

A HANDBOOK OF

AMERICAN

LITERATURE

A HANDBOOK OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

**a comprehensive study from
colonial times to the present day**

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Preface

This volume attempts to see the literature of the United States of America as part of the literature of the English-speaking people and as a part of world literature. Understandably, accounts of a country's literature usually dwell heavily upon authors who have contributed to sectional and national development even though their significance seems rather meager to the world outside. I have dutifully pored, as have multitudes of other students of American literature, over the not-too-eminent writings of the early Connecticut Wits, the New York Knickerbockers of facetious memory, and minor poetizers of the American Civil War. These and many other worthies have been firmly excluded in favor of American authors and writings that the world outside the U.S.A. now deems important or decidedly interesting.

Especially at this pivotal point of America's bicentennial (1776-1976), the nation and the world might well contemplate the literary achievement of the U.S.A. not from the partisan national viewpoint nor from the traditional perspective. What has the U.S.A. to offer to the rest of the globe as its significant writings? What is the base, as of now, for the forward thrust of American literature?

I blush to admit that when, in the 1930's, I had my first academic contacts with American literature, the mid point in the historical survey was the American Civil War. We then gave as much time and effort to American literature up to 1865 as we gave to subsequent American literature. This volume seeks the contemporary stance of the larger world. The proportions of this text approximate the proportions of the bibliographies in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* and *American Literature*, where the overwhelming interest is clearly directed to this century. Even more important in influencing me is my experience lecturing about and discussing American

literature in Canada, Australia, New Guinea, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, and India. Whether just across the border from the U.S.A. or at the antipodes from the U.S.A., I find professors, students, and the world at large totally ignoring Nathaniel Parker Willis, Bayard Taylor, and Robert Montgomery Bird (who all seemed important American authors in the last century) but showing avid interest in John Barth, Ray Bradbury, and Edward Albee. The present literary interests of America and the outside world are rather faithfully indicated, I believe, in the book that follows. The emphases will be entirely different when the tercentennial rolls around, but this text hopefully reflects what the world wants to know and should know about American literature at bicentennial time.

The table of contents will reveal the extent of coverage of the literature of the U.S.A. and will also indicate the brief sketching of background needed perhaps by non-Americans to set American writings in place. In addition the book will be helpful perhaps to Americans in their self-examination during the bicentennial era. Biographies of writers, summaries of plots, and footnoting have been minimized to devote the maximum attention to the scrutiny of the literature itself. As much bibliography as possible has been appended to aid the reader in further perusal of American literature.

Thanks are due to many, but I must especially single out the entire staff of the University of Queensland Press. Until you have worked on a book with the author and the editorial staff at opposite ends of the planet, you cannot fully appreciate the patience and endurance of editors.

Houston, Texas, 1975

Martin S. Day.

Contents

Preface	xi
Part 1: From first colonization to the young republic, 1620-1812	1
1. The seventeenth century beginning	3
England seeks empire overseas: Richard Hakluyt, Thomas Hariot	3
The origins of the American South: John Smith	4
New England in the New World: John Cotton, Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth	7
The Puritan heritage and its variations: Roger Williams, Edward Taylor	10
The middle Atlantic colonies	14
2. The eighteenth century before the revolution	16
The Age of Enlightenment	16
New England: John Wise, <u>Jonathan Edwards</u>	22
The middle Atlantic colonies: John Woolman, Benjamin Franklin	23
The southern colonies: <u>William Byrd</u>	28
3. Revolution and the young republic	29
The American colonists oppose Great Britain	29
Revolutionary voices: Thomas Paine, the Declaration of Independence	30
Political philosophy: Alexander Hamilton versus Thomas Jefferson	31
Towards a national literature: Royall Tyler (drama), Charles Brockden Brown (novel), Philip Freneau (poetry), J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur (the American dream)	33
Part 2: From the young republic to the Civil War, 1812-1865	39
4. Introduction to the period	41
Economic and political background	41
Major cultural background	45
Romantic expression in literature	49

