

## WALT WHITMAN: Poet of the People

The man whom Ralph Waldo Emerson had once greeted "at the beginning of a great career..." spent his final years as a resident of Camden, New Jersey. It was at his little house on Mickle Street that he breathed his last, the evening of March 26, 1892, two months shy of his 73rd birthday. Since the original publication of his LEAVES OF GRASS he had earned the adulation of poetry buffs abroad, especially in England, while being despised by critics in his own country. Thousands of people came to pay respects to the "intellectual expatriate" prior to the March 30th funeral.

Robert Green Ingersoll, "the Great Agnostic", was invited to eulogize Whitman. Ironically, the funeral thus provided an occasion for the union of two "kindred spirits" insofar as each had come to be known as Heretics of 19th Century America.

Robert Green Ingersoll was among the most renowned orators of the 1800s. Beginning as a political speech-maker, he branched out as a defender of "free thought". His speaking tours from one end of the U.S. to the other established him as the foremost "American Infidel" in the eyes of clergymen from every Faith. His reputation as "an Agnostic" banned him from "Chautauqua-platforms" and led one pundit to dub him "the most famous American not remembered"!

Ellen "Nelly" O'Connor was formerly the spouse of William Douglas O'Connor, the friend and admirer who helped Walt find employment and living accommodations at Washington, D.C. in 1862. It was O'Connor who became Whitman's primary publicist with publication of a pamphlet entitled THE GOOD GRAY POET which he composed as reaction to the Poet's dismissal from his civil service position at

The Interior Department amid allegations that his poetry was obscene. Ironically, years later the two men became estranged from one another though a reunion was effected not long before O'Connor's own death two years prior to Walt's funeral. Sometime before that "Nelly" had remarried, thus coming to be known as "Ellen Calder".

Scene 1: Camden, New Jersey 1892  
Robert Green Ingersoll  
Ellen O'Connor Calder

Calder: Mr. Ingersoll,  
I WANT TO TAKE THIS OCCASION  
TO PERSONALLY THANK YOU  
FOR THE STIRRING EULOGY  
YOU DELIVERED JUST NOW  
FOR Walt.  
HE WAITED HIS WHOLE LIFE  
FOR A DISTINGUISHED PERSON  
SUCH AS YOU ARE  
TO PRAISE HIM  
AS YOU JUST DID.  
I ALWAYS FELT  
THAT HIS LOT IN LIFE  
WAS TO  
- IN THE WORDS  
OF HIS BELOVED Shakespeare -  
"endure the slings and arrows  
of outrageous fortune"! LIKEWISE,  
TO AGAIN CITE The Bard OF Avon  
WHO WAS EVER THE SOURCE  
OF Walt's INSPIRATION,