



IN MEMORIAM: Joann Peck Krieg, 1932-2017

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

Recommended Citation

Karbiener, Karen. "IN MEMORIAM: Joann Peck Krieg, 1932-2017." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35 (2018), 288-289. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2293>

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IN MEMORIAM: JOANN PECK KRIEG, 1932-2017

Joann Peck Krieg was a groundbreaking scholar, fierce “Whitmaniac,” valued teacher and mentor, and cherished friend. She will continue to be a role model for many, for her professionalism and determination to build a remarkable career after raising a family and in what Whitman called “the years of middle age” (which he agreed “ought to be those of your best performances” in “Manly Health and Training”). She generated influence in and out of academic settings at a time when such scholarship was uncommon from a female perspective; for example, she chaired a panel on “Whitman on Women” and edited a collection of papers from the “Walt Whitman: Here and Now” conference at Hofstra University in 1980, in which not a single presentation of 25 was delivered by a woman (“America has been catching up with the Whitman who waits,” she shrewdly notes in her unsigned “Preface”). Joann assembled a year-by-year, often day-by-day *Whitman Chronology* that is still a standard scholarly reference two decades on; her discussions of race, ethnicity, and sexuality in *Walt Whitman and the Irish* (2000) resonate through the latest work in Whitman studies. She loved her “Walt”—and she adored opera as he did. After retiring from her professorship at Hofstra University in her mid-70s, Joann moved to an apartment within walking distance of Manhattan’s Lincoln Center and became an opera aficionada, as passionate about Luciano Pavarotti as Whitman had been over Marietta Alboni. At the time of her death, Joann left unfinished a book on Whitman and opera that her daughter, a professional editor, is currently revising.

Joann Peck, like Walter Whitman, was a native Long Islander; and both were equally proud of “starting from Paumanok.” Born in Jamaica, Queens, Joann graduated from secretarial school in 1950. After marrying John Krieg in 1952 and raising two children on Long Island, she returned to school in her late thirties to earn her BA in 1974, an MA a year later (both at Hofstra University) and her PhD from CUNY in 1979. She began teaching in Hofstra’s English and American Studies departments in 1978 and retired in 2005. Elected to Phi Alpha Theta and the Fulbright Specialist Program, Joann wrote or edited fourteen books and numerous articles, organized major conferences for Hofstra and edited the proceedings of several of them, including two of the university’s presidential conferences. She was involved in Hofstra’s Long Island Studies Institute from its beginnings in 1986; indeed, from early on, her writings reflected her own deep-rooted interest and engagement in local history and literature. The almost palpable connection she felt to her subject matter can be sensed in the precision and details of such books as *Long Island and Literature*, and encouraged such comments as she offered after verifying a manuscript of “Thou Vast Rondure Swimming in Space,” found in a Long Island basement in 1986: “I don’t know how to say it,” Joann told a *Newsday* reporter; “But it is overwhelming . . . touching something that was touched by the hands of this great person and was part of his creative life.”

Much of the Whitman scholarship accomplished by women in the twen-

tieth century focused on the poet's Long Island roots: Florence B. Freedman, Katherine Molinoff, Joan D. Berbrich, and Bertha H. Funnell all contributed significant research on the poet's least-known years. Joann's work on local poetry and history stands apart from such efforts: it was never simply regional or provincial in nature, and its impact reached well beyond academic audiences. From 1970 to 1985, she served as a trustee of the Whitman Birthplace and later as president of the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association. She was president in the mid-1990s, when the Birthplace's multi-million dollar Interpretive Center was approved, funded, and constructed; and she saw to conclusion a prolonged paper war over the content of one of the Center's information panels, originally titled "I Am He That Aches With Love—Whitman's Life of Love." In June 1996, Joann gave "final approval" on text that included the title poem, a discussion of "same-sex love" and photographs of Whitman with Peter Doyle and Harry Stafford; six months and ten edits later, the panel was renamed "For the Love of Comrades," no longer used the offending phrase, and featured a dominating image of Whitman and Anne Gilchrist (with the image of Walt and Pete reduced in size, and the other of Whitman and Stafford removed). Finding herself overruled by Association board members who expressed concern about the original content's reception by exhibition viewers, Joann reluctantly approved the Board's revisions and stated in her final notes: "WW can still be a good American even if he is gay. Perhaps the kiddies needed to learn this, even if the parents—and teachers—haven't."

The omissions made in the so-called "love panel" have been the subject of much scrutiny and protest, and have encouraged the Birthplace Association's current initiative to replace its signage. Joann—and her Walt—would be pleased to learn that plans for new panels on Whitman's celebration of all types of sexuality (as well as the story of how the Birthplace came to express Whitman's words as openly and joyously as the poet himself did) are in the works for 2019, the bicentennial of Whitman's birth.

I miss you, Joann, and the ways you brought Whitman's message of love to your work and to the people in your life.

—Karen Karbiener, *New York University*