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CONSTANTINE BELTRAMI.

[By A. J. Hill, of St. Paul; at the request of the Minnesota Historical Society.]

§ 1. INTRODUCTORY.

Though narratives of the fortunes of early explorers of a country cannot, in general, throw any light upon its history, apart from their travels in the region itself, yet such recitals or biographies may still be useful in enabling us to form juster opinions of the accounts given by the travelers of their discoveries, from the knowledge afforded as to character, attainments and position.

Of the subject of this article, till within a few years, nothing was known to us, Minnesotians, beyond the little to be gleaned from his own books of travel and from the narrative of the expedition of Major Long; and even these works are so out of date that the name of Beltrami is unfamiliar to our ears. His life is like the bridge in the vision of Mirza—we see but the middle of it—the beginning and end are hid in obscurity. The recent publication, in Italy, of biographical notices of this traveler, has furnished the means of supplying the deficiency of information concerning him; and at the request of the Historical Society of Minnesota, the present memoir has been compiled, as a fitting contribution to its "Collections."

§ 2. PUBLISHED KNOWLEDGE OF BELTRAMI BEFORE HIS DEATH.

No doubt, at the time our traveler visited the United States more or less was said concerning him in the journals of the day; and that he was violently assailed by writers of that time is shown in his own books; but such accounts, appearing in fleeting papers, are now entirely inaccessible, and indeed would be of but little interest or value if they could be found.

Hitherto, therefore, our knowledge of Beltrami was derived from three books only, which were:

1. A work, published by himself at New Orleans in 1824, entitled "La Decouverte des Sources du Mississippi et de la Riviere Sanglante," one vol., 8vo pp. 328.
2. "Keating's Narrative of Long's Expedition to the Sources of the St. Peter's River, &c.," Philadelphia, 1824; and
3. "A Pilgrimage in Europe and America, leading to the Discovery of the Sources of the Mississippi and Bloody River, with a description of the whole course of the former, and of the Ohio. By J. C. Beltrami, Esq, formerly judge of a royal court in the ex-kingdom of Italy." London, 1828; 2 volumes. 8vo., pp. 1093.

The first of these is a narrative simply of his tour in the west, from Pittsburg to the head waters of the Mississippi, and thence to New Orleans, written in French, and in the form of letters addressed to a friend, the Countess *Compagnoni* born *Passeri*. Major Long's book contains but one or two references to Beltrami, and those of a depreciating character. The exact nature of the disagreement between the two gentlemen is not

known, nor would it be right to exhume and display it, if it could be done. All familiar with the history of "expeditions" must have noticed how often coolness or rupture have occurred between leading men of such parties, arising from arrogance, jealousy, or incompatibility of temper. The "Pilgrimage" of Beltrami gives an account of his European travels previous to his coming to the United States, and then embodies his former work which he seems merely to have translated into English, without other alterations than a few verbal changes.

A synopsis of the personal history found in the above works is as follows :

He had been an official of the ex-kingdom of Italy, and was sent into exile without trial—traveled in France, Germany, and England, in 1821-2—went to the United States in 1823, and descended the Ohio river to its mouth ; thence, in company with Major Taliaferro, embarked for the Upper Mississippi—reached Fort St. Anthony (Snelling) May 20, 1823, whence he had expected to accompany Major T. up the river St Peter—at that time unexplored—with the intention of proceeding further, toward the sources of the Mississippi, also unknown. But circumstances did not admit of that, and he was on the point of changing his direction for the south, by traversing by land, the wild tracts lying between the Fort and Council Bluffs, when Major Long and his party unexpectedly arrived. He accompanied this expedition, which left the Fort on the 7th of July, as far as Pembina, where he quitted it, on the 9th of August, and with a *bois brule* and the two Chippewas only, for companions, plunged into the wilderness lying to the south east, and struck "Robber's" (Thief) river near its confluence with Red Lake River (which he calls "Bloody River," and insists that it is the true Red River.) He then followed the course of the latter stream to Red Lake, whence, after visiting its south shore, he ascended the river of the Grand Portage to its sources at a small lake on a hill where he arrived on the 28th, and which, on "the theory of the ancient geographers, that the sources of a river which are most in a right line with its mouth, should be considered as its principal sources, and particularly when they issue from a cardinal point and flow to the one directly opposite," he maintained to be the head of the Red River of the North. This lake he also described as supplying the most northern sources of the Mississippi ; and on that ground, and also that they had been previously unknown, rested his claims as a geographical discoverer. He named the lake "Julia," from a dear friend of his, deceased, [Moroni says, "after the woman of his heart ;"] and the stream issuing southwardly from it, the "Julian sources of the Mississippi." The present Itasca Lake he referred to as called by the Indians "Bitch Lake," (Lac la Biche—"Elk" Lake,) and as being most probably the "western sources of the Mississippi*." After

