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WASHINGTON IRVING AND THE KNICKER- BOCKER GROUP

AMERICAN LITERATURE, a transplantation, originated not in the usual manner of national literatures, in ritual and oral recitation of ethnic legends, but in prose, much of it controversial.

Seventeenth century American literature was predominantly theological, that of the eighteenth century primarily political; not a scientific analysis, for Michael Wigglesworth and Ann Bradstreet wrote verse in the seventeenth century; Jonathan Edwards composed his powerful theological-philosophical discourses in the eighteenth century; and toward the end of that same century several American men and women wrote fiction. Not before the nineteenth century did Americans attempt systematically creative literature as a fine art, in the Knickerbocker group, including Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Halleck, Drake, Paulding and others.

Geographically, American writing began in New England, with offshoots in Virginia, shifted to Pennsylvania, home of Franklin, thence to New York (the Knickerbockers), thence to New England, centers in Hartford, Boston, Salem, Cambridge, Concord. From New England the center oscillated back to New York, which became the capital of business, including the publishing business, and absorbed authors, to the detriment of some whose local burnish was bruised by alien contacts.

We elders remember when the Middle West, Chicago and Indianapolis, began to challenge the supremacy of New

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York. And now New York must compete with the South, the Southwest, the Northwest, the Pacific Coast. Here is a paradox: As government becomes more centralized, literature becomes more regional. The latter trend is wholesome, the former dubious.

There were flashes of literary art in early America; a handsome eulogy of John Smith by Richard Potts, winsome descriptions of New England by Thomas Morton, some genuine personal poetry by Ann Bradstreet, Franklin's fluent pregnant prose, Thomas Paine's flashing epigrams, Jefferson's lucent political analyses. Such things, however, were casual or secondary to weightier purposes. As the eighteenth century was merging into the nineteenth Brockden Brown envisioned an Americanized literature, but young, star-crossed, broken in health, his achievement was less than his aspiration; his novels are crude, his models British, in especial Horace Walpole and William Godwin. Thus the generalization stands: The Knickerbockers practically originated artistic literature of pleasure.

The Knickerbocker group is a less cohesive designation than the New England school, between whose members were organic filaments, personal companionships, intellectual affiliations, a heritage of New England history and legend, Puritanism latent or manifest, anti-slavery views, in some cases transcendentalism.

The Knickerbockers merely happened to live in New York, sporadically or habitually. Excepting Cooper, the most "American" of them, they looked to England for inspiration and guidance, and even Cooper was touched by Sir Walter Scott's wand, though much of his best work was set in the American forest. He and Bryant were tangentially of the Knickerbocker group. Bryant wrote many poems, two imperishable, *Thanatopsis* and *To A Water*

Fowl. But politics and journalism side-tracked him, and he became less the creator than the venerable Nestor of critics.

An elfin quality in Rodman Drake's *Culprit Fay* may account for its immense popularity two generations ago, when practically all reading Americans were familiar with it, and some extravagantly ranked Drake with John Keats. Drake's alter ego was Fitz-Greene Halleck, saturated in British literature, imitator of Byron, author of *Marco Bozaris*, declaimed from most school commencement platforms when our fathers were boys, maker of a threnody on his dead friend Drake, which is in all the anthologies:

Green be the turf above thee,
Friend of my better days;
None knew thee but to love thee,
Nor named thee but to praise.

Lack of time inhibits remarks on Paulding, especial friend of Irving's, on John Howard Payne, homeless author of *Home Sweet Home*, and many minors. It is a fair generalization that practically all of the group relied on English literature for models, among them Irving, with modifications.

Washington Irving was by genius and practice pure literary artist. He was too stout fibred to catalog under the rubric of "art for art's sake." But he had an instinct to make words do his bidding, as the painter makes pigments his servitors. Your dog requires nothing of a cushion except that it be soft, but when you embroider your cushion you announce your difference from your dog, you crave comeliness as well as comfort. Washington Irving was the first American to revel in the glory of words, our first Simon-pure man of letters.

