

Chapter XII: Longfellow's Triumph.

John Morley's estimate of Longfellow is that he is the only poet America ever gave to the world. People generally do not have this opinion of him, and it is well to know that there is a reason extrinsic of the merits of his work.

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When the Transcendental Movement started, its disciples looked around for a poet to adopt its principles; and naturally their gaze fell upon the man who was gaining most fame at the time, Longfellow. Happily, he had too much sense to be attracted to this movement which utterly disregarded the conventions of literature, and instead they had to take Emerson and make a poet out of him.

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In this great struggle Emerson and his clique did everything in their power to detract from the popularity of Longfellow, but although he stood absolutely alone, he was able to withstand their attacks. They spoke about the dignity of man, without referring his majesty to God. They spoke about the "far horizon of time" without any thought of immortality. Longfellow always had in mind the wisdom of Divine Providence.

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Longfellow has sometimes been commended as the poet of our early national life, but Longfellow never wrote a line about our early national life. He was a world poet. The things about which he wrote have been the topics of many another songster in many different tongues. Emerson thought himself the echo of the lost Egyptian ages. He directed his poetry "to cryptograms." Mrs. Margaret Fuller, while assisting the Emerson boom with all her might could hardly speak patiently of Longfellow, and would never mention one of his poems.

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This is the prejudice that is working against Longfellow: it persists because we are ignorant. We should read all of his work, good, bad and indifferent. (Of the works of any poet, not more than ten per cent ever live.) We shall find running through them all his belief in Providence and immortality, his deep respect for religion, especially Christianity. (Longfellow was not a Christian, but a Unitarian.) He describes Christ and the Catholic Church with touching reverence and sublime regard.

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Hemmed in by their own conceit, his critics did not realize that over in England one of the greatest religious movements of modern times was in progress and that its direction was towards the Catholic Church. Longfellow had caught the echo. His critics meanwhile ran about like a lot of ninnyes saying: "musn't sing, birdie; musn't sing."

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Providence intervened. Fifteen years after Longfellow began to write, the great wave of Catholic immigration to this country began, and before he knew it Longfellow had the grandest audience of modern times outside of Tennyson, and he became, unconsciously, their spokesman.