Epilogue

See thousands flocking to this favoured land,
Teeming with blessings for fair freedom's band.
A round where late the savage yell was heard
Tem'hawk and scalping knife have disappeared
E'en savage foes are now no longer feared.
On every hand now thriving towns are seen,
Famed Cincinnati 'mong them sits as queen.
O'er all their land which does such beauties show,
Haven's choicest blessings rise up to our view;
In this blest land, far from old ocean's shore,
O! may the oppest e're find an open door.
Moses Guest, Poems on Several Occasions (1823)

In September 1838, the year of Cincinnati’s fiftieth birthday, Edward Deering Mansfield returned to his native city after having completed a journey of 2,500 miles. Even after his relatively short absence the editor of the Cincinnati Chronicle detected evidences “of rapid improvements . . . of a substantial and healthy prosperity which few places in any country possess.”1 The country was rallying from the first shocks of the panic, Mansfield reported, and he noted with pleasure the general improvement in culture and morals.

The people of Cincinnati, who were not to experience the full weight of the 1837 recession for another year or so, were ready to celebrate as 1838 drew to a close. Cincinnati’s pride, the steamboat Moselle, had exploded in the spring of that year, saddening the Queen City,2 but by August the citizens were making plans to commemorate the first fifty years of Cincinnati’s remarkable history. The fathers of Ohio, in the words of Timothy Walker, had “left civilization, where they found barbarism—afluenoe where they found penury—blooming gardens, where they found a cheerless waste—fair cities,

where they found only wigwams—a palmy state, where they found only desolation.” No fifty years “in the history of any people,” he declared, had been so remarkable; Cincinnatians might look back at the first half-century “with scarcely a wish that it had been different.”

Without subscribing completely to Walker’s complacent message we can appreciate the wonder of the people as they contemplated the rise of their city. In 1788 plans for Losantiville were being projected in Lexington, Kentucky. At this time small settlements could be found at the mouth of the Muskingum and where the two Miamis flow into the Ohio, but the entire civilized population within the limits of the present state of Ohio comprised only several hundred people. Indians dominated the vast stretch from the banks of the Ohio to the shores of the Erie, and they gathered where Cincinnati now stood preparatory to making their raids on the Kentucky settlements. One need hardly ask why the growth of Cincinnati under these conditions should have excited great astonishment, even reverence.

In proposing a public celebration of Cincinnati’s first settlement, a local writer urged that all the citizens join together for the event regardless of their religion, politics, class, or origin; and he requested further that the anniversary proceedings be conducted with appropriate dignity:

The first settlement of such a city deserves to be commemorated, annually; but especially is it proper that the first semi-centennial epoch of her existence should be signalized by more than ordinary effort. . . . It should not be an occasion for mere eating and drinking, for these are every day luxuries with the poorest of her citizens: but a “feast of reason and a flow of soul.” The past should be brought up with all its touching romance—the present be surveyed, and full scope given to the contemplation of the flowing and gorgeous future.

The committee in charge of the anniversary made its plans with these ideas in mind. Members took special pains to invite every old settler to the celebration and arranged free accommodation and entertainment for them at the Pearl Street Hotel.

On the twenty-sixth of December, which turned out to be a fine day, the “celebration of the first fifty years since the day of the landing of the earliest settlers on the site of Cincinnati, took place.”

5. Ibid., Dec. 29, 1838.
a thirteen-gun salute by the Cincinnati Artillery Invincibles in honor of the original states. This was followed at noon with a fifty-gun birthday salvo for Cincinnati and an evening finale of twenty-six guns for the present sisterhood of states. A procession of notables formed at ten in the morning and marched with all the customary fanfare to Joshua Wilson's First Presbyterian Church. Here before a crowded audience began the ceremonies of the day. Dr. Wilson offered a prayer. He was followed by Professor Timothy B. Mason's Eclectic Choir and the Buckeye Band. The main speaker of the morning, appropriately enough, was Dr. Daniel Drake, who perhaps more than any other citizen in the community had identified himself with the destiny of his beloved Cincinnati. Drake spoke for over three hours. The audience, if reports of his eloquence are correct, could have listened even longer. Dinner at the Pearl Street Hotel, "prepared and served up in superior style," followed the Reverend William Burke's closing benediction, and the proceedings ended with toasts to the past, present, and future. Cincinnati had come of age.

