

PREFACE

IT was a hard saying of a Spanish aphorist of the seventeenth century that "to equal a predecessor one must have twice his worth." We should deprecate the application of that standard to *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, yet we are not without hope that the work, of which we here present the first volume, will be found to mark some progress in the right direction. We would call attention to the following as perhaps its chief distinctive features: (1) It is on a larger scale than any of its predecessors which have carried the story from colonial times to the present generation; (2) It is the first history of American literature composed with the collaboration of a numerous body of scholars from every section of the United States and from Canada; (3) It will provide for the first time an extensive bibliography for all periods and subjects treated; (4) It will be a survey of the life of the American people as expressed in their writings rather than a history of *belles-lettres* alone. The significance of these features may be emphasized by some reference to the characteristic merits and defects of previous works in this field, to which we are under obligations too extensive for detailed mention.

The earliest and the latest historians of a literature have great advantages: the earliest, that he has no predecessors; the latest, that he has many. It is a pleasure to remember Samuel L. Knapp, who in the preface to his *Lectures on American Literature*, published in 1829, easily justified the publication of that interesting and patriotic overture: "We have very good histories—narrative, political, military, and constitutional; but I know none, as yet, that can be called literary—meaning by the term, a history of our literature, and of our literary men." "You are aware," he continues, "that it has been said by foreigners, and often repeated, that there was no such thing as American literature; that it would be vain for anyone