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## JAMES WEIR, FIRST CITIZEN OF OWENSBORO

by R. STEPHEN TAYLOR\*

With the publication of *Lonz Powers: or, The Regulators* in 1850, James Weir became Kentucky's first historical novelist.<sup>1</sup> Besides his accomplishments as an author, he also figured prominently as a lawyer, bank president, and railroad executive. Perhaps no other man in the public or private life of Owensboro during the sixty years of Weir's residence there pursued as many dissimilar lines as he and no one was held in higher esteem by the people with whom he came in contact in business and social life.<sup>2</sup>

The Kentucky Weirs, descendants of old colonial families of South Carolina and Virginia, have been a family of real and varied distinction from the pioneer times of the state.<sup>3</sup> James Weir, born in Greenville, Muhlenberg County, on June 16, 1821, was the second son of James and Anna Cowman (Rumsey) Weir.<sup>4</sup>

His father, born near Charleston, South Carolina, belonged to a Presbyterian family of Scotch-Irish descent that emigrated to America from northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup> He came to Muhlenberg County in 1798 and settled at Greenville.<sup>6</sup> After a number of years of surveying, he entered the mercantile business and became the county's first important businessman. As a merchant he was a forerunner of a modern phase of business in-

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<sup>1</sup> Otto A. Rothert, *Local History in Kentucky Literature* (Louisville, 1915), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906.

<sup>3</sup> William Elsey Connelley and E. Merton Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, Charles Kerr, ed., 5 vols., III (1922), 276.

<sup>4</sup> Gayle R. Carver, "James Weir Was the First Kentucky Writer of Kentucky Historical Novels," *Greenville Leader*, March 3, 1949.

<sup>5</sup> Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906.

<sup>6</sup> *Greenville Leader*, March 3, 1949.

volving the centralized management of a chain of stores. With headquarters at Greenville, he conducted stores at Gallatin, Tennessee; Equality and Shawneetown, Illinois; and Henderson, Morganfield, Madisonville, Lewisburg, Hopkinsville, and Russellville, Kentucky.<sup>7</sup> James Weir, Sr., conducted a very large and profitable trade with the Spaniards in New Orleans and in Cuba, at a time when all freight between New Orleans and Kentucky was carried on flatboats.<sup>8</sup>

Weir's mother, Anna, was a lineal descendant of Charles Rumsey, who came to the American colonies from Wales in 1665 and settled in Maryland.<sup>9</sup> She was the daughter of Doctor Edmund Rumsey, whose brother, James, developed the application of steam to boats and other vessels.<sup>10</sup>

Weir's grandfather, William Weir, a resident of Charleston, South Carolina, served as a soldier in the Revolutionary War under General Thomas Sumter.<sup>11</sup>

James Weir acquired his early education in a two-room schoolhouse in Greenville. An instructor, Ezias Earle, later became a character in one of his books.<sup>12</sup> From the Greenville school he went to Danville and entered Centre College, where he received a literary degree in 1840. The following year he studied law under Judges Aaron Kitchell Woolley, George Robertson, and Thomas A. Marshall at Transylvania University and received a degree.<sup>13</sup> In 1844 Centre College granted him a Master of Arts degree.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*; Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906.

<sup>8</sup> *Biographical Cyclopaedia of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Chicago-Philadelphia, 1896), 230.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Connelley and Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, 276; Mabel Dill Brown to Gayle R. Carver, March 30, 1949, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green.

<sup>12</sup> *Greenville Leader*, March 3, 1949.

<sup>13</sup> *Biographical Cyclopaedia of the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 231.

<sup>14</sup> Maude Sutton to Gayle R. Carver, March 23, 1936, from the directory of the Alumni of Centre College, prepared in 1890; *Greenville Leader*, March 3, 1949; Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906; Otto A. Rothert, *History of Muhlenberg County* (Louisville, 1913), 134.

After completing his formal education, Weir returned to Greenville where he practiced law. In 1842 he married Susan A. Green, daughter of Judge John Green of Danville. Eight of their ten children reached maturity: Ann Belle Griffith, John G., Arthur W., Doctor James, Susan Maxwell, Norah Triplett, William L., and Paul Weir. Paul Weir succeeded his father as an Owensboro attorney and banker. Doctor James Weir wrote two books, *Religion and Lust* and *The Dawn of Reason*, and numerous journal articles of a scientific nature.<sup>15</sup>

During the same year (1842), Weir moved to Owensboro and established a law practice. From that time until near the end of the Civil War, he maintained a prominent position as a member of the Owensboro bar; gained a high standing as a chancery lawyer. He paid very little attention to criminal practice; one of his contemporaries could not recall having seen him appear in a criminal case.<sup>16</sup>

