

The Drunken Poet of Danville



Thomas Johnson, Junior, the first Kentucky poet for many years enjoyed the sobriquet of the "Drunken Poet of Danville," was born in Virginia about 1760, and he came to Kentucky when twenty-five years of age.

He settled at Danville, then a village, and immediately entered into the role of poet, punster, and ne'er-do-well. Documentary evidence is extant to prove that Danville was a gay little town when the young Virginian arrived there about 1785; and he was early drawn into excesses, or led others into them. Johnson was a rather prolific maker of coarse satirical rhymes, which he finally assembled into a small pamphlet, and published them as *The Kentucky Miscellany* (Lexington, 1796). This was the first book of poems, if they may be so termed, printed in Kentucky.

The original price of this pamphlet was nine pence the copy, but it is impossible to procure it today for any price, and there is not an extant copy of this first edition.

The *Kentucky Miscellany* went into a second edition in 1815, and a third edition was published a few years later, but no copies of either edition are extant. The fourth and final edition appeared from the Advertiser office at Lexington, in 1821, and a dog-eared, much-mutilated copy of this is in the collection of the Filson Club in Louisville; perhaps the only copy in the

world. The Miscellany contained but thirty-six small pages, about the size of the medical almanacs of to-day.

Many of the little verses are very vulgar and actually obscene, perhaps due to the fact that Johnson could never quite bury John Barleycorn alive. The most famous of them is the Extempore Grace, which the bard delivered one day in the tavern of old Erasmus Gill in Danville.

In his cups he stumbled into the tavern dining-room, where he found the meal over, and the guests gone, nothing being left but the crumbs. He glanced at the tables, then at Gill, and offered Extempore Grace. His lines on Danville, on Kentucky, and on several other subjects reveal the satirist; and the verses to Polly, his sweetheart, and to his favorite physician the better elements in his nature.

That these rather vulgar verses of Johnson did not escape the censorship of Western advocates of the pure food law in literature, is made certain by a letter from an Ohio critic which appeared in the Lexington Intelligencer for January 28, 1834. Johnson died and was buried at Danville, but the date of his death or the exact place of his burial is unknown. He had passed and was almost forgotten by 1830.

Source: Bibliography. History of the Presbyterian Church in Kentucky, by R. H. Davidson (New York, 1847); History of Kentucky, by R. H. Collins (Covington, Kentucky, 1882); Centre College Cento (Danville, Kentucky, January, 1907); Kentuckians in History and Literature, by J. W. Townsend (New York, 1907).