

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892)  
*An Appreciation*

By Michael Maglaras



In grammar school, we had to memorize poetry and, standing before the class, recite what we had committed to heart. As I was not a particularly good student, but did have a certain facility for memorization, I would memorize many more poems than my teachers required and eagerly ask to recite them all. This, of course, endeared me to my teachers. It also, quite naturally, infuriated my classmates.

Today, because of this early experience with memorizing poetry, I can still remember whole pages of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," among many other poems no one seems to pay much attention to anymore. Memorizing poems as a kid and, moreover, reciting them, instilled in me a love of language. It also trained my ear. Although my powers of memorization have now declined, I still like to test myself from time to time. At a recent public reading of Whittier's "Snow-Bound" I closed the text before me and simply recited the last six minutes of the poem from memory as a dare to myself. I am as proud of those six minutes as I am of anything else I have done in my life.

The bicentennial of John Greenleaf Whittier's birth comes in 2007, and we should rejoice. For Whittier's work, taken as a whole, is the finest body of poetical work by any 19th century American poet. Some might argue that Whittier is the finest poet the American experience has produced. No one would get any argument from me. His stature seems, to me, to be beyond questioning. His influence subtly pervades our collective consciousness even today...at a time when his name is on signage all over Massachusetts Route 495, but too few of us actually still read his work.

Whittier's work is filled with a New England sensibility, but a special sensibility all his own. He transcends the "Fireside Poet" label we've slapped on him in the past one hundred years or so. It is easy to use comfortable labels for poets. In Whittier's case he quickly wriggles out of any label we place on him. He lived at the same time as the great Transcendentalist spirits; he was, however, not much of a joiner, and it is easy to see, when one examines Whittier's life and work, why he didn't have much to do with Emerson and his followers – fellow New Englanders who lived just a few miles down the road. However, Whittier was enough of a universal poetical genius that he could write the kind of poetry he wanted to, and he could and did write incomparable Transcendentalist poetry of the kind that Emerson, for example, for all his greatness, could only hope to have written. "Hampton Beach" defines transcendentalism more clearly than any philosophical discursion I have ever read on that subject. When I read the work of Robert Frost or, more recently, the work of Stanley Kunitz, I hear Whittier's voice, and I

realize that Whittier's spiritual and poetic legacy, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps runs deeper inside us than we can know.

I have devoted more than two years of my life to the study and now to the recording of Whittier's poetry. This is not nearly enough time. During this time, I have begun to understand that among the many poems in Whittier's vast output are a number that, arguably, are less than first rate. Among these are works that Professor Elaine Apthorp, formerly of San Jose State University, rightly calls "topical poems." Whittier was, like the composer Franz Schubert, someone who could take the most mundane consideration and amplify it into something so outside itself that it could take on a meaning far beyond the apparent. Even so, in a number of these topical poems, Whittier seems to be uninspired by his subject matter. Some of these attempts, as a result, simply do not and probably cannot speak to our modern sensibilities. Among these poems of lesser importance are ones about the birthdays of people now long-forgotten, public library openings, and similar commemorative events. Whittier was a famous man and took pride in being a public poet...a concept with which you and I have no familiarity in 2007. When he was asked for a poem, he conscientiously did his best to commemorate the event, and his best is still pretty good; but the results are, for the most part, not the work for which he is and will be remembered. Whittier's work can also sound very old-fashioned to us; this is not surprising, but for a different reason than we might imagine: good poetry demands a patient reading, and Whittier's occasional quaintness of voice requires more patience than we may be capable of – for at the beginning of the 21st century we have become an impatient lot.

But Whittier was also a poet of genius. He wrote many poems in which his heart and mind are fully engaged, and where he catches us up – enfolds us, and takes us along with him almost before we have had a chance to object. Whittier can be very seductive. We can find ourselves walking quietly beside him in some leafy glade, or, as with the painter Turner, find ourselves strapped to the mast, facing the teeth of the gale right alongside the half-crazed artist. Whittier wrote poems among which are masterpieces of the first order. Some of this work is so fine that it simply has no equal in the work of any other American poet.

Early in 2006, *217 Records* released my reading of Whittier's "Snow-Bound," as Volume One of the Whittier Bicentennial Recording Project. This recording features a wonderful essay by the estimable Brenda Wineapple and employs sections of Charles Ives's Piano Sonata No. 2 "The Concord Sonata." In Volume Two "Barbara Frietchie & Other Poems" we use music as well. I have chosen music that, I hope, adds something to the story and feeling each poem conveys without diluting Whittier's intent. Speaking of works of genius, there are at least three masterpieces among the poems collected on this recording: "Hampton Beach," "Maud Muller," and "Burning Driftwood." I have chosen these and the other poems in this collection carefully...I might also say, painfully...as there were many more poems that I wanted to share with you than would fit on one CD.

Whittier was a complex creative personality and his poems are not easy to read well aloud. I've heard many people read Whittier's poems, over the years, and many times these readings have all but ignored Whittier's passion...even his anger. His work draws from all of his varied life experiences, which all seem infused – whether youthful experiences or those of old age – with a passionate intensity. Whittier was a man of intense and burning passion, and we must never forget this. It is one of his more attractive contradictions that, alongside this intensity of feeling, he was also a devout Quaker. He was an ardent abolitionist long before it became chic to be one in New England intellectual circles, and he damn near lost his life for his beliefs. As a young man he was, of all things, a cobbler...and also a school teacher. He was one of the founders of the

Liberal Party, which became, over time, the Republican Party; and, of course, he was a poet of the very first rank.

