

'Rational Exultation': The Erie Canal Celebration

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I

AMERICANS in the wake of the War of 1812 may be seen as snatching victory from the jaws of a stalemate (generally figured as a yawn), for the celebrated accomplishment of Perry's tiny fleet on Lake Erie was considerably overmatched by the shameful rout suffered by William Hull in his attempted invasion of Canada, and the glorious triumph of Andrew Jackson at New Orleans was not only shadowed by metaphorical smoke from the nation's burning capital but by the fact that the war was already over when the great event occurred. Still, the victory of the 'other' Hull on the high seas over the mighty *Guerrière* was justly praised, and served as a symbolic certification of American independence. And if the treaty signed at Ghent remained silent on a number of thorny international issues—including the notorious matter of impressment—it did stabilize the northern boundary of the United States and finally cleared the disputed Northwest Territory for settlement, making straight the way for imperial expansion. The outcome of the war may therefore be said to have reunified and given new purpose to a nation that at the start of the conflict had been threatened by secession from within and toward the end seemed threatened by invasion from without.

Certain it is that the years immediately following the war were characterized by an intense feeling of national euphoria,

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inspiring expressions of national unity, sentiments approximating Jefferson's phrase in his first inaugural address: 'We are all Republicans. We are all Federalists.' This period has been called the Era of Good Feelings, but as with Jefferson's first administration, the mood was like that which attends the consumption of champagne, being of effervescence the essence. Washington's dreaded, two-faced spectre of section and faction was not dead, only sleeping, and the good feelings may best be seen as a sunny ocean from which the Kraken would soon enough emerge. As a period, the years of James Monroe's administration are perhaps most interesting because of what followed afterwards, a massive demonstration that good will among men lasts only as long as the general welfare and individual interests remain in balance, a truth that may be charted by Calhoun's transmogrification from a champion of nationalism to a defender of states' rights. Still, as long as the euphoria lasted, Americans seemed to be having a good time, and enjoyed an extended bout of self-congratulation that provided a high comic counterpart to the tragic farce that was the war.

The mood was literally celebratory, for the Era of Good Feelings witnessed four notable public festivities: the tour of President Monroe in 1817; Lafayette's tour in 1824-25; the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825; and the jubilee of Independence, in 1826. Each of these celebrations had its own particular meaning, but all four were vehicles for the expression of a general exhilaration, and taken together they may be seen as manifestations of an art form best calculated to memorialize the national optimism. Celebrations are a kind of public theatre, the 'spontaneous' outpouring of emotions that by necessity must be carefully arranged beforehand, lest the enthusiasm of crowds result in disaster, as during the 'Fifth Celebration' that put a decided end to the era, Jackson's Inaugural Brawl. The celebration is an art form particularly (though hardly peculiarly) American, a popular manifestation carefully con-

trolled by an elite, a tradition of oligarchical orchestration dating back to the time of the Revolution and epitomized by that uniquely American secular festivity, the Fourth of July.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such events were associated with the kind of art works requiring planning and production—illuminations, panoramas, allegorical paintings, floats, triumphal arches, fireworks—often created or engineered by professional artists. The celebration also inspired (usually through the muse of commission) original works of literature—poems, speeches, even dramas, yet these works were by nature ephemeral (like the fireworks they accompanied) and seldom outlived the occasions for which they were created. Moreover, if they somehow managed to transcend the momentous event, they tended afterwards to lose meaning and impact, there being no lustre to a diamond once the light is removed. But we miss an important aspect of the culture of the day if we ignore or dismiss as merely transient these celebrations and the works they inspired. Not only were they a signal manifestation of the good feelings assigned to the period, but we can detect by a careful examination of extant records numerous clues to the inner complexity of what might appear to be a simple outpouring of joy.

For one thing, although each of these four celebrations was at least in part inspired by past events—immediate or of some duration—they all projected the euphoria of completion forward into the future; and all are characterized by that same enthusiasm for progress found in the visionary poems of an earlier generation, the 'Rising Glory' tradition of Freneau, Barlow, and Timothy Dwight. They are attempts to harness good feelings as a kind of public power, urging on the sorts of improvements that will produce even better feelings, the kind of ultimate joy associated with the Enlightenment version of the Millennium. If Joel Barlow's *Columbiad*, which antedates the Era of Good Feelings by a decade, can be read as a celebratory exercise prefiguring the pageants yet to come, then in a

literal as well as a poetic sense, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, first published a half-century later, can be seen as a cumulative and summary (if perpetually extended) celebration, and like that great parade of a poem, the occasions that may have helped inspire it have their cadences, although they are not immediately apparent to the eye.

James Wilson, who argued persuasively for the adoption of the Constitution in Pennsylvania, took advantage of the celebration of its adoption in Philadelphia to point out the didactic value of such public demonstrations: 'They may *instruct* and *improve*, while they *entertain* and *please*. They may preserve the memory, and engrave the importance of great *political events*. They may represent, with peculiar felicity and force, the operation of great *political truths*.'¹ Thus President Monroe's tour of 1817, like Washington's tour of 1789, was intended in part as a demonstration of national unity, a specific political goal, while Lafayette's tour was a much more general assertion of good will, in effect celebrating a 'great political event' of fifty years earlier. The same may be said of the jubilee of 1826, but the Erie Canal celebration for the most part was *geopolitical* in implication, mounting an elevated perspective with transcendent views and devoting its didactic burden to encouraging 'improvements' of the kind associated with civil engineering. Of the four celebratory events, moreover, it was the one that most clearly addressed itself to the future, a massive demonstration of the Enlightenment faith in progress which animated the first century of the Republic.