5. New York takes the lead	57
America's first notable man of belles lettres: Washington Irving	57
America's first notable novelist: James Fenimore Cooper	59
America's first notable poet: William Cullen Bryant	66
The novelist of the sea: Herman Melville	68
6. Renaissance in New England	78
From Calvinism to Transcendentalism	78
Transcendentalists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau	82
The Brahmins and the genteel tradition: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell	92
The Quaker poet: John Greenleaf Whittier	102
The New England novelists: <u>Nathaniel Hawthorne,</u> <u>Harriet Beecher Stowe</u>	103
7. Poe and Whitman	111
Poe abandons sectionalism for European cosmopolitanism	111
Whitman abandons sectionalism for one America	121
Part 3: From the Civil War to World War I, 1865-1914	137
8. Introduction to the period	139
From country to city, from agriculture to industry	139
The Gilded Age	142
Literary taste and productivity	143
9. Romantic fiction: crowd-pleasers and myth-makers	146
The dominance of fiction	146
<u>Romantic crowd-pleasers: Lew Wallace, O. Henry</u>	147
Romantic myth-makers: Horatio Alger, Owen Wister, Edgar Rice Burroughs	148
"Local colorists": Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewett, George Washington Cable, Thomas Nelson Page	151
10. Realistic Fiction	158
American realism and why it grew	158
Realism in the British and European tradition: John William DeForest, William Dean Howells	160
Realism in the native American idiom: Mark Twain	162
11. Naturalistic fiction	172
American naturalism and its gestation	172
Veritism: Hamlin Garland	174
Naturalistic novelists: Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London	174

12. Classical fiction	183
American classicism and its origins	183
The fiction of Henry James	184
The fiction of Edith Wharton	203
13. Poetry between the Civil War and World War I	207
American poetry at low ebb	207
"Local colorists" in verse: James Whitcomb Riley, Bret Harte, Robert Service	207
Sidney Lanier's poetry of the South	208
The verse of Emily Dickinson	209
14. Prose non-fiction	216
Technology: Frederick Winslow Taylor	216
War strategy: Alfred Thayer Mahan	216
Economics: Henry George, Thorstein Veblen	217
Sociology: Lester Ward, William Graham Sumner	218
Philosophy and Psychology: Josiah Royce, Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, George Santayana	220
Science: Josiah Gibbs	223
History and Biography: Henry Adams, Frederick Jackson Turner	224
Part 4: Contemporary America, 1914 to the present	227
15. Introduction to today's America	229
The general scene	229
The American writer of this era	240
16. The Golden Age of American drama: O'Neill	249
The renaissance of the American drama	249
The plays of Eugene O'Neill	253
17. The Golden Age of American drama: playwrights serious and comic	269
Realists: Sidney Howard, Sidney Kingsley, Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets	269
Experimenters: Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, Marc Connelly, Thornton Wilder	274
Comic dramatists: S. N. Behrman, Robert Sherwood, Philip Barry, Moss Hart and George Kaufman, William Saroyan	282
18. The Silver Age of American drama	292
The Broadway musical	292
Recent dramatists: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, Archibald MacLeish, Edward Albee	293

19. Twentieth century poetry: traditionalists	311
Edwin Arlington Robinson	311
Robert Frost	317
Other traditionalists: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mark Van Doren and Robert Hillyer, Stephen Vincent Benét, Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Brooks, W. H. Auden in America, Theodore Roethke, Richard Eberhart and Richard Wilbur	324
20. Twentieth century poetry: sons of Walt	331
The Chicago renaissance: Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg	331
Other major Whitmanites: Vachel Lindsay, William Carlos Williams, Robinson Jeffers, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes	334
Recent Whitmanites: Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg	345
21. Twentieth century poetry: modernist	347
Modernists poetry from Symbolists to Imagists	347
Major Imagists: Amy Lowell, Hilda Doolittle and John Gould Fletcher	350
The troubled life and difficult verse of Ezra Pound	351
Wallace Stevens, insurance executive and poet's poet	358
The contemporaneity of Marianne Moore's poetry	367
Liberal democracy and the verse of Archibald MacLeish	370
The romantic poetry of e. e. cummings	373
Robert Lowell's tension-laden verse	376
Poets from the New South: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, James Dickey	380
22. Romantic fiction	387
Modifications of romantic fiction in the twentieth century	387
Historical fiction (American subjects): Kenneth Roberts, MacKinlay Kantor, Stephen Vincent Benét, Harold Lenoir Davis, Alfred Bertram Guthrie, Vardis Fisher, Oliver La Farge, B. Traven, Walter van Tilburg Clark	
Historical fiction (non-American subjects): Gore Vidal, John Hersey, Thornton Wilder	391
Exotic locales: Pearl Buck, John Hersey, Frederic Prokosch	392
Science fiction: Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Walter M. Miller	394
Humorous fiction: Damon Runyon, Ludwig Bemelmans, Leonard Ross, Max Shulman	395
Gothicism: John Collier, Shirley Jackson, James Purdy	396
American romantic novelists in foreign languages: Ole Rølvaag, Scholem Asch	397
William McFee and the twentieth century novel of the sea	398
Southern romantic novelists: Du Bose Heyward, Thomas Wolfe, Jesse Stuart and Harper Lee, James Dickey as novelist	398

