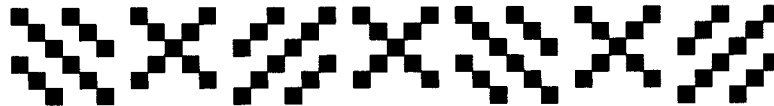


*The Diary of Calvin Fletcher:*  
A Review Essay

Robert L. Jones\*



*The Diary of Calvin Fletcher. Volume IX, 1865-1866: Including Letters to and from Calvin Fletcher.* Edited by Gayle Thornbrough and Paula Corpuz. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1983. Pp. xxi, 602. Illustrations, notes, volume index, cumulative index. \$10.00.)

Publication of the ninth and final volume of *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher* provides an opportunity not only to review this volume but to comment on the entire project. Volume nine will be of general interest for the light it throws on the reaction in Indianapolis to the closing phase of the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln, and the adjustments necessarily being made in the aftermath of the conflict. For Fletcher, it was a time when he was trying to reduce his responsibilities in the management of the Indianapolis Branch Banking Company so that he could work on his farm north of the city. There were many days when he visited it twice and others when he put in manual labor during most of the daylight hours. On March 30, 1866, just as he was reaching home, he was badly injured through being thrown from a frightened mare and dragged some distance. In a month or so he was satisfied he had recovered and so resumed his horseback trips to the farm. On May 13 he made his last diary entry. He died May 26, apparently from complications arising out of his injury.

Calvin Fletcher was born in Vermont in 1798 and left home in 1815 to seek his fortune. In 1817 he was teaching school at

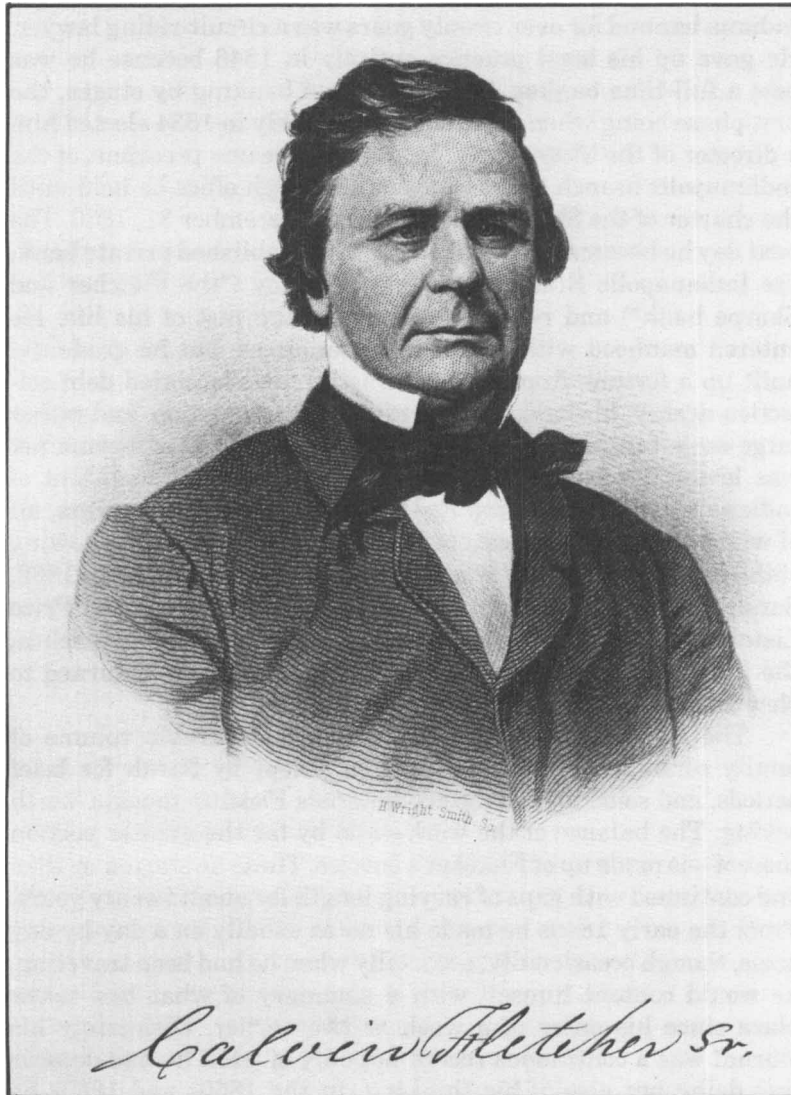
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Urbana, Ohio, and simultaneously reading law. At Urbana he met Sarah Hill, whom he married in 1821, a few months after being admitted to the Ohio bar. The couple shortly moved to Indianapolis, arriving just a week before the first sale of lots in the new state capital. Fletcher was immediately admitted to the Indiana bar and for over twenty years was a circuit-riding lawyer. He gave up his legal practice entirely in 1846 because he was now a full-time banker. He had entered banking by stages, the first phase being when the General Assembly in 1834 elected him a director of the State Bank. In 1844 he became president of the Indianapolis branch of the State Bank, which office he held until the charter of the State Bank expired on December 31, 1856. The next day he became president of a newly established private bank, the Indianapolis Branch Banking Company ("the Fletcher and Sharpe bank") and remained so during the rest of his life. He entered manhood with no financial resources, but he gradually built up a fortune from his law practice, an associated debt-collection agency, his banking activities, land speculation, and rather large-scale farming operations. When the Civil War income tax was levied, he was revealed to be the wealthiest inhabitant of Indianapolis. He and Sarah had nine sons and two daughters, all of whom survived him, except Maria who died in 1860 following childbirth and Miles who was killed in a railroad accident in 1862. Sarah died in 1855 and in 1856 Fletcher married Keziah Price Lister, who had come from Maine a few years earlier to teach in the Indianapolis public schools. After his death she returned to New England, where she died in 1899.

