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PHILIP FRENEAU AT SEVENTY

By LEWIS LEARY

Among the numerous files of old American newspapers owned by the Rutgers Library that of the New Brunswick Fredonian is one of the most rare. For the eighteen-twenties, indeed, only the file of the Library of Congress can approach that of Rutgers for completeness, and even it lacks a few numbers. Consequently when following the scent of uncollected poems by Philip Freneau, the poet of the Revolution and a resident of Monmouth County, New Jersey, Mr. Lewis Leary, himself a graduate of the University of Vermont and now teaching at the University of Miami but whose father was the Rev. Lewis G. Leary, Rutgers 1897, came to New Brunswick to search through the Fredonian for Freneau items. He found several hitherto unrecognized poems by Freneau, and he also found a number of books which had belonged to the poet and which bear his autograph. In the following article Mr. Leary makes accessible to modern students of American literature these uncollected poems.

WHEN Philip Freneau's home at Mount Pleasant, New Jersey, burned to the ground on the afternoon of October 18, 1818, many of his manuscripts and most of his books were apparently consumed by the fire. Among the few volumes which have survived from his library is a copy of the *Miscellanies for Sentimentalists*¹ which, published by Robert Bell of Philadelphia in 1778, included the first printing of the poet's "American Independence, an Everlasting Deliverance

¹ Rutgers University Library.

Philip Freneau

A M E R I C A N 1778.

INDEPENDENCE,

AN EVERLASTING

DELIVERANCE

FROM

BRITISH TYRANNY.

A P O E M.

By PHILIP F——, Author of the American Village,
Voyage to Bolton, &c.

I could a Tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy Soul, freeze thy young blood;
Make thy two Eyes, like Stars, start from their Spheres;
Thy knotty and combined Locks to part,
And each particular Hair to stand on End
Like Quills upon the fretful Porcupine!

SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET.

P H I L A D E L P H I A :

PRINTED, BY ROBERT BELL, IN THIRD-STREET.

M DCC LXXVIII.

from British Tyranny." (See *frontispiece*.) On the flyleaf of the volume is inscribed:

Philip Freneau
his Book
A present from Mr. Rob. Bell
Philadelphia
1778

Freneau was a hard user of books. The margins and blank pages of this volume, which he owned for more than fifty years, are filled with notes and jottings, some appreciative of the contents of the *Miscellanies*, others having to do with more personal matters, family affairs and his financial difficulties during his poverty-ridden later years. To the student of American poetry, however, the most interesting portion of the volume is the inside front cover. There, in Freneau's own handwriting, are found six fragmentary quatrains of an unfinished poem. The subject is the Erie canal:

To make this object all complete,
Before they make two oceans meet
By human powers to accomplish all
What rocks must Yield, what forests fall

From Eries Lake to Hudsons Stream
The Glorious task would endless Seem;
Vulgar
To (Fancy's)² Lanquors View it would dismay
At least two ages pass'd away

The Sons might see what sires began
Still unperform'd the Mighty plan,
The *unfinish'd* barque in durance held—impeded
By hills confined, by rocks repell'd

Thou prompter of this Great design
Clinton, be long honour thine.
seem'd to bar the way
When Nature, (with despotic sway)
Had fix'd her bound,—You (forced your way)
checked her sway.

² The words in parentheses have been deleted with a penstroke in the manuscript.

Not Chinas wall, the vast & strong
 500 Leagues it towers along,
 Not Chinas wall tho, stretching far
 With this (great purpose) can compare.
 vast object

For commerce here expands her sail
 And distant climes these waters hail
 As wafting to (long waters) Manhattans shore
 The products that their harvests bore.

Students of Freneau will remember that on May 14, 1822, the poet, seventy years old, wrote to Dr. John W. Francis, of New York, to suggest that the doctor see what he could do about circulating proposals for "a new, correct, and elegant edition of the Poems and Miscellanies of Philip Freneau."³ The plan for a new edition never materialized, and nothing further is heard of it. But Freneau evidently had a batch of unpublished poems on hand. If they could not be printed in a new collected edition, he would send them to the newspapers. So, on August 8, 1822, "Stanzas on the Great Western Canal of the State of New York" appeared in the New Brunswick *Fredonian*. They were signed "F," and contained the lines which Freneau had written upon the inside cover of his copy of the *Miscellanies for Sentimentalists*. This was probably one of the last poems that Philip Freneau composed. He begins with a quotation from Horace:

*Meliusne sylvas ire per longas
 Fuit, an recentes carpere undas?*
 —Horace.

i.e. which was best—to travel through tedious,
 dreary forests, or to sail on these recent waters?

