

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Soldier's Memorial Day

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This poem/song is the first of two selections (see Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Decoration Day") that speak explicitly about decorating the graves of the warrior dead. It was written in 1870, just two years after, and in response to, General Logan's order to establish an annual Decoration Day in honor of the memory of the fallen Union soldiers. Mary B. C. Slade (1826–82), poet and author of numerous Protestant hymns, wrote the words; composer and musician William Oscar Perkins (1831–1902) supplied the music.¹

What is the mood and tone of this song? What, according to the song, is the purpose of Decoration Day for the dead? What is the point of bringing "bright flow'r to deck our soldier's tomb"? In what sense can flowers be the "best offering" of "our grateful land"? According to the last two verses, "changeless love" is more important than the floral gifts. Why? Can we make a duty of "changeless love"? Can we make good on a pledge of "changeless love"? Does it really matter to the dead?

When flow'ry Summer is at hand,
And Spring has gemm'd the earth with bloom,
We hither bring, with loving hand,
Bright flow'rs to deck our soldier's tomb.

(Chorus)

Gentle birds above are sweetly singing
O'er the graves of heroes brave and true;
While the sweetest flow'rs we are bringing,
Wreath'd in garlands of red, white and blue.

They died our country to redeem,
And from the loving earth we bring
The wealth of hill, and vale, and stream,
Our grateful land's best offering

¹ Although we could not find a recording of the song, the sheet music is available here:
<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/sheetmusic/a/a22/a2221/a2221-1-72dpi.html>.

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(Chorus)

With snowy hawthorn, clusters white,
Fair violets of heav'nly blue,
And early roses, fresh and bright,
We wreath the red, and white, and blue.

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(Chorus)

But purer than the fairest flowers,
We strew above the honored dead,
The tender changeless love of ours,
That decks the soldier's lowly bed.

(Chorus)

We bend and kiss the precious sod,
Swift fall our tears the graves above
Oh! Brothers! from the hills of God,
Look down and see our changeless love.