



## Peck, Garrett. Walt Whitman in Washington, D.C.: The Civil War and America's Great Poet [review]

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GARRETT PECK, *Walt Whitman in Washington, D.C.: The Civil War and America's Great Poet*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015. 192 pp.

*Walt Whitman in Washington, D. C.* will appeal to readers curious to see Whitman's life overlaid with the evolving urban history of the capital. The book straddles the genres of biography and literary travel guide. Garrett Peck offers a narrative-driven portrait of Whitman seen through the overlapping frames of nineteenth- and twenty-first century D.C. The author of *Capital Beer: A Heady History of Brewing in Washington, D.C.*; *Prohibition in Washington D.C.: How Dry We Weren't*; and *The Potomac River: A History and Guide*, Peck is first and foremost a writer concerned with the history of Washington. Peck's background as a tour guide with the Smithsonian Associates permeates his prose. This is much more an exploration of a city than of a poet.

Attuned to general readers not already intimate with Whitman's life and work, this book focuses on the decade that Whitman lived in Washington (1863-1873). Peck seeks to elevate the poet's place within the contemporary cityscape, and to illuminate the impact that the capital had on the trajectory of Whitman's life during and following the Civil War. He begins with the premise that Whitman is most often associated with New York City, or, in his twilight years, with Camden, New Jersey. Aside from the Civil War, Peck argues, Whitman's Washington has not entered the cultural zeitgeist:

When people asked why I was writing this book, I explained that Whitman lived in Washington, D. C. for ten years. "He did?!" was the near universal response. They knew he served as a hospital volunteer during the Civil War, but not that he remained in Washington and took a job as a federal clerk or that he wrote his Civil War poetry book *Drum-Taps* as a Washington resident (14).

While there is no other book devoted solely to Whitman's residency in the capital, this period has been extensively covered in the major biographies by Gay Wilson Allen, Justin Kaplan, Jerome Loving, and David S. Reynolds. Additionally, Robert Roper's *Now the Drum of War: Whitman and his Brothers in the Civil War* (2008) focuses primarily on this era, as does Roy Morris Jr.'s *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman in*

*the Civil War* (2000). Both Roper and Morris are biographers writing, like Peck, for a general audience, although the scope of their projects is far greater. Kenneth M. Price's recent article, "Walt Whitman and Civil War Washington" (*Leviathan* 16, March 2014), and the interdisciplinary digital archive *Civil War Washington* (civilwardc.org) are two integral sources for scholars seeking to understand Whitman's relationship to the capital.

Readers already familiar with the above works will find no new discoveries in Peck's treatment of Whitman, though they may appreciate the author's knowledge of the District's landscape. Peck unites a collage of geographical and biographical material, juxtaposing archival photographs and correspondence with scenes from contemporary D.C. This book aims to reincarnate, visually and textually, the traces Whitman left on the city. Although the apartments he inhabited have all vanished, Peck follows Kim Roberts's footsteps in mapping Whitman's Washington. (Roberts's map of Whitman's boarding houses and work places, published in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* (2005), is another invaluable scholarly resource.) Peck also charts the locations where Whitman's words have been inscribed onto landmarks:

Coming out of the north entrance of the Dupont Circle Metro station, you'll see part of Whitman's poem "The Wound-Dresser" carved into the giant stone that surrounds the entrance. . . . The poem was carved into the station entrance in 2007. It echoes the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, when thousands of gay men were dying of the disease. Another Whitman poem is quoted at the Archives-Navy Memorial Metro Station, his "Prayer of Columbus." Two more are carved in pink granite in Freedom Plaza, one from 1855, the other from 1888. In the Mount Pleasant neighborhood, there is a firebox converted into street art showing Civil War casualties arriving at Mount Pleasant Hospital. The back quotes Whitman's poem "Dirge for Two Veterans" (16-17).

As someone who lived in Washington while researching a book about Whitman, I appreciated Peck's depictions of the poet's enduring presence in public spaces. I always caught my breath when ascending or descending under "The Wound-Dresser" at Dupont Circle. I first learned of the Mount Pleasant firebox sculpture when reading this book, however; had I known of it then I would have made sure to visit

the site.

One part of Peck's interpretation of the era, the city, and Whitman does not ring true to this reviewer. Despite its author's impressive knowledge of Whitmanian Washington, the book provides a less than nuanced rendering of one of the most vital and complex aspects of Whitman's life during the war years—the poet's "magnetic" attachment to wounded soldiers. Writing about Whitman's hospital work, Peck lapses into heteronormative rhetoric: "The soldiers Walt met in the hospital wards must have provided every sort of temptation for him" (97). The book drastically oversimplifies the erotic reciprocity that characterized nineteenth-century same-sex relationships. The following passage on Whitman's friendship with John Burroughs offers one example:

One Sunday, Burroughs ran into Walt, who was en route to a hospital with his haversack full of supplies. Walt spontaneously invited Burroughs to join him and Burroughs accepted. It was this hospital visit that helped solidify their friendship. John was a confirmed heterosexual, but Walt undoubtedly took a fancy to his young lettered comrade. Just a month after meeting Whitman, Burroughs confessed to a friend, "I have been much with Walt. Have even slept with him. I love him very much. The more I see him and talk with him, the greater he becomes to me." The phrase "have even slept with him" isn't necessarily taken in a sexual sense: they simply shared a bed one night. But it was clear that John had a "man crush"—if you will—on Walt (84).

This two-dimensionality recurs at pivotal moments throughout the book—a historical flattening that restricts its rich subject matter to binary sexual borders. As the term "man crush" suggests, perhaps in an effort to be more approachable, Peck displays a curious lack of interest in historical context, projecting his own twenty-first century perceptions onto Whitman's sexual milieu. How, precisely, is nineteenth-century sexuality "confirmed"? Engagement with queer histories such as Jonathan Katz's *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (2001), Graham Robb's *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (2003), or Mark Turner's *Backward Glances: Cruising Queer Streets in London and New York* (2004), would strengthen the author's understanding of Whitman and his comrades.

Peck's work is strongest when focused on the urban history of

the District. One compelling example is his account of the recent rediscovery of Clara Barton's Missing Soldiers Office. As the war drew to a close, Barton transitioned from nursing to searching for soldiers. She converted the boarding house rooms that had previously stored hospital supplies into the Missing Soldiers Office, where she responded to thousands of letters from families requesting assistance. According to Peck, Barton helped locate more than 20,000 soldiers. In 1868, Barton closed the Missing Soldiers Office, storing some of her possessions in the attic, where the material was forgotten until 1997. When the building was being prepared for demolition, a contractor noticed a letter protruding from the ceiling. Upon entering the attic, he found, in Peck's words, "a veritable Clara Barton time capsule, untouched for more than a century" (70). This discovery saved the building from destruction; a museum opened on the site in 2014, under the direction of the National Museum of Civil War Medicine.

Peck's book, then, can introduce unfamiliar readers, particularly D.C. residents and visitors seeking to retrace the poet's Civil War footsteps, to a pivotal time in Whitman's life and Washington's history. Scholars and readers familiar with Whitman Studies are unlikely to find this book essential. Yet, as evidence of continued popular interest in this vital point in Whitman's biography, we should find its publication heartening.

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ADAM C. BRADFORD, *Communities of Death: Whitman, Poe, and the American Culture of Mourning*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014. xiv + 248 pp.

For those accustomed to the conventional literary wisdom that Walt Whitman's primary mentor was Ralph Waldo Emerson, Adam Bradford's *Communities of Death* may prove startling. Bradford puts forward the audacious thesis that instead of Emerson's Transcendentalist work,