WALT WHITMAN
QUARTERLY REVIEW

Volume 26 | Number 4 (2009) pps. 218-222

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation
Folsom, Ed. "Roper, Robert. Now the Drum of War: Walt Whitman and His Brothers in the Civil War [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 26 (Spring 2009), 218-222.

Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1878

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REVIEW

ROBERT ROPER. *Now the Drum of War: Walt Whitman and His Brothers in the Civil War.* New York: Walker and Company, 2008. 421 pp.

Robert Roper's *Now the Drum of War* is part of an emerging genre of Whitman books written for a general rather than a scholarly audience. These books—including Roy Morris, Jr.'s *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in the Civil War* (2000) and Daniel Mark Epstein's *Lincoln and Whitman: Parallel Lives in Civil War Washington* (2004)—are written by talented authors whose previous work has had little or nothing to do with Whitman, and they focus on the most gripping part of Whitman's life, his interactions with soldiers during the Civil War. Morris is a Civil War historian and biographer of Ambrose Bierce and General Philip Sheridan, and his book put Whitman's Civil War experience in an illuminating historical context. There was nothing new to be found there about Whitman, but the familiar stories glowed again when surrounded by a wealth of information about conditions in Civil War hospitals, about Civil War medicine, and about the timing of Whitman's activities in relation to Civil War events. Similarly, Epstein—a biographer of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Nat King Cole, as well as a poet himself—offered no new information about Whitman but added a fresh edge to Whitman's wartime experiences by putting Whitman's activities and movements in close juxtaposition with Abraham Lincoln's, thus creating the illusion that the two iconic American figures were much closer than they actually were.

Roper's book, like Morris's and Epstein's, makes for engaging reading. Roper is a novelist, journalist, and the biographer of the mountain climber Willi Unsoeld. His new book, again like Morris's and Epstein's, appears to be a one-time foray into Whitman's life. And, like its popular Whitman-and-the-Civil-War predecessors, *Now the Drum of War* is stronger on narrative than it is on discovery. It covers much the same ground as Morris (who also tracked George Whitman's military career, though in far less depth than Roper), and, like Epstein, creates a set of "parallel lives" to illuminate Whitman's Civil War experiences—in Roper's case, George Whitman's experiences during the Civil War serve as a counterpoint to, companion of, and continual inspiration for Walt's experience. While Morris, Epstein, and Roper clearly have all read a significant amount of material by and about Whitman, their books are largely based on *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, parts of which are over forty years old, and they therefore miss numerous important new discoveries about Whitman—newly found letters (to and by Whitman), newly uncovered manuscripts, newly identified pieces of journalism (by and about Whitman), newly found documents relating to Whitman, and rediscovered works by Whitman's friends and associates during the Civil War years. Roper, in his acknowledgments, seems to recognize the problem, noting how "the *Collected Writings* project had produced a series of indispensable volumes

but had somehow failed to come to the end of Walt," as "the poet seemed to be toying with his devoted scholarly protectors from beyond the grave," issuing an endless stream of "more private letters and journalistic manuscripts." Roper, calling himself "a humble late-arrival at the feast of Whitman scholarship," graciously recognizes the burgeoning scholarship, "Whitmanesque in its rich amplitude"—so rich, it would seem, that it's easy for late-arrivers to miss some important finds.

These general-audience books, then, attract far wider audiences than scholarly monographs, and, in the process, disseminate outdated information and perpetuate some mistakes. Epstein, for example, builds a case that Whitman was obsessed with Lincoln, claiming that the poet wanted to come to Washington, D.C., so that he could work for and thus be close to the president. Epstein bases this claim largely on his speculation that, if we still had the letter that Whitman wrote for himself and sent to Emerson as a guide for writing him a recommendation for a government job, we would see that Whitman wanted to work specifically for Lincoln. It is "a pity," Epstein announces, that "Whitman's 'enclosed form of letter' has not survived." But the letter *did* survive and was reprinted in this journal as early as 2000, and it in fact does not prove anything like what Epstein imagined it would.