President Monroe, in his quaint costume of tricorne and shoebuckles, begged association with the forefathers; Lafayette, a bona fide hero of the Revolution and Washington's adopted son, was a living relic of the heroic past. The Constitution was a precious heritage created by an older generation of venerated statesmen, but the Canal was a signal triumph of

¹ Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1976), pp. 578-79.

the heroic present, and the men associated with its design and execution were regarded as modern avatars of progress, who were dictating the shape of the future. Although resembling the other three celebrations in mode and manner, the festivities marking the opening of the Erie Canal were different in terms of implication, not only because they were addressed to the future but because, in ways not at the time comprehended, they forecast much that was to come. Beyond the tinkling brass and sounding symbol, full of millennialist music, can be found the dark glass of prophecy, made even darker by the brightness of Enlightenment optimism. In the pages that follow, I wish to dwell on the celebration and its meaning, not only the canal that provided the occasion, but the written testimony that commemorated the event, the *Memoir* (New York, 1825).

II

Something of the Erie Canal's significance can be derived from the chronology of its construction, for it was begun under the administration of James Monroe and completed in time for the inauguration of John Quincy Adams. Where Monroe was the last of the Revolutionary generation to hold presidential office, Adams was the first of the (in his case, literal) second generation to do so. And where the senior Adams was associated with the statesmen who produced a Constitution providing for a workable union of the States, the younger man put his political weight behind measures insuring that the Union would endure. Much moreso than his father, who remained a granitic Federalist, the son shared the progressive *élan* of the Republicans, and where John Adams's espousal of Enlightenment optimism was never more than a half-way covenant, John Quincy Adams experienced a total conversion, and was in symbolic terms at least the son of the father who was his father's political rival, Thomas Jefferson.

'The spirit of improvement is abroad upon the earth,' John Quincy Adams announced in his inaugural address of 1825,

declaring, 'We have seen under the persevering and enlightened enterprise of . . . one State of this Union . . . the Waters of our Western lakes mingle with those of the ocean.'² Adams hoped that the example of the Erie Canal would encourage Congress to remedy the constitutional deficiency regarding the expenditure of national treasure on public works—one of Jefferson's favorite themes—so that a truly United States would be guaranteed by a continent-wide system of waterways and highways. But no such remedy was forthcoming. The jealousy between sections, often expressed in terms of states' rights, continued to prevail; for such had been the uncooperative mood during the first fifty years of the Republic that building the Erie Canal 'by the authority of [a] single member of our Confederation' had been possible only because geological forces and geopolitical events had given New York State a fortunate shape, a generous wedge of territory not only encompassing the Hudson River and Lake Champlain, but stretching in a corridor all the way to the shore of Lake Erie. As early as 1727, Cadwallader Colden, the colonial philosopher-scientist, had pointed to the possibility of a fur-trading route between the lakes and the Hudson. In 1782, at war's end, George Washington made a personal inspection of the portages and waterways connecting Lake Ontario with the Mohawk River, and recognized the importance of the route to opening the commerce of the Ohio Valley. And in 1785, Christopher Colles, an Irish-born engineer, made the first published recommendation of many to follow that a system of canals be constructed that would connect Lake Erie to the Hudson.

In so doing, Colles pointed out that Providence had lowered the Appalachian Mountains between the Mohawk River and the Great Lakes, suggesting that New Yorkers should not disobey the divine mandate to improve upon God-given design. But although New Yorkers did not have to deal with the ambi-

² James D. Richardson, ed., *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897*, 10 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1900), 2:316.

tions of rival states—as did proponents of Washington's own favorite canal project, involving the Potomac and Monongahela Rivers—they still had to deal with each other, and within the one large state sectional interests (and personal biases) warred with each other over the issue. Civil engineering, moreover, had not kept pace in America with vision, and the early attempts made to improve existing waterways by means of short canals were not uniformly successful. By 1817, however, both the times and technology were right, and the labors of politician-promoters like De Witt Clinton had gained headway, owing in part to the vivid proof provided by the late war that an adequate defense of the Canadian frontier required an improved system of transportation. The pamphlet literature inspired by the project was voluminous, both pro and con, but Clinton and his colleagues were eventually able to convince a majority that the canal would shower benefits on the entire State.

By the time the project was completed, in 1825, politicians were scrambling to claim credit for the great achievement, and Clinton had been unfairly shoved aside in the rush. But the mood attending the official opening of the Erie Canal was one of universal jubilation, nor was the governor denied his full share of recognition. There was no doubt that the Erie Canal had been the work of New Yorkers and that New York would be its chief beneficiary, with the result that its completion had the effect on the people of that diverse and often divided state that the tour of Lafayette had on the country as a whole. Still, as a regional event it was praised in terms of national union, and where Lafayette's tour was, like Washington Irving's recent tale of Rip Van Winkle, mostly a matter of confronting a relic of the past with the wonders of modern progress, the canal celebration was largely a projection of the greatest of those wonders into the future.

