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[In this biographical essay on James Buchanan penned in 1859, Lily Macalester writes about this American President from the perspective of a friend and supporter. This transcription, prepared by Ty Bream in 2001, attempts to be true to the original handwritten text, including all misspellings and other errors.]

James Buchanan

“Pennsylvania’s favorite son” as Mr. Buchanan is affectionately been brevetted was born in a picturesque spot termed Stony Batter in the immediate vicinity of Mercersburg in Franklin County April 22nd 1791. From his earliest youth he showed a degree of mental and physical vigor, which gave the happiest prospects of future & extensive usefulness & distinction. His father was one of the pioneers of Western Penn. An Irisman by birth, and a person of strong sense, great integrity & indomitable energy. His mother Elizabeth Speer, daughter of a respectable farmer in Adams Co., who was distinguished for her intellectual superiority and earnest piety. In 1798, the family removed to Mercersburg where their son James Buchanan received his early education in in English, Latin & Greek. At the age of fourteen he entered Dickinson College, Carlisle where he graduated with the highest honors in 1809. Having determined to adopt law as his profession he commenced the study of it, with Judge Hopkins of Lancaster, & was admitted to the bar Nov. 17th 1812. There he speedily attained a degree of eminence rarely enjoyed by youthful devotees to that exacting mistress and after only 4 years of practice he was called upon to defend before the Senate of Penn. in the session of 1816-17 a distinguished Judge who was tried upon articles of impeachment. This he did with brilliant success unaided by senior counsel. His practice & his reputation increased with almost unprecedented rapidity and at the age of 40, when he gracefully retired from his profession, his name had appeared more frequently in the “Reports” of the State than that of any other lawyer of that period. Once only after his retirement did Mr. Buchanan appear in court & then in a case which does his heart, as well as head so much honor that we cannot but mention it. A poor widow whose little all was in imminent danger from an action of ejectment, appealed most urgently to him for professional aid, in a case made

almost hopeless by the technical difficulties which surrounded it. Acting upon the scriptural injunction "to comfort widows in their distress," he undertook the case with such earnestness and ability as to overcome all opposition and establish the poor woman's undeniable title to the property in question. Thus did Mr. Buchanan give in public evidence of that kindness of heart obstinately denied him by those who unable to find a flaw in his moral character or political integrity assail him in those points only defensible by friends who have had the privilege of knowing and appreciating his many acts of graceful and generous benevolence.

The military episode in Mr. Buchanan's life must not be forgotten. During the year of 1812, when the British after destroying the public buildings of Washington threatened an attack upon Baltimore, a public meeting was called at Lancaster to obtain volunteers to march to the defence of their sister city. With words of stirring eloquence Mr. Buchanan addressed his fellow citizens, appealing to their patriotism to expel the intruders from a soil made sacred by the blood of their forefathers. Then proving his sincerity by his actions he registered his name at the head of the open list as a private soldier. This example was followed by many gallant spirits, & the company commanded by Judge Henry Shippen marched to Baltimore & served under Major Charles Sterret Ridgely until they were honorably discharged. He then evinced his devotion to his Country no less strongly in the Legislation Halls of Penn. where Phila. was in danger of attack he made the most urgent appeals to the Legislation to adopt measures for her protection. On being reelected in 1814 he gave his ardent support to the bill appropriating 300,000 dollars as a loan to the Federal government to pay the state volunteers & militia for services to the United States. In 1820, Mr. Buchanan was elected to Congress and soon took a position among the most able debaters in that body. During the agitation of Mr. Lowndes, one of South Carolina's most gifted & cherished statesmen whose health at that time fast failing prevented him from speaking on a subject which he considered so important selected with prophet's presight Pennsylvania's young Representative to express his views and convictions which he knew coincided with his own. This Mr. Buchanan did in his maiden speech in a manner that excited the admiration and attention of the Country & gave him at once a reputation for eloquence and statesmanic ability, which he has always sustained unquestioned.

We cannot in this brief sketch attempt an account of the various occasions which he distinguished himself while a member of the House of Representatives. Abler hands have already described with graphic power this portion of his career, one event however in which he while associated with, and opposed to one of the wisest & most prominent men in the country must not be passed unnoticed. This was the trial of Judge Peck of the District Court of Missouri against whom articles of impeachment were passed upon which he was tried before the Senate. The circumstances were these. In Dec. 1825, the claims of the widow & children of one Antoine Soulard to lands in Missouri & the territory of Arkansas were decided upon adversely by Judge Peck. One of the prosecuting counsel Luke E. Lawless of St. Louis wrote a respectful article for a newspaper in which he pointed out the errors into which he conceived the Judge to have fallen. Upon this Judge Peck had him summoned and after depriving him of the right to practice his profession committed him to prison. Mr. Lawless then made complaint to the House of Representatives, and his memorial was referred to the Judiciary Committee of which Mr. Buchanan was chairman. The Committee reported unanimously articles of impeachment against the Judge, which were adopted by the House & presented to the Senate, upon which that body resolved itself into a Court of Impeachment for his trial. Five managers were chosen by ballot on the part of the House to conduct the prosecution. They were James Buchanan of Penn., Henry P. Storrs of N.Y., George McDuffie of S.C., Ambrose Spencer of N.Y. & Charles Wickliffe of Ky., the counsel for the defence were William Wirt & Joshua Meredith. The case was opened on the part of the prosecution by Mr. McDuffie, in a speech of great power, & closed by Mr. Buchanan who confining himself closely to the legal & constitutional questions involved, presented an argument so convincing that although the Senate refused by a vote of 22 to 21, to punish Judge Peck it passed a short time after unanimously an act obviating the technical objections which had prevented his conviction & so framed the law that no judge could again venture to commit a like offense.