Romantic transformation of society: Upton Sinclair, Ayn Rand	406
Romantic transcendence of society: Thornton Wilder, e. e. cummings as novelist, John Barth, Donald Barthelme	407
23. Classic fiction	413
Novelists of manners: Kay Boyle, Jean Stafford, Louis Auchincloss, Mary McCarthy	413
Novelists of art: Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, James Branch Cabell, Vladimir Nabokov	416
24. Realistic fiction: naturalistic writers	427
"Pure" naturalists: Theodore Dreiser, James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren	427
"Virtual" naturalists: Sherwood Anderson, James Jones, Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates	435
A "psychedelic" naturalist: William S. Burroughs	441
The negro naturalists: Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin	441
"Black Humor": Henry Miller, Nathanael West, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.	445
25. Realistic fiction: major figures between the wars	453
Popular novelists turn to realism: Zona Gale, Booth Tarkington	453
The great realists: Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, John P. Marquand, James Gould Cozzens, John O'Hara	455
26. Realistic fiction since World War II	488
General realists: Wright Morris, John Updike, John Cheever	488
Raffish realists: Jack Kerouac, James P. Donleavy, Ken Kesey	492
Roman Catholic realists: James F. Powers, Edwin O'Connor	493
Jewish-American novelists: Irwin Shaw, Jerome Weidman, Budd Schulberg, Bernard Malamud, Jerome D. Salinger, Saul Bellow	495
27. Realistic and naturalistic fiction of the Southern renaissance	505
Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, William Styron, Flannery O'Connor, George Garrett, Shirley Ann Grau	505
28. Non-fiction prose	541
Literary criticism	541
Search for a "usable past": Van Wyck Brooks, Vernon L. Parrington	542

Sociological criticism: Edmund Wilson	543
Psychological criticism: Lionel Trilling, Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, Kenneth Burke	544
New Humanism: Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More	547
New Criticism: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, René Wellek and Austin Warren, Yvor Winters, Richard Blackmur	549
Neo-Aristotelianism: Ronald S. Crane	552
Art criticism: Bernard Berenson	553
Autobiography and biography	554
General autobiography: Lincoln Steffens, Vincent Sheean, Malcolm X	554
Literary autobiography: H. L. Mencken, Ernest Hemingway, Edmund Wilson, Gertrude Stein, Clarence Day	556
Spiritual and poetic autobiography: Thomas Merton, Conrad Aiken, Jesse Stuart	557
The "new" biography: William Woodward and debunking, psychoanalytical studies, Gamaliel Bradford and "psychographs," Catherine Drinker Bowen and synthesized biography	558
Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln	560
Romantic biography and biographical romance	561
Scholarly biography: Douglas Southall Freeman, Allan Nevins, Leon Edel	561
The "new" history James Harvey Robinson, Charles A. Beard, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., Carl L. Becker, James Truslow Adams, Samuel Eliot Morison, Bruce Catton, Henry Steele Commager, Daniel J. Boorstin, Max Lerner, Carroll Quigley	563
Subjective essays Agnes Repplier, David Grayson, Christopher Morley, E. B. White, Wendell Berry, George Santayana	569
Humor: Don Marquis, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, S. J. Perelman	572
Broad cultural appraisal of the era H. L. Mencken, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd, David Riesman, Vance Packard, C. Wright Mills, William H. Whyte, John Kenneth Galbraith, Corliss Lamont, Thurman Arnold, Walter Lippman, Lewis Mumford, Joseph Wood Krutch	575
Bibliography	583
Index	619

PART ONE

From the first colonization to the young republic 1620-1812

1 The seventeenth century beginning

England seeks empire overseas

During the expansive era of European colonization from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the Spanish and Portuguese, French and English, were all intent upon the choicest morsels they could snatch from the huge, defenseless continents and the sparkling islands of the sea. No one suggested the altruism and benevolence we hear spoken of these days as motives for taking an interest in the "less fortunate". England behaved like all its fellows, settling the sprawling lands that would later be Canada, the U.S.A., and Australia with only an acquisitive gleam in its eyes.

