A Colonial Topographical Poem

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IT WAS TO BE EXPECTED that topographical poetry, the roots of which reached back to the writers of the classic period, flourished in England during so-called Augustan Age.[1] John Denham's *Cooper's Hill* (1642) provided a model which influenced 18th Century poets both in Britain and the British colonies of North America. Denham, as Samuel Johnson put it, was "the author of a species of composition that may be denominated local poetry, of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape, to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospection, or incidental meditation."[2] Local poetry, to use Dr. Johnson's term, due to the conventions of the genre, called for catalogues of topographical features and personal names. Thus it holds interest for both the student of terminology and the literary historian.

Although it is not as well known as it should be, a considerable body of verse written in the American colonies found its way into print in English publications such as the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Magazine*. Much of it was dull stuff indeed though no worse than similar contributions by British poetasters; some of it showed competence if not merit. Its literary value today is chiefly that it illustrates rude beginnings of a distinctly American literature and provides evidence that secular writing existed as well as the more widely known and predominantly religious productions of Puritan New England.

Because topographical poetry must make use of "some particular landscape," the examples written in colonial America, even though they show no departure from traditional forms and the contemporary British literary fashion, bear consideration because they make use of materials available on the premises. The poet had to keep his eye on the object. The result, therefore, was that these poems

were more "American" than other varieties of imitative verse, and that they contain materials which merit the consideration of those concerned with the study of American names.

A case in point is a poetic epistle entitled "C. W. *in* Carolina *to* E. J. *at* Gosport" published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of July, 1753.[8] Significantly, it hinges upon the literary device of the impact upon the poet caused by the names of South Carolina rivers "never yet immortaliz'd in song" in contrast to the emotion aroused upon his recalling the name of Britain, his native land. Thinking of his home in England and his newly married friend there, the poet calls aloud his friend's name, feeling a desire to share with him the impressive prospect of Carolina's rivers. He then embarks upon a catalogue of the rivers and other bodies of water, interspersed with a roll call of the distinguished people who inhabit their shores. Finally, as a result of the memory of the name of his homeland ("Struck with thy name, my country"), he expresses longing to return and to see once more the sweetheart he left behind, a neo-classic nymph who, typically, is named Stella.

The poem, presented in full below, included lengthy footnotes designated in the *Gentleman's Magazine* by blackface letters. In this transcription letters enclosed in parentheses have been substituted. The original footnotes here follow the text of the poem.

C. W. *in* Carolina *to* E. J. *at* Gosport

While you, my friend, indulg'd in each desire,
Your blooming bride with rapt'rous love admire;
From grave to gay with various authors change,
Or blithe from concert to assembly range,
Me harder fate to foreign lands conveys;
In foreign lands the muse my call obeys.
The land, tho' foreign, softest seasons bless,
To the pleas'd native bounteous in excess.
Ev'n I, who pine for less indulgent skies,
Am charm'd where'er I turn my wond'ring eyes.
Almost I seem to tread enchanted ground,
And endless beauty fills the circuit round.
Thy pleasing name I echo thro' the woods,
Then wish thee with me near these chrystal floods,
To view (a) *Santee* tumultuous in its course,
And trace the great *Port* (b) *Royal* to its source:
To see *Savanna* (c) draw his watry store,
Thro' the long windings of a swampy shore,
And rapid (d) *Ashley* with impetuous tide,

