

## Walt Whitman at Iowa

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The University of Iowa Libraries house a small but unique collection of materials relating to Walt Whitman. Included in the collection are 15 editions of Whitman's writings published during his lifetime. His continually evolving poetry is represented by these books: a fine copy of the rare first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855); two copies of the third edition of *Leaves* (1860), one of them a pirated version (published in 1879 by Richard Worthington, a New York publisher who finally goaded Whitman into taking legal action to stop the unauthorized printing); a copy of *Walt Whitman's Drum-Taps* (1865), his Civil War poems, with *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (containing "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd") bound in at the back; a copy of the first British edition of his work, *Poems by Walt Whitman* (1868), edited by William Michael Rossetti; a copy of an occasional poem Whitman wrote for the Managers of the American Institute Exhibition in 1871, called *After All, Not to Create Only*, which later became "Song of the Exposition"; a copy of *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, later to become "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood," a poem Whitman read at Dartmouth to graduating seniors in 1872 (they had invited Whitman as a prank to shock the faculty); a copy of *Two Rivulets* (1876), an odd mixture of prose and poetry, which contains a signed photograph of Whitman; three copies of the sixth and final edition of *Leaves* (1881-82), where Whitman's poems are arranged in their final order (one copy in the Iowa collection is the first issue of the sixth edition, printed in Boston where it was banned and withdrawn; the other copies are reprints published in Philadelphia by Rees Welsh, who was anxious to cash in on the scandalous publicity *Leaves* had received when it was banned in Boston); a copy of the *Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman, 1855-88*, one of only about 600 copies printed, all handled by Whitman; a copy of the very rare 1888 printing of *Leaves of Grass, with Sands at Seventy*, autographed by Whitman, and one of only 300 copies printed (Whitman had often compared *Leaves* to the Bible, and this special edition—published to celebrate the poet's seventieth birthday—seems to confirm his desire to have *Leaves* become the new American Bible; the book is

manufactured to look and feel like a Bible); one copy of *November Boughs* (1888) and one of *Goodbye My Fancy* (1891), companion volumes mixing prose and poetry, the poetry forming what would come to be the old age “annexes” to *Leaves of Grass*; and one copy of the famous “deathbed edition” of *Leaves* (1891-92), which contains the 1881-82 *Leaves* along with the two annexes, and forms the authorized text, the only version of *Leaves* that Whitman wanted to have reprinted from that point on. The Iowa collection also has several editions of Whitman’s prose, including a first edition of *Democratic Vistas* (1871) in its original paper wrappers, and a first edition of *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882-83), Whitman’s autobiography and collected essays.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these books, the Iowa collection contains three of Whitman’s holograph letters: a June 22, 1877, postcard to John Burroughs; a February 11, 1884, note to Thomas G. Gentry; and a June 12, 1884, note to Charles Aldrich. The Burroughs letter is identified and included in the correspondence volumes of *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, but the Gentry and Aldrich letters have gone unnoticed over the years.<sup>2</sup> Those letters, along with the Iowa copy of the 1855 *Leaves*, which contains some fascinating notes inside, suggest three interesting stories about the nature of Whitman’s surprising friendships. In this essay, I would like to put the two letters from Whitman and the inscriptions in the 1855 copy of *Leaves* into the wider context of the lives of the people involved and try to tell the stories that these documents hint at.

### I. *Whitman’s Letter to Aldrich: The Iowa Connection*

Whitman’s letter to Charles Aldrich helps us trace Whitman’s attitudes toward Iowa. Before we get to that 1884 letter, though, let us get an overview of Whitman’s odd relationship to Iowa. In 1879, while visiting St. Louis, Whitman proclaimed himself a midwesterner: “Although born in New York, I am in sympathy and preference Western—better fitted for the Mississippi Valley.” Whitman said this during the excitement

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<sup>1</sup> See Carolyn Wells and Alfred Goldsmith, *A Concise Bibliography of Walt Whitman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922); Gay Wilson Allen, “The Growth of *Leaves of Grass* and the Prose Works,” *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 67-159, 377-87; Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, William White, “Introduction,” in Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), I, xv-xxv.

<sup>2</sup> See Ed Folsom, “The Mystical Ornithologist and the Iowa Tufthunter: Two Unpublished Whitman Letters and Some Identifications,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 1 (June 1983), 18-29. Parts of sections one and two of the present essay are reprinted from that article. For identifications of the Whitman letter to Burroughs that is in the Iowa Collection, see Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1969), III, 89.

328 Mickle Street  
Camden New Jersey  
June 12 '84

Dear Sir

I send you, same  
mail with this, a copy of  
the #3 autograph edition  
of Leaves of Grass

- yours of some weeks  
since sending #2 was  
received - leaving #1 due -  
which please enclose  
in letter & send me  
here. Walt Whitman

Letter from Walt Whitman to Charles Aldrich of Iowa concerning payment for a copy of *Leaves of Grass*. From the Aldrich Collection, The University of Iowa Libraries.

of his only trip west of the Mississippi, a journey that took him out to the Colorado Rockies and then back to Camden, New Jersey, where he had settled in 1873 and where he would live until his death in 1892. Soon after his return to Camden, he wrote a poem called "The Prairie States," in which he praised the developing Midwest as "The crown and teeming paradise, so far, of time's accumulations. . . ." His western train trip took Whitman across Missouri, about 80 miles south of Iowa. It was the closest he would ever actually get to the state, though he had already made several imaginative journeys there in his poems, cataloging Iowa among the prairie states where he would "fly like a bird, / . . . To Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, to sing their songs, (they are inimitable;) . . ." Since Whitman felt that new hope and possibility were sure to arise from the regenerative West, these Iowan songs were clearly worth singing, and in the 1850s and 1860s he sang them frequently. When in "Song of Myself" Whitman imagines the hoped-for new natural man who would bring about the future perfect democracy, he sees Iowa as one possible place of origin for this American Adam with his "Behavior lawless as snow-flakes, words simple as grass, uncomb'd head, laughter, and naiveté. . . ." Whitman muses, "Is he from the Mississippi country? Iowa, Oregon, California?" And so when Iowa had asked for statehood in 1846, Whitman was quick to endorse the move enthusiastically in an editorial in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which he was then editing. He applauded Iowa's unique constitution and claimed Iowa was the sign of the future, refining and perfecting American democracy as it marched westward across the prairie: "The west is striding on ahead of us, like a giant!"<sup>3</sup>

