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Boyd's Influence As Writer, Citizen Widely Noted On 20th Anniversary Of His Death

(David Whisnant, who holds B. S. and M. A. degrees, is currently working on a Ph. D. dissertation, a literary biography of James Boyd, at Duke University, Durham. The following article has appeared recently in several of the state's leading daily newspapers—Editor.)

By DAVID E. WHISNANT

Twenty years ago last week, the beloved North Carolina novelist James Boyd collapsed while attending a dinner party for British Army officers at Princeton University. He was to talk to them the next day about the South, as part of an orientation course on American life. Dressed in his habitual tweed jacket and plaid tie, he was in the midst of one of his famous and witty stories when he suddenly fell forward onto the floor.

Two hours later, shortly after midnight on February 25, James Boyd died, and North Carolina lost not only one of its most brilliant writers but also one of its most energetic citizens.

Widely Esteemed

Boyd was loved and respected beyond the state's borders. At his funeral, a wreath of ivy from Princeton's Nassau Hall was placed on his coffin, an honor customarily reserved for Princeton presidents and trustees.

James Boyd was known to many as the author of novels of America's past, among them "Drums" (1925), "Marching On" (1927), and "Long Hunt" (1930). Others knew him as the gay and sparkling leader of a fashionable circle of fox-hunting enthusiasts in Southern Pines, where he was founder and Master of the Moore County Hounds. To the townspeople of Southern Pines, he was "Jim," the friendly publisher of the town newspaper. But everyone who knew him, knew him as a charming, softly urbane, warm-



JAMES BOYD

ly personable, witty human being.

Deeply Devoted

Although it is not true, as is often said, that Jim Boyd's ancestral "roots" were in North Carolina, the roots of his heart could not have been more firmly implanted in the soil of his adopted homeland. He loved North Carolina from the time of his boyhood visits to his grandfather's farm here, and to the end of his life he spoke glowingly of the state to anyone who would listen. The eclectic Southern Pines literary circle of the 1930's came together largely because of his enthusiasm for North Carolina, and some of the writers remained to make the state their permanent home.

Born on July 2, 1888, James Boyd was the son of a prominent Harrisburg, Pa., coal dealer. The foundation for his attachment to the Carolina Sandhills region was laid about 1895 when his grandfather Boyd, stranded for a few hours by the break-down of a railway engine in Southern Pines, bought a pine-covered hill-top to save it from desecration by woodsmen's axes.

When young Jim came back from World War I, he and his wife Katharine settled on this land. Mrs. Boyd still lives in the charming house they built there, although she recently donated a great part of the original family property to the state of North Carolina for use as a nature preserve.

Early Talent

Boyd early displayed considerable talent for writing, and after receiving an award for his writing at the Hill School, he went on to Princeton, where in 1908 Struthers Burt found him to be an "especially brilliant" student. Burt read the young man's latest stories and poems, and noted that "the mark of the writer" was upon him.

From Princeton he went to Cambridge University, where his wit and charm overcame British reserve and allowed him to be admitted to the social and literary circles of the University. He returned to the United States two years later with profound admiration for the British people.

Following a brief and unsatisfying stint as a teacher and then as a magazine writer, Boyd plunged into Red Cross war work, having been refused by the A.E.F. because of a chronic sinus condition. But his love for his own country and for Great Britain made him determined to fight, and after a corrective sinus operation he was accepted in the Ambulance Service. He served 18 months in the worst of St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives before being sent home with an aggravated sinus condition that was to cause constant pain and countless operations throughout the rest of his life.

Early in 1920, Boyd moved to North Carolina with his wife, entered spiritedly into the life of the region, and returned to his life-long interest, writing. John Galsworthy saw some of his work, praised it, and encouraged him to continue writing. In September, 1920, his first story was accepted by Scribner's Magazine. He continued to publish short stories while working on his first novel, "Drums," set in Revolutionary North Carolina.

The Human Values

But Boyd should not be remembered simply as a "historical nov-

times the two went to square dances with their wives, attended Negro revivals with solemn interest and talked endlessly to students about the subject they loved most, writing.

Boyd's home in Southern Pines was a frequent stopping place for many other writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Laurence Stallings, Scott Fitzgerald, and the "hungry Gulliver" Tom Wolfe, who used to come unannounced in the small hours of the morning, and fall asleep on the living room sofa.

As the clouds of war gathered in 1940, the novelist's concern for democracy and its destiny caused him to organize a patriotic group of actors and playwrights who tried in a positive way to counteract Nazi propaganda. "The Free Company," which included Paul Green, Archibald MacLeish, John Steinbeck and others, presented a very successful series of radio plays in 1941.

'Private America'

Boyd felt that the roots of American nationalism lay in each man's valuing his "own private America," as he himself valued North Carolina.

In 1941 he bought the nearly-defunct Southern Pines Pilot, built it into a strong weekly newspaper, and used much of its influence on behalf of the war effort in the North Carolina Sandhills. Josephus Daniels congratulated him for having "joined the Tar-Heel aristocracy" by becoming editor of a "country journal." The paper has continued to flourish in the competent hands of Katharine Boyd.

The early years of the war, which coincided with the last years of Boyd's life, bore for him as for most people a constant threat of bewilderment, fear, upheaval, and absence and loss of loved ones. But the effect of these uncertainties upon him was unusual because of his uncommon poetic sensitivity. From this sensitivity he derived an infectious calmness. He wrote to Paul Green after Pearl Harbor that "Nothing is left, on this earth at least, for us to believe in, except the spirit of those we know and love."

This turning inward to the calmness and certitude of familiar relationships and felt truths is the burden of the poetry which formed the bulk of Jim Boyd's writing during the final years of his life.

Agonized Longing

His poetry cries longingly for possession of that rootedness and wholeness which gives meaning to life, for the lasting truths of human experience which afford quietness at the center of turmoil.

I do not know the ending to this day
Or how much of our hope is lost or won,
But trust that at the end I, too, can say
To the unborn who follow:
Daughter. . . Son
The sky and the sea speak loud,
But the earth speaks clear.
Put an ear to the ground.
Listen. You will hear.

But though Boyd was tormented both by physical pain and by the agonies and excesses of war, he never lost his faith in humanity and its potential. In a poem not published until after his death he affirmed:

Though there is torment in man's life
To strike me dumb, to strike me dumb,
What of this singing in my blood?
Whence does it come? Whence come?

Jim Boyd heard and felt as fully as anyone ever has "the endless ground-swell of the deep," and he interpreted it and expressed it by pouring out his life selflessly in the interest of his beloved North Carolina, his South, his country, and his art which embraced them all.

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