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WALT WHITMAN'S INFLUENCE IN CANADA

THE ABSENCE OF A RADICAL ELEMENT in Canadian society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has generally been taken for granted. The usual assertion is that Canadians were too conservative and reactionary to champion any radicalism in either literature or politics, and as a general statement this may be valid enough. One must be careful, however, about extending generalizations to individual cases. Logically, one might assume that Walt Whitman's poetry, with its radical departure from traditional form and structure, would have no effect on catholic Canadian tastes, and the fact that our major poets reflect no important Whitman influences supports the assumption. Nevertheless, there was in Canada a persistent body of Whitman devotees who actively promoted Whitman's work. The Whitman Club of Bon Echo and the Whitman Fellowship of Toronto were groups whose membership exerted a wide range of influence in Canadian life.

Responses to Whitman can be divided into two strains: one, criticism presented through the Canadian press and periodical literature; the other, reflected in opinions expressed by people who might be called Whitman cultists. The articles expressed opinions ranging from charges of "rampant bestiality"¹ and "dullness"² to unrestrained praise of Whitman as "a Homeric writer of poetry as intense as molten lava".³ In between these two poles were the opinions of such critics as Charles G. D. Roberts, Wilfred Campbell, and Mrs. Seymour Maclean, who attempted to present balanced evaluations of the poet. But even they were forced to acknowledge the play of extremes in Whitman's work. The comment of Charles G. D. Roberts was typical:

Whitman's genius is so great that, in spite of his immodesties, his irritating egotism, his inapt and awkward coinage of unnecessary words—in spite of the deadly dullness of his catalogues, his pages on pages of utter failure, at length the most hostile critic, unless blind of the mind's eye, is constrained to yield him homage.⁴

The second main stream of opinion, represented by the Whitman cul-

tists, began with the cult created around Whitman in the United States by Dr. Maurice Bucke, Horace Traubel, and Thomas Harned, all literary executors of Whitman. Both Dr. Bucke and Horace Traubel have significant connections with the Canadian reputation of the poet. Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke was born in Methwald, England, in 1837, a descendant on his father's side of Sir Robert Walpole, first Earl of Oxford. In 1838, his family moved to Canada and settled near London, Ontario. Both parents died before Bucke reached his sixteenth birthday, and he set off on his own to see America. After a series of hair-raising adventures in the western United States, he returned to Canada, entered McGill Medical School, and took his M.D. degree.

Bucke explained in his own words how he came to know *Leaves of Grass*. He writes in the third person:

At the age of thirty, he fell in with *Leaves of Grass* and at once saw that it contained, in greater measure than any book so far found, what he had so long been looking for. He read *Leaves* eagerly, even passionately, but for several years derived little from them. At last light broke and there was revealed to him (as far perhaps as such things can be revealed) at least some of the meanings.⁵

In 1873, while in England, Bucke underwent a mystical experience after spending an evening with friends reading "Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman".⁶ Upon his return to Canada, Dr. Bucke travelled to Camden, New Jersey, and met Whitman. In a letter to H. Buxton Forman he explained his impression of the poet:

I have never seen any man to compare with him—any man the least like him. He seems more than a man and yet in all his looks and ways entirely commonplace (Do I contradict myself). He is an average man magnified to the dimensions of a God—but this does not give you the least idea of what he is like and I despair of giving you any idea at all.⁷

In the summer of 1880, Whitman reciprocated by spending four months with Bucke in London, Ontario. They made a summer voyage down the St. Lawrence as far as the Saguenay River, then up the Saguenay to Chicoutimi and Ha Ha Bay. A strong friendship developed between the two men, and Whitman consented to allow Bucke to write his biography. This book was the only authorized biography ever written. Whitman himself wrote the first twenty-four pages.

In 1901, Bucke published *Cosmic Consciousness*. In this book Bucke

devoted chapters to the great men of history whom he believed to have "cosmic awareness"; he places Whitman at the apex of conscious development, surpassing such notables as Aristotle and Jesus. The book was extremely successful: in 1965 it was in its 22nd edition, and it has never been out of print. Although its impact on Canadian readers is hard to assess, later Whitman enthusiasts in Canada were familiar with it.

