

Washington Irving
the legend of
Sleepy Hollow
and Other Stories



The **LEGEND** *of* **SLEEPY** **HOLLOW**

and other stories
WASHINGTON

Introduction

Washington Irving is one of the most read and the most unread of authors. In his own day, of course, he was very widely read both in America and England. His writings caught the current fancy for romanticism, for local color, for sentiment, for nostalgia, for humor. In spite of this past popularity, it is doubtful how much of Irving's writing is still read today. Dust-covered sets of Irving's complete works probably appear in the second-hand bookstores as often as do those of Longfellow or Lowell, or any of the other traditional classics of American literature whose reputations have been revised downwards in recent years. Yet a few of Irving's writings, above all "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," are still very widely read. It is a rare general anthology of the short story that does not contain one or both of these stories, but it is an even rarer one that has anything more by Irving. A collection such as the following, which ranges more generously over Irving's whole work, may not only teach us why Irving was once so popular but may suggest that Irving has more to

offer a modern reader than just his two most famous stories.

Irving is of course one of the earlier American authors, but curiously, he seems even earlier than he actually was, and this illusion may help to define his essential quality. His most characteristic writings are all set in an earlier time than his own: the early days of the Dutch settlement of New York, the Revolutionary War era, or some earlier, more legendary period in Europe's past. This choice of subject gives a clue to where his sympathies lay and also to the general tone and effect of his writing. "Irving always lived a little in the past tense," it has been said. As a writer, Irving took on roles as historian of the past, as student of legend, and as recreator of legend in literature, that exploited this leaning toward the past, both real and fabulous, in all its dimensions. Almost always in Irving's writings we feel strongly the sense of the story's being retold and filtered through the memory of one or more narrators. This gives all his writing a special quality close to Wordsworth's aim of some powerful emotion recollected in tranquillity and then contemplated until the emotion is renewed.

Irving has been given three ambitious titles: the First American Man of Letters, the Ambassador of the New World to the Old, and the Father of American Literature. How well has he earned them?

The First American Man of Letters: this title really embodies two facts about Irving. First, he was able to make his living as a writer. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he wrote more as a professional than as a gentleman amateur. In this he set a kind of example. In his later years, moreover, he became a national hero, a local boy who had made good in the larger world of European literature. In this, too, he set a kind of example. His later writings, his books of travel and biography and history, reflect one of the problems of the professional man of letters—the need to write whether he has an immediate inspiration or not. This need may cause a writer to fall back on compilation, rather than creation, to maintain his position, and to some extent Irving did this.

The Ambassador of the New World to the Old: this title also embodies two facts about Irving. Literally he held various diplomatic posts in Spain and England. But these posts were a tribute to his more important role as a literary ambassador. The great success of Irving's writings in England proved that the New World had a writer that could be ranked with those of the Old World. On the other hand, Irving gained this rank chiefly by meeting the Old World writers on their own ground. Except for a few stories, little that Irving wrote was characteristically American in the way Mark Twain's writings, fifty years later, were characteristically American. Even compared to Cooper, his contemporary, Irving could not be said to have presented any extensive image of America to his European readers—certainly not an image that differed in any serious way from the half-romantic image these readers already had of the New World.

The Father of American Literature: finally, how much right has Irving to this title? In many ways, as already suggested, Irving was indirectly an example and inspiration for later writers. But his direct literary influence is harder to judge. If he did suggest to the authors who came later new subjects, new attitudes, and new techniques, it must be in his short stories that he did so. These stories may have influenced Hawthorne, Poe, and the later writers of the local color school. But it is almost impossible to distinguish the influence of Irving himself from the influence of various kinds of English and German writing through Irving. Moreover, no one would ever claim that Irving's stories equal those of Poe or Hawthorne. If we see some of Irving's rich use of local material in Hawthorne, we see little of Hawthorne's moral complexity in Irving. If we see some of Irving's skillful creation of a single mood in Poe's stories, we see little of Poe's psychological or symbolic complexity in Irving's, or of anything like Poe's wide variety of technique and subject.

