

Washington Irving

Whims, Tales, and Sketches

In 1819 Washington Irving wrote to Walter Scott, "I am unfitted for any periodically recurring task, or any stipulated labor... I shall occasionally shift my residence and write whatever is suggested by objects before me, or whatever rises in my imagination." (Rust)

Irving's wonderful capacity to spin compelling tales from any source that caught his wandering fancy made him a remarkably engaging, wholly original, and highly influential writer. William Cullen Bryant may have exaggerated when he said that Irving is the fountainhead of American literature (Rust), and William Makepeace Thackeray may have been florid when he called Irving "the first Ambassador whom the New World of Letters sent to the Old." (Rust) But Horace E. Scudder was not far from the mark when he called Irving the "first author in the United States whose writings made a place for themselves in general literature." (Scudder, 1) It is certainly true that Irving guided the country's literature in new directions and helped create new literary forms, and as a member of the first post-Revolutionary generation, Irving was among the first outstanding writers of the new American republic.

He combined a remarkable talent for story-telling with an antiquarian's appreciation for the patina of time. Irving had a special gift for retelling old legends, evoking times past, and finding charm, mystery, and pleasure in people and places everywhere. His voice was warm, compelling, and universally appealing. James Russell Lowell described his personality as:

...a choice nature, not wholly deserving
A name either English or Yankee—just Irving. (in Wilson, 160)

And Richard Henry Dana wrote that "Amiability is so strongly marked in all Mr. Irving's writings as never to let you forget the man." (in Wilson, 159)

Because Irving began his career as a journalist, worked as a magazine editor and publisher's agent, and self-published some of his own works as periodicals, his connection to the American magazine business is an interesting sidebar to his many other literary achievements. With the exception of the *History of New York*, everything Irving wrote before the age of 40 was originally produced in short form and published serially: "brevities, dashes while the mood is on, embodied emotions, impressions, tales to be told at a sitting," as critic F. L. Pattee described his early works. (6) Irving humorously introduced *Tales of a Traveller* by saying that though the stories may be bad, "they will at least be found short." (Pattee, 6)

Irving was born in New York City in 1783, the year that America won independence, and he was named for the hero of the Revolution. The two Washingtons met when Irving was six. Irving was fond of recounting how George Washington "laid his hand upon my head and gave me his blessing." (Rust) It brought him good fortune.¹

He was the baby of the family, the youngest of seven surviving children, and well into adulthood his brothers and sisters indulged, supported, and encouraged him. He later described himself as "lively boy, full of curiosity, of easy faith, and prone to relish a story the more it partook of the marvellous." Irving was never much of a scholar, and although he studied law as a young man, the harder he worked at his legal studies, the more bored and impatient he grew. (Rust) When he stood for admittance to the bar, one examiner commented, "I think he knows a *little* law." The other agreed. "Damned little!" (Jones, 57)

Jonathan Oldstyle and Salmagundi

Like Benjamin Franklin, Irving began his career as a writer by contributing pseudonymously to an older brother's newspaper. Peter Irving was the editor of Aaron Burr's newspaper, the New York *Morning Chronicle*, and in 1802 and

¹ Many years later Irving had the scene painted in watercolors, and hung the picture on the wall of his bedroom. (Jones, 4f)

1803 Washington submitted nine essays as “Letters from Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent,” in which he poked fun at fashion styles, weddings, the theater and its critics, and the custom of dueling.

It's hard not to suspect that Irving's nom de plume was a tip of the hat to Joseph Dennie, who edited *Port Folio* magazine (launched in 1801) under the name “Oliver Oldschool.” Like Dennie, Irving had been raised on Addison, Oliver Goldsmith, conservative politics, and the law, and he undoubtedly recognized a kindred spirit. (Pattee, 7)

The first Oldstyle letter opened, “If the observations of an odd old fellow are not wholly superfluous, I would thank you to shove them into a spare corner of your paper,” a low-key beginning. But a few of the letters, especially the drama reviews, had enough bite to produce a reaction. Irving's nephew Pierre noted that in some quarters they caused excessive irritation,

Meaning of course among the actors, for to the town they afforded great entertainment. (Irving, *Spanish Papers*, i)

Burr, who directed his daughter Theodosia's education with high standards, sent her copies of the first five letters,² noting the 19 year-old author's skill and cleverness. (Brooks WI, 127) Charles Brockden Brown, who published Philadelphia's *Literary Magazine and American Register*, was impressed enough by the letters to ask Irving to join his staff, an invitation which Irving declined. (Stoddard, xvii)

