The ‘unspeakable’ quality of homosexual desire in late Victorian Britain has, of late, become a familiar presence in historical writing and literary criticism. It encompasses Lord Alfred Douglas’s by now clichéd ‘love that dare not speak its name’, E. M. Forster’s Maurice, as well as John Addington Symonds’s A Problem in Modern Ethics. Just as Maurice described himself as ‘an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort’, Symonds, considering how to approach the subject, could ‘hardly find a name which will not seem to soil this paper’. Historians and theorists have taken up this theme, with the result that the euphemisms and evasions of Victorian Britain are now frequently seen as pregnant with sexual meaning of all kinds. Most recently, William Cohen has argued that ‘silence about sexuality composes a strategic form, not an absence of representation’. Instead of mere repression or censorship, the forms of discourse which dealt indirectly and euphemistically with sexual matters enabled, he suggests, the creation of a ‘prolix and polyvalent’ set of terms which came to designate various forms of illicit sexuality.
venerated cultural artefacts) where morbidity or physicality could be plausibly denied or displaced. This search for legitimacy could be found in cultures of Hellenism, in Anglo-Catholicism, and in the relations between pupils and teachers in public schools, sometimes dignified by the ‘Uranian’ poetry of serving and (more likely) former masters.4 In more common settings, the love of men for men and for youth without doubt motivated many a career in education or the Boys’ Brigade.5

These tactics and vocabularies of evasion, along with the stringent legal sanctions available to punish male homosexuality (which had begun to be applied systematically after about 1780)6 suggest a landscape of simple repression. Yet I want to suggest instead that this climate also provided, paradoxically, a series of opportunities for those who felt attracted by the possibilities of same-sex desire. In particular, it allowed such men to develop their own particular understandings of passionate friendship which licensed what would otherwise have been an impossible and ‘morbid’ intimacy.7 As an illustration, I want to take the example of a group of men who met regularly in Bolton at the end of the nineteenth century to discuss the poetry of Walt Whitman.8 Using the letters and diaries left by the Bolton Whitman fellowship, I want to show how a fascination with homosexual desire, understood and represented as ineffable, existed at certain moments in their lives and how they were both attracted and repelled by its fascination. In addition I suggest that passionate attachments between them could develop without their being rendered erotic (and therefore corrupt and unhealthy), through the substitution of inexpressible, spiritual communion for ‘unspeakable’ physical possibilities.

Although the sources used here are clearly unique, they do epitomise some of the concerns of the period, and in that sense show how discourses other than the post-1895 association of Wildean dandyism with ‘unnatural desire’ might have informed a ‘homosexual’ or ‘comradely’ subjectivity. In addition, it must be recognised that such personal accounts of sentiment and affect rarely survive. Therefore, I want to suggest that these diaries could plausibly be read as standing in for other, lost accounts of homoerotic friendship which either failed to reach the page or failed to survive. As the work of Joy Dixon on theosophy and spiritualism has shown, the association of the homoerotic and the spiritual in this period was not untypical.9

Much has been written from a Foucauldian perspective about the origins of homosexual identity in the fin de siècle and its dependence
on the articulation of a reverse discourse which appropriated the
terms of sexology.\textsuperscript{10} Less has been said about homosexual desire as a
phenomenon which partook of the late Victorian search for the spirit.\textsuperscript{11}
From the table-rappings and ectoplasm of spiritualist mediums,
through the Buddhist intimations of theosophy, to the new credibility
of hypnotism and the exploration of the unconscious, this period
resonated with the fascination of immortality as part of a more gen-
eral attempt to recover spirituality in a post-Darwinian world. The
Whitman fellowship, which skirted the edges of spiritualism and
theosophy without ever accepting them fully, shows how these cur-
rents could meet and join discussions of sexual inversion. In addition,
the Bolton group were part of the flowering of some great Victorian
traditions, chief among which were manly friendship, a provincial and
plebeian literary culture, and the power of self-cultivation as expressed
in the idea of ‘character’.\textsuperscript{12}

Although some of the Whitman fellowship expressed an intense
interest in sexual inversion, they cannot be claimed wholeheartedly
for a gay history which has concentrated either on literary production
or on the intermittent visibility of (metropolitan) subcultures, desires
and identities. We should also bear in mind Christopher Lane’s warn-
ing against the dangers of ‘reading through’ the evasions of Victorian
comrades to a stable, homosexual ‘secret’ beneath. Instead, the often
ineffable and contradictory quality of homoerotic desire must be
taken into account.\textsuperscript{13} In addition, many of the men involved in the
group seem to have expressed no interest in the subject of homo-
sexuality. Among those that did, loving marriages and intense friend-
ships with women were not unusual. Instead of glibly asserting the
homosexuality of this group, then, and reading their elaborate denials
of Whitman’s homoerotic verse and their own passionate friendships
as symptoms of self-censorship, their feelings for each other (which at
times verged on the unmistakably homoerotic) should be seen in their
own terms and words. They did not ‘identify’ as homosexual then,
but an intense love existed between some of them which at certain
moments teetered on the brink of homosexual desire.

These men were only tenuously linked to a metropolitan literary
culture and would not countenance the suggestion that Whitman’s
poetry was even vaguely homoerotic. One of them, John Johnston,
was a typically Victorian urban public figure and pillar of Bolton’s
community. Others were unremarkable clerks and ‘small gaffers’ re-
luctant to entertain even some of their friends’ less outlandish beliefs

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about the immortality of the spirit. In the context of their own lives, the Bolton Whitmanites (or ‘Whitmaniacs’ as they described themselves) could not be expected to welcome, still less articulate, notions which linked their own gatherings to the diseased individuals who occasionally appeared in the police reports of the national press. Therefore, when such an interest did develop in Johnston and perhaps in others, it required a new vocabulary of evasion to be spoken of, and new understandings of consciousness in order to be acknowledged.

The Bolton Whitman fellowship grew up in the 1880s out of the association of a few friends who shared an interest in the American poet of comradeship and democracy. It was soon dubbed the ‘Eagle Street College’ by its members, after the address of its meetings and in ironic imitation of more formal educational institutions. The core of the group was never more than seven or eight men, with occasional additions of friends and visitors. These were J. W. Wallace (affectionately known as ‘the Master’ of the College) and the ‘Fellows’, Dr John Johnston, Wentworth Dixon, Fred Wild, William Ferguson, Samuel Hodgkinson, Thomas Shorrock, Richard Greenhalgh, Charles Sixsmith, Frederick Hutton, Will Atkinson, Walt Hawkins and a group of around five or six other occasional attenders. Wallace was an architect’s assistant, Johnston a GP, while the others worked in the textile industry as managers and businessmen, apart from Hutton, a clergyman, and Wentworth Dixon, a solicitor. They were initially united by little more than friendship. As Wallace later recalled, the men had begun to call on him every Monday shortly after the death of his mother in January 1885. They soon agreed to devote some of this time to discussion of subjects of ‘more permanent interest and value’ than mere current events. According to Wallace, the group ‘never formulated any programme … nor thought of organising a society for any specific purpose’. Only a few of them had received an education beyond school and professional training in their respective fields, and they were not connected with literary events even in Bolton. At the beginning, Wallace wrote later, the group was no more than ‘a little company of men of widely different characteristics, ideas and training, who were united only in a common friendship’.14

They had, by Wallace’s own admission ‘no remarkable gifts or attainments’ which lifted them above the run of Bolton’s middle classes, but the group nevertheless had a ‘certain emotional atmosphere’ which grew out of long acquaintance and mutual acceptance. As a result, they felt able to speak their minds on matters of importance to
them, such as religion and philosophy. ‘Each one of us’, Wallace recalled, ‘felt that this friendly and perfectly free interchange of ideas on such subjects did us all an invaluable service’, as well as leading, ‘by imperceptible stages, to a deepened intimacy, in which the inmost quests and experiences of the soul were freely expressed, and each grew conscious of our essential unity, as of a larger self which included us all’.  

