

MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

THE LITERATURE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Marshall Walker



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OF THE
UNITED STATES
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MACMILLAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE

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General editor: A. Norman Jeffares

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TO NORA K. WALKER
AND IN MEMORY OF
HAROLD WALKER

This book is not written for the over-fed.
It is written for men who have not been able
to afford an university education or for young
men, whether or not threatened with universities,
who want to know more at the age of fifty than
I know today, and whom I might conceivably aid
to that object. I am fully aware of the dangers
inherent in attempting such utility to them.

Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*

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MARSHALL WALKER
Hamilton, April 1982

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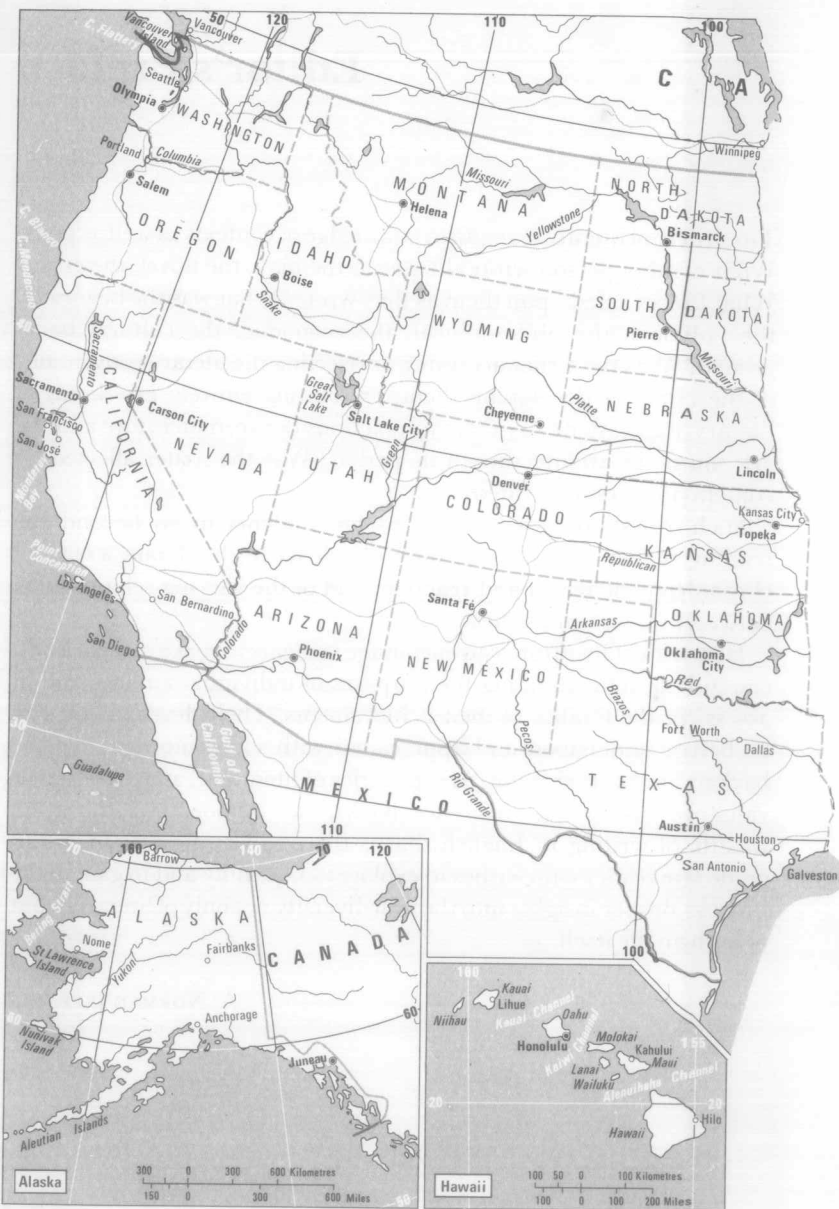
Editor's Preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that is there to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES



The United States of America. Map © Macmillan Education.

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Terms of a Tradition

'THE land was ours before we were the land's', writes Robert Frost (1874–1963) in 'The Gift Outright' (1942). He is thinking about the effort early American settlers had to make to commit themselves to a vast new country 'vaguely realising westward'. The land itself could be appropriated by men and women of sufficient ingenuity, strength and determination. Transforming a frontier into 'home' took longer and required imagination. Every life lived in the new land brought home closer. Every artistic response to America acknowledged it as the artist's field of activity, his own place; and as artists of all kinds grew in number, the land increasingly possessed them.

The Pilgrims of the *Mayflower* who entered Cape Cod Harbor on 21 November 1620 and made a landing in snow at what is now Provincetown, Massachusetts, were still spiritually possessed by England. Separatists from the Church of England who sought to restore the church to its 'primitive order, liberty, and beauty', they were themselves shaped, even in their rebellion, by English life, language and ideas. Nothing in their past could have prepared them for the exotica of Indian culture, and nothing in England could have anticipated the sheer scale of the new country. They would become American only through generations of strenuous mental as well as physical adjustment and improvisation. The history of American literature is a sequence of spiritual appropriations of, and by, the land which the settlers and their descendants found and altered as it altered them.

The prime fact of America is its physical size, its huge distances. Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) says, 'In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is.' With an area of 3,615,122 square miles, America is slightly smaller than the People's Republic of China and less than half the size of the Soviet Union, but to settlers from Britain, Ireland and the populous countries of Europe it presented a varied, alien

geography of awesome proportions and mysterious extent. The size of the country is the basis of its political organisation, a federal system of government in which the central authority of Washington is complemented by separate, largely autonomous administrations in each of the forty-eight contiguous states, in Alaska to the northern extreme of the continent, and Hawaii in the mid-Pacific.

