

## *John Greenleaf Whittier*

*The 150th Anniversary of his Birth*

BY C. WALLER BARRETT

FIFTY years ago the eminent scholar Bliss Perry commemorated the 100th anniversary of Whittier's birth with an appealing sketch of his life and work. The poet had died just sixteen years before and memories of him were cherished in the hearts of living men and women who had been his friends. Echoes of his fight for freedom could still be heard and his reputation as a poet was deservedly high. In commenting on the paucity of books in the Whittier household Professor Perry said "Our own generation bewildered by far too many newspapers, magazines and books is apt to forget that a few vitalizing ideas may more than make good the lack of printed matter." This observation showed deep insight into the development of Whittier's mind and art. Unfortunately, however, this spate of printed words complained of, now grown into a flood, has tended to submerge the reputations of some of our great figures of the past whose lives were marked by devotion to a few vitalizing ideas and fundamental principles.

It must be admitted, therefore, that interest in Whittier has receded considerably from the level of 1907. Not that this fact should cause undue concern. Those in the antiquarian and literary field have seen reputations rise and fall and rise again too often to worry about the ultimate niches to be occupied by men like Whittier whose contributions and achievements are too important to be forgotten. Institu-

tions such as this one and libraries and scholars in general assume willingly the task of preserving for the future America what they have written and thought and done.

And yet it is too bad in many ways that Whittier is not alive today in this new period of sectional turmoil, alive to bring home to the conscience of America the realization that the task to which he dedicated himself with such selfless zeal a century ago was only partly accomplished by the fratricidal struggle of 1861. What Whittier and his cohorts brought about was the freedom of the Negro's body. It is our responsibility to bring about the freedom of his mind and spirit.

It is not difficult to imagine the scorn which he would feel toward the paltry politicians of today who are infinitely inferior to the brave but misguided Southern Secessionists of the previous era who were at least willing to risk their lives and fortunes for a principle they believed in, however wrong it may have been. The modern practitioners of the political art seem to be principally concerned with gauging the extent to which they need arouse the latent emotions of blind hatred and unreasoning fear so as to insure their continuance in office.

How inspiring it would be to hear that noble voice sound out in a new "Massachusetts to Virginia." We would once more hear echoes from Marblehead, Cape Ann, from Barnstable and Nantucket and "From rich and royal Worcester, where through the calm repose of cultured vales and fringing woods the gentle Nashua flows." One may feel certain that his exhortations would today fall on far more fertile soil than they did in 1843, and we should be confident that there is a large element in the South which, silent for the present, needs only an inspired leader to join ranks in support of a step in the moral progress of the nation that cannot be long delayed.

How vain imaginings of this kind are! but they serve a purpose: they bring home to us the decisive role that Whittier played in his time as he crystallized the wavering sentiments of the northern and western states against the institution of slavery. When Whittier joined the abolitionist ranks in 1833 it was not an easy or safe thing to do. He had set his heart on a political career and the espousal of the anti-slavery cause, vastly unpopular even in the North, meant the end of these ambitions. Furthermore, there were involved the certainty of constant contumely and a grave risk of bodily harm. Nevertheless, the grim circumstances of the time had awakened his mind and heart to the evil and to a man of Whittier's character this was conclusive. He went in with everything he had. On the surface it wasn't much. Of money he had the slenderest means yet he devoted the greater part of a year's income to the publication in 1833 of the celebrated pamphlet *Justice and Expediency*. Suffering always from the most wretched health, he expended without stint his strength for the advancement of the cause.

In the annals of those tragic pre-war years, history has depicted so vividly the violent emotions of the South that one is apt to forget the virulent hatred of abolitionists in New England. Yet it is a fact that a year or two after Whittier had thrown himself body and soul into the campaign he barely escaped with his life. It is an oft-told tale how in the company with the English Abolitionist George Thompson at Concord, New Hampshire, he found himself menaced by a crowd which had the avowed intention of stoning them to death. By the greatest good fortune, the rain of rocks missed their heads so that they were able to reach their host's house lame and sore only. The brave and resolute action of this friend most certainly saved their lives. Whittier said afterward, "I understood how St. Paul felt when he was thrice stoned."

With his personal ambitions firmly buried, Whittier was able to devote himself with complete independence to the cause of freedom. He skillfully steered through mid-channel so as to command the widest support for the accomplishment of the desired end. He broke with the radical wing, typified by Garrison, which thought him weak and vacillating. He constructed the coalitions necessary for the election of Cushing and Rantoul to Congress and of Boutwell as governor of Massachusetts. An even more important achievement was the successful effort to send the stalwart Sumner to the Senate.

