



# Whitman, Walt. Drum Taps: The Complete Civil War Poems; Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition [review]

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tongues” is a vivid description of the collaboration required to make meaning. *War Memoranda* invites us to join our uttering tongues to that collaboration.

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MAGDELYN HAMMOND HELWIG



WALT WHITMAN. *Drum Taps: The Complete Civil War Poems*. Introduction by James McPherson. Kennebunkport, ME: Cider Mill Press, 2015. 213 pp.

WALT WHITMAN. *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition*, ed. Lawrence Kramer. New York: New York Review of Books, 2015. xxiv + 170 pp.

Two stand-alone editions of Walt Whitman’s 1865 *Drum-Taps* hit bookshelves in 2015 beside a score of books commemorating the sesquicentennial of General Robert E. Lee’s surrender and the end of the Civil War—an anniversary coinciding with the birthday of Whitman’s war poetry collection. Both editions of *Drum-Taps* stand apart from the majority of those other books, celebrating one of the few collections of Civil War poetry written by an eye-witness. Cider Mill Press’s *Drum Taps: The Complete Civil War Poems* offers a visceral experience, integrating the poems with full-color and black-and-white historical images of battlefields, hospitals, and veterans. The result is a collage attempting to present Whitman’s poetry as documentation—eye-witness testimony to the bravery of soldiers and the savagery of war, with a special emphasis on the “eye.” *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition*, published by the press of the *New York Review of Books*, is a text-only paperback, about one-third smaller in dimensions than Cider Mill’s version, with a back cover declaring this edition to be “a revelation, allowing one of Whitman’s greatest achievements to appear again in all its troubling glory.” The books differ dramatically not only in appearance but, more importantly, in the editorial approaches to the source material.

Pulitzer-prize winning and *New York Times* bestselling author James McPherson, the renowned historian whose books include *Battle Cry of Freedom*, introduces Cider Mill's *Drum Taps* (the missing hyphen in the title is the Press's own mistake) as "[making] the war more real to readers of the poems and viewers of the photographs, [offering] a stark portrait of the grim realities of war that confronted Whitman as he made his rounds of hospitals and battlefields" (4). The editors have chosen a fair balance of iconic and lesser known images of the period, including Currier and Ives lithographs, Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner photographs, and daguerreotypes of enlisted soldiers. A majority of the images are black-and-white or sepia, and are remarkably clear for a book of this size. The color images, mostly artistic representations of the war, are equally stunning in their detail, testifying to the quality of Cider Mill's printing.

Any book relying so heavily on illustrations runs the risk of encountering problems in formatting, especially when pulling those images from historical archives and collections. While most of the illustrations are full-page, smaller images require internal framing to fit the 6" x 9.2" book format. Some of these frames—mock-Victorian borders against stock-design backgrounds—contain images no bigger than 2" x 3.5", mostly horizontal images presumably reduced in size to fit the vertical dimensions of the book. Among otherwise full-page spreads, these frames are clunky and often interrupt the continuity of the reading experience. Photo information and credits are located at the back of the book, so, with nearly 200 images to contend with, the reader is forced to constantly flip back and forth between the pages. The presence of the frames might suggest the book's role as a curatorial item, a museum on the page, but the absence of localized, focused captions and the inconsistency of formatting detract from the maneuverability of the work as a whole.

Cider Mill internally divides their collection of Whitman's Civil War poetry into two books, the first of which is textually and structurally identical with the *Drum-Taps* cluster found in the final (1881) arrangement of *Leaves of Grass*, thus relying on Whitman's later ordering and edits. The two "books" are separated by an "interlude"—two prose pieces detailing the inauguration and death of President Lincoln

taken directly from Whitman's *Specimen Days*, an attribution that does not appear anywhere within the book itself. Other aptly-selected pieces from *Specimen Days* on the days leading up to the war are featured as a forword to Book I, but also are given only an author source attribution. Book II, presumed at first reading to be the *Memories of President Lincoln* cluster, omits two poems found in the 1881 edition of *Leaves* ("Hush'd be the Camps Today" and "This Dust was Once the Man"). This editorial decision may have been because those poems were not included in Whitman's *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, an addendum to the first book appearing later in 1865 and containing most of his Lincoln elegies. Though "Hush'd" was published in the original *Drum-Taps*, it is absent from Cider Mill's edition completely. "This Dust" was written in 1871 and absorbed into *Memories of President Lincoln* in the 1881 revision. Cider Mill, however, does include in its Book II several poems originally found in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* but later moved to other clusters in *Leaves of Grass*, including "Chanting the Square Deific," and "I heard you, Solemn-sweet Pipes of the Organ." The result is a Book II that is a little bit *Sequel to Drum-Taps* and a little bit *Memories of President Lincoln*.

"This moving collection of poems," write the editors, "describes the tragedy, chaos, compassion, and triumph of the Civil War." It was their goal, according to their editorial statement, to put "Whitman's *tour de force* in historical context . . . breathing new life into Whitman's remarkable verses." The textual context provided includes the prose pieces by Whitman from *Specimen Days*, a biographical excerpt from natural historian John Burroughs speaking to Whitman's selfless character, McPherson's introduction, and an "original introduction to *Drum Taps*." The latter piece is not to be confused with anything written by Whitman or published in 1865; rather, it is an essay written by Walter de la Mare (again unidentified in Cider Mill's publication) and published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1915. This piece, while supplying the reader with some helpful insights, lacks sufficient identification in the current edition and in fact seems to purposely mislead the reader.