Roper's book also suffers from a vital omission. It is disappointing that, in a book that describes itself as focusing on Whitman and his brothers during the Civil War, Roper seems unaware of or at least unsure of the fact that Andrew Whitman did serve in the Union army and that we have his discharge papers to prove it (see Martin Murray's "Bunkum *Did* Go Sogering" [*WWQR*, Winter 1993]). We know that Andrew's 13th Regiment, New York State Militia, Heavy Artillery (the same regiment George had enlisted in the previous year), was in Suffolk, Virginia, for the three months Andrew served and that he was engaged in several skirmishes. Yet, in Roper's index, under Andrew, there is no listing for his war experience, and in the text we get only a fleeting mention that, "like his younger brother George, [Andrew] had enlisted in the Union army, but he was sent home after only a brief service, probably because of illness." In fact, Andrew served his full three-month term. And even Roper's passing mention seems contradicted later in his narrative, when he tells of brother Jeff's buying his way out of military service and comments that "other families sent two (and sometimes three and more) sons to the Civil War," but that "among the Whitmans there appears to have been no anguished debate about the correctness of avoiding service." The Whitmans, though, *did* send two sons, both of whom were in combat. It is not just that Roper has not checked the recent scholarship, where he would have found this important information; he also seems to have selectively neglected parts of George's correspondence, from which he otherwise quotes profusely, since George several times comments on Andrew's service and once even says he is going to try to visit his brother in Suffolk; Walt, too, mentions Andrew's service in his correspondence. Andrew's experience in the war should be a key part of the narrative weave of the story of "Walt Whitman and his brothers in the Civil War," but Roper has relied on outdated sources like Katherine Molinoff's 1941 sketches of Whitman's family and Gay Wilson Allen's 1955

Solitary Singer, both of which express doubts about Andrew's service, and he thus misses the opportunity to flesh out Andrew's military experience and the effects that it had on the Whitman family. When Andrew returned home to Brooklyn only to die a few months after he was discharged, probably of tuberculosis, he became the one Whitman brother lost during the war. Had the luckless Andrew only died while on active duty in Suffolk, he would have been a family hero.

Roper does offer some interesting discoveries of his own, including new information about Walt's brother Jesse's life as a seaman (a discovery described at greater length by Roper in this journal [Summer 2008]). And he is in general an effective narrator of the story of Whitman's family. The title of the book is somewhat misleading, though, since much of the first hundred pages is a kind of pre-war biography of the Whitman family, possibly the most full and illuminating account we have of the Brooklyn life of this incredibly diverse, troubled, and resilient group. Roper's careful attention to this family history allows him to achieve a very convincing portrayal of Whitman's relationship to Fred Vaughan, including the ways that the breakup between the two men may well have facilitated Whitman's decision to simply leave Brooklyn several months later for Fredericksburg, never again to return to live in his home town. Roper also offers a lively and detailed account of George's amazing four-year military career, and he brings to life the officers George served under, as well as offering a vivid account of the dangers he faced and escaped in what seemed to be nearly every major battle of the war as well as two notoriously hellish Confederate prison camps. From the decimation of George's company at Spotsylvania (where his command dwindled from forty men to eight) to his near-death in Danville prison to Walt's furious efforts to get his brother released in a prisoner exchange, Roper's exposition is keen and evocative. He offers an illuminating exploration of Jeff Whitman's life and accomplishments as an engineer, and the book gradually becomes an examination of the three successful Whitman brothers—Walt, George, and Jeff—who all demonstrated "the combination of physical labor at a craft, leading to membership in a white-collar profession," something Roper calls "a Whitman family hallmark," even if it applies to only three of the nine Whitman siblings. Along the way, Roper offers some nice moments of illumination, often in footnotes, as when he points out that for a brief time in the 1860s—when Walt was a government clerk, George an acting major still drawing a captain's salary, and Jeff a junior engineer—all three brothers were earning nearly the same salary (between $1100 and $1386 per year).

