FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel 1888-1892

Gary Schmidgall, editor
University of Iowa
978-0-87745-766-4
(June 15, 2001)

In the spring of 1888, Horace Traubel, 29, began almost daily visits with Walt Whitman, who was almost 69. For the next four years until Whitman's death in 1892, Traubel played Boswell to Whitman's Samuel Johnson, recording the daily life, events, and conversations of America's "good, gray poet." Traubel's notes, totaling more than 1.9 million words, were published in nine volumes titled With Walt Whitman in Camden over a period of 90 years. Although it provides a unique look at America's greatest poet, at nearly 5,000 pages, With Walt Whitman is too long and too poorly indexed to wade through for any except the most dedicated Whitmanite.

That's why Intimate with Walt is such a welcomed book. Editor Schmidgall (author of Walt Whitman: A Gay Life) has provided an invaluable service in editing a one-volume selection of Traubel's conversations with Whitman that allows the more casual Whitmanite to sample Traubel's treasure trove. The excerpts are arranged topically into 46 subjects, including Whitman's works, his friends, his opinions of other writers, and his views of sexuality and love. Schmidgall has also written an extensive introduction that focuses on the relationship between Whitman and Traubel. Those who have tried to use With Walt Whitman in Camden will be thrilled to find that, unlike those volumes, Intimate with Walt is thoroughly indexed and citations are provided for the original location of all excerpts.

The portrait of Whitman that emerges from these selections is that of a passionate man approaching the end of his life. He is at turns perturbed, amused, flattered, and understanding of Traubel's frequent questions and constant vigilance to preserve the various artifacts of Whitman's life. Between the lines, one can see the developing friendship between the two. Particularly moving are the excerpts from Traubel's journals as Whitman was on his deathbed.

Whitman's published works were always overtly autobiographical. When reading Leaves of Grass, one always feels that he or she is listening to the man. As a result, those who have read Whitman's works extensively will find little that is particularly new or surprising or unpredictable here regarding his beliefs. However, the image of the poet that emerges in this

book is less polished than the one that emerges from his own works, more intimate even. Considering that Whitman is one of the most intimate poets, and considering the amount of mundane material that Schmidgall had to edit out, this quite an accomplishment. Intimate with Walt is an essential addition to any Whitman collection.

Erik Bledsoe