

Martin Van Buren's Autobiography

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IN the strange fashion noted above, more than sixty years after the last word of it was written, there comes to light one of the greatest autobiographies ever written. President Van Buren wrote it expecting that shortly after his death it would become public property, and continually discounts or appreciates the verdict of his readers. Readers he has had none until today, when it comes out as the second volume of a public document. He began it in 1854, and wrote or dictated until death stopped him in 1860. The Van Burens apparently kept it in their possession until 1905, when Mrs. Smith Thompson Van Buren of Fishkill presented it to the Library of Congress. Worthington C. Ford began to edit it for publication when he was chief of the Manuscript Division there, but when he departed from the scene it seems to have lain fallow until Assistant Chief Fitzpatrick took it up, and he now presents it in this shape fifteen years after its deposit—a first-rate editor he is, too.

And what an autobiography! In its perfect abandon it reminds one of Roosevelt's, but there is no other that one can call to mind at the moment to which it is comparable in that respect. Since whenever a comparison of this sort is made a host of critics spring up with a reminder that the two men, whoever they be, were not twins or doppelgangers, it is repulsively necessary to qualify this one by saying that the two autobiographies mentioned are not written in the same style. It is difficult to bracket any two, however, which are so engagingly frank, both about their writers and about other people and the events in which they took part, as these two, one by the first President elected from New York and the other by the latest. Can there be anything in the Dutch blood to account for it?

Both stop short of the final point, Roosevelt's by his own choice and Van Buren's by death. His autobiography is arrested before he becomes President. But he has practically completed the history of an Administration more stirring than his own—Jackson's—and if he had completed it the book would have contained no such stirring scenes until he came down to his own Presidential candidacies in 1840, 1844 and 1848, the last as the head of the Free Soil (anti-slavery) ticket.

He is as frank about himself as about anybody else and describes his own blunders and defects as keenly as an enemy could have done. That is not necessary, however; his manner is so free that he paints his own portrait unconsciously, as he paints those of others with a hand of power. At the hottest moment of the battle of Monterey Colonel Baillie Peyton rode up to General Taylor and reported that a letter had been found in the pocket of a dead Mexican officer from Santa Anna in regard to his plans. "Well," said the General, "which way is he moving?" "Upon that point," replied the Colonel, "his letter is quite Van Burenish and leaves us altogether in the dark!" General Taylor replied, somewhat sharply, "Colonel Peyton, allow me to introduce you to my aid, Major Van Buren." This was the ex-President's son, who was alongside. With shot falling all around him, Peyton apologized, and the Major excused him on condition he would allow him to tell the story to his father.

Van Buren says that this general belief about him was unfounded, but his autobiography shows that it was

not. He had quite the Rooseveltian characteristic, if he resembled the other New York President in nothing else, of refusing to be drawn into any statement of his position until he had thoroughly thought it out. Once Van Buren had made up his mind he was inflexible, and he could not be scared from it or forced into a compromise. He generally tested any subject by the touchstone of democracy. He had come into politics at a time when the words republicanism and democracy were not the empty things they are now, but when there was an actual antagonism between those who believed in the people and those who were proud to say they did not. To say that one was a friend of the people meant that he was a member of the Democratic Party, or, as it was then called, the Republican Party. Van Buren used the latter name to the end of his days.

This fixity of his was nowhere better shown than in the famous social war that raged over Peggy O'Neale. That was her maiden name, and she was the wife of Major John Eaton, Jackson's first Secretary of War. She had been a gay girl, and her father was a tavern keeper. The high-browed Cabinet ladies refused to recognize her, and attacked her character. Jackson, always chivalrous, stood by her: his own niece, who presided over the White House, joined in the hue and cry, and Jackson packed her back to Tennessee. Van Buren, the Secretary of State, did not reach Washington until the row was in full swing, and a go-between promptly approached him with a full account of it for his information, and asked him how he was going to stand. Van Buren, who had made up his mind, replied that he intended to treat Mrs. Eaton precisely as he treated all the other ladies of the Cabinet.

