

**DUNLAP**  
**WILLIAM**

ANDRÉ

William Dunlap

**André**

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**Dunlap W.**

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# Содержание

WILLIAM DUNLAP:	5
PREFACE	9
PROLOGUE	12
CHARACTERS	13
ACT I	14
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	18

# William Dunlap André

## WILLIAM DUNLAP: FATHER OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE (1766-1839)

The life of William Dunlap is full of colour and variety. Upon his shoulders very largely rests the responsibility for whatever knowledge we have of the atmosphere of the early theatre in America, and of the personalities of the players. For, as a boy, his father being a Loyalist, there is no doubt that young William used to frequent the play-house of the Red Coats, and we would like to believe actually saw some of the performances with which Major André was connected.

He was born at Perth Amboy, then the seat of government for the Province of New Jersey, on February 19, 1766 (where he died September 28, 1839), and, therefore, as an historian of the theatre, he was able to glean his information from first hand sources. Yet, his monumental work on the "History of the American Theatre" was written in late years, when memory was beginning to be overclouded, and, in recent times, it has been shown that Dunlap was not always careful in his dates or in his statements. George Seilhamer, whose three volumes, dealing with the American Theatre before the year 1800, are invaluable, is particularly acrimonious in his strictures against Dunlap. Nevertheless, he has to confess his indebtedness to the Father of the American Theatre.

Dunlap was many-sided in his tastes and activities. There is small reason to doubt that from his earliest years the theatre proved his most attractive pleasure. But, when he was scarcely in the flush of youth, he went to Europe, and studied art under Benjamin West. Throughout his life he was ever producing canvases, and designing, and his interest in the art activity of the country, which connects his name with the establishment of the New York Academy of Design, together with his writing on the subject, make him an important figure in that line of work.

On his return from Europe, as we have already noted, he was fired to write plays through the success of Royall Tyler, and he began his long career as dramatist, which threw him upon his own inventive resourcefulness, and so closely identified him with the name of the German, Kotzebue, whose plays he used to translate and adapt by the wholesale, as did also Charles Smith.

The pictures of William Dunlap are very careful to indicate in realistic fashion the fact that he had but one eye. When a boy, one of his playmates at school threw a stone, which hit his right eye. But though he was thus early made single-visioned, he saw more than his contemporaries; for he was a man who mingled much in the social life of the time, and he had a variety of friends, among them Charles Brockden Brown, the novelist, and George Frederick Cooke, the tragedian. He was the biographer for both of them, and these volumes are filled with anecdote, which throws light, not only on the subjects, but upon the observational taste of the writer. There are those who claim that he was unjust to Cooke, making him more of a drunkard than he really was. And the effect the book had on some of its readers may excellently well be seen by Lord Byron's exclamation, after having finished it. As quoted by Miss Crawford, in her "Romance of the American Theatre," he said: "Such a book! I believe, since 'Drunken Barnaby's Journal,' nothing like it has drenched the press. All green-room and tap-room, drams and the drama. Brandy, whiskey-punch, and, latterly, toddy, overflow every page. Two things are rather marvelous; first, that a man should live so long drunk, and next that he should have found a sober biographer."

Dunlap's first play was called "The Modest Soldier; or, Love in New York" (1787). We shall let him be his own chronicler:

As a medium of communication between the playwright and the manager, a man was pointed out, who had for a time been of some consequence on the London boards, and now resided under another name in New York. This was the Dubellamy of the English stage, a first singer and *walking-gentleman*. He was now past his meridian, but still a handsome man, and was found sufficiently easy of access and full of the courtesy of the old school. A meeting was arranged at the City Tavern, and a bottle of Madeira discussed with the merits of this first-born of a would-be author. The wine was praised, and the play was praised – the first, perhaps, made the second tolerable – that must be good which can repay a man of the world for listening to an author who reads his own play.

In due course of time, the youthful playwright reached the presence of the then all-powerful actors, Hallam and Henry, and, after some conference with them, the play was accepted. But though accepted, it was not produced, that auspicious occasion being deferred whenever the subject was broached. At this time, young Dunlap was introduced to the stony paths of playwriting. He had to alter his manuscript in many ways, only to see it laid upon the shelf until some future occasion. And, according to his confession, the reason the piece did not receive immediate production was because there was no part which Henry, the six-foot, handsome idol of the day, could see himself in to his own satisfaction.

