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Royall Tyler and Ethan Allen's Appendix to *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*

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HISTORY abounds with interesting unanswered questions. Some have remained this way because of missing letters or of gaps in existing correspondence. A little-known letter of 1787 from Ethan Allen, Vermont's earthy warrior, statesman and political figure, to Royall Tyler, the dramatist, novelist and jurist, illustrates this point.

What theological relation did Tyler, religiously conventional, have with Allen, deist and iconoclast?

Both men shared a deep and profound interest in religion and the role it played in the development of a man's character and the way it directed a man's life on earth.¹ It would seem, however, that their respective family backgrounds and upbringings would lead them to two variant points of view on religion.

Tyler, from both birth and education in Boston's mercantile class, leaned toward the established Episcopalian faith in his youth. In 1787, when he first met Allen he was nominally of that church and although in later years his outlook fluctuated, no matter what the change Tyler always did so within the established religious framework of his day.

For Allen it was different. Reflecting the spirit of the Enlightenment he felt that man should throw out an active challenge to the religions of the past and present. The result of his questioning was his philosophical epic, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*.² It was published in 1784 by Anthony Haswell at Bennington, Vermont. Although a good part of the edition was destroyed by fire while it was still in Haswell's print

1. A recent discussion of Allen's religious philosophy is contained in Ernest Cassara, "Ethan Allen as Philosopher," *Vermont History*, XXXV, No. 4 (Autumn, 1967), 208-21. The most readable biography is still John Pell's *Ethan Allen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1929).

Tyler's biography can be found in two recent works: G. Thomas Tanselle, *Royall Tyler* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Marius B. Péladeau, *The Collected Verse of Royall Tyler* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1968).

2. Outside of the first edition of 1784 there are several other editions of the book more readily available. The abridged second edition was published in New York by G. W. and A. J. Matsell, 1836. It was reprinted in Boston by J. P. Mendum, 1854 and, with an introduction by John Pell, issued in a facsimile edition by Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, New York, 1940.

shop, the book did circulate and it did elicit comment—most of it unfavorable.

Allen was roundly vilified. Not being one to step back and let a challenge go unanswered, he early gave thought to rebutting his critics in a sequel to the *Oracle*.

Since nothing is now known about Tyler's religious philosophy which would lead us to believe he was sympathetic with Allen's deistic views, it is of interest to learn from the letter of 1787 that the two apparently had at one time talked about religion for many hours and had discussed a possible alliance between the two in the printing of Allen's addendum to *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*.

The Tyler-Allen letter is of importance because it contains one of the few mentions by Allen himself of his proposed rebuttal. It also contains a paragraph relating to the efforts of Tyler to enlist Allen and other Vermonters in apprehending Daniel Shays and other fugitives of Shays' abortive uprising against Massachusetts authority in 1787.³

In the note Allen gives the impression that this communication was merely to follow up earlier lengthy conversations between the two men when Tyler was in the Bennington area on the Shays' Rebellion matter.

The shrewd Allen would not have approached Tyler on such a business matter as outlined in the letter if he had not previously ascertained that the young militia major (Tyler was only 30 years old at the time) was a man somewhat sympathetic to Allen's literary efforts. Also, Allen would have made sure Tyler was trustworthy enough to be entrusted with the financial responsibility of raising funds to publish "the Appendix to the Oracles of reason."

These suppositions only lead us to theorize that Tyler and Allen sat around the fireplace somewhere in Bennington and talked about more than Daniel Shays and contemporary politics. They must have also discussed religion—especially as interpreted by Allen.

Did Tyler promise he would attempt to raise money to issue the "Appendix" among the well-to-do families of Boston? Did Tyler involve himself in this enterprise simply because it was a chance to make some money (at a time when he badly needed it) or at his impressionable age was he also somewhat impressed by Allen's theological views? Unfortunately, if the correspondence extended beyond the one extant letter

3. The best contemporary account of Shays' Rebellion is found in George R. Minot, *History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts in the Year MDCCLXXVI and the Rebellion Consequent Thereon* (Worcester: Isaiah Thomas, 1788). See also *The Collected Verse of Royall Tyler*, pp. xv-xvi, and *Royall Tyler*, pp. 19-23.

it has all been lost or misplaced and there is no way of ascertaining Tyler's complete motives.