There was little that was unique to Bolton which could have inspired the meditations of the College on politics, culture and the spirit. Rather, we should see the group as typical of the brief late Victorian meeting between political change, and spiritual, social, personal and cultural reform. This was a conjunction that was characteristic of many radical and socialist groups in this period, especially across the north of England. Indeed, Bolton was an almost archetypal location for the millennial hopes and fears brought on by the anticipation of a mass culture and mass electorate. It had a large labouring population based in the textile industry which had, by the 1880s, established powerful trade unions. A concern for the future conduct of such a potential power bloc, and for the possibility of reaching out to and guiding the people in their political manoeuvres, ran through much of the debate within the College, as it did through early socialist organisations across the country.

In addition the concern of the College with the spiritual condition of ‘the democracy’ and the purity of their own souls was entirely characteristic of social reformers elsewhere. Socialists like Robert Blatchford and Katherine Conway, both of whom came into contact with the College, saw moral, spiritual and cultural reform as an indissoluble unity. Neither were the Bolton Whitmanites alone in their veneration of a prophet of these new times. Other small groups of spiritually inclined thinkers on the edge of socialism formed in Surrey to follow the teachings of Tolstoy, and in Liverpool to follow those of Ruskin. These coteries caught the spiritual idiom of the moment by forming into semi-religious sects. In this respect, we might include the College in the same category as the Fabians, the Fellowship of the New Life, the Labour Church movement and other groups which shared a similar holistic approach to reform and whose allegiance was primarily to universal ideals rather than locality.

The College also used a religious idiom, and dedicated itself to the spread of Whitman’s ‘teachings’. As such their allegiances were more towards other Whitmanite fellow travellers across the Atlantic than to
the local artistic scene. They scorned the Bolton literary society as an upper-class social clique, consisting of people more interested in being seen to be cultured than in the power of literature. Although some of the group were involved in local politics, and John Johnston became a prominent campaigner against child labour and the poor conditions of life for working-class children, these activities were mostly kept separate from what were regarded as the higher concerns of the College. Whitmanite notions were only introduced into more conventional social and political circles by stealth, if at all, as a subtext to more prosaic ideas.

That is not to say that the College was uninvolved in local life. Indeed, the very success of the group and its longevity in part resulted from its similarity to other more conventional forms of association. Johnston in particular was a member of local professional bodies as well as less formal social organisations such as the Boys’ Brigade, local Scottish groups and cycling clubs. The College shared with these associations a masculine heartiness which was summed up by Johnston’s ‘Song of the Eagle Street College’.

This cheerful self-deprecation was one of the consistent strands of College life throughout its long existence. Given this and other continuities, it would be somewhat artificial to divide the activities of the College into periods or phases. However, the changes in the group do clearly fall into three stages which mirrored the fortunes of progressive thought between about 1885 and 1900. The first, from 1885 to 1891, was a relatively quiet period during which the foundations of group solidarity and interest were laid. Much time was spent pondering the meaning of *Leaves of Grass* and considering the nature of the message it contained. In particular there was a consistent effort to exonerate Whitman from the taint of homoerotic desire, an effort which the College continued to pursue throughout its existence.

After 1891 and Wallace’s visit to Whitman, the College, inspired by its ‘Master’, took on a more millennial feel, with Wallace attempting
to forge links with the emerging ILP (Independent Labour Party). Also at this time the College cemented its connections with Edward Carpenter and with Richard Maurice Bucke, Whitman’s personal physician. Bucke provided the College with ideas of an alternate spiritual personality through his notion of ‘cosmic consciousness’, a notion which was to have a powerful influence on the idea of comradely attachment.

These years, between 1891 and 1894, were the headiest days of the College and culminated in the arrival in Bolton of a young American singer and composer Philip Dalmas in the summer of 1894. This remarkable man seems to have become the focus of many of the hopes and aspirations of the College, especially those of Wallace, Johnston and Sixsmith. In particular, he aroused intense feelings of love and admiration, and seemed, like Whitman, to personify the ‘new spiritual personality’ which was to herald the new world.

In the years following 1894, however, the diaries and letters seem to exhibit a palpable sense of a lost possibility, a quietening of the tone and the implicit abandonment of any ‘mission’ to the people. It would be tempting to place this apparent sea change in the context of the trial of Oscar Wilde and its cramping effect on male intimacy. It is certainly true that Johnston’s diaries from 1895 have either not survived or were not kept, a void that might encourage all manner of speculation. Yet there were other events and trends which dented the millennialism of the College and of other similar groups across Britain. Chief among these was the overall transformation of the socialism of the 1880s and 1890s from a holistic attempt at universal transformation into a narrower political grouping. It was not only the Whitmanites who felt this lost opportunity. As one trade unionist put it, looking back on this ferment from the 1920s, this ‘fanatical time’ was an evanescent excitement, and was ‘in fact too exciting to last’.18

Therefore, through the Bolton Whitmanites we can see that it was not only the post-Wilde moral atmosphere which transformed the idea of comradeship and its homoerotic aspect. There were other factors involved too, in particular the marginalisation of ideas like ‘cosmic consciousness’ and spiritualism from scientifically authorised discourses like psychology and to a lesser degree psychoanalysis. These developments tended to defeat the talk of ‘alternate selves’ which had sustained the College and given power to the idea of comradely love. Yet, although the climate was less conducive after about 1895, this ideal of spiritual love nevertheless remained. In order to do justice to
its potential, we must first consider the relationship of the College to Walt Whitman and his writings.

It was Wallace’s interest in Whitman, which he later encouraged particularly in John Johnston, Wentworth Dixon, Fred Wild and Charles Sixsmith, which lent the College its association with the American poet. In 1887 Wallace and Johnston began to write to Whitman, expressing their admiration of both his poetry and his attachment to comradeship and democracy. Over the next three years they corresponded regularly with Whitman and his acolytes in America, an interchange which both Wallace and Johnston regarded as a great honour. In addition they forged links with the poet’s English admirers, in particular John Addington Symonds, who saw in Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* a justification and an ennoblement of homosexual desire. Both Johnston and Wallace visited Whitman in 1890 and 1891 at Camden, New Jersey, making careful notes of his every conversation to bring back in triumph to Bolton for publication.

For the leading figures in the College, Whitman held out a number of hopes. Chief among these was a renewal of faith in the immortality of the soul. Closely linked to this faith was the ennobling of the love of comrades, and the hope for social change resulting from the rise of ‘the Democracy’ to political power. These were all part of what for the College was a new view of society, each part dependent on the other. Just as the achievement of immortality depended on the possibility of experiencing comrade love, this in turn implied a sympathy with one’s fellow man which would be the motive force for new forms of political and social organisation. Whitman himself was the exemplar of these characteristics, and inspired an effort among the College to imitate his sensibility, itself the avatar of a new world.