Mr. Buchanan retired voluntarily from Congress at the close of his 5th term, & was almost immediately after appointed by General Jackson Envoy Extraordinary & Minister Plenipotentiary to Russia. He remained there two years, in which time he concluded the first commercial treaty between the United States and Russia, which

secured to our merchants & navy important privileges in the Baltic & Black Seas. His personal popularity at the Court of the Czar contributed undoubtedly not a little to this result, & the impression his refined courtesy, & attractive social qualities made upon all who were there associated with him was most pleasingly alluded to by his successor. Upon his return in 1833, he was elected to the U.S. Senate which had during his absence been the scene of one of the most violent struggles that our country had ever witnessed. A rupture between General Jackson and Mr. Calhoun had led to a dissolution of the cabinet. A new tariff had been enacted, & the battle against a renewal of the charter of the United States bank had been fought and won by the administration party. In this new position Mr. Buchanan displayed the same profound ability, calm judgement, & statesmen like qualities joined to a never failing courtesy which had distinguished him in the lower House, & took a prominent part in all subjects which arose for discussion & disposal at the eventful period. At no period of our country's history, or at least since the courtly time of the first Congress, has the U.S. Senate presented such an array of varied and distinguished talent. There was Calhoun always imposing violence and never failing to command admiration even from his opponents, Daniel Webster whose giant intellect was acknowledged & deferred to in the British Parliament, Henry Clay, the trusted idol, & fearless champion of his party, Silas Wright. Thomas Benton whose powerful mind & untiring industry enabled him to grasp a subject & handle it with telling effect. John C. Forsyth, the model debater, whose graceful manner of parrying the attacks made upon the Administration during the contest in 1831 & 2, was compared to the movements of a proficient with a small sword. With such men did Mr. Buchanan take a position confessedly second to none in force & cultivation by the various subjects which were acted upon during the ten years he had in the Senate. We shall merely allude to the French Spoliation bill, which he warmly advocated, the attempted agitation of the slavery question, by the introduction of a bill for abolishing it in the District of Columbia, which was opposed by Mr. Buchanan as an unwise & inflammatory measure. The Texas Revolution in which he evinced always a deep interest. The naturalization question in which he showed his usual liberality. The debate on "Expunging Resolutions" of censure upon the gallant old veteran Jackson whose fearlessness & inflexibility had carried him triumphantly through a political contest as fierce & desperate as the military one where

he won the laurels which gave him a place in the foremost ranks of his Countries [*sic*] Heroes. Here Mr. Buchanan spoke *con amore*, & the vote being taken immediately after the disgraceful resolutions were expunged from the Records of the Senate. The Sub Treasury Bill was defended by him with ability & earnestness. Passing on to the Tyler Administration we find another attempt being made to recharter the U.S. Bank which was vetoed by the President, whose action in the matter was narrowly sustained by Mr. B. The question of the Annexation of Texas, next came up, was eloquently advocated by Mr. B as he had from the first shown a kind & active interest in the young state. The bill passed only a few days before the inauguration of Mr. Polk when Mr. Buchanan left the Senate to take the chair of Secretary of State. In this position he had many important and delicate questions to meet & dispose of. The Oregon question, which had been pending during the previous administration had now assumed a position of critical importance which demanded prompt and decided action. A proposal had been made for its settlement by Mr. Tyler, the line of Latitude 49th. This was accordingly renewed by Mr. Buchanan in his first protocol to the British Minister Mr. Packenham, but immediately rejected by him, without reference to his government. Mr. Buchanan replied in a state paper of great power, and elaborate detail, in which he exhibited the claims of our government to the whole territory and proved that the compromise proposed was one of great generosity on the part of the United States proceeding from a desire to avoid a rupture between two countries to whose welfare mutual friendliness is so essential and desirable. He concluded by formally withdrawing the proposition which decided the fate of the controversy, and resulted in the dismissal of Mr. Packenham as a negotiator. The spirited and determined tone of this dispatch satisfied the British Cabinet that our government was resolved to maintain its rights and produced very speedily a proposal from him to settle the boundary according to the offer made by Mr. Polk. This it declared was its ultimatum. In this dilemma the President determined to submit this question to the Senate which was then in session, and that body having recommended an acceptance of the proposition, it was settled.

