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## LONGFELLOW COMES IN THREES

COINCIDENCE plays as capricious a role in the life of a curator of rare books as it does in Gothic novels and para-colossal movies. Our collection of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow first editions had lain dormant for eight months when, in the space of eight days, it was dramatically augmented by three volumes, each emanating from a totally different source. And thereby hangs a tale (of *Acadie*), a mystery, and a potter's wheel. Let us approach them in that sequence.

I. From the daughter of Thomas Sergeant Perry, Miss Margaret Perry of Hancock, New Hampshire, came *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie*, another addition to her father's extensive library, now housed in Colby College. The book is in its original binding of unglazed grey boards and, by all reliable specifications, the second state of the first edition. The title page carries the imprint of William D. Ticknor & Company, the date 1847, and a printer's diamond-rule between Longfellow's name and the city of publication, Boston. Later forgeries lack this authenticating ornament and align the last figure in the date carelessly. Four pages of advertisements (books by Longfellow, Tennyson, Whittier, Keats, Holmes and others), dated October 1, 1847, are tipped in on the front endleaf.

Less than a dozen copies of the first state have been recorded. The bibliographic point which distinguishes the two states is the word *Long* on line 1 of page 61. Longfellow's personal copy contains the word intact but with a slightly imperfect *g*. In the bulk of the first edition *Long* appears as *Lo*, the *ng* apparently victim of some accident to the stereotype plate. Strangely, this deficiency was not corrected until the fifth edition.

Longfellow never set foot in the valley of Grand Pré nor on the magnolia isles of the South. For details about background in the dispersion of neutral French by the British in 1755, he is said to have borrowed from works by J. C. Fremont, Charles Sealsfield, and W. I. Kip. Yet the poet himself told Horace E. Scudder that he relied mostly upon the histories of Thomas C. Haliburton and Abbé Thomas Raynal. (His daughter Alice

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later added that he consulted old annals of Philadelphia and a geographical description of Louisiana.) The inspiration came in a way so often recounted that one falters to recall it again. Briefly: in October of 1838 Nathaniel Hawthorne heard this pathetic story from a rector friend of his while walking down a Salem street. He mulled it over for several years but finally decided that "It is not in my vein: there are no strong lights and heavy shadows." Some time after, Hawthorne and his friend were dining with Longfellow in Craigie House and the topic veered once more to the Acadian lovers. Longfellow followed the narrative intently, wondered aloud why Hawthorne rejected it, then proposed: "If you have really made up your mind not to use it for a story, will you give it to me for a poem?" Hawthorne acceded, remarking: "Even if you should write a poem and I a novel, so different would be the views we would take that no one would ever recognize that they were both on the same subject." (Hawthorne was not only more dour than the average but also more acute.) Although he subsequently cursed himself dry over his magnanimity, Hawthorne never utilized the plot. After it was written and published, Longfellow thanked Hawthorne deferentially for bypassing "the pleasure of writing a prose tale which many people would have taken for poetry, that I might write a poem which many people take for prose."

Longfellow composed most of *Evangeline* at his favorite up-right desk by the window in his study which overlooked Charles River and the salt marshes. ("The portions of the poem which I write in the morning, I write chiefly standing at my desk here, so as to need no copying. What I write at other times is scrawled with a pencil on my knee in the dark.") He was not one of your jibbering romantics who agonize over every metaphor and forfeit a drop of blood with each rhyme, but this poem did cost him some minor twinges from inception to final public release. This cull of allusions to its creative progress is from his Journal in Volume II of Samuel Longfellow's *Life* (Boston, 1899):

*November 28, 1845.* Set about "Gabrielle," my idyl in hexameters, in earnest. I do not mean to let a day go by without adding something to it, if it be but a single line. F. and Sumner are both doubtful of the measure. To me it seems the only one for such a poem.

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*December 7.* I know not what name to give to . . . my new poem. Shall it be "Gabrielle," or "Celestine," or "Evangeline?"

*April 5, 1846.* After a month's cessation, resumed *Evangeline*,—the sister of mercy. I hope now to carry it on to its close without break.

*May 20.* Tried to work at *Evangeline*. Unsuccessful. Gave it up.

*July 9.* Idly busy days . . . which leave no record in verse; no advance in my long-neglected yet dearly loved *Evangeline*.

*November 17.* I said as I dressed myself this morning, "To-day at least I will work on 'Evangeline'." But no sooner had I breakfasted than there came a note . . . to be answered forthwith. And now it is past eleven o'clock and . . . I can write no more.

*December 10.* Made an effort, however, and commenced the second part of *Evangeline*. I felt all day wretched enough to give it the sombre tone of coloring that belongs to the theme.

*December 15.* Stayed at home, working a little on *Evangeline*; planning out the second part, which fascinates,—if I can but give complete tone and expression to it. Of materials for this part there is superabundance. The difficulty is to select, and give unity to variety.

*December 29.* I hoped to do much on my poem to-day; and did nothing.

*February 1, 1847.* During the day worked busily and pleasantly on *Evangeline* . . . it is nearly finished.

