

Samuel Lorenzo Knapp and Early American Biography

BEN HARRIS McCLARY

It is much to be wished that more might be known of that solid portion of the community, whose course is marked by nothing brilliant or wonderful, but who have added to the stock of human knowledge and diminished human labour by invention, who have taught men to be wiser and happier, and who have filled up the measure of their days in usefulness and honour, in acting well their part, where 'all the honour lies.'

Samuel Lorenzo Knapp on
biography, 1817¹

I

AMONG THE THOUSANDS of sketches in the *Dictionary of American Biography* probably no individual subject fared worse in his coverage than Samuel Lorenzo Knapp (1783–1838).

The main portion of the research for this paper was done during the winter of 1982–83 while the author was a Samuel Foster Haven Fellow at the American Antiquarian Society. He wishes to express his special gratitude to Nancy Burkett, then head of readers' services and now assistant librarian, and her staff for their generous assistance in making his exploration of American collective biography a pleasurable adventure.

¹ *New-England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*, October 10, 1817, p. 1. Reviewing recent American biographical works, including the studies of Washington by Marshall and Bancroft, that of Ames by Kirkland, and the study of Buckminster by Thacher, Knapp discussed the state of contemporary national biography. Sounding his usual positive note, he emphasized the need for biographers to present the full picture, for 'the character worth presenting to the public has nothing to suffer from truth.' He noted the value of eulogies as source material and the role of Freemasons in preserving biography in that form. Illustrating his assertion that there is a natural attraction to the lives of the more common folk, Knapp expressed his belief that Cadwallader Colden in his biography of Robert Fulton had 'made a more interesting life of a mechanic than the Poet Laureate [of England had written] of the hero of the Nile,' a reference to Southey's life of Nelson. He deplored sensationalism in biography: 'Of the catch-penny lives of wonderful itinerants, canting hypocrites, and successful felons, we say nothing, but leave them to the vulgar lovers of the marvelous; for they must have garbage.'

Factually the 'life' is little more than the shaky biographical outline which has been circulating since the middle years of the last century,² when it was devised from easily available data and vague recollections by James Spear Loring for *The Hundred Boston Orators*³ and by Mrs. E. Vale Smith for her *History of Newburyport*.⁴ Although Knapp, who had been elected to the membership of the American Antiquarian Society in 1814, was committed throughout his adult years to preserving the 'character' and achievements of others, he seems never to have made himself the subject of an autobiographical account, and, sadly, neither in his lifetime nor in the years immediately after his death, before he became an image clouded by time, did anyone see fit to survey his career with a study of any substance. Not until 1936 when Fred Lewis Pattee wrote 'A Record of Forgotten Fame: Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, Class of 1804' for the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* was he accorded the consideration of a thoughtful review of his work.⁵ Pattee's concern was with the corpus of Knapp's work wherein he found Knapp's forte to be as a commentator on American culture. Other writers have identified Knapp's special field to be that of biography but have judged his efforts in that area to be less than memorable. Mrs. E. Vale Smith, writing in 1854, offered a mild critical estimate of Knapp's work: 'As a writer Mr. Knapp was easy and graceful, but with too great a tendency to

² *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v. 'Knapp'; this title is hereafter cited in the text and footnotes as *DAB*. Aspects of Knapp's life and bibliography remain problematic for anyone trying to work on him. Much more research must be done in these areas before an adequate biography can be written. No attempt is made in this paper to deal with his role in American literary historiography and criticism or with his commitment to American culture, both of which were briefly outlined in a paper I read at the American Antiquarian Society on January 19, 1983, the bicentennial of Knapp's birth.

³ James Spear Loring, *The Hundred Boston Orators Appointed by the Municipal Authorities and Other Public Bodies, from 1770 to 1852, Comprising Historical Gleanings, Illustrating the Principals and Progress of Our Republican Institutions* (Boston, 1852), pp. 445-47.

⁴ E. Vale Smith, *History of Newburyport* (Newburyport, 1854), p. 326.

⁵ The full title is 'A Record of Forgotten Fame: Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, Class of 1804, Was Orator, Writer, Editor; Perhaps Dartmouth's Greatest Literary Light,' *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* 29(1936):7-8, 72.

the highly ornate in his biographical sketches, allowing too much sway to the personal admiration and feeling of friendship which he felt for many of his subjects.⁶ Twentieth-century evaluations reveal a sharper tone. The *DAB* author noted, 'As a biographer he is ornate, laudatory, and patriotic, and wholly untrustworthy.'⁷ In 1938, without any reference to a source, Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycroft's *American Authors 1600-1900* summarized the *DAB* article: 'His main writing . . . was as a biographer. In this he was laudatory and patriotic, but not trustworthy.'⁸ Finally, *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* reduced the *DAB* evaluation to a state of greater brevity by declaring that Knapp 'specialized in ornate, effusive, and unreliable biographies.'⁹ There Knapp's reputation as a biographer has remained.

The purpose of this essay is to recognize Knapp's contributions to biography, especially to the genre of collective biography, by noting some of the actual uses of his writings in subsequent biographical studies and by reviewing his belief, as indicated in the headnote, that 'greatness' exists on all levels and in all walks of life, creating in its amalgamation the unique culture that becomes the heritage of future generations. Today, his biographical cameos viewed as a whole appear to be early examples of what scholars would later dub 'social and cultural history.'

II

Knapp explained his goals as a biographer in 1820. His primary wish was to rescue 'from oblivion many names which are fading from the memory of the present generation.'¹⁰ These people,

⁶ Smith, *History of Newburyport*, p. 326.

⁷ *DAB*, s.v. 'Knapp.'

⁸ Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycroft, eds., *American Authors 1600-1900* (New York, 1938), p. 442.

⁹ *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 4th ed., s.v. 'Knapp.'

¹⁰ Printed letter sent to prospective contributors of biographical sketches, this one signed and dated January 7, 1820, by Knapp. This letter was included with a cover letter written by Joseph T. Buckingham to Royal Tyler, dated March 14, 1820, located at the Boston Public Library.

he said, need not be the great—who, indeed, are amply recorded—but should be individuals ‘deserving of notice and regard who have lived in comparative obscurity.’ Beyond that, he hoped to use these biographical studies emphasizing individual traits to reveal ‘something of the history of the manners, habits and institutions of New England.’¹¹ James Spear Loring thought that *Biographical Sketches of Eminent Lawyers, Statesmen, and Men of Letters*, Knapp’s first collective biography, fulfilled the author’s intentions. Loring declared it to be ‘a model for writers of biography.’¹² Twenty years later, another collective biographer pronounced it to be ‘a model for that species of compositions.’¹³

Knapp’s plan as he began work on *Biographical Sketches* was to supplement the standard American biographical compendia, John Eliot’s *A Biographical Dictionary*¹⁴ and William Allen’s *An American Biographical and Historical Dictionary*,¹⁵ both published in 1809. In his own work he avoided the dictionary format, which he ‘found impractical’ in a group of sketches of such variable length and for which complete data was sometimes lacking; instead, Knapp preferred a more casual, personal-essay approach. Knapp also did not think it necessary ‘to be confined to the order of time.’¹⁶ Consequently, the individual subjects in *Biographical Sketches* appear in an order suggesting, first, those whom Knapp personally regarded most highly and, second, the more arbitrary point when Knapp—sand-

¹¹ Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, *Biographical Sketches of Eminent Lawyers, Statesmen, and Men of Letters* (Boston, 1821), p. 5, hereafter cited as *BS*. In his later works Knapp took a decidedly nationalistic view.

