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WITH WALT WHITMAN IN LANCASHIRE, 1886-2008

Michael Robertson and Joey Cain

Bolton, ten miles from Manchester, nestles against the foothills of the Pennine range in Lancashire, England. During the nineteenth century the town was an important center of the international textile trade, its mills annually turning out millions of yards of cotton cloth. In the twenty-first century Bolton, like many other English cities, is struggling to find its way in a post-industrial economy. It faces that struggle possessed of several advantages, including a solid infrastructure with excellent public transportation and handsome Victorian architecture; a vibrant city center of shops, restaurants, and clubs; and an exceptionally strong commitment to preserving and celebrating its past.

The most prominent figures in Bolton's past, obvious to any visitor strolling around town, are the seventh Earl of Derby, who ate his last meal in a handsome timbered tavern, which still stands in central Bolton, before he was beheaded by Cromwell's troops in October 1651; and, rather improbably, Walt Whitman. Whitman's connection to Bolton—a happier one than that of Lord Derby—is celebrated in seven plaques placed prominently around the city and in the surrounding Lancashire countryside. Whitman never visited Bolton, but in the last few years of his life he struck up a deep friendship with two Bolton residents: J. W. Wallace, an architect's assistant, and John Johnston, a physician. Wallace and Johnston both made pilgrimages to Whitman in Camden, New Jersey, and their joint book, *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-1891, by Two Lancashire Friends*, includes vivid descriptions of Whitman and a good portion of the over one hundred letters and postcards that Whitman sent to Wallace, Johnston, and the "Eagle Street College," a group of friends who began celebrating Whitman's May 31 birthday in 1886.

The Lancashire celebrations of Whitman's birthday continued long after the deaths of not only Walt Whitman but also Wallace and Johnston, finally petering out in the 1950s. However, in the early 1980s, Paul Salveson, who was studying Lancashire history for his doctoral dissertation, came across the extensive records of the Eagle Street College in the Bolton municipal library archives. Fascinated by what he discovered, he enlisted the aid of friends in the Bolton Socialist Club to revive the Whitman birthday celebration. The first of the revived celebra-

tions included a walk across the Lancashire moors that were beloved by Wallace and Johnston, readings from *Leaves of Grass*, a talk by Salveson about Bolton's connection to Whitman, and the ceremonial imbibing of wine from a nineteenth-century loving cup brought to Bolton by an American Whitmanite.

The Whitman birthday outing became an annual event, and 2008 marked the revived celebration's twenty-fifth anniversary. A confluence of events led the organizers to turn the 2008 celebration into a major Walt Whitman festival that drew more than one hundred people over the course of four days: May 2008 saw not only the twenty-fifth anniversary but the publication of two major studies of the Bolton-Whitman connection, the unveiling of a new Whitman plaque at the Bolton Library and Museum, the meeting in Bolton of the Edward Carpenter Forum, and the tenth anniversary of a special service honoring Whitman at a Unitarian chapel frequented by the Eagle Street College.

The 2008 Bolton Whitman celebration would be worth describing at length if it were purely a historical commemoration offering the opportunity to recall the peculiar and fascinating connection between America's greatest poet and a group of lower-middle-class Lancashire men. However, the most recent celebration also illuminates aspects of Whitman's work that have had special significance to his British readers from the nineteenth century through today: Whitman's proto-socialist dimensions, his celebration of nature, his prophetic spirituality, and his affirmations of comradeship and love between men.

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The reception of Walt Whitman in England has been closely tied to the history of British socialism from the 1880s to the present. Wallace and Johnston, the leaders of the Eagle Street College, were deeply involved in the ethical socialist movement of their era, or what is sometimes called the "larger socialism." England's Fabian socialists and Marxist revolutionaries may have had scant interest in poetry, but for the ethical socialists of the industrial north, parliamentary politics and state ownership of the means of production were only a part of a broader socialist vision that included art, recreation, spirituality, and personal relationships. Wallace and Johnston were active in the politically oriented Independent Labour Party, but they were also members of the Labour Church, where readings of poems by Whitman took the place of scripture, and they had ties to the widely popular Clarion movement, which sponsored bicycle clubs and singing groups.

