

2008

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McNair, S. "Poetry and Physicianship: The Intertwined Lives and Works of Walt Whitman and Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke". The Proceedings of the 17th Annual History of Medicine Days, March 7th and 8th, 2008 Health Sciences Centre, Calgary, AB.

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Poetry and Physicianship: The Intertwined Lives and Works of Walt Whitman and Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke

by

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Abstract

If Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke is recalled in medical circles, it is in his role as professor, psychiatrist and patient advocate. He was one of the founding professors of the medical school in London, Ontario, and its first professor of Nervous Diseases. From 1877 until his death in 1902, he served as the superintendent of the Asylum for the Insane in London. He is recognized for his forward-thinking views on the patient-centered care of the mentally ill. He embraced occupational therapy and abolished the physical restraint of patients, as well as the use of alcohol as a sedative. Furthermore, his ideas of disease prevention as the ideal of medical practice remain relevant today.

However, in literary circles, Richard Maurice Bucke is remembered in quite a different way: as a devoted friend and admirer of celebrated American poet, Walt Whitman. Studying Whitman's poetry led Bucke to a moment of pure, religious enlightenment that coloured his life's work, beliefs and activities. He is perhaps best known for his publication of *Cosmic Consciousness*, a work which expressed his theory of the continuing evolution of human emotional and intellectual awareness. He acted as Whitman's first biographer, inviting Whitman to stay at his home in London for a four-month period and, later, as Whitman's health began to fail, Bucke became his caring, solicitous physician.

Medical circles may not recall Bucke's relationship with Whitman, and literary circles may ignore Bucke's creative thought in painting him as simply a Whitman devotee. Yet, Bucke was unabashed in his admiration of Whitman, and the influence of Whitman's ideas is evident in Bucke's medical advances. Whitman's work and self-view was also manifestly impacted by Bucke's friendship and by his encounters with the medical profession. A study of these two men reveals an intimate link between poetry and physicianship.

Introduction

Walt Whitman (1819-1892), famous American poet, and Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke (1837-1902), Canadian psychiatrist and mystic, do not seem to have much in common at first glance. How would these two men, of different professions, backgrounds, and home countries, even be aware of each other? Perhaps because of these differences, few are aware that Walt Whitman and Dr. Bucke were close friends with a rich and complex relationship.

Introduction to Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke

Richard Maurice Bucke was born in Norfolk, England, in 1837. His family immigrated to Canada just one year later, and settled in London, Ontario. His father, a minister, was well-read and made sure that his children also read widely from the classics and in several languages. Other than their reading, the children received no formal education in their youth (Greenland, "Pioneer").

The young Richard Bucke displayed a very early interest in spirituality and questions of the metaphysical. He wrestled with the doctrines of Christianity but, from a young age; found he was unable to accept a narrow spiritual practice. He also recalls, at the age of ten, earnestly wishing to die – just to find out what it was like (Greenland, "Evolution"). Bucke's curiosity about the nature of enlightenment, consciousness, and spiritual life would continue throughout his life.

At the age of sixteen, following the death of his mother, R. M. Bucke left home without a particular plan or destination in mind. He worked as a labourer and a miner in various states. In the winter of 1857, he and a fellow miner got caught in a storm attempting to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains en route to California to register a mining claim. His companion died in the storm; Bucke himself lost one foot and part of the other to frostbite. The crude amputation did not heal well, and the wounds troubled him for forty years following (Greenland, "Evolution").

After making his way back to Canada at the age of twenty-one, Bucke enrolled in medical school (perhaps having been affected by the recent death of his friend and his own injuries). His spiritual interest remained strong: he graduated as the Gold Medalist in the McGill Class of 1862 with a paper entitled, "Correlation of the Physical and Vital Forces," investigating the relationship between the spiritual and the physical aspects of humanity (Lozynsky, p. 30).