Therefore, their visits to Whitman, and the letters which Wallace and Johnston received from him, attained a kind of religious significance. On his return from the poet’s home in Camden, New Jersey, Wallace told Johnston that he seemed as though he had experienced a ‘spiritual visitation’. Johnston also confessed to feeling ‘a different man altogether since seeing and conversing with the Master’, and to a sense of being ‘sanctified and solemnified’ by contact with the poet. Whitman was regarded by them as a man of super-perception, who was ‘endowed with exceptionally acute senses’. Johnston also felt him to have a ‘unique spiritual personality’.\(^{19}\) Whitman’s doctor, Richard Maurice Bucke (to whom we shall return later), also noted

\(^{19}\) Whitman’s doctor, Richard Maurice Bucke (to whom we shall return later), also noted.
that Whitman claimed acute faculties and that these allowed him to ‘speak of hearing the grass grow and the trees coming into leaf’. For the starstruck Wallace and Johnston, Whitman’s goodness bestowed not only kindness but also a sweetness and light which derived from his ethos of comradeship, and which the College friends sought to reproduce in their finer moments. In *Leaves of Grass*, Wallace and Johnston found an entire approach to life and a set of practical ‘teachings’ which could be appreciated through the imitation of the poet’s life and sensibility. According to Johnston, it was Wallace, only half-jokingly nicknamed the ‘Master’, who was unquestionably the closest to this Whitmanesque sensibility, and who inspired the greatest reverence among his friends.

Wallace was, for Johnston, the nearest thing to the poet’s ‘unique spiritual personality’ that he knew, as well as the exemplar of the self-cultivation which the College propounded. Such attention to character would be the motive force of social change since it would automatically lead to the development of comradely bonds. The signs of this sensibility were therefore sought by Wallace and Johnston in themselves and in the College. Johnston saw this quality in his friend expressed as a uniqueness ‘not to be met with above once a life time’, which by itself made ‘one think better of the future of the human race’. Mere proximity to Wallace, as to Whitman, acted ‘as a spiritual tonic to me’, Johnston confided to his diary, ‘and I leave him with an elevation of moral resolve and determination to attempt to attain something of the … ideal he seems to set before him’.

For Wallace and Johnston the various aspects of Whitman’s ‘message’, with its emphasis on love, comradeship, super-perception and immortality, formed one harmonious whole. *Leaves of Grass* intimated the survival of the spirit beyond death, and at the same time, in the *Calamus* lyrics, suggested that this would only occur to those who had experienced the true love of comrades. This faculty could in turn be witnessed amongst those who exhibited the same acute perception and quasi-divine love which emanated from the poet himself, a love which was destined to cement the bonds of democracy and prepare the way for a new world.

Clearly the College found in Whitman an alternative to the doctrines of Christianity in a post-Darwinian world and personal solutions to their own crises of faith. Wallace had begun life as a Presbyterian and a regular church attender, but through his wide reading in the sciences had lost his faith. His readings in philosophy and metaphysics,
however, had failed to provide him with an alternative to the immortality of the spirit. Johnston had also gone through the process of losing his faith, and, he later recalled, was not far from becoming a sceptical, not to say cynical man. For Wallace, the death of his mother had turned his thoughts to the possibility of immortality, feelings which he found echoed in *Leaves of Grass*. There, he read in Whitman’s *Calamus* lyrics (which most critics have seen as Whitman’s most homoerotic writing) a poetry of love and death which confirmed his view that death was merely the gateway to immortality, that what Wallace called the ‘ego’ or personality continued after death, merely transformed into a new form of matter. Matter, he suggested, was ‘a mere film enveloping the soul’. Since spirit and matter were the same, they could be held to have a material existence, and were, according to Wallace, of the same character as the universe itself. Therefore, the soul or spirit was the universe, and all matter was one. An understanding of, and sympathy with nature was therefore the closest one could get to an understanding of matter, the universe and the oneness of spirit. Through nature, Wallace suggested, ‘we shall slowly come to realize in her myriad colours and forms the many-coloured revelation of one spirit to whom we may speak’. Death was therefore no ending, but merely a transformation.

Yet Whitman’s notion of comradeship meant that the transformation wrought by death could only truly be attained by those who felt a perfect love for humanity or who were imbued with the idea of comradeship written into the *Calamus* poems. Whitman, Wallace argued, was conscious of an ‘immortal life’ underlying life and death which was felt most assuredly ‘in the presence of those he loved’. Love made us conscious of the Soul, the higher attributes of which could be attained and expressed by death in a literal sense, but also by the death of ‘all purely personal desires and aims, and of all forms of what we call selfishness’. Only in this way, through the triangle of love, death and immortality, could ‘the Soul pass into the Universal and Eternal Life in which Love is supreme’.

Modern critics have seen the centrality of death in *Calamus* as a means by which Whitman deferred his own homoerotic desire. For Wallace too, *Calamus* suggested the death of selfish passion and the submerging of personal interest in the love of comrades, which itself was the only way to reach immortality (as Whitman put it, ‘I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes death most’). In a letter to his cousin, Wallace advises that the aims of life are to cultivate the
self, to ‘recognise the perfect One in all others, ignoring all contrary seemings, [and] to cease from personal desires in the trust which comes from knowing that Good alone rules our lives’. To abandon oneself to that purpose was ‘the right course for us, and this only’. Abandoning personal desire also enabled individuals to devote their lives to the public good, and hence to assure their immortality, in a peculiarly Victorian fashion. As Johnston pointed out when he invoked Matthew Arnold to support this view, this form of Karmic character-building merged effortlessly with classically Victorian notions of duty and morality. Reading Arnold, Johnston pointed out, showed that ‘life is made up of three parts conduct’, and that immortality was dependent on how one lived in the present. Personal desire and selfishness should therefore be abandoned, and life lived ‘in and for the sake of others’.

Although Wallace’s cosmology of death and desire provided a distracting point of emphasis for students of Calamus, other critics were not slow to point out the potentially diseased ethos lurking within comrade love. Far from being the preoccupation of post-Freudian critics alone, same-sex love was not all that far from the minds of Wallace’s contemporaries. One of Whitman’s early reviewers in the Gentleman’s Magazine of 1875 noted that the poet spoke partly of the ‘sick, sick dread of returned friendship, of the comrade’s kiss, the arm round the neck’, none of which would avail in Britain, for ‘he speaks to sticks and stones; the emotion does not exist in us, and the language of his evangel poems appears simply disgusting’. Even in 1894, Edward Carpenter could suggest in his pamphlet Homogenic Love (which he gave to Charles Sixsmith) that Whitman ‘certainly had the homogenic instinct highly developed’. By 1913, after the advent of sexology, W. C. Rivers could argue that Leaves of Grass immediately suggested a ‘strong similarity’ to ‘confessions of homosexual subjects recorded in text-books on the human sex instinct’. Moreover, one of Whitman’s first biographers, Bliss Perry, also suggested in 1906 (in an appendix removed from later editions in response to objections from the poet’s executors) that ‘the truth about him (the innermost truth) escapes from almost every page for those who can read’. In 1925, when the International Journal of Psychoanalysis finally got round to noticing Rivers’s book, his conclusion was deemed to be ‘obvious at first sight to anyone having any knowledge of homosexuality’.

