



Myths And Legends Of Our Own Land

Charles Skinner

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It is unthinkingly said and often, that America is not old enough to have developed a legendary era, for such an era grows backward as a nation grows forward. No little of the charm of European travel is ascribed to the glamour that history and fable have flung around old churches, castles, and the favored haunts of tourists, and the Rhine and Hudson are frequently compared, to the prejudice of the latter, not because its scenery lacks in loveliness or grandeur, but that its beauty has not been humanized by love of chivalry or faerie, as that of the older stream has been. Yet the record of our country's progress is of deep import, and as time goes on the figures seen against the morning twilight of our history will rise to more commanding stature, and the mists of legend will invest them with a softness or glory that shall make reverence for them spontaneous and deep. Washington hurling the stone across the Potomac may live as the Siegfried of some Western saga, and Franklin invoking the lightnings may be the Loki of our mythology. The bibliography of American legends is slight, and these tales have been gathered from sources the most diverse: records, histories, newspapers, magazines, oral narrative—in every case reconstructed. The pursuit of them has been so long that a claim may be set forth for some measure of completeness.

But, whatever the episodes of our four historic centuries may furnish to the poet, painter, dramatist, or legend-building idealist of the future, it is certain that we are not devoid of myth and folk-lore. Some characters, prosaic enough, perhaps, in daily life, have impinged so lightly on society before and after perpetrating their one or two great deeds, that they have already become shadowy and their achievements have acquired a color of the supernatural. It is where myth and history combine that legend is most interesting and appeals to our fancy or our sympathy most strongly; and it is not too early for us to begin the collation of those quaint happenings and those spoken reports that gain in picturesqueness with each transmission. An attempt has been made in this instance to assemble only legends, for, doubtful as some historians profess to find them, certain occurrences, like the story of Captain Smith and Pocahontas, and the ride of General Putnam down Breakneck Stairs, are taught as history; while as to folk-lore, that of the Indian tribes and of the Southern negro is too copious to be recounted in this work. It will be noted that traditions do not thrive in brick and brownstone, and that the stories once rife in the colonial cities have almost as effectually disappeared as the architectural landmarks of last century. The field entered by the writer is not untrdden. Hawthorne and Irving have made paths across it, and it is hoped that others may deem its farther exploration worthy of their efforts.

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