

Morris Birkbeck: Eminent Englishman

By ROBERT BIRBECK

Morris Birkbeck was an Englishman, who made the best of his opportunities in America. The name, Birkbeck,¹ belongs to "an old established family of distinction, the first occurrence of the name being in 1318". It was in 1817, that Morris Birkbeck of near Guilford, Surrey County, England, led a number of English emigrants from England to south-eastern Illinois and southwestern Indiana. Having disposed of his large holdings in England for some \$55,000, he came to the United States and established a group of settlers on a site, formerly known as Wanborough, about two miles from the present town of Albion, Edwards County, Illinois. He organized a model town in five-acre tracts, but the village has been almost forgotten. However, he and George Flower spent a fortune of something like \$100,000 to establish for their English friends a settlement where they not only could have the advantage of cheap lands, unburdened from taxation, but an opportunity to dwell in a new land free from aristocracy where no established religion prevailed.²

According to his descendants, he was an only son of a Quaker preacher. He had received the advantages of a good education, and especially was he schooled in Latin and Greek. Traveling extensively in Europe and America, he wrote some important sketches which are valuable to students doing research in early nineteenth century history.³ His writings attracted the attention of men like Thomas Jefferson and Marquis de Lafayette, as well as English emigrants. Again, his anti-slavery writings were considered valuable, inasmuch as he exerted an influence to keep the state of Illinois from

¹ Robert Birkbeck, grandfather of the writer of this brief sketch, was an Englishman who came to America in 1832. After he came to the United States he dropped the "k" out of the middle of the name.

² There is quite an extensive account of the work of Morris Birkbeck in the *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois*, by George Flower (Vol. I, Chicago Historical Society's Collection, edited by Elihu B. Washburn, 1882). See also the following: Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America from the Coast of Virginia to the Territory of Illinois* (Philadelphia, 1817), and *Letters from the Illinois Territory* (1818); William Faux, *Memorable Days in America* (1828).

³ In addition to the little volumes mentioned above, Morris Birkbeck wrote and published *Notes on a Journey through France* (1814) and other pamphlets, letters and articles.

changing its constitution, and adopting slavery as an institution.⁴

His activities in model farming in England had given him knowledge which he applied in this new country, particularly in Illinois, where he was made president of the Agricultural Society. His experience and information in regard to agriculture he used for the good of emigrants coming from the old country.

When he migrated to America, he brought sons and daughters with him to this sparsely settled country, known as the broad prairies of southern Illinois, in Edwards County. Here were found Indians on every hand. Some one hundred fifty colonists came to share in the cheap land, where they met privations in the new country, unlike anything they had ever witnessed in their home country. In fact, these English pioneers were "considered as little above jack rabbits and prairie squirrels" by the native frontiersman until such a time as their activities had proved invaluable to the new community.

Of the family of Morris Birkbeck, Prudence Birkbeck-Ford, a granddaughter, who died in 1915 at New Harmony, Indiana, at the age of ninety-one years, was the last of his family to bear that name in America. His sons were "scattered to the four winds". Two went to Mexico City. One or two went to Australia. A grandson, Robert E. Birkbeck, worked in the office of the Chief Engineer of the Royal Queensland Railroad at Brisbane, Australia. In 1908, this grandson sent a brief summary of some seventy-five of the letters of his grandfather, Morris Birkbeck, to the Illinois Historical Society. An earlier manuscript of his grandfather was given to the Chicago Historical Society in 1860. This particular document was borrowed by some one a few days before the great Chicago fire, thereby saving a valuable historical source for the future use of persons doing research.

In the matter presented in the early writings of Birkbeck, Lafayette is said to have shown much interest, especially in the *Journey in France*, and the *Journey in America*. In letters from Jefferson to George Flower, co-founder of Edwards County, Illinois, the statement appears that these ac-

⁴The part played by Birkbeck in the contest over slavery in Illinois is discussed in Elihu B. Washburn, *Sketch of Governor Edward Coles* (Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, XV, edited by Clarence W. Alvord, 1920). See also, Theodore C. Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818-1848* (Vol. II of the *Centennial History of Illinois*, 1918), and Solon J. Buck, *Illinois in 1818* (Vol. I of the *Centennial History*, 1917).

counts were written with interest, and the writer sent his regards to the esteemed author, the partner of Flower, Morris Birkbeck.

