

A Brief Footnote to Naomi Griffiths on Longfellow's Evangeline

P. B. Waite

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[See table of contents](#)

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Communications

A BRIEF FOOTNOTE TO NAOMI GRIFFITHS ON LONGFELLOW'S *EVANGELINE*

ONE CAN ADD A BRIEF FOOTNOTE to Naomi Griffith's excellent article in your Spring 1982 issue. Her last sentence reads, "The fate of *Evangeline* as a chosen embodiment of Acadian historical sentiment was never foreseen by its author".

Not only that. There is some evidence that he never saw, nor perhaps wished to see, the land he had described.

A little light is thrown upon Longfellow by letters in the R.H. Dana Papers in the Massachusetts Historical Society, in Boston. R.H. Dana, Sr. (1778-1879), and R.H. Dana, Jr. (1815-1882) had links with Longfellow. R.H. Dana III married Edith Longfellow, the poet's daughter, 10 January 1878 in Cambridge, Mass., and the families had been close for some years past.

R.H. Dana, Jr. had also links with Halifax. The author of *Two years before the mast* (1840) was the senior American lawyer at the 1877 Halifax Fisheries Arbitration. He argued the case for the United States with the able help of a young Halifax lawyer whom the Americans hired, J.S.D. Thompson. At Halifax, the British-Canadian member of the three-man arbitration board, Sir Alexander Galt, asked Dana to get Longfellow to come to Nova Scotia. Dana had himself spent a few days in the Annapolis Valley, in what was already known, he said, as "Evangeline country", and he did invite Longfellow, and with some enthusiasm. You should come to Nova Scotia, Dana wrote; you should visit personally the country to which you have given "her only delphic ground. You have done for it what Scott has done for Loch Katrine . . .".

It appeared that Longfellow had never been to Nova Scotia. He would not come, however; not even Sir Alexander Galt's civilized hospitality, with its "old fashioned sober notions, and . . . European ways of giving freedom to guests", as Dana put it, would induce Longfellow to leave Boston. Dana told Galt, a little sadly, that there was no chance of Longfellow accepting. Longfellow had been ill, he was not fond of sightseeing, he feared being a literary lion, and quite frankly "disliked leaving home . . .".

Longfellow died in 1882. His connection with Acadia would begin and end in his imagination, shrouded in romance. In 1877, at 70 years of age, Longfellow seems to have believed — perhaps rightly, who knows? — that reality was for others, not for him. He was like the reader in Anatole France's *Île des Pingouins*: "Et qu'est-ce que les nouveautés? Des impertinences".¹

P.B. WAITE

¹ The sources for this note, other than *Île des Pingouins* (Paris, 1908), p. 12, are in the R.H. Dana Papers in the Massachusetts Historical Society. The particular letters are: Dana to Longfellow, 18 September 1877, from Halifax; Longfellow to Dana, 21 September 1877, from Boston; Dana to Dana Sr., 23 September 1877; Dana to Longfellow, 27 September 1877.