

THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW, WASHINGTON IRVING, By Gail Curry:

Washington Irving wrote about his times from the unique perspective in which he lived. In the September 2019 issue of *The Microbibliophile*, I wrote about this iconic author. In particular, I noted that Washington Irving was called the father of the American ghost story. Though it was a small part of his total output, it was significant. The two ghost stories, popular at Halloween, are *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. For purposes of this article, we will discuss the former, and leave Rip for another time.

The ghost stories first appeared as part of a collection of sketches and stories published in *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, in 1820. These became immensely popular in the United States, Britain and Europe. What can we learn of Irving's life? What in that life may have helped shape his perspective?

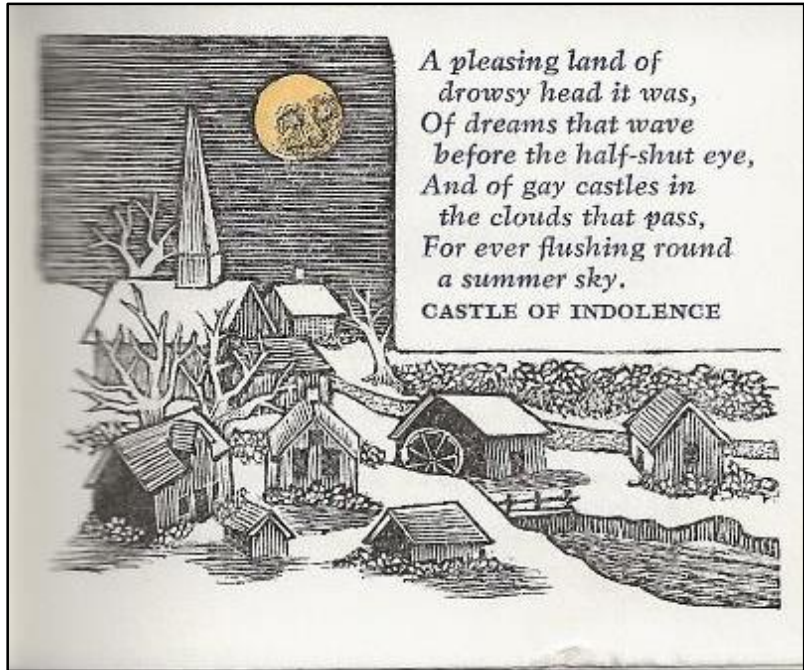
About Washington Irving, (1783-1859)

Fifteen year old Washington Irving made his way up the Hudson River to the Tarry Town area in 1798 to escape a Yellow Fever outbreak in New York City. This epidemic had already killed 5,000 residents in Philadelphia, and New York expected even worse. There was much in this new area that left its mark on the impressionable young man, and sparked his writing career. By the age of 19, Irving was well launched. He spent two years touring Europe. His first major work, *A History of New York* was published in 1809 under the pen name of Diedrich Knickerbocker. He would use this name also on the ghost stories. He never married, having lost his fiancée Matilda Hoffman to tuberculosis in 1809. Deeply depressed, he returned to writing and travel, and while in Britain, wrote *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* in 1820. As stated, it was in this book that *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* first appeared. The setting is based on his own observations while living in Tarry Town some 20 years prior, including the stories and tales heard all around him.

Setting:

In the late 1700's the land comprising Tarry Town and its environs was very unusual, as described in the opening paragraphs of the story:

“In the bosom of one of those spacious coves which indent the eastern shore of the Hudson, at that broad expansion of the river denominated by the ancient Dutch navigators the Tappan Zee... there lies a small market town which is generally known by the name of Tarry Town. This name was given by the good housewives of the



