

DELPHI
CLASSICS

Oliver Wendell Holmes
Complete Works

DELPHI POETS SERIES

DELPHI POETS SERIES

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

(1809-1894)



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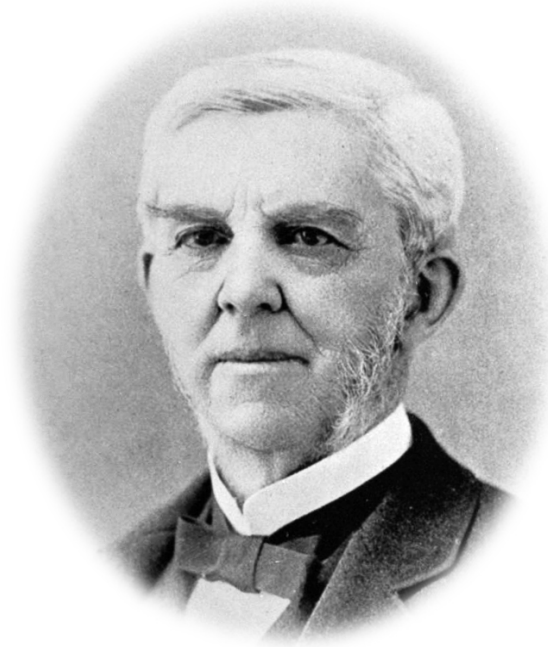
Oliver Wendell Holmes.

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Version 1

DELPHI POETS SERIES

Oliver Wendell Holmes



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NOTE



When reading poetry on an eReader, it is advisable to use a small font size and landscape mode, which will allow the lines of poetry to display correctly.

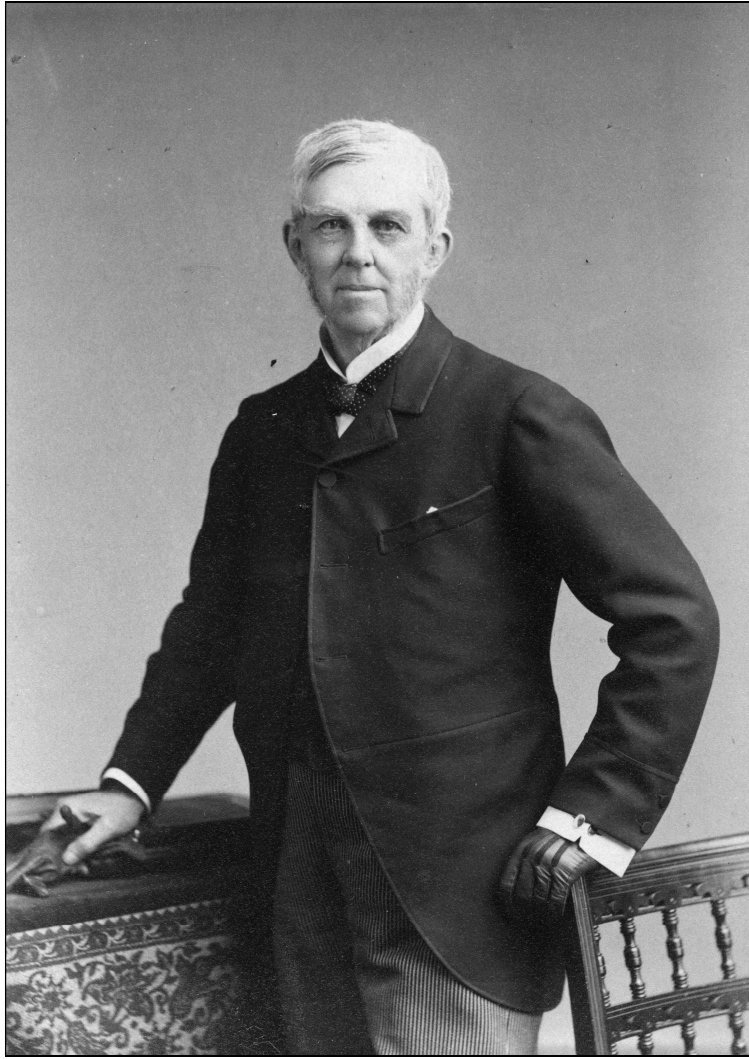
The Life and Poetry of Oliver Wendell Holmes



Cambridge, Massachusetts — Oliver Wendell Holmes' birthplace



The birthplace in Cambridge — the house was demolished in 1862.



