Writing the American Revolution: War Veterans in the Nineteenth-Century Cultural Memory

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With how little cooperation of the societies after all is the past remembered – At first history had no muse – but a kind fate watched over her – some garrulous old man with tenacious memory told it to his child.

Henry David Thoreau,[1]
Journals (1842)

In 1823, something of the bittersweet occurred in Cranston, Rhode Island: an aged revolutionary war veteran returned to his hometown after a prolonged exile in England. Hopeful about reuniting with his family and community after an absence of nearly fifty years, the old soldier was surprised and disappointed to learn that his property had been sold, his family had moved west, and few among the remaining villagers even remembered who he was. Such is the story of one Israel Potter. An adventurous fellow, he had fought at the battle near Bunker Hill, had met Benjamin Franklin, and, after being captured by the British, had roamed England after the war, continually poverty-stricken, while searching for a passage back to America. Once returned to Cranston, he applied for a federal pension for his wartime services. In all probability, Potter never received any financial compensation, but he left a narrative of his life, reminding his readers that at one point in the republic's history, he did matter.

The historical context from which Israel Potter emerged and created his memoir brings into focus how war veterans' pension narratives, as well as

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[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, *Volume 1: 1837–1844*, eds. Elizabeth Hall Witherell, William L. Howarth, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Thomas Blanding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 416.

their construction through oral history, directly contributed to the historical memory of the Revolution. Potter had recounted his life to a printer, Henry Trumbull, who then published the veteran's story in 1824, partly to increase Potter's chances for a pension. But, certainly, memoir publishing was not the only way of ensuring the survival of one's life-story. More informally, parents and grandparents of the revolutionary generation, as well as local neighbours, recollected tales and experiences to younger members of the community, imbuing them with a sense of living history.[2] The first and second generations born during or after the war meanwhile adapted these reminiscences not only for historical interest, but also to comprehend their own period. Existing together within the same historical moment, the revolutionary and post-revolutionary generations conceived, disputed, and transformed the larger, malleable culture that simultaneously enmeshed them within the nineteenth century.

Through the presence of surviving revolutionaries and their reminiscences, the nineteenth-century literary generations rendered their own collective memories of the past by emphasizing how oral history not only perpetuated a sense of community, but also accented the social disruptions caused by the war. As Walter Ong has remarked on the dynamics between oral and written discourses: "[L]iteracy, though it consumes its own oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. It can restore their memory, too."[3] Washington Irving (b. 1783) and Herman Melville (b. 1819) provide but two examples of how nineteenth-century authors imaginatively evoked and transcribed the experiences of those who lived during the Age of Revolution. Surely the motif of Israel Potter's miraculous reappearance is reminiscent of Irving's earlier, more mythical tale, "Rip Van Winkle." Published in 1819 as part of *The Sketch Book*, the short story humorously depicts the clueless Rip and his efforts, after a twenty-year nap, at adapting to his transformed post-revolutionary community. In 1854, Melville fictionally recycled Potter's adventures into his eighth novel, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, first serialized in *Putnam's Monthly*. Both "Rip Van Winkle" and *Israel Potter* address how the Revolution destabilized the role of oral history within communities of remembrance by exploring

[2] George Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided: A Psychological Interpretation of Lincoln and His Age* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), 20; Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 31, 34–35, 49–51.

[3] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; rpr., London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 15.

the consequences of social and historical disruption, even as they sought to reconstruct bonds to the past, however imagined.

Within their works, Irving and Melville pose a central question: What happens to communities adjusting to the din of post-war nation-building? Rip Van Winkle and Israel Potter represent the authors' responses to changing impressions of the past, particularly its effect on who was remembered or forgotten within a community. The oral networks and the sense of history created from them at times maintained only a fragile bond between past and present. If inventing a new nation required not only consensus-forging, but also the shedding of a colonial past that had signified economic and cultural dependence, where did those who identified with that discarded history fit? Indeed, what social and cultural implications lurked ahead for future-minded Americans as they even sought to jettison their revolutionary past? This sense of connectedness with and disconnectedness from these pasts highlights how the post-revolutionary generations reacted to and affected nineteenth-century perceptions of the war and nation-forming in terms of a community of memory. James Fentress and Chris Wickham have written that "social memory…is…a process that ensures the stability of a set of collectively held ideas, and enables these ideas to be diffused and transmitted. Social memory is not stable as information; it is stable, rather, at the level of shared meanings and remembered images."[4] But the "truancy" of Rip Van Winkle and Israel Potter reflected the nation's own gaps in collective memory, what Americans chose to remember or forget about the war, or even how they recollected differently from one another.

