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"SAIL ON, O SHIP OF STATE!"

How Longfellow Came to Write These Lines
100 Years Ago

By HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW DANA

PRESIDENT Franklin Delano Roosevelt, at a crucial moment early in the war, sent a significant message to Winston Churchill, in which he wrote out in his own hand the following lines:

... Sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!

This quotation from Longfellow's "The Building of the Ship" aroused an instant and ardent response in Churchill and throughout England. Now, by comparing the different manuscript versions of the poem and by examining certain hitherto unpublished passages from Longfellow's journals and letters, the circumstances under which the lines originated in the poet's mind are here traced for the first time.*

It was on November 11, 1849, that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote these lines as part of a new ending to "The Building of the Ship." The poem, originally called

* A somewhat abbreviated form of this article was printed in the *Christian Science Monitor* for November 11, 1949. It is here reprinted, with the restoration of all the passages not printed in the *Monitor*, by permission of its editor, Erwin D. Canham.

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merely "The Ship," exists in two different manuscripts, a rough draft in pencil and a later copy prepared for the printer, written in ink on blue paper. Both of these are still preserved in the Longfellow House in Cambridge.

In the first manuscript version, the poem covered nearly eighty pages and gave a detailed account of the construction of the ship from the building of the little model, through the laying of the keel, the raising of the ribs of the ship, the adding of the sheathing, the putting in of the mast, the adjusting of the rudder, the forging of the anchor, the carving of the figurehead, leading up at length to the pastor's final prayer and benediction and the final launching of the ship.

The original ending, however, was a rather pessimistic one. Realizing what was the almost inevitable fate of the wooden ships that he had seen launched, Longfellow wrote:

But where, oh where,
Shall end this form so rare?
... Wrecked upon some treacherous rock,
Rotting in some loathsome dock,
Such the end must be at length
Of all this loveliness and strength!

It was apparently in this form that "The Building of the Ship" was first sent to the printers and set up in type.

Then, at the last moment, just before the volume called *The Seaside and the Fireside* was about to be printed, with "The Building of the Ship" as the leading poem, Longfellow decided to change the ending to a more optimistic one, bringing in an allusion to the Ship of State.

For Longfellow, "The Building of the Ship" was not merely a literal description of what he had so often observed in the shipyards of his native Portland; but it was also for him an allegory of the growth of the Union. Plato in his *Republic* and Horace in his *Ode* beginning "O navis!" had made brief analogies between the state and a ship.

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Longfellow, however, carried out the metaphor in a far more extended form. This was not something added at the last moment, when he substituted the new ending. On the contrary, the idea of having the Ship serve as an emblem of the Union was in his mind from the start. For, even in the first rough draft in pencil, he had written:

A goodly frame, a goodly fame,
And the UNION shall be her name!
And foul befall the traitor's hand
That would loose one bolt, or break one band
Of this gallant ship or this goodly land!

The last three of these lines were later dropped out, but the first two were kept in substance. In any case the doleful first ending

Lost, lost, wrecked and lost!
By the hurricane driven and tossed

seemed an unhappy prophecy if applied to the country as a whole.

Moreover, Mr. Longfellow had been stirred by the growing crisis in 1849 to assert a new faith in the Union already threatened with secession by the South. With the discovery of gold in California, the "Gold Rush" and the "Forty-Niners," the struggle of "Free Soil" against "Slave Soil" swept across the whole country and came to a head in the election on November 12, 1849, in which Mr. Longfellow cast his vote for the first Free Soilers to sit in Congress. Longfellow, who had published his *Poems on Slavery* some seven years earlier, now encouraged his closest friend, Charles Sumner, "to take strong ground" on the anti-slavery question.

On November 11, 1849, the day before the election, Sumner came to dinner with Longfellow, all aglow with the speech he had made on the previous evening at the Free Soil Meeting at Tremont Temple. It was on that same November 11 that Longfellow decided to write a new and

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more stirring ending to "The Building of the Ship." On a large sheet of rough paper he wrote in pencil:

Sail on! Sail on! O Ship of State!
For thee the famished nations wait!
The world seems hanging on thy fate!