The nation true to honor's cause,
 To *equal rights* and *equal laws*,
 Is well secured, and well released
 From the proud monarchs of the east.

Thus *Holland* rose from *Spain's* controul,
 And thus shall rise from pole to pole
 Those systems formed on reason's plan
 That vindicate the *Rights of man*.—

³ Charles F. Heartman, *Unpublished Freneauana* (New York, 1918), pp. 20-21.

Nature, herself, will change her face,
 And arts fond arms the world embrace;
 In works of peace mankind engage,
 And close the despot's iron age.

And *here* behold a work progress,
 Advancing through the wilderness,
 A work, so recently began,
 Where Liberty enlightens man:
 Her powerful voice, at length, awakes
 Imprisoned seas and bounded lakes.

The great idea to pursue,
To lead the veins the system through;
 Such glorious toils to emulate,
 Should be the task of every *State*.

From *Erie's* shores to *Hudson's* stream
 The unrivalled work would endless seem;
 Would *millions* for the work demand,
 And half depopulate the land.

To *Fancy's* view, what years must run,
 What ages, till the task is done!
 Even *truth*, severe would seem to say,
One hundred years must pass away:—

The sons might see what sires began,
 Still unperformed the mighty plan,
 The impeded barque, in durance held,
 By hills confined, by rocks repelled.—

Not *China's* wall, though grand and strong,
 Five hundred leagues it towers along,
 No *China's* wall, though stretching far,
 With this vast object can compare,⁴

With such gigantic works of old
 This proud *Canal* may be enrolled,
 Which to our use no tyrant gave
Nor owes its grandeur to one Slave.—

If kings their object tribes compell'd
 With toil immense, such walls to build,
 A *new Republic* in the west
 (A great example to the rest)

⁴This line appears in the *Fredonian*: "Which this vast abject. . ." In this, and in other obvious cases of misprinting, I have made corrections.

Can seas unite, and *here* will shew
What Freedom's nervous sons can do.

See Commerce *here* expand her sail,
And distant shores those waters hail,
As wafting to Manhattan's coast
The products that new regions boast.

And hence our fleets transport their freights
To jealous kings and sister states,
And spread her fame from shore to shore,
Where suns ascend, or billows roar,

To make the purpose all complete,
Before they bid *two oceans* meet,
Before the task is finished all,
What rocks must yield, what forests fall?

Three years elapsed, behold it done!
A work from Nature's *chaos* won;
By hearts of oak and hands of toil
The Spade inverts the rugged soil
A work, that may remain secure
While suns exist and Moons endure.

With patient step I see them move
O'er many a plain, through many a grove;
Herculean strength disdains the sod
Where tigers ranged or *Mohawks* trod;
The powers that can the soil subdue
Will see the mighty project through.

Ye patrons of this bold design
Who *Erie* to the *Atlantic* join,
To you be every honour paid—
No time shall see your fame decayed:—
Through gloomy groves you traced the plan,
The rude abodes of savage man.

Ye Prompters of a work so vast
That may for years, for centuries last;
Where Nature toiled to bar the way
You mark'd her steps, but changed her sway.

Ye Artists, who, with skillful hand,
Conduct such rivers through the land,
Proceed!—and in your bold career
May every Plan as wise appear,

As *this*, which joins to *Hudson's* wave
 What Nature to *St. Lawrence* gave.⁵

During 1822 five other poems were contributed to the *Frederonian* over the pseudonym "F." The first, which had appeared on July 18, three weeks before the stanzas quoted above, was entitled "Stanzas Written on a visit to a field called, 'The military Ground,' about one mile and an half to the Southward of Newburg, in the county of Orange, State of New York, where the American army was disbanded by General Washington, nearly forty years ago." Philip Freneau's sister Margaret had married John Hunn, a merchant of New York, in 1788. Early in the nineteenth century the couple had moved to Newburgh, where Mr. Hunn became a prominent citizen and banker. It must have been upon a visit with the Hunns that the veteran poet, who had outlived many another soldier of the Revolution, was moved to these lines:

The Hills remain!—but scarce a man remains
 Of all, who once paraded on these lands,
 Yet the rough soil some vestiges retains
 Of camps, and crowds, and military bands.
 I mark, I trace a spot renowned in fame,
 And something, still, may Fancy's pencil claim.