Holmes, 1886

Brief Introduction: Oliver Wendell Holmes (1911) by John Torrey Morse

From 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica, Volume 13

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES (1809-1894), American writer and physician, was born on the 29th of August 1809 at Cambridge, Mass. His father, Abiel Holmes (1763-1837), was a Calvinist clergyman, the writer of a useful history, *Annals of America*, and of much very dull poetry. His mother (the second wife of Abiel) was Sarah Wendell, of a distinguished New York family. Through her Dr Holmes was descended from Governors Thomas Dudley and Simon Bradstreet of Massachusetts, and from her he derived his cheerfulness and vivacity, his sympathetic humour and wit. From Phillips (Andover) Academy he entered Harvard in the "famous class of '29," made further illustrious by the charming lyrics which he wrote for the anniversary dinners from 1851 to 1889, closing with the touching "After the Curfew." After graduation he studied law perfunctorily for a year and dabbled in literature, winning the public ear by a spirited lyric called forth by the order to destroy the old frigate *Constitution*. These verses were sung all over the land, and induced the Navy Department to revoke its order and save the old ship. Turning next to medicine, and convinced by a brief experience in Boston that he liked it, he went to Paris in March 1833. He studied industriously under Louis and other famous physicians and surgeons in France, and in his vacations visited the Low Countries, England, Scotland and Italy. Returning to Boston at the close of 1835, filled with a high professional ambition, he sought practice, but achieved only moderate success. Social, brilliant in conversation, and a writer of gay little poems, he seemed to the grave Bostonians not sufficiently serious. He won prizes, however, for professional papers, and lectured on anatomy at Dartmouth College. He wrote two papers on homoeopathy, which he attacked with trenchant wit; also a valuable paper on the malarial fevers of New England. In 1843 he published his essay on the *Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever*, which stirred up a fierce controversy and brought upon him bitter personal abuse; but he maintained his position with dignity, temper and judgment; and in time he was honoured as the discoverer of a beneficent truth. The volume of his medical essays holds some of his most sparkling wit, his shrewdest observation, his kindest humanity. In 1840 he married Amelia Lee Jackson, daughter of the Hon. Charles Jackson (1775-1855), formerly associate justice of the State supreme judicial court, a lady of rare charm alike of mind and character. She died in the winter of 1887-1888. Their first-born child, Oliver Wendell Holmes, afterwards became chief justice of that same bench on which his grandfather sat. In 1847 Dr Holmes was appointed professor of anatomy and physiology in the Medical School of Harvard University, the duties involving the giving of instruction also in kindred departments, so that, as he said, he occupied "not a chair, but a settee in the school." He delivered the anatomical lectures until November 1882, and in later years these were his only link with the medical profession. They were fresh, witty and lively; and the students were sent to him at the end of the day, when they were fagged, because he alone could keep them awake. In later years he made few finished contributions to medical knowledge; his eager and impetuous temperament caused him to leave more patient investigators to push to ultimate results the suggestions thrown out by his fertile and imaginative mind.

