

## The Library of America Interviews David S. Shields about American Poetry of the 17th and 18th Centuries

In connection with the publication in October 2007 of *American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by David S. Shields, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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*Collecting more than 300 poems by 108 poets, including many whose work has never been published before, American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries is arguably the definitive anthology of early American poetry. What makes this volume so distinctive?*

There have been very few attempts at creating a comprehensive anthology of early American poetry. Samuel Kettell did it in the early 19th century. The last person to attempt this was Kenneth Silverman over a generation ago, and his volume had less than a quarter of the poems included here. This collection could not have been made 15 years ago, when a change took place in our understanding of how early American culture operated. Until that point literary investigators thought that everything that was important was *printed*. Then they discovered that, prior to the American Revolution, the majority of belletristic works and over 80% of what was written in poetic form appeared *only* in manuscript. Suddenly, the research paradigm changed and people begin to look in family papers and in commonplace books. Since about 1990 there has been this enormous recovery of the poetic literature, which is reflected in this collection. This volume redraws the landscape of early American poetry.

*In your book Oracles of Empire, about American poetry from 1650 to 1790, you write that printing presses did not become the major means of distribution until the 1730s and that the preceding period was characterized by a manuscript culture. Could you describe this manuscript culture?*

The writing of poetry was one of those polite arts which were considered

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one of the benefits of leading a civil life in the British Empire, like singing or living in a presentable house or having polite manners. You weren't considered a full citizen unless you manifested some degree of polish in some area. Poetry reflected the ideals of civility and empire. One of the features of the world of the late 17th and all throughout the 18th century was that like-minded people who believed in these values gathered together in a number of associations: ladies' tea tables and salons, tavern clubs, coffeehouse associations, societies for the promotion of some ideal, or subscribing libraries. They cultivated good conversation, good food, and the trading of impromptu verse. Speed of creation, the ability to spontaneously, off the tip of your tongue, produce a witty and eloquent response to something going on around you was considered the highest mark of civilization, and was a talent cultivated by women as well as by men.

The creation of polite letters, or *belles lettres*, was something that was done in these clubs, taverns, and associations, either orally or in manuscript. Manuscripts were passed around and some of them were done up just like a handwritten book. Historically, a number of poets dominated these local scenes of creativity. A good example is Archibald Home, a poet from the early 18th century who became the secretary of the colony of New Jersey. He organized around himself a circle of young would-be poets that included the first great Jewish belletristic poet, Moses Franks of the Levy-Franks family, and several women, Richa Franks and Abigail Coxe, and several colonial officials, like Joseph Worrel and Robert Hunter Lewis. Much like Dryden, Home presided as something of an archwit over a coffeehouse society he created. He would read everyone's manuscripts, critique and correct them, make sure a second draft was performed, and then he'd allow them to circulate. Here you had a person who set himself up as a central authority generating the next generation of poets. And you can chart the influence and power of these individuals. There's at least one of this sort of person in every writing scene of the 18th century. Archibald Home's posthumous poems, which circulated in manuscript transatlantically, were prepared by a scrivener and its title page is one of the masterpieces of colonial calligraphy.

***This revolution in scholarship must have led to many discoveries of “new” poets who are being anthologized here for the first time. Do you have any favorites?***

Yes. Quite a few. One is the writing of Susanna Wright. “Anna Boleyns Letter to King Henry the 8th,” “On the Benefit of Labour,” “On the Death of a little Girl,” “My Own Birth Day,” “To Eliza Norris—at Fairhill.” She was an amazing figure. A botanist, a translator. She lived in the wilds of the Susquehanna in

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Indian country in Pennsylvania. She designed her own house which is still standing in the town of Columbia. She wrote poetry that circulated throughout Pennsylvania. Only two or three of these poems were known prior to the early 1990s. Then a copybook, Milka Martha Moore's commonplace book, was discovered in the Dickinson College library by two scholars and suddenly we have a wonderful body of her work. She is truly a fine poet.

### *Yes, she's marvelous. What are some others?*

The poems of Henry Brooke, this wit who lived in Lewes, Delaware, and was one of the great poets of Pennsylvania, when Delaware was part of Pennsylvania. His poems are quite funny and witty and great examples of English social verse and comic verse: "The New Metamorphosis, or Fable of the Bald Eagle," "To My Bottle-friends," "Modern Politeness." Those are engaging poems.

