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## Schmidgall, Gary, ed., *Conserving Whitman's Fame: Selections from Horace Traubel's "Conservator," 1890-1919* [review]

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## REVIEWS

GARY SCHMIDGALL, ED. *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame: Selections from Horace Traubel's "Conservator," 1890-1919*. The Iowa Whitman Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001. lviii + 418 pp.

This volume makes easily accessible for the first time a wealth of essays, reviews, and memoirs garnered from the thirty-year run of Horace Traubel's journal, *The Conservator*. Its ample selection provides a glimpse into the social and intellectual world of Whitman's disciples, shows us the early negotiations of (and battles for) Whitman's reputation, and allows us a rare glimpse into the lively, enthusiastic, and radical birthing-ground of Whitman studies. While there are pieces enough here to interest almost any Whitman scholar, those interested in Whitman's reception in the years after his death will find the book indispensable. The importance of the early Whitman enthusiasts is only now beginning to be recognized, and *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame* should speed and deepen that recognition.

In his first work in the Iowa Whitman Series, *Intimate with Walt*, Schmidgall pored over the nine volumes of Traubel's epic biography *With Walt Whitman in Camden* to produce an approachable single-volume work that would appeal to a wider audience. In *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame*, he continues his engagement with Traubel and extracts from the fascinating mass of *The Conservator's* political, literary, and religious-ethical writings those most apt to be of interest to the modern Whitman scholar. These are mostly presented in their entirety, and organized chronologically within several large categories: memoirs of Whitman and his circle; topical articles on Whitman; discussions of Whitman editions; writings from "The Whitman Wars" over the poet's reputation, and short fillers and squibs of Whitman interest (with often droll titles appended by Schmidgall). In addition to these broader categories, Schmidgall dedicates sections to Traubel's personality and his editorial policy, the question of sex morality, and a generous sampling from the May 1919 Whitman Centennial issue of *The Conservator*.

The first section introduces us through a series of editorials and reviews to the thinking of Horace Traubel, but the whole book continues and deepens our acquaintance. Those who do not know Traubel outside of his Boswellian role in *With Walt Whitman in Camden* should enjoy the insight afforded by the selection and Schmidgall's careful and sympathetic introduction into one the most dedicated, indefatigable, feisty, and sometimes funny of Whitman's disciples. While it may not be quite a "universally acknowledged fact" that "Whitman's and Traubel's values were practically indistinguishable," as Schmidgall argues, Traubel's decidedly Whitmanian humanity, egalitarianism, and humility are apparent throughout (xix).

Those who have read Traubel's *Chants Communal* or *Optimos* or delved far into his *Collects* will be relieved to find that, while Schmidgall's selections illustrate the paragraphless, repetitive, steam-engine chug of Traubel's unique

prose style, they rarely present it at its most distracting. Likewise, the most extreme and least insightful Whitman-worship to be found in *The Conservator* is not to be found here, and almost all of the poetry is mercifully omitted: though I applaud the admission of Traubel's moving retrospective "As I Sit at Karsner's Front Window," written shortly before his death.

Some of the best fun to be had in the book is afforded by Traubel's habit, picked up from Whitman, of valuing his bad press at least as much as his good, and reprinting the lot. As a result, this book affords contemporary views of Traubel and the burgeoning Whitmanite movement from within and from without: to balance the occasional vatic announcement of a Whitmanite-socialist future on its way, there are reprinted attacks on the "Whitman cult," on Whitman imitators, on Traubel, and on Whitman himself. Several controversies are featured: the long-running quarrel concerning Bliss Perry's *Walt Whitman: His Life and Works* is particularly well-documented. Schmidgall also aptly notes several works that received only silence, such as Dr. W. C. Rivers' *Walt Whitman's Anomaly*, which alleged Whitman's homosexuality.

