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HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

EVANGELINE

Introduction by C. L. Bennet

and other Poems

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

EVANGELINE

and Other Poems

HENRY WADSWORTH
LONGFELLOW

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET · NEW YORK 10022

An Airmont Classic

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from the immortal literature of the world

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Introduction

No American poet has been so widely read around the world, in his own language or in translation, as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), the author of "My Lost Youth," "A Psalm of Life," "The Village Blacksmith," "Paul Revere's Ride," "The Wreck of the Hesperus," "The Courtship of Miles Standish," "Tales of a Wayside Inn," "The Song of Hiawatha," and "Evangeline." It is true, of course, that some of his best-known and most-quoted lines depend for their survival on popular sentiment, on familiar subject matter, on metres that are easily memorized rather than truly memorable, or simply upon the impact on younger minds that could not escape them in the schoolroom. Such popular appeal, having endured for a century, is no bad thing in itself, although it has had the bad effects of bringing Longfellow's reputation below his true worth and of distracting both "common" and critical readers from the best qualities of his best work. It was not until his face was scarred in the fire that took the life of his beloved second wife—a loss borne with characteristic faith and courage—that he grew the flowing beard that gave him the expected appearance of a poet; and his very cheerfulness and common sense, his orderly and productive

life, his assured place by character and inheritance in New England society—even his position as a Harvard professor—somehow combined to deprive him of a place in the high company that he deserved. That he did not belong with the highest he would have been the first to agree; but he could have claimed with justice that few among the immortals had been able to touch the minds and hearts of so many people, from youth to age in so many walks of life, and in so many countries.

Among his longer poems, there is none that has been more widely read than *Evangeline*, "the first important long poem in American literature." The metre of *Hiawatha* may strike more familiarly on the ears of more people—including many who have read neither poem—but no story in verse is better known than the tale of the peaceful life of Acadian folk in the "land of Evangeline" in what is now Nova Scotia, one of the Maritime Provinces of Canada; of the hasty dispersal and forced separations; of the search south to Louisiana, across to the Great West, and finally to a deathbed reunion in a charity hospital in Philadelphia.

Regardless of his sources, of conflicting views—depending at least to some extent on sympathies of language, race, and religion—of history and politics, and of his own opportunities for observation, Longfellow knew that he had a story of universal appeal. For historical background on the expulsion of the Acadians he used the idealized and emotional account, in French, of *Abbé Raynal* (1770), and *The History of Nova Scotia* (1829) of Thomas Chandler Haliburton, the author of "Sam Slick." Although Judge Haliburton lived within a few miles of Grand-Pré and rode circuit from the Basin of Minas to the first French settlement at Annapolis (originally Port Royal), his account was influenced by that of Raynal, so that Longfellow was doubly exposed to French sympathy for the innocent if probably recalcitrant victims of the treaty that put an end to more than a century of struggle and alternating claims for possession of the territory that their forefathers were the first Europeans to occupy, and that they had come to regard as their own. The fortunes of war and their rights by treaty justified the British in expelling colonists, how-

ever long-established, who jeopardized the new garrison at Halifax and the settlement of their own people. The mass evacuation—*"le grand dérangement"*—could hardly have been accomplished without some exercise of force, much loss of cherished possessions, and many tragic separations. Governor Lawrence, in a letter explaining his action, wrote: "The success that has attended His Majesty's Armes in Driving the French from the Encroachments they had made in the Province, Furnished me with a Favourable opportunity of Reducing the French Inhabitants of this Colony, to a Proper Obedience to His Majesty and Governmente, or forcing them to quit the Country . . ." Colonel Winslow, who directed the evacuation, used these words in his proclamation: "The Part of Duty I am now upon is what thoʰ Necessary is Very Disagreeable to my Natural make & Temper as I know it Must be Grievous to you . . ." Neither Raynal nor Haliburton told the story that inspired Longfellow to use the expulsion of the Acadians as the background for his poem. It was given to him by a Father Conolly who had heard it from a French-Canadian parishioner, told it to Hawthorne, and repeated it to Longfellow, who—with Hawthorne's permission—immediately seized upon the theme. Originally called *Gabrielle, Evangeline* was begun in November, 1845, and finished in February, 1847, on the eve of the poet's fortieth birthday.