To nineteenth-century readers, Rip Van Winkle's and Israel Potter's old age alone would have provided a continual reference point between the past and present. Many saw the revolutionary veterans as personal and immediate connections to the republic's birth. In 1843, one essayist in *Godey's Lady's Book* observed: "The Revolution…was an event of the last age; and there are enough 'veterans of half a century' yet lingering with us, to link the past and the present generation as closely together as though both were but a single succession of men." Toward the Civil War's end in 1864, Reverend E. B. Hillard examined his own generation's affiliation with the revolutionaries: "Our own are the last eyes that will look on men who looked on Washington; our ears the last that will hear the living voices of those who heard his words. Henceforth the American Revolution will be known among men by the silent record of history

[4] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 59.

alone.'' War veterans served not only as historical actors, but also as democratic intermediaries between the post-revolutionary populace and the untouchable greatness of Washington. Everyone, at least indirectly, had access to the founding father.[5]

Nineteenth-century Americans for the most part venerated the aged, especially the surviving founders. Charles Carroll of Carrollton, who became known in the early nineteenth century as the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence, received much adulation from younger admirers. As *Niles' Weekly Register* reported in 1826, a gift of venison was offered to Carroll on his ninetieth birthday. Andrew Jackson, mindful of another presidential bid, astutely paid homage to Carroll in 1831 at the latter's manor for the founder's ninety-fifth birthday celebration. In 1832, the centennial of Washington's birth, and shortly before Carroll's death, Philadelphia artisans presented him with a "splendid beaver hat," the aged man being "pleased with this token of respect."[6] Aside from the surviving founders, other elder members of a community were looked upon as experienced people who as teachers could pass on their knowledge to their progeny. Not only would moral lessons be propounded, but also, by telling and retelling past experiences, the yarn-spinners themselves would perpetuate their own sense of identities through the memories of their listeners.

On the other hand, some remained skeptical that the persistence of revolutionary memories would survive in their progressive society, in which those personal links to the past were in jeopardy of being too easily cast aside. Ironically, by abandoning their colonial identity through the war, the revolutionary generation had set in motion a pattern for future generations: that of rejecting history and the sense of dependence that came with acknowledging cultural debts to that past. The danger of associating too closely with the Revolution even became apparent to Thomas Jefferson, as he wrote to a friend in 1825: "All, all dead…and ourselves left alone amidst a new generation whom we know not, and who knows not us."[7]

Many women who had lived through the war's destruction and into the

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[5] Lewis R. Hamersly, "Thoughts and Reminiscences for the Fourth of July," *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, **27** (1843), 41; Reverend E. B. Hillard, *The Last Men of the Revolution*, ed. Wendell D. Garrett (1864; rpr. Barre, Mass.: Barre Publishers, 1968), 10, 23.

[6] *Niles' Weekly Register*, **31** (30 Sept. 1826), 65; **41** (8 Oct. 1831), 105; **42** (4 Aug. 1832), 404.

[7] Jefferson, quoted in Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 368.

days of the early republic were especially mournful over the lack of recognition for their sufferings. In her history of women in the Revolution, Elizabeth F. Ellet noted in 1848: "The heroism of the Revolutionary women has passed from remembrance with the generation who witnessed it." She observed that too much historical focus had been placed on the political aspects of the war, leaving the domestic sphere unemphasized. Four years earlier, Susan Livingston Ridley Sedgwick fictionalized an account of her aunt recounting stories about the hardships caused by the war. As the elderly Mrs. Cargill explains to her offspring: "[T]hose were sad times! You know nothing about it. War without – dissensions within – friend against friend – brother against brother.... You ought to be thankful to God that you live now instead of then. When I see any of our young people who seem to underrate their own country...I feel so grieved that I could cry! – to think that all we went through in those shocking, horrid times should meet with so little return!" One of her young listeners reassuringly tells the aged woman that she deserves a pension from Congress. The overall perception remained, however, that many survivors felt neglected, playing no role in the future-minded republic.[8]

John Greenleaf Whittier remarked in 1847 that African Americans who had fought against the British Crown "have been quietly elbowed aside, as no more deserving of a place in patriotic recollection" than others who had participated in the Revolution. "Of the services and sufferings of the Colored Soldiers of the Revolution," he continued, "no attempt has...been made to preserve a record. They have had no historian."[9] The black abolitionist William C. Nell later compiled anecdotes regarding free blacks' and slaves' contributions to the nation's cause, addressing the prejudice and hypocrisy of the founders' declaring their own independence while holding African Americans in bondage. Many of the portraits Nell included were of pensioners, and he announced that their actions and responsibilities deserved more notice that went beyond mere financial renumeration or manumission.

