



WASHINGTON IRVING

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American Pioneer Prose Writers

WASHINGTON IRVING

Monograph Number Four in The Mentor Reading Course



BANKRUPTCY produced one of the greatest American writers. If the business house with which Washington Irving was associated had not failed, he might never have seriously attempted to take up literature.

Washington Irving was born in New York City on April 3, 1783. He was named after George Washington, who at that time was the idol of the American people. Both his parents were immigrants from Great Britain. His father was a prosperous merchant at the time of Irving's birth.

Irving was a mischievous boy. Perhaps this was due to the fact that Deacon Irving was a severe father. He detested the theater, and permitted no reading on Sunday except the Bible and the Catechism. Washington was permitted on weekdays to read only Gulliver's Travels and Robinson Crusoe. Nevertheless, in spite of his father's strictness, the boy managed to steal away from home to attend the theater.

Irving intended to be a lawyer; but his health gave way, and he had to take a voyage to Europe. In this journey he went as far as Rome, and in England made the acquaintance of Washington Allston, the famous American painter, who was then living there. On his return he was admitted to the bar; but he made little effort at practising.

In the meanwhile, however, he, his brother William, and J. K. Paulding wrote some humorous sketches called "Salmagundi Papers," which were quite successful.

About this time came the single romance of Irving's life. Judge Hoffman, in whose law office he was, had a daughter named Matilda. The young lawyer fell in love with her; but this romance was brought to a tragic end by her death. Irving never married, remaining true throughout life to the memory of this early attachment.

Irving's first important piece of writing was the Knickerbocker History of New York. It was a clever parody of a history of the city published by Dr. Samuel Mitchell. The book was received with enthusiasm by the public, and Irving's reputation was made.

His health, never of the best, again gave way. In 1815 he revisited Europe, and made the acquaintance of many important people there, including Disraeli, Campbell, and Scott. The business in which he was a silent partner fell into bad conditions and ended with a bankruptcy which left Irving virtually without resources. His brother, who was an influential member of Congress, secured for him a secretaryship in the United States Navy Department with a salary of \$2,500 a year; but Irving declined this, with the intention of writing for a living.

From that time he was successful. All his books were eagerly received, and it was not long before he was considered America's leading writer. He went to Spain as attaché of the American legation in 1826. When he returned to the United States he found his name a household word. Then he decided to settle down somewhere in the country and quietly enjoy life. He built a delightful home on the Hudson River, New York, to which he gave the name of "Sunnyside," where he spent his last years. His charming personality attracted to him many friends, and there were no worries to bother him. He continued his writing to the very last. He died of heart disease at Sunnyside on November 28, 1859. On the day of his funeral all the shops in Tarrytown were closed and draped in mourning. Both sides of the road leading to his grave at Sleepy Hollow were crowded with sorrowful mourners.

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