A sense of space is fundamental to the work of writers as diverse as James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), Mark Twain (1835–1910), Willa Cather (1876–1947), Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), John Steinbeck (1902–68), William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) and Jack Kerouac (1922–69). It is there in the nineteenth-century panoramic landscape paintings of Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Erwin Church, as well as in the monumental effects of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood. Size and distance are implicit in the grandiose polytonal music of Charles Ives and in the widely spaced chords and gapped arpeggio melodies of Aaron Copland. Towering images of space assert human ingenuity in city architecture from New York to Los Angeles. Perhaps the most spectacular response to the scale of American landscape was the attempt in 1971–2 by Christo, a Bulgarian-born artist, to construct his ‘Valley Curtain’ near Aspen, Colorado, a hawser slung between two mountains 1,250 feet apart and carrying an orange curtain weighing four tons.

There is still plenty of space ‘where nobody is’ in America. From some ten million people in 1820 the population has grown by more than twenty times, yet any substantial journey along the country’s nearly four million miles of roads will bring the traveller – especially one accustomed to the congestions of Britain and Europe – a new sense of arrival and departure. Small towns and villages are definable incidents along the way; they do not just melt vaguely into each other. A small place makes its point, still, as a settlement in the great space of America. There is romance in this, and, outside the major cities, it fosters those local and regional characteristics which are, to a large extent, based on climate.

America’s eastern seaboard runs from the northern climate of New England down to the semi-tropical states fringing the Gulf of Mexico. A journey down the centre of the country leads from the cutting winds of the Dakotas to the fetid airs of the Mississippi delta. Western climates range from the English affinities of Washington and Oregon to the hot, dry deserts of Arizona. There is a corresponding variety of flora and fauna, from timber-wolves to alligators and conifers to cactus. When to all this are added the diverse national

origins of the thirty-five million people who emigrated to America between 1830 and 1914, the result is the supreme paradox of the post-Civil-War USA. It is both a single nation held together by a Federal government, transport lines, the English language, and coast-to-coast Coca-Cola, and many countries, none of which is uniquely indentifiable as the real America. Paul Simon's (b. 1941) wistful song 'America', popular in the late 1960s when to be young was to be nomadic, brings these elements together:

'Kathy', I said
As we boarded a Greyhound in Pittsburgh,
'Michigan seems like a dream to me now
It took me four days to hitch-hike from Saginaw.
I've come to look for America.'

Discovery and Settlement

Christopher Columbus was looking for the Indies, not for the America he is wrongly credited with discovering in 1492. Asiatics must have preceded him and possibly African and Egyptian voyagers. Norwegian archaeology has dated the foundations of seven buildings in the north end of Newfoundland at around the tenth century, and Scandinavian sagas of the eleventh and twelfth centuries refer to Norsemen who crossed the ocean. A world map drawn some fifty years before the voyage of Columbus, and now in Yale University Library, shows a large island called Vinland, south-west of Greenland. A Latin inscription proclaims Leif Eriksson (son of Eric Rauthe, or Eric the Red) and his men as the discoverers of this island and says that Pope Paschall II sent Bishop Eric Gnupson to civilise it. Columbus himself got no further than an island in the Caribbean which he named 'San Salvador'. Believing he had attained his goal he called the natives 'Indians'.

The name 'America' derives from the Italian explorer Amerigo (or *Americus*) Vespucci who made four voyages to the New World. In 1502 Vespucci landed on the coast of Brazil, but in his report of a voyage of 1497 he mentions touching upon a coast 'which we thought to be that of a continent'. If he was right, the touch would give him precedence not only over Columbus in reaching the American mainland, but also over John Cabot whose voyage of 1497 under patent from Henry VII took him only to Cape Breton Island. It was in Cabot's second voyage the following year that he explored other parts of North America as a basis for England's claim to the continent.

The English were slow to begin their settlement of the New World. In 1583 Sir Humphrey Gilbert failed in an attempt to settle Newfoundland, and the 1585 expedition to what is now North Carolina, sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh, survived only a year. Other attempts to settle 'Virginia', as the entire Atlantic seaboard of America was then called, also failed and it was not until 1607 that the first permanent colony was established by Captain John Smith at Jamestown. With this first successful settlement American literature properly begins and the first report is written of a 'fruitful and delightful' virgin land of promise waiting for man to realise prelapsarian opportunities for ever lost to him in Europe.

A new Eden and the American Dream

The Irish philosopher, Bishop George Berkeley, expressed the yearning of fellow-intellectuals with his vision of a new world of 'innocence where nature guides and virtue rules'. Berkeley's plan for a Christian college for the natives in Bermuda failed, and, for the nine and a half million people who sailed the Atlantic in the first hundred years of America's history as a nation, reality was often a harsh climate, misfortune and enduring social inequality. The myths that kept them going and lured others form the basis of the American Dream. The New World would be an Arcadia, a new Eden, a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth where, uninhibited by the restraints of older societies, a man could practise his trade or his religion with freedom and control his political destiny – he could be Adam again.

John Smith's (1580–1631) *A Map of Virginia* (1612) says of Virginia that 'heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation', and his *A Description of New England* (1616) develops the image of America as a Promised Land. Though under constant pressure from the many hardships of colonial life, the image is sustained with religious conviction by the Pilgrims of Plymouth, the first New England colony, and by the Puritans who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629–30. More than half the Plymouth colonists died of disease, exposure or deprivation in the first American winter but, with help from the Indians, the year 1621 yielded a good harvest which prompted the first American Thanksgiving. William Bradford's (1590–1657) *History of Plymouth Plantation* (1620–50; pub. 1856) soberly narrates the hard facts of colonial survival, but is clearly the work of a man who deeply believes in the Christian destiny of the