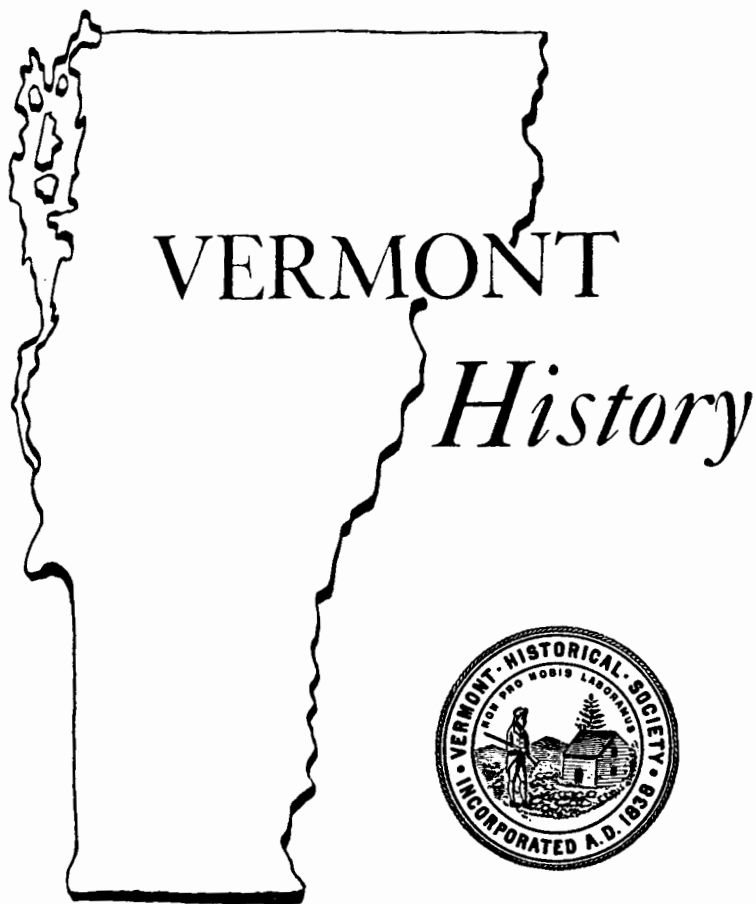


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“The diaries of these theatrical visitors to bygone Vermont confirm that actors can be superb observers of the human drama and its natural stage.”

As the Actors Saw Us: John Durang, John Bernard, and Tyrone Power on Vermonters and Their Neighbors

By GEORGE B. BRYAN

When the poet prayed for some power to grant us the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us, he doubtless did not consider itinerant actors as mirrors that could free us from blunders and foolish notions. Yet because the actor's trade requires him to be keenly observant of the foibles and follies of human behavior, he is delicately positioned to show us ourselves. Three important actors left their impressions of Vermont and Vermonters as they found them in 1797, 1808, and 1835. John Durang (1768-1822), the earliest, was a Pennsylvanian; the second, John Bernard (1756-1828), an Englishman; and the third, Tyrone Power (1797-1841), an Irishman. The diaries of these theatrical visitors to bygone Vermont confirm that actors can be superb observers of the human drama and its natural stage. With their eye for detail, their ear for authentic speech, and their penchant for the dramatic, performers sometimes leave records that are at the same time more precise and more evocative than many other travelers' tales.

On 19 July, 1797, John Durang, an established dramatic actor, dancer and equestrian clown, joined a circus troupe managed by John B. Ricketts on an expedition to Canada, where Ricketts hoped to find a large and appreciative audience. Six horses accompanied them: Cornplanter, Lady Washington, Merry Jacko, Governor, Silver Heels, and Little Boner. These were not ordinary horses; they were performers. For example, Cornplanter's trick was to jump over another horse which stood fourteen hands high (about fifty-six inches).¹ The other horses contributed to Ricketts' equestrian feats "such as throwing a somersault over 30 men's heads and over five horses with their mounted riders; he would also ride

two horses at full gallop and leap over a garter or ribbon 12 feet high”² Durang doubled as a trick rider and as a clown.

