



UNDATED *portrait*  
of *William H. Keating*  
by *Hugh Bridport*

## A Versatile EXPLORER

### *A Sketch of WILLIAM H. KEATING*

WYNDHAM D. MILES

IN LATE April, 1823, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun sat at his desk in Washington and signed an order that sent Major Stephen H. Long into the Minnesota country. Three years earlier Long had led an expedition into the Rocky Mountains, exploring the valley drained by the Missouri River, a region about which the government had learned little since the days of Lewis and Clark.<sup>1</sup> The value of his data

induced the government to send him out again, this time to investigate the valleys of the Minnesota and Red rivers and the border country between the latter stream and Lake Superior. Contradictory reports were current concerning the nature of the country, in which British and American fur companies carried on a valuable fur trade, and Calhoun's instructions called for a survey which, while rapid, would bring back essential knowledge of the region.

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<sup>1</sup> An extract from Long's orders of 1823 is in William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St. Peter's River*, 1:11 (Philadelphia, 1824). On Long's earlier trip, see Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia, 1823).

It was late in the season to leave for the northwestern frontier, and Long had to move fast if he was to organize a party, lead it to its destination, and then get back to civilization before the snows of the next winter locked him in the wilderness. Fortunately Philadelphia, the starting point of the expedition, was a center of scientific activity, and within a few days Long had signed on William Hypolitus Keating, mineralogist and geologist; Thomas Say, "the father of descriptive entomology in America"; and Samuel Seymour, an artist and painter of landscapes. The war department sent J. Edward Colhoun, topographer and astronomer, to join the group in Ohio, and it also assigned to the expedition Dr. Edwin James, an army surgeon and expert botanist who had been with Long on the Rocky Mountain expedition. Dispatches, however, did not catch up with James, who was on his way west from Albany, New York, to a new post at Bellefontaine near St. Louis, until mid-June, and he was left behind.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to checking the geology of the region, Keating acted as historian of the expedition, or its "literary journalist," as Long called him. Long kept a journal, which is now owned by the Minnesota Historical Society; Colhoun kept a diary; and other members of the expedition recorded their impressions of the journey. None of their accounts has been published, however, and it was through the eyes of Keating that the public saw the Minnesota country as it looked to Long and his followers in the 1820s.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Keating, *Narrative*, 1:12n.; Richard G. Wood, "Dr. Edwin James: A Disappointed Explorer," in *Minnesota History*, 34:284-286 (Autumn, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> The Long Journal, in three closely written notebooks illustrated with numerous sketch maps, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, which also has a copy of the Colhoun Diary. The original of the latter is owned by Dr. Mary D. Galligan of St. Louis Park. The society is planning to publish both documents. See Long Journal, April 30, 1823, for the first reference to Keating.

<sup>4</sup> Keating, *Narrative*, 1:164.

<sup>5</sup> Keating, *Narrative*, 2:16-21.

<sup>6</sup> *Franklin Gazette* (Philadelphia), October 27, 1823.

Long and his men left Philadelphia by carriage at the end of April, took to the saddle at Wheeling, and continued on through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Chicago, as seen by Keating, consisted of a "few huts, inhabited by a miserable race of men. . . . Their log or bark houses are low, filthy and disgusting, displaying not the least trace of comfort."<sup>4</sup> At Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi, troops from the local garrison, Fort Crawford, reinforced the party, which then split temporarily into two groups. One went up the Mississippi by boat to the St. Peter's or Minnesota River, while the other rode overland. At Fort St. Anthony, later Fort Snelling, at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, the party picked up a larger military escort, and then followed the Minnesota to its source. There the travelers turned northward till they reached the Red River, which they followed into Canada.

