

THE CAREER OF PUFFER HOPKINS

[Reviewer Unknown]

Published in *The Pioneer*
January 1843 (1:1)

Edited and Annotated by Jakub Safar
University of Arizona Antebellum Magazine Edition Project
May 3, 2015

THE CAREER OF PUFFER HOPKINS. By
Cornelius Mathews.¹ Author of the *Motley Book*, &c.² New York: D. Appleton & Co.³ 1 vol.
319 pages.

The author of this book⁴ is a resident, and we believe a native,⁵ of the city of New York. He is a member of the legal profession,⁶ and is still quite young, though his name has been for

¹ Cornelius Mathews (1817-1889) is a curious figure of American belles-lettres. A lawyer turned writer, he wrote poetry, sketches, plays, and novels. He also worked as the editor of a number of magazines, such as the short-lived *Arcturus* and *Yankee Doodle*, as well as *The New-Yorker*, *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, and *The New York Review* (Stein).

² Prior to the publishing of *The Career of Puffer Hopkins* (1842), Mathews published his poems *Bebemoth*, *A Legend of the Mound-Builders* (1839) and *Wakondah; the Master of Life. A Poem.* (1841), and his prose works *The Motley Book* (1838) and *The Politicians* (1840), as well as several essays in *Arcturus* (Stein).

³ D. Appleton & Co. (originally The House of Appleton) was one of the oldest and longest lived American publishing houses. Printing its first book in 1831, the company would exist in various forms for the next 150 years, publishing an impressive list of historically significant authors. Beginning as a publisher of travel literature, religious texts, and biographies, D. Appleton & Co. owes its longevity to shrewd business maneuvers such as establishing business connections with Latin America, developing the genre of “Children’s Literature”, establishing the *Popular Science* journal, and forming the educational textbook publishing conglomerate American Book Co.

⁴ *The Career of Puffer Hopkins* is a satirical novel dealing with the American political scene. It depicts the “initiation of Puffer Hopkins, an idealistic young man from the country, into the workings of a big-city political machine” (Stein). Mathews’ heavy handed satire attacked everything from bombastic and empty political oratory to insidious voting fraud, all through the innocent lens of young Puffer, who gets his name from “puffing” which is the practice

some years on the list of our prominent authors. His first publication was the *Motley Book*,⁷ which was issued in numbers in 1838, and of which three editions have since been disposed of. In the succeeding year appeared *Behemoth, a Legend of the Mound Builders*,⁸ a story, or rather a prose poem,⁹ the scenes and characters of which were drawn from the ancient and extinct inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley. In 1841-2, Mr. Mathews in conjunction with Mr. Evert A. Duyckinck¹⁰ commenced the publication of *Arcturus, a Journal of Books and Opinions*,¹¹ which was continued for two years with eminent ability, if not with great

of giving “extravagant or unwarranted praise or commendation; promotion or advertisement through the writing or publication of puffs” (OED). This particular review of *Puffer Hopkins* received harsh comment from E. A. Poe in a review for the *Philadelphia Saturday Museum*, stating “[Lowell writes] a qualified puff when it should have been an unqualified condemnation: “Puffer Hopkins” being one of the most trashy novels that ever emanated from an American press” (Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore).

⁵ “Native” is a pointed description, a joke referring to Mathews’ early city sketches and Native American themed writings.

⁶ Mathews worked as a self-described “plodding lawyer”—a minor member of a large firm. His career as a lawyer began in 1837 (Stein) but within a year he had written *The Motley Book*.

⁷ *The Motley Book* was a series of sketches of New York and the surrounding country. From the very beginning of his literary career, a “sense of place” was very important to Mathews, and integral to his desire to establish a “national literature” which he believed could not be done without a serious treatment of the American city and country life.

⁸ *Behemoth* marks a different approach to Mathews’ perpetual national literature question. It is his attempt to create an American epic, drawing on the American analogue of the European ruin (burial mounds) to link America’s landscape with its history. The result is a tale that is as monumental as it is alien: a tale of an ancient heroic struggle between the Mound Builders and a gigantic Mastodon that blots out the sun. Mathews described it as an “Experiment of the boldest and most hazardous kind” (Stein) and a century later in *The Raven and the Whale* Perry Miller would describe it as a “ridiculous fanfaronade,” but also note it as a possible influence of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

⁹ *Behemoth* could not be described as lyrical nor graceful. It is written in a style that is both obscure and grandiose, perhaps intended to be imitative of the language of a mythical prehistoric civilization.

¹⁰ Evert Augustus Duyckinck (1816-1878) was a school friend of Mathews’. He was an “obscure bibliophile” and an important intellectual figure of the New York literary scene at this time. Fostering relationships with many of the most famous authors of the day, such as Melville and Hawthorne, he placed himself (and the literary clique which formed around him) in opposition with the more conservative circle of the *Knickerbocker*. This clique, which later acquires the name of “Young America” combined in its ideologies the advocacy of a National Literature, International Copyright Law, Expansionism, Locofocoism, Abolitionism, and Populism.

