

NOTES FROM THE LIBRARY

*THE BIBLE IN THE
WILDERNESS*

THE STRUGGLES of William Waith, London attorney, against the New York State frontier—his transformation from a petty clerk to a stalwart civilizer and respected minister; his hardships and sufferings, humiliations and disappointments, through all of which cheerfulness comes peeping through—make the brief memoir by his son a dramatic narrative and a valuable item for local history and national mores.¹

Early orphaned and brought up on an Hertfordshire farm, Waith was forced to make a scrawny living as a lawyer in the London maelstrom when his foster father died. There his trusting nature too often got the better of his legal acumen; the foul city air aggravated his chronic asthma; restrictions against his dissenting faith depressed his spirits. He took up the promise of a new life in a new land, and after a torturing six weeks' voyage, he arrived in America in the fall of 1832. With him came his wife and three children, one still a baby.

A towboat carried the family up the Hudson to Troy and Albany, where Waith immediately took out naturalization papers. On the journey his troubles began. An "oily-tongued plausible man named Marsh of the *genus* 'Yankee Peddler'" inveigled him into buying what turned out to be "the frostiest hole in the western part of

the state"; and he fell in with a vulgar cockney bricklayer named Barrow, who insisted upon becoming his partner and co-settler. Before they began their westward trek to the region around what is now Buffalo, a cholera epidemic had taken the life of Barrow's little boy and exhausted the much-tried strength of Mrs. Waith. The men, suspected of carrying the dread cholera germ, made the journey amid the freight of a canal boat; their families followed in wagons over frightful roads to their new abode, named, ironically, Sugar Town.

Their first shelter was a tent-like lean-to, sealed only with rugs and quilts against the rigors of an up-state winter in almost virgin forest. The babes in the woods proceeded to hew out a clearing with a hand-saw. It was with some chagrin that they yielded at last to adopting the good old Yankee axe, expertly wielded by a sardonic pioneer who all too willingly helped them out of some of their difficulties. It was not long before they could invite their neighbors to a house raising.

¹ Recollections/ of an/ Emigrant's Family,/ with a Sequel./ Two Papers/ Read Originally to the Buffalo Ministers'/ Meeting, and Subsequently, at the Request/ of Friends, Printed for Private Circulation./ By A Country Pastor [William Waith]./ Printed at the Office of The Lancaster Times./ [1896.]

Presented to the Rutgers University Library by Mrs. George C. Andrews, the great-granddaughter of the subject, William Waith.

It was this celebration that turned the healthy drinking emigrant into a "cold water man." The Temperance Cause had made little headway among the uncouth settlers, and so the whiskey was produced. "The logs were rolled up; but several of the men rolled down; and half of them became silly drunk, while the other half became fighting drunk, and tore each other's clothes, and swore and howled like dervishes."

His money soon gone into the pockets of the acute Yankees, who sold him far more than he needed and then wrecked his purchases by borrowing them, Waith faced the winter of 1833-34 without hope. Some people of nearby Ellicottville, however, recognized that he was a man of intelligence and learning and got him a job serving eviction notices on squatters. But it was the nadir of his fortunes: "Our house was a wretched hovel; our clothing was scant; our fuel green; and our food far from sufficient either in variety or quantity."

The battle he waged against prowling wolves at night and fleeing Yankees by day he soon realized was a losing one. He was induced to re-enter his old profession of the law and made a considerable contribution to the legal history of Cattaraugus County. But his law practice never amounted to much. On Sundays he used to conduct Sunday School meetings as a lay preacher, and soon he was persuaded to study for the ministry. He was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1836.

The preaching of the time was in the last stages of the old hell-fire-damnation school that had made Jonathan Edwards famous a hundred years before. Waith brought to his congregations a change which they welcomed. In England he had learned and loved religious persuasion rather than religious force, and he awakened in his people a spiritual interest far different from that of the usual ranting guides of those isolated communities. Sixty years later the author would meet an old pioneer who would say to him: "Oh how I loved your father when he was our minister."

The memoir is peppered with anecdotes which serve better to illustrate the life of the New York frontier than would pages of description. Particularly noticeable in them are the ignorance and misguided judgments of crude pioneers. Meetings of the school boards would be dominated by selfish, narrow minded, and quarrelsome men. The main object of the meetings was "to reduce the school bill by getting a cheap hack of a teacher for the shortest possible term." A bully named Root continually intimidated all the meetings in Waith's "deestrick" by calling all of his opponents unqualified liars until finally a burly "squire" offered to throw him out the window. The only opportunities for advanced education open to the son of a minister who was paid only three hundred dollars a year were a few terms at the Chautauqua County academies, where the masters often learned as they tried to teach the pupils. Instruction was necessarily self-

acquired at the expense of ridicule from those pioneers who queried how one was going to fell an oak or plough an acre with a team of Greek and Latin.