While the textual content of the book is comprehensive and the historic images chosen are, on their own, both moving and usually

complementary to Whitman's poetry, the book suffers as a whole from a hyper-kitschy visual design that might distract from a serious consideration of the atrocities of the Civil War. The cover and interior design bear striking similarities to Cider Mill's publication of Shakespeare's sonnets—one would hope for distinct artistic and design approaches between Elizabethan love sonnets and American Civil War free-verse. From the faux-yellowed (or possibly faux-vellum) background on every page to a visually unappealing font (appears to be Footlight MT Regular), Cider Mill's *Drum Taps* aestheticizes the bloodiest conflict in American history—a conflict that claimed around 800,000 casualties in four years of fighting. Images of fallen soldiers, amputees, and desolate battlefields strewn with corpses are packaged in a way that trivializes their importance to history and relation to Whitman's text. The inappropriate design results in visual overload and does not assist the reader in constructing meaning from the relationship between the images and the poetry.

Standing apart stylistically from Cider Mill's edition, *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition* from the press of the *New York Review of Books* presents a faithful transcription of the 1865 poems in a smaller, text-only format; the editor acknowledges the use of the *Walt Whitman Archive* for access to the original edition and for information provided in the almost 200 endnotes. Some pages contain as many as four notes, often referring the reader to edits made by Whitman after the appropriation of *Drum-Taps* into *Leaves of Grass* or to historical background of the war deemed helpful in understanding a particular poem. Lawrence Kramer, Distinguished Professor of English and Music at Fordham University, provides a scholarly introduction ("*Drum-Taps, Leaves of Grass, and the Civil War*") that details some of the publication history of *Drum-Taps* and the place it occupies in the canon of American literature. Kramer emphasizes Whitman's own editing of the work, which led to its truncation and eventual disappearance as a stand-alone collection of poetry. "Once folded into *Leaves*," Kramer laments in his introduction, "*Drum-Taps* ceases to exist as a work. . ." (xi). Kramer ignores earlier reprints of *Drum-Taps*, especially the 1959 facsimile reprint of the original edition with an important introduction by F. DeWolfe Miller, but Kramer's is the first one to make the book widely

and inexpensively available. Scholarly without sacrificing readability, Kramer supports Whitman's original text, not with the visual context of Cider Mill's edition, but with quality academic research and framing, noting that the project began with graduate students' supervised research in a seminar at Fordham (xxiii).

Restoration of *Drum-Taps* to completeness is set up as the goal of the NYRB edition, as Kramer states: "The primary aim of the present volume is to undo the damage Whitman did to his own legacy when he dismantled the expanded *Drum-Taps*," and Kramer hopes that "the restored original should be able to take its place beside the original 1855 version of *Leaves* as a text of independent interest and value" (xiii). By so stating, Kramer places his methodological approach to Whitman beside that of Gary Schmidgall, whose 2000 selection of Whitman's poetry features over two hundred poems in chronological order and as originally published prior to Whitman's extensive editing. What could be called the "Restorationist" approach to Whitman is gaining momentum as editions like Schmidgall's and Kramer's are finding their way into bookstores and classrooms, and are gaining favor over the thoroughly revised final "Drum-Taps" cluster in the last edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Kramer's restored *Drum-Taps*, while using the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first publication as a convenient platform for its incarnation, is far more than a mere ephemeral celebration of American literature and history. Kramer presents *Drum-Taps* as every bit as relevant today as when it was first published in 1865—a relevance buried for over a century under Whitman's own edits.

Despite containing all the poems printed in the 1865 *Drum-Taps* with their spelling and grammar peculiarities intact, the NYRB edition does not present a direct facsimile of that edition, as was the case with the 2010 *Democratic Vistas* and *Leaves of Grass, 1860*, both published in the University of Iowa Press Whitman Series. While Kramer gives the reader a fairly authentic experience of the text, he does not reproduce the pagination and typeface of Whitman's original. Had he done so, such an editorial decision might have been in keeping with his admiration of the 1865 edition, but may have given the book a feel that was too antiquarian and possibly alienating to casual readers. By presenting *Drum-Taps* in original textual form but packaging it in a

typeface comfortably familiar to modern readers (what appears to be 8-point Adobe Garamond Pro) and providing lots of space around each poem, Kramer highlights the relevance of Whitman's composition for today's reader, even while sacrificing important elements of the original text, like the packed arrangement of the poems, a result (as Ted Genoways has demonstrated in "The Disorder of *Drum-Taps* in *WWQR* [Fall 2006]) of the difficulties and costs of publishing in the years during and just after the war.

For serious and casual readers alike, then, Kramer's *Drum-Taps: The Complete 1865 Edition* is an important addition to the Whitman bibliography. The copious endnotes allow academically inclined readers to delve more deeply into Whitman's poetry in an edition that is conveniently portable and easy to read. The concept of the illustrated *Drum Taps: The Complete Civil War Poems* is novel and, if it had been executed effectively, could have been an inspiring collection valuable to poetry fans, Civil War buffs, and Whitman devotees. The Cider Mill edition, however, buries the harsh realities of war and the compassionate gestures of a poet and voluntary nurse beneath an over-saturation of heavy-handed visual design—it is a book made more for viewers than for readers. The inclusion of prose passages from Whitman's Civil War writing to support the narrative of the poetry is effective, but the absence of proper attribution to *Specimen Days* betrays an editorial emphasis on visual over textual documentation of the war. While Kramer gives pride of place to Whitman's poetic text, that text appears almost as an afterthought in Cider Mill's visual celebration of the Civil War.

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