



From the collection of Anne Montgomerie Traubel

WALT WHITMAN

*Hitherto unpublished photograph, undated and unsigned*

# WITH WALT WHITMAN IN CAMDEN

January 21—April 7, 1889

---

HORACE TRAUBEL

*Edited by*

SCULLEY BRADLEY

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

1959

## INTRODUCTION

The conversations recorded in this volume took place sixty-five years ago, yet they have an immediate interest and value, both for the general reader and the literary scholar. In 1906, when Horace Traubel published the first volume of these discourses, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, only a few enthusiasts and far-sighted librarians recognized its value, and preserved it for readers of future generations. It now seems impossible that a book reporting Whitman warmly and truly should have experienced neglect even later, in 1914, when the third volume was published. When Horace Traubel died in 1919, he had been unable to secure a publisher for his fourth volume, and it appears here for the first time.

With the passing years, there has been a mounting recognition of Whitman. Today he towers among the unquestioned great interpreters of America. A new generation of poets found that he had been their pioneer, enlarging their horizons, and giving a new freedom to their craft. Readers in many lands, during these troubled decades, have taken comfort from Whitman's faith in democracy, his serene individualism, his vision of "inseparable cities with their arms about each other's necks" in a universe whose "kelson" is love. The postponed approval of Whitman caused scholars and critics, somewhat belatedly, to discover the values in Traubel's volumes, so that today they are widely sought by literary specialists and libraries. Except for the writings of the poet himself, there has been no source so clearly indispensable as the three volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. Every good biographer and critic of Whitman has used this work as a source, and many serious readers have enjoyed it.

Each of Traubel's volumes may stand alone, the present no less than the three that preceded it. You may open it anywhere and begin reading, for this work needs no such logical or chronological sequence as is customary in a work of formal interpretation or biographical narrative. Its logic is the delightful and limber illogic

of conversation, in which one thing by chance recalls another in the daily meeting of two friends with a storehouse of memories. It is Whitman, the man himself, there in the cluttered Camden house, fully aware, at seventy, of the adventure of each new day; but talking, endlessly talking, of remembered yesterdays. He is an old man now, turning the kaleidoscope of recollection, and reviewing his colorful life; but he is also still very much alive, reading the news and the books, concerned for his friends, firm in his opinions.

All this Traubel transferred quickly to his notes, almost with the fidelity of a modern wire recorder. Like a good reporter he made no effort to "improve" Whitman; he impartially recorded both the old invalid, peevish with constipation, and the lofty thinker; both the angry partisan and the magnanimous forgiver of trespasses; he reproduced the trite, the common, even the vulgar remark as cheerfully as the sublime idea. Without the reporter's training, Traubel apparently had the reporter's instinct, and the eyes and ears of a television camera. The present writer is indebted to Mrs. Traubel for the following account of her husband's method of work: "The notes of the visits to Whitman were written on small bits of paper to fit into the pocket of his jacket, and were written in what he called 'condensed longhand,' in the dim light of Whitman's room. Within the hour of the words spoken, the material was put into the complete form with which you are familiar in the three published volumes. There was no vacuum of time or emotion, thus preserving the vitality of the original conversation." The idea, one gathers, was to transcribe not only the words, but the very inflection of the poet's voice. The young scribe often read it back to his future bride to check the sound of it.

Does Whitman know that young Traubel, making notes as they talk, will soon be back in his room, transcribing his "story", as it were, before the midnight deadline? In any case, the old poet knows, by journalistic experience, that eventually it will serve a good purpose. John Burroughs and Dr. Bucke have already published their accounts, authorized and supervised, in part, by the poet himself, but Whitman seems here to be making an effort not to define the book that Traubel might write, not indeed to imply that he is obligated to write any book at all. Yet the two continue endlessly to recall the moments of life, homely or lofty, dark or luminous, that

the old man might want to winnow from the chaff, while retrieving from the piled debris, the litter of papers that always surrounded him, the precious documents and letters that substantiated his memory. These he gave to Traubel, with only one command concerning their possible use: "Whatever you do do not prettify me." Traubel's understanding of his commission, and his method of fulfilling it, were precisely stated in his address to the readers of his first volume, in 1906. In order to avoid the presumption of restating it here, we have reprinted it, under its original title, "To Readers," immediately following this introduction.