Yet even though some Victorian critics intimated that there might be something infamous about Whitman’s love of comrades, it was still
possible, during the 1890s, for the College to celebrate both the intensity and the innocence of comradeship. However, exonerating Whitman from the taint of unnatural lust did become even more pressing following the publication of John Addington Symonds’s *Walt Whitman: A Study* in 1893. Symonds suggested, much to the horror of Whitman’s acolytes in America, that *Calamus* provided the first modern literary justification and defence of homosexual desire. It was clear, Symonds argued, that ‘those unenviable mortals who are the inheritors of sexual anomalies, will recognise their own emotion in Whitman’s “superb friendship, exalté, previously unknown,” which “waits and has been waiting, latent in all men,” the “something fierce in me, eligible to burst forth”’.33

In spite of their anxiety, both Wallace and Johnston corresponded with Symonds on the subject of sexual inversion before the publication of *Walt Whitman: A Study*. Johnston had first contacted Symonds after his visit to Camden in 1890, enclosing some photographs of Walt Whitman, to which Symonds warmly responded, taking Johnston’s letter ‘as a sign that our Master Walt has the power of bringing folk together by a common kinship of kind feeling’. That was the principal meaning of *Calamus*, Symonds suggested, ‘the doctrine of Comradeship’ which might bring strangers into contact, although he also wondered, like Wallace, ‘what more than this “Calamus” contains’.34 There was also correspondence between Symonds and Wallace over the meaning of *Calamus*. Symonds suggested that the ‘real drift’ of *Calamus* was towards the justification of homosexual feelings and asked Wallace to provide details of a man arrested under ‘Labouchère’s Clause’ in Bolton.35 He also told Wallace that Whitman’s adoring letters to his companion Pete Doyle (some of which Wallace had copied into his notebooks when in Camden) ‘As you say … throw a distinct light on what he meant by comradeship, and do more than aught else could to explain Calamus’.36

For all their interest in the subject of sexual inversion, it was still Johnston’s concern to exonerate Whitman. He thought Symonds’s attempt to read *Calamus* as implying the dignity and humanity of homosexual desire ‘one of the most damnable [and] atrocious suggestions conceivable’ and that ‘to speak of “sexual inversion” as being implied seems to me nothing short of a gross insult to Walt himself’. Symonds, he suggested, ‘cannot be serious in that odious suggestion!’37 The true meaning of *Calamus* was surely contained in Symonds’s suggestion that it might lead to a ‘luminous ideal of a new chivalry
based on brotherhood and manly affection’. It was emphatically not the gateway to disease. Johnston approvingly quoted a letter on the subject from Whitman’s American acolyte Horace Traubel, who declared in 1887 that Symonds was very wrong. His theory, Traubel declared, ‘argued bad for his comprehension not only of Leaves of Grass but of the times in which we live’. Contrary to what Symonds suggested, homosexuality had not played any part in history, and ‘it certainly would not appear in Leaves of Grass where there exists the most solid and substantial avowal of self’. ‘Homo Sexuality’ Traubel said, was a ‘disease, it is wreck and rot – it is decay and muck’, while Walt was ‘health and salvation of purity of growth and beauty – elements vital for upstarting for blossoming for repair’. Although their condemnation could not have been stronger, the extended disavowal of this reading of Calamus by Johnston, Wallace and the College perversely enabled their romantic friendships. It acted to remove the taint of corruption from any association with Whitman, and had the corresponding effect of licensing their own comradeship by displacing any possible homoerotic desire into a distant and abject realm of moral corruption and disease.

By stressing Whitman’s attachment to immortality (‘Death or life I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer’) Wallace and Johnston were able to reaffirm their religious faith, to try and accommodate it to the findings of science, and to elevate the significance of their comradeship. Where critics saw in Whitman’s evasive, coded language a vocabulary of homoerotic attachment, Wallace and Johnston read an ethereal, ineffable attachment to death, immortality and the oneness of the universe (or of God) reached only via the love of comrades. This explains why love and its expression was so important to the College, and goes some way towards explaining how their effusive idiom of passionate love for one another could exist without the suggestion of pathological desires. By associating love with immortality and faith, comradeship was made all the more powerful, provided that erotic desire had been overtly evaded.

The template for this loving comradeship within the College was the relationship between Wallace and Johnston. They shared an intense spirituality, with Johnston often cast by his friend (only half-jokingly) as a subordinate St Paul to his Saviour. Johnston regarded the emulation of Wallace’s sweet temperament in the same way as he regarded the emulation of Whitman, as a moral duty. ‘I love him more and more as a man,’ Johnston wrote in 1891, ‘strong with heroic
strength and gentle and tender and considerate and loving, with all a woman’s and a mother’s delicate loving soul.” In 1887 Wallace inscribed a copy of John Seeley’s *Ecce Homo* with a quote from Whitman’s ‘To Him That Was Crucified’. The poem begins by pledging ‘My spirit to yours dear brother’ and ends in the hope that ‘the men and women of races, ages to come, may prove brethren and lovers as we are’. Johnston’s response was no less effusive. ‘I accept the book,’ he wrote in his diary, ‘and with it the heart love which prompted the giver to insert that inscription and all that it implies – especially the last six words which to me are inexpressibly precious because I know that he means me to accept them as true. Oh that I were more worthy to be your “brother and lover.” My dear friend! To be so called by you is a great honour and privilege.’

Their intimacy, which, as we shall see, was to be reproduced with certain privileged others, even extended to sharing beds, not a necessity in the large houses owned by both men. In 1901, after a College meeting, ‘Wallace stayed all night with me and after the others had gone we had a right good talk together before we went to bed – and after too (for we slept together, my wife being away at Menai Bridge)’.

Whitman, then, provided a thorough philosophy of life, the basis of which was personal connection to one’s comrades. However, the relevance of his poetry went beyond spirituality, and implied a sense of social mission, which Wallace in particular was keen to take up. This feeling became particularly strong following his life-enhancing visit to Whitman in 1891. Thereafter, Wallace became ever more committed to inventing socialism as a political and spiritual project based on comrade love and immortality.

Wallace’s visit to Whitman inspired the ‘Master’ of Eagle Street to adapt the College and its Fellows to a more purposive social role. Viewing his friendship with Whitman as nothing less than a religious experience, Wallace began to talk of ‘carrying out the duties of my apostolsy’, responsibilities which were shared in equal measure by Johnston. Their visits to Whitman (‘the crown and glory of our whole lives’) meant that, as Johnston put it, ‘for the Whitman cult in America Bolton is the centre of England’. Will Atkinson hoped that their town might become ‘the centre of the world’. This gave the College a predominant place in the emergence of what Wallace clearly hoped would be a religion of Whitman, to rank with the Labour and Ethical churches. In short, he became ever more determined to
spread Whitman’s ‘teachings’ among those to whom they were naturally addressed: ‘the democracy’. During the following year, the talk of missions and of a democratic millennium heightened the already intense and passionate atmosphere of the College in ways that were to prove increasingly unpredictable and even disquieting.

