

## REVIEWS

JOANN P. KRIEG. *Whitman and the Irish*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000. xx + 273 pp.

On a December evening in 1888, Horace Traubel found himself riding a train with Michael J. Ryan, president of the Irish American Club. During their conversation, which inevitably addressed the topic of Walt Whitman, Ryan recalled an article in which an English author predicted that the poet's fame would one day approach Christ's. This encounter with an Irish immigrant gains casual mention in Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, but as Joann Krieg's new study demonstrates, there was nothing casual about Whitman's involvement with the Irish. Krieg excavates the important if often indirect connections between the various Whitmans and his Irish constituencies—between the editor of the *Aurora* and those who fled the potato famine, between the poet of democracy and Irish nationalists, between the singer of the modern and key figures in European modernism. In the process, Krieg contributes to two important developments in Whitman studies. First, she reconstructs Whitman's historical moment and offers a creative but carefully contextualized reading of his life, politics, and occasionally his poetry. Second, she demonstrates that our understanding of Whitman can be significantly enriched by examining how his myriad admirers and detractors reacted to him in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She has produced an engaging and thoughtful narrative, one that, in her own words, is geared toward "establishing the kinds of links . . . upon which subsequent critical and theoretical studies can be built."

Krieg certainly fulfills her promise, although her engagement with questions of ethnic and racial identity will likely leave some readers wishing that she had taken up some of the broader theoretical questions that recent scholarship has raised in these fields. Nevertheless, she opens her book with a sound overview of Irish history as it pertains to Whitman, noting especially the importance of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood and its American counterpart, the Fenians, a fraternal order of immigrants who twice tried to invade Canada in hopes that a successful campaign might help them wrest control of their homeland from the British. Here too are introductions to the fundamental issues involved in the fight for Home Rule (a struggle that Whitman supported) and the efforts to reform land ownership. Krieg also details the circumstances that prompted the great famine of the mid-nineteenth century, a disaster that, between 1847 and 1851, sent some 840,000 Irish to New York City. These immigrants, notes Krieg, were among the working-class roughs that Whitman celebrated.

Aside from a useful timeline, the remainder of the book is organized into chapters that trace Whitman's involvement with the Irish in key cities—New York, Boston, Washington, Camden, and Dublin. Perhaps the most impressive of these is the long chapter on New York, in which Krieg argues that the poet's anti-Catholicism compelled him to embrace some Irishmen less fervently

than others. In 1842, Krieg finds Whitman hissing at a group of immigrant demonstrators led by New York City Bishop John Hughes, who asked the city's Public School Society and the state legislature to divert funds to parochial schools so that Catholic students might elude discrimination. Because the Democratic party relied so heavily on immigrant voters, Hughes and his faithful had the ears of high-ranking officials. Whitman, then a Democrat, was unimpressed. When Hughes's supporters crashed a rally that opposed the Catholic cause, Whitman responded with a vitriolic attack on the Irish, whom he dubbed "an insult to American citizenship." Howling in their "hideous native tongue," these "filthy wretches" were, Whitman wrote in the *Aurora*, the "bloated offscourings from the stews and blind alleys."

But just when it seems that Whitman has reduced the Irish to the simian-like Paddy stereotype that pervaded the nineteenth century, Krieg notes that he failed to succumb to the nastiest forms of American nativism and befriended a number of Irish immigrants. To be sure, Whitman had published in John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review* and held the radical labor leader Mike Walsh, an Irish Protestant, in high regard. In fact, when Walsh, who resented the Democratic Party for paying too much attention to Catholics, led an assault on Hughes's residence, Whitman praised him for "rout[ing] the Paddies in magnificent style." Whitman's willingness to tolerate certain Irishmen and not others suggests that the category of Irishness—or at least the less palatable qualities that defined it—was mutable and implies that certain Irishmen could become Americans.

In Krieg's terms, Whitman believed that extrinsic rather than intrinsic qualities stymied Irish advancement in the United States. Adherence to Catholicism, a religion that Whitman viewed as an anti-democratic vestige of feudal Europe, was one habit that the Irish would have to break if they were to become part of the democratic experiment. But there were economic reasons for Whitman's ambivalence about the Irish as well. Worried that industrialization was threatening the dignity and livelihood of the common man, Whitman idealized the ethos of small producer capitalism. Whereas Walsh was a skilled laborer who fought desperately to protect the craft system from the assault of industrialization, the unskilled Irish who arrived in New York at mid-century were used to further expand that assault, largely by working in factories. To be men fit for democracy, to become Americans, the Irish would have to prove their independence in the market as well as in the pulpit. Those who did so facilitated a softening in Whitman's attitudes and even earned his praise for their "independent instinct." His estimate of the Irish was improved by their participation in the Civil War (more than 140,000 men of Irish descent fought in the conflict) and their service as members of the New York City police department. In particular, Whitman lauded the policemen of "Irish stock" who in 1871 played a part in quelling the Orange Riots, a bloody skirmish between Irish Protestants and Catholics. The back alley vermin who insulted the United States in 1842 had now become "great, brown, bearded, able, American looking fellows."

