

HARMON'S DREAMS

May 10, 2004

David Black

He was born in England in 1764 to Irish gentry, with lineage back to King Edward III [W.3, W.7]. Most of his childhood, however, was spent in Ireland. He was educated at the celebrated school of Westminster. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin; and later earned a law degree from King's Inn in 1790 at age of 26 [B.21]¹.

He never practiced law. Rather he visited France after graduation where he became disillusioned by the undemocratic slant of the new revolutionary government. He was also unhappy with the oppression of the Irish by the English government [B.24]. He "committed treason (in English eyes at least) by joining the Society of United Irishmen, a secret organization dedicated to destroying England's rule of Ireland."² His biographer, William Safford, wrote in 1859, that he chose "... to pursue the more flowery paths of literature than the sterner and more rugged way of political preferment. . ." [B27]. He sold his County Kerry estate, Castle Conway², to a COUSIN for \$160,000 [S.4, W.6]³, took his "considerable additional fortune", inherited from his father, to England. There he courted and married Margaret Agnew, daughter of the Lt. Governor of the Isle of Mann [B28]. She was 14 years younger, a breathtaking beauty [A.75] and an accomplished horsewoman. She also was his niece [A..75]⁴.

Margaret's parents were understandably outraged at the incestuous marriage and promptly disinherited her [W.7]. Becoming increasingly uncomfortable with life in England, he began to dream of a studious, democratic, bucolic atmosphere in America. Thus, there were several reasons for his leaving the British Isles for America: [1] his outspoken dislike of George III's harsh rule over Ireland, and [2] societies disdain for his incestuous marriage.

In London he "...supplied himself with an extensive library and philosophical [i.e. scientific] apparatus" [B.30]. He and his idealistic wife sailed for New York City in 1796 where for several months he studied the newly founded country. He determined to go to Pittsburgh, and thence to Marietta, Ohio in the fall [B31]. The following spring he bought on Elijah Bachus's Island on the Ohio River tract of 170 acres, below the mouth of the little Kanawha River at Parkersburg for \$4,500 [B34, S.5, W.9]. Attorney Bachus had bought all of the island, 269 acres, for \$835 four years earlier [W.9]⁵.

¹ [Bracketed] references "B" refer to quotations from "Life of Harman Blennerhassett" by Wm. Safford, published, Cincinnati 1859, HCPL # B/B6475, and the page therein.

² Blennerhassett Historical Foundation pamphlet. It dates his birth in 1764, and his arrival in New York in 1796, slightly at odds with Safford's biography.

³ [Bracketed] references "S" refer to "Blennerhassett Island and the Burr Conspiracy", by N.F. Schneider, 1938, HCPL R977.198 S35b.

⁴ [Bracketed] references "A" refer to quotations from "Aaron Burr by Buckner F. Melton, Jr, John Wiley & Sons, 2002, and the pages therein.

⁵ [Bracketed] references "W" refer to "None Called Him Neighbor" by Marie Wood, 1951, E. TN State College Library. W973.48/W851.

Harmon then spent \$60,000 on constructing a house, "designed in the Palladian style (like Mt. Vernon)...contained 7,000 sq. ft. of floor space..."⁶. The main building was 2 stories and contained 10 rooms. It was flanked by one story wings which curved forward and culminated in a kitchen and servants quarters on the right [S.7]. It was "...a fabulous white-painted mans on set like a jewel amid landscaped gardens and lawns... rare plants, oriental carpets, paneled rooms, Venetian mirrors, oil paintings, gold and marble clocks, and silver doorknobs...Its creation contained...all the mystic elements of a dream."² Although that description by his biographer, William Safford, may seem flowery, it is to be believed if you visit today's replica of this home on Blennerhassett Island.