Our relations with Mexico began now to assume an angry aspect, in truth our forbearance had been trifled with and insulted to a degree that rendered armed demonstration a patriotic necessity. Our troops having advanced to Corpus Christi the

Mexicans crossed the Rio Grande and without writing the form of a declaration of war, commenced open hostilities. Under these circumstances there was but the course to pursue, which was one always acceptable to our gallant American spirits. Congress declared war and passed a bill authorizing the acceptance of a volunteer force of ten thousand men, upon which fifty-thousand pressed forward eager for the glory of defending their Country's rights. The history of this war, where the unparalleled success of our mobile little army in numbers a mere handful compared to the force to which they were opposed, seemed at the time and in retrospection almost miraculous, is too well known and too formally recorded in our Country's history to need more than a passing allusion. Our army whose gallantry, high toned honor, & generous humanity, not less than their unfailing courage and strategic skill is proverbial not only in our own land but frankly admitted in the countries of Europe performed prodigies of valor, and aided by our no less efficient naval forces, proceeded unwaveringly upon a series of nations which resulted in the unfurling from the citadel of the enemys Capitol the stars and stripes of our glorious Republic. During this time Mr. Buchanan was ever on the alert to seize the fitting moment to terminate by an honorable and advantageous treaty a contest so intimate in its results to us, and so disastrous to our enemy. The terms concluded upon were in point of generosity and justice unequalled in the history of nations. To our government important possessions were added, the acquisition of California & the peace which enabled us to profit at once by the wealth resulting therefrom, more than compensated for any additional advantages of territory that at as some captious spirits suggested might have been obtained but only as they did not consider by unwarrantable sacrifice of life and money. In this negotiation Mr. Buchanan especially avoided European mediation & instructed our minister to Mexico Mr. Slidell emphatically to decline any such intervention.

In 1849 at the close of Mr. Polk's administration Mr. Buchanan retired to private life but even this his watchful eye was still upon the Ship of State and his far seeing sagacity appreciated whilst still but a speck in the political horizon the storm which was gathering, and which unless prompt and vigorous precaution were taken would bring destruction upon the vessel which had weathered already a many dangers. The slavery agitation was spreading with fearful violence in the North, whilst a spirit of determined

resistance to what they deemed an unwarrantable interference with the rights of property, was equally strong in the Southern States. Our veteran statesmen now reduced to a little band who had thought to enjoy tranquility & relief from care in their declining years stepped forward again in their Country's need, Clay, Webster, and Cass, in the Senate, and Mr. Buchanan in his own state, where his voice was all potent brought forward conciliatory suggestions which acted like oil upon the troubled waters of opposing factions, "Saying to the North give up, & to the South hold not back." Finally, by the united efforts of these gallant patriots and statesmen aided by the good and true men from both sections of the country, the Compromise measures of 1850, were passed occasioning a jubilee throughout the Union. The conservative position taken by Penn. throughout this memorable contest gave her a new right to the proud title of the Keystone State which she has always gloried.

Mr. B now gave himself up to the calm pleasures of country life at his beautiful home near Lancaster, where he dispensed a southern like hospitality to all who came within its limits, and where he himself always genial and social was the instigator and sympathizer, in all amusements and merry making in the home circle composed of the charming niece, whose beauty and grace of manner and peculiar conversational attractions were as remarkable in the then school girl, as now they are admired in the Hostess of the Executive Mansion and of two nephews, and constant visitors of all ages. And no matter what the fatigues of the day might have been, the evenings were always devoted by Mr. B to the family and eagerly anticipated by them, an inexhaustible variety of anecdotes relating to events and people in our own Country as also in other lands, especially Russia told with a spirit and interest which fascinate his listeners, always cheerfully contributed to the entertainments, and a participation in any social game, merrily acceded to. It is in his home life that Mr. Buchanan should be seen and known by those who doubt his possession of those qualities which adorn it. From this quiet happiness he was summoned in 1853 by President Pierce to represent our government at the Court of St. James. This he reluctantly consented to do and whilst in that position displayed the same ability which had distinguished him in every position in which he had been placed. The Central American difficulty was then under discussion and Mr. Buchanan's papers to Lord Clarendon on that subject have been considered both in this

Country, and in England as model diplomatic documents. The question had however been complicated by previous negotiations and still remains unsettled. Mr. Buchanan resigned this mission in March 1856, and returned home to a welcome so cordial and demonstrative as to prove most satisfactorily how fully his services were appreciated by his countrymen. The following June, he was nominated unanimously by the Democratic Convention assembled at Cincinnati for the Presidency and despite a two fold opposition triumphantly elected. On the 4th of March 1857 he was inaugurated as President of the United States.