Following her exhaustive treatment of New York, Krieg effectively employs class analysis in a pair of chapters on Whitman's contacts in Boston, where, she contends, the Irish were "seen as a moral danger to the Protestant City on the

Hill.” Despite the interest Whitman had sparked in Emerson, he too was seen as something of a pariah in New England literary society, largely because this polite crowd recoiled at his unabashed celebration of sexuality. But Krieg suggests that the prejudices Bostonians harbored against Whitman and the Irish were linked because the poet and the newly arrived immigrants offered a class-based resistance to abolitionism. Seeking to secure their liminal place in the economic order, many working-class Irish feared that free blacks would provide unwanted competition for jobs; the Irish predictably brandished racism as a defense mechanism. Whitman’s views on slavery and race were, of course, quite complex, but he too shied away from radical abolitionism, in part because he could not overcome his own attitudes, in part because he resented European moralists who condemned America for maintaining its peculiar institution. In 1842, Whitman vilified English abolitionists who condemned chattel slavery but supported white wage slavery in their factories. He dismissed their self-righteousness by subscribing to attitudes about blacks that, as Krieg notes, appeared in various Southern defenses of slavery. Slaves, Whitman insisted in a response to British critics, were careless, cheerful Sambos who aimlessly whiled away their days on plantations. This stereotype appeared not only in the work of George Fitzhugh and John Pendleton Kennedy, but permeated the minstrel stage as well. Given Whitman’s love of minstrelsy and the fact that many blackface performers were Irish, it is surprising that Krieg does not survey this common ground. She nonetheless does a fine job of illustrating that in racial matters class loyalties bound Whitman and the Irish together and thwarted their widespread acceptance in the capital of anti-slavery.

In the twilight of his life, Whitman would find a Catholic friend among Boston’s Irish in John Boyle O’Reilly. The editor of a diocesan newspaper entitled *The Pilot*, O’Reilly, suggests Krieg, was as important to Whitman as the familiar figures William Douglas O’Connor and Pete Doyle, both of whom she also discusses in terms of their Irishness. Krieg situates the Whitman-O’Reilly relationship in the context of Boston’s 1881 banning of *Leaves of Grass*, but what emerges from the chapter is a clear sense of how and why Whitman ultimately saw a particular aspect of the Paddy stereotype as endearing. Deeply involved with the struggle for Home Rule, O’Reilly was arrested for his efforts in 1866 and sent to a prison colony in Australia, where he was starved by his English captors. He escaped from prison, arrived in the United States in 1869 and soon earned the respect of Boston’s Brahmins. Under the eyes of Catholic hierarchy, O’Reilly authored a positive but guarded review of Whitman in *The Pilot* and was perhaps the author of a more enthusiastic but anonymous piece that appeared in *The Critic*. He never embraced Whitman as fanatically as did the poet’s dearest supporters, but Whitman was drawn more to O’Reilly’s personal narrative of imprisonment, endurance and escape than to his loyalty. In short, Whitman saw in his struggle evidence of Irish feistiness and rebellion, qualities that inspired him to feel a sense of kinship with O’Reilly and his countrymen. Indeed, it was O’Reilly’s commitment to freedom and disrespect for authority that enabled Whitman to see beyond, or at least to dismiss, his religious affiliation. “O’Reilly was no Catholic!—it was not in him,” he told Traubel. “I know he was in the formal sense—it was the thing to be, he was born to it—was in fact a Catholic as he was a Democrat, for reasons that did not run as

deep." For Whitman, commitment to democracy trumped Irishness and membership in the Catholic church.

The final two chapters of Krieg's narrative recount the travels of Irishmen who made pilgrimages to Mickle Street and discuss Whitman's influence on Irish literature. She finds Bram Stoker's visit to Camden worthy of mention and notes that Irish writers from Standish James O'Grady to Sean O'Casey were attracted to Whitman for various reasons, including his sense of nationalism and his joyousness. William Butler Yeats was among those who flirted with Whitman but ultimately rejected him as a model because the poet of democracy failed to garner a significant audience.