"Retiring in disposition, [Harmon Blennerhassett's] life was sedentary and studious; books and [scientific] experiments..." in chemistry, electricity, galvanism, and astronomy occupied him [B.42]. But he was as naive and guileless [A.74] as he was studious. He had a theory that animal meat might be a source of oil for lamps, like the spermaceti of sperm whales. So he lowered pieces of meat into the Ohio River. Fish ate them [B.42]. On another occasion, he hired a local to collect mussel shells for an experiment. The man collected shells lying on the beach and charged an exorbitant price of 50 cents a bushel, for the labor. When Harmon inquired about the fee, the man said he had to dive down 15 feet, and HB paid him five times the value [B.43].

His life of puttering around his island on the frontier for some eight years [B.58] began to change when Aaron Burr came west in 1805 1] to ascertain the mood in "West Augusta", a term used by General Washington to label the NW Territory, 2] to enlist recruits for a private expedition against Mexico and the Spanish provinces in Florida, and 3] to buy land in Louisiana on which to establish a colony of intelligent and wealthy individuals [B.59]. These three objectives were intermingled and embellished by Burr, depending on who was listening to him. His narrow failure to win the presidency in 1800 [A36], and the hostility and criticism he incurred by shooting Alexander Hamilton did not change his ambition. At the end of his term as Vice President in March 1805, he began to dream of enhancing his career in the West - by conquest, or separation of the United States, or whatever.

Burr:

To understand how Harmon's dreams were about to change, we need to review briefly the career of Aaron Burr. He was a brilliant Princeton graduate, and he was studying law when the Revolution started. He joined the forces led by Col. Benedict Arnold to attempt to capture Quebec. His valor in that campaign won him a captaincy and later an assignment to Geo. Washington's staff. Somehow that duty was short lived, and he continued to irritate and cross Washington, who was reported to have hated him [A.24-28]. At war's end he practiced law in New York City, sometimes working with Alexander Hamilton in court. He prospered, was elected to the NY Assembly, and was Gov. Geo. Clinton's Attorney General.

⁶ W. Va. State Park website.

Meanwhile, Hamilton had cultivated Washington's favor, became his Sec'y. of Treasury, and was a founding Federalist, who favored strong central government. Burr was not fully in the opposition Republican camp, but tended to vote with them. Eventually this political difference led to the separation between the two men, then the exchange of insults, and finally the duel. His killing Hamilton was a kind of last straw for prominent people, who distrusted him because he so often played both sides of issues while determining which side would prevail or favor his ambitions.

Aaron Burr was never popular with the public. Blennerhassett's biographer gives us the following appraisal of Burr. "In him the elements which make great and good men were strangely mixed up with those which we may suppose the spirits of evil to pride themselves....In his own person he combined two opposite natures. He was studious, but insinuating; dignified, yet seductive. Success did not intoxicate, nor reverse dismay him. . . He was profligate in morals, public and private; selfish and artful; a master in dissimulation, treacherous, cold-hearted...a skeptic in honesty, a scorner of all things noble and good, he failed to secure the public confidence, and fell headlong from his dizzy eminence.. .There was nothing in his character to which the great head of the people could attach itself in love; but they shrank from him, in mistrust, as from a cold and glittering serpent..." [B.183].

Harmon's Changed Dreams

After Burr visited Harmon in December 1805, he wrote Blennerhassett that his talents deserved "...a higher sphere than that in which he was employed. [His comforts of life only] served to effeminate the mind, for want of active engagements. [His] pleasures were merely passive, and were better suited to the negative enjoyment of the rude and unconscious herd than to those delightful sensations experienced by the intelligent mind when in the active exercise of all its ennobling powers ...[His growing family]...demanded of him superior advantages than to be obtained in his unpolished neighborhood. [His] fortune was gradually diminishing, while no effort was being made to add to his present estate. The inevitable consequence, therefore, must be the impoverishment of his children." [B.63].