*See hydrographical discussion by Col. W hittlesey, appended to this memoir.

ascending Leech Lake River, and visiting the lake itself, he returned by the Mississippi to the Fort, (Fort Snelling) arriving there the 30th of September, and thence descended to New Orleans, where, in the spring of 1824, he published the French account of his travels.

He now disappears from our view.

§ 3. BIOGRAPHICAL FACTS FROM RECENT ITALIAN SOURCES.

Gabriele Rosa, of Bergamo, Lombardy, an author of note, furnished to the *Review* of Venice, (*Revista Veneta*) a couple of papers on this traveler, which appeared April 20 and 27, 1856, and were reprinted, at Bergamo, in 1861, under the title, "Of the Life and Writings of Constantine Beltrami of Bergamo, Discoverer of the Sources of the Mississippi;" (*Della vita e degli scritti di Costantino Beltrami da Bergamo, scopritore delle fonti del Mississippi*)—a pamphlet of 34 pages octavo. On being applied to, through the post, the author courteously sent several copies of his little work to the United States—to the writer of this paper—besides furnishing, in his letters, information in reply to inquiries.

In consequence of this correspondence, which took place in 1863-4, the municipality of the same city formed the plan of publishing, and dedicating to the Historical Society of Minnesota, a work which should be a proper memorial of him who was their countryman and so deserving of honor. This book was brought out in the beginning of 1865 and is entitled "Costantino Beltrami da Bergamo—Notizie e lettere pubblicate per cura del municipio di Bergamo e dedicate alla società storica di Minnesota." It is a small but handsome quarto of 134 pages and contains: 1. As a frontispiece, a photograph from the full length portrait of Beltrami, painted by Professor Enrico Scuri, and presented to the public. 2. An elegant dedicatory preface, addressed to the Society, and signed by the members of the city council. 3. The papers of Signore Rosa, before mentioned. 4. A lecture on the same subject as the preceding, delivered by Count Pietro Moroni, in 1856, before the Athenæum of Bergamo, and 5. Letters from Chateaubriand and other eminent men, addressed to him, also one from his own pen.

From these sources, our knowledge of Beltrami has been perfected, and the facts so obtained are now given—mostly in the form of a close translation.

J. C. Beltrami (Giacomo Costantino B.) was born at Bergamo, in 1779, his parents being Giambattista Beltrami of that city, and Catterina Carozzi of Pontita. His father was a man of fine presence, and of note from his position as custom-house officer of the Venetian republic, and also by reason of his courteous manners. There were ten children, of whom our hero, Constantine, was the youngest. It appears that there was a tradition in the family of its being derived from *Beltrand des Goths*, who fled from Paris at the time of St. Bartholomew in 1572, and took refuge at Bergamo under the sheltering wing of the Venetian republic—model in those times