Perhaps the most interesting material in these chapters is devoted to Whitman's 1882 meeting with Oscar Wilde. Krieg's fascinating telling of this encounter details Whitman's reservations about Wilde's aestheticism but, more important, provides insights into late nineteenth-century attitudes about sexuality. Whitman welcomed his guest warmly, and although he would later tell Traubel that there was "a little substance lacking" in Wilde, he ultimately described the foppish aesthete as "genuine, honest and manly." Wilde, who was found guilty of sodomy in 1895, fairly worshipped Whitman, the author of what he called "Greek and sane" poetry. This characterization suggests that Wilde was particularly taken with the homoerotic content of Whitman's work. In fact, the two men were rumored to have had a private audience during which they discussed their predilections for male lovers and kissed one another on the lips. Krieg dismisses these particulars as apocryphal, but suggests that the meeting sparked a homophobic reaction, notably by Charles Swinburne. Between 1868 and 1871, Swinburne wrote enthusiastically about Whitman but in 1887 published an essay that ridiculed loyal Whitmanites. "Whitmania," Swinburne argued, had developed into an "ethical and aesthetic rabies." In one of her most provocative readings, Krieg argues that Swinburne's decision to describe this disorder in medical terms was an attempt to root his opinions firmly in a contemporary medical discourse that constructed homosexuality as a disease. By diagnosing the Whitman worshipers as abnormal, he hoped to prevent guilt by association that might lead to the disclosure of his own sexual practices.

In this example, and throughout her book, Krieg brings to light fascinating new information and renders fresh insights. She not only uses history to illuminate the poet, but demonstrates that Whitman's work and the discussion that emanated from it can broaden our understanding of the history of race, ethnicity and sexuality. This thoughtful, accessible, well wrought narrative, her latest in a series of valuable contributions to the field, raises interesting questions and issues that will resonate throughout Whitman studies.

*Sidwell Friends School*

BRYAN GARMAN

HAROLD BLOOM, ed. *Walt Whitman*. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 1999. "Bloom's Major Poets" series. 109 pp.

J. MICHAEL LÉGER, ed. *Walt Whitman: A Collection of Poems*. "The Harcourt Casebook Series in Literature." Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College, 2000. xvi + 194 pp.

GARY WIENER, ed. *Readings on Walt Whitman*. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven, 1999. "The Greenhaven Press Literary Companion to American Authors" series. 224 pp.

In the last couple of years a new genre of Whitman book has emerged. It goes under various names, like "study guide," "handbook," "manual," "companion," or "casebook." These books, as the introduction to the Harcourt volume puts it, are created "to facilitate student research—and to facilitate instructor supervision of that research" by providing in one "convenient" package "all the resources students need to produce a documented research paper on a particular work of literature." It is as if the increasingly vast resources of the Worldwide Web have spawned a counter-reaction: to "supervise" students' sources (and presumably reduce the chances of plagiarism), we now have books that delimit the materials they can use for their Whitman papers. Harold Bloom's version of this new genre is called a "Comprehensive Research and Study Guide" and is described on the back cover as "the ideal aid to all students, . . . a definitive guide for independent study and a single source for footnoting essays and research papers." The Greenhaven Press "Literary Companion Series" describes each "unique anthology" as "designed for young adults" and "provid[ing] an engaging and comprehensive introduction to literary analysis and criticism." These books, claims Greenhaven's general introduction to the series, are ideal tools "for introducing students to literary analysis in the classroom or as a library resource for young adults researching the world's great authors and literature." Let's look, then, at how these three anthologies present to the beginning literature student the world of Whitman criticism and the nature of a good research essay.

Bloom's anthology is the most irresponsible of the three: it is a grab-bag of extremely short excerpts from a wide variety of critical essays and books. Sixteen of the twenty-seven excerpts are from the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* or its predecessor, the *Walt Whitman Review*. All these excerpts were printed without permission; no one at Chelsea House even informed the journal of the fact that its essays were being used to form the bulk of Bloom's book. Most of the excerpts are so truncated that it would be impossible for students to get much of a sense of the main points of the essays; perhaps the "viewpoints" were kept to no more than two pages or so in the belief that this constituted "fair usage" and thus freed Chelsea House from seeking permissions (nothing in the book suggests that permission was sought for any of the selections).

The "User's Guide" to the "Bloom's Major Poets" series promises that each volume contains "a detailed biography of the author, discussing major life events and important literary accomplishments," as well as "a bibliography of the author's writings (including a complete list of all books written, cowritten, ed-