

Longfellow's Letters to Cornelia Fitch

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On July 10, 1861, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wife, Fanny, died from burns suffered in her home the preceding day. This event was staggering to Longfellow and, although he continued to be America's most renowned and most widely-read poet, the tragic death of his second wife was a lasting grief to him. Annie Fields, the wife of his publisher and a woman who knew him until his death, called the event "a shadow which never could be lifted from his life."¹ As long as eighteen years after the event he wrote "A Cross of Snow," a sonnet in which he testified to having worn a "cross" upon his breast "throughout all the changeless scenes/ And seasons, changeless since the day she died."

Fanny's death was made all the more difficult for Longfellow to bear by the fact that he was left with five children, ranging in age from five to seventeen. His own testimony to the importance of this problem to him appears in a letter to his wife's sister, Mary, a month after Fanny's death: "My heart aches and bleeds sorely for the poor children. To lose *such* a mother, and all the divine influences of her character and care. They do not know how great their loss is, but I do. God will provide. His will be done!"² It was obvious, of course, that, despite his almost crippling grief, "he must be both father and mother."³

Perhaps the two major sources of support in facing his own grief and his fuller responsibility to his children were his writing and his friends. When Fanny died, he was in the midst of his translation of Dante and, after his initial shock was overcome, he found refuge and

¹ *Authors and Friends* (Boston, 1898), p. 36.

² Edward Wagenknecht, *Longfellow: A Full-Length Portrait* (New York, 1955), p. 258.

³ Cecil B. Williams, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (New York, 1964), p. 92.

comfort in the intellectual labor of this project. But his friends were equally important to him. In his final twenty-one years of life his friendships included several with women. Professor Edward Wagenknecht has outlined his relationships with Charlotte Fiske Bates, Frances Rowena Miller, Clara Doria, Blanche Roosevelt Tucker, Sherwood Bonner, and (perhaps the most important of these to him) Alice Frere.⁴ It is understandable that he would have wanted to cultivate female friendships at this time, for his children's sake as well as his own, since he was so much aware of the void in his home left by the loss of the children's mother.

The recent gift to The University of Iowa Library of eight Longfellow letters has enabled us to have a glimpse of a friendship which has heretofore been unknown but which, while it lasted, may have been more important to his family than any of the others discussed by his biographers. The letters were all written by the poet to Miss Cornelia Fitch, a young woman of twenty-six, during a seven month period from July 11, 1864, to February 6, 1865. The acquaintance apparently did not last much longer than this. The first letter was obviously written soon after their first meeting and is a somewhat self-conscious, yet successful exercise of gallantry and kindness by Longfellow in expressing his regrets at missing a meeting with her because of a violent rainstorm. In his letter he addresses her, "Dear Miss Fitch" and signs "With great regards/ Yours truly/ Henry W. Longfellow." In all of the seven succeeding letters, he signs "H.W.L." instead of using his full name and in the third letter he addresses her "Dear Miss Cornelia" as he does in all of the rest. The last letter is clearly a farewell to her, after hearing of her engagement to a man from Dobbs Ferry, New York, where she was thenceforth to live.

Except for the last, the letters contain little of a reflective nature and are therefore not apt to provide the basis for much new knowledge of Longfellow's intellectual processes or poetic theories. It is more the record of a gracious and even gallant host's invitations to a young lady and his expressions of the pleasure he has had in the visits after she has returned home. But what is significant is that the letters make it thoroughly evident that Cornelia Fitch became a fast friend of the entire family and was valued by Longfellow not solely as a charming female companion for himself, but as a woman who brought pleasure to the lives of his children.

⁴ *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Portrait of an American Humanist* (New York, 1966), pp. 183-191.

In the summer of 1864, Cornelia was staying with Mrs. Frances Case, her sister,⁵ at Cohasset, Massachusetts, just across the Bay to the south of Nahant, where Longfellow's summer home was located. The letters reveal that Longfellow rode to Cohasset on the train to meet her and escort her back with him on her first visit. (She was always accompanied by a relative on her visits; this time it was "your Lieutenant"—probably one of her brothers.) Later in the same summer he apparently sailed across the Bay to bring her back to Nahant at least once. She called on him again in October at his Cambridge home, and probably at least one more time in the same autumn. In a letter from Nahant dated August 5, 1864, his appreciation of the brightening effect she had on his children during her last visit is evident as he urges her to visit them again soon, using eight-year-old Annie Allegra's comments as perhaps his best argument:

Soon after your departure little Annie said to me:

"Papa, are you not sorry Miss Fitch is gone?"

"Yes, very sorry. Are you?["]

"Yes."

"Then I will write and ask her to come again.["]

"O do ask her to come as soon as she can."