In the meantime, despite accusations of faint-heartedness, Whittier was using his poetry as a well-tempered instrument to arouse and keep aflame the widespread moral indignation so necessary for ultimate success. The "Voices of Freedom" ring out in such poems as "The Slave Ships," "The Hunters of Men," "The Christian Slave" and "The Farewell of a Virginia Mother to Her Daughters Sold into Southern Bondage."

Not to be forgotten is the famous "Ichabod" expressing the grief and shame felt when Daniel Webster spoke in support of the "compromise" and the Fugitive Slave Law:

"So fallen! so lost! the light withdrawn  
Which once he wore!  
The glory from his gray hairs gone  
Forevermore!

"All else is gone; from those great eyes  
The soul has fled:  
When faith is lost, when honor dies,  
The man is dead!"

Whittier hoped that the South could be roused to the moral obloquy of its course and turned back to the teachings of such illustrious forebears as Washington and Jefferson who had realized full well the evils of slavery. These hopes were

implicit in the stanza from Randolph of Roanoke:

“As from the grave where Henry sleeps,  
From Vernon’s sweeping willow,  
And from the grassy pall which hides  
The sage of Monticello  
So from the leaf-strewn burial-stone  
Of Randolph’s lowly dwelling,  
Virginia! o’er thy land of slaves,  
A warning voice is swelling!”

Furthermore, his Quaker religion and his deepest instincts had nurtured in him an abhorrence of war. A peaceful settlement was his fervent prayer as shown in this stanza from the stirring poem “Our Countrymen in Chains”:

“Up now for Freedom!—not in strife  
Like what our sterner fathers saw—  
The awful waste of human life—  
The glory and the guilt of war.  
But break the chain—the yoke remove,  
And smite to earth oppression’s rod,  
With those mild arms of Truth and Love  
Made mighty through the living God!”

Even when Sumner was struck down in the Senate Chambers by Preston S. Brookes of South Carolina Whittier suppressed his intense indignation and counselled his followers:

“The North is not united for freedom as the South is for slavery . . . Let us not be betrayed into threats. Leave violence where it belongs, with the wrong-doer. It is worse than folly to talk of fighting slavery, when we have not yet agreed to vote against it. Our business is with . . . ballots, not bullets. The path of duty is plain: God’s providence calls us to walk in it. Let me . . . repeat . . . Forget, forgive, and UNITE.”

Once the war was unavoidable, Whittier’s Quaker conscience became reconciled only by its inevitability and by his unshaken belief that Divine Providence would bring about

the proper results. His poems "In War Time" breathe this spirit and in "Italy" this stanza reflects his feelings:

"Yet surely as He lives, the day  
Of peace he promised shall be ours  
To fold the flags of war, and lay  
Its sword and spear to rust away  
And sow its ghastly field with flowers."

When the war was over at last and the Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery was adopted the exultant *Laus Deo* fittingly celebrated the event:

"It is done!  
Clang of bell and roar of gun  
Send the tidings up and down  
How the belfries rock and reel!  
How the great guns, peal on peal,  
Fling the joy from town to town!

"It shall belt with joy the earth!  
Ring and swing  
Bells of Joy! on the morning's wing  
Send the song of praise abroad!  
With a sound of broken chains  
Tell the nation that he reigns  
Who alone is Lord and God!"

Whittier's love for New England so evident in many of his poems found expression too in his absorption in the early history of the colonies. His interest in the legendary lore of his native region led him to peruse such published works on the subject as were available to him, and when opportunity offered to delve into old court records, narratives, and diaries of the early period. Yet he did not fancy himself as gifted in original research. He wrote in a preface, "New England is rich in traditionary lore—I leave the task of rescuing these associations from oblivion to some more fortunate individual." By nature Whittier was incapable of being a scientific historian. He was not above changing

facts to heighten his dramatic effects. He sought to transmute the old tales and legends into a form that would preserve them for the future. Thus his versions were wrought by his creative imagination into pictures of simple and nostalgic beauty and stirring drama.

This segment of his genius flowered into prose as well as poetry. His earliest prose work is *Legends of New England*, published in 1831, which, incidentally, includes seven poems. The prose pieces range from the "Midnight Attack" to the dramatic "The Powwaw" and the legend "The Human Sacrifice." Whittier published *Leaves from Margaret Smith's Journal* in 1849 and this fictional account of daily life in the Colony of Massachusetts is an evocative reconstruction of the early years of the Bay State.

