



“O Frenchmen! . . . study the Americans of the present day.”

__ Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville __

NEW TRAVELS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Performed in 1788 [Published 1791] __ Preface: Excerpts

Nouveau Voyage dans les Etats-Unis de l’Amerique Septentrionale, fait en 1788

A fervent admirer of the American Revolution, the French political writer Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville fulfilled a dream by sailing to the United States in 1788 (backed by speculators in the American war debt and the western lands). He spent several months travelling from Boston to Virginia, interviewing numerous Patriot leaders, evaluating the state of American slavery and abolitionist activity, and studying the Quaker lifestyle as a model for principled democracy. On his return to France he became enmeshed in the politics that led to the Revolution of 1789. Two years later he removed himself from the escalating turmoil to publish *Nouveau Voyage* and present postwar America as a model for the French. As he asserted in his Preface, excerpted here, his travels were meant “to study men who had just acquired their liberty” and to “be taught by them the secret of preserving it.” The French were not able to preserve liberty from the polarizing extremism that led to the Reign of Terror of 1793-94, in which Brissot de Warville and thousands of others were guillotined as “enemies of the revolution.”

*“A people without Morals may acquire Liberty, but
without Morals they cannot preserve it.” Tacitus*

P R E F A C E

THE publication of Voyages and Travels will doubtless appear, at first view, an operation foreign to the present circumstances of France.¹ I should even myself regret the time I have spent in

reducing this Work to order² if I did not think that it might be useful and necessary in supporting our Revolution. The object of these Travels was not to study antiques³ or to search for unknown plants, but to study men who had just acquired their liberty. A free people can no longer be strangers to the French.

We have now, likewise, acquired our liberty. It is no longer necessary to learn of the Americans the manner of acquiring it, but we must be taught by them the secret of preserving it. This secret consists in the morals of the people — the Americans have it, and I see with grief not only that we do not yet possess it but that we are not even thoroughly persuaded of its absolute necessity in the preservation of liberty. This is an important point — it involves the salvation of the revolution and therefore merits a close examination.

What is liberty? It is the most perfect state of society. It is the state in which man depends but [relies only] upon the laws which

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¹ I.e., an undertaking inappropriate considering the current events in France (after the Revolution of 1789).

² I.e., preparing it for publication.

³ I.e., artifacts of the past, not the narrower sense of old objects of material culture. Numerous Europeans travelled in North America to compile encyclopedic descriptions of the continent’s flora and fauna, and of Native American [Indian] culture.

he makes; in which to make them good he ought to perfect the powers of his mind; in which to execute them well he must employ all his reason, for coercive measures are disgraceful to freemen — they are almost useless in a free State; . . . Reason or morals are to the execution of the laws among a free people what fetters, scourges, and gibbets⁴ are among slaves. Destroy morals, or practical reason, and you must supply their place by fetters and scourges, or else society will no longer be but a state of war, a scene of deplorable anarchy, to be terminated by its destruction.

Without morals there can be no liberty. If you have not the former, you cannot love the latter, and you will soon take it away from others; for if you abandon yourself to luxury, to ostentation, to excessive gaming, to enormous expenses, you necessarily open your heart to corruption. You make a traffic of your popularity and of your talents. You sell the people to that despotism which is always endeavoring to replunge them into its chains.

. . .

But how can we create private virtue among a people who have just risen suddenly from the dregs of servitude, dregs which have been settling for twelve centuries on their heads?

Numerous means offer themselves to our hands — laws, instruction, good examples, education, encouragement to a rural life, parceling of real property among heirs, respect to the useful arts.

Is it not evident, for instance, that private morals associate naturally with a rural life; that of consequence manners would much improve by inducing men to return from the city to the country, and by discouraging them from migrating from the country to the city? The reason why the Americans possess such pure morals is because nine tenths of them live dispersed in the country. I do not say that we should make laws direct to force people to quit the town or to fix their limits; all prohibition, all restraint, is unjust, absurd, and ineffectual. Do you wish a person to do well? make it for his interest to do it. Would you re-people the country? make it his interest to keep his children at home. Wise laws and taxes well distributed will produce this effect. Laws which tend to an equal distribution of real property, to diffuse a certain degree of ease among the people, will contribute much to the resurrection of private and public morals; for misery can take no interest in the public good, and want is often the limit of virtue.

