

Introduction

Washington Irving (1783–1859), writer and statesman, was the first American writer to achieve international recognition. Born and raised in New York City, he began to contribute satirical sketches and essays to the city newspapers as early as 1802; his first pieces are collected in *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.* From 1807 to 1808, with his brothers Peter and William, and William's brother-in-law, James, Washington Irving wrote *Salmagundi, or The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq., and Others*, a series of humorous satirical essays and poems on New York society.

Irving's reputation as an excellent essayist was strengthened by *A History of New York* (1809), ostensibly written by his famous comic character, the Dutch-American scholar Diedrich Knickerbocker. An account of New York under Dutch occupation, *A History* is a satire and a conservative critique of Jacksonian democracy. It is generally considered to be the first important contribution to American comic literature.

In 1815, on a business trip to England, Irving became friends with Thomas Campbell, Sir Walter Scott, and Thomas Moore. Irving's *The Sketch Book* (1820), written under the pen name of Geoffrey Crayon, was a collection of essays and short stories acclaimed for humor both in England and the United States. "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" have become classics of American literature.

Irving spent several years of his life in Spain, first in Madrid and then in Granada. *History of Christopher Columbus* (1828) and *The Alhambra* are the most well-known works of this period. *The Alhambra* is a series of sketches based on Irving's residence in an ancient Moorish palace at Granada. In 1842, he was appointed U.S. minister to Madrid. After seven years he returned to America in 1849 to settle in Sunnyside, his country home near Tarrytown, New York, where he remained until his death on November 28, 1859. Sunnyside is now a historic house and a museum.

Irving's popular but elegant style, based on that of Joseph Addison and Oliver Goldsmith, and the picturesque imagination of his best work have gained him international popularity. American writers were encouraged by his example to look beyond the United States for subject matter. He also discovered

and proved, for Americans at least, the effectiveness of the short story as a form. Among his other works are *Bracebridge Hall* (1822), *Tales of a Traveller* (1824), *Conquest of Granada* (1829), *The Crayon Miscellany* (1835), *Oliver Goldsmith* (1849), and *Life of George Washington* (5 vols., 1855–1859).