

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Stephen Burroughs (1765-1840)

Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs

In the early nineteenth century, Stephen Burroughs was a famous, or infamous, man. Fifteen different editions of his *Memoirs* came out between 1798 and 1861, plus eleven editions of a *Sketch of the Life of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs* and four pamphlet editions of the sermon he purportedly delivered from a hay-mow in Rutland, after being chased by the people of Pelham as an imposter. Who was he? Why was he so well known? And what interest does his autobiography have today?

His father, he says, was a clergyman in Hanover, New Hampshire, who raised him with a Presbyterian "rigor...which illy suited my volatile, impatient temper of mind." At age fourteen, he tried three times to enlist in the Continental Army, each time being withdrawn by his father. In 1781 his father enrolled him in Dartmouth College, but he was so undisciplined he had to quit. Next he went to Newburyport, Massachusetts, and sailed aboard a privateer, having picked up enough instruction from an elderly doctor to act as the ship's physician. But after a year at sea and in France, he was jailed for reportedly breaking open a chest of wine and distributing it to the crew.

Shortly afterwards comes the adventure he describes below, in which he successfully posed for a while as a preacher. To judge by the number of times he later refers to it, this was also the act he became most famous for, the legend even springing up that he started by stealing a real minister's watch and clothes. So perhaps one reason for Burrough's fame was this boldness in imitating, and thus in a way exposing and making fun of, the most revered of early American professions. None of his later tricks as counterfeiter, prison-escape artist, school teacher, and real estate shark were quite so brazen. Nor were they quite so ridiculous, which is another pleasure in reading Burroughs. He likes telling of his pranks, and defends them by sometimes confiding in the reader and sometimes acting very proper and offended (see the short second selection). Burroughs was a trickster who could both laugh and be laughed at. But we also wonder at how he deceived himself. Robert Frost, who wrote a short introduction to a twentieth-century printing of the *Memoirs*, called him not just a "knowing rascal" but a "naïve hypocrite"—nearly contradictory personalities.

A further reason for Burrough's fame may have been that the members of the early American republic were deeply worried by confidence men. As Karen Halttunen wrote in *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1803-1870*, the American emphasis on sincerity and benevolence made people fear and try to exclude all those who were insincere and too boldly, or too covertly, selfish. A whole system of manners and rituals grew up around protecting and yet properly displaying the depth and the goodness of individual feeling. A culture cannot establish such codes without painful repression, however, which repression is released in fascination with those who break them, as appears to have happened with Burroughs and would later happen with P.T. Barnum. In addition, the autobiographies of the confidence man, trickster, and prince of the humbug are the books we read to try to learn the difference between sincerity and hypocrisy, the good man and the shyster, the true and the false.

Such autobiographies, however, also raise fundamental questions about autobiography. What credence can we place in Burroughs, when we know he lied? Autobiographies are written, we also believe, out of an impulse in the writers to know and examine themselves. But can hypocrites and, especially, naïve hypocrites ever do that? Or to ask a very specific question, how is Burrough's pretending to be a minister, a role he played reasonably well, different from Benjamin Franklin's game of pushing his goods in a wheelbarrow so as to convince his neighbors he was virtuous and industrious?

The text is adapted from the *Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs* (Albany, NY: B.D. Packard, 1811), chs. 7, 8, and 10. A new edition of the *Memoirs* has been edited by Philip Gura (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1988). For an informed and insightful critical article, see Daniel E. Williams, "In Defense of Self: Author and Authority in the *Memoirs of Stephen Burroughs*," *Early American Literature* 25 (1990): 96-122.

Reading

Memoirs of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs

<http://archive.org/stream/memoirsofnotorio00burr#page/n7/mode/2up>