Dunlap's next play was "The Father; or, American Shandy-ism,"<sup>1</sup> which was produced on September 7, 1789. It was published almost immediately, and was later reprinted, under the title of "The Father of an Only Child."

Most historians call attention to the fact that to Dunlap belongs the credit of having first introduced to the American stage the German dialect of the later Comedian. Even as we look to Tyler's "The Contrast" for the first Yankee, to Samuel Low's "Politician Out-witted" for an early example of Negro dialect, so may we trace other veins of American characteristics as they appeared in early American dramas.

But it is to "Darby's Return,"<sup>2</sup> the musical piece, that our interest points, because it was produced for the benefit of Thomas Wignell, at the New-York Theatre (November 24, 1789), and probably boasted among its first-nighters George Washington. Writes Dunlap:

The eyes of the audience were frequently bent on his countenance, and to watch the emotions produced by any particular passage upon him was the simultaneous employment of all. When Wignell, as *Darby*, recounts what had befallen him in America, in New York, at the adoption of the Federal Constitution, and the inauguration of the President, the interest expressed by the audience in the looks and the changes of countenance of this great man became intense.

And then there follows an indication by Dunlap of where Washington smiled, and where he showed displeasure. And, altogether, there was much perturbation of mind over every quiver of his eye-lash. The fact of the matter is, as a playgoer, the Father of our Country figured quite as constantly as the Father of our Theatre. When the seat of Government changed from New York to Philadelphia, President Washington's love of the theatre prompted many theatrical enterprises to follow in his wake, and we have an interesting picture, painted in words by Seilhamer (ii, 316), of the scene at the old Southwark on such an occasion. He says:

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<sup>1</sup> The/Father;/or,/American Shandy-ism./A Comedy,/As performed at the New-York Theatre,/By the/Old American Company./Written in the year 1788./With what fond hope, through many a blissful hour,/We give the soul to Fancy's pleasing pow'r./Conquest of Canaan./New-York:/Printed by Hodge, Allen & Campbell./ M, DCC, LXXXIX./

<sup>2</sup> Darby's Return:/A Comic Sketch,/As Performed at the New-York Theatre,/ November 24, 1789,/For the Benefit of Mr. Wignell. Written by William Dunlap./ New-York:/Printed by Hodge, Allen and Campbell./And Sold at their respective Bookstores,/and by Berry and Rogers./M, DCC, LXXXIX./

[The President] frequently occupied the east stage-box, which was fitted up expressly for his reception. Over the front of the box was the United States coat-of-arms and the interior was gracefully festooned with red drapery. The front of the box and the seats were cushioned. According to John [*sic*] Durang, Washington's reception at the theatre was always exceedingly formal and ceremonious. A soldier was generally posted at each stage-door; four soldiers were placed in the gallery; a military guard attended. Mr. Wignell, in a full dress of black, with his hair elaborately powdered in the fashion of the time, and holding two wax candles in silver candle-sticks, was accustomed to receive the President at the box-door and conduct Washington and his party to their seats. Even the newspapers began to take notice of the President's contemplated visits to the theatre.

This is the atmosphere which must have attended the performance of Dunlap's "Darby's Return."

The play which probably is best known to-day, as by William Dunlap, is his "André,"<sup>3</sup> in which Washington figures as the General, later to appear under his full name, when Dunlap utilized the old drama in a manuscript libretto, entitled "The Glory of Columbia – Her Yeomanry" (1817). The play was produced on March 30, 1798, after Dunlap had become manager of the New Park Theatre, within whose proscenium it was given. Professor Matthews, editing the piece for the Dunlap Society (No. 4, 1887), claims that this was the first drama acted in the United States during Washington's life, in which he was made to appear on the stage of a theatre. But it must not be forgotten that in "The Fall of British Tyranny," written in 1776, by Leacock, Washington appears for the first time in any piece of American fiction. Dunlap writes of the performance (American Theatre, ii, 20):

The receipts were 817 dollars, a temporary relief. The play was received with warm applause, until Mr. Cooper, in the character of a young American officer, who had been treated as a brother by André when a prisoner with the British, in his zeal and gratitude, having pleaded for the life of the spy in vain, tears the American cockade from his casque, and throws it from him. This was not, perhaps could not be, understood by a mixed assembly; they thought the country and its defenders insulted, and a hiss ensued – it was soon quieted, and the play ended with applause. But the feeling excited by the incident was propagated out of doors. Cooper's friends wished the play withdrawn, on his account, fearing for his popularity. However, the author made an alteration in the incident, and subsequently all went on to the end with applause.