After two postgraduate years of study in Europe, Dr. Bucke began practicing as a psychiatrist in Sarnia, Ontario, and then moved to Hamilton. In 1877, he was promoted to the position of Medical Superintendent of the London Asylum for the Insane, and so moved back to London, Ontario. This is where he spent the remaining 25 years, until his death in 1902 (Lozynsky, p. 30).

The Formation of Dr. Bucke's Spiritual Ideas

Dr. Bucke's best-known work was the book, *Cosmic Consciousness*, which detailed his theory that human consciousness is evolving over time – similar to the human physical form. In this book, he delineated three types of consciousness: Simple Consciousness, Self-Consciousness and Cosmic Consciousness. Simple Consciousness is the knowledge of a world external to the self; he felt that this had been demonstrated in certain higher-order animals such as apes, horses, and dogs, as well as in humans. Self-Consciousness, which currently distinguishes human beings from other animal life, is an awareness of self, and an awareness of the self's capacity to think and know. Cosmic Consciousness is, in his view, at least as different from Self-Consciousness as Self-Consciousness is from Simple Consciousness. It involves an awareness of time and space, the soul's immortality, and the fundamental interconnectedness of all things (Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, pp. 1-49). These themes also define much of

Whitman's poetry, so perhaps it is not surprising that Dr. Bucke viewed Walt Whitman as the pinnacle of human evolution – capable of a higher connection with the world around him. Walt Whitman is the centerpiece of Bucke's arguments in *Cosmic Consciousness*. His list of people who had Cosmic Consciousness includes major religious figures, but also other figures from the world of literature: Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Francis Bacon (1561-1626; who Bucke believed wrote the works attributed to William Shakespeare, 1564-1616), William Blake (1757-1827), and Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), to name a few. He felt that in their works and lives, they demonstrated this deeper cosmic understanding.

Dr. Bucke attributed many of his spiritual ideas to a moment of revelation he experienced in connection with a study of Walt Whitman's poetry. One night, in 1872, on his way home from a poetry reading with his friends, he found himself illuminated in a flash of divine insight:

It was in the early spring at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman [...] All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city, the next he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss. He saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of everyone is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught.

(R.M. Bucke, in: *Cosmic Consciousness* p. 8)

After that, he wrote a paper summarizing his beliefs about the origins of man's "moral" sense, or sense of intuitions and emotions, which had been heightened for him in this instant. He sent a copy to Whitman, along with a letter naming Whitman as the source of his elucidation:

I send you by this mail a copy of one essay of mine which is just published [...] it is part of a book which I have been engaged upon for about six years – the book is on "Man's Moral Nature." This book as I say was inspired by yourself about six years ago in the city of London England.

(R.M. Bucke, in a letter to Walt Whitman, Nov. 4th, 1877, published in: Lozynsky, p. 49)

Although Bucke claimed that the ideas for Man's Moral Nature first came from this Whitman-inspired moment of illumination, Artem Lozynsky notes that earlier letters indicate a more long-standing interest in this moral philosophy. In 1871, he seemed mostly concerned with finding a way to explain his thoughts on spirituality: "The ideas themselves are all on hand and have been for several months," he wrote, "[but] I carry them still entirely in my head because I cannot get them out of it unto paper"

(R.M. Bucke, in: Lozynsky, p. 29). It is possible, then, that his moment of revelation served less as an enlightening experience and more as a crystallizing one. It gave him personal experience with the moral attributes about which he intended to write and gave him the impetus to write out his ideas.

Development of Friendship between Dr. Bucke and Walt Whitman

Dr. Bucke's 1872 letter was not his first letter to Whitman. In 1870, he wrote to Whitman to order several volumes of Whitman's poetry and to indicate that he would like to visit Whitman in person one day. As far as is known, Whitman did not reply to either letter, but Dr. Bucke was not deterred. In 1877, he dropped in on Whitman, largely unannounced. Allegedly his reception was quite cordial, and Dr. Bucke says that they were old friends in a few minutes (Lozynsky, p. 32).

