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## NIAGARA

**I**n 1829 the innkeepers at Niagara Falls announced an off-season exhibition: they would explode huge rocks into the Niagara gorge, they would decorate a sailing ship and send it over the Falls, and they would ask Sam Patch to perform one of his leaps. They contacted Sam through friends in New York. Sam accepted the invitation and set out to become the first Niagara Falls daredevil.

**O**n the morning of October 6, 1829, Colonel William Leete Stone, editor and part owner of the *New-York Commercial Advertiser*, stepped onto the veranda of William Forsyth's Niagara Falls Pavilion, the grand hotel at British Niagara. Just out of sight, at the base of the island that separated the Canadian and American Falls, was the spot from which Sam Patch would make his leap. Up and to the right, a low pier led out from the island to rocks at the brink of the Falls; a closer look revealed workmen planting charges for the afternoon's explosions. Downriver, on the Canadian side, more workmen packed gunpowder into an overhanging rock shelf. Hawkers of food and drink were setting up their booths. A corps of circus riders had arrived on the

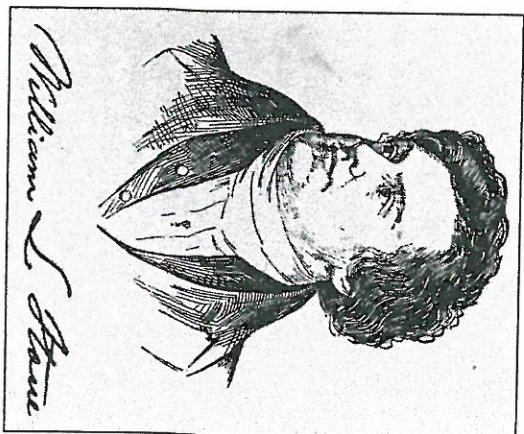
American side. The beginnings of a crowd of country people watched the preparations and gawked at the Falls.

Colonel Stone witnessed the various events of the day and wrote about them. But early in the day and at intermissions he studied Niagara Falls. His travel journal reveals the utter seriousness with which he undertook that study. Stone was a country boy who had made good in New York City. He had power, wealth, and influential friends, and he was an acknowledged spokesman for a mercantile elite that claimed more than money and connections. Stone and his friends were a self-conscious community of sensibility and taste: they knew the best books and plays, they mastered an elaborate system of manners, they followed London fashions, and they spoke an upper-crust English that distanced them from ordinary Americans. In Colonel Stone's social circle aesthetic taste—not money, heredity, or social connections, though all of these were tied to taste—was deemed the principal sign of one's inner worth. They cultivated good taste in themselves and sought it in others, and they were trained to recognize poseurs and pretenders.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1820s this genteel elite began to cultivate an appreciation of natural beauty and a consuming interest in scenic tourism, as their English models had done decades earlier. The wealthy had always traveled for pleasure, but now Americans made long and expensive journeys for the sole purpose of looking at scenery. A pilgrimage to Niagara Falls, which was accessible by Hudson River steamboat and the Erie Canal (completed in 1825), was the high point in what became known as the "Fashionable Tour." People of means came to Niagara to live for a few days or weeks in perfect beauty—an experience that gave them profound and authentic pleasure, and that asserted their membership in an emerging cultural elite.<sup>2</sup>

The journey to Niagara was an important cultural task, and William Leete Stone prepared himself. In New York he read travel books and texts on aesthetics, notably those of Basil Hall

William Leete Stone (*Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, New York, 1888)



(whose *Travels in North America* was a popular, if controversial, guide to Niagara) and Edmund Burke, and studied the scale model of Niagara that the rising artist George Catlin was exhibiting in the city. Stone almost certainly attended William Dunlap's drama *A Trip to Niagara*, a popular farce played before a moving diorama of the scenic route from New York to the Falls. Along with the lesson in landscape, Dunlap's play showed audiences how (and how not) to think and act on the journey to Niagara. Colonel Stone was also a regular at Niblo's and the other summer gardens of New York, where the evening often ended with Niagara displayed in fireworks. (The fireworks were a lesson in the sublime: "[The Falls] will be seen in the first instance of great extent and beautiful appearance, but gradually become more and more violent, until they assume the character of 'the Tremendous Cataract,' bursting from its confined and precipitous bed, with the noise of thunder.") Most important, he traveled in the highest circles of New York society, where beauty and taste, the Fashionable Tour, and the proper experience of Niagara Falls were the common coin of polite conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Stone and his wife, Susannah (she was the sister of Francis Wayland, president of Brown University), took three weeks to reach Niagara, taking side trips to Stone's childhood haunts at Cooperstown and his parents' home at Sodus, and surveying the new world that was being made by the Erie Canal. Stone's preparations for Niagara continued throughout those three weeks. His travel journal (a private diary, unpublished in his lifetime) routinely sorted landscapes and people into aesthetic categories. There was the majesty and beauty of the Hudson Highlands seen from the steamboat; the pleasing farmscapes of the Mohawk Valley on the way to Cooperstown (farmscapes that became beautiful when seen from high ground); the grandeur of an old-growth forest in autumn colors (again seen from above, west of Lockport); the mean, unpicturesque aspect of poor towns and uneven country. At times Stone, following the rules of picturesque travel, corrected imperfections: in Rochester, where developers had moved down a whole forest to make room for a new city, his mind's eye saved some of the prettier trees for shade and ornamentation; later, Stone moved the village of Skaneateles to place it in a more tasteful relationship to its lake. Stone sorted people in the same taste-driven ways: the best of them (judged by their clothes, houses, gardens, manners, and eloquence in conversation) were elegant and genteel, others were respectable and agreeable, the worst were unpleasant. It was a relentlessly aesthetic sensibility that William Leete Stone brought to Niagara Falls.<sup>4</sup>

Twice on the journey Stone's meditations were interrupted by moments of astonishment and fear that he had learned to call sublime. In Cooperstown he stood below a flaming hillside at night, reveling in the red glow of the fire, the ghostly obscurity provided by darkness and smoke, and the dreadful sounds of falling trees. Later Stone felt the same ennobling terror when he turned off a road and suddenly confronted a storm on Lake Ontario. In both instances Stone experienced Edmund Burke's "de-

lightful horror" without fear. The fire near Cooperstown had been started and controlled by woodsmen. It was thus safe, and Stone enjoyed a sublime experience "unallayed with painful or unpleasant emotions." The storm on Lake Ontario was foregrounded by a "picturesque and beautiful" shoreline of calm inlets and stately forests, "while the view of the mighty expanse of heaving waters beyond, was full of majesty and grandeur." (The older heroic sublime had required danger and physicality; Colonel Stone's new mercantile elite gave up the horrific sublime just as they gave up fencing lessons, mistresses, and physical risks—all of which entailed danger and a breach of genteel spectatorship.) This fusion of beauty and awe, seen from a point that was both pleasing and safe, was what Stone was seeking at Niagara Falls.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1820s William Forsyth and the other hotelkeepers had shaped the land surrounding Niagara Falls with people like Colonel Stone in mind. Before 1815 access to the grand viewpoint at Table Rock on the Canadian side was down a steep, slippery path into the brush. Most visitors made that hike, but few descended to the river below the falls. Goat Island, which afforded the best viewpoints in the United States, was inaccessible. With the end of war between Great Britain and the United States in 1815, and with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, the Falls opened to scenic tourism. By 1829 Stone and other tourists found hotels, landscaped paths, planked walkways, bridges, piers, ferryboats, and staircases that transformed the rigors and dangers of Niagara into an ordered and comfortable succession of scenic views. Some viewpoints placed them at brink level or on high ground, affording vast, reassuring horizontal panoramas of the Falls and the surrounding countryside. Safe stairs descended to the banks below the Falls, and Stone experienced the vertical sublimities of the Falls chasm without effort or danger.

Niagara in 1829 presented an aesthetic rather than a physical challenge. It was grand beyond literary description, too vast and

varied to be captured by even the most skilled and inspired painter. But the well-prepared tourist could view Niagara from a variety of safe points, framing scenes of natural beauty, the well-balanced picturesque, and the stunning sublime. The most accomplished aesthetes joined the beauties of horizontal vistas with the vertical terrors of Niagara into a spiritual experience of overwhelming beauty surrounding a muffled shudder of fear—an experience that was the unique creation (and then the treasured memory and conversation piece) of every successful tourist. That perfect moment gave the journey to Niagara the transcendent qualities of a work of art, and it made an artist of every good tourist. The opportunity to make that moment was the principal commodity on sale at Niagara Falls.<sup>6</sup>

Colonel Stone and his wife reached Forsyth's Pavilion in Canada on the night of October 5, 1829, at about the time that Sam Patch checked into a hotel on the American side. The Stones ate supper and retired to an upstairs apartment that overlooked the rapids and Falls. Colonel Stone, knowing that astute travelers considered this view banal, fought off his curiosity and kept the curtains drawn—"being resolved," he tells us, "not to dissolve the charm of a first look upon the mighty, glorious whole!" He prepared for bed and lay down in the dark. As the bustle of a busy hotel quieted for the night (on this night before the planned shipwreck and explosions, Forsyth's may have been a bit noisier than usual), Stone heard the roar of the Falls and felt the shudder that they sent through the building, and he slipped into fitful dreams of waterfalls and whirlpools and towering, jagged rocks. In the morning he and his wife rose, ate breakfast, and began composing their experience of Niagara Falls.<sup>7</sup>

Colonel Stone walked to the first-floor veranda, passing up not only the higher view from his room but the great panorama afforded from the roof of the Pavilion. (Forsyth advertised that his hotel sat on "commanding ground," with a rooftop view "un-

equalled for . . . grandeur & diversity," i.e., for its combination of the grand and the civilized picturesque.) At other points in his journey, Stone had sought high ground—particularly when it afforded him broad vistas of cultivated land. From the roof of a museum in Utica he had enjoyed a "glorious view" of the town and the surrounding countryside; from atop a hotel in Buffalo he had looked at a similar townscape set within a pastoral country, this time with a busy Lake Erie harbor thrown in, and pronounced it "a fine view." At Niagara, however, he did not seek "commanding" ground from which he could subject the scene to a satisfied "Magisterial Gaze." He wanted to be overwhelmed by beauty and sublimity, and he knew that such things were best accomplished at eye level and from below.<sup>8</sup>

