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## Nicholas Marcellus Hentz (1797-1856), Pioneer American Araneologist

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The force of the saying that "the real misfortune of the South was not Northern arms, but the Northern historians" has been lessened in recent years through the work of Southern men writing histories that set forth Southern points of view with a temperateness and candor that command the respect of scholars everywhere. But the exploration of life in the ante-bellum South is still far from being complete, particularly as regards intellectual achievements. I refer particularly to the fact that there is in existence no unified account of the splendid work done by some two-score of men of science in the South before the Civil War: at Transylvania, the first real university in America; at the University of North Carolina; and at the University of Nashville—to say nothing of that galaxy of gifted scholars who cultivated science in Charleston, South Carolina, from the mid-eighteenth century down to the Civil War. Indeed, the North of ante-bellum days owed to the South many men of science, such as the famous LeConte brothers of Georgia—an obligation often generally forgotten if it has ever been widely recognized.<sup>1</sup>

I am reminded of these things by discoveries made in the course of extensive and intensive study of the life of one of the least known among these Southern naturalists. Nicholas Marcellus Hentz was, before his death a hundred years ago—he died 4 November, 1856—the great American student of spiders. Through his numerous publications, including some 18 articles and a book, he gained wide acclaim as a naturalist. Yet, although in Europe and America he was recognized by his peers as an ample and seasoned scholar, Hentz was in his private life almost a recluse. Except for a handful of well-worn generalities, but little is generally known of his life. When he is remembered at all, it is as the

<sup>1</sup>In my "Notes on Scientists of the First Frontier" (*Southwest Review*, v. 18, pp. 50-86, 1932) I have attempted to give a brief, documented account of the chief naturalists of the ante-bellum South.

husband of Caroline Lee Hentz, a writer of graceful stories and poems, and of novels that once had a wide vogue. It has been forgotten, if it was ever generally known, that Hentz has a right to be remembered for his own work, and not merely as the consort of a once-popular novelist.<sup>2</sup>

We are told that the first few years of our lives make or break us, even before we arrive at the mythical years of responsibility. Never was this truth more clearly demonstrated than in the life of Nicholas Marcellus Hentz. He was born in France during the tempestuous days of the French Revolution, as the son of Nicholas Hentz, a member of "the Mountain" group in the Convention—a member whose life at one time hung upon a thread, and who left a reputation for cruelty which cannot be fully wiped away by the passing of the years. And Nicholas Hentz, the son, manifested all during his life a nervous instability which may be ascribed to the fears and insecurities of his early childhood. Brought up by his mother in the Catholic church, he later relinquished that faith; but through all the years he retained symbols of his childhood beliefs in a way that bordered on the psychopathic.

Hentz came to America with his family in 1816, when he was but 19 years old. For several years he taught French and miniature-painting in Philadelphia and Boston. Later, he became tutor of French at Harvard; taught with the famous historian, George Bancroft, at the scarcely less famous Round Hill School in western Massachusetts; and was professor of modern languages and belles lettres at the University of North Carolina from 1826 to 1830. During the remainder of his active life he taught with his wife in girls' seminaries and academies in Kentucky, at Cincinnati, Ohio, in Alabama, and at Columbus, Georgia. At the age of 52 he suffered a nervous and mental collapse, and after seven years of helpless invalidism, died in his fifty-ninth year.

<sup>2</sup>The *Dictionary of American Biography* includes a sketch of his wife, but none of Professor Hentz. ... In Burgess & Emerton's edition of Hentz's collected papers on spiders (*Bibliography*, No. 20), is printed a carefully prepared biographical sketch of N. M. Hentz, by his son, Dr. Charles A. Hentz; his bibliography (incomplete) also is given. This biographical sketch has been used by Atkinson and Cobb (*infra*). Part of it has been copied by Collier Cobb in his fine (1932) account of Hentz (*Jour. Elisha Mitchell Sci. Soc.* 47:47-51, portr., facsimile). George Francis Atkinson (*ibid.*, 4:13-15, 1887) has published briefly on Hentz; as also T. C. Johnson, Jr. (1936) in his *Scientific Interests in the Old South* (pp. 192-93). Neither Smallwood (in his excellent *Natural History and the American Mind*, 1941), nor G. Brown Goode in his Presidential Address before the Biological Society of Washington (*Proceedings* 4:9-94), nor Howard or Osborn in their histories of American entomology—none of them has made any reference to Hentz and his work with spiders.

