

THE EUROPEAN JOURNALS OF JOHN HOUSTON MIFFLIN: 1836-37

The name of John Houston Mifflin is not a familiar one in the annals of Pennsylvania history. More familiar, perhaps, is the name of his son, Lloyd Mifflin, hailed at the beginning of the century as one of America's more skilful poets but now almost completely neglected by the literary critics — an oblivion that is richly deserved when one considers that, though he produced more sonnets than anyone else in American literature, he produced them chain-fashion, like sausages on a string. Ludwig Lewisohn, a critic not renowned for savagery, has probably labelled this poetry correctly when he calls these "stucco sonnets."¹ For this poetry is dull and lifeless stuff indeed, and there is little in it to indicate that Lloyd inherited any of the obvious zest for life that marks every page of his father's letters from Europe.

John Houston Mifflin, born in 1807 and a descendent of the John Mifflin who emigrated to the colonies from Wiltshire in 1679, was an artist by profession. He was educated at the Friends Westtown Academy in Philadelphia, then studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, and, anxious to study portraiture at its best, went to Europe to study art in the company of several other young American artists. Prior to his departure in 1836, he produced a book of lyrics, which he had printed and distributed to his friends as a token of his friendship.² Though these poems are not particularly good, they are at least readable and serve to indicate the genesis of the talent that passed on to Lloyd Mifflin himself.

While in Europe, he produced the series of letters with which this paper deals. Eleven of them have been preserved for us, and, taken together, they constitute an almost complete journal of John Houston Mifflin's stay in Europe, covering a period extending from August 19, 1836, when he left New York on the **Orpheus** for Liverpool to June 1, 1837, when he informed his friends that he had booked return passage on the **St. James** and would see them by August 1.³ The letters are addressed to two Philadelphia friends: Charles Gilpin, a young Philadelphia attorney, and Charles West Thomson, then working in the Bank of the United States but soon to renounce the life of commerce for the more cloistered activities of the church.⁴ They are long, descriptive letters, and were evidently intended for publication, at least in part, for in them he refers to publication possibilities in the **Augusta Chronicle**. The "journal" — for it was by this term that he referred to the collection of letters and notes which he sent home — not only gives us a complete picture of the man who wrote them, a charming portrait of an artist as a young man undergoing the grand tour in a Europe far different from the one we now know, but it offers us a valuable commentary on the sights and customs of Europe and an extremely interesting eye-witness account of the theatre of that time in London and

in Paris as seen by a young Pennsylvania gentleman with an observant artist's eye. In a subsequent article I intend to deal with his theatrical observations, a matter too technical for the scope of this present essay, for Mifflin comments at length on Madame Vestris, Macready's acting, the success of Edwin Forrest in London, and his visits to see Browning's **Strafford** and Talfourd's **Ion**.

II

"I am," he wrote when the **Orpheus** was five hundred miles at sea, "entirely indifferent to the elements — willing to be resolved into them as soon as they determine on it . . . cabined, cribbed, confined! And to see and hear the whole of the passengers at the long indulged pastime of their meals! Even the ladies . . . devouring substantial by the hour."⁵ Ill with the ague when he boarded the **Orpheus** in New York, Mifflin spent at least ten days of his first ocean voyage in his cabin. To add to the discomfort, he had poor reading matter to occupy him. "I came away without Shakespeare or Byron," he writes, and adds that there was "poor company on board or rather so — clever fellows . . . ladies all old or ugly, 7 of 'em and 11 or 12 gents."⁶ However, the ship was well-captained and the fare was good, though Mifflin declared himself opposed to sea-travel. "But what is the comfort of anything at sea to traveling by land. What is the cabin of a packet, to the splendid drawing room of a Mississippi steamboat!"⁷

Writing on September 13, 1836, to Thomson, he described the first part of his stay in England. Landing in Liverpool, he and his companion Deveaux rushed off to visit the walled city of Chester.⁸ He was impressed with Liverpool — "fine buildings . . . its infirmary, Exchange, churches, and in visiting the museums where there are stuffed alligators and a beautiful account of splendid birds . . . a very splendid picture of Achilles casting off his female disguise, a splendid picture of Queen Mary . . . a number of figures by Wood and another a beautiful (a sweet thing) life-size."⁹

His visit to Chester resulted in one rather startling observation, though perhaps not so startling when we realize that he was a healthy twenty-three and possessed an artist's keen eye for detail;

. . . the girls of Chester are very fair to look upon — Whew! You might learn to colour from such foreheads and such cheeks as theirs!!! — all pretty! "Birds of Paradise" all these village girls of England — their complexions lovely beyond anything familiar to our eyes in Philadelphia — but if I sent you one, as a specimen of the Angel, I would make her celestial, Empyrean origin and home, undoubted by depriving her, in true bird-of-paradise style, of her feet — Nature has been too liberal there! We have not seen, in all England, one pretty foot, confound it, in town or country, ladies or wenches, their feet are large and flat — and fairly scalloped out on the instep.¹⁰

This observation seemed fairly important to him, and he returned to it in a later letter:

There are few carriages they say — this must account, we hope (in charity) for the gross monstrosity of all the feet we see the women paddling along with here! — in real Newfoundland dog fashion — rolling — such feet! — the prettier the face the worse the feet — so never look down."

