Sir Charles Lyell and Lady Mary Plunge into the Great American River;

and Draw Out a Rare Portrait of Mid-Nineteenth Century America

Sir Charles Lyell III
Baronett
1797-1873

Lady Mary Horner Lyell
1808 - 1875

an oldfashionedhistory™ by Bill Kitchens

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Mid-nineteenth century America was as much natural phenomenon as nation: a wild river in flood, tumbling along a disparate humanity eroded by far flung tributaries in the Old World, rounding the jagged edges of the past, mixing and sorting people in new ways, depositing them finally in the vast human delta that was the "west". There, in the more level social topography of the west, men discovered a new view of the world and their place in it: egalitarian, independent, confident. These characteristics came to describe America in the eyes of the world.

To the heirs of that nation building epoch it was a beautiful and a majestic scene. But to some contemporary observers, especially across the sea in England, it was a chaotic and somewhat threatening scene as the familiar New England landscape receded before the looming west with its radical democracy and militant vision of "manifest destiny".

By 1845, the new America had become the favorite target of English criticism and ridicule. British abolitionists blasted Southerners for slavery and Northerners for permitting it (despite England's very recent abolition after centuries of slavery). London's Fleet Street financiers were in a panic after several states defaulted on their loans, and the two nations seemed inexorably edging toward war over the Oregon boundary; just what one would expect to result from "Jacksonian Democracy". And from Dickens' famous "quarrel with America" to the London burlesque halls, to the floor of Parliament American "westerners" were the caricature of ignorant boors.

There was one notable exception to this antagonistic state of affairs however. A prominent English couple ventured out on this wild river on an extraordinary journey and returned to write of it. Their unadorned account of adventures, candid and astute observations, and straightforward, unbiased descriptions of the people they met along the way was influential in reconciling the two nations. More importantly for today, it preserves one of the most detailed and accurate portraits of that unique period.

It should come as no surprise that so factual and accurate an account should come from the hand of one of the Nineteenth century's great naturalists, sometimes called “the Father of Modern Geology”; a man who knew a great deal about rivers and deltas.

What is surprising perhaps, is that a brilliant, but rather stuffy, gentleman scientist would write with such a wide range of interest, candor, and charm that over a century and a half later his work would still fascinate and move anyone with a love for a bygone America. But then to know the couple is to understand.

In September of 1845, Sir Charles Lyell, F.R.S. prominent scientist, socialite, and author arrived in Boston on another of his marathon geological expeditions. Accompanying him, as usual, was Lady Mary. From their honeymoon on, this quintessentially Victorian couple with wanderlust, and no children, had traveled together on these expeditions. They had already made a trip to the US for Sir Charles' lectures in Boston, and had toured much of the East. But this trip was to be unique.

Ahead of them lay an arduous nine months of travel by steamer, riverboat and dugout canoe, by railroad coach and handcar, by stagecoach and horseback. They would enjoy suites in the finest hotels and attend all the best parties, have tea with Mrs. Polk at the White House, and experience the hospitality of great southern plantations. At other times they would socialize with "crackers" and fur traders, and feel fortunate to have a pallet on the floor of a settler's cabin. And always capturing the spirit of the times as only a keen but unfamiliar eye could.

Travel in that day was quite an adventure:

with danger ever present,

occasionally luxurious,

more often cramped and uncomfortable, sometimes harrowing, but always an adventure.

On such a trip it is quite understandable that Sir Charles would *"sometimes wonder how far an English couple, traveling for mere amusement, would enjoy themselves*". But it was not the ordinary hardships of travel that elicited complaints from Sir Charles. The physical hardships were to be expected, and the Lyells were accustomed to them. It was the peculiarly American phenomenon of "*leveling and equality*" that elicited such lament from Lyell. Not that they were rudely treated, Sir Charles gratefully acknowledged that they were treated with courtesy. But it was common courtesy, not deference to a superior – a courtesy, and a familiarity, to which the British upper class was not accustomed.

