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GENERAL JAMES WILKINSON IN THE KNICKERBOCKER *HISTORY OF NEW YORK*

Diedrich Knickerbocker's *History of New York* was published by Washington Irving in December, 1809; its readers soon discovered that the book satirized not only Dutch colonial history of the seventeenth century but also American politics of their own day. *The Monthly Anthology and Boston Review* was the first to note the *History's* "good natured satire on the follies and blunders of the present day, and the perplexities they have caused." [1] Similarly, the English *Monthly Review* observed that the book "touches and tickles the political maxims, institutions, and manners of certain other people, not forgetting the . . . Americans." [2] Sir Walter Scott regretted that "as a stranger to American parties and politics, I must lose much of the concealed satire of the piece." [3] In 1825, the erratic American novelist and miscellaneous writer, John Neal, asserted that Irving had satirized certain chief executives of the United States,[4] and that the burlesque Dutch general, Jacobus Von Poffenburgh, "is a portrait—outrageously distorted, but nevertheless a portrait, of General Wilkinson." [5] Later reviewers made references to the

[1] 8, 123-124 (February, 1810).

[2] 94, 74 (January, 1821).

[3] Pierre Irving: *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving*, New York, 1862, I, 240.

[4] This satire is discussed in the introduction to a forthcoming reprint of the 1809 edition of the *History*, edited by S. T. Williams and the present writer. Edwin Greenlaw has written on Irving's treatment of Jefferson in *The Texas Review*, I, 291-306 (April, 1916).

[5] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 17, 62.

political satire in the *History*,[6] but no one appears to have again mentioned James Wilkinson. As John Neal was an ultra-romantic both as novelist and critic, given to exaggeration and sensationalism, his identification of the Dutch general cannot now be accepted without demonstration.

Jacobus Von Poffenburgh is, as his name suggests, a character not to be found in the annals of the New Netherlands. James Wilkinson, however, was a prominent figure during the early decades of the American republic. Born in 1757, he served as an officer in the American army during the Revolution, was for a time in business in Kentucky, and later returned to the army, of which he was given supreme command in 1796. Known as a one-time intimate of Benedict Arnold and suspected of being a pensioner of the King of Spain, this former correspondent and supposed ally of Aaron Burr amazed the United States in 1806 by accusing Burr of treason. A prominent figure at Burr's trial, he was not brought before the courts in his own defence until after the publication of the *History of New York*. Washington Irving as a Federalist was politically unsympathetic with Wilkinson, as with President Jefferson; when the latter became so involved in the Burr affair that his reputation appeared to depend on Wilkinson's vindication, the Federalist party was venomous in its attack upon the General. Further, Irving was moved by personal interest in Aaron Burr.[7] Having been sent by a New York Federalist to aid in the defence of Burr at Richmond in 1807, he wrote concerning his client, "I feel no sensation remaining but compassion for him,"[8] and again, "his situation is such as should appeal to the feelings of every generous bosom."[9] Similarly, he was much moved by his last sight of Burr in the Virginia peni-

[6] *E. g.: The Port Folio*, 19, 437 (May, 1825); *The Quarterly Review*, 31, 473 (March, 1825); *Frazer's Magazine*, 44, 13 (July, 1850).

[7] There appears to be little evidence to support the assertion of Henry Adams that Irving was politically a Burrite (*A History of the United States*, New York, 1889-91, IX, 210). Irving stated in 1804 that he was "an admirer of General Hamilton, and a partisan with him in politics" (Pierre Irving: *op. cit.*, I, 91), and in 1807 he wrote of Burr that he was "opposed to him in political principles" (*Ibid.*, I, 191).

[8] I, 191.

[9] I, 201.

tentiary.[10] Finally, Irving, as might be expected, took an instinctive dislike to James Wilkinson when he saw the latter at the trial of Burr; expressions of this antipathy are quoted below. These facts make it clear that Irving was possessed of sufficient information to draw a sketch of Wilkinson with some exactness, and sufficient animus to make the portrait bitingly satirical.