But after 1865 Whitman never mentioned Iowa again in his poems. His catalogs of states, roll calls of Western hope, began at that point to omit Iowa. 1865 was the year Whitman encountered his first Iowan, James Harlan—a powerful Methodist layman, president of what would come to be Iowa Wesleyan College, and United States senator. In 1865 Harlan became secretary of the interior, where Whitman worked as a clerk in the Indian Bureau. Entering his new job with cost-cutting enthusiasm and religious zeal, Harlan promptly ordered the firing of all nonessential employees and all employees whose Christian morality was in doubt. Whitman was one of the clerks fired; Harlan claimed that Whitman was simply inessential, but Whitman firmly believed that he had been fired on moral grounds, that Harlan had sneaked around at

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<sup>3</sup> Whitman's comments about being a midwesterner are quoted in Walter H. Eitner, *Walt Whitman's Western Jaunt* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), p. 20; Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 402, 284, 73; Whitman, "Iowa," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (June 10, 1846).

night looking through clerks' desks, had found Whitman's working copy of *Leaves of Grass*, had read it, was outraged at its indecency, and so ordered the poet out. Whitman's friends made a major issue of the event, and Harlan's dismissal of Whitman has become perhaps the most familiar anecdote in Whitman's life. Whitman's friends saw the event as symbolic—America becoming repressive in silencing its powerfully unconventional artists—and Harlan was portrayed as a narrow-minded provincial bigot who abused his power by trying to destroy a great humanitarian whose talents he could not understand. In 1888, thinking back on the event, Whitman reveals how fully his conception of Harlan had affected his vision of Iowa.

To Iowa as Iowa Walt Whitman as Walt Whitman was not easily digestible; so Whitman as the author of an indecent book had to go. Harlan was so dead in earnest that when his action was disputed by influential people he simply declared that he would resign his folio rather than reinstate me: which was all right for Harlan and all right for his kind of Iowa.

Harlan had come to be representative of Iowa, which in turn had come to be for Whitman the backwater of the "high conventional feeling." Whitman's attitude over the years, then, had shifted dramatically; Iowa diminished from the striding Western giant to the region of the small-minded, from the radical to the conventional, from the home of the "friendly and flowing savage" to the dwelling of the unimaginative average.<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately there was another Iowan in Whitman's life, and late in Whitman's life he managed to reinstill some positive feelings about Iowa in the poet. This Iowan, Charles Aldrich (1828-1908), was founder of the Iowa State Historical Department, and his fondness for Whitman led to the beginnings of the Whitman collection at The University of Iowa Libraries. Aldrich was a newspaperman from upstate New York and shared several important experiences with Whitman; both were apprentices on newspapers in their teenage years, and both established their own papers when they were around 20 years old. By 1848 both were avid Free Soil party members and attended the first Free Soil convention; they both edited Free Soil newspapers, Whitman the *Brooklyn Freeman* and Aldrich, somewhat later, the *Hamilton Freeman* in Iowa, where he had gone to seek out the adventure of the frontier and to start a newspaper in a young, unformed community. Later he published several other newspapers, became a respected ornithologist, was a captain in the Iowa Infantry in the Civil War, became chief clerk of the Iowa

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<sup>4</sup> Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1906; rpt. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), I, 3-4; *Correspondence*, II, 160.

House of Representatives, served as a state representative, then founded the State Historical Department and was its director and curator for the final 20 years of his life. He was also a voracious lifelong autograph collector, and it was this hobby that first made him contact Whitman. Aldrich had made a habit of writing to the famous asking for autographs; one request had been to John Burroughs, the famous naturalist and friend and supporter of Whitman. In addition to asking Burroughs for his autograph, Aldrich had approached Burroughs about the possibility of getting a Whitman autograph. Burroughs's response is in the Iowa collection.

West Park NY  
April 3rd 84

Dear Sir:

I enclose autograph asked for. Walt Whitman [sic] home address is *Camden N.J.* If you feel like sending him a little money do so. It will be all right.

Truly Yours  
John Burroughs

Aldrich immediately followed Burroughs's advice and a couple of months later received this response from Whitman, a letter that is also in the Iowa collection.

328 Mickle Street  
Camden New Jersey  
June 12 '84

Dear Sir

I send you, same mail with this, a copy of the \$3 autograph edition of *Leaves of Grass*—yours of some weeks since sending \$2 was received—leaving \$1 due—which please enclose in letter and send me here.

Walt Whitman

Apparently Aldrich had written to Whitman asking for an autograph and enclosing a token \$2, and Whitman had responded by sending him a \$3 copy of the autographed *Leaves*, billing him for the difference. But Aldrich was pleased to get the book; nearly 20 years later he still wrote about his "good fortune . . . to purchase a copy [of *Leaves*] from the author himself." Whitman's daybooks show that Aldrich promptly sent the poet the dollar due, as Whitman carefully marked in a red "paid" after the "\$1 due" that appears by Aldrich's name in Whitman's meticulous ledgers.