Would you extend public spirit through all France? Into all the departments [provinces], all the villages? Favor the propagation of knowledge, the low price of books and of newspapers. How rapidly would the revolution consolidate if the government had the wisdom to frank the public papers from the expense of postage!⁵ It has often been repeated that three or four millions of livres⁶ expended in this way would prevent a great number of disorders which ignorance may countenance or commit, and the

New Travels in the United States of America 1791

Selected chapters that represent Brissot de Warville's interests in visiting the United States

2. Observations on Boston.
5. On New York.
8. Visit to the Farm of a Quaker.
13. On Benjamin Franklin.
14. Steam Boat. Reflections on the Character of the Americans and the English.
17. On the General Assembly of Pennsylvania . . .
19. The School for Blacks in Philadelphia.
20. The Endeavors Used to Abolish Slavery.
21. The Laws Made in Different States for the Abolition of Slavery.
24. A Project for Re-transporting the Blacks to Africa.
25. Philadelphia: Its Building, Police, Manners, etc.
26. On the Progress of Clearing and Cultivating Land.
28. The Diseases Most Common in the United States
29. Longevity—Calculations on the Probabilities of Life [Length of] in the United States—Their Population
30. Prisons in Philadelphia, and Prisons in General.
31. On the Quakers: Their Private Morals, Their Manners, Customs, etc.
33. Religious Principles of the Quakers.
34. Political Principles of the Quakers: Their Refusal to Take Arms, pay Taxes for War.
35. Journey to Mount Vernon [Brissot spent several days with George Washington].
36. General Observations on Maryland and Virginia.
40. The Debt of the United States.
41. Importations into the United States.
42. Exportations from the United States.
43. Their Trade to the East Indies, and Their Navigation in General.
44. The Western Territory, and the Different Settlements in It.

⁴ Devices for restraining slaves.

⁵ Allow them to be distributed without taxation.

⁶ *Livre*: unit of French money until 1795.

reparation of which [disorders] costs many more millions.⁷ The communication of knowledge would accelerate a number of useful undertakings, which greatly diffuse public prosperity.

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. . .

O Frenchmen! who wish for this valuable instruction, study the Americans of the present day. Open this book — you will here see to what degree of prosperity the blessings of freedom can elevate the industry of man, how they dignify his nature and dispose him to universal fraternity. You will here learn by what means liberty is preserved — that the great secret of its duration is in good morals. It is a truth that the observation of the present state of America demonstrates at every step. Thus you will see in these Travels the prodigious effects of liberty on morals, on industry, and on the amelioration of men. You will [now] see those stern Presbyterians [Puritans] who, on the first settlement of their country, infected with the gloomy superstitions of Europe, could erect gibbets [gallows] for those who thought differently from themselves. You will see them admitting all sects to equal charity and brotherhood, rejecting those superstitions which, to adore the Supreme Being, make martyrs of part of the human race. Thus you will see all the Americans, in whose minds the jealousy [distrust] of the mother country had disseminated the most absurd prejudices against foreign nations, abjure [reject] those prejudices, reject every idea of war, and open the way to an universal confederation of the human race.

You will see independent America contemplating no other limits but those of the universe, no other restraint but the laws made by her representatives. You will see them attempting all sorts of speculations — opening the fertile bosom of the soil, lately [recently] covered by forests; tracing unknown seas; establishing new communications, new markets; naturalizing in their country those precious manufactures which England had reserved to herself; and, by this accumulation of the means of industry, they change the balance that was formerly against America and turn it to their advantage. . . .

. . .

Coercive measures and liberty never go together — a free people hates the former — but if these measures are not employed, how will you execute the law? By the force of reason and good morals. Take away these and you must borrow the arm of violence or fall into anarchy. If, then, a people wishes to banish the dishonorable means of coercion, they must exercise their reason which will show them the necessity of a constant respect for the law.