Irving himself had no great pretensions about his aims and achievements. In "The Author's Account of Himself"

from *The Sketch Book*, reprinted in the following collection, Irving gives a very clear statement of what he is setting out to do in his writings. He reminds the reader of his childhood interest in what we would call local color, and he praises American scenery as a source of “the sublime and beautiful”—an interesting echo of Edmund Burke’s famous eighteenth-century treatise on esthetics. At the same time, he praises Europe’s “storied and poetical associations” and speaks of his wish to escape “from the commonplace realities of the present.” His final comment is the most revealing. He frankly rejects the role of the philosopher for that of the lover of the picturesque, and by implication he offers the reader of the sketches: “the delineations of beauty . . . the distortions of caricature, and . . . the loveliness of landscape.”

The pen names Irving adopted at various times also suggest something of his qualities as a writer. First he called himself “Jonathan Oldstyle,” uniting the Revolutionary War term applied to the rebelling colonists with an implied allegiance to the style and manner of the eighteenth century, an allegiance not, however, without overtones of irony and parody. At other times, he posed as “Diedrich Knickerbocker,” a humorous and pedantic amateur historian of New York’s own past. And *The Sketch Book* is presented as by “Geoffrey Crayon,” with its suggestion of the particular medium and limitations of the artist responsible for these “sketches,” and also, perhaps, with overtones of an earlier and greater Geoffrey—Chaucer, who delighted equally in the humorous portrayal of character.

What can we learn about Irving’s writing from his most famous story, “Rip Van Winkle”? First, the framework, content, and meaning of the story all involve us in various dimensions of the past. By way of the framework we move past the author-narrator Geoffrey Crayon, past the supposed manuscript source in the papers of Diedrich Knickerbocker, into an even earlier world where the story of Rip had already happened and become legendary. At the end of the

story the framework takes us even further back into the time of Indian legend. Within the story, we have not only the double past of Rip's youth before the Revolutionary War and his old age in the time of the Republic, but the further past of Hendrick Hudson and his crew. And at least part of the meaning of the story is surely how to live through an unpleasant personal and social past as if it had never happened.

The style of the story is characteristic of Irving. The sentences are long, but easy and balanced. The tone is familiar and sympathetic toward the reader and the tale. The opening paragraph shows Irving's ability to paint with detail, with color, and even with the very shape and sound of his sentences an atmospheric picture. The last sentences of the third paragraph show Irving's gentle wit. The dialogue is similarly easy and fluent and unobtrusively suited to the character speaking.

Not only has the story of Rip Van Winkle become a tradition, but many of the elements in the story are themselves traditional and familiar. Rip is a rich example of the hen-pecked husband and likable good-for-nothing, and Dame Van Winkle an example of the termagant wife. The mountains are the traditional home of magic, and the magical sleep is found throughout folk and fairy tale. In spite of the conventionality of these elements in the story, Irving has, by the skillful use of the specific setting of the Hudson River valley and by such details as the rusted gun Rip finds when he wakes and the changes Rip meets when he returns to the village, made the story as real to us as if it were an everyday occurrence.

In spite of its informality, the story of Rip Van Winkle can have great effect and meaning. Not only is Rip himself appealing to one side of our natures, but his story, too, has its attractions, for the impulse to sleep out our troubles, to fade away from the world, lies not too far below the surface of our minds. We may also, if we wish, ask how much Rip has lost by his long holiday from reality: has the price been

too high? Above all, Rip's mixed attitude toward the changes in his village reflects not only Irving's mixed attitude toward the rejection of the past involved in any great political and social revolution, but also the more universal yearning that all men feel at sometime toward "the good old days," especially when those days are seen through the kindly eye of memory.

The collection of Washington Irving's writings that follows should give a good idea of what Irving achieved as a writer. This achievement is well summed up in a letter Irving wrote to a friend: "It is the play of thought and sentiment and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life; and the half-concealed vein of humour that is often playing through the whole—these are among what I aim at, and upon which I felicitate myself in proportion as I think I succeed."