A scene from the last act of "André"<sup>4</sup> was produced at an American Drama Matinée, under the auspices of the American Drama Committee of the Drama League of America, New York Centre, on January 22nd and 23rd, 1917. There are many Arnold and André plays, some of which have been noted by Professor Matthews.<sup>5</sup> Another interesting historical study is the stage popularity of Nathan Hale.

We might go on indefinitely, narrating incidents connected with Dunlap as citizen, painter, playwright, author, and theatrical manager, for within a very short time he managed the John Street and New Park Theatres, retiring for a while in 1805.

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<sup>3</sup> André;/A Tragedy, in Five Acts;/As Performed by the Old American Company,/ New-York, March 30, 1798./To which are added,/Authentic Documents/respecting/ Major André;/Consisting of/Letters to Miss Seward,/The/Cow Chace,/Proceedings of the Court Martial, &c./Copy Right Secured./New-York:/Printed by T. & J. Swords, No. 99 Pearl-street./1798./

<sup>4</sup> One of Dunlap's best-known tragedies was "Leicester," published by David Longworth in 1807.

<sup>5</sup> Freneau began a play, "The Spy" (Pattee, "Poems of Philip Freneau"), in which André was a character.

But this is sufficient to illustrate the pioneer character of his work and influence. Inaccurate he may have been in his "History of the American Theatre," but the atmosphere is there, and he never failed to recognize merit, and to give touches of character to the actors, without which our impression of the early theatre in this country would be the poorer. The name of William Dunlap is intimately associated with the beginnings of American painting, American literary life and the American Theatre. It is for these he will ever remain distinguished.

As a playwright, he wrote so rapidly, and so constantly utilized over and over again, not only his own material, but the materials of others, that it is not surprising to find him often in dispute with dramatic authors of the time. A typical disagreement occurred in the case of the actor John Hodgkinson (1767-1805), whose drama, "The Man of Fortitude; or, the Knight's Adventure," given at the John Street Theatre, on June 7, 1797, was, according to Dunlap, based on his own one-act verse play, "The Knight's Adventure," submitted to the actor some years before.

Only the play, based on the 1798 edition, is here reproduced. The authentic documents are omitted.

## PREFACE

More than nine years ago the Author made choice of the death of Major André as the Subject of a Tragedy, and part of what is now offered to the public was written at that time. Many circumstances discouraged him from finishing his Play, and among them must be reckoned a prevailing opinion that recent events are unfit subjects for tragedy. These discouragements have at length all given way to his desire of bringing a story on the Stage so eminently fitted, in his opinion, to excite interest in the breasts of an American audience.

In exhibiting a stage representation of a real transaction, the particulars of which are fresh in the minds of many of the audience, an author has this peculiar difficulty to struggle with, that those who know the events expect to see them *all* recorded; and any deviation from what they remember to be fact, appears to them as a fault in the poet; they are disappointed, their expectations are not fulfilled, and the writer is more or less condemned, not considering the difference between the poet and the historian, or not knowing that what is intended to be exhibited is a free poetical picture, not an exact historical portrait.

Still further difficulties has the Tragedy of André to surmount, difficulties independent of its own demerits, in its way to public favour. The subject necessarily involves political questions; but the Author presumes that he owes no apology to any one for having shewn himself an American. The friends of Major André (and it appears that all who knew him were his friends) will look with a jealous eye on the Poem, whose principal incident is the sad catastrophe which his misconduct, in submitting to be an instrument in a transaction of treachery and deceit, justly brought upon him: but these friends have no cause of offence; the Author has adorned the poetical character of André with every virtue; he has made him his Hero; to do which, he was under the necessity of making him condemn his own conduct, in the one dreadfully unfortunate action of his life. To shew the effects which Major André's excellent qualities had upon the minds of men, the Author has drawn a generous and amiable youth, so blinded by his love for the accomplished Briton, as to consider his country, and the great commander of her armies, as in the commission of such horrid injustice, that he, in the anguish of his soul, disclaims the service. In this it appears, since the first representation, that the Author has gone near to offend the veterans of the American army who were present on the first night, and who not knowing the sequel of the action, felt much disposed to condemn him: but surely they must remember the diversity of opinion which agitated the minds of men at that time, on the question of the propriety of putting André to death; and when they add the circumstances of André's having saved the life of this youth, and gained his ardent friendship, they will be inclined to mingle with their disapprobation, a sentiment of pity, and excuse, perhaps commend the Poet, who has represented the action without sanctioning it by his approbation.

