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The Longfellow and Their Books



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his study at Craige House, c. 1875; photo by George K. Warren



Ambrotype of Frances
"Fanny" Elizabeth
Appleton Longfellow



Daguerreotype of
Fanny Longfellow
reading to her children

Nicholas A. Basbanes

Reading together as intellectual equals and doing so often was central to the marriage of the celebrated nineteenth-century poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) and his beloved wife of 18 years, Frances "Fanny" Elizabeth Appleton Longfellow (1817-1861).

"I particularly love Fanny's face by lamplight as she sits reading," Longfellow wrote in his journal on June 22, 1846, a few weeks before they would celebrate their third anniversary. The selection for that evening's meeting of the minds had been Casimir Delavigne's *Don Juan d'Autriche*: "which the author calls a comedy, but which we should call a melodrama,"

he offered in his commentary, and added a postscript: "I did not think Delavigne had so much blood in him." A week before that there was this: "A true summer morning, warm and breezy. Fanny sat under the linden tree and read me Heine's poems, while I lay on a haystack." A few days after that, they enjoyed "a charming sketch" – "Fire Worship" – written by Henry's good friend and Bowdoin College classmate, Nathaniel Hawthorne, which he deemed "very well done."

That Christmas, another close acquaintance, Ralph Waldo Emerson, sent Longfellow a copy of his poems, prompting an immediate response. "My wife read it to me last night. It gave us both the highest and keenest delight. A precious volume! The only bad thing about

it is, that I shall never get my wife to read any more of my poems, you have fascinated her with yours!" A few weeks later, on a snowy Sunday afternoon in February, Henry took a break from his work on *Evangeline* to relax with Fanny and their mutual friend Charles Sumner, a regular weekend houseguest. "Tasted the sweet luxury of sitting all day by the fireside and hearing someone read," Henry recorded. "Sumner delivered to us from an arm-chair his lecture on 'Algerine Slavery,' which is exceedingly clever, simple, and striking."

Henry's private journal, kept faithfully by him for more than 50 years, is replete with pithy observations about the books he was

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reading, studying, teaching, or translating into English during the 25 years he worked as a professor of modern European languages, seven of them at Bowdoin, 18 at Harvard College. He continued the regimen after he and Fanny were married and had taken up residence in a magnificent Georgian mansion on Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The house was notable for having served as the official residence and command headquar-

Beautiful in Henry's eyes, to be sure, but also highly cultivated, sharp-witted, impressively artistic, multi-lingual, and formidably well-read, with an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge. In disclosing his new-found obsession for this remarkable woman, who was just 18 years old when they met, to one of his closest confidantes several months later, he described Fanny as a "glorious and beautiful being – young – and a woman *not* of talent but of *genius!*"



Longfellow's study; photo by Nicholas A. Basbanes

ters for George Washington during the Siege of Boston (1775-1776).

How Henry and Fanny became a couple is central to the narrative of my recent book, [*Cross of Snow: A Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*](#) (Knopf). It is a compelling story that involves seven years of frustrated courtship and the ill-advised writing of *Hyperion*, a thinly-veiled fictional "romance," as he called it, in which a rejected suitor pines for what was then the "stately dark lady" of his dreams.

As recalled in *Hyperion*, the first impression that the Henry character, Paul Flemming, has of Mary Ashburton, his female counterpart, is of a woman he hears conversing in the dimly lit common room of a Swiss inn, her words "spoken in a voice so musical and full of soul" that they come to him as "a whisper from heaven." The woman leaves the room before Flemming can see her face, leading him to seek out her identity. He "would fain have sat and listened for hours to the sound of that unknown voice," he rhapsodizes. "He felt sure, in his secret heart, that the being from whom it came was beautiful."

When the two first crossed paths in July 1836, Henry was still reeling from the loss eight months earlier in Holland of his 23-year-old first wife, Mary, following a miscarriage. He and Mary were six months into a rigorous European trip at the time, the goal being to master half-a-dozen languages and literatures to go along with the half-dozen others he had acquired in Europe a decade earlier. In both of those journeys, Henry bought books for himself and the colleges he represented. He picked up tips and nuances of the antiquarian trade early on in Madrid from the expatriate American bookseller, Obadiah Rich, that would stay with him forever.

