

The Emigrants (Penguin Classics)

By Gilbert Imlay

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Editorial Review

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THE EMIGRANTS

Gilbert Imlay (1754?–1828?) was a man of many trades and talents, few of which were within the confines of what is conventionally regarded as legally and morally acceptable behavior. A self-styled “captain” in the American Revolutionary army, Imlay set out to try his luck across the Allegheny Mountains in the Ohio Valley soon after the war ended. In Kentucky, he became involved in various shady activities, including land speculation schemes and dubious secessionist politics. Having accumulated more debt than he could handle while successfully eluding sheriffs’ summonses and court writs, Imlay quietly left the West (as the Ohio Valley was considered then) and America sometime in late 1786. He reappeared in London in 1792, the year in which his first and highly influential book, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America*, was published. This was followed, in 1793, by his only other known publication, the epistolary novel *The Emigrants*. During much of 1793 Imlay was in Paris, where he associated with the group of intellectuals and revolutionaries who gathered around the notorious radical Tom Paine. It was here that he met the writer and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, with whom he began a tempestuous and ill-fated love affair. After he abandoned Wollstonecraft, little is known of Imlay’s life. A grave believed to be his is found on the Channel Island of Jersey, dated 1828.

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Together, W. M. Verhoeven and Amanda Gilroy have coedited the special issue of the journal *Prose Studies* on nonfictional letters, and *Cultural Correspondences: Essays on Epistolary Writing* (forthcoming).

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INTRODUCTION

I

The American Gilbert Imlay is best known to readers of British Romanticism as the cad who abandoned Mary Wollstonecraft, the founding mother of modern feminism, and whose philandering drove her to attempt suicide (twice). Wollstonecraft’s *Letters to Imlay* (first published posthumously in 1798) and her travel book *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) detail the ups and many downs of their affair, while William Godwin, in his *Memoirs* (1798) of his late wife, set the tone for subsequent criticism in deeming Imlay, after Othello, a man who could, “like the base Indian, throw a pearl away, richer than all his tribe.”1 Scholars of American literature and history, on the other hand, have long been familiar with another side of Imlay, that of the entrepreneurial author of one of the most influential and successful travel books of the late eighteenth century, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (first published in London in 1792). Few readers of either British or American literary history, however, are familiar with Imlay’s novel *The Emigrants*, published in England in July or August 1793, a few months after the start of his affair with Wollstonecraft. This epistolary novel, which combines a sentimental plot of impeded love with episodes of travel and adventure (including a capture by Indians), acts as a type of fictional companion to the travel text: Both books, aimed at a British audience, function as practical guides for emigration to the Ohio Valley and map out a geopolitical future for the New World across the Allegheny Mountains.

In addition, *The Emigrants* provides a salutary alternative to the distinct absence of feminist ideals in Imlay’s checkered personal life, for it “espouse[s] the cause of oppressed women” (Letter XIII), especially the rights of women in marriage, which it ties to an anticolonial agenda. The novel exposes marriage in England as a type of cultural captivity for women, and makes a plea for more liberal divorce laws. The treatment of women also serves as the most affecting example of the differences between Britain and America, as Imlay

uses the issue of domestic politics to construct a utopian vision of American national character. *The Emigrants* thus makes a claim for consideration as a Jacobin novel—a document of the transatlantic revolutionary movement. However, there are contradictions in the revolutionary rhetoric of personal liberty that support *The Emigrants'* valorization of America over England (or Europe), and women continued to be seen as possession or spectacle.

In order to understand the novel's politics of geography and of gender, we need first to know something about Imlay's *Topographical Description* and the revolutionary era in which and of which he wrote, as well as something about the contradictory and charismatic character of the man himself, whom Edith Franklin Wyatt described as "unscrupulous, independent, courageous, a dodger of debts to the poor, a deserter, a protector of the helpless, a revolutionist, a man of enlightenment beyond his age, a greedy and treacherous land booster."2

II

Very little information is available about the earliest period of Gilbert Imlay's life or, indeed, about his life after he broke up with Mary Wollstonecraft—the known facts of his life covering roughly the twenty-year period from 1777 to 1797. Imlay was born on 9 February 1754, probably in Upper Freehold, Monmouth County, New Jersey, where the Imlay family had been established since the early decades of the eighteenth century. Apart from a brief reference to a Gilbert Imlay in a will drawn up in 1761, nothing is known about him until his name appears in the military service records of the American Revolutionary army. These records indicate that Imlay served in Forman's Additional Continental Regiment from 11 January 1777 to July 1778, and that he had enlisted for the duration of the war. Although he commonly styled himself "captain" (as on the title page of *A Topographical Description*), there is no evidence that Imlay ever rose beyond the rank of first lieutenant.