He had a distinguished diplomatic career, secretary to the American legation in London, minister plenipotentiary to Spain, but his master motive was literary art. Even his

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histories and biographies, prolific, original, some based on careful research, carry the tone of letters rather than professional history. Trained historians will doubtless not admit to their ranks the author of *Life and Voyages of Columbus*, *The Companions of Columbus*, *The Conquest of Granada*, *The Alhambra*, *Mahomet and His Successors*, *Astoria*, *Captain Bonneville*, *Oliver Goldsmith*, and the *Life of Washington*. His state papers dispatched from Madrid, housed in the Congressional Library, may sometime be edited by a competent hand, and Irving may then take a secure place in the history of American diplomacy, for he was indefatigable in duty, following with high intelligence what he called "the tortuous course of Spanish politics." Irving almost invented the short story in America, but it is the long short story, in which incident is imbedded in character-sketch and description. This method was premeditated and rationalized. In the introduction to *Tales Of A Traveller* he wrote:

For my part, I consider a story merely as a frame on which to stretch my materials. It is the play of thought, and sentiment, and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly, yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life; and the half-concealed vein of humor that is often playing through the whole;—these are among what I aim at, and upon which I felicitate myself in proportion as I think I succeed.

A discursive mental habit determined the character of his writing, part story, part essay. Even *The Alhambra* is a series of sketches rather than a structured history.

He loved side lights on history because he was infatuated with the past. Dutch life and legend appealed to him because it was picturesque and smelt of antiquity. It was not ancient when Irving wrote but it was something finished. It had for him the lure of the antique, that which one who

loves the past feels in the missions of San Antonio, Monterey in California, the old quarters of New Orleans, Charleston, Boston, and Quebec. These localities are young compared with Babylon but they whisper of civilizations that have ceased, or organically altered; one seems to hear the soft muffled tread of ghosts. Irving was a romantic and cherished reminders of things once vital, now slumberous. Part of his charm is that of reminiscence, the savor of things half forgotten. This quality is a preservative which retains Irving among the classics. But like many another classic he is read less eagerly and by fewer people than formerly. Time and mutations of taste have reduced his ratio. He, once the most popular of American authors has been superseded. With all his urbanity, suavity, drollery, good humor, there is in his writing the flavor of an elder world. He is Addisonian, Goldsmithian. He is not of the age of Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Mencken—lacks their brevity and sparkle. Even the quieter methods of Willa Cather or Thornton Wilder are not his technique. He belongs to stage coach days, not the age of automobiles and airplanes.

Excepting *The Alhambra* and a few story-essays, such as *Rip Van Winkle*, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, *The Spectre Bridegroom*, *Dolph Heyliger*, Irving is less a dynamic reality than a memory.

He had not the "overflowing and inexhaustible vitality that is the mark of the great writer," which Mr. Hugh Walpole says, and truly, Sir Walter Scott possessed. Perhaps that is why, in this anniversary year of the two men the market is flooded with new books, magazine articles about Sir Walter, while almost nothing new is published about Irving. He had the humor but not the hilarity of Dickens. He could recreate the country life and the inn life of old England, but not with the strong zest of Fielding. He loved

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the legends of his own land and other lands but did not permeate them with the psychic mystery or awful moral implications of Hawthorne. He dealt in the supernatural but without the creepiness of Poe. He was a shrewd observer of men and manners, but seldom wove the tragic fatalities of human contacts. When a contemporary critic wrote that there is always some underlying motive in his sketches, Irving laughed and said "that man has found me out. He has discovered the moral of *The Stout Gentleman*." He was faithful in detail but often prolix. He was a maker of sketches, not a dramaturgist. His sympathies were almost universal but he did not flame with the fierce fires of passion.

Enough of what he was not. It is a sorry sort of criticism to castigate a writer because he is not somebody else. But the comparisons are not condemnatory; only a crude attempt to "place" him. What is his place? Not on the mountain peaks but in the foothills; not with the giants but among the most lovable of men; one who contrived to transfer to his pages something of his personal loving kindness. What Thackeray said of Dick Steele applies to Irving: "We love him as children love their love with an A because he is amiable." Not many read Steele today but they who do, love him. So it is with Irving. And we don't have to begin, as in the case of faltering Dick, by excusing a multitude of indiscretions. Irving's personal faults were few and minor: chiefly an inclination to idleness—obviously overcome, else how could there be so many books by him; that and the fact he was not the most brilliant of men or profoundest of thinkers. What is his secret? Personal charm and generosity. It would be difficult to find among American writers, or English writers either, a more endearing person than Washington Irving. Again we may quote Thackeray on Steele and apply the quotation to Irving, "if he is not our

