

Three Chapters in the Story of Wake Forest: Ed Wilson reflects on writers and writing at Wake Forest

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Provost emeritus, Edwin Wilson assumed a Janus-like posture, looking to the past and future, as he addressed the audience gathered Friday evening for the concluding event of Words Awake's inaugural day, March 24, 2012. With characteristic clarity and elegance, Wilson wove together texts and reflections that joined the rich humus of Wake Forest's literary traditions with the achievements of contemporary and the promise of future writers.

Most of you here tonight do not know about Wake Forest College life, as it was for our first writers, in the Town of Wake Forest – before World War Two, before coeducation, before the move to Winston-Salem. In order to understand those first writers, four of whom will be admitted to the Hall of Fame tomorrow night, you need to know. To guide me in my own reflections, I have turned to alumnus Gerald Johnson, who in 1938 looked at six faculty members who were retiring and wrote about them in an essay he called “Six Characters in Search of an Author,” an appreciative allusion to the 1921 play by Luigi Pirandello by the same name. These “characters” were: James W. Lynch, in

Religion, “a scholar with the soul of a poet,” who “lifted up a banner upon the high mountain, that we might go into the gates of the nobles”; Willis R. Cullom, also in Religion, who “silently preached one doctrine: ‘goodness is the only creed worth while’”; J. Hendren Gorrell, in German, and Benjamin Sledd, in English, who drove “undaunted through the tangled jungle of an undergraduate mind”; Needham Gulley, in Law, who “wrote the word ‘Justice’ indelibly upon the minds of young men”; and William Louis Poteat, the biologist President, who waged war against the “confederation of prejudice and superstition” and pointed students toward “a gleam of light.”

I mention these six professors and their values because I have always challenged the notion, held by some outsiders, that the Wake Forest of the past was backward or provincial or narrow-minded or too much compromised by Southern Baptist doctrine. Dancing and drinking were prohibited, to be sure; services in chapel were regularly required; and, as you have already heard, words with a spiritual connotation like nobility and goodness and justice were often related to the academic enterprise; but the classrooms were free, discussions among students and teachers were daring and lively, and the imagination was boundless and unfettered. It was in that environment that some students began, with hope, to see themselves as “writers,” and I would like to tell you about six of them: my own “Six Characters in Search of an Author.”

First, Benjamin Sledd, Professor of English. Bald, bearded, with Shakespearean whiskers, he was called “Old Slick,” and every student who took his English courses came under his spell. Whimsical and playful, but with an occasional “spark of malice,” he gleefully called his students “jackasses,” and it was said of him that he could spot a beautiful woman from afar. He may, as students said, have played games with fairies and nymphs, but he taught Shakespeare and Tennyson brilliantly, and his own poetry was formal and serious – in the manner of the British Victorians.

John Charles McNeill was the best poet who came out of Benjamin Sledd’s classroom, but in his own work he rejected what he called the songs of “Pan” and the “formal figures” of art and looked to the landscapes and the people, black and white, of eastern North Carolina. He wanted “sunburnt blood,” he said, and “sandhill air” and “swamp mud”: all in a place like Riverton, North Carolina, where “no book-agent penetrates” and where “no schedules prevail” and “time moves without fever.” It is not surprising that, years later, young Archie Ammons, himself from eastern North Carolina, turned away with relief from college literary quarterlies to the “home country” poems of John Charles McNeill.

No Wake Forest writer of his generation was more famous than Thomas Dixon, charismatic preacher, gifted orator, popular lecturer, prolific novelist, and writer of numerous screenplays. In the Euzelian Literary Society hall on the old campus his

portrait occupied a central place of honor, and, as late as 1937, when he returned to the campus to speak, the hall was jammed with listeners who heard him praise the Ku Klux Klan, which, in his words, rode out at night “in defense of life, liberty, and womanhood.” In those words he was echoing the white supremacist theme of his best-known novel, The Clansman, which became the source of David W. Griffith’s racist film masterpiece, The Birth of a Nation. The portrait of Thomas Dixon is now somewhere in storage, and he is not being admitted to the Wake Forest Hall of Fame.

From Thomas Dixon I move with pleasure to the name of Gerald Johnson, the sage of the Baltimore Sun, whose many books and essays brought him national acclaim but who never lost touch with his alma mater and was always eager to write for Wake Forest and to speak to Wake Forest people. It was said of him that he was a one-man board of visitors. He famously said of Wake Forest, “She is rowdy but there are those who love her,” and once, when he was asked what our “greatest need in athletics” was, he said, “the abolition of intercollegiate contests.” He admired Franklin Roosevelt, was a friend and supporter of Adlai Stevenson, and was one of the first critics of American’s war in Vietnam.