At the close of the Revolutionary War, Imlay, like so many other decommissioned officers of the American army, set out to try his luck across the Allegheny Mountains in the western territories of the Ohio Valley. The settlements along the shores of the Ohio River, in what is now the state of Kentucky, were at the time the farthest outposts of the westward expansion of America. This was the age of legendary frontiersman Daniel Boone, who first visited the area in 1769 and whose adventurous rambles through the sublime wilderness and constant tussles with the Indians in what the latter called the "dark and bloody ground" later earned him the status of national mythic hero (as well as the honorary title of "colonel"). This was the age, too, of Boone's first biographer and fellow Pennsylvanian John Filson, who had crossed over into Kentucky in 1783 in search of fame and fortune, and who a year later published *The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke*, one of the most influential accounts of what Filson described as "the best tract of land in North America, and probably in the world."3

According to his own account of the trip in *A Topographical Description*, which borrows heavily from Filson's book, Imlay arrived in Kentucky in March 1784. Although as a veteran officer of the Revolutionary War he would have been able to claim automatic land rights in the western territory, in March 1783 he had already bought a tract of land in Fayette, one of the three counties into which the District of Kentucky was divided at the time. Soon after his arrival in Kentucky, Imlay became deeply immersed in land speculation deals, leaving a long and complex trail of legal entanglements, according to Kentucky county court records. In Louisville in April 1784 he was sworn in as a deputy surveyor of Jefferson County, a position which must have been of considerable commercial advantage to him: As "a Commissioner for laying out Land in the Back Settlements" (as he styled himself somewhat inflatedly on the title page of *A Topographical Description*), he could play a modest role in publicly furthering the cause of the "probable rise and grandeur of the American empire" (Letter III in *Description*), while lining his pockets on the side.

It is not known how long Imlay retained his surveying job, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that before long lining his pockets was his main, if not his sole, preoccupation. However, the records of the various county courts also indicate that he was not always very successful in his business deals. Continually incurring debts and breaching contracts, Imlay was soon forced into a life of constant county-hopping in an attempt to elude sheriffs' summonses and court writs. At one point, in August 1784, a warrant for Imlay's arrest was issued by the Jefferson County Court, but, of course, he had taken to his heels by then.

Among Imlay's business associates in Kentucky was the notorious General James Wilkinson. A veteran of the Revolutionary War and a man with a lust for wealth and power, Wilkinson had survived the siege of Boston and was present at the siege of Quebec, after which he served under Washington at the battles of Trenton and Princeton. Wilkinson later showed up in Kentucky, where he was soon involved in large-scale land speculation schemes. What earned Wilkinson the sobriquet "Washington of the West" was his plan to establish relations between the western territories and the Spanish authorities in Louisiana, with the ultimate aim of bringing about the secession of the western regions from the United States. While ostensibly backing the federal government in its dispute with the Spanish over boundaries and navigation rights to the Mississippi, Wilkinson was actually an agent in the pay of Spain and secretly campaigning for an independent state west of the Alleghenies and, ultimately, for his self-aggrandizement.

Sharing Wilkinson's commercial self-interest as well as his unruly, rebellious western pride, Imlay became an admirer and a supporter of his double-tongued patriotism. Thus it is quite possible that the staunchly patriotic and expansionist 1788 petition to the United States by "the people of Kentucky in convention," which is quoted at length in the preface to the first edition of *A Topographical Description*, was actually composed by General Wilkinson, who appears in *The Emigrants* as the avuncular character of "General W——," the kindly godfather of Imlay's secessionist utopia. In May 1785 Imlay asked Wilkinson to look after his business interests in Fayette County, no doubt because the place had become too hot for Imlay himself. In November 1785, soon after he had joined an ambitious investment project aimed at erecting an ironworks (later known as the "Green River Company"), Imlay absconded from Kentucky, leaving his business associates to figure out what had happened to their money. For years after his departure, sheriffs' summonses continued to be posted on church doors and published in newspapers, but Imlay was no more to be seen or heard of in Kentucky.

