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1861 - Bread and the Newspaper - Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

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Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

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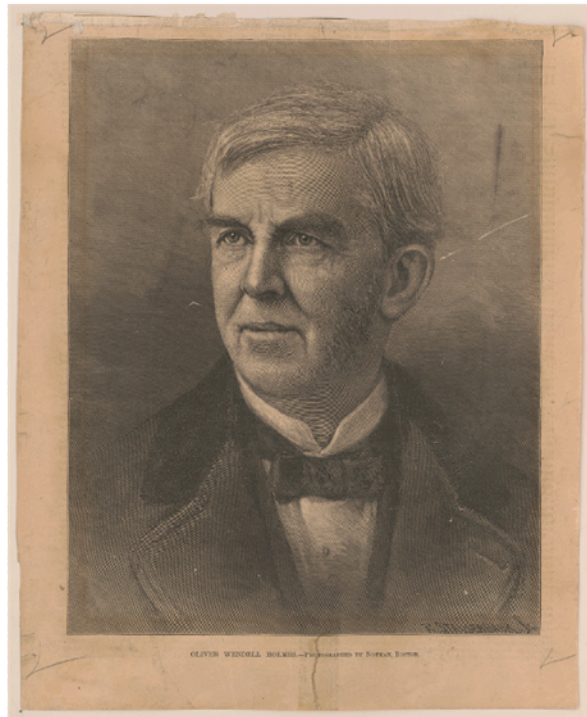
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1861 - Bread and the Newspaper - Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.



Staudenbaur, R., Engraver, Notman, James, photographer.
Oliver Wendell Holmes / photographed by Notman,
Boston ; R. Staudenbaur sc. , 1886. June 5. Photograph.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2012649668/>.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. was a Boston physician and poet. A Harvard graduate and a member of New England's literary elite, he was one of the founders of the widely respected Atlantic Magazine. Five months into the war, he described the patriotic yet anxious mood on the home front. He was amazed by the power of newspapers, as the people waited impatiently for the "almost hourly paragraphs, laden with truth or falsehood as the case may be."

Bread and the Newspaper

This is the new version of the Panem et Circuses [Bread and Circuses] of the Roman populace. It is our ultimatum, as that was theirs. They must have something to eat, and the circus-shows to look at. We must have something to eat, and the papers to read.

Everything else we can give up. If we are rich, we can lay down our carriages, stay away from Newport or Saratoga, and adjourn the trip to Europe sine die. If we live in a small way, there are at least new dresses and bonnets and every-day luxuries which we can dispense with.... How this war is simplifying our mode of being! We live on our emotions, as the sick man is said in the common speech to be nourished by his fever. Our ordinary mental food has become distasteful, and what would have been intellectual luxuries at other times, are now absolutely repulsive . . .

So far we have noticed little more than disturbances of the nervous system as a consequence of the war excitement in non-combatants. Take the first trifling example which comes to our recollection. A sad disaster to the Federal army was told the other day in the presence of two gentlemen and a lady. Both the gentlemen complained of a sudden feeling at the epigastrium, or, less learnedly, the pit of the stomach, changed color, and confessed to a slight tremor about the knees. The lady had a "grande revolution," as French patients say,--went home, and kept her bed for the rest of the day. Perhaps the reader may smile at the mention of such trivial indispositions, but a more sensitive nature's death itself follows in some cases from no

more serious cause. An old gentlemen fell senseless in fatal apoplexy, on hearing Napoleon's return from Elba. One of our early friends, who recently died of the same complaint, was thought to have had his attack mainly in consequence of the excitements of the time.