Even the preachers' favorite topic was the uselessness of learning, and they boasted that they were "none of your college-bred professors." A Unitarian minister, for instance, insisted to his congregation that the word "Bible" is derived from "by bill," the book having been written originally on parchment rolls, or bills, and hidden away in by places until collected by a certain King James. Another abused David and attacked Jacob as a "willful guilty liar." Waith himself denounced this man, standing up to him in a tattered tow smock and vigorously assailing him with texts and reasoning. Such a riposte was encouraged by the custom of the preacher at the end of his harangue to "give liberty" for any present to add a word for or against the sermon.

The Millerites were in full swing when Waith started his ministry. The end of the world had been predicted for April 23, 1843, and as the date drew near, men even murdered their wives for refusing to be converted. Waith, though urged earnestly to do so, consistently refused to support the millenarian faith, basing his decision on the text that "of that day and that hour knoweth no man, not even the angels in heaven." He proved to be right. Neither would he have any truck with the charlatanism of the popular revivals or with the "Roches-

ter rappings" and other manifestations of the vogue of spiritualism.

Obviously life then was not without excitement and danger. Wolves roamed the hills. Panthers screamed in the forests. Bears broke into kitchens. Badly broken oxen frequently bolted for freedom, dragging driver and sledge after them in Homeric panic. Men remonstrated with one another by tapping them on the shoulder, a euphemistic defence for a savage mauling. Compared to his neighbors and environment, Waith was a cultured man, having haunted the London theatre, especially when Sarah Siddons was playing, and knowing as well as the Bible, Shakespeare, the lesser English poets, some classic authors, and mathematics.

The years Waith lived in covered the span of America's growth from the formation of the nation to its crystallizing crisis. Captain Marryat, writing in 1839, depicts "a vast nation forming, society ever changing, all in motion and activity, nothing complete, the old continent pouring in her surplus to supply the loss of the eastern states, all busy as a hive, full of energy and activity." Full of energy and activity was the life of William Waith, pioneer, man of God, spreader of civilization.

MONROE M. STEARNS

WHITMAN AS PARENT

ONE OF THE familiar problems in Walt Whitman's biography is that of the alleged children. The allegation

was made by the hypothetical father himself, who wrote in a letter to John Addington Symonds in 1890, "Though unmarried I have had six children." Biographers have been disposed to doubt the tale because Whitman was known to enjoy romanticizing the truth and because "no basis in fact for such a claim has ever been discovered," as his latest biographer, Hugh P'Anson Fausset, says in *Walt Whitman: Poet of Democracy* (1942).

Inasmuch as the matter, if it could ever be settled, would be of some value in a complete appraisal of Whitman's character, perhaps it is well not to overlook any available testimony. The Rutgers University Library possesses one small bit of evidence, contained in a long letter from Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, a close friend of Whitman's from 1877 on, to William Sloane Kennedy, another close friend and champion of the poet. The letter, dated March 14, 1895, has never been published in its entirety, although excerpts from it concerning Whitman's difficulty with James Parton appeared in the *Journal* of December, 1940 (p. 2). The pertinent paragraph is offered here for whatever it may be worth:

I know little about Walt's children—do not know how many there were—believe there were several. He and their mother were not married. This is the whole story. I, for my part, am no believer in the sacredness of the marriage ceremony, can imagine a perfect pure union without it and a very impure one under its sanction and without knowing more of the case than above I could not condemn Walt's act. It might

have been either right or wrong we not having the data cannot tell which. Like yourself I have no desire to hold W. up as a saint who could do no wrong. But I claim that the fact of his having children by a woman to whom he was not married *by the church* is in itself no evidence of wrong doing.

Dr. Bucke's assertion that he did not know how many children there were points to a source of information other than the letter to Symonds—probably some other reference to them by Walt himself. The fact that Bucke, his biographer and devoted friend, knew little about the children suggests that Whitman was chary in discussing the subject, either because he did not consider their existence a credit to him or because there were no children. At least the good doctor had no doubt of their existence, as the tone of his letter makes clear, for it was he who questioned Whitman about them to no purpose when the poet was making his will three months before his death.¹ The absence of any reference to the story in Bucke's volume, *Walt Whitman* (1883), proves nothing, of course, for the rumor may have been unknown to him at that date, and in any event it would have interfered with the laudatory intention of the book. Moreover, Whitman carefully edited the manuscript and could have suppressed any disclosure that he considered derogatory to his character. Whether Bucke's eventual acceptance of the report was well founded is still a matter for conjecture.

O.S.C.

¹ See Frances Winwar, *American Giant: Walt Whitman and His Times* (New York, 1941), p. 318.