

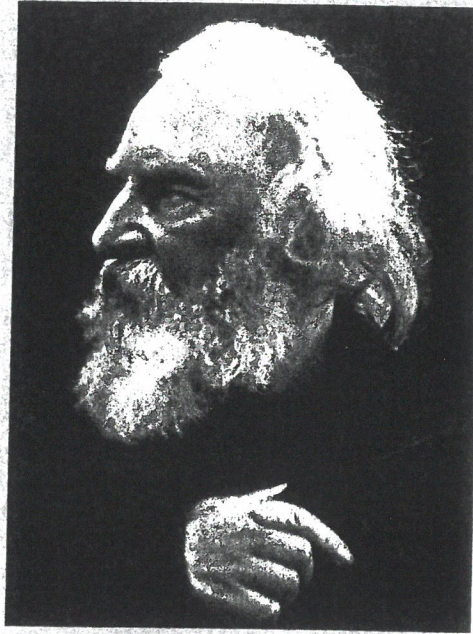
# Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

(1807–1882)

Longfellow was and still is the most popular poet America has ever produced. With the possible exception of Robert Frost (page 790), no twentieth-century poet has ever become a household name, let alone achieved the kind of recognition suggested by the word *popular*.

Longfellow's immense popularity was based largely on his appeal to an audience hungry for sermons and lessons. That audience wanted assurances that their cherished values would prevail over the new forces of history—such as industrialization—that were threatening to destroy them. The values Longfellow endorsed were positive forces in the making of the American character, but his tendency to leave these values unexamined led to poetry that often offered easy comfort at the expense of illumination.

Born in Portland, Maine, Longfellow was never far from the rocks and splashing waves of the Atlantic Coast or from the cultural and religious influences of the well-to-do families who lived north of Boston. Longfellow's early interest in foreign languages and literature led him naturally to an academic career. He attended Bowdoin College (where Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of his classmates) and then pursued three additional years of study in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. When Longfellow returned, he joined the Bowdoin faculty, married, and began to write a series



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron.

Courtesy of George Eastman House.

of sketches about his experiences abroad.

During a second European trip in 1835, Longfellow's young wife died of a miscarriage. When he returned to America, the young widower became a professor of French and Spanish at Harvard; seven years later he married Frances (Fanny) Appleton, whom he had met in Europe after his first wife's death. He settled into eighteen years of happily married life, fathering six children and producing some of his most celebrated poetry, much of it

based on American legends, such as *Evangeline* (1847) and *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855).

By 1854, Longfellow had devoted himself to writing full time. Seven years later, though, a second tragedy struck: His wife, Frances, died in a fiery accident at home, when a lighted match or hot sealing wax ignited her summer dress. Longfellow tried to save her, smothering the flames with a rug, and was badly burned himself.

Longfellow now devoted himself to his work with a religious and literary zeal. By the end of his long and productive life, he had become for Americans the symbolic figure of the Poet: wise, graybearded, haloed with goodness, and living in a world of undiminished romance. Two years after his death, Longfellow's marble image was unveiled in the Poets' Corner in London's Westminster Abbey. He was the first American to be so honored.