

WALT WHITMAN AT 200: INTRODUCTION



This issue of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* both celebrates and documents the two-hundredth birthday of Walt Whitman, an occasion marked by conferences, exhibits, performances, books, essays, special issues of journals, newspaper and magazine articles, websites, films, musical events, and other commemorative activities taking place all around the United States and around the world during 2019. As we begin the Third Whitman Century, this issue invites us all to pause for a few moments and take in the vast, stunning response (so far) to Walt Whitman at 200.

The year 2019 provides quite a contrast to 1919, at the end of the First Whitman Century, when celebrations of the poet certainly took place but were few in number, and the coverage in news media was slim. The *New York Times* focused on a single event at the Whitman Birthplace on Long Island, with a short article buried deep in the June 1, 1919, issue, describing how “the hundredth anniversary of the birthday of Walt Whitman was celebrated yesterday by a pilgrimage of American writers to the house where he was born at West Hills, L.I., and to the schoolhouse at Woodbury, on the Jamaica Turnpike, where Whitman taught school” (see Figure 1). The event was arranged by the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, and it attracted “about 200 pilgrims.” Whitman’s birthplace, now a New York State Historic Site, was then still privately owned, and the owners graciously “threw the place open to the party, which inspected the old house, the apple orchard and the rest of the setting in which was reared the poet, who was generally acclaimed yesterday as America’s greatest.”

Tributes were read by those present and from writers who could not attend, such as Edgar Lee Masters, who presented his “verdict upon Whitman”: “he has more nearly justified the ways of God to man than any writer that we have produced, and perhaps more so than any poet who has lived. . . . He found life good, and sang of its

GO ON A PILGRIMAGE TO WHITMAN'S HOUSES

Writers Pay Tribute to Poet by Visiting His Birthplace on His 100th Anniversary.

The hundredth anniversary of the birthday of Walt Whitman was celebrated yesterday by a pilgrimage of American writers to the house where he was born at West Hills, L. I., and to the schoolhouse at Woodbury, on the Jamaica Turnpike, where Whitman taught school. About 200 pilgrims made the trip, which was arranged by the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences.

Addresses and letters of appreciation were read at the anniversary exercises, which were held on the grounds at the Whitman birthplace, now possessed by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Watson, who threw the place open to the party, which inspected the old house, the apple orchard and the rest of the setting in which was reared the poet, who was generally acclaimed yesterday as America's greatest.

A poem from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" was read by Percy Mackaye. Dr. Mabel Irwin from Brooklyn also read some selections from the poet. Dr. Richard Burton, who made the principal address, said that in his opinion the five greatest American writers were Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman.

"Twenty years ago," said Dr. Burton, "Stedman's estimate of Whitman was prophetic, as was the earlier European judgment of critics like Stevenson, Symonds, Rossetti, and others. Since a volume in the American Men of Letters Series, written by so sanely conservative a critic as Bliss Perry, numbers the Camden refuse among our literary worthies, our present business is not to champion, but to explain."

Among the estimates of Whitman, contained in letters which were read, was one from John Masefield. It follows:

"Roughly, he was your first real voice. You had plenty of writers before him, but he was the first to speak out in a way that was American. He came out of a big, unmade, abundant, new country (the Republic wasn't a man's life old when he began to write) that was free of most of the shackles and the shams of the old countries. He spoke out just as though the country, such as I've described it, were speaking through him, in a way big, abundant and new. His value is, that he liked men and women, and made even the meanest of us feel that he or she was heartily welcome and good for something, 'good enough, anyway, to be Walt's friend.' That is a message which does the world's heart good. It is something honest and manly and kind for the wide world to fall back on in a bad time."

Arnold Bennett wrote: "In reply to your letter of the 7th of April as to the Centenary of Walt Whitman's birth, I can only say that in my opinion America has produced no greater writer than Walt Whitman, and that he is one of the greatest teachers that ever lived."

Edgar Lee Masters paid tribute in the following terms:

"It may be that he was right in thinking that poetry suitable to the human soul was never possible before the day of the American Republic. It is an inspiring thought to think this, and it was one that filled the vision of Whitman. It remains to be seen what can be done by the future along the way of his prophesying, for I believe that America has, and will have, the richest mine of epical and lyric ore that the world has known; at least, more colorful, and hued with stranger quality,

"But, finally, my verdict upon Whitman is this: that he has more nearly justified the ways of God to man than any writer that we have produced, and perhaps more so than any poet who has lived. In the 'Prayer of Columbus' he rose to cosmic consciences out of the abundant vitality of his own powerful soul. He found life good, and sang of its goodness; and he found death not evil, and proved it as nearly as man may prove a thing. He seems to me the Hesiod of our Homer to be, who will take the civil war for example and make an epic all inclusive of our life, our America, our new world, with its tragedy, its humor, its audacity, its courage, its inventive power, its energy, its hopefulness, and its faith."

Figure 1: "Go on Pilgrimage to Whitman's Houses," June 1, 1919. © *The New York Times*.

goodness; and he found death not evil, and proved it as nearly as man may prove a thing." Whitman, Masters said, absorbed our history, including "the civil war" and made "an epic all inclusive of our life, our America, our new world, with its tragedy, its humor, its audacity, its courage, its inventive power, its energy, its hopefulness, and its faith."

The only other coverage of the Whitman Centennial in the *Times* was a brief piece on the mysterious appearance and disappearance of "Walt Whitman, in the shape of a stolen bust," in the New York University Hall of Fame, where, rumor had it, he had suddenly appeared on "his hundredth anniversary" but just as quickly and mysteriously disappeared (see Figure 2). NYU's chancellor wasn't talking, nor was the watchman for the Hall of Fame.

