

Walt Whitman Handbook

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PREFACE

I

The Crofts series of excellent *Handbooks* for the major British poets has long been useful to students and teachers of English literature, but for various reasons similar guides have not been published for American writers. Yet—without in any way attempting to compare the importance of American authors with such giants as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, or Spenser—I think anyone acquainted with the vast body of scholarship and critical interpretation already accumulated around such American poets as Walt Whitman will agree that “Handbook” guides are almost as seriously needed for the American as for the major English poets.

But though the fecundity of scholarship in the field of American Literature is today comparable to the similar activities in other literary fields, the problems which have confronted me in preparing this *Walt Whitman Handbook* have been in many ways unique to the subject. For one thing, Whitman biography, despite the scores of published books, continues in a state of flux. Even some of the basic facts are still a matter of dispute. And when we come to the interpretation of Whitman’s poetry, the diversity of opinion and the controversies still far from dead are little short of bewildering.

As I worked on this *Handbook*, therefore, it gradually and necessarily became more ambitious. My task has been not only to summarize the vast scholarship in the field but

also to select and evaluate the significant contributions. Furthermore, despite abundance of publications, certain phases of Whitman's thought and art—especially his sources and his influences—have been insufficiently investigated, and I have had to fill in some of the gaps (notably in Chapters III and VI) in order to give a well-rounded account of the poet and his work. Thus here some new interpretations appear in print for the first time, but I believe they are in harmony with the latest and best Whitman scholarship—of Canby, Furness, Matthiessen, Schyberg, and the others whom I mention throughout the book.

Possibly in a few years from now this *Handbook* might have been easier to write, but at the present time there is no indication as to when, if ever, Whitman scholarship will reach an equilibrium, and meanwhile the book is needed. If the field continues to develop at the present rate, the book may be out of date in a few years; but I hope that it will prove sufficiently useful in the meantime to justify future editions—and that the faults of this edition may be largely overcome in future revisions. To this end I invite suggestions and corrections.

II

I am, of course, already indebted to the many authors of articles and books about Walt Whitman, especially to Holloway, Catel, Schyberg, and Canby. In order to acknowledge this tremendous debt and to make it easy for students to find their way around in the maze of Whitman publications, I have used many quotations and footnotes. In the absence of both a published Whitman

concordance and a complete bibliography, these should be doubly useful.

My debt to several friends and scholars is so great that I must mention them specifically. In addition to many other personal favors, Dr. Clifton Joseph Furness has read Chapter I and supplied me with many facts and criticisms. The Whitman dealer, Mr. Alfred Goldsmith, and the well-known bibliographical scholar, Mr. Rollo G. Silver, have read and criticized Chapter II. Professor Oscar Cargill, the historian of modern ideas, has read Chapters III, IV, and V and offered many helpful suggestions. Dr. Oreste Pucciani kindly lent me his personal copy of his Harvard Dissertation on *French Criticism of Walt Whitman* and has permitted me to quote from his unpublished work. And I am similarly indebted to Dr. Dorothy Frederica Mercer for the use of her University of California dissertation on *Leaves of Grass and the Bhagavad Gita: A Comparative Study*. Mr. Fernando Alegria, of the University of California, has generously permitted me to use his unpublished studies of Whitman in Latin America. Dr. Horst Frenz of Indiana University, who is investigating relationships between American and European literatures, has supplied me with bibliographical data and has read the Germanic part of Chapter VI. The Danish biographer and critic, Dr. Frederik Schyberg, first aroused my interest in Whitman's relations to World Literature, and up until the German invasion of Denmark generously sent me books and information. I have also had the good luck to have several talks with Dr. Henry Seidel Canby on this subject and am indebted to him for encouragement and advice. My colleague, Dr. Emerson Shuck, has also offered helpful criticisms of

Chapters I and II, and Dr. Cecil L. Rew has assisted me in reading proof on Chapter VI. To all these men and women I am deeply grateful, and to others who have helped in various ways, such as President Frank J. Prout, who lightened my teaching load in order that I might make more rapid progress on this book; to Mrs. Evelyn Simmons Hart, who has verified quotations and footnotes and often challenged me to prove my statements; and to my wife, Evie Allison Allen, who has aided the work in more ways than I can specify. Professor Walter Hendricks, the publisher, has given unceasingly of his time, effort, and interest to make the book a success.