Indians of the region were peaceful with the exception of a Sioux war party that the explorers met along the Red. Outnumbered three to one, the explorers expected an attack. That night Major Long, who was familiar with the Indian custom of attacking at dawn, waited until all was quiet and the moon was up, and then led his men away. By sun-up they had traveled many miles, out of reach of the warriors.<sup>5</sup>

Long's instructions, drawn up by someone sitting at a desk in Washington, were to stop his northward course at the border and turn east to Lake Superior. But trappers and Indians who roamed the region in search of furs for the Hudson's Bay Company persuaded him that it was much easier to continue down the Red River by canoe. The explorers thereupon paddled north through British territory to Lake Winnipeg, and then southeast by way of Lake of the Woods, Rainy Lake, and the border waters to Lake Superior. Two weeks in an open boat, buffeted by storm and gale, and the group was safe at Sault Ste. Marie.<sup>6</sup> Long and the scientists traveled by



MAJOR Long in 1823

steamboat and revenue cutter to Niagara, thence by canal boat and carriage to Philadelphia. In October, after an absence of six months and a journey of forty-five hundred miles, Keating was back in his home city, where he drew up the account of the exploration, using his own notes and those of Long, Colhoun, and Say. It was published in two volumes in 1824 by H. C. Carey and I. Lea of Philadelphia under the title *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River, Lake Winnepeek, Lake of the Woods, &c. &c. Performed in the Year 1823*.

Keating's *Narrative* was widely read. A London firm reprinted it for British readers in 1825 and again in 1828. A German publishing house issued a translation at Jena in 1826. The *North American Review*, one of the most influential journals of the time, ran a friendly review by the editor, the well-known American historian Jared Sparks.<sup>7</sup> "On the whole," he wrote, "Mr. Keating has accomplished his task, as historiographer to the expedition, with much good judgment, and with full measure of industry, which a work of so varied a character required, and he deserves the praise

not less of successful authorship, than of skill in his favorite science." An anonymous Englishman in the *British Monthly Review* was less cordial in his criticism; nevertheless he felt that the book was so important that he devoted a total of thirteen pages to it.<sup>8</sup>

Keating brought back a number of minerals, analyzed them in his laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, and gave the results in the *Narrative*.<sup>9</sup> Concerning his observations on geology, the *Monthly Review* printed some unflattering remarks: "The part of these volumes which describes the geology of the country is the least satisfactory of any, as it adds little to the scanty information we before possessed. The gentleman who undertook this department appears much better qualified to examine mineral specimens in a cabinet, than to explore the geological character of an extensive region." Sparks took the opposite view, concluding that "The geological observations made by the expedition are mostly new, and very interesting." Each reviewer had a point. Actually the expedition moved so rapidly that Keating had time only for a cursory inspection; consequently while the *Narrative* did not contain any basic contributions to geology, it did have observations that were of value at the time. For three decades the *Narrative* remained the standard geological report on the region, until David Dale Owen

<sup>7</sup> Although Sparks did not sign his review, his authorship is established in his own set of the *North American Review*, where he inserted marginal notes identifying the authors of all unsigned contributions. The file is preserved in the library of Harvard University, which Sparks served as president from 1849 to 1853. The Minnesota Historical Society has copies of Keating's *Narrative* in the American edition of 1824, the British edition of 1825, and the German version of 1826. The author used a copy of the latter in the library of the German Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. A facsimile reprint of the London edition of 1825 has been issued in one volume (Minneapolis, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> *North American Review* (Boston), 21:189 (July, 1825); *Monthly Review* (London), 108:113-125 (November, 1825).

<sup>9</sup> Keating, *Narrative*, 1:15, 17, 41.

made his survey of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota for the federal government in the 1850s.<sup>10</sup>

The most valuable sections of the *Narrative* are those dealing with the Indians of the region. Keating's contemporaries immediately recognized the importance of this material. Sparks considered that "among the most interesting researches, contained in these volumes, are those relating to the aboriginal inhabitants of the countries adjoining our frontiers." The writer for the *Monthly Review* stated the opinion that "the most important part of this 'Narrative' is that which relates to the Indian population, in the countries through which the expedition passed." Years later Joseph Sabin, in his monumental *Diction-*

*ary of Books relating to America*, described the *Narrative* as "almost a cyclopaedia of material, relating to the Indians of the explored territory. Nothing escaped the attention or record of the gentlemen who accompanied the expedition; and their statements respecting the Sioux and Chipeway tribes are among the most valuable we have."<sup>11</sup>

