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John Nichol's Visit to Virginia, 1865: 'The James River

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TEXTS

John Nichol's Visit to Virginia, 1865: "The James River"

*Terry L. Meyers
College of William and Mary*

In the autumn of 1865, a young Scot, John Nichol, a graduate of the University of Glasgow and Oxford University, sailed down the Chesapeake Bay and up the James River from Baltimore to Petersburg and Richmond. Only about six months had passed since the Confederacy had capitulated and the scars of war were raw. Out of Nichol's trip came his poem "The James River" (reprinted below) an evocation of the James as military highway and, more particularly, an interesting sketch of the infamous Petersburg Crater.

Published in 1881 in Nichol's *The Death of Themistocles and Other Poems*, "The James River" has been overlooked, as best I can tell, in all the vast literature on the Civil War. Yet in brief lines it vividly captures the lingering devastation left by war in the horror of the Crater, which was created July 30, 1864 when Union forces dug a shaft under Confederate lines, packed it with black powder, and set off a tremendous explosion. In a ghastly chapter in the annals of military mismanagement, the Union triumph turned into a Union disaster, costing hundreds of black and white Union soldiers their lives. What Nichols describes at the site of the Battle of the Crater was a morbid scene of bodies and remains still unburied fourteen months later.

Nichol (1833-1894) went on to a distinguished career as a Professor of English at the University of Glasgow. He published one of the earliest surveys of American Literature,¹ his interest stimulated in part by his youthful visit to the United States and Virginia. His fame today beyond Glasgow rests perhaps most in his having been, at Oxford and afterwards, the best friend of the controversial Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909).

Nichol came from a rationalist and liberal household; his father, John Pringle Nichol, was a distinguished astronomer and scientist, author of revolutionary essays and supporter of the anti-slavery

movement in the United States (his father's second wife was Elizabeth Pease, who was active in the British Anti-Slavery movement, as her father had been). Looking back on his student days at Glasgow, John Nichol described himself and his friends as "keen 'Radicals,' believing in the 'people,' 'progress,' 'free education,' 'wider suffrage,' 'rights of man,' 'rights of women'" (qtd. in Knight 114).² Nichol had a powerful impact on Swinburne's developing radicalism at Oxford, but the two disagreed on the War Between the States.

Himself an aristocrat by birth and education (although also a radical republican in a monarchical country), Swinburne supported the Southern cause; in a letter of December 12, 1861, he commented that "there is only one view of the matter taken, and a very good one" (1: 48). The one view he took is clear in his sketch of one of his friends, Richard Monctkon Milnes, later Lord Houghton, whom Swinburne comically denounced in a letter (November 3, 1862) to another friend as a "hoary villain ... still speechifying among the clods, and blandly deprecating intervention [on the side of the Confederacy] or Southern sympathies. Last year I know he disgraced himself by colloquing with Northern envoys, and went into mourning after the auspicious day of Bull's Run" (1: 61).

Nichol, as his biographer, William Knight, writes, "threw himself, in the press and on the platform alike, into the cause of the North, with an energy and ardour which ran strongly counter to the prevailing sentiment of his Glasgow townsmen" (109). In a diary entry quoted by Knight, Nichol expressed his abhorrence at "the prohibition of education to the slaves, and the doctrine in which their minds are steeped by the sycophantic priests of Protestantism in America" (109). When, in a letter of ca. July 5, 1867,³ Nichol wrote, "Maximilian is shot, with all deference to your great political heresy, I wish it had been Jeff Davis," he pushed Swinburne into a complex defense of his admiration for the Southern cause (in a passage just after, incidentally, Swinburne expressed admiration for Whitman's threnody for Lincoln, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed"):

Apropos of my 'heresy,' please observe that it simply arose out of this, that I have friends who served on both sides (I mean some on the North and some on the South side—it was the unluckiest chance) and can honestly sympathise with either. There, the Republic to be preserved entire—and there, the divine right of insurrection; both are grand causes in my eyes, and I hope

will always be. I was nearly going off this week on a swimming escapading tour with an aide-de-camp of General Lee's [probably Colonel Henry Wemyss Feilden]—I defy you not to like him if you knew him—who was personally in all the battles of the war, I believe, and one of the nicest fellows alive, and open, as such men should be, to admiration of all fallen causes and exiled leaders. I'm not saying they're equal in worth, you know—heaven forbid! Only I must say failure is irresistibly attractive—admitting as I do the heroism of the North. (1: 251)

Though Swinburne and Nichol remained friends despite their disagreement here, Nichol suffered slights from holding fast to his beliefs. He comments in his preface to his 1881 collection of poetry that “the verses relating to the American Civil War are memorials of a time when the expression of the sentiments they convey was followed by social ostracism” (*Death of Themistocles* ix).