The College assumed a role of greater importance in this programme since, for Wallace, it represented a microcosm of the way in which the new society should work. Hearty but serious and open discussion, accompanied by an effusive ethos of love, would be the basis of the new democratic social order. The ‘great work for England’ which Wallace envisaged, was to suggest a spiritual context for the labour movement by promoting Whitman’s teachings among its members. The College Fellows were, according to Wallace, ‘the heaven-appointed preachers to the Democracy of England!’ to whom labour leaders would increasingly look for spiritual sustenance’.46

In practical terms, this mission meant trying to gain the ear of those influential in the early labour movement. By early 1893, Wallace had succeeded in making contact with Robert Blatchford (editor of the Clarion, the most popular socialist newspaper of the time), Kier Hardie and socialist lecturer Katherine Conway, with the latter of whom he was to develop a characteristically intense friendship. In February 1893, the same time that Symonds’s ‘sexual inversion’ theory was causing such a stir in the College, expectations of a political millennium were raised by Wallace’s initial success with ILP leaders. He wrote to key ILP figures, enclosing a copy of Leaves of Grass, with hints as to its beneficial contents. The Labour movement, Wallace told Kier Hardie, ‘must eventually turn for its gospel and Bible’ to Leaves of Grass, ‘as it must find its supreme prophet in Walt Whitman’. Not only the movement itself, but Hardie himself would find there ‘the deeper need of his spiritual nature’, not to mention the ‘best incentive and highest cheer for all the circumstance of your public and private life’.47

The detail of what might have become Wallace’s political programme was set out in a speech to an ILP conference in Bolton in May 1894. This outlined an ethical project which was a watered-down version of the religious necessity of comrade love. In order for a socialist utopia to arrive, the Master argued, it was vital that socialists cultivate their higher selves, so that they were able to love as the ethos of comradeship required, and, by implication, were ready to establish what was, at heart, a divine order. The cultivation of self of
course fitted much more neatly with late Victorian moral precepts than perhaps Wallace would have liked, but it was this appeal to accepted notions of character which, in typically Whitmanesque fashion, hid his much larger concepts of comrade love. The success of socialism, Wallace told the ILP, depended on ‘the attraction of our own personalities, [on] what we call character’. Socialism required a new form of subjectivity that would allow the ‘average man or woman … to shape out and exemplify in ourselves this type of future citizenship’. Where Wallace differed from socialist writers like his friend Katherine Conway was in arguing that the exemplar for this form of being was Walt Whitman. With the development of ‘the personal soul’ would come ‘an equal and universal sympathy and love’, the essence of socialism.48

Wallace’s politics required self-cultivation in order for one’s ‘higher’ senses to emerge. The fact that the self was at the heart of this political and religious vision meant that the College was particularly open to new views of consciousness being propagated by the more sober wing of spiritualism and allied psychical and psychological researchers. These possibilities were given shape by the association of the College with Richard Maurice Bucke, whose efforts to theorise new forms of consciousness corresponded perfectly with the emerging utopian spirit of the College.

At the same time that Wallace and Johnston were reaching out to the ILP, they were also entertaining new ideas of consciousness which ran in parallel to their own religious mysticism and heightened the sense of mission and expectation around the College. Their association with Whitman had put them in touch with Dr Bucke, who was beginning to piece together a new understanding of consciousness. His theory proposed that this new level of consciousness – beyond ordinary awareness – was about to come into existence and could already be seen in exceptional men.49 Bucke came to England in 1891 to visit Edward Carpenter and consult ‘England’s Whitman’ on his theories, after which he was introduced to the College, where his work was enthusiastically received. As we shall see, cosmic consciousness could function as an explanation of behaviour and thoughts which were out of the ordinary by way of displacing them from ordinary consciousness. It also provided professional sanction and scientific theory to justify Wallace’s belief in the power of comradeship. Indeed, it confirmed the belief of Wallace and Johnston that comrade love was itself a form of subjectivity which arose from the cultivation
of the ‘higher self’ and could therefore be attained by the democracy. Wallace’s belief that, like *Leaves of Grass*, comrade love was initially reserved for a few men whose super-perception enabled them to see the oneness of the universe was also reaffirmed by Dr Bucke. As a result, the importance of cosmic consciousness to the College meant that they were, like some Calvinist elect, both constantly searching for signs of its operation, and willing to see some exceptional forms of behaviour as signs of this coming phenomenon. In particular, they were primed to view expressions of love as the sign of this new awareness, and thereby to accept an even greater level of intensity in their friendships. In addition, cosmic consciousness was closely associated with a kind of sexual desire. These desires and hopes focused on the visiting American musician and composer, Philip Dalmas.

Richard Maurice Bucke (1837–1902) had trained at McGill Medical School in Montreal and studied in Europe in the early 1860s. On his return to Canada, he took up the post of superintendent of the asylum for the insane at London, Ontario, in 1877. There, he built a reputation as one of Canada’s leading alienists and a pioneer of gynaecological operations as a cure for hysteria. In 1882 he became Professor of Mental and Nervous Diseases at Western University, and was elected president of the Psychological Section of the British Medical Association in 1888. In 1890, the year before his visit to Bolton, he was elected president of the American Medico-Psychological Association. He had met Whitman for the first time in 1877 and described the experience (in terms similar to those used by Johnston and Wallace) as ‘a sort of spiritual intoxication’.

As S. E. D. Shortt has pointed out, Bucke’s work on cosmic consciousness was entirely characteristic of late Victorian attempts to theorise the unconscious mind. Whereas the dominant interpretation of the mind in Britain and America was physiological, and accorded primacy in shaping consciousness to the will, new investigations deriving from varied sources, each of which claimed some degree of scientific authority, suggested that the mind might not be a simply material entity. These explorations of the dynamic unconscious derived from several sources, ranging from spiritualism and psychical research in England, through to the hypnotherapy practised by Charcot and Janet in France on their hysterical patients. Some of these strands of thought, particularly spiritualism and psychical research in England, shared with the College an attempt to renew the idea of immortality in an age of scientific revolution and loss of faith. By the 1880s,
Shortt suggests, the table-rappings of spiritualistic mediums had begun to be dissociated from the more earnest and empirical efforts of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The leading researcher of the SPR, Frederic Myers, had also been interested in Whitman, and in 1865, as a fellow undergraduate of John Addington Symonds, had introduced his friend to the American poet for the first time.

By the 1890s Myers’s psychical researches concentrated on the access to the unconscious provided by trance states and automatic writing. Through the study of these, he became convinced that there was what he called a ‘subliminal self’ which acted outside the guidelines of the will. Myers’s work culminated in a book, which addressed the very same issue which so preoccupied J. W. Wallace and the College: *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*. For Bucke, the work of the SPR showed that telepathy and hypnotism ‘really exist’ and could be studied empirically. Exceptional forms of consciousness, such as those seen in trance states, or in states of cosmic consciousness, were not alien to the mind, but an integral part of it. Johnston was also impressed by some aspects of spiritualism (as were some of the College Fellows), in particular its parallels with Christianity, and commented favourably in his diary on a spiritualist lecture he witnessed in Bolton in 1892.

Although cosmic consciousness would, according to Bucke, progress according to the laws of natural selection, it was at present restricted to very few men who exhibited acute powers of perception. It could also be experienced momentarily by others, who included both Bucke himself, J. W. Wallace and Dr Johnston. Bucke’s own experience of cosmic consciousness came after an evening reading and discussing Whitman and other poets. ‘At once,’ he wrote, ‘he found himself wrapped around … by a flame-coloured cloud’, which was followed by ‘a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe’. In that instant, ‘he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain’. Wallace, according to Bucke, had experienced the same momentary enlightenment after the death of his mother. From that time he became ‘clearly superior to the average man’, the proof of which was...
his status as the ‘Master’ of Eagle Street. The Fellows had given him their respect and affection because ‘they saw clearly in him a superior spiritual nature’.57

Cosmic consciousness was, according to the principles of evolution, destined to become a general attribute of humanity. Man had passed through animal awareness, or ‘simple consciousness’ as far as ‘self-consciousness’ or awareness of selfhood, and would soon evolve a new ‘consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe’. The possession of cosmic consciousness almost escaped definition, but was characterised by the enhanced appreciation of the order and oneness of the universe, to which was added a ‘state of moral exaltation’ and an ‘indescribable feeling of elevation, elation and joyousness’, not to mention ‘a quickening of the moral sense’. With these, Bucke suggested, comes ‘what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life’.58