Although the canal as a means of transportation would soon be outmoded by the railroad, and even in 1825 was already

rivalled by the steamboat, the Erie Canal was truly a great accomplishment and more than fulfilled its proponents' expectations. As each part had been finished, enthusiasm mounted, as did the complexity of celebrations marking successive occasions. In October 1819, when the first section was opened from Rome to Utica, the ceremonies were limited to the symbolic towing of a boat (the *Chief Engineer*) carrying the canal commissioners 'with a band of music' from Utica to Rome, where they were greeted by 'the ringing of bells, the roaring of cannon,—and the loud acclamations of thousands of exhilarated spectators . . . who lined the banks of the new created river.'³ But two years later, in October 1823, when the entire eastern section of the canal was completed, and the western end carried as far as the town of Erie, the departing workmen seemed to have been followed closely by a committee of arrangements.

For the outburst of joy that ensued was expressed by an elaborate ceremony, one that lent a ritualistic formality to the occasion and amounted to a dress rehearsal for the far grander, and more extended, celebration that took place two years later. In 1823, the main event involved the opening of the lock at Albany, which allowed 'a line of Canal boats, with colours flying, bands of music, and crowded with people,' to enter the Hudson River, an occasion that inspired a self-consciously symbolic wedding of waters:

The first boat which entered the lock was the *De Witt Clinton*, having on board Governor Yates [Clinton's successor], the Mayor and Corporation of Albany, the Canal commissioners and engineers, the committees, and other citizens. Several other boats succeeded. One (not the least interesting object in the scene), was filled with ladies. The cap-stone of the lock was laid with masonic ceremonies, by the fraternity who appeared in great numbers and in grand costume.

The waters of the west, and of the ocean, were then mingled

³ Elkanah Watson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Existing Condition of the Western Canals in the State of New York* (Albany, 1820), p. 79.

by Doctor [Samuel L.] Mitchill, who pronounced an epithalamium upon the union of the River and the Lakes, after which the lock gates were opened, and the *De Witt Clinton* majestically sunk upon the bosom of the Hudson.⁴

This aquatic marriage, presided over by one of New York's leading polymaths, the Enlightenment equivalent of an ordained minister, may be said to have sown the seeds for the ceremonies of 1825, a 350-mile-long occasion unmatched in its time (and perhaps as yet unrivaled) for duration of display.

The main events of President Monroe's tour were recorded by a literary hack named S. Putnam Waldo and Lafayette's tour was used as a unifying device in J. Fenimore Cooper's *Notions of the Americans*, a signal document reflecting the mood of the Era of Good Feelings. But the book inspired by the grand celebration of the canal's completion was a singular production, compiled in the hope of capturing the essence of an ephemeral event. The *Memoir* was a production gauged to match the accomplishment it was designed to commemorate, a thick quarto volume, with large type and generous margins, and packed with pictures. Like the canal itself, moreover, the book was a pioneering achievement of American technology. It was the first book published in America using the new process of lithography, which the editor saw as one of 'the most useful and beneficial improvements in this remarkable Age of Discoveries,' comparable to 'the immortal Fulton's application of steam to the purposes of navigation.'⁵ A final addendum to the book suggested however that the printerly millennium was yet to arrive, for if the *Memoir* nearly matched Cotton Mather's *Magnalia* in size (to say nothing of a pervading sense of self-importance), so it also shared with Mather's masterpiece a number of *errata*, 'typographical errors . . . scattered throughout the volume,' among which, ironically, was

⁴ Cadwallader D. Colden, *Memoir Prepared at the Request of a Committee of the Common Council of the City of New York, and Presented to the Mayor of the City, at the Celebration of the Completion of the New York Canals* (New York, 1825), pp. 60-61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 397a.

the misnumbering of the page on which the tribute to American technology is made.

Still, the *Memoir* was no mean achievement, its 'chief object' being, as the editor phrased it, 'to adopt the mode of expression, verbal or pictorial, by which, with the utmost precision might be communicated, a correct idea of our Grand Canal Celebration—its attendant circumstances and history, in the most concise, but comprehensive manner practicable. But when thus both systems are united, we have the most perfect mode of conveying ideas to distant ages and nations, that mankind are as yet possessed of.'⁶ Book illustration is an art as old as printing, yet the use of graphic materials in the *Memoir* served a singular purpose: to 'communicate with the utmost precision' a facsimile of the celebration itself, preserving it (by means of images drawn on stone) for the edification of future generations. The word 'communication' was in 1825 beginning to gather the complex meanings it has today: the canal itself was seen as a 'communication' between East and West, as a conduit not only of commerce but culture, and the *Memoir* was its printed counterpart. If Barlow's *Columbiad* of 1807 expressed the enlightened expectations of the post-Revolutionary generation concerning progress in America, then the *Memoir* of 1825 recorded the realization of one of those expectations (Barlow had been an early champion of canals), and by celebrating a massive 'improvement' by means of 'improved' printing technology, the book rivaled the canal as a work illustrating by force of example the kinds of progress that Enlightenment savants had promoted.

III

The *Memoir* consists of two separate but related parts: the main text, 98 pages of large print devoted to the history of the canal's planning and construction, and an appendix of 300 more pages, set in considerably finer type, which contained among

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

other things a monumental collection of the reports and correspondences of the various committees responsible for the celebration. This massive appendix is the part I am primarily interested in, but some attention needs to be paid to the main text also. That section was written by Cadwallader D. Colden, the grandson of the man who first pointed the way for the canal route. In it, Colden stressed both the physical (geopolitical) and spiritual (geopsychological) meaning of what had been finally accomplished, expressing the mood of good feelings that the efforts gathered in the appendix had utilized in the most productive manner.

