



Volume 24

Number 2 ( 2006)

*Special Double Issue:*

*Whitman as a Bookmaker*

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pps. 126-140

## David McKay: Whitman's Final Publisher

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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### Recommended Citation

Green, Charles. "David McKay: Whitman's Final Publisher." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 24 (Fall 2006), 126-140.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1820>

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## DAVID MCKAY: WHITMAN'S FINAL PUBLISHER

CHARLES GREEN

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IN HIS "DEATHBED EDITION" of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman clearly called for fidelity to the final version of his text:

As there are now several editions of L. of G., different texts and dates, I wish to say that I prefer and recommend this present one, complete, for future printing, if there should be any; a copy and facsimile, indeed, of the text of these 438 pages.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this fact, David McKay, Whitman's final publisher, made significant modifications to the work in subsequent printings following the poet's death. This article will explore the relationship between Whitman and McKay, examining why this relationship seemed to work for both parties and what factors might have led McKay to make posthumous revisions contrary to Whitman's specific instructions.

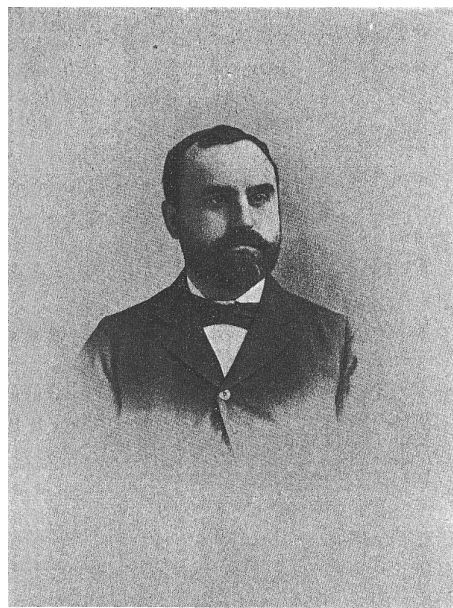
As the suppression controversy surrounding the 1881 James R. Osgood edition of *Leaves of Grass* raged, Whitman consoled himself by writing "I tickle myself with the thought how it may be said years hence that at any rate no book on earth had such a history."<sup>2</sup> Now, sixty-three years old and having spent over thirty years of his life as a professional author and publisher, the Good Grey Poet had come to relish his image as a neglected martyr. As a reporter wrote in the *Boston Herald* in April 1881:

Walt Whitman has in times past been perhaps more ignorantly than willfully misunderstood, but time brings about its revenges, and his present position goes to prove that, let a man be true to himself, however he defies the world, the world will come at last to respect him for his loyalty.<sup>3</sup>

Whitman had gained pretty nearly everything that he might have asked for—public demonstrations of love and support; international prominence; a more benign climate of appreciation; sales for his book; a home; a steady stream of visitors; and gifts and donations. He would not let the Osgood flap upset him.

Having received the plates of the Boston edition from Osgood on May 17, Whitman contented himself with making arrangements to bring

out a new printing. On May 19, he ordered “new titles” for 225 copies from Rand, Avery (*Corr* 3:280). Henry Clark of the firm sent a proof of the title page to Whitman on May 22 which Whitman marked up and instructed Rand to print 250 copies, noting, “I have 225 copies here in sheets to be bound & these titles are for them.” On June 8 he sent the corrected proof back to Rand and ordered 1000 new copies of *Leaves of Grass* printed. Perhaps because of fear of legal action, Rand declined, but did send over the corrected title pages. Whitman bound some of the remaining Osgood sheets and issued a small number of copies with the new title page. But this work proved very burdensome for the aging



David McKay.

poet. Physical complaints were common—gastric and liver troubles, dizziness, lethargy, and lameness—and he had difficulty selling the books himself. Fortunately, just as he needed assistance, he was approached by David McKay of the Philadelphia publishing house of Rees Welsh & Company. The firm, primarily a used book distributor and small publisher of law books, was interested in expanding its offerings and wrote to Whitman on June 5 offering to print his book. Eager to capitalize on the publicity still surrounding the Osgood edition, the firm wrote again on June 16 expressing their desire to proceed “*at once*” (the book had sold over 1500 copies before Osgood withdrew it). Whitman responded with his terms, including desk space “without charge” at Rees Welsh & Company for the length of the contract, and the firm quickly agreed.<sup>4</sup>