The exemplar of cosmic consciousness was, of course, Walt Whitman, who, Bucke suggested, was only able to write the remarkable *Leaves of Grass* after he had experienced his own variety of illumination in which he ‘saw the Universe’.59 Whitman’s realisation of cosmic consciousness, Bucke told the College in 1891, could be read in one of the most erotic sections of *Song of Myself*:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,} \\
& \text{How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me,} \\
& \text{And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,} \\
& \text{And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my feet.}
\end{align*}
\]

For Bucke, this passage described ‘a new power’ which ‘overshadowed’ the poet. It held his feet and beard, ‘mastered and controlled him from that time forth’. This new faculty enabled him to see and know things ‘that are perfectly hidden from the ordinary mind’ which were told only in *Leaves of Grass*.60

The sexual element in the awakening of cosmic consciousness was not only confined to Bucke’s reading of *Song of Myself*. For Edward Carpenter cosmic consciousness was much more likely to develop in those who possessed a ‘homosexual temperament’. Carpenter, with whom Bucke had been consulting prior to his College address, made a specific analogy between sexual ecstasy and cosmic consciousness in his 1892 book based on his travels in India and Ceylon, *From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta*. The happiness which such an illumination
produced, Carpenter suggested, may be compared ‘for its actual force, as a motive of human conduct, with the intensity of the sexual orgasm’. The sexual connotations were clear for other Edwardian critics as well. For W. C. Rivers, writing in 1913, the passage quoted by Bucke proved the ‘prima facie case’ of Whitman’s homosexuality, and was reproduced in his account of *Walt Whitman’s Anomaly* without comment. Johnston, however, thought Bucke’s analysis ‘a perfect electric illumination of Whitman’. The power of cosmic consciousness derived not only from its capacity to replicate sexual ecstasy, but also from its apparent conformity to the idea of comradeship. That too was only owned by the few who had cultivated the capacity to love, and who had learned this from a close reading of *Leaves of Grass*. Accordingly, cosmic consciousness was also an ineffable, unsayable quality of personality which could be met with only in those with special sensual capacities. It is not surprising then, that such men began to be identified in ordinary life as well as in history and literature. In 1893 and 1894, the College, which met frequently at this time (often twice in a week) was charged with a religious enthusiasm, an awareness of the coming political millennium, and with the search for an apparently new variety of human nature.

Into this heady atmosphere in the summer of 1894 stepped the young American composer and singer, Philip Dalmas, who had been introduced to the College by the American Whitman group, and who instantly cast a spell over Wallace, Johnston and some of the others. He seems to have acted as a focus for their love, their hopes and muted desires. Dalmas also cemented the association between comradeship, cosmic consciousness and the fascination of desire which drove both Wallace and Johnston. Johnston met him for the first time at a College meeting organised in his honour in July 1894, and noted in his diary that he was ‘a tall, straight-limbed, handsome looking fellow’, altogether ‘a most striking personality’ from whom ‘seemed to emanate a spirit of sweetness and tenderness and loving kindness’. From their first meeting, Johnston recalled, ‘I felt a curious and irresistible attraction for this gentle-mannered, beautiful-souled man who seemed dowered with the grace of a woman and yet was possessed with the masculinity of a strong man’. Wallace was also enchanted by Dalmas. Soon after their first meeting, Johnston wrote in his diary with an air of disquiet, ‘I think I will here record what TS [Thomas Shorrock, a College Fellow] said
to me about PD [Dalmas] and JWW [Wallace] as I sat by his side in the Borough Council one morning’. Dalmas had been staying with Wallace in Adlington, and, according to Shorrock, it was ‘extraordinary what an affection’ there was between them. Dalmas addressed his host as ‘Beloved Wallace’, and his music produced rapturous reactions. ‘After some of it’, Johnston recorded, ‘Wallace threw his arms around Dalmas’ neck and sobbed upon his breast like a child’. The two of them, Johnston recalled, “carry on” like a couple of lovers and were also sleeping in the same bed. After meeting Dalmas for a second time, Johnston told Wallace that he didn’t know whether he was ‘on my head or my heels’. Wallace agreed that the state the American aroused was ‘either a sweet hell or a perfect place’.

Dalmas also claimed to have special qualities, an assertion which was taken with the appropriate seriousness of those urgently seeking after the immortal spirit. His cosmic consciousness took the form of an extraordinary sensitivity (what Wallace described as ‘wonderfully clear intuitions and perceptions’) and a self-declared synaesthetic capacity to hear colours and smell sounds. Although such properties of the mind were imperfectly understood in the 1890s, they were nevertheless increasingly visible in European culture. For example, there was a brief fashion for musical experiments in the 1890s which sought to combine sensations of sound and colour, culminating in the invention of the ‘colour-organ’ in 1893.

The first properly scientific accounts of such synaesthesia also began to appear during the early 1890s, a fact noted by Havelock Ellis. Although it is unlikely that Dalmas knew about the studies from the early 1890s which Ellis cited in Sexual Inversion (1897), the tantalising historical coincidence remains that Ellis used synaesthesia to illustrate an analogy with homosexuality, and later defined it as an explicitly female characteristic. Symonds, seeking parallels in harmless variations of mental capacity, had already compared inversion to colour-blindness, but for Ellis, ‘coloured hearing’ was a better comparison. Such an adaptation was not a defect or a ‘diseased condition’ but rather ‘an abnormality of nervous tracks producing new and involuntary combinations’. Just as the synaesthete instinctively reacts to colours as sounds, ‘so the invert has his sexual sensations brought into relationship with objects that are normally without sexual appeal’.

Although Dalmas could have been aware of these cultural trends, it is clear that the College viewed his synaesthesia as remarkable and portentous. For the Fellows, Dalmas’s sensibility provided evidence
of an alternate consciousness. It was revealed to them one day after the American had seen a rainbow which, he claimed, made ‘the most beautiful sounds imaginable’. He also claimed to have an astral body which had visited London and made its sights familiar to him when his corporeal self finally arrived there. Most significantly, there were literal echoes of Whitman himself in Dalmas, and Johnston even suggested that the poet must have had similarly acute faculties. Dalmas, like Whitman, could ‘hear the trees grow up and … the rush of the saps in spring’.  

Not only that, but he claimed to have had a prevision of the happiness which the College, and in particular Johnston, would bring him. He told Johnston that he had felt his presence before he had met him, and that he was ‘drawn to you particularly’. Dalmas told the doctor, whom he had begun to address as ‘the Flower of the North’, that ‘I would not think of living without you, and in fact could not do so now’. Henceforth, he told Johnston, ‘we shall … be always together’ beyond life and into immortality. These attitudes, Dalmas confessed to Johnston, meant that people sometimes thought him ‘morbid and queer’. They failed to understand him, and ‘they simply condemn me’. After these revelations, the doctor recorded, Dalmas ‘put his head on my shoulder and almost sobbing said, “And what would it be without you?”’

Part of Dalmas’s ‘fascination’ was the fact that his particular consciousness confirmed the super-perception of a man who was able, it appeared, to love unreservedly. His sensibility also tended to confirm Dr Bucke’s theories. According to one of Charles Sixsmith’s American correspondents, ‘Dalmas has cosmic consciousness; that grand new sense’, while Bucke also found the young American to have ‘some extraordinary psychical qualities’. Yet, typically, the attraction of Dalmas was somehow beyond expression. In addition to the literal excisions from Johnston’s diary (where he has tried to cross out the most intimate or embarrassing detail), words failed the good doctor and some of the others. Fred Wild thought the American ‘an extraordinary fellow’, while Will Law, according to Wild, ‘adores him and uses words in letters about him that he would not speak’.  