Chief among the physical aspects of the canal was the sheer length of the accomplishment: 'more than four hundred miles' of artificial waterway, including the link between the Hudson and Lake Champlain, which Colden pointed to with regional pride as having been completed 'in little more than eight years, by the energies and resources of a single State.'⁷ But Colden was also willing to credit New York's achievement to the liberating effect of the Revolution, the 'expansions of the minds of men the moment they are set free' from 'despotic governments,' asserting that 'to use and enjoy the reason and power with which man is endowed by his Creator, he must have liberty and independence.'⁸ Having been made possible by an event nearing its fiftieth anniversary, by then a historical moment, the canal in its turn would affect the future of the United States, for Colden saw it as the first link in a system of natural and artificial waterways that would carry Americans not only to 'the foot of the Rocky Mountains,' but over those hills and far away. Whether by means of another canal or, if this 'be impracticable,' a turnpike, Americans would soon be carried to the 'Lewis River and the Oregon' (by which Colden meant the Columbia River) and on to the Pacific Ocean. And since, as Colden pointed out, 'from Astoria . . . to China, would, in a

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

steamboat . . . be a passage of some fifteen or twenty days,' there would soon be a 'northwest passage to India, for which Hudson was searching when he discovered the river which bears his name.'⁹

Regions west of the Hudson River have always enjoyed a foreshortened perspective from the island of Manhattan, but if Colden's hyperbole indicates just how full the tide of good feelings was flowing in 1825, we should remember that his visionary rhetoric would be inherited by the next generation of promoter-politicians and that the Union Pacific Railroad would finally accomplish what the canal commenced. Moreover, even in the short view Colden was remarkably accurate, predicting that 'the Canals of New York and Ohio will make a change in the course of waters on the American continent, which it could hardly have been believed the power of man could have effected.'¹⁰ By means of those canals, the products of the West were drawn down to the port of New York, determining for at least a century the future direction of the flow of American commerce.

Despite his regional loyalty, Colden made the right sounds concerning the wellbeing of the nation, acknowledging that New York, 'is but a member of the great political family, and that our welfare is intimately connected with the prosperity of the whole.' He likewise asserted that 'the establishment of steam navigation and the opening of Canals have not only consolidated the interests of our own State, but indissolubly united every part of the Union.'¹¹ But the main point not to be denied was that the primacy of the Erie-Ohio system guaranteed that 'no Canal can be opened in the United States which will not be a benefit to us. However remote, it will be a channel through which commerce will be attracted by our great emporium, the local situation of which precludes a rival. . . . There is

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 93-94.

already another New York grown up from that which existed before the Canals were commenced.¹² Although a regnant symbol of continental unity, the Erie Canal as a practical fact would ensure that 'New York will stand alone at the entrance of this extensive channel'; for although the course of empire may flow ever westward, it was toward the Empire City by way of the Empire State that the commerce generated by that western empire would float.

Given Colden's stress, we should not be surprised that the celebration itself was distinguished by a regional emphasis. Although the *Memoir* has affixed to its closing pages facsimile copies (another triumph of lithography) of letters of congratulation sent to the canal committee by all living ex-presidents, surviving signers of the Declaration of Independence, and General Lafayette, documents that acted to lend the event a transcendent endorsement and national importance, the record of the celebration itself has a distinctly parochial quality. The author chosen to write the 'Narrative of the Festivities' was William Leete Stone, a well-known journalist of the day and an important contributor to the rich and turbulent world of Knickerbocker letters, but he was hardly a representative of the highest level of literary genius then available in New York. And the author of the poem commissioned to celebrate the event was Samuel Woodworth, chiefly remembered today for 'The Old Oaken Bucket.'

Still, the conditions under which Woodworth's poem was printed and circulated give some indication of what the celebration meant as an event. A large part of the parade that wound its way through lower Manhattan, providing one of the high points of the occasion, was made up of 'cars of gigantic structure' (Colonel Stone's phrase) decorated by tradesmen's associations with appropriate murals and symbols, floats (as we would call them today) that displayed 'their respective

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 93-94.

artizans . . . busily engaged in their several occupations.¹³ The float constructed by the Printers' Society displayed 'the venerable JAMES ORAM . . . seated in the Library Chair of Dr. Franklin, attended by four Boys costumed as Heralds and Mercuries, who distributed copies of the Ode, as they were printed, to the assembled multitude.'¹⁴ This union of the poetic muse with technology is intrinsic to Woodworth's poem, in which 'Art' as celebrated in New York in 1825 included the voyage of Columbus, Franklin's lightning rod, and 'an unshackled PRESS,' the last of which was responsible for 'the immortal decree' by means of which Albany connected 'ERIE . . . to the Ocean.'¹⁵ Where Colden saw national independence as being responsible for the canal, Woodworth, while acknowledging that the labor was done 'by the hands of the brave and the free,' claimed that 'the great work' was given 'its first motion' by the printing press.