The view from Forsyth's veranda disappointed knowledgeable aesthetes. To the right was the distant, mile-long explosion of the rapids, quieting and turning emerald green as the river rolled over the precipice. It was impressive enough, but the veranda afforded only a partial view of the Canadian Falls and no view at all of the chasm. One visitor dismissed the view as "superficial." Another complained that "the prospect there gave me but an indifferent idea of Niagara. . . . I could see only part of the Horse-shoe Fall, and consequently had no idea of the sublime part of the precipice below the Fall." Others pronounced the partial view from Forsyth's a mere appetizer for what was next. According to a visitor in 1828, it "only increased our desire to have the whole scene unfolded"; a Philadelphia merchant dismissed it as a mere "preparation of soul for what was to come." Colonel Stone agreed: he was glad that clouds of spray shrouded Forsyth's broken view of the Horseshoe, though he granted that the beauty and violence of the rapids "afforded a prospect sufficiently interesting to render the senses keenly alive to the more sublime and glorious spectacle that was to come."<sup>9</sup>

Eager for his first full view of Niagara, Stone followed a pathway

from the Pavilion to the fabled viewpoint at Table Rock. Forsyth had cleared the path as a pleasant promenade that descended in easy switchbacks, but he ensured that shrubbery obstructed the view. Table Rock would burst properly and suddenly upon the senses at the end, and not before. Colonel Stone, like thousands before and after him, stepped onto Table Rock and was “struck silent and breathless for some moments, with wonder and dread admiration of this stupendous monument of almighty power.”<sup>10</sup>

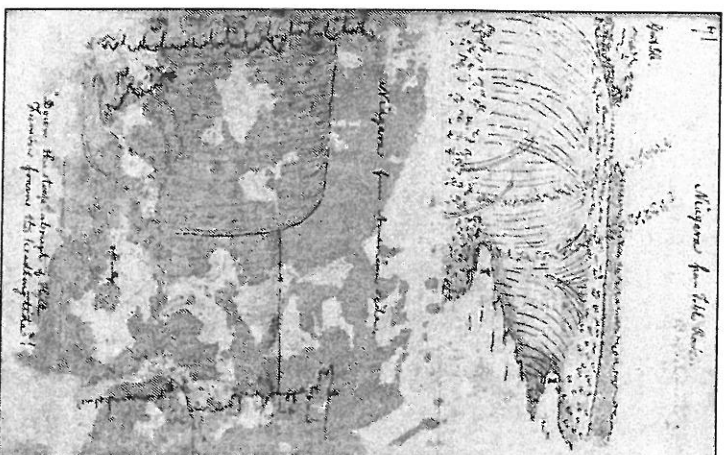
Discerning tourists agreed that Table Rock afforded, as one of them put it in 1823, “one of the grandest and most romantic views in nature”: an unobstructed brink-level panorama of the Canadian and American Falls. In 1831 Frances Trollope stood still as “wonder, terror, and delight completely overwhelmed me. I wept with a strange mixture of pleasure and of pain.” An Englishman visited Table Rock at night and—like Trollope, Colonel Stone, and many others—waited for astonishment to subside and contemplation to begin. The experience, he concluded, “seemed to complete in absolute perfection the rare union of the beautiful with the sublime.” The Englishman Basil Hall was interestingly candid about the place of Table Rock in cultural history: “At one moment I looked upon myself as utterly insignificant in the presence of such a gigantic, moving, thundering body,—and in the next, was puffed up with a sort of pride and arrogant satisfaction, to think that I was admitted into such company, and that I was not wasting the opportunity.”<sup>11</sup>

Stone stood on Table Rock and allowed himself a long moment of astonishment and an acknowledgment of God’s wonders. He slowly collected himself, looked closely at each portion of the panorama, and recalled the paintings, poetry, and travel books that had shaped his ability to perceive. At last he was prepared to write his account of the view from Table Rock. There were those, he knew, who could be unaffected by such scenes (indeed, on this morning of Forsyth’s shipwreck and explosions, Stone may have been surrounded by such persons).

But to one who has an eye alive to the glorious works of the Creator, as manifested in this beautiful world; who has a heart to feel his power and goodness; and perceptions to admire and appreciate their vastness and magnificence, I can think of no other spectacle in nature more calculated to thrill the bosom, and call all those faculties and perceptions into elevated and delightful action, and to lead the mind from the contemplation of Nature up to Nature’s God, than this wonderful cataract.<sup>12</sup>

William Leete Stone and Niagara Falls had begun their conquest of each other:

Along with its horizontal beauties, Table Rock afforded a vertical gaze into Niagara’s horrible abyss. In 1827 an American had crept on his belly to the edge and looked down. He “recoiled in-

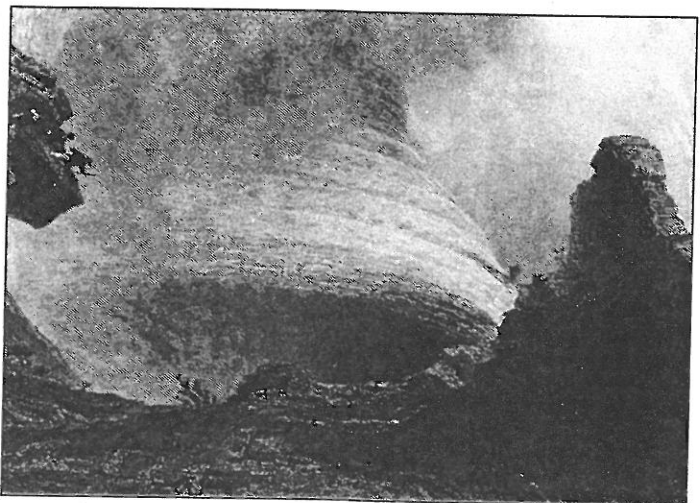


In 1827 a merchant from Philadelphia sketched Niagara Falls from above and below. The panorama from Table Rock is bright, expansive, and reassuring. The view from below is dark and tumultuous, and it is accompanied by sublime poetry (John Fanning Watson *Travel Diary*, 1827, courtesy of the Winterthur Library; Joseph Downs *Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera*)

stinctively, and in horror," explaining that "all distinctness of vision was lost—annihilated by the boiling, bounding, bursting hell beneath me. . . ." Another visitor "glanced in giddy fear on the phrenzied, foaming agitation of the gulph below," while yet another (a man who had just pronounced the horizontal view from Table Rock as Niagara's finest composition) looked down to see only "the wildest confusion." Colonel Stone stared down into the chasm and pronounced the view "overpowerful." He then descended William Forsyth's staircase for a closer look at the base of the Falls.<sup>13</sup>

Forsyth had built the staircase in 1818 as one of his first improvements. It was a spiral staircase covered with wooden siding (a guard against vertigo and a premature view of the Falls) and it gave a comfortable experience of sublime terror. At the entrance Stone paid a toll and signed a guest album. Then he passed down the stairs and through a guide's shack and stepped toward the chasm, a few feet from the stupendous violence at the base of the Falls.

A guidebook pronounced this Niagara's "most sublime scene." Here the visitor stood beneath Table Rock, immediately beside the overwhelming movement and within the deafening roar of the Falls as they exploded into the abyss. The debris of great rockfalls cluttered the way, worrying tourists who looked up at overhanging cliffs. One overwrought English gentleman averred that "the dark firmament of rock which threatened destruction to the intruder, the terrors of the descending torrent, the deep thunder of its roar, and the fearful convulsion of the waters into which it falls, constitute the features of a scene, the sublimity of which undoubtedly extends to the very verge of horror." Another, overwhelmed in precisely the same way, found snakes on the ground: "These, when combined with the other terrors of the place,—the frightful roar of the cataract, and the troubled aspect of the river,—tend powerfully to augment the fearful propensities of the astonished visitor." Yet another English visitor insisted that under Table Rock



*Beneath Table Rock*, by W. H. Bartlett (W. P. Willis, *American Scenery*, 1840, author's collection)

"the soul can be susceptible only of one emotion, viz., that of uncontrollable terror." The American explorer and ethnographer Henry Schoolcraft, who like the others knew his artistic conventions, explained: it was beneath Table Rock

that the mind becomes fully impressed, with the appalling majesty of the Fall. Other views . . . are more beautiful and picturesque; but it is here that the tremulous motion of the earth, the clouds of indescendent spray, the broken column of falling water, the stunning sound, the lofty banks of the river, and the wide spreading ruin of rocks, imprint a character of wonder and terror upon the scene, which no other point of view is capable of producing.<sup>14</sup>

Colonel Stone had studied these lessons. Stunned by spray and thunder, he wrote that "he who can unmoved look up from

the dreadful gulph, and gaze upon hanging rocks and rushing waters above, and the dizzying whirlpools beneath—upon the clouds of ascending vapour, now dense and humid and now light and fleecy, and reflecting the melting and beautiful tints of the rainbow, must be made of sterner stuff than I." He concluded that the vertical terrors of the chasm (even when softened by a redeeming rainbow) were "intensely and awfully sublime." Then he reminded himself, in proper fashion, that "no passion contributes more to the sublime than terror."<sup>15</sup>

"But I am becoming too prolix," wrote the Colonel at this point, "and must draw this imperfect outline to a close." Little mobs of farmers and laborers now crowded the viewpoints. Forsyth's men would set off their first explosion after lunch, and the wreck of the *Superior* was scheduled for three o'clock in the afternoon. Stone interrupted his tour to watch the show. The next day he crossed to the American side to witness the leap of Sam Patch. He assures us that he "spent the day in studying the cataract," "viewing this wonderful curiosity from different points of observation . . . and [that] each moment . . . was of still more thrilling interest—of more special wonder—of higher and more elevated enjoyment." His journal, however, provides details only for the morning of October 6. At noon that day, apparently, Stone put his travel journal away and picked up his reporter's notebook.<sup>16</sup>

Colonel Stone spent two days at Niagara—the days of Forsyth's explosions, the wreck of the *Superior*, and the leap of Sam Patch. For much of the time he put the exhibitions and the crowds out of mind, and collected sublime spiritual moments for his travel journal. He recorded those moments in the high authoritative language of Anglo-American genteel aestheticism. But in the same two days Stone watched the shows and reported on them

for the *Commercial Advertiser*. For that he needed a different voice. The United States, as Colonel Stone frequently complained, was becoming a democratic society that made its own heroes, its own entertainments, and its own political movements. Stone and other genteel conservatives paid as little attention to the emerging democracy as they could. But the mob was everywhere and could not be ignored—certainly not by a daily journalist like William Leele Stone. In the 1820s Colonel Stone experimented with cultivated ways of talking about democracy. He worked a surprising number of those experiments on the exploits of Sam Patch.

