Longfellow's Income from His Writings, 1840–1852*

I PRESENT in this report a few of the results of a study of manuscript materials in the Craigie House in Cambridge of which almost no use has been made heretofore. The materials consist of: (1) An Account Book in which Longfellow listed, among other things, his receipts from writing and teaching for the years 1840–52. Details herein include usually the title, price, and place of publication of each poem he was paid for; payments for each printing of books; his salary from Harvard; and, after 1843, his wife’s income. (2) A list of editions of each of his works to 1864, indicating the date and the number of copies of each printing. (3) A number of contracts, copyright documents, and bills for stereotyping; and lists of the number and value of stereotype plates acquired between 1845 and 1852. (4) Letters from publishers and editors to Longfellow.

When it is carefully integrated, this information offers a fairly complete story of the business aspects of Longfellow’s literary career in America¹ for the period stated. I have reconstructed that story partly in the belief that it adds significantly to our knowledge and understanding of a poet whose reputation has suffered not because we know too much about him but too little. The traditional portrait, almost unmodified until recent years, lacks humanizing nuance and three-dimensional solidity. But I am still more interested in the facts for the evidence they give of Longfellow’s importance in the history of professional authorship. It is no small matter that he was the first American writer to make a living from poetry—that by shrewd, aggressive, and
intelligent management of the business of writing, he raised the commercial value of verse and thereby helped other American poets to get out of the garret.

The period covered by the Account Book begins the month after the publication of *Voices of the Night*; it ends a year after the appearance of *The Golden Legend* and two years before Longfellow resigned from Harvard. It is the period of the *Ballads, Poems on Slavery, The Spanish Student, The Belfry of Bruges, Evangeline, Kavanagh,* and *The Seaside and the Fireside*; of three anthologies; and of three collected editions. It represents, therefore, the era of Longfellow's life when he established his reputation and popularity as a poet; and inasmuch as he published fourteen books in these thirteen years, it was also one of his most productive periods. Anyone who tries to write while he carries a full-time job can appreciate what has never been fully recognized—that the gentle Longfellow was a phenomenally industrious worker. Fortunately we need not break the story off short at 1852, for Longfellow's list of editions enables us to construct the publishing history of these books to the year 1864, by which time, apparently, most of his old separate publications in their original form had been taken off the market. It is thus possible to determine the total sale of many of his works during their whole existence, and to offer comparative statistics concerning them.

Two warnings concerning the interpretation of these facts are in order. The first is that one must not assume that Longfellow's accounts are entirely correct or complete. One's private bookkeeping rarely is. I have discovered a few minor omissions, and one amusing error: in the year 1849 there is a mistake of $1,000 in Longfellow's addition of his receipts—$1,000 too little—which shows that he was getting on pretty well in 1849. Moreover, the year-by-year accounts are slightly misleading because they record income only, not outgo. There is no indication of the important fact that up to 1852 Longfellow paid out about $2,600
for stereotype plates, an expenditure which, as I shall show, added greatly to his prosperity.

My second warning concerns the muddy problem of comparative cost of living. Let us assume, unscientifically, like most economists, that money in the 1840’s had three times the buying power it had in the 1930’s. On that scale, Longfellow’s income of $2,019 for 1840 was equal to $6,000 today, and better than that of a congressman in 1840, who earned $8.00 a day when he worked. By this standard Longfellow’s rate of $15 or $20 a poem in 1840-41 was not so poor as it sounds. It would have been poor enough had he been forced to grind out poems at this rate to pay his rent. But, as we shall see, Longfellow never let himself be blown about by book-trade winds. Once he began to take himself seriously as a poet with an audience, he became a first-rate sailor.

The total bulk of a poet’s work is usually small compared to that of the prose writer, and the problem of the poet who wants to make a living is how to sell the same poem as many times as possible. Ordinarily, in the nineteenth century, his resources in this respect were three: (1) single publication in a newspaper, magazine, or annual; (2) collection in a small volume; (3) reassembly of small volumes in a “collected” edition. Longfellow learned exactly how to use each of these methods; in fact, it is doubtful whether any other poet of the century was so resourceful in bringing his work before the public in so many forms and on so many price levels.