William Knight's biography of Nichol includes virtually all that is known about the 1865 trip to America, including Nichol's visits with Longfellow and Emerson in New England. Several of Nichol's letters recount in prose the experiences he takes up in his poem. Two letters (in Knight, 273-74) to his wife (the first undated but written from Petersburg about September 18) describe his visits to Petersburg and to Richmond:

I started from Baltimore yesterday, and ran down the Chesapeake Bay, when I had an opportunity of seeing an American boat race. Today we sailed up the James river, staying a short time at Fortress Monro[e], where I went as near as possible to the walls where Jefferson Davis is still in durance awaiting his trial. Today, or rather this evening, I have been round a great part of the [Petersburg] fortifications, and seen the mine which Grant blew up on the rebels. I had an old soldier with me (they abound here) who explained everything, and I carried away with me some bullets and other relics, which I shall bring home. These are very interesting reminiscences of great events, and tomorrow I hope to see to equal advantage the fortifications around Richmond itself. The whole country here is one vast ruin—broken houses, broken fortunes, and broken-down

looking people meet one at every corner. Everything I hear in the South, explicitly or implicitly, confirms everything I have heard in the North. Davis seems to be very generally hated by both sections of the people, and he may be hanged without exciting any disturbance. All I said at home now seems to me too mild in praise of the Northern, in dispraise of the Southern cause.

Several days later, September 24, 1865, writing from Washington, Nichol offers several more details of his visit to Virginia. He says that he has

passed unscathed, except by the mosquitoes, which were pretty savage, through the late capital and citadel of the late rebel domain. Richmond is hot, and save that the streets are broad and the view from the high parts of the city extensive, not very interesting. I did not care to stay there more than a day, during which I walked about a good deal, and saw most of what is to be seen, the fortifications, which are all made of earth heaped up into hills; the Dutch gap; and the ruins of the large part of the town, which has been burnt. All around in Virginia there is the same prevalent desolation, the punishment of her crimes. I am told that one might ride on a saddle-horse for twelve months and not see all the earthworks and battlefields.⁴

Nichol opens "The James River" with an account of his trip by steamship from Baltimore; the captain takes up a challenge to race, pushing the other ship dangerously close to its capabilities. Then they enter the James River, and steam towards Petersburg. Some of the language seems intended to recall the earliest explorers' descriptions of the James, but Nichol emphasizes the military appearance of the river and the military installations still remaining along the river, signal units, observation and artillery posts, Confederate earthworks, and the like. He evokes "Pocahontas' mound" (doubtless Pocahontas, the section of Petersburg that had been home to many of the city's thousands of free blacks before the war—see Davis 16) and then his trip to the battlefield and especially to the site of the Crater.

Though the allusion to Jefferson Davis in the last stanza seemed to Nichol needless to annotate, he does add notes in the two instances marked by asterisks. The reference to Hell, he says, is to "the name given to one of the sand and mud forts round Petersburg, on the Confederate side, which came nearest to Federal lines. The opposing fort was called Damnation." In fact, Nichol reversed the forts' names. According to one historian, the Union Fort Hell, also known more properly as Fort Sedgwick, was "given its nickname because of the heavy Confederate artillery fire, which was concentrated there when the fort was begun" (Lykes 51). Noah Andre Trudeau gives more information:

Located at the spot where the Union line pivoted from north-south to east-west, Sedgwick came under such a steady barrage of artillery and sharpshooter fire that the soldiers manning the position referred to it as Fort Hell. Before long, the enemy strongpoint across the way acquired the corresponding sobriquet of Fort Damnation, while the pickets in between referred to their place as Purgatory. A Union soldier who spent some time in Sedgwick noted wryly, 'When the boys desired to jar their friends at home they would start their letters "between Hell and Damnation."' (Trudeau 289)

Of Libby Prison in Richmond, Nichol notes that "the Federal prisoners in the Libby and at Andersonville were deliberately starved: a fact of which Mr. Davis was at least cognizant. The Confederates pleaded want of resources; but they refused to exchange their prisoners." Clearly the visit made him think of the maimed men who had survived the prison's appalling conditions and whom he had seen on his earlier stay in northern cities (he commented in a letter of May 1, 1880 to Swinburne that "when in America I saw with my own eyes some of the men whom Davis had nearly starved to death, & certainly would not blackguard him or anyone on the mere authority of Spew [Harriet Beecher Stowe] & Co"⁵).

