

*American Fiction:  
the First Seventy-five Years*

BY CLIFTON WALLER BARRETT

MR. CHAIRMAN and members of the American Antiquarian Society: It is difficult to think of a more suitable place than this time-honored institution to speak about the first seventy-five years of American fiction. It is likewise difficult to think of a subject involving more complexities and less susceptible to compression in a paper of this kind. I hope, therefore, that I shall be pardoned many errors of omission. Limitations of time and space make it impossible to mention many significant authors and their works. In no sense of the word should their omission here be considered a disparagement of their vitality and importance. I should also like to acknowledge my debt to the many noted scholars and writers who have produced many fine books about this period.

When I said that this was the most suitable institution for the present purpose, I was referring to the fact that here is preserved what is perhaps the greatest collection of American fiction to 1850 in the entire world. This collection is a monument to the knowledge and pertinacity of your director and his staff. As a collector in this field, I have intimate knowledge of the enlightened energy with which they have sought to fill the gaps in the collection and the overwhelming success which they have attained. As the members of this institution are aware, it has been the firm purpose of your director to obtain the first edition of every work of fiction published in the United States from the

beginning of the Republic to 1850. One may legitimately ask the purpose of gathering together all of the fictional works of this period which would certainly bring to our shelves many books completely lacking in literary merit which, if read today, would invoke boredom or ridicule. The answer is that the fiction of this crucial period of the development of the American Republic sheds a clear light on the customs and habits of the day. It portrays even more plainly than histories or factual narratives the types of houses, the eating habits, the apparel, and the social usages of the time. Perhaps above all it delineates the intellectual attitudes, the religious convictions, the moral standards, the dreams and aspirations of people of all occupations and all classes of society. Without an inclusive collection of these works it would not be possible to have a complete picture. This has been clearly recognized by other institutions and University libraries and steps are being taken to gather on their shelves many of the books which have been reposing here for some time. Once again grateful thanks are due for the vision and foresight that has been displayed in forming this collection.

When we go back to the very beginnings of American fiction, when we ask who started it all, we find ourselves in a perplexing situation. "It is a wise child who knows his own father." To try to name a founding genius of American fiction would arouse a great deal of controversy. Many a writer from Benjamin Franklin on might be proposed as the one whose work gave the first impulse to this branch of our literature. However, I feel inclined to agree with Lyle Wright and others and to affirm that Francis Hopkinson, author of *A Pretty Story* published in Philadelphia and Williamsburg in 1774, produced the first bit of fiction by an American. This first effort was an allegorical tale of King George, Parliament, Lord North and the American Colonies.

It might be rewarding to take a quick glance at the life of this individual whom we have just named as the progenitor of the flood of tales and novels ranging from the sublime to the fantastically ridiculous, that sea of rag and pulp which proceeded to irrigate the imaginations of the reading public in America and to a certain extent the entire world. Francis Hopkinson was born in Philadelphia in 1737 and was the first student and the first graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. He acted as secretary of the Philadelphia Library Company. In 1763 he was appointed Collector of Customs in Salem (New Jersey not Massachusetts) and in 1766 he sailed for England expecting the appointment of Commissioner of Customs. These expectations were disappointed and instead he returned to America and opened a dry goods store. A marriage followed with Ann Borden, daughter of the founder of Bordentown, New Jersey. Among their five children was Joseph, later famous as the author of *Hail, Columbia!* Like Harry Truman he left the dry goods business and returned to politics, becoming a delegate to the First Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He became a Judge of Admiralty, was impeached and acquitted. He was secretary of the convention which established the Episcopal Church in America. In the same year he was appointed First Judge of the United States Court in Pennsylvania. During all this time he was an active author, a skilled musician, and a harpsichord performer. He wrote *My Days Have Been So Wondrous Free*, the first song published in America, and the noted poem *The Battle of the Kegs*. He helped to design the seals of New Jersey, the University of Pennsylvania, and also the American flag. It is no surprise that he died of apoplexy at the age of fifty-four.