The *Diary* as published includes a considerable volume of family correspondence, a few journals kept by Sarah for brief periods, and some miscellaneous materials Fletcher thought worth saving. The balance of the work—and by far the greater portion thereof—is made up of Fletcher's entries. These he started in 1820 and continued with gaps of varying length for about twenty years. From the early 1840s he made his notes usually on a day-by-day basis, though occasionally, especially when he had been traveling, he would content himself with a summary of what had taken place since his entry of a week or two earlier. Ultimately his journal was a continuous record not only of what he had done or was doing but also of his thinking. In the 1850s and 1860s he made a practice of ending the old year or beginning the new with a recapitulation of the highlights of the preceding twelve months.

The *Diary* furnishes an indispensable source of information for the history of Indianapolis during its first forty-five years. For instance, it is of value for its description by a practitioner of the problems of the legal profession in the early days. It is of great



Courtesy Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

interest for what is mentioned of the banking business, especially as the viewpoint is not that of a politician or an economist but rather of an insider involved in day-to-day detail. As Fletcher was for several years a trustee of the common schools of the city, in which office he had wide responsibilities in hiring teachers, exercising discipline, arranging examinations, engaging in visitations, and inspecting facilities, the *Diary* reveals much concerning these aspects of the educational system. Fletcher was deeply involved in the activities of the considerable number of charitable and benevolent organizations in the community. One of the best ways to piece together an account of the attempts to alleviate the lot of the poor and the unfortunate would be to go through the *Diary*. Among the other incidental values of the *Diary* to the local historian are many references to entertainment, this comprising an assortment of games, picnics, concerts, circuses, patriotic celebrations, horse races, fairs, and other events characteristic of the times.

The *Diary* is likewise of worth for Indiana state history. Fletcher was a member of the Indiana Senate from 1826 to 1833, but thereafter he held no state office. He was, however, active in political matters as a promoter, as an organizer, and as a behind-the-scenes consultant. His role as adviser was especially important during the Civil War, when Governor Oliver P. Morton sought his opinion with respect to the Copperhead menace and other urgent matters. Fletcher was especially identified with the temperance movement and subsequently with the Free Soil movement. Outside the conventional political realm, he was identified with the promotion, construction, and operation of several Indiana railroads, so that there is much scattered information on these enterprises. As he was often away from Indianapolis for legal or business reasons, and as he and members of his family made many journeys to the East and elsewhere, the *Diary* in its entries and correspondence is illuminating on travel in its various aspects from the days of sloshing on horseback along forest trails to the time when trains were safe and reliable.

Seeing that Fletcher was a lawyer, a banker, and a resident of Indianapolis involved in multifarious activities, it may come as a surprise that what lay nearest his heart was farming. During his Indiana years he had several farms, some operated by tenants, some in partnership, some by supervised hired help, and some by his sons. His concentration was on livestock, especially cattle and swine. He was scarcely an innovator in his practices, but he did attempt to keep current with improvements, and he was attuned to market fluctuations. Other men in his position would in all likelihood have become outright absentee landlords, but he fan-

cied himself as a farmer, in his sixties glorying in his continued capacity to do a hard day's work in the field. There are so many references in the *Diary* to the inception, evolution, and outcome of his farm-related activities that their cumulative effect is to make it essential to any study of Indiana agriculture.