Such, in brief, are the main outlines of his life, apparently prosaic enough and futile enough for a moralist to ring the changes upon. He was a man who in youth had great promise, had been connected with some of the greatest colleges in the country, yet who sank into the futility of "female education" at a time when it hardly deserved the name of education at all. Yet Hentz had as an avocation natural history, and American science is the richer for his labors. From his childhood shy and reserved, with an innate feeling of insecurity springing from the unfortunate conditions of his youth, he avoided mature man and loved the company of youth and of little children. He loved to roam the woods; and the study of natural history became for him a release, an escape. The excursions made during his peripatetic career netted close to two-hundred new species of American spiders (chiefly from Alabama, Georgia, and Massachusetts) and laid the foundation of our modern knowledge of them.<sup>3</sup>

That he was an admirable teacher, especially of French, we have ample testimony. At the University of North Carolina he built up a splendid reputation as teacher and scholar; and Professor George Ticknor, the famous historian of Spanish literature, has recorded that he was the best French teacher who had been at Harvard. He was remembered affectionately by his pupils, especially at the University of North Carolina; but all through life he was haunted by groundless fears, and oppressed by morbid suspicions, so that his life was full of disappointment and useless grief.

He studied medicine in Paris, and spent a year in the medical school of Harvard University, but so far as I have been able to learn, his only degree was an honorary Master of Arts degree conferred upon him by the University of North Carolina in 1829.<sup>4</sup>

His married life seems to have been uniformly happy. Caroline Lee Hentz was as good as she was personally charming and mentally acute. In the days of her husband's invalidism, Mrs. Hentz took upon her shoulders the burden of supporting the family through literary work. Hentz

<sup>3</sup>Nathan Banks in his *Catalogue of Nearctic Spiders* (1910), in a list of something in excess of 1300 species, included 177 Hentzian species which he considered valid, and 67 species of Hentz which he put into the synonymy—five of them doubtfully.

<sup>4</sup>Burgess & Emerton (1875) on their title-page ascribe the degree of M.D. to Hentz. This, so far as I can learn, is an error.

seems, however, to have hidden behind the superabundant social adequacy of his wife. Society charmed her, and brought out her remarkable attractiveness. It was easy for him to shrink back into the shadows and let the light play about her—enjoying through her, human contacts that his own sensitive nature shrank from and yet longed for.

Mansfield, in his life of Dr. Daniel Drake<sup>5</sup> has told, revealingly, of the “social literary reunions” held at Cincinnati in the 1830’s at the home of that famous physician—meetings that the Hentzes attended. Mrs. Hentz and Catherine Beecher (daughter of Lyman Beecher, and sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe) were the pivots around whom the conversation turned, while Professor Hentz kept to the shadows. It is amusing to view the scene again: Harriet Beecher, then a somewhat graceless girl of 22, dominated by Mrs. Hentz, who already had built up a substantial literary reputation for herself. When in 1851, Harriet Beecher, now Mrs. Stowe, upon the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* attained at a bound a literary fame far beyond that attained by Mrs. Hentz in the two decades of her career as an author, Mrs. Hentz was moved to write a counter-blast in the form of a novel, *The Planter’s Northern Bride*, her most ambitious work. Let us credit her with being only human, and realize that she may have been inspired by considerations other than an abstract love of truth from the Southern viewpoint.

The career of Hentz shows a curious reversal of the ordinary trend of human life. In this case, we have a highly gifted man with some social inadequacy that might by careful treatment have been remedied, so that he might have risen to a high position in his profession. Quite without intending it, entirely innocently in the simple process of living out her own destiny as shaped by her social gifts and intellectual abilities, Mrs. Hentz so dominated her husband that he shrank, more and more, into a progressively pathological condition. His work became a way of escape, yet in this escape from reality he built up a body of knowledge and developed a branch of science in which (to those who know) his name shines with hardly-dimmed luster after the passing of a hundred years.

<sup>5</sup>Edward D. Mansfield, *Memoirs of the Life and Services of Daniel Drake, M.D.* ... © 1855; see, esp., pp. 223-26.

