

WHITMAN'S CANADIAN FRIEND

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IN a recent number of the DALHOUSIE REVIEW I made some observations about Thoreau's description of his visit to Canada, one of his less well known works, but by no means uninteresting. Thoreau was one of a number of prominent literary figures who visited Canada during the nineteenth century and recorded their impressions. Charles Dickens was perhaps the most notable, but Walt Whitman was also among them, and few people are aware that his *Journal of a Visit to Canada* was published in a small edition in 1904. It is poor stuff, too—scattered notes, filled with clichés, and it contributes nothing new to our knowledge of Whitman; nor does Canada appear in Whitman's poetry, for *By Blue Ontario's Shore* was written in Ohio and the shore is the southern one.

But Walt Whitman was visiting a friend in Canada, Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke of London, Ontario. Bucke is an interesting and curious figure; he was Whitman's closest friend for a number of years, the recipient of many letters from him. He is referred to frequently in every biographical study of Whitman, and he himself wrote a biography of the poet. Bucke's own biography is at present being written by his son-in-law, Dr. Edwin Seaborn of London, and it must contain much new Whitman material. His connection with Whitman is therefore of interest to us.

Richard Maurice Bucke was born in England in 1837, and came to Canada with his parents when he was one year old. He spent his earlier years as a woodsman, construction man and prospector, and his wanderings took him over a large part of the continent. For years he was engaged in a dispute over the ownership of the Comstock Mine, but meanwhile he studied medicine at McGill, practised at Sarnia, and from 1877 until his death in 1902 was superintendent of the asylum at London. A photograph in Clara Barrus's book on Whitman shows a man whom we might easily mistake for Whitman himself; there is the same flowing beard, but the features are stronger, the nose more aquiline, the eyes scientific and enquiring rather than soft and reflective, a man of strong ideas and feelings.

It was in 1870 that Bucke wrote from Sarnia to Whitman expressing his admiration for his work and hoping one day to meet him. The first meeting took place in 1877 at Camden, New Jersey, and it was to be the first of many visits. Whitman's

poetry and the controversy over the banning of *Leaves of Grass* seem to have aroused this man's intelligent and sympathetic heart; he felt that he really appreciated Whitman and must tell him so. Bucke in *Calamus* describes that first visit and the effect Whitman had on him:

It would be nothing more than the simple truth to state that I was by it (this interview) lifted to and set upon a higher plane of existence, upon which I have more or less continuously lived ever since . . . and my feeling toward the man Walt Whitman from that day to the present has been and is that of the deepest affection and reverence.

Whitman later told how all his friends came to his side gradually. He mentions this especially of Bucke, who evidently told Whitman himself how slowly he was won over. Whitman in his intensely egotistical manner said of him:

He was much given to Oriental studies—mysticality; dived into them deep, oh so deep!—and coming along fresh from that, falling upon me, upon Walt Whitman—the things he had been dreaming about embodied right here in this modern world and in an American—it was a revelation of convincing significance.

Whitman's friends came likewise to appreciate Bucke, and it was an equally slow process. In 1892, the year after Whitman's death, John Burroughs mentions in his journal a visit from Dr. Bucke, and his arrival brings him strangely into touch with Whitman again:

Dr. Bucke came this morning . . . Very glad to see him. He reminds me strongly of Walt—large, long gray beard, and walks with a cane. We had a day full of talk and communion. How true it is that you must love a man ere he seem worthy of your love! I did not used to like Dr. Bucke, but since the death of Whitman my heart has softened toward him, and I begin to feel a strong attachment to him. I see more in him to love and admire. A little inclined to run off with a single idea and make too much of it. His idea now is that there is such a thing as Cosmic Consciousness; that it is a new sense or power developing in the race, and that Walt Whitman had it in a pre-eminent degree—Paul had it, Buddha and Mahomet. I fear he will ride the idea too hard.

It is a pretty fair estimate of Bucke, and Burroughs had mentioned him several years before this: ". . . of choleric temper mainly; voice rather hard and harsh; brow with a nervous pucker; whole look rather harsh and intense". Whitman himself described Bucke:

An exceptionally strong character; is a great complex of tradition and rebellion; I admire his eligibility to employ the conventions while in no way overvaluing them; he is very worldly—yet also very not-worldly—has great ability to make his own way in the world, yet always has eye and ear for the higher consideration. Bucke's spirits are unailing.

The two characters, often so much alike in temperament and feeling, took a liking to each other, and thus began a great friendship which grew stronger with the passing of the years. Whitman was much attached to Bucke, and it seems no exaggeration to say that Bucke must have come to know the poet as well as anyone ever came to know that enigmatic yet inspiring character; and everyone of Whitman's friends and admirers seems to have grown to recognize Bucke as one of themselves, the inner circle who appreciated him and were resolved to be near and defend Whitman against the assaults of prudish morality and snobbish literary criticism.

Bucke's visits to Whitman at Camden and Philadelphia seem to have been frequent, and in 1880 and again in the following year Whitman visited Dr. Bucke in Ontario and the two friends sailed from Toronto to Montreal and up the Saguenay together. Bucke already had in his mind the idea of acting Boswell to Whitman's Johnson and was observing his friend closely. He recorded many conversations with Whitman, received many letters, and it is doubtful whether Whitman would have given all the information he did to anyone but Bucke. Bucke's *Walt Whitman*, published in 1883, is the only authorized biography; Whitman himself approved of it:

I have had a thousand books and essays, and Dr. Bucke's is about the only one that thoroughly radiates and describes in the way that I think thoroughly delineates me. I accept Dr. Bucke's book.

