

LUDWIG BARON VON CLOSEN

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In the course of the last eighty years there appeared several articles and books which mentioned or dealt with the diary of Ludwig Baron von Clozen, an aide-de-camp to the French General Rochambeau. On the occasion of the centenary of the 1780 French landing on American soil, the *Magazine of American History* of the years 1879-81, published a number of articles in which we learn that while stationed in Rhode Island, according to our diarist "the most beautiful island of the globe," Clozen stayed at Henry Potter's house and that he lived on "Main Street this side of the Bridge" in John Foster's house in Providence.

After the publication of Paul G. Gleis' article on "Eighteenth Century Maryland through the Eyes of German Travelers" in the *Twenty-eighth Report* of this Society, more factual information became available through an article and a book by Evelyn M. Acomb who presents an exhaustive annotated translation and analysis of Clozen's diary.*

Our diarist was born in the village of Monsheim, near Worms, in the Bavarian Palatinate, between 1752 and 1755 and christened Hans Christoph Friedrich Ignatz Ludwig von Clozen-Haydenberg. He belonged to an old family of great military traditions. His uncle was a famous general and personally known to Clozen's superior, General Rochambeau. His father, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the service of the Netherlands died at the age of forty, in 1765. Ludwig von Clozen entered French military service on September 10, 1769, and was, according to his regimental records still kept in the Château de Vincennes, France, "a subject of great promise, very industrious, extremely intelligent, especially well-informed." Just before he left for America, in April 1780, he was made a second captain. It was on this continent that the young officer saw actual battle for the first time, and he appears to have been a brave sang-froid soldier. He once won great praise from General Washington who watched Clozen when, under heavy enemy fire, he retrieved his hat which he had lost in the heat of an encounter.

The day after disembarking, General Rochambeau appointed Clozen his aide-de-camp. From this day on (July 14, 1780), he had the complete confidence of that general who entrusted him with important missions. In February, 1871, he carried messages to Washington in New Windsor, N. Y. and accompanied him on his visit to Rochambeau's Headquarters in Newport. The following month he was sent to the French consul in Boston. In June he accompanied the generals on reconnaissance trips to the region of New York. Before the final plans for the Yorktown campaign were drawn up, he was constantly with Rochambeau, and during the decisive phases of that battle he was engaged in actual combat. After the defeat and capitulation of the British armies, in 1782, he was sent to consult and negotiate with the French Admiral Vaudreuil regarding the transportation of the French expedition corps to the West Indies. Shortly before Christmas

* "The Journal of Baron von Clozen"; translated and edited by Evelyn M. Acomb, *William and Mary Quarterly*, X (1953), pp. 196-236. *The Revolutionary Journal of Baron Ludwig von Clozen, 1780-1783*. Translated and Edited with an Introduction by Evelyn M. Acomb. Published by the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Virginia. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1958, 392 pp.

1782, the *Brave* carried the French on a very circuitous route via Puerto Rico, to Puerto Caballo in Venezuela. During this voyage Closen worked constantly on his diary, and after a stay of about two months in South America, he was able to add some pertinent—and mostly unfavorable—observations on social customs, religion and administration, military and colonial, of that part of the world. On April 3, 1783, the French convoy sailed, first to the French colony of Santo Domingo, and three weeks later for France.

These facts can be gleaned, to a large extent, from Closen's diary and other contemporary accounts. Miss Acomb did remarkable research on the fate of the diary and its author. After his return, the Baron was married to a distant cousin, Dorothea von Fürstenwärther, in August 1783. Four daughters and a son were born to the couple. Highlights in his military career in Europe were his appointment to membership in the Society of the Cincinnati, in February 1792, and his promotion to the rank of major-general on July, 1792. Professional jealousies, personal intrigues, and the growing unrest preceding the French Revolution made life, at times, rather uncomfortable to Closen. He resigned from military service in 1792 and returned to Germany where he was involved in lengthy civil suits concerning his inheritance rights. Later he repeatedly applied to Napoleon for a position in the civil service, and after the intercession of a comrade-at-arms he was made sub-prefect of Simmern, in the Department Rhin-et-Moselle, in 1806. In recognition of his services he was named a member of the Order of the Legion of Honor in 1811. After Napoleon's defeat in 1813, he retired and moved to Mannheim where he died on August 9, 1830.

Evelyn M. Acomb's *Revolutionary Journal* mentions the strange fate that befell the original manuscript. When, after long negotiations, it was brought to this country to be shown at the St. Louis Exposition, in 1904, the Library of Congress was allowed to make a transcript, a very difficult undertaking because some passages must have been hard to decipher; e. g. pages 160-189 of the transcript are missing, page 142 was probably omitted for reasons of "decency." Due to imperfect techniques of photography and microfilming, the appendix containing valuable documents and unbound papers was almost completely disregarded. On March 14, 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt is said to have examined the papers at a White House luncheon. Strangely enough neither the *New York Times* nor the two Washington papers carried any reports on this event. In November of the same year, the diary and the collection of related documents were shipped back to the Closen castle at Gern, Bavaria. In November 1921 they were destroyed by fire. Thus, the incomplete transcript of Closen's diary, in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, is the only known copy in existence.

