

**The Centenary of
Oliver Wendell Holmes**

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THE CENTENARY OF OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

The span of years lying between 1809 and 1909, present one of most striking periods of the world's progress. With little difficulty the period divides itself in halves. The first half deals with the beginnings, and the dream of the forefathers began to be realized; the second exhibits our national expansion. Those years gave to the world several of its most useful benefactors, men of great mind and masters of great deeds. These characters are found in nearly every vocation. The results of their labors are found in every phase of human activity. Among these world figures is found one, Oliver Wendell Holmes, an American poet, essayist, man of science and humorist, acknowledged as one of the illustrious, as well as one of the most versatile.

The first period of his life is fully represented in the great formative scheme of our country's actions as a nation. His birth and earlier years were spent amid those stirring incidents of 1812 and 1815, which finally established that condition of peace which enabled the United States to enter upon an era of prosperity unparalleled by any country. In this period the development of the country reads like a romance of the most extravagant type. The arduous tasks imposed upon the people during the Colonial and revolutionary periods, were successfully achieved. The star of the west was enlightening the nations of the world and the asylum of the New World had opened its doors to the oppressed of every land. The development of the country was rapid and certain. An ever flowing tide of immigration, chiefly from Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany swept to

our shores. Of kindred blood, the great body of immigrants readily adjusted themselves, to their new surroundings and vigorously joined themselves, with our native-born people in developing the agriculture, mineral and industrial resources of our country.

Amid these exciting scenes did Oliver Wendell Holmes, as a precocious school boy and young collegian grow. He was born in Cambridge, Mass., one hundred years ago, August 29th. His ancestors were of good New England stock. His father, the Reverend Amiel Holmes, was a writer of rare parts and was ever an inspiration to his son who early displayed literary tendencies. His mother, Sarah Wendell, was a woman of unusual vivacity and cheerfulness with a very keen sense of humor. His early boyhood days were spent in an old rambling dwelling in Cambridge, the historic "gambrel-roofed house."

We thus find Holmes blessed with those privileges which he considered the essentials for developing a strong worthy character, good parentage and pleasant surroundings. Always a firm believer in heredity and devoting no small part of his writings to the discussion or illustration of inherited tendencies, he never made any special mention of his own ancestors.

Let us for a brief moment view the scope of intellectual culture that kept pace with the material expansion of the people.

The public school system was extended from New England throughout the free states. In the west, liberal appropriations of land were made for their support. Schools of

Secondary education were founded in all parts of the country. Harvard College exerted an astonishing influence.

Between 1821 and 1831 it graduated Emerson, Lowell, Sumner, Phillips, Motley, Thoreau and Holmes. The list as will be seen contains a number of the honored names in American literature.

The periodical press became a powerful agency in the diffusion of knowledge. This form of literature has perhaps never been equaled in any country. The periodical has always been a great enterprise in America from the first. The periodicals gradually rose in excellence and soon stimulated literary production. Many of our ablest writers, among whom were Bryant, Poe, Whittier and Lowell, served as editors. The North American review was founded in 1815, and claimed among its contributors nearly every writer of prominence in the first period of Holmes' lie. As the foregoing considerations show our country now for the first time presented conditions favorable to the production of general literature. The stress of Colonial and Revolutionary periods was removed and the intellectual energies of the people were freer to engage in the arts of peace. The growing wealth of the country brought the leisure and culture that create to a greater or less degree, a demand for the higher forms of literature.

The large cities became literary centers. Large publishing-houses were established. At this time and under these conditions appeared writers in fiction, history and poetry who

attained a high degree of excellence, names that reflect credit upon the honor of their country.

The period under consideration witnessed a wonderful movement in human progress. It was not confined to any one province but was extended throughout the whole civilized world. It will not be necessary to enumerate the various inventions which in a few decades revolutionized the entire system of agriculture and commerce. The drudgery of life was greatly relieved and the products of human industry were vastly increased and the comforts of life largely multiplied. The nations of the earth were drawn closer together and the intellectual horizon was extended until it embraced the Christian world. But the period was distinguished scarcely less by its spirit of scientific inquiry.

