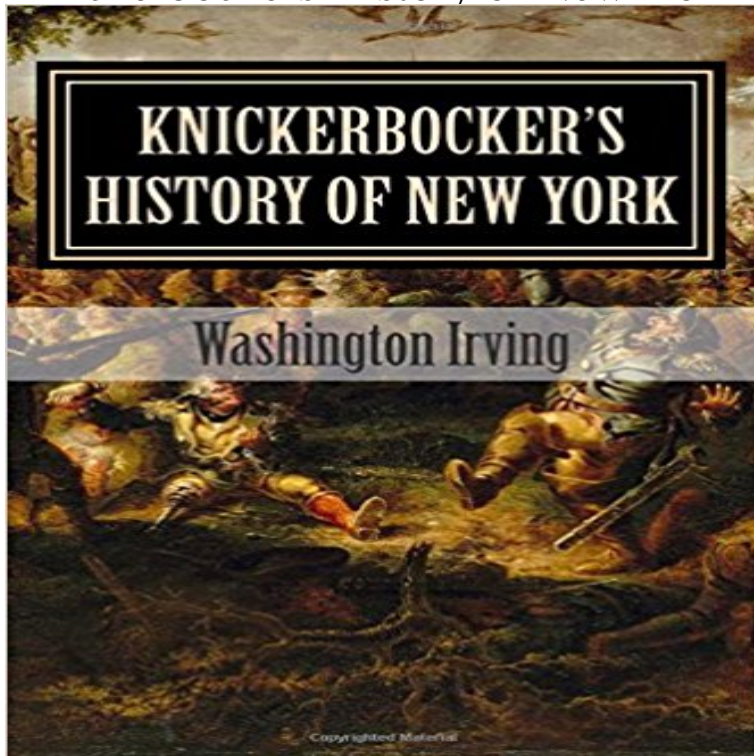


Knickerbockers History of New York



The fun of reading a parody is heightened by acquaintance with the material being burlesqued. Although Washington Irving confessed, in the Authors Apology added to the edition of 1848, that his idea had been to parody Samuel L. Mitchells *A Picture of New York* (1807), a knowledge of Mitchells book is not necessary to the enjoyment of Irvings work. The parody is only part of the humor of *A History of New York, By Diedrich Knickerbocker*, which was originally begun as a collaboration between Irving and his older brother, Peter, and had the original title *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*. The work reveals the interest of its twenty-five-year-old author in history, customs, and etymology; the burlesquing of several literary styleshis notebook supplies the names of some of the authors parodied, names now largely forgottenreveals Irving as a literary critic. Irving was in the process of finishing the book when his fiance, Matilda Hoffman, died suddenly. At first he was too stunned to continue working, then he returned to the manuscript as an anodyne for his grief and finished it quickly. About the same time, he conceived the idea of ascribing the authorship to an imaginary and eccentric Dutchman. The hoax was elaborately contrived and began when the public press printed a story about the disappearance of a man named Diedrich Knickerbocker. A short time later, an advertisement appeared, supposedly signed by the owner of the boardinghouse where Knickerbocker had lived, offering for sale a very curious kind of written book, which the landlord ostensibly had printed to reimburse himself for the old gentlemans unpaid rent. On December 6, 1809, *A History of New York*, in seven parts and 130,000 words, was first offered for sale. Legends about its reception spread rapidly. A Dutch woman in Albany threatened to horsewhip the

author for his slanderous account of an ancestor. A number of famous New York families reportedly prepared to sue the publisher. On the other hand, Sir Walter Scott was reported to have complained of sore ribs from laughing so hard over the book. Irving's style ranges from playful to erudite. Evidence of his wide reading appears on almost every page, and voluminous footnotes clothe it with pseudo-scholarship. At first, readers thought these references were part of the humor; later scholars began tracing them to actual, though minor, Roman and Greek writers. The author's pleasantries are apparent from the beginning. Book 1, according to him, is learned, sagacious, and nothing at all to the purpose, and he suggests that the idle reader skip it. When Irving embarks on a study of cosmogony, or creation of the world, he advises the reader to take fast hold of his skirt or take a short cut and wait for him at the beginning of some smoother...

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