From Closen's own remarks and other evidence it is apparent that his diary consists of "layers." The core of his notes was probably written down shortly after the events, and since as an aide-de-camp he had access to the official French diaries, command files and maps, he added comments on events and developments of which he had not been an eyewitness.

Miss Acomb in the introduction to her *Revolutionary Journal* points to some similarities between the Closen and Du Bourg diaries. Du Bourg, a fellow aide-de-camp and close friend of our diarist, visited with him Totowa Falls, Germantown and Philadelphia, and they traveled overland through Maryland and Virginia in 1781. It is rather difficult to decide who borrowed from whom, if at all. As to the military aspects of the French rôle in the Revolutionary War, Closen's diary reveals nothing substantially new

or different. It was primarily meant as an informal account of his experiences for the benefit of his relatives and friends.

The other discernible "layer" consists of various essays on people, places and things American. He had collected numerous newspaper clippings, pamphlets and almanachs to which he often refers in his reports, and he must also have read some books on America later on. This information was woven into his day by day accounts, presumably after his ultimate retirement and return to Germany, i. e. after 1813. And though these essays cannot be considered a primary source of authentic information on the state of affairs prevailing at that time, they make very interesting reading and reveal much of Closen's character, his wit and sense of humor, his gift for accurate observation, his insight and understanding, his love and admiration for this country.

Since Miss Acomb has furnished a complete and adequate translation of Closen's diary, only a few excerpts are added here.

Upon sighting land, Closen wrote: "On the 10th [of July, 1789], at sunset, we finally discerned the land and recognized the Islands of Martha's Vineyard and, farther to the West, *No Man's Land!!!* Thereupon the General signalled to us to turn to the N. W., which carried us directly toward Block Island, a small island off Rhode Island, where we anchored at last, on the 11th, after a passage of seventy days. . . . There was continuous joyful cheering!!! both by those who were arriving and by the inhabitants, who had been expecting us for a long time. . . ."

There is, under the dating of December 25, 1780, the following entry concerning social life in Rhode Island: "by now we can manage a little better with the English language and have more access to American society. . . . Their customs have so little in common with ours that I cannot help making some remarks, good and bad, for those who will amuse themselves by reading this diary . . . their manners are very unrestrained and even free. One leans on his neighbor quite unceremoniously, puts his elbows on the table while eating, and what would be considered in France a sign of bad breeding or too much liberty is considered proper behavior as it is generally taught here. The outward appearance of Americans in general betrays nonchalance and almost unseemliness; but it is surprising that these same men who display such apparent indifference fight with such great valor; how can they sustain a war, and have such well trained and disciplined troops to the point that they are really theirs? Who would believe that an American who might hardly leave his house when it rains, faces all the dangers and the worst weather the moment he has a musket on his shoulder. There just isn't any man of thirty who has not borne arms. . . . Another peculiarity of this country is that in the majority of homes, even in rich ones, no napkins are used, and every one uses the table-cloth, of course the edges are worn out by this. Furthermore, almost all people here eat, just like the English, with their knives (which are rounded at the end) without using forks—and they have only *two* points."

Closen's observations on the fair sex, whether in Rhode Island, Baltimore, Boston, New York, or Virginia are essentially the same: he loved all American ladies, or admired them. Copies of some of his sketches and silhouettes of leading ladies and dance partners, are still preserved in the Library of Congress. ". . . the fair sex here is something really rare on account of their modesty and sweetness of demeanor. Nature has blessed the ladies of Rhode Island with the most delicate features possible; their complexion is white and clear; their hands and feet are generally small; but their teeth are something not so remarkable. The great quantity of tea

they have may be a contributing factor. One sees few women of bad stature, their dress and hairdo are completely English in style. French fashions, however, are not unknown, and it is likely that the presence of the French army will enhance their taste for fashions." Here follows a description of Quaker women "who are noted particularly for the neatness and simplicity of their dress; their bonnets (almost like those of Zweibrücken) are very fine, white as snow, as are also their Sunday clothes. On week days they prefer grey. I collected all available information on their cult and the customs of this sect. . . ." His information does not vary from what is generally known about them now.

(August 5, 1782) "I shall take the liberty to observe here that, to my taste, the women of Baltimore have more charm than the rest of the fair sex in America. Most of them have very white skin; it is true that in order to preserve the delicacy of their complexion they use hats of enormous size. They also ravish through their freshness and the brilliant vivacity of their eyes. Many can be seen with small waists and perfect proportions, with beautiful small hands, white and dimpled, and with tiny feet, excellently shod (better than anywhere else). They have hair styles of infinite taste and are given much to French fashion. Particularly those who have beautiful long hair have the good sense to let it impress by fastening it very low, and by letting it hang loosely in a tress, floating with ribbons airily over beautiful shoulders and other parts, of the whiteness of alabaster."