Thro' the long chain of num'rous islands glide.
With transport fir'd, attentive I survey,
The two (e) *Podees* to (f) *Winyaw's* bason stray,
Parents of floods! who rolling thro' the plain,
The (g) *Cherokees* of half their moisture drain,
And swol'n with rains, or swift dissolving snow,
Distribute wealth and plenty where they flow.
Their names, enfranchiz'd by the tuneful throng,
Were never yet immortaliz'd in song:
They, lost in silence and oblivion, lye,
Till time ordains to flow in poetry.
Ah! were I blest with tuneful *Gaselee's* skill,
Thy streams, (h) *Black-River,* shou'd my numbers fill,
(i) Where *Cleland, Powel* and *Trapier* reside,
And learning's toil rude savages deride.
Sometimes to (k) *Pon-pon's* banks I calm retire,
Or shallow (l) *Stono's* fertile shores admire.
Stono, a languid stream, derives its course,
From various urns, and from a doubtful source,
When wilt thou, (m) *Wando,* in poetic lays,
Acquire, like *Helicon,* immortal praise?
When shall some deathless muse exalt thy fame,
Fair (n) *Edistow,* and dignify thy stream?
Broad (o) *Waccamow,* which now obscurely strays,
May gain distinction while it yields the bays,
And farther than her *rice* can find its way,
(p) *Ashpoo* may be convey'd some future day.
Here could my humble muse, a train run o'er
Of gen'rous names, that honor (q) *Cooper's* shore:
The *Cordes's, Harlstons, Beresfords,* and *Beard,*
(By ties of virtuous friendship long endear'd)
(r) With *Broughton, Simmons, Austen,* and *Durand,*
The pride and grace of *Carolina's* land!
Did not the tilting bark unwilling stay,
And southern breezes chide the short delay:
The pleasing talk, at present, I suspend,
And bid a *Langhorn's* (s) pen their worth commend.
Oh! would a spark of empyreal fire,
With (t) *Parker's* warmth my ravish'd breast inspire,
Unnumber'd beauties in my verse should shine,
And *Carolina* grace each flowing line.
See how her fragrant groves around me smile,
That shun the coast of *Britain's* stormy isle,
Or when transplanted and preserv'd with care,
Curse the cold clime, and starve in northern air.
Here, kindly warmth, their mounting juice ferments,
To taller growth and more exalted scents:

Ev'n loosen'd sands with tender myrtles bloom,
And trodden weeds exhale a rich perfume.
Bear me, some god, to (u) worthy *Michi's* seat,
Or give me shade in (m) *Taylor's* calm retreat,
Where western gales eternally reside,
And bounteous seasons lavish all their pride;
Blossoms, and fruits, and flow'rs, together rise,
And the whole year in gay confusion lyes.
What! tho' a second *Carthage* here we raise,
A late attempt, the work of modern days,
Here (n) *Drayton's* seat and (a) *Middleton's* is found,
Delightful villa's! be they long renown'd.
Swift fly the years when sciences retire,
From frigid climes to equinoctial fire:
When *Raphael's* tints, and *Titian's* strokes shall faint,
As fair *America* shall deign to paint.
Here from the mingled strength of shade and light,
A new creation shall arise to sight,
And sculpture here in full perfection shine,
Dug, for her hand, our *Apalachian* (b) mine.
Methinks I see, in solemn order stand,
The first advent'rers to this blooming land:
Ashley and *Archdale, Colleton,* and *Boon,*
Bull, Johnson, Izzard, heroes worthy *Rome,*
See Indian chiefs whom cruelties renown,
Submit their country to the *British* crown,
Domes, temples, bridges, rise in distant views,
And sumtuous palaces the sight amuse.
How has kind heav'n adorn'd this happy land,
And scatter'd blessings with a lib'ral hand!
But what avail her unexhausted stores,
Her woody mountains, and her sunny shores,
With all the gifts that heav'n and earth impart,
The smiles of nature, and the charms of art?
While noxious reptiles (c) in her vallies reign,
And stinging (d) insects fill the watry plain,
While droughts and hurricanes at once impair,
The smiling prospects of the plenteous year.
The red'ning orange (e), and the bearded grain (f)
Are scarce enjoy'd, or snatch'd with fear and pain:
The planter joyless views luxuriant vines,
And in the myrtle's fragrant shade repines;
Scorch'd in his boasted aromatick grove,
From heat no shelter, no recess for love.
O *Britain!* queen of isles, serenely bright,
Profuse of bliss, and pregnant with delight,
Eternal pleasures in thy borders reign,