*A pleasing land of
drowsy head it was,
Of dreams that wave
before the half-shut eye,
And of gay castles in
the clouds that pass,
For ever flushing round
a summer sky.*
CASTLE OF INDOLENCE

adjacent country from the inveterate propensity of their husbands to linger about the village tavern on market days. Not far from this village, perhaps about two miles, there is a little valley among high hills which is one of the quietest places in the whole world. A small brook glides through it with just murmur enough to lull one to repose; and the occasional whistle of a quail or tapping of a woodpecker, is almost the only sound that ever breaks in upon the uniform tranquility. From the listless repose of the place, this sequestered glen has long been known by the name of Sleepy Hollow. Some say that the place was bewitched during the early days of the Dutch settlement... Certain it is, the place still continues under the sway of some witching power that holds a spell over the minds of the descendants of the original settlers. They are given to all kinds of marvelous beliefs, are subject to trances and visions, and frequently hear music and voices in the air. The whole neighborhood abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions.”

Among these, an oft' told tale is of the Headless Horseman. Said to be a Hessian soldier who lost his head to a cannonball in the Revolutionary War, he is seen about these parts looking for his head. He is seen most often riding by the church, where he is said to have been buried.

In an article entitled *What The Legend of Sleepy Hollow Tells Us About Contagion, Fear and Epidemics* written by Irving scholar Elizabeth L. Bradley for smithsonianmag.com (October 30, 2014), she states that the story's narrator, Diedrich Knickerbocker, describes the "sequestered glen" of Sleepy Hollow as "a place with 'contagion' in the very air... it breathed forth an atmosphere of dreams and fancies infecting all the land." Natives and newcomers alike were susceptible to this airborne infection, which caused them "to walk in a continual reverie."



Characters:

The principal characters in The Legend of Sleepy Hollow are:

Ichabod Crane. Described as "a native of Connecticut, who 'tarried' in Sleepy Hollow for the purposes of instructing the children of the vicinity. He was tall and exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, and feet that might have served for shovels. His head was small, and flat at top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weathercock perched upon his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew. To see him striding along on a windy day, with his clothes bagging and fluttering about him, one might have mistaken him for some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield."

Katrina Van Tassel. Described as "the only child of a substantial farmer. She was a blooming lass of fresh eighteen, plump as a partridge, ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father's peaches, and universally famed, not merely for her beauty, but her vast expectations." She had numerous admirers, among them Ichabod Crane.

Brom Van Brunt. Described as the most formidable of Katrina Van Tassel's admirers. He was a "burly, roaring, roistering blade of the name of Brom Van Brunt... He was broad-shouldered, with short curly black hair, and a bluff but not unpleasant countenance, having mingled air of fun and arrogance. From his Herculean frame, he had received the nickname of Brom Bones. He was famed for great skill in horsemanship... [He] was the umpire in all disputes... He was always ready for either a fight or a frolic, but had more mischief and good humor than ill will in his composition."

Plot:

Ichabod Crane, the local school teacher, singing teacher and frequent guest at his students' homes, meets Katrina Van Tassel. She is the only child of Baltus Van Tassel, one of the more successful farmers in the area. Ichabod falls in love with her as well as her likely inheritance. Irving describes it thus, "The Van Tassel farm was situated on the banks of the Hudson, in one of those green sheltered, fertile nooks in which the Dutch farmers are so fond of nesting. A great elm tree spread its broad branches over it, at the foot of which bubbled up a spring of the softest and sweetest water."



Ichabod quickly sets out to win Katrina's hand in marriage. He was successful against a multitude of other more earthy admirers. Finally, it was down to two, Ichabod and Brom Bones. Brom's normal course of action is to fight off other suitors. When it doesn't work with Ichabod, he turns to pranks to humiliate and frustrate Ichabod. One evening Ichabod went to the Van Tassel home and was encouraged in his advances. However, Katrina ultimately turned him down; and he left crestfallen.