French farm girls, on the other hand, delighted him in this respect:



J. H. Mifflin

JOHN HOUSTON MIFFLIN
1807 - 1888

We saw young girls (laundresses and the like) with fresh rosy faces and bright eyes walking in the streets with their little white caps . . . their dress reaching only to the knee and a pretty rounded limb finished by a neat little foot, in clumsy clogs below!!!¹²

Such human architecture, however, did not detain him for long, for there was much to see, "much in nature, much in manners and in customs altogether new, collections of pictures, scenes memorable from their associations, edifices venerable for their antiquity and cities dazzling in their magnificence."¹³ He felt at home in England and "walking in some handsome street so like to Chestnut Street or Broadway" he found it difficult to believe that he was really in London. "It seemed," he wrote to Thomson, "much more like being away from home when we had some 1,500 miles of water between us and a shore than since we have stepped on solid earth again! Here the grass grows green, the trees are very like to trees, and the people speak a sort of language so nearly English that we . . . think we are in that blessed land we left behind us."¹⁴

From Liverpool they journeyed to Manchester and from Manchester to Birmingham, "in the stage, 4 in and 11 out for Birmingham"¹⁵ They tallied in Birmingham for one night and then moved on to Stratford-upon-Avon, a town that, perhaps more than any other in England, fascinated the young writer and artist. "Was it," he asked Thomson, "our imagination that made everything a little prettier in this pretty village than in any other we have seen in England?"¹⁶

From the moment that the coach stopped in front of the celebrated **Red Horse**, Mifflin loved Stratford. In typical tourist fashion he fell a prey to the commercialization that even then was providing the residents of Shakespeare's town a tidy revenue. "We stepped out at the stage office door," he wrote to Thomson, "and were shown into a little room 10 by 12 — over the fireplace of which hung the portrait of Washington Irving! The very little room of the **Red Horse** which he had immortalized in **The Sketch Book** and the description of which we read in the very house itself that day!"¹⁷

In the Town Hall his artist's fancy was captured by the Gainsborough portrait of Garrick — "a beautiful picture with a most living face, no painted skin but natural flesh . . . the figure leaning against, embracing, and supported by the pedestal and bust of Shakespeare with its inspired countenance . . . the picture is very harmonious, painted with wonderful and catching boldness, but at a proper distance has the effect of the most beautiful finish."¹⁸

The statue of Shakespeare which Garrick presented to the town did not please him so much. "It is," he wrote, "a performance not very remarkable which has been blackened by the northern rains for many years."¹⁹

Slowly, and with extreme reverence, he approached the "venerable church which has been visited for years by thousands of pilgrims to the tomb of Shakespeare!"²⁰ Though he tells Thomson to "turn to Irving and let him describe it," he proceeds with this lavish commentary of his own:

Thro' the same shaded avenues of trees and over the same gray stones we walked to that church door. No spot could be more suitable for the repose of Shakespeare — in a quiet churchyard within the edge of a quiet village, upon the very bank of the gentle river Avon, within the chapel of that venerable church with the monuments of departed and forgotten power

around him. Fit spot for him who had so much of the milk of human kindness in his bosom. I would not bury him in the cold pomp and vain glory of the titled great, nor would I banish the tomb of sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child, to the grand solitude of Nature — but make his rest within the influence of human, social happiness, yet where it would be tranquilized by the softening shadow of murmuring trees, the sound of rippling waters, and the song of early birds.

I stood upon the stone that covers him — I had previously sat within the pew where he was wont to worship. The ostentacious heraldry, the marble effigy and long eulogies of departed knights were near — their names I have forgotten, their family I was told is now extinct and so is that of Shakespeare — who will recall the splendours of the proud — when will the bard be forgotten.²¹

And then, rushing on, he added ecstatically that “of course we visited the ancient building — the very room in which the poet was born — saw its walls scribbled over and over with ignoble and illustrious names . . . glanced at the three volumes of registered names of visitors — among them Scott and Irving and many known to fame . . . of course left ours, without addition of a rhyme — alas, some have done this too foolishly.”²²

Riding to Warwick in the evening, Mifflin was angered at the English cruelty to horses, a viewpoint which he later enlarged upon when he saw similar maltreatment in France. “We rode in a Phaeton,” he wrote to Thomson, describing their sight-seeing in Warwick, “and would you could have seen it! One horse dragging up a monstrous vehicle of 4 wheels — heavy enough for an ox-cart — one driver a position . . . riding and whipping . . . oh! They load their horses here — and in such a carriage (the carriage itself a load) they think not too much for one horse!!!²³ And, writing from Paris, he continued this commentary: “. . . now drags along a monstrous cart for the scavengers — dragged by one strong horse in the shafts and a little donkey in the lead . . . Horses suffer much in France — Pavements slippery and bad and they load them immensely.”²⁴

Warwick and Kenilworth thrilled him tremendously, and he wrote to both Thomson and Gilpin about their grandeur. “Ruins indeed!” he wrote in a letter to Thomson. “Ruins indeed! There it (Kenilworth) stands a noble wreck in ruinous perfection! High, massive, gray . . . fearful, vast, and beautiful — elegant proportions . . . decorated as for a picture with the ivy, that with adorning might is fairly pulling down the very ruins that it hides . . . I never saw so much grandeur, never so much romantic beauty in an hour's ride.”²⁵ To Gilpin he continued in the same enthusiastic vein: “. . . the ruins of that castle whose strength and finished beauty is decked with princely splendour and around whose crumbling walls the enchantment of Scott has cast a more dazzling lustre and more imperishable interest.”²⁶ The freshness of the landscape enchanted him, and he remarked that here all was “green rolling fields, clumps of trees all in fresh and vigorous green, hedge and walls on the roadside — (none of our straggling wooden fences).”²⁷

Pausing only momentarily to glance at a “maiden with her pretty modest look,”²⁸ he plunged into historical reverie on seeing Kenilworth:

. . . great in themselves and rendered interesting by so many various associations — I had often imagined the traveller, lingering “to meditate amidst decay” but I had seen him “couched among fallen columns” — the ruins of old temples — the remains of the deserted shrine — the mar-

ble monuments of splendor and power — but here all was rude and stern and strong, more wildly picturesque — and recalling those rough times when in this castle the haughty baron could hold out, as here did Hastings for a half a year against his King Henry III — six hundred years ago! In those guard rooms — on this pavement — how many feet have trod since then — By those narrow windows the timid maiden has rushed as the horns announced the arrival of the master or the guest and the Earl and his knightly guests rode into the courtyard below. Upon these very flags Elizabeth may have walked, looking perhaps unconsciously upon the splendid preparations for the tournament below — or gazing listlessly upon this beautiful landscape and yonder village church which was then as it is now so prominent in the quiet prospect — but listening perhaps believingly to the whisperings of the courtly Leicester.²⁹

