Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: America's No. 1 Literary Celebrity

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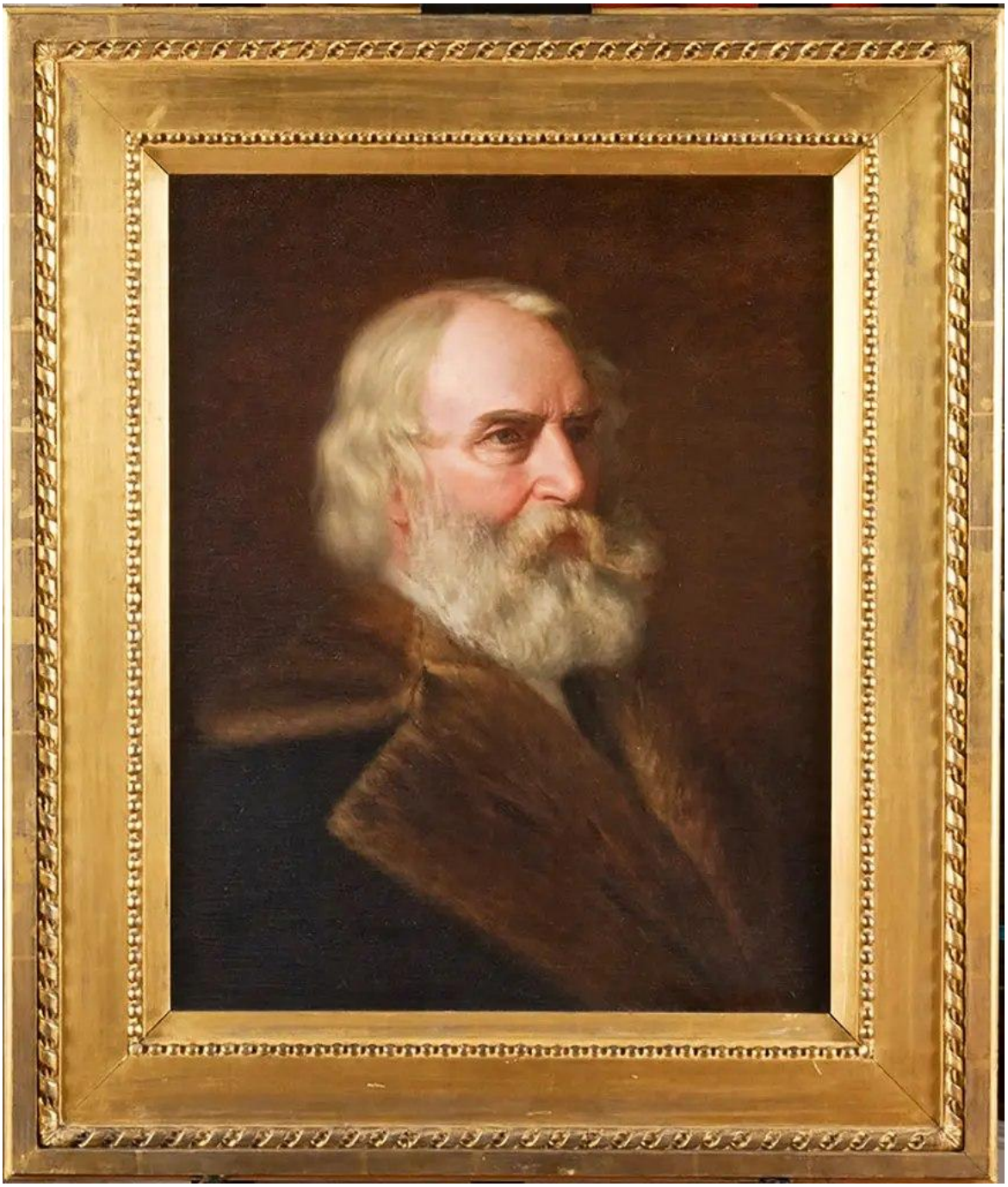

A portrait of the poet by his son Ernest Longfellow, 1876.Credit...Longfellow House

CROSS OF SNOW

A Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

By Nicholas A. Basbanes

Literary reputations are seldom secure, and with the passing of time tend to sink rather than rise. Even so, the case of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow seems extreme. At his death, in 1882, he wasn't just the most famous poet in America but an international celebrity, translated into dozens of languages, admired by Dickens, Ruskin, even Queen Victoria. Readers loved his clarity, his accessibility, his storytelling. But by the time of Longfellow's centennial, in 1907, he was already beginning to be dismissed as old-fashioned, and nowadays, if he's remembered at all, it's mostly as the author of lines almost laughable in their badness: "By the shores of Gitche Gumee, /By the shining Big-Sea-Water"; "I shot an arrow into the air, /It fell to earth, I knew not where"; "Thy fate is the common fate of all, /Into each life some rain must fall."

