzyklopädien. In: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte (2011), URL: <<http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2011/Article=509>>.