A few months after Mary's death, Henry informed George Ticknor, the professor he would be replacing at Harvard, that three trunks of new acquisitions he had shipped to Boston from Rotterdam had been lost with the sinking of the brig *Hollander* "in sight of her port," the titles "rare and curious Dutch books; the harvest of a month's toil among the book-stalls of Amsterdam." Though the con-

signment was insured, he found the loss lamentable. “The books were really too good to be sunk; they were food for worms – not fishes. And so goes the entire collection of Dutch literature.” Six years later, and deeply depressed with Fanny’s steadfast rejection, he traveled to Germany for some restorative “water-cures” at a spa on the Rhine, but he still found time to go book hunting. “I know not how it is,” he wrote home of some materials he had just sent shipped off to Boston, “but during a voyage I

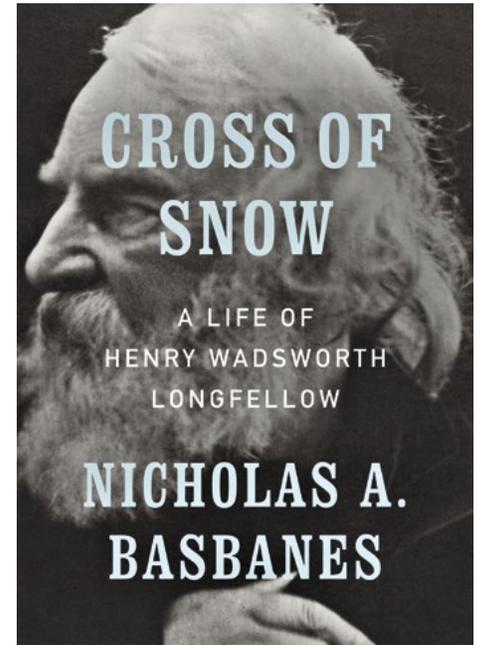
Fanny had been taught by eminent private tutors from early childhood and was fluent in several languages. She dazzled Henry with her on-the-spot translation of a German ballad into English – superior, even, he acknowledged, to his own. A voracious reader, she impressed him with her critical acumen, commenting boldly in one spirited exchange on the merits of Nathaniel Parker Willis, a writer from Maine they both knew personally. She allowed that while Willis displayed occasional “flashes” of talent, they were

the book-length narrative poems *Evangeline*, *a Tale of Acadie* (1847), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858), and numerous stand-alone classics such as “The Building of the Ship” (1849), “The Children’s Hour” (1860), and “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1861). Popular before their marriage, Henry’s celebrity quickly reached new heights as his fame spread worldwide.

He wasted no time putting Fanny to work on his literary projects, most productively, in her



Longfellow’s Craigie Library; photo by Nicholas A. Basbanes



collect books as a ship does barnacles. These books are German, Flemish, and French.”

Henry spent the winter and spring of 1835-36 studying at Heidelberg University, finding solace, he would write in *Hyperion*, by having “buried” himself in “books, old dusty books.” Deciding, finally, that he needed a break, he set out on a summer excursion through the Rhineland that took him eventually to Switzerland and the serendipitous meeting at Interlaken with Fanny, then traveling through Europe with her family. Henry readily accepted an invitation from Nathan Appleton, her father, a Massachusetts textile manufacturer, to travel for a fortnight with his entourage, reading aloud with them during lengthy carriage rides from the ample supply of books they had brought along for just that purpose. There is nothing in either of their journals to indicate any kind of epiphany that might have fomented a lasting relationship; what both did record of their interactions, however, suggests an appreciation each had for the other’s mind.

little more than “well-polished prettinesses” that were at best superficial and imitative. “If one could separate the man’s personal character, so false, so flimsy, from his poetry,” she continued, holding nothing back, “I might admire him much more – his best thoughts now seem but affectations, mimics of other people’s best garnished out his own way.”

Shortly after taking up his new duties at Harvard, and after the Appletons had returned to Beacon Hill, Henry began calling on Fanny with the hope of gaining her affections. Soundly rebuffed – “for my love [she] gives me only friendship,” he lamented – he wrote *Hyperion* with the utterly misplaced thought that it might improve his prospects. Seven years would pass before they became husband and wife, devoted to each other from the day they exchanged vows on July 13, 1843. “It is part of our theory of life,” Henry would write to an admirer in Europe, “never to be separated.”

On a professional level, their rapprochement was similarly transformative, ushering in 18 prolific years of literary output that included

words, as a “pretty active spur upon his Pegasus.” Her journal documenting their first year of marriage describes a frenetic pace that included his writing of a “peace poem” that she, a lifelong pacifist, had urged he take on after a visit to the armory in Springfield, Massachusetts, during their honeymoon. For a central image, she proposed that he use the thousands of long-barreled muskets racked there in rising stacks to suggest organ pipes “for the fearful musician Death to play upon.” The result was “The Arsenal at Springfield,” a nine-stanza poem that became a rallying cry for the antiwar movement propounded most vigorously in the North by Charles Sumner, who would in time become the most vigorous champion of abolition in the United States Senate.

Fanny worked closely at this time too with Henry on a two-volume anthology – *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1844) – that would be the first of its kind in the nation, some 900 pages containing material selected from 10 European literary traditions that he translated

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into English; the original manuscript in the Houghton Library shows numerous textual notations in her hand. She also contributed some commentary: "Wrote a little in Swedish preface," she noted one morning; another entry proudly described the mammoth effort as "our book."