Speaking of parents, the first American novel, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), could not boast of a parent by name

until 1878 when it was attributed to Sarah Wentworth Morton, better known as Philenia, the Dellacruscan poet. This incorrect attribution was made for the illogical reason that the novel contained a subsidiary plot relating that Mrs. Morton's husband Perez, a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, seduced her sister Frances Aphthorp who was then living with them. Miss Aphthorp committed suicide after bearing a child. It should be emphasized that this is only a minor portion of the narrative as the main story concerns the hero Harrington who unwittingly marries his half sister Harriot, the product of an illegal amour of his father. The unhappy bride dies by drinking poison and the grief-stricken husband commits suicide, one of three suicides in the volume.

In 1894 it was shown conclusively that the actual author was William Hill Brown, poet, dramatist, and producer of fiction including one other novel, *Ira and Isabella*. Little is known of his antecedents beyond the fact that he was the son of the clockmaker who installed the famous timepiece in the Old South Church in Boston.

One of the most interesting things about this first work is the fact that it was forced to adopt certain disguises in order to combat the constant denunciations against novels on the part of the pulpit and press. The clergy consigned to hell all readers of these fiendish works and one eminent divine ruled that "between the Bible and novels there is a great gulf fixed." Only when free of the accusation "a mass of lies" and when introduced as a vehicle of high moral purpose could a novel hope for acceptance.

This explains a part of the title, *Founded in Truth*, a device adopted by many later works. It also explains the dedication: "To the young ladies of United Columbia, these volumes, intended to represent specious Causes, and to expose the fatal consequences of *Seduction*—" The author even goes to the lengths of having his leading character

say, "Novels, not regulated on the chaste principles of friendship, rational love, and connubial duty, appear to me totally unfit to form the minds of women, of friends, of wives."

In this manner commenced the fight for the novel and, despite the thunderings from the moral authorities, this first effort unloosed on the eager public a stream of similar works in epistolary style which under the guise of moral instruction based their plots on wholesale murder, incest, seduction, and suicide.

One of these novels became the first American best seller. This was *Charlotte* with again the subtitle, *A Tale of Truth*, by Susanna Haswell Rowson. It was later called *Charlotte Temple*. This tale involved the adventures of a young girl in an English boarding school who, by the stratagems of one Mademoiselle La Rue, a teacher in the school, was despoiled by a British officer in a scarlet coat who carried her off to America and left her to die in New York. The scheming teacher in the meantime is resourceful enough to shed her original admirer and marry a colonel. The astounding fact is that this tear-drenched novel over which in contemporary words "thousands have sighed and wept and sighed again" has gone through more than 200 editions right up to the present day. Some critics believe that this is a serious reflection on the taste of the mass of American readers. In any event, it cannot be denied that the author's narrative talent and skill in contriving dramatic effects filled an aching want of the *fin de siècle* maidens and matrons.

One of the best-written novels in the seduction group was *The Coquette*, a work once again *Founded on Fact*, published in 1797 by Hannah Foster. This one introduces a more realistic point of view. No longer is the maiden spotlessly innocent nor is the villain painted in unrelieved black. Here is an example of the seducer's version:

I fancy this young lady is a coquette; and if so I shall avenge my sex by retaliating the mischiefs she meditates against me . . . I have never yet been defeated. If a lady will consent to enter the lists against the antagonist of her honor, she may be sure of losing the prize.

Later when the girl has been ruined the seducer even considers marrying her but this altruistic impulse is quickly submerged by this thought:

I confess the idea of being thus connected with a woman whome I have been able to dishonor would be rather hard to surmount. It would hurt even my delicacy to have a wife whom I know to be seducible.

In 1792 publication of the first major American novel began and this continued with additions and revisions until 1815. This book was *Modern Chivalry* by Hugh Henry Brackenridge who studied at Princeton with Philip Freneau, James Madison, and Aaron Burr. This American epic scores many firsts. It is a pioneer effort in its portrayal of the life and customs of the new frontier to the west. It is the first novel which satirizes and ridicules such sancrosanct groups in the community as the clergy, the scientists, the physicians, and even the politicians. Brackenridge, a born democrat and ardent Jeffersonian, did not hesitate to expose the shortcomings of democratic institutions and in doing so was the first one to use dialect. Here is a picture of a backwoods election. The unanimously successful candidate meets the arguments of his sober and intellectual rival by a short speech proffering the contents of two kegs:

Friends, I'm a good dimicrat and hates the Brattish—I'm an elder of the meeting—and has been overseer of the roads for three years—my mammay was kilt o' the Ingens—now all ye that's in my favor, come forit and drenk.

