

Bulfinch's Mythology



Thomas Bulfinch

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Charles Martin*

George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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From the Pages of Bulfinch's Mythology



If no other knowledge deserves to be called useful but that which helps to enlarge our possessions or to raise our station in society, then mythology has no claim to the appellation. But if that which tends to make us happier and better can be called useful then we claim that epithet for our subject. For mythology is the handmaid of literature; and literature is one of the best allies of virtue and promoters of happiness.

(“Preface,” page 7)

“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree,
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea.”

—*Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

(“Proserpine,” pages 61-62)

Venus, playing one day with her boy Cupid, wounded her bosom with one of his arrows. She pushed him away, but the wound was deeper than she thought. Before it healed she beheld Adonis, and was captivated with him. She no longer took any interest in her favourite resorts—Paphos, and Cnidos, and Amathos, rich in metals. She absented herself from heaven, for Adonis was dearer to her than heaven.

(“Venus and Adonis,” page 69)

“What was that snakyheaded Gorgon-shield
What wise Minerva wore, unconquered virgin,
Wherewith she freezed her foes to congealed stone,
But rigid looks of chaste austerity,
And noble grace that dashed brute violence
With sudden adoration and blank awe!”

—*John Milton*

(“Perseus and Medusa,” page 114)

Æneas parted from Dido, though she tried every allurements and persuasion to detain him. The blow to her affection and her pride was too much for her to endure, and when she found that he was gone, she mounted a funeral pile which she had caused to be erected, and having stabbed herself was consumed with the pile. The flames rising over the city were seen by the departing Trojans, and, though the cause was unknown, gave to Æneas some intimation of the fatal event.

(“Dido,” page 245)

“Ah, Launcelot! my knight, truly have I been told that thou art no longer worthy of me!”

(“The Story of Launcelot,” page 412)

In the last decade of the twelfth century Richard I. of England took the cross, which had come to him as a sort of legacy from

his father, and sailed for Antioch, which was being besieged by the Christians, to assist in the war in the Holy Land.

(“King Richard and the Third Crusade,” page 591)

Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, succeeded his father, Pepin, on the throne in the year 768. This prince, though the hero of numerous romantic legends, appears greater in history than in fiction. Whether we regard him as a warrior or as a legislator, as a patron of learning or as the civilizer of a barbarous nation, he is entitled to our warmest admiration.

(Introduction to “Legends of Charlemagne,” page 669)

France was at this time the theatre of dreadful events. The Saracens and the Christians, in numerous encounters, slew one another.

(“Medoro,” page 748)

“I receive thy homage, and pardon thee the death of my son, but only on one condition. You shall go immediately to the court of the Sultan Gaudisso; you shall present yourself before him as he sits at meat; you shall cut off the head of the most illustrious guest whom you shall find sitting nearest to him; you shall kiss three times on the mouth the fair princess his daughter, and you shall demand of the sultan, as token of tribute to me, a handful of the white hair of his beard, and four grinders from his mouth.”

(“Huon of Bordeaux,” page 820)

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Published by Barnes & Noble Books
122 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10011

www.barnesandnoble.com/classics

The present text of *Bulfinch's Mythology* comprises *The Age of Fable*, first published in 1855; *The Age of Chivalry*, first published in 1858; and *Legends of Charlemagne, or Romance of the Middle Ages*, first published in 1863.

Published in 2006 by Barnes & Noble Classics with new Introduction, Notes, Biography, Chronology, and For Further Reading.

Introduction, Notes, and For Further Reading
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Note on Thomas Bulfinch and *The World of Thomas Bulfinch and Bulfinch's Mythology*
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Bulfinch's Mythology
ISBN-13: 978-1-59308-273-4 ISBN-10: 1-59308-273-8
eISBN : 97-8-141-14318-7
LC Control Number 2005929203

Produced and published in conjunction with:
Fine Creative Media, Inc.
322 Eighth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

Michael J. Fine, President and Publisher

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST PRINTING

Thomas Bulfinch



Thomas Bulfinch was born in Newton, Massachusetts, on July 15, 1796, to Hannah Apthorp Bulfinch and noted architect Charles Bulfinch, both from wealthy and distinguished Boston families. Charles was financially destroyed by bad real estate investments, but Thomas received an excellent education in his years at Boston Latin School, Philips Exeter Academy, and Harvard gave him a foundation in the humanities and the classic Latin texts that he would later put to use in *Bulfinch's Mythology*.

