

John Greenleaf Whittier: Godfather to Lynn's Poets

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Presented at "John Greenleaf Whittier and the Lynn Poets He Influenced," the 2003 Celebration of the Poetry of Lynn, cosponsored by The Lynn Museum, The Essex National Heritage Commission, The Whittier Home, The Whittier Family Homestead & Birthplace and North Shore Community College

Of all the major American poets of the nineteenth century, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807 - 1892) exerted the greatest influence on the poetry of Lynn. He was called "The Quaker Poet" by Sidney Perley in *Poets of Essex County* (1889) and "the slave's poet" by Frederick Douglass in his 1845 autobiography written in Lynn. His influence on the poets of Lynn was strong and it was lasting. From Alonzo Lewis who knew him, to Joseph Nye who commemorated his birthdays and his death, to David Johnson, Whittier garnered more poetic tributes from Lynn's nineteenth century poets than any other American poet.

While it is true that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow summered in Nahant and authored the best known poem about Lynn written in the 1800's, "The Bells of Lynn," and while it is true that he shared with the early Lynn writers, Lewis especially, an appreciation of the value of local and regional lore as a source for verse, Longfellow seems to have had little contact with the city or its poets. Although having Longfellow summering in Nahant may have been inspiring on some level, no Lynn poet wrote a tribute to him.

Whittier had the closest ties to Lynn of any major American poet of the nineteenth century. The best insight into this relationship comes from a newspaper article in a Lynn Museum scrapbook, "Whittier Often Visited Lynn", written in 1907 on the hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth. The article states that besides Boston, Lynn was the city Whittier visited most frequently from his home in Amesbury. One important bond that tied Whittier to Lynn was his Quaker religion. Quakers were persecuted in colonial New England and even in Lynn as late as 1650, but as the article reports, Lynn became an important center for the Society of Friends after the meeting house and graveyard of the Boston Quakers were moved to Lynn in 1826. Whittier developed his abolitionist principles in his efforts to use Friends' meetinghouses for anti-slavery meetings, and his abolitionism undoubtedly strengthened his relationship with Alonzo Lewis. In fact, the only letter to Alonzo Lewis published among Whittier's collected letters contains high praise for "The Cloud Ship," a long poem combining regional lore with abolitionist sentiment. Whittier's abolitionism also brought him in contact with Lynn's famous Hutchinson Family Singers. Even after the Civil War, Whittier continued his friendship and collaborations with John Hutchinson. They were both interested in temperance and woman's suffrage, "and so they maintained a warm friendship, although they seldom met." (Lynn Scrapbook vol. 1 p. 482) At Whittier's funeral in 1892, the Hutchinson Family Singers provided the only music, and Joseph Nye wrote the central hymn.

In addition to sharing progressive values with the poets and singers of Lynn, Whittier was a student of regional and local lore. Having spent a significant amount of time visiting family in Lynn as a boy, Whittier was familiar with prominent Lynn legends. "Moll Pitcher," Whittier's first long narrative poem, published in his second book in 1832, uses the life of the Lynn fortune teller as a source. The poem was one that Whittier came to dislike, perhaps, as the Lynn

Scrapbook article suggests, because there were too many borrowings, perhaps, as some critics suggest, because the poem was sub-par, or perhaps because in his portrayal of Moll Pitcher, he may have negatively exaggerated her idiosyncrasies. The poem focuses not only on Moll Pitcher, but also on a maiden seeking information on her beau at sea. Pitcher says he is dead, but after he returns home, Pitcher dies a miserable death. "The Bridal of Pennacook" is another well-known narrative poem of Whittier's taken from Lynn legend. Inspired by a story in Thomas Morton's *New England Canaan*, the poem involves Winnepurkit, Sagamore of the Lynn area, Weetamoo, his bride, and his father-in-law, Passaconowaty, an older, wiser, more magical sagamore of the Merrimack Valley. The younger sagamore of Lynn/Saugus is brash and proud, and, after allowing his bride to visit her father, is indifferent to her return. In Whittier's poem, Weetamoo sets out for Lynn/Saugus on her own in a canoe, and is lost in a torrent on the Merrimack River. In creating unhappy endings for these poems based on traditional legends, Whittier greatly enhanced their emotional charges.

Whittier also understood and appreciated the culture of the artisan shoemaker, as shown in his poem, "The Shoemakers." Whittier was an apprentice shoemaker at nineteen, and the poem is an anthem urging, "Young brothers of the ancient guild./Stand forth once more together!" on St. Crispin's (the patron saint of shoemakers) Day. First published in 1845, the poem celebrates the work and dignity of the shoemakers by declaring, "Free hands and hearts are still your pride,/And duty done, your honor." Therefore, "...all shall see your toil repaid/With hearth and home and honor."

Whittier's poems were published in the *Lynn Transcript*, a weekly newspaper. "A Greeting to Lynn" appeared shortly after the *Transcript* began publication in 1868, and was composed in response to an invitation sent to the poet by a new Lynn literary society. Whittier opens by hailing shoemakers "Who, sympathizing heart with heart,/ Are firmly joined together." The last verse begins with a call to all Lynn residents: "In earnest toil for human right,/May we fulfill our mission." (1/18/68 [2]) The poem demonstrates Whittier's ties to Lynn as well as his solidarity with shoe workers. Later the same year, the *Transcript* published Whittier's "My Creed," which promotes charity, love, and work as cardinal values, and concludes by stating about the man will not work: "I know the blood about his heart/Is dry as dust." (9/12/68 [1]) The *Transcript* even published Whittier's "Retrospection", about his fifty-fifth Haverhill Academy reunion. (9/25/85 [1]) Poems about Whittier also appear in the *Transcript*. The anonymous "Whittier" was published in 1871, the unsigned "To Whittier" in 1873, and Bayard Taylor's seventieth birthday tribute appeared in December of 1877.

Whittier was a man of principles. Literary historians agree his abolitionism cost him widespread critical acceptance until the publication of "Snowbound" in 1865 at the conclusion of the Civil War. As a Quaker, as an abolitionist, as a resident of Haverhill and Amesbury, and not Boston or Cambridge, Whittier was for much of his life an outsider. Whittier was invited to join the Saturday Club, a weekly meeting of Boston area literati, but, according to Lawrence Buell in *New England Literary Culture*, he seldom cared to attend. Whittier was considered a peer by the writers Alonzo Lewis wanted recognition from, but Whittier was reluctant to join them and shed his regional veneer, something Buell suggests the more urbane Saturday Club members envied. Buell groups Whittier with other Schoolroom Poets: William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Homes, Longfellow and James Russell Lowell, and it is through the association of Whittier with these stalwarts of American poetry that the poets of nineteenth century Lynn are connected with the mainstream of American poetry.

The combination of Whittier's longtime association with Lynn, his close ties with the Quaker community in Lynn, his understanding of shoemaking and the legends of Lynn, his championing of abolitionism and his embracing of progressive causes and values, even his relationship with John Hutchinson, all enabled Whittier to be a strong influence on the poetry of Lynn during his lifetime, and, to judge by the article in honor of his hundredth birthday, even after his lifetime. John Greenleaf Whittier was the poetic godfather of the poets of nineteenth century Lynn.