At the end of 1785 Imlay was in Richmond, Virginia, where he continued to speculate in Kentucky land. Thus in December he acquired a patent for over twelve thousand acres of land in Jefferson County, Kentucky, which he sold in Philadelphia in September 1786 to a Silas Talbott for a dollar an acre. In November 1786 Imlay was back in Richmond, presumably to receive letters of patent issued to him for a large tract of land in Fayette County, Kentucky. Very shortly afterward, Imlay's trail on the North American continent abruptly terminates, and it is generally assumed that he left the United States in December 1786, leaving behind legal entanglements that were to keep the courts busy for more than a decade. (Indeed, one case—that of Isaac Hite, one of Imlay's fellow investors in the Green River Company—dragged on until October 1799, when, though Hite had died in the meantime, the plaintiff's inheritors finally savored the taste of a legal victory over Imlay, although of course no money was forthcoming.)

As for Imlay's reasons for silently departing from the United States, we can only speculate. It has been suggested that he may have been involved in a French conspiracy against Spanish Louisiana. It is known that French agents were active in Kentucky as early as 1785 and that many of the settlers there were frustrated with the federal government for not settling with the Spanish the question of the navigation of the Mississippi, and were therefore threatening to appeal to a foreign power to intervene on their part. However, it seems more likely that Imlay's trip to Europe (if that is where he went) was motivated by his own troubles

in America rather than by any concrete plan to plot against the United States. It is, for one thing, hard to imagine that the *ancien régime* would recruit a small-time land speculator from Kentucky as an *agent provocateur* against the Spanish interests in Louisiana and the southwest. Still ahead were the two developments needed to change this situation and put Imlay at the center of a cabal that, had it been successful, might have changed the map of the United States and the course of American history: the emergence of a more radical, expansionist foreign policy in France under the national assembly, and the publication of Imlay's highly successful *A Topographical Description* in 1792, which won him the reputation of being a geopolitical expert on the western territories of North America.

III

Following the example of Crèvecoeur's *Letters From an American Farmer* (London, 1782), *A Topographical Description* presents itself as "a series of letters to a friend in England," but internal evidence suggests that the book was written (at least in part, but probably in its entirety) long after the author had left both Kentucky and America, most probably in England from 1791 to 1792. Again like Crèvecoeur's *Letters, A Topographical Description* is aimed at a European, particularly British, audience, and, as may be concluded from its format (a cross between an epistolary correspondence and a travelogue), it asks to be read as an authentic, eyewitness account of the American social experiment as a "real life" application of a long tradition of progressive, utopian, Enlightenment thinking, which could be described as radical pastoralism. Thus, in the Introduction, the English "editor" of the letters describes his American friend "Imlay" as a "man who had lived until he was more than five-and-twenty years old, in the back parts of America," where he had become "accustomed to that simplicity of manners natural to a people in a state of innocence." Having since traveled to Europe, his friend "must have been powerfully stricken with the great difference between the simplicity of [the New World], and what is called *etiquette* and good breeding in the [Old]." Being a man of unspoiled manners and morals, his American friend, the "editor" believes, "is better calculated than ourselves to judge our manners." Besides being an eclectic account of the American horn of plenty and a practical "how to emigrate to Kentucky" guide, Imlay's *Topographical Description* thus becomes a comparative analysis of, in the words of Imlay's Kentuckian Noble Savage, "the simple manners, and rational life of the Americans, in these back settlements" and "the distorted and unnatural habits of the Europeans," which, Imlay's narrator reminds us, "have flowed no doubt from the universally bad laws which exist [in Europe], and from that pernicious system of blending religion with politics, which has been productive of universal depravity" (Letter I).

