In Search of Fanny Kemble and Her Georgian Plantation Journal: An Historical Appreciation

By TIMOTHY B. BIRD

One hundred and thirty years ago, a Victorian gentlewoman of refinement, sophistication, and accomplishment, to a degree remarkable even in that age of widespread individual achievement, visited for some three months the distinctive region of the American South known as the Sea Islands of the Georgia coast. While there, the lady—Frances Anne Kemble [1]—kept a lengthy record of her impressions, activities, and reactions as she lived and moved within the society of "the Golden Isles." These observations were in the form of letters which she intended to pass on to a circle of her friends in New England. The resulting account, a series of vivid and highly critical commentaries on Southern life, was duly circulated, read, and discussed among Miss Kemble's Yankee acquaintances, but only after her return from Georgia.[2]

She had found much of interest to relate. The islands, abundant with wildlife and lush in vegetation, had in the decades since the Revolutionary War become the favored site of a prosperous plantation culture, devoted to the production of rice and a type of long-staple cotton so valued that it took its name from the sea islands whereon it was bred.[3] In accord with the economic pattern by then

---

1. Born in 1809, Miss Kemble was one of Britain's foremost actresses from the time of her début at the age of 21. A member of the famous theatrical family which included Sarah Siddons and John, Richard and Charles Kemble, she was well-known in England and on the Continent long before she came to America on tour in 1832. Once arrived, she was pursued and married by Pierce Mease Butler, a dashing socialite who later took her with him to visit the family estates in Georgia. The best biography of Kemble is Leota S. Driver's *Fanny Kemble* (Chapel Hill, 1933), but a full sketch of her life as it relates to the topic at hand is contained in the Introduction to the 1961 edition of the *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf), compiled by John A. Scott.

2. The full story of the circumstances and motives surrounding the preparation of the accounts which later were published as Kemble's *Journal* is in Scott, "Introduction," xviii-xlv. The original letters were addressed to Elizabeth Dwight Sedgwick, a Boston friend who with her sister-in-law Catherine Maria Sedgwick presided over a *salon* of intellectuals and literary figures, many of whom held antislavery attitudes.

3. Sea-Island cotton was prized for the unusual length of its fibers. Prior to the invention of the Whitney cotton gin in 1793, it was the primary cash-

well-established in the South, and determined also by the harsh semi-tropical climate, the entire labor force on the sea island estates was composed of thousands of Negro slaves, imported from Africa, the West Indies, and the Upper South.

Although Fanny Kemble was in principle opposed to the idea of slavery and never disguised her views in this respect, she readily admitted her lack of first-hand experience; before going south she had pledged herself to report only that which she personally observed or could indisputably verify, and she conscientiously avoided any embellishment of fact. Aware of the pitfalls in accepting hearsay unquestioned, she understood how people everywhere desire to make positive impressions upon their guests and other strangers; specifically, she noted several errors of misinformation or gullibility committed by an earlier Southern traveler, the Englishwoman Harriet Martineau.[4]

In her position as the wife of Pierce Mease Butler [5]—among the area's largest planters and slaveholders, whose duties had occasioned their Southern trip—Fanny was placed in unusual proximity to every aspect of the plantation system and its peculiar, central institution. Although an "outsider"—by virtue of her English heritage, her foreign education, her theatrical profession, and her antislavery sympathies—she nevertheless took full advantage of her situation to investigate and record faithfully her observations and her complex, often tortured analyses of Southern life.[6]

Incredibly active for a woman of her era, or indeed any other, the

---

crop variety of cotton cultivated in the South, and the sea islands and littoral region of the Georgia-Carolina coast to which it was limited managed to develop a rich and distinctive agriculture based upon cotton and rice.

4. Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839,* edited by John A. Scott (New York, 1961), 54, 65, 116-117.

5. Fanny had married Butler in 1833. Their differences over slavery began as matters of argument soon thereafter, but developed into a serious threat to their relationship only after their sojourn in the Georgia island estates. Fanny exhibited an inflexible position on the injustice of bondage and those who maintained it, and this led to a stalemate in other matters. Butler was not one to bend to a woman's will, either. In 1844 he was caught with another man's wife, which led to a duel. He and Fanny were separated for several years and finally were divorced in 1849. She never re-married. The tragedy was further compounded when Pierce's half of the family slaves had to be sold to cover his debts in 1859. It was the largest such sale in the history of the slave South, involving 436 men, women and children. See Scott, "Introduction," xlii-liii. The later events are detailed in Mortimer Thomson, *What Became of the Slaves on a Georgia Plantation?* (Philadelphia, 1863).