Emanicipating themselves largely from the authority tradition, men learned to look upon the world for themselves. Patient toilers carefully accumulated facts upon which to base their conclusions. All the natural sciences were wonderfully expanded. The origin of man, the history of the past, the laws of society were all brought under new and searching investigation. As a result of all this scientific inquiry a flood of light was shed upon the principal problems of life and nature. Christendom was lifted to a higher plan of intelligence than it had ever reached before.

These conditions enriched literature with new treasures of truth, literary activity was stimulated and gave new views of the universe and drew men from the other professions. It was decided by the parents of Holmes with his consent that he should read law, but he next accepted the study of medicine, but from early childhood he had been wooed by the

extraordinary charms of literature and readily submitted to her infatuations. There is but very little known of his school or college days except that his record is remarkably good in general scholarship and that he wrote occasional poems for the Collegian and was graduated in that famous class of " '29". His reputation as a rhymers was established and at his commencement he was elected class poet, and ever remained as such through all those years, in which he combined the whole makeup of his nature to deliver something to the ever thinning ranks of his old classmates as they gathered at their "reunions". His purpose was to drive away dull care and to push the gray locks back and to smooth out the furrowed brow. How far he was able to perform his task, we must learn from those many beautiful tributes to his school days. Probably the best and one of the widest known of them all, showing in the fullest display the poet's happiest mood mingled with rich humor and deep pathos is "Bill and Joe" –

“Come dear old comrades, you and I
Will steal an hour from days gone by,
The shining days when life was new
And all was bright with morning dew,
The lusty days of long ago,
When you were Bill and I was Joe.”

As has been suggested, he began the study of law, but soon realizing his mistake he abandoned the scheme at the end of a year and resolved to read medicine. He attended the lectures in Boston and then went to Europe to make himself more proficient in his profession.

While in Europe, he took time to do some sight-seeing, and visited England, Holland, Germany, Switzerland and Italy, but the greater part of his two years were spent in Paris where he gave himself diligently to professional study. He had exalted the practice of medicine to a very high plane and appeared as though he would attain unto his ideal, but one incident in his life as a law student, which must not be passed by, forever placed the name of Oliver Wendell Holmes upon the roll of literary honor of his country. One day he read that the Navy Department had issued orders for the breaking up of the old frigate Constitution, then lying at Charleston. His soul was deeply stirred and seizing a scrap of paper he dashed off the passionate lines of "Old Ironsides":

"Ay tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rang the battle shout
And burst the cannon's roar:-
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more."

This stirring poem with its ringing tones was copied in the press throughout the country and found a response in the heart of the people. Under a sudden blaze of indignation the astonished Secretary of the Navy revoked his order and the gallant vessel was spared for

half a century. This was a remarkable achievement for a young man who had just attained his majority.

About the year 1836, Holmes opened an office in Boston as a practicing physician. He soon won a fair practice, by his conscientious application to the demands of his profession. He was sympathetic and painstaking. The year he opened his office in Boston he published his first volume of verse, which was probably a detriment to his profession as a physician. As the public is rather suspicious of a verse making Doctor. However, two years later he was elected Professor of Anatomy at Dartmouth College, which was more in keeping with his scholarly taste. Though capable of taking part in the great movements of his day, he stood aloof in a remarkable degree. The other New England writers were more or less engaged in the strifes of Theology and Philosophy and the debated question of slavery, but he early accepted the province which was better suited to his nature than anything else. He would rather amuse than attempt to instruct and he became eminently successful in his chosen field. When an author succeeds in both amusing and instructing he has a double claim upon the grateful affection of the public. This twofold end Holmes achieved more fully than any of his contemporaries. He had little sympathy with transcendentalism. Instead of depending upon an "inner light" he placed his reliance, with Baconian spirit in observation, evidence, investigation. When, as really happened, he attempted to be profound in his speculations, he was not notably successful. Conservative in temperament he did not aspire to the role of a social reformer. His indifference to the abolition movement brought upon him the censure of some of its leaders. Unswayed by external influences he steadfastly adhered to the path he had marked out for himself.

Though far more earnest than is commonly supposed he was not dominated as was Emerson by profound philosophy. His poetry has not the power that springs from a great moral purpose. He did not concentrate all his energies upon a single department of literature or science. It is true that his poetic powers matured early and among all his productions of his subsequent years, there is nothing superior than "The Last Leaf" – that inimitable combination of humor and pathos. One of its stanzas is a perfect gem:-

The mossy marbles rest
On the lips that he has prest
In their bloom,
And the names he loved to hear
Have been carved for many a year
On the tomb."