Irving appears to have lost interest in the Oldstyle letters before the public grew tired of reading them, and his contributions fell by the wayside when he left on an adventurous journey through northern New York to Montreal and then took a two-year tour of Europe from 1804 to 1806, sponsored by his siblings. It was an eventful trip, which Irving recorded in journals containing character sketches and other impressions, showing him to be “confident, curious, observant, and easily directed by chance occurrences or influences.” (Rust) He studied French and Italian, saw Paris and Rome, encountered pirates, watched as Nelson pursued the French fleet toward Trafalger, befriended artist Washington Allston, and met Madame de Stael, the writer and saloniere. (Brooks WI, 131f)

Back in New York, Irving became the center of a circle of young gentlemen who spent their leisure hours drinking and talking. They sometimes referred to themselves as the Nine Worthies or the Lads of Kilkenny (Jones, 53), and the group included Irving's brother William, his brother-in-law, John K. Paulding, and other friends and family. They enjoyed weekends at the home of Gouverneur Kemble and his family, “Mount Pleasant,” on the Passaic River outside Newark, NJ. The large house was the scene of many relaxed and happy discussions, and as “Cockloft Hall” it became a setting in Irving's next literary venture. (Rust)

Salmagundi is a cold dish of meat, onions, eggs, seasonings, and other miscellaneous ingredients—in other words, a hodgepodge. Paulding, William Irving, and Washington Irving met with David Longworth, a New York publisher and bookstore owner, and proposed a literary salmagundi—a humorous gallimaufry, to be published as the mood struck. The first serving appeared on Saturday, January 24, 1807, under the full title of *Salmagundi; or the Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq., and Others*. (Brooks WI, 135) The publication's motto and “translation” were:

In hoc est hoax, cum quiz and jokesez.
Et smokem, toastem, roastem folksez,
Fee, faw, fum

With baked, and broil'd, and stew'd, and toasted,
And fried, and boil'd, and smoked, and roasted,
We treat the town.

The *Salmagundi* medley included theatrical criticism, sketches, and light poetry by three fictional contributors: Anthony Evergreen, William Wizard, and Launcelot Langstaff. In reality, Paulding and Washington Irving shared the prose; William Irving contributed the verse. The trio said their purpose was “to instruct the young, reform the old, correct the town, and castigate the age.” Roasts outnumbered toasts.

² The letter on dueling was not part of the package.

Produced as a small pamphlet with a yellow cover, *Salmagundi* turned out to be a success for its editors and publisher, who on one occasion sold 800 copies in a single day. (Brooks WI, 135) *Salmagundi* was modeled on Addison's *Spectator* and Goldsmith's "Citizen of the World" letters, and its sketches and verse poked fun at local gossip, fashions, and society. The journal's expanding cast of recurring characters, including the Cockloft family, Mustapha Rub-a-dub Keli Khan, Demy Semiquaver, Sophy Sparkles, 'Spidlikens, and so on must have made at least a few New Yorkers nervous about who would be profiled in the next issue. For some of the victims the experience was unpleasant. After being criticized in *Salmagundi*, poet Thomas Fessenden described the publication as a "bramble," that "pricks and scratches everything with its reach." (in Jones, 61)

In fact, many readers may have taken the journal more seriously than the editors wished. The second issue contained a notice discouraging readers from being too sensitive.

Perhaps the most fruitful source of mortification to a merry writer, who, for the amusement of himself and the public, employs his leisure in sketching odd characters from imagination, is, that he cannot flourish his pen, but every Jack-pudding imagines it is pointed directly at himself; he cannot, in his gambols, throw a fool's cap among the crowd, but that every queer fellow insists on putting it on his own head; or chalk an outlandish figure, but every outlandish genius is eager to write his name under it.

Readers seeking satisfaction in a duel were advised that the editors had hired a pair of "strapping heroes of the stage" to stand in for them. (No. II, 55f)

Although their style sounds a little formal to the 21st-century ear, the editors' good humor comes through clearly despite the two intervening centuries, in "a collection of sunny and good-natured essays." (Wilson, 376) Pattee said the journal had qualities

... that keep it alive while all else of its day has gone to the scrap-heap; the satire of Washington Irving is still readable, and with pleasure. Addisonian undoubtedly, yet unstrained, seemingly flowing with unconscious ease, and wholly free from the prevailing taint of old rose and lavender. But there is more than this: there is individuality in the style, a literary newness, an element uniquely American. (FC, 240)

Salmagundi must have been a breath of fresh air in 1807: at the time the only other humorous journals were partisan—caustic, meanspirited, and not at all amusing to readers who disagreed with their politics. *Salmagundi* had its own political leanings, and Jefferson came under fire,³ but politics weren't the point—laughter was. In fact, *Salmagundi* was America's first humor periodical not devoted to party politics, which makes it forefather to the numberless American humor magazines published since, from the *Harvard Lampoon* to *Spy*.