¹² Loring, *The Hundred Boston Orators*, p. 446.

¹³ Francis S. Drake, *Dictionary of American Biography; Including Men of the Time* (Boston, 1872), p. 516.

¹⁴ The complete title of Eliot’s work is: *A Biographical Dictionary: Containing a Brief Account of the First Settlers, and Other Eminent Characters Among the Magistrates, Ministers, Literary and Worthy Men, in New England* (Boston, 1809).

¹⁵ The full title of Allen’s work continues: *Containing an Account of the Lives, Characters and Writings of the Most Eminent Persons in North America from Its First Discovery to the Present Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 1809).

¹⁶ Knapp, *BS*, p. 5.

wiching the project between his law duties—got the sketches ready for publication.¹⁷

As an addendum to Eliot and Allen, *Biographical Sketches* had immediate and continuing value.¹⁸ Of the thirty-five figures in Knapp's collection, twenty-two men had not been described in Eliot's book and twenty-three had not appeared in Allen's dictionary. When Allen published his second edition in 1832, he added eight people from Knapp's group and, according to his notes, his information for three of those figures came from *Biographical Sketches*.¹⁹ In this way Knapp's original work became grafted to Allen's standard reference tool.

¹⁷ The notations indicate that three people other than Knapp contributed to *BS*. They were identified as 'A,' 'B,' and 'C.' The study of James Sullivan (pp. 291–313) was done by the first; that of Tristram Dalton (pp. 315–20) by the second. The third, 'C,' is credited with eight sketches: James Otis, Elkanah Leonard, Timothy Ruggles, John Sprague, Peleg Sprague, Joseph Cushing, George Leonard, and Thomas Hammond (pp. 321–45). Knapp used the Sullivan and Dalton sketches in *American Biography* (New York, 1833), pp. 328–35 (hereafter that work is cited as *AB*; see fn. 92 below for more publication data). Knapp listed 'A' as the author of the Sullivan sketch but gave no source for the Dalton piece. From the pen of 'C,' Knapp used only the piece on Elkanah Leonard, which he attributed to 'Holmes,' perhaps Abiel Holmes, the author of *American Annals* (Cambridge, Mass., 1805) and the father of Oliver Wendell Holmes. Nothing is known of Holmes's life prior to his attendance at Yale in 1780, but the general geographical area of the eight sketches by 'C,' Barnstable and Plymouth counties, Massachusetts, is not far from Woodstock, Connecticut, where Abiel Holmes was born. In the Leonard memoir, the author noted that in his youth he had been in Middleborough, Massachusetts, in August 1774, and remembered a long conversation with Elkanah Leonard (p. 329). At least two textual comments regarding his research suggest that the author had some scholarly experience such as the compiler of *American Annals* would have had, but the work of 'C,' nevertheless, is uncharacteristic of Abiel Holmes's careful, organized style. These eight sketches reflect the same haste and looseness of composition as the other parts of the book. Moreover, *BS* was not listed in the 'Catalogue of the Authors Used in This Work' when Holmes brought out his second edition of *American Annals*, using a somewhat altered title. See *The Annals of America*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1829), 1:ix–xvi.

¹⁸ For example, *BS* was the source of at least eight sketches in J. L. Blake's *A General Biographical Dictionary* (New York, 1835), pp. 261, 523, 539, 704, 722, 777, 797, and 857.

¹⁹ In his revised dictionary, Allen cited Knapp's *BS* in his biographies of Theophilus Parsons, Benjamin Pratt, and Samuel Sewall (pp. 633–34, 656, 689). In *Lectures on American Literature* (New York, 1829), pp. 129–30, Knapp discussed the writings of Eliot, Allen, and Holmes as representative of 'the biographical department of literature.' He found Eliot's work to be 'carelessly written, and more carelessly printed,' but he declared that it 'will do honor to his memory, and will be in the hands of all who wish to know any thing of the character of the early worthies of New-England.' Knapp described Allen as being more modern and having 'a more extensive acquaintance with

A much more significant use of *Biographical Sketches* has been its contributions to the monumental work *Sibley's Harvard Graduates 1642-1771*.²⁰ Twenty-eight of Knapp's subjects had been Harvard alumni. Seven, however, had been graduated after 1771, presently the cut-off date of the series. Of the remaining twenty-one, Knapp's sketches were used as source material for thirteen of the *Sibley's* studies, in some cases serving as the major reference.²¹ Knapp had, for example, been instrumental in saving the minor poet Thomas Kilby, class of 1723, from total obscurity.²²

Individual descriptions in Knapp's *Biographical Sketches* have served an enduring function as a resource for biographical information. Among the portraits arrayed in the Knapp canon, the biographies of Theophilus Parsons, Joseph Warren, and John Lathrop typify the contribution Knapp has offered to later historians. Theophilus Parsons (1750-1813), the chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court from 1806 until his death and the man under whom Knapp had studied law, received more extensive treatment than any other figure in *Biographical*

facts than most biographers. . . . It is said, that the publick are soon to be favored with a new edition of this work; we hope they will not be disappointed.' Of Holmes's *Annals*, he wrote that 'in its first editions it was a very correct chronicle of successive events, but the last edition is enriched by biographical notices and pertinent remarks, and is not only history itself, but a manual for future historians.' One of Knapp's more flowery sketches in *Female Biography* is of Allen's wife, Maria (d. 1829), whose father, John Wheelock, the second president of Dartmouth College, 'could have none but a scholar for a son-in-law.' See *Female Biography* (Philadelphia, 1843), p. 69; hereafter that work is cited as *FB*.

²⁰ This series, begun by John Langdon Sibley, was originally entitled *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts*. The first volume appeared in 1873. In this century it was continued by Clifford K. Shipton as *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*. Shipton's last volume (17), extending the coverage through 1771, was published in 1975. This series is hereafter cited in the text and notes as *Sibley's*.

²¹ Sketches utilizing *BS* were those of Elisha Cooke, Sr., class of 1657; Elisha Cooke, Jr., 1697; John Reed, 1697; Thomas Kilby, 1723; Jeremiah Gridley, 1725; Joseph Green, 1726; Timothy Ruggles, 1732; Benjamin Pratt, 1737; Joseph Cushing, 1752; Tristram Dalton, 1755; Joseph Warren, 1759; Joseph Orne, 1765; Benjamin West, 1768.

²² *Sibley's*, 7:193-96.

Sketches.²³ At times it seemed as though Knapp's purpose might have been primarily to celebrate the life of that man, a situation to which John Adams took exception, declaring that Chief Justice Francis Dana, who had only appeared as an occasional name in the book, was 'in no degree inferior to his successor in Office Chief Justice Parsons.'²⁴ The Parsons piece has the faults and the virtues of Knapp's other sketches, magnified by its length and the degree of Knapp's personal involvement with the subject. There is a first-draft quality to the style and a hardly discernible sense of organization, suggesting, if anything, a conversational reminiscence. Yet the effect of the whole is to make one acquainted with an admirable man whose wig is askew and whose mind is filled with law, wit, and enough eccentricities to make him truly worth knowing. Knapp's biographical portrait of Parsons (or portions of it) was used in Benjamin Franklin French's *Biographia Americana* (1825),²⁵ Caleb Cushing's *The History of the Present State of the Town of Newburyport* (1826),²⁶ and William Allen's second edition of *An American Biographical and Historical Dictionary* (1832),²⁷ finally appearing word-for-word in Knapp's *American Biography* (1833).²⁸ After that, the Parsons's sketch was often used in collective biographical works either with no reference to Knapp or by reference to his *American Biography*. However, this work on Parsons was effectively eclipsed by the publication of *A Memoir of Theophilus Parsons, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts; with Notices of Some of His Contemporaries* (Boston, 1859), written by Parsons's son of the same name. 'When he died,' the younger man wrote of his father, 'I

²³ Knapp, *BS*, pp. 37-77.