6. Scott, "Introduction," xxix-xlv, liii-lix. Also see Kemble's own statement of intention in the *Journal,* 3-11. The whole text in its complexity gives ample evidence of her care, energy and anxiety.

lady made repeated visits to every corner of her husband's estates and to her neighbors' homes, concentrating her feminine, actress' ears and eyes upon each behavioral characteristic and any incident which revealed the social arrangements and inner workings of caste and class. Ceaselessly observant, she tried to catch every individual nuance and was attentive to the personal qualities of every person she met—whether black or white.[7] As if to provide a backdrop for the players on her Southern stage, she studied and keenly described the natural and man-made environment in which that society functioned; her sensitivity to human foibles was no less attuned to the infinite variations of flora and fauna which flourished in the forests, fields and marshes of the half-tamed islands.[8]

After her return from Georgia in April, 1839, Fanny shared the letters with her friends, as planned. And if her account embodied a profound, first-hand critique of slavery and the terrible moral, psychological, and spiritual costs it exacted from both master and bondsman—and it did contain that and much else—who was either to be hurt or the wiser for it, beyond that select group of New England intelligentsia in their privileged *salons*? When a few of her more actively abolitionist acquaintances suggested at the time that she make the Georgian letters public, Fanny categorically refused. She was no publicist. Indeed, even her abolitionism was of the mild variety urged by Dr. Channing: slaveholding was a personal issue to be faced by each owner individually, and all that the concerned outsider could or ought to do was employ moral suasion and Christian reason to bring these wayward unfortunates toward the light. In Georgia Fanny had taken this very approach toward her own husband's complicity in the evil of slaveholding.[9] She was also aware that publication would be an act of serious impropriety, with possible sorry consequences for her already tenuous marriage to Pierce Butler.[10] Her study of the South should remain a private incident.

---

7. Fanny was unique among white observers of the antebellum South, in this writer's estimation, in her penetrating attempt to *identify*, to share the eyes, so to speak, of each Negro or white who caught her attention. See, for example, her portraits of Psyche, the nursemaid, and of Roswell King, Jr., the white overseer. *Journal*, 132-140, 110-114, 220, 265-267.

8. Some critics of Kemble have trusted her colorful reports on the appearance of the sea island surroundings, while thoroughly disdaining her analysis of the human inhabitants. They will be discussed shortly.

9. Scott is especially helpful in developing this point, which not one of her biographers appreciates. "Introduction," xxix-xxxv.

10. Fanny was doubtless a temperamental, if fascinating companion. Their discord began over slavery, and ended in a tumult of infidelity, "mental cruelty," and separation followed by divorce in 1849. Scott, "Introduction," xliii-xlvii. Also see Driver, *Fanny Kemble*, 168-291.

The entire affair would be of only passing concern to today's students and scholars of history, had not Fanny decided twenty-five years later, at the crest of the American Civil War in 1863, to publish the letters. She took this action in the hope of rallying British public opinion, and especially that of the working classes, to the cause of the Union forces—which she supposed was faltering. Issued under the title, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-39,* in first an English, then an American edition,[11] the book sold well on both sides of the Atlantic and the author gained a certain notoriety for her allegedly merciless and vindictive attack upon everything the South held dear.

In the anguished waves of shock and despair generated by the Northern victory, for defenders of the antebellum era, the Kemble saga became elevated to the status of a major myth of betrayal. To the most impassioned Confederates, the impetuous actress had not only violated Georgia's hospitality and prostituted the honor of the Southland; by some she and her *Journal* were credited, or blamed, for having single-handedly prevented British recognition and military assistance to the Confederacy, just as it was about to materialize and turn the tide. The *Journal* became as infamous as Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: if *Uncle Tom* had caused the Civil War, Kemble's vicious *Journal* had kept the South from winning it.[12]

As with many other incidents and aspects of the antebellum South, the story of Fanny's visit and the *Journal* she produced took on successive accretions of fact and fancy in the ensuing postwar years, as popular and professional writers of history fastened upon it. Apologists and critics, debunkers and revisionists, when not using it to aid their cases, found it necessary to dispose of the *Journal* somehow. Best-known for its thorough and incisive critique of slavery, the book had in particular to be confronted by those who sought to cast the prewar South in a positive, wholesome light. Others saw it as reinforcing whatever attack might be made against the region and its traditions. Widespread exposure to treatment, by scholars of every rank, has not served either Miss Kemble or her *Journal* fairly.[13] They have, by and large, been misused as partisan tools in

---

11. London: Longmans and Company, 1863; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1863.

12. Scott, "Introduction," xlvi-liii. Some examples of the "overblown" school are: Margaret Armstrong, *Fanny Kemble: A Passionate Victorian* (New York, 1938); Dorothy Bobbé, *Fanny Kemble* (New York, 1931); Caroline Couper Lovell, *The Golden Isles of Georgia* (Boston, 1933); Medora Field Perkerson, *White Columns in Georgia* (New York, 1952).

13. Among the scholars who utilize Kemble but are not discussed in this essay are John Hope Franklin, who briefly cites her in both *The*

the ongoing debate and search for the "true" nature of the Old South, and both critics and defenders have consistently substituted sketchy images of single, flat dimension for the complex substance of the letters and the character of their brilliant author.

Present students of the South and its past can no longer be readily excused for their misinterpretation and ignorance of the actual nature and significance of the Georgian *Journal*. In 1961, the book was reprinted by Alfred A. Knopf, in a new edition well annotated and fully researched by John A. Scott.[14] It is as close to a definitive version as is likely ever to be produced, and is accompanied by a lengthy Introduction (also by Scott)—the only comprehensive study of the book itself ever published.[15] Scott has apparently uncovered every bit of data known about the book: the circumstances of Miss Kemble's sojourn; her motives and methods in composing the *Journal*; the disputes over the accuracy of its contents; the importance of its wartime publication; the reactions of the press; and the available sales figures. His essay thoroughly treats all these matters and his appendices include biographical sketches of every notable person the book mentions.

