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On the Road with Washington Irving: Chiefly in 1832

Mary Weatherspoon Bowden
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While many readers are familiar with Washington Irving as the author of such classic tales as “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” few may be aware of his other singular adventures in life as a diplomat, biographer, and adventurous traveler. Mary Weatherspoon Bowden’s well-researched book, On the Road with Washington Irving, focuses on the most peripatetic segment of her subject’s life: the seventeen years he spent abroad in the American foreign service, his return like Old Rip to a much-changed homeland, and his tour of twenty-one of the twenty-four United States.

Bowden’s book successfully depicts a young American republic in the throes of tumultuous politics, swells of immigration, and land development. It is a lively portrait of both this rapidly changing country and of America’s first bestselling author. The Irvings were merchants in New York City and his early associations with supporters of Aaron Burr during his 1807 treason trial led to many fortuitous alliances later on; he served as an assistant to future President Martin Van Buren in the London Embassy and in various advisory capacities with the Jackson and Polk Administrations.

The author provides a thorough accounting of Irving’s footsteps during his ambassadorial sojourn and cross-country travels back in the States, and offers inferences about his itinerary where journal entries are missing or newspaper accounts are inaccurate. This meticulousness is brightened with amusing secondhand accounts of Irving’s amiable nature and endearing traits, like his habitual postprandial naps at the table and dread of public speaking. On his tour of the American frontier lands, he seems to have graced his traveling comrades with good humor even when food was scarce, brambles were thick, and horses were spent; Bowden notes that Irving is likely responsible for dispensing with a stinky skinned skunk carcass that was planned for one evening meal on the road.

Bowden vividly supplements Irving’s notes about his travels with descriptions of geography and social customs and snippets from other contemporary accounts. Readers will be transported to a New York City filled with roaming livestock, a Cincinnati outraged by harsh comments from the visiting English writer, Frances Trollope, and a New Orleans roiling from waves of cholera and yellow fever. Bowden writes with a smooth pace and often laces passages with wry humor. Historians will appreciate the extensive endnotes and bibliography, however the very bulk of this volume and its slim page margins do make it unwieldy and hard to read along the inner margins.

Readers who enjoy a juicy biography or history will relish Bowden’s book. It is a lavish portrait of the author and his journeys during a politically and culturally tempestuous era in Europe and America, before Washington Irving left this span of great adventure and ensconced himself into a quieter, cozier life at his beloved Sunnyside.
RACHEL JAGARESKI (July 1, 2010)

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