

**The National Period of American Literature**

BY LORENZO SEARS, LIT. D.,  
Professor of American Literature in Brown University.

VIII.—Nathaniel P. Willis and Bayard Taylor.

**T**HERE are names in the history of any literature which become faint echoes of their former importance. Once they were shouted by the multitude; now they are recalled as having a half familiar sound and suggesting further inquiry. If a popular vote had been taken in the second quarter of the century for the most widely admired writer of emotional verse and of light and graceful prose Nathaniel Parker Willis would have received the majority of suffrages. He was another New Englander who drifted into the literary coterie of New York in the years when it was the center of attraction for young writers. Born in Portland, Me., with the advantages of a publisher for a grandfather and the editor of a religious paper for his father, the young student at Yale illustrated the law of heredity in his college course by writing poems almost as precocious as Bryant's and of far greater emotional power. To be sure they were Scriptural in tone, but tradition has it that this was not due to an over-religiousness on the part of the poet himself. Yet the same may be said of Pope and fall asleep in blissful unconsciousness of the somewhat worldly-mindedness of the courtly author. Still, there is no good reason why the product of a poet's best impulses should not be taken for what it is worth to the reader in reproducing similar emotions in his own mind. Biography may explain literature, but it need not necessarily qualify it. Accordingly these "Scripture Sketches" of the college youth may be allowed to stand for those better moods of reflection and aspiration which alternate with academic surpluses of animal spirits, for whose effervescence no gymnasium was supplied at Yale in 1825. As offsets to what then took the place of athletics in various devices for keeping a high temperature in the old town Willis could write such verse as "Absalom" and "Jephtha's Daughter."

Literature did not offer so many paths to a college graduate turned loose 75 years ago as in these latter days. Then it was a confident or desperate youth who dared to trust to the pen for a living. Willis, however, had been commended for his college pieces and had won a publisher's prize of \$50 for the best gift book poem. With this send off the recent graduate undertook the editorship of a series of volumes published by that Peter Parley to whom sundry American authors of distinction owed their bringing out. Then *The American Magazine* was established, to be finally merged into the *New York Mirror*, to which Willis contributed editorial letters during two years' travel in the old world. These "Pencilings by the Way" were the first valuable specimens of the abundant literature of American travel, often more interesting to the writer than the reader. This writer, however, had the crayon quality in his pen and could put life and picturesqueness into worn paths and dull statistics. Besides, he was favored with passports as an attaché of the American minister at Paris, giving him access to courtly circles in Europe and the east. With these facilities the record of travel made by such an observer was a revelation to those even who had been over the ground and a delight to those who had not. The sale of the "Pencilings" was greatly increased by a virulent review in *The Quarterly*, and a personal article by Captain Marryat occasioned a meeting for satisfaction.



Willis.

Four years of residence abroad satisfied this travel-loving American for awhile, and he took up his abode far from cities and men in his cottage at Glenmary, on the Susquehanna, where he wrote the "Letters From Under a Bridge." Then came the financial reverse which in so many instances has been the spur to easy going loiterers along the highway of letters, driving him back to New York and to work on *The Corsair*, a weekly journal which had the distinction of employing Thackeray as a contributor before he had grown so great as in the days of "The Newcomes." This paper was soon abandoned for *The Evening Mirror*, the demands of which undermined his health, resulting after a third voyage to Europe in the establishment of *The Home Journal* and insuring a more moderate pace in literary labor.

