

WHITMAN'S DISCIPLES

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This special double-issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* focuses on the fascinating and often maligned group of people who gathered around Whitman and in some sense worshipped him, especially during the final decades of his life. Sometimes referred to derisively as "Whitmaniacs" or "Whitman's hot little prophets," these people often accepted such derision as a badge of honor. In his *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), Justin Kaplan plays with the term "disciples" and offers a list of Whitman's apostles:

The Saint Peter, rock and chosen successor of the Camden church, was Horace Traubel, son of a Jewish father and a Quaker mother. . . . Richard Maurice Bucke, a physician and eminent alienist, superintendent of the insane asylum in London, Ontario, was Whitman's Luke as well as his Paul, missionary to the gentiles and to far-flung congregations of true believers. A Whitman fellowship in the Lancashire mill town of Bolton, England, cherished among other sacred objects a lock of the poet's hair and the stuffed body of a canary that had once trilled in the parlor at Mickle Street. On the occasion of Bucke's visit in 1891 the members of the Bolton "college" or "church," mostly business and professional people, welcomed Whitman's "defender," "explicator" and "vindicator" in verses composed to be sung to the tune of "Men of Harlech." (34)

Kaplan's gently mocking tone here is characteristic of most of the mentions that Whitman's disciples receive in biographies and critical studies of Whitman. The often hyperbolic rhetoric of the poet's followers seems to invite dismissive comments, and most commentators—if they discuss the disciples at all—find them an embarrassment and cringe at comments like those of William Sloane Kennedy, another follower of Whitman, who claimed that the poet was "the equal, and in many respects the superior of the much misunderstood Jesus," and that "in a thousand years from now people will be celebrating the birth of Walt Whitman as they are now the birth of Christ" (quoted in Kaplan, 35).

It is understandable, then, why few scholars have given serious attention to these disciples, but recent investigations have revealed that we may in fact have a great deal to learn from them. Although they are frequently portrayed as eccentrics, as kooks whose views of Whitman are merely laughable, they were for the most part remarkably well-read, wide-ranging, and widely admired professionals who simply chose to

devote themselves passionately to a poet they believed was a prophet of a new democratic future. They wrote voluminously about Whitman—in books, articles, and in letters to each other—and their writings form a remarkably full and revealing record of early response to Whitman.

In this issue, we present the most extensive study to date of the “Eagle Street College,” the group of Whitman supporters around Bolton, England, who devoted themselves to the reading and study of Whitman in the 1880s. In 1984, Paul Salvesson’s essay on the Bolton Whitmanites was privately published as a pamphlet. Since it is a difficult item for most Whitman scholars to find, we asked Salvesson to revise and update his work for publication in *WWQR*, and we are pleased to present the new version of his essay here. His work reveals for the first time just how diverse the Bolton group was and how closely tied it was to the British socialist movement. The Bolton group certainly found spiritual insights in their reading of Whitman, but primarily they found socialist prophecy. Salvesson’s work is based on his extensive research in archives in Bolton, Manchester, Sheffield, and Liverpool. The major Whitman collection outside the United States is housed in the Bolton Metropolitan Library, where the Eagle Street College members left their extensive papers. The collection contains some original Whitman manuscripts (including copies of his books inscribed to his Bolton friends), some fascinating Whitman memorabilia, records of the meetings of the Eagle Street College, and hundreds of Whitman-related letters to J. W. Wallace and other Bolton Whitmanites from a wide range of correspondents, including Horace Traubel, Anne Traubel, Richard M. Bucke, Thomas Harned, Warren Fritzingler, Clara Barrus, Léon Bazalgette, Edward Carpenter, and John Addington Symonds. Included in this special issue is a bibliography of some of the important materials in that collection. The John Rylands Library in Manchester also houses smaller collections related to the Bolton group.

Following Salvesson’s essay is an essay by Joann Krieg that demonstrates the importance of the Whitman-related manuscript collection that the Bolton group amassed. Basing her essay on the Traubel-Wallace correspondence, Krieg traces out the fascinating story of how Whitman’s disciples argued with each other over the control of Whitman’s image in the years following his death. Especially revealing is the debate over Whitman’s attitude toward homosexuality, as Traubel and Wallace discuss in remarkably open terms the claims and suggestions about Whitman’s sexuality that had been propagated by Symonds and Carpenter. Krieg shows that Whitman’s disciples formed anything but a unified front as they carried on often contentious debates about how to construct the memory of their departed master.

Finally, Carmine Sarracino offers an essay that attempts to resituate our understanding of Whitman’s disciples by viewing them through the

lens of Eastern cultural traditions in which intense relationships between poet-masters and disciples are commonplace. Part of our problem in understanding Whitman's disciples, Sarracino argues, is that their responses to Whitman do not fit Western paradigms. Behavior and beliefs that have struck many American commentators as eccentric or bizarre appear far less so when reconsidered in light of ancient Eastern traditions of discipleship.

Following this group of essays, Jerome Loving reviews the long-awaited final two volumes of Horace Traubel's nine-volume record of his daily conversations with Whitman during the last four years of the poet's life. These two volumes, finally published more than a century after they were written, conclude Traubel's monumental project, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, which now stands at nearly 5,000 printed pages. Traubel was the most loyal and devoted of all of Whitman's disciples, and the concluding two volumes of his affectionate and illuminating journal are filled with details and insights that subtly alter and deepen our understanding of Whitman.

The study of Whitman's disciples is a promising area of Whitman scholarship. The Bolton group is a particularly interesting example of how Whitman's work was constructed in ways that responded directly and effectively to particular ideologies in cultures outside the United States. The Eagle Street College did preserve Whitman's dead canary bird (it still perches beneath a bell jar in the Bolton Library; see the back cover of *WWQR* 5 [Fall 1987])—and that fact alone has led to several reductive caricatures of the group—but their regard for Whitman and their understanding of him have a lot to tell us about Whitman's influence and about the early construction of Whitman's reputation.

—Ed Folsom



Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke and Edward Carpenter visit the Eagle Street College, August 1891. J. W. Wallace is seated next to Dr. Bucke (with the cane). Carpenter is in the back row, on the right, wearing a hat. On Carpenter's right, also with a hat on, is Fred Wild; on Carpenter's left, hatless, is William Ferguson. In front of Carpenter is Richard Greenhalgh, and next to him, just behind Bucke's left shoulder, is Dr. John Johnston. Also in the photo, standing, from the left, are Sam Hodgkinson, Thomas Shorrock, Rev. F. R. C. Hutton, and Wentworth Dixon.



Whitman Day celebration at J. W. Wallace's home, 1908. Seated from the left are Dr. John Johnston, J. W. Wallace, and Wentworth Dixon. Standing from the left are an unidentified man, Fred Nightingale, and Fred Wild. Minnie Whiteside looks out from the window. Note the lilacs on the lapels.