Concerning the first of these, a glance at the facts shows that Longfellow did not remain one of the miserable brotherhood of “magazinists” very long. Though contributions to magazines brought in almost half his literary income from 1840 to 1844, they counted for less than 10 per cent of his total literary income for the whole period. During the thirteen years he averaged only three paid contributions a year.

The accounts illustrate graphically the sudden and startling rise in magazine rates for authors in 1842, for though in 1840-41
poems brought him $15 or $20, in two years he moved permanently into the $50 level. This increase in the pay scale has rightly been attributed chiefly to George Graham; but the correspondence shows that Longfellow helped to bring this scale into effect by putting pressure on the publisher. The most interesting fact about the situation is that Graham paid these high prices only for a monopoly of an author's work, and that this was his way of protecting himself against the unethical Mr. Godey. From 1843 to 1848 Longfellow's paid contributions appeared in Graham's only; and it is likely that he was one of the first American authors to try this early form of the modern contract for exclusive rights to an author's name.

Inasmuch as Longfellow never gave even Graham as many contributions as the latter was willing to pay for, it is apparent that he realized that book publication was, or could be made, more lucrative than magazine work, and that to be salable a volume of poems must be made up partly of previously unprinted pieces. Concerning this second form of publication, it should be stated at once that Longfellow did not merely follow established techniques; he helped to create new ones. In the 1830's he had tried the old unsatisfactory plans of flat payment for copyright, and sharing profit with the publisher; and it was on this latter plan that he was obliged to begin his relations with John Owen when he published Voices of the Night in 1839. For Owen's first five printings of Voices and first four printings of the Ballads, Longfellow's half share of the profits was six or seven cents a copy, or an average of 8 per cent on a retail price of seventy-five cents. But as soon as these books had proved successful, he somehow persuaded his publisher to revise the contracts, so that beginning in 1842 and 1843 he received for Voices and the Ballads ten cents a copy—which was a royalty of 13½ per cent—a high rate for poetry in those days—and these. He made the same arrangement for The Spanish Student in 1843 and The Waif in 1844.
On June 18, 1845, he took an important step: he bought from Owen the plates of his five books, crediting himself in the Account Book with $400 for royalties due, with the explanation, “Received payment in stereotype plates.” In 1845 and 1846 he ordered stereotypes of his old prose works, *Outre-Mer* and *Hyperion*. From then until at least 1865 Longfellow paid for and owned the plates of all of his books (except *Poets and Poetry of Europe* and the Philadelphia illustrated edition), and sold to publishers the right to print from them. Let us see what effect this had on his rate of profit.

From Owen he had received, when the publisher owned the plates, first 8 per cent, then 13 1/4 per cent. After 1845, when he owned his own plates, he received, on eight books on which the facts can be clearly determined, gross rates of from 20 per cent to 27 1/2 per cent—an average of 23 1/2 per cent—on the retail price. But of course his real royalty depended upon two factors—the cost of the plates of a book, and the volume of its sale. Thus, for example, the *Estray* of 1846 yielded him a gross royalty of 26 1/2 per cent; but as the plates cost him almost $100 and only 1,000 copies were printed, his real royalty was only 13 1/3 per cent. Now, the plates of *Evangeline* also cost $100; but as the book had a sale of 13,425 in seventeen years, his gross royalty of 26 1/2 per cent (twenty cents a copy) was a real royalty of 25.6 per cent. His net average royalty for all eight books was 18 1/4 per cent.

The moral, of course, is that if a mid-nineteenth-century author of some reputation had a little capital and the sense to invest it in stereotype plates, he could get 18 1/4 per cent rather than the traditional ten. Moreover, as Prescott, who also used this system, pointed out, it provided perfect insurance against the vagaries of publishers’ bookkeeping. Longfellow could not be cheated. When Ticknor needed more books, he had to ask Longfellow to send an order to Metcalf to print so many copies, and payment for these became due when the volumes were
printed, not when they were sold. There were variations on this method, of course, most of them inferior. Longfellow's first arrangement with Harpers for the cheap edition called for the delivery of the completed book, manufactured at Longfellow's cost, the publisher taking a commission for sales. This was Emerson's system for many years. Longfellow wisely avoided it, perhaps because it would have deprived his publisher of incentive. His own method not only brought him author's pay but made him a publisher's partner who shared in some of the profits of book manufacture. It is worth noting that, from the business point of view, his two most troublesome books were the Poets and Poetry of Europe and the illustrated edition, both published by Carey and Hart in Philadelphia in 1845. The publishers owned the plates of these, and he and they quarrelled frequently over control and management of copyright. Finally, not the least of the advantages of his method was that he could choose his own printer and thus control more effectively the typography of his books.