The unburied remains at the Crater which Nichol mentions can be documented elsewhere. Michael A. Cavanaugh and William Marvel have detailed how the burial of the soldiers killed at the Crater was not easy, and was not completed (if it ever was) until 1866. After the carnage of the battle and the suffering immediately after, they point out, the usual posting of burial details was delayed:

Twenty-four cumulative hours under a merciless summer sun had baked all the dead a uniform black, so that Negro and white could be distinguished only by the hair, and their bloating flesh strained at the seams and buttons of their clothing. Often their pants or shirt had burst open; in some cases so had the skin itself. Many of the bodies were shot to pieces, and maggots covered the myriad wounds. Flies swarmed over the few wounded who still breathed. So fragile were the corpses that no attempt was made to retrieve them to their respective sides. Instead, Confederate and Union soldiers worked beside each other to dig long trenches, and they flopped the dead into them indiscriminately, touching them only with their shovels whenever possible. (104-105)

The four hour truce allowed for the burials had to be extended to eight hours. And then hostilities were renewed, with a vengeance. Cavanaugh and Marvel note that the Confederates' attempts to themselves mine the Union lines were complicated by the hasty burial of the dead: "The malodorous gases from the dead bodies buried in the Crater had permeated every underground fissure in the vicinity; because of the explosion [of the earlier, Union mine] these fissures radiated in every direction." The stench was so bad that Confederate engineers had to rig fans and ducting to continue work, but "the corpse-packed Crater" complicated their task (107, 108).

In the spring and summer after Nichol's visit, as Cavanaugh and Marvel go on to describe, the bodies were disinterred by a detail of 100 men and 10 wagons:

When the reburial detail neared the Crater it was confronted with the thickest mass of graves on the whole Petersburg front. Suffering miserably from the sight and smell of the decayed bodies, those involuntary sextons began hauling bodies away by the score. On the second anniversary of the battle they were busy at that site, and on that day alone three hundred bodies were exhumed from either the Crater or the trench graves outside it They found 669 bodies. A contemporary account notes that the dead who were found in common

graves were remarkably well preserved. Still, not a man in the Crater could be identified. (113)

Several of the plates in Cavanaugh and Marvel (82) show tourists at the Crater and, "circa 1865," skulls still on the surface along the Confederate lines.

When Nichol refers to the black soldiers who fought in the Battle of the Crater, he does so in a way that at first made me think that he was reflecting contemporary claims (long since disproved) that the United States Colored Troops at the battle fought reluctantly. Nichol writes of "Where the black charge was driven, / Vain on the bellowing breach, / By fires of fury riven." In the last line, he seems to evoke the racist outrage, recorded by observers, among the Confederate soldiers when they discovered they were fighting blacks.

And in the first line Nichol might seem to suggest the black soldiers' being "driven" into the crater. Such a view was abroad at the time. At least one northern "military spectator," in the *New York Herald* (August 6, 1864), denounced the first black troops onto the field as cowards. And *The Times* of London (August 17, 1864), quoting American accounts, echoed this:

But the rebels, exasperated as we know them now to have been at sight of the negroes, fought with the fury of devils, and reinforcements coming to their aid, . . . the tide of battle turned. The coloured troops gave way, broke in confusion, when the rebels, having repulsed their charge, charged them in turn, and then they ran, a terror-stricken, disordered mass of fugitives to the rear of the white troops. In vain their officers endeavoured to rally them with all the persuasion of tongue, sabre, and pistol. Whatever discredit attaches to the troops themselves, their officers were beyond reproach.

In its issue of September 9, 1864, *The Times* printed a dispatch from its own correspondent dated August 5, 1864:

At the first onset of the Confederates, many of the panic-struck negroes (who numbered 2,200 in all) crowded into the empty crater of the mine, and cowered down in abject terror. As the Confederate soldiers, infuriated by the passions of battle and maddened by being for the first time in their lives engaged hand to hand

with negroes, forced their way up to the ghastly hole, into which wounded, dead, and shrinking men had together been thrust, a scene ensued which baffles description. Confederate officers who have witnessed this war from the commencement, and who have seen 'on horror's head horrors accumulate,' tell that their eyes have rested on no such other scene. Here and there, a few white Federals, who did not share the panic of their black associates, kept firing from the edge of the pit, while volley after volley was poured by the Confederates into the writhing, quivering conglomeration of black and white humanity which struggled and died in this hole of horror.

The correspondent of *The Times*, of course, sympathized with the South; Cavanaugh and Marvel and other historians provide a more detailed and balanced analysis of the situation and very real effectiveness of the United States Colored Troops.

When I asked members of the VICTORIA List-Serv about how to read these enigmatic lines, one member, Richard D. Fulton, most helpfully pointed out that the correct reading of "driven" was as of a lance being driven home, not of troops having to be driven:

....given the rhetoric of the time there really isn't an indication [in Nichol's wording] that the soldiers were forced to charge—in fact, I read the line as something like 'the charge drove into the line.' Describing a column of soldiers in terms of a lance (you drive a lance home) is certainly not uncommon, even in the rhetorical commonplaces of WWI descriptions. In addition, none of the imagery of the two stanzas (and especially of the last two lines) demeans the black troops, and the poet would have done so clearly had he meant to [Describing] troops being driven into the breach is a common description of troops as weapon being driven home to victory or death.⁶

With this as background, here is Nichol's dramatic poem:

The James River.
1865.