Whittier's feelings for his sister Elizabeth, who died in 1864, (and to whose memory this recording is dedicated) seem to have been as loving and at least as intense, from a creative standpoint, as those that Wordsworth felt for his sister Dorothy – but, in Whittier's case, without the unfortunate perversion and mental breakdown that was the result of Wordsworth's obsession. "The Pressed Gentian" is all about the quiet, secret side of Elizabeth Whittier that she showed only to her brother. It is a poem of revealing passion. Elizabeth's love for her brother and he for her inspired a number of other poems as well. The poem "Sweet Fern" (which I recorded for this CD but reluctantly cut to save space) is yet another example. Unlike Wordsworth – who wrote some fairly silly stuff in his old age – Whittier's work just got better and more heartfelt as his hair turned white. The poem "Burning Driftwood" attests to this. Whittier, in the stern photographs taken in his old age, looks like someone we might not like to know. The irony is, of course, that he was exactly who we needed to know then...and, God knows, need to know now.

"Hampton Beach" is about the ineluctable oneness of things: for it seems clear that on a trip to the short New Hampshire seacoast, Whittier experienced the same melding of body and spirit with the quiet forces of Nature that Rousseau reported in his Confessions a century earlier. The poem "Isabel," an early work, is a fine example of Whittier's understanding of matters of the heart. (So, John, who *was* this woman who spurned your youthful intensity of feeling?) "Maud Muller," a personal favorite of mine (I grew up near "where the cool spring bubbled up"), is the best kind of sentimental story – its hoped-for happy ending depending upon the beneficence of Providence and an ardent belief in life after death. "In School Days" shows Whittier at his most powerfully reminiscent and quietly evocative. It is a sweet gem of a poem. I still cannot read it, after many months of living with it, without tears in my eyes.

Yes, John Greenleaf Whittier was a so-called "Fireside Poet." But, he was also a poet of rebellion and call to action. His abolitionist poetry pushed intolerance and injustice right back in the faces of his readers; he shames us, even today, and, I suspect, would be entirely unapologetic about it. In "What the Birds Said" he weighs our spirits down with a vision of corpses littering the southern Civil War battlefields, while ending the poem by suggesting to us that the flight of these birds northward is a symbol and embodiment of the renewal of Spring and that season's inherent optimism and refreshment of the spirit. Whittier always points his finger at the evil; but, while we watch, just above his sightline, the evil is slowly dissipating in the newly-lit horizon... for it cannot abide the face of dawn. With this dawn comes hope, and we must remember that Whittier is the most hopeful of poets. He knows that we are capable, as human beings, of being much better than we are. That he likes to remind us of this, in his best work, is perhaps why in 2007 some of us may feel uncomfortable with him.

In the disturbing poem "How the Woman Went From Dover" it is no holds barred, as Quaker women accused of witchcraft are carted down the New Hampshire seacoast and, by order of the Crown, whipped at each village along the way...the madness stopped by the intervention of an enlightened magistrate in the village of Salisbury. This poem, too, is unapologetic in its intensity of feeling and deep sense of outrage. It was intended to make Whittier's readers angry at such injustice. I hope it makes you just as angry today. (My producer, Terri Templeton, and my engineer, Alex Kosiorek, have created a masterful recording of this work, and theirs is the prize for its success as a fine example of recording art.)

Whittier lived a full span of 85 years. In his early years he lived a dramatic and eventful life; in middle age he established his reputation by selling 20,000 copies of the poem "Snow-Bound"

within a few weeks of its printing. (Just imagine a poet selling 20,000 of anything, in any time frame, today.) When anyone wrote Whittier a letter – and many strangers did – he would answer each letter himself. These letters are filled with his own special brand of generosity and fullness of spirit. I own two of these letters he wrote to fans who had written to him and reading them fills me with a quiet joy.

In his old age, he was revered, all the while continuing to produce work that was increasingly metaphorical, sometimes abstract – always passionate. Schools closed to honor his birthday. Children memorized his poems and recited them to their parents with pride. As he aged, his work became more profoundly felt and masterful. There are many examples of this blossoming of artistic powers in old age in the canon of western artistic experience. It is no accident that I chose to end my performance of "Burning Driftwood" on this recording with the music of another defiant, surprising, and celebrated octogenarian, the English composer Ralph Vaughn Williams. These men had much in common: not the least of which was that even in their 80's they still could not get enough of life.

At this 200th anniversary of Whittier's birth, let us take time to read his best work again; yes, perhaps, even memorize some of it. Perhaps we would discover, by doing this, the things that are surely ever-present in ourselves, but, alas, which now may be a source of self-consciousness in the stark world we have inherited. Reading the work of Whittier, especially reading it aloud, can reaffirm *life*. Some of his poems will arouse our innate and natural sense of indignation and anger at any and all injustice. Others will astound us with their simple beauty, and, in doing so, perhaps remind us that there is no reason for the unjust neglect of our finest poet. For while we have named hospitals, streets, and even towns in memory of Whittier (and this is as it should be), the best memorial to him is the private one that once resided in the hearts of the people who had read his work, and can, I believe, reside in modern hearts just as easily. For once we permit the old Quaker to speak to us, the beauty of his imagery and language can win us over. We can marvel at this bachelor poet's deep and inexplicable understanding of love. We will, without doubt, gain inspiration from his passionate commitment to all that is good and all that is true.

- Michael Maglaras  
Old Greenwich, CT  
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"Peace and order and beauty draw  
Round thy symbol of light and law;



And ever the stars above look down  
On thy stars below in Fredericktown."

- Barbara Frietchie