

**VALERIAN, A NARRATIVE POEM:  
INTENDED, IN PART, TO DESCRIBE THE  
EARLY PERSECUTIONS OF CHRISTIANS,  
AND RAPIDLY TO ILLUSTRATE THE  
INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE  
MANNERS OF NATIONS**

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**JOHN BLAIR LINN**

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**BY JOHN BLAIR LINN, D. D.**

LATE PASTOR OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION, IN PHILADELPHIA.

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WITH A SKETCH  
OF THE *copy 31*  
LIFE AND CHARACTER OF THE AUTHOR.

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A SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND CHARACTER

OF

*JOHN BLAIR LINN.*

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JOHN BLAIR LINN was descended from ancestors who originally came from the British islands. They appear to have been emigrants at an early period, and to have given their descendants as just a claim to the title of American, as the nature of things will allow any civilized inhabitant of the United States to acquire.

His name bears testimony to the paternal and maternal stock from which he sprung. His great-grandfather, William Linn, was an emigrant from Ireland, who settled land in the wilderness of Pennsylvania, and whose eldest son, William, was the father of a numerous family, of whom the present Dr. William Linn was the eldest.

The father of John Blair Linn received a careful education, which his family enabled him to complete at the college at Princeton. He was trained to the ministry, in the presbyterian church, and married, at an early age, Rebecca Blair, the third daughter of the Reverend John Blair. Her brother and uncle were likewise clergymen, and the family were eminently distinguished by their knowledge and piety.

Their eldest son, John Blair Linn, was born in Shippensburg, in Pennsylvania, March 14, 1777, at no great distance from the spot at which his father first drew

breath, and where his great-grandfather first established his residence in this new world. The humble dwelling which was first erected in the forest still existed, at a small distance from that town, and continued, for a considerable time after this, to be inhabited by his great-grandfather, who lived upwards of a hundred years.

It is impossible for his survivors to recount the earliest incidents of his life; to trace the first indications of future character and genius; or enumerate the little adventures and connections of his childhood. The juvenile stages of our moral and intellectual progress, which are in all cases entertaining and instructive, are so, in a particular manner, when they relate to eminent persons. The authentic memoirs of any man's life and character are only to be found in his own narrative, compared with the observations of others. In the present case, Mr. Linn's modesty prevented him from being his own historian, and peculiar circumstances occasioned his early life to pass over without much observation from others. We cannot any longer profit by his own recollections: the hand is now cold, and the tongue silent, which were best qualified to gratify the curiosity of love or veneration. We only know that he acquired the rudiments of knowledge at an age somewhat earlier than is customary. He was initiated into the Latin language while yet a child, and evinced very early a strong attachment to books. On his father's removal to New York, when John was only nine years old, he enjoyed new opportunities of improvement, under several respectable teachers. The happiest period of his life, however, in his own opinion, consisted of two or three years which he spent at a place of education at Flatbush, in Long Island. He was in his thirteenth year when he left this seminary for New York, where, at Columbia college, his education was completed.

Fortunate is that man who has spent any part of his early years at a country school. In youth, every object possesses the charms of novelty; care and disease have as yet made no inroads on the heart, nor stained that pure and bright medium, through which the external world makes its way to the fancy. The noise, the filth, the dull sights and unwholesome exhalations of a city are, in consequence of this enchantment, ever new and delightful to the youthful heart; but how much is this pleasure heightened, when the objects presented to view, and by which we are surrounded, are in themselves agreeable! There is something in the refreshing smells, the green, the quiet, the boundless prospects of the country, congenial to the temper of human beings, at all ages; but these possess ineffable charms at that age, when the joints are



firm and elastic; when the pulse beats cheerily, and no dark omens or melancholy retrospects invade the imagination. To roam through a wood with gay companions, to search the thicket for blackberries, to bathe in the clear running brook, are pleasures which fill the memory with delicious images, and are frequently called up to afford a little respite to the heart from the evils of our subsequent experience.

Dr. Linn was indebted to nature for a healthful rather than a robust constitution. He was a stranger to disease till after he had reached manhood, and of that constitutional vivacity, which mere health confers, he possessed a very large share. His fancy was alive to the beauties of nature, and he experienced none of those little vexations and crosses, which some lads are doomed to suffer, through the malice of school-fellows, the tyranny of ushers, and the avarice of housekeepers. Hence, in the latter part of his life, no recollections were so agreeable as those of the time he passed at Flatbush, when he revelled in the full enjoyment of health, and its attendant cheerfulness. They formed a vivid contrast to that joyless and dreary state, to which disease afterwards reduced him.