Paulding wrote, "Its goal was to ridicule the follies and foibles of the fashionable world. Though we had not anticipated anything beyond a local circulation, the work extended throughout the United States and acquired great popularity. It was, I believe, the first of its kind in the country." (in Tassin, 112f)

In all, 20 issues of *Salmagundi* were produced; their frequency was roughly biweekly but varied depending on the moods and distractions of the editors. The last came on January 25, 1808.

When they first began to publish *Salmagundi*, Longworth had suggested that the three editors might copyright their contents. When they declined, Longworth secured the copyright for himself. *Salmagundi* closed followed arguments about the journal's length and cover price, with lingering resentment on the part of the editors, who felt that they had not received a fair share of the profits, which Paulding estimated at \$10,000 as of 1822. (Jones, 61, 76; Tassin, 113) It is worth noting that the editors had said in the first issue that "in common with all philosophical wiseacres from Solomon downward, we hold money in supreme contempt." (in Mott I, 197)

Tassin said that *Salmagundi*, which Paulding referred to as a "saucy flippant trollope," is the only American magazine to have closed at the height of its popularity. (115) Yet perhaps it had run its course. Paulding attempted a revival of the title in 1819, under his sole direction and for which he did all the writing. It was not as successful as the original and closed the following year. (Mott I, 172)

³ "A man of superlative ventosity, and comparable to nothing but a huge bladder of wind." (Pattee FC, 239)

Knickerbocker's History and the Analectic Magazine

Salmagundi was where New York City was first called Gotham. New York itself played a recurring role in the journal, and the editors' affection for the city was one of their motivations for launching *Salmagundi*. Given this focus it was probably natural that Washington Irving and his brother Peter would consider a joint project covering New York's history.

The brothers originally intended a jeu d'esprit satirizing Samuel Latham Mitchill's *A Picture of New-York*, a handbook published in 1807. Mitchill was a well-respected professor of science at Columbia College, a U.S. senator, and founding editor of the *Medical Repository*, one of the country's first scientific magazines. The professor's guide turned out to be a little dry and self-absorbed—at least to the Irvings' ear—and thus a tempting target for parody.

The project ended up in Washington's lap when Peter sailed to Liverpool to establish a branch of the family business. Left to his own devices, Washington decided on a different approach. Instead of poking fun at Mitchill, he would examine the history of New York through the eyes of an old Dutch inhabitant, a tactic that allowed Irving to promote the project by means of an innovative public relations campaign, concocted with his friends Paulding and Henry Brevoort. (Jones, 92ff)

On October 26, 1809, a notice in the New York *Evening Post* asked anyone knowing the whereabouts of a missing elderly gentleman named Diedrich Knickerbocker to contact the paper. Soon another notice appeared from the owner of the "Independent Columbian Hotel," saying that a manuscript had been found abandoned in Knickerbocker's room. After a series of similar notices, it was finally announced that the manuscript had been published to defray debts. (Jones, 92ff) Rising public interest in the missing man and his mysterious manuscript helped make the *History of New York by Diedrich Knickerbocker* an immediate sensation when it was first published in December, 1809. (Jones, 97) Irving was able to write in a note,

It took with the public & gave me celebrity, as an original work was something remarkable and uncommon in America. I was noticed caressed & for a time elated by the popularity I gained. Wherever I went I was overwhelmed with attention. (in Jones, 98)

The book's popularity was due, of course, to Irving's engaging style, his ability to remain faithful to the historical record while satirizing contemporary figures such as Jefferson, and his Cervantic humor throughout—sometimes impish, sometimes slapstick, and sometimes biting. (Jones, 95ff; Pattee FC, 241ff) Many critics have said that *Knickerbocker's History* is Irving's best book. Pattee called it "a history true in its main bearings, yet so funny as to send its reader into roars of laughter." (FC, 243) In Britain its fans included Sir Walter Scott (who said he was "absolutely sore with laughing"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Lord Byron. (Jones, 99)