²⁴ John Adams to Knapp, January 26, 1822, *The Adams Papers*, ed. L. H. Butterfield. Massachusetts Historical Society, reel 124.

²⁵ French, *Biographia Americana* (New York, 1825), pp. 240-43.

²⁶ Cushing, *History of Newburyport* (Newburyport, Mass., 1826), p. 101.

²⁷ William Allen, *An American Biographical and Historical Dictionary* (Boston, 1832), pp. 633-34.

²⁸ Knapp, *AB*, pp. 211-23.

was but sixteen years old, and had little knowledge, and now have but few trustworthy recollections of him in his more public relations.²⁹ The volume is a somewhat priggish Victorian book addressed to the author's Cambridge circle. No mention was made of Knapp in the biography, although the younger Parsons did make use of the eulogy by Judge Isaac Parker, to which Knapp had also referred.³⁰ Understandably, the son's *Memoir* became the standard reference for Parsons's life, although Knapp was occasionally cited as a second source.³¹ As casual as Knapp's memorial piece may seem to a modern reader, historically it approaches the *ana* tradition of the eighteenth century, for its collection of disparate tidbits creates a rather well-rounded word portrait of Knapp's model jurist.

Knapp's biography of Revolutionary War hero Joseph Warren (1741-75) has also proven Knapp's service to historians and scholars. Warren, the most widely known figure in Knapp's collection, had been the subject of many studies before 1821, but Knapp's sketch became one of the frequently used sources on his life in the nineteenth century. Perhaps one reason for this success was Knapp's original anecdote concerning young Warren's determination to get into a locked room on the second floor of a Harvard building by means of an unstable rotten water spout. 'A spectator of this feat, and narrow escape, related this fact to me in the college yard, nearly half a century afterwards,' Knapp wrote, 'and the impression it made on his mind was so strong, that he seemed to feel the same emotion, as though it happened but an hour before.'³² Although this was the only item of value as a reference, the piece has had a distinguished history of usage. Knapp himself reprinted it with a lithograph of Warren in his *Boston Monthly Magazine*

²⁹ Theophilus Parsons, Jr., *Memoir*, p. 2.

³⁰ Parker's eulogy to the elder Parsons was reprinted in *Memoir* on pp. 403-22. This eulogy was also cited in Abiel Holmes, *The Annals of America*, 2:461.

³¹ Cf. S. Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1858-71), 2:1518.

³² Knapp, *BS*, p. 108.

(1826).³³ The biography of Warren was appropriated by James Thacher for his two-volume *American Medical Biography* (Boston, 1828),³⁴ and in 1838 Alexander H. Everett used the drain pipe story in his *Life of Warren*, which formed a part of *The Library of American Biography*. 'This little anecdote was related fifty years after the occurrence of the incident described,' Everett declared, 'that is, about the year 1807, by a person who was present at the time, and who pointed out the window, which was the scene of a part of the action. There is, therefore, little doubt of the correctness of the statement.'³⁵ Nevertheless, Everett gave no indication of his source. A description of Warren in S. Austin Allibone's *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors* cited 'Thacher's Ame. Med. Biog., ii. 161-170,' adding the brief reference '(by S. L. Knapp, and from Bost. Mag., June 1826).'³⁶ And finally, *Sibley's* tells the drain pipe story, citing Thacher's *American Medical Biography*.³⁷

John Lathrop (1772-1820), an adventurous but star-crossed older friend of Knapp's, might well have dropped beyond the bounds of effective historical recovery except for Knapp's efforts. It is evident that Samuel Kettell's three-volume *Specimens of American Poetry with Critical and Biographical Notes* (Boston, 1829) took its information about Lathrop from Knapp, adding one fact concerning Lathrop's poem 'The Speech on Canonicus' that Knapp said had been printed only in India.³⁸ Kettell's impressive 'Catalogue of American Poetry' had turned up an edition³⁹ that enabled him to add, 'It was reprinted in

³³ Knapp, 'Memoir of Joseph Warren,' pp. 1-10.

³⁴ In that work, Thacher wrote, 'The preceding memoir is taken from the *Monthly Magazine* published in Boston, June 1826, and is the production of Samuel L. Knapp, Esq.' Thacher, *Medical Biography*, 2:170.

³⁵ Jared Sparks, comp., *The Library of American Biography*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1834-38), 10:96-97.

³⁶ Allibone, *Critical Dictionary*, 3:2589.

³⁷ *Sibley's*, 14:510.

³⁸ Kettell, *Specimens of American Poetry*, 2:101-2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:392.

Boston, in 1803, but has been so little known among us, that a biographer of the poet was ignorant that it had ever passed through the American press.'⁴⁰

Knapp continued to be the recognized authority on Lathrop for many years. Indeed, the author of Lathrop's *DAB* article stated that 'the best sketch of Lathrop's life is to be found in S. L. Knapp's *Biog. Sketches of Eminent Lawyers, Statesmen, and Men of Letters* (1821)'.⁴¹ Recently, in 1981, Lewis Leary expanded Knapp's sketch into an article entitled 'John Lathrop, Jr.: The Quiet Poet of Federalist Boston,' published in this journal.⁴² Thus has Knapp's friend, the uncle of John Lothrop Motley, enjoyed an affable biographical history, with a secure position in American culture.

There is, however, a counterfeit among Knapp's shorter sketches in American literary biography. No doubt attracted by the family name, he wrote a vague 108-word comment on Francis Knapp, who, he asserted, 'in the beginning of the last century . . . resided in Watertown, near Boston.'⁴³ Knapp interpreted 'Atlantic shores' and 'wilds remote from public view' as New England references in Francis Knapp's 'To Mr. Pope on his Windsor-Forest' (when, in fact, they refer to Ireland) and, in so doing, provided the beginning for what would become in future years a fully developed ghost figure in American colonial letters.⁴⁴ Only recently were he and the others who contributed to the image of American Francis Knapp shown to have been in error. In 1966, Leo Lemay reported on his excellent detective work in an article in *The New England Quarterly*. The title of Lemay's essay tells the story: 'Francis Knapp: A Red Herring in Colonial Poetry.'⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:102. Knapp seemed to correct his oversight regarding Lathrop's poem in discussing Lathrop in his *Lectures on American Literature*, p. 178.

⁴¹ *DAB*, 11:16.

⁴² Lewis Leary, 'John Lathrop, Jr.: The Quiet Poet of Federalist Boston,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 91 (1981):89-89.

⁴³ Knapp, *BS*, p. 140.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Knapp, *BS*, pp. 141-43.

⁴⁵ Lemay, 'Francis Knapp,' pp. 233-37.

Clearly, *Biographical Sketches* is a collection that has figured in a consequential way in American biography. 'If my book adds but little to the common stock of knowledge the example of such an effort is something,' Knapp told John Adams when he presented a copy to him.⁴⁶ Had this collective biographer seen his plan for a second volume to fruition, the example would have had even greater importance. 'The second volume will, I have no doubt, be better suited to the taste of the public than the first, for in that I shall more freely avail myself of the labours of my friends,' he wrote in the preface.⁴⁷ *Biographical Sketches* ended on page 360 with the statement 'End of Volume I.' The second volume, however, never appeared. Booksellers and librarians who were not aware of this fact have sometimes sought futilely to complete a set that does not exist. One might speculate that Knapp did not pursue a second volume because his friends were not as responsive as he had hoped they would be. At any rate, after the publication of Volume I Knapp seems to have applied himself for the next three years exclusively to trying to further his law career.