This rough draft went on with lines that were later much altered:

We will not doubt, we will not fear,
But sail right on with hearts of cheer,
Our hearts, our fortunes go with thee. . . .
Sail on, nor fear to breast the sea!
Sail on, sail on forever more. . . .
Our faith and trust, that banish fears,
Are all with thee—are all with thee!

At the end of these lines was written: "Nov. 11. 1849."

This new ending was then revised in a version written in ink and sent to James T. Fields, the publisher, with a letter saying: "What think you of the enclosed, instead of the sad ending of 'The Ship'? Is it better?" The new ending was apparently approved by the publisher and set up in type in place of the old ending. Even in the proof sheets, however, Longfellow made still further changes, and after the line

Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!

in place of

For thee the famished nations wait!

he inserted at the last moment the line

Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!

By bringing in again the name of the ship "UNION" in capital letters, he echoed his earlier reference to the name "UNION," tied the whole poem together, and brought out more clearly the significance of the fact that in referring to the fate of the ship he had at heart the fate of the nation.

When the volume was published, early in December,

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1849,* "The Building of the Ship" with its "blaze of patriotic feeling at the end" aroused great enthusiasm. Thomas Wentworth Higginson called this poem of Longfellow's "the most complete and artistic which he ever wrote." The Chief Constructor of the British Navy, "one of the greatest ship-builders the world ever produced," declared it "the finest poem on ship-building that ever was." The concluding passage about the "Ship of State" was chanted by children in Faneuil Hall under the title "Ode to the Union." The great English actress, Fanny Kemble, recited the entire poem before a Boston audience of over three thousand to thunderous applause. Mr. Longfellow in his journal describes her "standing out upon the platform, book in hand, trembling, palpitating and weeping, and giving every word its true weight and emphasis. It was grandly done." As Charles Eliot Norton says, these verses "rendered a great public service, in appealing to the national sentiment of the people with such an inspiring passion of patriotic fervor as quickened faith and strengthened confidence in the already threatened union of the States."

On the threshold of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln quoted the lines beginning:

... Sail on, O Ship of State!

His secretary, Nicolay, declared: "These lines seemed to stir something deep in Lincoln. His eyes filled with tears and his cheeks were wet. He did not speak for some minutes, but finally said with simplicity: 'It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that!'"

On the threshold of World War II, a later President of the United States, in a similar great crisis, quoted these same lines. On January 19, 1941, during a visit from Wendell Willkie, whom he had defeated in the presidential

* Although published in 1849, and "entered" by Longfellow for copyright "in the year 1849," the book bears upon its title-page the date "M DCCC L." It was published in Boston by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields. For the past two months the Colby College Library's copy of this book has been on exhibition in its Treasure Room.—*Editor.*

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election two months earlier, Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote out this same passage in longhand, placing it in a sealed envelope addressed "to a certain naval person." This he gave to Mr. Willkie to take to England and deliver to Winston Churchill, who was, of course, the "certain naval person" referred to. Roosevelt knew that no one would appreciate the reference to "the Ship of State" more than the former Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill. He also realized how much this would appeal to a seafaring people like the British. In his note to Churchill he added that this quotation "applies to you people as it does to us." Churchill relayed this message in a broadcast, and almost immediately the five lines about "the Ship of State" were printed in large type in newspapers and on pictures, on cards and on calendars, both in England and in America. In response to the general interest at that time, Longfellow's original manuscript of this passage was loaned to the Library of Congress in Washington and placed on exhibition where it attracted great attention throughout the war.

Now, on the hundredth anniversary of the publication of this poem, it has been possible to trace here the gradual evolution of these lines—lines which created such a deep impression when they were first published and which were later to be quoted by at least two Presidents of the United States during great crises, national and international.



TITLES FROM THE POETRY OF

A. E. HOUSMAN

By TOM BURNS HABER

ONE minor quantitative index of a poet's greatness is the number of times other writers draw on him for titles. The practice of keeping literary christenings within the family has of late been occurring with perhaps more than normal frequency, for one rarely scans the list of a