

Whittier and His Writings

A short time ago we received in his two-centured year, at the American Museum, a paper containing part of an American poet, Whittier. It was Longfellow, now, December 17th, it is Whittier. Longfellow was ten months older than Whittier in the journey of life and had been in his grave ten years when the minnows of the slate angels came to Whittier.

The personal history of two contemporaries, both attaining eminence in the same profession, could scarcely be more diverse than in this case. Longfellow, surrounded in childhood and youth by the best of culture and education, that the State of Maine afforded; educated in one of the schools of his native town, talented, and having had much college training, and armed with an ample physique for enduring and profiting by extensive foreign travel and study afforded by a full purse, was the product of well-used opportunity. But how different was it with Whittier! Note these glimpses of his career and mark the contrast.

BIOGRAPHY.

At the old Whittier homestead, Haverhill, Massachusetts, December 1807, was born John Greenleaf Whittier. He grew to manhood in this severely religious but as severely poor home. The farm upon which the family resided and from which they drew their living responded but poorly to the art of cultivation and life was an endless toil.

There were in the family the parents, two sons, two daughters, a maid-aunt, and a bachelor uncle. John Greenleaf's health was poor, and it is said that the drudgery of farm labor in winter, and scant clothing made inroads on his constitution, from which he suffered through his long life.

The only schooling he got was a few weeks in the district school in mid-winter till his eighteenth year, and two terms thereafter of six months each at the Haverhill Academy. At the age of fifty, Harvard College conferred upon him the degree of master of arts, and six years later Brown University, the degree of doctor of laws.

Whittier's education was not supplemented by travel. If he had had health, he had not the money for such luxury. He scarcely ever went beyond the bounds of Massachusetts. For a short period, however, he did editorial work in Hartford, and in New York, and afterwards and for a longer period in Philadelphia. We learn from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, that late in life, some friends offered him the use of a cottage in Florida, but he declined the offer, saying he was too much wedded to Massachusetts to go so far away.

Two sisters largely influenced Whittier's life and poetry. One was Robert Burns, a copy of whose poems was lent to him by his first teacher, Joseph Coffin. The Scottish bard's lyrics struck fire in the rustic Quaker boy's soul and henceforth Burns became his inspiration in ballad and song. The other who had such large influence upon him, especially upon the content of his thoughts and the direction of his spirit was William Lloyd Garrison. These two influences came early into his life. He was only 14 years old when Mr. Coffin, one day visited the Whittier home and read some verses from Burns' poems. Young Whittier, until then, had read no poetry except what he had found in the Bible, of which he had been a close student. Burns' poetry was fascinating to him and the owner graciously wished to borrow the volume by sending it with him.

After diligent study, Whittier gave the Scotch dialect at the end of the volume and set to writing verses. It was five years, or so, after this that his sister, Mary, sent one of his poems, "The Exile's Departure," to William Lloyd Garrison, then the editor of The Newburyport Free Press. Garrison liked the poem and came to the humble Whittier home to see the author. The two souls were kindred and a strong friendship was the result.

Whittier was but two years older than young Whittier, yet he was a far more vigorous boy and had no little experience for one of his years. A dissolute father, though of refined tastes, had brought the family to such straitened circumstances that the mother had hired herself out as a professional nurse and had apprentices. William, the shoe maker in Lynn, before his fifteenth year, failing health in the shoe-shop made it advisable to change his occupation, and he was next apprenticed to a cabinet-maker. He did not stick here, and by his seventeenth birthday we find him a compositor in a Newburyport printing office.

Like Franklin, he soon learned to write for publication, and had some three years' experience before launching The Free Press in 1828. His paper venture in Newburyport soon failed, and he and Whittier went to Boston, where the latter became editor.

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Whittier's circle of close friends was different from the Cambridge group of which Longfellow was long the central figure as were the lives of the two poets. Longfellow was the polished gentleman among gentlemen, a tireless worker, a popular, influential Harvard professor. Whittier was more of a recluse somewhat eccentric, likely to leave the home of his host without saying "good-bye" especially if a little too much company should come in.

This apparent incivility may have been due, in part at least, to the fact that he could not endure excitement in youth, physicians warned him to avoid excitement, yet he had a desire to live to his fiftieth year. It is a difficult to conclude, however, that a lively company of friends in the drawing room could possibly be a greater peril to pulmonary weakness than a public stoning or other mob violence.

In personal appearance, Whittier was not the most prepossessing of men. Throughout his life, he adhered to the peculiarity of Quaker dress. One, an admirer, in 1858 described him as having "a good exterior, a figure slender and tall, a beautiful head with refined features, black eyes full of fire, dark complexion, a fine smile, and lively but very nervous manner. Both soul and spirit have overstrained the nervous cords and wasted the body. He belongs to those natures who would advance with firmness and joy to martyrdom in a good cause, and yet who are never comfortable in society, and who look as if they would run out of the door every moment. Another describes him as being "of a nervous, bilious temperament, tall slender, and upright on his feet, a superb head, a brow like a cloud under his raven hair, eyes large, black, and glowing with expression." Of his shyness Nora Perry remarks that: "He is generally spoken of as a shy man, avoiding all society, if by society we mean large parties, dinners, and receptions, the general idea is a true one. But I think that no one enjoys the society of a few friends better than this accredited society hater."

"No one relishes a good story more, nor can relate one with better grace."

Francis H. Underwood, Whittier's biographer, regards him as neither "odd" nor "eccentric" (in usual parlance) but as of marked personality and strong individual flavor in all his utterances.

Mary B. Claffin, the year after his death published "Personal Recollections of Whittier" in which she says: "Though ordinarily shy and cautious and reserved, he could, under favorable circumstances, blossom into rare graciousness and sympathy of speech and manner."

Whittier has an abiding faith in the ultimate reign of universal freedom and international peace, and that respect he is not surpassed by any American poet.

In "Snow-Bound" he ranks with Goldsmith in "The Deserted Village," and Burns in "Cotter's Saturday Night." The "Barefoot Boy" interprets not only the New England boy's life, but also the American boy's life.

"Skipper Irvin's Ride," meets with as responsive a ring in Dixie or in California, as if the amusing comedy given others had been transacted on those sunny or western shores. We shall likely come to find the year go by, that Whittier is a more accredited writer than any New England poet. His hymns are found in the church music of all denominations. In the collection of sixty-six hymns used at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, nine were from Whittier—more than from any other poet.

Whether Whittier will live in American literature none of the critics can tell, but it is significant that so many think he will, yet he appears to be read less and less every year. He has been dead only fifteen years, yet it seems as if it had been fifty. Mr. Charles F. Johnson, six years after Whittier's death, wrote:

"Whittier, perhaps less graceful than Longfellow, will influence men longer, for his content of thought is more weighty and the emotions called out by a great struggle pulsate his verse." We here cite only one other critic that is of this opinion. Mr. Barrett Wendell, in a careful study of Whittier's life and times, says: "Before considering his works in detail, I suggest that his chance of survival is better than that of any

other poet. There were two sources of Whittier's inspiration. One was his love of freedom and sympathy for the oppressed of every name and order. The other was New England rural life. Unlike Garrison, he believed freedom should come to the slaves of the South through political channels. He believed in the power of public opinion that would result in emancipation of the slaves as it had done to the Quakers of New England and free from their persecutions at the hands of the Puritans. The wounded blood from these persecutions

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