In these days before the penny press, New York journalists wrote for the monied elite—an elite that knew Stone's *Commercial Advertiser* as a source of useful news, sound politics, and gentlemanly wit. When Sam Patch first won notoriety, Stone and his colleagues looked for ways to dismiss him. The more self-conscious aesthetes wrote him off as nameless and insane—"a half crazy fellow," in the words of an Albany paper. The *New England Palladium* published an excruciatingly genteel account of a carriage ride from New York to the falls of the Passaic, and concluded with a dismissive scrambling of the single utterance Patch was known to have made. He claimed his jumps were undertaken, said the *Palladium*, to demonstrate that "somebody besides other folks can do something." The *New York Journal of Commerce* (founded by the evangelical Lewis Tappan to provide business news without advertisements for liquor or the theater) described Patch as "a hair-brained fellow in Patterson [sic], whose name we do not recollect," and followed with an account of Patch's July 4, 1828, leap couched in the conventions of the sublime: "The universal anxiety of the multitude was manifest in their countenances . . . a cloud had come over the spot, adding to the sublimity of the cataract," and so on. William Leele Stone's first stories about Sam Patch also denied the jumper his name.

An anonymous madman—a “crazy chap” and an “insane gentleman”—had made these jumps, and “the writ of *de lunatico inquirendo* should be issued before he performs.”<sup>17</sup>

Stone soon found better uses for Sam Patch. He had already learned to identify Patch with the followers of Andrew Jackson, who were upending the founders’ republic and replacing it with a noisy, plebeian mass democracy. On his journey to Niagara, Stone recounts his discomfort on a canal boat with passengers who were “very good for *universal suffrage folks*—all Jackson men, as the color of their shirt collars abundantly attested.” He ran into another “boisterous gang of Universal Suffrage Jackson men” heading for the show at Niagara Falls. At the end of that day he crossed to King George IV’s Canada and “seemed to breathe a purer air.” “I am as decidedly a *Republican* in principle, as any man, but I am no Jacobin—no democrat. I hate the mob.”<sup>18</sup>

A year earlier the Paterson strike had broken out during Jackson’s triumphant contest for the presidency in 1828. Stone, countering a Democratic Journalist’s story about the strike, branded it a Jackson riot. The rioters wore hickory sprigs in their hats as homage to their hero, “Old Hickory.” Worse, they threatened to throw supporters of President John Quincy Adams into Patch’s chasm. “We did not learn to what party [Patch] belongs,” wrote Stone, “but take it for granted he is a Jackson man.” The easy association of Sam Patch, Andrew Jackson, and anything low became a staple of Stone’s journalistic repertoire.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout 1828 the *Commercial Advertiser* argued against Jacksonian suspicions that President Adams had bought the electoral votes cast for Henry Clay in the 1824 contest, in which Andrew Jackson had won the popular vote but not a majority of the Electoral College; Clay had thrown his decisive support to Adams, and had then been appointed Secretary of State. Stone thought the rumors of a “corrupt bargain” between Clay and Adams were political humbug. Immediately after Sam Patch’s

leap at Hoboken, he constructed “a regular-built Jackson article” documenting a bargain between Henry Clay and Sam Patch—a parody of the missing, misconstrued, and forged evidence on which, Stone claimed, Democrats based their accusations. The fictional Sam Patch of the piece is illiterate and glibble, and his language is the mangled opposite of genteel. “Sur—I got yure note,” he writes Clay, “but most haaf on it was tore off. I shall jump accordin to yure wishes, and transackt the bizness I trust, to your taste. All I complane’s of is yure not being suffishently konphidenshall.” The letter misrepresents vernacular speech and plebeian-phonetic spelling, but that is not the point. The article was a feast of parodied ignorance and bad taste served up for the Adams supporters who read the *Commercial Advertiser*. The “insane gentleman” of Stone’s first Patch article was transformed into a low and ignorant fool.<sup>20</sup>

At Niagara, Stone wrote about Sam’s leap under the name and in the character of Hiram Doolittle, Jun. He had invented Doolittle two weeks earlier for a piece he composed for the Cooperstown *Freeman’s Journal*, the Federalist weekly on which he had served his journalistic apprenticeship.<sup>21</sup>

Stone’s readers knew what to expect from Hiram Doolittle, Jun. The original Hiram Doolittle was the antagonist in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823), a novel of politics and social disintegration in early Cooperstown. Hiram Doolittle is a dissembling, cowardly politician who undermines the fortunes of Judge Temple (modeled on the novelist’s father, William Cooper), the noble woodsman Natty Bumppo, and the social harmony of Temple’s town. Wielding a formidable shrewdness and a rural New England dialect (“heard” for “heard,” and so on), he intrigues after power, money, and respect that he cannot earn. At the conclusion of *The Pioneers*, a defeated and humiliated Hiram Doolittle leaves town, and good order under the Temple family returns.<sup>22</sup>

Cooper’s Hiram Doolittle was among the first of the Yankee

characters who invaded American drama and literature in the 1820s. By the 1830s their rustic mistakes and rustic insights were elbowing the wit of English drawing-room ladies and gentlemen off the American stage and out of popular literature. Some Yankee characters were depicted as simple and virtuous, some were simple and dishonest, some were populist democrats, and others found folksy, commonsense ways to uphold the power of the elite. Without exception, however, Yankees named Doolittle were talkative and empty exemplars of what was wrong with democracy.

Stone's Hiram Doolittle, Jun., was one of a growing Yankee clan. The earliest Doolittle character, another verbose and ignorant fellow, appeared in *The Yankee in England*, written in 1814 by the prominent Federalist David Humphreys and performed (once) in the author's factory village of Humphreysville, Connecticut. Cooper introduced Hiram Doolittle in 1823, and in 1828 one Jonathan Doolittle appeared on stage, as impersonated by the Englishman John Bull (both characters played by a young George "Yankee" Hill), in Dunlap's *A Trip to Niagara*. Dunlap's Doolittle is a comic-vernacular braggart who tells exaggerated stories and pretends knowledge of things of which he knows nothing; James Hackett, the first of the great Yankee character actors, brought one Industrious Doolittle to the New York stage in 1829. Industrious was, the playbill says, "A Busy, Talkative Native of one of the Eastern States—Speculator in every thing—Auctioneer, Bank and Insurance Director, and Stump Candidate for Assembly, with a sneaking notion for Caroline, or more 'specially' her rich inheritance in Rice and Cotton Plantations." Like Cooper's original Hiram, these Doolittle characters were neither the sturdy yeomen who formed the ideal base of conservative society nor the gentlemen at its top. They were demagogues and small-time businessmen who cheated and manipulated the yeomanry for their own selfish purposes—purposes often driven by

low resentment of their social and cultural betters. When not in politics, the Doolittles found devious and insubstantial ways to make a living. Dunlap's Jonathan Doolittle manufactured wooden nutmegs. Hackett's Industrious Doolittle talked, among other things, of speculating in feathers.<sup>23</sup>

The Doolittle characters sprang from the imaginations of gentlemen—Cooper, Dunlap, Hackett, Stone—who had been hurt, or believed they had been hurt, by populist democracy. With Hiram Doolittle, Cooper took literary revenge on Jedediah Peck, a real-life evangelical preacher and politician who had in fact undermined the fortunes of the Coopers. William Dunlap spent his life trying to establish an English-style national theater in America, with himself as a principal arbiter of popular taste in drama. Democratic America paid little attention to him. *A Trip to Niagara*, a rare popular success for him, was a light farce intended as an afterpiece. Dunlap acknowledged that it attracted audiences more for its unique scenic apparatus than for the play itself. James Hackett, who after his father's death had been raised among his mother's relatives in the Beekman, Roosevelt, DePeyster, and Duane families, and who continued to benefit from his connections to the old New York aristocracy, was the husband of a classical actress and a friend of William Dunlap's. He developed his Yankee and other vernacular characters in an effort to civilize Americans through comic bad examples. He played successfully to his wealthy friends in the East; western audiences sometimes chased him off the stage.<sup>24</sup>

All these New York gentlemen knew each other. Dunlap and the English comedian Charles Matthews (who is often given credit for developing the first stage Yankee) enjoyed a long evening with Cooper on a Hudson River steamer in 1823. Dunlap also knew and liked Hackett (and may have been on his way to join Hackett in Utica when he ran into Cooper on the steamboat). Stone was a boyhood friend of Cooper's and wrote an early

and important review of *The Pioneers*. In New York he lived at the center of the social circle in which Dunlap and Hackett operated.<sup>25</sup>

And he certainly knew the story of *The Pioneers* and Hiram Doolittle as family history. Stone spent his boyhood near Cooperstown in the hardscrabble village of Burlington, where his father was a Presbyterian minister, a Yale-trained descendant of the Puritans who struggled for right religion and tutored his son in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Among the Stones' neighbors was Jedediah Peck. Peck, an unaffiliated evangelical exhorter, built a successful politics by asserting the worthiness and political capacity of the poor farmers of Otsego County, and he launched his democratic revolt from Burlington. While his chief target was the proprietor William Cooper at the county seat, he and other evangelical democrats doubtless assaulted outposts of gentility in Burlington—outposts that included the home and church of the Reverend Stone. William Stone hinted as much. "My father," he wrote during a visit to Burlington, "had been cruelly displaced as a minister here."<sup>26</sup>

