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978-1-107-55420-7 - A Short History of American Literature

Edited By William Peterfield Trent, John Erskine, Stuart P. Sherman and Carl Van Doren

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**A SHORT HISTORY OF  
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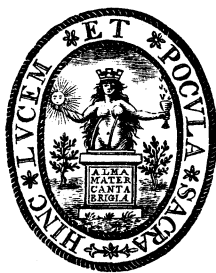
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A SHORT HISTORY  
OF  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

EDITED BY

WILLIAM PETERFIELD TRENT, JOHN ERSKINE,  
STUART P. SHERMAN, AND CARL VAN DOREN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
CARL VAN DOREN



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## INTRODUCTION

IN calling this abridgment *A Short History of American Literature*, instead of *Chapters of American Literature* as was originally planned, the publishers and editors have had in mind chiefly the convenience of those students and general readers for whom the abridgment is intended and who might perhaps, had the discarded title been chosen, have failed to notice that the abridgment not only excerpts the chapters given to the principal figures in the four-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature* but also rearranges them in an order which illustrates the development of literature in the United States more simply than it was possible to do in the larger work. That larger work, the editors are aware, has the disadvantages as well as the advantages inherent in its method. Though no single writer could have spoken with the authoritative knowledge which the sixty-four different contributors brought to the undertaking, neither could so large a number of eyes have seen with the singleness of which one pair might have been capable, nor could so many pens have set down their observations with the unity of tone and style which one pen might have employed. Moreover, the years 1917–1921, during which the successive volumes passed through the press, were troubled years when it was not always practicable to follow programs laid down in quieter times; when editors and contributors had to do more of their work at long range than they desired; when this or that chapter had occasionally to wait so long upon its fellows that it needed revisions which it could not always get; and when parts of the material intended for the earlier volumes had to be left over to the later if they were not to be left out altogether. In the abridgment, however, it has been possible with a free hand to select and arrange those topics and chapters which seem best adapted to the need of the particular public which the abridgment aims to serve.

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Exclusion has had to fall heavily, in a volume of this length, upon the underwoods and backgrounds of literature, to which the total work gives unprecedented attention. The matter of space demanded that minor authors be slighted for the sake of those others who could not be slighted if any real principle of excellence were kept to. Nor was it thinkable to cut the chapters on the ephemerides to the dimensions of encyclopædic entries already to be found in numerous works of reference with which the *Short History* does not compete. It seemed better to omit the lesser figures entirely than to dismiss them with scraps of information and bare critical epithets. If an exception has been made in the case of the chapter on the short story, that is due to the special importance which the form has in American literature. As a matter of fact, throughout the abridgment it will be noticed that the significance, the representativeness, of individual writers was taken into account when the question of their inclusion or exclusion came up. Some strictly academic disposition might have urged that the principle of selection ought to consider only intrinsic excellence or only representative qualities; but the present editors, in view of their purpose, have denied themselves whatever sense of luxury might have come from the exercise of a disposition so strict.

So with the chapters concerned with the backgrounds which can be no more than hinted at in this briefer record. *The Cambridge History of American Literature* has been called not only a history of one country's literature but a history as well of the moral, social, and intellectual development of that country. Of these two aspects of history the editors in the abridgment have felt obliged to confine themselves to one for fear of skimping either by attempting both, and they have chosen the one which, for this undertaking, seems to be essential to their function. It happens, too, that the experience of many teachers confirms the belief that has helped to give the abridgment its general direction: the belief that literary history in its more technical concerns is a study which as a rule interests none but advanced students and which ought to wait upon the study of individual authors, taken up one by one, until students have the body of knowledge that is prerequisite to any real understanding of the schools and movements and tendencies and influ-

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ences to which the historian of literature, as distinct from the critic, must give his time. Before New England transcendentalism, for instance, can mean a great deal to a student, he must, without too much attention to generalizations regarding its doctrines and policies, have gone directly to the lives and works of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, upon whom, indeed, the most important generalizations regarding native transcendentalists must be based. Only after such fundamental inquiries is he ready for the wider range of reading and reflection that the topic offers him. Otherwise he will hold his opinions upon faith, without the concrete details which are the life of the matter. This *Short History of American Literature* undertakes to deal with the fundamental materials of its subject and leaves to the original work the task of presenting transitions and illustrations and elaborations for which there is here not enough space.

