Richard Hildreth Biography

Richard Hildreth

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Biography

Richard Hildreth (1807-1865), American historian and political theorist, wrote one of the first multivolume histories of the United States.

Richard Hildreth was born in Deerfield, Mass., on June 22, 1807. He went to Phillips Exeter Academy, where his father was teaching, and then enrolled at Harvard, graduating in 1826. After an apprenticeship in a law office at Newburyport, he was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1832. During his legal studies Hildreth was a correspondent for several newspapers and afterward turned to newspaper work permanently, becoming editor of the *Boston Atlas*.

Hildreth was an antislavery, free-bank Whig whose first published work was a popular antislavery novel, *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836). In 1840 he published *Despotism in America,* an attack on slavery; *The Contrast; or, William Henry Harrison versus Martin Van Buren,* a campaign tract for Harrison; and *Banks, Banking, and Paper Currencies,* a book favoring free banking.

In 1840 Hildreth traveled to British Guinea to recover his failing health. There he worked on newspapers and wrote two books: *Theory of Morals* (published 1844) and *Theory of Politics* (published 1853). In the latter he claimed that wealth controls political power and unequal distribution of wealth results in the destruction of democracy.

Hildreth returned to the United States in 1843. He began the *History of the United States* in 1847. Six volumes, published between 1849 and 1852, covered the periods from the Age of Discovery to the Missouri Compromise. Failing to obtain an appointment in history at Harvard, he became a political reporter for the *New York Tribune*. For his support of the Republican party, President Abraham Lincoln named Hildreth consul at Trieste during the Civil War. While in Europe, Hildreth became ill, and he resigned. He died on July 11, 1865, in Florence.

Hildreth's multivolume history did not gain acceptance in his lifetime. His astringent criticism of Puritan rule alienated New Englanders, while his adamant opposition to slavery put off Southern readers. He lacked the rampant nationalism of the historian George Bancroft and thus failed to tap the romantic patriotism of the day. However, critics today suggest that Hildreth was some 40 years ahead of his time, and his reputation has improved with the years.