Irving continued revise and rewrite the *History*, and the public continued to buy the revised editions—it was a long-term best-seller. Work on the second edition began almost immediately following publication of the first. Otherwise, however, Irving was at loose ends: he was a celebrated author, but he didn't have a follow-up. After spending much of 1809 traveling and visiting with friends, he went to Washington, DC for a few months in 1810 to lobby on behalf of the family business. He took naturally to Washington society, but rising tensions with France and Britain dominated the political agenda and prevented him from accomplishing much on behalf of the firm. The second edition of the *History* was published in early 1812, just about the same time that Congress declared war on Great Britain.

Around mid-year Irving was approached by Moses Thomas, a Philadelphia publisher who had recently purchased a monthly magazine called *Select Reviews*. Thomas was looking for an editor, and Irving was looking for something to do. For \$1,500 a year—very good money from Irving's perspective—a meeting of the minds was achieved. (Mott I, 279) Thomas agreed that Irving could work from New York, which made the position even more appealing. "It is an amusing occupation," he wrote to his brother, "without any mental responsibility of consequence. I felt very much the want of some such task in my idle hours." (Mott I, 279) But he spoke too soon.

Select Reviews and Spirit of Foreign Magazines had been launched in Philadelphia in 1809 by Samuel Ewing, a founder of the Philadelphia Athenaeum and contributor to *Port Folio*. (Smyth, 136) Its content, as the name suggests, was taken mostly

from British magazines. Thomas didn't appear to have different plans for his new periodical, which he renamed the *Analectic Magazine*—analects being literary gleanings. However, when Irving began his editorial labors on the issue for January, 1813, he discovered that Thomas had promoted the *Analectic* by promising that Irving would produce a series of biographical sketches of American naval commanders, an announcement that caught Irving by surprise.

Despite being unhappy with the assignment, Irving rose to the occasion, and his portraits of James Lawrence, David Porter, Oliver Hazard Perry, and William Burrows proved popular—predictably, given the war. As the series ran, the magazine and its contributors began to develop a reputation for their coverage of naval affairs. Irving's brother-in-law, Paulding, a regular contributor, owed several later naval appointments (including his position as Secretary of the Navy in the Van Buren administration) to his association with the *Analectic*. (Mott I, 282) A clerkship with the naval department which Irving was offered in October, 1815 (but declined) was partially due to relationships formed through the biographical series (Jones, 172f).⁴ The magazine continued to focus on the navy after Irving left, and in 1816 changed its name to the *Analectic Magazine and Naval Chronicle*.

In addition to the naval biographies, Irving wrote reviews for the *Analectic* and some stories later included in the *Sketch Book*. He also drew from Scott, Byron, Thomas Campbell, and from other foreign sources that he continued to mine throughout his career—German, Muslim, and Spanish folk tales. A handful of American writers contributed regularly, among them Paulding and author Gulian C. Verplanck, who wrote several biographical sketches. (Mott I, 280f; Wilson, 386)

Irving never warmed to the editorial position. He left at the end of 1814, after two years in the post, although he remained on good terms with Thomas. Irving was succeeded as editor by Thomas Issac Wharton, who led the magazine's redoubled focus on naval subjects. Mott mentions that the *Analectic* was also noted for its illustrations, which included wood and copper engravings and lithographs. (I, 282) In 1819 printer James Maxwell purchased the magazine from Thomas and converted it to a weekly. It closed at the end of 1820. (Mott I, 283)

The Sketch Book

Irving's patriotic feelings had risen throughout the years of the war, and in the autumn of 1814 he joined the New York state militia as an aide-de-camp to Governor Daniel Tompkins. His short military career consisted of fortifying the town of Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario against an invasion which never occurred. (Jones, 121f)

By early 1815 the war had ended and Irving was again at loose ends. Instead of seeking employment in America, he headed for Europe, sailing to Liverpool in May, 1815 on what he thought would be a short trip. It lasted 17 years. (Jones, 126)

On his arrival Irving discovered that his brother Peter was ill and the family business near collapse. Washington spent his first months in England helping his brother and the firm recover, and despite his inexperience and discomfort with finance, managed to improve the business's condition and delay its closing, which turned out in the end to be unavoidable. P. Irving & Company eventually declared bankruptcy in February, 1818 (Jones, 166), leaving Washington in need of income.

