

**OBSERVATIONS ON  
DOCTOR STEVENS'  
HISTORY OF GEORGIA**

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Observations on Doctor Stevens' History of Georgia by William Bacon Stevens

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**WILLIAM BACON STEVENS**

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"What overgrown piece of lumber have we here? cried the curate."  
DON QUIXOTE.

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SAVANNAH:

MDCCCXLIX.

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A History of Georgia, from its first Discovery by Europeans, to the Adoption of the present Constitution, MDCCLXVIII. By Rev. William Bacon Stevens, M.D., Professor of Belles Lettres, History, etc., in the University of Georgia, Athens. In two volumes. Vol. I. New York, 1847. 8vo. pp. 603.

THE Preface of this book announces that it was undertaken in the year 1841, and that every facility has been afforded for its composition, both by the Historical Society, and by private individuals.

The title-page proclaims its author to be a Professor of Belles Lettres and History, and fixes the date of its publication in the year 1847.

Thus the inferences that it is accurate in statement and correct in style, are only not suggested. Six years would give ample time for frequent and deliberate revisions, for the rectification of mistakes

committed in haste, or through negligence, and for the removal of any redundancies or improprieties of language. Six years did elapse between the commencement and publication.

The natural conclusion from the preliminary parade of the author's advantages is, that he has availed himself of them; that the volume which he "presents" (for and in consideration of the sum of two dollars and fifty cents per copy) to "*his beloved state*, as an offering of *first fruits*\*" from the harvest of her past memorials,"† is, what it ought to be. Nor is there any disclaimer offered to repress such a conclusion. There is not the slightest appearance of a modest diffidence of his own abilities, not a

\* Three pages before this (Preface, p. ix.), we find Doctor Stevens writing thus: "Entering a field of enquiry which *has been reaped by four predecessors*, I could scarcely expect to do more than *glean here and there a sheaf which the sickle had spared*, or the reaper neglected." As they now stand, these two declarations are directly contradictory. One of them must be untrue,—or perhaps he has only put the cart before the horse. The figure of reaping, &c., is stale enough,—Doctor Stevens, with an originality quite ingenious, turns it topsy-turvy. He begins by *gleaning* with the humility of a Ruth *after the reapers*, and ends with *gathering the whole harvest*, and offering "the first fruits" "to his beloved state," Georgia. Poor Georgia! here is a woman's name, here has been a woman's fate! Trusting—yielding—deserted! To the empty mouth that gave her empty professions she returned abundance of food, and seated ignorance in the chair of learning. But what in the recipient of her generosity was ungrateful abandonment, has been for Georgia a happy deliverance.

† Preface, p. xii.

single admission of imperfection, not a doubt as to the adequacy of his powers to his work, not a hint of a possibility of its not being immaculate.

The tone of the Preface is that of presumptuous egotism; the rest of the work is marked by shallowness and incapacity. We looked for "a thing of life," and behold an abortion! for comeliness, and behold a monster! It is put forward, too, with a pert confidence worthy of the hero of nursery renown:—

"Little Jack Horner sat in the corner,  
Eating a Christmas pie:  
He put in his thumb, and he took out a plum,  
And said 'WHAT A GOOD BOY AM I!'"

Indeed a serene self-satisfaction pervades the whole performance. If anything were wanting to complete the absurdity of the book, this would do it. Self-conceit is ridiculous, and impotence is ridiculous; but united in such proportions as this book exhibits—both in such monstrous development—O rare! For a man to talk nonsense is bad enough; but to talk nonsense with the air of one uttering wisdom—vanity can carry folly no farther.

With equal self-approbation, and equal unconsciousness of the fantastic figure she cut, did Madge Wildfire lead good little Jeanie Deans up the church



aisle before the amazed congregation. But—poor Madge was crazed.

The Preface contains no apology for defects, but it gives a reason for introducing this miserable bantling of a meretricious muse to our notice. It declares the work was written to supply the want, long felt, of a history of Georgia. The deficiency truly has been remedied. The gap has been filled up. But how? Rags have been stuffed into the broken window, and the hole is no longer open. The tempest is kept out, but so is the light.

Yet perhaps 'tis rather fortunate for the Historical Society that this book has proved a failure. Were it what it assumes to be, it would have necessarily covered the whole ground, and rendered the future labours of the Society works of supererogation.\* Nothing would have remained for that respectable association to do, but to hold meetings and elect members. The main purpose of its formation being accomplished, there would have been little use in the protraction of a feeble and languishing existence.

The completion of an accurate and well-written history of Georgia will necessarily be a finishing stroke to the Society. It will be the fulfilment of its function. If, however, it should survive that event, and still linger on, it must degenerate from

\* See Appendix.

the dignity of a Society down to a mere club of Jonathan Oldbucks.

With this view, we regard the failure of this book as its chiefest merit; the Society being thereby relieved from an unpleasant and probably unforeseen predicament—a position of uselessness and insignificance.

Certainly Doctor Stevens's work can never cause such a deplorable catastrophe. Instead of a history, it is a sort of historical patchwork, in which the pieces about Georgia are rather more numerous than the others. It abounds, too, in errors as to fact, which in the course of our remarks we shall endeavour to expose; and shall not hesitate to rebuke; and is also distinguished for a style so grandiloquent, so preposterous, so pompous, so corrupt, so grotesquely incongruous with the simplicity of the subject, that every attempt we have made to give it serious consideration has ended in a hearty fit of laughter. It is difficult to condemn what is so delightfully absurd. We have a kindness for its very faults—they have afforded us so much merriment. It is too ridiculous for contempt—we laugh and pity.

The big words about little things—the ambitious diction, not unfrequently rising into nonsense—the “laboured nothings” lavished with indiscriminate

profusion upon the most trivial occasions—all remind us irresistibly of the issue of the famous labour—

*"Parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus."*

It is indeed very funny to observe how every subject which affords the slightest opening for a burst of impassioned loquacity, is relentlessly tortured into some relation with the history of Georgia—how the meagre theme of our early annals has been expanded into a volume competent to contain an ancient empire's story—how the simple, dry details have been bedizened with rhetorical decorations, like an old, enduring dowager's withered phiz set about with flowers, till we are revolted at a contrast which makes dryness seem drier, ugliness more hideous, and even bloom repulsive.

But not even this is quite so amusing as the self-satisfaction evinced throughout the book, the triumphant air with which the nonsense is produced, and the conviction, everywhere apparent, that this "fine writing" will achieve for the author his coveted literary immortality.

The frequent repetition of these tropes and figures, however, diminishes the amusement to be derived from them; they cease to be diverting, and become tiresome. The reader is at last fatigued by the eternal glitter, though it be but the glitter of tinsel,