"The only person who would talk of the episode was Mary, who scrubs the tile floor," but, since she "had never heard of the poet," all she could add was that there was "something funny about it all, how he got in and out again without any one seeing it done." Maybe it did not happen at all but rather was another incident of the poet being everywhere and nowhere: "Missing me one place search another. . . ."

As 2019 dawned, it became clear that we were about to experience an explosion of Whitman activity for the Bicentennial. In this Bicentennial Issue of *WWQR*, we offer several special features to document

WHITMAN BUST VANISHES.

Poet's Stay In Hall of Fame Brief, If at All.

Perhaps the watchman and other employes at the New York University had been told to deny all knowledge of the fact that Walt Whitman, in the shape of a stolen bust, had spent yesterday, his hundredth anniversary, in the Hall of Fame, so that the joke may be, after all, on the "Bohemian" disciples of the "good gray poet" who placed him in a niche Friday. The bust was not in the honored corridor at 10 o'clock yesterday morning, but many persons testified that they had seen it before that hour.

Chancellor Elmer E. Brown said that he had not been officially notified that the bust had been in the Hall of Fame and that he could cast no light on the mystery. He said that it would be an easy matter for any one to smuggle a small statue into the Hall of Fame, as the building is open and no precautions to guard against such things are taken. He said that other practical jokes had been played on the Hall of Fame. A few years ago, he said, some admirer of Lina Cavalieri had placed her likeness in the hall.

The only person who would talk of the episode was Mary, who scrubs the tile floor. Mary, who was told that it was Whitman's 100th anniversary, frankly admitted that she had never heard of the poet, but she insisted that there was "something funny about it all, how he got in and out again without any one seeing it done." She said that he was "all white" and not "brown" like the others.

Figure 2: "Whitman Bust Vanishes," June 1, 1919. © *The New York Times*.

just a fraction of the events. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of special readings of Whitman's work this spring by book clubs, college and high school classes, public libraries, reading groups, and others, including marathon readings of "Song of Myself" in over fifty cities. The three cities that Whitman lived in for long periods of time—New York, Philadelphia/Camden, and Washington DC—all planned extensive and impressive series of events. Major Whitman exhibitions were held (some are still being held) at The Grolier Club, the New York Public Library, and the J. P. Morgan Library and Museum in New York, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Iowa, and elsewhere. The Whitman Birthplace planned an entire year of events, including three multi-day conferences or festivals, multiple poetry readings, several community collaborations, five distinguished lectures by Whitman scholars, an oral history project, Whitman exhibitions, and a Library of Congress facsimile exhibit and lecture.

In this special issue, *WWQR* is pleased to publish two of the distinguished lectures delivered at the Birthplace. The first is by Jerome Loving, author of the definitive Whitman biography, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, as well as the author of many other biographies and works of criticism, including his remarkable study of the Emerson/Whitman relationship, *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse*. His talk, delivered at the birthplace on Whitman's 200th birthday, focuses on the major Whitman birthday celebration during the poet's own lifetime, his seventieth birthday, commemorated in the remarkable book that Horace Traubel edited called *Camden's Compliment to Walt Whitman*. The second Birthplace lecture we are publishing is by Gary Schmidgall, author of *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* and *Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition*, as well as the editor of *Conserving Whitman's Fame: Selections from Horace Traubel's Conservator, 1890-1919*, and *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel, 1888-1892*. His talk, delivered at the Birthplace on the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, is a remarkable examination of Whitman and the closet.

We did not want to overlook—in all the excitement about Whitman's 200th birthday—that 2019 is also the centennial of Horace Traubel's death. The fact that Traubel died just after he celebrated

the Whitman centennial is a story in and of itself. The New York centennial event that the *Times* did *not* cover back in 1919 was the Whitman Fellowship International dinner at the Brevoort Hotel in Greenwich Village on May 31, 1919, which Traubel—in ill health—attended, and at which thirty-eight-year-old Helen Keller, the deaf and blind author and political activist, gave a powerful tribute to her friend and compatriot Traubel. We offer a special section honoring the centenary of the death of Horace Traubel, whose vast nine-volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden* is one of the most revealing works ever created about an author. We include Keller's tribute to Traubel, as well as the last extended essay Traubel wrote about Whitman, published in the Centennial Edition of his Whitman-inspired magazine, *The Conservator*. In that final piece, he concludes with this: "He used to say that when you got his meaning *Leaves of Grass* was no longer 'I, Walt Whitman, of Manhattan the son,' but just as much 'I, Horace Traubel, of Camden the son,' or 'I, anybody, man or woman, of anywhere, the son or daughter.'"

Then we offer a Bicentennial gallery—a kind of visual feast, a partial gathering of posters, flyers, brochures, and assorted artwork created for just some of the Whitman events that have been taking place during this Whitman Bicentennial year. We could not gather them all, but the ones here can stand—just like a Whitman catalog—as random representative samples of the vast and diverse outpouring of response to Whitman as we open the Third Whitman Century. At the end of the issue, we have some reviews of recent books on Whitman, and then conclude, as usual, with the annotated bibliography of work on Whitman. It is a particularly robust bibliography this time, listing nearly 150 essays, newspaper and magazine articles, films, podcasts, musical compositions, and books that have already appeared during the Bicentennial. The various programs, exhibits, and celebrations continue through the rest of this year, and our next issue—a combined Summer/Fall 2019 Bicentennial issue—will bring you up to date, as well as presenting some exciting new scholarship on Whitman and his work.