
Augustus C. Buell Fraudulent Historian

Author(s): Milton W. Hamilton

Source: *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Oct., 1956), pp. 478-492

Published by: [The Historical Society of Pennsylvania](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20088910>

Accessed: 25/05/2011 16:02

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=hsp>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*.

Augustus C. Buell

Fraudulent Historian

Noah an' Jonah an' Cap'n John Smith,
Fishermen an' travelers, narreratin' myth . . .

Don Marquis

IT takes a poet to suggest that some of the most revered yarns of history belong in the realm of tall stories. People looked askance when historian Edward Channing doubted the story of John Smith and Pocahontas, and the debunkers had a rough time when they threw out some of the cherished Washingtoniana of Parson Weems. We still are inclined to believe whatever appears in print, especially if it is buttressed by footnotes and bibliography. In this category fall the works of one of the most bare-faced hoaxers in American history who, fifty years after his death, is still misleading and bewildering students and writers. Surely a full scale exposé is in order.

Augustus C. Buell (1847-1904), author of four historical biographies and a widely quoted personal narrative of the Civil War, has been proved to be unreliable in practically everything he has written, to have falsified documents, forged others, and to have cited scores of nonexistent sources. With a facile pen, a convincing narrative power which made his books good reading and popular, and a skill in anecdote greatly to be admired in a writer of fiction, he has perpetuated myths and inventions to the point where it often requires considerable research to disprove oft-cited episodes. Within the last few years historical novelists have utilized his anecdotes and interpretations with no thought that they are fictitious; writers of non-fiction and biographies have accepted his stories and given them new credence; and serious anthologists have quoted him with praise and assurance. Perhaps a comprehensive black-listing of him may accomplish what the exposés of long ago or the verbal castigation in footnotes and bibliographies were unable to do—that is, warn off the unwary reader, student, or writer.

In bold outline, the career of Augustus C. Buell was an honorable one, apparently unmarred by serious criticism until just before his death. Even then, he stood so well with Scribners, his publishers, that they brought out his last biography posthumously, "as it left his hands, with the exception only of the omission of a few unimportant paragraphs." He was a veteran of the Civil War, had a career as a journalist, civil engineer, and shipbuilder. Writing biography seemed to be a side line of this versatile man-of-affairs. Contemporaries often held him in high regard. Yet to the historian he must be written down as one of the most villainous practitioners of the hoax, documentary forgery, and the big lie. As one disgusted researcher later wrote: "Buell is pure fraud!"

Biographical detail about Buell is scant and confusing. In various writings he has claimed a distinguished lineage—"through seven generations from Rolf Buell, a trooper, in Ayrton's Horse, which guarded the scaffold of Charles I," or, from Ezra Buell, a pioneer in the American colonies—but under the circumstances it is suspect. In writing biography he liked to identify himself in some way with his subject: he claimed descent from Sir William Johnson through one of his half-breed children; another ancestor served under John Paul Jones; and one David Buell, who kept a journal, served under Andrew Jackson! A few facts can be verified.

Augustus C. Buell was born on September 4, 1847, son of Simon and Julia Buell, at Kings Settlement, near Norwich, New York. There he attended the local schools as well as the seminary at Cazenovia. The Civil War interrupted his schooling, for he enlisted in 1863, although he had to lie about his age; army records give his age as eighteen, but he was not yet sixteen. There are other discrepancies about his army service, of which more later. Mustered out of service in 1865, he went back to school and was graduated from Cazenovia Seminary in 1868. Many years later a biographical sketch in *Harper's Weekly*, May 31, 1902, designed to promote his books and no doubt inspired by him, befogged the record. It failed to mention Cazenovia Seminary, but stated that Buell was educated "in the scientific school at Hamilton College." Yet the records of Hamilton College do not contain his name, nor does the alumni record of Colgate University at Hamilton, New York. According to the sketch in *Harper's*, "at the age of eighteen Corporal Buell was a civil engineer

along the surveys of the Pacific railroads, and saw the first rock-drill worked in the Union Pacific tunnel." The chronology is off here, for at eighteen he had three years to go before he was graduated from Cazenovia.¹

