

S. Weir Mitchell's Hugh Wynne, Free Quaker - a gay reading

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[1] Intro

Hugh Wynne, *Free Quaker*: Sometime Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel on the Staff of his Excellency General Washington (1896) was the most popular novel by a prolific poet and novelist, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell.

Quakers may find this novel interesting because it treats the difficult historical problem of "free" or "fighting" Quakers who defended our nation in the Revolutionary War... but as we shall see, a far more fascinating aspect is its portrayal of the friendship between a fair-haired Quaker "girl-boy" and the "the perverted Quaker with the blue eyes."

In addition to his role as a popular author, Mitchell was also one of the most eminent physicians in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia.

Indeed, Mitchell was a physician to Walt Whitman, and seems to have been a good friend. (About which more later.)

Mitchell's novel, like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, plays out in the center of a triangular stage defined by sailors, lovers, and Quakers in early America.

Join me, won't you, in teasing apart Mitchell's treatment of the love triangle between the hunky hero, Hugh Wynne, his womanly friend Jack Warder, and the woman they both love, Darthea Peniston [!]. ?

[2] "Muscular power" and "a manly miss"

[As young Philadelphia Quaker boys, Hugh Wynne and Jack Warder] "were free... to haunt the ships and hear sea yarns... Jack Warder I took to because he was full of stories, and would imagine what things might chance to my father's ships in the West Indies..."

[Although this sounds perfectly bland and innocent, an astute reader in 1896 would wonder whether Hugh and Jack had the unusual ability to imagine what **really** happened aboard a sailing ship a long way from shore, as modern historians have discovered. Regardless, these young Quakers were being exposed to an unusually libertine class of men. While the fact is glossed over in this passage, it logically follows from another account, given later.]

[At about age 14 or 15] "...I was taken to the academy, or the college, as some called it, which is now the university... my friend Jack and I were by good fortune kept in constant relation..." [Note: oddly, when Wynne left "college" at age 16, this was considered a bit late!]

[Jack Warder's adult journal contains a reminiscence:] "When Hugh Wynne and I went to school at the academy on Fourth street, south of Arch, I used to envy him his strength. At twelve he was as tall as are most lads at sixteen, but possessed of such activity and muscular power as are rarely seen, bidding fair to attain, as he did later, the height and massive build of his father. He was a great lover of risk, and not, as I have always been, fearful... He still has his mother's great eyes of blue, and a fair, clear skin..."

[By the way, this sounds like a reference to Walt Whitman. Similar fictional references to muscular Quaker sailors, however, can be found in James Fennimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.]

"...God bless him! ... For this is one of the uses of friends: that we consider how such and such a thing we are moved to do might appear to them. And this for one of my kind, who have had--nay, who have--many weaknesses, has been why Hugh Wynne counts for so much to me."

[Hugh Wynne's spinster "masculine" aunt, Gainer Wynne, considered Jack] "a girl-

boy, and fit only to sell goods, or, at best, to become a preacher." [At another time, she called him 'a manly miss.']

[Note that in 1860, "Song of Myself" was parodied as the song of the "counter-jumper," an effeminate dry-goods clerk who loves to lounge around in luxurious silks.]

[Hugh, meanwhile, became] "strong and muscular as [my blacksmith apprenticeship] went on... [while commendation] was what Jack most needed. His slight, graceful figure filled out and became very straight, losing a stoop it had, so that he grew to be a well-built, active young fellow, rosy, and quite too pretty, with his blond locks..."

[3] "Worse things... openly indulged in"

[Then Hugh fell in with the sailors who lodged with his "masculine" spinster Aunt Gainer (a non-Quaker?)]

[Hugh points out the reality of Quaker tolerance for violent defense of their own ships, not to mention tolerance for piratical and lusty sailors -- for more about gay Quakers and pirates, see: Hans Turley, Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash and Daniel Defoe, Captain Singleton.]

"...These years, up to the autumn of 1772, were not without influence on my own life for both good and evil... It was not without its pleasures [!]. Certainly it was an

agreeable thing to know the old merchant captains, and to talk to their men or themselves. The sea had not lost its [...er...!] romance. Men could remember Kidd and Blackbeard. In the low-lying dens below Dock Creek and on King street, were many, it is to be feared, who had seen the black flag flying, and who knew too well the keys and shoals of the West Indies. The captain who put to sea with such sailors had need to be resolute and ready. [Quaker-owned] Ships went armed, and I was amazed to see, in the holds of our own ships, carronades, which out on the ocean were hoisted up and set in place on deck; also cutlasses and muskets in the cabin, and good store of pikes. I ventured once to ask my [Quaker] father if this were consistent with [Quaker] non-resistance. He replied that pirates were like to wild beasts, and that I had better attend to my business; after which I said no more, having food for thought."

[Hugh almost shipped out] "but unluckily my mother prevailed with my father to forbid it. It had been better for me had it been decided otherwise, because I was fast getting an education [in vice, from these sailors] which did me no good."