Aldrich's purchase of *Leaves* was only the beginning; although he appears only once very briefly in Gay Wilson Allen's definitive biography of Whitman—where he is misleadingly referred to as “a librarian in Iowa, who strongly disapproved of Whitman's poems”—Aldrich actually had a long and rewarding relationship with Whitman.<sup>5</sup> For the next six years, Aldrich continued to write to Whitman requesting autographed material, and he visited the poet in Camden at least four times—twice in 1885, once in 1886, and again in 1888. Each time, he came away with more signed mementoes which he took back to Des Moines and added to his vast collection, a collection he eventually gave to the state of Iowa in 1884 as the foundation for a state archive. He had special cases hand made to display his materials, which are still on view in Des Moines. He managed to get from Whitman six signed portraits, a portrait of Whitman's mother, and two manuscripts. At times, his appetite for autographs was excessive: “That is a very hungry man—Aldrich,” Whitman told his friend Horace Traubel in 1889; “He has been here—has had autograph, what-not. But is never satisfied—is always crying for more and more.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the portraits he received from Whitman, along with the holograph letter, is now in the Iowa collection, for during the mid-1880s Aldrich began giving duplicates in his collection to The University of Iowa Libraries. A series of letters from Aldrich to Ada North, University librarian from 1879 to 1892, record his decision to give a collection to the state university and capture his frustration at trying to get University president J. L. Pickard to authorize funds for proper display cases. Today, the Aldrich collection is in five large volumes, with each autograph mounted on a piece of cardboard and identified. Many of the “autographs” are actually complete letters. Volume one includes statesmen and lawyers (e.g., Chester A. Arthur, Jefferson Davis, Daniel Webster, Frederick Douglass); volume two, famous Iowans (James Harlan, Samuel Kirkwood, Thomas Hart Benton, Jr.); volume three, authors and artists (P. T. Barnum, Robert Browning, James Fenimore Cooper, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe); volume four, scientists and reformers (John Wesley Powell, Joseph Leidy, Susan B. Anthony, Amelia Bloomer); and volume five, his “Rossetti Collection” with many

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on Aldrich, see the memorial issue of *Annals of Iowa* honoring him, 8 (January 1909); Aldrich, “Walt Whitman and James Harlan,” *Annals of Iowa*, 6 (October 1903), 225; Whitman, *Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1978), II, 335.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 524; the dates of Aldrich's visits are recorded in Whitman's *Daybooks and Correspondence*; Traubel, *Camden*, V (ed. Gertrude Traubel; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 444.

famous Victorian writers and painters. The Rossetti Collection was given to him by William Michael Rossetti, poet, editor, and brother of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti, two of the best-known British Pre-Raphaelite poets. Aldrich literally traveled the world to procure autographs and photos, and it was during one of these trips that he became good friends with Rossetti, who was Whitman's first British editor and his ardent supporter. Aldrich and Rossetti had carried on a lively correspondence about autograph collecting, an avocation that Rossetti also indulged in. In fact Rossetti and Aldrich exchanged many autographs, and on several occasions Rossetti furnished Aldrich with large selections of letters from his personal collection of correspondence. He sent the letters to Aldrich complete with a long list of annotations about the letter writers; the Iowa Rossetti Collection is made up of one of these batches of letters. Aldrich's growing autograph collection with its prized Rossetti additions gained enough notoriety to be described at length in national journals like the *Critic*. (It was the 1889 notice in the *Critic* that prompted Whitman's outburst about Aldrich being a "very hungry man.")<sup>7</sup>

And in 1885, it was Aldrich who brought to Rossetti's attention the deplorable conditions in which Whitman was living in Camden. After visiting Walt on a frigid snowy day in February, Aldrich wrote to Rossetti about Whitman's illness, poverty, and lack of good care; Aldrich reported that the poet "seemed to me to be in a condition of wretched poverty." After receiving a response from Rossetti that seemed somehow to miss the point, Aldrich wrote a second, more alarming letter in May; this time Rossetti was upset by the news and sent the letter on to his friend (and Whitman's ardent admirer) Anne Gilchrist, who was concerned but puzzled, since she had only days before received a comforting and contented note from Whitman about his "nook in Mickle Street" where he doubted "if I could be better provided—". But Aldrich's distressing letter was enough to make Anne's longtime ardor for Whitman flare once more. In the final months before her death she convinced her son Herbert and her friend Rossetti to advertise, organize, and administer a "free-will offering" for Whitman's benefit. Aldrich contributed twice to the fund, the only American to donate, and after Whitman's death he wrote an article for the *Critic* chastizing his countrymen for their

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<sup>7</sup> The Ada North/Aldrich correspondence is in volume one of the Aldrich collection at The University of Iowa Libraries; Rossetti talks about autograph collecting in *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti* (New York: Scribner's, 1906), II, 510-11; some of his lengthy correspondence with Aldrich has been published in Clarence Gohdes and Paul Franklin Baum, eds., *Letters of William Michael Rossetti Concerning Whitman, Blake, and Shelley* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1934); some 20 letters from Rossetti to Aldrich are in the unpublished Aldrich papers in the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines and many of them discuss autograph collecting.

relative neglect of Whitman compared to the efforts of his British friends. Aldrich, then, was responsible for getting Whitman's two most faithful English admirers to devote their energy and effort one more time in Walt's behalf.<sup>8</sup>

In 1886 Aldrich visited England and spent time with Rossetti and his family. He checked in on Whitman in Camden both on his trip to England and on his return, carrying messages to and from Rossetti. By the time he visited Whitman on his return trip, he was able to bring good news about the success of the fund drive, and indeed a large installment arrived in Camden just after Aldrich did. The money from this fund was a major source of Whitman's income during this time, and according to Aldrich "enabled Whitman to live comfortably—for him."<sup>9</sup>

In the summer of 1888 Aldrich again visited England and once more spent a good deal of time with Rossetti. And once again, on his return to America (in October) Aldrich visited Whitman. This time he told the poet about a dinner party he had attended at Rossetti's home during which a Frenchman mentioned an article in French about Whitman. Whitman, of course, was curious about the essay and its author, and a week later Aldrich sent Whitman the information—the name and address of Gabriel Sarrazin. Thus Aldrich helped initiate one of the warmest and most satisfying relationships of Whitman's last years.