In 1836, being in that year the Phi Beta Kappa poet at Harvard University, he published his first volume of *Poems*, which afterwards reached a second edition. Among these earlier lyrics was "The Last Leaf," one of the most delicate combinations of pathos and humour in literature. His collected poetry fills three volumes. In 1856–1857 a Boston publishing house (Phillips, Sampson, and Co.) invited James Russell Lowell to edit a new magazine, which he agreed to do on condition that he could secure the assistance of Dr Holmes. By this urgent invitation the Doctor was equally surprised and flattered, for heretofore he had stood rather outside the literary coterie of Cambridge and Boston. He accepted with pleasure, and at once threw himself into the enterprise with zeal. He christened it *The Atlantic Monthly*; and, as Mr Howells afterwards said, he "not only named but made" it, for in each number of its first volume there appeared one of the papers of the *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. The opening of the *Autocrat*—"I was just going to say when I was interrupted"—is explained by the fact that in the old *New England Magazine* (1831 to 1833) the Doctor had published two *Autocrat* papers, which, by his wish, have never been reprinted. In the commercial panic of 1857 the new magazine would inevitably have failed had it not been for these fascinating essays. Their originality of conception, their wit and humour, their suggestions of what then seemed bold ideas, and their expression of New Englandism, all combined to make them so popular that the most harassed merchant in that gloomy winter purchased them as a dose of cheering medicine. Thus Dr Holmes made *The Atlantic Monthly*, which in return made him. A success so immediate and so splendid settled the rest of his career; he ceased to be a physician and became an author. These twelve papers were immediately (1858) published as a volume. No sooner was the *Autocrat* silent than the *Professor* (1859) succeeded him at the breakfast table. The *Professor* was preferred by more thoughtful readers, though it has hardly been so widely popular as the *Autocrat*. Its theology, which seemed in those days audacious, frightened many of the strict and old-fashioned religionists of New England, though to-day it seems mild enough. Twelve years later, in 1871, the Landlady had another boarder, who took the vacant chair—the *Poet* (published 1872). But here Holmes fell a little short. In these three books, especially in the *Autocrat* and the *Professor*, the Doctor wrote as he talked at many a dinner table in Boston, but less well. The animation and clash of talk roused him. The dinners of the Saturday Club are among Boston's proudest traditions, as they were the chief pleasure of Dr Holmes' life. Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Sumner, Agassiz, Motley, and many other charming talkers, and among them all he was admitted to be the best.

There were characters and incidents, but hardly a story, in the *Autocrat* and the *Professor*. Holmes had an ambition for more sustained work, and in 1861 his novel, *Elsie Venner*, at first called *The Professor's Story*, was published. The book was illuminated throughout by admirable pictures of character and society in the typical New England town. But the rattlesnake element was unduly extravagant, and in other respects the book was open to criticism as a work of art. It was written with the same purpose which informed the greatest part of the Doctor's literary work, and which had already been scented and nervously condemned by the religious world. By heredity the Doctor was a theologian; no other topic enchained him more than did the stern and merciless dogmas of his Calvinist forefathers. His humanity revolted against them, his reason condemned them, and he set himself to their destruction as his task in literature. The religious world of his time was still so largely under the control of old ideas that he was assailed as a freethinker and a subverter of Christianity; though before his death opinions had so changed that the bitterness of the attacks upon him