Others sympathized with their old raconteurs, but occasionally with embarrassing consequences. One writer in 1838 recorded his wanderings around Boston, bemoaning the present generation's forgetfulness, and in

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[8] Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution*, Vol. 1 (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1848), 21–22; [Susan Livingston Ridley Sedgwick], *Alida; or, Town and Country* (New York: Henry G. Langley, 1844), 16.

[9] Whittier, quoted in William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855; rpr. New York: Arno Press, 1968), 9.

the progress-obsessed *Democratic Review* no less: "[T]he generation that immediately succeeds to one that has wrought great deliverances…too often wants that reverence for great actions which a remoter age entertains." Knocking on the door of an antiquated home, the narrator delighted in finding an aged man who might have been able to relate some tales of revolutionary times, but was surprised to discover that the elderly gentleman "had espoused the side of the loyalists at the time of the Revolution, and in no degree shared my enthusiasm on the subject of those days."[10]

Eliza Leslie recounted the fictional trials and tribulations of one family that searched for a veteran to attend its Independence Day picnic after the grandfather had passed away. "A fourth of July celebration ungraced by a revolutionary warrior…is like – is like – like something flat," one member announces. Two of the sons hurry off to find an appropriate replacement for "old grand-daddy," who anyhow had been "quite childish the last ten years, and dreadfully deaf, and could not walk a step without two canes; and he had quite forgotten all his battles." They come across a white-haired stranger in the village, and since "[t]here's no mistaking these old veteran men," the two literally kidnap him for their family picnic. Much to everyone's shock, the old man admits to having fought for the British as a Hessian mercenary.[11]

During the opening decades of the nineteenth century, many of the surviving veterans had relayed their memories publicly, in effect institutionalizing them, when applying for federal pensions. In 1818, when Irving began composing "Rip Van Winkle," Congress enacted a pension plan for officers and enlisted men who had served in the Continental Army. By 1832, a more comprehensive plan came into effect whereby almost anyone who had participated during the Revolution could apply. Many soldiers had not formally enlisted in the Continental Army, and, possessing no discharge papers, had to rely solely on oral testimony to give proof of their service. The candidates for pensions usually appeared before a courthouse and had their statements taken down by an attorney or clerk.[12] These proceedings sometimes became festive occasions, attracting crowds of listeners, with food and liquor served to the entertaining reminiscers. One weekly journal reported in 1832: "The

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[10] "Reminiscences of a Walker Round Boston," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, **3** (1838), 82–83.

[11] Eliza Leslie, "Fourth of July Doings: A Sketch – Founded on Fact," *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, **33** (1846), 147, 150–52.

[12] John C. Dann, ed., *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), xvii.

assemblage of revolutionary soldiers yet remaining…constituted an interesting occasion to them and those who could look upon them as relics of the past generation."[13]

But, in recounting their wartime experiences, the veterans' memories sometimes proved inaccurate, and with mixed results. In Chenango, New York, a father and son (94 and 70 years old respectively) gave their pension testimonies. *Niles' Weekly Register* added: "While the son was giving his declaration to the court, the father caused much laughter by occasionally correcting him, with 'tut, boy, you are mistaken.' 'You are wrong, boy!' The term 'boy,' applied to a war-worn veteran of '76, whose whitened locks and wrinkled visage evinced extreme old age, was irresistably amusing."[14] Other instances were not so humorous. One Jacob Gove of Maine "was a pensioner under the revolutionary pension law; and the act of perjury was committed in taking the oath upon which he obtained his pension." Gove had to pay a $100 fine and spend sixty days in prison for falsifying his deeds.[15] The notice did not provide any further explanation as to how or why the perjurer's actions were perceived as such. One can only surmise that, to those who had been present, publicized memories depended on the extent to which Gove's fiction intruded upon their fact.

In the larger scheme of regulating pensions, other problems arose for the federal government in that Congress had not anticipated on distributing such a vast amount of funds to those who came forward to claim them. As *Niles' Weekly* noted apprehensively in 1820:

The amount paid on account of these pensions – more than three millions of dollars *per annum*, has justly caused considerable enquiry and surprise; and the reports have gone abroad that many persons are receiving the bounty of government, who are not entitled to it…. It is very certain, that the disbursement of so great a sum has a very serious effect upon the funds of government – but will serve as a lesson to congress [*sic*] that will not soon be forgotten.[16]

Apparently Jacob Gove was not the only charlatan who had taken advantage of government oversights through his guise as a bona fide veteran. The concern among many like Hezekiah Niles was the threat to the supposed virtue of the republic that had been inherited from the previous century. If nothing else, the Revolution would be proven a failure should the nation's citizenry revert to the corruption and insincerity

