

Dr. Longfellow brings poet Longfellow to life



Photography by Wendy Elliott

Dr. Layne Longfellow resurrects his relative, noted American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the author of "Evangeline."

BY WENDY ELLIOTT

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For a short duration, Dr. Layne Longfellow actually resurrected his distant relative, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, last week.

He delighted visitors to the Memorial Church at Grand Pre with memories and the words of the author of *Evangeline*.

Longfellow is the poetry ambassador from the Longfellow National Historic Site in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

He described a three-dimensional Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was the world's most popular poet in his time, a respected scholar, and a man of great social consciousness.

His rare combination of talent, intellect, and character produced several works of conscience, said the younger Longfellow: A volume of antislavery poems 20 years before the American Civil War; the epic poem "*Hiawatha*," which pleads for Native Americans, who were then thought of as savages; and "*Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie*," a preservation of Acadian culture and history.

Longfellow told the moving story of *Evangeline's* three-year creation. He dedicated his reading and the day to the Acadian people, whom the poet both idealized and immortalized.

Poet Longfellow also idealized female devotion through his heroine *Evangeline*. The facts of the tragic deportation were imprinted on the human heart of generations of readers by means of her suffering, Longfellow said.

"Longfellow clearly believed that the Acadian society that existed on these shores was as close to ideal as any society he knew," he noted.

A psychologist by training, Longfellow compared the immortality of Henry Longfellow's phrases to those of Thomas Chandler Haliburton's character Sam Slick, whose aphorisms have also lived on in the popular lexicon.

He read from the beginning of the epic work, noting that he occasionally revises slightly to allow for modern sensibilities and to accommodate the spoken, rather than written, word.

Acknowledging his pleasure at being in the Acadian homeland, Longfellow, who is a scholar in his own right and clearly passionate about this poetry, said he hoped to return for six or eight weeks of research.