*February 23.* *Evangeline* is nearly finished. I shall complete it this week, together with my fortieth year.

*February 27.* *Evangeline* is ended. I wrote the last lines this morning.

*April 3.* The first canto of *Evangeline* in proofs. Some of the lines need pounding; nails are to be driven and clinched. On the whole I am pretty well satisfied.

*October 2.* Why does not Ticknor publish *Evangeline*? I am going to town to ask him that very question.

*October 30.* *Evangeline* published.

Longfellow hoped that the first batch of printed copies would be delivered to his home on Saturday, October 30, where he might present them to relatives and friends gathered for the christening of his daughter Fanny. In one of his letters he had quipped: "The baby is to be christened this morning; so that the baby and the book will be published on the same day." He was to be disappointed. The books did not arrive until

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Monday, but this did not deter him from inscribing them "October 30" as souvenirs of the occasion.

Despite his deprecations of *Evangeline*, his first poem of appreciable scope and dramatic purpose, it lifted Longfellow to a higher stratum of public esteem than he had hitherto occupied. And its popularity did not diminish over the years. Some three hundred editions—plain and illustrated, annotated and not—have found their way to market; a similar count of books and articles have praised and damned it; there have been close to one hundred fifty translations, to say naught of dramatizations, full-scale film versions, musical settings, and an opéra bouffe, to boot. A Professor Brunetta of Verona requested permission to make an interlinear translation to be used as a schoolbook. One muses whimsically on the dichotomous effect this might have produced on Longfellow the poet and Longfellow the teacher.

II. That our second Longfellow acquisition should be shrouded in mystery is supremely appropriate to its title. In the afternoon mail of an otherwise insipid day came this brown-paper packet, about 8 x 10, postmarked Van Nuys, California. Addressed with chill simplicity, it bore not the baldest clue to the identity of the sender. First we shook it; no rattle. Then we listened to it; no ticking. With a Gallic shrug—who can live forever?—we reached for the scissors. Bravado helped us rip away assorted wrappings until—ah, Golconda—through the last two sheaths of tissue, gleamed aureately *The Skeleton In Armor*. For such it was, and no doomful instrument. To this day, for good or ill, donor remains silent. Perchance, a skeleton in closet?

Our tomb—beg pardon—*tome* is the first edition of the first separate printing of the poem (James R. Osgood & Co., Boston, 1877). A small quarto, it is bound in light green cloth, title running the length of the spine in green against a gilt background. A decorative border is stamped on the back cover; the front cover stamped with identical border in black, inside which black armor and weapons surround the title and author's name in gold. The leaves are gilt-edged, unnumbered, the left-hand pages blank. Verses are printed within elaborately illustrated squares and circles, only on the right-hand pages. After

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the second, each verse alternates with an engraving of scene or character by A. V. S. Anthony. In the Introduction, Longfellow supplies a scant account of the origin of the poem and justifies his historical opinions.

As early as May 3, 1838, Longfellow confided to his Journal: "I have been looking at the old Northern Sagas, and thinking of a series of ballads or a romantic poem on the deeds of the first bold viking who crossed to this western world, with storm-spirits and devil-machinery under water." By December 1839 his title had fully jelled. A year later he informed his father that he had "prepared for the press another original ballad, which has been lying by me some time. . . . Of course I make the tradition myself; and I think I have succeeded in giving the whole a Northern air."

His urge to write an heroic ballad on the discovery of America by the Norsemen was kept lively by the existence of an ancient round tower at Newport, claimed to have been erected by Danes before the twelfth century. With Julia Ward Howe and others, he visited the museum at Fall River to see a skeleton clad in corroded brass armor, which had recently been exhumed in the vicinity. It occurred to him that a connection between the tower and the skeleton was not improbable. In a quaint reversal of his position in the Hawthorne-*Evangeline* transaction, Longfellow recommended the idea to Mrs. Howe as an excellent one for a poem. She did nothing with it. By May 24, 1839, he noted: "The more I think of it, the more I like it." Then, presto! the poem "flashed" upon him.

Although Longfellow was "very well satisfied with it," he could not work up the enthusiasm his friend Samuel Ward displayed when he read the poem. Ward insisted on taking it to New York and demanding \$50 for it, a rather steep stipend in those days. On his way to see editor Lewis Gaylord Clark, Ward stopped off at John Jacob Astor's cheerless counting house, where the considerable poet Fitz-Greene Halleck ruled as confidential clerk. When Halleck heard the lines "his eyes glistened like diamonds" and he voluntarily indited at the foot of the verses: "I unhesitatingly pronounce the above to be, in my opinion, Professor Longfellow's finest effort." Armed with this absolute certification, Ward proceeded to the offices of the

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*Knickerbocker Magazine*. Here he cornered Clark, who "stood aghast" when asked for \$50. With the practiced throb of a man more able at promises than payments, he protested that he had paid only \$25 for its predecessors. It is not known exactly how much Longfellow eventually received; the likelihood is that he got not a red cent. In retrospect he told one of his biographers he had been promised \$5 for each contribution to the magazine, but in point of fact the sum total had never quite amounted to that. Innately gracious, he continued: "The brothers Clark were noble fellows, and were struggling hard in those days for a livelihood. I have no reason to complain of what they did for me."