Aspects of Dr. Bucke and Walt Whitman's Relationship

Messiah and Disciple

One aspect of their relationship was certainly that of a disciple to a messiah, or religious teacher. This is how Dr. Bucke is typically portrayed in literary circles – as a fanatic Whitman devotee. In analyzing posterity's view of Bucke, S.E.D. Shortt notes that "he appears [in certain studies] largely as an uncritical biographer given to fanciful judgments of a man to whom he naively assigned the character of a saint [...] few scholars have departed from this image of Bucke as the adoring, almost sycophantic follower, obsessively preserving each scrap of the poet's work for posterity" (Shortt, 1984). Bucke's biography of Whitman, indeed, is frequently exuberant and seems in certain instances to editorialize Whitman's character. For example, he has the following to say about Whitman's life between the ages of nineteen and thirty-four:

It was during those [...] years [...] that he acquired his especial education [...] it was perhaps the most comprehensive equipment ever attained by a human being [...]. It consisted in absorbing into himself the whole city and country about him [...] he went on equal terms with every one, he liked them and they him, and he knew them far better than they knew themselves.

(R.M. Bucke, *Walt Whitman*, p. 19)

It is clear here that Dr. Bucke was prone to exaggeration when it came to Walt Whitman's life. His beliefs colour his depiction of Whitman's early years so much so that Whitman, when given early drafts of this biography, insisted that certain elements of high praise be toned down (Jaffe, p. ix).

However, Dr. Bucke's exultation of Whitman stemmed not from sycophancy but from an almost-religious conviction that Whitman was a spiritual leader. He believed that Whitman possessed Cosmic Consciousness; not just in a flash like he himself had experienced, but all the time. Walt Whitman was one of the central case studies in Cosmic Consciousness, alongside major religious leaders, including Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed etc. And it is Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* that Bucke compares to the Bible and the Koran:

What the Vedas were to Brahmanism, the Law and the Prophets to Judaism [...] the Gospels and Pauline writings to Christianity, the Quran to Mohammedanism, will Leaves of Grass be to the future of American civilization [...] Leaves of Grass is the bible of Democracy.

(R.M. Bucke, *Walt Whitman*, p. 185)

Clearly, Dr. Bucke felt that more was at stake in his depictions of Whitman than simply his friendship with an extraordinary man. When Bucke wrote about Whitman, it was with the conviction that he was writing about a new and important religious figure, one that would be central to the spiritual development of the American people. On the occasion of Whitman's death, Bucke records that "over and over again I keep saying to myself: The Christ is dead! Again we have buried the Christ!" (Lozynsky, p. 184).

Dr. Bucke's friends noticed his devotion, too: Sir William Osler (1849-1919) records that when Dr. Bucke talked about Whitman, he became exalted in a very physical way:

It was experiences to hear an elderly man [...] with absolute abandonment tell how 'Leaves of Grass' had meant for him spiritual enlightenment [...]. All this with the accompanying physical exaltation expressed by dilated pupils and intensity of utterance that were embarrassing to uninitiated friends.

(William Osler, in: *Greenland*, "Richard Maurice Bucke, MD 1837-1902: The Evolution of a Mystic")

The devotion of Dr. Bucke to Walt Whitman cannot be denied. However, a more complete picture of their friendship is necessary to truly understand the influence of these two men on each other.

Doctor and Patient

Walt Whitman had a series of strokes in June of 1888 that left him physically weakened. This would be a difficult and vulnerable time in anyone's life; for Whitman, whose poetry speaks frankly about the utter joy he derived from physical existence, from having a functioning body, it seemed to be exceptionally difficult. His diaries and letters of this time detail minutely all of his new physical failings and the misery they caused him. Dr. Bucke was profoundly sympathetic but also was able to take on the paternalistic role expected of doctors at this time. He advocated well for Whitman's care. One example is seen in his handpicking of the medical staff that would be responsible for Whitman's care in his absence:

I do not hear good accounts of your present nurse (Musgrove) and I have just written [...] about a young man whom I can freely recommend who is willing to go from here and take the place. His name is Edward Wilkins [...] I have known him some years [...]. I hope you will approve of the chance, I am sure you will be pleased with it when made.