III

Knapp's second collective biography, *Sketches of Public Character, Drawn from the Living and the Dead* (New York, 1830),⁴⁸ was written under the pseudonym 'Ignatius Loyola Robertson, L.L.D.,' but there was no real intention of concealing the identity of the author. Set primarily in the young nation's capital, where Knapp attempted to support his family with his law practice from 1826 to 1829, the idea of the book must have come from the anonymously published *Letters from Washington, on the Constitution and Laws; with Sketches of Some of the*

⁴⁶ Knapp to John Adams, August 30, 1821, *Adams Papers*, reel 452. To Knapp's letter John Adams eventually replied: 'I hope you will continue your researches into the history of these characters [*i.e.*, early Americans] and describe them as well as you have these already printed.' John Adams to Knapp, January 26, 1822, *Adams Papers*, reel 124.

⁴⁷ Knapp, *BS*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ Hereafter, *Sketches of Public Character* is cited as *SPC*.

Prominent Public Characters of the United States. Written during the Winter of 1817-18, by a Foreigner (Washington, 1818).⁴⁹ Knapp's book was also a series of letters to a friend abroad, purportedly by a visitor who had 'seen and heard much during the seventeen years I have resided in the United States.'⁵⁰ As in *Biographical Sketches*, Knapp's first and fullest consideration was of a person who had been important in his life. Here it was Daniel Webster, whom Knapp had known as a fellow student at Dartmouth College and as junior counselor in law court and with whom he had shared honors in 1826 as the other of Boston's two official eulogists of Adams and Jefferson. In spite of these associations, Knapp maintained the guise of a detached reporter throughout the 'letter.'⁵¹

Webster could not have been displeased with the piece, for in 1831 Knapp was allowed to expand it into the first authorized book-length biography of the man, *A Memoir of the Life of Daniel Webster*, which was revised as a second edition in 1835.⁵² Almost devoid of personal references or private insights that, if inappropriate, would have given the work associational value, the biography was designed to appeal to the taste of the time. Written in ornate language⁵³ and containing long quotations from Webster's speeches, the book is today a tedious half-told story, for in 1830 Webster's most interesting

⁴⁹ In *SPC*, Knapp praised this volume: 'Some of the sketches of the great men, in and about Washington, . . . are splendid and original, and give a very good view of their character' (p. 125).

⁵⁰ Knapp, *SPC*, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Letters from Washington* was revised, enlarged, and published as *Gallery of American Portraits* in 1830 by its pseudonymous author George Watterston, first librarian of Congress. Following the 'letter' on Webster, Watterston added, 'A very correct and well-written sketch of Mr. W. has been recently given in a work lately published, and attributed to the pen of Mr. Knapp' (p. 75).

⁵² The first edition was printed in Boston; the second edition was printed in New York.

⁵³ To quote but one example, Knapp wrote that Webster 'stops not to view the groves of the academy, the fountains of inspiration, nor the Mountains where range the songs of the never-dying Muse. Neither the wisdom of Socrates, nor the justice of the Areopagus, nor even the eloquence of Pericles, or Demonsthenes, detain him for a moment.' Knapp, *Memoir of Daniel Webster*, p. 55.

years were still to come. Yet Knapp's descriptions of Webster's oratory⁵⁴ and his physical appearance⁵⁵ remained the standard presentations of the man for twenty years.⁵⁶

Although he was not treated separately, Aaron Burr appeared as a point of discussion in a letter entitled 'The President.'⁵⁷ Later, after becoming personally acquainted with Burr in New York, Knapp expanded on his subject in *The Life of Colonel Burr* (New York, 1835), a potboiler for the author who was struggling with declining health and finances. Historically, however, this *Life* is noteworthy, for it was the first book-length biography of Burr,⁵⁸ published the year before his death, and it does contain some bits of source material.⁵⁹

If Knapp's 1830 sketches of Webster and Burr exist today only as biographical curiosities, at least two of the other selections in *Sketches of Public Character* have survived as items of intrinsic value. Knapp's review of the life and work of his friend, the 'deaf and dumb poet' James M. Nack is still the best early piece on this remarkable man who died in 1879.⁶⁰ A second subject, Joseph Bartlett, a lawyer and adventurer, Knapp apparently admired less, for he used the subterfuge of attributing his story to 'a manuscript . . . [put] in my hand from which . . . I have extracted the following account.'⁶¹ The story involves Bartlett's shenanigans at Harvard, his activities with society bucks in London, and such carryings-on that eventually

⁵⁴ Knapp, *SPC*, p. 22; this was somewhat expanded in *Memoir of Daniel Webster*, p. 221.

⁵⁵ Knapp, *SPC*, pp. 6-7; Knapp, *Memoir*, p. 229.

⁵⁶ See Loring, *The Hundred Boston Orators*, pp. 443-45.

⁵⁷ See Knapp, *SPC*, pp. 69-71.

⁵⁸ Holmes Alexander, *Aaron Burr: The Proud Pretender* (Westport, Conn., 1970), p. 353.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Herbert S. Parmet and Marie B. Hecht, *Aaron Burr: Portrait of an Ambitious Man* (New York, 1967), pp. 35, 37, 346.

⁶⁰ Knapp, *SPC*, pp. 170-75. This appeared in the *New-York Mirror*, July 10, 1830, p. 6, credited to 'Knapp.' The *Mirror* printed many of Nack's poems. See *DAB*, 13:377-78.

⁶¹ Knapp, *SPC*, p. 219.

the phrase 'as odd as Jo Bartlett' became a common term to describe a truly bizarre person.⁶² The author of the *DAB* sketch suspected that Knapp was 'too prejudiced to be entirely trustworthy,' although he still depended heavily on Knapp's account of Bartlett.⁶³ In *American Biography* Knapp used the sketch of Bartlett without the pseudo-manuscript frame.⁶⁴ There, in the margin of the American Antiquarian Society's copy, he received what appears to be a contemporary endorsement. Someone signing himself 'CG' identified a 'Mrs. Fxxxx' as 'Mrs. Fenno' in the text and penciled 'All true' beside Knapp's description of one of Bartlett's most audacious antics.⁶⁵

To describe *Sketches of Public Character* as a collective biography is perhaps to stretch the limits of the genre. It might be more accurately defined as a sequel to Knapp's *Lectures on American Literature*,⁶⁶ a book that treats the development of American culture. Although the biographical pieces occupy the major portion of *Sketches of Public Character*, they seem almost incidental to Knapp's comments on the American mind, the Library of Congress, and the White House, as well as to his chauvinistic calls for the United States government to become a patron of the arts and to found a national university. In *Sketches of Public Character*, as in *Lectures on American Literature*, Knapp was decidedly nationalistic in his outlook. His only derogatory remarks were aimed at John Randolph's attacks on John Quincy Adams, a reflection of Knapp's personal, not sectional, bias. Typical of Knapp's tone throughout the volume were the 'letters' from New York and Boston which dealt with those cultural centers as contributing parts to the national whole and Knapp's observation that in the early years of the Republic 'The East, North, and South had many things to

⁶² Knapp, *SPC*, pp. 219-40.

⁶³ See *DAB*, 2:8-9.

