THE ROOTS OF NATIONAL CULTURE

American Literature

TO 1830

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PREFACE

The two centuries of American literary history which are illustrated by the selections in this volume may claim for themselves the greatest of all pioneer scholars in the field, Moses Coit Tyler. But in spite of the exhaustive detail of his work and that of his successors, this period as yet seems to lack the critical patterns and standards which have recently defined a romantic movement in the first half of the nineteenth century and charted the course of our later literary development in terms of realism and the frontier.

The problem was first confused by "belles lettrist" anthropologists like Deenick and Griswold, who indiscriminately listed all the writers known to them, and then attempted, somewhat apologetically, to apply aesthetic judgment to their work. More recently, social and economic historians like Parrington and Beard have provided some useful organic principles of criticism, but the material under consideration sinks, in their hands, to the level of mere evidence, and loses much of its claim to the modest literary excellence which it unquestionably possesses.

The selection and arrangement of the material in this volume have been determined by factors in literary rather than in other forms of history. It would be impossible to apply a single term of criticism to all of it, or even to a part. It is not "romantic," "classic," or "realistic." In the work of individual authors, we do not hesitate to speak of early production as "apprentice" or "experimental" work, and some such term may well be applied to early American literature. But there could not be an American literature before there was an American race or nation in something more than a political sense. Our study, therefore, divides itself into two parts which are clearly demarked by a date somewhere in the neighborhood of 1760 to 1785. The first is concerned with an organic process of social and economic evolution, the transfer of matured civilizations to a primitive environment; the second with an organic process of literary evolution, the earliest expression in art forms of the new civilization which emerged. American writing of the period of settlement and of adjustment to the new environment is more interesting and important for its bearing upon the process of constructing a new civilization than it is for its artistic excellences or defects. With the awakening of a literary consciousness in the periods of imitation and of national self-assertion, emphasis must shift to the study of literary forms and modes, and of works which, in their authors' own minds, were literature.

There are certain traditions as to which authors and works may be considered American and which may not. Certain of the writings of John Smith and Thomas Paine are usually included in our literature, whereas all those of William Penn are excluded; and yet Penn left as deep an impress upon our
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