Journalism then beckoned, and he "joined the editorial staff of the Kansas City *Times*, from which he went to the *Missouri Republican*, becoming its Washington correspondent, and subsequently one of the editors of the Washington *Post* and of Don Piatts *Sunday Capitol*." His Washington sojourn was from 1879 to 1893, according to Washington directories.² After 1890 he was listed as civil engineer, and from 1893 on he served as secretary to Charles H. Cramp, the shipbuilder, in Philadelphia. As an associate of Cramp's, he wrote a *Memoir* of the shipbuilder, which was published in 1906.³

Buell's "historical" work began with his reminiscences of the Civil War. As a journalist he wrote twenty-six articles which were published in the Washington *National Tribune*. These were later assembled, revised, buttressed with military dates, and issued in 1890 as *The Cannoneer. Recollections of Service in the Army of the Potomac "By A Detached Volunteer" in the Regular Artillery*. This volume is not only a company history, but an anecdotal account of army life, and purports to be a firsthand account of the campaigns of Gettysburg and the Wilderness. Some of these vivid accounts have been highly praised as battle records and as authentic personal observations. There is no doubt about their compelling interest. Selections have been included in the most recent Civil War anthologies. According to Henry Steele Commager, Buell supplies the best firsthand ac-

¹ Augustus C. Buell appeared in *Who's Who in America, 1903-1905*. Obituaries which contain inaccurate and conflicting statements were found in *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, May 24, 1904, and a clipping, apparently from another Philadelphia paper, in the pension records of the National Archives. The date and place of his birth, and his first marriage are given in the family Bible records, courtesy of Mrs. Ethel B. Thomas of Norwich, N. Y. His graduation from Cazenovia Seminary in 1868 is attested to in a letter from Miss Isabel D. Phisterer, President. Walter Pilkington, Librarian of Hamilton College, has unsuccessfully searched for any record of his attendance there; nor was Buell a student at Colgate University, Hamilton, N. Y. (a possible confusion), according to the alumni records of that institution.

² Evidence for some of his newspaper connections is vague, and is taken from these later laudatory sketches. Washington directories, however, consulted for me by Miss Lacy of the Washingtoniana Division, Washington Public Library, confirm his connection with the *Evening Post* (1879), the *Sunday Capitol* and *Evening Critic* (1881-1883).

³ Augustus C. Buell, *The Memoirs of Charles H. Cramp* (Philadelphia, 1906).

count of the first day at Gettysburg.⁴ The following extracts give an idea of his style⁵:

The last thing we did the night of June 30 was to draw three days' cooked rations, and when we were packing our haversacks Corp'l Packard said: "See here, 'Cub,' you want to hang onto that grub, my son, because we shall probably be fighting up here for two or three days, and you can't get any more while that is going on."

We were turned out the next morning about daybreak, harnessed up, and, after crossing the creek, halted to let the infantry of Wadsworth's Division file by. There was no mistake now. While we stood there watching these splendid soldiers file by with their long, swinging "route-step," and their muskets glittering in the rays of the rising sun, there came out of the northwest a sullen "boom! boom! boom!" of three guns, followed almost immediately by a prolonged crackling sound, which, at that distance, reminded one very much of the snapping of a dry brush-heap when you first set it on fire. . . . But my eyes were riveted on the infantry marching by. No one now living will ever again see those two brigades of Wadsworth's Division—Cutler's and the Iron Brigade—file by as they did that morning. The little creek made a depression in the road, with a gentle ascent on either side so that from our point of view the column, as it came down one slope and up the other, had the effect of a huge blue billows of men topped with a spray of shining steel, and the whole spectacle was calculated to give nerve to a man who had none before.

So it went in a vivid story of the action as seen by a cannoneer⁶:

When this desperate work began I had stood close in to the gun in thumbing vent, standing bolt upright according to the letter of the manual, arching my left arm and resting my fingers on the gun. I was wearing my jacket, and had the two top buttons buttoned. About our third load a bullet from the enemy behind the fence on our flank tore through the breast of the jacket, making the cloth fly and carrying away the second button from the top. It hurt like a sharp blow of a whip; but, running my finger along the track of the bullet, I saw that the skin was not broken. . . . My breast had a red welt across it, and was sore for several days.

⁴ Henry Steele Commager, *The Blue and the Gray. The Story of the Civil War as told by Participants* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1950), II, 603-617; 843-845; 976-978; Otto Eisenschiml and Ralph Newman, *The American Iliad* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1947), 469-471, 561-562.