Even before any true colonial settlement was established, Richard Hakluyt, Oxford don and indefatigable anthologizer of travel literature, vociferously propagandized for British colonies to benefit the mother country. His essay, "A Particular Discourse concerning the great necessitie and manifolde comodities that are like to growe to this Realme of Englande by the Western discoveries lately attempted" (London, 1584) looked to the New World as a dumping ground for excess population. In spite of its swashbuckling vigor and literary grandeur, Renaissance England experienced quite modern curses such as poverty, unemployment, and overpopulation. Hakluyt's essay also looked to the New World as a fertile source of colonial riches such as silver and tobacco, and a captive market for English-made goods. In addition, Hakluyt championed American colonies as a base for securing and controlling the westward passage to the opulent East, as a counterbalance to egregious Spain, and as a means of converting the natives to Protestantism.

The continuance of this self-centered European imperialism into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eventually caused almost all of North and South America to rise in rebellion

against its Spanish, Portuguese, or English masters. Apparently British colonialism was eminently superior to Latin colonialism, for a huge segment of its American colonies remained loyal to England and went on to become modern Canada.

The initial attempt at overseas English settlement began upon the soil of the present Canada at Newfoundland in 1583. Shortly after this enterprise failed, its would-be founder, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, died at sea. His half-brother, Sir Walter Raleigh, sponsored an expedition of 1585 that resided for only one year upon Roanoke Island, offshore from the present North Carolina.

Accompanying the expedition was Thomas Hariot (or Harriott), who observed the local Indians, collected flora and fauna, and recounted his experiences in *Brief and True Report of the New-Found Land of Virginia* (London, 1588). At the time "Virginia" (named in honor of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen) was the vague British designation for the entire Atlantic seaboard of North America. Hariot's is the first work in English on the first English-speaking residents in the present U.S.A. This and two subsequent expeditions sponsored by Raleigh guttered out in failure.

The origins of the American South

The major English colonial settlements throughout the world, later to fuse into the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia, all began as congeries of separately administered colonies, each frequently an acrimonious rival of its neighbouring English colonists. The peculiar characteristics of initial settlement produced sectional differences that still survive, as, for instance, between a Nova Scotian and an Ontarian, between a New South Welshman and a Western Australian, and most pronouncedly between an American Southerner and the other Americans. The independence and unification of the U.S.A. were unable in the early nineteenth century to obliterate this sectionalism, which steered to collision in the American Civil War. The South of today is roughly defined as the area from Maryland to central Florida, bounded on the north by the Ohio River and extending westward to include Arkansas and eastern Texas.

The first enduring English colony on the continent of North

America was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Most of the initial settlers were adventurers, wide-eyed seekers of treasure trove, rather than sober agriculturists. Their idleness, cupidity, and quarrelsomeness brought them to the verge of disaster from which they were extricated by the iron will of a resolute soldier of fortune, Captain John Smith (1580–1631). In spite of bitter opposition from his disgruntled fellow colonists, Smith became the president of the group, imposing discipline, mollifying the hostile natives, and securing food for the starving Englishmen. Injuries from exploding gunpowder forced his return to England in 1609, but in 1614 he was back in America, leading an exploring party that gave to the northern coastline the name of New England. From 1617 until his death Smith boasted the resounding title of Admiral of New England, but he was thwarted in his attempts to colonize New England.