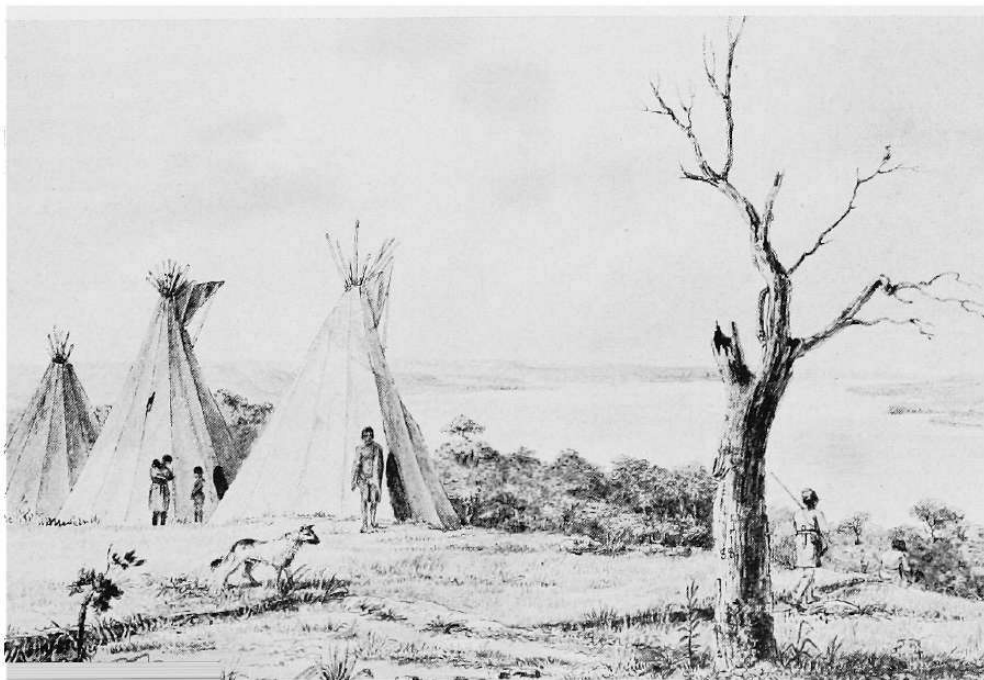
KEATING, through whom Americans and Europeans learned much of the Minnesota country, was an interesting person in his own right. Mineralogist, geologist, professor of chemistry, mining engineer, lawyer, legislator, and railroad executive, he was each of these things in a short span of forty years. He was born in Wilmington, Delaware, August 11, 1799, and grew up in Philadelphia. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with the B.A. degree in 1816, he spent three years in the technical schools and mines of France, Savoy, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, and England, studying geology, mineralogy, chemistry, and mining engineering.<sup>12</sup> This would be a fine technical education today, but in Keating's time it was exceptional. When he returned home in 1820 he was one of the best trained scientists in the United States—perhaps the nation's one and only professional mining engineer.

<sup>10</sup> *Monthly Review*, 108:123; *North American Review*, 21:183. For a brief account of Keating's geological observations, see George P. Merrill, "Contributions to the History of American Geology," in United States National Museum, *Reports*, 1904, p. 274-276 (Washington, 1906).

<sup>11</sup> *North American Review*, 21:186; *Monthly Review*, 108:116; Joseph Sabin, *Dictionary of Books relating to America*, 9:398 (New York, 1877).

<sup>12</sup> For biographical information on Keating, see J. Percy Keating, "John Keating and His Forebears," in American Catholic Historical Society, *Records*, 29:324 (December, 1918); Louise Welles Murray, *The Story of Some French Refugees*, 83 (Athens, Pennsylvania, 1903); and John H. Frederick, in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 10:276 (New York, 1933). Keating himself describes his education in his *Considerations upon the Art of Mining*, 40, 43 (Philadelphia, 1821).

SEYMOUR'S  
view of  
Big Stone Lake





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