It is clear, then, why Whitman—despite his reservations about Aldrich's hunger for autographs—would recall that "Charles Aldrich is my good friend: he has ideas, faiths, which lead him affectionately my way." It is not so clear, however, why Gay Wilson Allen characterizes him as a person "who strongly disapproved of Whitman's poetry." All the evidence is to the contrary. Indeed Aldrich in 1903 wrote an essay, "Walt Whitman and James Harlan," in which he says of Whitman that he "was too great to need defense from anybody." Aldrich was one of the few people—if not the only person—who was in a position to judge the Harlan-Whitman affair evenly, since he was a personal friend of both the politician and the poet. In his article he defends Iowa's former senator by asking readers to try to understand Harlan's conventional morals and to try to forgive his understandable tendency to share "the popular estimate" of Whitman's work as "indecant." But Aldrich makes clear that he himself does not share that estimate, but instead is proud to have known this great poet.<sup>10</sup>

Aldrich's last correspondence with Whitman took place in 1889-90, and involved, of course, a final request for another autograph, this time a manuscript copy of "O Captain! My Captain!" so that he could put it

<sup>8</sup> *The Critic*, 20 (April 23, 1892), 245-46; *Correspondence*, III, 392-93.

<sup>9</sup> See E. H. Miller's "Introduction: Walt Whitman's Income, 1876-1892," in *Correspondence*, VI, esp. pp. xvi, xxx-xxxii; Aldrich's comment is in *The Critic*, 20 (1892), 246.

<sup>10</sup> Traubel, *Camden*, II, 292; Aldrich, "Whitman and Harlan," 225-27.

on display in the capitol at Des Moines (where it today remains in the Historical Building). After delaying a half year, Whitman finally obliged, and Aldrich promptly sent him five dollars in return, the last money he gave to Whitman.

Rossetti, recalling Aldrich, said, "I never met a man to whom the duties of citizenship seem to come more natural. . . . At an advanced age he continues to work hard, and always with a public end in view." And Whitman, describing Aldrich to Traubel, said, "He is . . . a very likeable man—I suppose what they would call in England a tuffhunter. . . . Though that is not peeping out, so far as I could see—not making itself obtrusive. . . . He is from Iowa. . . . I noticed that he had a little touch of local pride. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

## II. Whitman's Letter to Gentry: The Mystical Ornithologist

The Whitman letter to Thomas Gentry in the Iowa collection is scrawled on the back of a request from Gentry. <sup>12</sup>

Germantown, Pa.,  
 February 8, 1884

Mr. Walt Whitman  
 Dear Sir:—

Since the completion of my late work on "Nests & Eggs of Birds of the U.S.," I have been engaged in preparing a book on bird-poetry. Would like to include your poem on "The Man-of-War Bird," if you have no objection. Anything else that you would like to appear, will be given a place, if you will call my attention thereto. Trusting to hear from you soon.

I remain

Yrs., & c., Thos. G. Gentry

Whitman promptly responded on the reverse side:

Camden New Jersey  
 Feb. 11 '84

Dear Sir

I am entirely willing you should print the piece as you request—  
 Walt Whitman

It was not an unusual request nor an unusual reply, but the brief exchange contains the germ of another story of a Whitman friendship, this one more hidden in the shadows of the past than the Aldrich relationship.

Thomas G. Gentry (1843-1905) was an ornithologist from Germantown in Philadelphia. His *Nests and Eggs of Birds of the United States* had been published in 1882 and was his sixth book; earlier works included such forgotten volumes as *On Habits of Some American Species of Birds*

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<sup>11</sup> Rossetti, *Reminiscences*, II, 509; Traubel, *Camden*, III, 2. The "O Captain!" ms. is in a display case in the Iowa Historical Museum in Des Moines.

<sup>12</sup> The Gentry/Whitman letter is in the Foreman M. Lebold Collection at The University.

(1874) and *The House Sparrow at Home and Abroad* (1878). He was a member of several respected professional organizations including the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, the Nuttall Ornithological Club, and the Canadian Entomological Society, and was a frequent contributor to solid scientific journals like the *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences* and *The Auk* during the 1870s and the early 1880s. At first glance it would appear that he was a respected if unremarkable scientist, who followed many like him into obscurity.

But there was more to Gentry's story: by the time he wrote to Whitman his professional reputation had already begun a remarkable decline; a long review of his book on *Nests and Eggs of Birds in the United States* had appeared in the authoritative *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club* (*The Auk*) in 1882. It was the kind of notice one does not easily recover from. The reviewer was clever in the way he moved in for the kill.

... we are given an amount of detail and exact data, concerning some of the most inaccessible points connected with the breeding habits of birds, that excite, first, admiration (for the author's extraordinary acuteness of observation); next, astonishment (at the possibility of attaining a knowledge of certain peculiarities mentioned); and finally, incredulity (regarding the reliability of the author's statements).

And this was only the beginning; Gentry's work, said the reviewer, has "the stigma of untrustworthiness," is "unreliable and worthless . . . trash," at best "well-adapted for the amusement of children," and its few admirable parts are plagiarized. Twenty years later the same journal printed a review of an even earlier Gentry work, *Life-Histories of the Birds of Eastern Pennsylvania* (1876). This two-volume study, the reviewer says, was rightfully ignored when it first appeared, but now—to the horror of the reviewer and other scientists—it was being accepted as a factual record by some unsuspecting scientists in England. There seems to have been an odd conspiracy of gentle silence about Gentry's works: "As if by common consent they have been very consistently ignored by American ornithologists," says the reviewer, who admits that he himself "has up to the present acquiesced in the silent treatment of Gentry's volumes." But now, seven years after Gentry's death, the reviewer feels a duty to let the ornithological world know that this "glib author" offers a "dangerous mixture of fact and unifact," and that the major revelations of Gentry's study are "almost entirely products of the author's imagination." The reviewer then carefully dissects Gentry's various claims and reveals them to be patently false.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The first review appeared in *The Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club* (later *The Auk*), 7 (1882), 246-49; the second review was in *The Auk*, 29 (1912), 119-21.