After the war he never actively engaged in the practice of law; however, he remained with the law firm of Weir, Weir, and Walker for a number of years in an advisory capacity. Although he continued nominally as head of the firm, his other duties allowed him little time to devote to the practice of that profession.<sup>17</sup>

He not only had the reputation of being a lawyer of the highest rank, but also possessed considerable ability as a banker. He presided over one of the oldest and largest banking institutions in the city, the Owensboro Deposit Bank. On February 17, 1862, Weir was elected president of the bank, later known as the National Deposit Bank. This institution, organized in 1859 with Senator Thomas C. McCreery as its president, developed into a banking house of importance due principally to the leadership of James Weir.<sup>18</sup> The annual statement of the bank made January 1, 1862, shows a paid in capital of

<sup>15</sup> Rothert, *History of Muhlenberg County*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> H. Levin, ed., *The Lawyers and Lawmakers of Kentucky* (Chicago, 1897), 329-331; Anonymous, *History of Daviess County* (Chicago, 1883), 147.

<sup>17</sup> Levin, *Lawyers and Lawmakers of Kentucky*, 331.

<sup>18</sup> William Foster Hayes, *Sixty Years of Owensboro, 1883-1943* (Owensboro, Kentucky, 1946), 108.

\$16,060. At the time of Weir's death in 1906, the capital had increased to \$325,000, with \$52,000 in surplus.<sup>19</sup>

C. C. Watkins, a close associate of Weir, often made remarks to this effect:

It has been a source of pleasure for me to see farmers come into the bank and ask for Mr. Weir, saying that they never came into town without coming to see him. One of them only a short time ago told me that when his land was being sold at the courthouse door, Mr. Weir bought it, allowed him to retain possession and gave him ample time to pay off the indebtedness.<sup>20</sup>

Versions of substantially the same story have been told numerous times.

From 1869 until the latter part of 1878 James Weir was president of the Owensboro and Russellville Railroad Company, later the Owensboro and Nashville Railroad.<sup>21</sup> It eventually became part of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad system. Weir personally looked after the affairs of the company and, with the completion of the road, he went East and purchased the rolling stock and other equipment. In March, 1873, the railroad ran regular trains to Stroud City, Muhlenberg County, thirty-six miles; had the grading nearly completed to the Tennessee state line, at Adairville, Logan County, eighty-six miles; and was confident of extension, in 1874, to Nashville, 120 miles. It formed part of a great through route from Nashville to St. Louis, Chicago, and Cincinnati.<sup>22</sup> Weir remained at the head of the company until the Louisville and Nashville Railroad absorbed the line in 1878.<sup>23</sup>

Weir's business interests included a hub and spoke factory. With John Moorman, he incorporated the Owensboro Wheel Company, which manufactured wagon, carriage, and buggy

<sup>19</sup> Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906; Anonymous, *History of Daviess County*, 355. This book lists the capital of the Deposit Bank at \$50,000 on October 1, 1860, and \$200,000 at the time of Weir's death.

<sup>20</sup> *Greenville Leader*, March 3, 1949.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous, *History of Daviess County*, 207-209.

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 2nd edition (Louisville, 1924), 154.

<sup>23</sup> Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906.

wheels.<sup>24</sup> He was also instrumental in bringing the first telegraph line to Owensboro.<sup>25</sup>

When James Weir came to Owensboro in 1842 he purchased 400 acres of land south of the city, and in 1858 began the construction of his famous residence, "Waveland." The home, since destroyed, was one of the handsomest in western Kentucky. "The broad halls and large airy rooms were beautifully frescoed and the library with the picture of 'Washington Crossing the Delaware' [sic] on the ceiling, [contained] well-filled bookshelves, for Mr. Weir was a great reader. . . ."<sup>26</sup> The frescoing of the walls, created by a Confederate army officer, cost \$12,000.<sup>27</sup>

Even though a lawyer and banker whose judgment and ability were recognized in financial and business circles, and a citizen of great popularity, James Weir never posed as an active politician. He never sought or held any political office. A Whig in his earlier days, he voted with the Democratic Party after the Civil War.<sup>28</sup> Being a prominent citizen of the state, Weir often involved himself in national political conventions. The 1864 Republican Convention at Louisville appointed him as a delegate to the national convention at Baltimore. He declined to serve because the delegates were instructed to cast their votes for Abraham Lincoln.

. . . although I think Mr. Lincoln undeserving of the wholesale denunciation heaped upon him, and that necessity and the urgency of the case may go far in mitigation of many of his acts, still, I have had quite enough of his rule during the last three years to fully satisfy me. . . .<sup>29</sup>

In the same year, illness forced Weir not to attend the Union Democratic Convention. In a letter to *The Louisville Weekly*

<sup>24</sup> Anonymous, *History of Daviess County*, 346.

