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Introduction

WASHINGTON IRVING IS often thought of as America's first professional writer—that is, the first to make a living entirely by his pen, and certainly the first to become internationally known. In that sense, American literature as a conscious practice began with him, which is why he was hailed by *Harper's* magazine as "the Patriarch of American Letters" (an ironic title for a lifelong bachelor). His works were read widely in England and translated into French, Spanish, and German, among other languages. He kept reinventing himself as a writer over seven decades, setting a pattern for other American authors to follow. He began as a humorist and satirist: His first book, *A History of New York, from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty, by Diedrich Knickerbocker,* was a hilarious spoof that gained him fans such as Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron.

While other American authors urged the necessity of shedding the influence of Europe, Irving, with his veneration for the past, went in the opposite direction, living abroad for seventeen years. He embraced England and its cathedrals, rituals, and ruins in his second book, a collection of personal essays entitled *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon,* which was polished, elegant, humorous, and sentimental, befitting the taste of the times. It

also contained his two most popular tales, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," both of which revealed his interest in folklore and lifelong tension between writing short stories and writing essays.

After the publication of two more collections of sketches, *Bracebridge Hall* and *Tales of a Traveller*, the form started to feel played out to him; seeking other challenges, other materials, he found them in Spain, an exotic, fatalistic, sensuous alternative to the more materialistic and puritanical United States. He had the good fortune to be housed in the Alhambra and wrote a charming evocation of that then-decaying palace.

The considerable research required to produce a quartet of full-length biographies—Christopher Columbus, Muhammad, Oliver Goldsmith, and George Washington—allowed Irving to outgrow both the satiric and sentimental modes of his previous work and to write as a genuine historian. Returning to the United States, he went out west and wrote a book about touring the prairies and another, *Astoria*, about the abortive attempt to establish a trading center in Oregon. Finally settling down in the Hudson Valley, he built Sunnyside, a dream house for his retirement, but was unable to retire because of money problems (bad investments and needy relatives); thus, Irving gained the dubious distinction of becoming one of America's earliest hack writers. Then again, what writer since then has not been inveigled into doing a bit of hack writing when the wolf was at the door?

"For fifty years Irving charmed and instructed the American people, and was the author who held, on the whole, the first place in their affections," wrote Charles Dudley Warner.

> As he was the first to lift American literature into the popular respect of Europe, so for a long time he was the chief representative of the American name in the world of letters.

> During this period probably no citizen of the Republic, except the Father of the Country, had so wide a reputation as his namesake, Washington Irving. . . . Thirty years ago Irving was much read by young people, and his clear style helped to form a good taste and correct literary habits. It is not so now . . . it has been to some extent the fashion to damn with faint admiration the pioneer if not the creator of American literature as the "genial" Irving.

In the nineteenth century, everyone read Irving. Now no one reads him, beyond his two chestnuts, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," which are still taught in some primary schools. Why is he now so neglected?

Edgar Allan Poe, no less a critic than a storywriter, admired Irving's long, nimble sentences and was happy to get the older writer's praise: "Irving's name will afford me complete triumph over little critics." But he regretfully declined the offer to do a thorough appraisal of Irving (although "it is a theme upon which I would very much like to write"), perhaps fearful of criticizing this revered writer: "Irving is much overrated, and a nice distinction might be drawn between his just and his surreptitious and adventitious reputation—between what is due to the pioneer solely, and what to the writer."

In his day, Irving may have been overrated; today he is underrated.

I question the whole notion that this or that author no longer "speaks" to us, no longer "matters." If Irving, with his beautiful, long, elegant sentences, has come to be considered old-fashioned, it represents a test case in the changing fashions of style. What can we learn from that?

I am not trying to promote Irving to the top levels of the American pantheon. I agree, Irving is a minor writer, not in the

same league as Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, or Dickinson. But minor writers have their fascinations; indeed, they may be one of the glories of literature. Here I simply want to offer a taste of a writer I enjoy and esteem to those adventurous souls who are willing to take it further.

The big question about Washington Irving remains: Is he important mainly for historical reasons, for his position as one of the founders of American literature, or does he still deserve to be read on the merits of his writing? For me the answer is both.

My own connections to Irving? Like him, I am a native New Yorker; like him, an essayist and belletrist, who sometimes strays from that genre; like him, until I gave up the practice some thirty years ago, but not before having written a collection entitled *Bachelorhood*, I too was a bachelor; like him, a minor writer who cannot retire my pen—nor would I choose to. Beyond that, is it just a coincidence that I write for the literary journal *Salmagundi*, I am a lifelong fan of the New York Knicks, and I belong to the Knickerbocker Tennis Club? There is no escaping him. Twenty years ago, I acquired a complete set of Washington Irving works, some twelve volumes, a thousand pages each—probably when the university library I taught at was deaccessioning books that had not been checked out enough—and they sat on my own bookshelves collecting dust. When I finally began poking around in them, I discovered a wonderful new companion.

I am not presenting here an exhaustive chronological biography, but rather a more belletristic treatment, surrounding my subject through a series of essays about key topics—sketches, you might say, to use Irving's word.

As for Washington Irving the man, he is a poignant, lonely, often homeless, insecure, but brave and resilient figure who haunts me. I am haunted by his courage in knowing what his

limitations were but still always embarking on new challenges; by his curious diffidence, tact, and affability in social situations, his ability to get along with everyone, behind a mask hiding melancholy; by his satisfying the good taste of his time, only to see it evolve into an edgier, rawer form; by his persistence, turning out copy till the very end. His is, to me, the prototype of a writer's life, with all its setbacks and triumphs.

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