

REVIEWS



KENNETH M. PRICE. *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xiii + 191 pp.

In *Whitman in Washington: Becoming the National Poet in the Federal City* (Oxford, 2020), Kenneth M. Price makes the most comprehensive and compelling argument to date for putting the US capital at the center of our understanding of the poet during and after the Civil War. Price convincingly demonstrates this, despite the poet's close connections to New York and "Manahatta," and his later residency in New Jersey, memorialized in Horace Traubel's multi-volume *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Instead, Price argues, it was Whitman's time living and working in DC that shaped his views of the war-torn nation and helped cement forever his reputation as a national poet. With insightful textual analysis and groundbreaking archival research, *Whitman in Washington* is essential reading for those seeking to understand Whitman's life and politics during the Civil War, and the troubling disjunction between the democratic egalitarianism of much of his poetry and his personal and political views.

The broad outlines of Whitman's life in Washington are familiar to Whitman scholars: the journey to Virginia at the end of 1862 to find his wounded brother George, and the subsequent decision to remain and volunteer in the hospitals; his employment as a clerk in a variety of government offices, and his notorious termination from the Bureau of Indian Affairs; and, of course, the prodigious amount of writing and revision the poet accomplished during his ten-year residence in the city. Given the productivity and vibrancy of his life there, Whitman likely would have remained if not for the paralytic stroke that caused him to move in with his brother and eventually cost him his position working for the government. While these facts are well known, no prior volume has done so much to bring them to life. Price has an intimate knowledge of the wartime capitol, honed by his ongoing work on the invaluable web resource *Civil War Washington* (www.civilwardc.org). His descriptions include street-level detail of the rapidly changing city, and carefully chosen images like the photograph of cattle on the capitol Mall (80) drive home the fact that Washington was a very different place than it was today.

Similarly, Price's headline-making archival research into Whitman's

actual output as a clerk provides new insights into the poet's day-to-day working life. Through close attention to "scribal documents," texts that Whitman either copied or wrote on behalf of others, Price demonstrates not only the demands of the poet's job, but how it brought him into contact with some of the most pressing and controversial issues of the period. Whitman read and copied reports dealing with efforts to combat the Klan in the South, for example, and witnessed the stream of former Confederates arriving in the Attorney General's office to apply for pardons (158). Price also provides background on the status of clerks in Washington and the poet's views on the profession prior to and during his time working there. As he notes, disjunctions between the poet's stated values and his bureaucratic role become apparent upon inspection: "Nearly 250 documents Whitman inscribed as a clerk close with a formulaic declaration of subservience: 'your obedient servant.' In contrast, there is not a single instance of Whitman signing this way as a private citizen" (114). While this is only one way that the poet may have felt constrained by his job, Price also reveals that "Whitman admired his fellow federal employees. He asserted that 'honesty' was the 'prevailing atmosphere' in government offices" (117). No other book has done so much to trace the contradictions inherent in the poet's work for the government and analyze the role it may have played in his poetry and politics.

While Whitman's time as a clerk has received relatively little attention by scholars up to now, his time volunteering in the hospitals has long been central to scholars' accounts of Whitman during the Civil War. Here again, however, Price provides new insights into the poet's service and the occasional tensions and possible contradictions that emerge from a closer examination of the context. In particular, he employs Whitman's later description of himself as a "missionary to the wounded" (qtd in Price 23) as a lens through which to explore the poet's volunteerism and his initial engagement with the Christian Commission, an apparently unlikely turn of events given his religious views. Price provides valuable background information and context for the Commission, including how it differed from the more well-known U.S. Sanitary Commission, and provides ways to interpret Whitman's relationship with the more overtly religious organization: "Although Whitman was neither evangelical nor religious in a conventional sense, he long believed that those who relished work in hospitals were driven by an inner light and put into action values of compassion and self-sacrifice" (39). Here as elsewhere, Price employs considerable archival evidence in explaining the poet's thoughts on both religion and serving the wounded, and offers new readings of Whitman's poetry, as well as his interactions with and letters on behalf of soldiers.

