

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen  
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo  
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm  
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller  
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka  
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis  
Baum Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac  
Leslie Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
Burroughs Verne  
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain  
Darwin Zola Lawrence Dickens Plato  
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Andersen Harte  
Kant London Descartes Cervantes Burton Hesse  
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke  
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Irving  
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# **Initial Studies in American Letters**

Henry A. (Henry Augustin) Beers

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## PREFACE.

This volume is intended as a companion to the historical sketch of English literature, entitled *From Chaucer to Tennyson*, published last year for the Chautauqua Circle. In writing it I have followed the same plan, aiming to present the subject in a sort of continuous essay rather than in the form of a "primer" or elementary manual. I have not undertaken to describe, or even to mention, every American author or book of importance, but only those which seemed to me of most significance. Nevertheless I believe that the sketch contains enough detail to make it of some use as a guide-book to our literature. Though meant to be mainly a history of American *belles-lettres*, it makes some mention of historical and political writings, but hardly any of philosophical, scientific, and technical works.

A chronological rather than a topical order has been followed, although the fact that our best literature is of recent growth has made it impossible to adhere as closely to a chronological plan as in the English sketch. In the reading courses appended to the different chapters I have named a few of the most important authorities in American literary history, such as Duyckinck, Tyler, Stedman, and Richardson. My thanks are due to the authors and publishers who have kindly allowed me the use of copyrighted matter for the appendix, especially to Mr. Park Godwin and Messrs. D. Appleton & Co. for the passages from Bryant; to Messrs. A. O. Armstrong & Son for the selections from Poe; to the Rev. E. E. Hale and Messrs. Roberts Brothers for the extract from *The Man Without a Country*; to Walt Whitman for his two poems; and to Mr. Clemens and the American Publishing Co. for the passage from *The Jumping Frog*.

**HENRY A. BEERS.**



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# INITIAL STUDIES IN AMERICAN LETTERS.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE COLONIAL PERIOD.

1607-1765.

The writings of our colonial era have a much greater importance as history than as literature. It would be unfair to judge of the intellectual vigor of the English colonists in America by the books that they wrote; those "stern men with empires in their brains" had more pressing work to do than the making of books. The first settlers, indeed, were brought face to face with strange and exciting conditions—the sea, the wilderness, the Indians, the flora and fauna of a new world—things which seem stimulating to the imagination, and incidents and experiences which might have lent themselves easily to poetry or romance. Of all these they wrote back to England reports which were faithful and sometimes vivid, but which, upon the whole, hardly rise into the region of literature. "New England," said Hawthorne, "was then in a state incomparably more picturesque than at present." But to a contemporary that old New England of the seventeenth century doubtless seemed any thing but picturesque, filled with grim, hard, work-day realities. The planters both of Virginia and Massachusetts were decimated by sickness and starvation, constantly threatened by Indian Wars, and troubled by quarrels among themselves and fears of disturbance from England. The wrangles between the royal governors and the House of Burgesses in the Old Dominion, and the theological squabbles in New England, which fill our colonial records, are petty and wearisome to read of. At least, they would be so did we not bear in mind to what imperial destinies those conflicts were slowly educating the little communities which had hardly yet secured a foothold on the edge of the raw continent.

Even a century and a half after the Jamestown and Plymouth settlements, when the American plantations had grown strong and

flourishing, and commerce was building up large towns, and there were wealth and generous living and fine society, the "good old colony days when we lived under the king," had yielded little in the way of literature that is of any permanent interest. There would seem to be something in the relation of a colony to the mother-country which dooms the thought and art of the former to a helpless provincialism. Canada and Australia are great provinces, wealthier and more populous than the thirteen colonies at the time of their separation from England. They have cities whose inhabitants number hundreds of thousands, well-equipped universities, libraries, cathedrals, costly public buildings, all the outward appliances of an advanced civilization; and yet what have Canada and Australia contributed to British literature?