American democratic ideology seemed to impinge upon them at every hand. Sir Charles felt reduced to *"Plato's definition of man:`bipes implume', a featherless biped*". The English master/servant relationship was awkward in America, so the Lyells, unlike many other Brits including the Charles Dickenses, traveled without servants. Lyell earnestly advised any of his English readers contemplating such a journey "*They had better not take with them an English maid servant unless they were prepared for her being transformed into an equal.*"

Worse, as Dickens had complained, everyone in America feels free to speak to anyone they wish (or interrogate them), anytime, about anything. Though the Lyells considered this American trait to be an invasion of privacy, they made the best of it. Sir Charles even boasted that he turned the tables on his inquisitors and gave as good as he took. Lady Mary responded to the American "rudeness" by listening patiently, answering graciously, and sewing beautifully.

The Lyells arrived in Boston to spend the fall visiting, sightseeing, and, of course, "geologising" in New England. They would head south when winter brought an end to the fever season. With some difficulty, Sir Charles secured a suite of rooms in the Tremont House, one of Boston's finest hotels. On their previous trip the Lyells had tried boarding house life, but found it *"irksome to take every meal at a common table...and play the agreeable to companions often uncongenial, and brought together on no principle of selection"*. There were times in the coming months however, when a Boston boarding house would have been welcome.

Probably the low point of their journey was the crossing from Savannah to Montgomery. Part of the way, Sir Charles went by railway hand car, examining road cuts and lodging with settlers along the way. Lady Mary wisely avoided this experience and went ahead by train to Macon, accompanied by a Director of the railroad.

"I could have dispensed cheerfully", Lyell wrote of his accommodations on that trip, *"with milk, butter, and other luxuries; but I felt very much the want of a private bedroom. Very soon however, I came to regard it as no small privilege to have even a*

bed to myself”. He hesitated to ask anyone for water or towels, *"nor could I beg anyone to rub a thick coat of mud off my boots or trowsers, lest I reflect upon the members of the family, who had no idea of indulging in such refinements themselves.*"

To add to his discomfort, he was constantly cold in the crude cabins, and amazed to see his backwoods hosts comfortable in shirtsleeves. Due, he surmised to an excess of heat built up during the notorious southern summer.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Lyell in Macon, was settling into her room in a (you guessed it) boarding house. This time a rather different duty befell her. A young man from the north who had come south seeking relief from tuberculosis had succumbed to the disease in the boarding house. And as the young man had no friends or relatives with him, it fell to the ladies of the house to give the unfortunate soul a proper wake.

Perhaps the Lyells, who never missed Sunday services during their trip, were cheered by the sermon they heard a few days later in Milledgeville. The pastor of the Presbyterian Church (the Episcopal Church was without a pastor at the time) exhorted his hearers to remember that life was like the journey of the emigrant westward; full of hardship and privation, but which "*prove momentary in their duration, in comparison to the longer period he hopes to spend in a happier land.”*

The travelers spent several days in Milledgeville, then the capital of Georgia. One day, the Governor's wife, Mrs. Crawford called upon them in the small hotel (probably much like a boarding house!) across from the capital, whereupon "*our landlady made herself one of the party just as if we were visitors at her house.*" Mrs. Crawford apparently had little to say, or maybe she just couldn't get in a word, as Lyell records nothing; but of the landlady:*"...among other inquiries, she said to my wife: ‘Do tell me how you make soap in England’. Great was her surprise to hear that ladies in that country were in the habit of buying the article in shops, and would be much puzzled if called upon to manufacture it for themselves.*"

Not willing that her guests depart in such a shameful state of ignorance, the landlady delivered a full discourse on the art of making soap from hog fat and wood ashes.

Continuing on to Montgomery, the travelers encountered "*southern steamboats*", luxurious affairs with social regimes all their own and reputations for danger. Departing for Mobile half a day late on one of these steamboats Sir Charles was much annoyed, "*although I had been forewarned that much less value was placed on time in the southern states than in the north.*" Then he noticed that the *Amaranth* was heading back upstream to pick up a last load of cotton.

The Lyells mood was not much improved when the *Amaranth* suddenly and noisely blew the sediment out of her boilers. For a moment they thought their journey had come to an abrupt and unhappy end. Soon however, annoyance gave way to appreciation as the *Amranth*'s unhurried captain waited patiently for his passengers to examine the geology and collect fossils at all the stops along the way downriver. Sometimes he even put out a boat to row Sir Charles around to nearby bluffs.