And likewise an attack on the clergy and lawyers:

te clerchy, said an honest German; te clerchy is the pickest rogues from de two. An honest Sherman minister as knows nottin is petter as tem. Te lawyers are worsen as te dyvil, mit tare pooks, and sheets te beeples for te money. Larning is gote for nix, als to make rogues.

His passage attacking halfway measures in dealing with slavery is interesting:

In the phrenzy of the day, some weak-minded powers in Europe begin to consider what is called the African trade as a moral wrong and to provide for a gradual abolition of it. If they will abolish it, I approve of its being done gradually; because, numbers being embarked in this trade, it must ruin them all at once, to desist from it. On this principle, I have always thought it a defect in the criminal codes of most nations, not giving license to the perpetrators of offences, to proceed, for a limited time, in larcenies, burglaries, etc., until they get their hands out of use to these pursuits, and in use to others. For it must be greatly inconvenient to thieves and cut-throats, who have engaged in this way of life, and run great risks in acquiring skill in their employment, to be obliged all at once to withdraw their hands, and lay aside picking locks, and apply themselves to industry in other ways for a livelihood.

In 1798 with the publication of *Wieland* there arrived on the scene America's first professional novelist, an individual by the name of Charles Brockden Brown. Although he wrote his total of six full-length novels in the short period of three years, Brockden Brown may justly be characterized as a professional man of letters. He is also the first American writer to exert a definite influence on European authors including such figures as Godwin and Shelley. His impact on American writing was profound. Despite the Gothic atmosphere of his books, he was the first to recognize the value of and make wide use of American materials.

In 1789 one of the most interesting encounters in American literary history took place when the celebrated Commander in the American Revolution and the newly elected President of the United States met his namesake, a boy of six. This young lad, Washington Irving, was destined in his time to advance tremendously the cause of American letters and to add greatly to the glory and reputation of America abroad. In 1809 he published *Knickerbocker's History of New York* which charmed the populace far and

wide and gave a name to a whole region and its inhabitants. Later he traveled to England and in 1819 and 1820 published the first authentic American classic, *The Sketch Book*. This book was a crushing rejoinder to the question asked by Sidney Smith in the *Edinburgh Gazette* in 1820, "Who reads an American book?" Almost as soon as this question was asked all England was reading the charming tales and essays of Washington Irving and it seems safe to say that *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* will endure as long as the English language.

The year 1812 brought war with England but it also saw the publication of the first novel by James K. Paulding entitled *The Diverting History of John Bull*. An uncompromising enemy of the stilted and bombastic style he has been called the father of American realistic writing and his pictures of the old Dutch life in New York as in *The Dutchman's Fireside* and his narrative of the Revolution in *The Old Continental* pointed the way for the later realists.

In 1819 a woman who was not a writer herself may have played a determining part in opening one of the richest veins of American fiction. Her husband was reading one of the recent English novels then being imported in such profusion into the new Republic. As he perused it he joined the celebrated company of book throwers which includes such notables as Becky Sharpe and Dr. Samuel Johnson. At any rate, he flung the book down with the pungent remark that he could write a better one himself. Now this former Yale man and officer of the United States Navy had married a wife who had a will of her own and her half-laughing, half-scornful challenge ignited the latent spark in the mind of that cantakerous genius, James Fenimore Cooper, and started a freshet of superlative tales of the frontier, the forest, and the sea which are still read and studied all over the world. His first work, *Precaution*, was followed in 1821 by *The Spy*



which was the first important novel of the American Revolution. The year 1823 saw the publication of *The Pioneers* and the introduction into our literature of that unforgettable character, Natty Bumppo. The way was cleared for the classic *The Last of the Mohicans* and the other tales in the Leather-Stocking series. Although the old hunter was given a farewell in the closing paragraph of *The Pioneers* and died in *The Prairie* he was happily revived in *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer*. The final moments in the two earlier novels still hold an indefinable thrill. Thus in *The Pioneers*:

He drew his hard hand hastily across his eyes again, waved it on high for an adieu, and uttering a forced cry to his dogs,—he entered the forest. This was the last they ever saw of Leather-Stocking—he was gone far toward the setting sun,—the foremost in that band of pioneers who were opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent.

