

President Smythe's Address at Whitman Fellowship Supper

"Crust and Crumbs," Sunday World, June 4th, 1916.

WITH the inauguration of a Whitman fellowship in Toronto we have the first organized effort in Canada, I believe, to recognize the continental genius of America's most original, most characteristic and greatest poet. Considering the amount of attention which Whitman gave to Canada, his visits and friendships here, we might have expected an earlier attempt at co-operation in bringing Walt Whitman before the Canadian public. We may, perhaps count ourselves fortunate that it has remained to us to take this step, who appreciate his spirit, who admire his writings, who have been inspired by his teachings, and who desire to carry on his work. The first readings of Walt Whitman which I heard given in public were by Mr. Phillips Thompson, about the year 1894, and since then it has been the private student more than the public reader, who has spread his fame among us. Mr. Henry S. Saunders has been a pioneer in gathering together a splendid collection of Whitmaniana, and in making a centre of Whitman interest which has been the means of introducing many to "Leaves of Grass." Mr. Roy Mitchell by his reading of Whitman and his public addresses, interpretative, biographical and critical has also widened the circle of Whitman influence. Dr. A. D. Watson by his "Whitman" poem in his volume, "Love and the Universe," has sown the trend of literary appreciation. More recently Mrs. Flora Macdonald Denison by her constitution of the Whitman Club of Bon Echo crystallized local Whitman sentiment in the meeting of the 7th January last, and out of this has come naturally and inevitably the Whitman Fellowship, which we may trust to spread to other cities and contribute to Canadian citizenship a due share of the elemental essence which is necessary to the realization of the principle—"Produce great persons, the rest follows."

There is no special starting-point with Whitman any more than there is with the ocean. One can begin anywhere. But we can begin with him as we begin with ourselves.