⁶⁴ Knapp, *AB*, pp. 23-30.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁶ See the introduction to the reprint of Knapp's *Lectures*, ed. Richard Beale Davis and Ben Harris McClary (Gainesville, Fla., 1961), p. iv.

learn, and not a small part of them was a better acquaintance with each other.'⁶⁷

IV

Knapp's *Female Biography*, copyrighted in 1833 and printed at least five times by 1846,⁶⁸ has been all but ignored by the feminist historians, perhaps because of his almost monomaniacal emphasis on motherhood. Writing on the topic of women's biography, he said, 'While here and there a noble mother is mentioned, as it were on the margin of a leaf in history, thousands pass away without a memorial.'⁶⁹ Equal education for women was, however, always a major national goal for Knapp, and in his recognition of equal educational rights for women he was far ahead of his time.⁷⁰ One negative feature of Knapp's book is the many sketches of ancient and European women that he copied from standard English references, although fifty of the total 172 sketches are of American women, including two American Indians. Actually, by page count, almost half of the 489-page text deals with these fifty American women. Knapp gathered these sketches from obscure newspaper accounts, from friends, or from his own experiences. 'Nearly fifty of them are from the pen of Colonel Knapp,' the *New-York Mirror* stated, 'and many of those were personally known to him.'⁷¹ The roster of women in *Female Biography* is an intriguing one and must, in due course, receive more attention in the field of feminist historiography.

While the quality of composition in *Female Biography* is fairly consistent, the biographical approaches are even more

⁶⁷ Knapp, *SPC*, p. 218.

⁶⁸ The first issue of Knapp's *FB* is easily identifiable because the title page contains an excerpt from a verse by Knapp's friend Samuel Woodworth, erroneously attributed to 'Wordsworth,' the result no doubt of the typesetter's difficulty with Knapp's atrocious handwriting.

⁶⁹ Knapp, *FB*, p. 270.

⁷⁰ See especially Knapp, *FB*, pp. xi-xii.

⁷¹ *New-York Mirror*, March 8, 1834, p. 303.

varied here than in any of Knapp's other collective biographies. They range from his appreciative, almost non-factual, but highly regarded memoir of Abigail Adams, which he wrote for the *New-England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*⁷² immediately after her death, to the exemplarily factual sketch of Elizabeth Ann Breese Morse, the mother of S. F. B. Morse.⁷³ Some sketches have a gossipy bent, such as those of Dorothy Scott, the widow of John Hancock,⁷⁴ Margaretta V. Fougeres, whose husband was 'the author of her misfortunes,'⁷⁵ and Martha Coffin Derby, who went from being an international beauty to a valetudinarian.⁷⁶ Knapp also gave special treatment to his friend, the American Mary Wollstonecraft, who had contributed three articles to the *Boston Monthly Magazine*.⁷⁷ Indeed, all of the best sketches are of women with whom Knapp had direct or indirect associations.

Two other contemporary studies of women, Rufus Wilmot Griswold's *The Female Poets of America* (Philadelphia, 1849) and Sarah Josepha Hale's *Women's Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women* (New York, 1853)⁷⁸ conceded no debt to Knapp's pioneering effort, but a review of the women represented in these three collections betrays undeniable parallels. There is a possibility that in some instances Griswold and Hale might have fallen back upon earlier sources that Knapp himself

⁷² That memoir appeared in the *New-England Galaxy* on November 13, 1818, pp. 18-19. It was reprinted throughout the United States. See, for example, *The Port Folio*, 4th ser. 7 (1819):168-71, where it was entitled 'The Character of Mrs. Adams,' and headed, 'an unknown writer has announced the eulogism of eminent virtues combined with a masculine understanding, and adorned with all the courtesies of polished society.'

⁷³ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 301-3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 460-63.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-38.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-93.

⁷⁷ Since she bore the same name, this Mary has sometimes been confused with her more famous English sister-in-law. See William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed., W. Clark Durant (London, 1927), pp. 203-6.

⁷⁸ Notice the discussion of the use made of this work in Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 1:x, hereafter cited as *N.A.W.*

could have used, but the frequent recurrence of key words or unusual word sequences suggests a common parentage for several of the Griswold-Hale studies. Often Griswold and Hale were able to add material from other sources, but the implicit use of *Female Biography* is still evident.⁷⁹

One flagrant instance of plagiarism can be easily proved. Knapp had been a close friend of the father of Francisca Anna Pascalis Canfield (1803-33), and in his work Knapp included a lengthy biography and several selections of her writings as a memorial to both daughter and father, the latter having died less than two months after the former.⁸⁰ There was, however, a careless typographical error in Knapp's text: 'Mrs. Canfield died on the twenty-eighth of May, 1823 [*sic*]. Her father was disconsolate at his loss, and never again resumed his cheerfulness or his pursuits. He lingered until July, 1833, when he followed his daughter to the grave.'⁸¹ In Griswold's work this passage became, 'she died on the twenty-eighth of May, 1823, before completing the twentieth year of her age. Dr. Pascalis, whose chief hopes were centered in his daughter, abandoned his pursuits, and after lingering through ten disconsolate years died in the summer of 1833.'⁸² In point of fact, the time from 1823 to 1833 was a highly productive period of Dr. Felix Alexander Pascalis's life. In his unacknowledged use of Knapp's work, Griswold also took Mrs. Canfield's representative poems from Knapp, changing the title of one from 'to Sxxx Lxxx' to 'Edith.'⁸³

Sarah Josepha Hale tended to be a better paraphraser and, indeed, a better researcher than Griswold, and she usually

⁷⁹ Cf. the piece on Sarah Louisa P. Smith, originally published by Knapp in the *New-York Mirror*, March 10, 1832, pp. 284-85 and repeated in *FB*, pp. 454-60. Parts of this were used in Griswold, *The Female Poets*, p. 212, and Hale, *Women's Record*, p. 510.

⁸⁰ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 109-38.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸² Griswold, *The Female Poets*, pp. 135-36.

⁸³ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 136-37; Griswold, *The Female Poets*, p. 136.

contributed significant fresh material to her subjects. Only in one instance did she seem to be totally dependent on Knapp. In her study of Marcia Burns Van Ness, the Washington society leader whom Knapp had mentioned in *Sketches of Public Character*,⁸⁴ Hale simply appropriated an abbreviated version of the sketch from Knapp's *Female Biography*.⁸⁵

Griswold, Hale, and all writers dealing with Susanna Haswell Rowson are indebted to Knapp's 'A Memoir of the Author,' originally prefixed to Mrs. Rowson's *Charlotte's Daughter; or, The Three Orphans* (Boston, 1828) and then reprinted in *Female Biography*.⁸⁶ Having known Mrs. Rowson well, Knapp was able to leave this record which was a basic tool for both Elias Nason's *A Memoir of Susanna Rowson* (Albany, 1870)⁸⁷ and R. W. G. Vail's study 'Susanna Haswell Rowson, The Author of *Charlotte Temple*: A Bibliographical Study.'⁸⁸ The 'Memoir' is also cited as a major source in the *DAB* and in *Notable American Women*.⁸⁹

Characteristically, the authors of *Notable American Women* documented their work by references to Griswold or Hale; only one other article, that on Susanna Wright (1697-1784), was directly credited to Knapp. In writing this sketch for *Female Biography*, Knapp remarked that his source was a memoir 'offered, more than eighteen years ago, by one grave matron to the memory of another, much her senior. . . . Such memorials are invaluable,' he added. 'They are the true elements of biography and history and grow fresher by the lapse

⁸⁴ Knapp, *SPC*, p. 140.