The *Diary's* importance extends far beyond the matters mentioned, important though these were. Bit by bit it reveals the many facets of a man who was an exemplary citizen, a hard-working and efficient businessman, and a dedicated self-improver. Fletcher had only a common-school education, supplemented by his reading of law, but he was always interested in learning. He subscribed to leading magazines and bought books—good ones, too—on religion, travel, and other areas of knowledge. He and Keziah had frequent and long discussions of what they were reading. He was greatly concerned that all his children should have a sound education and therefore sent them off to schools (and sometimes colleges) in the East. He was a friend to members of the black population when prevailing pro-Southern sentiments in the city made any such association a rarity. He was always personally generous. One illustration thereof is that it was long his practice to furnish every clergyman in the city a dressed hog at Christmas. This might be taken as an example of a conspicuous benevolence, so it should be added that he made frequent donations in money or kind to individuals and families he considered worthy of help and even sometimes to the wholly undeserving.

The *Diary* reveals much more of Fletcher than such externals. He had been brought up in an environment in which the old Puritan virtues were meaningful and respected, and he guided his entire life by adherence to them. Though it would seem that he was not given to making a display of piety, he was deeply religious. He was accordingly identified with various aspects of church work, including a quarter of a century or so as a Sunday-school superintendent. He was bothered when he fell short of his self-imposed standards and suffered remorse when, as not infrequently happened, he lost his temper at some shortcoming or thoughtless act of one of his children.

It was in the area of generational relationships that Fletcher had his worst problems. There were often serious tensions as his children grew through adolescence into adulthood. Thus Lucy, his younger daughter, was outspokenly opposed to his marriage to Keziah and was, as long as she remained at home, a perennial trial to her stepmother and so to her father. Again, with Cooley, his eldest son, there was a strained relationship over many years, this arising out of the fact that Cooley was financially irresponsible, and so contracted debts which his father felt obliged to pay.

Fletcher had difficulties with most of his other sons as they were growing up, because they resented his well-intentioned efforts to govern their lives. The parental advice he gave was usually quite sound, but the boys tended to think that they were being hectored, and sometimes said so. After they completed their formal education, Fletcher involved some of them in his farming operations as subordinates or partners, but he would not trust their judgment or respect their capacity, and so the enterprises as like as not ended in recriminations. While the young men unquestionably made serious mistakes, an outsider might well conclude that the fault was not all on their side, that indeed the root of the recurrent problem was that Fletcher did not or perhaps could not see that they had grown up and had developed perspectives at variance with his.

Among the interesting and thought-provoking aspects of the *Diary* is its revelation of the problems of operating a large household in the days before modern conveniences. In Sarah's time there were children of all ages, usually a couple of bound girls (supposedly a help, but probably in some instances really just more adolescents to be looked after), a hired man or two, and often guests. Perhaps there might be only one or two of these, but when there was a religious conference in the city, there might be half a dozen or more. Fletcher got up early in the morning to get the fires going, catch up on his reading and correspondence, and make his diary entries, but Sarah ran the household. Nor was this management restricted to the indoors. It was Sarah who looked after the making of maple sugar and who supervised and participated in the autumnal hog butchering. Fletcher realized that Sarah was overworked, and thought it not quite proper that this should be so, but he never did anything tangible to reduce her burdens. It is worth noting that Keziah never allowed herself to become a slave to running the household.

Such, then, are some of the impressions gained from a reading of the journal and its related materials. The nine volumes, with their accompanying footnotes identifying personages and places or explaining matters that might otherwise be puzzling or meaningless to a modern reader, run to 4,657 pages. Many a page, to be sure, is filled with inconsequential items. There is inevitably much repetition and plenty of weather reports. If all such things are passed over, there remains a solid core of worthwhile information. Accordingly, the *Diary* is a fundamental source for the study of Indianapolis and Indiana in its era. It is also of great value for the business history of much of the Middle West. It does not seem to have any rival in its class. The editing of the work is worthy of the highest commendation, as has been recognized by a succession of reviewers.

It is ironical that Fletcher, truly an archetype of leading citizen and successful businessman, will be remembered not for his many notable achievements but for the *Diary*, and that he will be a vital and believable personage to those who peruse its pages while his often more conspicuous contemporaries will tend to become dimmer and dimmer figures in a receding past.