After spending some time in their comfortable, albeit small stateroom, Mrs. Lyell "*thought it polite to visit the ladies cabin, as they might otherwise think her unsociable*." There, among the nursing mothers in rocking chairs and rowdy children were many travelers tales to hear. There was a young milliner from County Cork "*getting on extremely well*" in her adopted country. And a German stewardess "*who soon found out that my wife understood her native tongue, and, being in great want of sympathy, poured out her tale of suffering in the New World.*"

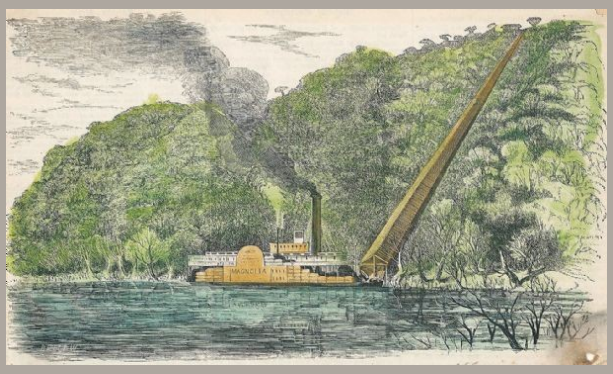
Once a "*contented peasant*" in Saxony, she had followed a charismatic cult leader to found a colony in Missouri. He was soon caught "*carrying on a licentious intercourse with several women of the colony*" and absconded, leaving the would be colonists destitute and disillusioned. Yet, after many adventures and hardships the young woman was able to say "*this is the land for the poor to thrive in*."

"There was also a 'cracker' family", in the ladies cabin, "*consisting of a squalling child and it's two parents, who were 'moving to the Washita River in Louisiana'. The young mother was smoking a pipe, which her husband, a rough looking backwoodsman, had politely lighted for her. As this practice was against the regulations, my wife joined the other ladies in remonstrating, and she immediately went out to smoke in the open air on the guard.*"

By now, such "*movers*" were a familiar, but ever fascinating, sight. Crossing Georgia and Alabama, Lyell was offered many a small farm at two dollars an acre. They were moving for free land, or to escape debts, or to join family and friends already swept away westward. A few just felt hemmed in by neighbors six or seven miles away, and longed for wide open spaces.

Perhaps the most poignant encounter with "movers" occurred later toward the end of their trip. The Lyells were returning eastward across the Alleghenies meeting the westward migration head on: "*...at one turn in the road, in the midst of the wood, we met a man with a rifle, carrying in his hand an empty pail for giving water to his horse, and followed at a short distance by his wife, leading a stead, on which was a small sack. 'It probably contains', said our companions, 'all their worldly goods; they are movers, and have their faces turned westwards.*"

We might interpret such a scene as bleak and unhappy, but it was not so for Lyell's American friends. They prophesied a little land, a clapboard house, and lots of grandchildren at the end of this young couples' journey. Not a bad prospect for anyone.



On their way down the Alabama River the travelers stopped over for a few days of fossil collecting at the town of Claiborne. Here they settled into an inn high above the river. Claiborne was noted for the long cotton chute down to the river and the 365 steps leading up the bank beside it.

Slaves were used to load cotton bales into the chute at the top, but because of the danger at the bottom, free Irish day laborers were hired to corral the 500 pound bales as they hit the deck. Slaves were too valuable to risk.

Sir Charles had the experience of being mistaken for the new Methodist minister and included in a little English bashing over Oregon. The consensus among the crowd at the inn seemed to be that we whipped the British before and we could do it again. Even if we weren't prepared for war, the US could struggle along until a sufficient force was mobilized. No such comments were made in his presence, he acknowledged, when his nationality was known.

One evening as the Lyells were returning to the inn, they saw some boys playing with a bird that had gotten drunk off fermented berries. Tender hearted Mary bought the bird off the boys for some sugar plums and brought it up to their room where it sat till it sobered up enough to fly away.