And smiling plenty leads thy wanton train.
On foreign mountains may the sun refine
The grapes of soft juice, and mellow it to wine.
With citron groves adorn a distant soil,
And the fat olive swell with floods of oil,
Thy sons ne'er envy warmer climes that lye
Stretch'd in bright tracts beneath a cloudless sky,
Nor yet at heav'n with impious frowns repine,
Tho' o'er their heads, the frozen *Pleiades* shine.
Struck with thy name, my country, which resounds
From many a voice, to ocean's utmost bounds;
Dear, conscious mem'ry wounds my breast with pain,
I long to tread paternal fields again:
To hear my lisping boy's delight exprest,
And snatch my *Stella* to my panting breast.

(a) *A great river, 40 miles East from* Charles Town, *which has its rise in or beyond the* Apalachian *hills. It oft will rise 36 feet perpendicular in a few hours, and carry every thing before it by its rapidity. This is owing to the small depth of water on the bar, which obstructs its discharge into the sea.*

(b) *A river and noble harbour 70 miles West of* Charles Town, *which port it greatly exceeds.—The town of* Beaufort *is built on an island in this vast bason.*

(c) *A noble river that separates* Carolina *and* Georgia, *on which the Towns of* Savanna, Purysburgh, *and* Windsor *are built.*

(d) *One of the rivers that form the port of* Charles Town, *running on the* S. *and* E. *sides.*

(e) *Great and little* Podee; *two rivers whose fountain is yet undiscovered,* N.E. *from* Charles Town.

(f) *A large bay 60 miles from* Charles Town, *formed by the confluence of the* Black River, *the* Pedees *and* Waccamow.—*On a creek of this great inlet,* George Town *is built.*

(g) *The* Apalachian *mountains, called also* Cherokee's *from an* Indian *tribe of that name which inhabit them.*

(h) *A beautiful, swift, and deep river (so called from the colour of its water) that falls into* Winyaw *bay.*

(i) *The minister of* Prince Frederick *parish.*

(k l) *Two rivers* W. *of* Charles Town, *on which lie the best lands in the province.*

(m) *A river that runs thro'* Christ church *parish,* E. *of* Charles Town, *and falls into the* Cooper, *at* Hobcaw.

(n) *There are two rivers of this name,* E. *of* Charles Town.

(o) *A large river that takes its rise from a fine lake in* North Carolina, *and falls into the grand reservoir at* Winyaw.

(p) *A river* E. *of* Charles Town, *on which lie fine rice lands.*

(q) *The river that forms the port of* Charles Town, *which city is built on a peninsula, between that and* Ashley *river.*

(r) *Gentlemen of* St. John's *parish, near the upper part of* Cooper *river.*

(s) *The minister of* Dorchester *parish, an eloquent gentleman; the* Cicero *of* Carolina.

(t) *The late worthy and ingenious Mr* Thomas Parker *of* Gosport.

(u w) *Gentlemen of estate in the province, of great probity and worth.*

(p a) *Gentlemen of large estates in* Goose Creek, *who have superb seats that would make a good figure in* England.

(b) *The* Apalachian *hills abound in mines of all sorts; quarries of fine marble, blocks of crystal, white clay for porcelain, and fine earth for potteries, are to be found in them.*

(c) *Rattle snake.* (d) *Muskettos.*
(e) *One sharp night, about 6 years ago, cut off almost all the orange trees in* Carolina, *so that they have had none since.—But next year its expected that great quantities will be gather'd.—Mr* Croft *at* Hobcaw, *has an orangery of 4000 trees.*
(f) *Rice.*