The first truly American book is Smith's *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Hapned in Virginia since the First Planting of that Collony* (London, 1608). Although the bold captain lived in America for only two years, his spirited chronicle keynotes later American literature in its zestful rise to the challenge of the vast New World and in its genuine appraisal of the American personality emerging from transplanted Englishmen. Dashed off between encounters with the natives, it often sounds like the latest news flashes. Smith reveals himself as an intriguing fellow, typical of many subsequent Americans: pragmatic and ingenious, self-reliant and individualistic, somewhat the gambler, decidedly the braggart. Dear to American legend is the tale of the captured Captain Smith's threatened death at the hands of the Indian chief Powhatan; the beautiful princess Pocahontas is supposed to have saved Smith's life by dramatically throwing herself between him and his executioners. Significantly there is no mention of such an episode in this volume. This completely uncorroborated anecdote is not proffered by Smith until sixteen years later.

The American South that originated in this quite chancy venture proved unique. While the central and northern colonies of the subsequent U.S.A. began in bourgeois nonconformity, the American South was "establishment". It attempted to transplant traditional English institutions to the New World. The

Church of England was the established church in Virginia (also technically but ineffectually in the Carolinas and Georgia). Huge grants from the British crown sought to create the manorial system instead of the pattern elsewhere of the middle-class tradesman and the small independent farmer. The American South trended toward a polarization of new landed aristocrats and lower class whites. The ambitious poor among English migrants gravitated toward the central and northern colonies where good free land was available to them. Blocked from desirable Southern soil by the great plantations, the relatively few poor settlers in this section filtered into the mountains and more sterile areas. Desperate for a labor force to till their giant holdings, Southern aristocrats welcomed negro slavery, first introduced in 1619. Every American colony in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contained negro slaves, but the central and northern areas had little need for them, since there the basic economic structure consisted of family-tilled farms or family-operated small businesses. Before the seventeenth century ended, negro slavery had become a rallying cry of the American South, reverberating its effects down through the years as any reader of the novels of Faulkner or the despatches from Selma, Alabama, is aware.

Contrary to the assertions of American Southerners aglow with genealogical light, relatively few noble British families migrated to the New World. Most of the plantation aristocrats arose from able tradesmen and farmers who seized their opportunity to emulate the English landed gentry. These newly minted aristocrats of the American South could seldom enjoy the leisure of the British upper crust but had to struggle laboriously to create their little empires out of the raw wilderness. Such landed gentlemen tended to be more like Squire Western of Fielding's *Tom Jones* than like Squire Allworthy. The enormous distances and the scattered population of the South made visitors a welcome rarity and therefore generated the renowned "Southern hospitality". Such open-handedness bred a genteel hedonism rather than intellectuality.

Not merely belles lettres but any sort of printed matter was almost unknown in the American South of the seventeenth century. Autocratic governors like William Berkeley of Virginia, in office from 1641 to 1677, purposely sought to keep the

colonists in ignorance by discouraging education and printing. The first operating printing press in the South appeared in Maryland in 1726.

New England in the New World

The present New England consists of the north-eastern states east of the New York state boundary. Dominant among the original colonizers of this area were English Puritans. During the English Reformation this group had been piqued by Elizabeth's compromise church of 1563, an astute mixture of Catholic structure and Protestant theology. Uncompromisingly Protestant, the Puritans espoused the doctrines of John Calvin and demanded the complete removal of all church ritual that smacked of "popery". Their perfervid pleas for "purity" caused them to be portrayed as obnoxious "wowsers" in Renaissance comedy and stuck them with the derisive epithet of "Puritan". While most Puritans sought to change the Church of England from within, the extremists (often termed Brownists or Separatists) pulled out of the fold altogether and worshipped in independent congregations. Elizabeth tried to ignore these extremists, but James I persecuted them.

Stung beyond endurance, the Separatists of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, in 1609 fled to Holland, then notable for its religious toleration. Though enjoying freedom in Holland, these Separatists as aliens found difficulty in securing employment and within less than a decade they saw their children being transformed into Hollanders. In 1620 they sailed from Plymouth, Devonshire, on the *Mayflower* to found the first New England colony at Plymouth, now in Massachusetts. Before landing, these Puritans (known to all Americans as the Pilgrims) signed the Mayflower Compact, nominally acknowledging royal rule but actually establishing an independent republic. This is the first notable document of American political history, stemming from the long line of the Magna Carta and foreshadowing the pronunciamientos of the late eighteenth century. In 1691 the Plymouth colony was absorbed by the much larger Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded in 1630 by Puritans who were not Separatists like the Pilgrims, and who came