

December 1981

The Hiawatha Saga: Bayard Taylor's Possible Contribution

David W. Berry

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 17, no.4, December 1981, p.256-258

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.

The Hiawatha Saga: Bayard Taylor's Possible Contribution

by DAVID W. BERRY

WHEN first published in 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha* stirred a storm of interest. Four thousand copies of the work were sold that November 10 when it initially appeared on bookstore shelves, and within half a year the sale had reached more than 50,000 copies. Critics also took an interest in *The Song of Hiawatha*, some focusing on a controversy over the origin of the work, a controversy that brought Longfellow himself into the debate. Some critics said that *Hiawatha* was indebted to the Finnish epic *Kalevala*. Longfellow denied this, but he did acknowledge borrowing some of his material on Indian legends from Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's book, *Algic Researches*.¹ Since then, critics have turned up additional sources for *Hiawatha* such as John Heckewelder's history of Indians,² and the late Ernest J. Moyne even went so far as to show the relationship between the meter in *Hiawatha* and the meter in Anton Schiefner's German translation of *Kalevala*.³ Yet, in all of this criticism, much of which is redundant, no critic mentions Bayard Taylor as a possible influence on Longfellow's poem.

Apparently there is a connection between Longfellow's epic and Taylor since canto v of *Hiawatha* contains the same story line as "Mon-da-min," a poem published by Taylor two years earlier. The story is derived from an American Indian legend of the Odjibwa tribe which was available to both poets in a chapter of *Algic Researches* (1836) entitled "Mon-Dah-Min; or, the Origin of Indian Corn." The legend tells of a young Indian fasting in the forest who is repeatedly visited by a shining god from the heavens and challenged to a wrestling match. The god predicts his own fatal defeat and gives the Indian instructions to bury him and tend his grave. During the final wrestling match the Indian does kill the god and tends the grave of Mon-da-min all summer. In the autumn corn grows from the grave.

It does not seem likely that two poets living in the same era wrote poems about the very same Odjibwa legend from Schoolcraft's book by mere coincidence. More probably there was an exchange of ideas be-

1. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Andrew Hilen (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), III, 509 and 541.

2. Joseph Pronechen, "The Making of 'Hiawatha,'" *New York Folklore Quarterly*, XXVIII, 151-60.

3. Ernest J. Moyne, "Longfellow's 'Hiawatha,'" *American Literature*, XXV, 87-89.

tween the two, particularly when one considers that Longfellow and Taylor were acquaintances. Taylor was in the habit of sending copies of his works to the Cambridge poet and may have sent him *A Book of Romances, Lyrics, and Songs* (1852), containing "Mon-da-min." Longfellow wrote Taylor on October 4, 1854, "You know very well already how welcome you and your writings always are under this roof."⁴ In their letters the two authors occasionally exchanged advice about writing poetry. In addition to written communication, Taylor visited his New England friend at least three times before the completion of *Hiawatha*: on September 14, 1846, October 11, 1848, and even December 1, 1854, the period when Longfellow was composing his epic, perhaps then nearing work on canto v, the canto about Mon-da-min.⁵ (Longfellow began writing *Hiawatha* around June 25, 1854 and finished it March 29, 1855).⁶

Another significant point is that Indian legends were not a common source for Longfellow's poetry. Prior to *Hiawatha*, he had written only one poem about the American Indian, "Burial of Minnisink," which was penned by the poet when he was only a teenager. It is a forty-eight-line poem which lacks real detail, names or legendary material. Not until *Hiawatha* did Longfellow really write about Indians; thus, when he began his epic in 1854, it was a new phase for him. From the earlier date of publication, the use of the same material, and the familiar relationship between the two poets, it appears that Bayard Taylor influenced Longfellow (either vocally during one of his visits or by example, having written "Mon-da-min") to write about Indians, particularly about the legend of Mon-da-min. Taylor may even have introduced Schoolcraft's book to Longfellow.

Although Taylor apparently influenced the material that Longfellow used, he had no influence on the latter's poetics. "Mon-da-min" is composed of iambic pentameter, rhyming ABABCC; whereas, *Hiawatha* is of unrhyming trochaic tetrameter. Taylor complimented the New England poet's meter in a letter to him, "It is the measure in which a Saga should be written." Taylor noted that he had "gone over the same authorities from which you drew your material," perhaps reminding Longfellow, and contrasted "Mon-da-min" with canto v of *Hiawatha*, "My own version is perhaps too ambitious, and hence too solemn and stately for the simple beauty of the story. Yours seems to me a little too sportive."⁷ Nevertheless, Longfellow's version has been far more successful with both the public and the critics.

4. Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, eds., *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), I, 289.

5. For Sept. 14, 1846 see Hilen, III, 126. For Oct. 11, 1848 see Samuel Longfellow, *The Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (1891; rpt. New York: Greenwood, 1969), II, 133. For Dec. 1, 1854 see Samuel Longfellow, II, 278.

6. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Longfellow's Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), p. 113.

7. Samuel Longfellow, II, 293-94.

Despite the fact that no critic has dealt with the relationship between the two versions, it appears evident that there was an exchange of ideas and that America's best-loved, Indian epic owes a debt to Bayard Taylor. This should not lessen Longfellow's accomplishment, however, for as Taylor said to the Cambridge poet in his letter of November 14, 1875, "Unless one poet helps another in this country, where shall we get encouragement?"⁸

Westminster Schools
Atlanta, Georgia

8. Hansen-Taylor and Scudder, II, 675.