In 1840 he was married to Miss Amelia Lee Jackson a gentle affectionate woman who appreciated her husband's talents and with noble devotion helped to make the most of them. For nearly fifty years her delicate and rare tact shielded him from annoyances and her skillful management relieved him of domestic cares. A few years after his marriage he was elected to the Chair of Anatomy at Harvard College which he filled with exceptional ability for nearly forty years. His power to amuse as well as instruct, ever made his lectures attractive and his classes full of interested students.

Mr. Holmes was sought for on the popular lecture platform not because of his imposing presence or his impassioned oratory, but for his unfailing vivacity and ready wit. His true

element was discovered when the "Atlantic Monthly" was founded. It is said he suggested the name of the periodical, whether this be the fact of the case we do not know but we do know that the occasion became one of the most important events of his life. He was secured as a regular contributor and as the result of that engagement we have been blessed with The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table. In this, which is probably his greatest work, he reveals himself as a charming writer of sparkling prose. The Autocrat interests us and talks delightfully on a hundred different subjects, presenting with a careless grace and irrepressible humor, the accumulated wisdom of years of observation and study.

Nothing appears too small or too great for his reflections. It is distinctly the impression of a mind teeming with the riches of many kinds. It is the Yankee phrase, thoroughly wide awake. There is nothing drowsy or dreamy in it, one must be alive and alert or he will miss much of its rare beauty. Interspersed throughout the brilliant talk of the Autocrat there are nearly a score of poems, partly humorous and partly serious. Several of these rank among the poet's choicest productions. Especial charm is given to each poem by its setting - "The Chambered Nautilus" was Holmes' favorite among all this poems. It will live and be an inspiration for centuries yet to come. The last stanza gives beautiful expression to the aspiration of a noble spirit:

"Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul

As the swift seasons roll!

Leave thy low-vaulted past!

Let each new temple, nobler than the last

Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast

Till thou at length art free
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea."

The humorous poem Contentment embodies as he tells us the subdued and limited desires of his maturity:

"Little I ask; my wants are few
I only wish a hut of stone,
(A very plain brown stone will do.)
That I may call my own;
And close at hand is such a one,
In yonder street that fronts the sun."

There are many other poems that may be mentioned especially "The Deacon's Masterpiece," or the wonderful "One-Hoss Shay." The Autocrat was followed by the Professor in 1859 and by the Poet in 1873. He also wrote two novels, Elsie Venner, designed to illustrate the effects of a powerful pre-natal influence; the other, the law of heredity. The scenes are laid in New England, the manners of which are portrayed with graphic realism. The plots are crude in development, but The guardian Angel contains much humor and sane thought.

He wrote the Biographies of Motley and of Emerson, these are interesting tributes but they lack sympathetic treatment. "Over the Teacups" a work similar to the Breakfast

Series was written when he was past eighty years of age. It lack the sparkling exuberance of the former works but is monument to the memory of a man of that age.

His last days cam quietly and were made as happy as possible by the affectionate remembrance and tender consideration of a large circle of friends. He was strong and hearty, taking his usual walks up within a few days of his death which occurred October 7th, 1894, while sitting in his chair. Loving tributes were paid to his memory on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a few days his centenary will be observed and those who know him personally will acknowledge that Oliver Wendell Holmes was an interesting and lovable man, genial, brilliant, witty and deeply in earnest with all. His personality is found in his works in a rare degree. Whatever the reigning genius at the Breakfast Table may be called, we know it is Mr. Holmes who is doing the speaking. His broad sympathy for his fellowmen gave him the assurance that they in turn would be interested in what he wrote and in this he was not deceived. For we still turn to his pages and seek some sparkling gem to cherish in our minds amid the perplexing care of this stubborn life. He was a man and lived with men and thus became the most humane of our men of letters. His life and work revealed his broad and tender sympathy and gave him an uncommon hold on the hearts of men.

He was born, lived, woked and died in one of the most interesting epochs of the world's history and may we at his one hundredth anniversary, see the beauty of his

character and revere his memory as a part of our heritage. He was an American and may we as Americans honor his work as a portion of our gift to the world of humor and of letters.

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