American literature had no infancy. That engaging *naïveté* and that heroic rudeness which give a charm to the early popular tales and songs of Europe find, of course, no counterpart on our soil. Instead of emerging from the twilight of the past the first American writings were produced under the garish noon of a modern and learned age. Decrepitude rather than youthfulness is the mark of a colonial literature. The poets, in particular, instead of finding a challenge to their imagination in the new life about them, are apt to go on imitating the cast-off literary fashions of the mother-country. America was settled by Englishmen who were contemporary with the greatest names in English literature. Jamestown was planted in 1607, nine years before Shakespeare's death, and the hero of that enterprise, Captain John Smith, may not improbably have been a personal acquaintance of the great dramatist. "They have acted my fatal tragedies on the stage," wrote Smith. Many circumstances in *The Tempest* were doubtless suggested by the wreck of the *Sea Venture* on "the still vext Bermoothes," as described by William Strachey in his *True Repertory of the Wrack and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates*, written at Jamestown, and published at London in 1610. Shakespeare's contemporary, Michael Drayton, the poet of the *Polyolbion*, addressed a spirited valedictory ode to the three shiploads of "brave, heroic minds" who sailed from London in 1606 to colonize Virginia, an ode which ended with the prophecy of a future American literature:

"And as there plenty grows  
Of laurel every-where —  
Apollo's sacred tree —  
You it may see  
A poet's brows  
To crown, that may sing there."

Another English poet, Samuel Daniel, the author of the *Civil Wars*, had also prophesied in a similar strain:

"And who in time knows whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores . . .  
What worlds in the yet unformed Occident  
May come refined with accents that are ours?"

It needed but a slight movement in the balances of fate, and Walter Raleigh might have been reckoned among the poets of America. He was one of the original promoters of the Virginia colony, and he made voyages in person to Newfoundland and Guiana. And more unlikely things have happened than that when John Milton left Cambridge in 1632 he should have been tempted to follow Winthrop and the colonists of Massachusetts Bay, who had sailed two years before. Sir Henry Vane, the younger, who was afterward Milton's friend —

"Vane, young in years, but in sage counsel old" —

came over in 1635, and was for a short time governor of Massachusetts. These are idle speculations, and yet, when we reflect that Oliver Cromwell was on the point of embarking for America when he was prevented by the king's officers, we may, for the nonce, "let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise," and fancy by how narrow a chance *Paradise Lost* missed being written in Boston. But, as a rule, the members of the literary guild are not quick to emigrate. They like the feeling of an old and rich civilization about them, a state of society which America has only begun to reach during the present century.

Virginia and New England, says Lowell, were the "two great distributing centers of the English race." The men who colonized the

country between the Capes of Virginia were not drawn, to any large extent, from the literary or bookish classes in the old country. Many of the first settlers were gentlemen—too many, Captain Smith thought, for the good of the plantation. Some among these were men of worth and spirit, "of good means and great parentage." Such was, for example, George Percy, a younger brother of the Earl of Northumberland, who was one of the original adventurers, and the author of *A Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony of Virginia*, which contains a graphic narrative of the fever and famine summer of 1607 at Jamestown. But many of these gentlemen were idlers, "unruly gallants, packed thither by their friends to escape ill destinies," dissipated younger sons, soldiers of fortune, who came over after the gold which was supposed to abound in the new country, and who spent their time in playing bowls and drinking at the tavern as soon as there was any tavern. With these was a sprinkling of mechanics and farmers, indented servants, and the on-scourings of the London streets, fruit of press-gangs and jail deliveries, sent over to "work in the plantations."