From the vantage point of the present we have looked back on the Queen City's first fifty years, particularly the decades of the twenties and thirties, and studied the thoughts and attitudes of the people. Cincinnati has been described as a relatively prosperous, comfortable, and complacent community, a society led and dominated by a commercial elite who made their influence felt in every branch of social activity. In municipal affairs, in religion, education, and charity, in politics and business, the same names appear and reappear. The story of Cincinnati has, in truth, been their story, although the hundreds of lesser individuals who belonged to the lodges, supported missionary societies, and attended the lyceums, who cooperated with one another for the glory of their city and themselves, have not been entirely overlooked.

This study has attempted to analyze the institutions of Cincinnati and, by implication, the moral values of the individual citizens, with the intention of discovering what might be called the public character of the community. In general I have made little effort to distinguish the Cincinnatians from their fellow countrymen residing in other sections of the country, because in most instances such distinctions would have been arbitrary and capricious. The setting of the city, to be sure, was unusual. Its population of Yankees, south-

erners, New Jersey natives, Pennsylvanians, Irishmen, Germans, and Englishmen gave it a cosmopolitan tone. It was said to be less southern than Louisville and more southern than Philadelphia, a city it was supposed to resemble in other respects. To others it suggested Boston; and it possessed a quality of its own, too, although it would be hard to say what that quality was. Tocqueville, visiting Cincinnati in 1831, found it less remarkable for its uniqueness than for its universality. Cincinnati, to this Frenchman, was a composite America:

All that there is of good or of bad in American society is to be found there in such strong relief, that one would be tempted to call it one of those books printed in large letters for teaching children to read; everything there is in violent contrast, exaggerated; nothing has fallen into its final place: society is growing more rapidly than man.7

Now if Cincinnati was a kind of an American primer, a broad caricature of the nation (and I think this is an accurate analogy), the character of its citizens should not be delineated in terms usually reserved for western people. Geographically and culturally Cincinnati symbolized America. It served as a crossroads where men and women of every section and representing every class came together. Above all it was new. Consequently we find rawness and refinement carried to their extremes. The rowdy riverboatman curses on the wharf or gouges out the eye of his friend at the same moment that a lawyer introduces his lyceum audience to Mohammedan civilization. Wealthy produce merchants construct impressive bank buildings or warehouses and stumble home at night through unlighted streets. Elegant ladies and gentlemen dance at the Bazaar or listen to the Hayden Society's performance of the Messiah while the "populace" scream and spit in the theater. Belles and dandies stroll in an atmosphere "redolent of swine."

The same disparities could also have been detected in older communities, although not so glaringly juxtaposed. In other cities, too, men were continually building and tearing down, making fortunes or going broke, getting religion or losing it, changing political affiliations, and running in and out of debt. Cincinnati, new and unfinished, possessed to an exaggerated degree many of the characteristics European observers had ascribed to the country as a whole. I should hesitate, therefore, in discussing the qualities of the people of Cincinnati, to say at any point—"This is a western trait" or "This could only have happened in Cincinnati."

The Queen City was not sui generis nor could it be said to epitomize the spirit of the "West," even though both western and eastern writers helped to foster this legend. Cincinnatians were fond of describing themselves in superlative terms. They were the trusty men of enterprise who left the indolent, sluggish, and shiftless people at home. Their orators created a municipal prototype endowed with superior courage, energy, eloquence, ambition, boldness, and business zeal. Western people, said James Hall, were independent and impatient of restraint, "unwilling to endure any discomforts, which may be removed by exertion, or escaped by change of residence."8 Timothy Walker, fresh from Northampton, Massachusetts, pronounced his fellow immigrants self-confident, self-dependent, and egalitarian. "Standing thus alone and unallied, our motto in action is, 'each for himself, and heaven for us all.'"9 Lyman Beecher ascribed to his western parishioners a peculiar sensibility that made them acutely susceptible to the touch of genius.10 "Everything here," declared young James Freeman Clarke, "is free, open, active. To be useful one must lay aside all narrow tastes and exclusive feeling, and from a pure spirit of humanity plunge into life around him."11 From this chorus of self-congratulation emerged the picture of western society which was later to be embodied in the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner.