Here walked the man, to live to distant times,
 Born, to a world its freedom to restore,
 While 'midst a war of rancour and of crimes,
 Fell at his feet the shafts of foreign power;
 And *they*, who trod this verge of Hudson's stream,
 Won all he wished, with duty, love, esteem.

To raise such scenes, pourtray such crimes again,
 To draw the picture of a land distressed,
 Another Gage should cross the *Atlantic* main,
 Another Navy float on *Hudson's* breast,
 Some new *Cornwallis* to the charge return,
Burgoyne arrive, and *Howe* for conquest burn.

Here flamed the fires that flash'd beyond the wave
 And struck with anguish, terror, and despair

⁵ On June 1st 1822 the canal had an uninterrupted navigation of two hundred and thirty eight miles. Then there remained to be finished, about 122 miles to Buffalo, at which place the canal will be connected with Lake Erie. The whole will be completed, it is said, by October 1825.—It is calculated it will then produce an annual revenue of ten millions of dollars! A sum almost exceeding credibility and transcending the most reasonable computation—as well as sanguine expectation. (*Freneau's note.*)

The *Cbiefs* who little to their monarch gave
 But sky built castles, and the brow of care:
Manbattan's island saw their rise and fall,
 To dine on wormwood, and to sup on gall.

Ambition's aims, with hateful avarice join'd
 Would worlds subdue, if worlds could yet be found,
 Bend to one Yoke the myriads of mankind
 Debase their tribes, & chain them to the ground:
 To *such* the muse her offerings will disdain,
 Nor shall they live in her celestial strain.

This vision, life!—how cheerly, once, was trod
 This glittering field, when all was mirth and glee,
 Their views accomplished, and their fame abroad,
 And *Patriots*, still, though curs'd with *Poverty*.
 Naught are they now—all decomposed to clay,
 Or wrecks of men, and hastening to decay.

The vulture screams!—approaching night I see,
 This scene of Soldiers soon will be concealed,
 Where, once, perhaps, they met at yonder tree,
 Where, once, no doubt, my friend, like us they smiled
 To think that *George*, the terror of mankind,
 Here, to another *George* a world resign'd.

In the same issue of the *Fredonian*, the aged Freneau, beaten down by poverty, with few of the plans which he had made years before as a wide-eyed young poet having been realized, looked forward contentedly to death in lines which he called "Philosophical Fortitude":

Though Vice and Folly dread that final day
 Which takes us from this dying world away,
 Yet no weak fears of mingling with the dust
 Alarm the Virtuous or disturb the Just;
 Let systems fail, or systems be restored,
 Still, active Virtue meets a due reward.—
 Though Vice and Folly dread that debt to pay
 Required by Nature on the funeral day,
 Yet conscious goodness soars above the clod
 And life, well spent, secures the path to God.

The Wise at Nature's Laws will ne'er repine,
 Nor think to scan, or mend the grand design.
 Ills from ourselves, and not from Nature flow,
 And true Religion never leads to woe:

What Nature gives, receive—her laws obey,
If you must die to morrow, live to day:
 'Tis ours to improve this life, not ours to know
 From whence this *meteor* comes, or where shall go,
 This *mind*, this *spark*, that animates our frame,
 Directs, impels, and still remains the same.—
 As o'er some fen, when heaven is wrapt in night,
 An *ignus fatuus* waves its trembling light;
 Now up, now down, the mimic taper plays,
 As varying winds affect the trembling blaze;
 Soon the light phantom spends its magic store,
 Dies into darkness, and is seen no more:
 Thus flows our life! but is that life secure?—
 Heaven trusts no mortal's fortune in his power,
 Nor serve those prayers, importunate, we send,
 To alter *fate* or *Providence* to mend;
 As well in *Judgement* as in *mercy* kind,
 Heaven hath, for both, the fittest state designed,
 The *fools* on life, the *wise*, on death depend,
 Waiting, with sweet reverse, their toils to end;
 Quit the vain scene, where few have found or know
 The first grand purpose—*why we live below.*

