

Whitman in Canada

Written for the Sunset of Bon Echo

By Albert E. S. Smythe.

Among the great birth names of 1819—James Russell Lowell, Charles Kingsley, "George Eliot," John Ruskin, Herman Melville, Susan Warner—Walt Whitman's name stands as the most revolutionary, not only in thought, but in form of all who distinguished the Victorian age of literature. Queen Victoria herself was born in the same year, a week earlier than the good, grey poet. The commemoration of his centennial by the dedication of the vast Gibraltar Rock at Bon Echo, through the homage and understanding of Flora MacDonald Denison, is a not unworthy tribute to one whose inspiration has a word of power for Canada, and who himself never forgot Canada in his reveries, and who spent many gracious and affectionate days in her borders. He found in Richard Maurice Bucke a Canadian in whom was no guile, and there was more than a blood brotherhood between them.

Whitman rises up out of the conventionalities of the Victorian era with a rugged strength that has shocked many and alarmed not a few. He lived as Adam before the serpent entered Eden, and was not ashamed to be found walking with God on familiar terms. However eager our outcasts from Eden may be to return to the bliss of Paradise, few of them are prepared to accept the implications of the situation. One must regain innocence as well as Eden—"regain the child state that you have lost." So they find Whitman hard to understand.

Whitman surveyed the world from China to Peru, en masse and in detail, not as a spectacle to be viewed and forgotten; but as an experience to be assimilated. His characteristic summaries are not to be taken as mere catalogues, but as the substance of the subjective meditations by which he gradually embraces the whole universe in his consciousness. It is a process of cognition.

Whitman always wrote Kanada—with a "K". I do not know if he had an intentional reference to the Great Indian Philosopher, whose name is accented on the second syllable, but as has been said, the new science, for its "very backbone and marrow," will have to go back to the old philosopher for its correlations. We are passing through the atom to an inner world, and Kanada long ago showed the way. Perhaps the new Kanada that sheltered Whitman for a while, will discover and walk upon it.

As a man thinks, so is he. So is it also with a nation. There can be no great democratic commonwealth in Canada until the people or most of them, learn to think right. That means first of all, reliance upon the Divine powers within them, and not in any external authority whatever, however venerable. But it also includes accurate thinking, so as to discriminate between the really Divine, and the elusive, glamorous and deceptive psychic powers, which hide the realities beneath.