



Christman, Henry M., ed. Walt Whitman's New York [review]

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WALT WHITMAN. *Walt Whitman's New York: From Manhattan to Montauk*. Ed. Henry M. Christman. 1963. New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1989. xiv + 188 pp.

Walt Whitman's New York reprints a series of articles that Whitman published in the *Brooklyn Standard* from June 8, 1861, through November 1, 1862. The newspaper called the series "Brooklyniana," a title that accurately reflects Whitman's emphasis; for while he writes about Manhattan and Long Island as well as Brooklyn, it is the latter that is given the fullest attention. Brooklyn had been, after all, Whitman's place of residence for many years, and he was living there when "Brooklyniana" was being written. Brooklyn was also at the time an independent city, the third largest in the United States; it did not become a borough of Manhattan until 1898.

In workmanlike prose, Whitman circles around his subject, approaching it from various directions. We are told of matters historical, geographical, political, architectural, economic, financial, artistic, military, and so forth. In its way, the book is analogous to the cetology chapters of *Moby Dick* and various sections of *Walden* in that it seeks to know its subject not through any kind of spiritual enlightenment, in the Romantic manner, but, rather, through accumulation of detail. "Brooklyniana" is clearly the work of Whitman the journalist, not Whitman the poet.

These articles do much to re-create a time and place that Whitman knew. We are given, for example, discussions of Brooklyn's fire department, jails, theaters, hospitals, and court houses; we learn about the Apprentices Library (for which in 1825 Lafayette laid the corner-stone and held the young Whitman in his arms as he lowered the future poet to a fitting vantage point); we are presented with the 1855 state census report on "the annual manufactures and products of Brooklyn," of which the largest by far, as measured in dollars, was distilled liquors (\$6,000,000), with rope and cordage coming in a distant second at \$2,500,000; we are told about newspapers and type-setting; about the early settlers; about roads and trains; about churches and ministers; about parks and graveyards; about battles and fires and shipwrecks; about clothing and houses. The articles of "Brooklyniana" show Whitman to be a conscientious and competent journalist, skilled in gathering and arranging diverse details.

These articles were previously collected in the now out-of-print second volume of *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway (1921; 2 vols. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1972). It is good to have them available again in this paperback reprint of Henry M. Christman's 1963 Macmillan edition of *Walt Whitman's New York*, for in these pieces considered in their entirety, there is much to interest the social historian or any reader who wishes to gain some sense of the world that Whitman knew. In addition, there are passages one would not want to miss, like the moving description of conditions on the prison ships during the Revolutionary War, or the account of Whitman at play, happily sailing and partying with several men and "some lively girls" ("We hopped like crows," Whitman wrote; "we pivoted like Indian dervishes; we went through the dance of *La Bayadère* with wonderful vigor . . ."). And then there is the indignant Whitman, seldom found in the poetry, who cannot, because of the expenses involved, support the

proposal that Long Island secede from New York and become “the State of Paumanok”: “our taxes hereabout,” he writes, “being already up to the hideously outrageous rate of *two per cent.* [sic], we do not feel like piling on the agony any higher.” Even Whitman could not imagine the agonies yet to come.

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