

1-1-2007

Even Santa Has Bad Days: The Rainy Day Christmas Card

Charles "Chip" Kaufmann
Maine Historical Society

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kaufmann, Charles "Chip". "Even Santa Has Bad Days: The Rainy Day Christmas Card." *Maine History* 43, 1 (2007): 105-110.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol43/iss1/8>

This From the Collections is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

Even Santa Has Bad Days: The Rainy Day Christmas Card

BY CHARLES KAUFMANN

AT FIRST, it seems like an unlikely Christmas Card: on the outside, a rainbow piercing the moody atmosphere over a Highland loch, a blue ribbon binding, and a poem by English writer Helen Marion Burnside, (1844-1923):

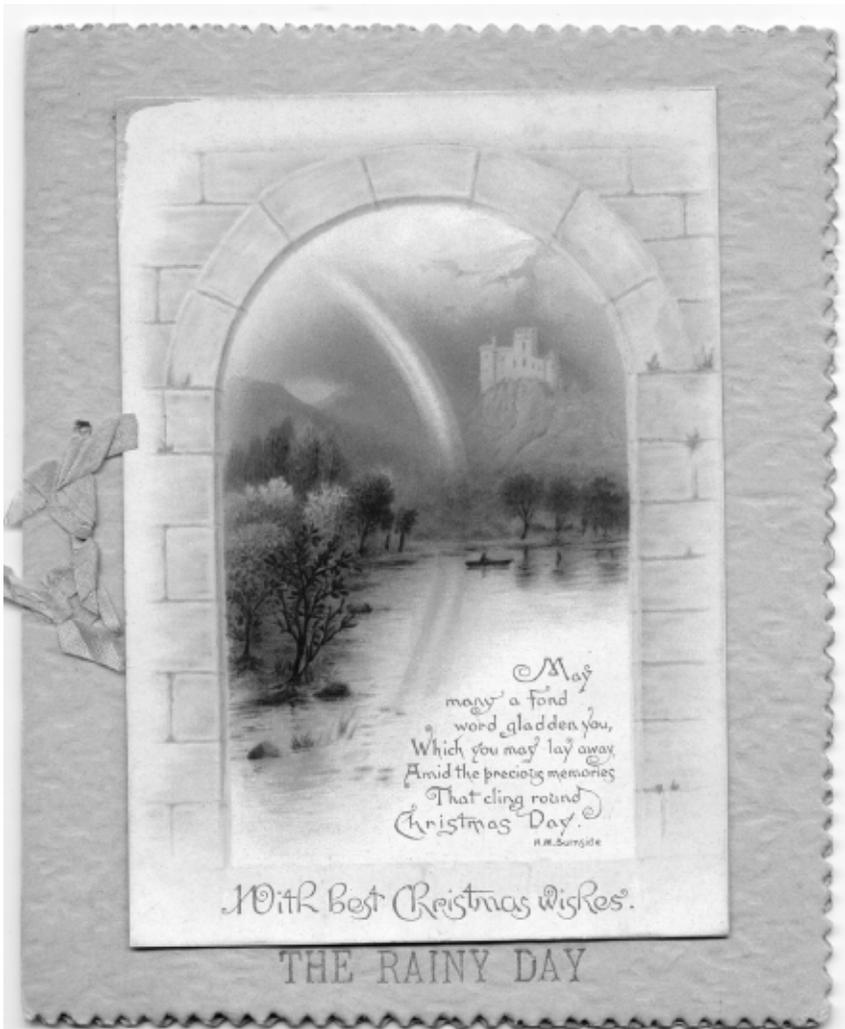
May many a fond
word gladden you,
Which you may lay away
Amid the precious memories
That cling round
Christmas Day.

And along the bottom:

With Best Christmas Wishes.
THE RAINY DAY

Inside, on three separate pages, was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1841 poem, *The Rainy Day*:

The day is cold, and dark, and dreary;
It rains, and the wind is never weary;
The vine still clings to the mouldering wall,
But at every gust the dead leaves fall,
And the day is dark and dreary.
My life is cold, and dark, and dreary;
It rains, and the wind is never weary;
My thoughts still cling to the mouldering Past,



The Rainy Day Christmas Card, Maine Historical Society Collections, S-5852, Misc. Box 148/15.

