



Longfellow: A Rediscovered Life

Charles C. Calhoun

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Charles C. Calhoun's Longfellow gives life, at last, to the most popular American poet who ever lived, a nineteenth-century cultural institution of extraordinary influence and the "one poet average, nonbookish Americans still know by heart" (Dana Gioia).

Calhoun's Longfellow emerges as one of America's first powerful cultural makers: a poet and teacher who helped define Victorian culture; a major conduit for European culture coming into America; a catalyst for the Colonial Revival movement in architecture and interior design; and a critic of both Puritanism and the American obsession with material success. Longfellow is also a portrait of a man in advance of his time in championing multiculturalism: He popularized Native American folklore; revived the Evangeline story (the foundational myth of modern Acadian and Cajun identity in the U.S. and Canada); wrote powerful poems against slavery; and introduced Americans to the languages and literatures of other lands.

Calhoun's portrait of post-Revolutionary Portland, Maine, where Longfellow was born, and of his time at Bowdoin and Harvard Colleges, show a deep and imaginative grasp of New England cultural history. Longfellow's tragic romantic life-his first wife dies tragically early, after a miscarriage, and his second wife, Fannie Appleton, dies after accidentally setting herself on fire-is illuminated, and his intense friendship with abolitionist and U.S. senator Charles Sumner is given as a striking example of mid-nineteenth-century romantic friendship between men. Finally, Calhoun paints in vivid detail Longfellow's family life at Craigie House, including stories of the poet's friends-Hawthorne, Emerson, Dickens, Fanny Kemble, Julia Ward Howe, and Oscar Wilde among them.

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Randal Revilla:

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