Nor were the conditions of life afterward in Virginia very favorable to literary growth. The planters lived isolated on great estates which had water-fronts on the rivers that flow into the Chesapeake. There the tobacco, the chief staple of the country, was loaded directly upon the trading vessels that tied up to the long, narrow wharves of the plantations. Surrounded by his slaves, and visited occasionally by a distant neighbor, the Virginia country gentleman lived a free and careless life. He was fond of fox-hunting, horse-racing, and cock-fighting. There were no large towns, and the planters met each other mainly on occasion of a county court or the assembling of the Burgesses. The court-house was the nucleus of social and political life in Virginia as the town-meeting was in New England. In such a state of society schools were necessarily few, and popular education did not exist. Sir William Berkeley, who was the royal governor of the colony from 1641 to 1677, said, in 1670, "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years." In the matter of printing this pious wish was well-nigh realized. The first press set up in the colony, about 1681, was soon suppressed, and found no successor until the year 1729. From that date until some ten years before the Revolution one printing-

press answered the needs of Virginia, and this was under official control. The earliest newspaper in the colony was the *Virginia Gazette*, established in 1736.

In the absence of schools the higher education naturally languished. Some of the planters were taught at home by tutors, and others went to England and entered the universities. But these were few in number, and there was no college in the colony until more than half a century after the foundation of Harvard in the younger province of Massachusetts. The college of William and Mary was established at Williamsburg chiefly by the exertions of the Rev. James Blair, a Scotch divine, who was sent by the Bishop of London as "commissary" to the Church in Virginia. The college received its charter in 1693, and held its first commencement in 1700. It is perhaps significant of the difference between the Puritans of New England and the so-called "Cavaliers" of Virginia, that while the former founded and supported Harvard College in 1636, and Yale in 1701, of their own motion and at their own expense, William and Mary received its endowment from the crown, being provided for in part by a deed of lands and in part by a tax of a penny a pound on all tobacco exported from the colony. In return for this royal grant the college was to present yearly to the king two copies of Latin verse. It is reported of the young Virginian gentlemen who resorted to the new college that they brought their plantation manners with them, and were accustomed to "keep race-horses at the college, and bet at the billiard or other gaming-tables." William and Mary College did a good work for the colony, and educated some of the great Virginians of the Revolutionary era, but it has never been a large or flourishing institution, and has held no such relation to the intellectual development of its section as Harvard and Yale have held in the colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Even after the foundation of the University of Virginia, in which Jefferson took a conspicuous part, Southern youths were commonly sent to the North for their education, and at the time of the outbreak of the civil war there was a large contingent of Southern students in several Northern colleges, notably in Princeton and Yale.

Naturally, the first books written in America were descriptions of the country and narratives of the vicissitudes of the infant settlements, which were sent home to be printed for the information of

the English public and the encouragement of further immigration. Among books of this kind produced in Virginia the earliest and most noteworthy were the writings of that famous soldier of fortune, Captain John Smith. The first of these was his *True Relation*, namely, "of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath happened in Virginia since the first planting of that colony," printed at London in 1608. Among Smith's other books the most important is perhaps his *General History of Virginia* (London, 1624), a compilation of various narratives by different hands, but passing under his name. Smith was a man of a restless and daring spirit, full of resource, impatient of contradiction, and of a somewhat vainglorious nature, with an appetite for the marvelous and a disposition to draw the longbow. He had seen service in many parts of the world, and his wonderful adventures lost nothing in the telling. It was alleged against him that the evidence of his prowess rested almost entirely on his own testimony. His truthfulness in essentials has not, perhaps, been successfully impugned, but his narratives have suffered by the embellishments with which he has colored them; and, in particular, the charming story of Pocahontas saving his life at the risk of her own—the one romance of early Virginian history—has passed into the realm of legend.

Captain Smith's writings have small literary value apart from the interest of the events which they describe and the diverting but forcible personality which they unconsciously display. They are the rough-hewn records of a busy man of action, whose sword was mightier than his pen. As Smith returned to England after two years in Virginia, and did not permanently cast in his lot with the settlement of which he had been for a time the leading spirit, he can hardly be claimed as an American author. No more can Mr. George Sandys, who came to Virginia in the train of Governor Wyatt, in 1621, and completed his excellent metrical translation of Ovid on the banks of the James, in the midst of the Indian massacre of 1622, "limned" as he writes "by that imperfect light which was snatched from the hours of night and repose, having wars and tumults to bring it to light instead of the muses." Sandys went back to England for good probably as early as 1625, and can, therefore, no more be reckoned as the first American poet, on the strength of his paraphrase of the *Metamorphoses*, than he can be reckoned the earliest

Yankee inventor because he "introduced the first water-mill into America."