But the main burden of Woodworth's poem celebrates the 'marriage' of Lake Erie to the ocean, an extension of the metaphor first used by Dr. Mitchill during the ceremonies of 1823. The lake is figured as a pagan goddess attended by naiads, who is led by means of the canal and the Hudson to 'the sceptered father of the main, / And in his heaving bosom hides her virgin face': The paean concludes:

'Tis done! the monarch of the briny tide
 Whose giant arm encircles earth,
 To virgin ERIE is allied,
 A bright-eyed nymph of mountain birth.¹⁶

This last line is a Miltonic as well as a geographical allusion, connoting the liberty traditionally associated with 'mountain birth,' and associated also by the celebrants with the building of the Erie Canal. The complex metaphor created by com-

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51.

pounding a neoclassical water maiden with technology and political freedom is further enlarged upon in the account (included in the *Memoir*) of Dr. Mitchill's repeat performance, when he once again married the maiden to Neptune by emptying a keg of Lake Erie water into New York harbor: 'Man delights in types and symbols,' Mitchell intoned, explaining that although the ancients gave their river-gods male gender, 'it was a modern and happy improvement in these matters to ascribe a female form and attributes' to Lake Erie, the 'LADY OF THE LAKES.' Moreover, this literary 'improvement' found its counterpart in the rearranging of the landscape that made her wedding to Neptune possible:

Her progress through an artificial river, more than three hundred miles long, was unexampled. At her annunciation obstacles of every kind disappeared. Was an excavation necessary for her accomodation?—the rocks disparted and made room. Was an embankment required?—the ground rose to its proper elevation. Were locks and reservoirs necessary to go up and down declivities?—they sprung into being and performed their functions. . . . Was water demanded to facilitate conveyance?—the ponds and brooks joyfully furnished their stores.¹⁷

The movement eastward of the Lady of the Lakes suggests a royal progress, but there are millennialist overtones also in the suggestions of mountains being lowered, valleys raised, and the crooked made straight. Given the recent movement of Lafayette through the land, it is hard not to think also of that specific journey, marked like the Lady's progress by the 'shouts of gladness' uttered by 'the voices of freemen all along the line. . . . The mouths of cannon told in strong accents her majestic movement. Illumination, song, and dance, honored the dignified march.' But where Lafayette once again was associated with the past, the Lady of the Lakes was a herald of the future, a symbol not only of progress but the plenty to be produced: 'She arrives rich in friends and produce. Never was

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

there an indication of so much wealth and fortune brought by a wife to her husband.¹⁸

To comprehend Mitchill's metaphor fully, we must turn to William Leete Stone's narrative, which describes in detail the procession of canal boats that made its way from Buffalo to Albany, and thence down the Hudson to New York, where the parade and marriage ceremony took place. As in all other aspects of the celebration, the 'flotilla' as it was called evinced a careful attention to parts. Jesse Hawley, who, while spending a period in jail for indebtedness, had written a series of newspaper articles under the pen name 'Hercules' that were generally regarded as having first put forth the specifics of the Erie Canal route, was appointed to deliver the send-off speech in Buffalo. The chief guest aboard the leading canal boat, the *Seneca Chief*, was Governor Clinton, the man who was universally credited with having engineered—in political terms—the actual canal. A number of other boats accompanied the *Seneca Chief*, including the *Commodore Perry* (a 'freight boat'), but the most novel was *Noah's Ark*, the work of a prominent citizen of New York City, Mordecai Noah, who used the occasion to promote his scheme for building a Zion on Grand Island in the Niagara River, just above the Falls.

The *Ark* as Stone described it was 'a small boat,' but it had on board 'a bear, two eagles, two fawns, with a variety of other animals, and birds, together with several fish—not forgetting two Indian boys, in the dress of their nation—all products of the West.'¹⁹ This crowded covenantal craft apparently found the canal a Jordan too shallow because it dropped behind the rest of the barges and never did arrive in Manhattan. As a symbolic vessel, however, it was replaced at Rochester by the *Young Lion of the West*, an apocalyptic beast of burden 'loaded with flour in half-barrels, butter, apples, &c. and . . . a quantity of cedar tubs and pails, of very elegant workmanship . . . and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

some brooms of a superior quality; and had on deck a collection of wolves, foxes, raccoons, and other living animals of the forest,' including the inevitable eagle.²⁰

As the flotilla moved along the route from Buffalo to Albany, its progress was marked by a variety of ingenious and traditional displays: banners, festooned bridges and aqueducts, illuminated buildings and signs proclaiming patriotic slogans—as at Clyde, where 'De Witt Clinton and Internal Improvements' met the boats and 'Union of East and West' signalled their departure. Fireworks, balloons, fusillades, cannonades, banquets, toasts, and 'Addresses to the Divinity and to the Assembled Guests,' all provided an extended prelude to the even more spectacular displays awaiting the celebrants in New York. Still, despite careful planning, there were occasional interruptions in the extended manifestation of joy. At Weedport, during the firing of salutes, 'a twenty-four pounder was accidentally discharged,' causing 'two valuable young men' to lose their lives.²¹ At Rome, where the citizens had lost a long fight to bring the canal through (instead of outside) the town limits, the flotilla was met by a solemn procession carrying 'a black barrel (filled with water from the old Canal, which [did pass] through Rome),' a counterpart to the nuptial keg carried by the *Seneca Chief*. And yet, having slow-marched their funereal barrel to the edge of the new canal and emptied it, the people of Rome joined the general festivities and welcomed their visitors, thus demonstrating to Colonel Stone that 'how-evermuch they have been disappointed, [they] are not behind any of their fellow-citizens, in appreciating the value of the Canal as a state and national work.'²² In sum, those who lived in Rome decided to do as the rest of the world was doing.