A special difficulty may seem to arise in connection with the colonial writers, of whom only Edwards and Franklin appear in the abridgment out of the many who are often mentioned and quoted in histories of literature of no greater bulk than this. The selection is deliberate. With no intention to undervalue the historians, theologians, travellers, and poets whom the colonies produced, one may still remember that many of them belong to the limbo of literature and that as a whole they have been greatly emphasized in countless textbooks and anthologies where they may be studied by any who want to go beyond the first principles with which this *Short History* deals. It happens, too, that in a particular degree the two are representative of the entire colonial era: Edwards of the old order which founded the northern colonies, established their culture, extended it over a large part of the country, and fought against the movement away from an order which in the end became a memory; Franklin of the new order which, in all the colonies, brought in modern theology, independent politics, worldly prudence, and secular attitudes in general. It happens, too, that they are both eminent writers, who may be read in a different age without the need of constant explanations as to how they could have been the kind of men they were, without the need of too much stress upon the significance of documents and of the curiosities of literature.

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If the vigorous literature of the Revolution is here passed over, that is because most of it belongs in the domain of political controversy and because the abridgment, mindful of the great stress laid upon such matters in the *Cambridge History*, has chosen to follow more closely than its parent treatise the path of belles-lettres. The discussion broadens, however, when it reaches the early national period and the numerous figures who then emerged after the long post-Revolutionary generation of distraction and experiment which struggled to realize an indigenous culture and to give it adequate expression. Irving, who planted legends on the American soil, fixed a tradition for the past of his native city, and interpreted America to Europe and Europe to America in the suave language of a man of the world; Bryant, who, bred in New England like Franklin, like Franklin also carried his qualities into a blander region and there ripened in a conspicuous career; Cooper, who discovered the riches of the frontier and made them known to the world at large—these men flourished in New York and they have a chapter in the record. Poe, descended from Virginians, born in Boston, active in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, has a separate chapter because he was, after all, an isolated figure not to be identified with any section of any country except the section of the country of art to which he belongs by virtue of his special traits. New England had its transcendental philosopher in Emerson, its transcendental romancer in Hawthorne, and its transcendental personality in Thoreau, who all lived in Concord, village of genius, and who deserve a chapter to themselves. And besides these there were the poets, essayists, and romancers, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, Lowell, Melville, and Mrs. Stowe, who in various parts of the United States, but mostly in New England, enlarged and enriched the field of letters as they enlarge and enrich this history in the chapter devoted to them.

Thereafter the *Short History* ventures to depart, advisedly, from the course pursued by most of the manuals on American literature. To Lincoln, orator and hero of the Civil War, and to Whitman, poet and prophet of the time, it gives a chapter each, calling attention to their great rôles and giving to them the distinctive place which it assigned them increasingly by fame as the slighter personages of their era pass from memory. A new

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emphasis is given, likewise, to the men of the Reconstruction by the chapter in which they appear: Mark Twain, humorist, who led a home-bred literary mode out of the waste of coarse fun which it had commonly inhabited; Howells, who preached the new code of realism in every season and practiced it with a new success; Henry James, who gave himself to international manners and found a fresh province for the imagination to revolve in; Lanier, who was the hopeful yet broken poet of the New South; Harris, who salvaged a folk-lore from the members of a racial minority before that minority could adapt itself to the conditions of the freedom that had been brought to them by the Civil War. And the chapter on the Short Story, making the exception already noted, calls attention to the process by which a form of art peculiarly characteristic of native literature advanced from its tentative beginnings under Irving to the height of its vogue and vernacularity under O. Henry.

In the chapter on Historians and Scholars will be found Prescott, Motley, Parkman, and Ticknor, who have had many chapters or parts of chapters assigned them in brief histories of American literature; but so also will be found Henry Adams, newly arrived at a reputation which must henceforth make it impossible to leave him out, and Whitney, heretofore neglected though one of the most notable of American savants. So also does the chapter on Preachers and Philosophers take account not only of Beecher and Brooks but also of those thinkers of a recent day, Royce and William James, who for some decades almost divided American thought between them. And finally, a chapter on the English Language in America now for the first time appears in a volume of the purpose of this one.

The desire to make the record as valuable as might be has not led the editors to include living writers in the *Short History*, even in the case of those whom the *Cambridge History*, in spite of its general policy, found it impossible to exclude altogether. The literature of the twentieth century, indeed, calls for investigation and will in time presumably receive it; but as that investigation has not yet been made it is too early for any manual to attempt to indicate the conclusions which only prolonged research can be expected to reach with authority. Nevertheless it is the hope of the editors of the *Cambridge History* and of the *Short History* that teachers and students will

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not forget that literary history is a continuous process and that eminence in literature is not merely a thing of the past. Meanwhile this abridgment, quarried from a work suitable for the most inquisitive specialist as well as for general readers, points the simpler way to an acquaintance with the most important American writers, discussed by many competent critics, arranged in a logical order, combined in a convenient form for readers of all classes.

C. V. D.

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