But, as at Stratford, his thoughts went to the transient quality of fame and he remarked, on looking upon the remains of Caesar's tower, that "its walls of 16 feet in thickness that once girt the warrior with impenetrable strength, shelter now a garrison of pigeons . . . the only banners waving there the long grass hanging from the wall."³⁰ Visiting the graveyard by the church in the town, he remarked again that "the forms of its founders are passed away but the people of the little village still worship in the church within the yard of which so many of their ancestors repose."³¹ And walking between the stones, he took time out to copy an inscription that pleased him:

Reader
 contemplate thy own mortality
 in the remains here before thee
 of the Rev. Wm. and Mrs. Best
 The former
 with indefatigable vigilance
 For fifty years vicar of this parish
 The latter
 For fifty and one years his wife
 Not one wife in fifty, not one mother
 Not one mistress of a family, not one neighbor
 Not one Christian in fifty
 Has she left behind her better than herself
 Fourscore years and ten
 Being the good old age to which she lived
 1748, the year of our Lord
 In which she died.

The paintings, of course, in Warwick Castle delighted him, and he left us a few artistic judgments. Rembrandt's work was "like to life," and Rubens' work thrilled him beyond all others. Rubens, he wrote, was a "colorist that played at everything with equal facility with his wonderful pencil — they rage and roar and are fearful to look upon."³²

From Warwick to Oxford he travelled by coach, riding outside as an experiment that had sad results because it rained and he was chilled through. On the ride he was interested in the passing sights: Leamington; a "wonderful" sheep market "then in full blast — bleat, I should say" going on in a village square; and the wonderful quality of the roads — "level and all of it smooth and hard and could be travell'd by a steam locomotor."³³ Seeing a crowd waiting along the road, he asked the reason for the gathering, "and was told they were waiting till the opening of a field, that they might go in to glean — and this after a much more careful gathering than our farmers give their fields. Yet the gleaners, many of them, looked well clothed and

cheerful."³⁴

Passing hurriedly through Woodstock, with a fleeting glimpse of Blenheim on the horizon, he saw Oxford in the distance, "its appearance . . . raising expectations even greater than the descriptions I had previously heard of this city of colleges, as domes and towers and spires and turrets rose upon our view."³⁵ He had arrived during the celebration of St. Giles Fair, and he found Oxford crowded with "classical theatre, Punch and Judy, menageries — pictures outside, representing horribly horrible murders, more horribly done to the death within — and a grand theatre whose whole corps danced upon their platform in front to show their strength and attract an audience for the evening performance."³⁶

"We were," he writes to Gilpin, "almost immediately on our arrival seized upon by a guide, whom however we shook off for the night."³⁷ The next morning, however, they were again "seduced, by a little gratuitous information, to be followers of quite an intelligent citizen of Oxford, a guide for twenty years."³⁸ Mifflin was not happy with the European habit of "guiding" Americans, and, in a letter to Thomson, he spoke out against it:

A showman, like a sentinel, stands posted near to every work of art, of Nature or of Fine — no monument, no waterfall, no ruin can be seen without their close attendance, and the descriptive accompaniment of their tongues! Who can feel the force of historical association, who can even composedly use their sense of sight when they are thus assailed? Verily if they could . . . they would obscure the view and "show it" for a shilling or a crown. Not a breeze flies o'er the meadow, not a cloud imbibes the setting sun's effulgence but they would monopolize it, and administer and exhibit it if it were possible, for a price.³⁹

However, guided they were through Oxford, "a city of palaces, of great extent and with nothing to remind you of modern time."⁴⁰

III

While all of these excursions were taking place, Mifflin and Deveaux were settled in London, having taken a studio on a side street near Oxford Street. In London they worked in the various museums and in their rooms, another artist, Frazer, painted Mifflin's picture — as did Deveaux later in Paris. "We have," he wrote to Gilpin, "visited and looked into some of the finest collections of pictures in the world since we were in England — have drawn and painted at our own rooms and trust that even already the sight of so many good things may have improved our taste."⁴¹ However, the Academy was closing for the off-season and they wished to go to Paris to "enjoy during dull weather in London the advantages of the Louvre."⁴² Accordingly, on October 2, 1836, they departed for Paris, settled at the Hotel de Lille on arrival (though they later took a tiny studio), and, within two days, Mifflin could write that he could "feel content to think I have seen the most and choicest paintings of the great masters already."⁴³

However, though settled satisfactorily in Paris, Mifflin devoted his first long letter bearing that city's postmark to a description of some interesting English sights.⁴⁴ Chief among these was an account of a trip to Windsor, Eton, Slough, and Stoke Poges. Gray was one of Mifflin's favorite poets, and he was thrown into an ecstasy by his visit to Stoke Poges, the result being a letter that is eminently quotable.