Occasionally, Roper's analysis of Whitman's motives is oddly proleptic, as if Whitman were somehow aware of how, for example, the next century would deal with same-sex affection: "In the debate over Walt's sexuality, it has sometimes been possible to lose sight of his own confusion, his long attempt to make sense of himself, to puzzle out the unusual nature that he felt to be his own. In a way of which he may have been mostly unconscious, he was in a race to define himself before someone else did, before his man-loving propensities were categorized, negatively, as would happen over the next half century, with same-sex behavior defined as sin and psychopathology." But this recognition of the confusion surrounding the puzzle of Whitman's sexuality gives way a

little too quickly to Roper's conjuring up scenes of sex between Whitman and the wounded soldiers, scenes that rival those imagined by Charley Shively in *Calamus Lovers* (1987) and *Drum Beats* (1989), where, Shively contended, "in the confined situation of the Civil War hospitals as in prisons, opportunities for cocksucking and butt-fucking greatly increased," and so "Whitman himself dressed as though he was going out cruising when he visited the hospitals, but he tried to look butch and presentable." Roper's imaginings are a little more delicate as he offers "glimpses into a secret arena—a realm of half-furtive sexual carryings-on," because "men having sex with men needed to be somewhat cautious, and were. Walt seems to want us to know that they were not all *that* cautious however. . . . For those who were so inclined, there may also have been a touch or a sexual embrace on occasion, in a private room, a latrine, or under a blanket." And Roper even provides us with a spun-from-whole-cloth three-way tryst in Armory Square hospital, as the suspicious attending nurse Amanda Akin is momentarily preoccupied:

> [W]e can possibly picture Walt on a night not of the most somber repose, a few of the younger soldiers spoiling for fun. Out of Walt's pocket or the famous haversack comes a bottle of fruit brandy, and medicinal swallows are shared all around. One of the patients now gets carefully out of bed. Miss Akin, engrossed, perhaps, in a book . . . looks up, then, seeing nothing about which to be too concerned, looks down at the page again. Ambulatory soldiers might use the latrines as needed, and they generally had the freedom of the wards. On this evening we are imagining, one soldier moves off quietly, followed a minute later by another, followed at just the right interval, by Walt himself. . . . By different routes, in the dusk of the wards just now settling down for the night, the three men end up eventually at the door of a spare back room. It is a room that belongs to a friendly wardmaster. They go inside. One of them strikes a match and lights a candle. Walt puts his arms around the shoulders of his friends. They are on their own now.

At less free-flying moments in the book, there are descriptions—more closely anchored to Whitman's own notes—of wonderful sensitivity embodied in beautiful sentences, some of them Whitmanesque in their length and breadth, as when Roper describes Whitman the hospital visitor from the perspective of a wounded soldier:

> The sight of him at the foot of your bed, if you were an ailing soldier, pulling out a handmade notebook and starting to write as you told him your story, his ability to jot as he spoke and went on looking you in the eye, remarkable in itself; his whole demeanor of attending, of caring enough to get the details down right, making a quiet answer to the impersonality of the ward, and to the squalor of the numberless other men sweating, groaning, stinking, and dying in nearby beds; his focus on what you wanted, as whimsical as that might be, implying that it was reasonable to hope for the day after tomorrow, when he promised to return, and by extension for a more distant future, a time when the open wound might heal or the fever pass or the dysentery miraculously cure itself—the simple sight of him, scribbling writing against the mass of unacknowledged, otherwise never-to-be-recorded misery, must have been good medicine.

Passages like that make much of this book a joy to read and capture the power of Whitman's Civil War work so effectively that it is surprising to find toward the end of *Now the Drum of War* that Roper judges Whitman to be largely a failure as a Civil War poet and chronicler. While Morris and Epstein both offered some moving readings of key Civil War poems—especially "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd"—Roper's readings of poems are few and shallow. He doesn't seem to care much for the *Drum-Taps* poems and worries that in them the "young soldiers seem almost to be hurried into silence, buried alive," not allowed to express their cries of rage and execrations of God. Even Louisa May Alcott, Roper proposes, "seems to have understood the awfulness" of war better than Whitman, who in Roper's view missed much of what the soldiers experienced—he was "quick to register surface alterations, the access of manly confidence, of an attractive rude manliness, but the idea that deeper changes might result, fundamental ones, either puzzled or repulsed him." Such a conclusion is not entirely without merit, but a more considered reading of the Civil War poetry—and a more informed sense of just when these poems were written and why—would reveal the deep and lasting changes Whitman knew the war had wrought in the soldiers who survived. Roper's book, then, is surprisingly out of step with the recent outpouring of critical interest in *Drum-Taps* and *Memoranda During the War*, which are emerging in the scholarship as some of Whitman's most powerful writing.

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