He was near fourteen years of age when he returned home and went to college. He now entered on a scene widely different, in all respects, from that to which he had been previously accustomed: a new system of scholastic discipline, a new circle of associates, the sensations and views incident to persons on the eve of manhood.

The ensuing four years were active and important ones. The moral and intellectual dispositions, which men may possibly bring into the world with them, become fixed and settled, and receive their final direction at this age. When the appetites are vigorous, the senses keen, and the conduct regulated by temper and passion, rather than by prudence and experience, we are most alive to all impressions, and generally take that path which we pursue for the rest of our days. It was during this period that Mr. Linn's taste was formed; and though his moral and professional views underwent considerable changes afterwards, the literary inclinations which he now imbibed, or unfolded, continued to adhere to him for the rest of his life.

His genius now evinced a powerful tendency to poetry and criticism. What are called the fine writers of the age, and especially the poets, became his darling study. In a youthful breast, the glow of admiration is soon followed by the zeal to

imitate; and he not only composed several pieces, both in prose and verse, but procured the publication of some of them in a distinct volume, before his seventeenth year. These performances possess no small merit, if we judge of them by comparison with the youth and inexperience of the writer. They manifest considerable reading, a remarkably improved taste, and talents which only wanted the discipline and knowledge of age to make them illustrious.

In a city where there is an established theatre, a young man, smitten with a passion for letters, can scarcely fail of becoming an assiduous frequenter of its exhibitions. Plays form a large portion of the fashionable literature of a refined nation. The highest powers of invention are displayed in the walks of dramatic poetry; and what the young enthusiast devours in his closet, he hastens with unspeakable eagerness to behold invested with the charms of life and action on the stage. At that period, some performers of merit had been recently imported from Europe, the theatre was, in an eminent degree, a popular amusement, and Mr. Linn was at that age when the enchantment of such exhibitions is greatest. The theatre accordingly became his chief passion.

To austere and scrupulous minds, the theatre is highly obnoxious, not only as hurtful in itself, but as seducing unwary youth into collateral vices and undue expences. On this account, such establishments are certainly liable to much censure. Whether reasonably or not, mankind have always annexed some disrepute to the profession of an actor; and hence no one will give himself to that profession, who cherishes in himself any lively regard for reputation. The odium with which any profession is loaded, even though originally groundless, has an unfortunate tendency to create an excuse for itself in the principles and manners of those who adopt it. To make men vicious, little more is necessary than to treat them as if they were so.

The example of Mr. Linn, however, may lead us to distinguish between that admiration for the drama, which leads some persons to the theatre, and those dissolute and idle habits, by which the attendance of others is produced, and which evince a taste for the life and manners of the actor, rather than a passion for excellent acting. The moral conduct of this youth was at all times irreproachable; and the impression made upon his fancy, by the great masters of the drama, seems to have contributed to

his security from low tastes and vicious pleasures, rather than to have laid him open to their influence.

When his academical career was finished, he was eighteen years of age; and it being necessary to adopt some profession, his choice, and that of his family, fell upon the law. The law leads more directly and effectually to honour, power, and profit, in America, than any of what are termed the liberal professions. As we are strangers to all hereditary distinctions, the road to eminence is open to all; and while the practice of the law is extremely lucrative, it tends to bring forth talents and industry into public notice, and to recommend men to offices of profit and honour. A young man who, though meanly descended, shows some marks of genius, and has received some degree of education beyond that of mere reading and writing his native tongue, seldom thinks of pursuing any mechanical trade, and if he has some ambition, he is generally educated to the bar. He is thus placed in the direct road of that profit and honour, which waits on political popularity, and may put in his claim, with more success than the followers of any other calling, for a seat in the national councils, and for any official station. The children of persons who are raised above others, by their riches or station, are, of course, whether qualified or not, destined to a liberal profession, and the law is generally preferred, because it affords the best means of building up a name or a fortune. Mr. Linn was probably influenced in his choice of this path, more because it was honourable and lucrative, than because it was particularly suited to gratify any favourite taste. He does not appear, therefore, to have applied with much assiduity or zeal to his new pursuit: his favourite authors continued to engage most of his attention; and his attachment to poetry acquired new force, by the contrast which the splendid visions of Shakespeare and Tasso bore to the naked abstractions and tormenting subtleties of Blackstone and Coke.

He was placed under the direction of Alexander Hamilton, who was a friend of his father, and who took upon himself, with ardour, the care of perfecting the studies and promoting the fortunes of the son. Instead, however, of becoming enamoured of the glory, excellence, or usefulness that environ the names of Murray and of Erskine, Mr. Linn regarded the legal science every day with new indifference or disgust, which, at the end of the first year, induced him to relinquish the profession altogether.