Traveling by coach from London to Slough and then on to a quick glance at "the fanciful pagoda and Chinese temple where the voluptuous George IV drained

away so many a day,"⁴⁵ Mifflin finally reached Windsor and its castle "with the Rubens, Van Dykes, Titians, its hundred Wests, the cartoons of Raphael, and the Gallery of Waterloo."⁴⁶ After a day crowded with such activity, he went, in the quiet of evening, to visit Stoke Poges, the country churchyard where Thomas Gray is buried and about which his famous *Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard* is composed. "You will not think a hustling day concluded ill," he wrote to Thomson, "by a further ride to the sequestered spot where the great elegiac poet is interred . . . the ride is through a pastoral country by a narrow unfrequented road, bordered with green hedges and shaded frequently by overhanging trees — a suitable approach to such a scene."⁴⁷

About two miles from the village of Slough, and almost adjoining the fields of Stoke Church, we passed the porter's lodge and handsome gateway to the park of the Penn Estate — a herd of deer grazed under noble trees that recorded the antiquity of the place. And the stately mansion told the wealth of the proprietor whose ancestors have made it their residence since the time of the founders of Pennsylvania. Our carriage stopped in the narrow road and by a little gate in the hedge we entered a green field directly in front of the monument to Gray — it is an oblong pedestal of brownish stone, supporting a handsome urn of the same form . . .⁴⁸

Noting the various inscriptions on the monument, the apt use of celebrated lines from the *Elegy* on three sides of the monument and the inscription facing the church — ("This monument in honor of Thomas Gray, was erected A.D. 1799 among the scenes celebrated by that great lyric and elegiac poet. He died July 10, 1771, and lies unnoticed in the churchyard adjoining, under the same stone on which he piously and pathetically recorded the internment of his aunt and lamented mother") — Mifflin walked across the lawn to the church itself.

In the distance the mansion of the Penn's was to be seen, but a boundary of venerable trees enclosed the churchyard prospect with a quiet of its own. A little group of happy, pretty children . . . were playing on the green — their playmate was a young ass and their little dog ran playfully toward us, frolicking around; and seemed delighted as he allowed me to pat him — If this want of distrust and harshness toward the stranger did not speak well for the innocence as well as the retirement of the place, the want of fastening to the little gate in the iron railing fronting the church, which opened with a latch, would have reminded us that we were "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife" . . . *It required no effort of the imagination to believe we were in the very churchyard where the poet lingered in the contemplative hour of twilight — it is indeed "the" country churchyard, not a "village" churchyard; but set down in the lap of nature, shielded from the gaze of the crowd and the bustle of the world, fit place for the humble worshipper when living and a congenial repose for him when dead.*⁴⁹

The church appealed greatly to Mifflin. He described it as "low and venerably old," venerable being an adjective with which he was much in love. The interior, he felt, corresponded admirably in simplicity with "the rude gothic form" of the exterior, and the yew trees, the largest and the darkest he had ever seen, threw a shade "that was dark, even to gloom, upon the turf that 'heaved in many a mouldering heap' below."⁵⁰

Finally, leaning over Gray's grave to read the inscription there concerning his mother, Mifflin started to philosophize:

. . . while we leaned upon the simple tomb which covers his remains, we read the record of the internment of his aunt and the notice of the death

of his mother . . . as I stood by this poet's grave, where even his name is not recorded, I could not but recollect that at the same hour, one week before, I was standing upon a marble pavement, and under a stupendous vault, gazing at the "storied urn and animated bust," the proud monument to the conqueror who died before Quebec. It is said of Wolfe that he recited the evening before his death, with much feeling. "The Elegy"; and added that "he would rather be the author of that poem than conqueror in the battle of the following day!" — Such a man deserved his victory and his monument! The splendor we had witnessed in the morning of this day, tended not a little by its contrast, to give repose to the quiet of this humble scene: We had seen the monarch of England roll by in his splendid equipage; and seen within the antique towers of Windsor in the halls of his ancestors, how much of "the boast of heraldry and pomp of power"! And in the chapel of the same, even

Where through the long-drawn aisle
and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the
note of praise.

We saw the listless crowd directing all the worship of their eyes to transitory power. Now, while we loitered, the birds, hidden in the thick leaves of ivy or hopping fearlessly in the branches above us, were chanting in full chorus their vesper hymn: and we could not but think that he whose fate allowed him the quiet of a life among such scenes, with all the innocence of nature around him, should bring from his worship in that lovely church a purer heart than most can hope who move amidst the shock of men."⁵¹

Reflecting on the man who had produced *The Elegy*, he went on:

Every reflection gave force and feeling to the lines of Gray, not one of which but would seem to be suggested to a mind like his most naturally here. We walked slowly away: the quiet of a sabbath evening had now deepened, and we heard the "Tinklings" which the poet calls (we never knew till now how characteristically or descriptively) "drowsy," such as might "lull the distant fold." By a coincidence that delighted me, we now heard the tolling of a bell, perhaps the very bell that toll'd the curfew to the ears of Gray! Not until the "glittering landscape" faded on the sight, did we leave this interesting spot: rendered so no doubt by the spell which the bard has thrown around it, yet having in its situation and approach more pastoral quiet, in itself more venerable simplicity, and round it more melancholy gloom, than any churchyard that I ever saw. When my thoughts are in the twilight mood they will often visit it again, and imagination will never picture a spot more congenial for a final resting place "upon the lap of earth."⁵²

He had made a sketch of the spot, which he promised to send to Thomson, and he ended this long letter by asking his friend to attempt to secure publication of the description which we have quoted in part above, adding that "if published use only my initial."⁵³

IV

His European sojourn, of course, elicited more descriptions and more commentaries. Settled in Paris, he wrote to Thomson concerning his artistic activities: "I assure you I have absorbing study to engage me — viz., per diem, **Breakfast, Lesson in French. Walk to the Louvre by 10 to paint** (copying any of the most celebrated masters of the world in a gallery where there are 14 or 1500 pictures, where hundreds are painting, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys — even artists — some

poor, some excellent) until 4 o'clock. Walk to dinner, dine. From 7 to 10 o'clock draw from the figure at the Academy. Walk home, and you will agree it is pretty well occupied, a short winter day."⁵⁴

