



Whitman Surprised: The Poet in 1885

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation

Loving, Jerome. "Whitman Surprised: The Poet in 1885." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 28 (2011), 141-144. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1968>

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NOTES

WHITMAN SURPRISED: THE POET IN 1885

In the same year that featured Silas Lapham as the owner of a thoroughbred trotting horse and sleek cutter, Walt Whitman rode around the New Jersey countryside and streets of Camden in a “natty phaeton” drawn by a “smart chestnut horse.” It was the surprise gift of a number of prominent individuals who answered the call of Tom Donaldson, the poet’s lawyer friend from Philadelphia. Donaldson limited every contributor to a donation of ten dollars, though Mark Twain, who expressed “great veneration for the old man,” offered to make an annual payment for the upkeep of the horse. Twain’s close friend William Dean Howells, the author of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), also contributed, but he did not want his generosity towards the now enfeebled “Good Gray Poet” made public. Howells, who had never appreciated Whitman nearly as much as he had Emerson and the Schoolroom Poets, did not want his involvement with the gift to be taken as an endorsement for *Leaves of Grass*, and so volunteered only “on the condition that I do not appear in the list of subscribers.”¹

Mark Twain had also hesitated to get involved with the poet whose book had been “banned in Boston” back in 1882. He had written a letter to the editor of a Boston newspaper arguing that Whitman’s verse was in no way “indecent” compared to the classics of antiquity found in every gentleman’s library. “Now I think I can show, by a few extracts,” he wrote in the letter-to-the-editor that he ended up never mailing, “that in matters of coarseness, obscenity, and power to excite salacious passions, Walt Whitman’s book is refined and colorless and impotent, contrasted with that other and more widely read batch of literature.”² He cited among others Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

John Greenleaf Whittier allowed his name to be included among the list of contributors, but he also sided with Howells in hesitating to make his gift of ten dollars (the equivalent of more than two-hundred dollars today) any kind of endorsement for *Leaves of Grass*. “I am sorry to hear of the physical disabilities of the man who tenderly nursed the wounded Union soldiers and as tenderly sung the dirge of their great captain,” he wrote Donaldson on June 5, 1885. “I have no doubt, in his lameness, that a kind, sober-paced roadster would be more serviceable to him than the untamed, rough-jolting Pegasus he has been accustomed to ride—without check or snaffle.” The Quaker poet concluded his remarks about the other Quaker poet from Brooklyn with the following caveat: “I need not say perhaps that I have been pained by some portions of W. W.’s writings, which for his own sake, and that of his readers, I wish could be omitted” (Donaldson, 175).

Howells was not the only one who contributed anonymously; only twenty-six of the thirty-two donors evidently allowed their names to be published. Charles Dudley Warner, Twain's co-author of *The Gilded Age* (1874), openly contributed. So did Edwin Booth, the famous actor (and older brother of John Wilkes Booth), and Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *The Century*, which had recently published three segments of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Otherwise, the public list contained the names of disciples or close friends of the poet, including Richard Maurice Bucke of Canada and William Douglas O'Connor, the author of *The Good Gray Poet* now ailing in Washington, D.C. Of the \$320 collected, Whitman received in cash "to feed the horse, etc." \$135.00. The horse, equipage, and delivery charge came to \$184.60, or well over \$4000 in today's dollars (Donaldson, 172, 186-187).

The September 16, 1885, article from the *New York Times* printed below was obviously not written by the poet who had often slipped anonymous pieces about himself into the newspapers.³ Usually, such pieces reminded readers that he was still alive and that *ergo* his book still lived as well. "Walt Whitman Surprised," on the other hand, presents the old poet as an object of pity, albeit a proud and enduring object nevertheless. While Whitman is referred to in the article as "the poet," there is no mention of *Leaves of Grass* or any allusion to the poet's notoriety. He was at the time probably better remembered (if not famous) for his hospital work during the war, as Whittier suggests in his otherwise scolding letter. Upon receiving the letter that came with the gift, the poet is described here as slow to move about and thus in great need of a vehicle to allow him to get out of the house. The Camden blue laws in 1885 did not allow public horse cars to run on Sundays "so that," Donaldson wrote in his 1896 memoir about the poet, "Mr. Whitman has been virtually a prisoner [in his Mickle Street row house] from Saturdays until Mondays" (187). His surprise gift liberated him.

WALT WHITMAN SURPRISED
PRESENTED BY MANY FRIENDS WITH A HANDSOME HORSE
AND PHAETON

PHILADELPHIA, Sept. 15.—Toward sundown this evening, as Walt Whitman was half dozing over a pile of manuscript near a window in his little frame house in Camden, the jarring rattle of wheels startled the old man, and a smart chestnut horse drew a natty phaeton up to the door. The poet glanced over his flowers at the turnout and nodded kindly to the little chap who held the reins, for he was a favorite, the son of his old friend, Tom Donaldson. The boy carefully tied the animal and handed up with a mysterious air a portentous [sic] envelope, big and fat, and started to walk away, but was called back and induced to enter the cozy workshop.

"What's all this about, my boy?" inquired Walt Whitman, turning over the missive, and handling it very much as if he feared it might contain dynamite.

"Them's the documents," piped the little fellow, in a childish treble.

"What documents? A commission from some foreign Court?" returned the old gentleman playfully, as he held the envelope up to the light and fruitlessly attempted to peer through the cover into the contents. "Is it a patent of nobility, or is it an address from a lot of my young friends?"

