

*Lecture at the Walt Whitman dinner of 1905 by author Henry David Wright: ' Professor Powys, from Cambridge University, England, who lectured here last winter, said that Whitman was the colossal intellect of the last century, and that when we understand the secrets of his book, and of this strange old man, we will understand the secrets of the universe. So with the Inner Light of Quakerism: "The light that never was on land or sea." '*

Henry David Wright. "Whitman: the Inner Light of Quakerism." *Conservator* 17 (April 1906), 24-25.

## **Whitman: the Inner Light of Quakerism\***

**\* Speech at the Walt Whitman dinner, Philadelphia, December 19 [1905].**

In Specimen Days, Whitman himself asserts his maternal and Quaker ancestry to be largely formative of his character; from his mother and his two Quaker grandmothers, we can largely trace his broad calmness of disposition, the willingness to sit still and observe. There is a Quaker story, told in connection with the Meeting at Moorestown, and which seems apropos of Walt Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* and of the peculiar effect the book has had upon so many minds.

One quiet First Day morning as the Friends and villagers were assembled in their sedate way in the meeting house for worship one of the ministers in the gallery arose and, knocking loudly on the floor with his cane three times, he said, "Get thee behind me Satan!" three times and then sat down in the silence. After the meeting was over, several of the Friends came up to him and inquired why he had preached so strange a sermon. The answer was: "I spoke the words and message just as they were given to me."

About one year later, after the Meeting was over, a young man came up to the Quaker preacher, and said: "I want to thank you for saving my life." "How is that?" inquired the Friend. The young man said: "One year ago, I was on my way to the woods nearby to commit suicide. I had a rope concealed beneath my coat, and on walking up the street I became interested in the calm faces of the Quakers, and so followed them into the meeting house, to sit and rest awhile, when you arose and spoke those words directly for me, so that I withdrew, returned the rope, went on about my business affairs, which I have straightened out, and am now a new man, thanks to your sermon." So after one year the odd sermon was explained.

This story seems much the same as that which John Addington Symonds tells of himself — that after reading *Leaves of Grass*, from being a misanthropic student, and shrinking from the world of men, he became closely interested in the study of his fellow-man and his own manhood was renewed.

To those who remember the portrait of Whitman's mother in its little round frame in the old house on Mickle street, Camden, there is no need to recall the poet's love for his mother's memory. At Christmas a sprig of holly, in the spring a spray of some fresh greens or a bunch of lilacs, would breathe their incense to the portrait.

Professor Powys, from Cambridge University, England, who lectured here last winter, said that Whitman was the colossal intellect of the last century, and that when we

understand the secrets of his book, and of this strange old man, we will understand the secrets of the universe. So with the Inner Light of Quakerism: “The light that never was on land or sea.” Yet the more we study the Leaves, or ponder over the very title itself, the more we become imbued with its strange mystic power for deepening, enriching, and enlarging our lives and mental outlook. I take it that Walt did not believe in polish, but he spoke the word, and wrote the book, and that, brothers, is the work for us — to say the word, to do the deed, to write the book, as the great creator puts it in our power to do it, and leave the rest to God.

*David Henry Wright.*