

Robert Montgomery Bird Biography

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Biography

Robert Montgomery Bird (1806-1854) was an American dramatist and novelist of true skill who gradually moved toward literary attitudes that foreshadowed late-19th-century realism.

Robert Montgomery Bird was born in New Castle, Del. His father died when the boy was 4. Bird attended medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, taking his degree in 1827 as part of a plan to restore the family fortunes. The family looked to him for support, but he had no real desire to practice medicine and he turned to literature, thus embracing a career that would be plagued by financial adversity.

At first Bird wrote only plays: romantic tragedies and comedies of Philadelphia life, such as *The City Looking Glass* (1828), and historical dramas, such as *The Gladiator* (1831), probably his most popular play. But the financial arrangements he made with Edwin Forrest, his producer, were based on a verbal understanding, not written contracts, and trouble resulted. Though Bird's plays were highly successful and his *Oralloossa* (1832) and *The Broker of Bogota* (1834) showed that his dramatic power was developing, he was not treated fairly by Forrest. The producer made a fortune but the playwright received only a pittance. Deeply discouraged, Bird gradually broke away from the theater.

Trying his hand at prose, Bird published *Calavar; or, The Knight of the Conquests* (1834) and followed it with a sequel, *The Infidel; or, The Fall of Mexico* (1835). These fictional accounts of the Spanish conquests gained the praise of historian William H. Prescott, but Bird earned little money from them. He next wrote *The Hawks of Hawk-Hollow* (1835), the story of the ruin of a prominent loyalist family in Pennsylvania during the Revolution. In 1836 Bird published *Sheppard Lee*, perhaps the earliest novel to employ psychological therapy as its central device.

Bird's finest novel, which is still widely read, was *Nick of the Woods* (1837). It foreshadowed realism in that it relentlessly presented Native Americans as the exact opposite of the "noble savage" of James Fenimore Cooper's novels. Bird's work aroused considerable commentary. *Peter Pilgrim* (1838) and *Robin Day* (1839) are interesting but minor efforts, probably because he was seriously ill at the time.

Bird taught at the Pennsylvania Medical Academy from 1841 to 1843, and in 1847 he became an editor of the *Philadelphia North American*, where he remained until his death in 1854.