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COLONIAL AND FEDERAL TO 1800
General Introduction and Preface by the Editors

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THE AMERICAN ROMANTICS 1800–1860
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COLONIAL AND FEDERAL
TO 1800
REVISED AND EXPANDED

WITH A GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND
PREFACE BY THE EDITORS

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Byrd, William. From The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712. Copyright 1941 by Louis B. Wright and Marion Costin and reprinted by their permission.

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PREFACE

“The imagery in these books called the Prophets,” asserted Thomas Paine in The Age of Reason, “appertains altogether to poetry. It is fictitious and often extravagant, and not admissible in any other kind of writing than poetry.” Later on in the same work he adds, “The natural bent of my mind was to science. I had some turn, and I believe some talent, for poetry; but this I rather repressed than encouraged, as leading too much into the field of imagination.” The modern reader may smile at the worldly busy-bodies of the Enlightenment’s republican machine, who is so immersed either in the revolutionary realities of class structure and government or in the Franklinian way to wealth that he can’t take time off from the office for such pleasantly superfluous pastimes as merely imaginative literature. Life is real, life is earnest, and the new world in the making demands from the real man a full-time schedule of practical activities.

Paine was speaking out of the American Enlightenment’s respect for observed fact, statistics, and reason. He also reflected a national pioneer experience that necessarily demanded a functional pragmatism and utilitarian expediency. The emphasis was on actualities. Yet the prejudices of Paine are not Idiosyncratic of the man or even of his age. From the moment the conquistadores saw gold, glory, and God (for many the sequence ran roughly in that order) in the new world until the 1820’s, when the “high Germanism” of European idealism began to make a serious impact upon young American intellectuals—approximately three hundred years!—the literature of and about America was