WASHINGTON IRVING

1783-1859

1 Washington Irving, the first American to achieve an international literary reputation,

2 was born in New York City on April 3, 1783, the last of eleven children of a Scottish-born

3 father and English-born mother. Well into his thirties his brothers routinely tried to make

4 plans for him, and his own devotion to his family was a dominant emotion throughout his

5 life. He read widely in English literature at home, modeling his early prose on the graceful

6 *Spectator* papers by Joseph Addison, but delighted by many other writers, including

7 Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith, and Laurence Sterne. His brothers enjoyed writing poems

8 and essays as pleasant, companionable recreation, and at nineteen Irving wrote a series of

9 satirical essays on the theater and New York society for his brother Peter’s newspaper, the

10 *Morning Courier*.

11 When Irving showed signs of tuberculosis in 1804, his brothers sent him abroad for

12 a two-year tour of Europe, where in his notebooks he steadily became an acute observer and

13 felicitous recorder of what he witnessed. On his return, he began studying law with Judge

14 Josiah Hoffman, but more important for his career, he and his brother William (along with

15 William’s brother-in-law, James Kirke Paulding) started an anonymous satirical magazine,

16 *Salmagundi* (the name of a spicy hash), which ran through 1807 with sketches and poems on

17 politics and drama as well as familiar essays on a great range of topics. Then in 1808 Irving

18 began work on *A History of New York*, at first conceiving it as a parody of Samuel Latham

19 Mitchell’s pompously titled *The Picture of New-York; or The Traveller’s Guide through the*

20 *Commercial Metropolis of the United States*, then taking on a variety of satiric targets, including

21 President Jefferson, whom he portrayed as an early Dutch governor of New Amsterdam,

22 William the Testy. Exuberant, broadly comic, the *History* spoofed historians’ pedantries but

23 was itself the result of many months of antiquarian reading in local libraries, where his

24 researches gave Irving refuge from grief over the sudden death of Judge Hoffman’s daughter

25 Matilda, to whom he had become engaged. Then the *History* was launched by a charming

26 publicity campaign. First a newspaper noted the disappearance of a “small elderly gentleman,

27 dressed in an old black coat and cocked hat, by the name of KNICKERBOCKER,” adding

28 that there were “some reasons for believing he is not entirely in his right mind.” After

29 further “news” items the old man’s fictitious landlord announced that he had found in

30 Knickerbocker’s room a *“very curious kind of a written book”* which he intended to dispose of to

31 pay the bill that was owed him, and the book at last appeared, ascribed to Diedrich

32 Knickerbocker. With its publication Irving became an American celebrity. Reprinted in

33 England, the *History* reached Sir Walter Scott, who declared that it made his sides hurt from

34 laughter. Like all but the rarest of topical satires, however, it has become increasingly

35 inaccessible to later generations of readers, who can hardly comprehend Irving’s strategies

36 and targets without precisely the sort of antiquarian footnotes he found delight in mocking.

37 During the War of 1812 Irving was editor of the *Analectic Magazine*, which he filled

38 mainly with essays from British periodicals but where he printed his own timely series of

39 patriotic biographical sketches of American naval heroes. Toward the end of the war he was

40 made a colonel in the New York State Militia. Then in May 1815, a major break occurred in

41 his life: he left for Europe and stayed away for seventeen years. At first he worked in

42 Liverpool with his brother Peter, an importer of English hardware. In 1818 Peter went

43 bankrupt, shortly after their mother died in New York; profoundly grieved and shamed,

44 Irving once again took refuge in writing. During his work on *The Sketch Book* he met Scott,

45 who buoyed him by admiration for the *History* and helpfully directed Irving’s attention to the

46 wealth of unused literary material in German folktales; there, as scholars have shown, Irving

47 found the source for *Rip Van Winkle*, some passages of which are close paraphrases of the

48 original. In 1819 Irving began sending *The Sketch Book* to the United States for publication in

49 installments. When the fill version was printed in England the next year, it made Irving

50 famous and brought him the friendship of many of the leading British writers of the time.

51 His new pseudonym, Geoffrey Crayon, became universally recognized, and over the next

52 years selections from *The Sketch Book* entered the classroom as models of English prose just

53 as selections from Addison had long been used. As Irving knew, part of his British success

54 derived from general astonishment that a man born in the United States could write in such

55 an English way about English scenes: Addison lay behind the sketches of English country

56 life, just as Oliver Goldsmith’s essay on the Boar’s-head Tavern in Eastcheap and on

57 Westminster Abbey lay behind Irving’s on the same topics. But in among the graceful, tame

58 tributes to English scenes and characters were two vigorous tales set in rural New York, *Rip*

59 *Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Everyone who read them knew instantly that they

60 were among the literary treasures of the language, and it very soon became hard to

61 remember that they had not always been among the English classics.

