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An Unknown Photograph of Whitman and Harry Stafford

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ON THE BACK COVER:

AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPH OF WHITMAN AND HARRY STAFFORD—This surprising photograph was sent to Whitman's English admirer Edward Carpenter by Harry Stafford's younger sister Ruth in 1924 and was accompanied by a letter in which Ruth fondly recalled Carpenter's visit with the Stafford family in 1877 (Carpenter recounts the visit in *Days with Walt Whitman* [London: George Allen, 1906], pp. 10–16). The photo is now in the Edward Carpenter Collection in the Sheffield [England] Library, by whose kind permission it is reproduced. I found it last year while doing research in England in preparation for the upcoming double issue of *WWQR* which will print all known photographs of Whitman; quite a few unfamiliar photos will appear there, but this one is of particular interest since Whitman's relationship with Harry Stafford has been getting increasing attention by Whitman scholars in the last twenty years. Until now, there has been no image of the two of them together. In volume 4 of his edition of Whitman's *Correspondence* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), Edwin Haviland Miller printed a photograph of Harry Stafford and dated it 1876; there is no mistaking the face of this emotionally troubled young man, who wears the same intense expression in both photographs.

Harry Stafford is seldom even mentioned in early biographies of Whitman. In Gay Wilson Allen's *The Solitary Singer* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), he becomes a minor character, but it was not until Miller collected the fascinating and emotionally complex Stafford-Whitman correspondence that Harry became an important figure in Whitman biography. In *Specimen Days* Whitman had acknowledged the importance of "my friends, the Staffords" and their farm, where he spent restorative days by Timber creek in the years following his paralytic stroke (1873). But he never publicly acknowledged the deep and entangled relationship he entered into with the 18-year-old Stafford, whom he met in Camden in 1876 when the boy was working in a printing office; even in Whitman's rambling conversations with Horace Traubel during his last years, when he touched upon endless details of his life, Harry Stafford is almost never mentioned, unlike Peter Doyle whom Whitman continued to recall fondly. Still, in making out his will in June, 1888, Whitman decided to leave his gold watch to Harry and his silver watch to Pete (See *With Walt Whitman in Camden* [1905; rpt. New York: Roman and Littlefield, 1961], 1:311); for Christmas ten years earlier, Whitman had bought a gold watch, probably to give to Harry (whether he ever did, we do not know; see *Correspondence*, 4:70).

In his introduction to volume 4 of the *Correspondence*, Miller offers the most complete examination of the Whitman/Stafford relationship (pp. 2–9). Harry, Miller says, "was the counterpart of the soldiers whom Whitman met in the Washington hospitals during the Civil War, of Peter Doyle, and probably of many others in the early years who have escaped literary detection" (p. 3). Whitman became father and mother to these insecure and semiliterate young men, acting out what Miller believes to be a "bisexual role, safely removed from the threats of literal paternity and of mature sexuality" (p. 4), building a series of unique "Calamus" friendships. Whitman began to refer to Harry as his "adopted son" or his "nephew" and told his hosts, when he and Harry traveled together, that they expected to share the same bed (see *Correspondence*, 4:68). In 1877, Whitman gave Harry a ring, and their relationship—a symbolic marriage, as Miller calls it (*Walt Whitman's Poetry* [New York: New York University Press, 1968], p. 54)—became more confused and stormy. In 1877, probably the year of this photograph, Harry wrote to Walt: "I wish you would put the ring on my finger again, it seems to me ther is something that is wanting to compleete our friendship when I am with you. . . . You know when you put it on there was but one thing to part it from me and that was death" (*Correspondence*, 4:6–7; Harry's misspellings retained). Perhaps it is this marriage/friendship ring that is visible in the photo, displayed on Harry's right hand.

Since the 1960s, Harry Stafford has become a more developed figure in Whitman biography, and in Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), the relationship between Stafford and Whitman becomes the culminating episode of the last twenty years of the poet's life, as Kaplan concludes his biography with a chapter investigating Whitman's association with the Stafford family.

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