

**The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman**

**By**

**Walt Whitman and Anne Burrows Gilchrist**

THE LETTERS OF ANNE GILCHRIST AND WALT WHITMAN

Edited

With an Introduction

BY THOMAS B. HARNED

In Memoriam

AUGUSTA TRAUBEL HARNED

1856-1914

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## PREFACE

Probably there are few who to-day question the propriety of publishing the love-letters of eminent persons a generation after the deaths of both parties to the correspondence. When one recalls the published love-letters of Abelard, of Dorothy Osborne, of Lady Hamilton, of Mary Wollstonecraft, of Margaret Fuller, of George Sand, Bismarck, Shelley, Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, and--to mention only one more illustrious example--of the Brownings, one must needs look upon this form of presenting biographical material as a well-established, if not a valuable, convention of letters.

As to the particular set of letters presented to the reader in this volume, a word of explanation and history may be required. Most of these letters are from Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, a few are replies to her letters, and a few are letters from her children to Whitman. Mrs. Gilchrist died in 1885. When, two years later, her son, Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, was collecting material for his interesting biography of his mother, Whitman was asked for the letters that she had written to him--or rather for extracts from them. In reply to this request the poet said, "I do not know that I can furnish any good reason, but I feel to keep these utterances exclusively to myself. But I cannot let your book go to press without at least saying--and wishing it put on record--that among the perfect women I have met (and it has been my unspeakably good fortune to have had the very best, for mother, sisters, and friends) I have known none more perfect in every relation, than my dear, dear friend, Anne Gilchrist." But since Whitman carefully preserved

them for twenty years, refusing to destroy them as he had destroyed such other written matter as he did not care to have preserved, it would appear that he intended that so beautiful a tribute to the poetry that he had written, no less than to the personality of the poet, should be included in that complete biography which is being slowly written, by many hands, of America's most unique man of genius. In any case, when these letters came into my hands in the apportionment of Whitman's literary legacy under the will which named me as one of his three literary executors, there were but three things which I could honourably do with them--rather, on closer analysis, there seemed to be but one. To leave them in my will or to place them in some public repository would have been to shift a responsibility which was evidently mine to the shoulders of others who, perhaps, would be in possession of fewer facts in the light of which to discharge that responsibility. To destroy them would be to do what Whitman should have done if it was to be done at all, and to erase forever one of the finest tributes that either the man or the poet ever received, one of the most touching self-revelations that a noble soul ever "poured out on paper." The remaining alternative was to edit and publish them (after keeping them a proper length of time), for the benefit, not only of the general reader, but as an aid to the future biographer who from the proper perspective will write the life of America's great poet and prophet. In this determination my judgment has been confirmed by that of the few sympathetic friends who, during the twenty-five years that the letters have been in my possession, have been allowed to read them.

It is a matter of regret that so few of Whitman's letters to Mrs.

Gilchrist are available. Those included in this volume, sometimes in



fragmentary form, have been taken from loose copies found among his papers after his death, or, in a few instances, are reprinted from Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist's "Anne Gilchrist" or Horace Traubel's "With Walt Whitman in Camden." Acknowledgment of these latter is made in each instance. But though Whitman's letters printed in this correspondence will not compare with Mrs. Gilchrist's in point of number, enough are presented to suggest the tenor of them all.

As a matter of fact, the first love-letter from Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman was in the form of an essay written in his defense called "An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman." For that reason this well-known essay is reprinted in this volume; and "A Confession of Faith," in reality an amplification of the "Estimate" written several years after the publication of the latter, is included. The reader who desires to follow the story of this friendship in a chronological order will do well to read at least the former of these tributes before beginning the letters. Indebtedness is acknowledged to Prof. Emory Holloway of Brooklyn, New York, for valuable suggestions.

T. B. H.