After investigating the book's impact in its own time—its alleged influence upon British policy toward the Confederacy, its supposed notoriety in inflaming popular opinion against the South in England and America, and its overall sales—Scott concludes: "Fanny's *Journal* simply came on the scene too late to affect the outcome at all."[16] Along with other pro-Union literature whose circulation was stimulated by the Emancipation Proclamation, the book was probably read widely; but it caused no unusual stir. Several major British and American literary magazines ignored its publication entirely and did not review it, and those which did take notice greeted it with mixed

---

Militant South and *From Slavery to Freedom*; E. Franklin Frazier, who makes extensive use of the *Journal* in *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, 1939, 1966) in discussing the slave family; and James Ford Rhodes, whose dependence on Fanny would require lengthy discussion, but whose devotion is well duplicated by his latter-day disciple Kenneth Stampp. [Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (New York, 1893).]

14. Scott, who teaches at New York University, appears to have used all of the known sources on Kemble in England and the United States; I was able to unearth only one serious omission on his part, discussed below. His "Introduction" runs to sixty-one pages.

15. This assertion may conceivably be unwarranted, but none of the published writings on Fanny Kemble or the *Journal* itself, and these include five biographies and several articles, make any mention of such a study.

16. Scott, "Introduction," li.

sentiments.[17] Among its admirers, the *Atlantic Monthly* went so far as to call Miss Kemble's "the decisive voice" in the long debate over slavery and the South. The *Journal* was "the first ample, lucid, faithful, detailed account, from the actual headquarters of a slave plantation in this country, of the workings of the system.[18]

Since the British publisher (Longmans and Co.) had its files destroyed in World War II, and Harper's, the American publisher, has no sales records, there is no sure way of ascertaining the book's actual circulation or sales figures. Scott has confirmed that in the United States a second printing of the 1863 edition was issued in 1864 (though its size is also indeterminate), and notes another "clue" to its apparent American popularity in that portions of it were thought worthy of reprinting in pamphlet form, entitled *The Views of Judge Woodward and Bishop Hopkins on Negro Slavery at the South* (1863).[19] It seems reasonable to conclude that the book may have had a wide readership, but that any furor it aroused had no effect on the war's conduct; that its impact was bound to be absorbed in the waves of excitement over the Emancipation Proclamation and the improved fortunes of the Union; and that its contemporary appeal or influence could in no way be compared with that of the earlier, sensational *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After 1864 there were no subsequent editions of the *Journal* in America, until the Scott version of 1961; and the book has experienced no British revivals whatever.[20]

Beyond summarizing Scott's commendable, balanced findings,[21]

17. *Ibid.*, lii-liv.

18. *Atlantic Monthly*, XII (August, 1863), 260. Also quoted in Scott, liv.

19. *The Views of Judge Woodward and Bishop Hopkins on Negro Slavery at the South* (Philadelphia, 1863). Cited also in Scott, liii. Leota S. Driver mentions another such excerpt, published as: *The Essence of Slavery, Extracted from a Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*, by Isa Craig (Ladies' London Emancipation Society, Tract Number 2), London, 1863. Driver, *Fanny Kemble*, 245.

20. Again, my search has been thorough, and Scott, Driver, or one of the others would have detected any exceptions.

21. Although Scott is certainly a partisan of Miss Kemble, his account is marked throughout by an effort to be fair to the critics. Especially notable is his handling of Margaret Davis Cate, Kemble's most skilled and troublesome detractor. Following Scott's research visit to the islands, Mrs. Cate published an article, "Mistakes in Fanny Kemble's Journal," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, XLIV (March, 1960), 1-22. Scott soon answered with his own sally, in addition to the new edition of the *Journal*: "On the Authenticity of Fanny Kemble's *Journal of a Georgian Plantation in 1838-39*," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVI (October, 1961), 233-242. Their differences were merely picayune at most points, but the one substantive question, that of Kemble's misdating of the Wylly-Hazzard duel to coincide with her visit (instead of previous to it), Scott

he who would add much of value to a full appreciation of the *Journal* and its author is sorely challenged. Supplementary to the reportage of certain essential information collected in the Scott edition, and the book's "story," above, the present investigation concentrates upon two issues which should be of primary concern to modern historians. One Scott has touched upon; the other he has not.[22]

I. How have scholars and other writers treated Kemble and her *Journal*? How have they used or misused her work?

II. How does Fanny Kemble's study of slavery and plantation life compare with other antebellum accounts and commentaries on the same region? What is the historical significance of her work?

* * * * * *

I. The *Journal* in Popular and Historical Writing

In the custody of numerous popular and scholarly writers, Fanny's *Journal* has usually been sketched in an extreme light or dark shade, depending on the writer's persuasion. For neo-abolitionists Miss Kemble has long been a major heroine because of her thorough hostility to slavery; for those who have sought to defend the institutions of the Old South she has remained an ill-mannered betrayer. In biographies, popular history, journalism, and serious scholarship, the issues of Fanny's motives and reliability, her portrayal of slavery and plantation life, and the significance of the *Journal* in Southern history have been argued repeatedly, with little agreement.

The several biographies of Fanny Kemble are generally unsatisfactory in their treatment of both her character and the story of her Southern residence, as Scott explains in his brief account of the literature. The works by Dorothy Bobbé, Margaret Armstrong, and Henrietta Buckmaster all are flawed on the side of romance at the expense of accuracy and insight.[23] But Scott commits a serious error of omission (the only one I could detect in his study) when he asserts, "Fanny Kemble awaits the biographer," and claims that none of the existing studies "has tapped the rich manuscript material

---

concedes immediately, while affirming that she had the circumstances correct. He maintains she wished to include the story because dueling had had a detested role in the ruination of her own marriage.