⁸⁵ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 475-77; Hale, *Women's Record*, p. 543.

⁸⁶ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 397-403.

⁸⁷ See especially pp. 35, 49, 54, 56, 194.

⁸⁸ Vail's study appeared in *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 42(1932): 47-160. See especially the reference to Knapp on p. 72.

⁸⁹ *DAB*, 16:204; *NAW*, 3:204. Knapp's sketch of Rowson also contains information on 'The Standard of Liberty,' a missing verse by Mrs. Rowson. See Roger E. Stoddard, 'Lost Books: American Poetry Before 1821,' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 76(1982):33.

of time.⁹⁰ The same could be said of other unrecognized pieces in *Female Biography*.

V

Although Knapp would produce several more books before his death in 1838, *American Biography*, published first in 1833, completed his tetrad of collective biographies. Several of the sketches in it had originally been part of an 'American Biography' series, including both males and females, in the *New-York Mirror* in the early 1830s. At that time, George Pope Morris, the *Mirror* editor, had written appreciatively (if hyperbolically) of Knapp: 'Many of his biographical sketches have been published in nearly every paper in the Union.'⁹¹ The collection *American Biography* was published as Part 6 of the American edition of *The Treasury of Knowledge, and Library of Reference* (New York, 1833), which had experienced great success in its ambitious original British edition.⁹² In the advertisement printed in the front, the publisher of the American edition noted, 'We consulted the publick taste in regard to our selection of the editor.'⁹³ There was no question in contemporary minds that Knapp was an obvious choice for the job.

⁹⁰ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 484–85.

⁹¹ This accolade to Knapp appeared in the *New York Mirror*, October 6, 1832, p. 107.

⁹² The original American edition of *The Treasury of Knowledge, and Library of Reference* (New York, 1832–33) was published in two bound volumes. Each volume was made up of three parts, the pages of each part numbered separately. Only parts 5 and 6 differed significantly in content from the British edition, and in both instances Knapp was responsible for the new material. Noting the elimination of material of exclusively British interest from part 5, entitled *Millions of Facts*, the American publisher wrote: 'In the place of the matter excluded, the publishers have obtained from Samuel L. Knapp, Esq., a sketch of the Literature of the Jews; a succinct History of American Literature, from the earliest times, giving a sketch of some of the more important writers and their works; and also brief annals of American History, with a cursory view of the rise and progress of the Useful Arts among us; other incidental facts as they came to the mind of the author, which he thought might be acceptable to the miscellaneous reader, have been added. The additions to this part have been written in paragraphs, with as much variety as possible, and in a style conforming to that assumed by the English writer.' *Millions of Facts*, p. 4. Part 6 was Knapp's *American Biography*.

⁹³ Knapp, *AB*, p. iv.

In the 'Preface' Knapp sounded his 1821 refrain that 'there are names not to be found in my pages as important as those that are there.' Knapp did include some of the 'truly great,' notably Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin, but his emphasis was on the 'demi-great' whose 'individual exertion' combined, each with the others, to form Knapp's concept of American culture. Concerning style, he decried the 'sameness' of 'most biographical dictionaries . . . that makes them dull and tedious. . . . Characters follow each other in such a work, as grave-stones in a church-yard, with but little variety in their shape, size, or inscription: the slab, the pyramid, the urn, and stone with rounded top, mostly make up all the fashions of monuments for the memory of the dead, . . . while dates of birth and death, with now and then a rhyme more remarkable for its solemn stupidity, than for its taste, make up the whole literature of cemeteries.'⁹⁴ By implication, he promised a more varied and lively text.

In *Biographical Sketches*, Knapp's emphasis had been on lawyers, and in *Sketches of Public Character* it was on politicians. In *American Biography*, there was a tendency to focus on the medical profession, perhaps out of deference to his helper, Dr. John W. Francis, who provided most of the articles on physicians.⁹⁵ John Sanderson's nine-volume *Biography of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Philadelphia, 1823-27) was the source of as many as forty-five sketches in this work. Some articles were signed with such familiar names as Gulian Verplanck, E. S. Gardner, and G. P. Osgood;⁹⁶ others have source citations referring to specific books, magazines, or newspapers. But a sizable number of the biographies are easily recognizable

⁹⁴ Knapp, *AB*, p. 6.

⁹⁵ Some of these sketches were later used with Francis's permission in Stephen W. Williams's *American Medical Dictionary: or, Memoirs of Eminent Physicians, Embracing Principally Those Who Have Died Since the Publication of Dr. Thacher's Work on the Same Subject* (Greenfield, Mass., 1845), pp. viii, xiii, et seq.

⁹⁶ See my note 'William Cullen Bryant's Sketch of his Father in *American Biography* (1833),' *American Literature* 54(1983):635-37.

as Knapp's work. Eighteen of the subjects are included from *Biographical Sketches*, although one of these men, Joseph Orne, is represented by the article from Thacher's *Medical Biography*.⁹⁷

Characteristic of Knapp's work is his insistence upon placing his characters within the context of American culture. Typically, he included an essay on printing in his sketch of Cadwalader Colden. Knapp added a discourse on the philanthropic spirit in his sketches of Isaiah Thomas⁹⁸ and Israel Thorndike, and in the sketch of Nathaniel Tracy Knapp lamented the country's deplorable treatment of its heroes. These sharp préces threaded throughout the text save many of the articles from the aridities that are usually associated with early collective biography. But Knapp's strength was his private knowledge of some of his subjects, among them his father-in-law, the Revolutionary War veteran and longtime quartermaster general of Massachusetts, Amasa Davis, his adventurous friend Nathaniel H. Carter, and the much-mourned son of his mentor J. T. Buckingham. Some pieces were based on personal interviews. Knapp's study of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, for example, was the last 'likeness' of Carroll composed during his lifetime,⁹⁹ and Knapp's piece on Samuel Welch reflected a visit in 1822 with that venerable man, then claiming to be 112 years of age.

Knapp took pride in the amount of history he had been able to tuck into the sketches, declaring at one point that his 'notes on conversations with more than one hundred persons who were in the battle of Bunker's-hill' had been 'condensed in the life of Col. Prescott in a few pages.'¹⁰⁰ Biographical sketches of

⁹⁷ See Knapp, *AB*, p. 413.

⁹⁸ In his series 'Familiar Rambling Epistles from Boston,' written for the *New-York Mirror*, Knapp discussed the American Antiquarian Society, remembered its founder, Isaiah Thomas as 'a decided Whig and a flaming son of liberty,' and lamented the recent death of the Society's second librarian, C. C. Baldwin. *New York Mirror*, July 20, 1836, p. 36.

⁹⁹ The sketch of Carroll was originally published in the *New-York Mirror*, August 4, 1832, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Knapp, *AB*, pp. 7-8.

four American Indians, Paugus, Powhatan, Philip, and Tecumseh, added a native touch. Inventors, industrialists, and merchants also claimed Knapp's attention. He was apparently interested in getting all elements of the American religious microcosm between the boards of his book, for in addition to sketches about ministers from most of the Protestant denominations, Knapp included his study of the Catholic priest Fr. Francis Matignon that had been originally published in the *New-England Galaxy and Masonic Magazine*.¹⁰¹ About fifty of the 188 sketches in *American Biography* are of individuals who were important in Knapp's mind but who were ultimately not considered significant enough to merit places in the *DAB*. Today, some of the egalitarian assemblages of data and impressions that Knapp composed offer the prospect of rich harvests for discerning researchers; the work is a virtual cultural/biographical *cabinet de curiosité*.¹⁰²

Compiled in the same year, *Female Biography* and *American Biography* make appropriate companions, providing as they do several husband-and-wife biographies. In addition to the inevitable sketches about George and Martha Washington and John and Abigail Adams, there are sketches of couples less famous: Henry and Lucia Knox, John Hancock and Dorothy Quincy Hancock Scott, John and Judith Sargent Murray, William and Elizabeth Gray, Samuel and Phoebe Phillips, and David and Martha Laurens Ramsey.

