The Diary of Calvin Fletcher and the Historians

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"In former years I kept a Journal or diary of the occurrancies of life and important daily transactions. And I now most sincerely regret that I had not continued the same with regularity and care down to the present period, at the age of thirty one (in Feb. next). Many transactions worthy of note are now forgotten, others the recollection of which is very imperfect, and which I sometimes have wanted and often may hereafter want in aid of the adjustment in my own mind [of] some difficulty which had grown out of imperfect recollection of facts."

- CALVIN FLETCHER, 1 January 1829

THE DIARY OF CALVIN FLETCHER AND THE HISTORIANS

George Geib

"In the summer of 1821 the Delaware Indians left the central part of Indiana then a total wilderness. . . . I had married; and on my request my worthy partner permitted me to leave him, to take up my residence at the place designated as the seat of government of Indiana."

— CALVIN FLETCHER, 29 March 1861, from a letter to the secretary of the New England Historical & Genealogical Register (diary entry, 28 March 1861)

CALVIN FLETCHER

at Two Hundred

1798 - 1998

While we all make New Year's resolutions, few of us ever keep them with the tenacity that Calvin Fletcher kept the one he apparently made on this day. The diary that he had begun in fragmentary fashion in 1817 and continued intermittently to 1829, he maintained religiously thereafter. In so doing, he provided us with an extraordinary record of his life and times. Published in nine volumes by the Indiana Historical Society from 1972 to 1983, The Diary of Calvin Fletcher represents perhaps the single most important printed source for understanding Indiana's history. In commemoration of Fletcher's two-hundredth birthday on 4 February 1998, Traces looks back at the diary and its impact on how we see ourselves.
his assumed a leadership role at some point in his life. By the 1840s he was an "essential man" whose presence in support of a project usually heralded its success. Because later banks in the city bore his family name, it has become common to see him primarily as an agent of sound money and credit. Yet in his diaries, banking plays a much less visible role than does transportation. Anyone wondering about the origins of the Indianapolis emphasis upon man-made ways to compensate for the absence of navigable water need look no further than Fletcher's early interest in toll roads and steam vessels.

Fletcher was particularly useful in documenting the presence of the New England mind-set. Given the small number of residents that, according to the U.S. Census, came from that area, historians tended to underplay their influence until we watched Fletcher impose his stamp upon central Indiana. He was in many ways the quintessential New ENgander, with his careful records, his agrarian interests, his improving ways, and his moral imperatives. "I have not been fortunate in any one undertaking in life where I have acted against my own judgment from fear, haver, or unmanly friendship. [25 July 1838]" Fletcher always addressed farming as his primary occupation, and he filled his pages with records of weather, soil, crops, livestock, and markets. He delighted in the physical activities of the farm, and to the end of his life he worked to bring in the harvest on his extensive acres.

His diaries also went far to confirm the links many historians see between economic change and the lumber reform of antebellum America. Fletcher's extensive land holdings made him a commercial farmer and undoubtedly helped account for the way the world of farming was always linked in his mind to the new economic measures of his time. Whether the issue was internal improvements, credit, legal arrangement, or land sale, he assumed a leadership role at some point in his life. By the 1840s he was an "essential man" whose presence in support of a project usually heralded its success. Because later banks in the city bore his family name, it has become common to see him primarily as an agent of sound money and credit. Yet in his diaries, banking plays a much less visible role than does transportation. Anyone wondering about the origins of the Indianapolis emphasis upon man-made ways to compensate for the absence of navigable water need look no further than Fletcher's early interest in toll roads and steam vessels.

Economic improvement was unacceptable in Fletcher's mind if it was not accompanied by moral judgment. "Although there is no legal obligations, I feel always bound to give satisfaction & not retreat under limitation laws. [12 December 1862]" Like many in his age, Fletcher spent time encouraging churches and, especially, Sunday schools. He was less interested in denominational distinctions than he was in the potential of the variety that impelled men and women to dedicate their lives to spiritual and personal improvement. Seldom the extremist, Fletcher was instead an educator and motivator who sought to draw as large a portion of the community as possible into his causes, which would range in his lifetime over much of the reform spectrum: free public schools, temperance, and colonization for free Blacks among them. A pragmatist who sought to build upon public opinion, and thus a man who shunned lost causes, he consistently hoped to create better individuals who could then in their turn promote better measures. It is worth reading him as he lamented the shifts of public sentiment that doomed immediate adoption of a Mainer-style "bone-dry" temperance prohibition in Indiana. The "Staw" temperance society met today. I regret signed my name to the call But few will attend I apprehend. With a Drunken debauched Governor ... Drunken debauched president of the state university ... & worse than all a corrupt bribed Sup. [Court] bench. ... With such a state of affairs what moral reform can be made. [18 January 1859]"