It was cold in Paris, and they had hired an additional room as a studio where they could paint "after the cold shall banish us from the best gallery of the Louvre."⁵⁵ Mifflin was shocked by the high price of wood in Paris — twenty dollars a cord for poor knotty stuff — though he deemed even a Paris winter a pleasure after the rains and humidity of London. He yearned for his friends in America and particularly for a certain lady — ". . . how gladly would I have her warm heart at my side this cold weather . . . and if my wish were to be proved by pilgrimage, I think I'd promenade with peas in my pumps a powerful distance for her good."⁵⁶ And he was bothered, as a sensitive young artist should be, by thoughts of fame and the progress of his career. "What shall come from our easels is yet in the blank-of-canvas, as no doubt it some day, and that soon, will be in the darker dimness of oblivion — meantime I hope your eyes may see some little evidence that we have "lived and bred" the Art!!! Whether we turn to and paint each other or immortalize bootblacks with white beards, or flower girls with black eyes, you shall see with your own."⁵⁷

To Gilpin he confessed more serious feelings concerning his talent. "I confess I often envy you the full amount of your ambition," he wrote to Gilpin after Gilpin had written to him lamenting his (Gilpin's) slowness in attaining success. "Mine, alas, will not keep pace, even with my little natural capacity — I find the flame is feeble and flickering which should blaze and be consuming me."⁵⁸ And then he went on to enlarge on this theme:

. . . when I walk thro' the long gallery of the Louvre, when I look upon the thousand pictures hanging on its high walls, on hundreds of votaries before them imitating with patient labour some portion of their beauties and observe crowds of visitors pass by, the gay, the proud, the beautiful, gazing listlessly for a moment upon the permanent reflection which art has given to the evanescent graces of Nature, forgetting to ask and not caring to know the name of him whose life exhaled in producing them — nay when I recollect the many splendid pictures I myself admire and scarcely recollect the authors of them, I can but say how empty is such fame — but when I think that thousands with more talent and infinitely more assiduous devotion to their art "have dropped into the grave unpitied and unknown," I think the very race ridiculous even if the prize were worthy when 'tis won ⁵⁹

And then he added, referring to his unsuccessful love affairs of the past and the separation of the present, that "henceforth I make love to **nothing** but immortal paint," going on from there to confess to Gilpin that "making love has never engaged me, however much I may affect to have felt it or how much soever I may hope again to feel some 'lingering gleams of lustre gone!'"⁶⁰

The sights of Paris fascinated him: the female street cleaners "beautifully dressed in gay colored shawls and handkerchiefs" (though he reproached them for their lack of diligence and called them "cruel creeping things"); the cafes; the restaurants where he reported a feast of "oysters cooked in all sorts of ways"; the church of St. Dennis whose effigies he summarized quickly as belonging to hundreds "whose names and deeds I know not nor shall know"⁶¹; and, finally, in good American-in-Paris fashion, an evening at the theatre where the dancing entranced

him — "9 pretty damsels in elegant light dresses (& I in the orchestra) and they with unrivalled skill going their whirligigs with one extended horizontal leg and then a turn of extra elegance that left the extra dress above the waist, the whole form being well displayed in its white elastic covering!"⁶² And then adding to this, his Quakerism reasserting itself, "Don't shew this stuff for I am scribbling most unworthy tattlings You see however that I am not very dissipated as I have been but twice in Paris, though the artist, I always held, has an excellent excuse, the study of physiognomy, of the figure in action, of drapery, of scenery, of color — light and shade — above and beyond the enjoyment of the literary man or musical amateur."⁶³

During this time he was hard at work, copying pictures in the various museums and sketching the various places which he visited in and near Paris. Rubens impressed him most: "the most glorious painter of them all, deficient . . . perhaps in the knowledge requisite for some of the excellence of his profession but combining more of the attributes of the painter than would your dozen great masters."⁶⁴ And some of the famous spots near Paris fascinated him, especially **Pere la Chaise** which he described as "a large and crowded city of the dead." However, it depressed him too. "It wants the space, the silence, the solemnity, the solitude of a cemetery," he wrote to Thomson. "It seems a city of funereal ostentation, its wide streets for the great, with their high monuments closely crowded . . . There is an artificial air about the whole, a superficial, fanciful taste, too showy to argue sincere simplicity."⁶⁵

He and Deveaux had planned a trip to Italy, but for some reason — not disclosed — Deveaux decided to remain in Paris. Mifflin, however, determined on going ahead with his plans, and, accordingly, began to search for a suitable traveling companion. He wrote to Thomson concerning his final choice:

I had to look about me for a companion for my truant excursion and found one in the person of a young physician who was a fellow passenger in the Orpheus last summer. He is a young Mississippian with many excellent traits — somewhat raw — 6 feet 2 — looks like a stranger everywhere and is not quite as much at home in Geography or in classical history as is meet for a companion of mine, who ought to be largely gifted, particularly in the latter, to make up for my deficiencies.⁶⁶

They left Paris on the evening of Feb. 21st and traveled by coach to Marseilles, making the trip of over two hundred miles in three nights and two days, "the most rapid conveyance in France." Marseilles he found to resemble the average American seaport and was delighted, since his funds were shrinking, with the cheapness of living there, a fact that also delighted him at their next stop, Naples. In Naples, however, the price of fruit was high due to a quarantine on oranges from Sicily — the price was a staggering one cent per orange in contrast to the usual market value of five for a cent! From Naples he wrote to Thomson about the cost of travel:

Yesterday we sent out our guide servant (who speaks English, French, and Italian) to bring in a little fruit. He brought six apples, six oranges (selected), about twenty walnuts (such as we term by the name of English walnuts), and a pound or more of the finest figs, all together costing sixteen cents.⁶⁷

They had traveled from Marseilles to Naples by steamboat, stopping at Genoa for a few days and remaining overnight in the harbor at Leghorn — a landing being impossible there because of the cholera quarantine. From Genoa he wrote to Thom-

son concerning the destruction of Italian art by the Catholics:

. . . all the pictures are of a fine order. The very best are seldom so used but unfortunately in many cases very fine pictures are disfigured and even permanently mutilated by the ridiculous custom of their religious ceremony — some favorite saint has an offering from a devotee (I presume) of a wreath of tin glory, a huge thing and this is whacked against the canvas to surround his pate — his wounded hands (if he is a martyr) are beplastered with little glittering leaves — a chain is suspended around his neck, or a crown is given to the brow of a virgin, solid and real, projecting from the canvas, and reduces the picture to darkness.⁶⁸