⁵ Augustus Buell, *The Cannoneer. Recollections of Service in the Army of the Potomac* "By A Detached Volunteer" in the Regular Artillery, in *The National Tribune* (Washington, D. C., 1890), 63-64.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

Yet when we check Augustus Buell's military record we realize that he was relating personal experiences in battles he never saw. Official records in Albany (Adjutant General's Office) and in the National Archives show that he enlisted at Norwich, New York, on August 21, 1863, and was mustered in as a private, Company L, 20th New York Volunteer Cavalry, on September 22, 1863, to serve for three years. He became a corporal in November, 1863, and was mustered out at Manchester, Virginia, on July 31, 1865.⁷ Thus he entered the army six weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg.

The first published version of the *Cannoneer*, in the *National Tribune*, had a detailed account of his entry into the army and sounded very convincing. He admitted that "the author [had] preserved no diaries or journals during his active service, and had no access to official rolls or rosters and but little opportunity to examine official reports." Yet the editor claimed it to be "the most elaborate sketch thus far printed of the services of the artillery, Regular or Volunteer." In the first article, however, the writer quoted "A now venerable document, which I keep carefully framed to transmit as an heirloom to my grandchildren after the final muster out, [which] certifies that on the '9th day of September, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two,' I was enrolled to serve three years, or during the war.' It further certifies that on the 31st day of August, 1865 I was discharged from the service of the United States by reason of

⁷ Letter from Brig. Gen. William H. Kelley, Adjutant General, State of New York Division of Military and Naval Affairs, Dec. 7, 1954. My attention was called to this discrepancy in Buell's military record by W. A. Alexander, Weymouth, Mass. A letter to Mr. Alexander from Maj. Gen. John A. Klein, Adjutant General, Department of the Army, Aug. 25, 1954, states: "A reexamination of the records has been made and nothing has been found to show that Augustus Buell . . . was ever detached to Battery B., 4th Regiment of Artillery. The name of Augustus Buell has not been found on the muster rolls of Battery 4, 4th Regiment of Artillery from 22 September 1863 to 31 July 1865." A similar search was made for me by the National Archives.

Confirmation of the dates of Buell's Civil War service is found in the Pension Records, now in the National Archives. A photostat of his application for a bounty, dated Jan. 23, 1867, attests to his dates of enlistment and service, and mentions no other unit than Company L, 20th Regiment of Cavalry, New York Volunteers. In this dossier also is the application of his widow (of a second marriage) in 1929 for a pension, giving the cavalry regiment and discharge from it, which the official noted was correct. An effort was then made to check on his alleged earlier enlistment "in 1862 in the 9th New York Artillery organized by Gen. Sheridan." There was also the query, "let it be shown whether this soldier received injury to right thumb at Battle of Cold Harbor." These last statements or queries were, no doubt, the result of a highly inaccurate obituary.

special order No. 191, Department of Texas, at Brownsville.”⁸ (This statement and these dates are proved false by his signed application for a bounty in 1867.) But he went on:

“When enrolled” I was [*apparently quoting from this document*] “18 years of age, five feet six inches high, fair complexion, brown eyes, brown hair, and by occupation a farmer.” The statement as to age was a little different from the inscription in our Family Record, but it was pretty nearly exact. This was my third enlistment, the two previous attempts having been foiled by paternal interference on account of being under age. But this time I was away from home at school—from which, by the way, I had just been expelled.

These intimate details were omitted later when this was put into book form. In the *Cannoneer*, however, he continued his story of having enlisted just before Antietam in 1862, but desiring service in the artillery arranged for his transfer as a “detached volunteer.” As he told it, his role as a cannoneer was heroic:

To give some idea of the attachment a cannoneer will have for his gun, I will remark that I served the same gun from Gettysburg to Five Forks. Some times men would be changed from one gun to another temporarily to equalize the force of gun detachments when men were killed or wounded; or when the gun itself was disabled or put out of action; but the general policy of officers was to identify each detachment with its own gun as much as possible. It happened that my gun was never disabled or put out of action—the worst ever happening to her being the destruction of her caisson at Gettysburg. She literally “served through the war,” having been in action about 40 times when Lee surrendered. . . .