## CHRONOLOGY OF NICHOLAS MARCELLUS HENTZ (1797-1856)

- 1797 Born 25 July, the son of Nicholas Hentz, deputy of Moselle, and his wife, Marie-Anne Therèse Daubree, both of Sierck, Moselle.
- 1798 1 August, Battle of the Nile.
- 1799 Government of the Consulate (1799-1804), following the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire (9 November).
- 1804 Establishment of the Empire, which lasted until 1814.
- 1805 Nelson's victory at Trafalgar (21 October); Battle of Austerlitz (2 December).
- 1810 Hentz began the study of miniature painting, in which he became proficient.
- 1813 Began the study of medicine at the École de médecine militaire (Larrey was at the head), connected with the Hôpital Val-de-Grâce, in Paris, until the fall of Napoleon. Battle of Leipzig (16-19 October).
- 1814 31 March. Entrance of allies into Paris; return of the Bourbons (4 May) in the person of Louis XVIII. Council of Vienna (14 September, 1814-June, 1815).
- 1815 Battle of Waterloo (18 June).
- 1816 Sailed with father and brother for New York, from Havre-de-Grâce (22 January-19 March); father forced to leave France by the Law of 1816 against regicides. Arrived at Wilkesbarre, Pa., in late April; there the parents set up a new home. (The father died about 1837, "on an island in Lake Erie" [?Presque Isle]; *not* in 1824, as Larousse states.)
- 1817-1819 Lived in Boston and Philadelphia, teaching French and miniature painting. (He met Charles-Alexandre LeSueur in Philadelphia, where he also was teaching drawing and painting.) Hentz attended "Wistar parties" in Philadelphia. For a short time he also was tutor to the children of a rich planter, Mr. Marshall, on Sullivan's Island, near Charleston, S.C.
- 1820 In the winter of 1820-21 he attended medical lectures at Harvard, but finally abandoned the study of medicine, without a degree. Hentz's teachers at Harvard Medical School: John Collins Warren (anatomy & surgery), Jacob Bigelow (materia medica), James Jackson (clinical medicine), Walter Channing (obstetrics), John Goring (chemistry), Joseph Green Cogswell (mineraology & geology).
- 1823 Joined Joseph Green Cogswell and George Bancroft in the Round Hill School, Northampton. Had as pupils (*inter alios*): Francis Boott (1792-1863), John Lathrop Motley (1814-77), Samuel G. Ward (1814-74), and John Murray Forbes (1813-98).
- 1824 Married (30 September) Caroline Lee Whiting, of Lancaster, Mass.
- 1825 Son, Marcellus Fabius, born (6 September) at Northampton.
- 1826 Applied early in April for chair of Modern Languages and Belles Lettres at the University of North Carolina. Professor at North Carolina, 1826-30.
- 1827 Son, Charles Arnould, born 28 May, at Chapel Hill [d. 1893]; son, Marcellus Fabius, died 14 July.

- 1828 In letters to Thaddeus W. Harris: *24 October*, 'believes that he has not more than two-thirds of the American spiders [!], and that in the South the spiders of a given species are much larger than in the North.' *19 December*, Hentz offers to 'divide the entomological field with Harris; will specialize on spiders.' On 11 October, daughter, Julia Louisa, born at Chapel Hill.
- 1829 The University of North Carolina conferred the honorary degree of A.M. on Hentz.
- 1830 Left Chapel Hill, where he was much loved and admired. In July he began "the serious study" of hymenopterous insects (no publications). Went to Covington, Ky., to head the Covington Female Seminary (1830-32). A son, Thaddeus William, born 20 January, at Chapel Hill.
- 1832 To Cincinnati, to head a girls' academy (1832-34).
- 1833 Daughter, Caroline Theresa, born 22 November, at Cincinnati.
- 1834 To Florence, Alabama, to head the "Locust Hill Female Academy" (1834-42).
- 1835 Joined the Presbyterian Church in Florence; had been reared a Catholic.
- 1842 To Tuskalooosa, Ala., heading a female academy (1842-46).
- 1846 To Tuskegee, Ala., heading a female academy (1846-47).
- 1847 To Columbus, Ga., heading a female academy (1847-49).
- 1849 Physical and mental health began to fail; had to close school, and thereafter Mrs. Hentz supported the family by literary work.
- 1851 Removed to Mariana, Fla.
- 1856 Caroline Lee Hentz died 11 February, and Nicholas Marcellus Hentz died 4 November, at the home of their son, Dr. Charles Arnould Hentz, at Mariana, Fla.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY OF NICHOLAS MARCELLUS HENTZ

