

THE GOOD GREY POET

By HILDA M. RIDLEY

THIS year (1955) marks the centenary of the publication of the first edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Set up by the author himself in the little printing shop of a friend, the thin volume found its way to the desks of critics, who alternately praised and damned it. Certain passages in the book were accounted offensive by the fastidious, and it was these that subsequently cost Whitman a good government post and other emoluments. But those who admired the book—like Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Concord mystic and poet, and Dowden and Tennyson of England—were impressed primarily by its revelation of a large and unique personality. Today the so-called "obscene" passages are read without a blush. Compared with the pornographic allusiveness of much of the literature of our time, they seem like clean and honest statements of certain physical facts.

In Canada we have a fine memorial to the man who was known affectionately to his friends as "The Good Gray Poet." This is at Bon Echo on Mazinaw Lake north of Napanee, Ont., where recently the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Leaves of Grass* was celebrated. Once the property of the Canadian playwright and industrial historian, Merrill Denison, it is now owned—through his generous gift—by the people of Canada, to be used by them for educational and cultural purposes. On a gigantic rock, rising starkly from the lake, Mr. Denison's mother, Flora Macdonald Denison, humanist and suffragist, and Horace Traubel, Whitman's friend and biographer, had a memorial carved to the poet in 1919, which time will not erase.

Among Canadians who became aware of Walt Whitman's significance when others decried him, was a remarkable man,—Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, of London, Ont. Physician and author, he was Superintendent of the Asylum for the Insane at London, and accounted a good alienist. Somewhat of a mystic himself, he responded to the mysticism latent in the poetry of Whitman, and in his book, *Cosmic Consciousness*, he developed the theme that those who shared the poet's largeness of mind and vision were the initiates of a new stage of evolution.

Eventually, Dr. Bucke became Whitman's biographer and literary executor. He entertained him at his home in London, frequently visited him, and wrote him many letters.

"No letter from Bucke today," grumbled Whitman once. "I get to look for Bucke as I look for my breakfast."

When Whitman settled at Camden, New Jersey, Dr. Bucke visited him not only as a friend but as a medical adviser. In 1864, after a year and a half of hospital visiting, during the Civil War, Whitman's magnificent health began to fail. It was his unselfish devotion to the care of soldiers wounded in the war that earned for him the title of "The Good Gray Poet." But his untiring services undermined his health. A friend who accompanied him on a daily round to one of the many hospitals he visited in Washington, D.C., has described a typical scene:

"There were rows of cots, and each cot bore a man. When he appeared, in passing along, there was a smile of affection and welcome on every face, however wan, and his presence seemed to light up the place as it might be lit by the presence of the Son of Love . . . To one he gave a few words of cheer, for another he wrote a letter home, to others he gave an orange, a few comfits, a cigar, a pipe and tobacco, a sheet of paper or a postage stamp. . . From another he would receive a dying message for mother, wife or sweetheart . . . He did the things for them which no nurse or doctor could do, and he seemed to leave a benediction at every cot as he passed along."

At Camden, Walt Whitman lived in **partial retirement**. Then it was that the visits, ministrations and letters of his friends helped to sustain and fortify his spirits. Dr. Bucke numbered among his own personal friends the great Canadian physician, Dr. William Osler. To him he one day hurriedly wrote:

"Please see Walt and let me know how he is."

"And who is Walt?" queried Dr. Osler.

"How can you ask?" replied Dr. Bucke.

And then Dr. Osler recalled how amazed he had been when Dr. Bucke first told him about Walt Whitman.

"I was stupefied by his absolute idolatry of the man," he wrote to a friend, "and had some doubts of his sanity. He told me that *Leaves of Grass* had meant for his spiritual enlightenment a new power in life, new joy in a new existence on a plane higher than he had hoped to reach."

He complied with Dr. Bucke's request, however, with good grace. From that time on until the death of the poet in 1892 Dr. Osler was a fairly frequent visitor at the little two-story house at 328 Mickle Street, Camden, N. J. He and Dr. Bucke never presented bills for their services. "Progressive paralysis, which has a certain inevitable result," was his diagnosis of Whitman's illness.

Although Whitman did not as a rule like doctors, he was prepossessed in favour of Dr. Osler, who, he admitted, had his "big points." One of these was that he made up very palatable

prescriptions for his patient. On one occasion, for example, Dr. Osler prepared for him a cordial composed of cocoa and wine, which Whitman declared helped him.

"He's a fine fellow and a wise one, I guess," he conceded,—
"wise, I am sure—he has the air of assurance."

Whitman called him and Dr. Bucke his "medicine men." Dr. Bucke had become a stable part of his life. The man who was so sensitive to the implications of *Leaves of Grass*, had a practicality that appealed to the poet. "But after all the real man is Dr. Bucke," he declared to his friend, Horace Traubel. "He is the top of the heap. He has such steady eyes—such a steady hand—such good common sense, and is in every sort of way a large man—liberal, devoted, far-seeing. I owe him so much—oh, so much."