The literature of colonial Virginia, and of the southern colonies which took their point of departure from Virginia, is almost wholly of this historical and descriptive kind. A great part of it is concerned with the internal affairs of the province, such as "Bacon's Rebellion," in 1676, one of the most striking episodes in our ante-revolutionary annals, and of which there exist a number of narratives, some of them anonymous, and only rescued from a manuscript condition a hundred years after the event. Another part is concerned with the explorations of new territory. Such were the "Westover Manuscripts," left by Colonel William Byrd, who was appointed in 1729 one of the commissioners to fix the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina, and gave an account of the survey in his *History of the Dividing Line*, which was printed only in 1841. Colonel Byrd is one of the most brilliant figures of colonial Virginia, and a type of the Old Virginia gentleman. He had been sent to England for his education, where he was admitted to the bar of the Middle Temple, elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and formed an intimate friendship with Charles Boyle, the Earl of Orrery. He held many offices in the government of the colony, and founded the cities of Richmond and Petersburg. His estates were large, and at Westover—where he had one of the finest private libraries in America—he exercised a baronial hospitality, blending the usual profusion of plantation life with the elegance of a traveled scholar and "picked man of countries." Colonel Byrd was rather an amateur in literature. His *History of the Dividing Line* is written with a jocularly which rises occasionally into real humor, and which gives to the painful journey through the wilderness the air of a holiday expedition. Similar in tone were his diaries of *A Progress to the Mines* and *A Journey to the Land of Eden* in North Carolina.

The first formal historian of Virginia was Robert Beverly, "a native and inhabitant of the place," whose *History of Virginia* was printed at London in 1705. Beverly was a rich planter and large slave-owner, who, being in London in 1703, was shown by his bookseller the manuscript of a forthcoming work, Oldmixon's *British Empire in America*. Beverly was set upon writing his history by the inaccuracies in this, and likewise because the province "has been

so misrepresented to the common people of England as to make them believe that the servants in Virginia are made to draw in cart and plow, and that the country turns all people black" — an impression which lingers still in parts of Europe. The most original portions of the book are those in which the author puts down his personal observations of the plants and animals of the New World, and particularly the account of the Indians, to which his third book is devoted, and which is accompanied by valuable plates. Beverly's knowledge of these matters was evidently at first hand, and his descriptions here are very fresh and interesting. The more strictly historical part of his work is not free from prejudice and inaccuracy. A more critical, detailed, and impartial, but much less readable, work was William Stith's *History of the First Discovery and Settlement of Virginia*, 1747, which brought the subject down only to the year 1624. Stith was a clergyman, and at one time a professor in William and Mary College.

The Virginians were stanch royalists and churchmen. The Church of England was established by law, and non-conformity was persecuted in various ways. Three missionaries were sent to the colony in 1642 by the Puritans of New England, two from Braintree, Massachusetts, and one from New Haven. They were not suffered to preach, but many resorted to them in private houses, until, being finally driven out by fines and imprisonments, they took refuge in Catholic Maryland. The Virginia clergy were not, as a body, very much of a force in education or literature. Many of them, by reason of the scattering and dispersed condition of their parishes, lived as domestic chaplains with the wealthier planters, and partook of their illiteracy and their passion for gaming and hunting. Few of them inherited the zeal of Alexander Whitaker, the "Apostle of Virginia," who came over in 1611 to preach to the colonists and convert the Indians, and who published in furtherance of those ends *Good News from Virginia*, in 1613, three years before his death by drowning in the James River.

