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Reawakening Whittier: Producer to release first-ever recording of 'Snow-Bound'

By Sonya Vartabedian

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HAVERHILL, Mass. — Michael Maglaras grew up in a time when children had to memorize poems. And John Greenleaf Whittier — the 19th-century Quaker poet from Haverhill and Amesbury whose mother was born in Maglaras' hometown of Dover, N.H. — was a natural subject in school.

At 16, Maglaras was introduced to Whittier's famed "Snow-Bound" and recalled he was "more puzzled than appreciative" of the narrative.

It wasn't until years later, with significant life experience behind him, that Maglaras rediscovered "Snow-Bound" by accident. Only then, after having lived through some difficult times himself, was Maglaras able to realize the depth of Whittier's prose.

"It haunted me that not many people of our day had read Whittier," said Maglaras, who now lives in Greenwich, Conn. and is on a mission to raise the profile of the poet who died in 1892. "He's viewed as an old, crotchety Quaker type. But he was really a man of passion."

Calling "Snow-Bound" one of the finest poems written in the 19th century, Maglaras said it led the Haverhill-born poet (1807-1892) to be held in high esteem in his time, regarded with the likes of masters Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Mention Whittier outside the reaches of Haverhill and Amesbury, where he spent his adult life, and Maglaras said most people scratch their heads in ignorance. They aren't aware of his poetry, nor his role as ardent abolitionist and one of the founders of the Republican Party.

"It's really time for Whittier to come back into consciousness," he said. "I'd like to see him restored to his rightful place — a poet of the first order, a statesman and a revolutionary who risked his life more than once."

In preparation for the bicentennial of Whittier's birth next year, Maglaras has begun recording the poet's works, beginning with "Snow-Bound." Friday, on what is the 140th anniversary of the publication of "Snow-Bound," Maglaras travels to Amesbury to give a live reading of the poem.

"It's too beautiful of a poem to let it go," Maglaras said.

Written in the summer of 1865 when Whittier was living in Amesbury, "Snow-Bound" depicts a bygone era. Celebrating the power of reminiscence, it recounts a New England blizzard that isolated the poet as a young boy and his family in their Haverhill home for nearly a week before a team of oxen could plow them out.

In the poem, Whittier paints the scene including his mother, father and two sisters, as well as their guests, huddled around the great fireplace in the homestead. Stories are exchanged, personalities are revealed, and the beauty of the scene is described.

“It takes us back to a time and place where people had to sit back and converse in a way that is foreign to us today,” Maglaras said.

Published in February 1866, the epic poem was an immediate success. It sold 20,000 copies by word of mouth in the first few months. Another 25,000 editions were printed later that year, and the poem was read and memorized throughout the English-speaking world.

“The Civil War had just ended and the nation was grieving the assassination of President Lincoln and the enormous loss of the countless soldiers who fought,” Maglaras said. “‘Snow-Bound’ captures that sense of loss through the personal reminiscences the family members share with one another about time past and loved ones long gone.”

Pat Dubus, caretaker of The Whittier Home in Amesbury, said the country was eager for a sense of nostalgia, and the picture of a blizzard was such a quintessential New England thing.

“It made him an overnight rock star,” Dubus said. “It so resonated with people in a country that was so brutalized by the Civil War. People were harkening back to an earlier period.”

While Whittier’s poetry strikes a chord with adults, Dubus said the challenge rests in helping students understand his work. The staff at the Whittier Home try to make the poet relevant by comparing him to modern-day superstars, such as Sean “Diddy” Combs, who, like Whittier, is an artist and an activist.

“All you really have to do to capture their imagination is to help them to see this is a human being who lived in their town who was a radical man of his time,” Dubus said. “It’s important for kids to see the bigger picture, not just an old toothless poet.”

Maglaras, who runs 217 Records specializing in alternative music and spoken-word recordings, said the Whittier Bicentennial Recording Project represents a personal passion.

Maglaras’ recording of “Snow-Bound” is the first-ever available to the public. It is accompanied by the music of Concord composer Charles Ives, and Maglaras hopes it will be the first in a trio of Whittier spoken-word releases. “Maud Miller” and other Whittier poems, including “The Pressed Gentian” and “Burning Driftwood,” will be featured on the second recording due out this fall.

To help people better understand the poet and his prose, the full text of “Snow-Bound” is included with the recording. The idea, Maglaras said, is people can read along as they listen to the words, preferably while sitting around a fireplace.

“Now more than ever,” Maglaras said, “Whittier’s words about the importance of family connections, a return to simpler times and a belief in the value of each person’s innate humanity is a message well worth listening to again and again.”

Sonya Vartabedian writes for The Daily News of Newburyport, Mass.

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