The association got off to a rocky start. Rees Welsh & Company initially printed advertisements which offended some of Whitman’s admirers. An ad the firm placed in the *Philadelphia Press*, for example, read: “*Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman is not an agricultural book in the haymaker’s parlance, but it is a daisy, and don’t you forget it.”<sup>5</sup> A critic from the *Springfield Republican* lamented: “It is to be regretted that Whitman had not the patience to wait for some firm of consequence to take up the task Osgood so feebly laid down.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, Whitman’s new publisher found himself faced with threats of suppression similar to those that had been served to Osgood & Co.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless,

the publicity surrounding the Attorney-General's suppression attempt drove sales of *Leaves of Grass* and, for the next year, the book sold better than ever before. Several printings were rapidly sold and for a while it looked as if Whitman would benefit substantially from the "banning" of his book. The first printing appeared on July 18, 1882, and an entire thousand-copy run reportedly sold out in a single day. By August 13, a second printing of a thousand was nearly gone and, on October 8, Whitman bragged that "they [Rees Welsh & Company] are now in the fifth" printing (*Corr* 2:309).

Whitman moved quickly to capitalize on this good fortune. When James R. Osgood had expressed an interest in *Leaves of Grass* in 1881, Whitman had proposed that they publish another book, *Specimen Days & Thoughts* (*Corr* 3:269). Osgood declined committing to this proposal and when the censorship controversy occurred, nothing more was said about the book. Now, in 1882, Whitman wrote Rees Welsh with a similar proposal, offering to make them exclusive publishers of the work for five years (*Corr* 3:292). David McKay responded immediately, asking to see the manuscript. A few days later, a contract was signed and the book was ready for sale by September 30. Again, printings sold quickly. By December 1, one thousand copies had been printed and 925 sold (*Corr* 3:314). About this time, David McKay "formally bo't out & assumed" the business of Rees Welsh & Company.<sup>8</sup>

David McKay was born in the town of Dysart, Scotland, on June 24, 1860. In 1871, his family emigrated to the United States. Known as "Dave" by his friends, McKay went to work for J. B. Lippincott & Company in 1873, one of the best training schools for young booksellers during this period. In 1881, Rees Welsh induced McKay to take charge of his old book business in order that he might devote his entire time to the law book business.<sup>9</sup> McKay, by this time a thorough bookseller, conducted Welsh's business for about sixteen months when a better position was offered to him. Welsh, when confronted with the announcement that he was about to lose his able lieutenant, proposed that McKay take the business off his hands. After much deliberation, the deal was finally struck, and in 1882, with a few hundred dollars of his own and about \$2,500 borrowed money and notes, David McKay bought a seven-thousand-dollar stock and entered the ranks of the book trade on his own account at 23 South 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Philadelphia. The next three years, until his notes had been redeemed and the borrowed money repaid, were perhaps the most uncomfortable McKay ever lived through because he didn't want "the other fellow to walk the floor o' nights" for fear he couldn't meet his notes.<sup>10</sup>

*Leaves of Grass* was the first new book brought out by McKay. As noted previously, this was followed by Whitman's *Specimen Days & Col-lect*. Despite these early efforts at publishing, McKay's primary business

for the next several years remained bookselling. During this time, McKay was a frequent visitor to 328 Mickle Street, Whitman's Camden, New Jersey, residence. The distance between McKay's offices and Whitman's home was a matter of a few miles, just across the Delaware, and so McKay fell into the habit of delivering Whitman's royalty checks personally and simply dropping by when business matters warranted. The resulting relationship lasted until the poet's death. Whitman would never forget how McKay had appeared in his moment of need: "Dave at that time rescued us, whatever else is to be said—he appeared just in the nick of our trouble. That is not to be forgotten—we must not forget it!"<sup>11</sup>

