Philip Morin Freneau Biography

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Biography

Philip Morin Freneau (1752-1832) was an American poet, essayist, and journalist. Remembered as the poet of the American Revolution and the father of American poetry, he was a transitional figure in American literature.

Philip Freneau's life alternated between ardent political activity and attempts to escape to the solitude he thought necessary to a poet. Born in New York on Jan. 2, 1752, he graduated from Princeton in 1771, when with Hugh Henry Brackenridge he wrote a rousing poem, *The Rising Glory of America*. A period of schoolteaching and study for the ministry followed. At the outbreak of the American Revolution, Freneau composed vitriolic satires against British invaders and Tory countrymen. But then he withdrew to the Caribbean, writing his ambitious early poems, *The Beauties of Santa Cruz* and *The House of Night*.

Returning in 1778 to his home in New Jersey, Freneau joined the local militia and sailed as a privateer. In 1780, on release from British imprisonment, he wrote the bitter poem *The British Prison-Ship* and the enthusiastic *American Independence*. The next 4 years were dedicated to patriotic prose and verse in the *Freeman's Journal*. In 1784 he again went to sea as master of vessels which plied between New York and Charleston. His poetry at this time was concerned with native scene and character.

Though nurtured on English poets such as Alexander Pope, Freneau strove now for an "American" idiom, producing in *The Wild Honey Suckle* and *The Indian Burying Ground* verses of quiet distinction. His first two collections were *Poems* (1786) and *Miscellaneous Works* (1788). In 1790 he returned to partisan journalism, ultimately working as editor of the outspoken *National Gazette*. He so earnestly opposed Federalist policies that George Washington called him "that rascal, Freneau," though Thomas Jefferson credited him with saving the country when it was galloping fast into monarchy.

In the early 1800s, after another period at sea, Freneau retired to his farm in New Jersey. Collected editions of his poetry appeared in 1795, 1809, and 1815; new poems appeared in periodicals into the 1820s. He died on Dec. 18, 1832.

The most prolific poet of his generation, Freneau produced verse uneven in quality, often marred by anger, haste, or partisanship, but sometimes exhibiting original lyric power. He anticipated such American romantic poets as William Cullen Bryant and Edgar Allan Poe. His prose is less often successful.