Bolton's Socialist Club, founded in 1888, was one of many independent socialist clubs of that era but is now one of only two remaining

clubs in Great Britain. The club's survival is due in large part to the purchase of a handsome townhouse in central Bolton in 1905 and the subsequent decision to turn the first-floor parlor into a taproom. During particularly bleak years for British socialism following the First World War, the club's availability as a drinking refuge during hours when public houses were closed kept its working-class membership rolls robust. In the 1980s, idealistic baby boomers surged into the club, renewing it politically and culturally. This new generation of members revived the Whitman birthday celebration and the Clarion cycling club and singing group, while also opening the club to trade unions, peace groups, immigration rights activists, and other progressive groups.

Paul Salveson and a band of Socialist Club stalwarts, along with Whitman lover Jacqueline Dagnall, are responsible for the annual Whitman walk, which takes place on a Saturday close to Whitman's May 31 birthday. The more elaborate 2008 events began on a Friday with an afternoon of speeches and ceremonies at the Bolton Library and Museum. Salveson spoke about his newly published pamphlet *With Walt Whitman in Bolton*, while Michael Robertson read from his group biography of Whitman's disciples, *Worshipping Walt*.[1] Although the event was sponsored by the Socialist Club, it was deeply integrated into Bolton's civic life, with the Mayor and his wife sitting in the front row, both wearing the massive, elaborate gold necklaces that English mayors and their spouses don on ceremonial occasions. The audience was diverse, with Socialist Club members rubbing shoulders with poetry lovers and local history buffs. Afterwards, the crowd gathered outside the Library to watch the Mayor unveil the newest plaque celebrating Lancashire's Walt Whitman connection. The plaque notes correctly that the Bolton Library's Whitman collection is the largest outside the United States, its civic boast encircled by a quotation from *Leaves of Grass*: "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."

Following the reading and ceremony, those in attendance went upstairs for a reception and viewing of a small part of the library's Whitman collection, including Whitman letters, a first edition of *Leaves of Grass* inscribed to Dr. Johnston, the three-handled loving cup sent by American Whitmanites in a gesture of transatlantic comradeship, and Whitman's pet canary, which he sent to a taxidermist after its death and then shipped to England in the care of Dr. Bucke as a gift to Wallace and Johnston.

Afterwards a smaller group walked about town to view Whitman-related sites, ending at the Socialist Club for a quintessentially English dinner of pasties and mushy peas with a pint of bitter. The club's parlor resembles a traditional English pub: a cozy, narrow room with comfortable chairs and small round tables along three sides, the fourth

side filled by the bar. The club's taproom is open every Friday and Saturday evening, and although events are sometimes scheduled, more often members simply drop by for a pint. The Socialist Club taproom reveals the convivial side of Britain's democratic socialism, its rootedness in working-class traditions of comradeship and a bit of fun on the weekend. Rather than spend all their time protesting the policies of Gordon Brown and George Bush, Bolton's contemporary socialists, like their predecessors of a century ago, have chosen to enact an alternative politics focused on comradeship, local traditions, and a variety of progressive causes. Although Walt Whitman never declared himself a socialist, he recognized that late-nineteenth-century socialists had legitimate claims on his poetry. When he received a copy of a British radical journal with an article on Walt Whitman as a socialist poet, he told Horace Traubel, "I find I'm a good deal more of a socialist than I thought I was: maybe not technically, politically, so, but intrinsically, in my meanings."[2] Bolton socialists, both in Whitman's time and today, have recognized and celebrated this intrinsically socialist dimension of Whitman's verse.

