

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Centenarian's Story

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Appreciating well the Revolutionary War means remembering not only our famous Founders and heroes, but also the nameless men who fought and died for our independence. It also means attending to the enduring need to preserve the freedom for which the war was fought. In this poem by Walt Whitman (1819–92), an aged veteran recalls for a Civil War volunteer—and for us—General George Washington's Brooklyn campaign (and defeat) in the Revolutionary War. It was published in Drum-Taps (1865)

The poem consists of three parts. In the first, a young Civil War Union volunteer, leading the Centenarian to a hilltop in Brooklyn, reports on the drill and parade that are taking place below. In the central second part, the Centenarian conveys his memories of the rout of the Continental Army—at “this hilltop, this same ground”—during the Battle of Brooklyn Heights, August 1776. In part three (“Terminus”), the narrator of the poem, speaking for the volunteer but now “as connector, as chansonnier of a great future.”—draws out the meaning he derives from the Centenarian's story.

What is the mood and attitude of the young volunteer in part one? How does he regard the Centenarian and the sights seen below? How is the Centenarian affected by the volunteer's report and questions? In what way is the Centenarian's story responsive to the volunteer—or is it? What did he see and learn from General Washington's deeds and manner, in the face of defeat? Having heard the interchange between Centenarian and the young volunteer—“the past and the present”—why does the narrator describe the role he now takes “as connector, as chansonnier of a great future”? What has he learned—and what does he want us to learn—from the interchange and (especially) from the Centenarian's story? What might the poem suggest about the relation between the Civil War, newly raging, and the War of Independence? How do you personally—and how should we, all as citizens—regard the many hills and fields of battles long past, especially those on which the War for Independence were fought? Can we feel there the mysterious presence of past deeds and the ghosts of our long-dead benefactors? Or do we need stories such as this to make these deeds and ghosts live for us?

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Volunteer of 1861–2, at Washington Park, Brooklyn, assisting the Centenarian.

Give me your hand, old Revolutionary;
The hill-top is nigh—but a few steps, (make room, gentlemen;)
Up the path you have follow'd me well, spite of your hundred and extra years;
You can walk, old man, though your eyes are almost done;
Your faculties serve you, and presently I must have them serve me.

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Rest, while I tell what the crowd around us means;
On the plain below recruits are drilling and exercising;
There is the camp—one regiment departs to-morrow;
Do you hear the officers giving their orders?
Do you hear the clank of the muskets?

Why what comes over you now, old man?
Why do you tremble, and clutch my hand so convulsively?
The troops are but drilling—they are yet surrounded with smiles;
Around them at hand the well-drest friends and the women;
While splendid and warm the afternoon sun shines down;
Green the midsummer verdure, and fresh blows the dallying breeze,
O'er proud and peaceful cities and arm of the sea between.
But drill and parade are over—they march back to quarters;
Only hear that approval of hands! hear what a clapping!

As wending the crowds now part and disperse—but we, old man,
Not for nothing have I brought you hither—we must remain;
You to speak in your turn, and I to listen and tell.

The Centenarian

When I clutch'd your hand, it was not with terror;
But suddenly, pouring about me here on every side,
And below there where the boys were drilling, and up the slopes they ran,
And where tents are pitch'd, and wherever you see, south, and southeast and southwest,
Over hills, across lowlands, and in the skirts of woods,
And along the shores, in mire, (now fill'd over) came again, and suddenly raged,
As eighty-five years ago no mere parade receiv'd with applause of friends,

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But a battle, which I took part in myself—ay, long ago as it is, I took part in it,
Walking then this hill-top, this same ground.

Ay, this is the ground;

My blind eyes, even as I speak, behold it re-peopled from graves:

The years recede, pavements and stately houses disappear:

Rude forts appear again, the old hoop'd guns are mounted;

I see the lines of rais'd earth stretching from river to bay;

I mark the vista of waters, I mark the uplands and slopes:

Here we lay encamp'd—it was this time in summer also.

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As I talk I remember all—I remember the Declaration,

It was read here—the whole army paraded—it was read to us here;

By his staff surrounded, the General stood in the middle—he held up his unsheath'd
sword,

It glitter'd in the sun in full sight of the army.

