John Gorham Palfrey Biography

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Biography

JOHN GORHAM PALFREY (2 May 1796-26 April 1881), editor, theologian, Unitarian minister, historian, professor, legislator, and postmaster of Boston, led a rather aimless life, although it was filled with accomplishment. He was born and died in Boston. Palfrey graduated from Harvard College in 1815 in the same class as Jared Sparks. In 1817 he began writing articles for the *North American Review*, which Sparks edited. In 1825 he edited the review while Sparks was in Europe. Later Palfrey bought the magazine and controlled it until 1843. As dean of the theological faculty at Harvard, beginning in 1831, Palfrey was in the center of the controversy over Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and was forced to resign in 1839 because of pressure from both liberal and conservative Unitarians. Palfrey's writings fall into two broad areas of interest: theology and history. His theological work is best represented by *Academical Lectures on the Jewish Scriptures and Antiquities*, 4 vols. (Boston: James Munroe, 1838-1852), which, like his teaching, emphasizes the importance of Biblical interpretation and a desire to get to the sources of Christianity through the knowledge and use of ancient languages. But Palfrey's greatest fame came with the publication of his *History of New England*, 5 vols. (Boston: Little & Brown, 1858-1890). This work deserves recognition as a major contribution to the fledgling discipline of historiography. Palfrey researched all available primary sources and amply documented those sources in his text, a practice almost unheard of it that time. But the wealth of information contained in the footnotes does not outweigh Palfrey's bias. Although the *History of New England* was lauded for its impartiality when it was first published, Palfrey's opinions are clear. All of the misdeeds of the Puritans, including intolerance, are justified; in cases of disputes between Massachusetts and other colonies Palfrey always sides with Massachusetts; and the Revolution, to Palfrey, is a case of the tyrannical aggression of the English versus the patriotism of the colonies.