“Why don’t you open it?” suggested the somewhat matter-of-fact emissary, who was on pins and needles through the consciousness of the possession of a huge secret many sizes too big for so small a custodian.

It seemed a long time that the poet consumed in adjusting his glasses and scanning the chirography of the superscription, and whole eras winged their way into eternity while he deliberately and nicely cut open the end and extracted the contents. Several large sheets of paper were folded up within. On them were scrawled the names of a number of prominent men in the various walks of life, but not a line to explain their significance save “Walt Whitman, with compliments of —” which was written at the top of the first page.

The old poet turned the sheets upside down and looked on the backs of them, while his forehead wrinkled with perplexity. He took off his glasses and polished them with his silk handkerchief, but their increased translucence did not augment their power of unraveling the mystery. In utter astonishment he turned to the boy, whom he began to suspect of joking with him, but that young man, who had been writhing under the effects of volcanic emotions, sprang to his feet, dashed out of the door, yelling wildly:

“It’s yours—all yours—yours for keeps!” and disappeared.

“God bless us, Mary,” gasped the old gentleman, as his good housekeeper appeared, with consternation written all over her features.⁴

“There’s something the matter with the boy.”

At this moment Mr. Donaldson walked in and grasped his old friend by the hand.

“What does it mean?” the poet demanded.

“The horse and phaeton are a present from your friends, whose names are on the paper,” was the laughing reply.

But Walt Whitman could not grasp the idea that he was the recipient of so valuable a present. “Don’t joke me,” he pleaded; “I never owned such a thing in my life.”

It took some time to convince him that the present was for him, and then he put on his wide-brimmed sombrero and insisted upon getting into the phaeton and dashing out into the green lanes. Mr. Donaldson accompanied him, and after a three-mile drive the poet let him out and drove to his old friend, Henry S. Scovel, and insisted that Mrs. Scovel ride out behind the wonderful animal.⁵

It was long after dark before the poet consented to return to his home, and when a reporter called at 9 o’clock; the old gentleman was fagged. He was sitting in his great armchair beside the window, with the lights turned down. The floor and table were still littered with books and papers, and the evening mail was still unopened.

“You don’t know how many good friends I have,” said the bard, as he half rose to extend his hand. Then running his fingers through his silver locks, and rolling back his wide collar still further from his throat, he continued:

“I have before now been made to feel in many touching ways how kind and thoughtful my loving friends are, but this present is so handsome and valuable, came so opportunely, and was so thorough a surprise, that I can hardly realize it. My paralysis has made me so lame lately that I had to give up even my walks for health let alone my rambles in the country, and my constitution has suffered for exercise. It was all done so unostentatiously and delicately that I was greatly affected. Tom Donaldson knew that I was getting more feeble, and he wrote to a number of friends and admirers of mine in different parts of the country, proposing presenting me with a carriage and horse to ease my declining years. Some of them I do not know. Some are very dear

friends. Here are their names: John G. Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Samuel L. Clemens, (Mark Twain,) Charles Dudley Warner, John Boyle O'Reilly, William J. Florence, Edwin Booth, and Lawrence Barrett, Mrs. S. A. Bigelow, of Boston; Horace Howard Furness, L. N. Fairchild, E. A. Buck, of the *Spirit of the Times*; R. W. Gilder, of the *Century*; Edward T. Steel, A. K. McClure, Stephen B. Elkins, Charles Emory Smith, Talcott Williams, William D. O'Connor, of Washington; J. H. Bartlett, George H. Boker, Edwin S. Stuart, William W. Justice, John Harker, of Exina, Canada, and R. M. Buck[e], M.D., and Dr. Beeman, of London, Canada.

"It is an interesting list, isn't it?" the poet continued. "It seems that this phaeton was made for me in Columbus, Ohio, and is as easy and convenient as it can be. It is very low in the bed, has gig lamps, and deep cushions.⁶ Oh, I shall have a famous time this Fall! They tell me there are lovely drives south and east of Camden, and there are sleepy old villages that I am informed are very like old English hamlets. I shall take long drives into the country each day, and once more enjoy nature, if not as I used to, at least as deeply and thankfully."

It is not generally known that the poet was recently in receipt of a considerable sum raised among his English admirers by subscription and without his knowledge. The gift is said to be about \$500 in value, and it was very welcome, coming as it did, when Walt Whitman was in financial embarrassment.⁷

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NOTES

1 Thomas Donaldson, *Walt Whitman, The Man* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1896), 174; Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 305.

2 Ed Folsom and Jerome Loving, "The Walt Whitman Controversy: A Lost Document," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 83 (Spring, 2007), 123-138. See also Jerome Loving, *Mark Twain: The Adventures of Samuel L. Clemens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 252-255.

3 Listed in Scott Giantvalley, *Walt Whitman, 1839-1939: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 75. The story of Whitman's receiving the horse and phaeton also appeared on September 15 in the *Camden Post* and on September 16 in the *Philadelphia Press* and the *Boston Herald*.

4 Mary O. Davis, the widow of a sea captain and Whitman's cook and housekeeper since 1884.

5 Probably a misprint for James M. Scovel, another lawyer friend who practiced in Camden and did small favors for Whitman.

6 Oil lamps designed for a "gig," or a carriage light enough to be pulled by one horse.

7 Whitman had encouraged financial help not only from his American friends but his British supporters as well. Edward Carpenter took up a collection and had recently sent the poet fifty pounds, which then amounted to \$239.83 (*Walt Whitman: The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller [New York: New York University Press, 1964], 3:399n).