Ricketts hired a sloop to transport the company to Albany, New York. Arriving on 24 July, 1797, Ricketts went about the business of obtaining a license to perform in the town. Durang’s observations of the local inhabitants are colorful if not complimentary:

I found the people here unsociable and the town dull. I observed the common mass of woman [sic] go barefoot, married or single. The original inhabitants of this place were Hollanders. They speak broken English; the girls in particular you cannot understand. . . . They are in general homely and frightened when a stranger speaks to them, but time will reform and accomplish them. . . . I have seen more cripples and blind people in this town than any other I have been in. The sturgeon fish is a peculiar [sic] usual dish in this town, known by the name of Albany beef. I have seen the skins lay [sic] in the streets and the hogs feed on them.³

The company remained in Albany long enough to perform several times, and then Ricketts arranged to have the gear shipped to St. Jean, Québec. The company headed north by horseback on 14 August. At nine o’clock on 16 August, the troupe arrived in Vermont, where, according to Durang, “a dollar goes . . . for 6 shillings (or, as they call it, lawful money).”⁴

After stopping along the way to replace the shoe of one of the horses, the party arrived in Fair Haven, where at eleven o’clock it repaired to the inn of Charles Rice for a well-deserved breakfast. Rice, a native of Brookville, Massachusetts, had been a resident of Fair Haven since 1785; his wife was Abigail Cutter. An eccentric man, according to his neighbors, Rice painted above his doorway a strange greeting for travellers: Nothing on this side nothing on t’other; / Nothing in the house, nor in the stable either.⁵ As Durang tells the story of their encounter,

We ask’d the landlord to let us have some poultry. He said he had no other but turkeys in the field, if he could catch one. We told him we would lend a hand. The landlord and his son, Mr. Ricketts and myself, and two boys went in the field each with a stick to knock one down. After in about a half hour we met with a flock; they took to flight, we in pursuit. The turkeys took thro’ the town. Some of the neighbor [sic] began to assist; it alarmed the whole town. At last, we succeeded in catching one and Mr. Ricketts superintended the cooking of it with the landlady in the kitchen. . . .⁶

While the turkey was cooking, two local blacksmiths “overhauled and inspected” the horses’ hooves. Attracted by the presence of strangers, some of the natives dropped by to gape. In the kitchen the local doctor and Mrs. Rice paid court to Ricketts, who perplexed them with his tall tales. Breakfast finally appeared at two o’clock. A few hours among Vermonters convinced Durang that “the state of Vermont is settlet [sic] principally by Yankeys.”⁷



Although John Durang did not formally perform on a Vermont stage, this drawing suggests something of the diversity of his talent.

The company's next destination was Shoreham, a distance of what Durang calls "the longest miles I ever travelet [sic]."⁸ Passersby managed to confound the travelers by their indecisiveness and inquisitiveness:

If you ask'd anyone on the road how far it was to the next tavern, one would say it was 4 miles; meet the next, he say [sic] it was 6; none could tell. Sometimes they would first ask you, where do you come from? where are you going? what are you going to do with all them horses? and after that, they guess it must be about 5 miles yet. We never could get a direct answer from one. We where [were] benighted in the mountainous desert of Vermont.⁹

At nine o'clock they arrived at Shoreham at an inn run by Squire Amos Callender, who had come to Vermont in 1774 from Connecticut and managed "the most elegant [tavern] in this part of the country, the resort of pleasure parties from the towns around."¹⁰ The Spread Eagle, as the inn was called, carried the words "Liberty and Equality" over the doorway. Both the innkeeper and his wife were initially uncommunicative:

The esq'r appeared to be a man of few words for when he came to the door it was with difficulty to obtain a satisfactory answer from him. His wife came to the door with a candle and began to question

us, and made no effort to invite us into the house. By the reflection of the candle I read the motto over the door. I thought that a sufficient invitation; we instantly put on the air of consequence and entered Liberty Hall, ordered a good supper, and oats, hay, and bedding for the horses. In the meantime we called in a bottle of Medeira and Spanish segars. A great change took place; two daughters of the esq'r where [were] call'd out of bed to assist the mother in getting supper. The squire sat down with us and puff'd a segar and took a glass of wine with us. The table was set out in a handsome manner and served with a plenty of the best. He had the best liquors of all descriptions in his cellar. He has an extensive farm; every product is raised on his farm, their clothes of their own factory. In the morning we took a party snack to the satisfaction of both parties.¹¹

On the morning of 17 July, Durang, Ricketts, and their associates set out again. On the road they saw many black squirrels and "a half gray" eagle in the woods. After traveling eight miles, the company paused for breakfast at Chimney Point and admired the fortifications of Crown Point across the lake. At noon they began the trek toward Basin Harbor:

We got out of the right road 2 miles; we cut thro' a wood for shortness, but it was thro' mud and holes above the horses' knees. We whare [were] obliged to dismount and walk and let the horse [sic] pick their way. Ruin seem'd to threaten our horses."¹²

Their consternation must have been great because the loss of the horses meant financial disaster, not merely a lack of transportation.