After graduating from Harvard in 1814, Bulfinch embarked on business ventures in hardware, textiles, and merchandising, with little success or pleasure. In 1837 he took a position as a clerk at the Merchant's Bank of Boston and remained there the rest of his life. He spent his evenings reading and writing and in 1853 published his first book, *Hebrew Lyrical History*, a reorganization of the biblical Psalms into a historical narrative.

Two years later, nearing the age of sixty, Bulfinch published *The Age of Fable*, the first of the books that, along with *The Age of Chivalry* (1858) and *The Legends of Charlemagne* (1863), would come to be collected in *Bulfinch's Mythology*. His *Poetry of the Age of Fable* (1863) and *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes and for the Family Circle* (1865), though little known today, were also popular. He based another work, *The Boy Inventor* (1860), on the life of his protégé Matthew Edwards. *Oregon and Eldorado*, about the explorations of the Pacific Northwest, was published in 1866. Thomas Bulfinch died the next year and is buried in the family plot in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The World of Thomas Bulfinch and Bulfinch's Mythology



- 1796** Thomas Bulfinch is born in Newton, Massachusetts, on July 15, to Charles, a prominent architect who designed the Massachusetts State House and other noted buildings, and Hannah Apthorp Bulfinch. Charles and Hannah are cousins; both are from distinguished and wealthy Boston families.
- 1805** Thomas enrolls in the Boston Latin School.
- 1807** Charles loses his fortune when a real estate investment fails. William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" appears.
- 1810** Thomas graduates from Phillips Exeter Academy and enrolls in Harvard College, where he pursues a traditional humanities curriculum.
- 1811** Charles is imprisoned briefly for debt.
- 1812** War with Britain begins.
- 1814** Bulfinch graduates from Harvard and begins to teach at the Boston Latin School. Francis Scott Key writes "The Star Spangled Banner."
- 1815** Jane Austen's *Emma* is published.
- 1818** President James Monroe appoints Charles Bulfinch architect of the U.S. Capitol. Bulfinch and his parents move to Washington, D.C.
- 1820** The Missouri Compromise is passed, admitting Missouri to the Union as a slave state and Maine as a free state, and prohibiting slavery from then on in territories north of Missouri's southern border.
- 1826** James Fenimore Cooper publishes *The Last of the Mohicans*.
- 1828** Noah Webster publishes *American Dictionary of the English Language*.
- 1831** William Lloyd Garrison, a friend of Thomas Bulfinch, begins to publish the abolitionist newsletter *The Liberator* in Boston.
- 1832** The New England Anti-Slavery Society is founded in Boston.
- 1836** Davy Crockett dies in the battle of the Alamo.
- Bulfinch obtains a job as a collections clerk at the Merchant's Bank of Boston, a position he

- 1837** will keep for the rest of his life. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* is an American bestseller.
-
- 1840** Bulfinch takes on a voluntary position as secretary of the Boston Society of Natural History.
- 1841** Bulfinch's mother, Hannah, dies. Ralph Waldo Emerson's first series of *Essays* are published.
- 1842** Charles Dickens' *American Notes* appear.
- 1844** Charles Bulfinch dies.
- 1845** Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven" appears.
- 1848** *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, appears. The discovery of gold sparks the first California gold rush.
- 1849** Henry David Thoreau publishes *Civil Disobedience*.
- 1850** Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* appears.
- 1851** Herman Melville publishes *Moby Dick*.
- 1852** Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appears. Hawthorne publishes *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, a retelling of Greek myths that may inspire Bulfinch's *Age of Fable*.
- 1853** Bulfinch publishes *Hebrew Lyrical History*, his first book, rearranging the biblical Psalms in a narrative historical order more easily grasped by the average reader.
- 1854** Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* is published.
- 1855** *The Age of Fable*, the first volume in what will become known as *Bulfinch's Mythology*, is published; the book enjoys considerable success. Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* are published.
- 1858** *The Age of Chivalry* is published. Bulfinch begins giving Latin lessons to a young man named Matthew Edwards.
- 1859** Edwards dies at the age of twenty-one. Bulfinch has his protégé buried in the Bulfinch family plot. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* is published.
- 1860** *The Boy Inventor*, based on the life of Matthew Edwards, is published; the title refers to various mathematical instruments that Edwards invented. Abraham Lincoln is elected president. South Carolina secedes from the Union.
- 1861** The American Civil War begins.
- 1863** On January 1 Lincoln enacts the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves. *The Legends of Charlemagne*, which