Critics seeking to find fault rather than discover its true merits have laid three charges against the poem: its "unclassical" metre; its lack of historical and geographical accuracy; and its sentimental picture of the Acadians and their life before the expulsion. All three criticisms are beside the point. Readers today are not inclined to complain that Longfellow's metre depends on stress rather than quantity and that he makes use of trochees rather than spondees. They are content to observe that the smoothly and gravely flowing lines, while not without occasional defects, are well-suited to a sustained pastoral poem in English. Classical or not, Longfellow's opening words, "This is the forest primeval," were long ago declared to be equaled in strength and familiarity only by those that begin Vergil's *Æneid*: "Arma virumque cano." On the score of accuracy, it need

only be said that the poet was not writing a historical tract or a guide for tourists (although his poem has been so used). He gives a fair picture of the expulsion, if not of the difficulties of government that led to it. There is not, and never was, a forest primeval with pines and hemlocks; but the great salt marshes, with their dykes and sluices and *aboiteaux,* still extend between English-speaking Acadia University at Wolfville and the massive headland of Blomidon, the familiar landmark around which the swelling waters of the Bay of Fundy fill the Basin of Minas with the highest tides in the world. As for the idyllic picture of Acadian life, Longfellow knew as a scholar that the life of colonial peasants in the mid-eighteenth century was far from Arcadian, but as a poet he distinguished two "Schools of Poetry . . . the Ideal and the Actual." "The first [he wrote] endeavors to invest ideal scenes and characters with truth and reality:—The second, on the contrary, clothes the real with the ideal, and makes actual and common things radiant with poetic beauty."

The same romantic charm that invests the early scenes in Acadia and the pathos of the forced departure are continued in the second part, where the poet was again writing, as was his habit, from reading and imagination rather than from direct knowledge. Longfellow had never visited Nova Scotia; neither had he traveled down the Mississippi to Louisiana, whose Acadian people today join in reunions with their distant kinsmen in Nova Scotia (to which some of their forebears returned, but not to Grand-Pré), and in New Brunswick, where a French-language newspaper carries the name *L'Evangeline.* He had not traveled to the West, or in fact seen any of the places he describes except the hospital and neighboring churchyard in Philadelphia. But the descriptions that he drew from first-hand accounts in letters, diaries, and books of travel have been praised for their accuracy by those who know, and they are true to the story, and to the poet's imaginative purpose in telling it. Because all the principal characters are French, and the first part of the tale is set in what is now British North America, it is not always remembered that *Evangeline,* like most of Longfellow's best poems, is American. It belongs

to the period before the Revolution, when what are now the New England States and the Maritime Provinces of Canada were a Colonial unit. In the second half of the poem, the greater variety of scenes takes in much of the vast panorama of the present United States as it was then known. Longfellow's faithfulness to his own country did not in any way reduce the honor in which he was held in England, or throughout Europe. He received their highest degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge, and was the first American to be given a memorial in Westminster Abbey, where his bust in the Poets' Corner has a place near the grave of Geoffrey Chaucer, the Father of English Poetry.

C. L. Bennet

Dalhousie University

I heard the trailing garments of the Night
Sweep through her marble halls!
I saw her sable skirts all fringed with light
From the celestial walls!

I felt her presence, by its spell of might,
Stoop o'er me from above;
The calm majestic presence of the Night,
As of the one I love.

I heard the sounds of sorrow and delight,
The manifold, soft chimes,
That fill the haunted chambers of the Night,
Like some old poet's rhymes.

From the cool cisterns of the midnight air
My spirit drank repose;
The fountain of perpetual peace flows there,—
From those deep cisterns flows.

O holy Night! from thee I learn to bear
What man has borne before!
Thou layest thy finger on the lips of Care,
And they complain no more.

Peace! Peace! Orestes-like I breathe this prayer!
Descend with broad-winged flight.
The welcome, the thrice-prayed for, the most fair,
The best-beloved Night!

Burial of the Minnisink

On sunny slope and beechen swell,
The shadowed light of evening fell;
And, where the maple's leaf was brown,
With soft and silent lapse came down,
The glory, that the wood receives,
At sunset, in its golden leaves.
Far upward in the mellow light
Rose the blue hills. One cloud of white,
Around a far uplifted cone,
In the warm blush of evening shone;
An image of the silver lakes,
By which the Indian's soul awakes.
But soon a funeral hymn was heard
Where the soft breath of evening stirred
The tall, gray forest; and a band
Of stern in heart, and strong in hand,
Came winding down beside the wave,
To lay the red chief in his grave.
They sang, that by his native bowers
He stood, in the last moon of flowers,
And thirty snows had not yet shed
Their glory on the warrior's head;
But, as the summer fruit decays,
So died he in those naked days.
A dark cloak of the roebuck's skin
Covered the warrior, and within
Its heavy folds the weapons, made
For the hard toils of war, were laid;
The cuirass, woven of plaited reeds,
And the broad belt of shells, and beads.
Before, a dark-haired virgin train
Chanted the death dirge of the slain;
Behind, the long procession came
Of hoary men and chiefs of fame,
With heavy hearts, and eyes of grief,
Leading the war-horse of their chief.
Stripped of his proud and martial dress,
Uncurbed, unreined, and riderless,
With darting eye, and nostril spread,
And heavy and impatient tread,
He came; and oft that eye so proud
Asked for his rider in the crowd.