

Walt Whitman Quarterly Review

<http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr>

The Origin of “The Dismantled Ship”

Mrs. Herbert S. Harned Jr.

Volume 16, Number 1

(Summer 1998)

pps. 37-37

Stable URL: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol16/iss1/5>
ISSN 0737-0679

The Origin of “The Dismantled Ship”

Mrs. Herbert S. Harned Jr.

Abstract

Describes an 1887 etching by Charles Mieltz that inspired Whitman’s “The Dismantled Ship.”

ON THE BACK COVER:
THE ORIGIN OF "THE DISMANTLED SHIP"

The etching of a sailing vessel in dry dock that is reproduced on the back cover of this issue once hung in the dining room of Thomas Biggs Harned, one of Whitman's three literary executors. According to Harned family stories, when at dinner at the Harneds' home on one occasion, Whitman admired the etching, and afterwards he was inspired to write "The Dismantled Ship," first published in the New York *Herald* on February 23, 1888, and later added to his "Sands at Seventy" collection in *November Boughs* (1888) and to the *Sands at Seventy* "annex" in the 1891-92 printing of *Leaves of Grass*:

In some unused lagoon, some nameless bay,
On sluggish, lonesome waters, anchor'd near the shore,
An old, dismasted, gray and batter'd ship, disabled, done,
After free voyages to all the seas of earth, haul'd up at last and hawser'd tight,
Lies rusting, mouldering.

Whitman recalled the etching and commented on its significance while talking with another of his literary executors, Horace Traubel, on June 27, 1888. Discussing "the origin of the poem *The Dismantled Ship*," Whitman says, "Yes, it was suggested by the picture in Harned's parlor: that's me—that's my old hulk—laid up at last: no good any more—no good . . . a fellow might get melancholy seeing himself in such a mirror—but I guess we can see through as well as in the mirrors when the test comes" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 1:390).

The 13" x 21" etching is signed in pencil in the lower right-hand corner of the original mat, "Chas. W. Mielatz." Also, on the original mat—outside the etching itself—in the lower left-hand corner is a line drawing of a canoe/row-boat, and centered just under the etching is neatly handwritten, "Copyright 1887 by C. F. W. Mielatz."

The etching is still hanging in the front hall of Dr. and Mrs. Herbert S. Harned, Jr., in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, but ownership now has passed to their son—Thomas's great-grandson—Douglas Alan Harned of Cary, North Carolina.

MRS. HERBERT S. HARNED, JR.