This admonishment by Whitman, particularly its subordinate clause, suggests that a problematic relationship may have existed between the poet and his publisher, and a close examination of this more troubled aspect of the relationship is critical to understanding why the publisher eventually abandoned the author's wishes regarding future revisions to his text. An excellent place to begin is Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. In reading through the nine volumes of this work, one is struck by how often McKay came to visit Whitman. Although McKay's Philadelphia office was a short distance from Whitman's home in Camden, the trip required the publisher to travel by ferry, sometimes a tedious affair. Regardless of how close or how difficult the trip was, it is unusual to find a publisher visiting one of his authors as often as McKay visited Whitman, especially since many of the matters were of minor importance. In many instances, for example, over the course of ten years, McKay would cross the river to deliver royalties to Whitman, even when these payments did not exceed more than a few dollars. Perhaps McKay was merely being considerate of Whitman's age and physical condition, but a messenger might have carried out these errands efficiently and spared the publisher many of these trips. The evidence suggests, rather, that McKay may have been seeking to establish the type of publisher/writer relationship of cordiality modeled by James T. Fields and James R. Osgood. More likely, McKay simply enjoyed Whitman's company and sought the poet's friendship. There was something about Whitman's and McKay's relationship, however, that seems to have prevented a really close friendship from ever forming.

The pages of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* reveal an interesting dynamic between Whitman and McKay. From the outset, Whitman framed his relationship with the publisher as almost adversarial: "I have suffered a good deal from publishers . . . damn 'em!" but then, establishing a pattern that occurs throughout this record, Whitman works to temper this sense of opposition: "God bless 'em!" (1:194). Following a visit from the publisher, in a passage that in some ways foreshadows McKay's eventual publication of an edition of *Leaves of Grass* that went against Whitman's specific wishes, Whitman relates to Traubel how

McKay intended to publish “an early Emerson” on which the copyright was about to expire: “What a cute—devilishly cute—lot the publishing wolves are. There they are, the whole hungry herd—a dozen sets of eyes straining for a chance to pounce on these things the first minute of freedom” (2:176). Elsewhere in Traubel’s volumes, Whitman continues: “the whole author business [is] twisted into all sorts of devilish business tangles. The author needs to be rescued from the publisher,” but “I don’t blame Dave . . . for standing out for all he can get. That is business. It’s not pretty in him or in me—it’s business” (2:318; 1:392). Whitman, at times, can’t seem to make up his mind about McKay: “The publishers have us in their hands,” he said, “and I trust Dave”—then after a pause: “But I don’t know—I don’t know” (1:460).

This ambiguity stemmed, in part, from McKay’s tough-nosed negotiating with Whitman regarding some of the poet’s various business proposals. Following the publication of *Specimen Days*, for example, Whitman decided that he’d like to get his hands on the plates: “I do not own the plates of *Specimen Days*: I ought to, but I don’t: they belong to Dave McKay.” Toward this end, he dispatched Traubel:

I want you to go to McKay and make him an offer of one hundred and fifty dollars spot cash for the plates. . . . I don’t believe Dave will accept the offer—no business man could resist the temptation to put more on an article some one was eager for. But try him, anyway. If he says no then I guess it must be no: I don’t think I am eager enough for the plates to increase my bid. (*WWC* 1:194)

McKay’s response was blunt: “That’s nonsense. . . . The plates originally cost six hundred forty-six dollars. It costs thirty-five or forty dollars to print one thousand copies—press work.” Whitman was not happy with McKay’s answer: “It’s nonsense, is it? Well let it remain nonsense and then done with it. I would not for a moment consider Dave’s alternative” (*WWC* 1:195). Despite this initial impasse, the two would eventually come to terms over the plates, a give-and-take process that would be repeated throughout their professional dealings:

McKay came over to see me yesterday . . . and conceded a point or two. For instance, he said I might use the *Specimen Days* plates in the complete book [*Complete Poems & Prose* (1888)]. He wanted to renew his expired contract—asked for five years more: said that after that time he would sell me the *Specimen Days* plates at my own figure—one hundred and fifty dollars. (*WWC* 1:205)

Although McKay’s resistance to some of Whitman’s proposals often presented obstacles to the poet’s designs, Whitman came to respect the young publisher as a businessman: “Dave is shrewd, canny, but honest: crude, almost crusty sometimes—but square. I like Dave” (*WWC* 1:206).