A number of the poems of Joseph Green, the famous satirist, have come to light only in recent years. He was the funniest man in New England. "The Disappointed Cooper," quite a ribald poem, makes fun of an evangelist preacher of The Great Awakening, who, even though he was a man advanced in years, married a quite lovely red-haired teenager and there were some questions about the sexual shenanigans going on. Green has an interesting connection with Mather Byles, one of the great poets in Boston of the first half of the 18th century. [Note: One of Byles's sermons also appears in the LOA collection *American Sermons*.] Byles was one of these figures like Archibald Home who set himself up as the arch poet, the master of politeness and eloquence. Green found Byles just the most pretentious person that existed. Virtually every time that Byles would put a poem before the public, Green would write a parody of it. Some of these parodies outlived the originals.

There are some poets who have left only tantalizing glimpses of their talent. Mary Hirst Pepperell, whose touching elegy to her dead child is included in the anthology, was known to have been a prolific poet as well as the great saloniere of early Maine. This one poem is all that is known to survive. But who knows what might be lurking in the attics of Kittery. . . .

*We think of life in the New World in the 17th century as quite bleak and presume that any poetry written during this time could only come from the favored few who had sufficient education and wealth to have the leisure to write. It sounds like poetry writing was a much more democratic pursuit.*

Right. In New England the Puritans were a middle-class movement that placed a great premium on universal literacy. It was only through reading God's word that you were going to be saved. Almost everyone who was a Puritan

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could read. There was this very creative association which is central to Reformed Christianity called the conventicle, later called the meeting. It met on Wednesdays or Thursdays and what the people assembled there did was figure out ways to make themselves more holy or more pure or more filled with the divine spirit. They did things such as invent diary writing and create hymns. The first Protestant hymns were written by a number of people who were associated with the New England venture, both in England and in New England. Prior to that what was sung in church services were the Psalms. The notion of creating a spontaneous spiritual expression was highly controversial in the 17th century, but a number of Puritans did it.

*The anthology includes selections from The Bay Psalm Book, written by Americans.*

John Cotton and a number of other people composed the English text for those. The language there is consciously made less than eloquent. They wanted it to be more primitive, direct, and closer to the Hebrew. In the preface to *The Bay Psalm Book* there's a phrase that "God's altar needs not our polishing." That tone of voice, which you find in some of the Puritan writers like William Bradford, is very much at odds with the poetic voice you find later on in the anthology when you run into the wits and the poets who cultivate ease and eloquence.

*Many of the writers here—Wigglesworth, Edward Taylor, Cotton Mather—were religious leaders writing at the same time as English metaphysical poets George Herbert and Henry Vaughan. These American writers seemed to have similar aspirations and to use similar forms as the English poets, and the American critic J.A. Leo Lemay finds that the "complex, unified, and economical" poems of Edward Taylor bear comparison to those of Herbert and Andrew Marvell. This carefully composed writing seems quite a contrast with the plainspoken writing of the other Puritans.*

You have different schools of Puritan poetry. The university-educated contingent inclined more toward metaphysical poetry. There was a great concern with the notion of wit overthrowing a routine sense of the world. The Puritans had an acute anxiety that their fallen nature made them somehow blind or insensitive to the presence of God all around them. So they used meditative procedures to tear away the common surface so they could see the divine spark within, so they could "see the universe in a grain of sand."

*The anthology includes selections from Wigglesworth's "Day of Doom," a 17th-century bestseller. You note in your biography of the author that he*

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*went away to Bermuda to recover from an ailment and returned to find himself a bestselling author.*

It's probably the plainest of his poems in terms of its directness of message. One of the things that he wants to do is to engage in persuasion through terror, to scare people into a sense of their sinful liability for death and damnation. He does spend some time on the felicities of heaven—it isn't all stick, there is some carrot to it—but the terrifying bits are so much more riveting than the glorious chorus of lambs singing alleluia. Down to the present day, when the poem is anthologized, the visions of the possibilities of hell are the parts always included.

*Some of the poems don't seem Puritan at all. Royall Tyler's "The Origin of Evil" surprised me with its sensuous description of Adam and Eve in the garden where we find Eve's "bosom, heaving for caresses" and where she "toy'd him with her roving hand." Wasn't this shocking at the time?*

It was. And Tyler was then courting a daughter of John and Abigail Adams and his reputation as a free thinker with a taste for libertine wit came out and tainted that arrangement, so he did it at a cost. Archibald Home had his moments of ribaldry too. There's this whole tradition. It's much more evident in England in the late 17th century in the Grub Street poets and less evident in American poetry, but there are several examples of scatology and ribaldry.

*Which ones are those—so readers can go right to them?*

I've already mentioned Joseph Green's "The Disappointed Cooper." There's also Archibald Home's "Black-Joke" and Tyler's "The Origin of Evil."