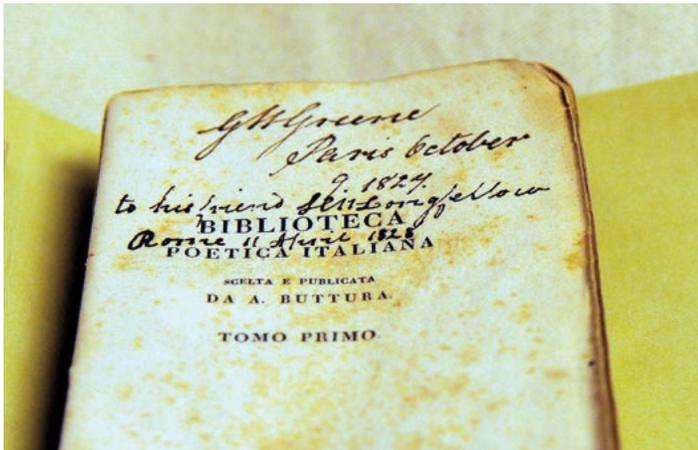
There was a satisfying rhythm in their routine. A day spent on Icelandic literature was balanced with a reading of *Les mystères de Paris*,

the classrooms. "I have proposed, à la Portia," she told her sister-in-law, making reference to a famous scene in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: "disguising myself in male attire to hear them, but have now resigned myself to getting a rehearsal only."

Of the 812 letters Fanny wrote known to survive, 225 were written to her closest friend from childhood, Emmeline Austin Wadsworth, and they are indispensable for any understanding of her opinions and con-

cerns, and for a period unable to resume the writing of original poetry. It was at this time that he returned to a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* he had begun years earlier. He became the first American to do a complete rendering of the epic poem into English.

Their residence, known now as Longfellow House – Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site, owned by the National Park Service – is distinctive for retaining its original contents, including the books. Henry



Dante inscribed by Greene



Dante gift from G.W. Greene with Longfellow signature

a serial novel by the French writer Eugène Sue that had appeared in 90 parts in "Journal des débats" over the previous 18 months. Fanny confessed being "sickened at heart with its horrors," shocked that "such hells of infamy exist in the souls God has made." They were meanwhile making steady progress with *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, the newly released best-seller written by Fanny's former Beacon Hill neighbor, the historian William Hickling Prescott. A day of editing page proofs was followed by Fanny reading aloud a commentary in the *North American Review* on Rufus Griswold's *The Poets and Poetry of America* by the up-and-coming Boston essayist Edwin P. Whipple, which she judged to be "brilliant and a remarkable production" for a young man of just 22 – "but too many youthful arabesques if one must be critical."

Fanny also was amanuensis for many of Henry's letters – he suffered from severe eye strain at this time, brought on, he thought, from too much reading at night by lamplight – and listened carefully to the lectures he prepared for his Harvard students, complaining at one point that she could not attend any in person because women were not allowed in

victions, not least among them her thoughts on books. Of note in this context is a perspicacious comment she offered in 1849 on a new novel by an English author going by the name of Currer Bell, whose first book, *Jane Eyre*, had captivated her the previous year. The pseudonymous author was not yet identified as Charlotte Brontë, and the gender still presumed by most to be male, but Fanny was having none of it. "There is so much two women have to say to each other," she confided to her dearest female confidante, then living in Geneseo, New York. "I have felt this more keenly reading *Shirley*. It is admirable, – nature itself, and the style wonderfully vigorous and natural." There could, she then asserted, "no longer be any doubt" in her mind – and she was way out ahead of everyone else with her hunch – "but a woman's genius sounds those depths. How I wish I could read it with you."

Fanny stopped keeping a regular journal with the birth of her first child in 1844, though the readings with Henry continued unabated throughout their marriage, and were recorded dutifully by Henry in his journal, and Fanny in her correspondence. Her death in July 1861 from a horrible domestic accident left him

never prepared a catalogue of his holdings, which today total 11,799 volumes. Writings in 15 languages and dozens of dialects are represented, each of which Henry read, and in most cases spoke, with fluency. Of its character, it can be said the contents are cosmopolitan to the extreme. While there is no formal catalogue, there is a decided sensibility to the arrangement that proceeds associatively from bookcase to bookcase and from room to room – there is nothing haphazard or willy-nilly about the organization.

Of the sonnets Henry turned to writing with consummate skill toward the end of his life, one, written in 1881, the year before he died, was dedicated to his "most intimate friends," and titled, simply, "My Books." It closes with these lines:

*So I behold these books upon their shelf,
My ornaments and arms of other days;
Not wholly useless, though no longer used,
For they remind me of my other self,
Younger and stronger, and the pleasant ways
In which I walked, now clouded and confused.*

§§