



One view of Kosciusko's Garden at the United States Military Academy at West Point. The rock engraving was done sometime in the late 19th century.

KOSCIUSZKO'S GARDEN:

*Flowers of Verse for
America's Champion --
and Poland's Martyr --
for Emancipation.*

"...Liberty -- dear Word -- I wish my Country feel [sic] its influence. -- Can you believe I am very unhappy been absent from your Country it seems to me the other world her[e], in which every person finds great pleasure in cheating himself out of common sense. The time may have some power to prepossess [sic] my mind in your Country[']s favour and adopt the opinion of greater number of men, but Nature more, it is in very breast, here they take great pains to subside the Charmes which constitute real happiness, but you folow [sic] with full speed the marked road and you fined [sic] by experience that domestic Life with liberty to be the best gift, that nature had top bestow for the human specie..."

~ Kosciuszko, in Paris late 1784, to Otho Williams.

Sometime, in probably Spring, 1778, during his sojourn there as supervising engineer at West Point, Lithuanian born Col. Thaddeus Kosciuszko¹ used spare time available to him to create and construct a garden amid a geologically enclosed portion of the western shore of the Hudson River. Shaded by trees and large boulders the site was, and is, optimally situated as a cool and quiet place to escape sultry or oppressive summer days. As well as paths, steps, rockery, shrubs, and flowers, it includes what, upon seeing it, Continental Army surgeon Dr. James Thacher, in his *Military Journal*, delightedly described as a "curious water fountain with spouting jets and cascades." Garden, fountain, and all are still there and have, with occasional alterations, been in continuous use since Revolutionary times.

Such a curious feat and endeavor is oddly characteristic of Kosciuszko's frankly strange, inimitable, and at times almost divinely miraculous career in the Revolutionary War. Unlike the numerous European officers who came to America to assist the nation in its struggle for Independence, he arrived (in late Summer of 1776) with relatively slight diplomatic credentials and even less money than such as Lafayette, Von Steuben, DuPortail and Pulaski had, and yet his dramatic affect on the outcome of the war was inferior to none of them. It was he who designed and helped build Fort Mercer that withstood such brutal and heavy pounding in the Philadelphia campaign of 1777. Had he been heeded (and which he wasn't), Ticonderoga might have been saved from falling into Burgoyne's hands. It was he who oversaw Gates' men felling trees and slowing down the British advance on Albany; thus gaining for the Americans vital additional time to gather their forces. It was he who decided for Gates where the Americans would make their final stand, and was placed in charge of erecting the redoubts and defensive works there. West Point itself, as the principal strategic point to safeguard the Hudson, owed its impregnable potency to his plans and efforts (circa 1778-1779) more than to any other single individual's. And were not all this enough, he acquitted himself quite respectably, if not flawlessly (thinking of the siege of Ninety-Six), as Nathanael Greene's ever handy and irreplaceable engineer in the southern theater; even procuring opportunity to lead men into battle himself in the last days of the war.

¹ Also "Kosciuszko," and pronounced "Ko-shus'-ko."

In reading Miecislaus Haiman's well done 1943 biography *Kosciuszko in the American Revolution*, he comes across as an often droll, and on occasion even somewhat comical, figure; playing the role of a pure and affectionate idealist striving to stay afloat amid politically ambitious and more coldly practical Continental Army officers. He spoke no English, and initially had to express himself in French, and though with time he necessarily gained some grasp of the former language, he remained far from ever coming close to mastering it, and as a result his letters from this period are replete with misspellings of words based on faulty pronunciations. He was loyally devoted to General Gates, and even served as the latter's second in a duel with the rascally James Wilkinson;² such that in following the account of their relationship, the well meaning if at times bumbling Gates emerges as a singularly sympathetic figure due to their friendship. A superb draughtsman and artificer, he was both artistic and clever in devising and making things for sundry purposes and occasions; and was the first choice of Congress to arrange a fireworks display for the 1783 4th of July celebration in Philadelphia. He came to America without much money, and notwithstanding his invaluable services, departed at war's end evidently with even less; while only just barely and at the last moment securing for himself from Congress a non-paying, brevet commission as Brigadier General. And yet also before departing had become admired by and a dear friend of more than a few illustrious Americans, including Greene, Otho Williams, David Humphreys and Thomas Jefferson.³

That, one would think, would have been abundantly enough for any single individual's lifetime achievements; at already 39 years of age. But, as you probably are also aware, he as well went on to become a most stirring and capable general in the Polish uprising against the Russians in 1794. Fighting against overwhelming odds, however, the resistance movement was ultimately defeated, and Kosciuszko was captured and held a prisoner in St. Petersburg. Held there for two years, he only succeeded in obtaining his release when Czarina Catherine the Great died. He was later tentatively supportive of Bonaparte with hopes that Corsican would finally set things right in his homeland, but was in this predictably dissatisfied and disgusted in the result.