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2. A notice concerning the spider, whose web is used in medicine. (*Jour. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist.* 2:53-55, 1821.)
3. On the alligator of North America, Phila., 1821. L' [Sabin] [Is this No. 1, repaged and with a title page?]
4. Description of some new species of North American insects. (*Jour. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist.* 5:373-75, 1826). Read October 24, 1826.
5. Description of eleven new species of North American insects. (*Trans. Amer. Philos. Soc.* [n.s.] 3:253-58, 1827). Read November 2, 1827.
6. Remarks on the use of the maxillae in coleopterous insects ... (*Trans. Amer. Philos. Soc.* [n.s.] 3:458-63, 1828). Read September 19, 1828.
7. On North American spiders. (*Silliman's Journal* 21:99-109, 1831). Signed "August 22, 1831."

8. The locust. (*Western Jour. Physical & Med. Sciences* 8:160-63, 1834).
9. Description of an American spider, constituting a new subgenus, of the tribe Inaequalatae of Latreille. (*Silliman's Journal* 41:116-17, 1841).
- 10- [8 installments, 1841-50.] Descriptions and figures of the Araneids
17. of the United States. (*Jour. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist.* 4:54-57, 1841; 223-31, 1842; 386-96, 1844; 5:189-202, 1845; 352-70, 1846; 443-79, 1847; 6:18-35, 1848; 271-95, 1850.) Reprinted in No. 20, posthumously).
18. Species of *Mygale* in the United States. (*Proc. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist.* 1:41-42, 1844.)
19. Supplement to the description and figures of the Araneids of the United States. (*Proc. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist.* 11:103-11, 1866.) This posthumous paper was edited by Samuel Hubbard Scudder.
20. *The Spiders of the United States*. A collection of the Arachnological writings of Nicholas Marcellus Hentz, M.D. Edited by Edward Burgess, with notes and descriptions by James H. Emerton. (*Occas. Papers, Boston Soc. Nat. Hist.*, vol. 2, 1875. [xiii + 171 pp., 20 pls.]) At pp. viii *et seq.* is given a very careful biographical sketch of N. M. Hentz, written by his son, Dr. Charles Arnould Hentz, then (1875) a resident of Florence, Ala. From this account, all subsequent sketches of the life of Hentz have been written.

*School Texts on the French Language*

1. *A Manual of French Phrases, and French Conversations*; adapted to Wanostrocht's Grammar ... , by N. M. Hentz. Boston, Richardson & Lord, 1822. 154 pp., 18<sup>mo</sup>.
2. *A Classical French Reader*, selected from the Best Writers of that Language, in Prose and Poetry ... . compiled by N. M. Hentz ... Boston, Richardson & Lord, 1825. 264 pp., 18<sup>mo</sup>.
3. *A Classical French Reader*, ... preceded by an Introduction ... and attended with Notes ... Compiled for the use of the Round Hill School, etc. Philadelphia, Thomas, Cowperthwaite & Co., 1839, 12<sup>mo</sup>.

*Fiction*

1. *Tadeuskund, the Last King of the Lenape*. An historical Tale. Boston, Cummings, Hilliard & Co., 1825. 276 pp., 12<sup>mo</sup>. [Published anonymously.]

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A CAVE BAT, *MYOTIS VELIFER INCAUTUS* (J. A. ALLEN), FROM DALLAS COUNTY, TEXAS.—The presence of the cave bat, *Myotis velifer incautus* (J. A. Allen), in Dallas County has not been reported previously in the literature, although its known range (open, arid country from Durango, Mexico, northward to Kansas) includes this area. On October 3, 1956, of this species I collected a female which was found hanging in a closet in a building on the campus of Southern Methodist University. This species may, therefore, be added to my list of mammals recorded for Dallas County (*Field & Lab.* 24:96-101, 1956). This specimen has been placed in the permanent collections of the Department of Biology at Southern Methodist University.—*William B. Stallcup*