



# American poetry and fiction: American literary

*Charles Francis Richardson*

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Excerpt:

[graphic]

CHAPTER I.

EARLY VERSE-MAKING IN AMERICA.

Poetry is the rhythmical expression of beauty or imagination, the verbal utterance of the ideal, and therefore the highest and most permanent form of literature.

According to this definition, it is easy to see that very little poetry was produced in America before the close of the eighteenth century. Much of the early verse of the colonies and states was unrhythmical, and most of it was neither beautiful nor imaginative. The human soul was here, and the glory of nature; but genius was smothered or non-existent, and poetic art was almost wholly lacking. Puritan theology in New England could no more produce poetry than it could paint a Sistine Madonna. Its theological force was intense, but it was neither gracious nor serene. Something more than intensity is needed in the production of a true poem.

Puritanism could preach, write diaries and descriptions, and make an occasional eloquent speech for liberty; but of the poetic art it had not an idea. It believed that saints were born, not made; but its poets were neither born nor made. The broad, thorough culture of John Milton, who could apprehend Dante and Shakespeare, as well as Moses and Paul, was impossible in early Massachusetts. Even an Andrew Marvell was not to be expected there. The soul was a part of the scheme of redemption, not a spontaneous singer of the beautiful. Nature, whether august on the sea-coast or fragrant by the brook-side, was of a lost world; and the Puritan had no idea that any earthly beauty could be its own excuse for being.

In the middle and southern colonies the state of things was no better. I suppose I shall hardly be required to demonstrate the statement that poetry was not to be expected from the brains or hands of the Dutchmen of New Amsterdam. The Pennsylvania Friends were as estimable and honest as they are now; but then, as now, they were unliterary. The various representatives of non-English nations, in the middle colonies, neither transplanted their own literatures nor aided the English. The Roman Catholics of Maryland were not a book-making folk; and the cavaliers of Virginia left behind them the lyrical power of the aristocratic songsters of England in the seventeenth century. The poetic prospect in the Atlantic colonies, prior to 1700, was more discouraging than it is in Canada to-day; and it must be confessed that the promise of better things had not become brilliant even as late as 1800. It is my opinion that only one true poem was produced in America before the latter year; and I am sure that no one could select a dozen pieces, of all the verse then in existence, deserving the name of poem, under the most liberal definition.

There is a bibliographical curiosity much prized by collectors of Americana, and well known to antiquarians, called "The Bay Psalm Book." This famous volume, which psalmBook^ appeared in 1640, was the first printed '4°

book produced within the present limits of the United States. It consists of a (so-called) metrical version of the Psalms, translated directly from Hebrew into English by several ministers of Massachusetts Bay. One hesitates to declare definitely that this is the worst book of verse ever produced in America, for the candidates for the lowest place are many, and I can recall at least one "poem" produced in our own day, the author of which proceeded on the theory that blank verse consists simply of ten prose syllables, beginning with a capital letter. But the "Bay Psalm Book" is so wretched a collection of pious doggerel that, on the whole, the philosophic reader rejoices at its badness. American verse had made a beginning, and was sure to rise, for the adequate reason that it could not sink any lower. In comparison with the "Bay Psalm Book" that dullest of Middle-English poems, the "Ormulum," is a masterpiece of genius and a model of metrical skill. When we consider that these translators of the Psalms might have availed themselves o

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