And then his final moments in *The Prairie*:

The trapper had remained motionless for nearly an hour. His eyes alone had occasionally opened and shut. When opened his eyes seemed fastened on the clouds which hung around the western horizon, reflecting the bright colors, and giving form and loveliness to the glorious tints of an American sunset. The hour—the calm beauty of the season—the occasion, all conspired to fill the spectators with solemn awe. Suddenly,—the old man, supported on either side by his friends, rose upright to his feet. For a moment he looked about him, as if to invite all in presence to listen, and then, with a fine military elevation of the head, and a voice that might be heard in every part of that numerous assembly, he pronounced the word—"Here."

But now the curtain was rising on two great figures whose work in its conscious artistry and enduring effect merits the use of that too often carelessly bestowed accolade, genius. Two anonymous works, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in 1827 and *Fanshawe* in 1828, heralded the arrival on the scene of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne who as practitioners of fiction were worthy to enter the lists with the greatest of the old world. Nine years

were to pass for Hawthorne between *Fanshawe* and *Twice-told Tales*. Most of these were spent in the top floor of the old house in Salem and if there were many periods of doubt and hesitation and self-questioning as to his abilities there was never any doubt as to what he was trying to do. An early letter to Samuel G. Goodrich (Peter Parley) shows clearly the self-deprecatory attitude:

I have nevertheless concluded to trouble you with some of the tales. You will see that one of the stories is founded upon the superstitions of this part of the country. I do not know that such an attempt has hitherto been made, but, as I have thrown away much time in listening to such traditions, I could not help trying to put them into some shape. The tale is certainly rather wild and grotesque, but the outlines of many not less so might be picked up hereabouts.

Before returning the tales (for such, I suppose, is the probable result) will you have the goodness to write to me and await my answer? I have some idea that I shall be out of town, and it would be inconvenient to have them come during my absence.

P.S. None of the pieces are shorter than the one first sent you. If I write any of the length you mention, I will send them to you; but I think I shall close my literary labors with what I have already begun.

We may be thankful that he received just about enough encouragement to continue so that in the fullness of time the incomparable *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* became a priceless part of our literary heritage.

While we are in the New England territory, it is worth mentioning that two of our outstanding poets essayed the fiction field, Whittier with *New England Legends* and *Leaves from Margaret Smith's Journal*, and Longfellow with *Outre-Mer*, *Hyperion*, and *Kavanagh*. Perhaps this letter of tactful criticism from Emerson to Longfellow may shed some light on their achievements in this endeavor:

I am heartily obliged to you for *Kavanagh* which I read on Sunday afternoon—it had, with all its gifts and graces, the property of persuasion and of inducing the serene mood it required. I was deceived by the fine name into a belief that there was some family legend, and must own (like

palates spoiled by spices) to some disappointment at the temperate conclusion, but it is good printing, and I think the best sketch we have seen in the direction of the American Novel, for here is our native speech and manners treated with sympathy, taste, and judgement. One thing struck me as I read,—that you win our gratitude too easily; for after our much experience of the squalor of New Hampshire and the pallor of Unitarianism, we are so charmed with elegance in an American book, that we could forgive more vices than are possible to you.

Incidentally, even Bryant in New York made his contribution to fiction with *Tales of Glauber-Spa*, but I think his fame rests more securely on *Thanatopsis* and his other poems.

