



Life, Literature and Education.

Washington Irving.



Among the earlier American writers, one of the most illustrious is Washington Irving. He was born in New York on April 3rd, 1783, the son of a Scotch father and English mother, who, however, were enamored enough of the land of their adoption to call their son Washington. During his boyhood the lad was no prodigy. He was, in fact, probably owing to ill-health, the only one of his family who never went to college. Neither did he show any remarkable application in home study, that alpenstock to the educationally hampered; and the only foreshadowing of his future ability lay in a fancy for scribbling verses—a facility usually regarded as a gift of rather questionable worth.

At sixteen he entered a law office, and at nineteen his verse-scribbling had begun to crystallize into prose, in contributions, pretentiously subscribed "Jonathan Oldstyle," which appeared in the local papers. Shortly afterwards he was threatened with consumption, and went to Europe, where he spent some time in Italy. Like Thackeray, he there became enamored of the idea of being an artist, but it does not appear that he ever made any especial progress in the study of painting. He was, however, acquiring that broad culture which showed itself later in his writings, and which, joined to an unusually attractive personality, caused him to be much admired, and much sought after in society.

In 1806 he returned to New York, and was admitted to the Bar, but continued his literary endeavors, his first work of importance being "A History of New York, by Diedrich Knickerbocker," a burlesque on the old Dutch settlers of Manhattan. In 1815 he went back again to Europe,

and remained for 17 years. Part of this time he spent in business life, in partnership with his two brothers; but, on the failure of the firm in 1818, he fell back on literature as a profession.

"The Sketchbook," which is, perhaps, the most popular of his works with Americans, was published in 1820. Many of the sketches deal with England. Westminster Abbey, Stratford-on-Avon, rural England, London's big national library—all are there, outlined by a pen that reminds us, somewhat, in its subtlety of description, its delicacy of humor, of Lamb's. Yet, it is when writing of his native land, perhaps, that Washington Irving "finds" himself most. "Rip Van Winkle" has made the Catskill region classic ground. Impossible though the story is, this delightful sketch is no mere fairy tale, nor ever will be while there is a hen-pecked Rip, a hen-pecking Dame Winkle, or a Nicholas Vedder with his pipe and his chair at an indoor. According, perhaps, to the fashion of his time, Irving rather delighted in the supernatural. It appears again in the Legend of Sleepy Hollow, which is interesting, but somewhat lacking in the human touches that have made "Rip Van Winkle" immortal. Where the shades of long-dead personages are not invoked, as in the legend of the Catskills, dreams are summoned to supply the deficiency. In the "Art of Bookmaking," the authors rummaging for ideas through the black tomes of the great library, deck themselves (behold the satire!) in the sleeves, capes and skirts of bygone knights of the quill, and the portraits of the authors on the wall thrust accusing heads and shoulders, and countenances full of fury, from out the dust-covered canvas. In the "Mutability of Literature," a "little, thick quarto, bound in parchment, with brass clasps," hems, and yawns, and breaks forth into complaining speech.

Of all the minor essays, however, perhaps every British subject who has a trace of humor in him, must enjoy "John Bull" the most. John can stand a bit of criticism, can even afford to smile when he chances to catch an odd glimpse of himself, so delightfully reflected as in the following:

"John Bull, to all appearances, is a plain, downright matter-of-fact fellow, with much less of poetry about him than rich prose. There is little of romance in his nature, but a vast deal of strong natural feeling. He excels in humor more than wit; is jolly, rather than gay; melancholy, rather than morose; can easily be moved to a sudden tear, or surprised into a broad laugh; but he loathes sentiment, and has no turn for light pleasantry. He is a boon companion if you allow him to have his humor and to talk about himself; and he will stand by a friend in a quarrel, with life and purse, however soundly he may be cudgelled." (Compare Lamb's *Lovel*, who was a good fellow, and "would strike.")

"In this last respect, to tell the truth, he has a propensity to be somewhat too ready. He is a busy-minded personage, who thinks not merely for himself and family, but

for all the country round, and is most generally disposed to be everybody's champion. He is continually volunteering his services to settle his neighbor's affairs, and takes it in great dudgeon if they engage in any matter of consequence without asking his advice, though he seldom engages in any friendly office of the kind without finishing by getting into a squabble with all parties, and then railing bitterly at their ingratitude. He unluckily took lessons in his youth in the noble science of defense, and, having accomplished himself in the use of his limbs and his weapons, and become a perfect master at boxing and cudgel play, he has had a troublesome life of it ever since. He cannot hear of a quarrel between the most distant of his neighbors but he begins incontinently to fumble with the head of his cudgel and consider whether his interest or honor does not require that he should meddle in the broil. Indeed, he has extended his relations of pride and policy so completely over the whole country that no event can take place without infringing some of his finely-spun rights and dignities. Couched in his little domain, with these filaments stretching forth in every direction, he is like some choleric, bottle-bellied old spider, who has woven his web over a whole chamber, so that a fly cannot buzz nor a breeze blow without startling his repose and causing him to sally forth wrathfully from his den."