Whitman appreciated the fact that the two of them had been able to collaborate on several projects on “the most amiable terms.” In fact, the poet had developed a “real admiration” for what he considered Dave’s “Napoleonic directness of purpose,” his “immense energy” and the way in which he had “made himself strong by self-discipline”:

He is young-blooded, careful, wide-awake, vital—has a shrewd eye, a steady hand. I should predict for Dave (you know he is greatly extending, greatly, all the time) that a few years of success will show him up as a big gun among publishers. Dave never shuffles his papers—he keeps his contracts. (*WWC* 2:176)

Whitman’s prediction regarding McKay’s future began to prove accurate as early as 1885 when the publisher celebrated the final payment of his debt to Rees Welsh by bringing forth a collection of Shakespeare’s works. In 1888, McKay took over the business of H. C. Watts & Co., increasing and strengthening his reprints of standard authors and special books suggested by the needs of his bookshop. He published a number of discovery narratives, a genre that was among the most popular of the time, and reprinted Longfellow’s *Hyperion: A Romance* and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Novels*, as well as Emerson’s *Essays*. He expanded his stock to include textbooks, dictionaries, even self-improvement books. While he continued to produce almost yearly printings of *Leaves of Grass*, he also began to publish secondary work devoted to Whitman, including Richard Maurice Bucke’s *Walt Whitman* (1883); William Sloane Kennedy’s *The Poet As a Craftsman* (1886), which included a section on Whitman; *Camden’s Compliment to Walt Whitman*, edited by Traubel; as well as Elizabeth Porter Gould’s *Gems from Walt Whitman* (1889).<sup>12</sup> During the 1890s, McKay also began a number of juvenile series including the clothbound Boys of Liberty Library and, later, The Newberry Classics and The Golden Books for Children. In subsequent years, the list included children’s books by Beatrice Potter and Lois Lenski.

Despite McKay’s development as a publisher, Whitman’s admiration for him was not necessarily shared by the poet’s inner-circle of friends.<sup>13</sup> In *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, for example, Whitman declares that he had been advised by some of his friends to “Watch Dave.” “I do watch him,” he tells Traubel, but found him to be “at all times scrupulous” (2:168). This suspicion on the part of Whitman’s close friends seems to have persisted despite Whitman’s ongoing attempts to temper the sense of opposition he himself had helped to establish:

Several of my friends have been to me lately and said: ‘You’ll have to watch McKay—he’s foxy—he’ll do you up.’ I asked them: ‘Why do you suspect Dave more than others—pick him out for criticism?’ They said: ‘We don’t—he is a publisher: that is enough: all publishers do it.’ (2:424)

Whitman had experienced problems with and was critical of publishers throughout his career. Although successful in having his work appear early in his career in magazines such as the *Democratic Review* and the *American Whig Review*, and later in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*, he had not managed to generate interest among publishers of comparable prestige for his *Leaves of Grass*. In addition, he had sought to maintain individual control over the production and integrity of his work. As a result, he had spent much of his career trying to publish and distribute his books on his own. The only two relationships that he was able to form with publishers had not worked out well for any of the parties. Thayer and Eldridge had gone bankrupt and, consequently, allowed the 1860-1861 plates of *Leaves of Grass* to fall into the hands of an unauthorized and unscrupulous publisher. Later, James Osgood and Co. had turned its back on the poet rather than confront the controversy surrounding certain poems and passages in his book. Osgood "deserted us," Whitman told his friends.

Considering this history and given the critical comments that Whitman often directed toward publishers, usually in front of his friends, it is not surprising that his followers did not come to trust David McKay. When Whitman was preparing to bring out *November Boughs* (1888) and negotiating with McKay over the terms, for example, William O'Connor wrote Whitman, expressing his hope that David McKay would do better with this new work than he had done with the poet's earlier books. "I long for you to have a good publisher," he concluded (*WWC* 2:467). When Traubel read O'Connor's letter, he asked Whitman whether or not he shared O'Connor's feelings about McKay. "No—I do not: and yet William is right, too," replied Whitman; "The point is that I have had no choice of publishers: the big fellows whom O'Connor wants do not want me" (*WWC* 2:472). Again, Whitman is unable or unwilling to commit to McKay, to fully trust him as his publisher, and this sentiment was passed on to the poet's close supporters. In a fateful discussion with Thomas Harned, Whitman's lawyer and member of his inner circle, Whitman indicated that he was "disinclined" to renew his *Leaves of Grass* contract with McKay for a five-year term:

My spark'll go out any day now: I don't want to tie you fellows up: you may find reasons for going to another publisher. I wouldn't advise you to go but I wouldn't put my corpse in your way if you were disposed to make a change. . . . I am willing to rely upon you to sustain the integrity of my book. (*WWC* 2:303-304)