In 1808, when William was sixteen, the family retreated to Sodus, near Lake Ontario. Stone visited them on his way to Niagara twenty years later. The town was, he wrote, "not a place of much business," and he reached his parents' "humble residence" over "a rough, ragged road." He stayed three or four days, but he recorded no details about his mother or father and did not describe their house or garden, though his diary included long passages about other houses, families, and gardens. The Colonel kept himself busy taking tea with ministers and village dignitaries, surveying the economic prospects of Sodus, surrendering himself to the stormy sublime of Lake Ontario. The only bit of family business was a visit to the graves of his two brothers. Before leaving he paid (as his father apparently could not pay) to have proper headstones erected for them. Between the lines of Stone's record of this brief, uncomfortable visit we glimpse a

family living in poverty and obscurity—the squalid result of a disaster that seems to have come at the hands of Burlington's populist democrats, perhaps at the hands of Jedediah Peck (Hiram Doolittle) himself.<sup>27</sup>

Colonel Stone's Hiram Doolittle, Jun., is a worthy offspring of Cooper's original. He is a braggart, a tasteless poseur, and a Jacksonian Democrat. Worse, he is a murderer of genteel English. He tells us that Hiram, Sr., had moved west from Cooperstown to become "the principal architect of all the successive villages which sprung up with the onward march of emigration"; he is now building the capitol at Indianapolis, "the seat of government of the state which furnishes the first four syllables of this name, at once so classical and beautiful." The younger Doolittle has met the Jacksonian journalists Amos Kendall and Duff Green, and recounts a conversation between them conducted in "the pure English of your own country"—talk filled with "a sprinkle of bears," "a heap of Indians," and an occasional "Well, I reckon." But Green, Kendall, and young Doolittle (not to mention whoever thought up the name Indianapolis) are guilty less of speaking in the vernacular than of using big words without the cultivation to back them up. Doolittle expands his vocabulary by reading Green's newspaper, then speaks thus to the hostler at a livery stable: "here—just be so good as to refrigerate my quadruped, by circumambulating him two or three times about this fountain; then permit him to imbibe a moderate quantity of aqueous particles; after which, administer to him proper vegetable nutriment, and inform me what will be considered competent pecuniary satisfaction." The hostler thinks that Doolittle is speaking German. Readers of the *Commercial Advertiser* would recognize him as a tasteless and spiritually empty Jacksonian upstart.<sup>28</sup>

Colonel Stone's report of Forsyth's spectacle and Patch's leap at Niagara used Doolittle's graceless, trumped-up erudition to buttress the real thing. Doolittle begins by divulging that William

Forsyth and his co-promoters were businessmen and the exhibition had profit as its motive. These "benevolent gentlemen," he says, "not the least interested, and in the most liberal manner possible," got up the show as a "treat" for local townspeople and farmers—a "treat" for which they would have to pay if they wanted to eat or drink or stand at the favored viewpoints. Doolittle further commodifies the place with his excuse for attending Forsyth's low entertainment: "But do not suppose . . . because I happen to be here just at this time, that I came from an idle curiosity to see the exhibition. Like a good many other gentlemen . . . I was called here upon pressing business; and being here, I must either shut my eyes, or see the show."<sup>29</sup>

Enlightened readers could recognize this talk about business as a horrible gaffe. If one ignored the hotels and tollbooths, as scenic tourists tried to do, Niagara was a pristine wonder of nature protected from development, a divine gallery of views for fashionable people who were too wealthy to think about business—particularly while they were at the Falls. Doolittle's talk subverted the timeless spiritual moment that was supposedly the one legitimate reason for traveling to Niagara Falls. Doolittle corrupted Niagara simply by being there and noticing, in his vulgar way, that Niagara Falls was a business.

That is about all that Stone's Doolittle notices about Niagara Falls. The exhibition, he tells us, has been gotten up "to embellish a very tame spot in the map, formerly an object of some interest to the curious, and the lovers of the sublime and beautiful, known as the cataract of Niagara." The crowd shares his aesthetic deadness. Doolittle is joined by a number of gentlemen who, like himself, had come not to see the show but on "special business." On the morning of October 6 "the universal suffrage folks of both nations" converge on the Falls, crowding around the shanties selling food and drink. They watch with great interest as workmen—"brave fellows, who like insects seemed to hang upon the beeting cliffs"—plant charges at the rocks that are to be blown

up. They watch the circus men and what Doolittle calls "a ragged company of strolling players," and they keep a lookout for Sam Patch, who had arrived on the American side the previous night. "But few of the crowd, if any, as it is supposed, were foolish enough to lose their time by gaping and gazing at the falls themselves. These they could see at any time; and all that they cared about them now, arose from the fear that the confounded roaring they made, would prevent the hearing of the gunpowder."

Hiram Doolittle, Jun., pronounces the show a failure. The governor of Upper Canada, "fearing perhaps that the whole cataract would be blown up," had banned the explosion at Table Rock. Forsyth had moved his gunpowder to a small island above the Falls and an overhanging ledge below them, and the Americans promised to blast the outer Terrapin Rocks at the end of their bridge. "The explosions took place, and the rocks went off—to the infinite delight of the multitude," but "the sublime effects of these displays" were like "a volley of popguns interfering with the thunder of Jupiter," as if "Gulliver's Lilliputians had been seated upon the loftiest cliffs firing off pocket pistols, and dropping pebbles into the valley below." Doolittle likens the smoke of the blasts to a few Germans blowing pipe smoke into Niagara's immense and eternal spray. Men had done something silly, small, and pointlessly physical in the grand temple of cultured spirituality. Doolittle tells us that "the good people, the sovereigns of our country, and the subjects of the other, were marvellously delighted."

Following the explosions there was an intermission—more eating, drinking, and circus tricks—then the wreck of the *Suprior* at three o'clock. The ship appeared far upstream, drifting calmly on the mirror-like river above the rapids. "How deceitful the calm!" gushes the mock-literary Doolittle. "And here I might moralize, if I had time." The crowd gaped with "breathless interest" as the schooner entered the rapids, "plunged gallantly among the successive breakers, like a noble war-steed in battle,"

then spun broadside to the current, rode up onto a flat rock, and stayed there.

At this point, Doolittle tells us, the crowd grew unruly. The explosion at Table Rock had not taken place. The substitutes were disappointing, the shipwreck had gone wrong, and Sam Patch had not made his leap. He promised to jump the next day, but most people had to go home, and some suspected a hoax. "The people on both sides," Doolittle reports, "went home heavy and displeased." On the Canadian side, "His Majesty's colored and Killarney subjects" ended the day with fistfights.

Sam Patch rescheduled his leap for noon on October 7. It rained hard that day, but Doolittle saw that "Sam was determined to have his jump. His reputation was at stake. True, the people were gone; but Sam was to jump for glory, not filthy lucre." (Even after Sam had died, Stone insisted that his motive had not been money but a celebrity that he did not merit, a breach of propriety that was at least as bad as mere greed and that he shared with Hiram Doolittle.) The plan was for Sam to leap from a platform atop an eighty-foot ladder that leaned from the base of Goat Island out over the pool beneath the Falls. It was an unwieldy apparatus, and workmen dropped it while raising it in the rain and broke off its end. Doolittle tells us that Sam "was visibly and very sensibly affected, inasmuch that the big tears did roll down his manly cheeks in pearly drops." But Doolittle assures us that Sam's sentimental repertoire is as limited as his own, and that his disappointments and hopes are imprisoned in the ordinary and the squalid. Doolittle retells the story of the tailor who saw Niagara and declared it "a fine place to sponge a coat! In like manner did Mr. Patch, after a solemn pause when he first beheld this tremendous cataract, exclaim in an ecstasy of delight: 'What a darned fine place to jump!'"

Sam surveyed the weather and the broken ladder and rescheduled his leap for four o'clock. At that hour the storm returned. For an hour the little crowd stood in the rain; Sam sat

beneath a rock ledge. The storm finally let up, and Sam Patch walked to the ladder "amidst cheers so loud that they would have been heard far abroad," said Doolittle, "had it not been for the roaring of the turbulent Niagara." He climbed the ladder, bowed to the men and blew a kiss to the ladies, then stepped off into the abyss.

"What a fall was that, my countrymen," wrote Doolittle. "He sank down genteely" and disappeared. Then a play on the emotional limits of ordinary men: "He has made an everlasting leap," said an old man, wiping away a tear"; "I wonder if he was told to look for the bones of Morgan," inquired a little old man who looked as though he wanted to go to the Assembly." (This was a gibe at the populist Antimasons, who were building a political movement on the belief that members of the lodge had murdered a man named William Morgan at Niagara.) Finally there was Doolittle himself, rustic and overblown, mouthing a classical reference and getting it wrong: "It was indeed a wonderful, a prodigious jump, such as mortal man had never made before; and the fishes must have stared some, I reckon, when he popped in so suddenly upon their unvisited kingdom—a province which even Neptune himself, nor any of his tritons, had ever yet dared to visit."

As a boat crossed the pool looking for him, Sam bobbed up, swam to shore, and "was discovered clambering up the rocks, like a soaked muskrat!" (Doolittle also tells us that the crowd in the rain looked like "drowned rats." We are left to wonder how he would describe wet fashionables; probably not as rodents.) "He was received with hearty cheers, and the people all scampered home to dry their clothes and talk grandiloquently of the hero of the day. At our house it was voted that . . . Sam Patch is but a scurvy name for the hero . . . and that henceforward he shall be known by the more appropriate cognomen of SAMUEL O'CATARACT, ESQ."

Stone gave his dispatch an anti-Jacksonian finale. The steam-

boats *Pioneer* and *Henry Clay* had ferried passengers between Buffalo and the Falls for the shipwreck and explosions on October 6. Returning to Black Rock, the *Pioneer* struck an ice break and sank. Doolittle moves this accident to October 7, putting it at the conclusion of Sam Patch's day at Niagara, and concocts a race between the two boats: "Being a Jackson man," he writes, "I don't like the sign at all. I fear that it is the sign of an omen, or the fore-end of a runner. I don't know which. It is plaguey hard that Henry Clay should always run ahead thus."

