DRAFT 2023-7-6

CBB Historical Marker Dedication 2023-7-19

2nd and Chestnut, Philadelphia

Nationally, 2023 in Philadelphia may be best remembered as the year when a section of I-95 collapsed and was repaired in less than two weeks. For locals, boomers at least, it may be the year when a section of South Broad was renamed for Jerry Blavat, the local radio dj who called himself the “geator with the heater” or the “boss with the hot sauce”…

But for my colleagues and others here today, we will remember 2023 as the year of Philadelphia’s first public celebration of Brockden Brown. His novels and other writings still resonate today, 252 years after his birth in 1771, 213 years after his death in 1810. Brown was born just over a block south of this spot, where 2nd meets Dock Street. For most of his 39 years, he lived, married, wrote, and worked with various printer-publishers within 10 minutes’ walk of this corner, including his brothers’ merchant office that was just over a block east near the corner of Chestnut & Water. And he was interred just over a block north, at the Arch Street Meeting House burial ground. So this spot is, therefore, a very appropriate location for this marker.

In the preface of his January 1809 pamphlet about the shipping embargo that was at the top of the news, Brown identifies himself with his Philadelphia origins: “[S]ome, observing the city where I…make my appearance, may think my pacific doctrine, my system of rational forbearance and forgiveness carried to a pitch of *Quaker* extravagance. The truth is, I am no better than an outcast of that unwarlike sect, but cannot rid myself of reverence for most of its practical and political maxims. I feel a strong inclination to admit to an equality of rights and merits, men of all nations and religions…” And as the reader of Brown knows, he means women as well.

Now, Ben Franklin’s historical marker is just west at Chestnut & Orianna. And if it was Franklin who put Philadelphia on the cultural map in Europe, it was Brown who put US literary arts there. His writings have attracted commentary and scholarly study since the 1790s, and this multi-generational and multi-national legacy has led to the marker we’re dedicating today.

American literature classes and textbooks always tell us that Brown plays a crucial role for later US writers, from Philadelphia’s George Lippard, to Poe, Hawthorne, Fuller, Whittier, and onward. But CBB, as we call him, also has a very important international reputation: he was the first US novelist to be translated: to German in 1803, French in 1808, Spanish in 1818, and on to recent translations in Mandarin, Korean and more. Brown was praised in his own time by William Godwin, the most important British novelist of the 1790s, Walter Scott, and many others. Godwin’s daughter, Mary Shelley, reread Brown when she wrote *Frankenstein* in 1818 and *The Last Man* in 1825, and he was the favorite novelist of Mary’s husband, the poet Percy Shelley. New editions of the novels were announced in newspapers from the US to Paris and colonial India throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. And, my own favorite, allusions to his work appear in the early avant-gardism of Lautréamont in the 1870s.

Finally, we should also emphasize that CBB’s legacy is not just scholarly or nostalgic: today 2 film adaptations have already appeared, one of them by director Cody Knotts, who is with us today.

So, on this occasion, thanks go to everyone who has directly or indirectly helped bring this recognition to Brockden Brown…

Vive CBB. And thank you.