

CYRIL GREENLAND AND JOHN ROBERT COLOMBO, eds. *Walt Whitman's Canada*. Willowdale, Ontario: Hounslow Press, 1992. xvi + 245 pp.

In their preface to this compilation of Whitman's experiences in, attitudes toward, and influence on Canada, the editors make a surprising observation: "Until now, no Canadian publishing house has ever published a book by or about Whitman. . . ." That certainly sets Canada apart from Mexico, China, Russia, Germany, Great Britain, India, and any number of other countries around the world. But, then, why *would* Canada publish books by and about Whitman, when their giant neighbor to the south churns out hundreds and is happy to ship them to bookstores north of the border? "We import our Whitman," write Cyril Greenland and John Robert Colombo; now, for the first time, American scholars will want to import some Whitman back from Canada.

In one sense, though, even after the publication of this book, there *still* has been no book on Whitman published in Canada. Apparently because of financial problems, the publishers retreated from full-blown publication, and so this interesting collection appears instead in what is intriguingly named a "QuasiBook format." A QuasiBook is to books what Near-Beer is to beer: you can imbibe it, but the most pleasing effects are absent. In this case, a Quasi-Book is what we would normally think of as page proofs—one-sided photocopies with two proof pages next to each other on each long page, all bound with those big black plastic rings. It's not an object that will comfortably fit on the bookshelves of your Whitman collection.

Still, it is a book worth having, even if it does look like a coursepack that you would have your students pick up at the downtown photocopying center. Greenland and Colombo have gathered just about everything related to Whitman's views of Canada and Canada's views of Whitman. Some of the information is wonderfully esoteric, such as the brief biographical sketches of three generations of "Canadian Whitmanites," including T. Sterry Hunt, Thomas Blair Pardee, Blodwen Davies, Frieda Held, and Roy Mitchell—certainly not the standard repertoire of Whitman-related names. Equally recondite is the gathering of documents, articles, and lectures dealing with the Canadian Branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship and its subset, The Whitman Club of Bon Echo. Bon Echo is the large tract of land in Ontario that Flora MacDonald Denison in 1916 decided to turn into "the Palladium of Whitmanism in Canada." In 1919, on the Centennial of Whitman's birth, the Bon Echo Club christened a giant granite cliff "Old Walt," and stonemasons went about inscribing lines—forty feet wide and twenty feet high—from "Song of Myself." The book contains a photograph of "Old Walt" as well as a generous selection of poems and articles from the club's journal, *The Sunset of Bon Echo* (including a useful listing of the complete contents of the six issues of that rare magazine).

Whitman's strongest Canadian link, of course, was Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, who in his 1901 book *Cosmic Consciousness* enshrined Whitman as "the best, most perfect, example the world has so far had of the Cosmic Sense." So it is fitting that *Walt Whitman's Canada* devotes a good deal of space to Bucke's theories and to other spiritualist and occultist views of Whitman. Greenland and Colombo offer transcripts of what Whitman had to say posthumously at

Albert Durrant Watson's 1919 Toronto seance; they offer a long unpublished 1908 essay by Peter McArthur on "Walt Whitman and Cosmic Consciousness"; and Colombo offers an overview of why so many Canadian spiritualists and Theosophists were attracted to Whitman. Greenland offers a concise and informative summary of Dr. Bucke's life.

The most satisfying part of the book, however, comes right at the beginning, where the editors reprint articles from London, Ontario, newspapers at the time of Whitman's visit to Dr. Bucke during the summer of 1880. It's great fun to read these contemporary impressions of Whitman. Two of the articles record interviews with the poet upon his arrival in London. In one, he offers a memorable description of his free-verse technique:

As to the form of my poetry, I have rejected the rhymed and blank verse. I have a particular abhorrence of blank verse, but I cling to rhythm, not the outward regularly measured short foot, long foot—like the walking of a lame man, that I care nothing for. The waves of the sea do not break on the beach one wave every so many minutes; the wind does not go jerking through the pine trees, but nevertheless in the roll of the waves, and in the sougling of the wind in the trees, there is a beautiful rhythm. How monotonous it would become—how tired the ears would get of it—if it were regular. It is undermelody and rhythm that I have attempted to catch, and years after I have written a line, when I have read it to myself, or my friends read it aloud, I think I have found it. It has been quite a trial to myself to destroy some of my own pretty things, but I have rigidly excluded everything of the kind from my books.

The image of Whitman destroying some huge collection of his own pretty metered poems is a picture the poet was often painting at this time; in another interview, he portrays himself regularly discarding his work as *Leaves* evolved: "I went down to Long Island on a long, cold, bleak promontory, where but one farmer resides, and I lived there while 'Leaves of Grass' was gestating. I wrote my first copy and threw it into the sea." When the reporter asks why Whitman destroyed that invaluable first copy, the poet says, "Well, I said to myself what better is this than ten thousand other poems, and tore it up. . . . I tried three or four more times, until at last the illustrious work—I may say—appeared."

There are other scattered comments in these long-forgotten newspaper interviews that may be of interest to recent critics working on Whitman's attitudes toward race and labor. "My theory of poetry is that it is not at all incompatible with labor and all that accompanies it," he tells one reporter; "Oh, no; poetry and work at not necessarily separated; they may go together quite harmoniously." And he tells the same reporter: "Well, when I was young I had an intense anti-slavery spirit, which was shown in my writings. Since that time I have been down South, and found out that there was no more slavery there fifty years ago than there is to-day in the North."

Also reprinted here are Whitman's original newspaper accounts of his days in Canada (parts of which he later used in *Specimen Days*), the notes for his shadowy and never-delivered "Ottawa Lecture," excerpts from letters he wrote while in Canada, and his entire *Diary in Canada*. The *Diary* is, in the format of this QuasiBook, a photocopy of a photocopy of William Sloane Kennedy's 1904 limited edition. It is useful to have this version of the diary in print again; it is

a reader-friendly text in contrast to the scholar-friendly version that appears in William White's *Daybooks and Notebooks*.

The most serious flaw in the QuasiBook printing becomes apparent when we turn to the illustrations. The editors have gathered an impressive array of visual images, but readers will be hard-pressed to make much of the dark and murky photocopies of photographs. There are photos and sketches of Bucke, Mrs. Bucke, the London Asylum for the Insane (where Bucke was superintendent), and even some still shots from the recent Canadian film based on Whitman's trip to Canada, *Beautiful Dreamers*. At one point, the editors tell us that they are publishing for the first time the "most striking of the portraits" of Whitman by the photographer William Daniel Edy. Edy took at least seven photographs of Whitman while he was in London, and the six known ones are all photocopied in this book, but, inexplicably, the promised never-before published seventh one does not appear!

We are told in the front of this volume that "this edition" has been limited to "one hundred and twenty-five copies only." A limited *photocopied* edition breaks new ground in the history of publishing! Be warned: pirated copies of this book will be extremely difficult to spot.

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