No single book out of the old campus has had more lasting importance than The Mind of the South, by Wilbur J. “Sleepy” Cash. An acutely sensitive young man who wanted to write many books, melancholy and often depressed, Cash knew poverty and failure, but, in response to an invitation by the publisher Alfred A. Knoff, he wrote one book which, in his own words, was “one man’s view of the South”: “a sort of personal report.” It “must rest in large part,” he said, “on the authority of my imagination and understanding at play upon patterns into which I was born and which I have lived.” This one book, though not without critics, continues to be read as a deeply personal, perceptive, and superbly original analysis of what Cash called “the mind of the South.”

What I might call the first chapter in the history of writers at Wake Forest ended in 1939 with the outbreak of World War Two. A second chapter continued – for twenty more years – until 1959, when the last students who studied on the old campus graduated. Those twenty years saw the return of veterans from Europe and the Pacific and a necessary and sometimes painful adjustment to the inevitability of the move to Winston-Salem.

Student writers came under the inspirational influence of Professor Edgar Estes Folk, a former New York newspaperman who – with gentle persuasiveness, with seemingly endless patience, and with a keen insight into the abilities, as well as the limitations, of his students – taught courses in journalism and in modern literature, where names not usually encountered in English curricula of that day were heard: D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce.

Bynum Shaw, after a career with Gerald Johnson's Baltimore Sun that included four years in West Germany, returned to Wake Forest to stay and, inheriting the mantle of Edgar Folk, to teach journalism. He wrote four novels, two of which – The Sound of Small Hammers and The Nazi Hunter – were based on his shrewd reporter's understanding of postwar Europe.

Archie Ammons, home from the Navy in 1946, quietly wrote poems that would lead him to the discovery of his own uniquely powerful poetic voice, to a professorship at Cornell, and to a high place among America's most esteemed twentieth-century poets.

Russell Brantley and Lib Jones Brantley, one of Wake Forest's first women writers, made the campus their life-long home and became interpreters of the College to a wider community, and in The Education of Jonathan Beam, Russell gave convincing life to the undergraduate experiences of a student at a Baptist college like Wake Forest.

Harold Hayes, undergraduate editor of a memorably exciting Wake Forest Student, went to New York and made Esquire the liveliest and most provocative magazine in America, but like Gerald Johnson, he never completely left home and was always available to proclaim Wake Forest in any way he could. (You have just seen Tom Hayes's colorful video tribute to his father.)

And Will Campbell, radical prophet of social justice and author of Brother to a Dragonfly, a deeply honest and compelling memoir of two brothers, became, in the 1950s, one of a few native Southern whites to become courageously active in the civil rights movement, thus helping to erase the stain left by Thomas Dixon on the conscience of Wake Forest.

You may have noticed that, of the six "characters" I promised to speak of as belonging to the years before 1939, I have named only five: Sledd, McNeill, Dixon, Johnson, and Cash. The sixth "character" I have saved until now because he provides an introduction to the third chapter of our story. He is Laurence Stallings, who graduated in 1916 and who did write about the old campus (he gave the College the name of Woodland in his early novel, Plumes) but who, after heroic service as a Marine in the First World War, where he was so severely wounded that he lost his right leg, was a reporter for the New York World; wrote the screenplay for The Big Parade, one of the great silent movies; was co-author of the Broadway play, What Price Glory?; published a photographic history of the First World War and a non-fiction account of that War called The Doughboys; was an editor of Fox Movietone News; and wrote screenplays for several John Ford movies, including She Wore a Yellow Ribbon. Because of the diversity of his talents and a career that took him far from the South and from the College campus, I see him as providing a transition to the writers of the world that most of you inhabit. You come here tonight from Atlanta, from Washington, from New York, from Cambridge, from Los Angeles, from Seattle – and from North Carolina – from wherever the four winds blow. You are

the writers of Wake Forest's third chapter – the chapter that began in 1959 – and we look to you to continue – with energy and with courage – the best of the Wake Forest traditions that are being honored here tonight – a tradition, by the way, that became amplified and strengthened in the 1960s when more and more gifted women joined your ranks.

Walt Whitman, looking to the future rather than to the past, once wrote a poem he called "Poets to Come." I like to think that your Wake Forest predecessors would echo what he said.

Poets to come! ... [he might have said "Writers to come"]

Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,

But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,

Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,

I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

I am someone who, sauntering along without fully stopping,

Takes a casual look upon you and then averts his face,

Leaving it to you to prove and define it,

Expecting the main things from you.

Tonight I leave it to you – a new brood, native, continental, greater than before known – to prove and to define what is to come, and I expect the main things from you. Now "I – and my contemporaries – hurry back in the darkness."

Edwin G. Wilson

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