<sup>25</sup> Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906.

<sup>26</sup> Sue R. McCulloch to Gayle R. Carver, March 7, 1936, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green.

<sup>27</sup> M. David Orrahood, "Frederica Street—Then and Now, 1896-1966," no date, unpublished, in Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, n.p.

<sup>28</sup> *Biographical Cyclopaedia of the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> James Weir, *The Louisville Weekly Journal*, XXIV, June 7, 1864.

*Journal* he gave this opinion: “. . . so far as I have read of its [Union Democratic Party] actions, I fully endorse it, and trust that a majority of the people of the United States will do the same.”<sup>30</sup>

Before James Weir became involved in banking and railroading and politics he found literary success in his romances of Kentucky. Weir's place in literary history mainly rests on the fact that he wrote the first Kentucky historical novel—*Lonz Powers: or, The Regulators* (1850). He also wrote two other books—*Simon Kenton: or, The Scout's Revenge* (1852) and *The Winter Lodge: or, Vow Fulfilled* (1853). Weir's adventure stories are regarded by many as superior to those of other nineteenth century romancers in respect to plot, structure, characterization, and use of local color; however, his *Lonz Powers* and *The Winter Lodge* “are afflicted with such crudities as too much emphasis on blood and gore and exaggeration of the villainies of bad men and the virtues of heroes.”<sup>31</sup>

*Lonz Powers: or, The Regulators*, a genuine American romance, quite evidently draws from nature. Weir portrays his scenes and characters with a bold, dramatic freedom, giving a vitality and freshness to the narrative, and sustains the reader through a succession of adventures. *Lonz Powers* has many of the elements of a superior novel—“a glowing imagination, truthfulness of description, lively humor, spicy satire, and an acute perception of the fleeting light and shades of character.”<sup>32</sup>

The history of the West presents two distinct phases for discussion by romancers: the first based upon the conflict between the native Indian and the Anglo-Saxon invader; the second, upon the discordant elements of civilized society in a primitive and unsettled condition.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence S. Thompson and Algernon D. Thompson, *The Kentucky Novel* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1935), 116.

<sup>32</sup> *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, I (New York, 1950), 860.

<sup>33</sup> James Weir, *Lonz Powers: or, The Regulators* (Philadelphia, 1850), x.

To no one of the western states is this remark more applicable than in Kentucky.

Here is the Indian, driven, after many a hardfought field, from his favorite hunting grounds, [who] was succeeded by a rude and unlettered population, interspersed with organized bands of desperadoes, scarcely less savage than the red men they had displaced.<sup>34</sup>

In this latter condition, as developed within a portion of the state of Kentucky, the author found the materials for his first book.

Immediately after its publication, *Lonz Powers* became the most popular and enthusiastically discussed book in western Kentucky and it attracted attention in literary circles throughout the whole country. The edition soon exhausted itself, and as the writer refused to permit the issuing of a second edition, the book quickly ran out of print. Weir gave as his reason for not issuing a second edition that he wanted to revise it first; however, when he found the time for revision, he lacked the inclination.<sup>35</sup> Several theories have been advanced as to why Weir really did not want his book re-issued. Sue McCulloch says that he never thought he had "done himself justice" in the book, as it was written in his early years.<sup>36</sup> Otto Rothert, in his *History of Muhlenberg County*, gives two differing opinions. He suggests that Weir may have realized that since his romance would be likely to help perpetuate the name and deeds of the hero, he decided to let its circulation spread no further. "He was undoubtedly aware that frequently a character's fame depends more upon the power of the historian than upon the hero's actual facts."<sup>37</sup> Rothert also suggests that Weir did not issue a second edition because a number of outlaws, having recognized themselves as characters within the book, sent the author an anonymous note in which they requested him to suppress the further circulation of the book and threatened to kill him if he issued another edition.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; book review, *Hunt's Merchant's Magazine and Commercial Review*, XXIII (New York, 1850), 710.

<sup>35</sup> Rothert, *History of Muhlenberg County*, 135.

<sup>36</sup> Sue R. McCulloch to Gayle R. Carver, mailed March 7, 1936.

<sup>37</sup> Rothert, *History of Muhlenberg County*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Regardless of the reason, the work was not republished and the few volumes printed in the first and only edition are now collector's items.