Their stay completed, the Lyells waited on the wharf boat for transportation down to Mobile. The first boat was headed up river. It swung in, shouts were exchanged: "*any passengers?*", "*no, what news?", "Cotton up 1\8, no war.*" and was gone. The next boat "*we were glad to find ... was the Amaranth, commanded by our old friend Captain Bragdon*" who had made the round trip just in time.

They made a side trip up the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers to the fledgling University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, then the Capitol of Alabama. Mary resided with a professor's wife and enjoyed the faculty society while Sir Charles, guided by the professor, toured the southern Appalachian coal and iron fields.

They then returned to Mobile and continued on to New Orleans (pictured to the left, and on the cover).

They spent the remainder of the winter enjoying the art and high society life of that cultural oasis in the west. Sir Charles noted that:

> *It was a pleasure to hear the French language spoken, and to have our thoughts recalled to the most civilized parts of Europe by the aspect of a city, forming so great a contrast to the innumerable new towns we had lately beheld. The foreign appearance, moreover, of the inhabitants, made me feel thankful that it was possible to roam freely and without hindrance over so large a continent, – no bureaus for examining and signing passports, no fortifications, no draw-bridges, no closing of gates at a fixed hour in the evening, no waiting till they are opened in the morning, no custom houses separating one State from another, no overhauling of baggage by gensdarmes for the octroi* (a local tax), *and yet, as perfect a feeling of personal security as I ever felt in Germany or France.*

But before the notorious New Orleans fever season began they were off up the Mississippi. Sir Charles wanted to visit New Madrid to study the effects of the great earth quakes of 1811 and 12. They arrived late one night and found themselves stranded, the only inn closed for lack of business. Leaving Mary on the wharf boat, a kind of floating tavern answering to today's terminal, Sir Charles set off by torchlight to find accommodations.

Someone remembered that a German immigrant baker and his wife, living near the river, sometimes took in boarders. Lyell awoke the family only to find their spare room occupied. But "*Uncle John*", a retired riverboat pilot on a fishing trip, cheerfully gave the exhausted pair his room: "*a kind of scullery, with a mattress on the floor, on which we slept, and did not make our appearance next morning till half past eight o'clock*."

Apologies were offered for this tardiness but the hosts had put the extra time to good use, laying in a few niceties, like a new tablecloth, for their distinguished guests. Because of these expenses on their behalf, the Lyells felt bound to decline offers, next day, of lodging in more comfort with some of the town's leading citizens.

At breakfast, the baker, thinking it improper for someone of his station to sit with such guests, stood by to wait table. His American born wife prevailed upon him to join them.

Sir Charles hired a horse and spent the day examining remnants of the great earthquakes, and interviewing survivors, some of whom had survived by clinging to downed trees as great crevasses opened and closed beneath them as the earth rolled in great waves.

Returning that evening, he was "*much amused*" to find Lady Mary hemming the tablecloth, while the baker's wife was busily copying her guest's *"worked collar of the latest Parisian fashion*".

After a few days stay, the Lyells were once again on the wharf boat late at night. Sir Charles was outraged when the proprietor failed to hail the first boat passing by. That carelessness proved to be a godsend however. That boat, they later learned, "*snagged*" with considerable loss of life and injury. The next boat carried them safely up the Ohio to New Harmony, Indiana for a few days visit. Then it was back to the river and on to Pittsburg.

Leaving the river at Pittsburg "*after living so many weeks in public with strangers"*, they hired a private carriage and continued on to Greensburg. Settling in at "*a comfortble old fashioned inn*" they discovered a shortage of "*help*" in those parts. This was due in the main to the burgeoning availability of factory work but also to the growing disdain for servant work. One local establishment had just lost a serving girl because she had not been allowed to sit at the table with her "*mistress*".

Of this inconvenience Lyell observed with resignation:
"*Fortunately for us, my wife and I had, by this time acquired the habit of waiting on ourselves in the inns, going down occasionally to the kitchen to ask for things, in a way which in England would be thought derogatory to one's dignity... Here, on the contrary, we found it made us popular*".