The poetry which reflects best Whittier's antiquarian studies is principally contained in the edition of his poems published by Benjamin B. Mussey & Co. in Boston in 1849, the first comprehensive edition. The notes contained in this volume are indicative of his reading and studies in preparation for such poems as "Mogg Megone," "Cassandra Southwick," "The Exiles," and "The Norsemen," which, perhaps even better than Longfellow's "A Skeleton in Armor," treats of the early exploration of North America by the Vikings.

That Whittier began to make rhymes at an extremely early age is well known and it is a tradition that his first efforts were written upon the beam of his mother's loom. As a schoolboy, his slate was covered with verses, one of which was preserved in the memory of his sister Elisabeth Hussey:

"And must I always swing the flail  
And help to fill the milking pail?  
I wish to go away to school;  
I do not wish to be a fool."

There was also an interesting attempt to catalogue in rhyme the books in the family library:

“The Bible towering o’er the rest,  
Of all other books the best.

William Penn’s laborious writing  
And a book ’gainst Christians fighting.

A book concerning John’s Baptism  
Elias Smith’s Universalism.

How Captain Riley and his crew  
Were on Sahara’s desert threw.

How Rollins, to obtain the cash  
Wrote a dull history of trash.

The Lives of Franklin and of Penn  
Of Fox and Scott, all worthy men

The Life of Burroughs too I’ve read  
As big a rogue as e’er was made.

And Tufts, too, although I will be civil  
Worse than an incarnate devil.”

The first Whittier poem to be published, “The Exile’s Departure” appeared in the *Free Press* of June 8, 1826, to which newspaper it had been sent by his sister Mary without the poet’s knowledge.

In 1832 an anonymous pamphlet of 28 pages was published by Carter and Hendee of Boston entitled *Moll Pitcher. A Poem*. A later printing came out in Philadelphia in 1840 with Whittier’s name on the title-page. Whittier thought the poem entirely unworthy and thenceforth was successful in suppressing it and preventing its inclusion in his collected works. Little did he dream of the avidity with which twentieth-century collectors would seek that fragile wrapped pamphlet of 1832. A year later “The Song of the Vermonters” was published in the *New England Magazine*. Many years were to elapse before the authorship was known and the



secret was so well kept that when the poem was printed in a broadside in 1843 the eminent bibliographer Henry Stevens read it to the Vermont Historical and Antiquarian Society as an authentic relic contemporary with the events of the year 1779, the only date shown on the piece.

Among the most appealing of Whittier's poems are those which evoke his boyhood experiences. These were written after the passage of years had cast a mellow glow over the stern realities and back-breaking drudgery of boyhood on his father's farm. To this group belong "The Barefoot Boy" of 1855, "Telling the Bees" of 1858 and "My playmate" of 1860.

In 1854 at the age of 47 Whittier published the famous poem "Maud Muller" and an oft-repeated couplet affords an insight about his feeling on single blessedness

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen  
The saddest are these, 'It might have been'."

In 1857 the establishment of the *Atlantic Monthly* gave Whittier a new forum. Of the many contributions to this magazine, now celebrating its 100th anniversary, two seem to stand out, "Skipper Ireson's Ride" and "Barbara Frietchie." It would be difficult to count the times that platforms have resounded with the schoolboy's declaration

"Shoot, if you must, this old gray head,  
But spare your country's flag, She said."

His sister, the gifted Elisabeth Hussey, like her brother had forsworn the marriage yoke and was his affectionate homemaker and intellectual companion until her death in 1864. His mother had died in 1857 and this double bereavement caused his mind to turn back to the old Whittier homestead. These thoughts crystallized in the poem by which he may be longest remembered. On August 28, 1865, he sent a note to Fields: "I am writing a poem, 'Snow-Bound, a Winter Idyl,' a homely picture of Old New England homes. If I ever finish, I hope and trust it will be good." "Snow-

Bound" was published in 1866 and his hopes were bountifully realized by its enthusiastic reception. How many generations since have experienced the wistful charm, the poignant nostalgia conjured forth by the lines!:

"Until the old, rude-furnished room  
Burst, flower-like, into rosy-bloom;"

and the pictures of the Whittier family

"Our father rode again his ride  
On Memphremagog's wooded side  
\* \* \* \*

"We heard again the tales of witch craft old,  
And dream and sign and marvel told  
To sleepy listeners as they lay  
Stretched idly on the salted hay  
\* \* \* \*

