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A SKETCH OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
By J. W. Searson

"Who reads an American book?"

Sydney Smith, a prominent English writer, sneeringly asked this question over 200 years after the first colonies were planted in America. True, the first centuries of American life were filled with deprivations, hardships, and bitter sacrifices. These years were naturally lean in literature. Today, we publish almost as many new books each year as are published in Great Britain. In 31 million homes, America reads nearly three thousand daily newspapers, fifteen thousand weeklies, and nearly four thousand monthly magazines. In addition, the telegraph, the telephone, the radio have made us over into a world neighborhood chatting and laughing and sorrowing together. From the early crude, rugged literature of fear and isolation, we have developed to a stage where now our literature sings of world dreams of brotherhood and peace.

The Colonial Period (1607 - 1765)

First American Books. The early colonists were dissenters. They had sought the new world for freedom of worship and for release from tyranny. But they were faced by famine, by severe winters, by hostile Indians, and by the stern necessity to work. Naturally, religion and liberty were the clear notes sounded in the literature of this period. Books and newspapers printed in England were shunned, and these colonists early began to produce crude newspapers, almanacs, and simple textbooks like "The New England Primer". The first book in American literature was Captain John Smith's "A True Relation of Some Occurrences and Accidents of Noata as Hath Happened Since the First Planting of the Colony." This was in fact only a pamphlet, written in 1608, reciting the events of the first year in the Colony of Virginia. But the first book actually prepared and printed in America was "The Bay Psalm Book", a metrical version of the Psalms prepared by prominent ministers for use in church services. This book was printed in Cambridge in 1640, the year after the first American printing press was set up in Cambridge. A part of the poetic version of the Twenty-third Psalm will serve to show something of the nature of the book. The first three verses of the Psalm were given as follows:

"The Lord to mee a shepherd is,
Want therefore shall not I.
Hee in the folds of tender-grasse,
Doth cause mee downe to lie;
To waters calm mee gently leads,
Restore my soul doth hee;
Hee doth in paths to righteousness;
For his names sake leads mee."

Leading Religious Writers. Among the leading religious writers of New England were Cotton Mather (1663-1728) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Cotton Mather was the son of Increase Mather, minister in the Old North Church at Boston and at the same time president of Harvard College. His greatest work is "The Ecclesiastical History of New England", a work setting forth the history and principles of Puritanism in New England, and the personal characters of our Puritan forefathers.

"The greatest single figure produced by Puritanism!" That is the verdict of the years concerning the majestic figure of Jonathan Edwards. Educated for the ministry at Yale, he became a great preacher, missionary, and writer. His "Freedom of the Will" and "Sermons" are his most noted contributions to the religious literature of the time. "Freedom of the Will" (1754) won for him such recognition that he was called from missionary work among the Indians to the presidency of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton, a position he never occupied because of his untimely death caused by a crude inoculation for small-pox.

Middle Colony Writers. Two names stand out in the middle colonies in this period: John Woolman (1720-1772) and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). John Woolman's "Journal" is the now little known autobiography of a simple, sincere Quaker soul, said to be "the sweetest and purest autobiography in the language." Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" and the "Autobiography" are still the most widely read literature of this period. Printer, inventor, philosopher, philanthropist, statesman, and writer, Franklin is easily the leading figure of his time. The story of his life is simply and charmingly told in the "Autobiography". "Poor Richard's Almanac" was, in addition, to an almanac extending thru the years 1732-1757, a clever book of wit and wisdom. It was easily the most generally read bit of colonial literature for it reached the high-water mark of 10,000 annual sales. Here are some specimens of the homely sayings:

"Be ashamed to catch yourself idle."

"Keep thy shop, and thy shop will keep thee"

"He that by the plow would thrive,

Himself must either hold or drive."

"What maintains one vice would bring up two children."

"It is hard for an empty bag to stand upright."

"A fat kitchen makes a lean will."

"The borrower is the slave of the lender."

"For age and want, save while you may;

No morning sun lasts a whole day."

Other works of this period worthy of more than passing notice are: Winthrop's "History of New England"; Samuel Sewall's "Diary"; Anne Bradstreet's "Poems"; and Wigglesworth's "Day of Doom".

The Revolutionary Period (1765-1800)

The Literature of Conflict. The literature of this period is combative, argumentative, and persuasive. Bitter controversies waged by the Colonists and the Mother Country, and equally bitter differences existed among the colonies themselves. Common interests and common enemies were gradually bringing the colonies together and awakening in them a distinctive national spirit. The leading orators supporting the Colonists were James Otis, Samuel Adams, and John Adams, all of Massachusetts and Patrick Henry of Virginia.