62 Irving’s next book, *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), and worshipful tribute to old-fashioned

63 English country life, was, as the author realized, a feeble follow-up, and *Tales of a Traveller*

64 (1824) was widely taken as a sign that he had written himself out. At a loss to sustain his

65 career, Irving gambled on accepting an invitation from an acquaintance, the American

66 minister to Spain: he was to come to Spain as an attaché of the legation (a device for giving

67 him entrée into manuscript collections) and translate Martin Fernández de Navarrete’s new

68 compilation of accounts of the voyages of Columbus, including Columbus’s own lost

69 journals as copied by an earlier historian. Helped by the American consul in Madrid,

70 Obadiah Rich, who owned a magnificent collection of books and manuscripts on Spanish

71 and Latin American history, Irving worked intensely and in 1828 published *The Life and*

72 *Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, not a translation of Navarrete (though the Spaniard’s volume

73 supplied most of the facts) but a biography of Irving’s own, shaped by his skill at evocative

74 re-creation of history. Out of these Spanish years came also *The Conquest of Granada* (1829),

75 *Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus* (1831), and *The Alhambra* (1832), which

76 became known as “the Spanish *Sketch Book*.”

77 In 1829 Irving was appointed secretary to the American legation in London, where

78 he became a competent, hardworking diplomat, aided by his access to the highest levels of

79 British society. No longer the latest rage, Irving by now was a solidly established author. On

80 his return to the United States in 1832 his reputation was in need of redemption from a

81 different charge—that of becoming too Europeanized. As if in an effort to make amends,

82 Irving turned to three studies of the American West: *A Tour on the Prairies* (1835), based on

83 his horseback journey into what is now Oklahoma; *Astoria* (1836), an account of John Jacob

84 Astor’s fur-trading colony in Oregon, written in Astor’s own library and based on published

85 accounts as well as research in Astor’s archives (in which task Irving was assisted by his

86 nephew Peter); and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, U.S.A.* (1837), an account of a

87 Frenchman’s explorations in the Rockies and the Far West.

88 In the late 1830s Irving bought and began refurbishing a house near Tarrytown,

89 along the Hudson north of New York City, just where he had dreamed of settling down in

90 *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. At Sunnyside he made a home for several members of his family,

91 including as many as five nieces at a time, but he wrote little. From this somewhat

92 purposeless stage of his life he was rescued by appointment as minister to Spain in 1842; he

93 served four years in Madrid with great success. After his return he arranged with G. P.

94 Putnam to publish a collected edition of his writing and took the occasion to revise some of

95 them. Using essays he had written years before, he also prepared for the edition a derivative

96 biography of Oliver Goldsmith (1849), after which critics more than ever compared him to

97 the Irish prince of hack writers. Irving’s main work after 1851 was his long-contemplated life

98 of George Washington. He worked in libraries, read old newspapers, studied government

99 records, and visited battlefields, but once again he drew very heavily on published

100 biographies, especially the recent one by Jared Sparks. He forced himself, in the most heroic

101 effort of his career, to complete the successive five volumes, the first of which was published

102 in 1855. Just after finishing the last he collapsed, and died a few months later, on November

103 28, 1859.

104 Decades before his death, Irving had achieved the status of a classic writer; in his

105 own country he had no rival as a stylist. As schoolboys, Hawthorne and Longfellow were

106 inspired by the success of *The Sketch Book*, and their prose, as well as that of a horde of now-

107 unread writers, owed much to Irving. Although Melville, in his essay on Hawthorne’s *Mosses*

108 *from an Old Manse*, declared his preference for creative geniuses over adept imitators like

109 Irving, he could not escape Irving’s influence, which emerges both in his short stories and in

110 a late poem, *Rip Van Winkle’s Lilacs*, which showed he saw Rip as an archetypal artist figure.

111 (Melville’s debt was even more tangible, for early in 1846 Irving had passed the word to

112 Putnam that *Typee* was worth reprinting in New York, but then Irving had been generous to

113 younger writers all his life, as in his supervision of the London publication of Bryant’s poems

114 in 1832.) The southwestern humorists of the 1840s, Irving read and enjoyed, were much

115 more robust than Irving in his mature years, yet they learned from him that realistic details

116 of rural life in America could be worked memorably into fiction. From the beginning,

117 Americans identified with Rip as a counterhero, an anti-Franklinian who made a success of

118 failure, and successive generations have responded profoundly to Irving’s pervasive theme of

119 mutability, especially as localized in his portrayal of the bewildering and destructive rapidity

120 of change in American life.