

**DAYS WITH WALT
WHITMAN: WITH
SOME NOTES ON
HIS LIFE AND WORK**

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Days with Walt Whitman: With Some Notes on His Life and Work by Edward Carpenter

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EDWARD CARPENTER

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Walt Whitman**

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*With some Notes on his
Life and Work*

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A VISIT TO WALT WHITMAN
IN 1877

IT was on the 2nd of May 1877, that
—crossing the water from Philadelphia
—I knocked at the door of 431 Stevens
Street, Camden. The house, a narrow
three-storied one, stood in one of those
broad tree-planted streets which are com-
mon in the States; and Whitman was
staying there, boarding with his brother
Colonel George Whitman and wife—
making the establishment at any rate his
headquarters, though frequently absent
from it. I waited a few minutes in a sit-
ting-room of the usual type—one or two
ornamental tables, with photograph books,

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things under glass shades, &c.—while “Walt” was called upstairs. He soon came down, slowly, leaning heavily on the banisters, always dragging somewhat his paralysed leg—at first sight quite an old man with long grey, almost white, beard, and shaggy head and neck, grey dress too; but tall, erect, and at closer sight not so old—a florid fresh complexion, pure grey-blue eye (no sign of age there), and full, strong, well-formed hands.

At the foot of the staircase he took me by the hand and said, “I was afraid we should miss after all”—this in reference to a previous unsuccessful call I had made. There was no hurry in his manner; having found me a seat, and then only leaving hold of my hand, he sat down himself and asked me “what news I brought from Britain.” War had just been declared between Russia and Turkey. Like other

Whitman in 1877

Americans, his sympathies lay with Russia. His idea was that Russia stood *in need* of a southern outlet (Constantinople) for her people and growing energies, that Turkey was falling in pieces, and that England was beginning to pursue "the wise policy of absolute non-intervention." Conversation then turned on England. He asked about friends there; also about myself some questions.

Meanwhile in that first ten minutes I was becoming conscious of an impression which subsequently grew even more marked—the impression, namely, of immense vista or background in his personality. If I had thought before (and I do not know that I had) that Whitman was eccentric, unbalanced, violent, my first interview certainly produced quite a contrary effect. No one could be more considerate, I may almost say courteous; no one could have more simplicity of

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manner and freedom from egotistic wriggings; and I never met any one who gave me more the impression of *knowing what he was doing* than he did. Yet away and beyond all this I was aware of a certain radiant power in him, a large benign effluence and inclusiveness, as of the sun, which filled out the place where he was—yet with something of reserve and sadness in it too, and a sense of remoteness and inaccessibility.

Some such impressions, at any rate, I gathered in the first interview. I remember how I was most struck, in his face, by the high arch of the eyebrows, giving a touch of child-like wonder and contemplation to his expression; yet his eyes, though full of a kind of wistful tenderness, were essentially not contemplative but perceptive—active rather than receptive—lying far back, steady, clear, with small definite pupils and heavy lids of

Whitman in 1877

passion and experience. A face of majestic ✓
simple proportion, like a Greek temple as
some one has said; the nose Greek in
outline, straight (but not at all thin or
narrow, rather the contrary), broad be-
tween the brows, and meeting the line of
the forehead without any great change
of direction; the forehead high, with
horizontal furrows, but not excessively
high; the head domed, and rising to a
great height in the middle, above the ears
—not projecting behind; ears large and
finely formed; mouth full, but almost
quite concealed by hair. A head alto-
gether impressing one by its height, and
by a certain untamed “wild hawk” look,
not uncommon among the Americans.

After some conversation Whitman
proposed a walk across to Philadelphia.
Putting on his grey slouch hat he
sallied forth with evident pleasure, and
taking my arm as a support walked slowly