The *Fredonian* of June 27, 1822, had contained a melancholy account of the wreck of the packet *Albion* several weeks before. Among the victims of the disaster had been General Lefevre Denouette, who, after the battle of Waterloo, had been forced to seek shelter in the United States from his political enemies in France. He had remained in America for six years. His wife and two children were in Europe. They made two attempts to join him in his exile, but each time were frustrated. Finally, Denouette, unable to bear separation longer, had determined to return to his native country and to throw himself upon the mercy of the King. He had sailed with the *Albion*, and lost his life in the disaster which overcame her. This was just the sort of sentimental story that had always touched Freneau deeply. On July 25, again over the pseudonym "F," he contributed "Stanzas On General Lefevre Denouette, who perished in the wreck of the ALBION, April 22d, 1822," to the *Fredonian*:

When the proud ALBION struck the fatal reef
 Where pitying crowds could yield her no relief,
 With *those*, to friendship, friends, and country lost,
Lefevre perished on that iron coast,

Where cliffs, tremendous, swept by many a gale,
Mark the rude entrance of thy port, *Kinsale*.

Fortune, to some in clouds and glooms arrayed
Paints Life's career with one unmingled shade,
No smiles, no ray of Sunshine through the gloom
Alleviates pain, or mitigates their doom;

Shade follows shade, to disconcert the *man*,
And the dark circle ends as it began.

Such was thy lot, Lefevre, such thy fate,
Napoleon's favorite at no distant date;
Such was thy doom!—"inglorious some would say
"Better in dungeons to have pined away,
"Better in arms to find an honored grave
"Than sink, unnoticed, in the briny wave."

They speak not so, who drink at wisdom's spring,
Their cool reflection says a different thing:
When the great author of our life decrees
The final hour, and seals our destinies,
Alike to HIM—*they* equal honor claim
Who sink in oceans or in fields of fame.

But still, we hold Lefevre's doom severe,
Almost in view of all he held most dear;
With joy returning to a wife adored,
An infant offspring, country, friends restored,
Just in the hour when all his hopes ran high
Just on the verge of France—fate bade him die!

Twice had his *consort* sought *Columbia's* shore,
To meet the man she early loved, once more;
Twice ruthless tempests made the ships a wreck,
And to her native Europe forced her back;
While he, an Exile on our western waste
Her long lost image in his dreams embraced.

Sighed as he toil'd, and gazed from day to day,
In Fancy's visions o'er the watery way:
Her wish'd arrival every toil endured.
For *her* he ploughed the soil, the forest cleared;
For *her*, the solace of his six year's pain,
Whom heaven had doomed him—not to meet again!

Oh! hadst thou stayed in *Alabama's* waste
And her dear form in Fancy's dreams embraced,
Hope still had beamed upon thy night of gloom;
Exile was better than a *watery tomb*—

*Now every hope, to cheer the mind is fled,
For one is wretched, and the other dead!*

On September 12, 1822, "Lines written for a lad of about eight years of age, who almost miraculously, escaped the bite of an uncommonly large rattle snake," appeared in the *Frederonian* over the initial "F." This was not a recently written poem. It had been contributed to the *New York Weekly Museum* six years before, on September 7, 1816, signed "P. F." One interested in the natural history of New Jersey may be surprised to learn that the snake from whose bite the boy was so fortunately delivered was said to have measured more than thirteen feet! The stanzas which Freneau wrote were limned with a simple sincerity:

Eternal praise to thee, my God,
Who guards me when the danger's nigh,
Preventing all my steps abroad
From lighting on the Serpent sly.

How near was I to death's cold shade
When the other step had been my last;
But *thou* art still my friendly aid
Both for the present and the past.

When wandering through the desert gloom
No thought, had I of *death so near*;
No thought, in youths progressing bloom
That life was just concluding here:

Or, had thy wisdom so decreed,
That his curs'd head should bruise my heel,
And, for my sins, that I should bleed,
Thy Judgment had been righteous still.

The subtile poison through each vein,
Had then thy Godlike image foil'd,
And through excess of rage and pain
Faint nature had in death recoil'd.—

Since God of me hath mindful been,
To guard me from the treacherous foe,
My endless praises he shall win
And all the world his mercies know.

