

HERMAN MELVILLE



TIMOLEON

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Herman Melville

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HERMAN MELVILLE - A PRIMER

CONSIDERED as a seed-time of eminent names, the year 1819 was one of remarkable fertility. Keeping to England and the United States alone, in that year were born Herman Melville, John Ruskin, J. R. Lowell, Walt Whitman, Charles Kingsley, W. W. Story, T. W. Parsons, C. A. Dana, E. P. Whipple, J. G. Holland, H. P. Gray, Thomas Hall, Cyrus Field, Julia Ward Howe, and Queen Victoria.

Of these names, which will endure the longer as author or artist? It seems to me that Melville's *Typee* has an intrinsic charm, born of concurring genius and circumstance, that make it surer of immortality than any other work by any other name on the list — not even excepting Queen Victoria's *Journal in the Highlands*. But re-incarnation is not as yet, and who shall know the future dealings of fate with these various fames?

But I am anticipating. Let me give a brief outline of the events of Melville's life, and indicate— within these limits I can do no more— how directly his writings flowed from real experience, like water from a spring. Melville was born August 1, 1819, the third in a family of eight children, in New York City — the last place that one looks for a poet to be born in. Eminent men generally, according to popular statistic-, are born in the country; they nourish their genius there, and come to town to win their fame. If this theory has any truth, it is simply due to the fact that more people

are born in the country, anyway, than in the town; a circumstance that does not occur to the popular statisticians. In 1835 young Melville attended the "Albany Classical School; " his teacher, Dr. Charles E. West, still lives in Brooklyn, and makes an occasional appearance at the Saturday evenings of the Century Club. He speaks of his pupil as having been distinguished in English composition and weak in mathematics.

In 1837, when Melville was eighteen, he made his first voyage before the mast in a New York merchantman bound for Liverpool, returning after a short cruise. The record of this first voyage will be found in *Redburn*, which, however, was not his first but his fourth book, having been published in 1849. For three years young Melville had had enough of the sea. He spent the summer of 1838 working on his uncle's farm in Pittsfield, Mass., and at intervals he taught school, both there and in Greenbush, now East Albany, New York. This sea-going and this school-teaching were undertaken in the pluckiest spirit for self-support, his father being then in straitened circumstances. But the seeds of adventure and unrest were also in his nature; and he shipped again before the mast in the whaler "*Acushnet*," sailing from New Bedford, January 1, 1841. This was the voyage that gave him his opportunity. In the summer of 1842, as detailed in the true history, *Typee*, he left his ship at the Bay of Nukuheva, in the Marquesas Islands, escaping to the Typee Valley. There he received from the natives the kindest treatment, and lived deliriously all the summer long; while, on the other hand, he was in constant fear of being sacrificed at any moment to their cannibal proclivities. He spent four months in this anxious paradise; finally he escaped from the valley to an Australian whaler, where he resumed the life of the fore-castle. It would be curious to know whether any of the rough sailors with whom he herded during these tossing years recognized the