will become the third volume incorporated in *Bulfinch's Mythology*, is published, as is *Bulfinch's Poetry of the Age of Fable*, a compilation of British and American poetry.

- 1865** *Shakespeare Adapted for Reading Classes and for the Family Circle* is published. The Civil War ends on April 9. President Lincoln is assassinated on April 15.
- 1866** *Oregon and Eldorado*, Bulfinch's account of the exploration of the Pacific Northwest, is published.
- 1867** Thomas Bulfinch dies. He is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Introduction



1

More than a hundred and fifty years ago, in 1855, three books that did much to shape the way Americans would come to view their emerging culture were published in the United States. Two of the three were written by poets concerned with creating American myths, and the third was written by a quiet, bookish man who labored to re-create the myths of classical Greece and Rome in a way that an American audience could understand. All three authors had great hopes of success, and sooner or later those hopes were fulfilled: Their books have remained in print in one form or another since their first appearances, though their initial receptions were very different.

The most phenomenally successful of the three was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's book-length poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which sold 10,000 copies in its first month in the stalls and 30,000 in its first year, making its author the most popular poet—and the wealthiest—in the English-speaking world. His book was an attempt to create an American epic out of Native American materials. Longfellow wove together stories gathered by folklorists about Hiawatha, the legendary culture hero of the Ojibways, and recast them in verse. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth Longfellow's creation was an inescapable part of the American cultural landscape, its monotonous trochaic lines recited and studied by generations of American schoolchildren, its situation dramatized, parodied, and translated into dozens of other languages. Though the book's reputation like its author's, went into an apparently irreversible decline in the twentieth century, *The Song of Hiawatha* remains in print and is currently available in numerous editions.

Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable*, according to its author's own modest estimation, sold moderately well. Actually, it did rather better than that, selling, in its first year, about 6,000 copies. Its success—for, despite its author's modesty, it was indeed a success—encouraged Bulfinch to bring out its first sequel, *The Age of Chivalry*, three years later. What *The Age of Fable* did for classical mythology its successor did for Arthurian legend; it gathered tales from diverse sources and told them in a way that would please an American audience. This book too was a success and was soon followed by *Legends of Charlemagne*.

By the time this last installment of the work we now call *Bulfinch's Mythology* had made its appearance, Thomas Bulfinch had become something of a minor literary figure. The emphasis here should be on "minor": In Boston, the city of his birth, Thomas Bulfinch was known only to a small group of family and friends; outside Boston, it is fair to say he was virtually unknown. Uncelebrated in his time and ours, he may nevertheless by now be the most successful of our three authors, since his book has been continuously in print in countless large editions since its first appearance.

Walt Whitman, the last of the three, expected that the American public would respond to his democratic affections with a similar enthusiasm for him. But despite its author's heroic efforts at self-promotion, *Leaves of Grass* was the least successful of the three books. Whitman's book, celebrating

himself in lines that swept beyond the margins of their pages, defying rhyme, meter, and contemporary literary conventions, would come to be seen in the twentieth century as one of the most important and original poems of the nineteenth. For its first edition, however, only 800 copies were printed, and it is anyone's guess as to how many or how few of these were sold.

Despite their differences, Longfellow and Whitman were both poets attempting to create a new American myth in verse. Both were conscious of the newness of the society in which they lived. Longfellow, born in 1807, grew up hearing from relatives the stories of the recent American revolution, some of which, like the stirring tale of Paul Revere's midnight ride, he would later use as the subjects of his poems. Whitman, born in 1819, often spoke of how, as a boy in Brooklyn, he had waved a flag to greet the Marquis de Lafayette on his triumphant return visit to the republic he had helped to save, and how the returning hero lifted the future poet up on his knee and made much of him. Many of the stories that Whitman had heard of the revolution would later find their way into his poetry. But despite the two poets' sense of belonging to a post-revolutionary generation with a strong responsibility for shaping a new American culture, they differed fundamentally in their attitudes toward its possibilities.