¹¹ *Arcturus, a Journal of Books and Opinion* was a monthly journal founded in December 1840 and ran 18 issues before ending in May 1842. Focusing mainly on American Literature and reviews, *Arcturus* notably counted among its contributors Hawthorne, Lowell, and Longfellow (Mott).

success. In its pages, *Wakondah*,¹² a poem by Mr. Mathews, first appeared, which has since been issued in a separate and very beautiful form.

During the past year, Mr. Mathews has been chiefly engaged in ardently and ably advocating the passage of an international copyright law.¹³ His services in this great cause will long be remembered with gratitude by all who have at heart the welfare of American literature.

Puffer Hopkins was commenced in *Arcturus*, and was unfinished when that periodical closed its existence.¹⁴ It is now offered to the public, completed, and in two different forms. *The Brother Jonathan*¹⁵ has issued the largest and more popular edition of the work in one of its extras, and Appleton and Co. have published another edition of the same in the usual book form, with several embellishments by an English artist.¹⁶

Of the merits of the work we have not room to speak otherwise than very generally. The story is interesting and pathetic, but somewhat involved and obscure,¹⁷ and interrupted by scenes and incidents which in no way assist in arriving at the conclusion. The characters are in general vigorously and acutely delineated, though if some of them are correct representations of the personages who parade the streets and frequent the garrets and oyster-houses of the commercial metropolis, we feel inclined to think that our good city of

¹² *Wakondah; the Master of Life. A Poem.* is similar in style and theme to *Behemoth*, again drawing on the motif of the American Native to create a uniquely American literature. *Wakondah*'s titular character laments the end of the American Native, and feels his once God-like command of nature waning in the face of the "white-browed hunters." The poem was positively ripped apart in a review written by E. A. Poe for *Graham's Magazine* in February 1842, stating *Wakondah* was "from beginning to end... trash" and "has no merit whatsoever," mainly due to the poem's unrealistic imagery and poor writing.

¹³ This paragraph is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Mathews' personality was considered abrasive by all who met him, and he was satirized by Lowell in *A Fable For Critics*, in the writings of C. F. Briggs, and throughout the *Knickerbocker* magazine for his snobbishness, arrogance, and general lack of social graces. Among the most dramatic of Mathews' fiascos was probably an excessively verbose speech on the importance of International Copyright at a dinner held for Charles Dickens during his American tour.

¹⁴ Mathews serialized approximately a third of *Puffer Hopkins* and a number of essays in this journal (Mott).

¹⁵ Appleton & Co. published their illustrated edition in 1842, followed by the newspaper *Brother Jonathan*'s extra edition later that year.

¹⁶ Hablot Knight Brown (1815-1882) was most well-known for his illustrations of Charles Dickens' novels. His illustrations were often published under the pseudonym "Phiz" (Mott).

¹⁷ This is likely a critique of the topicality of Mathews' writing, combined with his heavy-handed ironic tone. Mathews' satire of New York elections required too much knowledge of the political scene to be easily accessible.

Boston is blessed or cursed, as the case may be, with a very provincial monotony¹⁸ in respect to population.

The style of Mr. Mathews reminds us constantly of that of Dickens, by its frequent, unexpected and quaint turns of humor, and by the genial love for, and sympathy with nature and humanity that glows throughout its pages. He has evidently, however, a more scholastic mind than the author of *Oliver Twist*, and inclines rather more to the sarcastic and the melancholy.

The evidence of intellectual power and of just and noble feeling, which the book in common with all that Mr. Mathews has yet written, affords, leads us to look with high expectation to his future literary career. He is destined, we trust, to achieve a brilliant reputation, and what is far better, to perform worthy and enduring service to his country and her literature.



EDITOR'S NOTE

This review, most likely written by Lowell, provides an interesting glimpse of an obscure and curious character of American literature: Cornelius Mathews. A decidedly tragic figure, he is summarized in the final paragraph of Lowell's review, a man with "intellectual power" and "just and noble feeling." Lowell, unlike Poe, is too kind to include any analysis of Mathews' actual writing, which has been universally considered obscure and poorly written.

Throughout Mathews' collected writing there is a sense of experimentation. In an unabashed devotion to the creation of an utterly *new* and unique national literature, Mathews' sacrificed (or perhaps neglected to develop) anything that could be considered classical, natural, or graceful in his writing. In his "prose-poem" *Bebemoth*, there is an artificial monumentality that stems from his longing for a national epic. He finally decides that he must create one, *ex post facto*, because there seems to him nothing of the sort in the American canon worthy of the title. The result is a bizarre dinosaur tale, reminiscent of Lovecraft's proto-science fiction, written in a deliberately obscure, verbose, ornamental, and clumsy style. *The Career of Puffer Hopkins* deals with a more urban subject matter, but retains Mathews' characteristic experimentation. In twenty-plus chapters he attacks every aspect of the electoral process of the city of New York. He seeks to blend in an American sense of humor, dreaming of a book as funny as Dickens, but written in a new way. In *Puffer Hopkins* we can see many of the techniques that would be used to great success by America's more famous humorists like

¹⁸ Mathews is generally considered a failed humorist, his caricatures being too distorted to be believable as deep or even human characters.

Twain: natural color, melancholy understatement, loveable country bumpkins. The issue, again, lies in execution. In dreaming up the style of a new American humor, Mathews neglected to make an interesting story, or creating any depth to his characters.

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