The sales record of the eight volumes of original verse produced in this period is interesting, if not surprising. From smallest to largest, their sales, or rather, their printings, to 1864 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Printings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poems on Slavery</td>
<td>1,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not including the Anti-Slavery Association reprint)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spanish Student</td>
<td>1,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Belfry of Bruges</td>
<td>2,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballads</td>
<td>2,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Seaside and the Fireside</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voices of the Night</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not including Redding's pamphlet edition)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Golden Legend</td>
<td>8,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangeline</td>
<td>14,425</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(this is only one-third the sale of Hiawatha)
If Longfellow's records of receipts and printings are not misleading, one can generalize to the effect that long narratives, like *Evangeline*, or connected short narratives, like *The Golden Legend*, had a longer life as individual volumes than the other works. Excepting *The Seaside*, which was absorbed into the collected edition after one printing, not one of the first six volumes listed above was reprinted or brought Longfellow any royalties after 1848. It is true that a Ticknor advertisement lists all of them (except *Poems on Slavery*) for sale as of October, 1856, but it is likely that Ticknor, who apparently bought Owen’s stock when the latter failed late in 1846, was, in 1856, trying to get rid of all of his separate Longfellow titles before he published his “Blue and Gold” collected editions.

One of these volumes deserves a digressive paragraph. Ordinarily *Poems on Slavery* is dismissed with the slighting comment that Longfellow left it out of the Philadelphia edition of 1845. In the Account Book there is only one entry for this work: “Poems on Slavery, $00.00.” I interpret this to mean that Longfellow refused to profit by a work which he intended to be his contribution to a cause; and the integrity of his motive is further vindicated by the fact that he permitted the New England Anti-Slavery Tract Association to reprint it, without compensation to him, in a region where its distribution could do the most damage to his reputation. Longfellow could be quietly stubborn about his convictions as his unprinted letters concerning these poems show.

The figures for the three prose works, to 1864, are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Printings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Outre-Mer</em></td>
<td>6,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kavanagh</em></td>
<td>8,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hyperion</em></td>
<td>14,450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The surprising fact here is that the total printings of the prose works was 85 per cent of that of the seven separate volumes of original verse published in the same period (that is, up to 1849,
the date of *Kavanagh*). Comparing the best-sellers of the two
groups, *Hyperion*’s 14,450 is greater than *Evangeline*’s 14,425. 
Even more interesting, Longfellow’s gross receipts for the prose 
exceeded that for the verse group—$5,427 to $5,350. Obviously 
Longfellow was better known as a prose writer in his time than 
one would suppose.

The third form of publication—the collected edition—was, 
of course, the most important financially. Longfellow’s first three 
collections—the illustrated edition of 1845, the cheap edition of 
1846, and the Ticknor and Fields two-volume edition of 1850—
brought him almost double the returns of the individual volumes 
which they embraced, even though the sales of the collected 
editions were somewhat smaller. Experience early showed Long-
fellow that the technique of this form was worth watching. On 
the one hand, several levels of market could be reached by vari­
tions of price; on the other hand, each collection could be strate­
gically outmoded through the publication of new separate vol­
umes of verse and the inclusion of these in new collected editions. 
Longfellow’s first venture, the de luxe illustrated edition at $3.50, 
was brought out on the initiative of the publishers, Carey and 
Hart; but the fifty-cent, paper-covered Harper collection of 1846 
was Longfellow’s idea. Carey and Hart unreasonably tried to 
block this edition, and gave up only after they turned the ques­
tion over to Little and Brown for arbitration. In a way, the 
cheap edition was like a neat recovery of a fumble. In 1845, 
feeling that it was time to tap the cheaper market for *Voices of 
the Night*, Longfellow brought out a twelve and one-half cent, 
double-columned, paper-covered edition through Redding of 
Boston. Inasmuch as the plates for this cost him $72 and he 
received only $60, he was a loser. But not for long. After selling 
the idea of a cheap collected edition to Harpers, Longfellow 
 thriftily built the plates of the Harper edition around those of 
the cheap edition of *Voices*. Early in 1849 he freshened up the 
collection commercially by adding to it new double-column plates 
of *Evangeline*, raising the retail price from fifty to sixty-two cents.
The whole operation cost him about $340 for plates, but his net royalty for total Harper sales of 6,000 averaged 16 per cent.