(R.M. Bucke, in a letter to Walt Whitman, qtd. after: Lozynsky, p. 112)

In keeping with the conventional wisdom of the late 1800s, Dr. Bucke did not fully express to Whitman how severe he felt the condition was. This would have been the standard of care at the time, in keeping with the American Medical Association's first code of medical ethics published in 1847, which stated that:

The life of a sick person can be shortened not only by the acts, but also by the words and manner of the physician. It is therefore a sacred duty to guard himself carefully in this respect, and to avoid all things which have a tendency to discourage the patient and depress his spirits
(Vandekieft, 2001).

In Bucke's letters, there is a serious difference in tone evident between letters to Whitman, which were often chatty and cheery, and letters written to other mutual friends, which were often urgent and despairing of Whitman's recovery. For example, in a letter to Whitman dated July 11th, 1888, Bucke suggests "Would it not be as well, Walt, to sell the horse [...] it will be full as cheap to hire by & by when you want to go out." Yet the next day, in a letter to mutual friend Horace Traubel (1859-1919), Bucke laments: [...] "I wrote W. Yesterday advising him to sell horse & buggy & hire when better – I do not see how he *can* get better" (qtd. in: Lozynsky, p. 98). Dr. Bucke's letters to Whitman at the time were frequently of an encouraging tone, while his letters to Traubel and other mutual friends were often filled with plans for Whitman's funeral.

However, Dr. Bucke did demonstrate insight: Whitman became steadily more annoyed with Dr. Osler's firmly upbeat manner, writing: "I confess I do not wholly like or credit what he says – I do not fancy the jaunty way in which he seems inclined to dismiss the troubles" (Lozynsky, p. 112). Though Dr. Bucke also did not betray the true depths of his concern to Whitman, he did act as a foil to Osler, providing more solicitous care when Whitman became frustrated. S.E.D. Shortt relays the following anecdote to demonstrate the nature of their doctor-patient relationship:

Bucke took Whitman seriously and did not attempt to deny the validity of his perceived distress. "I'll be honest with you, Walt," Bucke said in 1889, "I know I couldn't deceive you if I wanted to: I don't think your status is anything to brag of." Replied Whitman, "I wanted you to say that, Maurice: I wanted you to tell me the truth as you see the truth."
(Shortt, 1984)

Though Dr. Bucke did largely accept the notion of paternalistic medicine, he also demonstrates a strikingly modern tendency to respect patient autonomy. Here, he recognizes that Whitman, far from being helped by physicians disregarding his concern, needed to be taken seriously and have his concern validated. Overall, it is clear that Dr. Bucke was a strong support to Whitman in his final days, and he acted as a good physician in the late 1800s would.

Collaborators and Comrades

It seems that in the two aspects of the Bucke-Whitman friendship already explored, the power differential is flipped. In the first aspect, the one generally recalled in studies of Whitman, Bucke is a devoted Whitman follower; in the second aspect, Bucke is the somewhat-paternalistic physician in charge of Whitman's care. Yet these two aspects of their relationship seemed to co-exist.

S.E.D. Shortt provides a third depiction of the Bucke-Whitman relationship, one in which Bucke and Whitman were equal participants and equally dependent:

Bucke read into Whitman's life and work ideas he had formulated independently and eventually persuaded his friend to accept certain of these views. For his part, Whitman became increasingly dependent on Bucke, first for his generous praise and later as an empathetic source of medical solace.

(Shortt, 1984)

Shortt's insight here – that both Dr. Bucke's spiritual ideas surrounding Whitman and his devotion to Whitman were as important to Whitman's development as they were to Bucke's – is important. Whitman craved praise, so much so that he wrote his own anonymous flattering reviews of *Leaves of Grass* to be published in subsequent editions (Reynolds, p. 87). Bucke's unflagging enthusiasm may well have bolstered Whitman's confidence. It may also be argued that Dr. Bucke demonstrates a certain amount of pride in being Whitman's physician and seems to enjoy the sense that he is "giving back" to an important figure in his life (Lozynsky, p. 90).