of political and religious toleration. Constantine was bred to the law ; and although he possessed a restless spirit, desirous of adventure, and that when he was just ten years old the great public commotions that afterwards shook all Europe were beginning, yet his natural talent prompted him to the acquisition of the Latin and Greek literature, to which afterwards, from his experience in public affairs, was added a rich store of geographical knowledge, and, finally, a familiarity with the modern languages. The courage and adventurous will that shone in him at forty-four impelled him, in his youthful vigor, to abandon the paternal house for military affairs ; and being brought to the notice of men high in office, friends of the family, and shortly opening the way by his own abilities, he became vice-inspector of the armies ; but, disgusted with occupations so far below his higher aspirations, he returned to civil pursuits. At the age of twenty-eight, in 1807, he became chancellor of the French departments of the Stura and the Tanaro, and soon after judge of the court at Udine. There, by his fine intellect and untiring zeal, he gained the praises of his superiors who testified to him their high satisfaction, as appears by many of their letters. Such expressions of approval were confirmed by his appointment as judge of the civil and criminal court of Macerata. In 1812, being afflicted with a severe disease, and having received permission, he left his post for a time, and visited Florence, where he formed relations with the Duke of Monteleone, and with the Countess of Albany—the friend of Alfieri and Foscolo—who afterwards, in time of danger, protected him by her counsels and influence. For the extraordinary activity shown by him in certain important matters the supreme judge, minister of justice, in a letter addressed to him in 1813, praised his zeal and acquirements, prophesying his promotion to the chair of the president of the court of Forli, for which the prince viceroy had proposed him for the imperial sanction of France. However, the cloud that shortly rose and darkened the political horizon of the Empire, and of the Italian kingdom, hindered any further transmission of names. From Florence he was hurriedly recalled by Poerio—at that time minister extraordinary of the King of the Two Sicilies, for the southern Italian departments. When the Austrians occupied the Marches, he retired to his estates at Filotrano, not far from Macerata, whence, from 1816 to 1819, he made excursions to Naples, Rome, and Florence. It appears that in some way he became involved in carbonarism ; for in 1821, although sick, and hardly able to stand upon his feet, he had to leave the Romagna and go into exile.

Immediately after his travels in the region of the Upper Mississippi, he embarked at New Orleans, in 1824, for Mexico, and traversed that country from ocean to ocean. He returned from the United States to London in 1826 or 1827. The revolution of July called him to Paris, where we soon find him in amicable epistolary relations with the Count D'Apony, the Austrian ambassador, to whom, in a letter written on the 10th of August,

1830, a few days after the revolution, he offered his services towards ameliorating the condition of his native country. At the same time, he carried on a correspondence with Benjamin Constant, with Lafayette and Lafayette. He participated in the theories of the Napoleonists of his time, and aspired for the elevation of the nations, and especially for that of Italy. In 1834, the Scientific Congress at Stuttgart being in session, Beltrami was sent to it to represent the Historical Institute of France, accredited therefor by the perpetual secretary, Mons. de Monglave, who did not hesitate to style him one of the most honorable and distinguished of that scientific association. Shortly after, he went to Heidelberg, where he acquired a small landed estate which he lived on for two years. In 1837 we find him at Vienna; then, shortly, at Rome, and so—now here, now there—he lived till 1850, when, finding himself bowed down by the weight of years, he returned to his property at Filotrano, where, amongst his early friends, he placidly passed the remainder of life, and where, in February, 1855, he died, having completed his seventy-fifth year.

Beltrami was a man of frank and sincere soul—an enemy of all flattery, and capable of unparalleled self denial. In proof of the latter, it is related that although he suspected that the cases of articles sent by him from America had been opened and plundered on their arrival at Florence, yet, to avoid the bitterness of certainty of such fact, he would never consent to their being examined during his lifetime, desiring that it should only be done by his heirs,—as so happened.

In the desire to be more generally read, he wrote everything in foreign languages, for which indeed he can hardly be blamed, having to print his works out of Italy. A complete list of his published writings is as follows :

1. *Deux mots sur des promenades de Paris et Liverpool.* Philad'a., 1823.
2. *La Decouverte des Sources du Mississippi, &c.* New Orleans, 1824. (Previously mentioned).
3. *A Pilgrimage in Europe and America, &c.* London, 1828. (Previously mentioned),
4. *Le Mexique.* 2 vols. 8vo. Paris, 1830.
5. *L'Italie et L'Europe.* Paris, 1834.
6. *Letter to the Secretary of the Historical Institute of France.* (in French). Heidelberg, 1836. (Reprinted in the Bergamo city memorial).