The conditions were much more favorable for the production of a literature in New England than in the southern colonies. The free and genial existence of the "Old Dominion" had no counterpart among the settlers of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, and the Puritans must have been rather unpleasant people to live with for

persons of a different way of thinking. But their intensity of character, their respect for learning, and the heroic mood which sustained them through the hardships and dangers of their great enterprise are amply reflected in their own writings. If these are not so much literature as the raw materials of literature, they have at least been fortunate in finding interpreters among their descendants, and no modern Virginian has done for the memory of the Jamestown planters what Hawthorne, Whittier, Longfellow, and others have done in casting the glamour of poetry and romance over the lives of the founders of New England.

Cotton Mather, in his *Magnalia*, quotes the following passage from one of those election sermons, delivered before the General Court of Massachusetts, which formed for many years the great annual intellectual event of the colony:

"The question was often put unto our predecessors, *What went ye out into the wilderness to see?* And the answer to it is not only too excellent but too notorious to be dissembled. . . . We came hither because we would have our posterity settled under the pure and full dispensations of the Gospel, defended by rulers that should be of ourselves." The New England colonies were, in fact, theocracies. Their leaders were clergymen, or laymen whose zeal for the faith was no whit inferior to that of the ministers themselves. Church and State were one. The freeman's oath was only administered to church members, and there was no place in the social system for unbelievers or dissenters. The pilgrim fathers regarded their transplantation to the New World as an exile, and nothing is more touching in their written records than the repeated expressions of love and longing toward the old home which they had left, and even toward that Church of England from which they had sorrowfully separated themselves. It was not in any light or adventurous spirit that they faced the perils of the sea and the wilderness. "This howling wilderness," "these ends of the earth," "these goings down of the sun," are some of the epithets which they constantly applied to the land of their exile. Nevertheless they had come to stay, and, unlike Smith and Percy and Sandys, the early historians and writers of New England cast in their lots permanently with the new settlements. A few, indeed, went back after 1640—Mather says some ten or twelve of the ministers of the first "classis" or immigration were among

them — when the victory of the Puritanic party in Parliament opened a career for them in England, and made their presence there seem in some cases a duty. The celebrated Hugh Peters, for example, who was afterward Oliver Cromwell's chaplain, and was beheaded after the Restoration, went back in 1641, and in 1647 Nathaniel Ward, the minister of Ipswich, Massachusetts, and author of a quaint book against toleration, entitled *The Simple Cobbler of Agawam*; written in America and published shortly after its author's arrival in England. The civil war, too, put a stop to further emigration from England until after the Restoration in 1660.

The mass of the Puritan immigration consisted of men of the middle class, artisans and husbandmen, the most useful members of a new colony. But their leaders were clergymen educated at the universities, and especially at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, the great Puritan college; their civil magistrates were also in great part gentlemen of education and substance, like the elder Winthrop, who was learned in law, and Theophilus Eaton, first governor of New Haven, who was a London merchant of good estate. It is computed that there were in New England during the first generation as many university graduates as in any community of equal population in the old country. Almost the first care of the settlers was to establish schools. Every town of fifty families was required by law to maintain a common school, and every town of a hundred families a grammar or Latin school. In 1636, only sixteen years after the landing of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, Harvard College was founded at Newtown, whose name was thereupon changed to Cambridge, the General Court held at Boston on September 8, 1630, having already advanced 400 pounds "by way of essay towards the building of something to begin a college." "An university," says Mather, "which hath been to these plantations, for the good literature there cultivated, *sal Gentium*, . . . and a river without the streams whereof these regions would have been mere unwatered places for the devil." By 1701 Harvard had put forth a vigorous offshoot, Yale College at New Haven, the settlers of New Haven and Connecticut plantations having increased sufficiently to need a college at their own doors. A printing-press was set up at Cambridge in 1639, which was under the oversight of the university authorities, and afterward of licensers appointed by the civil power.