One idea that occurred to him was to act as a transatlantic publisher's middleman, an opportunity enabled by the absence of international copyright laws. British authors were pirated and pillaged mercilessly in America, and the same held true in reverse, although to a lesser extent. Irving's plan was to provide American publishers with prepublication copies of British material for a fee, and, conversely, to represent American publishers in Britain. Thomas, of the *Analectic*, agreed to pay Irving a retainer of \$1000 per year, and benefited by receiving material from prominent British publisher John Murray. (Jones, 148) But while Irving's efforts worked to Thomas's advantage, none of the material Irving received from American publishers was of particular interest to Murray or anyone else in Britain. (Jones, 163f)

While continuing to deal with the struggling family business, Irving managed several trips outside Liverpool, and in August, 1817 Murray provided an introduction to Walter Scott, and a visit to Scott's home, Abbotsford, later that summer inaugurated a lasting friendship. (Jones, 145f, 157-160)

⁴ Van Buren offered Irving the post of Secretary of the Navy, but this was probably because of friendship the two formed while serving together in the U.S. legation to the Court of St. James in 1831.

A few years later, in late 1819, Scott invited Irving to serve as the editor of a new weekly to be established in Edinburgh, paying 500 pounds per year. "I know no man so well qualified for this important task," Scott wrote. Irving declined, and in response made his comment above about being "unfitted for any periodically recurring task." He added:

I have to watch the varyings of my mind as I would those of a weathercock. Practice and training may bring me more into rule ; but at present I am as useless for regular service as one of my own country Indians or a Don Cossak. (*Works*, vii)

Irving wrote several tales and essays during 1817 and 1818, including "Rip Van Winkle," and sent the first of what turned out to be seven installments of material to his brother Ebenezer in March, 1819. A second followed on April 1 and the third was dispatched on May 13. (Jones, 175, 177) At the same time, Irving asked his friend Henry Brevoort to act as his literary agent. Ebenezer arranged for a private reading of the first installment, which was quite a success, and Brevoort found a publisher—a printer named, improbably, Cornelius S. Van Winkle.

On June 23, 1819 the first number of the *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* was published in U.S. as a small octavo paperback of 96 pages, priced at 75 cents. The press run was 2,000 copies. (Jones, 177f) Like *Salmagundi*, the *Sketch Book* was not exactly a book and not exactly a magazine. When he sent the first installments to his brother, Irving may not have known how many stories the *Sketch Book* would ultimately contain, or when the stories would be ready to publish, but he probably knew he could continue the series long enough to build up at least one book's worth of material.

As was customary for a new periodical, the first number contained an "advertisement," or prospectus. In it Irving remained vague about his long-term plans, although he was clearly aware of the kinds of tales and essays the completed project would encompass.

The following writings are published on experiment ; should they please they may be followed by others. The writer will have to contend with some disadvantages. He is unsettled in his abode, subject to interruptions, and has his share of cares and vicissitudes. He cannot, therefore, promise a regular plan, nor regular periods of publication. Should he be encouraged to proceed, much time may elapse between the appearance of his numbers ; and their size will depend on the materials he may have on hand. His writings will partake of the fluctuations of his own thoughts and feelings — sometimes treating of scenes before him, sometimes of others purely imaginary, and sometimes wandering back with his recollections to his native country. (*Sketch Book* 1910, 1)

The seven numbers of the *Sketch Book* were published in America between June, 1819 and September, 1820. The fifth, as is obvious from the contents, was planned for Christmas, 1819, but came out late.

First number: June 23, 1819

- "The Author's Account of Himself"
- "The Voyage"
- "Roscoe"
- "The Wife"
- "Rip Van Winkle"

Second number: July 31, 1819

- "English Writers on America"
- "Rural Life in England"
- "The Broken Heart"
- "The Art of Book Making"

Third number: September 13, 1819

- "A Royal Poet"
- "The Country Church"

- “The Boar’s Head Tavern, East Cheap”
- “The Widow and Her Son”

Fourth number: November 10, 1819

- “The Mutability of Literature”
- “Rural Funerals”
- “The Inn Kitchen”
- “The Spectre Bridegroom”

Fifth number: January 1, 1820

- “Christmas”
- “The Stage Coach”
- “Christmas Eve”
- “Christmas Day”
- “Christmas Dinner”

Sixth number: March 15, 1820

- “John Bull”
- “The Pride of the Village”
- “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”