As a sequel to the affair of the cockade, the Author has added the following lines, which the reader is requested to insert, page [55](#), between the 5th and 15th lines, instead of the lines he will find there, which were printed before the piece was represented.<sup>6</sup>—

### Bland

Noble M'Donald, truth and honour's champion!  
Yet think not strange that my intemperance wrong'd thee:  
Good as thou art! for, would'st thou, canst thou, think it?

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<sup>6</sup> See p. 557.

My tongue, unbridled, hath the same offence,  
With action violent, and boisterous tone,  
Hurl'd on that glorious man, whose pious labours  
Shield from every ill his grateful country!  
That man, whom friends to adoration love,  
And enemies revere. – Yes, M'Donald,  
Even in the presence of the first of men  
Did I abjure the service of my country,  
And reft my helmet of that glorious badge  
Which graces even the brow of Washington.  
How shall I see him more! —

### **M'Donald**

Alive himself to every generous impulse,  
He hath excus'd the impetuous warmth of youth,  
In expectation that thy fiery soul, Chasten'd by time and reason, will  
receive  
The stamp indelible of godlike virtue.  
To me, in trust, he gave this badge disclaim'd,  
With power, when thou shouldst see thy wrongful error,  
From him, to reinstate it in thy helm,  
And thee in his high favour.

*[Gives the cockade.*

### **Bland [*takes the cockade and replaces it*]**

Shall I speak my thoughts of thee and him?  
No: – let my actions henceforth shew what thou  
And he have made me. Ne'er shall my helmet  
Lack again its proudest, noblest ornament,  
Until my country knows the rest of peace,  
Or Bland the peace of death!

*[Exit.*

This alteration, as well as the whole performance, on the second night, met the warm approbation of the audience.

To the performers the Author takes this opportunity of returning his thanks for their exertions in his behalf; perfectly convinced, that on this, as on former occasions, the members of the Old American Company have anxiously striven to oblige him.

If this Play is successful, it will be a proof that recent events may be so managed in tragedy as to command popular attention; if it is unsuccessful, the question must remain undetermined until some more powerful writer shall again make the experiment. The Poem is now submitted to the ordeal of closet examination, with the Author's respectful assurance to every reader, that as it is not his interest, so it has not been his intention, to offend any; but, on the contrary, to impress, through

the medium of a pleasing stage exhibition, the sublime lessons of Truth and Justice upon the minds of his countrymen.

*W. Dunlap.*

*New-York, April 4th, 1798.*

## PROLOGUE

### SPOKEN BY MR. MARTIN

A native Bard, a native scene displays,  
And claims your candour for his daring lays:  
Daring, so soon, in mimic scenes to shew,  
What each remembers as a real woe.  
Who has forgot when gallant André died?  
A name by Fate to Sorrow's self allied.  
Who has forgot, when o'er the untimely bier,  
Contending armies paus'd, to drop a tear.

Our Poet builds upon a fact tonight;  
Yet claims, in building, every Poet's right;  
To choose, embellish, lop, or add, or blend,  
Fiction with truth, as best may suit his end;  
Which, he avows, is pleasure to impart,  
And move the passions but to mend the heart.

Oh, may no party-spirit blast his views,  
Or turn to ill the meanings of the Muse:  
She sings of wrongs long past, Men as they were,  
To instruct, without reproach, the Men that are;  
Then judge the Story by the genius shewn,  
And praise, or damn, it, for its worth alone.