Turning to the *History of New York,* the reader finds that Irving's General Von Poffenburgh was "a huge, full bodied man"; that his ruddy face "glowed like a fiery furnace"; and that therein shone "a pair of large glassy blinking eyes, which projected like those of a lobster."[11] That James Wilkinson was thus portly is stated by Parton;[12] Wendell and Minnigerode call him obese;[13] and Lewis terms him "paunchy, gross," with "a red, sweat-distilling face."[14] These details are verified by C. W. Peale's portrait of Wilkinson[15] and by the crayon drawing by James Sharpless in Independence Hall, Philadelphia.[16] Von Poffenburgh, according to Irving, wore a coat "crossed and slashed, and carbonadoed, with stripes of copper lace, and swathed round the body with a crimson sash, of the size and texture of a fishing net."[17] His portraits show that Wilkinson equally loved display in dress, and his coat is said by Lewis to have shown "an exhuberance of epaulette and an extravagance of gold braid that speak of tastes for coarse glitter."[18] This same delight in display is mentioned by Wendell and Minnigerode.[19] Externally, therefore, the two generals have much in common.

Von Poffenburgh's bearing and personality were in accord with his appearance: in New Amsterdam "he strutted about," a "bitter looking . . . man of war";[20] in the South, he "swelled" and frequently "would he . . . strut . . . like a vain glorious cock pidgeon."[21] Irving had previously written in much the same

[10] I, 202-203.
[11] New York, 1809, II, 59-60.
[12] *The Life and Times of Aaron Burr*, New York, 1874, II, 32.
[13] *Aaron Burr*, New York, 1925, II, 194.
[14] *An American Patrician*, New York, 1908, p. 233.
[15] Reproduced in Wendell and Minnigerode, opp. II, 11.
[16] Reproduced in Lewis, opp. p. 234.
[17] II, 59.
[18] p. 233.
[19] II, 194.
[20] II, 60.
[21] II, 63.

words of Wilkinson; at Richmond "he strutted into court" and there moved about "swelling like a turkey cock."[22] Von Poffenburgh was exceedingly pompous; he was "completely inflated with his own importance" and he filled his position with "great importance, always styling himself 'commander in chief of the armies of the New Netherlands.'"[23] James Wilkinson made his similar self-importance clear in his *Memoirs* (1816), where he termed himself "commander in chief of the military forces of the United States in the Southwest." Naturally, the Dutchman was very "windy," resembling "one of those puffed up bags" which Eolus gave "that vagabond warrior Ulysses."[23] Irving had in 1807 described Wilkinson as burdened with "a mighty mass of words to deliver himself of" and as wearisome through his verbosity.[24] Henry Adams,[25] as well as Wendell and Minnigerode,[26] also testify to his wild talk, noise, and grandiloquence. Finally, an ironical reference to Von Poffenburgh's "magnanimous soul"[27] is reminiscent of Irving's allusion in his letters to "the magnanimous Wilkinson."[28] Here, then, the parallel between the two generals continues.

Irving's favorite figure in presenting the Dutchman's appearance and character is to liken him to brass; "his dress comported with his character, for he had almost as much brass and copper without, as nature had stored away within."[29] It is in this connection that Von Poffenburgh's relations with the Dutch governor are recounted; "he contrives to pass off all his brass and copper upon Wilhelmus Kieft, who was no judge of base coin, as pure and genuine gold."[30] This may be taken as a satirical reference to the credence given by Thomas Jefferson to the charges made by Wilkinson and the support which the President extended to him during and after the Burr trial, an attitude which aroused extreme bitterness against Jefferson[31] and won him some contempt even among his partisan supporters.

[22] Pierre Irving, I, 195.
[23] II, 59.
[24] Pierre Irving, I, 194.
[25] III, 323.
[26] II, 194.
[27] II, 60.
[28] I, 191.
[29] II, 58, 59.
[30] II, 58.
[31] Henry Adams, III, 456-469, 471; Wendell and Minnigerode, II, 194-195.

The career of Von Poffenburgh reached its climax in an expedition against the Swedes on "the southern frontier" during the administration of Stuyvesant. A previous account of these Swedes makes it clear that Irving is satirizing the inhabitants of the Southern United States in the early nineteenth century. When he states that these folk "lived on hoe cakes and bacon, drank mint juleps and brandy toddy" and indulged in "cock fighting, horse racing, slave driving, tavern haunting, sabbath breaking, mulatto breeding," [32] he describes not early colonists on the Delaware river but Southerners of the Jeffersonian era as they appeared to complacent Northerners.[33] Again, in referring to "a gigantic, gunpowder race of men . . . exceedingly expert in boxing, biting, gouging, tar and feathering," [34] he describes frontiersmen of Kentucky and the Southwest, not Peter Stuyvesant's neighbors. Von Poffenburgh's campaign therefore corresponds with Wilkinson's activities in the South in 1806, in which satire Irving departs from colonial history in giving the command of the expedition to the imaginary Von Poffenburgh, when it was in reality directed by Stuyvesant himself. The Dutch general, Irving writes, "conducted his army undauntedly to the southern frontier; through wild lands and savage deserts; over insurmountable mountains, across impassable floods and through impenetrable forests; subduing a vast tract of uninhabited country, and overturning, discomfiting and making incredible slaughter of certain hostile hosts of grass-hoppers, toads and pismires." [35] The Dutch expedition against the Swedes in 1656 which Irving purports to recount was made almost wholly by sea; the passage in reality burlesques General Wilkinson's version of his march to New Orleans, of which he boasts in his *Memoirs*. The event was in 1809 still in the public eye, as was shown a few days after the publication of the Knickerbocker *History* by an ironical allusion in a New York newspaper to Wilkinson's journey "to New Orleans upon a very celebrated occasion, 'by forced marches.'" [36] Arrived at his destination, the Dutch general built