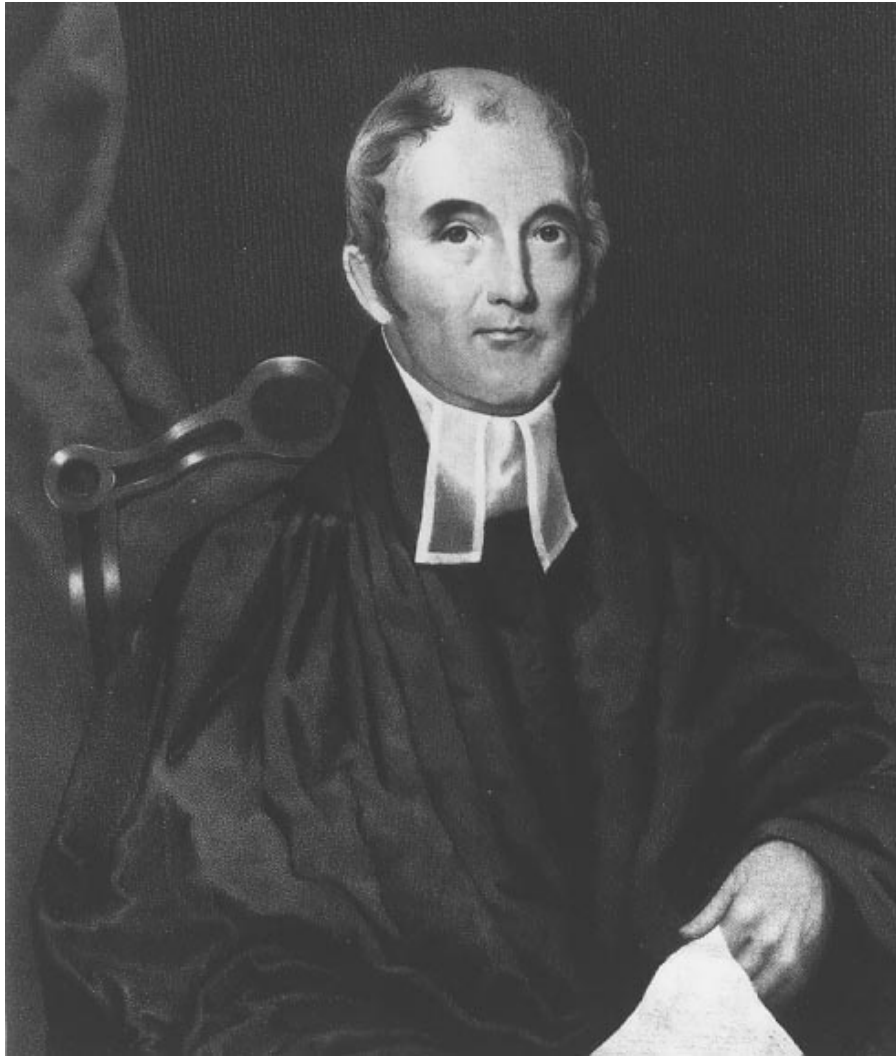
seemed incredible, even to some of those who had most vehemently made them. None the less, undaunted and profoundly earnest, he returned, six years later, to the same line of thought in his second novel, *The Guardian Angel* (published 1867). This, though less well known than *Elsie Venner*, is in many respects better. No more lifelike and charming picture of the society of the New England country-town of the middle third of the 19th century has ever been drawn, and every page sparkles with wit and humour. In 1884 and 1885 it was followed, still in the same line, by *A Mortal Antipathy*, a production inferior to its predecessors.

Holmes generally held himself aloof from politics, and from those "causes" of temperance, abolition and woman's rights which enthralled most of his contemporaries in New England. The Civil War, however, aroused him for the time; finding him first a strenuous Unionist, it quickly converted him into an ardent advocate of emancipation. His interest was enhanced by the career of his elder son Oliver (see below), who was three times severely wounded, and finally rose to the rank of lieutenant-colonel in the Northern army. He wrote some ringing war lyrics, and in 1863 delivered the Fourth of July oration in Boston, which showed a masterly appreciation of the stirring public questions of the day. In 1878 Dr Holmes wrote a memoir of the historian John Lothrop Motley, an affectionate tribute to one who had been his dear friend. In 1884 he contributed the life of Emerson to the American "Men of Letters" series. He admired the "Sage of Concord," but was not quite in intellectual sympathy with him. Both were Liberals in thought, but in widely different ways. But in spite of this handicap the volume proved very popular. In 1888 he began the papers which he happily christened *Over the Tea Cups*. As a *tour de force* on the part of a man of nearly fourscore years they are very remarkable.

After his return from Paris in 1835 Dr Holmes lived in Boston, with summer sojournings at Pittsfield and Beverly Farms, and occasional trips to neighbouring cities, until 1886. He then undertook a four months' journey in Europe, and in England had a sort of triumphal progress. On his return he wrote *Our Hundred Days in Europe* (1887), a courteous recognition of the hospitality and praise which had been accorded to him. During this visit Cambridge University made him Doctor of Letters, Edinburgh University made him Doctor of Laws, and Oxford University made him Doctor of Civil Law. Already, in 1880, Harvard University had made him Doctor of Laws. He died on the 7th of October 1894, and was buried from King's Chapel, Boston, in the cemetery of Mount Auburn.