Seventh number: September 13, 1820

- “Little Britain”
- “Stratford-On-Avon”
- “Westminster Abbey”
- “The Angler”

An author’s note said that “Rip Van Winkle” was found in Diedrich Knickerbocker’s papers, and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” is also in the Knickerbocker vein, but the personality of Geoffrey Crayon comes through clearly in the other pieces—so clearly that some reviewers picked favorites between Irving’s two fictitious narrators. Richard Henry Dana wrote in the *North American Review* that Knickerbocker was “masculine—good bone and muscle,” but that Crayon was “feminine—dressy, elegant, and languid.” (Jones, 183) Other critics preferred Crayon, who has been described as “a genial, gently alienated, amusingly obtuse persona, who is uncertain about the value of literature and, as an American visiting England, is unsure of his cultural heritage.” He is often identified with Irving himself. (Pancost)

To promote the publication, Brevoort—who must have been born with a gift for public relations—wrote a glowing review which appeared in the *New York Post* at about the same time the first number went on sale, and other, independent reviews were positive. (Jones, 178f) The second number (priced at 62.5 cents) sold as well as the first. Irving had already sent the fourth installment before he learned how well-received the first had been, and when the positive reviews reached Britain he replied to Brevoort that the reception “repays me for much doubt & anxiety.” (Jones, 181)

Prices on subsequent issues varied between 62.5 and 87 cents, and all issues sold out and went back to press. (Jones, 182) The pricing was high compared to magazines of the time, which usually sold for 12 to 20 cents, but was low compared to books, which usually sold for \$2.00. Irving earned between \$500 and \$600 per issue, and as of 1821 his total earnings from the *Sketch Book* added up to about \$5,000. (Jones, 192)

By the fall of 1819 American installments of the *Sketch Book* had reached Britain, and pirated copies began to appear. In order to secure a British copyright, Irving self-published what he called Volume I—consisting of the first four American installments—on February 16, 1820. Irving sent his final installment to the U.S. in June, and Murray published Volume II of the British edition in July. (Jones, 185-190)

Irving's ability to secure copyright in both America and Britain was based on the slight variance in the two countries' laws. In America, copyright holders had to be citizens; in Britain, any material published in the country could be copyrighted by a resident author regardless of nationality. This worked very much to the advantage of American authors living in Britain, who could copyright their work in both countries, while British authors could only obtain copyright in Britain. Irving was one of the first Americans to exploit this loophole; James Fenimore Cooper, who asked Irving's help in finding a British publisher, pulled the same trick in 1827, as other authors did later. (Spiller, 237; Jones, 202f)

The absence of an international copyright made it difficult for all but the most popular American authors to get a book published in the first place, since American book publishers could help themselves to the best British authors for free. In the long run, this predicament helped steer American authors to periodicals, where they stood a better chance of being published and at least a small chance of being paid.

Irving became a firm believer in the benefits an international copyright would have on American literature. He wrote to William Prescott, "If the copy right law remains in its present state, our native literature will have to struggle with increasing difficulties. No copy right to protect it in England and an influx of foreign and cheap literature to drown it at home." (in Jones, 335)

Irving's sales in Britain raised the enthusiasm of Murray, who encouraged Irving to produce two sequels to the *Sketch Book*: *Bracebridge Hall* (1822) and *Tales of a Traveller* (1824). *Bracebridge Hall* and *Tales of a Traveller* were published complete, not in installments. Neither achieved quite the pinnacle of popularity that the *Sketch Book* reached.

The Knickerbocker Magazine

Irving went on to Spain, where he lived, traveled, and worked from 1826 through 1829, developing a large body of writing. Returning to London, he served as a secretary to the American legation in London from 1830 to 1832, when he at last returned to America, a moment he called "the happiest in my life." (Rust)

Although he continued to write and publish short material, including tales collected in the *Chronicles of the Conquest of Granada* (1829), *Tales from the Alhambra* (1832), the *Crayon Miscellany* (1835), and *Wolfert's Roost* (1855), most of Irving's writing after 1825 was longer, nonfictional, and more sustained. Irving used the Geoffrey Crayon nom de plume on several other occasions and Diedrich Knickerbocker was called back for one last encore in 1855 in *Wolfert's Roost*. Irving also introduced a new imaginary narrator for the *Chronicles of the Conquest of Granada*, the Spanish friar Fray Antonio Agapida.