Despite his persistent ambivalence toward his publisher, Whitman's relationship with McKay was a productive one. Even though, over the course of a year, the 1881 edition of *Leaves* carried the imprints of Osgood, Rees Welsh, the Author, and finally, David McKay, it turned



out to be Whitman's greatest success financially. On October 8, 1882, just three months after the release of the book, four printings had been issued and sold out, and a fifth printing was selling quickly. McKay's royalty statement to Whitman dated December 1, 1882, shows 4,900 copies printed and 3,118 sold. Whitman's royalty for *Leaves of Grass* in 1882 was \$1,091.30. All told, over 6,000 copies of *Leaves of Grass* were sold between 1881 and 1882. Additionally, a thousand copies of *Specimen Days* were printed, and 925 sold. Whitman's return on *Specimen Days* was \$203.50—bringing the total of his royalties for that period to \$1,294.80. So, while the relationship between Whitman and Rees Welsh had gotten off to a bumpy start, Whitman's association with David McKay was now looking pretty good to the poet. Over the course of ten years, the pair would bring the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass* through twelve printings. In addition to *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days*, the pair issued *November Boughs* (1888), *The Complete Poems and Prose* (1888), *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891), and Whitman's final work, *Complete Prose Works* (1892).

While this list appears impressive, it is important to place the sales of Whitman's works in perspective. While he did sell several thousand copies of these books collectively, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha* sold over 43,000 copies in a single year. Similarly, Fanny Fern's collection of articles written for weekly newspapers, entitled *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-folio*, sold over 70,000 copies during its first year of publication. In March 1852, a Boston publisher decided to issue *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a book, and it sold over three hundred thousand copies within its first year; about two million copies were sold worldwide by 1857. For one three-month period, Stowe reportedly received \$10,000 in royalties. Many books did very well. Others, like Whitman's, simply did not.

With the exception of the title page changes that have already been noted and a few minor alterations across the different printings, *Leaves of Grass* remained fairly stable between 1881 and 1888, with the 1881 plates used for printings in 1882, 1883, 1884, and 1888. In 1888, Whitman added the annex "Sands at Seventy" and issued the *Complete Poems & Prose of Walt Whitman, 1855-1888* (this has often been incorrectly referred to as the eighth edition). The *Prose* section contains all of the previously published *Specimen Days and Collect* and *November Boughs*. In preparation for an 1889 printing, Whitman made what would be his final alterations to the 1881 plates. Just over a year later, with his health failing, Whitman "created" his final "edition" of *Leaves of Grass* by using sheets from the 1888 printing. He bound them with cancel title and contents leaves and with the annexes, including *Good-Bye My Fancy*, appended at the back. Whitman suspected that he had little time left and that this would be

his last printing. The book appeared for sale early in 1892, and Whitman died in his Camden home on March 26 of that year.

McKay had grown fond of the Good Grey Poet over the years. Upon Whitman's death, the publisher worked closely with Whitman's literary executors to help settle the poet's affairs, and he served as a pall-bearer at Whitman's funeral. Overall, critics and biographers have treated McKay kindly and viewed him as one of Whitman's friends. Perhaps this is why McKay's 1900 publication of a new edition of *Leaves* has puzzled scholars for years. Why would McKay, a friend, betray the poet's specific call for fidelity to his work? Whitman had certainly made his intentions regarding future publications of his work clear:

This, of course, is the edition [1891-1892] I swear by . . . the only authentic and perfect.

This is now my own personal, authenticated volume. . . . It is my ultimate, my final word and touch, to go forth now, for good or bad, into the world of the future.

The point is, to substitute *this* for all other editions—to make of it my final, conclusive utterance and message—a declaration of my realized intentions.<sup>14</sup>

McKay's 1900 production of *Leaves of Grass* is based upon an edition published by Whitman in 1871. There is no question that McKay was free to republish the 1871 edition if he so wished: it was, after all, out of copyright. What is troubling is that using anything other than the 1891-1892 printing violated Whitman's explicit final instructions. What makes matters worse is that McKay took liberties with the 1871 text, shifting the placement of poems and omitting others. The 1900 edition, therefore, presents an arrangement that reflects neither Whitman's wishes in 1871 nor his final wishes in 1892. It in fact presents a text different in arrangement than anything Whitman ever produced. McKay certainly was aware of Whitman's desire to keep and protect his life's work from revision. Although the publisher's records offer little details regarding his decision to alter and republish this text, an examination of the edition itself offers suggestive clues regarding McKay's motives.