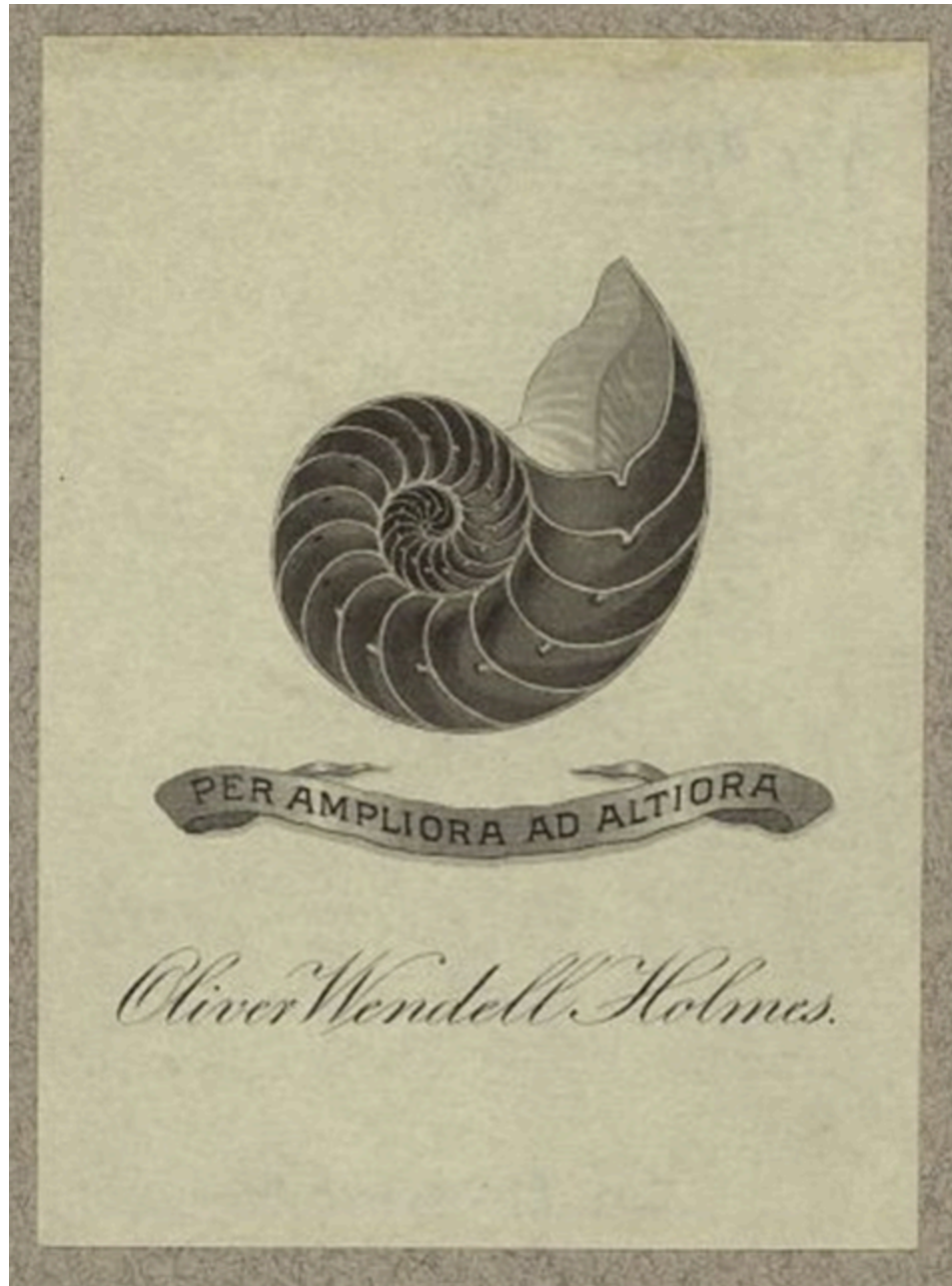
We all know what the war fever is in our young men,--what a devouring passion it becomes in those whom it assails. Patriotism is the fire of it, no doubt, but this is fed with fuel of all sorts. The love of adventure, the contagion of example, the fear of losing the chance of participating in the current events of the time, the desire of personal distinction, all help to produce those singular transformations which we often witness, turning the most peaceful of our youth into the most ardent of our soldiers. But something of the same fever in a different form reaches a good many non-combatants, who have no thought of losing a drop of precious blood belonging to themselves or their families. Some of the symptoms we shall mention our almost universal; they are as plain in the people we meet everywhere as the marks of an influenza, when that is prevailing.

The first is a nervous restlessness of a very peculiar character. Men cannot think, or write, or attend to their ordinary business. They stroll up and down the streets, or saunter out upon the public places. . . . [A] most eminent scholar told us in all simplicity that he had fallen into such a state that he could read the same telegraphic dispatches over and over again in different papers, as if they were new, until he felt as if he were an idiot. Who did not do just the same thing, and does not often do it still, now that the first flush of the fever is over? Another person always goes through the side streets on his way for the noon extra,--he is so afraid somebody will meet him and tell the news he wishes to read, first on the bulletin-board, and then in the great capitals and leaded type of the newspaper.

Whatever miseries this war brings upon us, it is making us wiser, and, we trust, better. Wiser, for we are learning our weakness, our narrowness, our selfishness, our ignorance, in lessons of sorrow and shame. Better, because all that is noble in men and women is demanded by the time, and our people are rising to the standard the time calls for. For this is the question the hour is putting to each of us: Are you ready, if need be, to sacrifice all that you have and hope for in this world, that the generations to follow you may inherit a whole country, whose natural condition shall be peace, and not a broken province which must live under the perpetual threat, if not in the constant, presence, of war and although war brings with it? If we are all ready for this sacrifice, battles may be lost, but the campaign and his grand object must be won.

Heaven is very kind in its way of putting questions to mortals. We are not abruptly asked to give up all that we must care for, in view of the momentous issues before us. Perhaps we should never be asked to give up all, but we have already been called upon to part with much that is dear to us, and should be ready to yield the rest as it is called for. This time may come when even the cheap public print shall be a burden armies cannot support, and we can only listen in the square that was once the marketplace to the voices of those who proclaim defeat or victory. Then there will be only our daily food left. When we have nothing to read and nothing to eat, it will be a favorable moment to offer a compromise. At present we have all that nature absolutely demands,— we can live on bread and the newspaper.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., "Bread and the Newspaper," Atlantic Monthly (Vol. 8: No. 47), September 1861.



Spenceley, J. Winfred , Engraver. Bookplate of Oliver Wendell Holmes. , ca. 1875. [Between and 1894] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2007683254/>.