On the way back to his current residence, he follows a dark and eerily quiet path. Very scared, he soon encountered a large, dark figure on a dark horse looming nearby. It doesn't respond to his call, but starts following Ichabod as he passes by. Ichabod is unable to shake him off. He notices the rider has no head, but rather a head resembling a pumpkin which seems to be sitting on his saddle in front of him. They end up by the church, where the Headless Horseman usually disappears. This time, however, the Horseman, instead of disappearing, throws his detached head at Ichabod, knocking him off of his horse. The next day, there is no sign of Ichabod, but footprints and Ichabod's hat are found with a smashed pumpkin next to it.

Ichabod was never heard from again, although there are those who much later claim to have heard from him. He is living elsewhere, it seems. There are those in the village

who believe Brom Bones pulled off a great prank, while local folklore maintains that he was taken by the Headless Horseman.

Conclusion:

The facts, setting and characters are intertwined in such a way as to make a quintessential American cautionary tale, as relevant today as it was 200 years ago.

According to Elizabeth Bradley, “In Irving’s *Sleepy Hollow*, the Dutch community can ‘vegetate’... or better still, incubate - nurturing its visions and ‘twilight superstitions’ without the interference of history. The town’s collective sickness has made it into a time capsule - each day, nothing changes; each night, the Horseman comes. But the ending of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* offers a kind of vaccination: a way to leave contagion behind - and superstition, too.” Further, “in truth, it is not the Horseman or the hoax that we should fear, but the contagion that grips Sleepy Hollow. Ichabod’s flight, far from being an act of cowardice, gave him back his life...

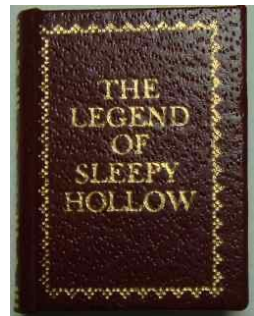
Just underneath the ghostly narrative, that so many Americans know and love, a darker, and infinitely scarier story is being told... If we read a little more carefully, we’ll find a history lesson embedded in the Halloween tale, a reminder to contemporary readers that the pathologies of the past were just as terrifying as our own modern plagues - and just as cloaked in mystery and misunderstanding.”

Note: Elizabeth Bradley writes about New York history and culture for several publications, including the ‘Smithsonian Magazine’. In addition to writing books, she served as editor of the Penguin Classics edition of Washington Irving’s ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Other Stories.’ She consults with Historic Hudson Valley, whose properties include Washington Irving’s home, Sunnyside.

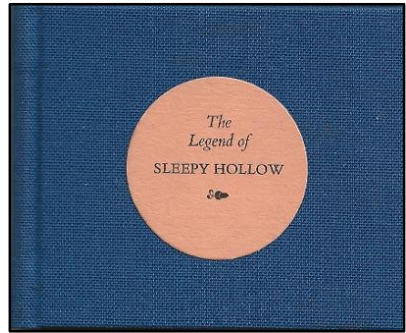
‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’, Miniature Books:

It is surprising that such an iconic tale has apparently only appeared in two miniature books, as follows:

Irving, Washington. *THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW*. Van Nuys, CA: Barbara J. Raheb, 1979, 300 copies. Sized at $1\frac{5}{16}$ " x $\frac{5}{8}$ " gilt burgundy pyroxylin, 104pp. Illustrated. Bradbury 1539.



Irving, Washington. *THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW*. Hyattsville, MD: Rebecca Press (1983). Published on October 30, 1983 in the bicentennial year of the birth of Washington Irving. Limited to 150 copies, of which numbers 1-35 are deluxe copies. Signed by Rebecca Saady Bingham. Sized at 2³/₈" by 2¹⁵/₁₆", dark green cloth with round paste label, [120]pp. Wood engravings by Sarah Chamberlain. Bradbury 1540



(Postage Stamp) 1974 Commemorative 10 cent 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow' stamp. 157,270,000 issued on October 12, 1974 in North Tarrytown, NY (re-named Sleepy Hollow in 1997). Designed by Leonard Everett Fisher, United States Bureau of Engraving and Printing. 📖



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