In the preface of the 1900 edition, McKay informs the reader that "[t]his edition of *Leaves of Grass*, presenting, as it does, many new features, requires a word of explanation." In an effort to establish that "early editions" of *Leaves of Grass* are in some way superior to newer editions, McKay points out that earlier editions had almost entirely disappeared from the market and that this was due to "their contents rather than their imprint." He then suggests that no other author "was given more to change than Walt Whitman" and that many of his poems or parts of poems were either altered or discarded for a time only to reappear

in new forms in later editions. Some, he adds, ultimately disappeared altogether. Next he argues that Whitman's poems appeal more to "the student" than to the "casual reader," and McKay announces that he therefore prepared the 1900 edition with this in mind: "[i]t aims to give the growing as well as the grown Whitman."<sup>15</sup> Finally, he notes that under the heading of "Gathered Leaves" he has collected various poems that have been dropped from one edition to the next.

In this manner, McKay develops his case for reconstructing *Leaves of Grass*. The 1900 edition, he argues, recognizes the value of earlier editions, honors Whitman's custom of rearranging and revising his poems, serves the needs of the student by offering variorum readings, and brings together many poems that may have disappeared or been excluded from various editions. This edition, McKay declares, recognizes a necessity brought about by his long association with *Leaves of Grass*. All "lovers of Whitman," he adds, will readily understand this necessity and appreciate the edition.

The preface is important in that it offers McKay's rationale for the changes he made to Whitman's text, but more significant is the way in which it further discloses the fundamental conflict that shaped the relationship between McKay and Whitman. The two were simply never able to reconcile their personal affection with their business concerns. Although McKay refers to himself, perhaps legitimately, as Whitman's "most successful publisher," Whitman left no provision stating that his executors needed to renew any contracts with McKay. Despite his long-time association and dealings with Whitman, copyright issues stymied McKay's attempts to produce further printings of *Leaves of Grass* after 1895.<sup>16</sup>

In the Library of Congress, there is a copy of the 1900 edition that was once owned by Thomas Harned. On the inside cover Harned has written: "When D. McKay was refused a renewal of his contract, he printed this edition of *Leaves of Grass*, using all matter where the copyright had expired."<sup>17</sup> The preface appears to confirm Harned's comments, as McKay accepts "all responsibility" for "errors of commission" but notes that "those of omission (and there are a few)" were caused by conditions outside of his control (presumably imposed by Whitman's literary executors).<sup>18</sup> Those conditions, he adds, would ultimately be remedied over the course of time (with the eventual release of copyright and free use of the different editions).

Whitman's literary executors, who, as we have seen, were never close to McKay, denied him renewal of Whitman's copyrighted works, including all printings relating to the 1891-1892 *Leaves of Grass*. Unable to use the text of any of the editions he had worked so closely with Whitman to bring forth during the poet's lifetime, McKay was forced to make a

decision. Either he could honor Whitman's final wishes regarding his text and simply walk away, or he could develop an alternative strategy. Thus, McKay elected to rely on one of the "early editions" he mentions in the preface. Supported by a rationale based on "necessity," he began building with the base text from the 1871 edition and then added other materials—poems not found in these earlier editions; footnotes giving variant readings of words and phrases as they appeared in pre-1871 editions; and personal mementos of his relationship with Whitman.

For example, in printing the poem that by 1900 everyone knew as "Song of Myself", McKay renders the first verse as:

I celebrate myself;  
And what I assume you shall assume;  
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.

David Levy claims that these lines were actually reproduced from the 1855 edition, and, while revisions have been made (semicolons have been substituted for commas at the end of the first two lines, and a comma has been added in the middle of the third line), McKay fails to acknowledge any of these changes, despite his claim in the preface to have carefully documented any transformations.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the lines are reprinted from the 1871 version of the poem, by which time Whitman had altered the punctuation but had yet to add the phrase "and sing myself" at the end of the first line; McKay also fails to acknowledge the 1881 addition of that phrase. As Levy suggests, to do so with a footnote "would have either constituted a violation of copyright or would have forced him to make explicit his strategy for dodging it."<sup>20</sup> Additionally, when McKay renders the title of the poem with the 1871 title "Walt Whitman," he fails to note that the poem was untitled in the first edition, or that it had other titles in earlier and later editions. Again, this is curious, since in the preface McKay says: "As Walt Whitman's publisher, I was frequently called upon to give information concerning poems whose headings had been changed. These have been noted, and in the alphabetical list at the end of the volume all such titles appear, with reference to the present title."