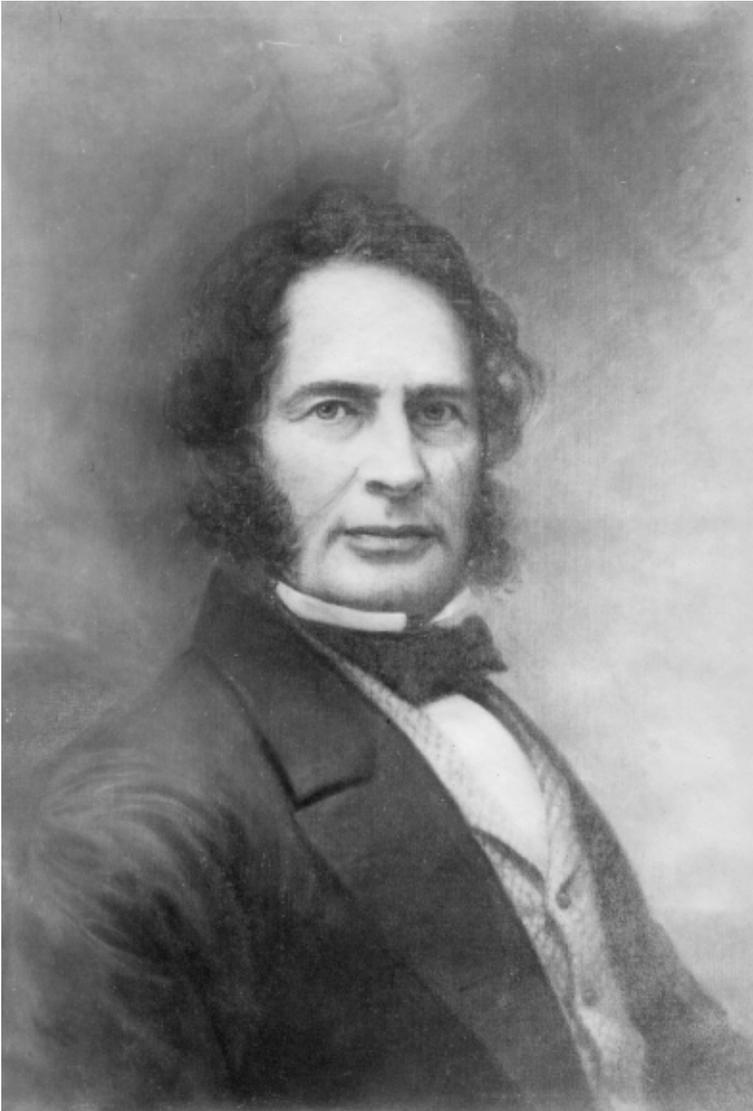
But the hopes of youth fall thick in the blast,
 And the days are dark and dreary.
 Be still, sad heart! and cease repining;
 Behind the clouds is the sun still shining;
 Thy fate is the common fate of all,
 Into each life some rain must fall,
 Some days must be dark and dreary.

What sort of dreary Christmas Day greeting is this? Something to send to that favorite long-suffering Victorian? Perhaps Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), awash in his own self-destructive storm clouds in December 1888; or Walt Whitman (1818-1892), who wrote his last will and testament on December 24, 1891; or Sam Clemens (1835-1910), forced in 1891 to move to Europe to escape debts, and who wrote, in 1897, rephrasing the optimistic motto eight-year-old Anne Longfellow Pierce stitched into her 1818 sampler (on display in the Wadsworth-Longfellow House): “be good and you will be *lonesome*,” or – better yet – right to the source, Queen Victoria (1819-1901), dressed in black for the rest of her life in constant mourning for Albert, a victim of typhoid fever in 1861?

The Rainy Day Christmas Card, donated to the Maine Historical Society Library by Earl Shettleworth, was designed by Rafael Tuck & Sons in London and printed in the 1880s or 1890s at the First Fine Arts Works Studios, Saxony. Other Victorian Christmas cards produced by Tuck (1821-1900) contain similarly un-Christmas-like images: a bouquet of damask roses; wild flowers; apple blossoms; green Scottish heathland; idyllic fishing nets in a rural village; a country churchyard with newly-green birch trees beyond a waterfall. Clearly, behind the clouds of an English Christmas, somewhere, the sun must be shining.

