



STEFAN SCHÖBERLEIN, ED. *Walt Whitman's New Orleans: Sidewalk Sketches and Newspaper Rambles*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2022. Library of Southern Civilization Series. xxx + 170 pp.

Stefan Schöberlein's collection of Whitman's newspaper writings from the spring of 1848, which Whitman spent in New Orleans, offers a glimpse into the spectacle of daily life in the city in that moment and, moreover, an invaluable view of Whitman's development in the years just before he began writing what would become *Leaves of Grass*.

The epigraph that begins Schöberlein's book is an excerpt from Whitman's *Specimen Days* that summarizes how, after losing his job at the *Brooklyn Eagle*, a chance meeting in the lobby of a theater on Pearl Street in New York, led to a job in New Orleans. The man who hired him was starting a new newspaper in New Orleans that would take its name from the shape of the boom town that was nestled into a sharp bend in the Mississippi River – it would be called the *Crescent*. Two days after the offer was made, Whitman and his younger brother, Jeff, set off for New Orleans.

They would arrive on February 25, 1848, and stay for ninety days, leaving to return to New York on May 27. In the excerpt from *Specimen Days* that serves as the epigraph to Schöberlein's volume, Whitman notes, "I enjoyed my . . . Louisiana life much." Near the end of the volume, Schöberlein includes a manuscript fragment that Whitman seems to have written near the end of his journey back to New York, in which he writes of his time in New Orleans, "My health was most capital; I frequently thought indeed that I felt better than ever before in my life." Perhaps he might have stayed quite a bit longer, but for his younger brother's homesickness (Jeff was fourteen to Walt's twenty-eight) and adverse reaction to the city's drinking water.

In his preface, Schöberlein begins with the question of attribution. In that period, newspaper writers did not sign what they wrote, so Schöberlein traces a history of Whitman scholars who have attributed to the poet articles from newspapers where he worked that bear Whitman's initials or that address events either mentioned in his brother's letters or that he himself wrote about or recalled in other contexts. Schöberlein also includes pieces written for the *Crescent* during Whitman's time there that demonstrate a coherent narrative persona that matches Whitman's use of New York slang or that reflects a stranger from the North exploring New Orleans on foot.

In a letter of 1887 that Schöberlein includes near the end of this volume,

Whitman notes that, in the New Orleans of forty years earlier, “Probably the influence most deeply pervading everything at that time through the United States, both in physical facts and in sentiment, was the Mexican War, then just ended.” He continues, “[T]he city of New Orleans had been our channel and *entrepot* for everything, going and returning. . . . No one who has never seen the society of a city under similar circumstances can understand what a strange vivacity and *rattle* were given throughout by such a situation.” Whitman then catalogues the details that had stayed with him over those four decades: “I remember the crowds of soldiers, the gay young officers, going or coming, the receipt of important news, the many discussions, the returning wounded, and so on.”

In Schöberlein’s excellent introduction to the book, he notes that the Whitman brothers lived just off Lafayette Square, an area where the noise was constant and deafening and the stench quite strong. From here, Whitman would take his “sidewalk rambles” and develop his “peeps” for the *Crescent*. He had done this sort of writing in New York, as Schöberlein notes, and found New Orleans to be fertile ground for the same practice. It offered him a viable mode in which to articulate, even if indirectly, the “Barnburner” political values that may have cost him his job a few months earlier at *The Brooklyn Eagle*. To wit, these short pieces allowed him to hold forth on the ordinary, working-class people he encountered on the streets in ways that might have been read as defiant of the more mannered, pretentious, conservative, and older newspaper voices of the time. In several of these pieces, one can discern the homoerotic traces that would become explicit in “Calamus Leaves,” a draft sequence of poems that echoes some of his New Orleans experiences and that is more commonly known by the Louisiana-evocative title, “Live Oak, with Moss.” Though Whitman never published this poetic sequence in his lifetime, much of it would be woven into the “Calamus” poems in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and Schöberlein reprints it in its entirety near the end of this new book.

The bulk of the collection offers Whitman’s sketches of scenes he encountered on the streets of New Orleans. There are about fifty of them. After an opening section called “Prelude: Excerpts from the Traveller’s Notebook” about the journey, mostly by steamboat down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, with stops in Cincinnati and Louisville, there appears the main section, “Sketches of New Orleans.” Here Whitman records his impressions of The Annual Celebration of the Firemen, where great music made everyone overlook the chilly weather and muddy streets; and of Mardi Gras itself, an account that begins, “Yesterday was the famous day for everyone who wishes to see the colors

of the rainbow in the streets and squares” and ends by noting approvingly that “we do not believe that more than a dozen fights took place during that day.” There then follows many “peeps” into barrooms and groups of people mingling along the levee. There are also portraits of people hanging around hotel lobbies, rhapsodies on the city’s foliage, nightscape, and entertainment options, a piece on the pratfalls of a drunken barber, the antics of a razor-strop man, and the two failures of a “lady aeronaut” to ascend in a hot-air balloon; there are pieces too on pickpockets, vagrants, an aging mother, an oysterman, some German sailors, an Irish drayman, some doctors, some church-goers, a Kentucky flatboatman, a bouquet-peddler, and an elderly pauper, to name only a handful. Whitman’s work anticipates that of Lafcadio Hearn some thirty years later, who was the first to deliver the “exotic” charms of New Orleans to a national audience of magazine readers after the Civil War and thereby anchor what would become the major themes of the city’s tourist industry as it hums along today, a century-and-a-half later. But Whitman’s short studies of a considerable range of social types anticipate, still more importantly, the long catalogues of snapshots of ordinary, urban, working-class people, going about their daily lives, that populate *Leaves of Grass* and make it a central artifact of the long struggle for democracy in the U.S.

Schöberlein’s collection of Whitman’s New Orleans newspaper writings from the spring of 1848 will be of keen interest to scholars focused on the question of how the poet developed and came to do the work that would soon follow. And for those curious about daily life in the city just over a decade before the Civil War and, more pointedly, in the ur-texts for the writings that, just over a decade after the war by Hearn and others, fixed the city as myth and symbol in the national imagination, the Schöberlein collection will be most welcome.

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