Naples and Rome fascinated him, and again he became lyrical when describing their beauty. "You never heard or read any exaggerated descriptions of the beauty of the bay of Naples," he wrote to Thomson, and then went on to pour out his praise for it — the ruins of the villa of Lucullus seen through the shimmering transparent water of a tiny lake, Vesuvius rising in the distance, the view of Naples from a convent five miles above the city, and finally the view from Virgil's Tomb. Virgil's Tomb, he wrote, "is of course of great interest to the classical traveler, but as I loathe all affectation I did not endeavor to feel the love that I imagined I had a right to acknowledge when I wandered in the churchyard of Gray or stood reverently near the dust of Shakespeare."⁶⁹ For a man who loathed affectation, however, Mifflin acted strangely, for in his next letter he tells Thomson that he had always admired Manfred's allusion to the Coliseum in *Childe Harold* and that he had recited it by moonlight in "the vast arena of that mystic ruin . . . where the awful vastness of the ruin round this spot crushed into insignificance every interest and thought of self."⁷⁰

Childe Harold, indeed, served as a guide to his sightseeing. "You say truly," he wrote to Thomson on his return to Paris, "that *Childe Harold*, particularly the 6th canto, would be no bad manual for a tour through Italy — at every step 'I trod the path of him' and found it so."⁷¹

V

Having hurried back from Rome to Paris, fearful that Deveaux would have sailed for England, Mifflin sent Thomson the itinerary of his trip: Paris to Marseilles, through the Mediterranean to Naples, to Vesuvius, Pompeii, to Genoa, to Pisa, to Rome (where he saw a puppet show that fascinated him as much as St. Peter's), to Florence, to Venice, to Verona ("where I laid in Juliet's tomb and saw, not at the same time! a modern farce in a grand antique theatre"), to Padua, then to Switzerland, to Dijon, and then back to Paris. Picking up Deveaux in Paris, he returned to London, via Antwerp and Rotterdam, Mifflin starting the trip to Holland by writing to Thomson, "Hurra for the pictures of Rubens and Van Dyck and after that of Reynolds . . . and after all of that how gladly will I hail some of the master-pieces of that greatest of painters, *Nature* — and where are they to be found as in Philadelphia!"⁷²

As his thoughts turned to his return to America, he expressed grave fears concerning the political situation in America. Hating Andrew Jackson and fearing that the leveling tendencies of Jacksonian Democracy would ruin America, he expressed himself forthrightly in his letters. In 1836 he wrote to Gilpin that he read only so much of the news from America "as is safe for me to mix with it (breakfast), considering my slender appetite and delicate digestion to say nothing of the present

quality of the savor of political viands.”⁷³ And later in the same letter, he wrote again: “To return to America . . . it is long since I had much hope of the success of our wishes in politics — the succession of Jackson is insured and the system it is to be feared will be strengthened — we have only to hope for the most that the evil may cure itself.” Later, after Van Buren had been inaugurated and the country was in the middle of the financial panic of 1837, he wrote to Gilpin again:

I have received no newspapers . . . however as the French papers furnished copious extracts I was not ignorant of American affairs — at present it would be well if one could be kept in darkness, but the news is too unfavorable to be unknown . . . we must hope for a speedy bettering of things, all the confusion cannot injure your professional occupation — tho’ perhaps it may slightly mine upon my return.⁷⁴

The trip home had been arranged, Mifflin having taken passage on the *St. James* for New York, slated to sail on the 21st of June and scheduled to reach New York by August. He was worried about the financial crisis in America — “I fear and yet I long to be there” — and he turned, in his last letter, to a comment on the poverty and misery of the English masses. Going to the theatre one evening, he was seized upon by a Cockney prostitute:

A very pretty woman fixed upon me, but she told me too much and apparently too true a story and chilled all my love into sympathy — poor creature, one of many thousands blest with “the fatal gift of beauty” and poor in a city where poverty finds it almost impossible to be virtuous. I hope it will be long before our country will be so crowded with wretchedness as is “Merry England,” joyous France or sunny Italy! Yet I fear — tho’ I’ve seen so little of it, tho’ its appearance is so powerfully suppressed — that in England — Great Britain at least — is the greatest misery.⁷⁵

However, the trip was over and the homeward trek was soon to begin. His baggage bulging with the copies he had made of the famous pictures of London, Paris, and Rome, Mifflin returned to America. His artistic career, however, was to be short. He went to the South Atlantic states and painted portraits for some years. Returning to Philadelphia in 1844, he married. But the great delicacy of his bride’s health rapidly pushed his career to one side. He gave up art to care for her, spending the remainder of a long life — he lived to be 82 — in Columbia, Pennsylvania. Doubtless the European hegira remained a bright spot on an otherwise tranquil life, the “Grand Tour” of a less burdensome time.

COMMENTS ON THE LONDON THEATRICAL SEASON, 1836-1837 **by John Houston Mifflin**

Probably the most interesting sections of John Houston Mifflin’s *European Journal* are those portions dealing with the London theatre of 1836-37. Warning his American friends not to reveal the theatrical portions of his manuscript (for his Quaker relatives would be shocked at his levity), he chronicled in his letters to Thomson and Gilpin a rather complete account of the London theatre scene. He had a natural taste for the theatre (he knew the American stage well, judging from the comparisons he made), and he enjoyed the company of actors and the discussion of things theatrical. He had hardly landed in Liverpool before he had met an American actor, George Jones, billed as “The American Tragedian,” though Jones offended him by permitting him to see “many panegyrics on himself — shewing us his Shakespeare anniversary oration and a Eulogy upon himself in rhyme.”⁷¹