It is worth noting that Imlay chose the same epistolary form for *The Emigrants*, and, as in *A Topographical Description*, he mixes in stirring amounts of travel and adventure. Though *The Emigrants* is relatively unsophisticated in its use of epistolary techniques and devices (apart from the duplicitous letter written by Caroline's sister that causes some misunderstandings between the lovers, there is nothing of the complexity of a Samuel Richardson or even of a Hannah Webster Foster), it is appropriate to consider the ideological resonances of this particular textual form at this particular historical moment. During the 1790s, the sentimental novel, and especially the epistolary novel—paradigmatically represented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tale of illicit love, *Julie; Or, The New Heloise* (1791)—came to be seen especially in conservative circles as supporting a trend toward dangerous, individual excess at a time when national political consensus was thought to be paramount. Parallel to this development, the familiar letter, traditionally seen as an authentic document of the self, moved more and more into the sphere of public critique: The letter was revolutionized, so to speak, and came to be regarded as an agent of conspiracy. Significantly, the increasingly reactionary British government began to view the burgeoning networks of radical correspondence (such as the London Corresponding Society), which were dedicated to political reform, with great suspicion, and ultimately imposed legislative gagging to suppress them. *The Emigrants* entered this ongoing cultural correspondence on the side of revolutionary writers.4

Imlay's *Topographical Description* made a strong impact on all those radical minds in Britain who considered their society to be hopelessly corrupt and their civil rights under serious threat from an outdated and despotic government. First published at a time when tensions were rising between the French and the British (with war between them eventually breaking out in February 1793) and when the violent revolution was expected to cross the English Channel into Britain any minute, Imlay's book was seized upon by many as the promise for a Rousseauesque return to nature in the pristine wilderness of the New World. The decision of the radical scientist and philosopher Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) to settle on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania and build an agrarian utopia not too long after a reactionary mob burned down his Birmingham house and laboratory in September 1791 initiated a widespread emigration movement to America among progressive European idealists in the 1790s, many of whom were thrilled by Imlay's description of the Kentucky paradise.

One of the best known of these utopian emigration schemes was Samuel Coleridge's pantisocracy—an experiment of human perfectibility which was to be created in pastoral seclusion, and which would be run on the principle of sharing property, labor, and self-government equally among all of its adult members, both men and women. Coleridge thoroughly researched the possibilities of an American pantisocracy, and enthusiastically read several of the recent reports on the country's topography, including Brissot de Warville's *New Travels in the United States* (1792), Thomas Cooper's *Some Information Respecting America* (1794), and Imlay's *Topographical Description*. It is probably not a coincidence that Kentucky was the first suggested site for Coleridge's pantisocracy, only some time later to be superseded by the site that most people nowadays tend to associate with pantisocracy—the idyllic Pennsylvanian hinterland on the banks of the picturesque Susquehanna River, which was the region Thomas Cooper (a business associate of Priestley's son in the Susquehanna project) recommended to potential emigrants.

It was apparently common knowledge in the 1790s that Imlay and Cooper were interested in more than the mere sale of their books. Thus, in January 1795, an article appeared in the *British Critic* discussing the activities of American and British land agents in London at the time, particularly the rival emigration schemes for Kentucky and the Susquehanna that were being promoted by Imlay and Cooper respectively. The article was highly critical of the dealings of both men, referring to "Messrs. Imlay and Cooper as two rival auctioneers, or rather two show-men, stationed for the allurement of incautious passengers; 'Pray ladies and gentlemen, walk in and admire the wonders of Kentucky.'—'Pray stop and see the incomparable beauties of the Susquehanna.' "5 Similarly, in the supplement to its 1794 issue, the *Gentleman's Magazine* published what it claimed was an authentic letter from an actual emigrant who had settled in Pennsylvania, hoping that its contents might "help to check the spirit of emigration so prevalent in [the] country," and that it "might serve as an antidote to the poison so generally diffused by writers, who scruple not to injure their native country by the grossest misrepresentations."6 It was generally acknowledged that there was a growing popularity of American emigration schemes among Quakers, Unitarians, and other idealist freethinkers. By 1796 it was calculated that some two thousand people had set out for America—though many returned disillusioned .7

Even though it is not known whether at that time Imlay himself still held any land rights in Kentucky, land-jobbing was certainly one of the activities that kept him occupied during the six-year interval between his departure from America in December 1786 and the publication of *A Topographical Description* in 1792. Soon after the appearance of the book, however, Imlay found himself launched on a rather different career, and one that some have considered to be an unlikely occupation for a former "captain" in the Revolutionary army and western confidence man: that of a successful writer. The popularity of *A Topographical Description* soon led to the publication in 1793 of a second, expanded English edition (strangely, under the name of *George* Imlay) which added, in an appendix, Filson's *The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke* and his *Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boone*. In the same year further reprints appeared in New York and Dublin, and a German translation was produced. *The Emigrants*, which also appeared in 1793, marked Imlay's

initiation into the realm of creative fiction, although the novel was probably meant to be a fictional companion piece to his *Topographical Description*—an attempt to jump onto the bandwagon of the then-popular Jacobin novel, a short-lived genre of radical fiction that was inspired by the early popularity of the French Revolution in Britain. An even more expanded edition of *A Topographical Description*—which included such texts as the treaty with Spain on the free navigation of the Mississippi, the Plan of Association of the North American Land Company, and Thomas Hutchins's *Historical Narrative and Topographical Description of Louisiana and West Florida*—appeared in London in 1797, testifying to the book's continuing popularity in Europe. The book was not reprinted in North America after the 1793 New York edition.