The *Sketch Book* was not Irving's final fling with serial publication. The *Crayon Miscellany* was published in three parts over four months starting in April, 1835. (Stoddard, xxviii) The division was natural: Part One, "A Tour on the Prairies," is material from Irving's visit to the American West; Part Two, "Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey," is based on his experiences in Britain; and Part Three, "Legends of Spain," is, obviously, from his days in Spain.

Irving is responsible for two of New York City's most common nicknames. The first, Gotham, originated in *Salmagundi*, as noted above. And although Knickerbocker (like Van Winkle) is a respectable old Dutch surname shared by a number of real families in Irving's time, the fame of the *History of New York* gave the name a generic meaning: as the book's popularity spread, all New Yorkers became Knickerbockers. Over the years this has led to Knickerbocker Beer, the New York Knicks basketball team, and countless other Knickerbockerisms. In fact, the prominent New York writers of the first half of the 19th century—Irving, Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Nathaniel P. Willis, Fitz-Greene Halleck, et al.—have been called the "Knickerbocker school."

One of the earliest Knickerbocker trademarks was the *Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine*, launched in January, 1833 by Peabody & Company, with Charles Fenno Hoffman as founding editor. Over the following three decades, the *Knickerbocker* became almost more of an institution than a magazine. Mott wrote, in high praise, "No American magazine has ever been regarded with more affection by its readers than was 'Old Knick.'" (I, 606) The *Knickerbocker* maintained very consistent standards throughout its run and worked hard to present the best American authors—its editor wrote in 1862, "He who reads *Knick* breathes the American tone for thirty years, and renders himself liable of being suspected to be a gentleman through long habit and association." (in Tassin, 116)

But it took a couple of years for the *Knickerbocker* to find its feet. Three months into the project, Hoffman quarreled with the publishers and left. He was replaced by S.D. Langtree, who was assisted by Timothy Flint, founder of Cincinnati's *Western Monthly Review*. But the *Knickerbocker* really hit its stride after it was purchased in May, 1834 by Clement Edson and Lewis Gaylord Clark. Edson was publisher; Clark replaced Langtree as editor. According to Mott, Clark was "light-hearted, always kindly disposed, and ever discovering amusement not only in trifling but the most serious events of life." (I, 607) He also had a "ready appreciation of talent" (Mott I, 607) and developed a first-class set of contributors.

One contributor was his twin brother, Willis Gaylord Clark, who edited the Philadelphia *Gazette*. Others over the years included Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Mathew Carey, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hoffman (who continued to write for the *Knickerbocker* after leaving as editor), Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells, Francis Parkman, Paulding, Benjamin Rush, Verplanck, and William E. Burton who covered the theater and later launched the *Gentleman's Magazine*. In one issue (July, 1859), the *Knickerbocker* published Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier. This must be some kind of a record. (Mott I, 608f, 613f)

The *Knickerbocker* ran a fair amount of humor, and Lewis Clark's column, the "Editor's Table," was a centerpiece of satire, gossip, sardonic commentary, and so forth—a prototype for the "Easy Chair," "Talk of the Town," and similar columns that later followed the same template. For a while Clark also produced a satirical small-town newspaper in the pages of the *Knickerbocker*, the "Bunkum *Flagstaff and Independent Echo*," and he consistently published other comic writers, such as frontier humorist John Phoenix, Donald Grant Mitchell ("Ik Marvel"), Albert Pike, and C. G. Cozzens. (Mott I, 424; Chielens, 191)

But the magazine was also known for fiction and for serious essays. Foremost among the former were short stories by Hawthorne, including "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" and "Edward Fane's Rosebud," and Gothic tales—very popular at the time—including John Water's "The Iron Footstep" and W. L. Stone's "The Skeleton Hand." (Chielens, 190) Nonfiction encompassed a wide range of subjects. J. N. Reynolds's "Mocha Dick, or the White Whale," which inspired the novel Melville wrote 12 years later, and Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail*, which was serialized in 1847, are good examples of the *Knickerbocker's* scope and quality.

At least one historian has said that poetry in the *Knickerbocker* was mostly mediocre and sentimental, but the magazine did publish Bryant's "The Prairies" and Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life." (Chielens, 190) Reviews and criticism also formed a significant portion of the content.