Niagara Falls in 1829 was exclusive and expensive. The four hotels kept by Parkhurst Whitney and William Forsyth could accommodate only a few hundred guests—visitors who stalked the sublime with parasols and spyglasses by day, then retired for educated conversation over hotel dinner tables. Forsyth advertised a good library and wine cellar; a pianoforte; a billiard table; and other accommodations for "noblemen and gentlemen of the highest rank with their families." The hotels published lists of their famous and highborn guests. An upstate editor looked at these lists and claimed that "in the grand piazzas may be seen at times, exiled Monarchs, Republican Generals, European Ambassadors, Whigs, Tories, Radicals, and Royalists; and Naval and Military officers of almost every nation in Europe. . . ." Others journeyed to Niagara only if they had money and were (or wanted to be) at ease in a place where aristocrats, rich merchants, and those who served them set the tone.<sup>30</sup>

The plain people of Upper Canada and western New York knew that Niagara was not for them. On the British side, only housemaids, ferrymen, guides, and others who served the tourist trade lived at the Falls. On the New York side the village of Manchester (its name betraying the early water-power ambitions of its proprietor) housed paper and woolen mills, but the village remained tiny, and was devoted almost solely to tourism after

completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. Villagers and farmers in the surrounding countryside welcomed the annual invasion of wealthy sentimentalists who bought food, rented horses, and gave them seasonal work. ("It is well known," a village newsmen confided, "that the people of 'rank, of fortune, of fashion, and of flash' which yearly crowd this frontier. . . all 'pay out like princes' when they travel.") But few locals traveled to the Falls, particularly when the fashionables were in residence. Of the thousands who lived nearby, wrote a local editor, "not one in one hundred have ever taken the trouble to visit the Falls."<sup>31</sup>

Yet visitors to Niagara in the 1820s encountered plenty of evidence that others had been there: hundreds of names were carved into rocks and trees—they covered the surface of Table Rock, and few of the trees on Goat Island were untouched—recording the visits of soldiers, traders, watermen, hunters and fishermen, and off-season gazers at the Falls. (The earliest carved inscription was dated 1769, which suggests that this was an English and American practice; French and Indian passersby surely saw the Falls before that time, but did not record their visits on rocks and trees.) Genteel tourists, who put their names only in alibuns at the hotels, viewed these carvings as relics of unworthy persons "anxious for immortality." A Philadelphia businessman recorded that on Goat Island "all the beech trees here are cut & carved with *names*—forming quite an *album*," and dismissed them with a bit of poetry: "Their names, their years, as spelt / The place of Fame or elegy supply!" Yet the names and dates inscribed on Niagara were tied to stories about the Falls—stories that were remembered and rehearsed in hundreds of places beyond the parlors of Philadelphia or the printing houses of London.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the Niagara stories were about war. Prior to completion of the Erie Canal, Niagara Falls had formed the one break to continuous water travel between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean. For a century and a half, Huron, Iroquois, French,

British, and American armies fought battle after bloody battle for control of the choke point at the Falls. In the War of 1812, fighting between British and American forces was almost continuous along the Niagara frontier. The American debacle at Queenston Heights, the exchange of bloody and inconclusive victories at Chippewa and Lundy's Lane, and the long siege of Fort Erie all took place near the Falls. In between the big engagements, raiders burned both Buffalo and York (now Toronto) and pillaged farms up and down the Niagara frontier. Well-heeled tourists in the 1820s passed near the ruins of Fort Erie and the bullet-pocked barns and cottages on the fields of battle. Some bought souvenir musket balls from Canadian children and a few rooted around for soldiers' bones. They could read battle accounts in their guidebooks and imagine sublime, ennobling contests fought within hearing of Niagara's glorious roar. But to the farmers and villagers who had fought in the militias of New York and Upper Canada or who had been burned out of their homes, as well as those who heard the stories from their elders and neighbors or saw the memories on their faces, the horrors of border war lived on, unsoftened by the divine wonders that refined outsiders came to see.

Along with the war stories, scores of smaller tales reinforced local knowledge of the immense, indifferent violence of Niagara Falls. There was a particular interest in the fate of animals, boats, and men caught in the rapids and swept over the Falls, the worst of Niagara's vertical terrors. "The inhabitants of the neighborhood," said one early guidebook, "regard it as certain death to get once involved in [the rapids]." Ravens picking at the fragments of birds, fish, and deer (along with an occasional human limb) below the Falls were ghoulish testimony to Niagara's malevolent power. (Birds and carrion, interestingly enough, disappear from travelers' accounts in the 1820s.) The soldiers who were among Niagara's first European residents experimented with the destructive force of the Falls. In 1750 Peter Kaln had watched

when French soldiers pushed whole trees into the rapids; they tumbled over the brink and disappeared forever. In 1787 British soldiers launched a damaged boat over the Falls and watched it break up and disappear. In 1815 a British officer offered a reward for the largest fragment of three old gunboats sent over the Falls. The winning entry was a foot long.<sup>33</sup>

As settlement on the banks and commerce on the Niagara River increased, a growing tribe of journalists recorded disasters. In 1810 a salt boat fell "into the jaws of this tremendous cataract." The boat and its crew were "dashed to atoms" as the men's families and friends watched from shore. In the following spring the rapids devoured a canoe and three men. In 1820 two American whiskey smugglers went over the Falls. An unhappy trio rowed a boatload of furniture too near the rapids in 1821 and suffered "one of the most awful deaths which it is possible to conceive." Only two weeks later, guests on Forsyth's veranda watched as two boats carried four men over the Falls. In 1824 two men ferrying apples and cider across the river entered the rapids and were "hurried into the awful gulf below!" A barrel of cider survived the plunge intact, and a ferryman downriver saw apples floating toward him. But the men had disappeared forever. Three boatmen capsized in the rapids in 1826; one struggled to the banks above the Falls, the bodies of the others were never found. Another boat with two men ran afoul of ice in the river in 1828 and plunged over the Falls; searchers found only fragments of clothing. There were hunting accidents as well. In 1828 a hunter fell from the cliffs trying to retrieve an eagle that he had shot. The following spring men drove a deer over the Falls, then nearly died trying to get it out of the icy chasm.<sup>34</sup>

Tourism itself created a full share of dangerous work, and the odd tourist who stopped to witness or imagine working at Niagara experienced a shudder of the old sublime. Workmen building the bridge to Goat Island, said an English visitor, "must have been in full possession of Horace's *aes triplex*, for a more perilous

situation could scarcely be imagined. A ship of a workman's foot would precipitate him into the Rapids, whence he would pass with the rapidity of lightning over the Falls." Frances Trollope felt "sick and giddy" as she watched men building a spiral staircase while suspended from ropes. "I had never seen life perilled so wantonly," she said. Few tourists, however, recorded these terrors. Most of the construction and all of the boating and hunting disasters took place during the off-season. (The most dangerous month for watermen was November, when blustery weather coincided with the seasonal obligation to move harvested and processed farm goods before the winter freeze set in.)<sup>35</sup>

Tourists who visited during the sunny months also recognized Niagara's power to kill. But they buried their fear in vastness and beauty, and in an airy knowledge of cosmic order that removed physicality, pain, and fear even from the contemplation of violent death. In 1834 a young Harriet Beecher Stowe stared into the brink at Table Rock. "Oh, it is lovelier than it is great," she wrote, "it is like the Mind that made it: great, but so veiled in beauty that we gaze without terror. I felt as if I could have *gone over* with the waters; it would be so beautiful a death; there would be no fear in it." To those who lived near Niagara year-round, who knew the rigor and danger of the Niagara frontier, and who shared neither Stowe's immersion in perfect beauty nor her sentimentalized God, Niagara Falls still threatened, as the newsman put it, "one of the most awful deaths which it is possible to conceive." There was more than one way to think about Niagara's power.<sup>36</sup>

Twice during the 1820s the hotelkeepers arranged off-season festivals for local crowds. Both were staged in the autumn, when fashionable visitors were gone and people from the countryside felt welcome at Niagara Falls. Both offered rustic audiences feats of human skill and daring, and both demonstrated the killing power and the vertical horrors of Niagara Falls.

In September 1827 the innkeepers dressed up the old lake schooner *Michigan* as a pirate vessel. They loaded the ship with live animals: a buffalo, two bears, a dog, a cat, a raccoon, a fox, a small flock of geese, and a tethered eagle—along with effigies of buccaneers, politicians, and the stage villain Blue Beard. Before a crowd estimated at somewhere between ten thousand and fifty thousand persons, they sent the ship over the Horseshoe Fall. Some in the crowd were late-season tourists, but most were local farm families. They witnessed the catastrophe of the *Michigan* and her doomed animals and patronized sideshows which included three brass bands, fiddlers and dancers, the educated dog Apollo, a menagerie with a caged African lion, and a ventriloquist from New York City. Pickpockets, gamblers, and women hawking beer and gingerbread worked the crowd.