He fought against Britain in the American Revolution, and yet perhaps all the more fittingly and sincerely some of the foremost Scotch and English poets and versifiers of that era subsequently lauded and effusively sang his praises as a premier exemplar of the universal struggle for freedom. Gathering then from this bed of pungent writings, presented here is a lyrical bouquet arranged in honorable remembrance and commemoration of a man matched, at that time, only by Washington and Lafayette for world-wide adulation as a hero of liberty.

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The first of the Kosciuszko tributes of particular note in English verse is a passage from Thomas Campbell's (1777-1844) *The Pleasures of Hope*. Although published in 1799, *The Pleasures of Hope* was presumably written at least as early as 1794; at the time of Kosciuszko's confinement by Catherine; as direct and indirect references to the poem are made in Robert Burns and Samuel Taylor's Coleridge's odes to Kosciuszko written in or about that same year. Campbell, by the way, composed an American Revolutionary War related epic, *Gertrude of Wyoming* (1809), and that was both popular and critically acclaimed in both America and in Europe.

From Part I of *The Pleasures of Hope*.

...He said, and on the rampart-heights arrayed  
His trusty warriors, few; but undismayed;  
Firm-paced and slow; a horrid front they form,  
Still as the breeze; but dreadful as the storm;  
Low murmuring sounds along their banners fly,  
Revenge, or death, -- the watchword and reply;

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<sup>2</sup> When some disputes arose with respect to post-duel protocol, Gates later said to him "Wilkinson, I am ashamed I fought you." Haiman, p. 61.

<sup>3</sup> John Quincy Adams, another who properly esteemed his merits, wrote a biography of Kosciuszko and which he appended to his 1851 *The Life of General Lafayette*.

Then pealed the notes, omnipotent to charm;  
 And the loud tocsin tolled their last alarm! --  
 In vain; alas! in vain, ye gallant few!  
 From rank to rank your volleyed thunder flew; --  
 Oh, bloodiest picture in the book of Time,  
 Sarmatia fell, unwept, without a crime;  
 Found not a generous friend, a pitying foe,  
 Strength in her arms, nor mercy in her woe!  
 Dropped from her nerveless grasp the shattered spear,  
 Closed her bright eye, and curbed her high career; --  
 Hope; for a season, bade the world farewell,  
 And Freedom shrieked -- as Kosciusko fell!  
 The sun went down, nor ceased the carnage there;  
 Tumultuous Murder shook the midnight air --  
 On Prague's proud arch the fires of ruin glow,  
 His blood-dyed waters murmuring far below;  
 The storm prevails, the rampart yields a way,  
 Bursts the wild cry of horror and dismay!  
 Hark; as the smouldering piles with thunder fall,  
 A thousand shrieks for hopeless mercy call!  
 Earth shook-red meteors flashed along the sky,  
 And conscious Nature shuddered at the cry!  
 Oh! righteous Heaven; ere Freedom found a grave,  
 Why slept the sword, omnipotent to save?...

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In Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine, and Literary Miscellany* edition of Jan. 1818 is found this preface with the title "Original Poetry of Robert Burns," and who had passed away in 1796.

"The following unpublished reliques of our immortal Bard were lately communicated to us from a highly respectable quarter. We quote one short passage from the very obliging letter that accompanied them: -- 'As every tiling that jell from the pen of Burns is worthy of preservation, I transcribe for your Miscellany the complete copy of a song which Cromek has printed, (page 423 of this vol.) in an unfinished state, -- together with two fragments that have never yet been published. The originals of these I possess in the handwriting of their unfortunate Author, who transmitted them inclosed in letters to a constant friend of his through all his calamities, by whom they were finally assigned to me.'"

Among the resurfaced pieces alluded to is this.

TO THE SPIRIT OF KOSCIUSKO.⁴

Unnoticed shall the mighty fall?
 Unwept and unlamented die?--
 Shall he, whom bonds could not enthrall,
 Who plann'd, who fought, who bled for all,
 Unconsecrated lie?
 Without a song, whose fervid strains
 Might kindle fire in patriot veins. --
 No! -- thus it ne'er shall be: and fame
 Ordains to thee a brighter lot;
 While earth -- while hope endures, thy name,
 Pure -- high -- unchangeable -- the same --
 Shall never be forgot;

⁴ *Edinburgh Magazine*, Jan. 1818, pp. 70-71.

'Tis shrined amid the holy throng;
'Tis woven in immortal song! --

Yes! -- Campbell, of the deathless lay,
The ardent poet of the free,
Has painted Warsaw's latest day,
In colours that resist decay,
In accents worthy Thee;
Thy hosts on battle-field array'd,
And in thy grasp the patriot blade!

O! sainted is the name of him,
And sacred should his relics be,
Whose course no selfish aims bedim;
Who, spotless as the seraphim,
Exerts his energy,
To make the earth by freemen trod,
And see mankind the sons of God!

And thou wert one of these; 'twas thine,
Through thy devoted country's night,
The latest of a freeborn line,
With all that purity to shine,
Which makes a hero bright;
With all that lustre to appear,
Which freemen love and tyrants fear.