Then the war was on to its fullest extent, with Jackson and Van Buren on one side and the rest of the Cabinet, except the Postmaster General and Eaton himself, on the other. Mrs. Donelson, the President's niece, demanded his views, and he replied by the plainest sort of statement that she owed her uncle a duty which she was not fulfilling. With evident moderation he describes her as "deeply agitated and also offended." "I arose from my seat," he concludes, "begging her to excuse whatever I might; under the excitement of the moment, have said to hurt her feelings, but perfectly satisfied that they were too far committed to be reached by anything I

could urge, and I asked her permission to drop the subject." Her cousin had withdrawn into a window embrasure and was crying. And this was the Van Buren who never permitted himself to be ruffled or moved into an uneven tone of voice; that slow, winning, gentle manner of his concealed dynamite. Donelson afterward told him: "I could have drowned you with a drop of water." Jackson ordered the whole family off to Tennessee, though Donelson was his private secretary.

The first official dinner given by the President was marked by such an insulting attitude on the part of the Cabinet and its ladies that when Van Buren went to follow his usual custom of spending a few minutes with Jackson he found the old hero completely overcome. He told the President to go to bed and left abruptly, meditating on what would happen at the next dinner, which it was his place as Secretary of State to give.

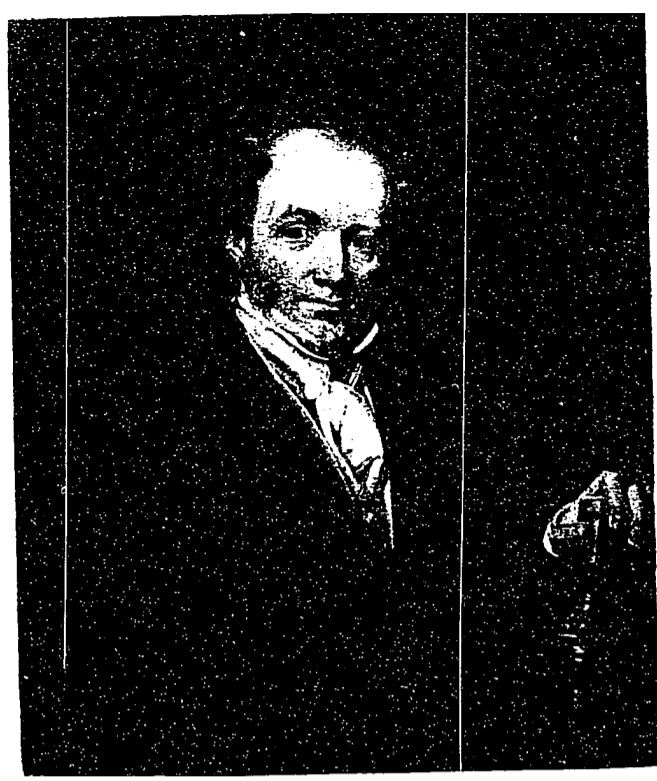
The anti-Peggy leaders had decided to drive her from society, and Eaton, too, by absenting themselves from any dinners at which the Eatons were present. Van Buren did not yet know this, but he intended that there should be no insult to Peggy. He went to one of the chief leaders of the old society of Washington, not of the official set—a distinction which still exists—and extended the invitation to a dinner to her, thus making it her dinner; he even had her name the day. He knew very well that without any agency of hers, the news that this great lady, the daughter of Jefferson, was to preside would spread to the other invited guests, and he had only to pick among the highest grandees. He gave it an official tinge, by inviting such naval heroes as Hull and Chauncey and other distinguished officers and their families. All the Cabinet ladies declined, including Peggy herself, and the evening which was to have been marked by the social overthrow of herself and Van Buren was a triumph.

Later he felt so sure of his ground that he duplicated the dinner, and Peggy appeared and shared in the social glory in spite of the absence of her enemies. She and Van Buren were stronger than ever. The Russian Minister, who was on their side, gave a ball and himself took Peggy in to supper. The anti-Peggy majority, however, had won over Mme. Huygens, the wife of the Dutch Minister, and determined to give a series of three parties, the first by Chevalier Huygens, at none

of which should Peggy be present. It was calculated that this would drive Eaton out of the Cabinet and Peggy out of Washington. But Jackson heard of it and sent for Van Buren, who thus describes the scene:

I went to him before breakfast. I found him deeply moved by communications that had been made to him on the previous evening. His eyes were bloodshot, and his appearance, in other respects, indicated that he had passed a sleepless night, as he indeed admitted had been literally the case. He was, however, unexcited in manner. The stories so often told of his violent and furious style on occasions of great anger and deep feeling, so far as my observation extended, had no other foundation than this: that when he thought he could in that way best influence anybody to do his duty he would assume an earnestness and an emphasis much beyond what he really felt. To me he always appeared most calmly. On the occasion of his very narrow escape from assassination, at the funeral of Warren R. Davis, I followed him to the White House immediately after the rites of burial were concluded, and found him sitting with one of Major Donelson's children on his lap and conversing with General Scott, himself apparently the least disturbed person in the room.