Since the journey to Basin Harbor had been so tiring, Durang and his friends stayed there for the rest of the day and night. The groom was able to wash the weary horses in Lake Champlain while the others visited a tavern run by a man called Rogers:

When we approach'd the house Mrs. Rogers, an elderly lady, stood in the door smoking a Holland pipe of two feet long, her arms a kimbo [sic]. There majestic stood fix'd till we made our obedience to her, then with the dignity of independence, and air of politeness, usher'd us into a comfortable side room. In the meantime the landlady was preparing our dinner, the landlord furnish'd us with some good old port and Spanish segars. . . . While we sat at our wine we heard the family chasing [sic] geese for our dinner. We prevail'd on Mrs. Rogers to dress a goose extra to take on the road with us next day, a precaution necessary in this thin settled country, to take Time by the forelock and mend the bad roads by a good meal and short stages to save the horses.¹³

Soon afterwards Durang and his associates ended their stay in Vermont, for on the morning of 18 July the men boarded the ferry that bore them across a mile and three-quarters of Lake Champlain; the horses made the journey in a flat-bottomed boat. Traveling the rest of the way through New York, the company finally reached Canada, where it played a lengthy engagement. On 20 October Ricketts and his men embarked on the return



Itinerant circuses used horses not only as performers but also to transport members of the troupe and their belongings.

journey, accomplished this time entirely by boat. Durang never again set foot in Vermont—if his diary is to be believed.

Ricketts' Circus did not perform in Vermont. Its theatrical baggage had been sent on to Canada, so any unscheduled performances in Vermont would have been mounted without theatrical trappings. Ricketts perhaps thought, moreover, that Vermont's small and scattered population was not sufficient to warrant the effort of a makeshift presentation; after all, Burlington boasted only 815 people in 1800. Vermont continued to grow, however, and the peripatetic Timothy Dwight reported that 1,680 people resided in Burlington in 1810.¹⁴ As a result, the state began to appear attractive to performers.

English actor John Bernard played regularly in Boston and in 1808 mounted a tour to Vermont, which he described in his American memoir.¹⁵ Since travel was difficult and expensive, Bernard took along a reduced company and a small wardrobe. Mr. and Mrs. Bernard travelled

in a carriage, while Snelling Powell and his wife Elizabeth, Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson, Mr. Mallet, Mr. Morgan, and Mrs. Graupner followed in two additional conveyances. The repertory consisted of serious dramas and farces "cut down, condensed, and adapted."

Their first professional stop was at a tavern in Concord, N.H. (which Bernard mistook for Vermont), where they "met with but a poor reception from the genteel inhabitants and a much worse one from the lower order." Even before the performance began, the natives gathered outside the tavern and loudly villified the performers, first because they were actors, then because they were for the most part English. Memories of the War for Independence lingered on the frontier. The intrepid actors undertook to perform, probably in the taproom, but the commotion was so great that Powell was intimidated; his wife bravely continued her performance. Bernard tried to calm the rowdies by appealing to their humorous feelings, but the din only grew louder. Mallet, the musician, had lived through the tempests of the French Revolution, and he finally saved the day. Laying aside his instrument, Mallet walked to the window and asked what the mob wanted. According to Bernard, the following exchange then took place:

"Tarnation . . . why, we want none of your company, I guess; you are reg'lar British spies and mountebanks."

"Aha! vhat vas dat you say, sare? ve no mount on de back—no spy. Ve artistes de Théâtre from Boston."

"Are you British, squire?"

"No; I am von Frenchman."

Here a great murmur ran through the crowd.

"A Frenchman! a Frenchman!"

