

Oliver Wendell Holmes

(1809-1894)

COMMENTARY

At the age of 21, Holmes read in the newspaper that the government had ordered the old frigate *Constitution* to be destroyed. The ship had defeated the *Guerriere* in the War of 1812 and was still seaworthy. To Holmes, it was a patriotic symbol. He wrote this poem as an indignant protest. It was published in a Boston newspaper, then reprinted around the country and circulated on handbills in Washington D.C., creating such an uproar the destruction order was retracted.

Old Ironsides (1830)

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon's roar; --
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more!

Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
Or know the conquered knee; --
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the mighty wave;
Her thunder shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!