

JAMES BROOKS, PIONEER POLITICAL JOURNALIST

THE EARLY YEARS (1807-1836)

PORTLAND

James Brooks was born in Portland, Maine, probably in 1807.¹ He was the eldest child of the sea-captain of the same name and his wife Betsey Folsom. His father commanded a privateer during the War of 1812; after the ship and all crew were lost at sea in 1814, the orphan children received an annuity from the U.S. Naval Pension Fund. In consequence, James, sister Eliza and brother Erastus were raised in straitened circumstances. Their mother remarried in 1817, to Joseph Dudley, and bore him a son George, who used the surname Brooks in later life. Widowed again in 1822, Betsey still had young children to raise.

James attended the public-school system in Portland, but the family's impoverished circumstances compelled him to seek work. At age 11 he was apprenticed to a storekeeper in Lewiston; his employer, observing the boy's love of learning and recognizing his abilities, freed him from his obligations, even assisting him to attend the Academy at Monmouth² — but, to support his mother and younger siblings, he withdrew from the Academy.

At age 16, James found employment as a schoolteacher. In the spring of 1826, having saved sufficiently to pay the tuition, he entered Freshman class at Waterville College (later Colby College). That same August he successfully advanced to Junior class and, in August 1828, he graduated with honors.³

Influence of John Neal

For the first year after graduation, James Brooks taught at a Latin school in Portland. Around this time, he approached the Portland writer and lawyer John Neal, expressing a wish to study law. Aside from the legal profession, Neal's varied activities included editing the periodical *Yankee* at the premises of his law office. It was there that Brooks had his first close-up taste of journalism. Neal was a complex personality, with a lively intellect: it would be surprising if some of his qualities did not rub off on the young apprentice, for, despite their difference in age, they had much in common, not least a capacity for hard work. In his autobiography, for instance, Neal

¹ We have not found any original record of birth or baptism, and secondary sources disagree. In later life, Brooks said that he was born on November 10th, 1810; but, in his passport application, dated May 5th, 1835, he declares his age as 26, implying a birth date of November 10th, 1808; yet another source, the Colby College *Alumnus* magazine gives 1807 (the year of his parents' marriage.)

² Anon 1873

³ Alumni of Colby University. 1870

recalled laboring 16 hours a day, seven days a week for four months, compiling his *Index to Niles's Register*, which he described as "*about the dreariest and heaviest drudgery mortal man was ever tried with.*"⁴

There were also coincidences in the two men's childhood experiences. John Neal and his twin sister Rachel lost their father when they were only a month old. Despite being "*sick, helpless, and well-nigh destitute*", their mother straightway set up a private school; she was to pursue this occupation for thirty-five years.⁵ Such circumstances were conducive to developing a high degree of self-reliance.

After completing his legal studies under Neal, Brooks was accepted to the Maine Bar. We may speculate that these years of close association with Neal led him to appreciate the potential power of the printed media, and those who work with it, and honed his ambitions towards the world of publishing.

Budding Reporter

July 1829 saw James Brooks, with his younger brother Erastus, at Washington DC, supporting the defense of Mrs. Anne Newport Royall, under trial as a "common scold".⁶ The experience of this notorious case doubtless served as an incentive to the young lawyer-journalist, sharpening his appetite for the profession, and increasing the attraction of the federal capital.

That same year, Brooks was given the opportunity to write for the *Portland Advertiser*. He succeeded, in John Neal's words, thanks to his ability to "talk on paper".⁷ At the older man's recommendation, the newspaper's owners appointed him to fill the vacant position of editor. The move was a shrewd one: by it, he grew in self-confidence and experience.

WASHINGTON

In late 1831, James Brooks proposed moving to Washington while Congress was in session, from where he could report on events and personalities. The *Advertiser's* owners consented. His earliest known travel writings date from this time. The concept of "Washington correspondent" was still in its infancy. Brooks' letters, chatty and sometimes irreverent, enjoyed rapid success, and were soon to be copied in other newspapers. This was a huge step forward, gaining him visibility and reputation on the national scene. During this period, he must have made numerous contacts and developed his political expertise, all of which would serve him well in later years.

⁴ Neal 1869 5-6

⁵ Neal 1869 14-15

⁶ Maxwell 1985 165, 170, 199

⁷ Neal 1869 342

SLAVE STATES

In the spring of 1833, events in the southern states provided a further stepping stone on Brooks' road to success. Talk of "nullification" in South Carolina over U.S. tariffs provided the justification to observe developments on the ground. His letters from such cities as Richmond, Charleston, Montgomery and New Orleans were published in the pages of the *Portland Advertiser*. In them he documented his travels, reporting on North-South tensions in the aftermath of Tariff legislation, and on the institution and practice of slavery, a cornerstone of most southern states' economies. Portions of his letters were reprinted in other newspapers. Returning by way of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, he conveyed the spirit of a great nation in motion. A sensitive interview with the ageing former President Madison, whom he visited at his home near Charlottesville, completed the set. By this stage, James Brooks had developed and tested the style of travel writing which he was to use on his future tours.