It seems incredible that a volume which claimed to have authentic records of many persons, their exploits, and the personnel of many detachments should be fraudulent in the autobiographical account of its author. It becomes more understandable when we realize that he later applied the same technique to the lives of famous men. The outline was factually correct, but the detail was fabricated to meet the romantic ideas and heroic concepts of the author.

In 1900, Buell published the first in a series of biographies, *Paul Jones, Founder of the American Navy. A History*.⁹ Reviews heralded this as “a perfect biography” (*New York Tribune*), which “shows

⁸ This and the succeeding quotations from the *Cannoneer* are to be found in the *National Tribune*, Oct. 10, 1889, Library of Congress.

⁹ Augustus C. Buell, *Paul Jones, Founder of the American Navy. A History*. With frontispiece, portraits in color and photogravure, maps, plans, etc. (New York, 1900), 2 vols.

throughout the author's deep familiarity with things martial and naval" (*Philadelphia Press*). John A. Long, former Secretary of the Navy, wrote that it "translated him [*Jones*] from the realm where romance preponderates to the realm of historical portraiture."¹⁰ The author was said to have gained new material on a visit to Russia on business for the Cramp shipyard, and to have devoted the most thorough research to the project. "The books, correspondence, State papers, magazines, and newspapers of six languages and two centuries have been gone over and the great libraries seem to have been ransacked in search of material." In the *Book Buyer*, January, 1900, published by Scribners, the enthusiastic reviewer gave the supreme accolade: "Nobody need trouble himself to write another [life of Jones], and it would be no considerable loss if all other lives were thrown into the fire. Let no one think that he knows Paul Jones till he has read this book."¹¹

Buell went far beyond other biographers and made claims for his hero never made before. His Paul Jones was "founder of the American navy" because of documents never before published. His treatment of a mutineer was illumined and justified. His early life was filled out with details no one else had recorded. And the author supplied a new and different story of the making of the first American flag! In 1905 the biography had reached a new edition, and apparently was very successful. Yet there was soon to come an undertone of criticism.

Naval circles questioned Buell's claim that Jones "founded the American navy." Other scholars were unable to locate the documents cited, and noted discrepancies in his narrative. Eventually he was besought to back up some of his quotations of documents, but he replied that his notes were such that he could not. He had not expected to be cross-examined, but expected that his work would be accepted as authoritative.¹²

¹⁰ Reviews quoted in back of Vol. II of Augustus C. Buell, *History of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1904).

¹¹ M. E. Seawell in the *Book Buyer*, XXI (January, 1900), 557-559.

¹² An early critical review was in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, VIII (1901), 442-445. This was concerned primarily with the sources for John Paul's life in Virginia. The writer concluded that the trouble lay in "the character of the authorities" used by Buell. For a thorough scholarly analysis of Buell's *Paul Jones* forgeries and frauds, see Charles Oscar Paullin, "When Was Our Navy Founded? Criticism of Augustus C. Buell's Paul Jones Founder of the American Navy," U. S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, XXXVI, No. 1 (March, 1910).

Finally, an earnest student of Jones, Mrs. Reginald de Koven, published an exposé in the *New York Times*, June 10, 1906: "A Fictitious Paul Jones Masquerading as the Real—The Accepted Life of the Naval Hero by A. C. Buell Pronounced to be an Audacious Forgery." "The book is now accepted as authoritative, but it can be proved to be the most audacious historical forgery ever put upon a credulous public. The book is based upon a bare framework of truth, . . . but it is padded with inventions of clever construction and unparalleled audacity. It contains reports of imaginary committees in Congress, invented letters from Washington, Franklin and Hewes, false letters and imaginary journals of Jones himself, false entries in the diaries of well-known persons such as Gouverneur Morris and the Duchesse d'Orleans, and quotations from others which existed only in Col. Buell's imagination. . . . The bibliography . . . is a masterpiece of invention, and is so shortsighted in its careless untruthfulness as to raise suspicion of the author's mental responsibility." All these assertions were fully documented and proved by Mrs. de Koven, and she went further to pin down his falsehoods in her two-volume *Life and Letters of John Paul Jones*.¹³