He could not, of course, continue very long to expand the cheap edition by these methods. Harpers had even hesitated to accept his proposal to add *Evangeline* to their edition on the ground that if they increased the price to seventy-five cents, as Longfellow apparently had suggested, they would drive his buyers into the bound book market. After the publication of *The Seaside and the Fireside*, Longfellow decided to bring out his first regular trade edition—the two-dollar, two-volume collection of 1850; but since by this date it was generally agreed that Boston was the best market for poetry, Ticknor, Reed, and Fields got the contract. The plates of this edition cost him $625; but with sales of almost 20,000 by 1864, his net royalty was a fat 18½ per cent. This edition was, in turn, outdated and surpassed in sales by the Blue and Gold edition of 1856, which, at $1.75, had a sale of 40,000 by 1864.

It might be assumed, from consideration of the question of royalty percentages in general, that as Longfellow's work grew in popularity, his revenues increased in proportion. Not so. Longfellow reached his peak in royalty rates in 1846-49, when Ticknor paid him, for *Evangeline*, *The Seaside and the Fireside*, and for editions of some of the older volumes which he had taken over from Owen, a gross rate of 26½ per cent. In the case of *Evangeline*, as I have said, this meant a net of 25.6 per cent—perhaps an all-time high for any poet.

The gross rates began to slip—as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td><em>Kavanagh</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td><em>Golden Legend</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td><em>Hiawatha</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>&quot;Blue and Gold&quot; *Poems&quot;</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By 1871, 10 per cent, net, was his regular royalty.
I have only guesses to offer for this phenomenon. One is that Longfellow's greatest relative prosperity came between the two great depressions of 1837 and 1857. Following the pattern of business history in general, publishing went through a great expansive period in the late forties and early fifties, and when the boom began to wane, publishing, always the first to suffer, had to contract. Ticknor and Fields did so in time; Phillips Sampson and Company (for example)—publishers of Emerson, Prescott, Holmes, and the *Atlantic Monthly*—did not. They collapsed in 1859, letting their mantle fall on their more wary rivals, Ticknor and Fields. I think it may be possible to show eventually that America's great literary activity in the fifties was directly related to this economic situation.

Returning now to the Account Book for a final glance, I should like to explore a natural but unwarranted assumption concerning Longfellow. Everyone knows that he married the daughter of a great industrialist in 1843; it is less generally known that he had no private invested funds. He worked for every cent he got; indeed, in later years, he paid to the rest of the family what he had borrowed from his father when he was young. Now, those familiar with the most elementary facts concerning Longfellow know that he did not lie back among pillows and mint juleps after he married the "heiress." They may even know that he continued to work hard at his two professions for eleven years thereafter. But more particular facts may be welcome even to the initiated. In the four years before his marriage, 1840-43, Longfellow's average yearly income, all of it derived from teaching and writing, was $1,917. In the nine years following his marriage, his yearly average was $3,536. The literary record is even more interesting, especially when one remembers the remark by Henry James's writer in "The Lesson of the Master," that marriage and children are an "incentive to damnation, artistically speaking." Longfellow's damnation was spectacular in that it skyrocketed his income from writings alone from $335 in 1843
to $2,860 in 1845; and his average, from writings alone, from that year to 1852 was almost $2,000. To clinch the subject, let it be known that during the first ten years of marriage, only once was his wife's income larger than his; and that in three of those years his income from writings alone was larger than hers from investments.

One may draw one's own conclusions from these facts and figures. I think it would be hard to deny that Longfellow helped to make the literary profession respectable by making it profitable, as had long been the case in England. It was harder, after his example, for fathers like his own to discourage their sons from entering the literary profession because it was not self-supporting. It would be unfair, I think, to attribute his financial success wholly to the almost universal readability of his work. That success was not handed to him on a silver platter: he worked hard for it and he used his head to solve his professional problems. One gets the impression, as one goes through the records and correspondence, that Longfellow took an extraordinarily active part in the publication of his own works at a time when commercial publishing in this country was not yet fully developed, and that he helped explore the potentialities of new reader markets. His success suggests that the lack of international copyright was not necessarily an insuperable obstacle to the development of American literature.