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[13] "Revolutionary Relics," *Niles' Weekly Register*, **43** (6 Oct. 1832), 89.
[14] "Relics of the Revolution," *Niles'*, **43** (8 Sept. 1832), 20.
[15] "Laudable Prosecution," *Niles'*, **21** (21 Oct. 1821), 133.
[16] *Niles'*, **17** (15 Jan. 1820), 321.

of the Old World, against which patriotic Americans had just fought. Beneath this ideological concern lurked deep financial and political anxieties. In 1819, the nation experienced its first major economic collapse, so that money channeled to pensions underwent more careful scrutiny.[17]

During the 1820s, with the depression waning, many revolutionary veterans had their pension narratives published in booklet form. Since the war of 1812, over 200 of them had appeared in print. These works comprised part of a larger autobiographical genre in *antebellum* culture that included stories about Indian captivity and escaped slaves. In the veterans' case, their memoirs specifically contributed to the historical memory of the Revolution. As mentioned earlier, one narrative, *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* (1824), became the source for Melville's character of the same name. Henry Trumbull, the printer from Rhode Island, took down Potter's testimony in an attempt to help the war veteran obtain his pension. Here Potter's experiences entered the public realm of memory, as proffered by Trumbull: "There is not probably another now living, who took an equally active part in the Revolutionary war, whose life has been marked with more extraordinary events, and who has drank deeper of the cup of adversity, than the aged veteran with whose History we now beg liberty to present the American public."[18]

Turning to Washington Irving's story: Rip Van Winkle, taunted by a termagant wife, escapes into the mountains with his dog to hunt and relax. He meets up with strange fellows playing ninepins, drinks liquor from their flagon, and falls asleep for twenty years, literally through the Revolutionary War. Because of his soporific adventure, Rip now faces various difficulties when he returns to his village. He fails to recognize anyone, and the community itself cannot place Rip into any discernible context. With a twenty-year gap in his memory, he thinks about the possibility of being bewitched; nothing that reaches his vision makes any sense.

Since Rip's departure, the village had changed structurally as well as in population: "Strange names were over the doors – strange faces at the windows – everything was strange." When Rip eventually finds his own house, it is nearly unrecognizable to him with "the roof fallen in, the

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[17] *Niles'*, **17** (16 Oct. 1819), 99–100; **17** (8 Jan. 1820), 314–16; **18** (15 July 1820), 345; **51** (29 Oct. 1836), 129. See also Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103–71.

[18] *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter* (Providence: Henry Trumbull, 1824), 3.

windows shattered and the doors off the hinges."[19] Rip's presence in effect mirrors the state of his abode – rundown and neglected over time. The village community attempts to find out from where this peculiar old man had come, mistaking him for a tory, a spy, and a refugee. Because of his apolitical nature, Rip cannot comprehend the uproar surrounding him. All the references that he hears had stemmed from the Revolution and its aftermath, events that had not been ingrained in his memory, and as a result affect his identity within the community as one who no longer fits. The context in which he had known acquaintances is now lost. Rip then begins to lose his grip on reality: "I'm not myself. – I'm somebody else, and every thing's changed – and I'm changed – and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!" (781). The Revolution not only causes acute transformations within the village, tearing it from its colonial past, but also casts aside those who, like Rip, had associated with that irrecoverable history.

The breaks in the community's historical knowledge reflect those in Rip's consciousness, both displaying a certain amount of unavoidable discontinuity. Unlike most elder members of the community, Rip cannot participate in the recounting of reminiscences about the war. The village, in turn, endures the changes over time initiated by the war, but the inhabitants retain no recollection of poor Rip or of the pre-revolutionary past that he represents. On the other hand, Rip's place in the community's memory, and in history, becomes even more difficult because he lacks not only individual memory of the past twenty years, but also historical knowledge of the Revolution.

The younger generation ironically must perform the task of filling in Rip's understanding of the past with respect to the Revolution. Here Irving provides a humorous inversion of the workings of oral history, in which the elder members of a community are supposed to pass on their stories and sense of identities to their progeny. The Revolution affects the prior forms of social interaction, and the more youthful inhabitants inform Rip about his past acquaintances, most of whom had already passed away. The village, however, has not been ruptured completely from its pre-revolutionary past. In order to verify Rip's legitimate identity within the community, the people rely on another old man, Peter Vanderdonk. Possessing the authority within the village to attest to the veracity of Rip's tale, Vanderdonk is skilled in the ways of providing a

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[19] Washington Irving, *Letters of Jonathan Oldstyle, Gent.*, *Salmagundi*, *A History of New York*, *The Sketch Book*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 778. Future page references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

historical sensibility through his own story-telling, thus paving the way for Rip to assimilate back into the community. Although missing out on the historical event of a lifetime, the old slumberer still plays a part within the community by reminding others of a colonial past that had been dismembered and forgotten by the revolutionary participants.

