THE OSLER-BUCKE RELATIONSHIP
AND THE WHITMAN CLUTTER

Walt Whitman did continue to write poems and edit and reorder his works until his death, all in new editions of Leaves of Grass (1), although he did so through many years of imperfect health. In January 1873, Whitman, then living in Washington, suffered the first of a series of strokes occasioned, he and his friends believed, by an illness picked up years before when nursing soldiers in camp hospitals during the War Between the States. By the summer of 1873, Whitman’s health had not improved. Thus the fifty-five year old poet, who was forced to move to Camden, New Jersey, a nondescript industrial and shipping town where his brother lived, had to move to Camden, New Jersey, a nondescript industrial and shipping town where his brother lived.

There, a ferry-ride away from wealthy, cultivated Philadelphia, the poet would hold his (often lonely) court. And there, through the years, Whitman would be attended by two McGill-trained Canadian physicians: Richard Maurice Bucke and William Osler. Dr. Bucke (1837-1902) was a respected practitioner and superintendent of the asylum for the insane in London, Ontario, when he came to Canada in 1877 on a personal mission— to search out the poet whose lines in Leaves of Grass, read years before, had echoed and further inspired his own mystic vision of the universe. From that meeting on, Bucke was to assume several functions for the charismatic Whitman, including biographer and active defender. However, it was his role as the poet’s medical advisor that is of initial interest here. For it is in this capacity that Bucke called upon his respected colleague William Osler, recently ensconced in Philadelphia as Professor of Medicine at University of Pennsylvania, to look in on Whitman. Osler agreed, and attended Whitman intermittently, alone and with Bucke, until 1889, when he left for Johns Hopkins.

The state of Whitman’s health has been amply explored, as has, for that matter, the poet’s attitudes towards his two Canadian doctors. (2) What has not been fully nor fairly explored is Osler’s view of Bucke, and the strengthened nature of their relationship, cemented by their work together on the Whitman case. (3) These are the areas I will explore here. Since much germane information is to be found in Bibliotheca Osleriana 7660, and the selectively reproduced sections therefrom—very damaging to Bucke—found in Cushing’s Life of Osler, an examination of these two sources will be my starting point.

Bibliotheca Osleriana 7660 contains twelve pages of notes for Osler’s projected lecture on Walt Whitman, and typescripts of related letters. As Cushing recounts, in 1919, the centenary of Whitman’s birth, Sir William was asked by two literary groups to speak about his encounters with Whitman twenty years previously; one was Sir Walter Raleigh’s English class at Oxford; the second was a group of English admirers of Whitman at London’s City Temple. Though himself in ill health, Sir William accepted these invitations, and spent his final summer vacation at St. Bride’s in Jersey with “two writing-tables prepared, one for the Nervous System [a revision of the chapter in his textbook] and one for Walt Whitman”. (4)

Osler did not live to polish or deliver the lecture he had entitled “A Centenary Address: Walt Whitman, with Personal Reminiscences”. Nor did he have a chance to reread his pages and note how large a portion of his Whitman talk had been devoted to “his friend Maurice Bucke of London, Ont.” (5) who had first asked him to look in on Whitman. And Osler could certainly not have anticipated that Cushing in his Life of Osler would excerpt the one passage from B.O. 7660 that presents Bucke in his least dignified state. That of a mystic Whitman enthusiast in the process of giving witness.

Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration! Fetch stonecrop and mix it with cedar and branches of lilac; this is the lexicographer or chemist . . . . This made a grammar of the old cartouches, these mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas, this is the geologist, and this works with the scalpel, and this is a mathematician.

Gentlemen I receive you, and attach and clasp hands with you, the facts are useful and real . . . . they are not my dwelling . . . . I enter by them to an area of the dwelling.