Although it has been claimed in the past that Imlay's *Topographical Description* is closely modeled after (or even concocted from) earlier topographical classics—notably Thomas Hutchins's *A Topographical Description of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina* (1778); Jonathan Carver's *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America* (1781); Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784–85); Comte de Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1749–1804); Jedidiah Morse's *American Geography* (1789); Brissot de Warville's *New Travels in the United States* (1792); and, especially, John Filson's *The Discovery and Settlement of Kentucke* (1784)—a closer look at Imlay's text reveals that, unlike its predecessors (with the exception of Jefferson's *Notes*), Imlay's book constitutes a sustained geopolitical doctrine. It does not merely describe the western territories as a new Canaan for the prospective emigrant; it also provides the physiocratic rationale for the opening up and development of the western territories.

A doctrine developed by political economists in France in the eighteenth century, physiocracy is characterized chiefly by the belief that government policy should not interfere with the operation of natural economic laws and that land is the source of all wealth. In contrast to Enlightenment thought in general, physiocracy holds that liberty is not so much a precondition for universal prosperity as the *consequence* of prosperity. In other words, liberty follows trade and commerce, not the other way around. Accordingly, Imlay's attitude toward the natural environment of the western territories is not that of an idealist pantisocratist seeking refuge from oppression and persecution, or of a romantic, Wordsworthian "lover of the meadows and the woods, and the mountains," but that of a staunchly rationalistic, pragmatic Enlightenment real estate developer. Thus, when he describes the area around Lexington, Kentucky, as the "finest and most luxurious country in the world" (*Description*, Letter III), Imlay is not transported by "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures," but is rather thinking of the richness of the soil, the navigability of the rivers, and the wholesomeness of the climate.

Roughly speaking, Imlay's topographical description of the western territory of the United States, as well as the geopolitical vision based on it, centers around just two natural phenomena: mountains and rivers—more particularly, the Allegheny Mountains and the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The Allegheny Mountains, which until the 1760s caused the colonization of America to be contained within the relatively confined coastal strip bordering on the Atlantic, undergo a crucial metamorphosis in Imlay's *Topographical Description* as well as in *The Emigrants*. Rather than an impregnable obstacle for further westward expansion, the Alleghenies are presented to us in both texts as not so much a physical but a *moral* watershed, separating the pastoral innocence of the western settlements from the social evil, political corruption, and religious blindness that dominate life in the eastern states. As stated in *The Emigrants*, the virtuous "region of innocence" lies to the west of the mountains, while vice runs rife in Bristol and the East. This symbolic geography underlies the distinction between European depravity and American innocence made in both of Imlay's books. As described in *A Topographical Description*, the Arcadian utopia of pastoral bliss that presents itself to the emigrant to the Ohio Valley reminds one of a blend of Samuel Johnson's Enlightenment "Happy Valley" in his Eastern tale *Rasselas* and an Old Testament view of the promised land from the top of Mount Sinai. Imlay's mountaintop prospect of the western Canaan occasions one of the few moments in the book in which he indulges in uncharacteristic "rhapsody" (reminiscent of similar outbursts in *The Emigrants*):