The poem first appeared in the *Knickerbocker* for January 1841 as "Saga of the Skeleton in Armor," garnished with marginal notes in the manner of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Longfellow next planned a collected volume to which it would lend its title, but on November 3, 1841, he wrote to Ward that it was no longer suitable, "the volume being now more than one hundred pages." Issued as *Ballads and Other Poems* the following month, its opening piece was "The Skeleton in Armor." The clumsy apparatus of lateral notes, really just a running index to the poem, was prudently excluded, to be resurrected only by Clark when he incorporated the selection in his *Knickerbocker Sketch-Book* (New York, 1845).

Critical acclaim touched new apices for this gallant attempt to reflect the viking spirit in rhythms of frigid winds and resistless waves. The historian William H. Prescott asserted it and "The Wreck of the Hesperus" as the best imaginative poetry since "The Ancient Mariner." To his other encomiums, Halleck subjoined that there was "nothing like it in the language." And Poe, who could turn irascible at the mere sight of Longfellow's name, scuttled *Ballads and Other Poems*, excepting only three "poems nearly true," one of which was "The Skeleton in Armor."

III. The third Longfellow item gained entry through that least glamorous channel—purchase. An expedient price in a bookseller's catalogue lured us, and *Kéramos* was ours. The curator's wheel, permit us to say, has come full circle. ("Turn,

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turn, my wheel! Turn round and round/Without a pause,  
without a sound.”)

Our copy of *Kéramos and Other Poems* is a duodecimo published by Houghton, Osgood & Company (Boston, 1878), in a binding of the same shade of green cloth as *The Skeleton In Armor*. A wheel surrounded by foliage is stamped on the back cover; the front cover shows a small and a large vase on an unfurled scroll of gold upon which is *Kéramos* in green, while *and Other Poems* stands in black within a black border; the author's name appears in gilt at lower right edge. A boxed advertisement of Longfellow's works faces the title page.

On May 7, 1877, Longfellow was busy “Trying to write a poem on the Potter's Wheel,—a poem of Ceramic Art,” which he completed by the last of the month. On August 3 he wrote James T. Fields “[It] has gone to Harpers, who will harp it to one hundred and fifty thousand households, or say half a million ears.” To our pedestrian ears this sounds like a monstrously large figure for a poetic audience, but it is approximately accurate and demonstrates the expanse of Longfellow's attraction in his heyday. Another striking figure is his honorarium for this piece. His Journal reports that he “Received from Harper and Brothers one thousand dollars for the poem ‘Kéramos;’ that is, for the right of first publication in their Magazine”—a flush departure from the days of threadbare Mr. Clark and his chimerical pledges.

The titular poem was first offered for public consumption in *Harper's*, December 1877, with fourteen florid illustrations not repeated in the book, but without the poet's name (although the index properly ascribed it to him). This printing, however, had been anticipated by a privately published stitched leaflet of twelve pages (Cambridge, 1877), without title page, and of which but six copies have been traced. The text of this minuscule edition differs somewhat from the magazine version, Longfellow evidently altering some score of lines in the interval. Another candidate for precedence is the London edition, deposited in the British Museum perhaps a couple of days before the first American issue, out on May 1, 1878. Apropos this welter, Longfellow said: “I no longer feel *la procellosa e*



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*trepida gioja* of sending out a book into the world. . . . Previous publication in Magazines certainly takes away from the freshness and flavor of a book." It is no wonder his first fine careless rapture evaporated. At least a dozen of the poems in this volume had already appeared in periodicals, and others had been written or translated for inclusion in his multi-volumed series, *Poems of Places*.

Two tributes of diametric tinge accrued to Longfellow after the launching of *Kéramos and Other Poems*. (1) A London publisher paid him the dubious compliment of pirating from it "The White Czar," collecting a miscellany of Longfellow magazine verses, and bringing them out—sans authorization—as *The White Czar: and Other Poems* in the same year. (2) Ravished by a reading of *Kéramos*, Richard Briggs, a Boston dealer in fine pottery, voyaged to the establishment of Josiah Wedgwood & Sons in Staffordshire expressly to commission a "Longfellow Jug" in justly celebrated Wedgwood ware. The finished product is a marvel of decorative sentiment. One of its two major panels is a portrait of the poet; the other quotes the familiar first verse of the poem. The remaining surface is replete with scrolls intertwined by flowers, bearing titles of Longfellow's most popular poems.

Thus endeth an epic of eight days. In an era of cold wars and hot rockets, *epic* is brave talk. Might we not be accused of arrant triviality, of squandering priceless time in so long savoring such small fruit? All the customary validations for the humanities surge to the fore, but repetition wearies. For every Robert Louis Stevenson who scorns books as "a mighty bloodless substitute for life," is there not a James Russell Lowell to expostulate for the "sense of security in an old book?" Verily. And let us unconditionally remember that when force and fear spend themselves—*littera scripta manet*.