A few Tuck Christmas cards contain other dreary poems, such as *Nithdale's Welcome Hame*, by Robert Burns, (1759-1796):

Tho' stars in skies may disappear,
 And angry tempests gather;
 The happy hour may soon be near
 That brings us pleasant weather:
 The weary night o' care and grief
 May hae a joyfu' morrow;
 So dawning day has brought relief,
 Fareweel our night o' sorrow.



Copy of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow photo owned by Edith Longfellow, donated to the Maine Historical Society in 1907 by Mrs. Richard Henry Dana III, Maine Historical Society Collections, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow pre-c.1861 photo file, also catalogued in the Museum Section of the PastPerfect Data Base as A85-444.

As anyone who has toured the Longfellow House knows, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) wrote his infamous *Rainy Day* poem while seated at the writing desk Anne later used as a sideboard in her “summer dining room.” There, looking out into the gloomy gardens behind the Wadsworth-Longfellow House on a particularly soggy, dismal 1841 day, Longfellow, struggling with depression, shaped the poem containing the sympathetic, cathartic phrase, “into each life some rain must fall.” Still mourning the death of Mary Potter, still hoping to succeed not just as a professor but as a poet, still tormented by the refusal of Francis Appleton to accept his marriage proposals, Longfellow was, simply put, in one big rainy-day-funk.

When I lead tours through the Wadsworth-Longfellow House, I always recite *The Rainy Day* in the Summer Dining Room, and I always ask the tourists to complete the next-to-last line, which, I say, they already know, even if they don’t know Longfellow wrote it. Prompting them, I pause after “into each life....” Ninety-nine times out of one hundred, if someone doesn’t erroneously blurt out “a silver lining,” at least someone will complete the phrase correctly.

More than Longfellow’s depression, this dreary poem reflects the grief of Anne Longfellow Pierce (1810-1901), whose husband, George Washington Pierce, died of typhoid fever in 1835. Much like Queen Victoria, Anne – sovereign in her own limited sphere – would carry her grief to her death.

So there is nothing unusual about a dreary-but-hopeful Christmas card. Both the “joyfu’ morrow” of Burns and the “behind the clouds is the sun still shining” of Longfellow are images easily adapted to traditional Christian views of Advent and Christmas. Jesus was the bridegroom of the “divine marriage” in this 1859 translation of the Lutheran hymn, *Sleepers Awake*, by English hymnodist Katherine Winkworth, (1827-1878):

She wakes, she rises from her gloom:
 Forth her Bridegroom comes, all glorious,
 In grace arrayed, by truth victorious;
 Her Star is risen, her Light is come!
 Longfellow’s 1863 poem, *Snowflakes*, begins like a Hallmark
 Christmas card, ends as a confession of deep, personal despair:
 Out of the bosom of the Air,
 Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken,
 Over the woodlands brown and bare,

Over the harvest-fields forsaken,
Silent, and soft, and slow
Descends the snow.
Even as our cloudy fancies take
Suddenly shape in some divine expression,
Even as the troubled heart doth make
In the white countenance confession,
The troubled sky reveals
The grief it feels.
This is the poem of the air,
Slowly in silent syllables recorded;
This is the secret of despair,
Long in its cloudy bosom hoarded,
Now whispered and revealed
To wood and field.

You can find Longfellow's *Snowflakes* on the Web on such sites as www.santas.net and oldpoetry.com, and *The Rainy Day* can be found, "dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives," as an appeal for donations to the American Red Cross Katrina Relief Fund. Thus Longfellow continues to hold his own in the age of digital poetry. For anyone needing something to do on a rainy day, the Maine Historical Society Library has preserved the "fond words" of the Rainy Day Christmas Card amidst all the other memories its collections contain. You will be surprised at – and perhaps find some sort of dreary comfort in – what you stumble across.

Charles (Chip) Kaufmann is a tour guide in the Wadsworth-Longfellow House of the Maine Historical Society and Organist and Music Director of First Parish Church, Unitarian-Universalist, Portland, Maine. Mr. Kaufmann's exhibit, "From Burlesque to Royal Albert Hall: Longfellow Poems Set To Music," will be part of the Longfellow 200th birthday celebration at the Maine Historical Society in Portland.