"Our mother, while she turned her wheel  
Or ran the new-knit stocking heel,—  
Recalling in her fitting phrase,  
The story of her early days  
\* \* \* \*

"Our uncle, innocent of books,  
Was rich in lore of field and brooks  
\* \* \* \*

"Next, the dear aunt, whose smile of cheer  
And voice in dreams I see and hear,—  
The sweetest woman ever fate  
Perverse denied a household mate  
\* \* \* \*

"There, too, our elder sister plied  
Her evening task the stand beside;  
A full, rich nature, free to trust,  
Truthful and almost sternly just  
\* \* \* \*

"Upon the motley-braided mat  
Our youngest and our dearest sat,  
Lifting her large, sweet, asking eyes  
Now bathed in the unfading green  
And holy peace of Paradise."

If these scanty and disjointed references to Whittier's life and works have proved anything they have demonstrated mostly through his own words that our Quaker poet contributed immeasurably to the cause of freedom and the preservation of the union and that he left for posterity in phrases of simple beauty and poetic imagery, pictures of an earlier American way of life that is a priceless part of our national heritage. Another American poet, James Russell Lowell, perhaps sums up our feelings best in *A Fable for Critics*:

"There is Whittier, whose swelling and vehement heart  
 Strains the strait-breasted drab of the Quaker apart,  
 And reveals the live Man, still supreme and erect,  
 Underneath the bemummying wrappers of sect;  
 There was ne'er a man born who had more of the swing  
 Of the true lyric bard and all that kind of thing;  
 And his failures arise (though he seem not to know it)  
 From the very same cause that has made him a poet,—  
 A fervor of mind which knows no separation  
 'Twixt simple excitement and pure inspiration,  
 As my Pythoness erst sometimes erred from not knowing  
 If 'twere I or mere wind through her tripod was blowing;  
 Let his mind once get head in its favorite direction  
 And the torrent of verse bursts the dams of reflection,  
 While, borne with the rush of the meter along,  
 The poet may chance to go right or go wrong,  
 Content with the whirl and delirium of song;  
 Then his grammar's not always correct, nor his rhymes,  
 And he's prone to repeat his own lyrics sometimes,  
 Not his best, though, for those are struck off at white heats  
 When the heart in his breast like a triphammer beats,  
 And can ne'er be repeated again any more  
 Than they could have been carefully plotted before:  
 Like old what's-his-name there at the battle of Hastings  
 (Who, however, gave more than mere rhythmical bastings),  
 Our Quaker leads off metaphorical fights  
 For reform and whatever they call human rights,

Both singing and striking in front of the war,  
 And hitting his foes with the mallet of Thor;  
 Anne haec, one exclaims, on beholding his knocks,  
 Vestis filii tui, O leather-clad Fox?

Can that be thy son, in the battle's mad din,  
 Preaching brotherly love and then driving it in  
 To the brain of the tough old Goliath of sin,  
 With the smoothness of pebbles from Castaly's spring  
 Impressed on his hard moral sense with a sling?

"All honor and praise to the right-hearted bard  
 Who was true to The Voice when such service was hard,  
 Who himself was so free he dared sing for the slave  
 When to look but a protest in silence was brave;  
 All honor and praise to the women and men  
 Who spoke out for the dumb and the downtrodden then!  
 It needs not to name them, already for each  
 I see History preparing the statue and niche;  
 They were harsh, but shall you be so shocked at hard words  
 Who have beaten your pruning hooks up into swords,  
 Whose rewards and hurrahs men are surer to gain  
 By the reaping of men and of women than grain?  
 Why should you stand aghast at their fierce wordy war, if  
 You scalp one another for Bank or for Tariff?  
 Your calling them cutthroats and knaves all day long  
 Doesn't prove that the use of hard language is wrong;  
 While the World's heart beats quicker to think of such men  
 As signed Tyranny's doom with a bloody steel pen,  
 While on Fourth of Julys beardless orators fright one  
 With hints at Harmodius and Aristogeiton,  
 You need not look shy at your sisters and brothers  
 Who stab with sharp words for the freedom of others;—  
 No, a wreath, twine a wreath for the loyal and true  
 Who, for sake of the many, dared stand with the few,  
 Not of blood-spattered laurel for enemies braved,  
 But of broad, peaceful oak leaves for citizens saved!"

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