friend he is nothing." Irving is a companion, a loving companion, a sociable friend. The time to read him is in the evening, in an easy chair, before an open fire, the curtains drawn, the boom of street traffic hushed, in the quietness of home. For he has one quality in common with Dickens, coziness. Probably modern publishers would reject his manuscripts as insufficiently peptic. But for decades the publishers, including illustrious John Murray, paid handsomely for his writings and seldom lost anything by their transaction, for the public bought and loved the books.

Irving was born April 3, 1783, in New York, youngest of a large family, the father, William, a Scotch Presbyterian deacon; the mother, Sarah, grand-daughter of an English curate, a distinction for Sarah, when all English curates were supposed to be aristocrats. That was before Anthony Trollope had written about them. William was a merchant in New York, plausible occupation for the parent of a child destined to write of the foremost merchant of them all, John Jacob Astor. By 1783 *finis* had been written to the Revolutionary War. The sign in front of Nicholas Vedder's inn up in the Catskills bore a new effigy, that of George Washington instead of King George, even as the child, grown man, was to relate it in a familiar quaint classic, *Rip Van Winkle*. Following a tradition old and not obsolete, the parents gave the child the name of the man most famous in the new nation, Washington.

Few episodes in American literary history are better known than that of the Scotch nurse Lizzie following General Washington into a shop and saying, "Please your Honor, here's a bairn was named after you," whereupon the hero placed a hand upon the child's head and murmured something (he was shy with strange children). Triumphant Lizzie reported it as a "blessing." There are slight varia-

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tions of the story, but there is no doubt that little Irving stood face to face with his namesake, whose biography he was destined to make his last contribution to literature, in five volumes, conscientious, reverent, without rhapsody, as too much Washingtoniana had been.

The New York which little Washington Irving blinked at was a small place, less than thirty thousand people clustered along the water fronts and intervening streets. The site of the present city hall was waste land or farm land. As for 42nd and Broadway, corner of tumultuous traffic, follies and tragedies, it was for practical purposes more remote than England, for packet boats brought from England mail and gazettes. The town which had been New Amsterdam before the British captured it, was now predominantly American in population, but a Hollander would have recognized its Dutch origin in the steep gables. And the Bowery, as the name implies, was a region of Dutch farms. Many of the notable families of the town and up the river were Dutch.

To this day to be a Knickerbocker is to be an aristocrat, as it is to be a Biddle in Philadelphia, where it is said that a Biddle is a sort of Cadwallader.

The name Knickerbocker is of course an invention of Washington Irving's, who wrote, with a little initial assistance from his brother Peter, a fantastical history of New York under the pen name of Diedrich Knickerbocker, thus described for the inspiration of cartoonists to this day.

He was a small brisk-looking old gentleman, dressed in a rusty black coat, a pair of olive velvet breeches and a small cocked hat. He had a few gray hairs plaited and clubbed behind. . . . The only piece of finery which he wore about him was a bright pair of square silver shoe-buckles.

Such was the whimsical figure, supposititious author of the history of New York, which began with the creation and

concluded with an account of Peter Stuyvesant, the whole a burlesque of a prosaic erudite history of the city.

Sir Walter Scott, who seems to have read everything, compared the Knickerbocker history favorably with Swift's satires. One Swiftian trait it has not, corrosiveness, for Irving could not hate. The Knickerbocker history was Irving's second book, his first, an Addisonian periodical, the Salamagundi papers, in which his brother William and his friend, Paulding, collaborated, mild satire on society at Ballston Spa, New Yorkers' fashionable resort. Irving had not finished Knickerbocker when Matilda Hoffman died in her eighteenth year.

