

John Randolph in His Own Words

Collected Letters of John Randolph of Roanoke to Dr. John Brockenbrough, 1812-1833, edited by Kenneth Shorey; with a Foreword by Russell Kirk, *New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Books, 1988.*
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PLANTER, STATESMAN, ORATOR, and diplomat, John Randolph of Roanoke (1773-1833) stands out as one of the most fascinating characters ever to strut across the stage of American politics. Born to one of the best families in Virginia, he was in public life for over thirty years, serving approximately twenty-two of them in the House of Representatives. Although he rose rapidly in the ranks of his party's leadership after his election to Congress in 1799, ill health, political self-isolation, and growing bouts of mental instability blasted eventually the hopes evoked by his early brilliant promise.

This colorful Southern gentleman who resembled in his appearance Don Quixote was one of his era's most interesting speakers. Few contemporaries in Congress could match his masterful command of language and breadth of knowledge. His speeches were unforgettable performances which kept his audiences enthralled. One visitor sitting in the House gallery, spying what he took initially to be a skinny boy on the floor of the House, was shocked to discover that the apparent intruder was none other than the famous John Randolph himself. Although taken aback by the Congressman's peculiar "youthful and effeminate appearance and voice," he considered him to be "the most impressive and accomplished Parliamentary debater I ever heard." Indeed, "I could scarcely help fancying, as I saw the meager sprite before me, like a being tottering to the grave, that I heard the voice of an angel sent down from

heaven to warn the deluded from their errors.”

He first met Dr. John Brockenbrough in 1807 while both were serving on the jury of Aaron Burr's treason trial. Thereafter, the Richmond doctor and banker would remain as one of Randolph's closest friends and confidants. In the last days of his life, lying ill in Baltimore, he thought of his old friend, and asked his doctor to write a letter for him to “a gentleman who stands A number 1 among men.” After practicing medicine briefly, Brockenbrough was elected president of the Bank of Virginia, a position he held for forty years. His Richmond residence later became the White House of the Confederacy and is now the Confederate Museum.

This volume, published in the Library of Conservative Thought, is edited by Kenneth Shorey, the former Arts Editor of the *Birmingham (Alabama) News-Herald*. It is the first chronological collection of the surviving letters, written over a twenty-one year period, from Randolph to Brockenbrough. Most of the letters were gathered from Hugh A. Garland's *Life of John Randolph of Roanoke* (1851). Only a few of the original holographs published in Garland's work escaped destruction or loss after the publication of this biography. The rest of the letters included in this collection are reprinted from William Cabell Bruce's *John Randolph of Roanoke* (1922) or were found in various archival sources.

In those rare instances where Shorey had access to the originals, he discovered to his dismay that Garland and Bruce in their works either had abridged them or “corrected” them by rearranging or omitting paragraphs. Hence, the accuracy or the completeness of those letters reprinted from these works cannot be guaranteed. Even when Shorey had the benefit of the original letters, he found that he had to struggle with Randolph's frequently difficult handwriting. Some

years ago, while attempting to read Randolph's correspondence with Francis Scott Key, now deposited in the library of the Maryland Historical Society, I was likewise almost defeated in my efforts by Randolph's nearly illegible scrawl. Transcribing the holographs for this work, therefore, as I know from personal experience, must have been a tedious and frustrating task.

Throughout his life, Randolph worried about the state of his health. Like Fisher Ames, the New England Federalist, he was “many years dying.” But even Ames could not match his skill in the art of hypochondria. When asked how he felt, he invariably replied, “Dying, sir, dying.” Evidently, he contracted some mysterious illness in his youth which left him beardless, with a soprano voice, and he was also evidently sexually impotent. No one seems to know the cause of his affliction, though some biographers have speculated that he must have suffered from either scarlet fever, syphilis, or some sort of glandular disorder.

He seemed almost to relish describing his numerous ailments and complaints to his correspondents. “The astonishing command of language which served to make his speeches memorable,” Gerald W. Johnson notes in his *Randolph of Roanoke* (1929), “served also to make his letters describing his symptoms a veritable masterpiece of hypochondria.” Nearly all the letters in this collection contain some mention of his condition—which was nearly always bad or more than bad—and he seemed always to imagine himself at Death's door. “Dreary, desolate, dismal—there is no word in our language, or any other, that can express the misery of my life,” he complained in 1821. “I drag on like a tired captive at the end of a slave-chain in an African Coffle. I go because I must. But this is worse than the sick man's tale.” In 1828 he told Brockenbrough that he should soon be in a coffin: “I daily grow

worse: if that can be called 'growth' which is diminution and not increase. My food passes from me unchanged. Liver—Lungs—Stomach (which I take to be the original seat of the disease)—bowels and the whole carnal man are diseased to the last extent. Diarrhea incessant—nerves broken—Cramps—Spasms—vertigo." The pain eventually drove him to take opium for relief.