For Whitman, the new society could not realize itself unless it managed to create a new culture; the United States could no longer look back to Europe, could no longer depend on myths and legends that had grown out of, and not beyond, a past mired in outworn social distinctions and blind obedience to ignorance and religious superstition. For Whitman, the past was Europe, and the European past represented a form of corruption that the new society had to expunge completely. (Whitman, of course, made an exception for Lafayette, the nobleman who had abandoned his wife, child, and clan in order to fight for American independence.) Only by sweeping away the past and starting anew could a new society be formed. The United States was to be a new Eden, and Walt Whitman saw himself (and was seen by many of his contemporaries) as its new Adam.

But to see the United States as a new Eden, and to sustain one's belief in that conception, then and now, required an act of faith. Much in the young nation's experience would have to be ignored or denied. This new Eden came already equipped with a history, which included the European settlers' destruction of the indigenous peoples and their enslavement of Africans. It also included the religions of the Old World, many of them imported by the American colonists. And, of course, it included the arts and sciences as well, and those the colonists responded to and depended upon were created and nurtured in the Old World long before Europeans migrated to the new.

In times when the influence of the past seems overwhelming, a dead hand laid on the ambitions of the present, the prospect of getting rid of the past altogether will have appeal to some. There are always others, however, who will find the idea horrifying or pointless. Is it ever possible to create the new by destroying the past?

Nathaniel Hawthorne, decidedly skeptical about the possibility, instead believed that the new society needed to found itself on a knowledge of the best of European culture, ancient and modern. Far from being corrupted by such knowledge, the children of the New World could only be improved by it, and so in 1852 Hawthorne published *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, in which he retold many of the myths and legends of the classical world, for the entertainment and edification of the young, arguing "No epoch of time can claim a copyright in these immortal fables."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had been Hawthorne's classmate at Bowdoin College, and he shared his belief in the importance of European culture. Accordingly, the future man of letters prepared

himself for his vocation by absorbing from the Old World the best it had to offer in the literature of the past and present. Longfellow, while at Bowdoin, devoted himself to the study of classical literature and he demonstrated his aptness for the literary life with a remarkable translation of one of the odes of the Roman poet Horace. As a result of this translation, Longfellow was offered a professorship in modern languages at Bowdoin and a trip to Europe, his first, in order to improve his command of French and undertake studies in German and Italian. On the eve of his trip, he wrote his father, "My familiarity with the modern languages will unlock ... all those springs of literature, which formerly would have been as sealed books to me."

In his subsequent career as scholar and writer, Longfellow lived up to the obligations he felt to his readers, by interpreting the best of European literature for them, whether in lectures and essays, like those he gave at Harvard on Goethe and Schiller, which made those European giants known in the United States, or in his still well-regarded translation of *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri.

Especially in his own poetry, Longfellow was convinced of the need to use both conventional and innovative European forms to interpret American materials: He used the ballad form to write of Paul Revere's ride through Massachusetts to warn the citizenry of the British invasion; he employed the hexameter line of Homer and Virgil in *Evangeline*, one of his most popular long poems, to tell the story of the exile of the French Acadians. And so, when he wrote *The Song of Hiawatha*, he went abroad in search of the meter he would use in his poem, and found it perfectly natural to use the meter of the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*, to retell the Native American legends. That meter was itself a literary form, the invention of a Finnish folklorist, Elias Lönnrot, who gathered and collated the various versions of anonymous oral poets dealing with the myth of a Finnish culture hero.