22. Scott, "Introduction," xlvi-liii.

23. Dorothy Bobbé, *Fanny Kemble*, and Margaret Armstrong, *Fanny Kemble: A Passionate Victorian*, are cited above; Henrietta Buckmaster, *Fire in the Heart* (New York, 1948). The same judgment applies to Janet Stevenson's biographical novel on Fanny, *The Ardent Years* (New York, 1960).

available in the United States." [24] He ignores completely the thorough, insightful and polished biography of Kemble which Leota S. Driver published in 1933.[25] Her work is based on primary sources (the same ones Scott himself used) and does not shy away from the complexity of Fanny's personality or the intricate questions raised by her critique of plantation society. Since the Scott study quotes directly from a review of the Driver volume, his awareness of its existence is certain; its absence from his consideration thus becomes incomprehensible, if not downright suspicious.[26]

The Kemble myth has endured extensive treatment in the realm of popular history, most often in celebrations of Georgia's hallowed past. Predictably, such works as *Georgia's Land of the Golden Isles, White Columns in Georgia,* and *The Golden Isles of Georgia,* while they abound in rich descriptive materials, tend to stress the "smiling aspects" of the Old South, understating both the hardships of slavery and the moral dilemmas of the owners.[27] Through their inaccuracies and excessive enthusiasm, these accounts have become the main bearers of the distorted impression of Miss Kemble which holds in the popular mind, and they have seemed to influence some ostensibly scholarly treatments as well. In some instances the factual error is exceeded only by the dramatic effect, as with Medora Field Perkerson's claim that "the book created a sensation little short of that which followed the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* English sympathy promptly swung away from the South and the hoped-for English support was lost." [28] The patent foolishness of that contention has been shown above.

Another patterned response of the Magnolia tradition has been to quote at length from Fanny's admiring descriptions of lush sea island scenery, applauding her perceptions, while dismissing entirely her critique of slavery on the grounds of her marital unhappiness, her

---

24. Scott, "Biographies of F. A. Kemble," in *Journal,* 409.
25. Driver, *Fanny Kemble* (Chapel Hill, 1933).
26. Further pursuit of the issue would likely be inconclusive, unless Scott himself could be consulted. Driver, with a full volume to utilize, certainly provides a more complex and satisfying explication of Kemble's personality development than Scott can entertain, although even she finds the lady slippery, changeable, and impossible of reduction to fixed formulae at many junctures. This is precisely her fascination as a subject. Scott seems wholly unaware of many subtleties of Kemble's character which Driver introduces, which leads to a tentative guess that he simply did not read the book, though he must have come across it by name in the Fletcher Green book review that he cites (Scott, "Introduction," liv.).
27. Burnette Vanstory, *Georgia's Land of the Golden Isles* (Athens, Ga., 1956); Perkerson, *White Columns,* and Lovell, *The Golden Isles.*
28. Perkerson, *White Columns,* 133-134.

being "spoiled," and her antislavery sentiments. As a "gifted artist" she could be trusted to perceive nature's beauty, but as a meddling outsider she lacked the license to report social relationships.[29] Occasional examples of the popular genre, while critical of Kemble's candid antagonism to slavery, manage to convey a balanced view of the legend. Hal Steed's *Georgia: Unfinished State* and the several works of Margaret Davis Cate are solid attempts to take account of both the sordid and the serene in the antebellum era, although they still retain a disproportionate emphasis upon the "smiling aspects" of the South's experience.[30]

Present-day journalists are among the other writers who have used the Kemble story. Two examples are Ralph McGill and James McBride Dabbs, both experienced observers of the changing South, who are similar in their attempts to rationalize and explain the shifting tensions of past and present. McGill in *The South and the Southerner* [31] devotes an entire chapter to "Butler Island Plantation," re-examining the Kemble legend in the context of the decaying sea-island region he observed in the 1930's. While he does not directly challenge Fanny's radical image, McGill effectively revives and confirms her perception of slavery's twisted impact: "The chloroforming myths lie yet on the land, and in the pages of novels and histories. Worse still, they have held in attitudes toward the Negro." [32] Mr. Dabbs notes the region's quality of "essential falseness touched with goodness" (a genial reversal of U. B. Phillips), as he cites Fanny Kemble on the social intricacies of race. Dabbs stresses the two-way involvement of the races in one another's lot, quoting the lady's comment on "the natural turn for good manners which is . . . a distinctive peculiarity of Negroes . . . . It is curious enough that there is hardly any alloy whatever of cringing servility, or even humility, in the good manners of the blacks, but a rather courtly and affable condescension." [33] Along this line, Dabbs thinks that the much-vaunted manners of white Southerners were largely learned from

---

29. Lovell, *The Golden Isles,* 196-213. Lovell devotes an entire chapter to Fanny's vivid descriptions, but refuses to consider the more touchy issues raised in the *Journal.* Lovell also errs in her implication that Fanny first published the *Journal* soon after leaving Georgia, and that the 1863 volume is a later edition (p. 209).