Walt Whitman, as the Good Gray Poet, photographed shortly after the Civil War. (Collection of the author)

Richard Maurice Bucke (Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Western Ontario Library)
my blurred vision saw only an old man, full of common sense and kindly feelings. Bucke felt himself in the presence of one of the world’s great prophets. One evening after dinner at the Rittenhouse Club with Dr. Chapin, Dr. ’s son and I drew each other. Who knew would appreciate him, drew Bucke on to tell the story of Whitman’s influence. The perfervid disciple and his felix Charapheon — Bucke’s oddities on a plane higher than he had ever hoped to reach. All this with the accompanying physical exaltation expressed by di- rected pupils and intensity of utterance that were embarrassing to unintinitiated friends. This incident illustrates the type of influence exercised by Whitman on his disciples — a cult of a type such as no other literary man of our generation has been the object... This portrait of a wild-eyed Dr. Bucke shows a less complimentary side of Osler as well. After his 1889 move to Baltimore, Osler continued to confer with Bucke by mail and phone, with no difficulty about W’s feelings, Bucke felt himself in the pres- ence of one of the world’s great prophets. One evening after dinner at the Rittenhouse Club with Dr. Chapin, Dr. ’s son and I drew each other. Who knew would appreciate him, drew Bucke on to tell the story of Whitman’s influence. The perfervid disciple and his felix Charapheon — Bucke’s oddities on a plane higher than he had ever hoped to reach. All this with the accompanying physical exaltation expressed by di- rected pupils and intensity of utterance that were embarrassing to unintinitiated friends. This incident illustrates the type of influence exercised by Whitman on his disciples — a cult of a type such as no other literary man of our generation has been the object... This portrait of a wild-eyed Dr. Bucke shows a less complimentary side of Osler as well. 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It would have been a very long and cold winter’s journey from Baltimore to a city sixty miles from Toronto, and thence to another town half that distance away. Yet Osler graciously made the trip to consult in the case of R.S. Gurd, who happened to be an in-law of his friend, Maurice Bucke. It may be that the greatest bond between Bucke and Osler was books — reading them, writing them, and above all, collect- ing them. Both were avid readers of contem- porary literature, the classics, philosophy, and the newest scientific treatises of their age. Both wrote articles and books, and most significantly for the argument of this essay, both were prone to what Cushin in his biography terms Osler’s “infection with the bibliomania.” To grasp the “disease of this “disease”, we must return to Osler’s memories of his first visit to Whitman, re- corded in B.O. 7660, and transcribed in Cushin’s biography. A series of letters written during the years 1868-1889 to a Young Friend and The Wounddresser: A Series of Let- ters Written from the Hospital in Washington during the War of the Rebellion. These works, certainly glanced at by Osler, brought new admirers to Whitman, and particularly in the last twenty-five years, have been re- sponsible for much groundbreaking work by Whitman scholars. However, among the surviving correspondence between Osler and Bucke is a note from Osler, dated Sep- tember 15, 1899, concerning another book, Notes and Fragments. Bucke’s self-published presentation, organized and annotated, of materials which Osler had described as “clutter”, and which had come to Bucke as Whitman’s literary executor. Osler wrote:

Dear Bucke -

I endorse the five dollars, though I have not yet seen the Fragment, as I have only just returned this morning. I have found several enthusiastic Wallitites in England.
had evidently become somewhat hooked on Whittmaniana. In 1900, he quibled Bucke about “anything good in any of the early Whitman editions”. (16)

In 1919, Osler was busy organizing his library which he planned to bequeath to McGill. Thus books and bibliographical issues were much on his mind. His summer work on the Whitman centenary talk brought back his experiences with Whitman and his “clutter”, and more deeply, memories of his exceptional friend Bucke, who had died shortly after the publication of his magus opus, Cosmic Consciousness.

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In any case, displaying one of the last flashes of his collecting spirit, Osler seems to have made a bid to locate, and perhaps acquire the “clutter”. Inserted in B.O. 760 is a letter, dated October 1919, from J.W. Wallace, a member of the inner circle of English Whitmanities Bucke had helped to establish. His power was such that the Whitmanian general public library which he planned to bequeath to the Public Library, and the Library of Congress had evidently become somewhat hooked on Whittmaniana. In 1900, he quibled Bucke about “anything good in any of the early Whitman editions”. (16)

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NEW COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT GRANT FOR THE OSLER LIBRARY

Over the past decade, the Osler Library has been awarded three Collections Development Grants by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, all for the acquisition of primary historic works on the social context of medicine. The first (1984-1985) was limited to France in the 19th century, the second to Western Europe from the 16th to the 19th centuries, and the third to North America — but all shared a common topical definition. Books were purchased which reflected issues where the medical profession and medical practice impinged upon the socio-political arena — society in action — and the legal system. They covered subjects such as public health, in as far as physicians attempted to persuade political leaders to enact policies involving disease control and sanitation; legal medicine, i.e. the involvement of the medical profession in defining and detecting criminal offenses; institutional organization and public recognition of the medical profession; and popular medical education, i.e. the drive by the medical profession to extend its influence over the public consciousness of health issues. However, in the course of building up our social medicine collections with the assistance of the Library's Friends, we soon became aware of the special position of infectious disease within this constellation of subjects.