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The
LEGEND
of
SLEEPY HOLLOW

WASHINGTON IRVING



AIRMONT

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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The Author's Account of Himself

"I am of this mind with Homer, that as the snail that crept out of her shell was turned ere long into a toad, and thereby was forced to make a stool to sit on; so the traveller that straggles from his own country is in a short time transformed into so monstrous a shape, that he is faine to alter his mansion with his manners, and to live where he can, not where he would."—

LYLY'S *Euphues*

I was always fond of visiting new scenes, and observing strange characters and manners. Even when a mere child I began my travels, and made many tours of discovery into foreign parts and unknown regions of my native city, to the frequent alarm of my parents, and the emolument of the town-crier. As I grew into boyhood, I extended the range of my observations. My holiday afternoons were spent in rambles about the surrounding country. I made myself familiar with all its places famous in history or fable. I knew every spot where a murder or robbery had been committed, or a ghost seen. I visited the neighboring villages, and added greatly to my stock of knowledge by noting their habits and customs, and conversing with their sages and great men. I even journeyed one long summer's day to the summit of the most distant hill, whence I stretched my eye over many a mile of *terra incognita*, and was astonished to find how vast a globe I inhabited.

This rambling propensity strengthened with my years. Books of voyages and travels became my passion, and in devouring their contents, I neglected the regular exercises of the school. How wistfully would I wander about the pierheads in fine weather, and watch the parting ships, bound to distant climes; with what longing eyes would I gaze after their lessening sails, and waft myself in imagination to the ends of the earth!

Further reading and thinking, though they brought this vague inclination into more reasonable bounds, only served to make it more decided. I visited various parts of my own country; and had I been merely a lover of fine scenery, I should have felt little desire to seek elsewhere its gratification, for on no country

have the charms of nature been more prodigally lavished. Her mighty lakes, like oceans of liquid silver; her mountains, with their bright aerial tints; her valleys, teeming with wild fertility; her tremendous cataracts, thundering in their solitudes; her boundless plains, waving with spontaneous verdure; her broad deep rivers, rolling in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests, where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; her skies, kindling with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine;—no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery.

But Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise: Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement—to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity—to loiter about the ruined castle—to meditate on the falling tower—to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past.

I had, beside all this, an earnest desire to see the great men of the earth. We have, it is true, our great men in America: not a city but has an ample share of them. I have mingled among them in my time, and been almost withered by the shade into which they cast me; for there is nothing so baleful to a small man as the shade of a great one, particularly the great man of a city. But I was anxious to see the great men of Europe; for I had read in the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought I, must therefore be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson; and in this idea I was confirmed, by observing the comparative importance and swelling magnitude of many English travellers among us, who, I was assured, were very little people in their own country. I will visit this land of wonder, thought I, and see the gigantic race from which I am degenerated.

It has been either my good or evil lot to have my roving passion gratified. I have wandered through different countries, and witnessed many of the shifting scenes of life. I cannot say that I have studied them with the eye of a philosopher, but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print-shop to another, caught sometimes by the delineations of beauty, sometimes by

the distortions of caricature, and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape. As it is the fashion for modern tourists to travel pencil in hand, and bring home their portfolios filled with sketches, I am disposed to get up a few for the entertainment of my friends. When, however, I look over the hints and memorandums I have taken down for the purpose, my heart almost fails me at finding how my idle humor has led me aside from the great objects studied by every regular traveller who would make a book. I fear I shall give equal disappointment with an unlucky landscape-painter, who had travelled on the continent, but, following the bent of his vagrant inclination, had sketched in nooks, and corners, and by-places. His sketch-book was accordingly crowded with cottages, and landscapes, and obscure ruins; but he had neglected to paint St. Peter's, or the Coliseum; the cascade of Terni, or the bay of Naples; and had not a single glacier or volcano in his whole collection.

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

Found Among the Papers of the Late Diedrich
Knickerbocker

*A pleasing land of drowsy head it was,
Of dreams that wave before the half-shut eye;
And of gay castles in the clouds that pass,
For ever flushing round a summer sky.*

CASTLE OF INDOLENCE

In the bosom of one of those spacious coves which indent the eastern shore of the Hudson, at that broad expansion of the river denominated by the ancient Dutch navigators the Tappan Zee, and where they always prudently shortened sail, and implored the protection of St. Nicholas when they crossed, there lies a small market town or rural port, which by some is called Greensburgh, but which is more generally and properly known by the name of Tarry Town. This name was given, we are told, in former days, by the good housewives of the adjacent country, from the inveterate propensity of their husbands to linger about the village tavern on market days. Be that as it may, I do not vouch for the fact, but merely advert to it, for the sake of being precise and authentic. Not far from this village, perhaps about two miles, there is a little valley, or rather lap of land, among high hills, which is one of the quietest places in the whole world. A small brook glides through it, with just murmur enough to lull one to repose; and the occasional whistle of a quail or tapping of a woodpecker is almost the only sound that ever breaks in upon the uniform tranquillity.