One example of Bucke and Whitman's collaboration is seen in the preparation of Bucke's biography of Walt Whitman. Dr. Bucke was the first person to write a biography of Whitman; in fact, he was likely one of the first people to recognize that such a thing would be valuable. As the first person to portray Whitman to posterity, Bucke had a tremendous deal of power over his image. Yet the two sent drafts of the book back and forth to each other, and the final copy reflects both of their thoughts. In an interesting reversal of the doctor-patient relationship, Bucke sent one draft to Whitman with the plea to "go as easy as you can [...] you are the terrible surgeon with the knife and saw and I am the patient!" (qtd. after: Lozynsky, p. 85).

In preparation for the writing of the biography, Whitman spent four months with Dr. Bucke's family in London in 1880. The time they spent together seems to have been inspirational to both. For Whitman's part, his journals of the time record his high esteem of Canada, particularly of the Canadian health care system. He was particularly impressed with what he saw of Canada's compassion for the disenfranchised:

If the most significant trait of modern civilization is benevolence [...] it is doubtful whether this is anywhere illustrated to a fuller degree than in the Province of Ontario. All the maimed, insane, idiotic, blind, deaf and dumb needy sick and old, minor criminals, fallen women, foundlings have advanced and ample provision of house and care and oversight, at least fully equal to any of the United States – probably indeed superior to them.

(Whitman, *White*, p. 648)

Whitman's journals of the time also record his impressions of Canada's natural landscape, and he seems to have begun several poems inspired by the sights that he saw during his visit. However, only one poem written during this time was published – a prose poem titled, *Sunday with the Insane*, about spending an afternoon at the London Asylum with Dr. Bucke.

For Dr. Bucke's part, he seems to have implemented the major changes of his career – abolishing restraints, banning the use of sedatives, and introducing occupational therapy – shortly after Whitman's visit. His 1884 asylum report details these changes, indicating that they had been in place for just a couple of years:

During the past fifteen months we have not used any mechanical restraint or seclusion of any kind whatever; neither have we during that time used any [...] sedative drug [...] we have revolutionized the whole morale of the institution, the disuse of restraint and seclusion being only a small part of the revolution. The central element in the change to which I refer is undoubtedly the employment of the patients.

(Bucke, *Greenland*, "Compleat Psychiatrist")

Although it is impossible to state for certain which man had these ideas first, it is clear that Dr. Bucke and Walt Whitman were at least comrades with a shared philosophy of universal equality. Whitman's enthusiastic approval of Canada's benevolence towards those often left voiceless is echoed in his poetry, which has an overall theme of the interconnectedness of people with each other, the natural environment, and the universe at large. Frequently in *Leaves of Grass*, he provides the voiceless with a voice by visiting the consciousness of others and speaking from their perspective. In particular, the following excerpt from *Leaves of Grass* demonstrates his notions of universality:

The laugher and weeper, the dancer, the midnight widow,
the red squaw,
The consumptive, the erysipalite, the idiot, he that is wronged,
The antipodes, and everyone between this and them in the dark,
I swear they are averaged now [...].one is no better than the other [...]
I swear they are all beautiful [...].

(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 63)

Conclusion

Dr. Bucke's philosophy of the treatment of the mentally ill is perhaps best summed up in another statement from the 1884 asylum report: "The object of treatment in the case of insanity is (to my mind) not so much the cure of the disease as it is the rehumanization of the patient" (Bucke, *Greenland*, "Compleat Psychiatrist"). This indicates that Bucke's primary concern as a psychiatrist was not with disease, but with the humanity of his patients. His disuse of inhumanizing restraints and sedatives, and his concern with providing useful occupations for his inpatients, indicates that he thought of his patients as human beings entitled to dignity and good treatment.

The complex relationship of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke and Walt Whitman offers insight into the interplay between poetic thought, spirituality, and medicine. It is an important Canadian medical history that is all too little-known.

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