A myrtle wreath was on thy blade,
Which broke before its cause was won!--
Thou, to no sordid fears betray'd,
Mid desolation undismay'd,
Wert mighty, though undone;
No terrors gloom'd thy closing scene,
In danger and in death serene!

Though thou hast bade our world farewell,
And left the blotted lands beneath,
In purer, happier realms to dwell;
With Wallace, Washington, and Tell.
Thou sharest the laurel wreath --
The Brutus of degenerate climes!
A beacon-light to other times!

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“To Kosciusko” was the seventh of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Sonnets on Eminent Characters* (1794-1795). Another of the *Eminent Characters* sonnets Coleridge penned was dedicated to “Fayette.” The Marquis also in 1794, as with Kosciuszko, ended up dungeoned as a political captive; in the Frenchman’s case by Francis I of Austria. The poem went through some small revisions, and this is the final, 1828, version.

#### VII. ON THE LAST FAILURE OF KOSCIUSKO.

O what a loud and fearful shriek was there,  
As tho’ a thousand souls one death-groan pour’d!  
Ah me! they view’d beneath an hireling’s sword

Fall'n KOSKIUSKO! Thro' the burthen'd air  
(As pauses the tir'd Cossac's barb'rous yell  
Of Triumph) on the chill and midnight gale  
Rises with frantic burst or sadder swell  
The dirge of murder'd Hope! while Freedom pale  
Bends in such anguish o'er her destin'd bier,  
As if from eldest time some Spirit meek  
Had gather'd in a mystic urn each tear  
That ever on a Patriot's furrowed cheek  
Fit channel found; and she had drained the bowl  
In the mere wilfulness, and sick despair of soul!

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Ostensibly following the lead and in brotherly emulation of Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, in 1815, and then John Keats, in 1816, wrote their own "To Kosciusko" sonnets.

'Tis like thy patient valour thus to keep,
Great Kosciusko, to the rural shade,
While Freedom's ill-found amulet still is made
Pretence for old aggression, and a heap
Of selfish mockeries. There, as in the sweep
Of stormier fields, thou earnest with thy blade,
Transform'd, not inly alter'd, to the spade,
Thy never yielding right to a calm sleep.
There came a wanderer, borne from land to land
Upon a couch, pale, many-wounded, mild,
His brow with patient pain dulcetly sour.
Men stoop'd with awful sweetness on his hand,
And kiss'd it; and collected Virtue smiled,
To think how sovereign her enduring hour.

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Good Kosciusko, thy great name alone  
Is a full harvest whence to reap high feeling:  
It comes upon us like the glorious pealing  
Of the wide spheres-an everlasting tone.  
And now it tells me, that in the worlds unknown,  
The names of heroes, burst from clouds concealing,  
And changed to harmonies, for ever stealing  
Through cloudless blue, and round each silver throne.  
It tells me too, that on a happy day,  
When some good spirit walks upon the earth,  
Thy name with Alfred's, and the great of yore  
Gently commingling, gives tremendous birth  
To a loud hymn, that sounds far, far away  
To where the great God lives for evermore.

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And finally, Byron, in the context of decrying Napoleon's waste and ravages, manages to include Kosciuszko; thundering thusly in his *The Age of Bronze* (1823):

From Canto III.

...Spain! which, a moment mindless of the Cid,
Beheld his banner flouting thy Madrid!
Austria! which saw thy twice-ta'en capital
Twice spared to be the traitress of his fall!
Ye race of Frederic! -- Frederics but in name
And falsehood -- heirs to all except his fame;
Who, crush'd at Jena, crouch'd at Berlin, fell
First, and but rose to follow! Ye who dwell
Where Kosciusko dwelt, remembering yet
The unpaid amount of Catherine's bloody debt!
Poland! o'er which the avenging angel pass'd,
But left thee as he found thee, still a waste,
Forgetting all thy still enduring claim,
Thy lotted people and extinguish'd name,
Thy sigh for freedom, thy long-flowing tear,
That sound that crashes in the tyrant's ear --
Kosciusko! On -- on -- on -- the thirst of war
Gasp for the gore of serfs and of their czar.
The half barbaric Moscow's minarets
Gleam in the sun, but 'tis a sun that sets!
Moscow! thou limit of his long career,
For which rude Charles had wept his frozen tear
To see in vain -- he saw thee -- how? with spire
And palace fuel to one common fire.
To this the soldier lent his kindling match
To this the peasant gave his cottage thatch,
To this the merchant flung his hoarded store,
The prince his hall -- and Moscow was no more!
Sublimest of volcanos! Aetna's flame
Pales before thine, and quenchless Hecla's tame;
Vesuvius shows his blaze, and usual sight
For gaping tourists, from his hackney'd height:
Thou stand'st alone unrivall'd, till the fire
To come, in which all empires shall expire!...

Wm. Thomas Sherman
1604 NW 70th St.
Seattle, Washington 98117
206-784-1132
wts@gunjones.com
<http://www.gunjones.com> and http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1

For Lee's Legion on Face Book:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LeesLegion/>