

**EVANGELINE, AND
THE EVANGELINE
COUNTRY**

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Evangeline, and the Evangeline country by H. W. Longfellow & Joan Huntley

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H. W. LONGFELLOW & JOAN HUNTLEY

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EVANGELINE
And the Evangeline Country

by

H. W. LONGFELLOW

With an Introduction by

JOAN HUNTLEY

COLLINS
SEVENTY BOND STREET

TORONTO

INTRODUCTION

THERE is a legendary quality about *Evangeline*. The illusion is due partly to the fact that it is the story of a people whom the main currents of history had swept by and partly to the diffusion of ethereal glory with which Longfellow clothes his narrative.

In 1838, not a hundred years after the eviction of the Acadians, Longfellow chanced on the rumour of the incident around which he wrote *Evangeline*. Already it seemed a folk-tale, a long-ago happening blurred by the overcrowding of more significant events. Strangely enough, it might have materialized in a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne, had not he one evening taken his Pastor, the Rev. Horace Lorenzo Conolly of Salem, to dine with his old schoolmate Longfellow.

They had met at Bowdoin College in 1821—Nat Hawthorne a dark, moody youth of seventeen; Henry Longfellow an alert, precocious lad of fourteen. Two things only

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they had in common: the blood of many generations of New Englanders ran in their veins; and they already cherished literary ambitions. Ever holding fast the bond of friendship, they followed diverging destinies through life. So on this evening in 1838 they sat, in the hospitable dining-room of Craigie House—Hawthorne the solitary, haunted by the ghost of his ancestral conscience, pursuing his slow dark way towards posterity; Longfellow the much-travelled young professor, already enjoying tangible literary success.

Conolly, sitting between them, tossed casually into the conversation the anecdote which Hawthorne notes in his diary: “—of a young couple in Acadie. On their marriage-day all the men of the Province were summoned to assemble in the church to hear a proclamation. When assembled, they were seized and shipped off to be distributed through New England, among them the new bridegroom. His bride set off in search of him—and at last found her bridegroom on his death-bed. The shock was so great it killed her likewise.”

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Did the Pastor, having thrown this challenge into the ring, lean back amused to watch novelist and poet pounce upon this slender thread of plot? But at that time Hawthorne's range was limited to purely local subjects and settings; a story about French Catholics in Canada was something as yet beyond his sphere. To Longfellow, who had gleaned poetic material from his two European sojourns, it was a bait luring him to themes closer home.

Nine years later, *Evangeline* was finished. It was Longfellow's first poem on a North American theme, and his first long work in that balanced rhythm since so familiarly associated with him—the English hexameter.

In his research for *Evangeline*, Longfellow harked back along a fascinating and unfrequented by-path of history, which we too must tread if we would fully appreciate the poem. The beckoning will-o'-the-wisp of an idea evoked in him questions which his poem re-awakens in us: who were the Acadians? Where was their home? Why were they driven forth?

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In 1604, the fogs shrouding the steep coasts of the Maritimes parted to disclose Act One of the drama of New World colonization. Those who watched Cape Sable loom out at them were gay and daring envoys of a gay and daring King—de Monts, Poutrincourt, and Champlain.

The reign of Henry IV. had been busy and dangerous. In striving to unify his Kingdom, split geographically into warring provinces and spiritually into wrangling creeds, he swerved from Catholic to Huguenot as expediency demanded until 1598, when his Edict of Nantes brought all the provinces under his control and granted religious liberty to papist and dissenter alike. Having thus set his house in order, he looked out eagerly across the seas for new fields of conquest.

Due to Cartier's discoveries (1534-42) France claimed all the Americas North of the sphere of Spanish influence. Until 1604 she had been compelled to leave it at that. But now, only six years after the momentous Edict, she was reaching out towards the New World's unplumbed treasure-store.

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These gallant gentlemen brought with them the spirit of Henry's court. Champlain, greatest of them all, was then in his middle thirties, already a soldier, mariner and explorer of renown; but his Canadian years lay yet before him. His lone vigil at Quebec; his sojourns among hostile Indians; the bickerings of unscrupulous traders, meddling Intendants, and bigoted priests, had not yet soured for him the heady wine of sheer adventure. Life at Port Royal in Acadia was one that challenged heroes; and they were heroes who met it, with a laugh and a song. Champlain instigated "The Order of Good Cheer," and all the venturers entered into the hearty and rollicking spirit of it. Like the Duke's band in the Forest of Arden, "They fled the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world."

Canada's first social club served a dual purpose. The little band, beleaguered against a continent of wilderness, needed it to keep morale and camaraderie at high level. Also, it endeared them to the Micmacs, who were admitted to the festivities as a matter of course. The new-comers spoke French flavoured

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with the coastal accents of Brittany and Normandy; they found Acadia peopled with a branch of the Algonquins which also had its peculiar dialect, distinct from that of its parent tribe. In its early years, the colony was mainly a centre from which fur-seeking or chart-making expeditions could set out; and this accorded with the habits of the nomad Micmacs. The French came with a fanfare of trumpets, a flourish of Fleur-de-lys. With Crucifix, blue-mantled Virgin, and all the deep drama of the Mass, they set about saving the souls of their savage brethren. It was a language easy for the Micmacs to understand; they too had their seasons for feasts, and their pagan sun-worship was fraught with ceremonial. They returned the compliment of admittance to the Order by taking the French with them to their favourite hunting-grounds; guiding their course along unknown waterways; and showing them herbs to combat the diseases contingent upon pioneering.

Fate sent a chronicler in 1606, in the person of Marc Lescarbot, a frail but indomitable Parisian lawyer. Let the lusty barons provide