On his first evening in London he and his companion Deveaux attended the Haymarket Theatre to see Sir Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Ion*. The play starred Vanderhoff and Miss Ellen Tree, and Miss Tree's performance intrigued Mifflin. It was, in his phrase, "measured, formal, affective in manner of delivery," and he dubbed Miss Tree "a woman of sense . . . tho' too much of an attitudinizer" and believed that she was primarily successful because she "had a pretty leg and has to show it."²

Ion had made Talfourd's literary fame. In its printed edition it had won the praise of its readers, and in its initial production at Covent Garden (Mifflin saw it in September at the Haymarket) won it many new friends. Talfourd was a pseudo-classicist, esteeming Addison's *Cato* as perfection in drama, and so he had tried in *Ion* to choose a classic theme and, in its treatment, hold to the unities. The result was a play that had little sense of reality, what Allardyce Nicoll calls a manner that is distant, where "reality seems to rumble far off from his scenes of artificiality and meaningless talk."³

Vanderhoff — who along with Kemble, Charles Young, Mrs. Warner, etc., were exponents of the classical school of acting — did not impress Mifflin. Of him Mifflin wrote:

V's appearance is very striking, very tall, large and well formed, and his head quite good for effect, but he has too much grimace, a bad voice, execrable taste in reading, is full of start and attitude and rant — oh how they applauded to the echo as he tore a passion to very rags! Deveaux and I could not but laugh outright at the grave sadness with which they tolerated and approved his solemn burlesque and wished for Forrest — Edwin — Forrest but to rave awhile — if he'd try he could "cut them crazy" in London with his capabilities for rant and roar!⁴

The play itself merited this comment in the same letter to Gilpin:

The play is effective in its representation without being very wonderful or new in its situation, the prototypes of all of which are familiar to us in Shakespeare and Kotzebue, but it was as new as could be expected and the language, which was really very poetical (a little too much so for the stage) was less frequently so palpable in its imitation.⁵

Mifflin was startled by the London theatres and their being the centers for debauchery. He wrote to Gilpin concerning this:

The theatre was filled — lower boxes well filled with ladies. Second row or "upper boxes" well filled but not filled well — wedged tight with loose women, and quite pretty and quiet. The lobby they promenaded and the coffee-room, adjoining, they frequented. The pit they say is respectable — it looked so.

In the same letter he speaks of two more theatrical expeditions, one to Astley's Amphitheatre (The Olympic), then under the celebrated management of Madame Vestris, and the other to the Victoria Theatre where a former Philadelphia actor, Archer, was playing in a farce.

Madame Vestris' establishment was easily the thing that thrilled Mifflin most in London, and his next letter to Gilpin concerned itself mostly with the glories of that theatre and the graciousness of Madame Vestris.

In addition to his ardor for Madame Vestris, Mifflin had the chance to see the famous comedian, John Reeve, perform at the Adelphi in his first performance after his tour in America in 1835. Reeve was a notorious stage figure of his day. He had made a successful tour in America and returned to the Adelphi, then under

the management of Yates, in a piece entitled *Novelty*, a sort of revue of his American travels in which he sang songs about America and commented on things American. It was this piece that Mifflin saw, and he gives us an interesting comment on it:

A prologue, and a happy one, was spoken by Mr. Yates, a pleasant thing called *Novelty* introduced the actors to the audience — Reeve appeared in his character, and then replied to questions about his absence, very honorably, of the manner of his reception in America and his determination not to return hospitality with ridicule — a sentiment which the audience received with enthusiasm — it did one's heart good to hear him and them on this occasion as he acknowledged Yankee worth and hospitality — "Well I've been to Boston and New York and Philadelphia" — "Yes and have come to Fill Adelphi again I hope" says the manager.

Mifflin gives no evidence in his comments on Reeve concerning Reeve's usual condition, for Reeve was a sort of early John Barrymore — drunk most of the time, unable to learn lines, a great darling of the crowd because he would leer at them in an off moment and shout, "You know I am fond of my glass and will excuse it."⁸ As a matter of fact, when Mifflin saw him Reeve had but two years to live, for he died in 1838 after breaking a blood vessel following an extended drinking bout. Mifflin tells us that "Reeve played admirably — the drunkard to the life in one scene," a fact which, knowing Reeve's normal proclivities, we have no need to doubt. The play was a melodrama, *The Wreck Ashore*, and Mifflin was particularly taken with a young actor named Smith — "his last scene dying in the cottage was perfection."

He reserved his greatest enthusiasm, however, for Madame Vestris:

I had only heard of Vestris as a dancer. I had imagined her tall and now declining into the vale of years and skinny. But she did not appear as a danseuse, but as an unaffected young lady, of a little archness, in a pleasant part that required some spirit but no pathos. The part itself was agreeable and to hear a voice like hers . . . I must leave London or I'll have to go to see her again!⁹

And several nights later he did go again, "for 2nd price—nine o'clock when you are admitted at 1/2 price, 2 shillings," and saw two plays "in which M. Vestris sings, plays, and looks charming!" Later, from Paris, he referred to her again — "Oh, she's fascinating. What was she twenty years ago!!!"¹⁰

Most interesting to the literary historian, however, are Mifflin's comments on the acting styles of the day, particularly on Macready's style, with which he contrasts Cooper's and Forrest's style.

He first saw Macready in *Macbeth* and was not impressed, though he went to the theatre with great expectations. The scenery, the actor portraying Duncan, the "well-trained supers" in the cast — these things pleased him. But of Macready, he wrote that he

was, in spite of the pictures of him, disappointed . . . his walk and his thrusting forward his chin, and the first words or sentence foreboded too much dropping of his discourse . . . I was disappointed in the first act — he inburst like a child to be led off by his wife, physically as well as mentally listless of the enterprise she is to perform.