Where possible, local coloration was provided, as at Lockport, where the waters from the West descended by a series of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 302-03.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 304.

five double locks 'whose workmanship will vie with the most splendid monuments of antiquity.'²³ There, 'the cannon used on the occasion were those with which Perry conquered upon Erie—the gunner was a Lieutenant who had belonged to the army of Napoleon—and the leader of the band was the cabin-boy of Captain Riley, who suffered with him in his Arabian captivity. During the passage [through the locks] the company were introduced to the venerable ENOS BOUGHTON, of Lockport, the pioneer of the Western District—the man who planted the first orchard, and built the first framed barn West of Utica!' The occasion was literally alive with symbols, and along with De Witt Clinton and his keg of Erie water, the *Seneca Chief* carried a token cargo, including potash, an Indian canoe, and the bird's-eye maple that was to be made into boxes by 'Mr. Duncan Fyfe' that would hold 'the medals to be struck on the occasion.'²⁴

Careful planning was the order of the day, arrangements in which even 'benignant Providence' seemed to have taken a hand, for, having lowered the Appalachian Mountains to accommodate the canal, God smiled, as Colonel Stone put it, 'upon the labors and triumphs of human genius and enterprise' by permitting beautiful weather during the final stage of the flotilla's progress, from Albany down the Hudson to New York. At Albany the procession was augmented by a number of steamboats, led off by the *Chancellor Livingston*, which took the *Seneca Chief* in tow, and as the 'gorgeously decorated' vessels passed down the river all in a line, the splendor of the sight surpassed all that had come before:

A brisk north-west wind caused the gay banners and streamers to flutter in the air, so as to be seen to the best possible advantage. And the beauty of the scene was still further heightened by the large columns of steam rushing from the fleet, rising majestically upwards, and curling and rolling into a thousand fantastic

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

and beautiful forms, until mingled and lost in surrounding vapors. Every boat was filled with passengers, and each was supplied with a band of music. The delight, nay, enthusiasm, of the people, was at its height. Such an animating, bright, beauteous, and glorious spectacle had never been seen at that place; nor, at that time, excelled in New York.²⁵

'At that time' allows for what followed after, for this waterborne vision of glory made possible by the wonders of modern technology had as its counterpart the grand procession that took place after the flotilla arrived at Manhattan, a parade that not only celebrated the various trades making up the industry of New York but that was in itself a product of considerable artifice. If the celebration as a whole was a 'rational exultation,' as Stone called it, the great procession and the aquatic display that took place at the same time were demonstrations central to the scheme, the key to which may be found in the many documents making up the appendix.

In those pages, we are admitted backstage, and are allowed to view the inner workings of the complex pageant, in which spontaneity played a very small part. Phrases like 'obeying with utmost exactness previously arranged signals,' 'uniformity and effect,' 'conform to regulations,' and 'utmost regularity,' appear with considerable regularity themselves, putting forth the overwhelming effect of clockwork precision in all matters pertaining to the celebration.²⁶ Those professional and tradesmen's societies 'who intended to unite in the celebration' were required to send to the office of the city recorder, Richard Riker, 'an estimate of their respective numbers, to the end that the Grand Marshal may apportion a sufficient space, in which each Society may conveniently form and move in the Procession.'²⁷ The Grand Marshal, Gen. Augustus Fleming (whose very name is a gift from the genius of crowd control), was

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 134, 153, 210.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

responsible for assigning 'to the Societies and Bodies that had signified their intention of uniting in the Celebration, their stations in the Procession,' which were 'designated by the cross-streets, in which they would respectively form.'²⁸

The procession was formed up in the lower part of Manhattan, below the 'gridiron' system of streets laid out in 1811, yet the organization and formation of the parade suggests the extent to which that regular and uniform plan had pervaded the thinking of New York's leaders. Devised to serve civic convenience, the grid system provided a rigid plat, a preordained order readily available for civil purposes of whatever sort, and although the streets of lower Manhattan are decidedly more organic (having, as Washington Irving might have pointed out, an easygoing Dutch quality as opposed to the rigid Yankee order evinced uptown), the great procession used the major intersections as preordained points of order, and under the guidance of General Fleming the marchers formed up in paramilitary fashion, even to the four 'divisions' into which the cross-streets were organized, three of which were commanded by militia officers.

The impress of the War of 1812 on the celebration extended far beyond matters of historical moment, providing a heritage of strict organization that informs the list of 'Regulations' by which the great procession was conducted:

1. The procession will be formed (six in front) under direction of Major General Fleming. . . . It will form on the west side of Greenwich Street—its right on Marketfield Street. The line of procession will begin to form at nine o'clock, A.M., and be ready to move at eleven o'clock, A.M.

2. Its right will wheel and pass, the whole line moving at the same time, so that all may see each other.

3. The procession will pass up Greenwich Street to Canal Street and to Broadway—up Broadway to Broom Street and to the Bowery to Pearl Street, down Pearl Street to the Battery. The procession will reach the Battery by three o'clock P.M.,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

when the whole aquatic Procession will have returned from the ocean, and be stationed off the Battery.