Everything here assumes a dignity and splendour I have never seen in any part of the world. You ascend a considerable distance from the shore of the Ohio, and when you would suppose you had arrived at the summit of a mountain, you find yourself upon a extensive level. Here an eternal verdure reigns, and the brilliant sun of lat. 39%, piercing through the azure heavens, produces, in this prolific soil, an early maturity which is truly astonishing. Flowers full and perfect, as if they had been cultivated by the hand of a florist, with all their captivating odours, and with all the variegated charms which colour and nature can produce, here, in the lap of elegance and beauty, decorate the smiling groves. Soft zephyrs gently breathe on sweets, and the inhaled air gives a voluptuous glow of health and vigour, that seems to ravish the intoxicated senses. The sweet songsters of the forest appear to feel the influence of this genial clime, and, in more soft and modulated tones, warble their tender notes in unison with love and nature. Every thing here gives delight; and, in that mild effulgence which beams around us, we feel a glow of gratitude for the elevation which our all bountiful Creator has bestowed upon us. Far from being disgusted with man for his turpitude or depravity, we feel that dignity which nature bestowed upon us at the creation; but which has been contaminated by the base alloy of meanness, the concomitant of European education, and what is more lamentable is, that it is the consequence of your [his British friend's] very laws and governments. (Letter III)

But Imlay knew well enough that even a promised land is a worthless land if it is not easily accessible. The northern route to Kentucky—by wagon from either Philadelphia or Baltimore across the Alleghenies to Pittsburgh and then down the Ohio River on flat-bottomed barges—was an onerous one, and no matter how smooth Imlay makes the journey appear, it would continue (as Filson had already noted in his book) to render produce dear in the western settlements. The key to reaching the the back settlements lay in the navigability of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, and it is not surprising that, in his *Topographical Description*, Imlay (following earlier authors like Carver, Filson, and Jefferson) dwells at length on the unique transportation potential of the West's interlocking rivers and lakes, which effectively turn the region into a physiocratic paradise:

You will observe, that as far as this immense continent is known, the courses and extent of its rivers are extremely favourable to communication by water; a circumstance which is highly important, whether we regard it in a social or commercial point of view. The intercourse of men has added no inconsiderable lustre to the polish of manners, and, perhaps, commerce has tended more to civilize and embellish the human mind, in two centuries, than war and chivalry would have done in five. (Letter V)

And, once the problem of upstream navigation was solved with the help of steam (and Imlay was confident that this would be only a matter of time, given that experiments with steam-powered boats were already under way in Virginia), dwellers on Kentucky's green and fertile fields would be able to open up communication and trade with the settlements on the Pacific coast and in Canada. Seeing that "[a]ccording to the present system, wealth is the source of power" and that "the attainment of wealth can only be brought about by a wise and happy attention to commerce," Imlay proudly concludes that the western regions, far from being an outpost of civilization on the margins of America, were actually at the heart of the North American experiment and were mankind's best bet to realize even the wildest, most extreme notions of physiocratic idealism and neoclassical perfectibility.8

The Emigrants in many respects simply puts into fictional form the ideological concerns of the earlier text. While downplaying any overt commercial angle, the plot nevertheless emphasizes the ease with which the emigrant may travel west and how an elaborate infrastructure of roads and waterways is at his disposal once he arrives there. With its sentimental interest frequently being put to the service of its geopolitics, *The Emigrants* not coincidentally reads at times more like a travelogue than a novel. Thus the opening letters

make much of the heroine's insistence on walking much of the way across the Allegheny Mountains—more like a picturesque tourist than a pioneer—in sharp contrast to her lethargic brother, George, who prefers to be moved around on a wagon, along with the old people in the company. But even more significant is Arl——ton's unstoppable wanderlust, which first takes him from Pittsburgh down the Ohio River to Louisville, and later, in what John Seelye calls "a fit of expansionist pique,"9 farther west, via St. Vincent (Vincennes) toward St. Anthony's Falls and the sources of the Mississippi, from which he plans to travel down the river to Kaskaskia, then up the Missouri, back again to Kaskaskia, down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and back to Baltimore (see map on pp. lviii and lix. Further details are provided in the Explanatory Notes). Even though Caroline's captivity by the Indians forces Arl——ton to prematurely abandon his frantic wilderness trip, the reader gets the distinct impression that moving across vast tracts of the rugged American landscape is not more arduous, and only slightly more risky, than a journey in rural England or a promenade in London, and certainly much more thrilling—sublime or picturesque sights being available at every twist and turn of the emigrant's tour. As Caroline puts it, "here is a continual feast for the mind" (Letter VIII).