## CHARACTERS

General, <i>dress, American staff uniform, blue, faced with buff, large gold epaulets, cocked hat, with the black and white cockade, indicating the union with France, buff waistcoat and breeches, boots,</i>	Mr. Hallam.
M'Donald, <i>a man of forty years of age, uniform nearly the same of the first,</i>	Mr. Tolar.
Seward, <i>a man of thirty years of age, staff uniform,</i>	Mr. Starie.
André, <i>a man of twenty-nine years of age, full British uniform after the first scene,</i>	Mr. Mordkison.
Bland, <i>a youthful but military figure, in the uniform of a Captain of horse — dress, a short blue coat, faced with red, and trimmed with gold lace, two small epaulets, a white waistcoat, leather breeches, boots and spurs; over the coat, crossing the chest from the right shoulder, a broad buff belt, to which is suspended a manageable hussar sword; a horseman's helmet on the head, decorated as usual, and the union cockade affixed,</i>	Mr. Cooper.
Melville, <i>a man of middle age, and grave deportment; his dress a Captain's uniform when on duty; a blue coat, with red facings, gold epaulet, white waistcoat and breeches, boots and cocked hat, with the union cockade,</i>	Mr. Williamson.
British Officer,	Mr. Hoax.
American Officer,	Mr. Miller.
Children,	Master Stockwell.
American Sergeant,	Mr. Sarsapar.
American Officers and Soldiers, &c.	
Mrs. Bland,	Ms. Matmouh.
Honora,	Ms. Tabor.

**Scene, the Village of Tappan, Encampment,  
and adjoining Country. Time, ten hours**

## ACT I

### *Scene I. A Wood seen by starlight; an Encampment at a distance appearing between the trees*

*Enter Melville*

**Melville**

The solemn hour, "when night and morning meet,"  
Mysterious time, to superstition dear,  
And superstition's guides, now passes by;  
Deathlike in solitude. The sentinels,  
In drowsy tones, from post to post, send on  
The signal of the passing hour. "All's well,"  
Sounds through the camp. Alas! all is not well;  
Else, why stand I, a man, the friend of man,  
At midnight's depth, deck'd in this murderous guise,  
The habiliment of death, the badge of dire,  
Necessitous coercion. 'T is not well.  
– In vain the enlighten'd friends of suffering man  
Point out, of war, the folly, guilt, and madness.  
Still, age succeeds to age, and war to war;  
And man, the murderer, marshalls out his hosts  
In all the gaiety of festive pomp,  
To spread around him death and desolation.  
How long! how long! —  
– Methinks I hear the tread of feet this way.  
My meditating mood may work me woe.

*[Draws.*

Stand, whoso'er thou art. Answer. Who's there?

*Enter Bland*

**Bland**

A friend.

**Melville**

Advance and give the countersign.

**Bland**

Hudson.

**Melville**

What, Bland!

**Bland**

Melville, my friend, you *here*?

**Melville**

And *well*, my brave young friend. But why do you,  
At this dead hour of night, approach the camp,  
On foot, and thus alone?

**Bland**

I have but now  
Dismounted; and, from yon sequester'd cot,  
Whose lonely taper through the crannied wall  
Sheds its faint beams, and twinkles midst the trees,  
Have I, adventurous, grop'd my darksome way.  
My servant, and my horses, spent with toil,  
There wait till morn.

**Melville**

Why waited not yourself?

**Bland**

Anxious to know the truth of those reports  
Which, from the many mouths of busy Fame,  
Still, as I pass'd, struck varying on my ear,  
Each making th' other void. Nor does delay  
The colour of my hasteful business suit.  
I bring dispatches for our great Commander;  
And hasted hither with design to wait  
His rising, or awake him with the sun.

**Melville**

You will not need the last, for the blest sun  
Ne'er rises on his slumbers; by the dawn  
We see him mounted gaily in the field,  
Or find him wrapt in meditation deep,  
Planning the welfare of our war-worn land.

**Bland**

Prosper, kind heaven! and recompense his cares.

**Melville**

You're from the South, if I presume aright?

**Bland**

I am; and, Melville, I am fraught with news?  
The South teems with events; convulsing ones:

The Briton, there, plays at no mimic war;  
With gallant face he moves, and gallantly is met.  
Brave spirits, rous'd by glory, throng our camp;  
The hardy hunter, skill'd to fell the deer,  
Or start the sluggish bear from covert rude;  
And not a clown that comes, but from his youth  
Is trained to pour from far the leaden death,  
To climb the steep, to struggle with the stream,  
To labour firmly under scorching skies,  
And bear, unshrinking, winter's roughest blast.  
This, and that heaven-inspir'd enthusiasm  
Which ever animates the patriot's breast,  
Shall far outweigh the lack of discipline.

### **Melville**

Justice is ours; what shall prevail against her?

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