Yet this exposé came too late to change any of the methods of the biographer, who died on May 23, 1904. In the meantime he had written and published biographies of Sir William Johnson (1903), William Penn (1904), and Andrew Jackson (1904), the last appearing posthumously. All these books had considerable popularity when issued, some were reissued by the publishers, and none were suspected for many years as being other than authentic, perhaps because the subjects were not then quite as controversial as Jones. And perhaps Buell's skill in invention and forgery and his choice of "unpublished" material were clever enough to avoid detection. Yet all these works posed puzzles for conscientious biographers who have

¹³ Mrs. Reginald de Koven, *The Life and Letters of John Paul Jones* (New York, 1913), 2 vols. See references to Buell's work: I, 163-164, 382; II, 42; Appendix D. "The First American Flag," II, 452-453, quotes Buell's evasive letter in reply to requests for his sources. In spite of her work and references to it in various publications (e.g., A. B. Hart, "Imagination in History," *American Historical Review*, XV [1909-1910], 231-232), some later popular biographies of John Paul Jones were uncritical of Buell and his fallacious claims. Cf. Phillips Russell, *John Paul Jones: Man of Action* (New York, 1927), and Valentine Thomson, *Knight of the Seas* (New York, 1939), later issued as *John Paul Jones, Father of the American Navy* (Cleveland, 1942). Lincoln Lorenz, *John Paul Jones, Fighter for Freedom and Glory* (Annapolis, Md., 1943), viii-ix, 757, 778, 779, has pointed to Buell's fictions and noted the laxity of some biographers.

tried to substantiate his statements, or to locate his sources. Some concluded, as well they might, that Buell had access to material no longer available, and went on to quote him on matters they could not check. Others took mild exception to his data and muttered imprecations that never reached the public.

For years the editors of the *Sir William Johnson Papers* in the New York State Historian's office at Albany were bedeviled by Buell's references, anecdotes, and bibliography. One state historian thought to learn more of Buell's methods and his sources by appealing to his descendants and his publishers. If Buell was a "left-handed descendant" of Sir William, as he claimed, perhaps some of the unique documents in his book were in the possession of his family. Francis W. Halsey, then of Funk & Wagnalls, wrote in 1912 that he had made the arrangement for the publication of Buell's book on Johnson by Appleton's. It was an outright purchase without royalties. But Halsey admitted that his friend Buell had been criticized for his failure to give references. He doubted that anything could be learned of his sources. "My acquaintance with Augustus C. Buell convinced me that he was quite indifferent as to references. At the same time he was a conscientious worker. Any errors he may have made were the results, rather of temperament and methods, than of any conscious statements of a misleading nature." Perhaps it is significant that Halsey failed to sign this letter!¹⁴

One of the things that most bothered the students of Sir William Johnson was Buell's yarn about the visit of a Mrs. Julia Grant, a portrait painter, to Fort Johnson in 1751. Attempts to connect portraits of Johnson with this visit were unsuccessful; the known portrait of that time was by Wollaston. A description of Johnson as seen by the "portrait painter" was so good that it has been quoted by many subsequent biographers. Yet Mrs. Julia Grant was a fictional person. Her book cited in Buell's bibliography was never seen by any bibliographer.¹⁵ Perhaps she was concocted from a hazy remembrance of the writing of Mrs. Anne MacVicar Grant whose *Memoirs of an American Lady* was first published in 1808.¹⁶ But Julia Grant has

¹⁴ Francis W. Halsey to J. A. Holden, Feb. 10 and 14, 1912.

¹⁵ Augustus C. Buell, *Sir William Johnson* (New York, 1903), 43-45. The bibliography, p. 274, cites "Eight Years in America. Journal of an Officer's Wife . . . Mrs. Julia Grant."

¹⁶ Mrs. Anne (MacVicar) Grant, *Memoirs of an American Lady* (London, 1808), 2 vols.

recently appeared in a book of fiction dealing with Johnson, the writer of which had no doubt that she was a historical person.¹⁷

In order to glorify his hero, Buell claimed exceptional achievements for him. He gave Johnson credit for the introduction of rifle manufacture in New York by importing rifle makers from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The names of four such gunmakers were given, and now these names are to be found in other publications and in check lists of gunmakers. Since the names do not appear in the *Johnson Papers* or in his accounts, the writer doubted the attribution. Experts on early American guns have been questioned, but no reliable evidence of such gunmakers has been found, nor any guns of their manufacture.¹⁸

In 1912, the New York State Historian queried the episode about a duel to which Sir William was challenged by one Hardenburgh. This story was based on documents quoted directly, but which could never be located in the voluminous Johnson manuscripts. It was further doubted because it was out of character, and because it was in a period when dueling was not common.¹⁹

The early life of Johnson is almost a blank as far as authentic information is concerned. Its mystery furnished an ideal opportunity

¹⁷ See Margaret Widdemer, *Lady of the Mohawks* (New York, 1951), preface and 2-3. This novel relies heavily upon Buell.