He compared Macready to Cooper, the man who, in his opinion, was the finest and noblest *Macbeth*, and found that Macready's scenes in comparison were "poor and pitiful . . . some parts well but hurriedly read, without action or feeling, much badly conceived and faintly executed, and a general want of solidity and dignity."¹²

Later he saw Macready again in Browning's *Strafford*, which pleased him as little as the performance of *Macbeth*. Macready, he wrote to Gilpin, is "blindly

idolized here — he is tame and monstrous, has an unmanly stammering manner of speech, no voice, his face is far from good, and he walks with his head and chin protruded in most unmajestical advances.”¹³

It was at this time (1836) that Edwin Forrest was on his way to England, to open there as Spartacus in **The Gladiator** at Drury Lane. Mifflin did not see this play, though he reported to Thomson in a letter from Paris that the British considered it “barbarian” and much preferred Forrest in **Othello**. This was, of course, the beginning of the famous feud between Forrest and Macready, started on its way when the audience hissed Forrest as Macbeth, an impolite outburst which Forrest blamed on Macready. Forrest retaliated by hissing Macready’s Macbeth in 1849 and, in the riot that followed, twenty-two men were killed and thirty-six severely wounded, marking this as the bloodiest feud in theatrical history. What was really in question were two completely different styles of acting. Forrest was the leading exponent of “physical” acting, while Macready led the “new” school of acting theory. His followers, including Phelps, Creswick, Wallack, Jr., C. Pitt, were noted for attaching primary importance to conception of character in the acting of a part and neglecting elocution and the fine delivery of lines that had been customary in the theatre before. The star system of the day, the peculiar actor-manager set-up in the theatre of that period, often resulted in odd distortions of character — the star wrenched the emphasis of a play to suit himself and to cast the greatest glory on the part that he was playing.

Mifflin had no trouble choosing sides in this matter. He preferred Forrest, and said so with determination. Before Forrest’s arrival in England, he wrote to Gilpin that “Forrest I think will take — he certainly is better than any they have and his worst faults are their greatest virtues.” And then he added: “Kemble is no favorite here, only tolerated!” His opinion was correct, and on December 20, 1836, he wrote to Gilpin that “Forrest . . . you will perceive has ‘cut them crazy’ in London. I told you would be so, but in this case their approbation is not undeserved, for all his faults are better than the only excellences of their best actors.”¹⁵

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NOTES

I

¹ Ludwig Lewisohn. *The Story of American Literature*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1932.

² Lloyd Mifflin republished these poems after his father's death. John Houston Mifflin, *Lyrics*, Henry T. Coates & Co., Philadelphia, 1900.

³ They are the property of the Fackenthal Library, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

⁴ Charles West Mifflin, one of Mifflin's sons, was named for Charles West Thomson.

⁵ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, August 19, 1836.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ A preface to the edition of his lyrics published in 1900 states that Mifflin was accompanied by the American artists Healy, Fraser, and Deveaux. He makes no mention, however, of Healy in any of his letters. Deveaux was the most celebrated of this group.

⁹ J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, September 13, 1836.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, September 20, 1836.

¹² J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836.

¹³ J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, September 13, 1836.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.* Mifflin refers again to the vain people who dare to try poetic efforts when signing the registry at Stratford in a letter to Gilpin on Sept. 20, 1836. He had met an actor, Haskett, in Liverpool, and when he got to Stratford he was reminded of Haskett by seeing his name in the registry. "We were afterward reminded of Haskett not so pleasantly . . . where few dare to write more than their name and home, and genius itself was quell'd to silence — we found many bouncing lines of would-be-witty doggerel signed by Haskett — they were flat."

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836.

²⁵ J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, September 13, 1836.

²⁶ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, September 20, 1836.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, October 31, 1836.

40 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836.

41 *ibid.*

42 *ibid.*

43 *ibid.*

44 J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, October 31, 1836.

45 *ibid.* On the same day Mifflin stood by the road and watched William IV and his court sweep into Windsor.

46 *ibid.*

47 *ibid.*

48 *ibid.*

49 *ibid.*

50 *ibid.* Mifflin, it will be noted, was very much a Romantic in his love for old graveyards and "grim and gory" castles such as Kenilworth. The three liveliest accounts in his journal are of his visit to Shakespeare's tomb, his visit to Stoke Poges, and his excursion to Pere La Chaise outside Paris, the resting place of the Napoleonic great.

51 *ibid.*

52 *ibid.* Turning to his favorite peeve in England, the presence of tourist guides, he remarked that "it was delightful to find an unmolested entrance to a spot that should be visited in quiet and alone!"

53 *ibid.*

54 J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, October 31, 1836.

55 *ibid.*

56 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836.

57 J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, October 31, 1836.

58 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836.

59 *ibid.*

60 *ibid.*

61 J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, March 10, 1837.

62 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836.

63 *ibid.*

64 *ibid.*

65 J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, March 10, 1837.

66 *ibid.*

67 *ibid.*

68 *ibid.*

69 *ibid.*

70 J. H. Mifflin to Charles West Thomson, May 7, 1837.

71 *ibid.*

72 *ibid.*

73 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836.

74 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, June 1, 1837.

75 *ibid.*

II

1 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, September 20, 1836.

2 *ibid.*

3 Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama*, The Macmillan Co., New York, vol. 1, 1930, p. 178.

4 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, September 20, 1836.

5 *ibid.* It is interesting to note that William Archer felt much as Mifflin did. In *The Old Drama and the New* (p. 350) he remarks that Bulwer was a success while Talfourd failed because Bulwer's plays are free from "the frippery of irrelevant wit and the adipose tissue of wordy rhetoric."

6 *ibid.*

7 J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836

⁸ **Dictionary of National Biography**, p. 410.

⁹ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836.

¹⁰ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836. In the same letter Mifflin refuses to allow Gilpin to publish his theatrical notes. He feared social reprisal — “I of the Society of Friends and they so helter-skelter.”

¹¹ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, June 1, 1837.

¹⁴ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, October 1, 1836.

¹⁵ J. H. Mifflin to Charles Gilpin, December 20, 1836.