In Greenburg they found "*several orators...haranguing an audience of the lowest class, in favor of a war with England about Oregon. The walls were placarded with … 'forty-five of fight', which meant that the Oregon territory must extend as far north as the 45th degree of latitude.*

I observed to one of the citizens, that it was satisfactory to see that none of the upper, or even of the middle classes, were taking part at Greenburg in this agitation. He shook his head, and said, 'Very true, but these meetings are most mischievous, for you must bear in mind, that your nobody in England is our everybody in America'."

This is just what Lyell's peers, and to some extent Lyell himself, feared and mistrusted about America. Political power was slipping away from the eastern gentry and the "*natural aristocracy*"

This unprecedented confidence of the American people in themselves, Lyell worried, was reducing the members of the legislature to "*mere delegates,... like the wires of an electric telegraph ... for conveying the behests of the multitude*".
But what of the multitude? Were they sufficiently informed, would they act rationally and in good faith? "*The great evil of universal suffrage*", he wrote "*is the irresistible temptation it affords to a needy set of adventurers to make politics a trade and to devote all their time to agitation, electioneering, and flattering the passions of the multitude*". On the other hand, the educated elite and top professional people who were more likely "*to have a mind of their own*" less and less were willing to "*engage in the strife of elections perpetually going on, and in which they expose themselves to such calumny and accusations*".

Valid as these criticisms were, and still are, confidence persisted. Americans told Lyell "*Let our institutions be judged by their fruits*". And it was undeniable that the United States was making astounding progress in industry, commerce, education, religious tolerance, and improvement in the condition of the people generally. "*How great must be the amount of misgovernment in the world in general*", *Sir Charles* concluded, "*if a democracy like this can deserve to rank so high in the comparative scale*".

Epilogue

The preceding article appeared, in more or less that form, in the Early American Life® column of the February 2000 issue of ***Early American Homes***.

I am adding this Epilogue to it as a further explanation of the Lyells. I was a bit premature in describing the Lyells as ‘Sir’ Charles and ‘Lady’ Mary during their American visit, but it seemed appropriate as they were the epitome of gentility even without the title. Charles was knighted shortly after his return home, probably in some part due to his helping reconcile British-American relations. A few years after that, he inherited the title ‘Baronet’ from his father. Lyell, actually Charles Lyell III, always seemed mindful of the fact that he was only the second generation “to the manor born”.

His grandfather had been an entrepreneur connected with the British Navy who made his fortune from captured American shipping in the Revolutionary War (fortunately, that information was not widely known during his visit here). It was his grandfather who purchased a derelict Scottish title and a run down estate. They made the estate pay, but never lavishly. Our Charles never lived in the manor house as Baronet, preferring to rent it out and live in town.

Mary Horner Lyell was the daughter of a successful Scottish businessman and amateur Geologist of considerable standing in the British scientific community of the day. He was also an active social reformer, especially in favor of child labor restrictions. I think we can see his humanitarianism in his daughter, as well as her practical middle class background – not a lot of the ‘princess and the pea’ syndrome.

The foregoing article emphasized the reaction of the Lyells to the growing egalitarianism of the United States as opposed to the rigid class structure of England. And the little biographical addendum is intended to account for the Lyell’s successful crossing of the “American River”.

I want now to go into some other, heavily intertwined, issues of more importance today. Charles earned respect wherever he went by giving respect to others. That made him something of a novelty among British observers of the day, as already noted. It also brought him vicious criticism from abolitionists because he didn't caricature slavery and slave owning southerners as monsters after the fashion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. He made clear his opposition to slavery but he presented a fair and insightful account of what he saw in his extensive southern travels.

He dwelt on the issue of slavery a great deal and from many perspectives, conversing in depth with the slave aristocracy, visiting among the slaves themselves, even attending their church services. A serious student of the subject could learn much from his six hundred plus page ***Second Visit to the United States***. Unfortunately many readers would immediately judge him by today's standards of political correctness, label him "racist", and never consider what he had to say; much in the same way ardent abolitionists treated him in that day.