In reviewing the 1900 edition, Levy notes that "these are just a few examples of the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies" in the work. This text represents "a nightmare to modern scholars trained to produce painstakingly precise critical editions and is seen not just as bad scholarship, but as evidence of a moral lapse on McKay's part."<sup>21</sup> While all of this is disturbing, there is another aspect of this text that Levy touches on in his review and which is perhaps more important to this study. Although it is not unusual to come away from *Leaves of Grass* with a strong sense of the poet, the interesting thing about McKay's edition is that you come away from that text with just as strong a sense of *McKay* as well.

McKay intended the 1900 edition to serve as a tribute to Whitman, as he makes clear in the preface:

Walt Whitman was an unique character. As his most successful publisher I saw much of him, and learned to love his sweet kindly nature. No one could enter the charmed circle of his friendship without feeling the mastery of his personality. This book, *the work of my own hands*, I give as a token of those never-to-be-forgotten days. To have met Whitman was a privilege, to have been his friend was an honor [my emphasis].

But the illustrations that McKay chose to include in the volume make it all the clearer that this book represents both a labor of love and of ego that work to celebrate and advertise not just the poet, but also the publisher's relationship with the poet (or, perhaps more precisely, the publisher's *perception* of his relationship with the poet). Included in the text is a photograph of an elderly, white-haired Whitman sitting in an ornate straight-backed chair, holding a cane in his right hand, his left hand resting inside his jacket pocket. The inscription reads, "David McKay/ from his friend/ Walt Whitman." More important than the inscription, however, is the placement of the photograph. It appears on the left-hand page facing the title page, the same position in which, forty-five years earlier, an engraving of the yet unnamed author appeared in the first edition.<sup>22</sup> Like Whitman's engraving, the inscription and the placement of this image "are involved" in what the work is presenting. Subtly and perhaps unconsciously, McKay seems to be claiming an essential part in the production of Whitman's work. Additionally, at the midpoint of the volume, on facing pages, are a personal note that Whitman had written to McKay and another inscribed photograph of the poet. At the center of this McKay-constructed version of *Leaves of Grass*, then, we find poet and publisher metaphorically embracing. Finally, a profile image of a bust of Whitman, dated 1888 and inscribed to "his friend David McKay," is placed toward the end of the text, seemingly looking back over the preceding work as if posthumously approving McKay's production. (Later printings of the book omitted the final two images.)

Whether McKay's decision to bring out the 1900 edition was the product of business pressures, the result of a squabble over copyright between McKay and Whitman's literary executors, McKay's own effort to frame himself and his relationship with Whitman more firmly within the history of the poet and his work, or some combination of these, McKay served as Whitman's longest running commercial publisher and works that might not otherwise have been brought forth were published because of McKay's interest.<sup>23</sup> Whitman ultimately did not want his supporters to ever forget the fact that Dave had "rescued" him during his moment of need: "Dave's early payments put me in this house . . . I do not mean that Dave was my publisher from affection" but "money or

no money no other publisher at that time would touch me. I shall never forget Dave's good will—nor his good sense, either, for it was good sense for a young business man to take up the *Leaves* while it was getting such a heap of gratuitous advertising" (*WWC* 2:461). As he approached the end of his career and his life, Whitman felt it important to leave things straight regarding McKay and, toward that end, he specifically charged Traubel with bearing testimony concerning "Dave McKay's fair dealing and general good will" toward the poet: "I believe Dave is friendly to me—not friendly alone as a publisher but as a man—treats me squarely. By and by that will come up and I want you to speak up for me on that point" (*WWC* 2:392).

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## NOTES

1 This notice appears on the copyright page of the 1892 David McKay issue of *Leaves of Grass*.

2 Letter to William O'Connor dated May 25, 1882; in Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, 6 vols., ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 3:284.

3 The article is attributed to Sylvester Baxter, "Walt Whitman: His Second Visit to the New England Metropolis: A Cordial Welcome in Literary Circles: Sketch of His Life and Poetic Characteristics," Boston *Herald* (April 18, 1881), Supplement, 1-2; part of the article, including the portion quoted here, appears in Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 224-225.