'Twas a bold act then;

The English war-ships had just arrived—the king had sent them from over the sea;

We could watch down the lower bay where they lay at anchor,

And the transports, swarming with soldiers.

A few days more, and they landed—and then the battle.

Twenty thousand were brought against us,

A veteran force, furnish'd with good artillery.

I tell not now the whole of the battle;

But one brigade early in the forenoon order'd forward to engage the red-coats,

Of that brigade I tell, and how steadily it march'd,

And how long and well it stood, confronting death.

Who do you think that was marching steadily, sternly confronting death?

It was the brigade of the youngest men, two thousand strong,

Rais'd in Virginia and Maryland, and most of them known personally to the General.

Jauntily forward they went with quick step toward Gowanus' waters,

Till of a sudden, unlook'd for by defiles through the woods, gain'd at night,

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The British advancing, wedging in from the east, fiercely playing their guns,
That brigade of the youngest was cut off, and at the enemy's mercy.
The General watch'd them from this hill;
They made repeated desperate attempts to burst their environment;
Then drew close together, very compact, their flag flying in the middle;
But O from the hills how the cannon were thinning and thinning them!

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It sickens me yet, that slaughter!
I saw the moisture gather in drops on the face of the General;
I saw how he wrung his hands in anguish.

Meanwhile the British manoeuvr'd to draw us out for a pitch'd battle;
But we dared not trust the chances of a pitch'd battle.

We fought the fight in detachments;
Sallying forth we fought at several points—but in each the luck was against us;
Our foe advancing, steadily getting the best of it, push'd us back to the works on this hill;
Till we turn'd menacing, here, and then he left us.

That was the going out of the brigade of the youngest men, two thousand strong,
Few return'd—nearly all remain in Brooklyn.
That, and here, my General's first battle;
No women looking on, nor sunshine to bask in—it did not conclude with applause,
Nobody clapp'd hands here then.

But in darkness, in mist on the ground, under a chill rain,
Wearied that night we lay foil'd and sullen;
While scornfully laugh'd many an arrogant lord, off against us encamp'd,
Quite within hearing, feasting, clinking wine-glasses together over their victory.

So dull and damp and another day;
But the night of that, mist lifting, rain ceasing,
Silent as a ghost, while they thought they were sure of him, my General retreated.

I saw him at the river-side,
Down by the ferry, lit by torches, hastening the embarcation;
My General waited till the soldiers and wounded were all pass'd over;

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And then, (it was just ere sunrise,) these eyes rested on him for the last time.

Every one else seem'd fill'd with gloom;
Many no doubt thought of capitulation.

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But when my General pass'd me,
As he stood in his boat and look'd toward the coming sun,
I saw something different from capitulation.

Terminus

Enough—the Centenarian's story ends;
The two, the past and present, have interchanged;
I myself as connector, as chansonnier¹ of a great future, am now speaking.

And is this the ground Washington trod?
And these waters I listlessly daily cross, are these the waters he cross'd,
As resolute in defeat, as other generals in their proudest triumphs?

It is well—a lesson like that, always comes good;
I must copy the story, and send it eastward and westward;
I must preserve that look, as it beam'd on you, rivers of Brooklyn.

See! as the annual round returns the phantoms return;
It is the 27th of August, and the British have landed;
The battle begins, and goes against us—behold! through the smoke Washington's face;
The brigade of Virginia and Maryland have march'd forth to intercept the enemy;
They are cut off—murderous artillery from the hills plays upon them;
Rank after rank falls, while over them silently droops the flag,
Baptized that day in many a young man's bloody wounds.
In death, defeat, and sisters', mothers' tears.

Ah, hills and slopes of Brooklyn! I perceive you are more valuable than your owners
supposed;

¹ A writer or singer of chansons; especially, a cabaret singer.

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Ah, river! Henceforth you will be illumin'd to me at sunrise with something besides the sun.

Encampments new! in the midst of you stands an encampment very old;
Stands forever the camp of that dead brigade.

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