The historical Potter's return to America does recall certain themes from "Rip Van Winkle." When Irving composed his story in 1819, he portrayed a community of memory still willing to accommodate Rip. The old man could perform in the oral history network and provide his listeners with an appreciated sense of the past. In the 1824 narrative of Potter, the case is similar. Even though Potter feels unadmired for his wartime services, he returns gratefully to America. Arriving in New York in 1823, he notes: "The pleasure that I enjoyed in viewing the streets thronged by those, who, although I could not claim as acquaintances, I would greet as my countrymen, was unabounded. I felt a regard for almost every object that met my eye, because it was American."[20] The rhetoric conforms to the dominant nationalism that the country was experiencing at the time, and Potter ingratiates himself to his readers, knowing that a possible pension waits for him at the end of his troubles. He is also able to place himself within the larger communal context of the new nation despite being surrounded by strangers. Potter, unlike the hapless Rip Van Winkle, welcomes the sight of unacquainted Americans because he knows that his fifty-year nightmare in England has ended.

Returning to his local township in Rhode Island, Potter relives Rip's initial befuddlement: "I hastened to Cranston, to seek my connexions [*sic*] if any were to be found; and if not to seek among the most aged of the inhabitants, some one who had not forgotten me, and who might be able to furnish me with the sought for information." Like Rip's friend, Peter Vanderdonk, an elderly person in Cranston is able to inform Potter about the community's past. Although Potter learns that his family had moved west and his property had been sold, he still maintains the hope of obtaining financial renumeration, pleading to the national community. As he explains: "I love too well the country which gave me birth, and entertain too high a respect for those employed in its government, to reproach them with ingratitude."[21] Potter even appeals for his pension through the power of Benjamin Franklin's name by recollecting a conversation with the old sage. Here Franklin "listened to the tale of my sufferings with much apparent interest," explains Potter, "and seemed disposed to encourage me with the assurance that if the Americans should

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[20] Potter, *Life and Adventures*, 102.   [21] Ibid., 102, 106.

succeed in their grand object, and finally establish their Independence, they would not fail to renumerate their soldiers for their services.''[22] The narrative concludes with his hopes that he would be absorbed into the community of memory by having his own recollections on the Revolution validated by a federal pension.

Herman Melville had to provide the critical voice to Potter's story thirty years later. In Melville's version, the protagonist also attempts to find his niche in society. Potter leaves his family residence when his father cannot accept the younger man's choice of a wife. When the Revolution begins, Potter joins the patriots and fights at Bunker Hill. He later becomes a prisoner of the British; when he arrives in England, Potter assumes a series of disguises to effect his escape. He then meets with British sympathizers to the American cause, gets sent to France as a courier for Benjamin Franklin, and serves under John Paul Jones in several naval engagements. All of these contacts, however, are highly tenuous. Although Potter receives aid in England, one of his benefactors dies, and the others can only provide limited assistance in an enemy country. Franklin dupes the young man with all the smoke and mirrors that the philosophy of Poor Richard can generate. John Paul Jones has his own reputation, or whatever self-conscious attempts to gain one, with which to concern himself.

When John Paul Jones's ship engages a British man-of-war, Potter boards the enemy vessel when he believes too trustingly that the rest of Jones's crew would follow. The British man-of-war escapes from Jones's grasp, unfortunately taking Potter along with it. With the ship's crew acting as a symbolic microcosm of society, Potter tries to ingratiate himself with the sailors, none of whom recognize him or his place on the vessel. Potter assumes the guise of several crew members, but is repulsed constantly; no room for him exists within the community of sailors. When questioned by the officer of the deck, Potter feigns insanity and responds with nonsensical answers. "He's out of all reason;" cries the officer, "out of all men's knowledge and memories!"[23] To further interrogation, Potter can only respond: "All hands seem to be against me; none of them willing to remember me," recalling Rip Van Winkle's lament (582). The luckless voyager eventually finds his place among the crew, ironically because of his apparent insanity, his Billy Budd-like willingness to work, and his good nature that wins over the hearts of his shipmates. Unlike Rip

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[22] Ibid., 50–51.
[23] Herman Melville, *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd*, ed. Harrison Hayford (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 581. Future page references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

Van Winkle, however, Potter must knowingly submerge his sense of historical knowledge and individual consciousness under his assumed madness in order to assimilate into that maritime society.

Potter's situation again becomes untenable when he begins his lengthy exile in London. Mixing in with the rest of the city's poor, Potter unsuccessfully tries his hand at several occupations. At one low point, he makes bricks from a clay pit, realizing the absurdity of remembering one glorious hero while forgetting another who may happen to be composed of more common material. "What signifies who we be, or where we are, or what we do?" he wails. "Kings as clowns are codgers – who ain't a nobody?…All is vanity and clay" (602). Later, Melville dramatizes Potter's descent into madness when the veteran is still wandering in London after fifty years of toil and hard luck.

