An Essay on the Life of the
Honourable Major-General Israel Putnam
AN
ESSAY ON THE LIFE
OF THE
HONOURABLE MAJOR-GENERAL
ISRAEL PUTNAM

Addressed to the State Society of the Cincinnati
in Connecticut and Published by Their Order

DAVID HUMPHREYS

Foreword by William C. Dowling

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David Humphreys, author of *An Essay on the Life of the Honourable Major-General Israel Putnam*, is today remembered less as a writer than as a historical personage. As principal aide-de-camp to Putnam and subsequently to George Washington, Humphreys passed through the darkest hours of the American Revolution, when a tiny, ragged, sickly band of citizen soldiers struggled to keep up the pretense that they could oppose the greatest military power in Europe. He was present at Yorktown when, with the aid of a French fleet, the same army miraculously brought about the surrender of British forces under Cornwallis. In a signal demonstration of the regard in which Humphreys was always held by his Commander-in-Chief, he was chosen by Washington to carry the surrendered British colors to Congress in Philadelphia. After the war Humphreys pursued a distinguished career as diplomatic representative of the new United States in Portugal and Spain. He spent the closing years of his life as a successful manufacturer and energetic promoter of American self-sufficiency in manufactures in his home state of Connecticut.

The irony is that Humphreys thought of his contribution to American literature as being as significant as any of his achievements in war or diplomacy. A member of the talented group of Yale undergraduates now known as the Connecticut Wits, who among them would produce such notable examples of early
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American writing as MFingal (John Trumbull), The Triumph of Infidelity and Greenfield Hill (Timothy Dwight), and The Vision of Columbus (Joel Barlow), Humphreys worked steadily in the interludes of his career on a body of verse celebrating the young American republic as an embodiment of what, in classical republican political theory, is called virtus: simplicity, hardihood, a willingness to live for the community rather than for narrow or egoistic self-interest. For Humphreys, it was virtus that explained the rise of republican Rome in the ancient world—before, as the victim of its own success, it had sunk inevitably into luxury and corruption—and it was virtus that explained the victory of the American colonies over England.

Yet Humphreys’s poetic talents were modest, and today his poetry is of interest only to specialists in early American literature. His one work of lasting value was produced quickly at a historical moment when the new confederation of American states seemed to him quite literally to be disintegrating. This work was An Essay on the Life of the Honourable Major-General Israel Putnam. The word “essay” in the title, retaining its older meaning of “trial” or “attempt,” was meant simply to signal the occasional nature of Humphreys’s short biography, which he composed for the Connecticut Society of the Cincinnati in 1787, when it was not possible for him to be present to address the Society’s annual meeting. The significance of the Life of Putnam derives from Humphreys’s attempt in it to epitomize, in the form of a short Plutarchan biography, the myth of virtus or civic virtue that he believed to be at the heart of the American Revolution.

For Americans of the revolutionary generation, nothing more powerfully summarized the myth of virtus than the story of Cincinnatus, the retired Roman consul who had been called from his plough to lead the Roman army against an invading
enemy, and who, having won the victory, immediately surrendered his power and returned to the plough. Here were all the elements that led so many eighteenth-century Americans to identify their own state with that of the early Roman republic: an agrarian society uncorrupted by luxury, a life of field and vineyard still close to the miraculously regenerative powers of the earth, a moral simplicity that viewed the glittering attractions of public or political life—power, wealth, influence—as no more than unwholesome delusions. Our meaning of dictator, which summons up the Hitlers and Stalins of the modern age, suggests how unimaginably far we have traveled from that memory of mythic simplicity. For to the early Romans, a dictator was an honored and trusted leader to whom the people temporarily granted, as they did to Cincinnatus, absolute power in a time of national peril. This is the early Rome, in short, of Livy’s History, or Rollin’s or Goldsmith’s Roman histories, or Dyer’s The Ruins of Rome, a poem that would have been familiar to most readers of Humphreys’s Life of Putnam:

From the plough
Rose her dictators; fought, o’ercame, returned,
Yes, to the plough returned, and hailed their peers;
For then no private pomp, no household state,
The public only swelled the generous breast.

Humphreys’s Israel Putnam is an American Cincinnatus, as brave and honest a man, as Humphreys says in his dedicatory letter to Jeremiah Wadsworth, as ever America produced. Thus it is, for instance, that when we first meet Putnam he is a simple yeoman with no more education than is needed by a farmer in a nation of farmers, but with native qualities of fearlessness and integrity that make him a natural leader. This is the Putnam who goes down into the darksome den of a ferocious she-wolf—
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in Humphreys’s narrative a naturalized version of the hero’s journey to the underworld—to reemerge as a half-mythic figure to his neighbors. It is the Putnam who displays an inexhaustible bravery and resourcefulness in the Seven Years’ War, and who survives a brutal Indian captivity in Canada to return to his home in Connecticut. It is, finally, the hero whose circumstances are identical with those of Cincinnatus when news comes of the shots fired at Concord and Lexington. Putnam, Humphreys solemnly reports, “who was plowing when he heard the news, left his plough in the middle of the field” to set off instantly for the theater of action.

