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PICTURESQUE NEW MEXICO REVEALED IN
NOVEL AS EARLY AS 1826

ONE HUNDRED and eleven years ago appeared what is presumably the first novel written in English with a New Mexico setting. This practically unknown book, *Francis Berrian*, which is in three volumes, was written by Timothy Flint in 1826, and was first printed in London by A. K. Newman and Company.

The author, who was born in North Reading, Massachusetts, in 1780, graduated from Harvard in 1800. After studying theology two years, he became pastor of a Congregational Church at Lunenburg, Massachusetts, a pastorate which he held twelve years. Because he spent much of his time in his chemistry laboratory, he was accused by his simple and unlearned neighbors of counterfeiting. Subsequently, for this and political entanglements, he resigned in 1814, and for the next ten years he did missionary work in the Mississippi Valley. His experiences in this region are vividly recorded in his *Recollections of the Last Ten Years Passed in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston, 1826). This is one of the first early books advertising the opportunities of the Middle West. So popular was the book that there was a reprint of it in England, and also a French translation appeared.

About 1825 Flint returned to the East in a futile effort to regain his health. *Francis Berrian*, his best book of fiction, was likely begun on this return trip, for it was published the following year. Flint was editor of the *Western Review Magazine* in Cincinnati from 1825 to 1828, and of *Knickerbocker's Magazine* in New York in 1833. He died in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1840.

Other works of this adventurous writer are: *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States or the Mississippi Valley* (2 vols., 1828); *Arthur Clenning* (1828), a novel; *Indian Wars in the West* (1833); and *Memoir of Daniel Boone* (1834).

In *Francis Berrian*, the hero of the story, a young man, "fine looking and dignified," relates his experiences in New Mexico, in Texas, and in Mexico. The setting at the beginning of the book is at Santa Fe, and, according to the story, the young man rescued "a damsel of exquisite beauty," who had been captured by a band of Comanche Indians. The "distressed damsel, . . . the only daughter and child of the Conde Alvaro, Governor of Durango, and superintendent-general of the Mexican Mines," later becomes the bride of the hero, Francis Berrian.

Flint describes very picturesquely, if not wholly accurately, a journey made by the Alvaro family from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Durango, Mexico, near the west coast.

We were awakened at three in the morning by the ringing of bells, the blowing of bugles, and the noise and bustle of preparing for the journey—The array was soon in marching order. The band struck up a slow and solemn march—almost a funeral strain—a Spanish martial air of parting—The morning dawned upon us, as we came upon the Rio Del Norte, at the Parso. The river is here of very considerable width, but white with its furious dashing among rocks. The scenery is most whimsically and delightfully wild and romantic—The alluvions of this noble and romantic river are covered with vines, from which is made the delicious wine of the Parso. Husbandry is here managed by irrigation. In this arid soil and burning climate, there is, in a landscape vivified by irrigation, a charm, which no language can paint—Each garden and patch had its own little rill, of the most limpid water. The verdure, the prodigious grandeur and strength of the Vegetation, contrasted so much the stronger with the red, sterile, and scorched hills, by which we descended to this alluvion. At this place we had more of the bustle of the militia parade. Our morning militia left us here, and returned to Santa Fe, and was replaced by new troops from the vicinity of the Parso. We halted in this village for breakfast—The country between the Parso and Durango was sufficiently pleasant,

though destitute of the wildness and sublimity of the country in the vicinity of the Comanches—We passed through Chihuahua, and Mont el Rey, considerable towns—It was high noon when we entered the city of Durango, whose spires I had seen glittering in the distance for some leagues.

From this description it is evident that the author's knowledge of the country was deficient. From Santa Fe to Parso evidently Passo (El Paso), would have required several days' traveling in 1826, and not a few hours' time the author states, which could be done only in the modern airplane. Presumably by Mont el Rey Flint had in mind Monterrey, in the eastern part of Mexico, a city which would be considerably out of the way in going to Durango from Santa Fe.

We also note the author's description of the Rio Grande, a river "of considerable width, but white with its furious dashing among rocks." Had the author omitted the latter part of the description, he would have been much more convincing.

The irrigation, arid soil, and burning climate, which Flint mentions, are typical today of certain sections of the State of New Mexico. Furthermore, he speaks of the "charm of landscape which no author can paint." This, also, is true of the Sunshine State.

Assertedly not photographing real people, the characters in this novel are much too stilted to become permanent characters of fiction. The hero, Francis Berrian, is artificial and of the knightly type. In very glowing terms is the heroine of the novel, dona Martha Miguela d'Alvara, described.

The author's strength, I think, lies not in his power to depict character nor in his ability to tell a story, but in his colorful style that is interesting in its unusualness. *Francis Berrian* belongs in the category of rare books; there are only a few copies known to be in existence in the United States.

On the whole *Francis Berrian* is an entertaining book and gives us glimpses of New Mexico in the early part of the

nineteenth century. There is in *Flint* a love of manly action and a freshness of imagination which compel attention. This is a memorable book, not that it is a great contribution to creative literature, but that it is presumably the first novel written in English about New Mexico.

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