



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Selected Poems



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Longfellow
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Selected Poems

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Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow



Selected Poems

Gramercy Books
New York

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This 2001 edition is published by Gramercy Books™,
an imprint of Random House Value Publishing, Inc.,
280 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

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Random House
New York • Toronto • London • Sydney • Auckland
<http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 1807-1882.

[Poems. Selections]

Selected poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-517-08246-2

I. Title

PS2253 1992

811'.3—dc20 92-12783 CIP

15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8

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INTRODUCTION

When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow died on March 24, 1882, he was the most popular poet in the English-speaking world. Not only was he America's first professional poet, but, after his death, he was the first American whose bust was placed in the Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey in London, England.

Longfellow was born on February 27, 1807 in Portland, Maine. He came from a long, distinguished line of upperclass New Englanders. His father was a lawyer, a judge, and a member of Congress. When the young Longfellow enrolled at Bowdoin College, it was expected that he would follow in his father's footsteps. But he was adverse to the prospect of a career in law and wrote to his father, "I utterly and absolutely detest it." He wanted to write but he knew his father would not consider it a suitable profession. A compromise was eventually reached; Longfellow would become the professor of modern languages at Bowdoin, a position established expressly for him (his father was a trustee of the college). After he was graduated in 1826, he spent three years in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany preparing himself for his new post. And, indeed, he became fluent in all four languages and able to competently read Swedish, Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, Dutch, and Portuguese.

Although Longfellow felt teaching interfered with his writing, he nonetheless became a distinguished professor at Bowdoin, where he taught from 1829 until 1835, and then at Harvard as the Smith Professor of Modern Languages, a position he gave up in 1854 after he began to earn

enough money from his poetry. Longfellow was one of the great educators of the American public. He had an extensive knowledge of European literature and became one of its principal disseminators through his many translations, which included Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This knowledge was the foundation for his own poetry as a great part of his poetic genius lay in his ability to experiment with and adapt preexisting verse forms to a distinctly American context and subject matter. This can clearly be seen in *The Song of Hiawatha*, his retelling of the story of a legendary Onondaga Indian chieftain, in which the eight-syllable trochaic line used throughout was borrowed from *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, or in *Evangeline*, his pastoral tale of star-crossed lovers in Nova Scotia, in which he used the hexameter line from Classical Greek poetry.

Longfellow was an unsurpassed master of musical language. Only Tennyson and Edgar Allan Poe at their best could match his sonorous and rhythmically sensual use of words. His poetry is rarely abstract, and the vivid, descriptive imagery and the narrative form of verse he favored make it easy to read and follow. His subject matter touched on American life and its verities, be it legendary heroism as in "Paul Revere's Ride" or in the honest, upright, and hard-working man of "The Village Blacksmith."

This collection brings together Longfellow's best and most famous poems, providing a complete overview of his versatile and multifaceted genius. All the classic Longfellow selections, including "A Psalm of Life," "The Children's Hour," and "The Day Is Done," are here, as well as lesser-known but equally worthy poems, like "The Cross of Snow," a sonnet written in memory of his second wife who died tragically in a fire. Also included, in their entirety, are his two long narrative masterpieces, *Evangeline* and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*.

CHRISTOPHER MOORE

New York
1992

Shorter Lyric
and
Narrative Poems



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 warhorse 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.

They buried the dark chief; they freed
Beside the grave his battle steed;
And swift an arrow cleaved its way
To his stern heart! One piercing neigh
Arose, and, on the dead man's plain,
The rider grasps his steed again.

A PSALM OF LIFE

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!—
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each tomorrow
Find us farther than today.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

HYMN TO THE NIGHT

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!

THE WRECK OF THE HESPERUS

It was the schooner Hesperus,
That sailed the wintry sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughter,
To bear him company.

Blue were her eyes as the fairy-flax,
Her cheeks like the dawn of day,
And her bosom white as the hawthorn buds,
That ope in the month of May.

The skipper he stood beside the helm,
His pipe was in his mouth,
And he watched how the veering flaw did blow
The smoke now West, now South.

Then up and spake an old sailor,
Had sailed to the Spanish Main,
“I pray thee, put into yonder port,
For I fear a hurricane.

“Last night, the moon had a golden ring,
And tonight no moon we see!”
The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe,
And a scornful laugh laughed he.

Colder and louder blew the wind,
A gale from the Northeast,
The snow fell hissing in the brine,
And the billows frothed like yeast.