At the time, much was written about *American Biography*,¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Knapp's sketch appeared in the *New-England Galaxy*, September 25, 1818, p. 3.

¹⁰² See the index to Knapp's *AB*, pp. 409-12. The sketch of Tecumseh was accidentally omitted in this listing.

¹⁰³ The reviewer in the *New-England Magazine* characteristically approved of *American Biography*, adding, 'But there is one drawback. It is printed with a censurable disregard to typographical accuracy. The author quotes occasionally a passage in the Latin language, when it is necessary to illustrate his subject; but these passages are always so execrably printed, that a decent Latin scholar would find it impossible to understand them without a very inconvenient amount of labor. This is a serious thing. Either a book is worth printing, or it is not. If it is worth printing, it ought to be correctly printed. Publishers mistake their own interest grievously, when they hurry into the world a book with all the imperfections of careless printing on its hand, for the sake of a small saving, or of anticipating a rival.' *New-England Magazine* 6 (1834):435.

but Evert and George Duyckinck summed up the contemporary critical estimate of the work. They defined the collection as 'one of the most valuable of [Knapp's] many productions The volume does not profess to furnish more than a selection from the many eminent names which have graced our annals, and in this selection the author has been guided, in many instances, rather by his individual tastes and preferences than by the actual eminence of the persons introduced. His sketches are anecdotal and spirited, drawing largely in many cases on his own fund of personal recollection, and the work forms an agreeable and varied miscellany.'¹⁰⁴

In spite of this high regard, *American Biography* is now a little-known source of American biography. For although it has its own pagination, is equipped with full and independent bibliographical paraphernalia, and may have been issued separately at least once, it has remained embedded among the encyclopedic trivia of *The Treasury or Knowledge, and Library of Reference*, a miscellany that served the laudable purpose of diffusing knowledge in the nineteenth century but one that would be taken seriously as a scholarly tool by few biographers today. Reviewing the *Treasury of Knowledge* in 1834, the *New-England Magazine* emphasized this very fact, focusing its attention on *American Biography* while disparaging the other scrapbookish portion of the the collection.¹⁰⁵ In many libraries, including that of the American Antiquarian Society, *American Biography* does not appear in the card catalogue under Knapp's name or as a separate title and can be ferreted out only through the title card of *The Treasury of Knowledge, and Library of Reference*.

VI

This paper opened with a brief discussion of the questionable validity of Knapp's biographical sketch in the *DAB*. That

¹⁰⁴ Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck, *Cyclopaedia of American Literature Embracing Personal and Critical Notices of Authors*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1881), 1:755.

¹⁰⁵ *New-England Magazine* 6(1834):434.

piece, however, is not his only representation in that compendium. His works are cited as source material in the bibliographies of fifteen of the sketches,¹⁰⁶ some of which have been previously noted. One sketch, that of John Louis Ann Magdalen Lefebvre de Cheverus, the first Catholic bishop of Boston, mentions 'Col. Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, the litterateur, for whom [Cheverus] procured an honorary degree from Paris.'¹⁰⁷ James Spear Loring, in *The Hundred Boston Orators*, seemed to imply that the honor was related to Knapp's 'biographical memoir of the venerable prelate,'¹⁰⁸ which was featured in the first issue of his *Boston Monthly Magazine*.¹⁰⁹ Of the fifteen *DAB* bibliographical references to Knapp, three are less than complimentary. That concerning the sketch of Joseph Bartlett has already been mentioned. In another entry, Knapp's *Life of Thomas Eddy* (1834) is described as 'an unorganized collection of narratives and eulogy by the author and others,'¹¹⁰ and finally, his *Life of Timothy Dexter* (1838) is dubbed 'unreliable.'¹¹¹

In defense of the last two works, it should be noted that the *Life of Thomas Eddy* might well be considered an early example of the life-and-letters genre that would assume great vogue in the next generation. The *Life* is a printed collection of all the marginally cogent Eddy-related letters that Knapp could acquire. In the British edition (London, 1836)¹¹² some of the more tangential items were dropped. Concerning Knapp's last book, his *Life of Timothy Dexter*, time may have played havoc

¹⁰⁶ References to Knapp occur in the following biographies in the *DAB*: Bartlett, 2:8-9; Cheverus, 4:61-63; Dexter, 5:282; Eddy, 6:15; English, 6:165; Green, 7:553; Gridley, 7:611; Lathrop, 11:16; Matignon, 12:408-09; Nack, 12:377-78; Read, 15:425-27; Rowson, 16:204; Stuart, 18:164; Sumner, 18:215-16; Webster, 18:592.

¹⁰⁷ *DAB*, 4:61.

¹⁰⁸ Loring, *The Hundred Boston Orators*, p. 446.

¹⁰⁹ *Boston Monthly Magazine* 1 (1825):1-21.

¹¹⁰ *DAB*, 6:15.

¹¹¹ *DAB*, 5:282.

¹¹² The American edition of *The Life of Thomas Eddy*, published in 1834 by Conner and Cooke, had 394 pages, whereas the British edition was reduced to 264 pages.

with Knapp's childhood memories of that eccentric Newburyport citizen, but the book was still John Marquand's major source for his two classic studies of Dexter.¹¹³

VII

Surely any author deserves the consideration of having the corpus of his writings evaluated in terms of his stated goals. In this respect, throughout his mature life Knapp had a firmly stated philosophy and purpose, one that he repeatedly expounded—to save anecdotes and other biographical information which would help future generations remember some of the relatively minor figures and events that had contributed to the development of this nation. 'In the next generation,' he wrote to John Adams in 1821, 'it will be more difficult than at the present time to gather any account of what happened previous to the Revolution except such facts as are now faithfully recorded.'¹¹⁴ By the time Knapp laid down his pen, the Revolutionary period itself had virtually passed beyond the pale of personal recollection and the early years of the Republic were fast receding from memory. Bridging this gap, Knapp usually left major figures to other authors, devoting his restricted time to the lives of minor figures, a process by which he could more easily 'add something to the common stock of knowledge.'¹¹⁵

However, in Knapp's mind, there was nothing sacred about

¹¹³ John P. Marquand evaluated Knapp's work on Dexter as 'a work of importance, if only because Mr. Knapp in his boyhood had seen Dexter and the Dexter palace and he had spent his childhood and youth in this Federalist period, which was still vividly imprinted on his memory in 1838.' John P. Marquand, *Timothy Dexter Revisited* (Boston, 1960), p. 21.

Knapp's study of Dexter had been the topic of a rather strong attack by William Cleaves Todd, 'Timothy Dexter, Known as "Lord Timothy Dexter," of Newburyport, Mass.: An Inquiry into His Life and True Character,' published in his *Biographical and Other Articles* (Boston, 1901), pp. 104-27. Noting Todd's 'schoolmasterly lucidity,' Marquand concluded: 'We are all, except on rare occasions, imprisoned in our age, and subjected to fleeting fashions—Lord Dexter, Knapp, William Cleaves Todd, . . . and I am with them.' Marquand, *Timothy Dexter Revisited*, pp. 22, 23.

