

**PARSON WEEMS: A
BIOGRAPHICAL AND
CRITICAL STUDY**

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Parson Weems: A Biographical and Critical Study by Lawrence C. Wroth

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LAWRENCE C. WROTH

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PARSON WEEMS

A Biographical and Critical Study

BY
LAWRENCE C. WROTH

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BALTIMORE, MD.
1911

*I dedicate this book
to the memory of
my brother
Thomas Page Wroth*

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PREFACE

There needs no apology for writing as fully as the material available will allow the life of that American author whose works for the first half of the nineteenth century were more frequently reprinted and more widely distributed and read than those of any other native writer during the same period. Mason Locke Weems published his first pamphlet in 1792, and in 1800 he brought out his *Life of Washington*, his best known contribution to the literature of his period. From this date until the Civil War, his works were published and republished with a frequency that has a parallel only in the many issues of the modern best sellers, a marked divergence, however, lying in the circumstance that in the case of the latter the necessity for republication generally dies with the same year that sees their first issue. Duyckinck¹ calls Weems the "Livy of the

¹ Duyckinck, G. L., *Cyclopædia of American Literature*. 2 v. N. Y. 1855.

common people," but this designation errs in its exclusiveness, for he was nearly as much appreciated by the upper classes of society as by the mechanic and the ploughboy. Perhaps the most obvious, although not the most important, claim that he has to our attention is the fact that upon his authority rests the best known of American hero tales—the story of George Washington and the Cherry Tree. His life has never been written with any regard for accuracy and fullness, and this is an attempt to do so within the limits imposed by a seemingly impenetrable veil which covers many of the years of his life and many of his actions and motives.

The absence of the vagabond element from the lives of the masters of American literature distresses many most properly brought up persons. Whitman allowed his natural bent in that direction to become an artificial cult of the unconventional, with the result that he became in a fashion the most conventional of men. Poe had it almost alone of those whose feet are on the summits. The rest of them

have been for the greater part quiet, scholarly men in whom the high lights are dulled or quite obscured by the library dust which envelops them. The heart that thrills at the thought of Marlowe brawling in a London tavern, or of Villon raking the streets of Paris with his "score of loyal cut-throats," resents the absence of the vagabond, or even the merely unconventional, element from the American Parnassus. On the lower slopes of the classic mount, however, there are found certain ones of this less formal type, and Mason Locke Weems is of the company.

For thirty years there was no more familiar figure on the roads of the Southern States than this book peddler and author who, provided gipsy-like with horse and wagon, his wares and his fiddle, travelled his long route year after year, sleeping in wayside inn, farmhouse or forest, fiddling, writing, selling books, living in the open and learning some new road lore, field lore or wisdom of the woods with each day that passed. He makes a bit of color in an oftentimes dreary landscape:



ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It would be difficult for the author to mention by name all of those who have been of service to him in the preparation of this book. It must be sufficient that he acknowledge with gratitude help from many persons in different parts of this country and England, naming only those three whose assistance was of such a nature that it could not pass unmarked. These are Miss Elizabeth Chew Williams, of Baltimore, a great-great niece of Parson Weems; Mr. Walter B. Norris, of the teaching staff at the United States Naval Academy, and the late Mr. Richard D. Fisher, of Baltimore, whose contribution was none the less valuable in that it consisted chiefly of encouragement when that was most needed.