As is inevitable in such a collection, the quality of the work varies, but there is little without interest. Among the gems are pioneering pieces like "What Walt Whitman Means to the Negro" by Howard University dean Kelly Miller and eloquent and subtle interpretations of Whitman such as John Burroughs's Phi Beta Kappa address, "Whitman's Relation to Morals." There are many attempts to reconcile Whitman's individualism with the socialist ethos of the *Conservator*, as well as attempts to articulate his view of violence during the madness of the First World War. There's also one satire, Ernest Crosby's "The Whitman Cipher," which lampoons the Bacon/Shakespeare controversy then playing out in the *Conservator* by using like logic to prove that Bucke was the real author of *Leaves of Grass*. "Memoirs of Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, and the Whitman Circle" contains rare glimpses of Whitman and those around him. It reprints twenty pieces, including William Cauldwell's account of Whitman's time as a dapper, top-hatted editor of the *Daily Aurora* in 1842, a memoir by illustrator David Edward Cronin that attests to Whitman's Pfaff's years, and anthropologist Daniel G. Brinton's "A Visit to West Hills," which recounts his pilgrimage to Whitman's birthplace.

One of the reasons for Whitman's continued fame is that his work is large enough to contain and entertain the approaches of multitudes of readers. Schmidgall recommends *The Conservator* on like grounds: owing to its mass and range, "readers who bring particular interests, aims, or methodologies with them are very likely to find much of interest in its pages" (xlix). Schmidgall's introductions and selections both enable and illustrate the possibilities of this kind of reading.

One of the charms of Schmidgall's editorial style is his presence in his own work. Woven into the introduction is the story of his own engagement with this material, his own experience of reading through a complete run of *The Conservator*. His account of where he caught his own reflection for good or ill, where he felt confirmed in his beliefs and where rankled, where amused and where surprised, gives us some insight into the joys of scholarship and encourages us to conduct our own research. To that end, and to show how little the battle-lines have shifted in the "culture wars," Schmidgall's introduction summarizes

*The Conservator's* contents on a wide variety of still contested debates: women's rights, capital punishment, assisted suicide, American imperialism, and sex education, to name a few.

Schmidgall's interests are represented unapologetically throughout. "Sex Morality" is the only topic to receive its own chapter (as "homosexuality" is the only topical entry in the index that is not subordinated to a name or title). The selection here gives a good sense of *The Conservator's* relatively enlightened position, mostly by producing the journal's reviews of books on the subject by Whitman disciple Edward Carpenter and early birth-control advocate and sex-reformer William J. Robinson (himself a Whitman enthusiast whose address to the Whitman Fellowship is included). Also included, for less clear reasons, is Oscar Lovell Triggs' skewering of Max Nordau's *On Degeneration*, which might have been better placed in the chapter on "The Whitman Wars."

Of course, owing to length, some of the issues prominent in *The Conservator* make only a token appearance here (for instance, there's relatively little attention paid to Bucke's and Carpenter's theories of cosmic consciousness, which were a considerable topic of discussion). But Schmidgall gives an account in his introduction of many noteworthy articles and reviews he does not have space to reprint, and two appendices—one a list by year of substantial articles on Whitman, and another of libraries containing complete or near-complete runs of *The Conservator*—will prove of great use to scholars wishing to make more use of this valuable resource.

*The Conservator* was finally not so much a literary journal as the medium of encouragement, exchange, and debate for a small (the circulation stayed at about 1,000), eclectic, reform-minded community which had formed around their sympathy with Whitman's ideals. Schmidgall calls the journal "a tonic emanation of the Whitman ethos and agenda," and its editorial voice, "a voice from Whitman's grave in countless respects" (xxi, xxvi). Part of its agenda was, as Schmidgall notes, "to assure that Whitman's poetry was not merely read but lived" (xix). And this concern with how to live Whitman is one of the things that gives *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame* its interest, beyond its considerable historical value. For many of the revolutionaries, radicals, and reformers who contributed to *The Conservator*, Whitman's writings were more than poetry: they were something between rallying-cry and new gospel. William Sloane Kennedy, with characteristic lack of restraint, calls them "a New Protestantism, a Scientific Religion of Joy, destined . . . to sweep over the globe" (252). While the writings here often frame the critical discussions we are still engaged in, they are both more and less than critical themselves. In 1901, Francis Howard Williams responded to an attack on "The Whitman Cult" by calling the "cult" "a very live organism" containing within itself, "the vital germ of a great personality" (268). *The Conservator* is a fascinating document that presents Whitman's works and memory at the center of a living and evolving world-view and the community that was negotiating it. Gary Schmidgall has done a great service by giving us such an engaging and relevant introduction to it.

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