Saturday's events began with a panel discussion at the Bolton Library, sponsored by the Edward Carpenter Forum. The Carpenter Forum had its beginnings in 2004 as an offshoot of the Edward Carpenter Community, a British gay men's group of several hundred members, most of whom had only the vaguest idea of their namesake. A handful of historically minded Carpenter Community members decided to correct this situation, and over the next two years they held conferences on Carpenter's life and work in Derbyshire, where Carpenter lived from 1883 until 1922 while making his living as a market farmer. Carpenter was a less than typical Derbyshire farmer: a graduate of Cambridge and former don, he was one of his era's most famous writers and political activists, the author of over twenty books, including *Towards Democracy*, a collection of poems modeled on *Leaves of Grass*. Known as "the English Walt Whitman," he made two pilgrimages to Camden, and his *Days with Walt Whitman* is an important biographical and critical study of the poet, a more artful and less awestruck version of Wallace and Johnston's *Visits to Walt Whitman*.

Carpenter visited Bolton in the 1890s and struck up a friendship with Wallace, Johnston, and Eagle Street College member Charles Sixsmith, and so it was a natural fit for the Edward Carpenter Forum to join the modern-day Bolton Whitman enthusiasts for the extended 2008 birthday celebration. More than a dozen Carpenter Forum members from as far away as San Francisco attended the Lancashire events. Saturday morning's panel featured Joey Cain of the Carpenter Forum, Michael Robertson, and Sheila Rowbotham of the University of Manchester, whose major new biography of Carpenter was published in fall 2008. In wide-ranging discussions at the panel and afterwards,

participants gave less attention to the sexuality of Whitman (there was general agreement with Carpenter's commonsense comment that "Walt Whitman was before all a lover of the Male. His thoughts turned towards Men first and foremost, and it is no good disguising that fact")[3] or Carpenter (who bravely set up housekeeping with his working-class lover George Merrill) than to the complex affectional lives of the Lancashire Whitmanites in the era before the social and medical construction of "the homosexual."

Robertson speculated that J. W. Wallace, who never married, sublimated homoerotic desires in intense Eagle Street College friendships, and he noted how the College served as a male world of love and ritual, a cultural haven in which men could freely express a love for one another that was simultaneously sensual and platonic. Cain pointed to a photograph of Dr. Johnston, newly published in Salveson's book, that shows him with Carpenter and Merrill on a jaunt to Morocco, which even in the 1890s had a reputation as a haven for men seeking sex with other men. (Salveson's book contains a passage from Johnston's diary noting that, despite his marriage, he was "intensely interested" in Carpenter's views on "sexual inversion" [33].) John Baker, a Carpenter Forum founder, offered a late-night presentation at the Socialist Club on Lancashire Whitmanite Charles Sixsmith. Sixsmith, a husband and father, was the closest to Carpenter of all the Eagle Street College men, and he poured out his heart in a remarkable letter newly published by Salveson: "You [Carpenter] are surely right—love is what life is for. . . . But my love affairs have broken down and I have not found the true mate. Women attract me, and yet full intercourse has not satisfied me, and I prefer the company of men, and can be attracted to them also. But really I am the greatest puzzle to myself, a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions" (33).

Like other members of the Eagle Street College, Sixsmith used Whitman's poetry as a means of understanding his emotional life. Whitman affirmed the Lancashire disciples' friendships, their passions, their political views, and even their recreations. Sixsmith and his circle shared the widespread English fondness for the outdoors, which in Lancashire had a highly charged political dimension: in 1896 over 10,000 Bolton residents engaged in an act of civil disobedience known locally as the Mass Trespass, walking across the property of a landowner who had cut off access to the footpaths crossing his fields. Then as now, the Lancashire countryside was a maze of paths, and the early Whitman birthday celebrations frequently included a ramble across the moors in tribute to the author of "Song of the Open Road."

The current celebrations are centered around moorland walks, and following Saturday morning's panel over fifty people gathered at Barrow Bridge, a picturesque former mill village outside Bolton. In brilliant

sunshine they hiked up gently sloping Pennine foothills, pausing in a lush green field to read aloud favorite poems from *Leaves of Grass* and, in tribute to the nineteenth-century disciples, drink from a communal loving cup. The cup is a tribute to the eccentric three-handled cup brought to Bolton in 1894 as a gift by an American disciple. Until recently, the Bolton Library loaned out the original cup each May. However, perhaps alarmed by a photo in Salveson's book of visiting American scholar Ed Folsom casually carrying the cup by one handle as he strides along a footpath, the library now keeps the original in a glass case.