*These poems come from a time before writers viewed themselves as Americans. In fact, many of the poets were born in England and immigrated to America. How do the subjects of these British American writers differ from the later writers who saw themselves as developing an American identity?*

There are continuities. Most of these people considered themselves legatees of a grand English legal tradition of rights dating back to the Magna Carta. So the imperial poems included here view English liberty as something that has come over to America. There's also the common Protestant religious heritage. One of the things you have to say is that the self-understanding of the various poets differs substantially from generation to generation. Some of these figures, like Captain John Smith or George Sandys, in the very beginning, while being important projectors of American colonization, spend most of their lives in

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England and view themselves as Englishmen, even though they're wishing to see a new England or a Nova Albion created across the Atlantic

There's a Creole generation, that is, a native-born generation that arises and begins to create a symbology of belonging to the land. And it's sometimes kind of ironic that Edward Johnson's folksong "New England's Annoyances," which is written in the middle of the 17th century, talks about what it's like to eat pumpkins all the time and suffer the frigid cold of New England. It takes a kind of perverse pride in that. That was a burlesque of the negative image of America that the anti-colonialists were always promoting. There was a group of people in England who did not want English people to leave: they wanted to keep the labor force large and the labor prices down. So they created a kind of anti-American literature. And people like Johnson and Ebenezer Cook in "The Sot-Weed Factor" mock it. They take the negative image and blow it up to such a point that it's incredible and seems absolutely mythological, turning the joke back on the original critics.

***This collection includes work by Native Americans and also work from Caribbean writers. What appealed to you about those writers?***

In the 17th and 18th century British America encompassed the West Indies as well as the mainland. There are English Canadian poems in the anthology as well. Since that is the political framework for much of the world that gave rise to the poems, that's what should be reflected, not what later became America.

Caribbean poems include James Grainger's "The Sugar-Cane" and John Singleton's description of an African American funeral. Representing Canada there's Anne Hecht's, "Advice to Mrs. Mowat" and "Hot Stuff" by Ned Botwood. Some of the Joseph Stansbury poems were written in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Then there are the offshore poems, like John Osborn's "A Whaling Song," which was written by the whale fishers off Newfoundland and New England. And "Poor Julian" is an interesting fellow, a New England Indian writing poems warning other people not to do what I have done to avoid hell. It must be said that very little of the rich oral tradition of America's Native peoples found their way into English verse during the 17th or 18th century. (You'll find the important translations in The Library of America's volumes of 19th-century verse.) But there is one striking exception: Henry Timberlake's translation of a Cherokee war song. And the collection does include the hymns of the Reverend Samson Occom, the greatest of the early Native American Christian evangelists.

***The anthology also includes America's first folksong.***

That was Edward Johnson's "New England's Annoyances." It's the first

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one that was created in the New World and taken up and sung by generations of people. It was collected in the late 18th century and the 19th century. Like folk songs it morphed, with verses being substituted, altered, and the reconstruction of the original from the 1640s or 50s was quite a work of scholarship by Leo Lemay.

### *Do we know what it sounded like?*

We don't know the original tune but we do know what the original words were.

### *These poets were writing during the pre-Romantic, neoclassical era, the same time Milton, Dryden, and Pope were writing in England. Were they mostly imitating the poetic forms of the mother country or were they doing something different?*

Well, it depends. Certainly Milton had his imitators. Roger Wolcott wrote an epic poem about the founding of Connecticut and the Pequot War, "A Brief Account of the Agency of the Honourable John Winthrop," which is in Miltonic form. You see the Pequots and the Puritans gathering and having speeches just like the angels and the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*. Some of the comic poems that you find in here certainly follow in the spirit of Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, which was the great late 17th-century mock heroic poem that had forced rhyme and a sort of a doggerel beat to it. "The Sot-Weed Factor" is one example of this, "The New Metamorphosis" another, and "M'Fingal" and "The Progress of Dulness," both by John Trumbull. It's a long-lived genre.

### *We think of colonial New England culture as being quite different from that of the southern colonies. Does the poetry of the regions reflect this?*

In the South there are pockets of Puritans in Dorchester, in South Carolina, and even in the Caribbean. The primary difference is that Southerners understood themselves as being part of an imperial agricultural empire. They took Virgil's georgics as a kind of model for validating their work away from London and the centers of civilization on behalf of the greatness of the whole. It's in poems like "The Sugar-Cane" or George Ogilvie's "Carolina; or, The Planter," poems that describe the labors of growing things, that you find literary descriptions of African American slavery. That's something you don't get to glimpse much in the New England world. New England is much more of a town world with farmers, rather than an agricultural estate world worked by bound laborers. When you read Grainger's description of the genius of Africa in "The Sugar-Cane" and the labors the Africans go to, there's an extraordinary anxiety

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about the morality of what's described and its political consequences. People realized that the love of liberty was not going to be quashed and that resentment would build. Unless you're humane as an overseer, your fate may be the bloodbath of Masaniello, the great example of the bloody rising of Savonarola in Italy where entire elites were wiped out. The anxiety intensified after the Haitian Revolution.

