

**WALT WHITMAN:
THE POET OF
DEMOCRACY**

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Walt Whitman: The Poet of Democracy by William Gay

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6

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THE POET OF DEMOCRACY

BY
WILLIAM GAY

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THIS little work is a reprint, with considerable alterations and additions, of three articles which appeared in *The Australian Herald* about a year ago, shortly after Whitman's death. It aims in the first place at a portrayal of the man, and, after that, at a vindication of the poet and his message. Whitman's faults, chiefly of literary execution, are, like his merits, great; but as they are so very obvious and have so often been expatiated upon, I have done little more than allude to them. What is excellent in him completely overshadows what is defective; and what that excellence is, I have, in what follows, imperfectly tried to indicate.

SOUTH YARRA,

MELBOURNE, June 2, 1893.

*As I ponder'd in silence,
Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long,
A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age, and power,
The genius of poets of old lands,
As to me directing like flames its eyes,
With finger pointing to many immortal songs,
And menacing voice, "What singest thou?" it said,
"Know'st thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring
bards?*

*And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers."*

*"Be it so," then I answered,
"I too, haughty Shade, also sing war, and a longer and
greater one than any,
Waged in my book with varying fortunes, with flight, advance
and retreat, victory deferr'd and wavering,
(Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain, at the last,) the
field the world,
For life and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul,
Lo, I too am come, chanting the chant of battles,
I above all promote brave soldiers."*

—WALT WHITMAN.

WALT WHITMAN.

I

WALT WHITMAN was born on May 31st, 1819, at the farm of West Hills, Long Island, in the State of New York. His father and mother both came of people who had been farmers in the neighbourhood for several generations. A paternal ancestor of his, named the Rev. Zechariah Whitman, emigrated from England to America in 1640. His mother was of Dutch extraction, her maiden name being Louisa Van Velsor. Whitman was the second in a family of eight. In 1824 the Whitmans went to live in Brooklyn, where the father followed the trade of carpenter and builder. In the same year an incident occurred which is chronicled as follows by John Burroughs: "On the visit of General Lafayette to this country in 1824 he came over to Brooklyn in state, and rode through the city. The children of the schools turned out to join in the welcome. An edifice for a free public library for youths was just then commencing, and Lafayette con-

sented to stop on his way and lay the cornerstone. Numerous children arriving on the ground, where a huge irregular excavation for the building was already dug, surrounded with heaps of rough stone, several gentlemen assisted in lifting the children to safe or convenient spots to see the ceremony. Among the rest Lafayette, also, helping the children, took up the five-year-old Walt Whitman, and pressing the child a moment to his breast and giving him a kiss, handed him down to a safe spot in the excavation." Thus the veteran of two great revolutions and one of the pioneers of democracy embraced the future poet of democracy and inspirer of revolutions (peaceful, let us hope) which are yet to be. Was there a memory of this kiss in Whitman's mind when he wrote of his songs?—

Not songs of loyalty alone are these,

But songs of insurrection also ;

For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the
world over,

And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind
him,

And stakes his life to be lost at any moment.

After having been for some years at the public schools in Brooklyn, Whitman, when about ten years of age, began life as a boy in a

lawyer's office. "I had a nice desk and window-nook to myself," he says; "Edward C. [Clarke, his employer] kindly helped me at my hand-writing and composition, and (the signal event of my life up to that time) subscribed for me to a big circulating library. For a time I now revelled in romance reading of all kinds; first, the *Arabian Nights*, all the volumes—an amazing treat. Then, with sorties in very many other directions, took in Walter Scott's novels, one after another, and his poetry."

Two years later he went to learn the trade of printer at the office of the *Long Island Patriot*, and afterwards worked on the *Long Island Star*. The boy grew fast, and was "nearly as big as a man at fifteen or sixteen." He spent much of his time down Long Island among the farming and sea-faring folks, and made excursions in all directions on foot, on horseback, and by sailing-boat. He had a great love for nature in all its aspects, even for those which are usually considered common or unsightly; but his love for the sea was of a special and passionate kind. The sea inspired some of his best writing, as, for example, that reminiscence of his boyhood beginning,

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking.

In many of his lines we hear its near thunder or its distant boom, and in many the moanings and whisperings of its quieter moods.

In 1836 and 1837 he worked as a compositor in New York; and at the age of eighteen he went school-teaching in the country districts of Long Island. In 1839 he started the *Long Islander*, a weekly paper, in the town of Huntington, near which he was born.

During his boyhood, and, indeed, all his life, Whitman was an omnivorous reader; and he made himself acquainted with, and had a real preference for, the masterpieces of literature. He says: "I went regularly every week in the mild seasons down to Coney Island, at that time a long, bare, unfrequented shore, which I had all to myself, and where I loved, after bathing, to race up and down the hard sand, and declaim Homer or Shakspeare to the surf and sea-gulls by the hour." In another place he says that he often used to ride the whole length of Broadway on the top of an omnibus, declaiming some stormy passage from Julius Cæsar or Richard, which he could roar as loudly as he chose in the "heavy, dense, uninterrupted street bass." And Mr. Moncure Conway says, in describing a visit he paid to him in