Several libraries have courteously made their resources available to me, including Newberry in Chicago, Library of Congress, Yale Library, New York Public, Toledo Public, Oberlin College Library, and both the Public and the University Library at Bowling Green.

III

For permission to quote from copyrighted publications, I am indebted to the following persons and firms:

Jay B. Hubbell, editor of *American Literature*; Ralph Tyler Flewelling, editor of *The Personalist*; Horatio Smith, editor of *Romanic Review*; the University of Chicago Press, publisher of *Ethics*; Emory Holloway, author of *Whitman, An Interpretation in Narrative* and editor of *Pictures*; George Allen and Unwin, Ltd.; American Book Co.; Chapman and Grimes (formerly Richard Badger); Cornell University Press; Doubleday, Doran and Co.; E. P. Dutton and Co.; Alexander Gardner, Ltd.; Harper and Brothers; Harvard University Press; Har-

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G. W. A.

Bowling Green, Ohio

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

[Note: Some of the dates for the events in Walt Whitman's life, especially the early years, are extremely difficult to establish. His own statements are often contradictory, and the earlier biographers added to the confusion. Clifton Joseph Furness has sifted all available data for his forthcoming factual biography and he has generously checked and corrected the following table. The complete evidence, too complicated for brief summary, will be given in Mr. Furness's biography.]

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN WHITMAN'S LIFE

- 1819 Born May 31 at West Hills, Huntington Township, Long Island.
- 1823 Family moved to Brooklyn.
- 1825 LaFayette visited Brooklyn, July 4—one of the poet's most cherished memories.
- 1825–30 Attended public school in Brooklyn. Family frequently shifted residence in city.
- 1830–31 Office boy in lawyer's office, then doctor's; probably quit school at this time.
- 1831–32 Worked in printing offices, began to learn the trade. Printer's apprentice on *Long Island Patriot*.
- 1832 Summer. Worked at Worthington's printing establishment.
- 1832 Fall—to May 12, 1835 worked as compositor on *Long Island Star*.
- 1833 The Whitman family moved back to the country.
- 1835 May 12th—till May, 1836, worked in printing offices in New York City.

- 1836-38 Taught in various schools on Long Island. Participated in debating societies.
- 1838 Spring—Spring, 1839. Edited *Long Islander* in Huntington.
- 1839-41 Returned to teaching on Long Island.
- 1840 Fall. Campaigned for Van Buren.
- 1841 May. Went to New York and worked as compositor for *The New World*.
- 1842 Edited for a few months *The Aurora* and *The Tattler*.
- 1843 Spring. Edited *The Statesman*.
- 1844 Summer. Edited *The New York Democrat*.
- 1844 October. Worked on *The New York Mirror*.
- 1841-48 Contributed to several prominent New York journals: *Democratic Review*, *Broadway Journal*, *American Review*, *New York Sun*, *Columbian Magazine*.
- 1846-47 Edited the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.
- 1848 Quit (or was discharged from) editorship of *Eagle* in January. February 11 left, with brother Jeff for New Orleans to take up editorial position on the *Crescent*. First number of *Crescent*, published March 5, contained Whitman's poem "Sailing the Mississippi at Midnight." May 24 resigned position, sailed to St. Louis May 27. Arrived home June 15. Back in Brooklyn, became editor of the *Brooklyn Freeman*, first number issued Sept. 9, 1848.
- 1849 In spring the *Freeman* became a daily. In April Whitman was also conducting a printing office and book-store on Myrtle Avenue—still listed in the *Brooklyn Directory* for 1851.

Resigned editorship Sept. 11, Free-Soilers having joined regular party.