[Hugh's friend Jack complained that "the town was full of officers of all grades, who... brought with them much licence and contempt for [the Puritanical?] colonists in general, and a silly way of parading their own sentiments on all occasions. Gambling, hard drinking, and all manner of worse things became common and more openly indulged in. Neither here nor in Boston could young women walk about unattended..."

[Jack escaped the temptations because his head and stomach could not stand alcohol, and] "As regards worse things than wine and cards, I think Miss Wynne was right when she described me as a girl-boy; for the least rudeness or laxity of talk in women I disliked, and as to the mere modesties of the person, I have always been like some well-nurtured maid."

[This led to the breakup of their relationship] "Thus it was that when Hugh, encouraged by his aunt, fell into the company of these loose, swaggering captains and cornets, I had either to give up him, who was unable to resist them, or to share in their vicious ways myself. It was my personal disgust at drunkenness or loose society which saved me, not any moral or religious safeguards, although I trust I was not altogether without these helps..."

[However, Jack tried to win Hugh back from the bars] "I felt that if I stayed until he came forth, although he might not be in a way to talk to me, to know that I had waited so long might touch him and help him to hear me with patience. I walked to and fro until the clock had struck twelve, fearful and troubled like a woman. Sometimes I think I am like a woman in certain ways, but not in all. There were many people who loved Hugh, but, save his mother, none as I did. He had a serious kindness in his ways, liking to help people... I think of him always as in time of peril, throwing his head up and his shoulders back, and smiling, with very wide-open eyes, like his mother's, but a deeper blue. The friendship of young men has often for a partial basis admiration of physical force, and Hugh excelled me there, although I

have never been considered feeble or awkward except among those of another sex, where always I am seen, I fear, to disadvantage...."

[4] "It is a love-affair"

[After Hugh becomes a degenerate] "Jack Warder was now a prime favourite, and highly approved. We rode up Front street, and crossed the bridge where Mulberry street passed under it, and is therefore to this day called Arch street, although few know why."

[Jack realizes:] "If I have in me something of the woman's nature, as Mistress Wynne used to declare, I do not now so much dislike the notion. It may explain why, as I mature, nothing in life seems to me so greatly to be desired as the love of my fellows. If I think a man I esteem has no affection for me, I will fetch and carry to get it. Thank God I need not for Hugh. For him I would give my life, should he want it, and what more can a man do for his friend...? ...My Hugh is a big handsome fellow nowadays, builded to be of the bigness of his father, but cleaner fashioned, from early use of his muscles. He has the strong passions of these hot Welsh, but is disciplined to control them, though not always..."

[During the Revolutionary War,] "...The Tory ladies laughed at his way of blushing like a girl, and, to Jack's dismay, openly envied his pink-and-white skin and fair locks. They treated him as if he were younger than [Hugh], although, as it chanced, we were born on the same day of the same year; and yet he liked it all--the gay [as in

happy] women, the coquettish Tory maids, even the 'genteel' Quaker dames..."

[Hugh's cousin Arthur] "laughed at him, and was, as he knew, of some folks' notion that Jack was a feminine kind of a fellow. That [Jack] had the quick insight and the heart of a woman was true, but that was not all of my dear Jack..."

[Jack witnessed an amusing show of Hugh's strength] "I saw Hugh strip," he writes, "and was amused to see Pike [acting as a teacher of swordsmanship] feel his muscles and exclaim at his depth of chest."

[Jack, disowned as a Quaker, becomes a captain in the American army], "in a new suit of blue and buff, looked brown and hardy, and his figure had spread, but the locks were as yellow and the cheeks as rosy as ever I knew them..."

[Hugh is overjoyed at their reunion in the army] "He ran to me as I spoke. I think I should have kissed him but for the staring soldiers. In all my life I never was so glad. There was brief time allowed for greetings." [So much for fallacy of extremist social constructionists, who argue that any almost amount of public displays of affection between men was acceptable. I could identify numerous other counter-examples.]

[Hugh realized that] "Jack felt that he was under some necessity to take care of me, or from that affection he has ever shown desired to keep me near him."

[Jack narrowly escapes what we today call typecasting] "Colonel Grange... invited Jack Warder to play Calista. Lady Kitty Stirling had said he would look the part well, with his fair locks and big innocent blue eyes, and she would lend him her best silk flowered gown and a fine lot of lace. Jack was in a rage, but the colonel, much amused, apologised, and so it blew over..."

[The mutual romantic interest of both Jack and Hugh, Darthea, asks] "But tell me about Miss Gainor's girl-boy--our own dear Jack."

[Hugh replies:] "He can still blush to beat Miss Franks, and he still believes me to be a great man, and--but you do not want to hear about battles."

[Darthea retorts:] "Do I not, indeed! I should like to see Mr. Jack in a battle; I cannot imagine him hurting a fly."