Infectious disease, whether transmitted directly from human to human or conveyed by vectors in the human environment, is fundamentally a social phenomenon. Medical efforts to allay such diseases invariably stimulate criticism of social institutions and practices, or of elements within society, which are identified as causes of the disease (etiologies). They also invoke prescriptions concerning public policy or social behaviour, or proposals for governmental coercion, e.g. universal vaccination, as a means by which society can prevent infectious disease (prophylaxis). Finally, they create a demand for strategies for the social management of outbreaks of infectious disease, including coercive measures such as quarantine (control). These social issues are the focus of some of the most interesting and topical scholarship in contemporary medical history; it is also a subject of immediate concern in our own society, as the AIDS crisis focuses our attention on the ways in which discussions of medical etiology, prophylaxis and control can be socially and politically manipulated.

The new grant of $20,000 will enable the Library to acquire, over a period of two years, primary works published in western Europe and North America between 1600 and 1900 on the etiology, prophylaxis and control of infectious disease. The chronological frame was chosen in order to include the final major outbreaks of Europe’s most long-lived epidemic, plague, as well as the careers of “new” diseases such as Asiatic cholera (introduced in 1828); the closing date of 1900 marks the era of major bacte-

The Friends of the Osler Library: A Report and an Appeal

With each passing year, the contributions of the Friends of the Osler Library make possible an increasingly diverse array of purchases and possibilities for the Library. The major priority is, of course, new acquisitions, particularly acquisition of rare or costly works which would, without the Friends’ generosity, be beyond our means. This year, outstanding historic works purchased with funds from the Friends of the Osler Library include G. Mauran, *Essai sur les maladies qui attaquent les gens de mer* (Marseille, 1766); C.N. Le Cat, *Traité de la couleur de la peau humaine... des nègres...* (Amsterdam, 1765 — an interesting chapter in the early history of racism), A. Charles de Lorry’s *Désespoir, ou morbis melancholici* (Paris, 1765 — probably the most important psychiatric treatise published in France in the 18th century), and a classic of physiognomy, *The Works of Professor [Peter] Camper*, on the connection between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, Statuary etc. etc. (London, 1794). I would like to draw special attention to the Le Cat volume, because it supports the research on the history of race consciousness in Enlightenment France being conducted by Prof. Pierre Bouille of the History Department and his students. The Friends may take special pride in knowing that their books are not only adding to the patrimony of the Osler Library but are also directly stimulating the use of the Library by scholars and students.

Acquisitions are only one chapter in the Friends’ story, however. Friends’ funds have enabled Library staff to attend conferences, paid student help for diverse Library projects, contributed to the elegant new shelving in the Wellcome Camera Mezzanine, and this year, have underwritten the production of the second volume of Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine. Dr. Richard Golden’s Oslerian Verse, which will shortly be rolling off the presses. Without the Friends, of course, this Newsletter could not be printed and mailed to its 1500 readers, nor could countless small, but necessary items not provided for in our regular budget be purchased.

Whether it is a big-ticket rare book, or a unglamorous, but crucially important piece of computer equipment, the Friends’ gifts to the Library are essential to our survival and growth. I offer you all, simply and very sincerely, profound thanks on behalf of the Library for your imaginative generosity. With this issue of the Newsletter, we are launching our appeal for 1992. Your help and support are now, perhaps more than ever, vital to us.

Faith Wallis

Faith Wallis, Osler Librarian and Editor; Edward H. Bensley, Honorary Osler Librarian and Consulting Editor; Wayne Le Bel, Assistant History of Medicine Librarian; Lilly Szczygiel, Editorial Assistant. Legal Deposit 3/1992 ISSN 0085-4567