Melville suggests that, while ordinary people like Potter gained very little recognition for their services during the war, heroes such as Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, and Ethan Allen became publicly honored and remembered by the post-revolutionary generations through many of the nineteenth-century histories and collected correspondences. Melville, however, subverts these heroes' public images by exposing their not-so-glorious personal traits. He achieves this goal in *Israel Potter* by refuting the nineteenth-century, domestic-centered ideology that a virtuous private character was the fount of disinterested public service, presenting instead the three revolutionary icons as duplicitous, egotistical, or both. Referring to Benjamin Franklin, Potter surmises: "Every time he comes in he robs me…with an air all the time, too, as if he were making presents" (486). John Paul Jones's character is tied intimately with the nation's. As Melville describes both: "intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations" (561). Ethan Allen possesses "that inevitable egotism relatively pertaining to pine trees, spires, and giants" (594). Melville implies that, historically, self-interest was really the main force behind the images of commemorated public figures like Franklin, Jones, and Allen. In contrast, Potter's self-sacrifice, representing many of the common veterans' contributions during the Revolution, was shamefully disregarded by the country.

Most nineteenth-century Americans, in spite of their democratic intentions, desired more "quasi-monarchical" heroes to adore, George Washington being the most obvious example.[24] As Melville created his

[24] The term is John Samson's. See Samson, *White Lies: Melville's Narrative of Facts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 189. For discussions on the multitude of

fictionalized Israel Potter, Irving near the same year began his five-volume biography of Washington that proved highly successful. Regarded as a pioneering oral historian, the biographer had relied on personal reminiscences for many of the anecdotes on the revolutionary hero. Here, Irving notes the useful blending of oral and textual histories: "Though a biography, and of course admitting of familiar anecdote, excursive digressions, and a flexible texture of narrative, yet, for the most part, it is essentially historic." As a real historian depicting a historic and yet mythic figure, Irving carefully elaborated on the factual nature of his work: "I have endeavored to execute my task with candor and fidelity; stating facts on what appeared to be good authority, and avoiding as much as possible all false coloring and exaggeration."[25] He worked from previously published nineteenth-century histories and collected papers of Washington, ranging from those of Mason Locke Weems to Jared Sparks and George Bancroft. Relying on a variety of sources, some (like Weems's work) bordering on pure fiction, Irving presented his *Life* as an authentic portrait of the founding father.[26]

One reviewer of Irving's biography did notice the apparent ambiguity of hero-worship in a democratic society. Admitting that "the prudent jealousy of a republic forbids that her free citizens should unduly exalt…any fallible and ambitious fellow-citizen," the writer also saw Washington as "the best examplar of the best and most prominent features of American character." With sectional disputes between North and South rising in the background, the reviewer commended Irving by noting that the biography as "by far the most national of all his works." In effect, the founding father embodied features with which all Americans could identify: self-sacrifice, virtue, honesty, industry, and piety, these traits being central as to how the national community remembered Washington and also celebrated itself.[27]

But where do the overlooked contributions of more ordinary citizens

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meanings that George Washington had for many *antebellum* Americans, see Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided*, 40–48; Barry Schwartz, *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[25] Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington*, Vol. 1, eds. Allen Gutman and James A. Sappenfield (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 2.

[26] Ibid., xxxix–xlv. The pages here refer to the bibliographic list of sources that Irving used for his biography. The editors compiled it from Irving's library, manuscript, footnotes, letters, and journals.

[27] "Irving's Life of Washington," *The United States Review*, **36** (1855), 66–67. See also Barry Schwartz, "The Social Context of Commemoration: A Study in Collective Memory," *Social Forces*, **61** (1982), 374–402.

of the republic fit into this commemorative scheme? Surely communities of memory have been known to incorporate tales and reminiscences of travail that would bind their tellers and listeners more closely to the past and to each other. Yet, in *Israel Potter*, Melville depicts the incompatibility of hero-worship in a supposedly democratic context, pointing out the ultimate failure of nationalism. As Benedict Anderson observes, the nation is an "imagined community" that is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" despite any actual conditions of inequality.[28] Melville regarded the nation in staunchly Jacksonian terms: the people as sovereign-citizens represented the common interest as opposed to the privileged and particular, a view that, by the 1850s, already had evaporated in the historical memory of the Revolution. In the end, Israel Potter (historically and fictionally), as well as those in a similar situation (namely poverty), could represent only themselves, guaranteeing that their memories would disappear within the larger societal recollections. Melville remarks "[t]hat the name here noted [Potter's] should not have appeared in the volumes of [Jared] Sparks, may or may not be a matter for astonishment" (425–26), leaving the perpetuation of the veteran's memory up to the creator of Moby Dick, and to those who cared to read his work.