The scenes of *Lonz Powers* are laid in western Kentucky, in the territory comprised chiefly of Christian, Todd, Muhlenberg and Webster counties. The book is a thinly disguised story of the life of Alonzo Pennington, a native of Christian County.<sup>39</sup> Pennington was the leader of a notorious band of outlaws which operated for several years, from about 1830 until 1845. Finally, the depredations of these outlaws led to the formation of a group known as the "Regulators," which determined "to take the law into our own hands and punish the offenders."<sup>40</sup> In the novel, Lonz Powers attempts to lead a double existence as a captain of a band of outlaws and a member of a local vigilante group. Even the crafty Lonz is unable to play this dual role and he ends his days at the end of a rope. In fact, Alonzo Pennington was tried and convicted in April, 1846, in the Christian County courthouse, and became the first man legally hanged in Christian County.<sup>41</sup> This use of literary license by the author makes the book of some interest, historically, but of little true value, since the real facts were distorted and colored to conform to the ideas of the author.

*Lonz Powers* enjoyed great popularity in Kentucky, owing to the fact that it appeared as a serial in the Owensboro *Tri-Weekly Messenger*, in eighty-one installments, the last published in the issue of October 24, 1885.<sup>42</sup> The story also ran as a serial in the Madisonville newspaper, *The Hustler*, several years later.<sup>43</sup>

The rarest of James Weir's novels is his *Simon Kenton: or, The Scout's Revenge*. Only two copies of it have been found in Kentucky. It is the only one of Weir's books to carry illus-

<sup>39</sup> Charles Meacham, *A History of Christian County, Kentucky, from Oxcart to Airplane* (Nashville, 1930), 107.

<sup>40</sup> Gayle R. Carver, "Some Historical Novels by Kentuckians," no date, in Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, 3-6.

<sup>41</sup> Rothert, *History of Muhlenberg County*, 148.

<sup>42</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 12, 1885.

<sup>43</sup> *Greenville Leader*, March 3, 1949.

trations. This book was designed to give a sketch of the habits and characteristics of the people of the western part of North Carolina in the days immediately following the Revolutionary War. In it Weir introduces Simon Kenton, the great scout and Indian fighter, and also his supposedly constant enemy, Simon Girty, the Tory and renegade. These two major characters stand against a backdrop of two North Carolina families, the Duffs and the Heads.

Weir speaks of his third novel, *The Winter Lodge: or, Vow Fulfilled*, as "an ower [over] truer tale of 'The Dark and Bloody Ground.'"<sup>44</sup> A sequel to *Simon Kenton*, *The Winter Lodge* traces the fortunes of the Duffs and the Heads in their migration to western Kentucky and their settlement there. The renegeades and Indians pursue them relentlessly and finally slay the heads of both families. Sketches of the battles in which Simon Kenton and Simon Girty were engaged are included. The historical significance of this volume lies in his descriptions of natural scenery and the habits and characteristics of the Kentucky pioneers. Historians still question whether the battles of the Simons can be considered historically correct. In her book, *Simon Kenton: His Life and Period, 1755-1836*, Edna Kenton questions the historicity of the books.

. . . James Weir's *Simon Kenton, Or, The Scout's Revenge* and *The Winter Lodge*, are magnificent examples of the loose and easy romantic historical novels of the period. Unfortunately for the hard-facts of the case, the author based his plot and all his conflicts on the supposed war to the death between the great Simon Kenton and "his old enemy, Simon Girty."<sup>45</sup>

James Weir wrote a trilogy of novels which do not deserve the obscurity into which they have fallen. All these romances were thrown upon historical backgrounds and they created much favorable criticism at the time of their publication.<sup>46</sup> All three novels were translated into German and were published in

<sup>44</sup> James Weir, *The Winter Lodge: or, The Vow Fulfilled* (Philadelphia, 1853), preface.

<sup>45</sup> Edna Kenton, *Simon Kenton: His Life and Period, 1755-1836* (Garden City, N. Y., 1930), 336.

<sup>46</sup> John Wilson Townsend, *Kentucky In American Letters, 1784-1912*, I (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1913), 235.

Leipzig, Germany.<sup>47</sup> Weir intended to write another sequel which would have brought the story down to the War of 1812 and the deaths of Simon Kenton and Simon Girty, but increasing business interests prevented him from doing so.<sup>48</sup>

James Weir's exceptional gifts and talents enabled him to impress his ability upon every enterprise with which he was connected. Moreover, he was a man of kind and generous heart and well worthy of the distinction that "among his fellow citizens he stood preeminently as the first citizen of Owensboro."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Memorandum from Otto A. Rothert to Gayle R. Carver, October 15, 1934.

<sup>48</sup> Owensboro *Daily Messenger*, February 1, 1906.

<sup>49</sup> Connelley and Coulter, *History of Kentucky*, 276.