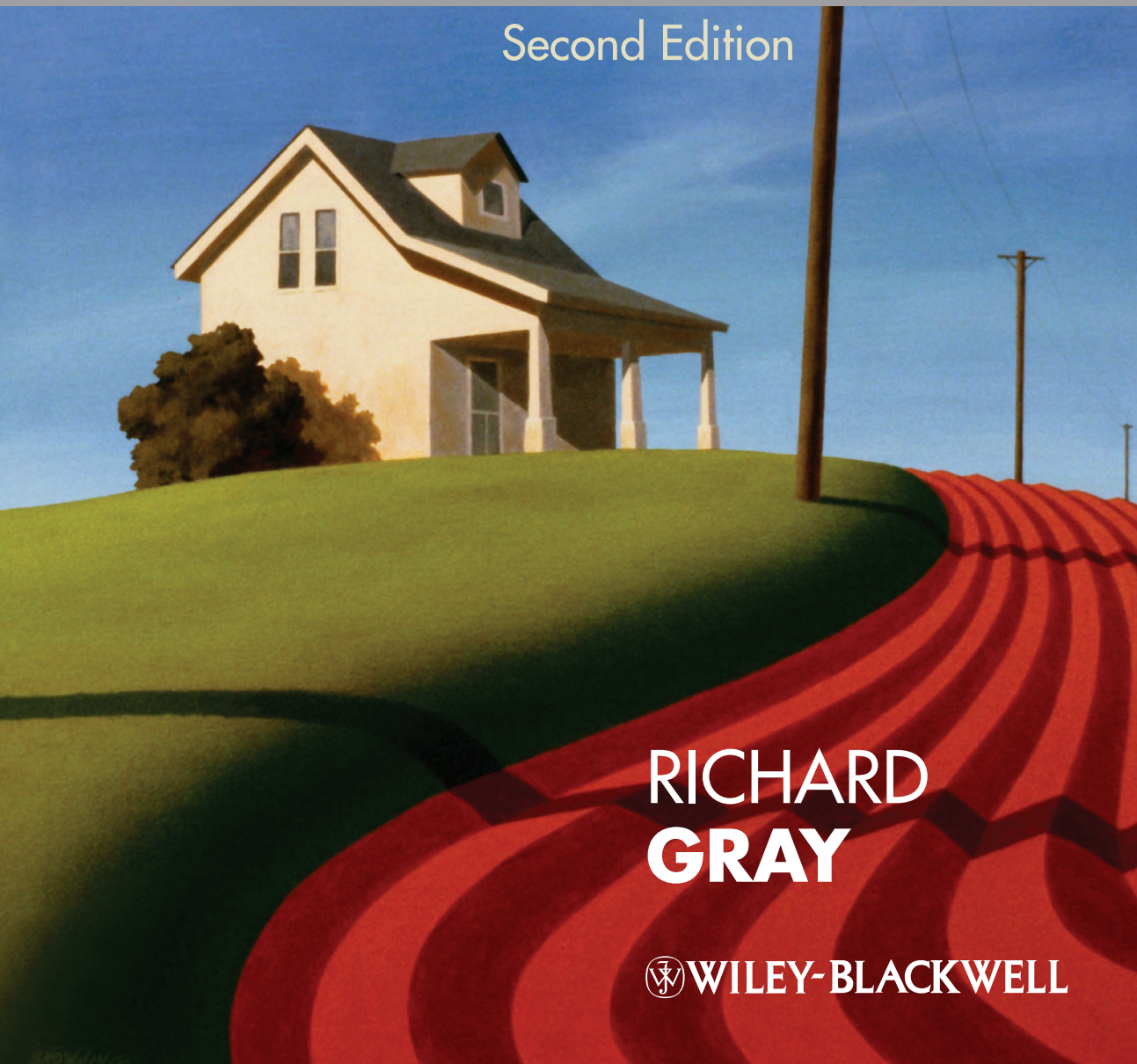


A HISTORY OF  
***american***  
*literature*

Second Edition



RICHARD  
**GRAY**

 WILEY-BLACKWELL



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To  
Sheona





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# **Acknowledgments**

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# ***The First Americans***

## *American Literature Before and During the Colonial and Revolutionary Periods*

### Imagining Eden

“America is a poem in our eyes: its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.” The words are those of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they sum up that desire to turn the New World into words which has seized the imagination of so many Americans. But “America” was only one of the several names for a dream dreamed in the first instance by Europeans. “He invented America: a very great man,” one character observes of Christopher Columbus in a Henry James novel; and so, in a sense, he did. Columbus, however, was following a prototype devised long before him and surviving long after him, the idea of a new land outside and beyond history: “a Virgin Countrey,” to quote one early, English settler, “so preserved by Nature out of a desire to show mankinde fallen into the Old Age of Creation, what a brow of fertility and beauty she was adorned with when the world was vigorous and youthfull.” For a while, this imaginary America obliterated the history of those who had lived American lives long before the Europeans came. And, as Emerson’s invocation of “America ... a poem” discloses, it also erased much sense of American literature as anything other than the writing into existence of a New Eden.

Not that the first European settlers were unaware of the strangeness of America: in October 1492, for example, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) confided to his journals that there were “a thousand kinds of herbs and flowers” in this New World, “of all of which I remain in ignorance as to their properties.” His ignorance extended, famously, into areas he was hardly aware of: convinced that he had arrived at the continent of India, he christened the people he encountered Indians. “Their language I do not understand,” admitted Columbus. And their customs he found either odd or abhorrent. The “natives” went about “with firebrands in their hands,”

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