All down the Chesapeake,
We ran from Baltimore,
And, behind us in the creek
Heard a rival's furnace roar.

As we watched her funnels flare,
"I'd not be in her, I guess,"
Said our captain, "if she dare
To make her distance less."

But, all night long, the race
Made the waters foam and glow
Till at dawn we found our place
The first by Fort Munroe [sic].

Then, up the slow James river,
With battle red no more,
We sailed, through the golden shiver
Of reed along the shore;

By swamp and tangled glade,
Batteries and sentry towers,
Dim lines of palisade,
And sultry autumn flowers.

By Appomattox' banks
And Pocahontas' mound
To where the rebel ranks
Clung to their vantage ground.

There, in the evening light,
I saw the long grass grow,
In ghastly glory bright,
Ghoul of the dead below.

Their bones unburied bleach
Where the black charge was driven,
Vain on the bellowing breach,
By fires of fury riven.

Ramparts, well named of hell,*
Ere hence your champions hurled,
Closed their bad fight, and fell
A warning to the world.

Again, in morning's gleam,
We steered our silent way
To where, above the stream,
Ashes of Richmond lay.

I looked on the Libby's den,
In the bandits' ruined hold,
The grave of valiant men
In want and filth and cold.**

Through many a northern street,
I saw the shadows crawl:
Remnants, with weary feet,
Of that accursed thrall.

Grim ghosts to haunt the sleep
Of Freedom's fellest foe,
Whom the stern warders keep
Fettered in Fort Monroe.

(Death of Themistocles 113-15)

Nichol's rapid trip up the James confirmed his Unionist sympathies and his disdain for the South. In his 1882 survey of American literature, he contrasted the cultures of the North and the South from their earliest days, praising the North for its heritage from England's commonwealth of "imported republicanism" (*American Literature* 16) and its "practical, self-relying, industrial spirit" (16) which was to prove the basis of the country's expansion to the west.

Of the South and its culture, "on the charms of which visitors of the upper class from England are wont to dwell," Nichol had little good to say. He noted its "rare hothouse fruit of wealth and leisure in a select society," but called it "a society whose prestige has been heightened by an outer circle of semi-barbarism." Its ways of life "have had to be broken in battle" (16). He was skeptical that slavery in Athens

did a great deal for the culture of the time,⁷ but of slavery in America, he was certain that it only corroded the South:

American slavery has done nothing but harm to the 'mean whites' of Baltimore or Charlestown.... The Southern States have produced scarcely any literature at all.... The indolence which is the natural concomitant of despotism has the same benumbing effect [as tropical heat]. Like the Spartan marshalling his Helots, the planter, lounging among his slaves, was made dead to art by a paralyzing sense of his superiority.
(17-18)

The impact of Nichol's trip up the James made him turn to Virginia in one other poem in the *Themistocles* collection, "Abraham Lincoln," an elegy for the slain president. He recalls the siege of Petersburg (June 15, 1864 - April 2, 1865) and Petersburg's and Richmond's being abandoned as Union forces massed for an assault as he salutes

The graves of heroes who have won the fight—
Who, at the storming of the stubborn town,
Rang loud the marriage peal of might and right,
And scaled the cliffs and cast the dragon down.
(162)

Nichol was taken enough with the United States that in his letter of perhaps July 5, 1867 (cited above), he expressed a desire to return to America—with Swinburne. Swinburne didn't go. And neither did Nichol.

Notes

¹*American Literature: An Historical Sketch, 1620-1880* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1882). Andrew Hook has written an intriguing account of Nichol's interest in America, "John Nichol, American Literature, and Scottish Liberalism," *British Association for American Studies Bulletin*, 6(1963), 20-30.

²For a sympathetic modern review of Nichol's achievements, see Hobsbaum.

³The letter is in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, and is printed with permission.

⁴Although somewhat to the side of the present issue, Nichol's letter goes on to recount a conversation with a black missionary, returning from North Carolina to Washington, who is made to move back to steerage: "The steward told me, apologetically, that they were obliged to adopt this regulation as they had so many Southern passengers." Nichol notes that in Washington "no such distinctions prevail, and, as far as I can see, every effort is being made to establish a legal equality between the races; but society lags behind the law here, as in England and most civilized countries" (p. 274).

⁵ The letter is in the British Library, and is quoted with permission.

⁶E-mail to the author, September 12, 2001.

⁷ Nichol examines slavery in ancient Greece and differentiates it from slavery in America (demonstrating the special baseness of the latter) in an "Excursus on Ancient Slavery," in *Fragments of Criticism*, 53-56.

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