¹¹⁴ Knapp to John Adams, August 30, 1821, *Adams Papers*, reel 452.

¹¹⁵ Printed letter, signed and dated January 7, 1820, by Knapp. See footnote 10 for full citation.

this 'common stock of knowledge'; it was merely an assortment of source materials to be sifted and utilized as needed by future generations. Biography was never unequivocal. Knapp firmly believed that each generation, using all the resources at its disposal, should rethink and rewrite the biographies of its people. 'The biographer should not servilely copy his predecessors. . . . He should study the character faithfully from all the light he can obtain, and draw from the images of his mind; then every likeness is in a degree an original,' he declared. Knapp's final statement on this subject is itself an example of how time and experience can sometimes make reinterpretation necessary. 'The dead,' Knapp wrote, 'are publick property, and should be used for the benefit of mankind.'¹¹⁶ If regarded from a twentieth-century perspective, this statement would be a cold naturalistic observation, but in Knapp's mind it was a warm humanistic pledge.

In evaluating Knapp's sketches, one should also be reminded of the early nineteenth century's taste in popular biography. A reader, in the first place, hoped more for philosophical instruction from the life of the subject than for a strict recitation of facts. And caught up in the popular literary notion of romantic death, he was apt to be more interested in the subject's death scene than in his life's accomplishments.¹¹⁷ Consequently, a historian using twentieth-century critical techniques on Knapp's sketches will find his work lacking. Such criteria would be as invalid as charging Knapp with medical ineptitude for using contemporary terminology in diagnosing Mary Jane Grosvenor's illness as 'wandering pains' and attributing Marcia Hall's death to 'Fell Phtisic.'¹¹⁸ Indeed, much of nineteenth-century popular literature, both biographical and fictional, has been victimized by scholars who have been unwilling to go

¹¹⁶ Knapp, *AB*, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ See Lewis O. Saum, 'Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,' *American Quarterly* 26(1974):477-95.

¹¹⁸ Knapp, *FB*, pp. 257, 260.

through the philosophical act of studying items within their cultural context.

It is also important to remember that the writing of biography was initially an avocation for Knapp. While trying to support his family by the practice of law, Knapp became more and more involved in writing. By 1830, he had abandoned the bar in favor of authorship, but since he never achieved financial security, he found it necessary to grind out a steady stream of prose in various forms to meet his day-to-day obligations. Recalling Knapp's last years, Henry T. Tuckerman wrote with obvious sympathy and regard about Knapp's 'prolific but ill-paid labours.'¹¹⁹

What were Knapp's faults as a biographer? The judgment of the *DAB* that Knapp's style was 'ornate, laudatory, and patriotic,' we should dismiss as symptomatic of the taste of the time.¹²⁰ The remark that he allowed 'too much sway to the personal admiration . . . for many of his subjects'¹²¹—a foible of which he pronounced himself guilty in his *American Biography* preface—might best be taken as an indication of Knapp's humanity, for Knapp himself censured the biographer who 'does not write with the freedom of a generous nature.'¹²² It is evident that Knapp usually wrote *con amore*. Yet, even in his most fervent writings, he is more guilty of exhibiting an effusive style, reflecting the spread-eagle oratory at which he excelled, than of writing hagiographies.

Knapp's single great fault as a biographer and writer (his collective biographical pieces probably made up less than an eighth of his total output) was his carelessness born of haste. In an obituary notice otherwise glowing with praise and friendship, the editor of the *New-York Mirror* took the late author to

¹¹⁹ Henry T. Tuckerman, 'A Memoir of the Author,' published as an introduction to John W. Francis, *Old New York: or, Reminiscences of the Past Sixty Years* (New York, 1866), p. xlv.

¹²⁰ *DAB*, 10:452.

¹²¹ Smith, *History of Newburyport*, p. 326.

¹²² Knapp, *AB*, p. 6.

task for his pococurantism, declaring that Knapp's manuscripts 'were usually sent to the press without sufficient attention to strict accuracy of composition.'¹²³ But Knapp was not always guilty of wanton disregard. There is reason to attribute some of his trouble to inadvertent errors developing out of the pressures under which he worked. And the few remaining erratic samples of his handwriting testify to the enormity of the chore of editors and typesetters who dealt with Knapp's texts.¹²⁴ But Knapp must be judged by us as he was by his contemporaries: too prone to precipitateness, which resulted in productions that were at times spoiled by inaccuracies and awkward construction. Occasionally cavalier in his research and organization, often incalculable in his script, and usually too rushed to proof-read adequately, Knapp's results were sometimes slipshod. But they were not always so and certainly not often enough to warrant the dismissal of his biographical studies as being 'wholly untrustworthy.'¹²⁵

As part of its 175th-anniversary observance, the Boston Athenæum recently issued a poster featuring a selection of its oil paintings and portrait busts. Commenting on the pictorial study that was used as the cover illustration of *The Magazine Antiques*, Wendell Garrett editorialized: "These are the heroes who have shaped our ideas of what is most prizeworthy as "Americans." These men and women stand for our collective faith. . . . These, in sum, are the national gods and minor heroes whom Americans admire and whose deeds and traits we deem to be good.'¹²⁶ Of the nineteen Americans represented in the photograph, Knapp had concerned himself with sixteen individuals in his biographical work. The lives of Washington,

¹²³ *New-York Mirror*, July 21, 1838, p. 31.

¹²⁴ In the archives of the American Antiquarian Society, Knapp's letter accepting membership in the Society, dated July 14, 1814, is uncharacteristically neat and legible. Other materials in the collections of Columbia University, Dartmouth College, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania reflect the extreme nature of the problem.

¹²⁵ *DAB*, 10:452.

¹²⁶ Garrett's comments appeared in *The Magazine Antiques* 124(1983):103.

Lafayette, Franklin, and Webster were treated frequently in both separate and collective studies. Those of John Quincy Adams, William Tudor, and Washington Allston appeared in *Sketches of Public Character*. Hannah Adams led the other distinguished citizens of her gender as the subject of the first and one of the longest sketches in *Female Biography*. The eight remaining men who were contemporaries of Knapp figured in *American Biography*, either in isolated sketches or as individuals of importance touching aspects of other people's lives.¹²⁷ One individual, the merchant-philanthropist James Perkins, who was not included as an entry in the *DAB*, is discussed fully in *American Biography*. In a sense, the Athenæum's glossy commemorative broadside stands as a testimony to Knapp's bio-historical acumen.

It is clear that the genre of collective biography needs to be studied. This repository of our aggregate past may prove to be an even greater treasure trove in the study of American culture than the gift books or the almanacs or certain areas of children's literature that have enriched and enlivened recent scholarship. In any evaluation of American collective biography, Samuel Lorenzo Knapp will have to be recognized as a serviceable contributor to the whole. For he was a dedicated practitioner of the art of biography, who not only salvaged people and events from our past, but who also addressed his contemporaries and posterity from a unique perspective within early nineteenth-century America.

¹²⁷ The others are Samuel Appleton, Nathaniel Bowditch, Rev. Joseph Buckminster, John Lowell, James and Thomas H. Perkins, Josiah Quincy, and William S. Shaw. Some of these men had appeared in Knapp's earlier works. Bowditch and Lowell, for example, had been figures in Knapp's anonymously published *Extracts from the Journal of Marshall Soult, Addressed to a Friend* (Newburyport, 1817), pp. 75, 128. Charles Francis Adams, John Brown, and Susan Hilles achieved prominence after Knapp's lifetime.

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