In this calm and unexcited manner, despite his sleepless night and bloodshot eyes, he told Van Buren of the combination between his Cabinet and the wife of one of the Foreign Ministers, and said that if it was true he would dismiss his own Ministers and hand Huygens his passports. Van Buren took the hint. He went to the Dutch Legation and told the Minister and his wife that if they had entered any conspiracy against the Secretary of War they would have to go. They were badly



Martin Van Buren.

frightened. Mme. Huygens earnestly denied that she had ever said anything of the kind or entered any such combination, and with her withdrawal from the combination it was broken up.

It is evident by a cautious hint on Page 373 that Calhoun was at the bottom of this whole imbroglio about the Eatons. He was then Vice President, calculated on being the next President, and was furious over any one who stood in his way, as first Jackson and then Van Buren did. It is generally believed that the imbroglio was what broke up the Cabinet, and Van Buren seems to admit it, though he proves circumstantially that the idea of breaking it up was his. He proposed to resign, and Jackson, in a couple of horseback rides, tried to dissuade him and even accused him of desertion, but Van Buren was always immovable when he had made up his mind. To the charge of desertion he quietly replied that if Jackson could think such a thing of him he would withdraw his proposal and stay throughout the Administration, or until Jackson admitted he was wrong. This completely altered the situation; Van Buren and Eaton resigned, and the anti-Eaton faction had to follow suit.

In the recess of the Senate Jackson appointed Van Buren Minister to England. He spent a year there, and then the Senate, taking up his nomination, rejected it. They imagined they had humiliated Jackson and Van Buren, but the only result was to make Van Buren Vice President and, when Jackson retired, President. At the time Calhoun, Clay and Webster thought they had done a great thing. While it was under way Calhoun said to a Senator: "It would kill him, sir! kill him dead! He will never kick, sir! never kick!" It was even arranged that the rejection should be accomplished by a tie vote, so that the Vice President, Calhoun, should have the casting vote.

Van Buren refers to letters with which he intended to accompany his autobiography, in which Jackson outlines his plans for subduing South Carolina in the nullification crisis. He had exhausted his constitutional powers, as they were then understood, and South Carolina had raised a force of 12,000 men to resist the Federal officials. Congress would not at first give him free use of the army, and Jackson planned to go in person to South Carolina at the head of a posse comitatus, which he knew he could raise in Virginia and Tennessee, and arrest Calhoun, Hayne, Hamilton and McDuffie in the midst of their nullification brigade.

The story of the fight over the United States Bank was never so clearly told, and in Van Buren's



"Settin' on a Rail."

A Cartoon Reflecting a Contemporary View of Van Buren.

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hands it becomes a matter of absorbing interest. But that may be said of everything he writes. He goes deeply into what appear to him the motives of all the actors in that great battle, though with never any apparent desire to do injustice to any of them, or in fact to any of the statesmen of whom he treats. Indeed, he manages to find some good qualities even in Webster, whom he evidently loathes, and is never so happy as when he is telling of a reconciliation with some one who had injured him—Clay, for instance, or Calhoun, both of whom had conspired in the plot to recall him from England. As has been said above, he discloses his character unconsciously, and it is the character of a brave, true gentleman, mild in manner, immovable in policy, generous in heart, and afraid of nothing.

The character of his hero, Jackson, rises and grows in the same steady manner in these deliberate pages. Some of his pen portraits are very striking; one can fairly see the "demoniac look" that blazed in the

eyes of Calhoun, standing close to the Vice President's desk, while the Senate was trying to humiliate that officer, Van Buren. Clay appears constantly and is always characterized, or else his acts characterize him. He pays a curious tribute to the Adamses, not knowing that their family had not finished with its fame. Once he approached John Quincy Adams, intending to shake hands and end their enmity, but Adams drew away with so fierce a look that Van Buren feared he meant to strike him. But he always admired Adams, and though there was never any reconciliation, it was not Van Buren's fault; nor does he utter anything but praise for the Old Man Eloquent.

It is a most remarkable book, a great autobiography despite its incompleteness. It covers an immense amount of ground, including the early days of Tammany Hall, and is embellished with the shrewdest and most thought-provoking commentaries on life and politics. He had a great reputation for common sense when he was alive, and his memoir proves that if anything it was underestimated.