As the western frontier advanced and attracted more and more individuals from all classes, the fictional treatment of the legends, customs, and experiences in this region expanded rapidly and became an ever-growing and important part of American fiction. Two writers who have preserved this aspect of our national life in novels and tales of a high order are such unlikely figures as a minister from Massachusetts, Timothy Flint, and a banker from Philadelphia, James Hall, who both made their way by roundabout travels to Cincinnati. As early as 1830 Flint used a scene as remote as the Oregon River as a setting for *The Shoshonee Valley* and Hall's *Legends of the West* hit a high-water mark for realistic and sympathetic treatment of the backwoodsman, the settler, and the displaced Indian.

Portrayal of the Indian as a vengeful barbarian rather than a noble savage provides the stirring drama for the work of another Philadelphian, a doctor this time, Robert Montgomery Bird, in the long lasting *Nick of the Woods* of 1837. The book stores still sell a goodly number of this book at Christmas time.

In 1839 in *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* Caroline Matilda Kirkland provided an incredibly realistic picture of the squalor, the bitterness, the intellectual poverty and social

tyranny of the small town which clearly paved the way for Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* eighty-one years later.

But what of the South during all this period? Who were the significant figures in that territory who provided some of the notable works of fiction during this formative yet exceedingly fertile period of American literature? This great region which embraced the lowlands of South Carolina and tidewater Virginia was steeped in aristocratic tradition and had provided a large majority of the Presidents, statesmen, judges, and soldiers for the young Republic. It is sad to relate that only two really vital figures emerge. It is true that they came from the right places. One was a native of Charleston, South Carolina, and the other was reared in Richmond, Virginia. The Virginian (by adoption) had also attended the University of Virginia. This was as far as any connection with the aristocratic tradition went. For the former had been born on the wrong side of the tracks and the latter was the son of wandering stock company actors. This latter individual was Edgar Allan Poe, "a small, delicate boy with somber eyes and a large head," whose lifetime of forty years was entirely encompassed in the period we are discussing. The anguished circumstances of his life are touched with so much romantic tragedy that they tend to obscure his solid achievements. A poet of great creative power he raised the standards of rhythm, form, and beauty in poetry to heights never before reached, and caused his influence to be profoundly felt far from his own native shores. In the field of fiction he was likewise a creator and originator. He was the founder of the modern detective story, and his effect on the short story in general has been deep and lasting. Let the words pronounced by George Bernard Shaw serve as his epitaph—"The finest of finest artists."

In our other Southron, William Gilmore Simms, we find an author who was ignored and neglected during his entire

lifetime in his native city of Charleston. To this day the only memorial to his memory which can be discovered in that fascinating city is a small statue in Battery Park with the single word SIMMS etched in the stone. The fame that he gained, the overflowing recognition heaped upon him in his lifetime did not awaken the slightest echo in the lovely mansions overlooking the sea wall. His distaff relatives had never been invited to the St. Cecilia Ball. His father was a rough character, a volunteer under Jackson, and had gone to live the wild life of the border. It is hardly strange that Simms was unable to make the slightest impression on his native habitat. The patrician planters and merchants enjoyed a somewhat narrow culture fed by importations from England, principally Sir Walter Scott, and if they admitted the existence of a native literature, certainly thought it beneath their notice. This enervating apathy influenced Simms to invade the North, and he found sympathy and support in the friendship of Bryant, Irving, Halleck, and others. In the friendlier atmosphere of New York he began publication of what was destined to be a long series of novels and tales of the border, the American Revolution, and episodes of Southern history that have carried him to the very forefront of American novelists. *The Yemasee* and *The Partisan*, both dated 1835, are perhaps the best of his stirring narratives, the one of earlier days of Indian warfare in the Carolinas and the other the guerrilla Revolutionary campaigns in the same territory. Simms has been called "The Southern Cooper," but this appellation does a disservice to the memories of both men whose solid accomplishments require no mutual support.

Before leaving the South one should mention two books of great importance. *Georgia Scenes*, published in Augusta, Georgia, in 1835 by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, is a foundation stone in the development of native humor.

*Swallow Barn* (1832) is a series of charming pictures of life in the Old Dominion. This book, reminiscent of Irving, was written by John Pendleton Kennedy, a Baltimorean and lawyer who later became Secretary of the Navy and guiding genius of Perry's expedition to Japan. His intimate knowledge of life in Old Virginia led to his writing a chapter of Thackeray's *The Virginians*. A later book of Kennedy's, *Hose-shoe Robinson*, is a pioneering novel in picaresque style about the Revolutionary War in the South, culminating in the battle of King's Mountain in North Carolina.