30. Margaret Davis Cate, "Mistakes in Fanny Kemble's Journal" (previously cited); Cate and Orrin S. Wightman, *Early Days of Coastal Georgia* (St. Simon's Island, 1955); Hal Steed, *Georgia: Unfinished State* (New York, 1942).

31. Ralph McGill, *The South and the Southerner* (Boston, 1959, 1963).

32. *Ibid.,* 157.

33. James McBride Dabbs, *The Southern Heritage* (New York, 1958), 139.

Negroes. Borrowing further from Kemble, he observes that when Fanny termed the flogging of a female slave "unjust," her husband, Pierce Butler, replied it was, instead, "disagreeable." Dabbs adds: "It only ruffled the surface of his life; it stirred hers to the core . . . . This is where you come out if you substitute love for justice." [34] Both McGill and Dabbs offer enlightened appreciations of Fanny's antebellum sensitivity, reviving her observations for present relevance.

Not surprisingly, the most frequent and extensive attentions have been accorded Miss Kemble by scholarly pursuers. The regional biases and the varying schools of historical opinion which are reflected in their views strikingly confirm Fanny Kemble's lasting power to provoke controversy. Some writers damn her openly, some by omission, while others admire her work so fully as to seem overdependent upon its support. The supposedly comprehensive studies of the South by William B. Hesseltine and Francis B. Simkins pass Kemble off with the briefest of mentions, and ignore the whole thrust of her argument.[35] Selectivity is unavoidable, of course, but these scholars could not have been unaware of the notoriety or the weight of Kemble's views, however unpleasant, and might at least have recognized her challenge. A third senior historian, Clement Eaton, has revised his treatment of the *Journal* over the years: from an early, curt (and unexplained) jab at her "bitterly prejudiced account of slavery and the life of a rice planter," he shifts and manages a decade later to cite her six times, balancing her harsh view of slavery against the kindlier outlook of the Swedish traveler, Fredrika Bremer, while accepting Fanny's comments on life in Savannah.[36] A more hostile opinion was that of Fletcher Green, who spoke only of Fanny's "preconceived ideas" of slavery's evils, and her "bitter condemnation" of the institution, which were influenced by her incapacity "to see or understand the view of the American people"; Green refuses to consider any of her arguments or observations on their merits.[37] The lofty Ulrich B. Phillips, for his part, precedes Eaton in moving from

---

34. *Ibid.*, 240.

35. William B. Hesseltine, *The South in American History* (New York, 1943), 220; Francis Butler Simkins, *A History of the South* (New York, 1942, 1963), 127.

36. Clement B. Eaton, *A History of the Old South* (New York, 1949), 240; Eaton, *The Growth of Southern Civilization* (New York, 1961), 102, 127. In his *Freedom of Thought in the Old South* (Durham, 1940), Eaton accepts Kemble's work without issue on the slaveowners' fear of servile insurrection (see p. 111).

37. Fletcher Melvin Green, review of Leota S. Driver, *Fanny Kemble*, in *Journal of Southern History*, I (May, 1935), 219-220.

a single blast, wherein he sourly records Fanny's evaluation without challenging her facts (he implies "absentee neglect" as the sole cause of the sad condition of Butler's holdings), to a later willingness to do battle with her. Phillips devotes a sizable segment of his compact *Life and Labor in the Old South* to a discussion of the Altamaha plantations, and attempts to destroy Kemble's indictment by quoting the Butler overseer's records and by damning the *Journal* as "a monotonous view of the seamy side, and an exhibit of the critic's own mental processes." [38]

For an appropriate antidote to Eaton, Green and Phillips, as usual nothing excels Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution*. Overplaying the part of horror, this study makes the most extensive use of the *Journal* of any secondary work examined by the writer. Fanny serves unopposed as a commentator on a dozen aspects of slavery ranging from slave breeding, to religion as a control device, to tetanus.[39] But like the other historians mentioned above, Stampp manages to miss the fullness and the variety of Kemble's comprehension of slavery and the South's social system. He completely ignores her sensitive observations on the ironies of slave life, such as the infantilism it sometimes produced, the relatively good condition of the slaves she knew, or her compassion for the masters. The endless contrasts and mixed blessings which her observations entail have usually gone neglected by those who have used her *Journal* for their own purposes. Only in rare instances have scholars sought to convey the full dimension of her work.

To the present writer, the three most satisfying applications of Fanny Kemble's contributions are those of Ralph B. Flanders, Lewis C. Gray, and Willie Lee Rose. [40] They are especially notable for the overall balance, catholicity, and grace of their separate investigations, beyond the inclusion of references to Kemble. Flanders (in *Plantation Slavery in Georgia*), using Kemble only sparingly, provides especially sharp insights into the problems of absentee ownership and the rustic, even frontier quality of sea-island civilization. The contradictory data and the varied opinions are spun into a well-rounded

---

38. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (New York, 1918; Baton Rouge, 1966), 251; Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929, 1963), 259-264.

39. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1956), 152, 158, 248-249, 286, 304, 317-318, 327, 333, 335, 339-340, 346, 363-364, 366.