4. The whole aquatic party being ready and the boats duly arranged, the procession will pass the boats at the margin of the Battery, upon the broad paved circular walk. This close approach of the boats to the Battery is intended to give to the City Procession, and the Aquatic Party, a view of each other, and to enable the Corporation to unite the two together in the Grand Procession.

5. The Corporation, with their guests, preceded by the aborigines from Lake Erie, with their canoes, will fall in the rear of the City Procession, following it under the direction of the Grand Marshal, to the City Hall, where all will disperse.²⁹

As the regulations emphasize, the procession was defined by the Battery, which served as a pivot and focus, the line of march at that critical point becoming two lines, the city procession and the aquatic party united in one transformational moment, at the same time performing as both actors and audience, displaying and admiring themselves all together. Thus the 'good feeling that animated the Procession' was the result of very careful orchestration, insuring that the spirit of American enterprise—symbolized by the many floats depicting men at work—would be conducted like the waters of Lake Erie through the most efficient and productive channel.

Coordination between the maneuvers of the steamboat flotilla (the aquatic party) and the procession was facilitated by 'means of the Telegraph under the superintendance of Captain John Greene, who promptly complied with the request to transmit and answer our despatches.' The apparatus in question was presumably the semaphore erected by Christopher Colles on Castle Clinton, which had seen service during the War of 1812. Having died in 1816, Colles was denied the pleasure of seeing the canal he had envisioned brought to completion, but he was at least able to make a posthumous contribution to the celebration, a contribution moreover that is yet

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

another attestation to the increasing complexity of the word 'communication' in 1825. Likewise, a number of pages in the appendix are devoted to the arrangements by which the signal cannon were obtained and set up along the Erie Canal and the Hudson, a marvel of coordination that sent word down the entire length of the route that the *Seneca Chief* had departed Buffalo, then returned notice from Sandy Hook that the message had been received. The telegraph on Castle Clinton (and Major General Fleming) and many of the cannon had served in the War of 1812, and having as Colonel Stone put it 'lately sounded our country's glory on the Northern Lakes, [they now] proclaimed the accomplishment of a work which . . . stands unrivalled in the annals of the world.'³⁰ One of the arguments originally used in promoting the canal was the cost of carrying those very cannon to the scene of the war, for, as Cadwallader Colden reminded his readers, 'the expense of transporting cannon from Albany to the Lakes was at one time, more than double what the pieces cost.'³¹

As Colden sat writing the text of the *Memoir*, he heard outside the roar of one of the signal cannons, and interrupted his historical narrative to record this historic moment. Thus, the present merged with the past to become part of that past, a moment to which Colden gave special meaning with a rhetorical question: 'Who that has American blood in his veins can hear this sound without emotion? Who that has the privilege to do it, can refrain from exclaiming, I too am an American citizen; and feel as much pride in being able to make the declaration, as ever an inhabitant of the eternal city felt, in proclaiming he was a Roman.'³² William Leete Stone expressed jubilation of a somewhat different sort, comparing 'the short space of one hour and twenty minutes' that 'the joyful intelligence' took to arrive in New York by way of the signal cannon

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

to the slow progress of the *Seneca Chief*, a trip of several days' duration.

As with Colles's telegraph, improved communication was very much in the air in 1825, and the fiery information that interrupted Colden's *Memoir* may have been heard also by a young painter, perhaps as he worked in his studio on the great portrait of Lafayette that would be both his masterpiece and the apogee of his artistic career. In 1827, the painter like Robert Fulton before him would turn from the graphic to the technical arts. Having attended a course of lectures on electricity, he would go on to invent a mechanism harnessing Ben Franklin's discovery to a use the postmaster general of America would most certainly have approved, for Morse's telegraph greatly accelerated the speed of communications—and the spread of empire—in the United States. He thereby furthered the favorite cause of his father, the pioneering geographer Jedidiah Morse, which was the sanctity and solidity of the Union. In effect, what John Quincy Adams's dissertation on weights and measures was to his father's *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States*, Samuel F. B. Morse's telegraph was to his father's *American Geography*: a mechanism for accomplishing the vision of the Founding Fathers. To this same category, as we have seen, belongs the Erie Canal itself, a technological mechanism designed to carry out the geopolitical function of the Constitution—the great Republican machine—which was to assist in the spread of the Union while ensuring its stability.

IV

Commencing with Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden*, the 'myth and symbol' school of American Studies has extracted a monotypological sequence from the nineteenth century, in which repressive reticulation can be identified with the coming of the railroad and industrialism, events that had their greatest impact during the latter half of the century. Writing about the

'incorporation of America,' Alan Trachtenberg sees the machines on display during the centennial celebration in Philadelphia in 1876 as symbols of mechanistic tyranny, most particularly the huge Corliss steam engine, which powered all the assembled machines, and a gigantic electrical pendulum clock, which governed more than two dozen other clocks distributed throughout the hall. 'Unstinted but channeled power,' writes Trachtenberg, 'and precisely regulated time: that combination seemed to hold the secret of progress.'³³ But in 1825, fifty years earlier, the builders and celebrants of the Erie Canal seemed already to have mastered that elementary truth, for the canal was a consciously celebrated symbol of channeled power and the parade and aquatic procession were marvels of precision regulated by coordinates of time. Even though its heyday was relatively brief, the canal preceded the railroad in America as a regnant icon of accelerated progress figured in terms of communication, and the success of the Erie Canal itself bolstered American optimism and fueled subsequent propaganda for the building of rail lines.