MARITIME PROVINCES

At the start of October 1834, Brooks left his native Portland, heading towards northern Maine and the Canadian frontier. A short editorial, written by his employers, explained that, conditions permitting, he intended to travel as far as the St. Lawrence River, before returning to report on the next session of Congress from Washington DC. But conditions did not permit: winter came earlier than expected, hampering travel. What was accomplished were visits to a handful of the principal towns of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Although favorably impressed by the agricultural and economic potential, Brooks was disparaging about the colonial administration. Where was the dynamism of his homeland? Why were the principal governmental, military and judicial posts filled by British citizens, instead of Canadians? When would the local people petition to join the United States? To make matters worse, barge travel on the St. John River was intolerably slow. So, abandoning his plans, he walked the final miles across the frontier to Houlton, Maine, then took a stagecoach back to Bangor, in the southern part of the state. We speculate that this series of articles was written primarily for the local (Maine) audience, at a time when Brooks was planning on entering state politics.

NEW YORK / MAINE

In early 1835, Brooks published two essays in the *Knickerbocker*, a New York City magazine, on complementary themes. First, *Our Own Country*⁸ — drawing on his travel experiences in the Southern States — a celebration of an America blessed by divine providence, which was widely copied. Second, *The Downfall of Nations*, a warning call to safeguard U.S. democracy from the ills that befell ancient Greece and Rome. His words were apocalyptic: "If we fail, adieu, a long adieu, to all republican

⁸ Brooks 1836 13-20

institutions, when they have failed under such auspices, with so many circumstances to favor them!" The tone was emotional "fire and brimstone," the delivery sermonizing.

These ideas can be traced, in part, to his early mentor, John Neal. In 1830, Brooks had asked him to give a lecture to the Waterville College alumni,⁹ which he entitled *Our Country*.¹⁰ Neal's core concepts unmistakably reemerge in Brooks' later essays: the impermanence of empires (both ancient and modern), intolerance on the part of the many towards the few, and a list of dangers to be rectified, for "*nothing less than all this will ensure that we have not seen our best days.*"

The timing of these essays coincides with Brooks' election to the Maine legislature for the political year 1835 — explaining, perhaps, their overtly oratorical language. This was his first term in office; while chair of a select committee, his recommendation¹¹ to move forward with a railroad project from Portland to Montreal is characteristic of his drive for results.

EUROPE

In May 1835, the young newspaper editor boarded the packet-boat *Toronto* in New York Harbor, bound for Portsmouth, England: he would not return to US soil until a year later.

In just four weeks' time, months of preparation would start to pay off. Armed with letters of introduction, bank instructions, a recently issued U.S. passport and a leather suitcase to hold his books and clothes, James Brooks was poised to visit old England — his father's homeland and the powerful colonial power which had founded his own birthplace — New England. To while away the hours of enforced idleness, he talked with fellow passengers and read voraciously. The French coast was spotted, then the Isle of Wight — landfall at last!

The British Isles were top of his list: first England, then Scotland, by sea to Ireland and back to Wales, returning to London. Political interests came to the fore, in visits to both Houses of Commons and Lords and a spirited public meeting in support of a controversial parliamentary bill. Law Courts were visited in Dublin and Edinburgh. Cultural differences caught his eye at once, such as the presence of a servant class, and the widespread practice of tipping. Knowledge of the local language was advantageous, although regional dialects left him metaphorically speechless.

Two months after arrival, Brooks moved on to the Continent, taking ship for Rotterdam. Henceforth he would be less of a communicator, more of an observer. Still, he could converse in passable French, the *lingua franca* among educated European travelers; and there were other English-speaking tourists — more than he would

⁹ Neal 1869 355

¹⁰ Neal 1830

¹¹ State of Maine, 1835

have wished — both British and American. Many hours would be spent riding in efficient, but slow, horse-drawn carriages.

Travelling up the Rhine valley, visiting city upon city, with their centuries of history, their academies of science, their museums of culture and palaces, Brooks could not but acknowledge the comparative insignificance of the United States at that point in its development. A world imagined previously from book-reading was made real for him — both its glorious accomplishments and its irksome restrictions on the free movement of people. Pausing briefly beneath the battlements of Heidelberg's mighty castle, he was captivated by a cultured society that apparently understood how to enjoy life's simple pleasures: it was a lasting impression, which was to draw him back in later life.

On reaching Switzerland, expectations were high, and he was not disappointed. Yes, there was an insurmountable language barrier at the mainly German-speaking national assembly in Bern, but elsewhere he found romance and orderliness. Geneva, he judged to be a model democracy, worthy of study by the U.S. Appropriately for a mountainous region, Brooks and companions enjoyed much of the country by the use of his own two legs. At Chamonix, he finally acknowledged that the rugged scenery of mountains and glaciers surpassed anything that the Eastern U.S. could offer the tourist.

