

---

# NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY FIRSTS

by Richard Walser

While the "firsts" of any literature are always significant, they are frequently difficult to establish. The following paragraphs will show why any "first" must be qualified to indicate just what sort of "first" it is. A librarian will be fortunate indeed to find any of these books on his shelves; and if he can establish a title which will antedate any one of them, it will be an exciting discovery.

## POETRY

The first book of poetry written in

in 1804 by Franklin and Garrow.

The first separate publication of a poem by a native North Carolinian, other than those poems issued as handbills, was **An Elegiac Poem on the Death of General Washington** (Philadelphia, 1800) by Charles Caldwell, a native of Caswell County, who was practicing medicine in Philadelphia. This pompous twelve-page lamentation, part of which had been previously circulated as a handbill, is an attractively printed pamphlet. There is a copy at Brown University.

#### DRAMA

The first drama written by a resident North Carolinian was **The Prince of Parthia** (Philadelphia, 1765), famous as the first American play to be produced by professional actors. Thomas Godfrey evidently began it in Philadelphia, his native town, but finished the romantic tragedy during the summer and autumn of 1759 after moving to Wilmington. In even blank verse Godfrey invented a tale of love and murder in the ancient country of Parthia at the beginning of the Christian era.

The first play published in North Carolina was **Nolens Volens, or the Biter Bit** (Newbern, 1809) by Everard Hall, a Virginian living in North Carolina at the time the drama was written. With its setting in England, the play reminds one of the eighteenth century comedies of Sheridan and Goldsmith. It is a felicitous production, and even today would be lively on a stage. There is a copy at Harvard.

The first play by a native North Carolinian was Lemuel Sawyer's **Blackbear. A Comedy, in Four Acts. Founded on Fact** (Washington, D. C., 1824). The playwright, a native of Camden County, laid the scene of his play in nearby Currituck County. The

North Carolina was **The Court of Fancy** (Philadelphia, 1762). This poem of twenty-four pages was composed in Wilmington by Thomas Godfrey, a native Pennsylvanian, who acknowledged his indebtedness to Chaucer's **House of Fame** and to the poetry of Alexander Pope.

Though many poems by native North Carolinians appeared during the latter part of the eighteenth century as handbills and in newspapers and periodicals, few of them were published in pamphlet or book form. In 1790 Sibley and Howard of Fayetteville printed **The Monitor; or a Poem on Dancing, addressed to the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Fayetteville Assembly**. No copy is extant, and there is no key to the author's identity. **The Rural Philosopher**, a long didactic pastoral poem translated from the French of Abbe Delille by John Maunde, was published in Newbern

plot centers about two sharpers who trick the country tyros of their money in a scheme to locate one of the treasures of Blackbeard the Pirate. A subplot deals with a county election to the accompaniment of whiskey and bribes. The amateurish effort by a United States Congressman is hardly an acting piece. **The Wreck of Honor**, a tragedy by Sawyer appeared also during 1824.

### FICTION

The first novel published in North Carolina was **Letters of Adelaide de Sancerre to Count de Nance** (Newbern, 1801), a translation from the French of Mme. Marie Jeanne (de Heurles Laboras de Mezieres) Riccoboni (1713-1792). It was first published in Paris in 1766, and an English translation came out in London the following year. It is highly probable that the Newbern edition, however, was a fresh translation made by Francis X. Martin, a Frenchman who had settled in the seaport and who evidently hoped to add a bit of continental zest to the drab orthodoxy of North Carolina life. Published by Martin, the novel was followed by six others. It is undistinguished literature. There is a copy in the private library of Bruce Cotten of Baltimore. **Historical Memoirs of Stephanie Louise de Bourbon-Conti** was published during the same year by Martin, presumably a little after **Adelaide de Sancerre**.

The first novel by a resident North Carolinian was **Matilda Berkely, or Family Anecdotes** (Raleigh, 1804), by Mrs. Winifred Marshall Gales. It was issued from the printery of her husband, Joseph Gales, who with his wife had come to North Carolina from England via Philadelphia. Though there is some evidence that this romantic novel of English life is a re-

print of a former English edition, it is a prized collector's item. Mrs. Gales' earlier novel, **History of Lady Emma Melcombe**, was published in 1787 in a three-volume London edition.

The first novel with a partial North Carolina setting was the well-known **Horse-Shoe Robinson: A Tale of the Tory Ascendancy** (1835) by John Pendleton Kennedy, a native of Baltimore. This story of the Revolution moves in its action from Virginia to both the Carolinas.

The first novel by a resident North Carolinian with its setting almost entirely in North Carolina was **Eoneguski, or The Cherokee Chief** (Washington, D. C., 1839) by Senator Robert Strange, who gathered Cherokee history and legends while he was a superior court judge in western North Carolina. The principal character is based on an important chieftain, Yonaguska. Though Strange was born in Virginia, he settled in Fayetteville when he was nineteen. This exciting adventure tale, which has never been reprinted, is by any accounting the first North Carolina novel.

The first novel by a native North Carolinian was **Alamance, or The Great and Final Experiment** (New York, 1847) by Calvin Henderson Wiley, who at the time of its publication was only twenty-eight, a few years before he became famous as the first state superintendent of public instruction. It is a historical novel of the Revolution as it affected the settlers near Alamance Church in Guilford County. There is an excellent description of the Battle of Guilford Court House. Wiley wrote one other novel, **Roanoke** (serialized, New York, 1849), about the coastal country of North Carolina before and during the Revolution.