These characterizations may or may not apply to the people living in sparsely settled districts of the West, but they should not, in my opinion, be used in describing the inhabitants of the Queen City. Of course many of the so-called western qualities were in part exemplified by the people of Cincinnati, as they were, indeed, by Americans in every state and section. But if Cincinnati was a more open community, its social patterns less fixed and arbitrary than those of some older localities in the East, so here could be found the conservatism, prejudices, sobriety, and reverence for established institutions not ordinarily identified with the West. The business and professional classes in Cincinnati, taken as a whole, were no less cautious and conservative than a comparable class in other parts of the country. The same

9. Timothy Walker, "Letters from Ohio," *New England Magazine* I (1831): 34. Although the series of letters from which this quotation is taken are signed only with "W," I have definite proof that these letters are Walker's. R. L. Rusk, in his *Literature of the Middle West Frontier* (New York, 1925), I, 38, accepts some sweeping and not entirely correct assumptions made in these articles as authoritative. Actually, Walker had been living in Cincinnati less than a year and was not yet a reliable observer.
kinds of social distinctions prevailed, if not always to such a marked degree. All the colorful and violent manifestations associated with the “rampaging frontier” could be found in the Queen City just as they could, I suspect, in New York and Philadelphia; but the people seemed to have been sober, moral, and industrious rather than exuberant or gay. Cincinnati was not so much southern or eastern as commercial.

The citizens of this river city exhibited all the mannerisms and attitudes befitting the inhabitants of a new and diversified community, and when we try to sum up their “public character” we meet the same paradoxes which make American society here and elsewhere at once so interesting and yet so difficult to explain.

Consider, for example, their attitude toward the old and established. Most of the citizens with whom I have been chiefly concerned throughout these pages were first-generation settlers reflecting native predilections which made it hard for them “to amalgamate and coalesce.”\footnote{12} Whether or not they admitted it, they followed the lead of the East in social and cultural matters. But with this attachment to conventional usages, with this desire to imitate older communities or even to surpass them in the refinements of life, they displayed a pride of city and section which is hard to reconcile with their almost slavish adherence to eastern standards. Perhaps it was a kind of provincialism in reverse that explains the satisfaction of a recent settler for his new home. Here, he protested,

"everything is fresh—the city is the growth of a day—you see none of those ancient and venerable nuisances called interesting antiquities—no decayed and falling houses, rendezvous for rats, bats, cats and desolation, the exuviae of past generations, who have left nothing behind them but their bones. The streets, houses, trees, and people are all new."\footnote{13}

Perhaps this same feeling made Cincinnatians insist that western problems required western solutions, that imported literature and science as well as imported merchandise could never satisfy the basic needs of the West. “We should be jealous of the introduction of foreign medicine among us,” a Cincinnati doctor told his audience, “and adopting the policy of our brothers

\footnote{12} Walker, “Letters from Ohio,” 33.
\footnote{13} CCLG, Jan. 31, 1835.
in commerce, encourage home manufacture, and lay a heavy tariff on foreign commodities.”

The people of Cincinnati, I should say, illustrate perfectly Tocqueville’s statement that Americans preferred to utilize learning rather than to possess it. They seemed to show a particular distrust for the speculative and the theoretical. We have seen that in Cincinnati, fiction, the fine arts, and the theater were condemned on the grounds of their unreality. In the same spirit, the Cincinnati Chronicle ridiculed all geological theorizing on the origins of the earth and praised the state geologists for treating this science as a department of natural philosophy, “valuable for its practical information, and interesting to the body of people because easily understood, and useful in its results.” Daniel Drake urged that Cincinnati children be instructed in anatomy and physiology rather than chemistry and astronomy, because the principles of the first two sciences were “always of use.” This emphasis on the pragmatic, according to Alexander Kinmont, this “assiduous and earnest cultivation of the mechanical and economic arts,” gave “a kind of sober and anti-sentimental aspect” to American society. Even the visionaries and the quacks obtained audiences, it seems, because of the practical implications of their theories. Steam doctors applied as well as preached their dubious principles. John Cleves Symmes, the man who resolutely maintained from 1819 to 1829 that the earth was hollow and “habitable within,” proposed to lead a polar expedition to the North Pole to prove the commercial value of his hypothesis.