Promoters advertised the "*Michigan* Descent" as an exercise in "INFERNAL NAVIGATION, OR A TOUCH OF THE SUB-LIME!" Deploying a mix of Burkean terror and Bowery Theater melodrama, they told people what to expect: "*The condemned vessel with her strange cargo, will pass away to her destiny; swift as the bosom of destruction.*" Captain James Rough ("the oldest navigator on the lakes," they tell us) would command the scow that towed the *Michigan* into the channel. His boat would pass near the rapids, and only experience and courage would keep its crew from being killed. The overpowering current would speed the *Michigan* and her cargo of trembling beasts into the rapids. "The cascades passed—if pass them she can without damage, she moves swiftly to the green glancing curve of the horse-shoe . . . where there as she lifts her bow, she will *seem* to pause ere she rides furiously down the feathery sheet, down, down, below! What can more unwrap the imagination—what can more freeze the senses—than such a scene. . . ." It was a treat, said the promoters, "to the lovers of novelty, and more especially of grandeur and sublimity. . . ." The best points for viewing the spectacle

were on Goat Island and the British shore, "or (for those who wish to add to the scene a little more of the terrifick,) in the basin below the Falls." The *Michigan* Descent was, if nothing else, an exercise in the vertical sublime.<sup>37</sup>

The second autumn entertainment at Niagara was, of course, "the Blowing up of the Falls," and the "Earthquake, Sam. Patch, and the Superior Shipwreck!" in October 1829. Hotelkeepers advertised the show as a sequel to the *Michigan* Descent. The *Superior*, they said, was "a stout, staunch vessel," which drew less water than the old *Michigan*. She would be guided into the rapids by Captain Weisssoon of Chippewa, who had been an oarsman in Captain Rough's boat. Promoters asserted that the *Superior* would reach the brink of the Falls in one piece, and that "her descent would be most splendid and imposing"—"a grand spectacle in going down the great falls: such a one as may ne'er be seen again." The explosion at Table Rock would be deafening ("a greater concussion is not in the power of human means to create"), and it would make for vertical thrills: the blastoff would dislodge ten million tons of rock, "a great part of it furiously precipitated into the bosom of Niagara." Finally, the leaper Sam Patch, a matchless performer of vertical excitement, would "give a specimen of his unique skill and daring."<sup>38</sup> The show took place long after the regular summer tourists had gone home. Promoters invited the plain people of the neighborhood to make Niagara Falls their own on October 6. "This is to be a frolick, it is true," went the final advertisement,

and it will be a very proper day of relaxation for the farmers of the neighboring counties, to harness up old dobbin and give their wives and daughters (heaven bless them) a good snug ride to the falls, all for to see the thousands of ladies, dandies, wizzards, witches, fops, clodhoppers, macaronis, a few terrible, dry, particular old bachelors, and sundry ready-to-go-the-first-load old maids: all rushing to and fro, to see and be seen.—The country girls, though not dressed in the extremes of fashion, will be the toast at

the falls on the 6th of October: blooming cheeks, light buoyant step: oh, for the Sunday days of youth: we must all go to see the grand review!

A village editor helped out, noting that "there are to be 'pretty particular' doings of an amusing nature at Niagara Falls . . . and the lovers of novel exhibitions, we think, would be well repaid for a visit to our great natural curiosity—leaving all other attractions of a graver nature out of the question." (A less friendly editor noted that the Niagara tavernkeepers "have a wonderful desire and art for making money." He predicted a large crowd, "and we shall then again learn that the 'fools are not all dead yet.'")<sup>39</sup>

Farmers and villagers accepted the invitation, but they went to Niagara knowing that the show would be flawed. Rumors that Sam Patch would not leap on schedule were hardening into official announcements. Two weeks earlier the governor of Upper Canada had forbidden William Forsyth's planned explosion at Table Rock, and while journalists repeated the governor's official explanation for the prohibition, the locals knew better: the royal governor spoiled the festivities because he hated Forsyth. After a checkered career as a farmer and militiaman, Forsyth had tried to monopolize tourism at British Niagara, and he had run afoul of the authorities. He had been accused of engrossing stage travel to and from Niagara through deals with out-of-town hotels, and many suspected that he had set a rival's hotel on fire. Then, in 1827, he built plank fences from his Pavilion to the banks above and below Table Rock. Henceforth, the only way to that favored viewpoint would be through his hotel. (That year two young men in a story by Nathaniel P. Willis raced their horses down the Canadian road toward the column of mist and were brought up short—not by Niagara Falls but by Forsyth's hotel and fence. Forsyth stood holding his hat at the door, asking, "Will you visit the Falls before dinner, gentlemen?") The government reminded Forsyth that a sixty-six-foot ribbon of land at the edge of the cliffs

was reserved for the Crown, and was not a part of the Forsyth properties. The governor sent soldiers to tear down the fence. Forsyth rebuilt the fence, the soldiers tore it down again, and Forsyth sued the government. The case was still in court when Forsyth announced his plans to blow up a part of Table Rock—an explosion that would have asserted his ownership of what the government insisted was the King's rock. Forsyth made plans for substitute explosions, but the spectators were disappointed before they arrived.<sup>40</sup>

On October 6 a Buffalo journalist noted that "there appears to be a general movement in the direction of the falls." The steamboats *Henry Clay* and *Pioneer* ferried well-dressed spectators to Niagara, but most of the crowd arrived on foot and in farmers' wagons. A reporter claimed that "a great crowd of people, of all sorts, sizes, and conditions, flocked in from all quarters . . . all for to see the show, and be seen themselves in turn." One visitor estimated the crowd at five thousand. More cautious locals guessed three thousand. In either case, the crowd was no more than a fourth or a fifth the number that had witnessed the *Michigan* Descent two years earlier: Vendors sold food and liquor from shanties on both sides of the river, but there were no brass bands, no caged lions, no learned dogs or New York ventriloquists. Hiram Doolittle, Jun., reported only "a forlorn corps of equestrians and a ragged company of strolling players" as sideshows. (The equestrians were from the company of Bernard and Page, a shoestring circus troupe that played the Erie Canal and Great Lakes circuit. We are left to guess about the strolling players.) A New Yorker reported that promoters promised fireworks, and that "for the gratification of the agricultural visitors, Mr. Tompkins will exhibit two fine pigs' of extraordinary size."<sup>41</sup>

Sam Patch was in the crowd. He had reached Buffalo on October 4 and taken a room at Whitney's hotel on the American side the night before the show—too late to test the wind and currents or to oversee the raising of his platform. Sam called off the

jump for October 6, promising to leap the following day. There were rumors that he would not jump at all. The reporter who spotted Sam tells us he was drunk.<sup>42</sup>

On the morning of October 6, with both Table Rock and Sam Patch eliminated from the show, promoters announced a different schedule of events: the ledge downriver from Table Rock would be blown off at half past noon; the explosion on the island above the Canadian Falls would go off at one o'clock; and the Americans would blow up the Terrapin Rocks at the end of the footbridge from Goat Island a half hour later. There would be an intermission, and the *Superior* would begin her final voyage at three o'clock precisely.<sup>43</sup>

Newspapers did not comment on the sites of the substitute explosions. But the promoters and their rustic patrons knew them well. The ledge on the Canadian side was near the old Indian Ladder, a precarious system of notched logs that carried the bravest of early visitors down the cliffs to the river's edge below the Falls. Few tourists mentioned the Indian Ladder after Forsyth built his stairs, but it remained in place at least as late as 1823. It was away from the tourist haunts and it did not require a toll. Doubtless many locals had shimmied down the logs to explore the chasm and to try their luck in one of North America's great freshwater fishing grounds. A crowd of people walked to the Indian Ladder on October 6. The few tourists among them saw an unremarkable rock ledge, while the minds of the locals filled with stories of the danger of the descent and the pleasures and adventures awaiting those who made it.<sup>44</sup>

The Terrapin Rocks, so close to the brink of the Falls, offered a giddy, terrifying vertical gaze into the abyss. Some fashionables shuddered at the view, but others despised it as giving cheap thrills for the unrefined. "The prevailing feeling is that of horror," said an English gentleman, "and a spectator partial to inordinate excitement, may get enough of it. But his eye can rest only on a small portion of the Fall, and the position is decidedly un-

favourable for pictorial effect." The locals had other ideas. The Terrapin Bridge had opened only in August 1827; some assumed that it had been built to provide the best view of the *Michigan* Descent. The proprietor sold reserved tickets to the bridge on that day, but the crowd overran the tollkeeper and took their stations near the brink. A few left the bridge and cavorted on the Terrapin Rocks themselves, enjoying a full measure of the "inordinate excitement" that the Englishman had found so unpleasant. At the end of the show they staged a small riot against the tollkeepers and went home. Journalists made no special mention of the Indian Ladder and the Terrapin Rocks. But local people knew they were not random spots on the map of Niagara. They were special places with histories of danger and fun.<sup>45</sup>

The crowd on the Canadian side walked downriver and stood at a safe distance as Forsyth's men touched off the first explosion. The blast, according to one witness, "deposited an immense mass of rock into the gulf." It was the one successful explosion. The second blast on the little island "took effect" but caused no special comment. Finally, the blow-up of the Terrapin Rocks failed: the blast went off, bits of debris ("to the amount of *several cart loads full!*" said one disdainful reporter) dropped into the chasm, but the rocks stayed where they were. A Canadian, borrowing a line from Hiram Doolittle, Jun., said the gunpowder explosions at the Terrapin Rocks "sounded like pop-guns to those on the opposite shore." An American denounced it as "an abortion—a mere flash, scarcely audible ten rods." (Promoters had promised blasts that would be heard forty miles away.)<sup>46</sup>

Only a perfect shipwreck could save the day. At three o'clock spectators on Goat Island spied the *Superior* and Weisssoon's tow-boat far upriver. For fifteen minutes the ship floated easily toward them. Having pointed her into the channel, Captain Weisssoon cast off and reached the Canadian bank above the rapids. The *Superior* drifted closer, and spectators could clearly make out her masts and the stripes painted on her side. With the

audience (including, apparently, even the scoffing journalists) staring in silent anticipation, the doomed ship passed from green into white water. In the first rapid she struck a rock and rolled onto her side. The masts snapped off, and the ship righted itself and plunged on. "At this moment," said an enthralled reporter, "every eye was riveted to the spot, with looks and feelings of the keenest and most thrilling anxiety." The battered ship rode over the first great shelf of rapids and fought its way through the second. But in the next rapid—about one third of the distance to the brink—she spun up onto a large smooth rock and keeled over, her decks facing the Falls. The crowd waited for the *Superior* to ride off the rock and plunge on. But the wait stretched on and on; at the end of the day journalists guessed that the ruined ship would remain part of the landscape of Niagara for a long time. They salvaged the shreds of their sublime expectations by pronouncing the wreck "an interesting spectacle," a relic of the terrific sublime lodged among the emerging beauties of Niagara Falls. One suggested that those who "have a taste for witnessing such scenes . . . go and view . . . this devoted vessel, in her present singularly melancholy and terrific situation."<sup>47</sup>

Most journalists—like Hiram Doolittle, Jun.—declared the exhibition a failure. "Nothing but *Patch* work," wrote a wag from Ohio, while the Cooperstown paper declared the show "altogether a failure"—through the editor (Colonel Stone's old boss) went on to hope that "the natural beauties of the scene . . . repaid the curiosity of the throng." Another recognized the show as a botched repetition of the *Michigan* Descent. "*Grand Farce at the Falls,*" he began, and went on: "The second part of the '*Grand Show and Farce,*' at Niagara Falls, which was begun two years ago" took place, and "*all was abortion and failure.*" A somewhat stuffer newsmen in Providence opined, "We should hope that the failure of the attempt to send an empty vessel over the falls of Niagara, which was made a few days since, would put an end to that species of boyish amusement. It would seem to be a small

concern, to draw together the inhabitants of *two nations* to witness a feat that had neither ingenuity, wit, nor talent to recommend it."<sup>48</sup>

Avoiding the fistfights and steamboat disasters, the crowd and most of the reporters went home. Yet Sam Patch was determined to jump on October 7. In the rainy afternoon he performed a perfect leap of more than eighty feet into what William Lyon Mackenzie's *Colonial Advocate* called "the vast abyss below." The Canadian (he may have been Mackenzie himself, who had written a sprightly firsthand account of the *Michigan Descent*) was more attentive to what Sam did than Colonel Stone's Doolittle had been:

Sam walked out clad in white, and with great deliberation put his hands close to his sides and jumped from the platform into the midst of that vast gulf of foaming waters from which none of human kind had ever before emerged in life. . . . [Sam] furnished in his own person an extraordinary proof of the power which self-possession joined with determined resolution gives to man.