Differences of opinion grew up between Birkbeck and Flower. A possible cause for the dislike of Flower by Birkbeck may have been that both were interested in a young woman, who was one of the first group of emigrants from England. The young woman, Eliza Julia Andrews, turned a deaf ear to Birkbeck's proposal when he asked her to become his second wife, while she showed favor to Flower who married her at Vincennes while the party was on the way to Illinois.⁵ Although such an estrangement was possible between two Englishmen, Birkbeck was generally considered broad-minded in regard to politics and religion. Being brought up a Quaker did not hinder him from dealing generously with other denominations in the new country. He believed firmly that every citizen should have a right to vote. Like many pioneer leaders, his usefulness was keenly felt. However, his career was cut short when he was drowned in crossing the Fox river on his return from a trip to New Harmony, Indiana, in the year 1825. He was then but sixty-two years of age.⁶ He had served as a leader in Illinois for a few years.

It should be mentioned that the subject of this sketch was selected to serve as Secretary of State in Illinois by Gov. George Coles in 1824. Due to the hostility of the state Senate, his appointment was not confirmed, but he had served for some three months when forced to give up the office.⁷

In every way Morris Birkbeck was a leader in the new settlement which he helped to found. On October 27, 1929, there occurred a ceremony proving that his name still lives. The Department of the Women's Relief Corps of Illinois, Auxiliary of the G.A.R. for the state of Illinois, met in Ed-

⁵ This estrangement remains a mystery. George Flower tells the story in his *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois*. He omits many details necessary to an understanding of the unfortunate breach, but expresses his belief that Mr. Birkbeck made his last trip to New Harmony to ask Robert Owen to use his influence to bring about a reconciliation. Mr. Flower attributed this desire of his former friend Birkbeck to bring about such a reconciliation to "that sense of justice in Mr. Birkbeck that prompted him to repair the injury inflicted from erroneous impressions or heat of temper". William Faux in his diary (*Memorable Days in America*) records what he learned from both families about the quarrel. From his account, it is perfectly clear that there were two sides to the controversy. Faux was closely associated with both Flower and Birkbeck for a few days in the fall of 1819. See a fair conclusion in regard to the Flower-Birkbeck feud by Pease, *The Frontier State*, 14.

⁶ Morris Birkbeck was drowned on June 4, 1825, on his return to Wanborough, Illinois, from New Harmony. He was swimming his horse across the Fox River, swollen by recent rains, when he lost his life.

⁷ Washburn, *Edward Coles*, 160-161.

wards County, Illinois, in a large body, and appropriately unveiled a marker in the court-house yard at Albion.⁸ Governor Louis Lincoln Emerson, who was born at Albion, reviewed the accomplishments of Birkbeck, one of the founders of Edwards County, not many miles from where he is buried at New Harmony, Indiana. His venture in this land buying scheme was made directly for Illinois and indirectly for Indiana. He served unselfishly the interests of others in establishing this English settlement. Incidentally it may be mentioned that six generations of his descendents have lived here in America.

The inscription on the marker set up at Albion in 1929, reads:

TO MORRIS BIRKBECK—WHO IN 1817 WITH GEORGE FLOWER FOUNDED THE ENGLISH SETTLEMENT IN EDWARDS COUNTY THIS MEMORIAL IS ERECTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ILLINOIS WOMEN'S RELIEF CORPS AUXILIARY TO THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC, "IN RESPECT AND GRATITUDE FOR THE DECIDED PART HE TOOK AGAINST THE INTRODUCTION OF SLAVERY". OCTOBER 27, 1929.

⁸ Washburn wrote in 1882 that "Edwards county could not do a more appropriate act than to erect a monument to his [Birkbeck's] memory." *Ibid.*, 140.