The Call to Arms. The most famous speech of the period was Patrick Henry's speech on liberty familiarly known as "A Call to Arms." This speech was delivered March 23, 1775, at the Revolutionary Convention of Virginia, at Richmond, in defense of resolutions providing for putting the Colonists in a state of defense against England. The passage of these resolutions, thru the magnetic influence of Patrick Henry, raised Virginia to leadership in the great Revolutionary struggle. The magnificent address of Patrick Henry closed with this plea.

"It is vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, 'peace, peace!' but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the crash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

Famous Documents and State Papers. Standing at the head of important papers of this period is the "Declaration of Independence" (1776) written by Thomas Jefferson, "The Federalist," a series of papers explaining and defending the Constitution was written by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison. The writings, addresses, and papers of George Washington, Thomas Paine, Samuel Adams, and John Dickinson form important contributions to the literature of the period.

Poetry, Drama, and Fiction. Little, but starved, poetry, drama, and fiction is to be found in this period so rich in political literature. John Dickinson's "The Song of American Liberty", Edward Bang's "Yankee Doodle," Francis Hopkinson's "The Battle of the Kegs," John Trumbull's "McFingal," Joseph Hopkinson's "Hail Columbia", and Freneau's "Nature Lyrics" are among the best known songs and ballads of the period. In Trumbull's "McFingal" is found the famous couplet:

"No man e'er felt the halter draw,
With good opinion of the law."

Thomas Godfrey's "The Prince of Parthia" (1759) was the first literary drama composed in America. Hugh Henry Brackenridge (1748-1816) of Pennsylvania, produced the best literary dramas of the period in "The Battle of Bunker Hill" (1776) and "The Death of General Montgomery" (1777). A few sentimental novels and unimportant essays pieced out the meagre literature of the period.

America's National Literature (1800-1900)

Four Groups of Writers. During the period of national life there have been four geographical groups of writers: (1) the New York and Middle Atlantic group, with New York City as a center; (2) the New England group, with Boston as a center; (3) the Southern group; and (4) Central and far Western groups.

During the 19th century period, we have the early literature of the new nation, the literature of the period of conflict, and the literature of the all-America period.

The New York and Middle Atlantic Group. The literature of this group centers about Washington Irving (1783-1859), essayist, story teller, biographer, and historian who is generally known as "the father of American literature." His "Sketch Book" charmed both American and English readers with its "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." "Knickerbocker's History of New York" added to Irving's popularity and everywhere he was received as the most distinctively American writer of his day. Among the important works of Irving are "Bracebridge Hall" (1822), "Tales of a Traveler" (1824), "The Alhambra" (1832), "The Life of Columbus," "The Life of Washington", and other stories of Spanish and American life.

James Fenimore Cooper (1796-1851), called "The American Scott" created three groups of stories; (1) historical tales, best represented by "The Spy" (2) sea tales centering around "The Pilot"; and (3) stories of Indian and pioneer life, represented by "The Leatherstocking Tales."

William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), called "The American Wordsworth," is undoubtedly America's greatest nature poet. As a journalist, he made the New York Evening Post one of the best edited newspapers in America. Some of his most popular poems are "Thanatopsis", "To a Waterfowl", "Forest Hymn", "Death of the Flowers", "The Prairies", and "The Battlefield", in which occurs his most often quoted passage.

"Truth crushed to earth, shall rise again;
The eternal years of God are hers;
But Error, wounded, writhes in pain,
And dies among his worshippers."

His translations of the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey" are among the best in American literature.

Then there is Walt Whitman (1819-1892), "The Good Gray Poet," at once the best loved and the best hated of all American writers. Tho sneered at as uncouth and ignorant and sensual and egotistic, he has come to be regarded as the greatest literary genius produced by American democracy. His "Leaves of Grass", written in unrhymed free verse, was at first regarded as a lawless defiance of all literary form. Then came his "Drum-Taps", "Specimen Days", "Democratic Vistas", and "Memoranda of the War." Thru all his poetry, ran the themes of "selfhood, comradeship, love, joy, nature, God, immortality, death, and above all democracy".

Then there were the minor poets such as Fitz-Greene Halleck, with his familiar "Marco Bozzaris"; Joseph Rodman Drake, author of "The American Flag"; and Alice and Phoebe Cary with their home songs so familiar to all. Among the song writers were Samuel Woodworth (1765-1842) who wrote "The Old Calender Bucket"; John Howard Payne (1791-1852), author of "Home, Sweet Home"; and Stephen C. Foster, (1826-1864), writer of "Old Black Joe", "My Old Kentucky Home", and "Old Folks at Home".