40. Ralph B. Flanders, *Plantation Slavery in Georgia* (Chapel Hill, 1933); Lewis Cecil Gray, *A History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860* (Washington, D. C., 1933); Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York, 1964).

and compelling narrative.[41] The classic work of L.C. Gray on the history of Southern agriculture cannot match Flanders' exceptional style, but its sound handling of exhaustive data on the economic development of a huge region bears the stamp of authority. Again it is the blending of materials from Kemble (plus hundreds of other sources) into a convincing whole that commands the student's respect. Gray makes use of the *Journal's* contents on matters of poor white status, female laborers, organization of slave labor, task labor, and health and sanitation.[42] Finally, Willie Lee Rose's *Rehearsal for Reconstruction* is deserving of mention for its refined integration of several of Fanny's most pointed observations—on the absolutism of masters, on the ill treatment of pregnant slave women, and on the direct connection between slavery and the coming of the war—into an account of a later period and a somewhat different district of the South.[43] Mrs. Rose weaves Kemble's ideas into the text in such a reasonable fashion, made legitimate by the surrounding data, that these incongruities in time and place pass unnoticed. As in the studies of Flanders and Gray, the *Journal's* arguments need not stand alone, but are employed as reinforcements within a continuous fabric of argument. In these more penetrating scholarly efforts, Miss Kemble's beleaguered *Journal* comes into its own. Rescued from oblivion, deflated from polemic, used judiciously the *Journal* has been established as a discriminating commentary and important primary source on the plantation South.

A further appreciation of the special clarity and integrity of Kemble's perceptions may be gained by comparing her insights and descriptions with the reports of other contemporary observers; at key points of similarity and difference, the *Journal's* unique sophistication is convincingly dramatized.

II. Other Views of Kemble's Georgia

Although the society of the sea islands and the Altamaha region had played host to many visitors of note since the colonial days of Georgia's founding,[44] it was not until the turn of the nineteenth century that the plantation system later scrutinized by Fanny Kemble evolved to dominate and characterize the area. Perhaps the first guest whose observations were later published, and certainly the most in-

41. Flanders, *Plantation Slavery*, 94, 224-225.
42. Gray, *History of Agriculture*, I, 563, 485, 548, 551, 562.
43. Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, 112-113, 122, 199.
44. Vanstory, *Georgia's Golden Isles*, 1-33. These guests included James Oglethorpe himself, and the theological brothers John and Charles Wesley.

teresting for the circumstances of his sojourn, was the ex-Vice President, Aaron Burr, who as a fugitive from New Jersey justice after his duel with Alexander Hamilton found refuge at Major Pierce Butler's Hampton Point Estate in 1804.[45]

Burr's exile there continued for several weeks, but his letters contain only sketchy and casual references to the workings of the agricultural system, the planter society, and the facilities and pastimes of the residents. He did note that St. Simon's Island had just twenty-five white families, that the territory seemed wild and forbidding, and that "it must become fine rice country," owing to the regular high rising of the tides (which caused the fields to be irrigated) and the strategic situation of Butler's Island.[46] His visit was pleasant, his host gracious, and he remarked being impressed especially with the intelligence, charm, and efficiency of Butler's neighbor, the renowned John Couper of Hopeton Plantation, whose reputation as a "model planter" was already widespread, and whose excellence as both a master and manager was to be recalled by every subsequent writer who visited the islands until the 1850's.[47] The one striking event recorded by Burr was a disastrous hurricane, which dramatized the tenuous aspect of coastal life by destroying most of the cotton and rice crops of both Couper and Major Butler, the former losing about $100,000, the latter half that amount. Nineteen of Butler's slaves were drowned and a neighbor, one Brailsford, lost seventy-four field hands.[48]

No critic of slavery, Aaron Burr was identified by his own heritage and position with the outlook of the upper classes. In his letters he had no intent to analyze or evaluate the plantation regime, an objective which was to preoccupy several subsequent commentators who visited the Georgia islands. But Burr's remarks, in particular his notes on the newness and ruggedness of this rich province of the slave South, provide a relevant backdrop for the fuller insights of later observers.

When Fanny Kemble compiled her *Journal* in 1838-39, the planter regime was firmly entrenched; the economic and social activities of the sea island dwellers had taken the shape they were to retain until disrupted by the Civil War. Two travelers who followed Fanny and who rendered what might be called competing views of the society,

---

45. Aaron Burr, *Correspondence of Aaron Burr and his Daughter Theodosia*, edited by Mark Van Doren (New York, 1929), 175-183.
46. *Ibid.*, 180-181.
47. *Ibid.*, 176-180.
48. *Ibid.*, 182.

and of slavery as it existed there, were Sir Charles Lyell [49] and Fredrika Bremer.[50] In contrast to Aaron Burr, both sought to examine, comprehend, and explain fully the nature of life in the American South, in writings which (unlike Kemble) they intended for publication as interpretive reports on the people, institutions, and habits of the United States.[51]

Sir Charles Lyell came to St. Simon's Island in 1848, and it was perhaps natural that the famous geologist and naturalist should choose to visit John Couper of Hopeton, who was known throughout the South as a scientist and agricultural experimenter. As he recorded it, slavery in the sea islands was a practical, even progressive social-economic system. Indeed, "to one who arrives in Georgia direct from Europe, with a vivid impression on his mind of the state of the peasantry there . . . the condition of the black laborers on such a property as Hopeton, will afford but small ground for lamentation or despondency." [52] To Lyell the slaves' labor requirements seemed relatively light, and that "if we place ourselves in the condition of the majority of the population, that of servants, we see at once how many advantages we should enjoy over the white race in the same rank of life in Europe." [53] He was impressed also by the mechanical skills of some slaves, their occasional use of leisure time to make canoes for sale (also noted by Kemble and Bremer) and by the salutary, educative effects of whatever contacts they might have with their white masters.[54] In this connection he emphasized the blessings of the religious training which many of the slaves were given. "Until lately," he reported, "the humblest slave who joined the Methodist or Baptist denomination could feel that he was one of a powerful association of Christians . . . . He could claim many schools and colleges of high repute in New England as belonging to his own sect, and feel proud of many celebrated writers whom they have educated." [55]

---

49. Sir Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (London, 1849).

50. Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World,* 2 vols. (New York, 1854).