The Life of Israel Putnam divides into two halves, the first being largely taken up with Putnam’s deeds in the Seven Years’ War—the “French and Indian War” of American history—the second being devoted to his role in the American Revolution. The first half, it is sometimes said, is closer to romance than to biography or history. This is especially true if by “romance” one means Hawthorne’s sense of the strangeness of an America that is still trackless wilderness, with a mysterious world of wild beasts and hostile Indians lurking just beyond the feeble glow of light cast by isolated settlements. It is no wonder that James Fenimore Cooper would when writing The Last of the Mohicans turn to the Life of Putnam for details of frontier war, for innumerable scenes in Humphreys’s early pages—scalpings, eviscerations, Indians howling around the pyres where captives are burning alive—belong to a familiar mythology of the early American frontier.

The usual reason given for the resemblance of this portion of the Life of Putnam to fable or romance is that Humphreys was working from anecdotes sent to him by Dr. Albigence Waldo, a former army surgeon who had interviewed Putnam at length about his experiences in the French and Indian War, and who
was therefore able to provide a sort of oral history of events as Putnam remembered them. It is true enough that Humphreys was working from these materials—a footnote in the Life takes an early opportunity to thank Waldo for his help—but it is also true, as Humphreys makes clear, that he had himself gone over much of this same ground with Putnam, taking the trouble to check or verify various points. Yet the atmosphere of romance, an ethos closer to myth or heroic legend than mere factual narrative, survives unaltered.

The reason why this is so takes us to the heart of the literary and cultural significance of the Life of Putnam. For while Humphreys is always interested in telling the truth—in the opening pages of the Life he is quite hard on previous writers who have circulated “fables and marvellous stories” about the heroes of the Revolution—he is also consciously writing within a Plutarchan tradition that takes the truth about a biographical hero to be moral rather than circumstantial or factual. The Life of Putnam is meant to be, in the phrase coined by John Dryden in a famous essay on Plutarch, philosophy teaching by example. This is what Humphreys has in mind, for instance, when he states, early in the Life, that his ends will have been served if he produces in his American readers a desire to imitate the “domestic, manly and heroic virtues” of Israel Putnam.

The point of Plutarchan biography, still the commanding model in that classically oriented age, is to give back to the community a sustaining image of its own deepest values in the personality of the hero.

Consider, from this perspective, the likelihood that Putnam, like Cincinnatus in the episode from Livy, should have been actually plowing his field when news of the battle at Concord and Lexington arrived. To modern ears, conditioned by nearly two centuries of the “scientific” history that began with Ranke's dic-
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turn that the historian’s task is to recreate the past wie es eigent-
lich gewesen, the implausibility of such a story is nearly over-
whelming. But, to Dr. Albigence Waldo, taking down Putnam’s
stories of his earlier adventures, or to David Humphreys, asking
his old commander to recall the events that had preceded his
important role in the American Revolution, nothing could be
more natural than that an aging warrior, brought up on stories
of Cincinnatus and Regulus and Horatio at the bridge, should
remember his own story in such terms. To set the story down in
the way it is told is, therefore, simply to assent to the truth that
a society lives by its myths, and that myth at a certain level func-
tions as something very like collective or cultural memory.

The spirit of the first half of the Life of Putnam is nowhere
better caught than in an episode in Humphreys’s poem On the
Happiness of America, written immediately after the Revolution
when Humphreys, then abroad in Europe, was reflecting on his
society from a certain idealizing distance. The scene in the
poem is an American homestead in winter, the wind howling
and the snow drifting along the roads. The crops have been har-
vested, the cattle are warm in their stalls, and now family and
neighbors have gathered around the cheerful blaze of the hearth
to, as Humphreys says, indulge in tales, news, politics, and
mirth. The tale they hear on this occasion is told by an “old war-
rior, grown a village sage,” and it begins with his early adven-
tures and proceeds to the Revolutionary War battles in which
he took part—“The big bomb bursts, the fragments scatter’d
round”—until, at the last, he pulls aside his shirt to reveal his
scars. The children, listening wide-eyed, suddenly understand
that this fireside tale is their own story, that this tiny community
around the hearth is able peacefully to gather only because oth-
ers have gone forth to distant fields of battle willing to die “in
freedom’s name.”

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The second half of the Life of Putnam is, in the conventional sense, more soberly "historical," more concerned with dates and events and the movements of British and American troops in various campaigns. The new factor introduced into the narrative is, of course, Humphreys's own first-person perspective, for during much of this portion of the story he was at Putnam's side as events unfolded, and even later when he served as Washington's aide-de-camp he was continuously aware of Putnam's day-to-day movements. Yet the shift toward a more matter-of-fact perspective is not altogether owing to Humphreys's participation in the story, for what he understands as having occurred is that American society, under the disintegrative pressures of war and competing political loyalties, has begun to lose that quality of spiritual coherence that had sustained a younger Israel Putnam in a sort of natural or spontaneous heroism.

A sense that the onset of the Revolutionary War marked the collapse of a mythic dimension in American life, the end of a period when ordinary men and women had, all unawares, moved about the world as though in an atmosphere of song or legend, is something one encounters repeatedly in the writing of this period. One gets a strong sense of it in, for instance, the letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams during his absence at the Continental Congress, with both husband and wife aware that they have somehow become characters in a momentous story in which people like themselves, ordinary enough souls in any other epoch, have been given a momentous role to play. This is what Humphreys is trying to get at when, in the Life of Putnam, he remarks that his own generation has "fallen upon an era singularly prolific in extraordinary personages, and dignified by splendid events." More particularly, this is what gives full meaning to Humphreys's declaration that Putnam, whom he has by implication chosen as biographical hero for this reason,