Then there is the New York group of prose writers. Among them, Charles Dudley Warner; the great naturalist, John Burroughs; the typical American, Theodore Roosevelt; the literary preacher, Henry VanDyke; and a host of others including the well known names of Frank R. Stockton, Kate Douglas Wiggin, Richard Harding Davis, Paul Leicester Ford, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather.

The New England Group. In the early part of the 19th century, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) led the revolt against Puritanism as prophet of the Unitarian movement. Other leaders of this great revolt were the famous idealists known as Transcendentalists, including among their number such leaders as Margaret Fuller, founder of The Dial, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott, all living in Concord and all being connected with the famous Brook Farm Experiment where a number of prominent writers attempted in vain to work out in practice their idealistic philosophy. Of this group, Emerson and Hawthorne are recognized outstanding leaders. Emerson's Essays are among the profoundest creations in American literature.

Leaders of the Abolition or Anti-slavery group are Wendell Phillips, distinguished orator; William Lloyd Garrison, editor of "The Liberator"; Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of "Uncle Tom's Cabin"; and the loved editors and poets, John Greenleaf Whittier and James Russell Lowell. Whittier's "Voices of Freedom" and Lowell's "Bigelow Papers" and "The Present Crisis" were especially influential during the long discussions that finally ended the war and the abolition of slavery. Leading orators of this period were Daniel Webster, Charles Sumner, and Edward Everett; the leading historians, William H. Prescott, John Lothrop Motley; George Canbroft, John Fiske, and Francis Parkman.

The leading poets are Samuel Francis Smith (1808-1895), author of "America"; Thomas Bailey Aldrich; J. G. Holland; and the immortal New England quartet, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, and Holmes. Of this group, Longfellow stands out as the "People's Poet", best loved of all the group by the common people of America. "Evangeline" (1847), "Hiawatha" (1855), "The Courtship of Miles Standish" (1858), and "Tales of a Wayside Inn" (1863) contain some of the most original and fundamental contributions to American folk literature. Among his noted prose works were "Outre Mer" (beyond the sea), "Hyperion", and "Kavanagh". "The Spanish Student", "The Golden Legend" and several volumes of shorter poems include the remainder of his output. Such of his shorter poems as "Children's Hour", "Excelsior", "The Arrow and the Song", "The Psalm of Life", "The Day is Done", have found their way into the inmost hearts of the common people of America and England.

New England Writers of Fiction Among the leading New England writers of fiction of this period, aside from those already mentioned, are Louisa M. Alcott (1832-1888) who, from her home in Concord, wrote for America's children such delightful stories as "Little Men", "Little Women", "An Old Fashioned Girl", "Eight Cousins", and "Rose in Bloom". Then there is Edward Everett Hale who wrote America's best patriotic short story, "The Man Without a Country". (1863).

The Southern Group of Writers

Slower Development of the South The south was largely rural and agricultural and slavery for a time seemed to add little to its development. The poetic literature of the south finds its high culmination in such distinctive writers as Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Sidney Lanier, Paul Hamilton Hayne, and Henry Timrod. Edgar Allan Poe has been called "the strangest and most unfortunate of all American men of letters". Even his most ardent admirers admit that he was at times erratic and intemperate, but his worst enemies see in him one of America's greatest geniuses. "The Raven", "The Bells", and "Annabel Lee" assure him immortality, to say nothing of his short stories and tales such as "The Gold Bug", "The Masque of the Red Death", "The Tell-tale Heart", "The Purloined Letter," and "Ligeia".

"A perfect life in perfect labor writ" was the ideal realized by the beloved Sidney Lanier (1842-1881) who contributed to American literature such wonderful poetic creations as "The Song of the Chattahoochee", and "Marshes of Glynn", and "Sunrise". He was an editor and writer of many charming stories for boys, such as "The Boy's Froissart", and "The Boy's King Arthur". He was a refined poet, an editor of rare skill, a talented musician, a charming letter writer, and a strong man among men.

The lyric genius of Paul Hamilton Hayne and the editorial and poetic skill of Henry Timrod are such as to warrant fuller study of the lives of these southern leaders.

Minor Southern Poets. Among minor southern poets worthy of note are Francis Scott Key (1780-1843) who wrote the "Star Spangled Banner" during the trying scenes of the war of 1812; Theodore O'Hara, author of "The Bivouac of the Dead"; Samuel Mintern Peck, familiarly known as the creator of "The Grapevine Swing", and John Bannister Tabb of Virginia, whose shorter poems have added much to the literature of the Southland.