So by the time Gentry wrote to Whitman, his ornithological career was virtually over; he wrote no more scientific books about birds, and his name faded from the membership rolls of the various scientific societies he had belonged to (his death is not recorded in any of their journals). Gentry's attention turned instead to projects like a biography of his friend, the famous paleontologist E. D. Cope (to whom Gentry dedicated some of his questionable works, with lavish thanks to Cope for his careful review of the manuscripts!), and a book, *Family Names from the Irish, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, and Scotch Considered in Relation to Their Etymology* (1892). The anthology of bird poetry that he wrote to Whitman about apparently never materialized, perhaps because of his own growing disrepute, or perhaps because the publishing market experienced a surprising surfeit of such books around this time (Mrs. A. N. Bullers's *Silver Voices: Poems of Bird Life* appeared in 1887, followed by D. R. Goodale's *Birthday-Book of Birds: Verses*, J. Pollard's *Favorite Birds, and What the Poets Sing of Them* in 1888, and Rosetta Munroe's *With the Birds: Selected Poems from English and American Authors* in 1891; A. P. Churchill's *Birds in Literature* would not appear until 1906).

The abandonment of this project, though, did not affect Gentry's growing fascination with Whitman. In Whitman's daybook for October, 1885, Gentry's name and address suddenly appear, nearly two years after his letter to Whitman. And apparently he and his son paid Whitman a visit on December 30, 1885. There is nothing to suggest what might have prompted the visit, but certainly Gentry's own life had been moving away from scientific investigation increasingly toward a philosophical and transcendental exploration that might well have drawn him to Whitman and his work. Indeed, Gentry's later years were spent writing and revising his major work—an odd mixture of science, fantasy, philosophy, and religion called *Intelligence in Plants and Animals* (published by Doubleday, Page in 1900 after Gentry had published an earlier version, *Life and Immortality, or Soul in Plants and Animals*, in 1897). This work was preceded by Gentry's own book of poems, *Pigeon River*, published in 1892, a collection of pedestrian verse filled with addresses to and images of birds—"To the Wood Thrush," "To the Song Sparrow," "The Towhee Buntings"—but also suffused with an extreme sadness brought on certainly by the death of his wife and perhaps also by his own diminishing professional stature.

'Tis vain to kneel beside the graves  
Of buried hopes and pleasures,  
And sigh for the companionship  
Of those decaying treasures.

'Tis vain to brood o'er hours misspent  
In idleness and sorrow,  
And seek to expiate their loss  
By begging from the morrow.

This tone of romantic melancholy permeates the book, which ends with "Dark Days," a poem that seems to define Gentry's state of mind during the 1890s ("Dark are my days and cold and drear"); his comforting birds have vanished from his life.

No more the robins joy and sing  
By breezy lanes, secluded hollows,  
Nor trip the air on purple wing  
The sun-adoring, lissome swallows.

And he concludes

Alas! It is my life seems dead,  
Crush'd 'neath a mountain-weight of sorrows,  
Else would my soul with Nature wed,  
And live with her the unborn morrows.<sup>14</sup>

So it is not surprising that the remainder of Gentry's life was dedicated to discovering just how to wed his soul to Nature's soul, to break out of his melancholy. This struggle is recorded in *Intelligence in Plants and Animals*, an exhaustive investigation of how such animals as bees, ants, worms, and buzzards, as well as all kinds of plants, display intelligence and thus have souls, how the "possession of soul and spirit can be predicated no less of plants than of man and the lower animals." "There is soul, in some sort of development, in everything. . . ." Only by embracing such a belief, says Gentry, can "all life [be] related to the Divine life, can there be any hope of escape from materialism, that curse of the age." He sets out to prove that even the "lower animals" will have "a future life, where they will receive a just compensation for the sufferings which so many of them undergo in this world." He posits a firm belief in Spencerian evolution: "Man is in reality but on the threshold of civilization." He uses the Bible and poets and scientific observation to support his ideas. The life-soul continually moves through and among the vast variety of forms: "The spirit of man must have entered into the spirit of the plant," he affirms, and so it is easy to see why Gentry would have been attracted to Whitman's poetry, where he would have read, "I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd breasts of melons." Gentry found intelligence in such things as the finger slime, and thus often echoes Whitman's faith: "To be in any

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<sup>14</sup> *Daybooks*, II, 371; *Pigeon River and Other Poems* (Philadelphia: Burk & McFetridge, 1896), pp. 9, 47.

form, what is that? / (Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,) / If nothing lay more develop'd the quahaug in its callous shell were enough." And Gentry certainly would have endorsed Whitman's ability to "turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self contain'd / . . . They bring me tokens of myself. . . ." "Not alone are we of the upper walks of being made the possessors of the inner life," concludes Gentry, "but all nature shares it in common with us, and love is its expression and the method of its action."<sup>15</sup>

It's clear then why Gentry had a fascination with Whitman's "To the Man-of-War-Bird," a poem about the possibility of instilling soul in the bird, about the desire of the human soul to attain the bird's vast vista: ". . . had'st thou my soul, / What joys! what joys were thine!" Like many of Gentry's own bird poems, Whitman's poem posited the possibility that man could talk to birds, address them. Had Gentry completed his anthology, he might well have included other Whitman poems that he must have been attracted to, especially the "carol of death" sung by the thrush in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" where "the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird." What the ornithological community upbraided Gentry for—infusing his scientific catalogs with flights of fancy—might well have been just what would have made him an interesting visitor for Whitman in the last years.

### III. *The 1855 Copy of Leaves of Grass: Three Generations of Owners*

The Iowa copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is unique. Whitman printed only around 800 copies of *Leaves* in 1855 and bound some in the familiar ornate gold-stamped green covers, while putting others in paper wrappers. The marbled end pages and extensive gilding on the cover of the Iowa copy identify it as a second issue of the first edition.<sup>16</sup> But what makes the copy unique is its history. It was the personal copy of Henry Kirke Brown (1814-86), one of nineteenth-century America's leading sculptors. Brown was trained, as were most sculptors of his time, in Italy where he learned Neoclassical techniques. But he later renounced much of this training and did for American sculpture what Whitman did for

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<sup>15</sup> *Intelligence in Plants and Animals* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1900), pp. 3, 478, 489, 423, 488, 489.