The manuscript has thousands of emendations by Whitman himself, and "it was statistically and spiritually revised by Whitman from cover to cover". The subject himself created difficulties. Whitman writes:

Bucke's book is going off slowly—not much cared for by my friends—but I like it. I opposed the book all along, till Bucke, getting fairly out of patience, came to me one day and said "Now I am just as obstinate as you, and I intend to bring it out whether you like it or no—so you had better make the best of the matter and help to make it authentic as far as you can." Whereupon I caved in, laughed heartily and wrote the account of my birth-

place and antecedents which occupies the first twenty-four pages of the book . . . I thought that there was a germinal idea in Bucke's book—the idea that *Leaves of Grass* was above all an expression of the Moral Nature.

The idea of Moral Nature had been elaborated in Bucke's book of that title. Whitman says "it is worked out on daring lines—clearly, reverently, impartially". The truth seems to be that Whitman was flattered to the highest degree that a scholar, such as Bucke professed to be, should be able to find any sort of coherent principle in his work at all; lacking as it seems to do any unifying strain. Bucke gave him, Whitman felt, some of the recognition as the poet of a Great Theme, the poet of America, which the poets of the time and America in general, except for a few faithful friends and not too exacting critics, failed to give him.

During the last years of his life, Whitman's correspondence is filled with many references to his two closest friends, John Burroughs and Richard Maurice Bucke. Whitman looks forward to Bucke's visits and hopes to visit him in Canada. In his serious illness in 1888 when the faithful Bucke was with him constantly, Whitman writes to Horace Traubel:

Tell him (Burroughs) also I am quite sure Dr. Bucke this time saved my life; that if he had not been here to roll up his sleeves and stay and work and watch, it would have been a final call.

Bucke, Whitman writes, looks around the room and says "Walt, every scrap of paper in this room is precious—will someday be interesting to the world". Whitman remarks here "Bucke always runs to extremes", or again in a gratified tone, "Maurice is just a little too much inclined to take my measure too large". It was Bucke who summoned Dr. (later Sir William) Osler, at this time the well known Baltimore physician, to attend Whitman. Still talking of his "medicine-men", Whitman writes:

But after all the real man is Dr. Bucke. He has such a clear head, such a fund of common-sense—such steady eyes—such a steady hand. Bucke is a scientist, not a doctor; he has had severe personal experiences—is an expert in questions involving the mind—is in every sort of way a large man—liberal, devoted, far-seeing. I especially owe him so much.

The scene at Whitman's funeral is an unusual one. On all the hill slopes as far as the eye could see, is a great crowd of people. There the messages from Tennyson, Rossetti, Symonds and a

host of friends and admirers are read; and there again Bucke and several others read selections from the poet's works.

After Whitman's death his friends and followers felt the need to keep together and to preserve the memory of their beloved friend. Burroughs is the most prominent, and Dr. Bucke is again there; recruits are added every year. A year after Whitman's death the friends published *In Re Walt Whitman*, containing new facts from Whitman himself on his early life and a collection of reminiscences and critical estimates by several of his friends. In 1897 Bucke edited and published *Calamus*, a collection of letters from Whitman to a young friend, Peter Doyle. When Edgar Fawcett's "spiteful allusions" (the term is Burroughs's) to Walt Whitman began to appear, it was Bucke who replied in "An Open Letter to Edgar Fawcett" published in *The Conservator* in 1898. In the same year the friends are engaged in a project for a great subscription edition of Whitman's complete works. It was to contain "a sort of official biography" by the literary executors, of whom Bucke was one.

The Bucke-Whitman collection has been, and still is, of the greatest importance for students of Whitman, and more interest seems to be evoked by Whitman and his work each year. The collection made by Bucke also held a number of documents of Whitman's earlier and comparatively unknown career, and copies of the rare earlier writings of Whitman, among them the only known copy of the first issue of *The Freeman*, the paper which Whitman started in Brooklyn in 1848 after his return from New Orleans. Much valuable information can be found in the Bucke collection alone, and much of the material is still unpublished.

One of the puzzles which perpetually creates difficulty in connection with Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* is the sudden appearance of his admittedly brilliant talent. The problem had occurred to Bucke, who had discussed it with John Burroughs. Whitman's earlier writings, Bucke observes, show not the slightest talent; they are "not up to the average of even the most ordinary newspaper writing". Miss Esther Shephard finds the solution in George Sand's *Countess of Rudolstadt*, and thinks that Whitman there obtained his conception of the Bard of Democracy. Bucke finds the answer to the problem of Whitman's poetical inspiration in "cosmic consciousness". The theory is elaborated in Bucke's book of that title, first published in 1901 and in its seventh edition in 1931.

Bucke was the first to employ this term in regard to Whitman's inspiration, and his interpretation was accepted by many who knew Whitman well, and by Edgar Lee Masters in his biographical study of Whitman. Masters says of Bucke's book that it is a "fascinating performance, whatever stock may be taken in its mysticism". Certainly Bucke must have read widely but, as Burroughs said, he rides an idea too hard. What he calls "cosmic consciousness" is simply another term for poetical imagination, which Whitman admittedly had to no small degree; and "cosmic consciousness" is as good a term as any to designate the heightened imagination of the poet. But it is no new discovery.

And here we must leave Dr. Bucke. We have seen only a part of his manifold activity, where it impinged upon one of the most fascinating and at the same time most puzzling figures in literature. But every student of Walt Whitman must be grateful to Bucke for the many illuminating facts and impressions of which every writer on Whitman has made use, and it is especially interesting to see that it was a Canadian who came to Whitman at a time when friends were few, and remained with him.