"Yes, I vas von Frenchman, sare, and I glory in the name of Frenchman, sare; I vas serve vid Napoleon in de battle of Marengo; and I vas know vat it vas to put one rascal to death that makes a noise outside of de vindow."¹⁶

This announcement, delivered with emphatic tone and menacing gesture, had the desired effect of daunting "the simple-witted though turbulent Vermonters." Having delivered himself of this threat, Mallet marched back to his chair, took up his fiddle, and resumed the performance, which this time received an attentive hearing.

Bernard next visited Walpole, "Vermont," where he noted "some oddities of manner" in the "inhabitants of Vermont, noted for their industry, their honesty, and their stationary character." Yet their behavior, he says, toward strangers and travelers can be decidedly odd, as an anecdote illustrates:

A Bostonian travelling through Vermont [was] overtaken by night on a lonely road, who at length saw a youngster some distance ahead, and apprehensive that he had mistaken his way, called out to the lad: "Jack! Jack! I want to know which is the way to Chesterfield?"

“How did you know my name was Jack?” responded the youth.

“Why, I guessed it,” replied the traveller.

“Oh, then you may guess your way to Chesterfield!”¹⁷

Having been warned of this prevalent attitude, Bernard took great care to get clear directions before setting out each morning. One day, however, he became lost and was actually headed back toward Boston. Along the road Bernard encountered a farmer busily chopping down a tree. The actor addressed the farmer, “My good friend, am I on the right road to Walpole?” “Yes,” answered the man, “you are on the right road; but I reckon you must turn your horse’s head or you’ll never get there!” At last the company reached the tavern at Walpole, where a performance brought no profit but paid for their lodging.

A cordial reception greeted them in Burlington. Bernard met some friends from Boston, with whom he shared a splendid day’s fishing on Lake Champlain. He met a farmer at an inn and accompanied him to view his homestead. After a several hours’ walk around the property, the farmer fed Bernard a real Vermont dinner consisting of pork and beans with molasses, sparkling cider, pumpkin pie, peaches and melons. All this was washed down with St. Croix rum. Bernard thought the farmer “a good sample of his class” who delighted in speaking of literature:

In the first place he informed me that he reckoned himself a tolerable good scholar, having been soundly instructed in the knowledge of those two instruments of literature—reading and writing, besides . . . arithmetic. Then he “always ’voted his evenin’s to readin’ and larnin’,” and besides the constant perusal of three books in his own possession, namely, the Bible, the almanac, and the dictionary, he took in a weekly paper and regularly rode over to Burlington once in a fortnight to see what there might be new and cleverish in the book-store. “Now,” he continued, “I’ve read Goldsmith’s ‘History of Rome;’ [sic] that’s rather a cute book, I reckon, and I like it much. And then there’s them volumes of Josephus—ha’n’t you never read them? they’re considerably well done, I think. And then there’s the Nat’ral History, Buchan’s ‘Med’cin,’ [sic] and Lindley Murray’s Grammar, and some more of the like I know well. Them are all judgmatical books, I reckon. What do you think on ’em? I never have read no rumances [sic] or poetry, but two—‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ and ‘Robinson Crusoe;’ [sic] don’t see there’s much genius in ’em; them are too ‘belittling’ as Mr. Jefferson says, for a man to read.”¹⁸

This rustic worthy had clear ideas on a number of current topics. Classical languages: “What, in all creation, had livin’ people to do with dead languages?” Colleges and universities: “Nothing more than aristocratical institutions, expensive without utility, and very unfit for a free country . . . since they shut out the poor from instruction only to receive the sons of the highborn and rich to make them acquainted,



John Bernard, shown here costumed for one of his better-known roles, experienced and recorded both the best and worst of times while travelling in early nineteenth century Vermont.

under the show of study, with the vices of gaming, drinking, and wenching."¹⁹ The hour had grown late, so Bernard rode back to Burlington.

He was, after all, in Burlington to act, and so a fair-sized audience assembled, perhaps in the courthouse, to see the show, probably Richard Cumberland's *The Jew: or, Benevolent Hebrew*. The receipts were disappointing. A second representation was given, however, with somewhat better results, but no profits accrued. Powell and Dickinson, the managers, consequently disbanded the company, the players circuitously returning to Boston, Bernard resorting to Albany, where he later established the town's first theatre in 1811.