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1. Longfellow's publishing arrangements in England have been investigated by Clarence Gohdes. See his "Longfellow and His Authorized British Publishers" in *PMLA*, LV (December, 1940), 1165-79. My materials reveal receipts of $25.00 in 1841 from Richard Bentley for contributions to Bentley's *Miscellany*; $100.00 in September, 1850, for an English illustrated edition of *Evangeline* (500 copies); $480.10 on December 13, 1851, for a London edition of *The Golden Legend*; and $200.00 on December 15, 1851, for a London edition of *Poems*, illustrated.

2. W. D. Ticknor's death in 1864, and the appearance of a variety of collected
editions in the next few years, suggest a complete rearrangement of Longfellow's contracts by James T. Fields, the surviving partner, at about this time.

3. On December 23, 1841, Graham offered Longfellow $30.00 a poem. On January 20, 1842, he wrote: "When I mentioned $30 I intended it on poems only, and as I have purchased at $20, I thought I was liberal." (Letters in the Craigie House.)

4. Graham to Longfellow, May 24, 1844: "I find it is time for me to protect my own interests. I have been paying high prices, and have fixed these prices permanently—for the articles of our best writers, and have agreed to take them regularly—not once or twice a year. Mr. Godey gets an article from some writer who has been sustained by me, and makes constant use of his name among his contributors. I shall stop that. He must have his set and I will have mine. And when I am deserted I shall cut the name from my list. This rule I shall apply to all, whose articles I bind myself to take regularly. I must have the obligation as strong on the other side." (Craigie House.)

5. This statement does not apply to annuals and gift books, which were not in competition with magazines. The Account Book shows that these also paid $50.00 and that Longfellow contributed to them fairly regularly.

6. The revised contract for Voices, dated February 8, 1842, is at the Craigie House; for the Ballads, same date, at the Morgan Library. The Accounts show that the latter did not go into effect until 1843.

7. The details of this transaction are not entirely clear. The full entry in the Account Book is as follows:

| Voices XI | 500 |
| Ballads IX | 500 |
| Spanish Student | 500 |
| Poems on Slavery | 500 |
| Waif IV |

Received payment in stereotype plates $400

It is confirmed by a receipt (at the Craigie House) dated June 18, 1845, and signed by Owen, for $400 in payment for the plates of the five works. But at the Yale Library there is an authorization, signed by Longfellow on the same date, for Owen to print from Longfellow's plates of Voices, Ballads, The Spanish Student, and The Waif, all in 16mo format, to the number of 2,667 copies. At fifteen cents a copy, this comes to almost exactly $400. Since the authorization does not include Poems on Slavery, these printings were to be made from only four of the works. Yet Longfellow does not record any further printings by Owen beyond those specifically mentioned in the Account Book (Voices XI, Ballads IX, and Waif IV), a total of only 1,500. It is possible that Owen's bankruptcy in 1846 (documents in the Registry of Deeds, Middlesex County, show that his property was assigned January 12, 1847, as of December 23, 1846) prevented his reimbursing himself in full for the plates. But the publication by Ticknor of an edition of The Waif in November, 1846 (for which he paid Longfellow) leaves that explanation open to question.

8. Published in Boston, 1845. A statement by Longfellow, dated July 7, 1846, in a notebook marked "Gleanings" (Craigie House) indicates that between 1,000 and 2,000 of this edition were printed.
9. In the foreword to one of these pamphlets there is an acknowledgment of "the magnanimous generosity with which the distinguished author has contributed [the slavery poems] to our series."

10. These figures cover sums actually paid to Longfellow. Colman, the bankrupt publisher of the first edition of *Hyperion*, seems to have paid only $272 out of a total of $500 due. See "Longfellow's Letters to Samuel Ward," *Putnam's Monthly*, III (December, 1907), 304.

11. Harper Brothers to Longfellow, November 28, 1848 (Craigie House).

12. Scattered documents and letters at the Craigie House show that Longfellow kept himself informed on the manufacturing costs of his various works.