Fletcher spoke much of politics in his writings and addressed issues in ways that fitted well with his contemporaries' interests in the shifting alignments of people and parties in that era. As an improver, a reformer, and a Whig, Fletcher seemed to exemplify the concept of themes of modernization that political scholars were using to define that party and to contrast it with the western Democracy. Better still for the inter­preters, Fletcher's subsequent shifts of allegiance-first to the Free Soil movement and then, somewhat reluctantly, to the Republican party-confirmed well to the pattern of moral concern that a new generation of social historians was using to explain party formation. The issues that gripped him in his diaries were the abuses heaped upon the freedman and the reformer, whether in Marion County or far away in Kansas. Fletcher's resentment at the treatment of John Freeman, a freed slave whose mea­ger possessions were lost in his legal fight to avoid a cor­rupt slave taker, reflects the direction of his forceful indignation. "I have had a call from his wife. I would turn out at once but counsel are employed. I have already had some unpleasant words with our officers who have taken secretly a part with the Slaveholders. [21 June 1853]"

Important as Fletcher was to recent historians, it could be argued that his most impressive contribution was his serv­ice to modern history itself. The same passion that led him to promote education also made him a friend of the study of local history. In his lifetime he made multiple attempts to advance both the Old Settlers Society and the Indiana Historical Society, and through his family he handed his remarkable papers down for posterity. The diaries, bound in a dozen volumes, were donated by his family to the Indiana Historical Society in the 1930s. There they caught the attention of one of the key figures in local study, Eli Lilly. By 1930 Lilly had read the manuscript and clearly liked what he had seen. Lilly surely saw a kindred spirit-a business­man of broad interests, a responsible reformer concerned with his local community, an educator with a special flair for local history, and a literate man who saw his wealth in the context of stewardship. "I think a young man ... unworthy of a place a home a good character who can not act like a man feel like a man able to battle with world as the most distinguished men of our time have beginning in poverty gradually going forward to wealth & usefulness. May the Lord impress the lesson. [25 August 1850]" Lilly took the lead in aspiring for the initial transcription of the manuscript in the 1930s.

It was not until a generation later that the series finally saw print, edited by a group of scholar-historians who had developed their skills bringing much of the current canon of Indiana history to the public. Gayle Thornbrough was the central figure here, in later cooperation with Dorothy Riker and Paula Corpuz. The project was not without chal­lenges. For all of his interest in his mature years, Fletcher had failed to keep the volumes of his youth. He was already a successful lawyer and community leader when the seri­ous entries began in the 1830s, denying us a detailed vision of the first decade in Indianapolis. Realizing the need to fill this gap, the editors turned to other Fletcher family papers, diary fragments of his wife, Sarah Hill Fletcher, and letters to family members who had remained in Vermont. Having once done so, the editors supplemented subsequent volumes with similar documents, adding texture and information but some­times interrupting the tone and message of Fletcher's diary. The real imbalance of the volumes, however, was of Fletcher's own choosing. Caught up in the events of the Civil War, and often reflecting at length upon the course and meaning of events, he created a record between 1861 and 1865 that was as long as that he kept in either the 1840s or the 1850s. Most readers grow a bit tired as they move through the last volumes.

Whether the content of the Fletcher diaries serves future generations as well as it has served ours will, no doubt, depend upon the questions that upcoming gen­erations of historians ask. But in one way, whatever the fash­ions and the excitement possible through access to Indiana's local records, the Fletcher project was clearly a success for local history itself. The same passion that led him to enjoy a remarkable man as he lives in remarkable times. And value it as well for what it has helped to set in motion in modern local historical study.