



An Essay on the Life of the Honourable Major-General Israel Putnam

David Humphreys

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David Humphreys was aide-de-camp to Washington during the American Revolution. His *Life of Israel Putnam*, originally published in 1788, has rightly been described as “the first biography of an American written by an American.” It is, as William C. Dowling observes, “a classic of revolutionary writing, very readable and immensely interesting in what it says about the temper of the new republic in the period immediately after the American Revolution.” The subject—General Israel Putnam—is remembered to history and legend as exclaiming: “Don’t fire ’til you see the whites of their eyes!” to American soldiers at the Battle of Bunker Hill. As Professor Dowling notes, “All the episodes are retold—Bunker Hill, the Battle of White Plains, the crossing of the Delaware, the Battle of Princeton—but from the perspective of one who was there throughout, and who always permits us to see Putnam as the sort of character by whom history is, in the last analysis, made.” Humphreys wrote the biography when formation of the Society of the Cincinnati, composed of men who were officers in the Revolution, “focused debate in the new republic about the competing claims of individual liberty and the good of the community.”

William C. Dowling is a Professor of English at Rutgers University

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