Connections such as these are the most impressive element of *Whitman in Washington*. Price never addresses these varying aspects of the poet's life in the capitol as discrete biographical episodes; instead, he shows how they affected both his writing and his view of a nation undergoing an enormous, if tragically incomplete, transformation. His most compelling example in a text filled with surprising new readings is his examination of the "Blue Book," a copy of the 1860-61 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in which Whitman made notes, emendations, and revisions while in Washington; indeed, his termination from the Department of the Interior was precipitated by the discovery of the Blue Book at his desk. As Price notes, "Differing significantly from the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* because many of its revisions were never implemented, the Blue Book is a unique document, a shadow edition. . . . Just as we think of *Drum-Taps* as a volume of war poetry, we should consider the Blue Book as a volume of war-inflected poetry" (131). As we have seen, the poet's experience of the war was shaped by the entirety of his life, from writing and copying documents during the day to serving as "missionary" and wounded soldier's amanuensis in the hospitals at night. Price makes the most compelling case thus far that Whitman scholarship has missed a great deal by not paying closer attention to the former, even if it lacks the pathos and immediacy of the latter.

A constant thread throughout the book is Whitman's representation of and reaction to the growing number of African Americans living and working in Washington. Building on the important work of Ed Folsom and others, Price's research further highlights the avoidance and erasure that too often typifies Whitman's writing when it comes to race: "Although Whitman's work as a scribe documents the government's efforts to destroy the Klan, he remained silent in his poems, essays, and journalism about the dangers of Klan activity" (165). For a poet who championed democratic and egalitarian ideals, too often Whitman's expression of these ideals was circumscribed. As Price notes: "It will not do to deny, obfuscate, and look away from Whitman's, or the nation's, pattern of associating egalitarianism only with white men" (170). By carefully reviewing Whitman's public and private writing, as well as his governmental work, Price provides a new way to measure the troubling gap between "persona and person" (172). The gap widens when Price compares Whitman's writing on racial equality with contemporaries like Frederick Douglass and Frances Harper; however, he also notes what the poet's work meant to later writers like Langston Hughes and June Jordan. What Price ultimately demonstrates is that scholars looking to understand Whitman's time in Washington will not find a simple or flattering portrait. In a tumultuous period in a city often under siege,

there is much to celebrate and to condemn, or, as Price notes, “Whitman is not beyond his culture but of it, for better and worse. He invited us to complete him or defeat him. There is much work to be done” (174). This is certainly true, and *Whitman in Washington* is a formidable contribution to that labor.

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MORTON SCHOOLMAN. *A Democratic Enlightenment: The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. xii + 318 pp.

January 6, 2022: No prophet or easy alarmist, I write this review on the precipice of a second civil war in the United States. Who, during these toxic times, could possibly think that Walt Whitman—poet of presumptuous if capacious whiteness—might be enlisted as a viable and revisable resource to reconcile our nation’s deep racial antagonisms?

Morton Schoolman, that’s who. Mort (he’s a friend) is a political theorist who, I propose, ought to be recognized as one of the most gifted and accomplished Whitman expositors, any and everywhere. He’s spent a well-wrought career devoted to ever-close readings of Whitman’s poetry and prose. Not many people advance a grand yet pressing vision of democracy’s utopic possibilities, and mean it. Whitman and Schoolman are two who do. They belong together, as poet and professor, both earnest and upbeat, while at the same time nobody’s fool about democracy’s failings.

A Democratic Enlightenment is a major work, impressive in its detail and scope. Schoolman lays out a step-by-step case for Whitman as the herald of a radically new enlightenment project, whose all-inclusive affects and sweeping egalitarianism are to supplant the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment that installed reason as the centerpiece for all estimable human affairs. It’s a book bookended by big claims. Schoolman worries, at the outset, that the book’s “core ideas . . . have gone unrecognized” and that he’s broaching his boldly wayward thesis “in our own dark democratic and most unlikely of political times” (1). Still, he accepts that heavy burden of explanation, to the point that readers might detect a measure or tone of compensatory evangelism in his scholarship. Yet, I dare say that even the most captious of readers will nevertheless find many moments and many pages of incisive exegesis and utterly brilliant