Horace Traubel made many friends in Canada and made visits to them. He became acquainted with Flora Macdonald Denison, one of the major figures behind the Toronto Whitman Fellowship and the organizer of the Whitman Club of Bon Echo. Mrs. Denison had plans for a Whitman shrine to be carved in the huge Bon Echo rock at Mazinaw Lake, Ontario. Mrs. Denison's son, the writer Merrill Denison, provided the following information:

The decision to settle for an inscription from Whitman's "Song of Myself" was reached in 1916 and was influenced no doubt by Woodrow Wilson's preachments of the day. By that time Flora Macdonald had become a warm friend of Horace Traubel, Whitman's principal biographer and nurse companion for several years, and although Traubel was in failing health, he and his wife Anne were induced to make what was then an arduous and really pretty terrible journey to Bon Echo in August, 1919, to take part with Flora Macdonald in dedication ceremonies. This objective was fulfilled early in September but not without considerable difficulty because of Traubel's rapidly declining health. He died two weeks later at Bon Echo.⁹

At Mazinaw Lake, Mrs. Denison operated an inn which became a mecca for a large number of Whitman devotees. The Whitman Club of Bon Echo was organized at some time after 1910 and before 1916. Mr. Denison states that "it was an entirely informal organization in which membership came largely from occlusion and no record of which exists."⁸ It is possible to trace some of the members through a small magazine called *Sunset of Bon Echo* which was published by Mrs. Denison and which became an organ for the club members. Subscriptions were a dollar a year and it was "published every so often . . . according to [their] bank balance."⁹ Anyone who did not get a dollar's worth was confidently promised a free trip to Europe. Number four provided the following information about joining the Whitman Club: "Announce yourself by letter or in person. Pay what you want to and we will put you on our wire for health and wisdom."⁹

An examination of numbers three through six of *The Sunset* revealed information about Flora Macdonald's connection with Horace Traubel. Mrs.

Flora Macdonald Denison first met Horace Traubel in April or May of 1916 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Simpson of Toronto, through the courtesy of Henry Saunders, a devotee and bibliographer of Whitman, also living in Toronto. She next met Traubel at the home of Albert Edward Smythe, the columnist for the Toronto *Sunday World*. A third meeting occurred at the home of Frank and Mildred Bain of Hamilton. All of these people are mentioned in *The Sunset* as Whitman enthusiasts.

In number six of *The Sunset*, Flora Macdonald wrote an article called "Walt Whitman" in which she stated her view of the poet:

It is not that each day, more and more, Walt Whitman is coming into "His Own" but that through him each day more and more we are all coming into "Our Own." Life is one ever lasting miracle and Whitman is its great apostle.¹⁰

In another article she wrote:

My tribute to Walt Whitman is whatever I have done and whatever I may do to propagate his Democratic Ideals.

To me the Great Teacher has come, and *Leaves of Grass* is his textbook.¹⁰

These two passages set the tone for Flora Macdonald's conception of Whitman. Her son states: "her admiration of the 'Good Grey Poet' was unbounded, to such an extent as to amount to sheer idolatry of Whitman as prophet, philosopher, sage and poet."⁸ Like Dr. Bucke before her, she created a cult around Whitman.

Among those attracted to *Bon Echo* was Dr. Albert Durrant Watson (1859-1926) of Toronto. He was a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, President of the Association for Psychical Research, and a poet for whom Lorne Pierce expressed great admiration.¹¹ Watson was co-editor, with Lorne Pierce, of the anthology *Our Canadian Literature* (1922). A. E. S. Smythe, in his inaugural address to the Whitman Fellowship of Toronto in 1916, gave credit for the advancement of Whitman's Canadian reputation to "Dr. A. D. Watson's poem 'Whitman' in his book *Love and the Universe*."¹² The poem is a monologue which suggests that Whitman underwent a mystical experience, a conjecture often put forth but never authenticated. Watson also published another poem, "Walt Whitman", in number five of *Sunset*. To understand Watson, one should check his very strange book *The Twentieth Plane: A Psychic Revelation* (1918), which was the result of a psychic dialogue