¹⁸ Buell, *Sir William Johnson*, 70-72; 249-251. In *The Bulletin of the Fort Ticonderoga Museum*, VI, No. 2 (July, 1941), 68, the statement is made that Sir William introduced these four rifle makers from Pennsylvania, and that "this rifle making became an enterprising industry, and by 1775 most of the Indians and settlers had traded their smoothbores for new rifles, and New York was second only to Pennsylvania in their manufacture." Since the Fort Ticonderoga Museum has an excellent gun collection and has devoted much study to the subject, this publication would carry weight. Although the article is not documented, it is obvious that the statement came from Buell. I am indebted to the following students of gunmaking for negative confirmation: Holman J. Swinney, Sturbridge, Mass.; Willis Barshied, Jr., Palatine Bridge, N. Y.; Henry J. Kaufman, Lancaster, Pa.; Joseph Kindig, Jr., York, Pa.; Paul W. Sharp, Newport, Pa.

Not only do the *Sir William Johnson Papers* fail to confirm Buell's story, but among the gunsmiths mentioned the four names do not appear. In a letter to George Croghan, June 11, 1772 (original in Boston Public Library), Sir William wrote: "If Mr. McKee or you could procure me a Rifle that is proved and shoots verry exact, (otherwise it would be needless to send it, as there are Several here but none that will Shoot so nice or exact as I hear they do that way.) You would much oblige me by sending it ꝓ any good oportunity. . . . Note I dont care how plain it is if it shoots true or exact." Evidently expert rifle making had not been transplanted to Johnstown by 1772.

¹⁹ Buell, *Sir William Johnson*, 73-77.

for such a biographer as Buell. Anecdotes of childhood, of his father, and of the family made Buell's *Johnson* the only book to dwell on this period of Johnson's life. In 1930 Arthur Pound and Richard E. Day in *Johnson of the Mohawks* threw doubt on Buell's chronology of Johnson's father and thus on the account of his early life. The present writer found that the "Log Ashore" of Sir Peter Warren, William Johnson's uncle, quoted by Buell, was nonexistent in the British Naval Society where it was said to be. Another document printed from the Johnson papers was shown by a "deadly parallel" with the original to have been garbled and falsified.²⁰

But a romantic story is hard to down. With a true sense of the dramatic, and the advantage of hindsight, Buell invented the story of Sir William's last words. Since Johnson died suddenly in July, 1774, there has been much speculation as to his probable role had he lived to experience the Revolution. His son and nephew became Tories, and his protégé Joseph Brant was one of the most hated of Indian raiders. What could be more dramatic, more charged with premonition of the future struggle, and more characteristic of the great Indian conciliator than his last words to Joseph Brant: "Joseph, control your people—control your people! I am going away!" Buell interpreted this to mean that the mantle of Sir William fell on Brant, that the Indians followed this parting injunction to make Brant their leading sachem.²¹ (Buell, perhaps, was already planning another book; the manuscript for his unfinished Joseph Brant is in the Halsey papers in the New York State Library.) Johnson's death-bed admonition to Brant has been repeated in subsequent biographies and histories, sometimes with great elaboration.²² Yet no earlier writer had mentioned it. Joseph Brant was not present at the Indian council at which Sir William died; he was not intimate with Sir William in his later years, and was not even mentioned in the baronet's will. The story appears to be yet another figment of Buell's imagination. Its persistence in writing and legend is another evidence

²⁰ Milton W. Hamilton, "Myths and Legends of Sir William Johnson," *New York History*, XXXIV (1953), 3-26.

²¹ Augustus C. Buell, *Sir William Johnson*, 270-271.