And last of all, fittingly, came Italy, the *pièce de résistance*, once the cradle of Roman culture and power. Venice, the city on the sea; Vatican, seat of popes and heart of a global religious empire; Florence and Naples, whose painting and sculpture galleries were world-famous; and Milan; and Pisa and more besides — all called out to be visited. For long, the purlieu of the British aristocracy, it was now the turn of the young American to complete his personal Grand Tour, by way of Paris, Antwerp and London, before making the long journey home.

The European Letters

James Brooks travelled with a mission: to write home, telling of what he saw and, significantly, what he thought about it. He was a political journalist, with a track record, and strong feelings about safeguarding the principles that had guided his nation's birth. As each *Letter from Europe* was published in the *Portland Advertiser*, his hometown newspaper, it was copied by numerous "exchange journals", in New York State and around the country. The public would have recognized his name as the recent Washington correspondent, and had an appetite for his reports from the distant continent. Their direct, personal perspective on foreign manners and institutions was well received.

An ample supply of articles fostered a rapid pace of publication, creating a more vivid experience for the reader — an illusion of near-real-time reporting, comparable, in present-day terms, to a television network, or a web blog. To a public accustomed to weeks of delay for news reports from Europe, (the lag-time being dictated by the

speed of transatlantic sailing ships), Brooks' series of letters would have conveyed an impression of immediacy.

Certainly, his letters came thick and fast — the first 95 of them in just 30 weeks, at a rate of over 1,000 words per day. They were substantial in length, varying between 1,500 and 4,000 words — educational, often amusing, and suitable for reading in a family setting. Brooks was an informed, unpretentious traveler, working on a modest budget; he wrote about rich and poor alike, and was not averse to walking long distances: these factors would have encouraged the reader to identify him as a straightforward fellow-American.

The contrast with contemporary newspaper correspondents, such as Nathaniel Parker Willis, was marked: Brooks' style was more down-to-earth. The distinction was well stated by Mrs. Ann Stephens, editor of the *Portland Magazine*:

"Our letter writers have hitherto wandered into the flower-gardens of England ... but where is the man who, like Brooks, has told us of the people, the great body of the English? ... Who like him has penetrated into the fairs and public festivals of the country, making observations, gathering together facts, and describing the realities, not the embellishments of human society?"¹²

Five months of near-continuous travel made for a predictably wide variety of experiences: for instance, he visited both houses of the British Parliament; followed in the tracks of Lord Byron; admired the legacy of Napoleon Bonaparte, while reluctantly conceding his atrocious butchery; restrained a penchant for criticizing the Catholic church; fumed about being subjected to tobacco smoke for hours on end in enclosed spaces; waxed ecstatic over the work of early Greek sculptors and Italian Renaissance artists; reflected on the inevitability of oblivion among the ruins of Ancient Rome; and so on, and so on. It was a veritable *tour de force*.

At Naples, Brooks finally admitted to burnout. Many of the late letters, chronicling his return to Paris, are brief: one suspects they were written more with a sense of obligation than in the spirit of joy in discovery. It was an impressive effort, but one doomed to rapid oblivion. True, his European travel letters documented a moving, unrepeatable target. Had they been republished promptly in book form, as some enthusiastic readers hoped,¹³ they would perhaps have had a more enduring popularity. But his own priorities and ambitions pointed in a different direction — towards national politics.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, in the field of news reporting, we take for granted the transience of each day's reports. Brooks' travel correspondence, too, was just such a passing phenomenon. Yet, viewed from the perspective of the 21st century, the letters acquire a

¹² Anon 1835

¹³ Anon 1838

fresh, historical significance. Their author symbolized "Young America". Oratorical, forthright and intensely proud of what his nation had accomplished, he was a journalist who used the medium of newsprint to talk directly to the public about political and social systems, sharing observations and shaping opinions. His chosen format was a travel journal; the deeper purpose was to safeguard the democracy constructed by the nation's founders fifty years earlier.

AFTERWORD

In 1836, back home in the U.S., James Brooks changed gears, building a career as owner-cum-editor of the *New-York Express* (with his brother Erastus), while alternating in and out of national politics. In 1841, he married Mary Louisa Randolph née Cunningham, who bore him 3 children. In 1873, after a long career in public office, he was one of a group of congressmen censured for their role in a railroad financial scandal; already in poor health, he died a few weeks later.

In overcoming his family's financial difficulties, James Brooks had shown himself to be a prototypical "self-made man" — rising from apprentice to college graduate and attorney-at-law, from essayist and journalist to newspaper editor and owner, and culminating with political office in the United States Congress. An anonymous biographer summarized James Brooks' achievements in these words: "*He attained success as an editor, an author, and a politician, and could have attained greatness in any one of the three professions to which he might have chosen to devote the whole, not a part, of his very clever, thoroughly-trained powers.*"¹⁴

Brooks' collected letters demonstrate how newspaper archives can open unexpected insights into past lives and times. Although never published in book form, his letters were not lost. Their transcripts are now conveniently accessible, for study and enjoyment.

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¹⁴ Anon 1873

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