Nicholas A. Basbanes thinks that the tumble in Longfellow's reputation was not the natural, inevitable result of changing tastes. In his new biography, "Cross of Snow," he argues, on not much evidence, that Longfellow was done in by a cabal of modernists and New Critics who conspired to expel him from their snobbish, rarefied canon. So his book, which has at times a defensive, anti-elitist chip on its shoulder, is a rehab mission of sorts, and seeks to restore Longfellow in our present eyes mostly just by reminding us how important he was back in his own day. That the poetry still stands up Basbanes takes pretty much as a given, and "Cross of Snow" (the title comes from one of Longfellow's better poems, a sonnet about his dead wife) devotes much of its attention to Longfellow's personal and domestic life. This is probably just as well, for, whatever you think of Longfellow the writer, Longfellow the person is hard to dislike.

He was both exceptionally talented and exceptionally decent. He was a gifted versifier — even his harshest critics grant that at least — accomplished in just about every poetic form, and he was a formidable linguist. He spoke at least eight languages, including Danish, Swedish and Finnish, and could read and write half a dozen more. Practically single-handed, he introduced America to European literature, Dante especially. Arguably his greatest achievement is not his own poetry but his translation of all three books of "The Divine Comedy," highly regarded even today for its accuracy and fidelity.

Longfellow was also famously generous and hospitable, and in the course of a very long career managed to acquire very few enemies. (Chief among them was an envious Poe, who accused him of plagiarism, by which he probably meant not outright copying so much as borrowing themes and ideas from European sources.) He had a wide circle of friends, including Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., William Dean Howells and the abolitionist politician Charles Sumner, and the fatherly sentiments in that sentimental poem "The Children's Hour" weren't just a put-on. Unlike a lot of men of his generation, he really did enjoy his family and disliked being apart from them.

A portrait of Fanny Appleton by G.P.A. Healy, 1834.Credit...Longfellow House

Longfellow married twice, the first time, in 1831, to a young Portland woman named Mary Potter. He was 24 then and a professor at Bowdoin College, his alma mater, which had encouraged him to wander around Europe for three years and learn some Romance languages so he could come back and teach them. In 1835 he was offered a better professorship at Harvard, but before taking it up, he set off again for Europe to pick up a few more languages. Mary accompanied him, not without misgivings, and died in Rotterdam of complications from a miscarriage. Heartbroken, Longfellow nevertheless pressed on with his travels and in Switzerland he met up with a large party led by Nathan Appleton, a wealthy Bostonian, and quickly fell in love with Appleton's 18-year-old daughter.

Fanny Appleton was brilliant, beautiful, exceptionally cultured and well educated for a woman of her generation, and she was rich, though that doesn't seem to have mattered much to Longfellow. She liked Longfellow well enough as a friend but not as a suitor and rebuffed his many advances. He didn't help his cause any when, in 1839, he published "Hyperion," a prose work that's part rambling European travelogue and part moony, overwritten romance about a grief-stricken young American who falls hard for an unattainable beauty who is a thinly disguised version of Fanny Appleton. He talks about her in language like this: "Every step, every attitude was graceful, and yet lofty, as if inspired by the soul within. Angels in the old poetic philosophy have such forms; it was the soul itself imprinted on the air. And what a soul was hers!" Fanny hated the notoriety, and also didn't think much of the writing. She said of "Hyperion": "It is desultory, objectless, a thing of shreds and patches like the Author's mind."

Four years later, they reconciled and were married, and not even Basbanes, who seems to know everything there is to know about Longfellow, can explain what changed. The marriage, in any event, was singularly happy on both sides until 1861, when Fanny died in a grotesque accident, setting her dress on fire as she sealed an envelope with wax and a candle. (Longfellow badly burned his hands and face trying to save her, and grew that snowy patriarchal beard we see in late photographs to conceal the scars.)

Basbanes, who began as a newspaper reporter, is a painstaking researcher, the kind who turns every page, as Robert Caro would say, and he has benefited from access to lots of material previously unavailable. He is also the kind of researcher who, having discovered something, can't bear not to cram it in. Aside from some clunky and ungrammatical writing and some unfortunate, Longfellow-like word choices ("verily," for instance, and "penned" as a substitute for "wrote"), this is his book's chief drawback: At times it feels overstuffed and disproportionate, devoting far too much space, for example, to Fanny's teenage travel journal and its gushing enthusiasms.

And for all his effort Basbanes hasn't discovered anything that seems likely to change our current estimation of Longfellow as someone who matters historically but is at best a minor writer — noteworthy more for a few small lyrics than for any of the big narrative poems, and certainly not on a level with the truly great poets of his era:

Whitman, Dickinson, even Melville (whose poetic reputation, unlike Longfellow's, has lately enjoyed an uptick). Without meaning to, though, "Cross of Snow" offers some clues to why Longfellow's work lacks their fervor, obduracy and the striking originality that so often verges on strangeness. Longfellow was moderate to a fault. He "hated excess or extremes," his son Ernest said, and disliked taking a stand about anything. He was antislavery, for example, but disappointed many of his friends by not being more outspoken. And his journals — at least the ones quoted by Basbanes — show a surprising lack of interiority or introspection. He seems utterly comfortable with who he is and what he has done, and you sense, in fact, that he didn't especially aspire to greatness. What he wanted was to be popular, to be read and understood by everyone, and he achieved that more than any American writer before or since. He was exactly the poet he wanted to be.

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By Nicholas A. Basbanes
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