The exercise of this faculty [reason] produces among the Americans a great number of men designated by the name of *principled men*. This appellation indicates the character of a class of men so little known among us that they have not acquired a name. There will be one formed, I have no doubt; but, in the meantime, I see none [in France] but vibrating, vacillating beings who do good by enthusiasm [impulse] and never by reflection.⁸ There can be no durable revolution but where reflection marks the operation and matures the ideas. It is amongst those men of principle that you find the true heroes of humanity, the Howards, Fothergills, Penns, Franklins, Washingtons, Sidneys, and Ludlows.⁹

Show me a man of this kind, whose wants are circumscribed, who admits no luxury,¹⁰ who has no secret passion, no ambition, but that of serving his country — a man who, as Montaigne says, *ait des opinions supercelestes sans avoir des moeurs souterraines*¹¹ — a man whom reflection guides in everything. This is the man of the people.

⁷ I.e., would prevent public unrest caused by people's ignorance of current affairs, and the consequences of public uprisings would cost far more than the cost of distributing papers without a government tax.

⁸ I.e., do good through enthusiasm for a cause, but not through reasoning about it.

⁹ British and American leaders, including John Fothergill (English Quaker), William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. There were several influential members of the Howard and Ludlow families at the time in Britain.

¹⁰ I.e., whose wants are kept controlled through self-discipline; who allows no luxury in his life.

¹¹ French: "has opinions grounded in heaven without having morals grounded in hell."

In a word, my countrymen, would you be always free, always independent in your elections, and in your opinions? Would you confine the executive power within narrow limits, and diminish the number of your laws? — have morals! — *in pessima republica plurimæ leges*.¹² Morals supply perfectly the necessity of laws; laws supply but imperfectly, and in a miserable manner, the place of morals. Would you augment your population, that chief wealth of nations? Would you augment the ease of individuals, industry, agriculture, and everything that contributes to general prosperity? — *have morals!*

Such is the double effect of morals in the United States, whose form of government still frightens pusillanimous [war-loving] and superstitious men. The portraits offered to view in these Travels will justify that republicanism which knaves calumniate with design,¹³ which ignorant men do not understand, but which they will learn to know and respect. How can we better judge of a government than by its effects? Reasoning* may deceive; experience is always right. If liberty produces good morals, and diffuses information, why do freemen continue to carp at that kind of government which, being founded on the greatest degree of liberty, secures the greatest degree of prosperity?

I thought it very useful and very necessary to prove these principles from great examples; and this is my reason for publishing these Travels. Examples are more powerful than precepts. Morality, put in action, carries something of the dramatic, and the French love the drama.

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It is to be hoped that the revolution will change the character of the French. If they ameliorate improve their morals and augment their

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information,¹⁴ they will go far; for it is the property of reason and enlightened liberty to perfect themselves without ceasing, to substitute truth to error, and principle to prejudice. They will then insensibly lay aside their political prejudices which tarnish still the glorious constitution which they have founded. They will imitate the Americans as far as local and physical circumstances will permit — they will imitate them, and they will be the happier for it, for general happiness does not conflict with absurdities and contradictions. It cannot arise from the complication, nor from the shock of powers. There is but one real power in government, and it is in referring it back to its source as often as possible that it is to be rendered beneficent. It becomes dangerous in proportion as it is distant from its source: in one word, *the less active and powerful the government, the more active, powerful, and happy is the society*. This is the phenomenon demonstrated in the present History of the United States.

. . . Great prospects are opening before us. Let us hasten, then, to make known that people whose happy experience ought to be our guide.

Paris, April 21, 1791.

¹² Latin: "In the most corrupt republic, the laws are most numerous." Tacitus (A.D. ca. 56-119), Roman senator and historian.

¹³ I.e., which knaves defame with falsehoods [to gain power for themselves].

* If you would see excellent reasoning on this subject read the work just published by the celebrated [Thomas] Paine entitled Rights of Man; especially the miscellaneous chapter. [note in original]

¹⁴ I.e., improve their morals and increase their knowledge.