Johnston and Dalmas developed a particularly intense friendship based on their mutual belief in the immortality of the personality and the possibility of cosmic consciousness. At times, their spiritual communion verged on the physical. While out walking together, and discussing these matters, Johnston recalled that ‘a curious thing
happened’. They reached Wallace’s house in Adlington, where Dalmas ‘threw his arms around me. I did the same to him and we kissed each other – the first time I believe that I ever kissed a man in my life – at least for a very long time’. Dalmas, Johnston recorded, ‘has touched something in my heart and it has responded to his touch in a manner which fills me with a strange and indescribable feeling’. Dalmas exerted ‘a strange fascination’ over Johnston, and had aroused in him ‘what no other man ever seems to have done’. ‘I feel for him’, Johnston wrote, ‘an inexpressible tenderness and affection; my best self “comes to the top” and I feel my heart over flowing with a universal sympathy and filled with a great happiness’. Sixsmith and Wallace too felt this ‘peculiar attraction’, the latter writing to Johnston that he wished he ‘could tell you all I know about Dalmas or translate for you all I have learned from him’, and promising him that ‘You too at the right moment shall enter into the splendour and joy, which no mortal tongue can express’.

Dalmas’s value to the College was in the way he enabled them to see cosmic consciousness and comrade love, however confusingly, working in an individual. It is clear, then, that the peculiar combination of spiritual love of comrades, cosmic consciousness and a Whitmanesque mysticism provided a space in which something akin to homosexual desire could be experienced without being explicitly expressed. The conjunction of these ideas, while not necessarily licensing erotic attachments, could provide the resources out of which a form of subjectivity (‘comradeship’) was made. In addition, the contacts of Johnston, Wallace, Dalmas and Sixsmith with Edward Carpenter and his ideas of an ‘intermediate sex’ who experienced homosexual desire provided further material for their interest in ‘sexual inversion’.

Dalmas’s characteristics also bore striking similarities to those of the homosexual mystics found in the work of Edward Carpenter. It is not implausible to think of Carpenter viewing the College, and especially Dalmas, Wallace, Johnston and Sixsmith as prototypical ‘homogenic’ types. The relationship between Carpenter and the College was also mutually productive in other ways. For Carpenter, the College represented the practical application of the notion of comrade love, while for Wallace and Johnston, Carpenter’s ideas provided a further, complementary vocabulary for understanding comrade love and homosexuality.

During the course of the 1890s, Wallace, Johnston, Sixsmith and Dalmas were regular visitors to Carpenter’s home at Holmsfield near Bolton.
Sheffield, where they found not only congenial company but also authoritative backing for their own views. In addition, Carpenter provided confidences and information concerning sexual inversion. Johnston in particular appears to have developed an intimacy with the writer which was partly based on a shared interest in homosexuality. In March 1897, Carpenter visited Johnston ‘and we had a good talk re “Homo-Sexism” in which he opened his mind to me and told me many strange and curious facts’. In spite of his earlier denunciations of implied homosexuality in the poetry of Whitman, Johnston was charmed by Carpenter’s relationship with George Merrill, whom he described as ‘the most remarkable specimen of “turning”-hood I have ever met’. Wallace too, for all his disavowals of Whitman’s homo-eroticism, found Carpenter’s relationship with another of his lovers, George Hukin, ‘natural’ and ‘simple’. Not only was Carpenter’s personal friendship ‘soothing and tranquilising’ for Johnston, but their ideas were completely ‘harmonious’. After one visit in 1898, during which they again discussed sexual inversion and Havelock Ellis’s book on the subject, Johnston returned to Bolton with a ‘strange feeling as if I had risen from the dead and were commencing life afresh’. Their discussions during these visits, Johnston wrote, were often ‘too intimate to record’.

Carpenter sent a copy of most of his books to Charles Sixsmith, including his 1894 pamphlet *Homogenic Love*. In it he explicitly associated comrade love and homosexuality in ways which might have been calculated to both describe and appeal to the College. Although comrade love was not necessarily sexual, and therefore could appeal to those who experienced intense feelings for other men, it nevertheless counted as part of a spectrum of homogenic love. According to Carpenter, homogenic types also frequently possessed distinctive mentalities. The physical side of comrade love, he argued, ‘from the very nature of the case, can never find expression quite so freely’ as heterosexual attachment and therefore developed ‘rather more along emotional channels’. Neither was it the case that inverts were degraded either physically or mentally. On the contrary, they tended to be of a ‘refined, sensitive nature’ and exhibited no physical symptoms of their condition, other than a tendency to ‘nervous development’.

These conclusions were clearly reinforced by men like Dalmas and others who claimed both comrade love and cosmic consciousness. They in turn used Carpenter’s ideas in a literal fashion to interpret their own emotions. Through this association, Carpenter developed a
historical and anthropological basis for the notion that inverted their potential to develop spiritual qualities and specific forms of consciousness which were not generally found in society. As we have seen, Carpenter’s association with Dr Bucke cemented his acceptance of the validity of cosmic consciousness. Also, both men found a parallel between sexual release and the ecstasy of illumination which, however, went unstated in Bucke’s work.

In spite of Bucke’s reluctance to face the sexual elements of cosmic consciousness, Carpenter developed the idea of an alternate consciousness into a theory of the special correspondence between inversion and mystical perception. These ideas were principally developed in three works, From Adam’s Peak to Elephanta (1892), in a 1911 article ‘On the Connection Between Homosexuality and Divination’, and in the later book on the same theme, Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk (1914). Like Bucke, Carpenter sought and found scientific support for the existence of a ‘secondary’ consciousness in the work of psychical researchers like Frederic Myers. For Carpenter, work on trance states focused the attention of Western science on a form of awareness which had long been recognised in Eastern religion, and lent foundation to later speculations on the character of homosexuality.

In his 1911 article, Carpenter developed the idea that inverted had, throughout history, been the bearers of special powers. He noted that in a number of early cults and religions, shamans and priests were frequently held to belong to an ‘intermediate sex’. The fact that inverted mixed both male and female characteristics was the key factor in making them susceptible to divination, Carpenter argued. This ‘double life and nature … seems to give them an extraordinary humanity and sympathy together with a remarkable power of dealing with human beings’. The interaction between masculine and feminine fostered a ‘mutual illumination of logic and intuition’, a mixture of ‘action and meditation’ which ‘may not only raise and increase the power of each of these faculties’, but ‘give to the mind a new quality, and a new power of perception corresponding to the blending of subject and object’. It may, in short, lead to the development of ‘that third order of perception which has been called cosmic consciousness’.