Gingerly one touches on this romance of Irving's life. Gingerly because most writers follow Charles Dudley Warner, who in turn followed Irving's first biographer, his nephew Pierre Irving, in sentimentalizing this romance, representing it as Irving's only romance with references to a locked box, a miniature, a tress of hair, a Bible and a prayer book, Matilda's, which Irving carried with him on his extensive journeyings. But it seems established that in middle life he contemplated, without results, marriage with an English girl, Emily Foster. The primary romance of Washington Irving needs no embellishment, is sufficiently sacred in its reality. Like Robert Browning, Irving had friends among women as well as among men, but, like Browning, one woman dominated his thoughts while she lived, his memory when she was dead. He said, speaking of Matilda :

I was naturally susceptible and tried to form other attachments, but my heart would not hold on; it would continue to recur to what it had lost,

to which he added that he dreamed of Matilda "incessantly" (his own word).

After the Knickerbocker history was issued in 1809 he

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published nothing until *The Sketch Book* in 1819-1820. This and *Bracebridge Hall*, 1822, established his fame on both sides the Atlantic.

Maugre his formal histories, most of his writings are sketch books, such as the *Crayon Miscellany* and *Tales of a Traveller*, in which are matters memorable; for instance the account of Abbotsford and the record of his tour of the West are in the *Crayon Miscellany*; *The Devil and Tom Walker* is in *Tales of a Traveller*; but *The Sketch Book* and *Bracebridge Hall* carry more of Irving's aroma than any other of his books. He and no other could have written them, books in which live the England of the earlier nineteenth century as in Dickens, the old Dutch life of New York as in no other book; sentiment without sentimentality, satire without bitterness.

After the death of Matilda Hoffman Irving might have assumed the Byronic pose of a blighted life. Not he. His sorrow was his own, a cross which he bore cheerily. He wrote the story of *A Broken Heart* without self-allusion. Indeed most of his writings are objective.

He cultivated society as a profession. He had no other; declined to follow his elder brothers to Columbia College, read law ostensibly, literature omnivorously. He loved books, men, women, children (devoutly), old scenes, old histories. He wrote to please himself and others. His literary purpose is in the genial preface to *Bracebridge Hall*,

I have always had an opinion that much good might be done by keeping mankind in good humor with one another.

He practiced in person what he strove for in letters, to make people happier by his presence. He was lovable because he loved others, was unselfish without martyrdom, unaffected, gay in manner, even when a frail constitution tempted him to melancholy. His handsome, smiling face,

wholesomeness, ready wit, won him welcome from Ballston Spa to Baltimore, not excepting Washington, where glorious Dolly Madison had him for guest in the Executive Mansion, and the President himself would relax to listen to the easeful talk, salted with worldly wisdom, from this darling of society. Irving's young manhood fell in the age of the dandies, and in a graceful way he was one of them. He who aspired to be chief of the dandies, George IV, as everyone else, was attracted to Irving, and seems to have put forward only whatever little good was in him in Irving's society.

George S. Hellman in a comparatively recent biography of Irving makes two palpable points: First, that Irving differs from the New England group in total lack of the Puritan strain. His father was a Scotch Presbyterian but Irving shared his mother's Episcopalian bent. Of course, some Episcopalians are Puritan, but Irving was not of the type. He was not deeply religious by instinct, more like those described by Wordsworth

Who do Thy work and know it not.

Singularly unselfconscious, except when he had to make a public speech, he was unawaredly good. Hellman's second point is that in his latter years Irving was aloof from the political and social problems which were raking America.

He himself wrote "I am not a politician." Notwithstanding a long career in diplomacy he was unagitated by the political conditions which were leading inevitably to war. He ignored the Wilmot Proviso, the tariff controversies (though earlier he had to adjudicate some tariff problems which disturbed Spain); as diplomat he had conducted correspondence with Daniel Webster when Webster was secretary of state, but I find no record of approval or disapproval of Webster's seventh of March speech, that magnificent failure to com-

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promise sectional dissensions. He made no comment on the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, the Fugitive Slave Law, the emergence of Lincoln, the controversies between Calhoun and Jackson, the activities of Garrison, John Brown and other firebrands of the tumultuous times. He was similarly detached from the social problems of the period, such as the enfranchisement of women and the temperance agitation. He was a notable figure in civic celebrations: the laying of the Atlantic cable, as in earlier days he had been prominent in founding the Astor library and at a functional dinner to Charles Dickens.