*There are quite a few woman poets in this anthology. How were women poets received in those times?*

One of the things we have to remember is that when Elizabeth became queen in England and became the center of the court she was an extraordinarily creative woman who set herself up as a kind of goddess. There were a number of women in Puritan and non-Puritan circles in the Elizabethan, Jacobean, and even the Caroline age who set themselves up in imitation, as local figures in a court. They received the accolades of men and wrote poems themselves, but usually in manuscript. Anne Dudley, who becomes Anne Bradstreet, grew up in this tradition in England. When she is called *The Tenth Muse* on the title page of her book it refers back to this earlier tradition where the central figures of these various coteries were held up as goddesses or muses. And her book was published against her wishes from a manuscript that had been circulating through the literati of Massachusetts by a relative who went to England and wanted to demonstrate that civilization was being extended into the New World by the Puritans. This was during Cromwell's regime. There was a real question among the Puritans and the people in the Commonwealth whether or not the Puritans on the other side of the Atlantic shouldn't come back and rebuild the Babylon of London that had been reconquered. Bradstreet's book was a demonstration that there was a sort of civilizing errand into the wilderness that justified the existence of Puritans in New England.

*What I found remarkable in your notes is that Bradstreet's The Tenth Muse (1650) was the first book of poems to be published by any woman in England or New England.*

That is true in a way. Aemelia Lanyer published *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* in 1611, which collects four poems. It was significant given the radical content of the pieces, but nowhere near in scale to Anne Bradstreet's volume, which was certainly the first truly large-scale collection of a woman's poetry in English. Much as in New England, a manuscript culture was operating in England at this time and it was only after the Restoration, after the

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Commonwealth had ceased to exist, that the great explosion of publishing women like Aphra Behn emerged.

*The other fascinating trans-Atlantic publishing phenomenon was the black slave poet Phillis Wheatley, whose poems appear here and whose book, when it was published in England in 1773, became a sensation and an argument for abolition.*

The Countess of Huntingdon is one of the figures in the great religious abolitionist campaign who wanted to call a halt to the slave trade. She's the person who engineered the publication of the first edition in England. Wheatley of course had put individual poems before the public both in broadside and in periodicals before this, when she was a teenager. This was her culmination, and one of the great mysteries of early American letters is whatever happened to the second collection that she put together and asked subscriptions for. We know that it was pretty much complete but to everyone's knowledge it never appeared. And there are people who are looking for it. Individual poems have been found. The poem "Ocean" was recently discovered and published. There are wonderful treasures floating around. We know the existence of bodies of poems that once existed that have just disappeared from the face of the earth.

*Some of these treasures appear in this anthology for the first time, like the work of Annis Boudinot Stockton and Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson.*

Yes, recovered by Carla Mulford and Susan Stabile. These feminist literary historians, and Pattie Cowell and Sharon Harris, were particularly industrious in exploring the roots of women's writings and they discovered a tremendous archive. The anthology contains a good deal of new political poetry, the poems of Lewis Morris, Henry Brooke, and Archibald Home, and other people we've mentioned. The amount written was vast. Indeed the amount of poetry written in general was vast—for before the advent of the novel in the 18th century, poems, along with dramas and prose histories—were the literary forms in which people conveyed their most important thoughts and sentiments. Because so much has been uncovered, a substantial amount is not included here—because it was rather ordinary verse or dealt with occasions that seem insignificant 300 years later. This is the cream of the literature.

*That reminds me of the poet Adrienne Rich's comment about Anne Bradstreet, that hers were "the first good poems in America." Are there other works collected here that might have equal claim to that description?*

Yes, I think that Susanna Wright is one of the best 18th-century religious

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poets writing in English. Benjamin Tompson is as ingenious a metaphysical Puritan poet as you would wish. “The Grammarians Funeral” is a fascinating poem that displays a very nimble mind at work. There are poets who are superb examples of a kind of plainspoken concision. Look at the directness and force of Roger Williams’s poems reflecting on the manners of English settlers and New England’s Native inhabitants. It is difficult to imagine how a poet could make more telling contrasts with such verbal economy. And then there are two or three really fine neoclassical poets. Richard Lewis, the archpoet of Maryland. His “A Journey from Patapsco to Annapolis” may be one of the great philosophical poems of the early 18th century in British America.