His eldest son Oliver Wendell (b. 1841), who graduated from Harvard in 1861 and fought in the Civil War, retiring from the army as brevet lieutenant-colonel in 1864, took up the study of law and was admitted to the bar in Boston in 1866. He was for some years editor of the *American Law Review*, and after being professor in the Harvard Law School in 1882 was appointed in the same year a judge of the Massachusetts supreme court, rising to be chief justice in 1899. In 1902 he was made a judge of the United States Supreme Court. His work on *The Common Law* (1881) and his edition (1873) of Kent's *Commentaries* are his principal publications; and he became widely recognized as one of the great jurists of his day.

Bibliography. — Holmes' *Complete Works*, in 13 volumes, were published at Boston in 1891. See J. T. Morse, *Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (London, 1896); G. B. Ives, *Bibliography* (Boston, 1907); and the bibliography in P. K. Foley's *American Authors* (Boston, 1897). An essay by Sir Leslie Stephen is prefixed to the "Golden Treasury" edition (1903) of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. See also monographs by William Sloane Kennedy (Boston, 1882); Emma E. Brown (Boston, 1884). (J. T. Mo.)



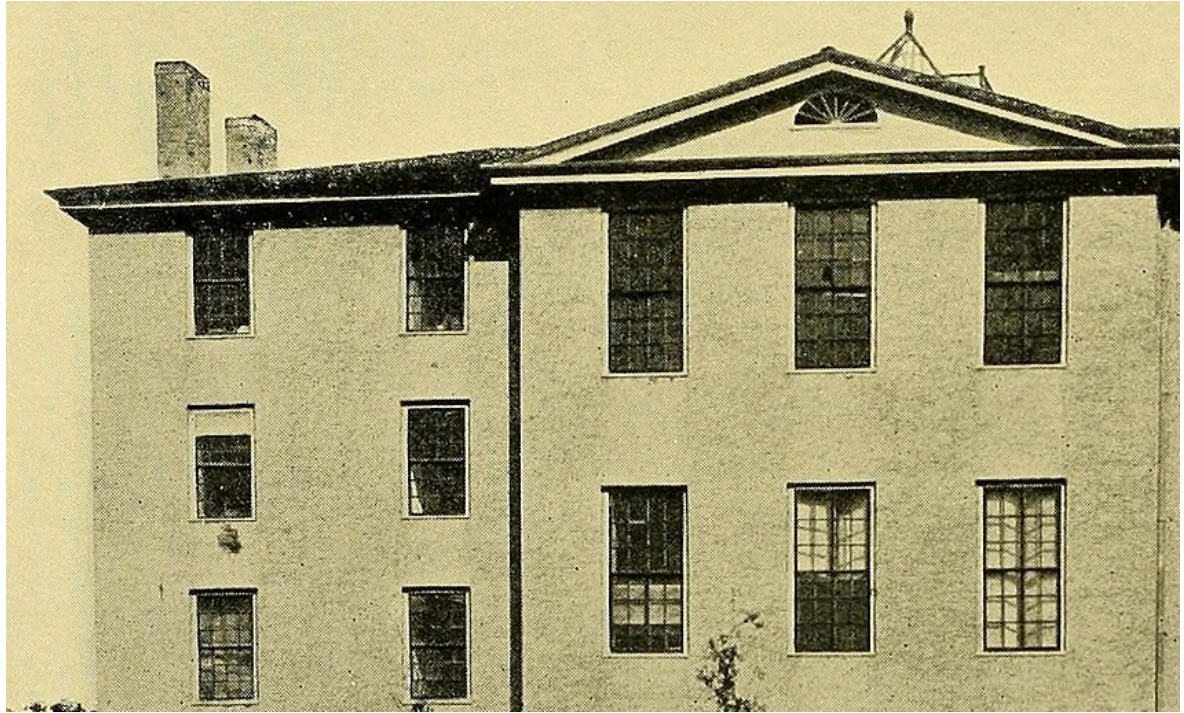
The poet's father, Abiel Holmes (1763 -1837) was an American Congregational clergyman and historian.