He was an old man when the furious political turmoils were approaching a climax and it was not in his nature to reverse the habit of a lifetime which had been to labor in his bland way to promote that which unites people rather than that which divides. As diplomat he performed important duties, among them a share in the amicable settlement of the Oregon boundary dispute. But his outstanding service had been that of ambassador of good will from his own country to Europe. In saying which I have been anticipated by Thackeray (a famous old American scholar used to say that Aristotle had anticipated him in his conclusions); Thackeray called Irving "the first ambassador from the new world of letters to the old." In their final meeting Queen Isabella of Spain said, "you may take with you into private life the intimate conviction that your frank and loyal conduct has contributed to draw closer the amicable relations which exist between North America and the Spanish nation." He had worked for a better understanding between this country and Great Britain, to a lesser degree between this country and Germany, between this country and France. International rancors were mollified by the presence of Washington Irving.

He was magnanimous, unenvious of anyone's reputation or undertaking. It was like him, saturated in Spanish lore, to forebear writing a book on the conquest of Mexico when he learned that Prescott contemplated the task and to aid Prescott with information at his hand. It was a pinching sacrifice, for, as Irving told his nephew, this had been a favorite subject with him from boyhood and he relinquished it when he had no other literary project in mind and was in sore financial need, but he added:

I am not sorry for having made it. Mr. Prescott has justified the opinions I expressed at the time, that he would treat the subject with more close and ample research than I should probably do, and would produce a work more thoroughly worthy of the theme.

Literary generosity could not go much farther.

One of the secrets of Irving's lovingness and belovedness was his rare gift of understanding people everywhere. Had a Spaniard written the opening pages of *The Alhambra* he could not have expressed finer appreciation of the people of Spain who dwell in the mountain regions. Irving was impressed by the "stern and melancholy country with rugged mountains and long naked sweeping plains destitute of trees," and he thought he found in the habitat an explanation of "the proud hardy frugal Spaniard, his manly defiance of hardship and contempt of effeminate indulgence."

England fascinated him by its solidity, its traditions, its ancient monuments. His mind reverted to the Dutch country adjacent to New York, its scenery, its legends and he wrote of Rip Van Winkle and Ichabod Crane. He invaded New England and wrote of the Devil and Tom Walker. He went West as far as Arkansas and wrote *A Tour of the Prairies*.

He went to Canada, became acquainted with the heads of the Northwest Fur Company, and after subsequent talks

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with John Jacob Astor he wrote of the Northwest region as far as Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia. He talked with Captain Bonneville, soldier by vocation, explorer by avocation, read Bonneville's diaries and described the middle country west of the Rockies in a book pleasurable to lovers of the West and even yet a sublimated guide book for those who travel the Union Pacific Railway. History, legends interested him, most of all personalities. Even his diplomatic messages from Spain, while faithfully chronicling events, contained vignettes of people, not unlike in kind to the official correspondence of Walter Hines Page, more politically minded than Irving, but with Irving's literary instinct and the belief that his chief could better understand situations if he should understand the people in the situations.

Irving was a cosmopolitan, perhaps the first American cosmopolitan after Franklin, but a better American for knowing Europe. He was loyal to America before and after his first visit to England, not, as already said, deeply interested in the processes of politics; he curtly declined to run for Congress though beyond doubt he would have been elected had he made the race.

He was, however, steadfast in his love and defense of American honor, in his faith in the American future. He wrote that he was born in a republic and that his faith in republican government strengthened with his years. When he heard that the British had burned the city of Washington he promptly offered his services to the governor of New York, was appointed staff officer and became Colonel Irving. He was on his way to Washington to join the national army when the war ceased abruptly.

He was zealous that intelligent English people should recognize the merits of American literature, proud of every

accomplishment of his fellow countrymen in letters. For a collected edition of Bryant's poems (1832) he wrote a brief preface commending the volume to English readers, informing them that Bryant's descriptions of nature are "essentially American . . . imbued with the independent spirit and buoyant aspirations incident to a youthful, a free and rising country, and worthy of being carefully preserved in the common treasury of the language." In the *Sketch Book* he published a serious warning to English writers against a condescending attitude toward American literature and the American people, admonishing Englishmen that a time might come when England should look to America for friendship and succor "should these reverses overtake her from which the proudest empires have not been exempt"—interestingly prophetic of 1914-1918 and after. Debonair Irving was not habituated to the mentor's mantle, but he loved his native country and the country from which it sprang, earnestly desired rapprochement between them, and could be as firm as he was genial.

