The poetry of early America is seen afresh in this groundbreaking new volume in The Library of Americas acclaimed American Poetry anthology series, charting its flowering over a span of almost two centuries, from the first years of English settlement in the New World to the death of George Washington. Gathering the work of more than 100 poets—including many poems never previously anthologized and some published here for the first time—it is the most comprehensive collection of its kind ever assembled, a celebration of the rich, varied, and often surprising beginnings of American poetry. The range of voices is unprecedented: broadside and newspaper satires, epitaphs, childrens verse, popular songs, ballads, and Christian hymns evoke the vital currency of poetry in the daily lives of average people; exhortatory elegies for public figures and historical epics declaimed on occasions of state stand alongside intricate meditative lyrics and private epistolary verses. The dramatic unfolding of American history is made immediate and vivid in the words of the participants: William Bradford reflects on the growth of New Englands first colonies; Roger Wolcott recounts the incidents of the Pequot War; Thomas Paine hails the victories of the American Revolution; Ann Eliza Bleecker describes her flight from General Burgoynes invading army; loyalist Jonathan Odell bitterly mocks the new Continental Congress. The first comprehensive anthology of early American poetry in more than a generation, this volume incorporates recent scholarly discoveries that have altered our understanding of the early American literary landscape. Alongside generous selections from long-admired New England poets such as Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and Michael Wigglesworth are poets from the Middle Colonies and the South, newly emerged from the archives. Along with familiar favorites by Phillis Wheatley, celebrated pioneer of the African-American tradition in poetry, are little-known verses by Benjamin Banneker, known as the Sable Astronomer, and African-American Minuteman Lemuel Haynes. The anthology includes hymns recently
attributed to Mohegan preacher Samson Occom and the earliest known translation of a traditional Native American chant, Henry Timberlakes Cherokee War-Song. The unpublished poems of Henry Brooke, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, Joseph Green, Hannah Griffitts, Margaret Lowther Page, and Annis Boudinot Stockton, among others, reflect the rediscovered vitality and importance of manuscript exchange as a form of publication in an era when it was sometimes considered indecorous, especially for women, to appear in print. Unprecedented in its textual authority and unrivaled in its scope, the anthology includes newly researched biographical sketches of each poet and extensive notes.

Features:
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My Personal Review:
In its ongoing efforts to make accessible the American experience in literature, the Library of America has published two-volume anthologies covering American poetry in the Nineteenth Century and American poetry in the Twentieth Century. The LOA’s most recent anthology, “American Poetry: the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” is a single volume and it presents the poetry of the earliest settlers -- poems written for the most part in America before there was a United States. In its 950 pages, the volume includes over 300 poems by 108 poets, including many works previously unpublished, together with biographies of the poets and explanatory notes prepared by the editor, David S. Shields. The poems and poets are chronologically arranged.

While Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American poetry will be familiar to many, most readers will find a great deal that is new in this recent collection. This anthology is the most comprehensive ever undertaken for early American poetry. As Shields explained in an interview he gave for the Library of America, access to printing was limited for early poets. They tended to meet in clubs, homes, and cafes to exchange their works. Poetry had a regional influence, and many works included in this collection were discovered in manuscript only recently. Thus, there is the excitement of reading and learning something new in approaching this volume.

Poetry is the mirror of the hearts and aspirations of a people, and the value of this collection lies in the insight it offers into colonial America in its diversity and preoccupations. Many of the poems in the early part of the book were written by New England Puritans and reflect their theological and religious bent. There are a great many ceremonial poems, apparently preached from the pulpit as an elegy on the death of a leader. Other poems constitute reflections on America and its promise and contrast, from varying perspectives, life in New England from life in the Old England. A small number of poems are critical of the Puritans and their severity. Michael Wigglesworth’s "Day of Doom", presenting a vision of hellfire to sinners was a famous poem of its day and much of it is included here.
Edward Taylor's meditative verse became generally available only in the late 1930s, and a generous selection of his poetry is presented here.

As the volume progresses, various voices come into play from the middle colonies and from the South. There are comic works, even ribald poems, poems describing, from various perspectives, the settlers encounters with the Indian tribes (and some poems by the Indians themselves), reflections on nature, on urban life (I enjoyed the poem by Joseph Breintnall "A plain Description of one single street in this City"), on commerce, and on the relations between the sexes. There are poems by Southern plantation owners which reflect their early ambivalence over slavery. And there are many poems about the American revolution written from a variety of perspectives, from ardent Patriots to the Loyalists who remained, at great cost to themselves, devoted to the British monarchy. Women are well-represented in this anthology, including the works of many women who led outwardly quiet lives, (Susanna Wright, Mary Hirst Pepperell, for example, to others who were highly active intellectually in revolutionary America (such as Mercy Otis Warren).

The poems in the volume tend to be lengthy. They use a variety of verse forms, almost all of which are in rhyme, and in many respects seem to follow patterns established by the English metaphysical poets and by John Donne or by later writers such as Alexander Pope. The poems vary widely in quality. There are many enjoyable works included but there are some which seem amateurish and which will be a struggle for most readers. The collection, on balance, seems less valuable for its literary worth than for the insight it offers into a developing people and an age. The best way to approach this book, as with many anthologies of poetry, is through browsing and through reading a little at a time rather than through working through the entire text at once.

The poets in the volume whose names will be recognized by some readers include Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), the first woman to have a volume of poetry published in English, Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), a brilliant African American woman who came to America as a slave and wrote beautifully during a short life, and Philip Frenau (1752--1832) whose work spans the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Frenau and Joel Barlow (1754-1812) whose homespun poem "The Hasty-Pudding" is included in this volume are the only two poets represented both in this collection and in the LOA anthology of Nineteenth Century American poetry. The works of Bradstreet, Wheatley, Frenau, and Barlow, are good places to start for the reader wanting to work into the volume.

One of the poets included in this volume is George Berkely (1685-1753). Berkeley's idealism is familiar to students of philosophy, but he also spent three years in America in an unsuccessful attempt to establish a college. Berkeley wrote a poem about his experiences in America, "Verses on the Prospect of planting arts and Learning in America." It concludes:
"Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;
   The four first Acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
   Time's noblest Offspring is the last."

This vision of America and its future is an inspiring summary of what is best in the dream of the early American settlers.

Robin Friedman

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