

BIOGRAPHICAL
AND
CRITICAL ESSAYS.

BY

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PREFACE.

THE following Essays, with a single exception, have been selected from contributions originally made to the *North American Review*. They are purely of a literary character; and as they have little reference to local or temporary topics, and as the journal in which they appeared, though the most considerable in the United States, is not widely circulated in Great Britain, it has been thought that a republication of the articles might have some novelty and interest for the English reader.

Several of the papers were written many years since; and the author is aware that they betray those crudities in the execution which belong to an unpractised writer, while others of more recent date may be charged with the inaccuracies incident to rapid, and, sometimes, careless composition. The more obvious blemishes he has endeavoured to correct, without attempting to reform the critical judgments, which, in some cases, he could wish had been expressed in a more qualified and temperate manner; and he dismisses the volume with the hope that, in submitting it to the British public, he may not be thought to have relied too far on that indulgence which has been so freely extended to his more elaborate efforts.

BOSTON, *March 30th*, 1845.

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Biographical & Critical Miscellanies.

MEMOIR OF

CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN,

THE AMERICAN NOVELIST.*

THE class of professed men of letters, if we exclude from the account the conductors of periodical journals, is certainly not very large, even at the present day, in our country; but before the close of the last century it was nearly impossible to meet with an individual who looked to authorship as his only, or, indeed, his principal means of subsistence. This was somewhat the more remarkable, considering the extraordinary development of intellectual power exhibited in every quarter of the country, and applied to every variety of moral and social culture, and formed a singular contrast with more than one nation in Europe, where literature still continued to be followed as a distinct profession, amid all the difficulties resulting from an arbitrary government, and popular imbecility and ignorance.

Abundant reasons are suggested for this by the various occupations afforded to talent of all kinds, not only in the exercise of political functions, but in the splendid career opened to enterprise of every description in our free and thriving community. We were in the morning of life, as it were, when everything summoned us to action; when the spirit was quickened by hope and youthful confidence; and we felt that we had our race to run, unlike those nations, who, having reached the noontide of their glory, or sunk into their decline, were naturally led to dwell on the soothing recollections of the past, and to repose themselves, after a tumultuous existence, in the quiet pleasures of study and contemplation. "It was amid the ruins of the Capitol," says Gibbon, "that I first conceived the idea of writing the History of the Roman Empire." The occupation suited well with the spirit of the place, but would scarcely have harmonized with the life of bustling energy, and the thousand novelties which were perpetually stimulating the appetite for

* From Sparks's American Biography, 1834.

adventure in our new and unexplored hemisphere. In short, to express it in one word, the peculiarities of our situation as naturally disposed us to active life as those of the old countries of Europe to contemplative.

The subject of the present memoir affords an almost solitary example, at this period, of a scholar, in the enlarged application of the term, who cultivated letters as a distinct and exclusive profession, resting his means of support, as well as his fame, on his success; and who, as a writer of fiction, is still farther entitled to credit for having quitted the beaten grounds of the Old Country, and sought his subjects in the untried wilderness of his own. The particulars of his unostentatious life have been collected with sufficient industry by his friend, Mr. William Dunlap, to whom our native literature is under such large obligations for the extent and fidelity of his researches. We will select a few of the most prominent incidents from a mass of miscellaneous fragments and literary lumber with which his work is somewhat encumbered. It were to be wished that, in the place of some of them, more copious extracts had been substituted for his journal and correspondence, which, doubtless, in this as in other cases, must afford the most interesting, as well as authentic materials for biography.

CHARLES BROCKDEN BROWN was born at Philadelphia, January 17, 1771. He was descended from a highly respectable family, whose ancestors were of that estimable sect who came over with William Penn to seek an asylum where they might worship their Creator unmolested in the meek and humble spirit of their own faith. From his earliest childhood Brown gave evidence of his studious propensities, being frequently noticed by his father, on his return from school, poring over some heavy tome, nothing daunted by the formidable words it contained, or mounted on a table, and busily engaged in exploring a map which hung on the parlour wall. This infantine predilection for geographical studies ripened into a passion in later years. Another anecdote, recorded of him at the age of ten, sets in a still stronger light his appreciation of intellectual pursuits far above his years. A visitor at his father's having rebuked him, as it would seem, without cause, for some remark he had made, gave him the contemptuous epithet of "boy." "What does he mean," said the young philosopher, after the guest's departure, "by calling me boy? Does he not know that it is neither size nor age, but sense, that makes the man? I could ask him a hundred questions, none of which he could answer."

At eleven years of age he was placed under the tuition of Mr. Robert Proud, well known as the author of the History of Pennsylvania. Under his direction he went over a large course of English reading, and acquired the elements of Greek and Latin, applying himself with great assiduity to his studies.