[Hugh insists that his sissy boyfriend can fight like hell] "The last I saw, at Germantown, of Jack, he was raging in a furious mob of redcoats, with no hat, and that sword my aunt presented cutting and parrying. I gave him up for lost, but he never got a scratch. I like him best in camp with starving, half-naked men [ahem!]. I have seen him give his last loaf away. You should hear Mr. Hamilton--that is his Excellency's aide--talk of Jack; how like a tender woman he was among men who were sick and starving. Hamilton told me how once, when Jack said prayers beside a dying soldier and some fellow laughed,--men get hard in war,--our old Quaker friend

Colonel Forest would have had the beast out and shot him, if the fool had not gone to Jack and said he was sorry. Every one loves the man, and no wonder."

[Darthea is impressed by the Wynne+Warder love affair:] "He is fortunate in his friend, Mr. Wynne. Men do not often talk thus of one another. I have heard him say as much or more of you. Mistress Wynne says it is a love-affair. Are men's friendships or women's the best, I wonder?" I said that was a question beyond me...

[5] The "pretty boy-captain" and the "perverted Quaker"

[Spinster Aunt Gainer is masculine:] "My sense of [my father's declining health] did much to make me more tender and more able to endure the sad outbreaks of passion which Dr. Rush taught me were to be looked for. Nor was my aunt less troubled than I. Indeed, from this time she showed as regarded my father all of that gentleness which lay beneath the exterior roughness of her masculine nature."

[When the army intercepts mail, the entire troop is amused to read some homophobic gossip among strangers about Wynne and Warder:] "How is the pretty boy-captain? Does he still blush? And... the perverted Quaker with the blue eyes?"

[Reading this letter to Jack caused him "to twitch in a queer way"] "When, amused, I read a bit to Jack, he declared we ought to read no more, and if he had been of the mess which did read it, he would have had reason out of some one. Indeed, he was

angry-red, and beginning to twitch in his queer way, so that I feared he would bring about a quarrel with Mr. Hamilton, who knew neither woman and was still shaking with laughter."

The novel ends with Jack agreeing to become just Darthea's friend, while Hugh's (conflicted) love for Miss Peniston [!] triumphs as it jolly well should.

[6] Conclusion

Mitchell first published Hugh Wynne at a remarkable juncture in history, one year after the Oscar Wilde trial. The reverberations were still clanging back and forth across the entire globe.

The Age of Sail was almost entirely over; and with the rise of fast steam navigation, the world no longer had any use for the "adhesive" power of manly love, which had previously bound sailors together with "hoops of iron" (to borrow Walt's phrase) during the long voyages.

Walt Whitman had been dead only three years, but his spiritual influence loomed mightily over America. Mitchell's son, Langdon, had often visited the dying poet, probably accompanying the doctor's visits. He wrote:

"... as you entered his door, he took your hand in his, and keeping it there while you both moved he led you into his room, his small clean room in that little house as of

some mechanic, in Camden....You felt, too, in seeing him, that there was an unaccountable moral strength and beauty in the man himself. As you sat in his presence, and he read his poems to you, as feeble, stricken and white haired as he then was, it was impossible not to see the other and younger, mature and athletic man of twenty years earlier. Even as he was, there streamed from him something of power, but of calm power. He radiated something so uncommon that you would not again in a lifetime feel these same human beams, the same radiant force.

Ed Folsom. "Walt Whitman at Iowa" Books at Iowa 39 (November 1983).
<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/spec-coll/Bai/whitman.htm>

(Note in passing: by 1902, Whitman would become enshrined as the prophet of the "religion of healthy-mindedness" in William James's influential Varieties of Religious Experience, and by 1930, the great Quaker minister Rufus Jones would belatedly chime in on Whitman's humanizing influence, in Some Exponents of Mystical Religion.)

Many, many years ago, Whitman scholar Ed Folsom published a fine essay (cited above) which examined how Dr. Mitchell received an extremely rare and valuable first edition of Leaves of Grass. It came not from Whitman, but from Whitman's old friend, a famous Brooklyn sculptor named Henry Kirke Brown. Like Whitman, Brown was a patient of Mitchell. Is it possible that the "real" Jack Warder, who died in 1910, was JC Julius Langbein?

David Hewett. "Beloved Statue of Civil War Drummer Boy Stolen but Recovered Three Days Later." *Maine Antiques Digest*, 2002.

<http://www.maineantiquedigest.com/articles/julo2/drumo702.htm>

Mark C. Mollan writes: "Correspondence concerning Langbein's application for [Congressional Medal of Honor] includes a clipping from the *Grand Army Journal* dated June 23, 1893. That newspaper article recounts the story of a thirteen-year-old drummer boy who enlisted with the Ninth New York Infantry Volunteers, Hawkins' Zouaves, on May 4, 1861. Because of his girlish looks and slight stature, Langbein was called "Jennie" by the soldiers of the Ninth New York, a name he failed to shake until leaving the unit two years later. Despite the ridicule over his feminine features, Jennie so proved his mettle to the unit that the officers invited him to bunk and mess in their quarters. Second Lt. Thomas L. Bartholomew became particularly fond of Jennie and promised the boy's mother th