51. Bremer, "Preface," 3-5; Sir Charles had previously published other studies of Americans and their environment, and he frankly announced his effort to interpret the huge young country for British readers. See Lyell, pp. 1-7.

52. Lyell, *Second Visit,* 262.

53. *Ibid.,* 263.

54. *Ibid.,* 265-269.

55. *Ibid.,* 270. What saddened him was that the Northern churches had recently deprived the slaves and their owners of this pleasant association by severing their ties, in misplaced pursuit of abolition.

Sir Charles never failed to stress the mitigating aspects of plantation life for the slaves, and never passed judgment on the institution as a whole. However, by restricting his investigations to Hopeton and by building generalizations upon his contacts there, serious distortions were inevitably built into his analysis. Lyell *knew* Hopeton was an exceptional case,[56] yet he focused his entire description of the plantation system upon it with not a single mention of the often widely differing practices—less efficient and less benevolent—on nearby estates. For example, one prevailing pattern in the islands, in marked contrast to Hopeton, was absentee ownership wherein the proprietors delegated the management of their holdings, for all or most of the year, to white stewards or overseers; in this the Butler operation was typical.[57] The condition of Couper's "hospital" and his lenient treatment of pregnant slave women were likewise unusually progressive, and while such matters might not be central, they do affect the "liberal," optimistic tone of Lyell's whole description.[58] His account only once lapses into negativism, and it is here that he reluctantly suggests a key insight on slavery, its very *arbitrary* nature:

> The names of gangs and drivers are odious, and the sight of the whip was painful to me as a mark of degradation, reminding me that the lower orders of slaves are kept to their work by mere bodily fear, and that their treatment must depend upon the individual character of the owner or overseer. That the whip is rarely used, and often held for weeks over them, merely *in terrorem*, is, I have no doubt, true on all well-governed estates; . . . .[59]

One year later, another traveler concluded after a stay at Hopeton:

> It is not natural to me to look out for subjects of blame. I do not recognize such excepting when they force themselves upon me. I do not avoid seeing darkness, but I seek for the light which can illumine the darkness, in all, and

56. His protestations ring unconvincing: "I may be told this was a favorable specimen of a well-managed estate; if so, I may at least affirm that mere chance led me to pay this visit, that is to say, scientific objects wholly unconnected with the 'domestic institutions' of the south, or the character of the owner in relation to his slaves." It was not strange that he should seek out Couper to talk science, but he need not have posed Hopeton as a randomly-selected operation. *Ibid.*, 262.

57. Flanders, *Plantation Slavery*, 94-95.

58. Lyell's account errs by omission because it takes no cognizance of those estates which departed from the Hopeton model. See p. 264.

59. *Ibid.*, 265.

> with all. In the darkness of slavery I have sought for the moment of freedom with faith and hope in the genius of America. It is no fault of mine that I have found the darkness so great, and the work of light as yet so feeble in the slave states.[60]

Fredrika Bremer, a sensitive bourgeois lady from Sweden, made an extensive tour through the United States and published her recollections in the form of letters, entitled *Homes of the New World*. Less scientifically minded than Sir Charles, she took more notice of social relations, domestic arrangements and moral conduct, areas which the naturalist had tended to overlook. Her account of life on St. Simon's Island, the only part of the Altamaha region she saw, is briefer than Lyell's but still of interest. In visiting John Couper, Mrs. Bremer was aware of his reputation as a reformer and sought him out to examine the plantation system at its most efficient. "But," she recalled, "I did not find him a reformer, merely a disciplinarian, with great practical tact, and also some benevolence in the treatment of the negroes." [61] She admired Couper's "unusual faculty for systematization," and agreed with his views regarding the "peculiar faculties" of the Negroes. More of a racist than Lyell, who imposed no prejudgment on the capacity of the blacks to advance,[62] Mrs. Bremer believed that:

> The tropical races can not attain to the development and intelligence of the native whites in the temperate zones. They are deficient in the power of abstract thought, of systematization, of pursuing strict laws of reason, and of uniting themselves on a basis of this kind. The tropical races typify the highest state of the life of feeling . . . . They are very receptive of culture, and may, during their subjection to a more developed race, develop a very respectable capacity for thought and artistic ability. They may arrive at a respectable degree of *semi-civilization,* interesting by the peculiar forms which it would assume . . . .[63]

---

60. Bremer, *Homes of the New World,* I, 492.
61. *Ibid.,* 488-489.
62. Lyell (pp. 266-269), to his credit, stressed the slaves' contact with whites, a kind of one-way, imitative "culture borrowing," as a demonstrable process of "uplift" which regularly had effect. As a further contrast, it was Fanny Kemble who perceived that this form of learning worked both ways, an insight elaborated much later by James McBride Dabbs.
63. Bremer, *Homes of the New World,* I, 489.