However, Imlay was not merely mindful of the economic, social, and aesthetic significance of the western landscape, especially its elaborate network of waterways: he was also very sensitive to its political significance. Blending the region's rivers with its mountains, soil, climate, and natural resources into a physiocratic, geopolitical doctrine of progress and universal prosperity, Imlay in effect creates a prototype of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, albeit with at least one significant difference: Imlay's physiocratic millennium does not have its origin in the early colonial experiments in Virginia and New England, nor even in the ideological energy released by the American Revolution; instead, he envisages the cradle of his physiocratic utopia to be in the West, more particularly in Kentucky, and the ideological forces that rock it to be generated by the French, rather than the American, Revolution. Indeed, underlying Imlay's dream of America is a fervent plea for a secessionist utopia across the Alleghenies, whereby "the Mountain" (as he refers to them) creates an ideological dichotomy between two distinct Americas: between the eastern states, which he regards as an outpost of an earlier, Puritan exodus and whose original energy had petered out and become permeated with the social evils of the Old World, and the "true," trans-Alleghenian America in the West, which was radically discontinuous with the earlier European colonization of North America. Imlay's separatist agenda leads him to reformulate the notion of a federal America as a nation whose political power is not centered in the East—not in the "federal city" that has just been established in the District of Columbia—but in the West:

The federal government regulating every thing commercial, must be productive of the greatest harmony, so that while we are likely to live in the regions of perpetual peace, our felicity will receive a zest from the activity and variety of our trade. We shall pass through the Mississippi to the sea—up the Ohio, Monongahala and Cheat rivers, by a small portage, into the Potowmac, which will bring us to the federal city on the line of Virginia and Maryland—through the federal rivers I have mentioned, and the lakes to New York and Quebec—from the northern lakes to the head branches of the rivers which run into Hudson's-bay into the Arctic regions—and from the sources of the Misouri [*sic*] into the Great South Sea. Thus in the centre of the earth, governing by the laws of reason and humanity, we seem calculated to become at once the emporium and protectors of the world. (*Description*, Letter V)

Imlay's physiocratic dream of an independent western state governed by the laws of reason and humanity is fulfilled in the utopia founded by Arl——ton toward the end of *The Emigrants*. Arl——ton confirms that he turns to the western territory as the site of his new community, named Bellefont, "as its infancy affords an opportunity to its citizens of establishing a system conformable to reason and humanity" and it is thus able to "extend the blessings of civilization to all orders of men" (Letter LXVII). The community is situated on the

banks of the Ohio near Louisville and constitutes in total an area of about 256 square miles, parceled out to men who served with Arl——ton in the Revolutionary War (presumably because they are most likely to be men of honor and common sense). These men and their families live in an idyllic, enchanting spot, against the background of the impetuous Ohio River, the gushing fountain that gives the community its name, fertile meadows, whispering breezes, and warbling birds. The days follow a regular routine of agricultural cultivation and rural relaxation, including much dancing to rustic music.

Bellefont is no doubt the type of insular Arcadia promised by Imlay to prospective emigrants as part of his land-jobbing activities. The society is organized along radical, Godwinian notions of social and political justice; each man owns the section of land that he occupies, and all males over the age of twenty-one are entitled to vote for members of a house of representatives, who, in turn, elect a president. The members are to meet every Sunday throughout the year to discuss issues of agriculture, arts, government, and jurisprudence. The subversive, antiecclesiastical Sunday meeting as well as the structure of its government confirm that Arl——ton's community is to be a secessionist state, independent of the government of the United States, rooted in a tradition of French physiocratic thought, and turning south (*not* east) toward Louisiana, and beyond, toward revolutionary France, for guidance and support.

No problems are foreseen for the fictional Bellefont, but in *A Topographical Description*, Imlay is somewhat more pragmatic: He recognizes that if Kentucky had the potential to become the center of the New World—indeed, the center of a New World millennium, thanks to its strategic position at the junction of the waterways of the future—then control of those waterways threatened to undermine Kentucky's position in Imlay's geopolitical master plan. He was acutely aware that "whoever are possessed of this river [the Mississippi], and of the vast tracts of fertile lands upon it, must in time command that continent, and the trade of it, as well as all the natives."10 In the early pages of the book, Imlay recounts with evident disgust the attempts by the French in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to put the western settlements in a stranglehold with an "insidious" plan to first occupy the mouths of the St. Lawrence and Mississippi rivers and subsequently to secure the communication between Canada and Louisiana by erecting an elaborate network of fortresses. But this "colossian plan" is very much attributed to the *ancien régime*, notably to Louis XIV ("that voracious tyrant"), and emphatically *not* to the new, revolutionary administration in France (Letter I).

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