

WHITMAN'S AMERICAN FAME: THE GROWTH OF HIS REPUTATION IN AMERICA AFTER 1892, by Charles Willard. Providence, R. I.: Brown University Press, 1950.

The purpose of Charles Willard's book, *Whitman's American Fame: The Growth of His Reputation in America after 1892*, is twofold: it is an anecdotal exposé of the propaganda behind Whitman's celebrity, as well as a thorough account of the major and minor Whitman critics and their works after 1860. The book traces Whitman's necessary and contrived plot to gain recognition for himself and for *Leaves of Grass*, uncovers the peculiarities of The Whitman Fellowship and its enthusiasts, and offers handy reviews of both positive and negative criticism from a variety of writers. Though dated, Willard succeeds in painting the portrait of Whitman from an isolated, struggling poet to immortal "bard of America."

In the introductory chapter, Willard expresses his underlying reverence for Whitman as an "innovative prophet-poet" and examines the slow emergence of his fame. He follows the poet from mediocre editor and writer before 1850 (he wrote a book on temperance, some short stories and a few pedestrian poems), to his strange and sudden metamorphosis as a genius poet and spokesman for the age. Willard defends Whitman's arrogance, self-confidence, and egotism ("Few, if any, of the great poets have been humble about their chances for survival.") and lauds him as an "innovator of technique, totally out of the world of other poets." Because his daring verse form was "technically unacceptable" (free from the conventional trammels of his predecessors, Tennyson and Browning), and his courageous voicing of the ideals of the democratic state was unprecedented, he was not always within the field of comprehension of the reader of the 19th century.

Willard sees Whitman's determination to get his book published and into the hands of leading writers as an ingenious contrivance. He also regards Whitman's propitious dismissal from his government job as a significant boon to his career. His disciples painted the government as a villain, guilty of censorship and of depriving America of the work of its greatest literary war hero. As a result of this, interest in Whitman flared in Europe and America, and his followers began to assemble.

John Burroughs, Charles Eldridge, Horace Traubel, Richard Bucke, and William Sloan Kennedy were among the first disciples of Whitman. These radical enthusiasts saw Whitman as a "new Saviour," and a "supreme creative god," and *Leaves of Grass* as sacred,

scriptural writing. Despite their fanaticism, they were most instrumental in championing the poet after his death and responsible for the publication of Whitman's personal memoirs and minutiae concerning his life.

Willard portrays The Whitman Fellowship (sometimes called Whitmaniacs), established in 1860, as a fanatical cult, due to their "unabashed, idolatrous admiration" for Whitman. Described as a group of persons "of queer ideas, weird ideas, little coteries pleased with their own eccentricities," The Fellowship was brought together to publicize and symbolize Whitman's democracy. They perpetuated Whitman's resemblance to Christ, a myth created by the poet in his 1854 "Christ portrait" and by his references to the "young god of Judea" in *Leaves*. Some of his followers saw him as the "peer of Buddha, of Muhammad, or of Paul."

Willard reviews works by leading writers such as *In Re Walt Whitman* and *Walt Whitman the Man*, but mostly concentrates upon Horace Traubel and his articles in *The Conservator*. He sees Traubel as the person largely responsible for creating and perpetuating the Whitman myth. Called by some a "perfect hero-worshipper," and considered a Boswellian figure, he succumbed to Whitman's personal charm, worshipping the personality of the living man nearly as much as the inspired words of brotherhood and democracy found in *Leaves of Grass*. His most important role, however, was to use *The Conservator* as a vehicle for Whitman thought and discussion, thus keeping the poet in the forefront of literary evaluation.

While the enthusiasts had no reservations in the acceptance of Whitman as poet, philosopher, and prophet, the literary crowd was careful in committing themselves. In reviewing the journalistic and academic critics of Whitman, Willard makes a careful distinction between this literary crowd and the devoted enthusiasts. Diverse criticism is divided into three groups: 1) journalistic critics and reviewers; 2) academicians and scholars; and 3) creative writers.