Horace Logo Traubel (1858-1919) was well suited for the mission which came to him unsought. Mrs. Traubel believes that her husband had no particular plan to write a book on Whitman when he began to record his conversations. He had known Whitman from his boyhood; he found in the poet an exhaustless source of interest and life, and responded naturally to the impulse to set down his conversation. The rest followed as a matter of course. Actually, Traubel had known Whitman for fifteen years or more before the first recorded conversations. In 1873, when Traubel was a boy of fifteen, and Whitman fifty-four, the poet, stricken with paralysis, secured a deputy for his small clerkship in Washington and took lodging with his brother, George, in Camden, New Jersey. The Traubels lived nearby, and were already acquainted with the Whitmans. A couple of years earlier, they had heard that Whitman's mother, on a visit with his brother George, had been stricken with illness, and like good neighbors of an earlier time, they had gone to see her. From that time young Traubel was a familiar at the Whitmans'. The father, Maurice Henry Traubel, a German by birth, came at twenty-one to Philadelphia from Frankfurt-am-Main, where he had received a liberal education in the arts. A lithographer by occupation, he provided for his son the environment of books, music, and ideas. In time, Whitman's young admirer became the mature friend.

During the earlier years of their association the poet wrote his last great poems, although he recovered somewhat from the paralysis that at first threatened his life. He prepared the Centennial Edition of his works for the celebration of 1876. Still later, he brought *Leaves of Grass* into its final organization for the edition of 1881, suppressed in Boston and transferred to a publisher in Philadelphia,

Morris, Herbert Gilchrist the painter, temporarily transplanted from England, and numerous others. Traubel knew them all personally; and he had also picked up a full knowledge of Whitman's associations with the great figures of the past—Emerson, Thoreau, Carlyle, Rossetti, Lincoln, Ingersoll, and many more. When the time came for Whitman to make a final recapitulation of his story, Traubel knew what questions to ask, and by instinct he knew what questions posterity would want to have answered. From 1890 until 1919, when he died, Traubel issued his monthly *Conservator*, supporting a mild form of socialism, and publishing many articles on Whitman. With Bucke and Harned he edited the authorized *Complete Writings* in ten volumes in 1902.

Not the least contribution of the present volume is the portrayal of the living man, Whitman, in the mellow fruition of his seventieth year. Anyone interested will read the record for himself, but a few illustrations at random may not be out of place here. One notes the remarkable clarity of the poet's mind and memory, and his touching sense of peace with a world which, as might have been thought, had rewarded him but little. No doubt he meant from the heart what he had declared in "A Backward Glance" the year before—that he had fared on the whole better than he had any right to expect, in that, after all, he "had fully arrived" within his own lifetime. There was still the poverty and privation: the payment from his publisher was "fifty-five dollars for six months' royalties—God save us from starvation!" But Gabriel Sarrazin had just written a notable critique for a French review, even if Whitman had to get Dr. Bucke and Kennedy to translate it for him; German translations by Rolleston and Knortz were bearing fruit in the increasing European reputation of *Leaves of Grass*. The old poet is fully alive to the stirring life of the present; he delights in the daily pageant. The Haymarket riots in Chicago are still in litigation; this reminds him of the high social purposes of his new friend, Hamlin Garland, just then emerging as a leading figure; and Garland's name recalls the hard blows for social justice struck by his early friend, William Cullen Bryant, and by Stedman, and even by Howells, who had not always been a friend to him. Whitman is interested in the painting of Millet, and among his own contemporaries prophetically picks Thomas Eakins for highest praise. He knows what Laforgue has been writing, while recalling

Rees Welsh, soon to be succeeded by David McKay. He published a prose volume, the *Specimen Days* of 1882. In 1884, he was able to move into the first house that he ever called his own, and the last, the simple wooden dwelling at 330 Mickle Street, Camden, where these conversations took place, and where the poet died. In all these enterprises after 1876, Traubel became increasingly the companion and the bearer of burdens for the physically handicapped poet. In 1888 appeared *November Boughs* (containing the fundamental essay, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads"); in the same year came what they called "the big book"—*Complete Poems and Prose*. This was followed within a year, in 1889, by the charming pocket edition, with its limp, black leather cover, published to commemorate the poet's seventieth birthday.

In these later publications, Traubel became truly the poet's literary adviser and critic, as well as his agent with the publisher, the printers, and the bookbinders; for Whitman, to the end, arranged for the printing and binding of his books, for which McKay was sales agent. These events, as contemporary with the present conversations, are vividly portrayed in their daily occurrence, in this scrupulous account of Traubel's regular visits to Whitman in 1888 and 1889. References to present visitors jostle with the memories of old friends. In this house, during the years to come, Horace Traubel was to assist the poet with his very last books, *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891), and the last *Leaves of Grass* (1892), dubbed the "deathbed edition" because Traubel brought one of the first copies, in its brown paper cover, to the dying poet's bedside.

