

An Interpretive Translation by Martha Benn Macdonald, Ph.D.,

Of Catherine Ladd's

"The Peculiar People," a poem

Signed "By Minnie,

Written during or after Reconstruction in

South Carolina

For Pelham Lyles, Ex. Dir.,
Fairfield County Museum
2/16/08

“There rolled a vast tide on the ocean of time, It bore on its crest a dark wave of crime” are the first two lines of Catherine Ladd’s “The Peculiar People,” a poem written in cantos and signed “By Minnie.” Probably written during the Reconstruction Period following the Civil War, the poem is a philosophical analysis of history and mankind’s spiritual awareness and development.

The poet writes that Rome had a gala day with Kings and Empires and that many kingdoms fell to Rome’s prey. The proud have fallen, and freedom is in exile, religion captive, science in bondage. Man’s conscience is dead, and mankind wanders away beguiled by Satan. The problem is that nations on the Earth have forgotten their God.

Many prayed to the Virgin Mary and paid homage to saints, but the gift of free grace comes only through the blood of the Lamb. Redemption, a free gift of God, has been sold in the market place and is bartered “for lucre, paid for with God’s gold.” The writer invokes the great Shepherd and asks where he is in the hour of sorrow and darkness and danger. “The dear flock of thy choice can hear but thy voice.” Many of the believers have wandered in goat skins and dwell in caves. They were fleeing to caves in the mountains from Oppression in Rome. Those who fled were also oppressed by the Albigenses (a group in Southern France that practiced a kind of Manichean dualism) and by the Waldenses. But Bohemia answered the cries of the Christians with prayer. “Prayer moves the Eternal, and written on high/ His record is found in archives in the sky.”

The first canto continues as the speaker in the poem asks where should Christians look? The reformer is not born in Rome, but somewhere far from pomp. He walks in the path of Truth. “He spreads the glad news of Christ’s new life of salvation.....Men’s souls are on fire with the Spirit’s quick breath/They do not shrink from torture and fear and death.” This spirit of truth comes in poverty and charity.

After the speaker calls, “Let There Be Light,” echoing one of the psalms, she shows countries where the dry bones have been stirred. These include Germany, Switzerland, and Albion. Of course, Satan’s legions and the King’s counselors all met and tried to defeat God’s plans, but Religion will be free, for God’s promise is sure. The first canto ends with the speaker proclaiming, “Rejoice, Oh! Ye generations. This God hath spoken.”

The second canto continues with verses with words like the prophets from the Old Testament, notably Isaiah and Jeremiah, as well as the psalmists. “The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof....,” and “He raiseth the lowly. He humbleth the proud/The vales are exalted. The mountains are bowed.” “God gives grace to the humble and strength to the poor.”

From that declaration, the speaker then attacks the countries which through the ages have tormented Christians and followers of God’s Truth. For example, there was proud England: “Queen of the sea. You boast in vain.” The pilgrims under the leadership of John Robinson had to seek refuge in Holland. He had to kneel “on that self-beaten strand” because England denied

the Pilgrims a home. Ladd calls the Pilgrims patriots. "God has opened a door/Cold rites and dead forms enchain no more." Ultimately, the Pilgrims find hope in Fair Columbia (an early name for the United States, following the belief that Christopher Columbus founded this country) where their dreams are ultimately fulfilled. Pilgrims were "welcomed by tempest and snow." Throughout this part, Freedom is called the twin-sister of Law," for both come from Eternal Justice. The Pilgrims found comfort in Jesus' words, "Fear not, little Flock." The Pilgrims stopped worrying and asked for God's blessings upon their labors. The Pilgrims were enlightened by Jesus: "The Truth, Life, and Way." The Sons of the Forest (another name for Indians) were discovered, and others seeking religious freedom followed the Pilgrims. Roger Williams in Rhode Island, William Penn in Philadelphia. The Huguenots from France traveled to South Carolina, the Dutch to New Jersey, Lord Baltimore to Maryland. And Georgia was founded by "Kind Oglethorpe." Virginia led the way for freedom when Washington, Jefferson, and Madison arose.

Because the Mother country broke her treaties, these Virginians and others concealed their deed in "The Old Charter Oak." Bells tolled. Columbia's sons had fled from Oppression, and in the name of God they would conquer their foes. The Revolutionary War began at Lexington. Others followed. "Brothers from France" came, and there was one battle after the other, and finally Victory came at Yorktown, Virginia. People asked who would lead the flock, and a voice from the heart of the people called on George Washington. "Columbia's daughters strewed flowers."

Unfortunately, though, within a few years, the Spirit of Dissension came. Dissention takes on the role of a male character. "His hands were smeared with the blood of nations and crimes of the past.....and the spirit of pride that stained white robes of Emmanuel's bride." The volcano burst, and there were various political parties from the North, the South, and the East. Blood flowed. Finally, slavery fell, and the South was stripped of any power it ever had.