Harmon, impressed by the former Vice President's advice, wrote back Dec.21 that he would like "...to be admitted into a participation of any speculation which might present itself to Burr's judgment as worthy...", be it a commercial enterprise, land purchase, or military adventure. Burr replied that Blennerhassett's talents "seemed to have destined [him] for something more than vegetable life..." Burr continued, "The confidence you have seen fit to place in me is extremely flattering, and it would seem that there has been, without explanation, a sort of consent between our minds..." [B.65] And he painted bright pictures of the riches of Mexico and the thrill of military conquest.

Blennerhassett was open to the flattery and images of profit which Burr brought. Harmon was going through his fortune with his extravagance. And travelers from England, who knew of his incestuous marriage were arriving in America in increasing numbers [S.17].

Harmon began to have a new and more exciting dream, one not original with him, but one excited by and shared with Burr: he virtually enlisted in Burr's enterprise [B.65-67]. In early 1806 he wrote Burr and offered Burr all that he had! "I hope that you will not regard it as indelicate of me to observe to you how highly I should be honored in being associated with you in any contemplated enterprise [such as Florida or Mexico] you would permit me to participate in." [A.91].

In Sept. 1806 Burr began to prepare for the expedition, whose purpose he described, variously as 1] to take Florida from the Spanish, 2] to invade Mexico, and 3] to settle the 800,000 acre territory on the Washita River, a dream of Burr's imagination, which was located somewhere near Natchez at the mouth of the Red River. Burr ordered 15 large bateaux, to carry 1500 men, and a keel boat for provisions: Blennerhassett paid for them all [B.75]. Further, Harmon began submitting articles to the Marietta papers, under the penname of Querist, suggesting the breakaway of the West from the United States, and talking of marching on Mexico [A.109].

Harmon's borrowed dreams were not original with either Burr or Blennerhassett. Various adventurers before them had wondered whether the huge land mass could survive as one nation. Washington had written to Benjamin Harrison in 1784, "the Western states stand as it were on a pivot...the touch of a feather would turn them. [S.19]". After the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, Jefferson wrote, "Whether we remain in one confederacy, or form into Atlantic and Mississippi confederacies, I believe not very important to the happiness of either part. Those of the Western Confederacy will get as much our children & descendants as those of the Eastern.[A.44]" Three years later he had changed his mind; but the quotation indicates that the notion of two Americas was at times a topic of conversation and not of treason.

In Nov 1806 Pres. Jefferson appointed a special agent, Graham, to determine the validity of rumors that something was being plotted on the Ohio River. Graham met with Blennerhassett, who thought he was one of Burrs recruits for the expedition. So he confided to Graham the information Burr had given him, namely that 300 men had been recruited in New Orleans to join the Burr expedition. Graham tried to tell Harmon that he was sadly mistaken, but to no avail [B.86].

Although Pres. Jefferson had been warned about Burr's convoluted designs and ambitions by many sources and done nothing, on November 27, 1806 he took action to stop Burr. He issued a nation-wide proclamation against the western insurgents [A.132]. It called for the capture of any persons believed to be preparing "a military expedition or enterprise against the dominions of Spain" [B.98] in violation of the Neutrality Act of 1794. No mention was made of Burr, or the rumors that he was trying to get public support for disunion.

Blennerhassett got wind of Jefferson's proclamation and the news that the Virginia militia was coming for him [W.24]. On the night of December 10, 1806, with a compatriot and fewer than 100 men and women, and 4 boats [A.135], he left his Island,

and his wife and two sons. He managed to float past the militia at the mouth of the Great Kanawha River. The militia men had followed "the ancient custom of keeping their spirits up by pouring spirits down"[B.102].