His character and intellect were formed before Emerson's *American Scholar*, a clarion call for an entirely Americanized literature:

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.
The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to
be timid, imitative.

Long before Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*:

America has yet morally and artistically originated nothing. She seems singularly unaware that the models of persons, books, manners, etc., appropriate for former conditions and European lands are but exiles and exotics here.

Before Whitman's "barbaric yawp," so raucous, so inspired, had resounded over the roofs of the world. Before the westward movement of population had created a distinctive

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race in what John Finley, echoed by Meredith Nicholson, called the "Valley of Democracy," geographically the Mississippi Valley. Before Andrew Jackson became president and the West invaded the East. Before the vast Southwest, Northwest, and Pacific Coast had become articulate in letters. He "commenced author" when most Americans thought of our literature as a scion of English literature, and Washington Irving neither conceived of nor desired parturition.

William B. Cairns in a monograph published in 1898 *On the Development of American Literature from 1815 to 1833* analyzed the prevailing attitude of America toward England in those years, a mixture of deference and defiance, an inferiority complex manifested sometimes in humility, sometimes in braggadocio, like an undergrown boy aware of his limitations and correspondingly truculent. It chanced that as these pages were being written *The Saturday Evening Post* of December 17, 1932, carried an editorial leader from which this is an excerpt:

There is no more convincing proof of our youthfulness as a nation than our sensitiveness to European criticism. The belittling of whatever is American because it is American, and the worship of the foreign label because it is not American pass as evidences of personal superiority.

Huge, resourceful, enigmatic, paradoxical America is very self-reliant; Matthew Arnold said that Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance was delivered to a people who of all the earth least needed it; and yet with all its self-reliance America is singularly solicitous not to appear gauche in the eyes of sophisticated and sometimes cynical Europeans. Is it possibly the case that America, so incredibly capable in big machine-made undertakings, is still hobbledehoy in some aspects of culture, and therefore self-conscious? The typical Englishman is serenely indifferent to what others think of him, "I am

John Bull and I do as I jolly well please." The American on foreign shores is sufficiently self-assertive, with money to spend and obsequious service in return, but is it conjectural that when he gets back home he sometimes wonders, "did I make rather an ass of myself in Europe?"

If the speculation is warrantable, there is this corollary, that maybe we are undergoing "a phase," as they say of growing children, incident to national adolescence, that maybe we have lost the poise of the pioneer and have not quite attained the easeful assurance of the traditioned European. One sometimes wonders if even Mr. Sinclair Lewis is quite as confident of his independent Americanism as he would have us believe. Mr. John Galsworthy is unmistakably British, could be nothing else if he should try. But he does not shout his Britishism. He accepts it quietly as one familiar with centuries of British tradition. America is still in the making. Out of the many regional literatures will come a synthesis, out of the synthesis a voice as powerfully American as Whitman's, with more *savoir faire*.

Our first complete artist in words, Washington Irving, would have been less the artist had he turned his back on England and become a propagandist for an all-American literature. He needed models. There were few in America when he was a young man. So he turned to England where literature had been a-making since Chaucer, since Cynewulf. He did not go so far back for tutelage (though there are references to Chaucer in his writing). He reverted chiefly to the urbane eighteenth century where was much that was congenial to his urbane nature. He wrought well. There is a gentle enchantment in his pages, the spirit of an artist and a gentleman. Whether or not Irving was a great writer may be questioned nowadays, but there is no question that he was a great gentleman.

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This little talk has become something different from the initial intention. In making and remaking, it became evident that exigencies of time demanded reduction to a minimum of comment on the Knickerbockers. Then, reading and re-reading the books, Irving himself appeared finer than anything he wrote. So the books have been used chiefly in an effort to give some impression of the man.

A more gracious man has not appeared in American literature.

STOCKTON AXSON.