Because of Whitman's unique style as a man and a poet, few literary critics took him seriously before 1900. With the publication in 1906 of Bliss Perry's *Walt Whitman, His Life and Work*, American reviewers turned more serious attention to the poet's life and literary contributions, and even the most stubborn reviewers relented. Reviews were widely mixed and not always in agreement. Some saw Whitman

as a "good grey nuisance," and *Leaves of Grass* as "the most amorphous agglomeration of unpoetic words ever shovelled together." Some regarded him as a "a subtle and spiritual visionary." Despite divergent opinions, his fame loomed larger and larger.

Curiously, Whitman initially enjoyed a stronger positive reputation in Europe than in America. Europeans saw Whitman as a caricature of Americans and were awakening to thoughts of democracy, thoughts which Americans took for granted. As divergent views soon diminished as a result of increased scholarship, by 1919 Whitman was popularly accepted as "the father of modern poetry," and his free verse style, though somewhat chaotic, as an original and fitting form with which to espouse democracy.

Willard's remaining chapters concern themselves with the numerous biographers of Whitman and the creative writers who continue to refine his style. He particularly notes Henry Binn's *A Life of Walt Whitman* and Isaac Platt's book, *Walt Whitman*, for their thorough and revealing insights. He points to Emory Holloway as the first professor to substantially influence Whitman scholarship, and to Jean Catel, a French reviewer, for his psychological examination of the source of Whitman's genius.

Mostly, Whitman's early biographers chose to forgive the poet's weaknesses. None, to be sure, presented him, as did the enthusiasts, as a model of morality, as a great thinker, or as a paragon of democratic virtues. Instead, they presented him as an honest, kind individual, intent upon developing his own unique voice in espousing personal democracy. Later reviewers brought more laudable praise and by the time of World War I, Whitman gained greater acceptance as one of the most dominant figures in American literature, ranked with Emerson, Poe, Twain, and Hawthorne.

Though Emerson was largely responsible for the poet's early admittance to literary circles, his initial enthusiasm died out. Whittier, Lowell, and Longfellow were apathetic towards him and, in 1880, Thomas Bailey Aldrich wrote ". . . As the voice of the 19th century, he will have little significance in the 21st." Henry James, Hamilton Wright Mabie, and Ezra Pound, however, acknowledged his talent from the start, and Hart Crane regarded him as the primary spokesman of America and American soil.

Though Whitman's fame increased dramatically, a salient point which Willard skirts is that as a spokesman for the common man, ironically, Whitman was scarcely known by the vast majority of Americans. Though slightly familiar for "O Captain! My Captain!," and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," his reputation was still in the hands of scholars and literary circles.

Willard's book provides valuable insights into the development of Whitman's poetry and raises significant questions about the origin of the genius and his permanent acceptance as a poet-prophet. Because the book was written in 1950, today's reader is left uninformed due to its rather limited scope. Nevertheless, it is a valuable reference source and does hint at the possibility of Whitman as a poetic poseur. Enthusiastic and thorough, Willard regards Whitman as a "spectacular writer" whose place has been firmly secured in American literature.

— Kathy Blake

THE ARTISTIC LEGACY OF WALT WHITMAN, ed. by Edwin Haviland Miller. N.Y.: New York University Press, 1970.

*The Artistic Legacy of Walt Whitman* is a collection of essays presented at the Walt Whitman Celebration held at NYU in April of 1969. Commemorating the 150th anniversary of Whitman's birth, the final speaker was Gay Wilson Allen, considered the "dean" of Whitman scholars and the one to whom Edwin Haviland Miller dedicated this book, ascribing to it the subtitle, "A Tribute to Gay Wilson Allen."

The book consists of six essays and 35 illustrations which include canvases and sculpture by major modern American artists, and the most famous photographs of Whitman. Essays by Ned Rorem, Max Kozloff and Robert Duncan cover Whitman's impact on music, art and literature respectively.

The most captivating article in the collection is the essay by Edwin Haviland Miller, "The Radical Vision of Whitman and Pollock." The similarities of artistic vision made evident by Miller illumine the work of both artists and their contributions to American art.