<sup>16</sup> Pasted inside the front of the book is a clipping from the October 10, 1855, *New York Tribune* which prints Ralph Waldo Emerson's letter to Whitman praising *Leaves of Grass*; Whitman had had the letter published in the *Tribune* without Emerson's permission, then cut out and pasted copies in many of his 1855 volumes (before actually reprinting the letter in the 1856 edition of *Leaves*).

American poetry: he sought out a new native form, urged American art to grow out of American experience rather than European tradition. He visited Indian tribes during the 1840s and 1850s where he studied natural forms and produced bronze groups with titles like *Indian and Panther* and *Aboriginal Hunter*. In 1850 he set up a studio in Brooklyn where many young artists gathered, and he and Whitman became close friends. Brown's compatriots were a boisterous, talented, and varied group; Whitman learned a lot from them and was himself a favorite of the younger artists who frequented the studio, artists like John Quincy Adams Ward, soon to become one of America's most influential sculptors. Late in his life, Whitman recalled those years just before he published *Leaves of Grass*.

. . . I fell in with Brown, the sculptor—was often in his studios, where he was always modelling something—always at work. There many bright fellows came—Ward among them: there we all met on the freest terms. . . . There I would meet all sorts—young fellows from abroad stopped here in their swoopings. . . . They were big, strong days—our young days—days of preparation: the gathering of the forces.<sup>17</sup>

Brown, Ward, and the others helped Whitman firm up his plans for a distinctly American poetry, and so Whitman no doubt was proud to present Brown a copy of the 1855 *Leaves* (published on July 4, 1855, exactly one year before Brown's most famous work, the equestrian statue of George Washington, was unveiled in New York's Union Square. Independence Day those two years celebrated not only the American Revolution but also the new revolution in American art, clearly revealed in the work of Whitman and Brown).

There is no record of the Whitman-Brown friendship after this time. In the late 1850s, Brown went to South Carolina to create sculptures for a new statehouse; the Civil War interrupted this work, and he returned to New York. Meanwhile Whitman went off to Washington, D.C., where he became a government clerk and devoted himself to nursing wounded soldiers in the makeshift hospitals around the capital. Brown became an officer in the United States Sanitary Commission, an organization charged with caring for wounded soldiers, but an organization often at odds with individual volunteer nurses like Whitman. Brown and Whitman apparently did not cross paths during the Civil War, and by the time Brown set up a studio in Newburgh, New York, in 1861, where he lived until his death, he and Whitman had lost touch with each other. Brown, though, had not forgotten his copy of *Leaves*, and once even added to it, pasting in a clipping, Whitman's poem called "A Death-Sonnet for Custer" (later titled "From Far Dakota's Cañons"), which appeared in the *New York Tribune* on June 10, 1876.

<sup>17</sup>Traubel, *Camden*, II, 502-3.

Then in 1878, Brown gave this copy of *Leaves* to Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia. Written on the flyleaf in Brown's handwriting is "Dr. Weir S. Mitchell [sic] compliments of H. K. Brown," and Brown's letter presenting the book to Mitchell is glued into the front of the copy.

Newburgh N. Y June 5' 1878

Dr. Mitchell

Dear Sir

I send by today's express "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman. It is of the first edition of the work—published by himself. Please accept it with my kindest regards.

I returned home last friday. My health has improved somewhat but am not quite a man yet. I do not feel the pressure in my head, as much as when I saw you last. Have gained somewhat in health and strength. Am in hopes of going to the woods soon trusting and shall hope to return quite well.

Please advise me if the book reaches you.