On the 10th of August 1782, "I accompanied M. de Rochambeau. We crossed on the Potapoco Ferry, two miles off Baltimore, and had dinner at King's Tavern, fifteen miles from there; afterwards we continued our journey and reached Annapolis in the evening." They stopped at the home of Mr. Thomas Sim Lee, the Governor. "His house is well kept up but not very pleasing. It looks out on the river that flows into the bay nearby. There is a large garden in the rear, but it is not properly maintained, since each governor knows that he will enjoy it only during his three-year term. The town is rather pleasant. The Maryland assembly meets here twice a year. There are two very impressive public buildings, the State House and a great church. The State House is very spacious, three stories high and well designed. There are three large halls; one for the senators, another for the delegates, and the third for the archives. There are also very beautiful paintings, among others, those of the former Lords Baltimore, the first proprietors of this state, who retained the title of governor only during and after the reign of George II. . . . Annapolis was a commercial center before the war; but for some time all the merchants have settled in Baltimore. However, the wealthiest people in the state prefer to reside in Annapolis; hence the town has a charming society and some very attractive ladies, very well educated and rather well dressed, who love entertainment."

The following is Closen's terse comment on the death of Galvin, a French officer who had fallen in love with a "coquette" from Philadelphia. When she rejected him and probably also because of his military mishaps he committed suicide. "Such Werther-like characters may also be found among the French though in general that nation knows well how to indulge in love without perishing by it."

While praising Virginia's beauty, hospitality and generosity, Closen has some harsh words for plantation owners and slavery, and for their favorite entertainment, cock-fights. "As for their cock-fighting they are something to see once for the sake of curiosity, but this spectacle is a little too cruel for enjoyment. One sees these poor animals knocked about, pricked, blinded, and finally killed with their iron spurs."

"For the most part, both banks of the [James] River are embellished with plantations, one more beautiful than the other, and inhabited by the haute voice of the country; all of them, the Carters, Randolphs, Harrisons, Byrds, to name some of the families, live in very comfortable circumstances, have many connections . . . they are fond of society, and abandon themselves to it, perhaps with too much relish, thinking only of their pleasures; they leave their estates to the attentions of an agent who often robs them enormously."

"The slaves are often treated very harshly and even cruelly, are left to run about almost naked, and are not considered better than animals. The whites believe that they debase themselves in doing any work they say is fit only for these wretched beings. I should observe that in New England there are almost no negro slaves any longer, whereas in the southern provinces all negroes are still enslaved. In general, despotism and aristocracy are the rule in Virginia more than elsewhere. A beagle or lap-dog very often leads a happier life and is so much better fed than the poor negroes or mulattoes, who have only their allowance of corn daily with which to do as they please. They have salted meat only once a week. That is the way these miserable people live. It is true that they recoup themselves with their light fingered hands and steal some victuals, even money, with incredible dexterity. They are thievish as magpies or faithful as gold: my good Peter [Closen's personal valet] born of free parents in Connecticut, belonged to the latter category."

Again and again, there are tributes to the American army; "I have the greatest admiration for the American army; it is unbelievable that troops consisting of men of all age groups, even children of fifteen years, white and black, all of them scantily dressed, without money and rather badly fed, can march so well and stand up to enemy fire."

Closen's diary abounds with admiring references and tributes to General Washington. He was impressed by his "immovable calmness and the assurance with which he carries through the most complicated military combinations. Whatever good may at any time be said about Washington, it can never be exaggerated." After Washington's visit to Rochambeau's Headquarters, there is this entry on March 13, 1781: "We shall miss him; he has the affection, respect, and veneration of our entire army. During my tours of duty under General Washington I had ample opportunity to observe his gentle and affable nature, his simple manners, his accessibility, his well-balanced temper, his outstanding composure, as a matter of fact everything about him attests to a great man and an excellent heart. As to military matters he does not have the brilliance of the French in perception, but he is farsighted in his combinations and has the insight of a true soldier. This is the opinion of the entire army, and no one could more sincerely agree on that than I."

"On the morning after the banquet [October 19, 1782, the anniversary of the capitulation of York] we took our leave of General Washington and the other officers of our acquaintance as our departure had been set for October 22. The thought of having to separate from the French army, probably forever, visibly affected Washington. He overwhelmed us with remarks of kindness and amiability. Our sorrow at parting was no less. We knew that we were separating from a man who, owing to his noble character, his military talents, and his imperishable service in the cause of his country, enjoyed the veneration of his fellow citizens and the admiration of all foreign nations; a man who, despite his high renown, had sacrificed none of his original simplicity of nature."