

THE INFORMATION BUREAU

MINNEHAHA FALLS AND LONGFELLOW'S "HIAWATHA"

TO THE EDITOR :

In the September number of MINNESOTA HISTORY you publish the letter of Alex Hesler in the manuscript collection of the Minnesota Historical Society apropos of Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and the daguerreotype of Minnehaha Falls taken by Hesler which Longfellow had in his possession at the time the poem was written.

It is an interesting, not to say romantic incident; but the statement in the Hesler letter that Longfellow took the daguerreotype "out in the woods with him and from it conceived the thought and poem of Hiawatha" gives a wrong impression of the origin of the poem.

Longfellow himself in his "Notes" in the first edition of *The Song of Hiawatha* (Boston, 1855) states (p. 299) :

The Song of Hiawatha. — This Indian Edda — if I may so call it — is founded on a tradition prevalent among the North American Indians, of a personage of miraculous birth, who was sent among them to clear their rivers, forests, and fishing-grounds, and to teach them the arts of peace. He was known among different tribes by the several names of Michabou, Chiabo, Manabozo, Tarenyawagon, and Hiawatha. Mr. Schoolcraft gives an account of him in his *Algic Researches*, Vol. I, p. 134; and in his *History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, Part III, p. 314, may be found the Iroquois form of the tradition, derived from the verbal narrations of an Onondaga chief.

Into this old tradition I have woven other curious Indian legends, drawn chiefly from the various and valuable writings of Mr. Schoolcraft, to whom the literary world is greatly indebted for his indefatigable zeal in rescuing from oblivion so much of the legendary lore of the Indians.

The scene of the poem is among the Ojibways on the southern shore of Lake Superior, in the region between the Pictured Rocks and the Grand Sable.

Schoolcraft further identified the Hiawatha legend as an Iroquois legend in his *Myth of Hiawatha, and Other Oral Legends* published in 1856 and dedicated to Longfellow (p. 13):

The myth of the Indians of a remarkable personage, who is called Manabozho by the Algonquins, and Hiawatha by the Iroquois, who was the instructor of the tribes in arts and knowledge, was first related to me in 1822, by the Chippewas of Lake Superior.

On page 303 of the "Notes" in the first edition of *The Song of Hiawatha*, Longfellow quotes also from Mrs. Mary H. Eastman's *Dahcotah; or, Life and Legends of the Sioux Around Fort Snelling*, published in 1849, as follows:

The scenery about Fort Snelling is rich in beauty. The Falls of St. Anthony are familiar to travellers, and to readers of Indian sketches. Between the fort and these falls are the "Little Falls," forty feet in height, on a stream that empties into the Mississippi. The Indians call them Mine-hah-hah, or "laughing waters."

As Dr. Warren Upham has pointed out in his *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 230 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17), the name "Minnehaha" was the work of white men, although based on Indian roots, and this was probably the first time the name had ever appeared in print. There is no record of an Indian legend about an Indian maiden, beautiful or otherwise, nor about an arrowmaker, ancient or otherwise, residing at Minnehaha Falls. If there were such, Mrs. Eastman would surely have included it in her collection of local Indian legends.

It is quite evident that the general theme of the poem was of Iroquois origin and that the courtship of Minnehaha was an imaginative episode incidental to the main theme. Whether Longfellow first knew of Minnehaha Falls through the Hesler daguerreotype or through Mrs. Eastman's book it is impossible to state. Very likely he had both before him at the time the poem was written, although the Hesler incident is nowhere

mentioned in the "Notes." Be that as it may, it was a happy circumstance which led Longfellow's poetic fancy to the "land of the Dahcotahs,"

Where the Falls of Minnehaha
Flash and gleam among the oak-trees,
Laugh and leap into the valley.

E. C. G.



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