The holy men Carpenter referred to were ‘bisexual’ in the sense of possessing both male and female characteristics. As we have seen, both Wallace and Johnston claimed to have experienced moments of
the cosmic consciousness which, for Carpenter, was so closely associated with inversion. Dalmas, in contrast, appeared to claim that he had attained that state in a more permanent sense. Other Fellows applied Carpenter’s understanding in an equally literal sense. Will Atkinson, a ‘mystic’ and spiritualist who Dr Johnston thought had ‘so much in common with myself that I marvel at the duplication of my own nature and mentality in him’, thought of himself in ways which were similar to the self-perception of Philip Dalmas. Indeed, according to Fred Wild they were alike in many ways and possessed a mutual ‘sympathy’. Johnston related in 1907 that three years previously Atkinson had undergone ‘a remarkable physical change’ similar to the awakening of cosmic consciousness, since which time ‘he has had many remarkable experiences and powers’. He was ‘gifted with remarkable powers of insight – far ahead of anything I am conscious of myself’, and claimed to have a “psychical body” which leaves his physical body during sleep’. In addition to this he stated he was ‘bi-sexual’ in the sense of being ‘psychically and physically both male and female’. Not only that, Johnston reported, but Atkinson claimed to experience ‘the sexual orgasm constantly within himself’ and averred that ‘semen is injected into his blood and that he has known it come out through his nostrils[,] his eyes and his mouth!’ Whitman must have been the same, Atkinson had suggested, in order to have written *Leaves of Grass*, since in its mystical lyrics he had found literal echoes of his own experiences.

Johnston was sympathetic to Atkinson’s story not only because Dalmas and Carpenter had familiarised him with the idea that sexual inversion was accompanied by acute perception, but also because he himself habitually sought evidence of his own rebirth. He finally claimed to have experienced cosmic consciousness itself, however briefly, in 1901. Although, he recorded in his diary, he had appreciated the teachings of Whitman and Dr Bucke, he had until the time of his ‘aurora’ failed to ‘realize it as a personal possession and recognise its … vitality as a fact in and factor of soul life’. The illumination came to him as he walked in Rivington with Wallace, reading J. W. Lloyd’s *Dawn Thoughts*. As Wallace’s words sank in, ‘there flashed through me a consciousness of their truth … and glorious illuminating thought seemed to suffuse my entire being with a heavenly refulgence’. At that moment ‘was revealed to me in a flash the Great fact of the Unity and the spirituality of the Universe’. Such thoughts ‘dazed me … as with a mighty presence, filling me with a
joy untellably great’. Cosmic consciousness was not only a religious awakening and a form of quasi-sexual ecstasy, but signified the mark of election to a newly evolving mode of being which was closely associated with inversion. Johnston can hardly fail to have realised this, given the closeness of his connection to Carpenter.

In these ways, the College shows the intellectual interchange which informed the search for what might be termed a homosexual mentality. In Carpenter’s case this had little to do with metropolitan subcultures and everything to do with spirituality. While Carpenter was concerned to bracket one area of experience to homosexual men, he also suggested that, because of their ‘intermediate’ status, they existed along a spectrum of masculine attachment. The College therefore showed homogenic love to be a spectrum of desires and interests which were not necessarily physical, but which shared a common mentality or consciousness. For Carpenter, as for Johnston and Wallace, homogenic love was primarily a question of sensibility rather than of congenital ‘orientation’.

William Cohen has suggested that, in literature at least, the unsayable nature of homosexuality was overturned during the course of the 1890s, a process symbolised by the flagrant sexuality of Wilde’s literary output.93 In spite of the vague and general depravities perpetrated by Dorian Gray, Cohen implies that his story could easily be read as fodder for ‘perverted Telegraph boys’ and ‘immoral aristocrats’. It could, he suggests, be interpreted as a tale of sexual decay rather than one of more general wickedness. It is certainly the case that at certain moments during the last two decades of the nineteenth century it became easier to publicly describe and denounce same-sex desire. These moments, in the form of public scandal, became more frequent during these decades, as the unspeakable nature of homosexual desire was challenged. Terminology became more precise in certain quarters and an entire genre of sexological science was devoted to explicitly detailing what had previously been simply ‘abominable’.

The fascination of the Eagle Street College lies in the fact that it forms part of the same cultural moment as these other, metropolitan moments of clarity. It began life in 1885, when it was still possible to celebrate the poetic beauty of Greek athletes without accusations of indecency and to insist on the innocence of comrade love, and declined just as these rich vocabularies became increasingly difficult to animate. For the College, Whitman was an avatar of comradeship
and the oneness of the Universe, whereas for some of their contemporaries he was simply and incontestably a homosexual. The College existed at the margin of both these ways of knowing. Even in their own lives, Wallace, Johnston, Sixsmith and the others enacted the peculiar English drama of attraction and repulsion from the fascination of homosexual desire. At certain moments during the 1890s and 1900s, they became intensely interested in sexual inversion, only to deny it later and dissociate themselves from the more pathological implications of comrade love. In order to do this, they employed other practices of dissociation, principally through the medium of cosmic consciousness and spirituality.

In a personal sense, it was still possible to separate any interest in sexual inversion from one’s public life and, like Johnston, participate fully in civic culture. However, its acknowledgement required a more elaborate set of terms. Comrade love and sexual inversion were accommodated by the association of cosmic consciousness and the immortal love which transcended time spoken of by men like Dalmas. On this mainly spiritual plane an intense love, an ‘inexpressible tenderness’ or a ‘peculiar attraction’ for another man could exist and be ennobled. The vagaries of the spirit and the ‘psychical body’ could also explain individual inversion, as in the case of Will Atkinson. In broader terms, the assertion of Edward Carpenter that inverts possessed special powers gave authority to the self-conception of men like Dalmas, Johnston and, to a lesser extent, Wallace. For Carpenter, the College, in its intense but non-physical homogenic love, may have represented the promise of his ideas in action.

The College represented both the limitations upon, and the opportunities available to those men outside metropolitan literary or bohemian cultures who were both attracted and repelled by the prospect of homosexual desire. The experience of the College in the years between 1891 and 1895 showed how same-sex desire could be rationalised in the lives of ‘ordinary’ men, and how it could inform utopian vistas of selfhood and consciousness. Looking back on this cultural moment in 1904, Wallace perhaps realised the overreaching nature of his vision. ‘At one time,’ he recalled, ‘the College seemed to occupy a very exalted position.’ But it had proved ‘too much for us’. All that remained was comradeship, a glimmer of hope for another moment when the world would be truly ready for the message of *Leaves of Grass*, a future in which ‘selfishness will be replaced by love’.94
Notes


15. Wallace and Johnston, *Visits to Walt Whitman*, p. 19.


20. Wallace and Johnston, *Visits to Walt Whitman*, p. 58.


26. J. W. Wallace to Jim Wallace, 8 August 1901, Wallace Collection, JRULM Deansgate Eng. MS 1186/2/5/2.
27. Johnston Diaries, vol. 6, 10 October 1889.
41. Johnston Diaries, vol. 15, 28 October 1891.
42. Johnston Diaries, vol. 1, 20 December 1887 (Johnston’s emphasis).
44. Quoted in Johnston Diaries, vol. 25, 28 February 1893.
46. J. W. Wallace, Address to the College, 6 January 1893, Charles Sixsmith Collection, JRULM, Eng. MS 1331/1/7/3/2.
47. J. W. Wallace to Kier Hardie, quoted in Johnston Diaries, vol. 25, 14 February 1893.
54. Johnston Diaries, vol. 21, 26 June 1892.
58. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, p. 3.
60. *Report of College Meeting held to Honour Dr Bucke*.
63. *Report of College Meeting held to Honour Dr Bucke*.
64. Johnston Diaries, vol. 28 21 July 1894.
67. This last sentence was crossed out in the diary.
74. William Innes to Charles Sixsmith (n.d.) [1892], Sixsmith Collection JRULM, Eng. MS 1170/2/1/1/7.
75. Dr Bucke to J. W. Wallace, 16 July 1893, Whitman Correspondence, Bolton Library ZWN 9/98.
89. Carpenter, *From Adam’s Peak*, p. 159.