[32] I, 232-233.

[33] For a parallel, see Royal Tyler: *The Algerine Captive* (1797), Hartford, 1816, pp. 30-36.

[34] I, 232. [35] II, 62.

[36] *The New York Herald*, December 16, 1809.

"a redoubtable redoubt, named Fort Casimer" which fortress was "the original germ of the present flourishing town of New Castle." [37] The fort (located in what is now Delaware) was in fact captured by Stuyvesant,[38] rather than by one of his generals. The incident, thus altered, resembles Wilkinson's conduct on reaching New Orleans, where he made noisy efforts on behalf of the national defence. His fortification of the city, arbitrary exercise of military law, and grandiloquent proclamations threw the whole region in an uproar, but it was found, when the excitement subsided, that Wilkinson had absurdly exaggerated the dangers of the situation. In military achievements, as in appearance and character, the two generals, it seems, correspond.

Irving further states of his general that rumor intimated he had in reality a treacherous understanding with the Swedish commander; that he had long been in the practice of privately communicating with the Swedes, together with divers hints about "secret service money." [39] Not until some time after the publication of the Knickerbocker *History* was it officially established that Wilkinson was in the pay of Spain while commanding the American army, but the accusation was often made by Burr's friends. It appears that Irving here refers to this suspicion concerning Wilkinson's integrity.

The point which completes and makes inescapable the identification of Von Poffenburgh as Wilkinson is the apparently farcical incident of the queues. "The general," says Irving, "in an evil hour, issued orders for cropping the hair of both officers and men" [40] among the Dutch troops. The order was unwelcome, and one Kildermeester, a veteran campaigner, was particularly violent in his opposition, being ardently devoted to his "immoderate queue." The wrangle occupies some two pages[41] and is ended only by Kildermeester's opportune death. Queues were in actuality unknown in the New Amsterdam of Stuyvesant, nor did they appear until several decades thereafter. They were worn, however, by soldiers in the early American army, and it was James Wilkinson who in 1801 ordered that in the

[37] II, 62.

[38] Van Rensselaer: *History of the City of New York*, New York, 1909, I, 367.

[39] II, 109. [40] II, 65. [41] II, 65-67.

United States army, the men's hair should be cut short. H. L. Nelson in *The Army of the United States* states that, as might be expected, "this innovation was for a long time resisted." [42] It is evident that Irving alludes to this incident.

The close resemblance between the imaginary Von Poffenburgh and the actual Wilkinson in face, form, and dress; their similarity in bearing and character; the relation of each to his superior; the parallel between the military exploits of the two; the fact that each is charged with being in pay of the enemy; and the anachronistic introduction of the queue episode, supported by two other significant violations of historical accuracy in the transformation of colonial Swedes into Southerners and the capture of Fort Casimer by a non-existent general, combine to vindicate John Neal in his assertion that Von Poffenburgh is a sketch of James Wilkinson. Neal appears to have erred elsewhere in commenting on the secondary satirical significance of the Knickerbocker *History,* but here it must be admitted that he is correct. It should be observed also that in this portrait Irving permits himself an unusual degree of asperity. Henry Adams justly says of the general tone of Irving's comment on his contemporaries that "its most marked trait was the good-nature which, at a time when bitterness was universal in politics, saved Irving's satire from malignity." [43] In dealing with James Wilkinson, however, Irving exercises only to a limited degree what Adams terms his "power of deadening venom by a mere trick of hand." The portrait is therefore unique among the satirical allusions to contemporary politics in the *History* in its caustic ridicule, although its victim was a man whom few today will venture to defend against Irving's strictures.

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[42] New York, n. d., n. p.
[43] IX, 210.