Yours very truly

H. K. Brown

Dr. S. Weir Mitchell

no. 1524 Walnut above 13<sup>th</sup>

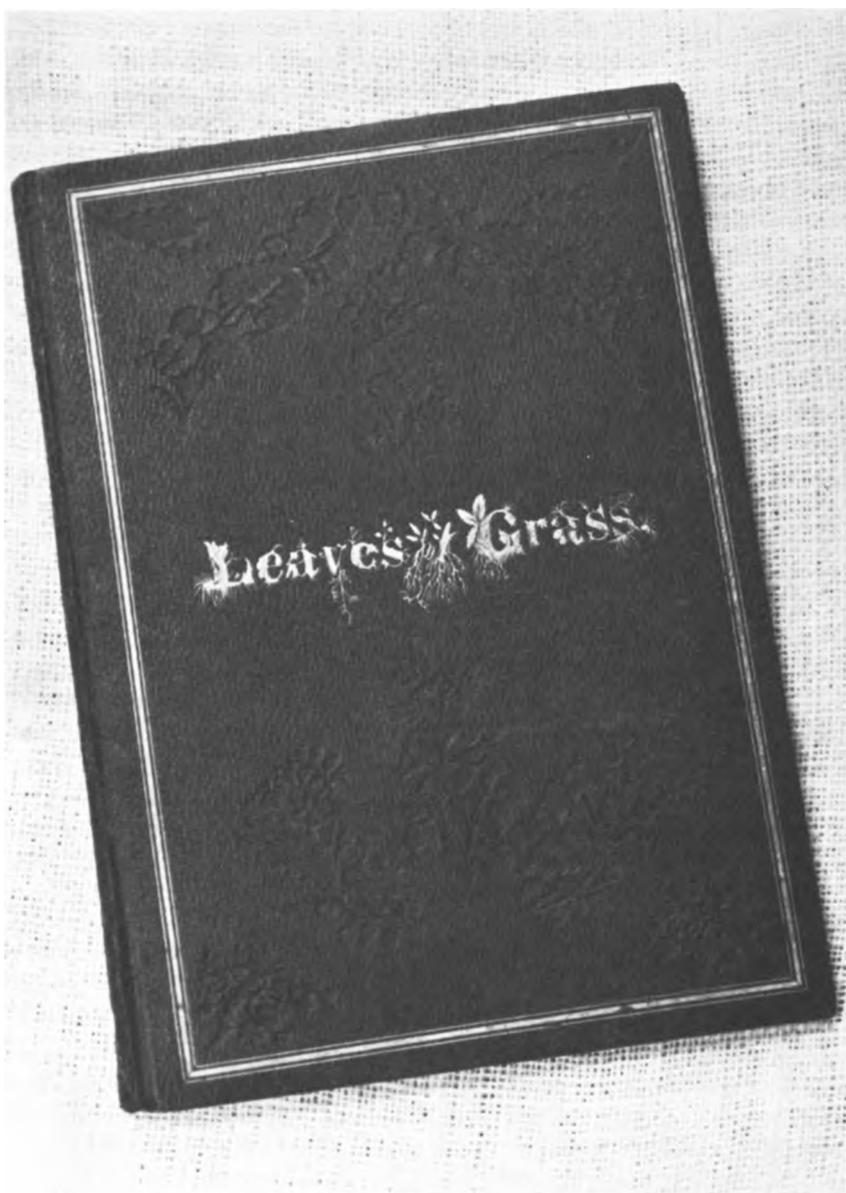
Philad. Pa

S. Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) was by this time one of America's most famous and respected physicians. During the Civil War he had been a surgeon in the Union army, where he studied injuries of the nervous system. Later he became a professor in the Philadelphia Polyclinic and College for Graduates in Medicine; he became known as the father of neurology in America, but his range of expertise was vast, and he did pioneer work in toxicology, pharmacology, psychiatry, and the concept of rest therapy. Just when and how he met Brown is uncertain—maybe during the Civil War, but more likely later, perhaps through their mutual acquaintance, the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. In any case, Brown's letter indicates that Brown had recently consulted Mitchell for medical reasons and apparently was about to take Mitchell's advice about a rest cure: his controversial "fresh air therapy" involved rest, overfeeding, and massage, mixed with electrical stimulation, or, depending on the patient's condition, physical conditioning through outdoor play. Brown is off to the woods for the "camp cure" and trusts he will "return quite well." But why had he suddenly sent Mitchell his personal copy of *Leaves*?<sup>18</sup>

At the time of Brown's letter, Whitman was well settled in Camden, New Jersey; he had recovered somewhat from the paralytic stroke he had

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<sup>18</sup>For more on Mitchell, see Ernest Earnest, *S. Weir Mitchell: Novelist and Physician* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), and for more on his medical care of Whitman, see Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), passim.



Front cover of the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, 1855. From a copy in The University of Iowa Libraries once owned by the sculptor Henry Kirke Brown (1814-86) and later presented by him to S. Weir Mitchell (1829-1914), novelist and Civil War surgeon. He in turn gave it to his younger son Langdon Elwyn Mitchell (1862-1935), whose study of this book "literally transformed him, re-made his mind."

suffered in 1873, and was under the care of several physicians. On April 13, 1878, thanks to a friend who knew the famous doctor, Whitman met Mitchell for the first time, crossing the Delaware to be examined by the "great Dr Mitchell": "I was very well pleas'd with him—I am to go again—," Whitman wrote that day. Mitchell was encouraging, urging as usual his outdoor rest cure. Whitman's friend, Anne Gilchrist, recorded Mitchell's diagnosis: "he wants mountain air, says the Dr."<sup>19</sup>

Mitchell was a close friend of many famous authors—James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William Dean Howells, Francis Parkman, George Bancroft, Edith Wharton—and he served most of these friends in a dual capacity, as physician and as fellow writer. Mitchell came to be, in fact, nearly as well-known for his imaginative writing as for his medical work; he wrote several volumes of verse, many tales, and after 1880 over a dozen novels. So Mitchell was interested, too, in meeting the notorious author Whitman, though he was wary of his poetry, and, according to his biographer, "much of *Leaves of Grass* offended his Philadelphia sensibilities." Given his list of friends, it is of course no surprise that he was not quickly attracted to Whitman; Whitman in 1888 said of two of those friends, "I understand that Lowell is in the habit of saying sore things about me—yes, very severe things—Holmes passes me off as a joke." So Whitman always associated Mitchell with this genteel side of American literature; when Lowell came to Philadelphia in 1889, Whitman noted that Mitchell was giving a dinner party for him, and emphasized his own exclusion from *that* society: "Lowell is one kind: I'm another: he'll not come here: Lowell is one of my real enemies. . . ." When asked if he had been invited to the dinner, Whitman burst out laughing: "What! to a dinner to James Russell? I guess not. My presence would spoil the soup." So, predictably, Whitman found that Mitchell "stands for refinements, proprieties, the code, all that," and he was aware in turn that the doctor did not rank Whitman "high as an artist" either.<sup>20</sup>

Mitchell did indeed find Whitman "a queer creature," as he said to Holmes, but he was fascinated with him nonetheless. Apparently he was intrigued enough to discuss him with H. K. Brown sometime soon after that first meeting when he examined the poet, for less than two months later Brown sent Mitchell his copy of *Leaves*. Mitchell studied the book over the next decade as he continued to give Whitman free medical advice and had his son, John Kearsley Mitchell (also a respected physician) do the same. During these years, Mitchell gave Whitman money over extended periods of time and subscribed to the poet's Lincoln Lecture in 1885 for \$100. By 1888 Mitchell had even come around to an admiration for Whitman's poetry, going so far as to view it as therapeutic, a kind of

<sup>19</sup> *Correspondence*, III, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Earnest, p. 65; Traubel, *Camden*, I, 454; IV, 74, 87, 88.