To the little house in Camden came many literary admirers—American and foreign visitors, great and small—while correspondence poured in from every quarter. Through the years, Traubel became one of the band of somewhat older men—the "Whitman circle"—who came and went continuously in thought and often in person: such as Burroughs, from his farm in New York; or Dr. Bucke from Canada, where he was Superintendent of a mental hospital; or William Douglas O'Connor (superintendent, in Washington, of the United States Life Saving Service), the author, in 1866, of *The Good Gray Poet*; and William Sloane Kennedy, man of letters, who, like all these others, wrote authoritative books about Whitman. In addition, there were the Philadelphia friends—Harned, the Smiths, Harrison



Morris, Herbert Gilchrist the painter, temporarily transplanted from England, and numerous others. Traubel knew them all personally; and he had also picked up a full knowledge of Whitman's associations with the great figures of the past—Emerson, Thoreau, Carlyle, Rossetti, Lincoln, Ingersoll, and many more. When the time came for Whitman to make a final recapitulation of his story, Traubel knew what questions to ask, and by instinct he knew what questions posterity would want to have answered. From 1890 until 1919, when he died, Traubel issued his monthly *Conservator*, supporting a mild form of socialism, and publishing many articles on Whitman. With Bucke and Harned he edited the authorized *Complete Writings* in ten volumes in 1902.

Not the least contribution of the present volume is the portrayal of the living man, Whitman, in the mellow fruition of his seventieth year. Anyone interested will read the record for himself, but a few illustrations at random may not be out of place here. One notes the remarkable clarity of the poet's mind and memory, and his touching sense of peace with a world which, as might have been thought, had rewarded him but little. No doubt he meant from the heart what he had declared in "A Backward Glance" the year before—that he had fared on the whole better than he had any right to expect, in that, after all, he "had fully arrived" within his own lifetime. There was still the poverty and privation: the payment from his publisher was "fifty-five dollars for six months' royalties—God save us from starvation!" But Gabriel Sarrazin had just written a notable critique for a French review, even if Whitman had to get Dr. Bucke and Kennedy to translate it for him; German translations by Rolleston and Knortz were bearing fruit in the increasing European reputation of *Leaves of Grass*. The old poet is fully alive to the stirring life of the present; he delights in the daily pageant. The Haymarket riots in Chicago are still in litigation; this reminds him of the high social purposes of his new friend, Hamlin Garland, just then emerging as a leading figure; and Garland's name recalls the hard blows for social justice struck by his early friend, William Cullen Bryant, and by Stedman, and even by Howells, who had not always been a friend to him. Whitman is interested in the painting of Millet, and among his own contemporaries prophetically picks Thomas Eakins for highest praise. He knows what Laforgue has been writing, while recalling



the earlier Whittier with discerning fairness. He thinks of Emerson—the historic episodes of 1855-56, and the later meetings in 1860 and 1881. The attempted expurgation of his own work is of a piece with the recent activities of Comstock, and with other censorship injurious to moral health. The new furor about “birth control” does not escape his observation or his wit. One of the rewards of this book for the general reader, certainly, is the mirroring of the events of the late 1880’s on the quick intelligence of the old prophet, who daily gave thanks for the survival of a clear mind in his infirm body.

The body with its ills will intrude, of course, from time to time. Whitman is immensely human, an old man beset by infirmities, sometimes goaded by Traubel’s sharp questions into momentary vehemence, even anger; but quickly subsiding into a sense of humor much richer than that revealed in his writings. The afflictions of his body, like the foibles of friends, are inevitable conditions of life, both alike to be accepted with a grim amusement that makes the best of all things. He can laugh at the impending frustration that Bucke is predictably destined to experience with his money-making invention, while loving the man dearly; he can recall the tempestuous earlier associations with the Irish O’Connor while being daily concerned by ominous reports of his present illness; he can reflect upon the growing eccentricities of John Burroughs, yet cherish undiminished the tenderness of an undying comradeship. It may after all prove that Traubel, in setting down the facts so faithfully for scholarship, has also accomplished the more difficult literary creation by which the living reality of a man is preserved for posterity.

SCULLEY BRADLEY

*University of Pennsylvania*  
*November 12, 1952*