The above particulars have been mentioned to illustrate the life of a man of letters in the second generation of the century. It was the period between the news letter and the journal, with the permanent magazine in its present form still in the distance. Whatever was printed was necessarily brief or cut into short sections if a long story, entailing the reader's impatience or expectancy. A volume of such brevities had usually the same choppy character, with the advantage of being laid down and taken up at odd intervals, a point in favor of a fragmentary and discursive author like Willis. Yet in the course of a lifetime he produced many volumes. To read one-half of them would be worse than a waste of time. People did not lose many hours at a time over them when they were published, since they came out for the most part in weekly installments. On the other hand, if one were stranded in the country with "Hurrygraphs" or "Outdoors at Idlewild" or "People I Have Met" or "Famous Persons and Places" for his only reading he would find more hours pleasantly occupied than with some more pretentious books. The range is wide over many lands, scenes and celebrities. Much light is thrown upon contemporary history. The manners of a bygone period in letters and politics in our own country are graphically depicted. Life in other and older lands is contrasted with the simplicity of republican ways and the scenery of the unbroken wilderness with the artificiality of landscapes that had absorbed the labor of generations—to take a few titles at random from a single volume, beginning with letters from Plymouth, Cape Cod, the Delaware, the Hudson, on Edward Everett, Calhoun and Benton, Fenimore Cooper, Daniel Webster, Irving, Whipple, society and manners in New York, shawl aristocracy and a score of similar home topics about which everybody was surprised to find how much Willis could tell them. He had an artist's eye to see the picturesque in familiar objects and the artist's touch to bring out the unexpected beauty or interest of the commonplace.

One of those who were always ready to acknowledge indebtedness to his literary hospitality was Bayard Taylor, a Pennsylvania youth who was blessed with visions of authorship and travel and troubled with scant means and opportunities. He acquired enough Latin at school to give him a clew to the romance languages and obtained the technical education of a printing office. To these he added the larger education of a literary tramp in foreign countries, writing letters to newspapers for his support, and after two years returned to New York for fresh orders. The metropolis was still keeping good its title to the purest literary atmosphere in the country, if not the highest. What remained of the old Knickerbocker school was doing fair work, and new material was added from time to time. Aside from those already spoken of were Morris, Hoffman, the Duyckincks and "certain women of their company," besides sundry Bohemian encampments on the borderland between aspiration and performance, all together causing some one to define the Knickerbocker school as "composed of authors whom we all remember as forgotten." To the survivors Willis, Griswold and Hoffman introduced Taylor, and within three months he had engagements to write for four journals, besides a place as chief of the literary department of *The Tribune*. He was at home in this diversified occupation, writing 15 hours a day, turning his hand to anything demanded for the daily press, doing his work so carefully and well that he won a higher position and became a stockholder in the company.

California and Mexico next gratified his love of travel and adventure, and an invitation to deliver a commencement poem at Harvard came as a tribute to his poetic talent. Then came the inevitable abuse which follows success like its shadow, and because he happened to be the winner of a prize song for Jenny Lind and 752 other contestants were not he began to wish he had never been born—a poet. Nevertheless he published "Book of Romances, Lyrics and Songs" and started for a long journey to Europe and the orient, during which he wrote letters to *The Tribune* and became the great American traveler, as much at home in Damascus as in New York.

As an outcome of his journeyings he published in one season his "Journey to Central Africa," "The Lands of the Saracens" and "Poems of the Orient." "A Visit to India, China and Japan" and "Summer in Sweden" followed.

Afterward he tried his hand at novel writing, producing four, of which "The Story of Kennet" is the best and "John Godfrey's Fortunes" nearest to the writer's personal experiences as a literary worker in New York. He also attempted the drama under the titles of "The Masque of the Gods," "The Prophet" and "Prince Deukalion." Poems he was always writing in his ambition to become a poet rather than be known as a traveler and journalist. It is not the first instance or the last of mistaking one's real vocation.

Taylor left in the abundance of his writings much that instructs and entertains and delights. Doubtless the majority of readers would prefer the multi-form results of his labor to greater excellence in a single department of it. As journalist, traveler, translator, dramatist and poet, his range is wide enough and sufficiently diversified to relieve his writing from monotony and retain the reader's attention. Beyond this each one will find before reading far something that will appeal to his love of nature, his interest in things and lands remote or his sense of poetic values. The lesson of all this long and active life is best summed up by Taylor himself: "Tis not for idle ease we gray, but freedom for our task divine."

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Cuvier was the most famous comparative anatomist and the founder of the science.

The most famous English admiral was Nelson, who destroyed the French power at sea.

The most noted Roman orator was Cicero, who won his renown in his orations against Cataline.

The most famous tenor was Farinelli. It was said of him, "There is one God and one Farinelli."

Montaigne was the most effective essay writer, and the founder of this style of composition.

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He that forgets his friend is ungrateful to him; but he that forgets his Saviour is unmerciful to himself.—Bunyan.

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