²² Arthur Pound and Richard E. Day, *Johnson of the Mohawks* (New York, 1930), 455, repeats the story as "legend"; Sir William "is said to have laid this touching charge" to Joseph Brant, although not citing Buell. Codman Hislop, *The Mohawk* (New York, 1948), 153-154, elaborates the story and gives it new credence. Buell's authorship is forgotten.

of the vitality of error. So long as printed biographies grace library shelves, some people will accept them as gospel truth.

Buell's next biography was of William Penn. Here was a biased work if ever there was one. Violently anti-Quaker, it concluded that Penn only became a statesman when he put aside Quakerism. Quaker pacifism was deplorably wrong to this writer, whose heroes were Cromwell, William III, and John Paul Jones. It was one of Buell's traits as biographer to disagree with previous writers, to correct and to chasten them. In this case he was reacting against the filiopietistic attitude of Quaker biographers; perhaps he was also reacting against some Philadelphia Quakers of his own day. In contrast, he extolled the Puritans by quoting from the sermon of one Elder John Buell, "a Puritan preacher of that period."²³

The temptation to correct and add to the known stories of his subject led to some falsification. He asserted that Penn's mother, Margaret Jasper, daughter of a Dutch merchant, was really the daughter of

an English merchant settled in Rotterdam as correspondent or "resident partner" of an important London trading-house. The fact that Penn's mother was living in Rotterdam when married has apparently led some writers to conclude that she was half Dutch. *But this, like many hasty conclusions reached in historical research, is an error.* Margaret Jasper was quite as English as Captain Penn, and their son was a full-blood, thoroughbred Englishman.²⁴

This positive assertion, in absence of full data, was for a long time of some weight in the controversy. But full information now reveals that Margaret Jasper was Dutch, born in Holland of Dutch parents.²⁵

Buell's prejudices in this volume and a number of his errors and unsupported assertions are well covered in Professor W. I. Hull's *William Penn. A Topical Biography*, for persons who will read footnotes.²⁶ Buell's evident bias in this book may have caused readers to be less ready to accept his conclusions. *Writings on Pennsylvania History* (1946) has labeled the biography "unjust and inaccurate";

²³ Augustus C. Buell, *William Penn As the Founder of Two Commonwealths* (New York, 1904), 42-45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. Italics mine.

²⁵ William I. Hull, *William Penn. A Topical Biography* (New York, 1937), 25-26.

²⁶ *Ibid.* See his index references to footnote criticism.

Hull at various places termed it "laughable," "anti-Quaker," "entirely unsupported," and "undocumented."

In writing of Andrew Jackson, Buell let his prejudices be known: "It is at least an American book—not an English one, like Parton's." His *History of Andrew Jackson—Pioneer, Patriot, Soldier, Politician, President* bears all the external appearance of an authoritative work.²⁷ It was so hailed when it first appeared, and John Finley concluded in his favorable review that the "new appraisal of both the faults and the virtues of Andrew Jackson will materially affect not only the memory of Jackson but also that of his biographer Buell."²⁸ One reviewer felt that it suffered from the anti-British bias, but the human interest, the amusing anecdotes, and material drawn from interviews were praised. "Jackson had been a life-time study with Mr. Buell," said the preface. There were new interpretations, and Mrs. Jackson was shown not to be the vulgar woman she was pictured by other writers.²⁹

The anecdotes, the personal reminiscences of Jackson which were obtained only by interviews, and the lively dialogue were much prized by later biographers, who found that they filled lacunae, even though the sources could not be checked. Sometimes they came from family papers of the author. There was David Buell, who, it was alleged, had served under Jackson and kept a journal. There were the recollections of Governor William Allen of Ohio whom Buell had interviewed in 1875. And there were excellent quotations from vaguely identified documents. But no sources were given for anecdotes about Andy when he was a boy, of his giving a public reading of the Declaration of Independence, and for stories the General was wont to relate in later life.³⁰

The most recent and best-documented biography of Jackson, by Marquis James, makes full use of these anecdotes, and cites Buell (usually for incidents for which there is no other source) thirty-two times.³¹ This biography corrects Buell once or twice, but nowhere

²⁷ Augustus C. Buell, *History of Andrew Jackson—Pioneer, Patriot, Soldier, Politician, President* (New York, 1904), 2 vols.