with a committee of famous dead men. This "Publication Committee" consisted of Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Robert G. Ingersoll. The book records the discussions with these and other dead people inhabiting a mystic twentieth plane of consciousness, during a series of séances conducted with a medium employing a ouija counter on a piece of heavy plate glass. Whitman spoke through the medium several times. It seems possible that Watson's "Whitman" poems were based on his psychic conversations with Whitman. Watson's book led Flora Macdonald to the following observation: "I had felt that a message in *The Twentieth Plane* was so significant of Whitman, that I longed for an evening where Whitman might converse freely with me about the work I am doing to propagate his Democratic Ideals". As a result, she arranged a session with Watson, and they "easily and pleasantly conversed with that Great Companion and some of his associates on the 'twentieth plane'."¹⁰ The conversation lasted for one and a half hours. To end, they called up Lincoln, Emerson, Bryant, Ingersoll, and Dr. Bucke to comment on Whitman, all of whom praised the poet.

Other names mentioned in *Sunset of Bon Echo* as Whitman devotees include Frank and Mildred Bain, the poet and cartoonist John Wilson Bengough, Anne Montgomerie, George W. Morris, Roy Mitchell (the first director of Hart House Theatre), S. T. Wood (who had a nature series in the *Toronto Globe*), Dr. Stowe-Gullen, and Dr. George Locke of Toronto. Many of these people belonged to the Whitman Fellowship of Toronto, formed in 1916.

The Whitman bibliographer, Henry Saunders, was a member of both Whitman groups. As a boy, he knew Dr. Bucke and through him had met Walt Whitman when he visited Canada. Mildred Bain recalls the incident in a biographical note on Saunders:

Dr. Bucke took him [Whitman] to the Saunders' home and there and then the current was started which years after was to prove such a directing force in Henry's life. Of this incident he says: "I have a distinct recollection of the large grey-bearded man sitting there taking special interest in my eldest brother who was an ardent student of bird life."¹³

Saunders went on in later life to become one of Whitman's most zealous bibliographers. He provided a link between the cult created by Bucke and the later Whitman groups.

Many of the people who were members of the Bon Echo Group were present for the first meeting of the Whitman Fellowship of Toronto. A circular advertising the Fellowship provided the following information:

The Canadian Branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, recently organized, in-

tends to have an informal gathering on the 97th anniversary of the poet's birthday, Wednesday, May 31st, [1916] at 6:30 p.m., at McConkey's restaurant, 33 Queen Street West, to consist of a supper, followed by papers, readings and short addresses. All lovers of Whitman are invited to become members of the Fellowship.¹⁴

This circular was issued by Henry Saunders, Secretary-Treasurer, A. E. S. Smythe, President, and Flora Macdonald Denison, Vice-President. Nearly one hundred Whitmanites attended the first meeting. The first president of the fellowship, Albert Edward Smythe (the father of Connie Smythe), was editorial writer for the *Toronto Sunday World*, and founder of the Toronto Theosophical Society. In his inaugural speech, he made the following observations:

With the inauguration of a Whitman Fellowship in Toronto, we have the first organized effort in Canada, I believe, to recognize the continental genius of America's most original, most characteristic and greatest poet. Considering the amount of attention which Whitman gave to Canada, his visits and friendships here, we might have expected an earlier attempt at co-operation in bringing Walt Whitman before the Canadian public.¹²

The Fellowship continued to meet at least until 1925. By then Whitman was winning public acceptance and the radicalism of being a Whitman admirer had declined. The work of Eliot and Pound was taking the attention of those seeking radical causes in poetry. William Arthur Deacon lamented the secularization and emasculation of Whitman in his address to the Fellowship in 1925:

The Whitman cult is slowly and quietly being captured by persons with the instincts of priests and schoolmasters, and once they are in complete control of the tradition you may expect a rigid expurgation of *Leaves of Grass*, and the systematic suppression of all biographical details that conflict with the tenets of the Ku Klux Klan, the Y.M.C.A., the Salvation Army and every other body representing the conventional view of theology and morals. . . . the cult of Whitman is being made respectable and harmless from within.¹⁵