Southern Fiction and Short Story Writers. Chief among southern writers of fiction is William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), author of "Guy Rivers", "The Yemassee", "The Partisan", and other stories. Next to Poe, Simms was the most powerful influence in southern literature preceding the Civil War. Thomas Nelson Page is known generally for his earlier works "In Old Virginia" and "Red Rock", a Chronicle of reconstruction. F. Hopkinson Smith will long be remembered for "Caleb West", and "Colonel Carter of Cartersville". Frances Hodgson Burnett has made all America love "That Lass O' Louries" and "Little Lord Fauntleroy". Then there is John Fox, Jr. whose "Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come", "Trail of the Lonesome Pine", and "The Heart of the Hills" have brought North and South alike to a new consciousness of the goodness of the sunny Southland. Most widely loved of all the story tellers of the Southland is Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) whose Uncle Remus stories constitute America's most charming collection of folk tales and fairy tales. The stories of "Brer Rabbit" and of "Little Mr. Thimblefinger and His Queer Country" are now American household tales. Other writers who have had a wide appeal to common life are George Madden Martin, author of "Emmy Lou" stories; and Alice Hegan Rice, creator of "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch," and "Lovey Mary".

The Central and Western Writers

The period of rapid territorial expansion developed wider Americanism and brought forth a group of writers who sounded the clear notes of optimism and good humor. Typical of this group are Abraham Lincoln, with his homely but wholesome humor and Mark Twain, with his striking humorous philosophy. Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and many of his other addresses and state papers will long remain as worthy contributions to the literature of statescraft. Mark Twain, whose real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910), was one of our greatest humorists and a writer "most thoroly representative of the genuine American spirit and life". Mark Twain and Walt Whitman are doubtless two of the greatest literary products of democracy. Everywhere, "Tom Sawyer", and "Huckleberry Finn", "Life on the Mississippi", "Roughing It", "Innocents Abroad", and many others of his works have become enshrined in the hearts of America's reading public. These works are distinctively typical of the life of the great Middle West which was interpreted further by such writers as Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller.

Favorite Children's Poets. Then come the children's poets, Eugene Field (1850-1895) and James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916). Eugene Field was a beloved companion of children and one who interpreted children from a grown-up's viewpoint. His "Little Book of Western Verse", "With Trumpet and Drum", and "Love Songs of Childhood" have made him one of the noblest bards of childhood. His best known child poems are "Little Boy Blue", "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod", "Jest 'Fore Christmas", and "Seein' Things at Night." Riley had the rare gift to interpret children from within.

"The Old Swimmin' Hole", "Little Orphant Annie", and "An Old Sweetheart of Mine" are among the popular favorites which endear him to the hearts of grown-ups as well as children.

The Minor Poets Then there are the minor poets such as Will Carlton of Michigan (1845-1912), author of many popular sentimental ballads such as "Betsy and I Are Out", and "Over the Hills to the Poorhouse"; Edwin Markham of Oregon (1852---), author of "The Man with the Hoe", "Lincoln, The Man of the People", "The Toiler", and other poems, and Edgar LeMasters, author of "Spoon River Anthology"; Carl Sandburg of the Chicago News, author of "Chicago Poems", "Cornhuskers", and "Rootabaga Stories"; Vachel Lindsay of Illinois, whose "Lincoln Walks at Midnight" has become one of the most popular of all in his several collections of fantastic modern poems.

Fiction Writers The Middle West has been slow to be recognized in the development of fiction but it is gradually coming into its own. Among leading writers who have won recognition are Lew Wallace (1827-1905), author of "Ben Hur" and "The Fair God"; Hamlin Garland (1860---) whose "Son of the Middle Border" and "Daughter of the Middle Border" are distinctive Middle West creations; Helen Hunt Jackson (1831-1885) author of "Ramona", a strange and fascinating tale of Indian life; Jack London, remembered principally for "Call of the Wild"; William Allen White whose most artistic creation is "The Court of Boyville"; Booth Tarkington, whose recent creations of "Penrod" (1914) and "Penrod and Sam" (1916) have captured the boy-heart of America.

In so brief a sketch of American literature, it is difficult to do justice to creative writers or even to the reader. The reader must go directly to the works of these writers and to stories of their lives in order to catch the real thrill that comes from the discovery that all these writers are human beings, working in a human way to interpret to us all the best there is in American life.

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