

‘I HEARD THE BELLS ON CHRISTMAS DAY’

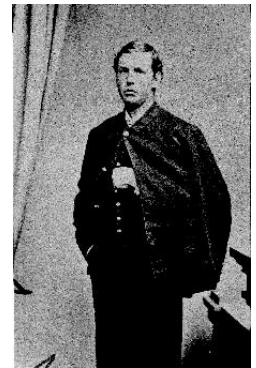


The 19th century Unitarian poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), the author of such as “Paul Revere’s Ride,” “The Song of Hiawatha,” “Evangeline,” and “The Village Blacksmith,” knew personal tragedy. His first wife, Mary Potter, died of a miscarriage in 1835. His second wife, Frances Appleton, died of burns when her clothing caught fire in 1861. In attempting to put out the flames, Longfellow suffered severe burns to his face, which he hid for the rest of his life under a full beard. The poet expressed his deep love and lasting grief in his sonnet “The Cross of Snow” (1879).



Longfellow was also sickened by the proclivity of human inhumanity, and so was an ardent Abolitionist. Yet he also yearned for reconciliation between North and South, as among all the human family. He never gave up his hope for harmony and understanding among people.

Soon came the Civil War. In 1863 the eldest son, Charles Appleton Longfellow (1844-1893) quietly stole away from home to join the Union Army. Charley was an adventurous but careless lad of 17, who was a good shot but had already shot off his left thumb by accident. HWL, as Charley referred to his father, was a single parent with five other children to care for, but he constantly worried about the safety and welfare of his oldest. Charley survived typhoid fever and malaria, was almost blown away by a cannon ball at Culpepper, and was shot through the shoulder at New Hope Church, the bullet just missing his spinal column. On December 8, 1863, Charley was brought back to the Longfellow home in Cambridge, Mass., to recover under his father’s care.



Nursing his son as Christmas approached, HWL contemplated his world, and penned a poem that soon became a Christmas carol, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.”

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet
The words repeat,
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

.....

*Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
and with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!*

.....

*And in despair I bowed my head;
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,*

*“For hate is strong
And mocks the song,
Of peace on earth, good will to men?”*

*Then pealed the bells more loud and deep;
God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men!*

Ref: Roberto Rabe, “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,”
http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/longfellow_bio.html; Robert Girard Carroon, “The Christmas
Carol Soldier,” <http://suvcw.org/mollus/art005.htm>.

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