Finally, on December 5, "F," from Long Branch, New Jersey, contributed a versified "Answer to a letter of despondency from an Invalid in the North." His correspondent may have been his sister Margaret, now sixty-one years old, or his unmarried sister Mary, sixty-eight, who had been living in Newburgh with the Hunns for many years. Freneau's "Answer" was in doggerel, but the playful wit and good natured pleasantry which seem to have characterized the poet in all his personal relations were still apparent. They were brave stanzas for the little veteran from Monmouth to have written:

Few words are best—the wind blows cold,
 Christmas, they say, will soon be here:
 This truth the *Almanacks* foretold,
 Whose sage predictions last—a year.

What need I say?—can I forget
 Your doleful letter came by post,
 By which I learn, with much regret,
 You are the next thing to a ghost.

No longer bound to distant lands,
 Pursuing wealth, to lose repose,
 To the bleak winds, from barren sands
 I give the story of your woes.

The aching heart and trembling hand
 Too plainly mark your gloomy page,
 That gives your friend to understand
 Your time grows short upon our stage.

If gout's attack, or frosts prevail,
 Still flows for you, the Mineral Spring,
 That may in time, though doctors fail,
 A renovated system bring.

The northern geese have winged their way,
 To feast a while at *Pontchartrain*,⁶
 Each lengthening night, and shortening day
 To some give pleasure, others pain.

On tortured nerves, your withered frame,
 Have palsies made such rude attacks?
 So thin you grow, I almost dream
 Wild-geese might bring you on their backs.

⁶ A large lake in West Florida, much frequented by Geese, and other wild fowl, in the winter season. (*Freneau's note.*)

Throughout this interval of time,
 While torpid nature takes her rest,
 Each claims the right, without a crime,
 To act the part that suits him best.

The storm upon the mountain's brow,
 To some affords supreme delight;
 Others contrive, they best know how,
 To spend the day, or cheat the night.

If in this whirligig of things,
 When states decline, or empires fail,
 You ask, while chained to Ballstown springs,
 What news from England by the mail?

All I can tell you may have read
 Five hundred times in public print;
 Stale news—how Britain's queen is dead,
 Divorced from hearts as hard as flint.

How George the fourth has Ireland seen,
 And drank his glass with honest *Teague*,
 Has dined, perhaps, at *Aberdeen*,
 And with Scotch lassies held intrigue.

In wedlock some have joined their hands,
 Another race appears of course;
 While some regret its tiresome bands
 And tease our statesmen for divorce.

That some are hang'd I scarce need say,
 And much, no doubt, against their will;
 Others are in a likely way,
 Next year, to turn the Treading Mill.

The world of news, should I detail,
 I must transmit a long Gazette;
 Your patience and your eyes would fail
 To read it half—and half forget.

Your blood yet flows in youthful veins;
 Forsake the springs, while yet you can,
 Trod mountain roads, and rough domains,
 And be, once more, the active man.

The *spleen* is half your sad complaint:
 Be off—reject the nauseous draft,

Which many a sinner, many a saint
Have quaff'd, and curs'd it while they quaff'd.

What can be done—what yet remains?—
Rouse up your spirits—and if here
You choose to meet on *Skrewsbury* plains
Your friend—sound cyder—and strong beer.

Vast seas in sight; great news shall tell;
Who can their utmost depths explore?
Who views their foam, and does not feel
Constrained their Author to adore!

Advance!—a welcome frank and kind
The *Friends* will give—nor much the worse
If, with what else you bring, they find
A generous heart—and weighty Purse.

It may not be fair to the younger Philip Freneau who sang his heart out in fervid patriotism during the American Revolution and who, when the war was over, composed poems like "The Wild Honey Suckle" and "The Indian Burying Ground" which remain at the head of any catalog of American song, to reprint these later verses which have been hidden in an old New Brunswick newspaper. But there is something fine about the old poet who, though his lyre was broken and the strings out of tune, still made new songs. Another generation of poets had risen in New York and Philadelphia. New England was soon to send a pulsing stream of prose and poetry coursing through America. Most of Freneau's contemporaries were dead. When he made an infrequent visit to New York, he was noticed as a curious old-fashioned character who still wore small clothes, but whose deep-set eyes flashed brightly and whose erect carriage belied his seventy years. In Monmouth he was forced to work upon the public roads in order to pay his taxes. Within a year he was to see the first of his acres at Mount Pleasant sold at public auction. The world had almost forgotten Freneau the poet. Philip Freneau, as a young man, wanted above all else to be the poet of America. He never succeeded. Yet he never stopped trying. It does not seem altogether unfitting that we, of a still later generation, should listen to his final courageous failures.