A counterpart to the canal was Fulton's steamboat, and perhaps the most impressive moment produced by the elaborate planning that went into the celebration occurred when the aquatic procession saluted two British sloops of war anchored in New York Harbor by forming up in a perfect circle and wheeling as in a gigantic round dance: 'While performing this circular manoeuvre, the British bands struck up "Yankee Doodle"; in return for which act of courtesy, the American bands, as they passed the other side, successively played "God Save the King."³⁴ Clearly, the world was no longer upside down but bright side up—and the wounds of the most recent conflict between the British and their American cousins were already healed. Yet there remains a certain flexing of United

³³ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982), p. 41.

³⁴ Colden, *Memoir*, 332.

States power, implicit not only in the superior numbers of vessels, but in the encircling movement, and the precision of this nautical maneuver—preserved in the *Memoir* by a lithographic plate (the first executed for the book), was made possible 'by means of steam navigation,' which overcame the vagaries of wind and tide. The fact that the British warships were powered by sail (and were standing still) adds more meaning to the triumphant dance, and this demonstration of technological versatility enlisted in a demonstration of good will approximating millennial jubilation—the American Eagle lying down with the British Lion—suggested to some viewers, including Colonel Stone, that it might be turned to other ends.

Stone pointed out that, if armed, a steam-powered fleet would provide New Yorkers a formidable weapon of defense: 'They could choose their own time, position, and points of attack; and tremendous must be the power that could successfully oppose, and superhuman the skill that could baffle, an expedition of this kind, directed by the hand of valor, and sustained by the unconquerable spirit of freemen!'³⁵ In 1825, Samuel Francis Dupont was serving as a young midshipman aboard the *Constitution*, stationed in the Mediterranean, but by 1861 he had risen to the rank of commodore, and, having become a foremost theorist in the use of steam-powered warships, Dupont drew up his fleet for the battle of Port Royal in South Carolina in just such a formation, a great ellipse that, slowly rotating in position (like the chamber of the newly invented Colt revolver) reduced two Confederate forts at one time and inspired Herman Melville's poem 'Dupont's Round Fight,' a blend of martial and aesthetic terminology celebrating the 'victory of Law.'³⁶

For Melville, the forms of art were characterized by movement 'in time and measure perfect,' and thus the 'Fleet that

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

³⁶ Henig Cohen, *The Battle Pieces of Herman Melville* (New York, 1963), pp. 48–49.

warred for Right' was an approximation of a work of art, since it was 'In geometric beauty curved,/ And in an orbit sailed.' Yet Dupont's 'Round Fight' was planetary in motion by appearance only; for like the great procession up and down Greenwich Street in 1825, the ships actually formed a double, rotating column so as to present a constant line of fire. The 'geometric beauty' was essentially the result of an Euclidean line—the soldier's, the sailor's, and the surveyor's ideal. Such was the beauty also of the Erie Canal as a technological marvel, and, given the effect that linear diagram would have on the delicate balance between state and nation, it might be said that the guns sending the good news from Buffalo to Sandy Hook were not merely veterans of the late war but recruits for a later conflict, and that the two young men killed when their cannon exploded were the first casualties of the Civil War.

Second only perhaps to the Constitution, the Erie Canal was a premier creation of the Enlightenment in America; and like that marvelous mechanism of state, it was a fatal machine, a configuration of forces that would in time assist in the disruption of the very Union whose preservation both inventions were designed to guarantee. 'IT IS DONE!' was the message signaled by the chain of cannon planted along the Erie Canal and the Hudson river, but the chain of events the completion of the canal set in motion had just commenced, and 'the longest canal in the world' would in time act as a geopolitical lever, a counterpart to the dreadful devices that wrested trees from its path, aligning the states of the Northeast with the territories of the West and thereby further isolating and alienating the South and Southwest.

'When law comes to establish its principles of permanency, uniformity, and universality,' wrote John Quincy Adams in his epochal treatise on the need for a uniform system of weights and measures, 'it has to contend not only with the diversities arising from the nature of things and of man; but with those

infinitely more numerous which proceed from existing usages, and delusive language.³⁷ The statement testifies that he had not entirely abandoned his father's Calvinist heritage, and may therefore serve here as a closing text, attesting that the 'rightness' of the law, whether celebrated as a planetary orbit or as a surveyor's line, is often at odds with the way of the world, much as a 'rational exultation' is a contradiction in terms. As a geopolitical phenomenon, the Erie Canal linked East to West, but considered in the context of historical continuity, the canal may be seen as a fiery conduit between the War of 1812 and the far greater cataclysm of 1860, an expression of nationalism and continental unity that gave way to and in part inspired the Great Rebellion. Equally important, it provided the precedent and the rhetoric that would speed the completion of the Union Pacific, which in itself was designed to insure that the solidity of the Republic, so recently asserted once again through trial of arms, would carry Americans into a future we are pleased to call the Modern Age.

³⁷ John Quincy Adams, *Report of the Secretary of State, Upon Weights and Measures* (Philadelphia, 1821), p. 13.

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