

Volume 15

Number 024

**The Last Full Measure (63) – Walt
Whitman – Soldier’s Poet**

Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on A Moment in Time is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose devotion gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, the last full measure.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Though he is perhaps best known as the “Poet of Democracy,” chronicling the lives of

working men in whose vocations he apprenticed as a youth and later, Walt Whitman also portrayed the heroic and tragic adventure of war, detailing the crushed dreams, lingering hopes and heartbreak of soldiers, North and South, in the Republic's greatest epic, the American Civil War.

Born in 1819 of an old New York family, fallen on hard times, Whitman was working by the time he was twelve and served in a variety of blue collar occupations, office boy, printer's assistant, and carpenter. At his father's death in 1855 he returned home to Long Island and moved into journalism, founding *The Long Islander*, a newspaper still distributed

in the twenty-first century, and began publishing his poems, the most famous collection of which remains *Leaves of Grass*.

After the breakup of his relationship with Frederick Vaughan and at the news that his brother George had been wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, in late 1862 Whitman left for Washington to find George, thus bringing him close to the warriors whose lives he would later describe in such poignant detail.

Though he never fought a battle, each evening he would leave his day job as a copyist in the Office of Army Paymaster and enter the world of convalescence in the clinics and

hospitals that filled the capital, acting as a volunteer attendant, treating wounds, rotating bed-ridden patients, assisting in operations, writing letters home, using his own money to buy the soldiers food, paper and envelopes, string, crackers and tobacco. There he met Thomas Haley and Calvin Harlowe, and the Yankee soldier fresh from the horror of Andersonville Prison and witnessed the ministry of a nurse to a patient at death's door and a southern caregiver bringing comfort to the survivors of Chancellorsville.

Ten years later, distraught over what he perceived to be the nation's fading memory of the war at the dawn of Gilded Age avarice, he began

telling their stories. Clearly, the experience of the great struggle changed his life and changed his writing. Eschewing the martial exhilaration and naiveté of *Beat! Beat! Drum!* written just after Bull Run, Whitman matured into the hard reality of *Memoranda During the War*.

Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I noticed a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for one horse cart.

Whitman's haunting narrative reverberates across the long decades, reminding indulgent generations who too often take the warrior's sacrifice for granted, just how much they have

given.

**Research by Abe Smith, at the
University of Richmond, this is Dan
Roberts.**

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