Most Cincinnatians, if they paid any attention to scientific, philosophical, or religious innovators, were not seduced from the important task of making a living. Although frequently disheartened by financial panics and natural catastrophes, a deep and unshakable optimism permitted them to pass rapidly over the imperfections of the present and fix their eyes upon an alluring and obtainable future. They freely exercised their imaginations, used so sparingly in everyday life, in making predictions about the future.

14. J. N. McDowell, A Valedictory Address before the Medical and Philosophical Society of Ohio (Cincinnati, 1830), 13.
15. CC, Mar. 10, 1838.
17. Alexander Kinmont, Twelve Lectures on the Natural History of Man, and the Rise and Progress of Philosophy (Cincinnati, 1839), 345.
They loved to think about the times when men would travel to New York from Cincinnati by rail in twenty-four hours, when Cincinnati would be the capital of the United States, when America’s population, running into the hundreds of millions, would make her preeminent among the nations of the world.

But the people of Cincinnati, like most Americans of their time, were so charmed by the wonderful prospects that they failed to plan for the contingencies which always accompany social and economic progress. Content with the promise of the future, it never seemed to occur to them that an expanding city would inevitably be confronted by new problems. In spite of what has been said about their “presaging future trends,” they rarely anticipated the needs of the coming years. In Cincinnati, as Morris Birkbeck observed, considerations of health and enjoyment too often yielded “to views of mercantile convenience,” and we have seen a good deal of evidence for what he calls a “short-sighted and narrow economy.” A few public-spirited persons like Drake, Foote, Peyton Symmes, Mansfield, and others saw beyond their own private interests. And when individual and public benefit coincided, the commercial leaders of Cincinnati were not wanting in energy and insight. Largeness of vision, however, is not the same thing as dreaming grandiose dreams or overcoming immediate obstacles. It is one thing to predict that a city will have a population of over 100,000 before 1860; it is another to realize what these figures will mean in terms of sewers, streets, slums, parks, squares, and public buildings. In a crisis the people could respond magnificently, but they seldom anticipated the crisis.

I have described Cincinnati’s society, and American society by implication, as kaleidoscopic and undigested, held together by mutual self-interest. This essentially was Tocqueville’s impression as he surveyed the people of Cincinnati in the winter of 1831. But tendencies working even at this time were cementing America together and giving direction to her civilization. National loyalties acquired from simply living under an enlightened government reduced certain frictions between the sections at the same time that economic issues were aggravating them. Technological inventions like the steamboat and the railroad (the importance of which Tocqueville never seems to have

recognized) reconciled local differences. The vague dreams of a powerful and beneficent country which I have just described, although sometimes rhetorically and blatantly announced, inspired Americans in every section of the country and served as a common goal for men and women who may have differed in respect to religion, class, or politics.

The new civilization [said Alexander Kinmont in describing this synthesizing process] which is beginning on this continent and also simultaneously in Europe (here perhaps more conspicuously, from having less of the old to contend with,) is a compound of many elements, which have been before separately prepared in different local centers;—but now that the whole are about being cemented into one, and amalgamated, they are disengaged from their various localities; and even locality itself, as respects the new civilization, is evidently designed to have less influence over the destinies of mankind, than it has heretofore exercised.21

Bound up as they were in their everyday affairs, and worshipping, in Kinmont’s words, the stern and careworn deities of reason, common sense, agriculture, and commerce, the citizens of Cincinnati were working for objectives less tangible than material gain. During the decades we have been discussing, they had noticed increasing evidences of disunion, and as Ohioans, proud of their country’s “matchless constitution,” they consecrated themselves to prevent a disastrous conclusion for “the great American Experiment.”22 If the people of Cincinnati seemed exclusively concerned with the practical and the mundane, they nevertheless caught occasional glimpses of a new and magnificent age for which they believed themselves to be ultimately responsible. It was this vision that somehow ennobled their labors. It gave them the assurance that in spite of the hazards that endangered their democracy, America contained “in her new principles, her new society, the freshness of her country, the unlimited regions of discovery in science, political and physical, the extension of benevolence, and the force of example, materials for thought and enterprize, more than any people possess, and sufficient to endure through the longest vision of futurity.”23

---