All join in this appeal. So you must be kind enough to say yes, and I will come for you in the yacht, as soon as there is a good wind.

Miss Fitch's visits were thus apparently occasions which the whole household—even other guests, as a later letter shows—enjoyed and, as Longfellow humorously and affectionately points out on a couple of occasions, all equally regretted her departures.⁶ The following pas-

⁵ The letters refer just to a "Mrs. Case," but Cornelia Fitch's granddaughter, Cornelia Fitch Prentiss Shrauger, the donor of the letters, has very helpfully provided detailed information about the Fitch family which reveals that Mrs. Case was the former Frances Fitch, one of Cornelia's eleven sisters and brothers. I wish here to express my thanks to Mrs. Shrauger for the valuable assistance she has given me in preparing this article.

⁶ Longfellow's speaking for "all this household" does not unfailingly mean that all of his children were at home when Cornelia made her visits. The eldest, Charley, was home recuperating from a war wound until November, 1864, but then sailed for Europe. Ernest was finishing his studies at Lawrence Scientific School in 1864-5, and the eldest daughter, Alice, age fourteen, was a "school-girl," as her father says in the letter of Jan. 18, 1865, though she was known to Cornelia nonetheless. It appears that the two youngest, Edith and Annie, were probably at home each time Miss Fitch visited the Longfellows. Undoubtedly the three youngest—the girls—were the children Longfellow most consistently meant to indicate when he made such comments as "all join in this appeal."

sage from a letter of October 31, 1864, shows the grace and good spirits which Longfellow seems always to have been able to command, as he attempts to prove to her that "we lament your departure as I told you we should."

Miss Davie has betaken herself to reading serious books; the children to playing dirges on the Pianoforte; and Mr. Greene⁷ sits for hours together, holding his head in his hand and pretending it is the light, which hurts his eyes. For my own part, I have had so bad a cold since you took away so much sunshine, that I have not been able to write till to-day. Behold the results of your too precipitate flight!

This is the writing, it should be remembered, of the man who was to write in all sincerity of bearing a cross for the eighteen years after his wife's death. It is apparent that Cornelia Fitch, a vivacious young woman who, according to her descendants, was considered the "beauty of her county,"⁸ brought her beauty and feminine vitality into the Longfellow household at a time when such attributes were undoubtedly very much needed, especially by Longfellow himself. She obviously succeeded, by radiating her "sunshine," in arousing his good spirits.

He never fails to mention his children in urging her to come again, and he uses the pronoun "we" at least as often as "I" in referring to the beneficiaries of her visits. There seems no convincing evidence in these letters to suggest that Longfellow was, in this relationship, a man in search of a wife or a father in search of a mother for his children, despite the traditional view among Cornelia's descendants that the relationship was a "romance."⁹ But he was obviously a father

⁷ The reference is to George Washington Greene, a close friend of Longfellow and frequent visitor in his home. See *Dictionary of American Biography*, VII, 568-569.

⁸ The county was Cayuga County, as the family home was in Auburn, New York. The claim of beauty for Cornelia is borne out by a portrait painted by George Baker, the noted American portraitist, and now in the possession of Mrs. Shrauger.

⁹ It is of course impossible to say that he was not thinking of Cornelia in this way. For anyone wishing to do so, it could probably be argued that the arrangement of a marriage for Cornelia by her parents and the very short engagement (the announcement of the wedding plans took place sometime between Longfellow's letters of January 18 and February 6, 1865, and the wedding was held on February 22 of the same year) were due to the family's desire to prevent the "romance" with the fifty-seven year old Longfellow from developing. Still, if one is seeking a love interest in Longfellow's life at this stage, it ought to be noticed that the letters to Alice Frere seem much more susceptible of

in search of a happy home environment and he certainly appreciated Cornelia Fitch's ability to contribute, through her visits, to such an atmosphere.

The relationship, however, seems to have ended abruptly when, sometime shortly before Longfellow's final letter, dated February 6, 1865, he received word from her that her family had just publicly announced her engagement to be married to the well-to-do President of the Tarrytown (N.Y.) National Bank, David Ogden Bradley, a widower with one child.¹⁰ In the same letter, she had apparently revealed to him for the first time a "sorrow" which had been troubling her. This sorrow is not identified in the letters, but Miss Fitch's granddaughter informs me that Cornelia's fiance had been killed in the Civil War, presumably before her acquaintance with Longfellow, and that the marriage to Bradley was arranged by her parents. Longfellow comments:

I little knew what sorrow was weighing upon you, and am very happy now to know that I did anything to alleviate it, and that you retain pleasant memories of those days, likewise.

As Emerson says in one of his poems,¹¹

"Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbor's creed has lent."