A related issue revolves around Lyell's scientific work. He is, as I noted above, sometimes called the "Father of Modern Geology". He championed the concept of 'Uniformitarianism', also called 'Gradualism' – that earth's Geologic history could be understood in terms of presently observed phenomena. That stood in opposition to the formerly established concept of 'Catastrophism' – that Earth's Geologic history was to be understood as a series of catastrophic events, including the Biblical world-wide flood.

His books, especially ***Principles of Geology***, were widely influential in establishing Uniformitarianism as the dominant principle of Geology, and the popular perception of an old earth (a requirement for Darwinian Evolutionary Theory). Darwin was greatly influenced by Lyell's work and the two were friends. For those reasons, Lyell is gathered up by the apostles of Darwinian Evolution as one of them. Ironically though, Lyell is claimed by both sides in the Evolution-Creation debate. Just as he was his own man, calling things as he saw them in the slavery debate, so he was in this greater debate.

Despite dealing a blow to Biblical literalism with his ‘old earth’ uniformitarian principles, Lyell was a Christian in his outlook. He led in opposition to the earlier evolutionary theory of Lamark, and championed faith in the stability of created ‘kinds’ of plant and animal life. Darwinism flamed into prominence late in Lyell’s life however, tearing apart the formerly congenial community of British gentlemen geologists. Lyell never took a strong position one way or the other on the major thrust of Darwin’s child – for he could see how it must grow up. The closest he came was at the very end of his life, embittered by the death of Mary; untimely in his eyes, as she was eleven years younger.

Darwinism’s evangelists cynically attribute Lyell’s reticence to jump into the fray to his wish to be buried in Westminster Abbey. I doubt that greatly. In fact, Darwin’s supporters even wangled a spot for him in the Abbey floor. That was a harbinger certainly – Christianity’s greatest enemy buried with honor in England’s greatest church.

Lyell could see Darwin’s Theory, with all its attendant corollaries, leading to atheism, scientifically accredited racism, eugenics, and perhaps genocide; all the things we bundle together under the title “Social Darwinism”, as indeed, was the case. That is not where he wanted to go, as we saw in his writings on the slavery issue. The following is a short excerpt from *Second Visit:*

> *It had previously been imagined that an impassable gulf separated the two races; but now it is proved that more than half that space can, in a few generations, be successfully passed over, and the humble negro of the coast of Guinea has shown himself to be one of the most imitative and improvable of human beings. Yet the experiment may still be defeated, not so much by the fanaticism of abolitionists, or the prejudices of those slave owners who are called perpetualists, who maintain that slavery should be permanent, and that it is a blessing in itself to the Negro, but by the jealousy of an unscrupulous democracy invested with political power.*

> *Of the imminent nature of this peril, I was never fully aware, until I was startled by the publication of an act passed by the Legislature of Georgia during my visit to that State, December 27, 1845.*

Notice that, while there is an explicit admission of a "gulf" between the races in their level of civilization, it is not an unbridgeable genetic division due to greater white evolution, as Darwinism would have it. Darwin's apostles today strive hard to cover up the inherent biological racism of their religion, but their founder's words are too widely known, written in a period when scientific racism was applauded. Darwin's younger cousin, Sir Francis Galton, is widely credited as the founder of the Eugenics Movement (for which he was knighted) that quickly morphed into genocide; but Darwin's own words, especially in *The Descent of Man*, clearly form the basis of eugenic theory.

It is obvious that Lyell was pulling for the bridging of the "gulf" between the races. That should be the determinant of whether he was a 'racist', not his interpretation of the vast ethnic, cultural, educational, and socio-economic divide of the time between white and black. Indeed, he commented that some of the slaves he met were more civilized than many of the white people had he met.

His last comment in the quote above could be seen by many today as remarkably prophetic. It referred to a law barring black artisans from making contracts for work in competition with white artisans, a major part of later 'Jim Crow' laws. It is also held by many today that a major (though veiled) motive force of the so called "Great Society" welfare state was to remove black competition from the work place, especially in heavily unionized areas. To a degree, that has taken place – witness the high unemployment rate among African Americans.

All that is speculation of course, but it is true that the past is a guide to the future, and we owe Charles Lyell III a debt for his record of our past.

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