Following the ceremonial imbibing, the 2008 celebrants walked to Walker Fold, the country house where many of the early-twentieth-century Whitman birthday events were held. Unfortunately, Penny and Paul Element, who owned the house for many years, no longer live there; Mrs. Element was always keen to show visitors pictures of the benign ghost who haunted the property. The hike ended, as always, at a tearoom housed in a seventeenth-century hilltop farm with a spectacular view overlooking Bolton and Manchester. The large number of hungry Whitmanites were far too many for the farm's tiny tearoom, so hikers took their tea and scones in the sloping garden, with sheep grazing in the meadow below and birds occasionally alighting to hunt for crumbs.

The 2008 extended celebration included a second day of rambling. A smaller group met at the Adlington train station on Sunday morning to walk, in steady rain, through the village where J. W. Wallace spent the last decades of his life, serving as host to a stream of activists who came to regard the cramped house of "Uncle Wallace" as a socialist retreat. The hikers moved on to Sixsmith's nearby but much grander country house; unlike the other largely lower-middle-class members of the Eagle Street College, Sixsmith was a prosperous businessman who transgressed class boundaries in his support for the egalitarian political vision of Walt Whitman and the Lancashire disciples.

Sunday's walk ended at another tearoom, this one attached to the Rivington Unitarian Chapel. The chapel, set on the central green of picturesque Rivington village, is one of the oldest Nonconformist chapels in England, built shortly after the Toleration Act of 1689. From Whitman's own time through today, Unitarians have embraced the poetry of a writer whom they regard as a spokesman for a liberal religious vision congruent with their own. During the early twentieth century, the Reverend Samuel Thompson welcomed the Lancashire Whitmanites to Rivington Chapel; now Judith Crompton extends the same hospitality. When Jacqueline Dagnall approached Crompton in 1998 about placing a plaque in the chapel's garden, Crompton enthusiastically embraced the idea and commemorated the plaque's unveiling with a special service in honor of Whitman. This year, on the occasion's tenth anniversary, Crompton led a similar service. Bible readings were replaced with passages from *Leaves*

of Grass, including a section from "Starting from Paumanok," in which Whitman emphasizes the central role of spirituality in his poetry:

Know you, solely to drop in the earth the germs of a greater religion,
The following chants each for its kind I sing.

My comrade!
For you to share with me two greatnesses, and a third one rising inclusive and more
resplendent,
The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion.[4]

Crompton preached a homily on "Lilac, Thrush, and Western Star," and selections from the hymnal were supplemented by Shelley's "Men of England" and Carpenter's "England, Arise!" sung by members of Bolton's Clarion choir, wearing red t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Singing for Socialism." The service ended with a British adaptation of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land"; the two Americans in attendance loudly, if bemusedly, joined in singing:

This land is your land, this land is my land,
From lowland pasture to western island,
From teeming city to fen and moorland—
This land was made for you and me.

With that Whitmanesque transatlantic refrain, the 2008 Whitman birthday celebration came to a close.

Leaves of Grass served Whitman's nineteenth-century Lancashire disciples as a means for uniting politics, sexuality, spirituality, and community, offering a unifying progressive vision at a moment when modern industrial capitalism encouraged and rewarded individualism, competition, materialism, and consumption. At the turn of the twentieth century, the members of the Eagle Street College used the work of an antebellum American poet for intensely local purposes, creating an alternative community of comradeship. More than one hundred years later, a new generation of women and men—socialists, gay advocates, religious liberals, and community activists—have embraced the Bolton Whitmanites' project, once again celebrating *Leaves of Grass* and finding in Whitman's poetry inspiration to continue the unceasing work of creating a more peaceful, just, and loving future.

The College of New Jersey
Edward Carpenter Forum

NOTES

1 Paul Salveson, *With Walt Whitman in Bolton: Spirituality, Sex and Socialism in a Northern Mill Town* (Huddersfield, U.K.: Little Northern Books, 2008); Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

2 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 2:4.

3 Edward Carpenter, *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex-Psychology* (London: British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology, 1924), 14.

4 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 21.