²⁸ *The Lamp*, XXXIX (1904), 302-305.

²⁹ *Dial*, XXXVII (1904), 265-266.

³⁰ Most of these episodes are to be doubted. The David Buell diary is probably on a par with other "family papers."

³¹ Marquis James, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* [2 vols. in one] (Indianapolis, Ind., 1933, 1937, 1938).

indicates that he is unreliable. There is a strong probability, however, based on the Buell record, that what cannot be substantiated from other sources is "pure Buell"—legendary, garbled, or fiction. Documents never seen before or since by anyone but the author are probably of a piece with the John Paul Jones fabrications. Legends form about great men in their lifetime, and it is often difficult to separate truth from folklore. But surely it is worth while to recognize folklore for what it is.

Then there is Buell's rehabilitation of Mrs. Jackson. Marquis James finds little of the original writings of Rachel Jackson. Printed letters of Mrs. Jackson appear to have been edited and corrected to remove crudities. It is a little incredible that the woman who wrote, "the enemys of the Genls have dipt their arrows in wormwood and gall and sped them at me. . . . as my judg will know—how maney prayers have I oferd up for their repentance. . . . they have Disquieted one that they had no rite to do,"³² should also express herself in such glowing prose as the following quoted from Buell: "O, that I had the pen of a ready writer that I might give you a correct detail of the great transactions. We having a house prepared and furnished, the General advised me to move down and remain until he could with propriety march in with the Fourth Regiment."³³

Would not a biographer like to know how a man's wife felt about his becoming President? Buell found Rachel's sentiments so well expressed that not only his recent biographer, but the novelist Irving Stone (*The President's Lady*), pounced upon it³⁴:

I do hope they will leave Mr. Jackson alone. He is not a well man and never will be unless they allow him to rest. He has done his share for the country. . . . In all this time and through all such trials I have not said aye, yes or no. It was his work to do, he seemed called to it and I watched, waited and prayed most of the time alone. Now I hope it is at an end . . . all of his friends who come here—talk everlastingly about his being President. In this as in all else, I can only say, the Lord's will be done. But I hope he may not be called again to the strife and empty honors of public place.

Rachel Jackson well might have had such sentiments, but probably never wrote them in such language. The Historical Society of

³² Rachel Jackson to Elizabeth Watson, July 18, 1828, John S. Bassett, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, D. C., 1926-1935), III, 416.

³³ Buell, *History of Andrew Jackson*, II, 152.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 157-158; Irving Stone, *The President's Lady* (Garden City, N. Y., 1951).

Tennessee, which Buell cites for these letters, has been unable to locate them in its Jackson collection.³⁵

It is hard to estimate the effect of the dead hand on the writing of history. As indicated above, the last manuscript of Buell, unfinished and in pencil on crumbling yellow paper, is in the New York State Library. Intended as a biography of Joseph Brant, it has already been read by a descendant of Brant engaged in genealogical research, who believed it to be authentic. Yet it contains the same sort of fantastic fabrication, quotation from nonexistent journals and records, and improvisation of history as are found in his published works. In the absence of more authentic information on the life of Brant, who has become a favorite subject for writers of fiction, these yarns, too, may seep into folklore and tradition and thus muddy the stream of history. It hardly seems necessary to investigate all the hallucinations of a dreamer for possible fact, or to disprove all the tall stories of a convicted prevaricator. Yet some such task is imposed on the historian as a result of the literary output of such a man as Augustus C. Buell. Since destruction of books will not down untruth, would it not be wise to have some of these works branded *Cave mendacem*?

Division of Archives and History
Albany, N. Y.

MILTON W. HAMILTON

³⁵ Letters to libraries having the major collections of Jackson documents fail to discover these letters. Buell's skill in improvisation is noteworthy in this instance. They are difficult to disprove and even the most thorough students have accepted them. Pauline Wilcox Burke, *Emily Donelson of Tennessee* (Richmond, Va., 1941), 2 vols., is largely based on documentary sources. Yet this collection, too, has included Buell's anecdotes (I, 51-52, 53-54, 236, and 278-279), although the author has expressed serious doubts concerning Buell's story of Mrs. Eaton's presiding at the White House (Buell, *History of Andrew Jackson*, II, 232, 254). Mrs. Burke also quotes Buell's "documents" in II, 97-98.