For the cultists, Whitman assumed the role of a messiah figure. In the words of Flora Macdonald, he was the "Great Teacher and *Leaves of Grass* was his text book." Tied into this vision was a strange mysticism, a view of life which might be considered a blend of transcendentalism and spiritualism. For some of the members of the cult, Whitman was a constant companion. Members of the two Whitman groups probably never numbered more than several hundred, yet the range of interests followed by the members was broad. There were poets, artists, doctors, suffragettes, musicians, journalists, a theatrical

director, and a bibliographer. Generally speaking, those who belonged to the Whitman cult could be classed as radical: they professed views that were contrary to the accepted literary and religious views of conservative Ontario society. The critics of Whitman objected to his "blatant Americanism", implying a certain British smugness in their attitude to the "rude republic" he proclaimed. People objected to his championing the masses and to his mystic religiosity, to his obscurity. Gradually, however, he became less and less objectionable until by 1925 Whitman had lost, for most people, his reputation for radicalism. Perhaps this is part of the reason why the new poets such as Smith and Scott ignored Whitman and turned to work of such current radicals as Pound and Eliot. While none of our major poets reflect influences from Whitman, many have expressed admiration for his work. Mr. Denison notes, from personal conversation with them, that F. R. Scott, Irving Layton, and E. J. Pratt all admired Whitman. From evidence presented above, it is clear that Charles G. D. Roberts and Wilfred Campbell both found much to admire in his work.

In conclusion, then, Whitman did make an early impact on Canadian society, but it was not as a literary influence. He was taken up because of his prophetic vision of a new democracy, because of his mysticism, or because of his view of nature. Generally, it was concluded that he was unique, beyond imitation. The existence of this sizeable group of Whitman followers underlines the fact that even then there were undercurrents of radicalism in Canadian society.

NOTES

1. *Canadian Monthly and National Review*, I (March, 1872), 279.
2. *The Week*, VII (May 16, 1890), 375.
3. Pelham Edgar, "Walt Whitman, An Essay on His Personality and Genius", *Toronto Mail*, Saturday, April 9, 1892, p. 12.
4. Charles G. D. Roberts, "Notes on Some of the Younger American Poets", *The Week* (April 24, 1884), p. 328. See also Kate Seymour Maclean "Walt Whitman and his Poems", *Canadian Monthly and National Review*, V(1880). 29.
5. Richard Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia, 1901), p. 9.
6. *Ibid.* This experience was quoted by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Mentor, New World Library (New York, 1958), p. 306. James called *Cosmic Consciousness* "a highly interesting book."
7. Quoted by Cyril Greenland, "Richard Maurice Bucke 1837-1902: The Evolu-

- tion of a Mystic", *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal*, II, ii (March-April, 1966), 146-154, p. 150.
8. Merrill Denison, unpublished letter to S. E. McMullin, December 30, 1967.
 9. *Sunset of Bon Echo*, ed. Flora Macdonald, I, 4, inside back cover.
 10. *Ibid.*, I, 6, 1; I, 5, 1; I, 5, 13.
 11. See Lorne Pierce, *Albert Durrant Watson: An Appraisal* (Toronto, 1923). See also Albert D. Watson, *Love and the Universe* (Toronto, 1913) and *The Twentieth Plane: A Psychic Revelation* (Toronto, 1918).
 12. A. E. S. Smythe, "Inaugural Address to the Toronto Whitman Fellowship", *Sunset of Bon Echo*, 1, 3, 9. Also published in the *Toronto Sunday World*, in Smythe's column, "Crusts and Crumbs", June 4, 1916.
 13. Mildred Bain, unpublished note in the Denison Papers, Rare Books Department, University of Toronto.
 14. Whitman Fellowship, Canadian Branch Circular, in the Denison Papers.
 15. William Arthur Deacon, "The Cult of Whitman", in *Poteen, A Pot-Pourri of Canadian Essays* (Ottawa, 1926), p. 98.

THE PANTHER'S CACHE

M. Travis Lane

The panther's cache:
 square hooves, a broad dull head,
 eyes opened, wind among
 them and the windy nape; the snow
 gnaws like the porcupines.
 Skinned logs hold down white ribs; the stars
 shine thinly in the branches. Time
 will paw the logs apart. Long gone,
 dissolved in winter nights,
 the breath of that warm killer, gone,
 and blown away, the ants, long gone;
 and gone, the broad dull heart.
 Eyes opened: night.