literary fresh air therapy: "Certainly some books get fresh flavors out of doors. . . . I should frankly name Walt Whitman and Thoreau. . . ." It was around the time he made this statement that he passed his gift copy of *Leaves* on. Right below H. K. Brown's inscription on the flyleaf is another, this one in Mitchell's hand: "Given to my son Langdon March 1887."<sup>21</sup>

Langdon Elwyn Mitchell (1862-1935) was Dr. Mitchell's younger son. Lany, as he was called, was always an irresponsible child, though clearly his father's favorite son; Dr. Mitchell believed that Lany was the true genius of the family. Lany's older brother became a renowned physician like his father, but Lany, after graduating from Harvard, dabbled in poetry and drama, eventually writing at least one vaguely memorable play (*The New York Idea*, 1906) and adapting novels—including one by his father—for the stage. It is as if Dr. Mitchell's two interests—medicine and literature—as well as two sides of his personality—seriously responsible and playfully indolent—had divided and manifested themselves in separate sons. Whitman, of course, had opinions about all three Mitchells. He considered the elder Mitchell to be "my friend" and was thankful for "his goodness," though he found him "a little bitter—touched just a touch by the frosts of culture, society, worldliness. . . ." And he found Dr. Mitchell's poems "non-vital" and "stiff at the knees"; he has "written volumes," Whitman said, "very bad, too—awful in their inadequacy." "I can't say that he's a world-author—he don't hit me for that size—but he's a world-doctor for sure. . ." (though later he would have doubts that Mitchell would even "acquire an immortality" as a physician). Whitman did not particularly like the young Dr. Mitchell, who always seemed to be trying to get Whitman to swallow pills: "The young man Mitchell did not take me by storm—he did not impress me." But Whitman *did* like Langdon; he read one of Lany's poems in *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1888 and found "it has some snap and go: it is worth looking over a second time," and when he met him the following year he said, "I liked the boy . . . it was his first visit—he seemed bright, intelligent." It is fitting, then, that Lany should have ended up with the copy of *Leaves*; at the time, he embodied for Whitman a touch of the old energy and experimentation that he had years before associated with the original recipient of the volume, Henry Kirke Brown.<sup>22</sup>

And Langdon Mitchell clearly devoted himself to the study of his copy of *Leaves*; the book literally transformed him, remade his mind. In 1927 he published a now-forgotten volume called *Understanding America*, a

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Aspiz, p. 101; quoted in Earnest, p. 116. After Whitman's death, when Mitchell read some of the poet's comments about him, he went back to calling him a "poetic tramp" (Earnest, p. 258).

<sup>22</sup> Traubel, *Camden*, II, 271; I, 454-55; II, 271; I, 454; II, 182; VI (ed. William White and Gertrude Traubel; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 188.

book devoted to seeing how the American past has created our American present, how people like Whitman “tell us much of the American character.” One long essay is devoted to Whitman, to discovering how “the spiritual quality of a nation is best perceived by dwelling on the character of its greater, its more original minds.” Langdon traces Whitman’s career, from his unpopularity during his own life to his wide influence on young poets of the 1920s. He acknowledges the power of Whitman’s radical poetry, but rejects the notion that Whitman was the voice of the common man, one of the “Common People.”

Whitman was not in the least like the Common people. He was of the people, he believed in the people, but he was not *like* the people. If in nothing else, he was set apart from the mass of the men of his time and country, by the predicament of his rare genius, and in the fact that his ideals were not theirs. He was a destroyer as well as a creator.<sup>23</sup>

Langdon here has gone far beyond his father’s understanding and appreciation of Whitman. Dr. Mitchell would have been shocked to read this essay where his son dismisses his father’s friend Lowell as a “distinctively minor” poet, but celebrates “Whitman’s many and wonderful poems” in very Whitmanian terms: “What a penetration these beams of truth have! How they surprise, dazzle, warm and delight!—How they urge something within us to come to its flower!” Like his father, Langdon found parts of Whitman’s work objectionable, lacking gentility, but he understood *why* Whitman wrote as he did: “Whitman protests against the way in which the men and women of his day regarded and spoke of their mutual relation. . . . Unfortunately when a man writes as *against* something he hates, he generally goes too far.” We must feel Whitman’s impact on Langdon’s life when he relives the times when he visited Whitman: “. . . as you entered his door, he took your hand in his, and keeping it there while you both moved he led you into his room, his small clean room in that little house as of some mechanic, in Camden. . . .” The effect on Langdon was tremendous.

You felt, too, in seeing him, that there was an unaccountable moral strength and beauty in the man himself. . . . As you sat in his presence, and he read his poems to you, as feeble, stricken and white haired as he then was, it was impossible not to see the other and younger, mature and athletic man of twenty years earlier. Even as he was, there streamed from him something of power, but of calm power. He radiated something so uncommon that you would not again in a lifetime feel these same human beams, the same radiant force.

Langdon felt that America’s puritanical and conventional culture—a culture that his father and friends represented—would continue to struggle to “protect itself from Whitman,” but “the future is with him.”

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<sup>23</sup>Mitchell, *Understanding America* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), pp. 41, 159, 167.

In the course of time, and as Science penetrating our thought and revolutionizing it, becomes in turn the parent of a new religion, Whitman will come to his own.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Mitchell's gift to his son had had a greater impact than he could have imagined it would. This same copy of *Leaves* had greatly affected three generations of owners: Brown, an early friend who, while fighting off the influence of his own European training, helped Whitman define his poetic project; S. Weir Mitchell, a genteel physician/author who was partially won over to Whitman's message; and Langdon Mitchell, who embraced Whitman's poems fully, who would be absorbed by the book long after Whitman's death.

All of these friends of Whitman—Aldrich, Gentry, Brown, the two Mitchells—were well educated and relatively conventional men, people whom we would not expect to be swayed by Whitman's "barbaric yawp." But all were nonetheless drawn to Whitman and in some way changed by him. The Iowa Collection helps confirm what an odd and varied lot Whitman's friends were.

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<sup>24</sup>Mitchell, pp. 162, 177, 181, 175, 178-79, 179-80, 182.