Randolph's letters in this collection will disappoint some readers who may want to consult them in the expectation that they would reveal a great deal about his life and times. Only brief tantalizing glimpses, which add little to what is already generally known of his views on the major political struggles of his day, will be found here. The issues which dominated his career—States Rights, slavery, internal improvements at federal expenses, tariffs, war with Britain, and the administrations of Madison, Monroe, and Adams—are barely mentioned or are omitted altogether. On the other hand, his letters written chiefly around 1818 do provide valuable insights into the nature of his Christian convictions and his middle-aged conversion to the Anglican Church. These facets of the letters are important because Randolph's humility before the awfulness of God's power and his belief in the reality of human depravity shaped the moral basis of his political thought. His views on slavery, the state of nation, and his accounts of his travels to European nations are additionally among some of the gems to be discovered in this collection.

Although he considered the institution of slavery to be a "cancer" on the Republic and opposed the slave trade, he did not support some of the efforts to free the slaves. Slavery, he argued, was preferable, for instance, to the plan of the African Colonization Society for transporting freed blacks to a land of their own. He was convinced that this misguided project would render the lives of

blacks even more miserable. Instead he favored "the good old plan of making the negroes work, and thereby enabling the master to feed and clothe them well, and take care of them in sickness and old age."

The drift of national affairs generally disgusted him. "I have long been of the opinion, that we are fast sinking into a state of society the most loathsome that can be presented in the imagination of an honorable man," he wrote in 1827. "If I had health and strength, I think that I would employ a portion of them in an inquiry into the causes that propel us to this wretched state. Why is it that our system has a uniform tendency to bring forward low and little men, to the exclusion of the more worthy? I have seen the operation of this machine from the beginning. The character of every branch of the Government has degenerated. In point of education and manners, as well as integrity, there has been a frightful deterioration everywhere."

Two years later, lamenting that democratic egalitarian tendencies had expunged forever the old aristocratic order he had known in his youth, he concluded that the country was "ruined past redemption: it is ruined in the spirit and character of the people. The standard of merit and morals has been lowered far below 'proof.' There is an abjectness of spirit that appalls and disgusts me. Where now could we find leaders of a revolution?"

He visited Europe in 1822, 1824, 1826, and 1830. Ireland and France appalled him and only England appeared to please him. Although he thought Paris had improved "since the last restoration....it is still the filthiest hole, not excepting the worst part of the old town of Edinboro,' that I ever saw out of Ireland." The Parisians left him unimpressed: "Except a few of the English, with which people Paris swarms, I have not seen, either in the streets or elsewhere, anything that by possibility might be mistaken for a gentleman."

But of all the places he visited, he found St. Petersburg, where he lived briefly after his appointment by President Andrew Jackson as Ambassador to Russia in 1830, to be the most detestable: "Heat, dust impalpable, pervading every part and pore, and actually sealing these last up, annoying the eyes especially, which are farther distressed by the glare of the white houses. Insects of all nauseous descriptions, bugs, fleas, mosquitos, flies innumerable, gigantic as the empire they inhabit; who will take no denial." He sardonically described this city as "the land of Pharaoh and his plagues."

This compilation of letters marks a significant contribution to Randolph scholarship primarily because it makes a considerable amount of otherwise hard to obtain primary research material easily accessible to the researcher. Those who are unfamiliar, however, with Randolph's life and political thought are advised to read first Kirk's *John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics* (1978) or Henry Adams's *John Randolph* (1882), both excellent biographies, before delving into this work.

Shorey could have made this collection more readable if he had taken the time to translate numerous Greek, Latin, and French quotations with which Randolph peppers his letters.

Additionally, it is frustrating to discover that in the letters reproduced from the Garland and the Bruce biographies, the names of certain of Randolph's contemporaries were omitted—identified instead only by their initials. In some cases, Shorey is able to identify the person to whom Randolph is referring, but mostly, unless the original letters reappear, they will remain a mystery. I frequently wished too, that Shorey had provided more extensive biographical information in his annotations on the persons he is able to identify.

—Reviewed by W. Wesley McDonald