Before leaving Burlington, Bernard sold his horse and carriage for a

tidy profit. At the inn Bernard met a newly married couple who invited the actor and his wife to accompany them in their wagon to Albany.

As the horses, decked each with a row of bells on its collar, were young, spirited animals, the wagon ran lightly on springs, the weather was extremely fine, the roads good, and the country we passed through green and luxuriant, everything seemed to unite to render this ride, a distance of nearly a hundred miles, very agreeable.²⁰

On the first night out, the party stopped at an inn (location unspecified) with acceptable food and lodging and entertainment of an extraordinary kind—a private museum.

It contained a large gathering of rarities in mineral and vegetable productions, insects and reptiles, which had evidently cost some trouble and expense to obtain, and which . . . exhibited much knowledge and taste in their arrangement. . . . No doubt, therefore, the person who adopted such a pursuit as had been here followed occasioned no little surprise to his neighbors, and met with some ridicule for the unprofitable manner in which he employed his money.²¹

Bernard and his friends soon crossed into New York and took lodgings in the village of Salem on the Battenkill. Thus his initial venture into Vermont ended.

Like Durang in 1797, Bernard recoiled at the bad roads, inaccurate and indistinct milestones, and uncommunicative signposts. At one point he alighted from his carriage to scrutinize a milestone that was nearly buried in a grassy knoll. The engraved letters had been so effaced by time and weather that no message was discernible. The thespian then saw that a previous traveler had pencilled an admonition on the stone: "Notice to all travelers! No reliance to be placed in the milestones all the way to Burlington, for they *lie*, every one of them!"²² Even more confusing to the troupers than the milestones were the fingerposts, which were designed to clarify directions at country crossroads. When they infrequently espied a fingerpost, their joy was dimmed by discovering the name of a town and its distance, but the fingerpost had "no representation of either hand or finger pointing one way or the other."²³

When Bernard made a later trip through Vermont in 1809 on his way to Canada, the stagecoach conveyed him to Rutland, where he hired a man to drive him in a wagon to Whitehall to catch the boat. This brief journey, says Bernard, was "more diabolical and temper-trying than all [he] had ever encountered before." The road as well as the Yankee temperament severely tried Bernard's endurance:

The road ran either through swamps, or over high, stony, almost perpendicular hills, which we had to walk up in order to lighten the vehicle as much as possible, and which we preferred to walk down, because our driver, saying he wanted to "make up for los' time," whenever he gained the top of an ascent would give his horses the



Tyrone Power found the vistas on Lake Champlain both impressive and beautiful.

whip and gallop them headlong to the bottom, to the imminent peril of every neck concerned. The swamp roads, however, were still worse, being simply made by throwing cut-down trees of immense circumference across the track at equal intervals, with nothing between, so that our wagon, like a boat on a rough sea, had always one end up and one down. The said wagon was a mere oblong, unpainted box, with three seats nailed across, and without springs or cushions, a little grease on the wheels supplying the place of the former, and a scanty sprinkling of straw the place of the latter luxury, while the horses drew us along at a villainous jog-trot, too slow for a hackney coach and too fast for a funeral.

The driver appeared to be a combination of Yankee, Vermonter, and Dutchman, and his conversation reflected these orientations:

He was as supposititious and indecisive as any New Englander; in his opinions, as stubborn as a mule, and therefore a Vermonter; while in the style of his delivery he savoured of the sluggish Scheldt. . . . We certainly had time to become acquainted, for though we had

started at four o'clock in the morning, we did not finish the twenty-five miles until nearly eleven, just an hour after the steamer had taken its departure. We had, therefore, to wait a week at the hotel in Whitehall, till the boat should start again.²⁴

The steamer that plied Lake Champlain and carried passengers to Canada served actor Tyrone Power, the great-grandfather of the screen actor. Power, renowned for his portrayal of comical Irish characters, journeyed to Canada to fulfill professional obligations. He arrived in Albany, N.Y., on 31 May, 1835, and boarded the stagecoach bound for Saratoga and Whitehall, a trek of nine hours. On the morning of 1 June, he boarded the steamer *Phoenix* at Whitehall and headed north:

In the course of our progress we ran into two or three of the sweetest bays imaginable, where the calm lake was shadowed by deep mountains, down whose sides leaped little tributary streams that rushed sparkling and foaming into its turbid bosom.