4 Rees Welsh & Co., Booksellers and Publishers, no. 23 Ninth St., Philadelphia, agreed to Whitman's terms on June 21 with two stipulations: they were unwilling to accept *Specimen Days* until they had seen the manuscript, and they wanted to know about the copyright of Richard Maurice Bucke's book *Walt Whitman*. (In 1883, Walt Whitman arranged with McKay to print Bucke's book. The poet personally supervised publication, including proofreading.) The agreement to publish *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days* was signed on June 28. Whitman was to receive 35 cents on a \$2.00 retail price if his plates were used; Rees Welsh would purchase the plates from Whitman for \$400 and, thereafter, the royalty would be reduced to 25 cents. The contract was to last for two years and two months. The contract also gave Whitman the right to "personally sell and dispose of" the 1876 *Centennial Edition* and the 1882 Author's Edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Finally, the contract obligated Rees Welsh to "furnish desk room for Walt Whitman personally in their store without charge so long as they publish his books" *Corr*, 3:291, n. 99; 292, n. 3.

5 See Philadelphia *Press*, July 15: "Walt Whitman's Work – The Society for the Prevention of Vice to stop the sale."

6 See Springfield *Republican*, September 24, 1882.



7 See *New York Tribune*, July 15: “Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* – Movement in Philadelphia to suppress the work.”

8 See *Publisher’s Weekly* (October 7, 1882).

9 The following partial letter from J. B. Lippincott & Co. to David McKay is located in the Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the University of Pennsylvania:

Dear Sir,

After a continuous engagement of over eight years it gives us sincere pleasure to state that we have always found you prompt and particularly efficient in all the duties required in the various positions you have been called upon to fill.

We learned with Regret of your intention of leaving our employ, and trust that in your new position you may meet with the good success that your energy, and ability, will doubtless deserve.

10 See *Publisher’s Weekly* (November 30, 1918), 1799.

11 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1906-1996), 5:359; abbreviated *WWC*.

12 William Sloane Kennedy (1850-1929), biographer, editor, and critic, was one of Whitman’s most devoted friends and admirers. He was a frequent correspondent and visitor to Whitman’s home as well as a constant contributor of small gifts. Kennedy also contributed several essays to newspapers in praise of Whitman. In 1896, Kennedy published *Reminiscences of Walt Whitman with Extracts from His Letters and Remarks on His Writing*. He also edited *Walt Whitman’s Diary in Canada* (1904) and published *The Fight of a Book for the Year: A Companion Volume to “Leaves of Grass”* (1926), which he considered to be his most important work.

13 Thomas Harned and William O’Connor were particularly critical of McKay and often encouraged Whitman to seek out a more established publisher.

14 *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Walt Whitman’s Conversations with Horace Traubel, 1888-1892*, ed. Gary Schmidgall (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 96.

15 Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1900), iii.

16 Recognizing that his contract with Whitman was expiring in 1895, McKay produced three printings of *Leaves of Grass* with the final printing numbering 3000 copies.

17 U. S. copyright law during this period protected an author’s work for twenty-eight years, with the possibility of a fourteen-year extension.

18 *Leaves of Grass* (1900), iv.

19 Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in a Digital Age* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001), 50.

20 Levy, 50.

21 Levy, 50.

22 “The engraving appeared in the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, then again in the 1876 and 1881-1882 (and following) editions . . . In reprinting it in the 1881 edition, Whitman insisted on its facing ‘Song of Myself’ because the portrait ‘is involved as part of the poem.’” (Steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price [11 September 2003], <http://www.whitmanarchive.org>.)

23 In 1904, McKay moved to larger quarters at 610 Washington Square and, after his death in 1918, his sons Alexander and James took over the company. They established the firm's famous series of chess books and published Christopher Morley's *Travels in Philadelphia* (1920); the first American edition of A. A. Milne's *A Gallery of Children* (1925); Sir James and Lady Frazer's book of juvenile poetry, *Pasha the Pom* (1937); and Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse books. The company was bought out in 1950 by a small group of investors led by Kennett Rawson who assumed the presidency and moved the firm's headquarters to 225 Park Avenue, New York. In 1968, Rawson sold the firm to Maxwell Geffen. In 1973, the firm merged with the Henry Z. Walck Company. The same year, Geffen sold McKay to Morgan-Grampion, Incorporated, a subsidiary of a British firm. Since 1979, the firm has been located at 2 Park Avenue, New York.