But Columbia vowed to build herself anew.

"A monarchial power," Saith the prophet, "then rose
Subdued all the States:---a religion they chose
Formed a national Church,---then taxed all the land
All societies formed levied to strengthen her hand
From churches I saw that they wrested possessions
Grew greater and prouder---waxed strong in oppressions
And dumb with amazement I saw this strange thing
My country a servant---her Ruler----a King."

Oh! The vision grows wild.---Nay, believe not that tale.

Hail! Proud land of Freedom---Columbia, Hail!

Before o'er the earth mortal footstep e'er trod

Blest Law had a home in the bosom of God

Fair Freedom herself is Twin Sister of Law

From Eternal Justice their kindred they draw:

The land is a free one! So boys will declare,

At play on the street when they're tempted to swear.

Oh! Freedom degraded! The child at his play

Mocks thy purest precept---and flings it away!

"But the country is free." So the drunkard will tell;

And turn to his cups with a swagger and swell!

If some wretch grows weary of mother or wife

Why, the country is free! And there lies the knife!

Men learn with distrust to gaze on each other

And shrink in dismay from the hand of a brother.

For Truth and Judgment are turned from the way

Who departeth from evil becometh a prey.

The speaker of the poem continues by writing that the Sabbath Day is forgotten and broken and is replaced with the ballroom, the bar room, game rooms, and the theatre of the circus, all debasing. Lincoln's death came, and Reconstruction, primarily led by one Ben Butler who claimed to be a fearless warrior brought about strife. The Northerner bound the slave and held him. God himself actually freed the Nation and compelled Emancipation.

The speaker of the poem calls for Columbia to arise, stronger, and for the children singing "To Zion Return" to be heard. She wants the Heavens to rejoice and for Columbia to appear adorned as a bride.

"Thy slaves shall be free! Thy Spoiler be broken!

Bright Hope caught the presage---'Twas dimly revealed

But Faith sweetly smiled as she signed it and sealed.

She saw Columbia emerging from sorrow

Fairer and stronger and freer tomorrow.

.....

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved!”

The Captain Commander is Christ, and all foes will be vanquished by the Word of the Lord. Watchmen stand on her tower.

“Then Blessed were thy who now weep and mourn

Her children with singing to Zion return

Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad

For the Church of our God in Beauty is clad

And war and dissension no more can divide

And lo! She appeareth adorned as a Bride!”

To be sure, this fourteen-page, singled-spaced poem, “The Peculiar People,” written in riming couplets, may be a little difficult to understand, primarily because of the archaic language and the fancy script written with brown ink. The fact remains, however, that it is an extremely valuable piece of literature and valuable to the Fairfield County Museum not only because it was written by a woman during a time when male writers dominated the world of Belles-Lettres, but also because of its rich style and its author, in particular, her role in Winnsboro’s history.

To begin, Catherine Ladd wrote “The Peculiar People” in the nineteenth century when the world of Belles-Lettres was dominated by male writers, e.g., Hawthorne, Melville, Tennyson, Browning, and many, many others. Moreover, the subject matter of the poem is not trite, not homely, not at all naïve. It is a poem which portrays the spiritual history of the world from the days of the Roman Empire to the period following the Civil War in our country. To write such a poem required a thorough knowledge of history, scripture, rhetoric, and far more.

In addition, this poem has a rich style. Written in the tradition of epics honoring Columbia (the United States), the poem may also be called an ode. As Thrall and Hibbard have defined the term in their HANDBOOK TO LITERATURE, quoting E. Gosse, an ode is “any strain of enthusiastic and exalted lyrical verse, directed to a fixed purpose, and dealing progressively with one dignified theme” (289-290). The verse is exalted. It is lyrical. While the

poem tells a story in a very broad sense, the poem is not in the narrative tradition like a ballad or Homeric epic, i.e., characters are not really developed, nor is the setting sustained. The purpose is to hail Columbia and to glorify God, and the theme is spiritual. Moreover, the writer reveals an ability to write musical, cadenced verse in the tradition of Poe, her childhood friend from Richmond, Virginia, and in the tradition of Tennyson. Even though the meter is varied at times, there are couplets throughout the poem. Sometimes, a word may seem strained for the sake of rhyme, but the couplets work well. It's fascinating to see where the writer has scratched through one word and immediately replaced it with another. Writing the first draft was apparently an easy task for Catherine Ladd. In addition, the poem is filled with allusions to history, to scripture, to the arts.

Among others, these very characteristics make the work valuable. The fact that Catherine Ladd, an educator, poet, dramatist, mother, and community leader and friend in Winnsboro and Fairfield County wrote this poem under one of her many noms de plume makes it a very valuable piece to the Fairfield County Museum. Indeed, that the museum may receive the original as a gift is extremely fortunate. The original would enhance the museum's credentials, complement its story, and serve as a testament to the rich heritage of Fairfield County.