I recollect that, when a stripling, my first exploit in squirrel shooting was in a grove of tall walnut trees that shades one side of the valley. I had wandered into it at noontime, when all nature is peculiarly quiet, and was startled by the roar of my own gun, as it broke the Sabbath stillness around, and was prolonged and reverberated by the angry echoes. If ever I

should wish for a retreat, whither I might steal from the world and its distractions and dream quietly away the remnant of a troubled life, I know of none more promising than this little valley.

From the listless repose of the place, and the peculiar character of its inhabitants, who are descendants from the original Dutch settlers, this sequestered glen has long been known by the name of SLEEPY HOLLOW, and its rustic lads are called the Sleepy Hollow Boys throughout all the neighboring country. A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere. Some say that the place was bewitched by a high German doctor during the early days of the settlement; others, that an old Indian chief, the prophet or wizard of his tribe, held his powwows there before the country was discovered by Master Hendrick Hudson. Certain it is, the place still continues under the sway of some witching power that holds a spell over the minds of the good people, causing them to walk in a continual reverie. They are given to all kinds of marvelous beliefs, are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air. The whole neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions; stars shoot and meteors glare oftener across the valley than in any other part of the country, and the nightmare, with her whole ninefold, seems to make it the favorite scene of her gambols.

The dominant spirit, however, that haunts this enchanted region and seems to be commander-in-chief of all the powers of the air is the apparition of a figure on horseback without a head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball, in some nameless battle during the Revolutionary War, and who is ever and anon seen by the country folk, hurrying along in the gloom of night, as if on the wings of the wind. His haunts are not confined to the valley, but extend at times to the adjacent roads, and especially to the vicinity of a church at no great distance. Indeed, certain of the most authentic historians of those parts, who have been careful in collecting and collating the floating facts concerning this specter, allege that the body of the trooper, having been buried in the churchyard, the ghost rides forth to the scene of battle in nightly quest of his head; and that the rushing speed with which he sometimes passes along the Hollow, like a midnight blast, is owing to his being belated, and in a hurry to get back to the churchyard before daybreak.

Such is the general purport of this legendary superstition, which has furnished materials for many a wild story in that region of shadows; and the specter is known, at all the country

firesides, by the name of the Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow.

It is remarkable that the visionary propensity I have mentioned is not confined to the native inhabitants of the valley, but is unconsciously imbibed by everyone who resides there for a time. However wide awake they may have been before they entered that sleepy region, they are sure, in a little time, to inhale the witching influence of the air, and begin to grow imaginative—to dream dreams and see apparitions.

I mention this peaceful spot with all possible laud; for it is in such little retired Dutch valleys, found here and there embosomed in the great State of New York, that population, manners, and customs remain fixed; while the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant changes in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved. They are like those little nooks of still water which border a rapid stream, where we may see the straw and bubble riding quietly at anchor, or slowly revolving in their mimic harbor, undisturbed by the rush of the passing current. Though many years have elapsed since I trod the drowsy shades of Sleepy Hollow, yet I question whether I should not still find the same trees and the same families vegetating in its sheltered bosom.

In this by-place of nature there abode, in a remote period of American history, that is to say, some thirty years since, a worthy wight of the name of Ichabod Crane, who sojourned, or, as he expressed it, "tarried," in Sleepy Hollow, for the purpose of instructing the children of the vicinity. He was a native of Connecticut, a State which supplies the Union with pioneers for the mind as well as for the forest, and sends forth yearly its legions of frontier woodsmen and country schoolmasters. The cognomen of Crane was not inapplicable to his person. He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together. His head was small, and flat at top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weathercock, perched upon his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew. To see him striding along the profile of a hill on a windy day, with his clothes bagging and fluttering about him, one might have mistaken him for the genius of famine descending upon the earth, or some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield.

His schoolhouse was a low building of one large room, rudely constructed of logs, the windows partly glazed, and partly patched with leaves of old copybooks. It was most ingeniously