The Indian curiosities and other articles brought by Beltrami to his native country from the region of our present Minnesota, together with his MS. papers &c., were presented by his heir, a nephew, shortly after his death, to the library of Bergamo, the municipality of which city cause them to be properly displayed in the vestibule of the building. Signore Rosa, his chief eulogist, says, in a private letter, that there is no genuine portrait of him extant;—the one by Professor Scuri being drawn from the engraving in the "Pilgrimage," and from tradition.

§ 4. REMINISCENCES OF MAJOR TALIAFERRO.

Major Lawrence Taliaferro, of Beaufort, Penn., a soldier of 1812, who from the year 1819 to 1840, acted as Agent for Indian Affairs for the tribes of the north-west, and who yet lives in the memories of the Sioux, to whom he was known as *Mahza Bakah* or Iron Cutter, furnished, under date of the 4th of April, 1866, the following information concerning his friend Beltrami:

“I was in Washington in 1823 relative to my official connection with the north-western tribes of Minnesota; whilst on my return, in March, to my post, I found a note, or card, at a hotel in Pittsburg, from Beltrami, asking permission to bear me company to the Falls of St. Anthony. When I saw him, his presence and manner at once obtained my confidence, and leave was granted to do so. We passed together down the Ohio, and up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling. I divided my quarters with him; and Col. Snelling and lady invited him to take his meals at their hospitable table.

“Beltrami was six feet high, of commanding appearance and some forty-five years of age; proud of bearing, and quick of temper, high spirited, but always-the gentleman. He expressed an earnest wish to explore the sources of the Mississippi. I gave him a passport to go where he pleased, and instructed the Chippewas of Otter Tail, and other lakes, to see him safely through their country, should he seek assistance. Shortly after this desire, Major Long, of the Topographical Engineers, with his corps, arrived. Beltrami was introduced to Major L. and permission granted Mr. B. to accompany the party to Pembina. At Pembina, a difficulty occurred between Major Long and Beltrami, when the latter sold his horse (my horse) and equipments, and in company with a half breed, passed near the line of 49° to the sources of the Mississippi. His sufferings were of no agreeable nature. Here, near Leech Lake, he fell in with a sub-chief, the ‘Cloudy Weather,’ most fortunately, who knew Mr. B., having seen him in one of my councils at the agency. This old man was given, by signs, to know that white man wanted to descend the river. The chief took our Italian friend in his canoe, and turned down stream. Indians are proverbially slow, hunting and fishing on the way; Beltrami lost all patience,—abused his Indian crew,—made many menaces, &c. The ‘Cloud’ tapped him on the hat with his pipe stem, as much as to say, ‘I will take you to my father safe if you will be still.’ The old chief told of this temper of my friend, but Mr. B. never made allusion to it, but was very grateful to his kind Pillager friends.

“Beltrami had been in the military service;—was judge of a court. I touched him at times with the appellation of Count; ‘Who is your dear Countess to whom you address many affectionate letters?’—‘Not my wife,’ said he; ‘but a lovely woman; and if you would replace the G in your name, [Tagliaferro] and come with me to Italy—the home of your ancestors—I would make you happy in her company.’

“That the tour of Mr. B. was not altogether abortive, I have full reason to believe. He explained by his notes to me his whole route, put the discovery of the true sources correctly, as others have since done,—including the distinguished Nicollet. To learn the habits of the Indian tribes was almost a mania with him. He had every facility;—his greatest anxiety was, before he left Italy, as he stated to me, to explore the wildest portion of the continent, north and west,—to see as many of the noble North American Indians as possible. He seemed fond of adventure. I saw he was dispirited for the lack of means;—he did not deny it when questioned delicately on this point.

“In conversing of Italy and Italian affairs, he hesitated not to speak very broadly about the highest ecclesiastical dignitary, touching whom he often lost his patience. Beltrami was a patriot, and undoubtedly of note, and had suffered persecution.”