As a Christian lady, despite "the darkness so great" she observed in slavery, Fredrika Bremer could not abandon hope that it would all come to some good end. With Mr. Couper, she united "with the good party in the South, who regard the colonization of Africa by the liberated negro slaves *as the final result and object* of the institution of slavery." [64] Unfortunately, Mrs. Bremer soon found that the high incidence of religious training claimed by the planters was greatly exaggerated, a revelation which dampened her enthusiasm for colonization, for one of the most alluring prospects of colonization was the conversion of African heathens by black American missionaries.[65]

Again, Hopeton was the chosen estate singled out for examination, but it is to Mrs. Bremer's credit that she explained her choice. It should be noted that both Bremer and Lyell stuck to the facts as they observed them, as did Fanny, and that the variations among the accounts are essentially those of emphasis, omission and interpretation, not data. Of course, Kemble's immediate and overwhelming advantage was that her explorations were concentrated upon one small region, whereas the others surveyed many parts of North America, and also that she was granted a three month tour, as against a few weeks for Lyell and Bremer, to develop her more complex, balanced, thus more valuable *opus*.

Far more than a carping, critical observer, Fanny Kemble took her role of plantation mistress seriously, if reluctantly (a fact unobserved by Scott or her biographers). Despite the brief duration of her stay, she spent much of her time attending to and improving those segments of the Butler estates which normally would be her province: the diet, shelter, clothing, health and cleanliness of the slaves; the house and kitchen; the infirmary. Within the context of the system she despised, she became something of a reformer and a missionary—hoping to ameliorate the slaves' condition by planning gardens, having roads and paths widened, and reading the Scriptures to them and encouraging baptism. Retaining her critical faculties, she nevertheless strove to make herself useful. And for all her indignation, her comments on the upper classes were far from one-sided, including sympathetic portraits of John Couper of Hopeton and his son James, and friendly remarks about her neighbors, Cap-

---

64. *Ibid.* Italics mine.

65. *Ibid.*, 491. This view on the highly limited degree of religious instruction received by the slaves was often noted by Fanny Kemble, who read to groups of them frequently but realized the appeal for them was more in the sound of her voice and her kindness than in the contents of the message.

tain Fraser and his wife. An unusually complimentary view of Dr. Holmes, a medical expert who was respected by all, is balanced by her intricate, mixed evaluations of the overseer Roswell King and her husband Pierce Butler. Regarding the latter pair, she might abhor some of their attitudes, but she never failed to appreciate their predicament. As owners and managers of human property, their own humanity was inevitably compromised.

In everything she did, always her moral sense, her superior, indefatigable intuition, invested her observations with a relevance and poignancy not restricted to her own brief experience of life in southern America. Fanny was no pure egalitarian. It was not her view that no man should be the servant of another; rather she believed, and strongly, that the relations of master and man should and could be those of mutual regard for their respective roles, obligations and duties. Her unquestioned support of a class system was accompanied by a powerful conviction that civilized societies must uphold the dignity of the human personality, at all stations of life. That slavery maimed and degraded the Negro was only its most tragic, obvious, and intolerable result. Its similarly grievous, if more subtle corollary, was the moral decadence and corruption bred amidst the planter classes through the exercise of arbitrary power over their black serfs.

As Scott notes:

> Mrs. Kemble was a white woman who cast aside the apologetics which rationalized and defended the Negro people, and who won a true perception of their strength, dignity, and beauty . . . . This achievement was nonetheless impressive for being the result of a constant struggle to penetrate to the heart of things through the repulsive outer circumstance of dirt, ugliness and disease. Fanny Kemble fought, in a difficult time, her own battle on behalf of the brotherhood of man.[66]

In short, and incredible for her era, she was simply not a racist. That was Fanny Kemble's gift, her triumph, her rarity. The *Journal* she left us remains unique among all other contemporary accounts of the antebellum plantation South for its thorough probing of one primary type of slaveholding society—the rice and cotton-rich sea islands—with a pen as critical as it was compassionate toward the filth and degradation of the system's black victims, and as analytical as it

---

66. Scott, "Introduction," lix.

was engaged with the horrors and dilemmas in which the white masters were entangled. If as a portrait of the South's whole life Miss Kemble's penetrations provide small competition for the widespread and comprehensive sorties of an Olmsted, they surpass in the extreme any comparable expositions of the social existence of localized plantation communities, such as those of Smedes and Chestnut. She managed despite her brief visit to probe, in her ceaseless tramps and unprecedented canoeings, every imaginable aspect—the foliage as well as the foibles—of the small yet complex world of Darien, St. Simon's, Butler's Island, Hopeton, and the Altamaha delta. The steady clarity of her perceptions is endlessly enriched by her wit, irony and premonition. She could quip about the fear of "race-mixing" held by covert miscegenators, expose the hypocrisy of "uplifting" religion for the slaves, and ponder the potentiality of sectional war, all in the same spirit of moral indignation sharpened by reason and successive experiences. Today's reader of the *Journal* re-lives with her the growth of awareness, the ebbing of optimism, the sorrow of her helplessness to change any of the conditions she loathed. Fanny Kemble's effort to understand and portray one corner of the antebellum South remains unmatched in its depth and sincerity—her spirit still commands respect, and her work demands rereading.