Although the identity of "C. W." is unknown, certain information about him is available and several reasonable conjectures, based upon his writings, may be made. He was a regular contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the 1750s. In May, 1753, he published an "imitation" of Horace's *Ode* iv, *Book* I in which he described himself in a headnote as "now residing in South Carolina." In February, 1754, the *Gentleman's Magazine* published his "*To* Benjamin Franklin *Esq; of* Philadelphia, *on his Experiments and Discoveries in Electricity,*" a poem of 78 lines in heroic couplets which was signed "*Cooper River,* S. Carolina." Another Horatian imitation based upon *Ode* iii, *Book* I, was printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of August, 1754. His final appearance in the *Gentleman's Magazine* was as author of an essay on the cultivation and curing of indigo, the dye-producing plant which brought such wealth to colonial South Carolina, published in May, 1755, and continued in the June issue. "C. W.'s" letter to the editor accompanying the essay is signed "*Charles Town, S. Carolina,* Nov. 30, 1754." His treatment of the subject is so thorough and his knowledge of the complicated curing process is so complete that it seems to be based on personal observation probably obtained through his own experience as a rice and indigo planter. He sticks closely to his subject, and the only instance where autobiographical information creeps in is when he describes a harvesting procedure used "at *Winyaw* (where I live)."

Internal evidence in the topographical poem indicates that "C. W." came to South Carolina from Gosport on the southern coast of England or some place nearby. The poem, of course, is inscribed "*to* E. J. *at* Gosport," and the single non-resident of South Carolina mentioned in the lengthy annotation is "*The late worthy and ingenious Mr* Thomas Parker *of* Gosport." More important, however, is the fact that the only poet invoked is the obscure Gaselee, whose skill at describing vistas of water "C. W." envies. Gaselee was the author of "Stoke's-Bay," a topographical poem of 165 lines which was published posthumously in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of May, 1739.[4] Stokes Bay is described in a footnote as

"a small Bay near Gosport, *famous for a Landmark for coming into* Spithead." A notable feature is the poem's catalogue of foreign rivers which are compared with "the gentler *Thames*" and the descriptions of water scenery along the coast. "Stoke's-Bay" was submitted to the *Gentleman's Magazine* by "T. Parker," doubtless the *"ingenious Mr* Thomas Parker *of* Gosport," who explained that it had appeared in an inaccurate and incomplete form in the *London Magazine* of the previous month "against the consent of the person chiefly concerned."

Eight of the thirteen South Carolina rivers mentioned in the poem were named for Siouan, Shawnee, and Cusaboo tribes which inhabited the area.[5] Two others, the Ashley and the Cooper, honored Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, the most talented and versatile of the Lords Proprietors of South Carolina. The Port Royal River was named by Jean Ribaut, who established a short-lived colony of French Huguenots on its banks in 1662. The Black River, as "C. W." observed, was *"so called from the colour of its water."* The roll call of personal names includes, to borrow "C. W.'s" apt phrase, *"Gentlemen of estate in the province, of great probity and worth"* and several "first advent'rers."

Most of the place names, with modifications in spelling, have been retained. "C. W." used "Cherokee," rather than "Appalachian" which supplanted it, as the name of the mountain range but remarked in his footnote that both were then current. Purysburgh, named for Jean Pierre Purry, a Swiss colonizer, and Windsor (usually New Windsor and actually a township rather than a town), both on the Savannah River, have ceased to exist; Hobcaw and Winyaw, both of Indian derivation, have both disappeared as names of settlements.[6]

NOTES

[1] See Robert A. Aubin, *Topographical Poetry in XVIII-Century England,* New York, 1936, which includes valuable checklists of various types of topographical poems.

[2] *Lives of the English Poets,* Dublin, 1779, I, 401.

[3] XXIII, 337–38.

[4] IX, 263–64.

[5] In addition, the Ponpon River, according to *Palmetto Place Names,* Columbia, S.C., n. d., p. 86, is "an Indian name of obscure origin."

[6] Winyah Bay, as it is now spelled, derives its name from a Siouan tribe. Hobcaw, according to J. S. Bolick, *"Waccamaw Plantations,* Clinton, S.C., 1946, p. 1, is an Indian word meaning "between the waters." It was also the name of one of the original colonial "baronies" and survives today as the name of Bernard Baruch's estate near Georgetown, S.C.