Of course, a "Yankee" wrote this, but who can think of Britain's little tempests in South Africa, in China, in Tibet, even her more recent demonstrations after the Dogger Bank incident, before the Algeiras Conference, and last of all at Tabah, without recognizing a few of the "filaments" and enjoying the sight of the spider sallying forth, armed with confidence, and with portentous mien.

But we must on. In 1822 Irving's "Bracebridge Hall" was published, and in 1824 his "Tales of a Traveller." In 1826 he went to Spain, and there laid the foundation for his "Life of Columbus," "Conquest of Granada," "Voyages of the Companions of Columbus," "The Alhambra," "Legends of the Conquest of Spain," and "Mahomet and his Successors," some of which were written on his return to the United States, after having held a four years' appointment as Minister to Spain, a position to which he was assigned in 1842. His other works are: "A Tour on the Prairies," "Recollections of Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey," "Astoria" (written in conjunction with his nephew), "Adventures of Captain Bonneville," "Biography of Goldsmith," "Wolfert's Roost," and a "Life of General Washington," in five volumes. This biography was his last work.

He died at his home in Sleepy Hollow on the 28th Nov., 1859, and was buried in the cemetery near his home. Owing to the death of his fiancée, to whose memory he was faithful all his life, Irving never married, and to his nephew, the same who assisted him in the writing of "Astoria," fell the duty of writing his biography, and of telling the world what it knows of one of America's best-loved authors.

Cowbird

(*Molothrus ater*—Blackbird family).

Description (Neltje Blanchan):

"Length, 7 to 8 inches, about 1-5 smaller than the robin."

"Male—Iridescent black, with head, neck and breast glittering brown. Bill dark brown, feet brownish."

"Female—Dull grayish-brown above, a shade lighter below, and streaked with paler shades of brown."

Have you ever seen birds of the above description strutting about among your cattle, picking up the insects stirred up by them in the pastures, and emitting from time to time a sort of "gurgling rasping note," followed by a few sharper ones? If so, then you have already become acquainted with one of the veriest villains of the bird tribe, and we trust that you will make small scruple about shooting it on sight.

The cowbird (also locally called cow blackbird, cow-pen bird, brown-headed oriole, and cow bunting) is, in fact, one of the most destructive agents as regards the other birds, and this destruction it accomplishes, not in fair and open fight, but by methods so sneaking, so revolting, that one can feel no mercy for it at all.

Cowbirds do not pair off in the spring, and make little homes in which the babies are raised as do other birds. On the contrary, they are polygamous, almost entirely void of protective care towards their eggs, and wholly so in regard to their nestlings, whose up-bringing they manage to foist on to the shoulders of more energetic or more parental neighbors. The cowbird has, in fact, been known to deposit an egg and turn right around and eat it. Very often, too, it lays its eggs carelessly in any exposed place. Pity it should not invariably do this. As a rule, however, it seeks out the nest of some other bird, usually that of one smaller than itself, and there it leaves the egg, seeking another nest for the next one, and so on. The ousted bird then returns and finishes the hatching process. The cowbird's egg is usually the first to come out, and the great birdling grows much faster than its little foster brothers, finally spreading out crushing them, and reaching its gaping bill up for the food brought by the old birds, who, not recognizing the deception, continue to nourish the stranger-child as though quite proud of it. Eventually, all the other nestlings are starved or trampled to death.

As soon as the young cowbirds are fledged, however, with the usual ungratefulness of their kind, they immediately leave their foster-parents and join the first cowbird flock they can find.

The eggs are usually much larger than the other eggs found in the same nests. They are nearly an inch long, and are white, with brown or gray spots.

For the cowbird we cannot recommend your mercy, but can only say, make war upon it at every opportunity if you would protect our native birds.

"In rural occupation there is nothing mean or debasing. It leads a man forth among scenes of natural grandeur and beauty; it leaves him to the workings of his own mind, operated upon by the purest and most elevating of external influences. Such a man may be simple and rough, but he cannot be vulgar." [Irving, in "Rural Life in England."