Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Hiawatha” (1860)

“Hiawatha” takes the person of a real-life native American chief of that name who formed the confederation of Iroquois Indians from numerous tribes in Northern America. In native American legend he is a demi-god who defeats wicked enemies and unites the people as well as introducing the cultivation of maize. In Longfellow’s retelling, he greets the arriving colonists and accepts their religion—or, rather, he undertakes a last heroic journey “westward” while binding his people with a promise that they will be ever hospitable towards the new arrivals and faithful to their revealed religion.

Hiawatha’s Wooing (Pt. XII)

Smiling answered Hiawatha:
“In the land of the Dacotahs
Lives the Arrow-maker’s daughter,
Minnehaha, Laughing Water,
Handsomest of all the women.
I will bring her to your wigwam,
She shall run upon your errands,
Be your starlight, moonlight, firelight,
Be the sunlight of my people!”
Still dissuading said Nokomis:
“Bring not to my lodge a stranger
From the land of the Dacotahs!
Very fierce are the Dacotahs,
Often is there war between us,
There are feuds yet unforgotten,
Wounds that ache and still may open!”
Laughing answered Hiawatha:
“For that reason, if no other,
Would I wed the fair Dacotah,
That our tribes might be united,
That old feuds might be forgotten,
And old wounds be healed forever!”

At each stride a mile he measured;
Yet the way seemed long before him,
And his heart outran his footsteps;
And he journeyed without resting,
Till he heard the cataract’s laughter,
Heard the Falls of Minnehaha
Calling to him through the silence.
“Pleasant is the sound!” he murmured,
“Pleasant is the voice that calls me!”
[…]
At the doorway of his wigwam
Sat the ancient Arrow-maker,
In the land of the Dacotahs,
Making arrow-heads of jasper,
Arrow-heads of chalcedony.
At his side, in all her beauty,
Sat the lovely Minnehaha,
Sat his daughter, Laughing Water,
Plaiting mats of flags and rushes.
Of the past the old man’s thoughts were,
And the maiden’s of the future.
[…]

As such it is a blatant attempt to justify the conversion of the Native (indigenous) Americans to the religion of Christianity and an example of the ideological construction of the European colonists—chiefly British—in East Coast America [New England]. The eight-syllable line in trochees (stressed-unstressed – e.g., “garden”) gives it a bouncing stride well-suited to the idea of a native saga though lacking in the ‘high seriousness’ admired by Matthew Arnold in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Longfellow’s poem is in 21 non-stanzaic parts or sections and suggests by its very length an epic intention.

It is, in other words, a way of valorising the Indian traditions towards which Longfellow felt great warmth and interest without actually embracing it as the defining type of American citizenship. (That is to say, it renders indigenous culture as a tributary stream in the wider river of colonial and latterly independent America.) That position was reserved for the White Man whose arrival is sketched in the poem and generally lauded as a force for good, particularly with the promise of a Redeemer who would bring peace and prosperity through his own sacrifice. In this way, Hiawatha and Jesus are treated as aspects of the same metaphysical power, two sides of the spiritual equation of colonial culture. Without elevating him to Saviour status, he is nonetheless made to serve as a national hero.

Hiawatha’s Dacotah [Dakota] wife Minnihaha (“Laughing Waters”) is possibly better remembered than he is and her death from famine-fever is probably intended as a footnote on the contemporary fate of the Indians we were being driven off their land and into “reservations” under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, inaugurated by the War Department under Minister Calhoun in 1824. The chequered history of this agency is part of the troubled history of Native Americans., Today its executive and staff is formed of 95% native Americans and is strongly supported by the Biden Administration.