By design the magazine's title was a homage to Irving, and by coincidence Clark was a fan of Irving's and a friend. When he offered Irving monthly space to share his thoughts, his timing was good: Irving, who never had much luck with his investments, needed money and signed a contract with Clark in 1839 that paid him \$2,000 for one year of submissions, an enormous sum at the time. The following year he renewed the deal, and his two years' worth of contributions were later collected as the *Chronicles of Wolfert's Roost*, "Wolfert's Roost" being Irving's first name for the house he built on the Hudson near Tarrytown, NY. Although Irving complained about "the irksome obligations of periodical labor," (Rust) there was something almost divinely appropriate about his writing a regular feature in a magazine that had Diedrich Knickerbocker's name on the cover... drawing a paycheck, in other words, from his own nom de plume.

The *Knickerbocker* continued on for more than two decades after Irving stopped contributing. It maintained neutrality in the years prior to the Civil War, but adopted a pro-Republican attitude in the early 1860s, and then, following a change of ownership in 1863, abruptly turned Democratic—"secesh and copperhead," according to the *New York Post* (in Mott I, 613)—and changed its name to the *Foederal American Monthly*. The last issue came in October, 1865. (Mott I, 613) Referring to the *Knickerbocker* and some of its competitors, historian Algernon Tassin said they...

...fought according to the measure of their intelligence for their place in the sun, yet they fought for the fatherland also—they had fallen in the combat, it is true, but they had gone down with the sustaining thought of having assisted in furthering the cause of American literature. (240)

Unfortunately, good financial management never supported the *Knickerbocker's* strong editorial performance in its 32 years of life. Had its business affairs been handled better, it might have lived longer. Its lineup of contributors featured an astonishing array of great American writers... but this was no defense against poor management. At one point the editors claimed that the magazine's circulation had quadrupled following a price cut, but, as Mott said, this "doubtless

could have happened without making a large list.” (612) Tassin reported that Clark was not paid in his last three years as editor. (140)

Irving's 24 months at the *Knickerbocker* marked his last personal involvement with periodical publishing. He changed the name of “Wolfert's Roost” to “Sunnsyde,” and he spent more and more of his time there in his later years, concentrating his writing on biography, and portraying John Jacob Astor, Mohammed, and Goldsmith, among others. He died in 1859, eight months after completing a five-volume biography of his namesake, George Washington.

It would be an exaggeration to refer to Irving's involvement in periodical publishing as anything more than a footnote to his innumerable other literary accomplishments, but since most of Irving's major contributions to American literature have been thoroughly analyzed and rehashed, it's almost more fun to look at some of the lesser-known areas where he also had a lasting influence. The American magazine industry is such a case: Irving brought a creative approach to periodical publishing: as the original American humor magazine, *Salmagundi* is still fun to read, the *Sketch Book* serials took a unique marketing approach, and under Irving's direction the *Analectic* was an important, respected, and influential magazine.

Irving is responsible for a number of stories and traditions that became ingrained in the American conscious. One example is the imagery of two major holidays, Christmas and Halloween. Saint Nicholas flew for the first time (in a wagon) in *Knickerbocker's History*, an attribute that Clement Moore appropriated for “The Night Before Christmas.” The Christmas number of the *Sketch Book* unfolds around English country traditions which Irving not only popularized for Americans but also revived for the British. Many had been forgotten, banned, or discontinued when Irving wrote—he used as his source *The Vindication of Christmas*, a book from 1635—but thanks to his eye for the charms of the past, today we take the Yule log, wassail, greens and holly, caroling, and so on for granted. The *Sketch Book* stories had an acknowledged influence on Dickens, too, who was an Irving fan. (Jones, 185) And likewise, the story of the headless horseman has become a staple of American Halloween.

Another Irving coinage is *almighty dollar*. (Jones, 396) Irving knew that his writing depended on his peripatetic eye, and that his wandering required financial sustenance—which was often but not always provided by his family. As a result, many of his projects were undertaken out of, and shaped by, necessity. The ability to publish his essays and sketches serially, and to earn money from short material by writing for periodicals, encouraged Irving to continue to work in forms in which he was not only comfortable, but able to earn compensation. As biographer Brian Jay Jones wrote, “He hadn't planned to win recognition and acceptance for American writers, and he certainly hadn't intended to become his country's first man of letters. He had only been trying to earn a living.” (407)

Irving's choice of form—tales, sketches, and essays—was undoubtedly related more to temperament than to conscious decision, but the short material provided publishing opportunities to Irving that may have been instructive to later authors. The next generation of American writers learned both by example and by virtue of market pressure that stories, essays, and sketches offered a viable path to publication, and by the 1840s a number of American writers who would have starved if left to the mercy of the book publishers found they could live on their earnings from magazines.

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