

Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816): Teacher, Military Chaplain, Journalist, Lawyer, Satirist, and Judge.

Born in Scotland, Brackenridge was brought to York County, Pennsylvania in 1753. At fifteen, he was a successful schoolteacher in Maryland. In 1773, he enrolled at Princeton to be trained for the Presbyterian ministry by its president, John Witherspoon. Graduating, he chose instead to return to school teaching and to write poetry. His Poem on Divine Revelation was published, as was his drama, The Battle of Bunker Hill. When independence was declared, he volunteered as a military chaplain, serving at Valley Forge. His patriotic sermons were published as Six Political Discourses Founded on the Scripture. Leaving military service, he founded The United States Magazine, which optimistically undertook to provide citizens with all the knowledge they might need to participate in self-government, thus expressing his exuberant optimism for democracy. After one year, his journal failed. He then moved on to Annapolis to study law with Samuel Chase.

In 1781, Brackenridge arrived in Pittsburgh, then a frontier village of 400 citizens. While practicing law there, he served in the legislature. He led the first steps to create the University of Pittsburgh and also led the movement favoring ratification of the Constitution. He often wrote for the Pittsburgh Gazette political commentary given to parody.

Brackenridge was an ardent Jeffersonian. In 1793, he urged military support for the French Revolution. In 1794, he was accused of participation in the Whiskey Rebellion, a disorder in which some of his clients protested against a federal tax imposed on their only source of revenue. In the era of ill humor of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, he became a

major target of Federalist vilification. The Democratic governor nevertheless appointed him to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in 1799.

While serving as a judge, Brackenridge continued his literary efforts. Modern Chivalry was published as a novel in 1804. Many of its chapters had been published earlier. It is an extended account of the career of the foolish Teague O'Regan, a popular politician. O'Regan was a servant to a wise captain Farrago who frequently repaired the consequences of his servant's blunders. The satire is interlarded with sober essays and commentaries on the problems of democratic government as illustrated by the antihero's many blunders. It concludes with the resignation in disgust of the wise Farrago as Governor of the benighted and ill-served commonwealth. That conclusion perhaps reflected the author's dyspepsia more than a repudiation of his earlier enthusiasm for democracy. Modern Chivalry was well received in frontier communities, but less honored by sophisticates. It has since been acclaimed as the first American novel.

Law Miscellanies was published in 1814. Brackenridge had planned to write the first American legal treatise, and this book was the vestige of that effort. Addressed to novitiates to the profession, it is, among other things, a commentary on the political role of courts in American government and on the ethical issues for lawyers participating in those institutions. It did not enjoy wide readership, but may have stimulated the efforts of early writers of legal texts.

Paul D. Carrington

A Hugh Henry Brackenridge Reader (Daniel Marder ed., University of Pittsburgh Press 1970)

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Law Miscellanies, Containing an Introduction to the Study of Law, Notes on Blackstone's Commentaries, . . . and a Variety of Other Matters Chiefly Original* (P. Byrne, Philadelphia 1814)

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry, Containing the Adventures of a Captain and Teague O'Regan, His Servant* (J. Conrad. & Co., Philadelphia 1804); republished as *Modern Chivalry* (Claude M. Newlin ed., American Book Co., New York 1937)

Claude Milton Newlin, *The Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge* (Princeton University Press 1932)

Madeline Sapienza, *Modern Chivalry in Early American Law: H. H. Brackenridge's Legal Thought* (University Press of America, Lanham 1991)