

The Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne

From 1800 to the period of the Civil War in 1865, New England became a nursery for writers and thinkers: men and women who not only avidly embraced the past knowledge available to the educated of their day, but who also began to question and to follow new ideas and ways of dealing with the problems of life. Just as the clipper ships captained and crewed by their fellow townsmen explored the seas and brought new trade, so were these thinkers to enliven the mental life of their country.

Among those born in this period of flowering was Nathaniel Hawthorne, who shared the birthday of his young country, arriving on the Fourth of July, 1804.

Nathaniel's father was one of the company of ships' captains engaged in the new growth of commerce. But Captain Hawthorne's early death in Surinam, when the boy was only four, brought about a sharp change in the life of the family. His mother returned with her three children to her family's home in Salem, and there she began a strange existence. She is reported to have never thereafter left her room for the next forty years but to have had her meals placed on trays before her bedroom door.

Nathaniel both read and wrote from an early age. At six he read *Pilgrim's Progress*, and at twelve he started to keep notes on his observations of what lay about him, as well as on stories and legends he heard, all of which were to be carefully set down in a book given to him by his grandfather. He was a solitary child with no close friends, but he possessed a deep interest in the past of all that which lay about him.

In 1808 he went to Maine, where the family had an interest in a frontier farm. There again he led a solitary life. A year later he returned to Salem to live once more with his grandparents, studying with a private tutor in order to enter college.

From 1821 to 1825 he attended Bowdoin College. There he proved to be an indifferent student, spending most of his time writing stories suggested by the remnants of history in his hometown and the curious old tales of the country roundabout.

Upon completing college, he once more came back to the house in Salem where, for ten years from 1825 to 1835, he lived a strange and solitary life. Days he spent in his small room, setting down his tales on sheets of foolscap. At dusk he ventured out for walks through the narrow streets of the older part of town. His taste for solitude was shared by his family, for it is said that in the course of two years, he saw his sister Elizabeth only once, though they lived under the same roof, she following the same pattern of living cloistered by day and going out for solitary walks at night.

Salem, which had been ruined financially by its loss of shipping during the embargo and the War of 1812, was indeed something of a ghostly town, and its atmosphere appealed strongly to Nathaniel's tastes.

He began to sell his stories, and in 1828 he paid to have his first novel published, although he came later to

be ashamed of that work and to refuse to refer to it. His short stories, however, found a ready market.

Tied though he was to Salem and to the home to which he always retreated, Hawthorne began to take trips. He visited New Hampshire and Vermont, often tramping the roads with itinerant wayfarers and staying at inns where, from some dusky corner, he listened avidly to the talk, especially to stories of unusual events and places.

In 1836 he was made an editor by the Peter Parley Company for whose publication he had written. However, of his promised two hundred dollars in wages he collected only twenty.

The following year a collection of his short stories was published under the title of *Twice-Told Tales*. During the time he was in Boston he made the acquaintance of the Peabody sisters, three young women who were noted for their talents and their hospitality to writers, artists, and those interested in the literary field. Nathaniel was attracted to the youngest, Sophie, but knew that he could not support a wife. Elizabeth Peabody, however, was able to obtain him a position as weigher and gauger with the Boston Customs House.

During the next two years he wrote three books for children: *Grandfather's Chair*, *Famous Old People*, and *The Liberty Tree*. Still unable to see a chance of financial security, he resigned from the Customs House and joined the Utopian community experiment at Brook Farm. Seeing the general folly of the experiment, he left at the end of eight months.

A year later, he married Sophie, and they rented the Old Manse in Concord for their first home together. There Nathaniel became acquainted with the Transcendental Circle, though he never knew how to manage a social life, even going so far as to sit hidden behind a curtain when he was in company.

He continued to write and publish his short stories of

New England, delving into history and legend for his material. In 1844 his first daughter, Una, was born. The following year he moved with his small family to Salem, again to share a house with his mother and sister.

Needing more funds, he applied for the position of Surveyor of Customs in 1846, the year which also saw the birth of his son, Julian. Unfortunately, this position with Customs was politically linked, and, after the next presidential election, he was removed. Friends rallied to help him with loans, but the year had not yet dealt him its worst blow: the loss of his mother, which was even harder to bear.

In 1850 Hawthorne moved to Lenox for a year and a half, and *The Scarlet Letter* was published, followed by the equally successful *The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Wonder Book for Boys and Girls*. In 1851 his second daughter, Rose, was born.

The following year, when *The Blithedale Romance* was published, the family returned to Concord and bought the house, Wayside, from the Alcotts.

Tanglewood Tales came out in 1853, and in that same year, Hawthorne was appointed American Consul at Liverpool, England, where he served until October 1857.

Free of his duties, he journeyed the next year first to France and then to Italy, where he began to write *The Marble Faun*. Hawthorne did not find Italy as attractive as did many Americans of his day, and he returned to England, living there with his family until 1860, when *The Marble Faun* was published in both England and America.

Back once more in Concord by 1861, he was deeply depressed by the Civil War. Resuming work on an English romance, he found himself unable to complete the book. He wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* an essay on the war in which his remarks concerning Lincoln were removed by the editor of the magazine.

In 1863 Hawthorne brought out a small book on England entitled *Our Old Home*. However, his health was declining and his chronic depression was growing worse. The following year, when he took a lengthy carriage trip with a friend, he died suddenly away from home.

—Andre Norton