Sam also possessed the rustic nonchalance of a true American hero. He swam to shore without help "and was heard on the beach, singing as merrily as if altogether unconscious of having performed an act so extraordinary as almost to appear an incredible fable." (No talk of rodents here.) "Sam Patch," concluded the Canadian, "has immortalised himself."<sup>49</sup>

Sam Patch advertised a second leap at Niagara for October 17 and spent the intervening days in Buffalo. "He is now the paragon, the lion," said a Buffalo editor. He "attends the parties of ladies—everyone desires to pry into his countenance, to see if something extraordinary cannot be discovered—they discover nothing, however, but a careless, good humored phiz, fond of conviviality and good cheer." There was another way of putting

that: both friends and enemies agreed that Sam was drunk most of the time. One village critic described him as a "drunken loathsome object," and even the friendliest of journalists admitted that Sam, "like many other great geniuses is a greater friend to the bottle than the bottle is to him." Indeed, it may have been Sam's ongoing retreat into alcohol that had delayed his arrival at Niagara. Sam's journalistic friend noted that he was dark and morose, perhaps suicidal. (The drinking stories suggest that Sam's attendance at the "parties of ladies" was either apocryphal or disastrous.)<sup>50</sup>

Sam passed his days in Buffalo in taverns. In the evenings he exhibited himself at Jonathan McCleary's Buffalo Museum. There is no detailed account of what he did there. It seems that he simply sat and talked with visitors. One unfriendly journalist reported that during the week the price of admission was cut in half, largely because Sam was known to be drunk. In any event, he became a staple of McCleary's Museum. In the weeks after Sam's departure McCleary delivered a comic recitation entitled "Sam Patch in all his Glory!" and exhibited a portrait of the "celebrated aero-nautical performer," painted from life.<sup>51</sup>

McCleary's Museum, only three months old in October 1829, was an eccentric establishment even by the standards of provincial museums. While museum keepers in other towns sometimes presented theatrical acts, they cloaked them in the rhetoric of rational (respectable, educational) amusements: stuffed birds, aboriginal artifacts from around the world, panoramas, cosmorama, phantasmagoria, electrical machines, shells, coins, medals, paintings, menageries of live and preserved animals, and galleries of wax figures. McCleary, on the other hand, opened his Buffalo Museum without a collection. He simply asked the citizens of Buffalo to donate curiosities. Within a few weeks he had procured, among other novelties, a mineral collection, paintings through arrangement with a local portrait and miniature artist, eight Indian spears, an Indian pipe with four stems, another In-

dian pipe garnished with porcupine quills (neither tribes nor localities were mentioned), specimens of cornelian and petrified wood, a Sioux bow, the skin of a Lake Michigan swordfish, a "Splendid Petrification of the back bone of a large fish," and a stuffed duck. In his second month McCleary added a half-tamed bear, along with a brace of ravens and some rattlesnakes. "The Museum," he explained, "is yet in its infancy, and requires but the fostering hand of a generous public to make it equal if not surpass any in the United States."<sup>52</sup>

Everyone in Buffalo knew that Jonathan McCleary was not a museum keeper but a theater man. During his first week of full operations he announced an evening of "Recitations and Songs," and before long there were satiric skits, then performances by such "gentlemen of superior histrionick talent" (not "actors," who were, as we shall see, increasingly unwelcome among respectable western New Yorkers) as James Anderson, late manager of a theater in the West Indies, and J. M. Hewitt of Montreal and Charleston. (Both men claimed to have appeared in New York; neither appears to have done so.)

McCleary's performances were eclectic and light. His "interesting and humorous description of the wonderful and extraordinary exploits of the justly celebrated and unique aero-nautical performer, SAM PATCH" was "interspersed with Original Anecdotes—Agitations of the Public Mind—Patriotic Feelings—Laughable Observations, and concluding with an entire new Comic Song." The song went like this:

Huzzal! Huzzal! The Dandies cried,  
Sam Patch does beat the Nation!  
The fishes fled, and Quadrupeds  
Crept off on the Occasion!

McCleary preceded this with an impersonation of the great English comedian Charles Mathews (himself an impersonator), and with the "Comic Yorkshire Recitation" of "Richard and Betty at

Hickleton Fair." The evening concluded with McCleary dressed as an Ottawa war chief, "reciting Pontiac's Appeal to His Warriors, written and presented to Mr. McCleary, by the Hon. H. R. Schoolcraft."<sup>53</sup>

During the week between his first and second jumps at Niagara—perhaps with the help of Jonathan McCleary—Sam Patch began turning himself into a showman. He now wore a black silk scarf at his neck. At subsequent leaps he would tie it around his waist, in the fashion of prizefighters and circus men. He also began wearing a sailor's jacket. Thus jauntily dressed, he appeared in the streets of Buffalo with a final touch of showmanship: a pet black bear on a chain. (He probably bought the bear from McCleary: Sam took the animal with him when he left Buffalo; at the same time, the bear disappeared from McCleary's advertisements.) The newspapers talked Sam up as a celebrity, and other men—perhaps jokingly, perhaps not—tried to horn in. Back in July, the owner of the Pagoda and Labyrinth Garden in Philadelphia had challenged Sam to jump against his "antedelluvian frog." More seriously, a W. P. Moore challenged Sam to a Niagara jump-off from any height.<sup>54</sup>

While he dressed up, drank, and exhibited himself in Buffalo, Sam Patch advertised a second leap at Niagara Falls. The elaborate handbill presented levels of showmanship that had been absent from Sam's earlier notices:<sup>55</sup>

TO THE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF  
WESTERN NEW YORK, AND OF UPPER CANADA

All I have to say is, that I arrived at the Falls too late to give you a specimen of my Jumping Qualities, on the 6th inst.; but on Wednesday, I thought I would venture a small leap, which I accordingly made, of Eighty Feet, merely to convince those that remained to see me, with what safety and ease I could descend, and that I was the TRUE SAM PATCH, and to show that some things could be done as well as others; which was denied before I made the jump.

Having been thus disappointed, the owners of Goat Island have generously granted me the use of it for nothing; so that I may have a chance, from an equally generous public, to obtain some remuneration for my long journey hither, as well as affording me an opportunity of supporting the reputation I have gained, by Aero-Nautical Feats, never before attempted, either in the Old or the New World.

I shall Ladies and Gentlemen, on Saturday next, Oct. 17th, precisely at 3 o'clock p.m. LEAP at the FALLS of NIAGARA, from a height of 120 to 130 feet, (being 40 to 50 feet higher than I leapt before,) into the eddy below. On my way down from Buffalo, on the morning of that day, on the Steamboat Niagara, I shall, for the amusement of the Ladies, doff my coat and spring from the mast head into the Niagara River.

Buffalo, Oct. 12, 1829

SAM PATCH  
Of Passaic Falls, New Jersey

The economic arrangements were secure. The proprietors promised Sam the tolls from the Goat Island bridge on the day of the leap—twenty-five cents per spectator. In addition, the jumper doubtless had an arrangement with the steamboat *Niagara*, which would treat its passengers to a private showing of Sam Patch and a leap from the masthead into the Niagara River. It would be a good payday for Sam Patch.<sup>56</sup>

Sam Patch boarded the steamer for Niagara Falls on the morning of October 17. The price of passage limited the audience for Sam's promised leap from the boat to the more well-heeled among the local sporting crowd, and Sam steamed downriver in that company. At noon the boat anchored in the river and crewmen raised the foreyard to about fifty feet above the water. Sam climbed up and dropped gracefully into the river. He surfaced and the passengers greeted him with three cheers. Some on the boat thought the jumper had hurt his back. But he climbed on board uninjured and in good spirits. "A beautiful leap it was," stated one account. Another agreed that Patch had "per-

formed the leap with dexterity and ease." The boat steamed on to Niagara Falls.<sup>57</sup>

It was another cloudy and rainy day, but Sam was determined to leap. He passed over the bridge and joined three hundred spectators who had paid the toll to watch him jump from Goat Island—a guaranteed \$75 for Sam Patch. Nonpaying spectators stood atop the cliffs on both sides of the river. In Canada a smaller crowd stood beneath Table Rock, looking at eye level across the basin at Sam Patch. Journalists estimated the total crowd at two thousand.

Sam Patch walked to the head of the island and to the entrance to the Biddle Stairs—built at the private expense of Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States, and completed only weeks before Sam's arrival. He entered a sloping tunnel and stepped into the dimness of covered circular stairs. Eighty feet down he stepped into light and noise, walked down Biddle's tastefully rustic stone steps, and stood in the chasm of Niagara Falls.