As Harmon floated down river, his wife tried to claim a family boat ordered by Blennerhassett in Marietta. But the Jefferson proclamation prevented that transaction. While she was on this journey, some of the Virginia militia invaded her home and rampaged it. "They had torn open the wine cellar, drunk their fill - and burned fine furniture as firewood. Bayonets and guns had defaced walls and pictures [W.24]". When Mrs. Blennerhassett returned, she was not deterred by the absence of her husband and the pillaging of her home. Rather, "she had long since resigned her beautiful abode for the more tempting lands which her imagination had dressed in fancy's brightest colours, where serener skies and gayer flowers shed their mingled delights over the perennial green of nature's bosom" [B.112]. Harmon wasn't the only dreamer in the Blennerhassett family. Offered passage by the militia she finally caught up with her husband and Aaron Burr halfway down the Mississippi River at Bayou Pierre [B.116, A.139, S.24] early in Jan 1807.

Burr was cornered at Bayou Pierre, and he was no happier than Blennerhassett. The acting governor of Mississippi, Cowles Mead, pinned him to the west bank of the Mississippi River, and General Wilkinson was sending a force up from New Orleans to take him. Burr then ordered the chests of arms for the expedition thrown overboard [B.118, A140], and surrendered to Mead.

Both Burr and Blennerhassett were arrested and summoned before a grand jury in Natchez; but both were subsequently discharged, as no evidence of active treason could be brought against them. Burr was rearrested and conveyed to Washington, DC during a very difficult journey. Harmon's situation was ". . .cheerless in the extreme. For Burr, he had abandoned his home...his books, his studies, his property, and he was deeply [in debt] for the enterprise" [B.117]. Blennerhassett left Natchez in June and headed home to his island. During a stop in Lexington, KY, an indictment issued in Richmond, VA caused his re-arrest [B.154]. Though defended by Henry Clay, his appeals to the court were denied, and he was taken to Richmond [A165]. There he was to be tried with Burr and others, before Chief Justice John Marshall for treason. The trial got under way on Aug 17, 1807.

During the trial, a young attorney, William Wirt described Harmon as a dupe. "Who is Blennerhassett? ...A man of letters who fled from the storms of his own country to find quiet in ours...On his arrival in America he retired even from the population of the Atlantic States, and sought the quiet and solitude of the bosom of our Western forests. But he carried with him taste and science and wealth. . ." Wirt described "the idyll that was Blennerhassett's Island, the intellectual climate, the gardens, the perfect family life...In the midst of all this peace, this innocent simplicity, and this tranquility, this feast of the mind, this pure banquet of the heart, the destroyer comes; he comes to change this paradise into hell. ... By degrees, he infuses into it the poison of his own ambition...The effect on the innocent was grave. In a short time the whole man is changed, and every

object of his former delight is relinquished...His imagination has been dazzled by visions of diadems, or stars and garters and titles of nobility. He has been taught to burn with restless emulation at the names of great heroes and conquerors. His enchanted island is destined soon to relapse into a wilderness..." [A211].

The focal point of the trial was the assembly on Blennerhassett Island on 12/10/1806, when Harmon left the Island. The prosecution claimed that it had to prove only that a body of men had "assembled for the purpose of effecting by force a treasonable purpose [A200]. Intent had to be proved, but so did an overt act of force. What was the meaning of the Constitution's words in Article III, Section 3, "levying war", and would the judge or the jury decide? [A.207]

Marshall declared that to prove Burr guilty of treason "...the government had to show force on the Island by at least two witnesses, and it had to connect Burr to that force [A215]". The prosecution could not provide such evidence, and the jury announced "... that Aaron Burr is not proved to be guilty under this indictment by any evidence submitted to us..." [A.216]. The trial had attracted national attention and took 28 days [B.158].

However, on Sept 9, 1807, Burr was again arraigned for a violation of the Neutrality Act [A217], ... the substance of which [was] that Burr did set on foot a military enterprise to be carried on against the ... province of Mexico, which was within the territory of the King of Spain, with whom the U.S. were at peace." [B.159]. For lack of sufficient evidence, Burr was again found not guilty on Sept. 15 [B.160].