In the 30's and 40's American inventive genius was in full spate and novels and books of tales are avidly read as they pour from the presses all the way from Wetumpka, Alabama, to Frankfort, Kentucky, to Walpole, New Hampshire. Bound in paper wrappers, in boards, leather and cloth, they are carried in explorers' packs, in covered wagons and in the knapsacks of soldiers in the Mexican War. They are found in lonely New England villages and in mud-daubed cabins along the new frontier. Even the stately manor houses have unbent enough to admit them, perhaps surreptitiously. The question arises as to who is doing the writing beside the significant authors we have mentioned. Hawthorne said it was "a damned mob of scribbling women." Without doubt, the ladies did contribute their share of lavender, tears, religion, and temperance, even blood and thunder to the parade. We find some redoubtable female figures, nearly all of them poets and dramatists on the side. There are the anti-slavery agitator Lydia Maria Child and the other Lydia, the gushing and sentimental Mrs. Sigourney, who can boast of sixty-seven successful published books. Perhaps best of all was the daughter of Theodore Sedgwick, Catherine Maria, whom even Hawthorne called "our most truthful novelist." Harriet Beecher Stowe too was writing but it was not until 1852

that she was to become world-famous with her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But I fear that we look at this period in vain for masterpieces from the sisters of the pen. They came later.

However, the poor ladies should not be accused of doing all the scribbling. There were many men who could match them in quality and quantity. Mrs. Sigourney's prolific work had its counterpart in the seventy books of Timothy Shay Arthur. A glance at a few of his titles affords a good idea of his themes:

*The Debtor's Daughter*  
*Family Pride*  
*Keeping Up Appearances*  
*Making Haste to Be Rich*  
*Love in High Life*  
*The Martyr Wife*  
*The Beautiful Widow*  
*I Knew How It Would Be*

It was not until 1854 that he perpetrated *Ten Nights in a Barroom*.

A much more virile writer was Joseph Holt Ingraham, the Episcopal clergyman whose novel, *Lafitte; or, The Pirate of the Gulf*, is still in print. He called on Longfellow in 1846 and was described as follows:

In the afternoon Ingraham the novelist called. A young dark man with a soft voice. He says he has written 80 novels, and of these 20 during the last year; till it has grown to be purely mechanical with him. These novels are published in the newspapers. They pay him something more than \$3,000.00 a year.

Even this astounding output was dwarfed by the some four hundred serials and novels of Edward Zane Carroll Judson who wrote under the name of "Ned Buntline." However, the reeking sensationalism of all of his work was overshadowed by the astounding facts of his life. He won a \$600 reward for capturing two murderers singlehanded. He

killed the husband of his mistress in a duel. The dead man's brother retaliated by firing at him during the trial. Like Injun Joe in *Huckleberry Finn* he escaped from a window. He was recaptured and actually lynched. A rescue party cut the rope before his life flickered out, and he was freed by the grand jury; and so forth throughout his life without a letup. Here without doubt truth was stranger than fiction.

But let us get back to work of more enduring qualities. As the half century approached its end, one of the truly great figures of American literature, Herman Melville, made his appearance. His first book, *Typee*, was published in both London and New York in 1846 and for the next five years with *Omoo*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, and *White-Jacket* he made a contribution to the literature of the sea that was not eclipsed until his own *Moby Dick* saw the light in 1851. Of all the notable creators of American literature there is none whose fame had grown in the last twenty-five years like that of Herman Melville.

In summing up these seventy-five years one has a feeling of profound astonishment at the progress made. From humble and crude beginnings the novel reached a perfection of artistry and form in such works as *Typee* and *The Scarlet Letter*. The short story advanced from the rambling and discursive sketch to the classic tales of Edgar Allen Poe. It may be justly said that this short period saw the raising of artistic standards to a level which has not yet been surpassed and in Irving and Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, it produced five American men of letters whose shadows lengthen as the decades pass.



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