*Only two poets, Philip Freneau and Joel Barlow, appear in both this volume and American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century.*

They had careers that extended well into the 19th century. We used 1800 as a hard and fast cut-off date.

*Freneau seems to have been a transitional figure in many ways. He was a newspaper editor with a leftist slant. He wrote in a sympathetic way about Indians and he seems to be one of the earliest poets to try to develop an American voice.*

He’s interesting in ways that are quite remarkable. He turns his back entirely on the club world of poetic creation. When he was in college he belonged to the clubs but when he goes out into the world in the 1770s he totally concentrates his literary production into print. He’s noteworthy because he never settles on a final form of a poem. He will rewrite certain of his works over and over again and print them in different newspapers and magazines. They might also appear in books, yet after they are published he will have another thought and rework them. He belongs to a moment when the world of periodical printing has made the poetic form unstable. You can present your ideas now, and a month from now, and four months from now. If you have changes in those ideas, why not lay them out there? The same poem could be printed six or seven times in different versions. Francis Hopkinson also did this late in his life. There is a group of people at the very end of the 18th century and early 19th century who belong to this transitional moment, when the printed text seems to be fluid. In selecting Freneau poems, I chose ones that were relatively stable and tended to choose the first iteration. One of the most interesting of his poems is “The Country Printer.” He suggests that these figures who are doing newspapers and almanacs out in the boondocks are the real glue of the republic. It isn’t your representative whom you sent to Congress who mat-

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ters as much as your conduit for information. It's the printer who connects you to other citizens and reports back about what's happening and who also gets your opinion down on paper so it can be forwarded. One of the things about representatives that is difficult is that they might show up in Congress and say something that you don't believe. Since they're far away from you, how can you police them? The closest things to watchdogs are these country printers. So the force that binds the country together isn't in the center of government but in these nodes out in the countryside—anywhere there's a printing office.

*The other much anthologized poet is Joel Barlow, perhaps best known as the author of "The Hasty-Pudding."*

It's a fabulous poem. It celebrates the commonest of American food—corn pudding made with Indian maize—and holds it against the fricassees and ragouts of the world. Its simplicity of taste symbolizes the simplicity of manners in America and shows up the luxury and decadence of European civilization. Barlow's very much a radical republican, particularly after being in Paris during the Revolution. He's a buddy of Tom Paine and probably saves Paine's life when he's under arrest. Barlow begins his career as a traditional New England Congregationalist, the rising glory of America in terms of arts, learning, and religion, and then he becomes radicalized and he begins to think that it's not so much religion as politics, liberty, and the creativity that comes from liberty of thought that will distinguish America in the future. He still thinks America is the great hope of the ages but the grounds of his evaluation of America have switched. He keeps trying to write this epic of Columbus. He has a hemispheric point of view. He thinks that the United States will eventually encompass all of Central and South America. In fact, he writes a plan for the revolutionary takeover of Spanish Louisiana in the early 1790s, before Spain had ceded it back to France. In the secret diplomatic archives in Paris his plan is there among a number of other takeover plans.

*I'd like to return to the literary coterie you described. These seem to be one of the great untold stories of the literary history of early America. How did they operate?*

Remember that the scale of population was such that most of the people who lived genteelly in a city knew one another. They might not like one another but they tended to form groups within the cities. And whom you knew and who was your friend was attested by the fact that you owned writing in that person's handwriting. It demonstrated your access to someone who was witty and wonderful. There was a premium in having it in manuscript.

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They would meet usually weekly. One of the great works of 18th-century American literature is *The History of the Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club* written by Dr. Alexander Hamilton of Annapolis. There are a number of poems by people who were affiliated with that club. These circles could exist even in a small town. Trenton was not a great city when Archibald Home was the central figure there. People would come from 25 to 30 miles out to get there. And sometimes you had a situation where a circle would migrate from a town to a plantation—this was a southern pattern. Margaret Lowther Page, who was the great poet in the circle of wits that existed in Williamsburg, would hold sessions of her salon in Rosewell, her plantation over in the Gloucester Neck. People would migrate across the river to spend the weekend at the big house enjoying all the benefits of hospitality, drinking and writing poems together.

I wrote a book, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, which describes a number of the earliest forms of these things, but the whole chronicle of the workings of these various groups has never been put together.

You can read more about the individual poets in the biographical material in the back of *American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. In certain instances the accounts here are absolutely new. Because many of these writers are anthologized here for the first time, the biographical sketches are the first re-creations and the best encapsulations to date of their lives.