Later, on October 20, 1807 Marshall committed them both for the misdemeanor and ordered them"... to appear in Chillicothe, OH to defend [themselves] once more..." [A.218]

Blennerhassett returned to Natchez, where he was pursued and hounded by his many creditors. They eventually sold "a portion of his library and philosophical apparatus. . . [and] his remaining furniture...His beautiful mansion...had been used as public property...The window casings were tom out to procure the leaden weights. The island was [turned over to a Kentucky creditor], who commenced the culture of hemp and the manufacture of cordage" [B.188].

Blennerhassett then met off and on with Burr. He ". . . blamed him for everything. The Irishman, in debt up to his ears, had to sell his [mansion and his] island, and he was trying to wring reimbursement from Burr for all the \$65,000 or more [S.29] he had spent to enable the ill-fated journey." [A.219]. Burr was being pursued by other friends and creditors as well, was broke [A.226]; and after several months of keeping a low profile, he sailed for England on June 9, 1808, finessing the Chillicothe court appearance. [A219].

Blennerhassett then turned his attention to recovering his fortune by raising cotton in Mississippi, where he bought 1000 acres and a small number of slaves [B.191]. Just as

this new venture was benefiting from favorable pricing, the war of 1812 involved an embargo on produce of every description [B.193]. His cotton Plantation incurred losses. Additionally, his W.Va. island home was now regarded as a mere convenience for farming, i.e. a barn, and used to store hemp [B.193]. On a very cold night in 1811 some traveling slaves "proceeded to the cellar where the spirituous liquors were kept...Passing through the hemp-room...By accident they communicated the flame of the candle to the hemp" [B.194]. And the beautiful mansion burned to the ground.

Ten years after Burr first met him, a friend of Blennerhassett's, the acting Governor of Canada offered him a judgeship in one of the provincial courts. He sold his interest in the island and the Mississippi estate; and he moved to Montréal in 1819. [B.196]. But the promotion was never realized because a capricious British ministry removed the Governor from office. "As a last resort, he determined to prosecute a reversionary claim still existing in Ireland..." [B.198]. So in 1822 he sailed for Ireland. He applied for a position to an old school friend in the office of Ordinance in London; but was advised by a secretary that "...the long list of pressing claims received from his predecessor...will not allow his lordship to hold any expectation that it will be inn his power to offer to your acceptance any appointment..." [B.201].

"Having resided a sufficient length of time with a maiden sister in England to find his plans for the future prostrated, he removed to the island of Guernsey. . . [there] in 1831... .he sank to his eternal rest..." [B.202] in his 67th year.

His wife, after his death, was left with two children to rear and educate. One was sickly and "reduced to imbecility" [B.208]. Courageously, she claimed that officers of the American government had "... not only detained the boats and stores prepared for the enterprise of Burr, but had actually destroyed the former and consumed the latter...They had invaded the sanctity of her household,... wasted her provisions, broken her furniture,... and had done serious injury to the mansion..." [B.205]. To pursue this claim, she moved to New York, enlisted the aid of Henry Clay. The matter received approval from the appropriate committees and was on its way to Congress when Mrs. Blennerhassett died in 1842, attended to in her last days by Irish sisters of the poor [B.210].

Epilogue

After Harmon met Burr, the dreams he adopted from Burr ended poorly, and his own dreams ended poorly. How much better he would have fared if he had just kept to his original ideals and muses - his beautiful home on a secluded island, away from the harsh political world, fussing with his experiments and books. He might never have accomplished much; and he might have run through his fortune without ever adding to it. On the other hand he might have faced financial reality and lived out his days on his island.

In the 1970's the Blennerhassett mansion was reconstructed on the old foundation. It is maintained by the West Virginia State Park service. Access to the island is by a sternwheeler from Parkersburg, W.Va. It is a beautiful building, furnished with carpets, paintings, furniture, etc. from the late 18th century. In a way it is a tribute to Harman's original dreams.