Portrait of the English poet Sir John Dryden, c. 1693. Holmes was heavily influenced by Dryden (1631-1700), who was England's first Poet Laureate and the dominating presence of the literary life of Restoration England.



James Jackson — pursuing a medical career in his twenties, Holmes became a student of Jackson, a physician and the father of a friend, while working part-time as a chemist in the hospital dispensary. Dismayed by the “painful and repulsive aspects” of primitive medical treatment of the time — which included practices such as bloodletting and blistering — Holmes responded favorably to his mentor’s teachings, which emphasised close observation of the patient and humane approaches.



Holmes served on the faculty of Dartmouth Medical School from 1838 to 1840, where he was appointed professor of anatomy and physiology.



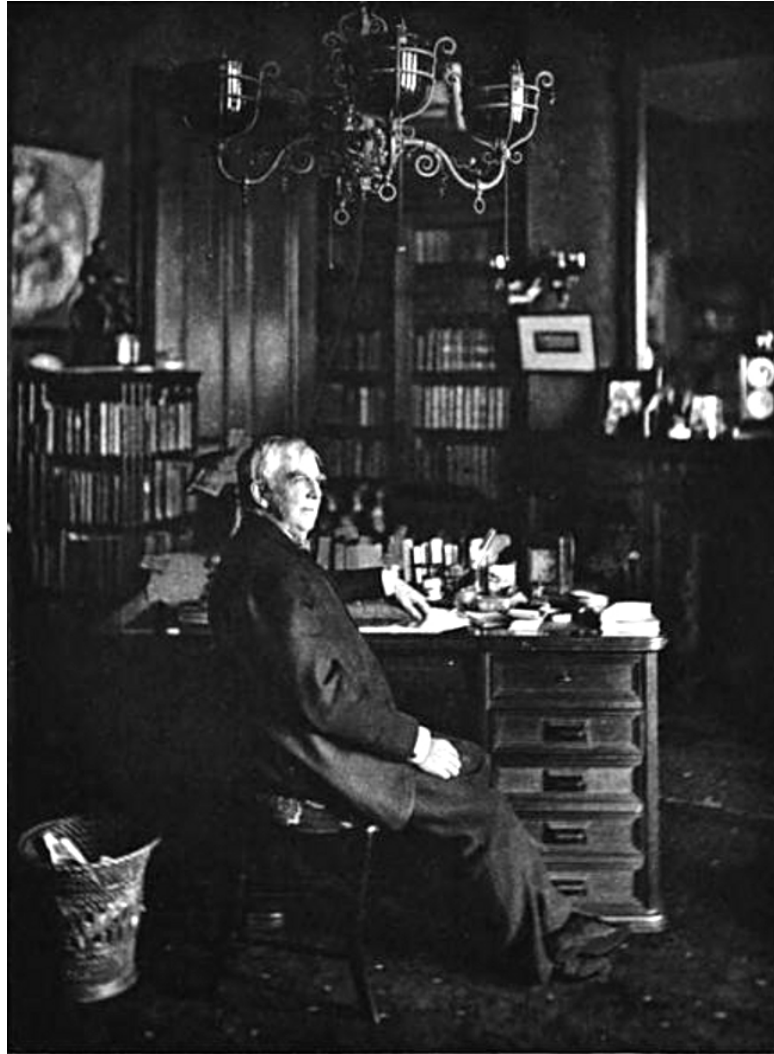
Holmes, 1853



Holmes with Members of the Boston Society for Medical Improvement in 1853, seated second from left



Holmes began writing poetry at an early age; one of his most famous works, "Old Ironsides", was published in 1830 and was influential in the eventual preservation of the USS Constitution, a three-masted wooden-hulled heavy frigate of the United States Navy. She is the world's oldest commissioned warship still afloat.



Holmes in his study in later life

Complete Poetical Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes

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