
David S. Reynolds, ed. *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 263p.

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Because *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* anchors one of America's most enduring and beloved poets to his time, some literary scholars and students might balk at this collection of essays, part of Oxford University Press' *Historical Guides to American Authors* series. But to ignore this work would be unfortunate, since the disparate essays edited by David S. Reynolds carry Whitman discourse beyond the commonplace and into the extraordinary. Although Whitman's homosexuality has long been analyzed, for example, M. Jimmie Killingsworth takes the subject further when he asserts that Whitman actually "helped to invent gayness" (122). And although scholars regularly claim, as Jerome Loving informs us, that "Emerson, the Italian opera, and the New Testament" influenced Whitman's shift from journalism to poetry. Loving additionally and convincingly argues that, as unlikely as it might seem, the Compromise of 1850 not only provided Whitman with a unique topic for his poetry, but also gave him "his free-verse rhythm, which echoed . . . the fiery speeches of that particular period" (102). And while we all agree that Whitman epitomizes the radically democratic poet, Kenneth Cmiel dissects Whitman's democratic notions and concludes that Whitman is "a bit less radical than often portrayed" (206). A peculiar virtue of the *Guide* lies in the fact that by focusing Whitman through a historical lens, through this seeming constriction, we actually can view panoramically a number significant contemporary issues such as race, gay ethos, class, and politics.

Reynolds demonstrates his editorial competence in whom and in what he includes in the *Guide*. His judicious selection of contributing scholars, all significant in their respective fields, practically guarantees the circumspect assessments found in the volume. A biographical sketch of each contributor proves useful, as does Reynolds inclusion of a "Brief Biography" of Whitman's life. An "Illustrated Chronology" not only contains pictures of Whitman and his associates, but also includes illustrations relating specifically to essay topics. In "Lucifer and Ethiopia: Whitman, Race and Poetics before the Civil War," for example, Ed Folsom speculates that Whitman modeled the emancipated slave in "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors" on Elihu Vedder's painting *Jane Jackson*; an illustration of the painting appears in the "Chronology." Roberta K. Tarbell's "Whitman and the Visual Arts" points to a kind of nineteenth-century respect for Feng Shui principles, for people of the era believed that appropriate public sculptures and buildings could enhance morality and well-being. Reynolds therefore includes a photo of

LaGrange Terrace as representative of the classical-revival architecture prevalent during Whitman's earlier years. But of course Reynolds includes Tarbell's essay on Whitman and the visual arts not simply because it furnishes the *Guide* with illustrations. Reynolds appreciates Tarbell's provocative and well-reasoned arguments, including the remarkable conjecture that *Leaves of Grass* amounts to a written rendering of Jean-François Millet's paintings. The essayists cannot in every line postulate such astonishing notions, but in this they show good judgment, for making splashy claims at the expense of careful scholarship naturally would devalue the work. Ed Folsom demonstrates such carefulness when he acknowledges the poet's support of emancipation but also unflinchingly examines Whitman's racism. Reynolds exacts vigorous analysis of his contributors and insists that they further Reynolds' own mission of grounding literary figures to their times. But beyond this, the editor leaves each essayist's expertise to direct the investigation. This yields an unexpected bonus: the scholars' notes provide a compendium of research on each topic. Following "Whitman and the Gay American Ethos," for example, Killingsworth cogently summarizes the debate concerning Whitman's homosexuality. For those unfamiliar with recent research on the subject, Killingsworth's notes reference essential works.

While some might fault the *Guide* in its failure to connect Whitman's poems with other "literary" (poetic and fictive) works of the time, this objection lacks strength. David Reynolds' monumental *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* already has established the influence of Whitman's literary contemporaries. The interdisciplinary *Guide*, on the other hand, invites literary scholars to launch fresh investigations of specific Whitman works. Other nineteenth-century Americanists can apply the abundant historical insights derived from the *Guide* to their own research interests. For scholars who specialize in areas outside of nineteenth-century American literature, the *Guide* might act as guide for ways to extend the scope of research projects. The resultant historical/interdisciplinary approach surely would enhance our understanding of any subject.

While it is difficult to fault a work of such obvious merit, *A Historical Guide to Whitman* nevertheless neglects a sustained discussion of the feminine, much to its detriment. (Kenneth Cmiel in "Whitman the Democrat" offers some shrewd observations on the issue, but only as a part of his larger concerns.) Additionally, the easy assumptions regarding Whitman's religion (a combination of Quakerism and deism, as Reynolds notes) might have been more deeply assessed. But ironi-

cally, the very excellence of the *Guide* engenders these objections: had Reynolds and his contributors not produced such a fine work, we might not have desired equally dynamic discussions on other topics. ✱