Melville portrays the sad and bitter end that the real Potter had omitted from his own tale. Writing in 1854, Melville arranges his version so that the elderly man arrives in Boston on 4 July 1826. Stepping onto the dock, Potter is nearly run down by an overly patriotic crowd honoring the nation's jubilee within the Cradle of Liberty. The fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence also had marked the simultaneous deaths of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Paying tribute to these leading heroes, Melville suggests, submerged in many the desire to return the favor to those who privately served and suffered. The zealous mob that he describes cannot afford to notice the return of the veteran of Bunker Hill. By situating Potter in a time and place that carried significant historical resonance to the post-revolutionary generations, Melville questions the success of the Revolution's legacies, chastising mindless patriot-citizens who had forgotten veterans like Potter. To Melville, Americans during the 1850s were failing to live up to the revolutionary promises of a democratic society by basking instead in other, more historically known, men's shadows, while compromising on the increasingly divisive issues of newly acquired territories, popular sovereignty, and slavery.

[28] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983; London: Verso, 1991), 7.

Like Rip Van Winkle, but with a more extended absence, Melville's Potter returns to his old town in the Housatonic Valley. "But the exile's presence in these old mountain townships," Melville writes, "proved less a return than a resurrection. At first, none knew him, nor could recall having heard of him" (613–14). Very little remains of his own home, and, as in Potter's 1824 narrative, the neighbors he had known have relocated westward. The aged veteran is bewildered by the transformations, reciting what Rip also had in mind: "Do I dream?…Nay, nay; I can not be old" (614). Yet unlike Rip, who, in the end, is welcomed back into his village, Potter can only resort to his own reminiscences. He realizes that the community of memory as he had known it has disintegrated, leaving him virtually alone and with no role to play as a chronicler of times past. Thus, as Melville describes it, Potter's life winds down: "He was repulsed in efforts, after a pension, by certain caprices of law. His scars proved his only medals. He dictated a little book, the record of his fortunes. But long ago it faded out of print – himself out of being – his name out of memory" (615).

Although many critics have commented on the darker vision of Melville and its sources, one may surmise that some of his views stemmed from already existing concerns as to what the Revolution had failed to accomplish. Despite the reverential tones generated by the combined deaths of Jefferson and Adams on the jubilee of the Declaration of Independence, several voices of disappointment emerged alongside the laudatory. In 1826, one weekly publication recorded the passing of other, less noticeable figures. William Ross, 109 years old, also had died on the Fourth of that year. He had fought under General Braddock in 1755 and "was in most of the engagements" of the Revolution. "Although poor," the notice continued, "he never received a pension." Like Ross, John Bailey had served in the French and Indian War as well as the Revolution; he passed away "comparatively poor" at the age of 87. Even officers were not immune from the trash heap of forgotten heroes. Twenty-five officers from Maine and Massachusetts were never compensated for their services since "they cannot swear they are paupers; and beg in their old age, of the country of which, in their youth, they were the salvation." Others still survived in South Carolina, although "none of them have ever applied for a pension."[29]

The battle near Bunker Hill and the monument completed there in 1842 engendered not only conventional praise regarding martyred heroes, but

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[29] *Niles' Weekly Register*, **30** (19 Aug. 1826), 440; **31** (25 Nov. 1826), 207; **32** (21 July 1827), 343.

also disappointment, if not deep sarcasm, concerning the forgotten. A revolutionary soldier "died in jail, where he was confined for a debt of 10 or 12 dollars," despite having fought at Bunker Hill. One poet reminisced in 1840 about how his grandfather had recounted tales of that epic battle to him. Lamenting his elder's lack of recognition, the younger sadly concluded: "But days have gone, and years have flew … / So let it be; he sought no trust, / No honors placed him high, / Unknown he ever prayed to live, / and unremembered die." John Greenleaf Whittier also remarked on the nation's ingratitude toward its veterans. In "The Prisoner for Debt," the poet addressed an old man who had participated at Bunker Hill, only to be imprisoned for his poverty: "Look forth, thou man of many scars, / Though thy dim dungeon's iron bars; / It must be joy, in sooth, to see / Yon monument upreared to thee – / Piled granite and a prison cell – / The land repay's thy service well!"[30]

Lydia Hall decried in poetry the need to pay an admission fare to see the monument. She may have caught the irony here, especially in light of Israel Potter's never having received his pension:

> I wonder if the good men thought,
> Where Death and Liberty had fought
>   A monument should rise
> In memory of their deeds sublime,
> To tell the world in after time,
>   Who'll pay a ninepence for the right
>   May stand on Bunker's sacred height.