- 1851-54 Followed carpentering trade in Brooklyn—exact details of this period are scanty.
Addressed Brooklyn Art Museum, March 31, 1851.
- 1855 First edition of *Leaves of Grass* published by the author, on or near July 4; Father died soon after, probably July 11. Fowler and Wells were agents for the book. Conway first to visit the poet. Emerson wrote his "greetings" July 21.
- 1856 Second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published sometime between Aug. 16 and Sept. 12, Fowler and Wells again acting as agents. In November Alcott and Thoreau visited the poet—Emerson the following year.
- 1857-59 Edited *Brooklyn Times*; unemployed by summer of 1859. Frequented Pfaff's Restaurant, a Bohemian gathering place.
- 1860 Third edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in Boston by Thayer and Eldridge, preceded by famous discussion with Emerson over sex poems.
- 1861 Thayer and Eldridge failed and the plates for the third edition were secured by a dishonest publisher, who printed and sold pirated copies for a number of years. Soon after the bombardment of Fort Sumter, April 18, Whitman recorded in his diary a moral and physical dedication. About this time deserted Pfaff's and Bohemian friends.
- 1862 Dec. 14 read brother George's name in list of wounded and went immediately to the war front in Virginia to find him. Became an unofficial nurse.

- 1863-64 Worked in field and army hospitals. Beginning of friendship with O'Connor and Burroughs. Health broke down in mid-summer of '64 and he returned to his mother's home in Brooklyn for six months.
- 1865-66 In January 1865 appointed clerk in Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior, discharged by James Harlan on June 30, but in July became clerk in Attorney General's office. *Drum Taps* issued in 1865; *Drum Taps* with annex called *Sequel to Drum Taps* published in 1866, containing "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd and Other Pieces." After Whitman's discharge from clerkship, O'Connor began writing his "vindication", published in 1866 as *The Good Gray Poet*.
- 1867 Fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Reviewed by William Rossetti. Burroughs published first biography, *Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*.
- 1868 Rossetti edited *Selections from Leaves of Grass*; well received in England. O'Connor published *The Carpenter*, presenting in thin disguise Whitman as a modern Christ.
- 1869 Mrs. Anne Gilchrist became acquainted with Whitman's poetry.
- 1870 Mrs. Gilchrist published "An English-woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman" in the Boston *Radical Review*. First edition of *Democratic Vistas*, incorporating essays published in the *Galaxy* during 1867-68.
- 1871 Fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Delivered "After All, Not to Create Only" ["Song of the Exposition"] at opening of American Institute in New York.

Swinburne greeted Whitman in *Songs Before Sunrise*; Tennyson wrote fraternal letters; Rudolf Schmidt translated *Democratic Vistas* into Danish.

Mrs. Gilchrist wrote a proposal of marriage and Whitman diplomatically declined in letter of November 3.

- 1872 Delivered "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" ["Thou Mother with thy Equal Brood" in 1882 ed.] at Dartmouth College commencement. Thérèse Bentzon (Mme. Blanc) published critical article in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, June 1.
Quarrel with O'Connor over Negro suffrage, and perhaps personal matters.
- 1873 Paralysis in February after preliminary spells of dizziness for over a year.
Mother died May 23.
- 1874 "The Song of the Universal" read at Tufts College commencement by proxy.
Discharged during midsummer from position in Washington, which had been filled by a substitute since Feb. 1873. In "Prayer of Columbus" the poet identified himself with the "battered, wrecked old man."
- 1875 Spent summer at Timber Creek, Stafford Farm. In November sufficiently recovered to visit Washington with Burroughs; they attended reburial of Poe in Baltimore.
- 1876 Wrangle in United States over Whitman's neglect started by article published in Jan. 26 *West Jersey Press*, which Robert Buchanan quoted in London *Daily News*, March 13.
Spring to autumn spent at Timber Creek.
Sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in two volumes (I. *Leaves of Grass*; II. *Two Rivulets*, including "Passage

to India" and miscellaneous prose). Rossetti and Mrs. Gilchrist sold many copies in England; the money and recognition aided poet's recovery.

