John Pendleton Kennedy Biography

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Biography

John Pendleton Kennedy (1795-1870), a prominent American novelist in his time, served briefly as President Millard Fillmore's secretary of the Navy.

John Pendleton Kennedy was the scion of a cultivated Baltimore, Md., family. He graduated from Baltimore College in 1812 and served for 2 years in the Maryland militia. In 1816 he began practicing law. He disliked the law, however, and by 1829 (thanks to a legacy from a wealthy uncle) was able to withdraw from the courtroom and begin his long literary and public career.

Kennedy contributed sketches and satires to various publications. In 1832 he published his first book, *Swallow Barn,* a series of sketches depicting plantation life in Virginia, written under the pseudonym Mark Littleton. Under the same name he published his most successful novel, *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (*1835*). In 1838 he not only produced another novel, *Rob of the Bowl,* but was also elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as a Whig. He lost and regained the seat several times. During this period he began to turn from fiction to more overtly political writing.

In 1840 Kennedy's satire on Jacksonian democracy was published. In 1843 his *Defense of the Whigs* attacked John Tyler's defection from party policy on assuming the presidency after the death of William Henry Harrison. Kennedy produced his last important literary effort, a two-volume biography of the great lawyer William Wirt, in 1849.

Kennedy penetrated most deeply into national politics in 1852, when he was appointed secretary of the Navy by President Millard Fillmore. During his 8-month tenure he helped organize Adm. Matthew Perry's expedition to Japan and dispatch the search party trying to find the missing explorer Sir John Franklin and his expedition.

At the outset of the Civil War, Kennedy, who had fought secession on the one hand and republicanism on the other, finally cast his lot with the Union. The genial community of Baltimore gentlemen disintegrated over this question, and Kennedy's last years were lived out in a stern atmosphere. In 1865 he published *Mr. Ambrose's Letters on the Rebellion,* in which he pleaded for compassion toward the fallen South. *Occasional Addresses, Political and Official Papers,* and *At Home and Abroad* (all 1872) were published posthumously.