She then sarcastically referred to Daniel Webster, who had spouted forth the adulatory rhetoric in celebration of others' past deeds there:

> I wonder what that Statesman meant –
>   That princely son of Fame –
> An orator so eloquent,
> Who bade you rear your monument
>   In Freedom's hallowed name!
> Say, did the pocket's glowing fire –
> The empty purse, his zeal inspire,
>   Stir up the depths of Webster's soul,
>   And gathered multitudes control?[31]

In his 1843 commemorative speech at the monument, Webster spoke in terms that many nineteenth-century public figures, including politicians

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[30] "Posthumous Sensibilities," *Niles' Weekly Register*, **30** (12 Aug. 1826), 412; "The Old Man," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, **7** (1840), 66; [John Greenleaf Whittier], "The Prisoner for Debt," *The Knickerbocker*, **7** (1836), 549.

[31] Lydia S. Hall, "Bunker Hill," *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, **30** (1845), 121.

such as himself or historians like George Bancroft, had used frequently to describe the Revolution and its legacies. Webster observed that "if the Revolution was an era in the history of man favorable to human happiness, if it was an event which marked the progress of man all over the world from despotism to liberty, then this monument is not raised without cause." As a master orator of nationalist themes, Webster, like several post-revolutionary writers already mentioned, replaced the ordinary veteran's role as an oral transmitter of the revolutionary past. But Webster's use of metaphysical phrases like "human happiness" and "progress" overshadowed those critical voices regarding the common soldier's poverty. Fittingly enough, Webster ended his speech eulogizing George Washington: "Washington is all our own!... The structure now standing before us, by its uprightness, its solidity, its durability, is no unfit emblem of his character."[32] The public realm of historical memory in the 1840s left little room for reminiscences concerning those of the more ordinary character.

Melville comments on Bunker Hill and what it signified in his own scathing fashion. In the dedication at the beginning of *Israel Potter*, he addresses the monument, a public item, and declared that Potter "well merits the present tribute – a private of Bunker Hill, who for his faithful services was years ago promoted to a still deeper privacy under the ground, with a posthumous pension, in default of any during life, annually paid him by the spring in ever-new mosses and sward" (425). Melville's play on "private" could also be seen as an indicting commentary on Webster's efforts to glorify, and yet give only lip service to, those who had borne the brunt of the fighting and suffering. In the context of historical memory, the stone "Highness" elicited troubled responses, many of them voiced before Melville had chimed in, as to what the Revolution had promised, and how the post-revolutionary generations had failed to appreciate the numerous sacrifices of the more common participants.

In 1891, Melville returned to the themes of memory and legacy initially raised by Irving over seventy years earlier. Now an old man nearing death, Melville composed "Rip Van Winkle's Lilac" as part of a collection of elegiac nature poetry. Within this work, he again dedicates his efforts to a past monument, here Irving himself, rather than the Bunker Hill Monument in *Israel Potter*. He writes that "little troublest thou thyself, O

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[32] Daniel Webster, *The Works of Daniel Webster*, *Vol. 1* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 92, 105.

Washington Irving, as to who peradventure may be poaching in that literary manner which thou leftest behind," comparing the creator of Rip Van Winkle to other "mellowing Immortals." Perhaps Melville hints slightly at how he himself may have "poached" in Irving's "literary manner" when writing about Israel Potter's return from exile. Addressing the unearthly presence of Irving once more, Melville humbly admits that "thy vision may now be such that it may even reach here where I write, and thy spirit be pleased to behold me inspired by whom but thyself."[33]

While replacing the Bunker Hill Monument with Irving as the fount of his inspiration, Melville also contemplates the regenerative aspect of nature, marking the passing of time and people. In *Israel Potter*, spring rewards the pensionless veteran with "ever-new mosses and sward" on his grave. In "Rip Van Winkle's Lilac," the flower grows in the place of an old willow tree:

> But yonder Lilac! how now came –
> Rip, where does Rip Van Winkle live?
> Lilac? – a lilac? Why, just there,
> If my cracked memory don't deceive,
> 'Twas *I* set out a Lilac fair,
> Yesterday morning, seems to me.

Bewildered about his identity, as well as his sense of time and place, Rip then realizes how nature had renewed itself when he returned. The awakened wanderer, however, resembles the old willow, both being "remanded into night." History and nature seem to have eluded him. But Melville's concern here centers on how nature is everlasting, providing in effect continuous revolutions. By extending both backward and forward in time, it transcends history and memory, where instead "the blossoms take the fame."[34]

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[33] *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Packard & Co., 1947), 281.   [34] Ibid., 291–93.