In September Mrs. Gilchrist arrived in Philadelphia and rented a house, which Whitman visited frequently.

- 1877 January, spoke in Philadelphia on Tom Paine's anniversary.

February, New York friends gave a reception and lionized the poet. Visited Burroughs on the Hudson. In May, Edward Carpenter arrived from England. Dr. R. M. Bucke, recently appointed head of asylum at London, Ontario, visited Whitman and became close friend.

Burroughs published "The Flight of the Eagle" in *Birds and Poets*—passages contributed by Whitman himself.

- 1878 Health better. Repeated excursion up Hudson.

- 1879 April 14 gave Lincoln lecture in New York (given each year for thirteen years).

Sept. 10 started trip West—visited St. Louis (where favorite brother, Jeff, lived), Topeka, Rockies, Denver, Utah, Nevada.

- 1880 Returned from western trip in January.

April, delivered the Lincoln Memorial Address in Boston.

June, went to Canada to visit Dr. Bucke. Took boat trip up St. Lawrence.

- 1881 Second Boston edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in November by Osgood (title-page bears 1881-82).

- 1882 February, the Society for the Suppression of Vice claimed the Osgood edition immoral. May 17 Osgood

ceased publication, gave plates to Whitman. After his own "Author's Edition" in Camden, Whitman found a new publisher in Rees Welsh and Company, Philadelphia (soon succeeded by David McKay). Edition of 3,000 copies sold in one day. *Leaves of Grass* now practically complete, subsequent editions being mainly reprints.

Pearsall Smith, wealthy Philadelphia glass merchant and prominent Quaker, became friend.

Specimen Days and Collect published in autumn.

- 1883 Dr. Bucke published his biography—approved and supervised by Whitman.
- 1884 Sale of the Philadelphia edition enabled Whitman to buy a house in Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey; March 26 moved in, remained until his death.
June, Edward Carpenter made a second visit.
New friends: Traubel, Harned, Talcott Williams, Donaldson, Ingersoll, others.
- 1885 Sun stroke in July. Walking became difficult and many friends, headed by Donaldson, bought a horse and phaeton for Whitman.
- 1886 Royalties from 1881 edition dwindled. *Pall Mall Gazette* promoted fund which resulted in a New Year's present of eighty pounds. Boston friends made up a purse of \$800 for a cottage on Timber Creek (never built).
- 1887 The Lincoln lecture at Madison Square Theatre attended by many notables—took in \$600. Poet sculptured by Morse and St. Gaudens, painted by Herbert Gilchrist and Thomas Eakins.
- 1888 Another paralytic stroke, early in June.
Continued trying to finish *November Boughs*.

- 1889 "House-tied."
- 1891 Last birthday dinner in Mickle Street home. Dec. 17, chilled, took pneumonia.
- 1892 Managed to publish tenth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which the literary executors (Traubel, Harned, Bucke) were "authorized" to perpetuate.
Died March 26, buried in prepared tomb in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden.

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CHAPTER I

THE GROWTH OF WALT WHITMAN BIOGRAPHY

*When I read the book, the biography famous,
And is this then (said I) what the author calls a man's life?
And so will some one when I am dead and gone write my
life?
(As if any man really knew aught of my life,
Why even I myself I often think know little or nothing
of my real life,
Only a few hints, a few diffused faint clews and indirections
I seek for my own use to trace out here.)*¹

INTRODUCTION

"Perhaps no man contributing to world literature," declared Charles N. Elliot in 1915, "has been the subject of so many books, magazine articles and pamphlets as Walt Whitman. Certainly no American has. Even at the time of his death the number of critical studies of his work, favorable or adverse, often bitterly so, constituted a formidable array. Each year since, the list has grown by at least one book devoted wholly or in part to the subject of Whitman's life and work."²

¹ *When I Read the Book*, one of the eight new poems in the 1867 edition of *LEAVES OF GRASS*.

² Charles N. Elliot, *Walt Whitman as Man, Poet and Friend*, (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1915), p. 9.