It is most certain that, had these beauties been given to England or Scotland, they would each and all have been berhymed and bepainted until every point of real or imaginable loveliness had been exhausted; for myself, I have looked on many lakes, and by none have been more delightfully beguiled than by a contemplation of this during some nine hours of sunshine, sunset, and twilight, the last alone too brief. Atmosphere, I am aware, does much; and this was one of those lovely days whose influence expands the heart and takes the reason prisoner.

After quitting Burlington, where we encountered the returning steamboat, and received a large access of force, I retired to my berth, and enjoyed the soundest possible sleep.²⁵

Tuesday, 2 June, proved to be a different sort of day:

On deck at six A.M.: found the lake had assumed a river-like appearance; the channel narrow, the banks low and swampy. The day, too, was as much changed as the scene from yesterday, for a drizzling rain was falling, and the clouds looked heavy and threatening.²⁶

Power soon arrived in Montreal, where he acted with a resident stock company and was treated by his hosts to a number of excursions to admire the scenic wonders. On 12 June he commenced the southward journey, again by boat:

Away we sped along the winding lake, turning from shore to shore, now visiting one pretty landing, now another; a mode of proceeding that is, amidst such scenery, perfectly delightful.²⁷

When the boat landed at Whitehall on the thirteenth, Power arranged a place on the coach and never returned to Vermont. In 1841 he died in a maritime disaster.

These extracts from the diaries of Durang, Bernard, and Power evoke

a picture of bygone Vermont that is at once awesome and appealing. The usefulness of their observations to the theater historian is obvious, but there is material here, too, for other specialists, the abundance of which has only been suggested in this paper. The diaries teem with details of daily life in New England — food, drink, social activities, reading, hunting, fishing, farming, and travel. Durang, in particular, records examples of Yankee dialect and idiom. All three actors were sensitive to the natural endowments of Vermont. Power, especially, writes eloquently of Lake Champlain's beauties, and Durang speaks frequently of fishes, birds, animals, insects, and forests. The social historian, the ornithologist, the ichthyologist, the ecologist, the linguist, and the geographer, as well as other students of Vermont life and lore, can profit by considering the pages indited by these early actors. One hopes that future students of the Vermont scene will not overlook the riches embedded in theatrical memoirs.

NOTES

¹ Isaac J. Greenwood, *The Circus: Its Origin and Growth Prior to 1835* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970 [1898]), p. 71.

² Greenwood, p. 72.

³ *The Memoir of John Durang: American Actor 1785-1816*. Ed. Alan S. Downer (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966), pp. 49-50.

⁴ Durang, p. 53.

⁵ *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer: A Magazine*. Ed. Abby Maria Hemenway (Claremont, N.H.: Claremont Manufacturing Company, 1877), III, 684.

⁶ Durang, p. 54.

⁷ Durang, p. 54.

⁸ Durang, p. 55.

⁹ Durang, p. 55.

¹⁰ *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer: A Magazine*. Ed. Abby Maria Hemenway (Burlington, Vt.: Abby M. Hemenway, 1867), I, 94.

¹¹ Durang, pp. 55-56.

¹² Durang, p. 56.

¹³ Durang, pp. 56-57.

¹⁴ *Travels in New England and New York* (New Haven, Conn., 1822), II, 427.

¹⁵ *Retrospections of America 1797-1811*. Ed. Mrs. Bayle Bernard (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1969 [1887]). To view Bernard in the larger context of Vermont's theatre history, see George B. Bryan, "Theatre and Drama in Vermont: An Historical Overview," *Theatre Studies*, No. 24/25 (1977/78-1978/79), 155-169.

¹⁶ Bernard, p. 319.

¹⁷ Bernard, p. 320.

¹⁸ Bernard, p. 325.

¹⁹ Bernard, p. 326.

²⁰ Bernard, p. 327.

²¹ Bernard, p. 327.

²² Bernard, p. 321.

²³ Bernard, p. 322.

²⁴ Bernard, pp. 346-348.

²⁵ Tyrone Power, *Impressions of America during the Year 1833, 1834, and 1835* (London: Richard Bentley, 1836), II, 294.

²⁶ Power, II, 295.

²⁷ Power, II, 335.