It was a perfect place to jump. The advertisement for the Biddle Stairs claimed that before September 1829 only "an occasional and daring adventurer" had descended into the gorge from Goat Island. The stairway "enables the visitor to place himself at the bottom of the abyss, midway between the two descending sheets, where, surrounded by rushing waters and impending rocks, the spectacle is magnificently sublime and electrifying." ("Here," gasped Harriet Martineau, "every successive pulse of the catract was like a cannon shot a few yards off. . . .") Upward and to Sam's left, the stupendous Horseshoe Fall curved toward Canada, with an unending and impenetrable explosion all along its base. To his right, violent crosscurrents troubled the river as it gathered itself for the journey to Lake Ontario. Straight ahead, however, swelled a huge eddy pushed up by the Falls—an aerated, calm spot into which Sam would jump. Sam's leaping apparatus was ready. It was the ladder that workmen had used to

erect the Biddle Stairs, held up by four trees spliced together and steadied by ropes leading back to the island. The platform from which Sam would leap leaned about 40 feet out over the water at a height of 120 feet, and from its top flew an American flag.

Sam Patch had promised to leap from more than forty feet higher than any of his previous jumps, and the jerry-built ladder of October 17 kept that promise. Inevitably, the audience and the reporters experimented with viewpoints. From the little windows in the Biddle Stairs, revealed a newsman, the height "did not appear so grand . . . but to descend to the margin of the water, in the gulf beneath, and then look up at the perpendicular ladder, made you imagine that it would require superhuman powers to accomplish such an enterprise." Later in the day, a daring gentleman scaled the ladder and mounted the platform from which Sam had leaped. He insisted that "few could imagine or appreciate the sublimity of the scene" who had not done the same.<sup>58</sup>

(We might comment on Sam's American flag. The Niagara inkeepers, as well as governments on both sides of the Falls, had a strong interest in stabilizing Niagara as a friendly border after 1815. So did British tourists and their genteel counterparts from the United States—most of whom, like William Leete Stone, were dedicated cultural Anglophiles who disliked democracy and who knew that Niagara could be properly apprehended only outside of nationality and historical time. The off-season spectacles, on the other hand, invited British Canadians and upstate New Yorkers who held historical grudges against each other. Impresarios carefully kept nationalism out of the shows. National symbols tied to the *Michigan* Descent suggested that it was an episode of cooperation between British Canada and the United States: the Stars and Stripes flew from the *Michigan's* stern while the Union Jack was attached to the bow; two of Captain Rough's oarsmen were Canadians, the other two were Americans; one of the bears was from Canada, the other from the

United States. At the shipwreck and explosions of 1829, as well as the first leap of Sam Patch on October 7, there were no national symbols at all—aside from flags flown from some of the refreshment stands. Yet Sam Patch made his second leap at Niagara facing Canada, with "the banner of his country above his head!" Jonathan McCleary noted that Sam's visit stirred "Patriotic Feelings." Northeastern workmen were notorious Anglophobes, and they co-opted emblems of American nationality when attacking targets such as blacks, English actors, or wealthy and Anglophilic Americans who questioned the worth of ordinary white men. Sam's flag was probably not an affront to all that was British: his mentors in Pawtucket and his workmates in Paterson had been English workmen, and he made good friends in Canada. The flag did, however, recall Niagara's angry history, and it assaulted the Anglophilic gentility with which William Leete Stone and others of his social class approached Niagara Falls.)<sup>59</sup>

Sam Patch stood at the foot of his dizzying ladder. He wore his spinner's uniform under a black vest and the sailor's jacket, and he wore the scarf at his neck—touches of celebrity dandyism he had acquired since his first Niagara leap. As he took off his coat and shoes men stepped forward to shake his hand. Some had tears in their eyes, and a few tried to talk him out of jumping. Sam brushed them aside and scaled the ladder. For ten minutes he stood on the little platform. The ladder veered in the wind and under his weight, the flag snapped above him. Sam took the scarf from his neck and tied it around his waist. He scanned the audience, bowing to his left and right. (Sam was learning how to work a crowd.) Far below him, a boat passed upriver and waited near where Sam would leap. Sam turned and took a corner of the flag in his hand, and kissed it. Then he stepped to the edge and stood still, and the crowd fell silent. Sam jumped outward and dropped into the abyss. A Buffalo reporter who watched from the foot of the ladder saw Sam fall "like an arrow into the flood below," and pronounced it a "matchless and tremendous leap."

From his viewpoint below Table Rock, a Canadian reported that the ladder wobbled as Sam leaped and that he made a sickening half-turn in the air and entered the water with one leg cocked and with a terrifying splash. For endless seconds the crowd stared at the point where Sam had disappeared; a third newsman reported that "a general burst of 'he's dead, he's lost,' ran through the crowd." In about half a minute Sam bobbed to the surface, waved the boat off, and sculled on his back toward shore. "Then it was," wrote the Buffalo newsman, "that a painful and unpleasant, yet indescribable sensation was driven from each breast, by the flood of joy which succeeded, on seeing that he was safe. —Then it was that the benumbing spell which had reigned a minute or two, from the moment he arose on the platform, was broke by the burst of the voice of congratulation. . . ." Sam stepped onto the American shore amid cheers and a little storm of white handkerchiefs. To the first man who offered his hand he said, "There's no mistake in Sam Patch!" It was a near-perfect exercise in the workngman's sublime.<sup>60</sup>

While at Niagara, Sam Patch talked at length with two journalists: William Lyon Mackenzie, the firebrand editor of the York (Toronto) *Colonial Advocate*, and the editor of the *Buffalo Republican*. The *Republican* was the mouthpiece for Jacksonian democracy in Buffalo. Mackenzie was the loudest voice for anti-Tory reform in Upper Canada and an admirer of the republican institutions of the United States.

William Lyon Mackenzie witnessed Sam's leap from below Table Rock and greeted the jumper that evening, when Sam ferried to Canada. Mackenzie was an educated man with a taste for popular entertainments (he had brought his family to witness the *Michigan Descent* two years earlier). He described Sam Patch as "slight, but well made . . . and of a temperament as indicated by his dark countenance, rather inclining to melancholy," and too

fond of drink. Sam revealed a few of his secrets: he inhaled as he leaped (again, the Pawtucket form), and entering the water had never hurt a bit. Armed with his eyewitness experience of the leap, and with a firm grounding in the literary sublime, Mackenzie wrote his story. It helped that the weather was gray and rainy, and that the mist from the Falls was particularly thick on that day. The ruin of the *Superior*, still stranded in the rapids, contributed its own dark note to the proceedings. Mackenzie added to all this by viewing the leap at water level, directly across the river from Sam's ladder. It was a "dangerous spot" below threatening, overhanging cliffs. Sam himself provided Mackenzie with more thrills and a horrifying allusion:

When he swung round and placed his elbows close to his back . . . he was an exact representation of a man being hanged, and I felt for the moment a sensation of terror which scarcely subsided till I saw him re-appear on the water. . . . To a mind fond of romance, and desirous to realize now and then a sufficient share of the marvellous, Sam's 118 foot jump, the cataraet above him and the cataraet below him, the seemingly bottomless pit at his feet, the 200 feet of perpendicular rock behind him, the apparatus from which he sprang, so like the fatal ladder of the state, added to the horrid din of the Horse Shoe Cauldron continually sending forth thick clouds of smoke, presented a scene seldom equalled by the most splendid and gloomy descriptions of our modern dealers in magic.

The immense power and the old vertical horrors of Niagara provided the backdrop. The skill, daredevil courage, and plucky nonchalance (with its touch of the morose and suicidal) of Sam Patch provided the action. Mackenzie—unlike Hiram Doolittle, Jun.—fused Sam Patch and Niagara Falls in an unsettling and deeply satisfying moment. But he could do so only by affirming the terrors of Niagara and the worth of Sam Patch.<sup>61</sup>

The *Buffalo Republican* shared Mackenzie's taste for the more melodramatic forms of the sublime. The editor of this pa-

per talked of the unimpressive view from the Biddle Stairs, the awful look upward from the base of the ladder, the dizzying horror of Sam's view from his perch, of Sam's plunge "into the depths of the abyss," of the "painful and unpleasant, yet indescribable sensation" and the "benumbing spell" endured and enjoyed by the audience; "what a dreadful moment! There was not perhaps ten who saw him, that believed he would come down safe."

Even more than Mackenzie, this editor took the trouble to understand what Sam Patch was doing. He knew that Sam did not merely throw himself into space and hope for the best. Sam's survival depended on practiced physical skills and absolute concentration during the leap. "This celebrated and unique aeronautical performer," he wrote, "seems to control the dangerous effects of rapid specific gravitation in the atmosphere. . . . Sam possesses, what few have arrived at, contempt of danger." He went on with a full description of Sam's jumping technique: "He seems to have perfect command of his motions during his swift transitions through the air, because, when near the water, he brings his hands suddenly from above his head to below his hips, and strikes the water in such a position as guards his back, his breast and his face, from injury." Along with these skills and beneath his cheerful nonchalance (this is the editor who identified Sam as a "good humored phiz"), Sam knew that a bad leap would kill him. ("Had he entered the flood in any other way than the way his skill enabled him to do so many times with entire safety," the journalist recalled in a later article, "his life, he knew, was the forfeit.") He practiced his skills, he made experiments with wind currents and water depths, and he focused into spiritual stillness and practiced movements in his leaps. "This jump of Sam Patch," concluded the *Republican*, "is the greatest fete of the kind ever effected by man. He may now challenge the universe for a competitor."

Sam admitted to the *Republican* that "his system of jumping"

was dangerous. The platform for his second Niagara leap swayed under his weight, making him feel "like a bug on a blade of grass" and nearly causing him to fall. But "he only feared, as he said, the disgrace of falling off the trembling platform. . . . 'Disgrace' indeed!—The fall would have been his destruction." Where gentle journalists found only mindless, suicidal bravado in Sam's leaps, and where Hiram Doolittle, Jun., found only the butt of stage Yankee jokes, the Buffalo editor recognized skills and concentration honed over years, joined with physical courage and a firm sense of personal honor. It was praise grounded in personal knowledge of Sam Patch—praise that the boys in Pawtucket would have understood.<sup>62</sup>