We may be certain that the Eurocentric impulse was not confined to Cambridge or to the bookshop of Boston. A glance at the map of central New York reveals a remarkable number of cities, villages, and towns with names derived from the classical civilization of ancient Europe. Syracuse was named for Syracuse in Sicily (both noted for their salt production), and nearby is Ithaca, named after the island home of Odysseus. The classical poets Homer and Ovid both have towns named after them, as does the Roman triumvir, Pompey. Pompey's contemporary, Marcus Tullius Cicero, is honored by a town that bears the affectionate nickname given him by successive generations of British and American readers, Tully. Rome is but a short distance from Troy, and nearby is the town of Fabius (named for a general who defended Rome against the invading army of Hannibal) as well as Camillus (a fourth-century Roman hero), Phoenix (the ever-rising bird), and Lysander (first to fall at Troy); the town of Marcellus preserves the memory of the Emperor Augustus' early-dying nephew, briefly eulogized in book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

This enthusiasm for applying classical, especially Roman, names to new American communities was no doubt an early instance of American optimism as well as an attempt to acquire by appropriation a better destiny for these ramshackle towns and villages than the facts on the ground might suggest. But it was also a derivative of the revolutionary notion that saw the founders of the nation as the inheritors and practitioners of the virtues of Roman republicanism, the Brutuses and Catos of their day, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor against the tyranny of the time. There was a way in which Americans of that period saw the myths and legends of classical Greece and Rome as a part of the foundation myth of the United States.

Thomas Bulfinch was clearly sympathetic to those who, like Hawthorne and Longfellow, saw the New World as deriving from the old in its cultural models, though improving it in its social

organization. The son of a man who had sought inspiration for an American architecture in Europe, student himself of classical literature and an admirer of his younger contemporary, Longfellow (whom he dedicated *The Age of Fable*), Bulfinch brought the classical myths to the citizens of the new republic. But while Whitman and Longfellow beam down on us from the choir of canonical American authors, the creator of *Bulfinch's Mythology* remains something of a mystery: Who was this Bulfinch that he should have a mythology of his own?

2

Thomas Bulfinch has never been the subject of a full-length biography, and virtually all that we know about his life derives from only two contemporary sources. One of these is a collection of letters and family papers made by his niece, Ellen Susan Bulfinch, which for the most part deal with the life and affairs of Thomas' father, Charles, an architect and public servant and a figure of great prominence in the Boston of his day. The other source is a pamphlet entitled *Voices of the Dead: A Sermon Preached at King's Chapel, Boston, June 2, 1867, Being the Sunday Following the Decease of Mr. Thomas Bulfinch, by Andrew P. Peabody*. Appended to the Reverend Peabody's sermon is a brief autobiographical sketch ending in 1860, which Thomas Bulfinch wrote for a Harvard College reunion and which is supplemented with information supplied by Peabody.

Both of these biographical sources testify to the great affection that Bulfinch's friends and family had for him; they also testify to the difficulties of writing about someone whose most prominent characteristic was the self-effacing modesty noted by all who came in contact with him. Selflessness of behavior combines with altruistic purpose in almost all of the glimpses that Bulfinch's friends offer of him. There are times when he seems to be a character in one of the sentimental novels of the period. His friend and eulogist the Reverend Peabody wrote, "So entirely had thought for the happiness of others become the pervading habit of his life, that on his death-bed one of his last inquiries was, what among his friends would be most gratified by the gift of some beautiful spring-flowers gathered by loving hands to be laid upon his pillow." Would such a person even have wanted a biography? Perhaps not.

Thomas Bulfinch's self-effacement was, it appears, an inherited trait. His father, Charles Bulfinch, was similarly reticent about his personal feelings and likewise left behind few indications of what his private life was like. On the other hand, the senior Bulfinch's public life as an architect and as a civic servant impacted directly and inescapably on the lives of his fellow Bostonians, from his time to the present day.

Charles Bulfinch was born in 1763, to one of Boston's wealthiest families. He grew up in a house on Boston's Bowdoin Square, and, after graduating from Harvard in 1781, spent several years traveling in England and France to complete his education. From childhood on, Charles was interested in architecture; if he wished to study the work of the best architects of his time and to study the ruins of the classical past that still influenced them, he would have to go to Europe. There he was able to gratify his interest by examining the kinds of buildings that he could not have found at home, for there were few buildings of any distinction then in any of the cities of colonial America. Guided by Thomas Jefferson, who was himself an amateur architect of some distinction, he made a grand tour of France and Italy.

When Charles Bulfinch returned from Europe in 1787, with trunks full of books and illustrations

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