§ 5. CONCLUSION.

No further direct information concerning Beltrami, personally, can be added to the preceding; and enough undoubtedly has been said to fill the blank hitherto existing, and to place him properly before the people of Minnesota, to the majority of whom his name is totally unknown. There remains, however, to supplement this monograph, one more task to be performed, at some future time, when the territory he independently explored shall have been surveyed and mapped by the deputies of the General Land Office, and that is the examination and verification of the route traveled by him, and of the lakes and rivers he visited, in order to restore and bring into popular use, so far as practicable, the names he gave to many places; though he named only certain lakes, streams and islands, hitherto undistinguished.

The Legislature, last winter, at the instance of the Historical Society, and in conformity with the custom of naming some of the counties of a territory or state after its early explorers, established a county by the name of Beltrami; which extends from the first “range line” below the mouth of Turtle River, on the east, to the line between ranges 38 and 39 on the west, and from the line between townships 154 and 155 on the north to the north line of Beecher county, and to the Mississippi on the south. This county comprehends the region of the head of “Bloody River,” &c., and is in area about 4,000 square miles—subject to reduction and modification of boundary it is true; but, it is to be hoped, always to retain the same name, and to include the “Julian Sources of the Mississippi” within its limits. Of this act of legislation, his friend, Major Taliaferro says, “It is a high compliment;—one well deserved, and creditable to the movers and State;” and all lovers of justice who read Beltrami’s own words will rejoice that his claims have at last been officially recognized.

In reference to the opportunity he had of perpetuating his own name in the Indian territory by giving it an archipelago, as he terms it, of the Mississippi—the present “Thousand Islands,” situated a mile or two below

St. Cloud—he wrote, “After my death, men will dispose of my name as God will of my soul, according as I shall have well or ill deserved during my life; and I leave to my friends, and to those who have had opportunities of becoming acquainted with my heart, the charge of defending my memory, should it ever be attacked by injustice or prejudice.”

APPENDIX.

HYDROGRAPHY OF THE SOURCES OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

In reference to the question as to which stream we should look to for the right source of the Mississippi, the following article has been prepared by Col. Charles Whittlesey—a man well known to the reading public, not only by his explorations and contributions to the stock of knowledge concerning the geology and physical geography of the North West, but by his writings on the earthworks and other relics of the aboriginal inhabitants of the same region :

“CLEVELAND, O., March 28, 1866.

“Turtle Lake, at the head of Turtle River, which discharges into Cass Lake, is the most northerly of the waters of the Mississippi. Mr. Schoolcraft claims that Itasca Lake and its tributaries constitute the true source of the Great River, because these streams are further from the mouth than any other. Whether this, if true, is a correct mode of fixing the head waters of rivers, I must be allowed to doubt. It seems to me that the *largest* branch forms the river, and the heads of that branch constitute the sources.

“When I was on the upper waters of the Mississippi, in September 1848, I compared the quantity of water flowing from Lake Winnibigoshish with that from Leech Lake, as far as observations without gauging enabled me to do it. At that time I judged the discharge from the Leech Lake branch to be three times as much as from Lake Winnibigoshish, and one of our voyageurs, who was raised in the region, said it generally discharged twice as much. The distance from the junction of the Leech Lake branch, below Winnibigoshish, to the most distant sources of the various branches, does not appear to me to be materially different. Among the hundreds of small streams converging into, and passing through nearly as many lakes, there cannot be said to be a main or separate river above this junction. From this point, the Mississippi assumes its proper characteristics, as one stream, to the gulf of Mexico; but above it, the branches are excessively numerous. Below the junction, it is two chains wide, with a broad regular current, having the same imposing features which it retains to its mouth. The furthest streams that discharge into Leech Lake rise to the south, interlocking with the waters of Pine River; but, if we can rely upon our maps—of a region as yet unsurveyed—the development of these branches, including the lakes through which they pass, equals in length the Itasca branch.

“Our missionaries at Cass Lake said the Turtle River discharged more water than Bemidji River, which enters Cass Lake from Itasca Lake.”



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