It would appear that the friendship served as a kind of dual therapy for people who had both recently suffered the loss of a loved one. Each retained pleasant memories of their brief acquaintance. For Longfellow, it was a friendship somewhat different from his other friendships with women at this time, insofar as we know of them. Most of the women whom Professor Wagenknecht discusses were artistic career women—singers or writers—part of whose appeal for Longfellow was undoubtedly their involvement in both creative activity and public life. Cornelia Fitch was more like the young Englishwoman, Alice Frere, than any of these others in being a woman of youth, beauty, and ability, but without professional pretensions. Undoubtedly both of these women (he met Alice Frere some two years after his last letter to Cornelia) helped him to forget for a time his own loss, or at least to reconcile it more successfully. But Alice

this kind of reading than do those to Cornelia Fitch which, without considerable reading between the lines, seem quite innocent of ulterior motives.

¹⁰ Bradley's name is not mentioned in the letter and I am indebted to Mrs. Shrauger for this information about him.

¹¹ "Each and All."

Frere was in his physical presence very little, since she sailed for England and the Near East soon after they met. Most of the other women friends and correspondents discussed by Wagenknecht came into Longfellow's life only after Cornelia Fitch had gone out. It was she more than the rest who was able to offer him and his children female companionship at a time when they undoubtedly were still feeling its absence much of the time.

It seems worth quoting the final letter in full since it not only contains Longfellow's final comments to a young woman for whom he had developed a warm friendship, but it is also the only letter which, of the eight in the group, contains overt suggestions of any of Longfellow's views on life and on the fluctuations in human relationships which occur in the course of one's life.

Cambridge Feb 6
1865

Dear Miss Cornelia,

I confess that the tidings in your last letter took us all by surprise. Still I do not much wonder at them, not even at the regal style of the betrothal; for I always thought you were a Princess in disguise. The manner of it is nothing, if your heart is in it; and so we all congratulate you, and wish you much happiness, even more than you dream of.

Pleasant memories of you will always linger here, and at Nahant, and along that gleaming, rocky shore southward, where you passed the Summer. I little knew what sorrow was weighing upon you, and am very happy now to know that I did anything to alleviate it, and that you retain pleasant memories of those days, likewise.

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Thy life to thy neighbor's creed has lent.”

“Uncle Tom” was pleased with your mention of him in your letter; and joins us in best and kindest wishes for you, and benedictions on your wedding-day. It will make a great stir in Auburn; and I cannot help thinking of those unhappy Theological Students,¹² who will have to seek comfort in the doctrine of Predestination, which I am far from disbelieving.¹³

¹² This is obviously a genially flattering jibe and refers to the students at Auburn Theological Seminary in her home town.

¹³ Despite Newton Arvin's claim that “Longfellow's work is pervaded by the fragrance of nineteenth-century religious liberalism” (*Longfellow: His Life and Work* [Boston, 1962], p. 10), this suggestion of sympathy for the concept of predestination is not inconsistent with the closing lines of “To-Morrow,” written just a year after this letter: “I am satisfied;/ I dare not ask; I know not what

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Opening lines of Longfellow's letter of February 6, 1865, addressed to Cornelia Fitch. One of the eight letters presented to The University of Iowa Libraries by Cornelia Fitch's granddaughter, Cornelia Fitch Prentiss Shrauger, of Atlantic, Iowa.

With my regards to your mother and to Mrs. Case, and for yourself,
“whatsoever things are lovely”¹⁴, and best and happiest,

I remain always
Yours truly
H. W. L.

The existence of these letters seems not to require any thoroughgoing reconstruction of our views of Longfellow’s personal life in the years soon after Fanny’s death. In many ways, they show us the Longfellow we have always known: a man able to combine what we call Victorian decorum and restraint with a sincere geniality and love of good company. But the letters do enable us to see more clearly his willingness to cultivate friendships with women who could provide congenial company for both himself and his children. Cornelia Fitch became known to him at a time when he had special need of a friend of her characteristics and all indications are that he and his children were glad to have experienced her friendship even if she was a part of their lives for only some seven months. Students of American literature and of the life of Longfellow in particular will undoubtedly be glad to have access to this interesting group of letters so generously given to the Iowa Library by the descendants of Cornelia Fitch.

is best;/ God hath already said what shall betide.’” Both passages are consistent, at any rate, with the spirit of humble acceptance which came to characterize his thought in the years after the loss of his wife.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that in a letter to Alice Frere dated April 7, 1867, just after she had sailed for England, Longfellow quoted the same phrase from *Philippians* IV:8 in a postscript, sending her “Good wishes—kind regards—sweet memories—the blessings of ‘Whatsoever things are pure and whatsoever things are lovely’” (Wagenknecht, *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Portrait of an American Humanist*, *op. cit.*, p. 189.)