Obviously, Tyler either refused to undertake the fund raising for the "Appendix" or else he was unsuccessful in his efforts. Although Allen's letter indicates the manuscript was completed in 1787 the sequel to *Reason the Only Oracle* was not published in either man's lifetime.

The surviving manuscript of the "Appendix," entitled "An Essay on the Universal Plentitude of Being and on the Nature of Immortality of the Human Soul and its Agency," finally saw the light of day in 1872.⁴

* * *

The Allen-Tyler letter, which remained among Tyler's papers upon his death in 1826, was passed on within the family. The author's son, the Reverend Thomas Pickman Tyler, recognized the letter's importance and presented it to the Brattleboro (Vt.) Society of Natural History, probably in the 1870's when he was compiling an extensive manuscript memoir of his father from the papers in his possession.⁵

The letter was mounted and framed and was apparently prominently displayed by the Society. At the bottom of the mat was a legend recounting the letter's presentation to the Society of Natural History by the Reverend Tyler. Upon the disbanding or merging of the society at some uncertain date the letter passed into the collection of the Brooks Library which now serves as Brattleboro's public library.

For many years the framed letter hung in the library. It was suitably admired by generations of Brattleboro school children (including myself) imbued by their teachers with a proper reverence for Ethan Allen.

Unfortunately, during one of the library's periodic redecoratings or rearrangings in the early 1950's the Tyler-Allen letter was taken down. Efforts to locate it in the last decade have proven fruitless. Some of the Brattleboro librarians have said that because of its historic value the letter was stored in a local bank vault with other priceless items. Searches of the vaults, however, have not yielded the letter. It is hoped that the letter is still extant and is only temporarily misplaced or misfiled.

Fortunately, the foresight of Howard C. Rice, Jr., of Brattleboro, preserved the actual appearance and content of the letter. In 1941

4. It is found in *The Historical Magazine*, II, 3d Series (April, May, June and July, 1873) and appended to the 1940 facsimile reprint.

5. The manuscript memoir of Royall Tyler by Rev. Thomas Pickman Tyler, dated 1873, is in the Royall Tyler Collection, Gift of Helen Tyler Brown, at the Vermont Historical Society. The Allen-Tyler letter is copied on p. 64 of the memoir.

The Rev. Tyler, who became a prominent Episcopalian minister, was the tenth of Tyler's eleven children.

Mr. Rice, who is director of the rare books and manuscripts collections at Princeton University, wisely made a photostat of the Allen-Tyler letter and the following transcript is made from a copy of this photostat.⁶

* * *

The Allen-Tyler letter:

Bennington 28th of August '87

Sir,

you will find by this time I dare say that the government of this State have been very friendly to yours, such persons who are criminals and have acted against law and [so]ciety⁷ in general and have come from your State to this we send back to you; and other[s] who have only took part with Shayes we [go]vern by our laws so that they do not, and dare not make any inroads or devastation in the Massachusetts.—

As to the Appendix to the Oracles of reason should you procure 18 or 20 pound by subscription in ready money it shall be published next spring. I am sir with respect your Hum^le Ser^t—

Ethan Allen

For Major Tyler.

[envelope sheet]

Major

Royal Tyler

Boston

per favour Maj^r Hopkins

6. The author wishes to thank Mr. Rice, a diligent student of Brattleboro and Vermont history, for his kindness in making the photostat copy available and for his assistance in bringing other details of the letter's history to my attention.

The letter was copied from Rev. Tyler's memoir and used by Henry Burnham in his *Brattleboro, Windham County, Vermont. An Early History* (Brattleboro: E. Leonard, 1880), p. 92. It was, in turn, taken by Miss Mary R. Cabot and printed in *The Annals of Brattleboro, 1681-1895* (Brattleboro: E. Hildreth & Co., 1921-22), I, 255. All three of these versions contain mistakes in transcription from the original.

7. There are three minor tears in the manuscript due to the breaking of the envelope seal. The missing letters are supplied within the three brackets.