

# Wolfe: Carolina's boy wonder

Editor's note: Today marks the 75th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Wolfe. During his years at Carolina, Wolfe served as president of the Dialectic Society. Roger Kirkman is current president.

by Roger Kirkman  
DTH Contributor

Young Tom was almost immediately a standout at Carolina. At six-foot-three, with a child's face and a head of hair like a wild goat, he could hardly have been otherwise. This impression was soon supplemented by the discovery that Tom was unusually glib compared to the other, old students. Duped repeatedly by his classmates, Wolfe went on not one, but several legendary "snipe hunts."

Tommy Wolfe. The kid who came to UNC while not yet sixteen years of age. Not that Carolina was the best. Tom had preferred to go to Princeton or, barring that, Virginia, both of which rated high in prestige in young Wolfe's view. However, his father considered Princeton extravagant and Virginia a snobbish school widely known in its capacity for dissipation. Thus, it was UNC or nothing, for Carolina was a nice homespun college, led by the young idealist Edward Kidder Graham. Prodded by reminders that none of the other seven Wolfe children had been privileged with such an educational opportunity, Tommy assented.

Wolfe quickly began to achieve distinction through his good humor and his abilities, once he threw off the initial ridicule and jokering typical of that day. An avid debater, Wolfe was made vice president of the Freshman Debating Club in October of his freshman year. Shortly afterwards he joined the Dialectic Literary Society. Though never an outstanding debater because of the stutter which developed when he became excited, Wolfe was nevertheless awarded honorable mention several times and participated in the Freshman-Sophomore Inter-Society Debate.

In his sophomore year, Wolfe began his writing career, selecting death as his theme—a concern which would continue to haunt him. This first work, entitled *A Field in*

*Flanders*, was a poem in the style of the popular *I Have a Rendezvous with Death*, published in November 1917. It was widely regarded, even in those war years, as particularly gruesome. Thus christened in his pursuits, Wolfe gained a measure of acceptance and began involving himself in



Thomas Clayton Wolfe, brilliant author, in a typical pose from his college days. Wolfe arrived at Carolina in 1916, a shabbily-dressed freshman from Asheville who was only 16 years old.

many extracurricular activities. By all appearances, Tom was one of the most popular men on campus at UNC even in his first years.

Wolfe also began to cultivate an interest in acting, though at first he did not confine it to the theatre. He became known for the oddity of his appearance, albeit a likeable one, which he incorporated into his act. At times during his English 21 class, taught by the

formidable Dr. Edwin Greenlaw, Wolfe would read themes apparently written in haste on the backs of envelopes, inside matchbook covers and on crumpled sheets of paper which emerged from his many pockets. At one point, Tom came in with an essay written on a roll of toilet paper, much to the unrestrained amusement of the class, for whose benefit the deed was done. Dr. Greenlaw, however, was as imperturbable as always until the finish.

"Tell me, Mr. Wolfe," Greenlaw said, "are we to judge the quality of your essay by the quality of the paper on which it is written?"

The wit and jocularly on campus was soon to end for Wolfe with the death of his roommate, Edmund Burdick, in May of 1918. A fellow Ashevillean and member of the Di Society, Burdick, along with Paul Green, was one of the two outstanding and promising scholars in the sophomore class. Burdick's death, because of a congenital heart problem, hit the acutely sensitive Wolfe so hard that he could no longer bear to remain in the room the two had shared.

The following fall, Wolfe continued his interest in extracurricular affairs, being named managing editor of the *Tar Heel* in early October. Later that month, Tom received word that his favorite brother, Ben, was very ill with pneumonia, and Wolfe immediately took the next train to Asheville. When the train stopped at Morganton, Wolfe received word that Ben was already dead.

After Ben's funeral, Wolfe traveled back to UNC to learn that the president, Edward K. Graham, had been struck down in the influenza epidemic and had died some days before. Graham's death was soon followed by that of the new acting president, Marvin Hendrix Stacy, who succumbed to the influenza himself within a few months.

The death of Graham was perhaps melded by Wolfe with that of his brother Ben, for Wolfe soon introduced a motion before the Di Society for the composition of a memorial to Dr. Graham.

Wolfe's judgment of Graham is an unsettled question. The paucity to America

and the democratic spirit in *You Can't Go Home Again* show the influence of Graham's speeches. But in the last weeks of his life, Wolfe wrote: "How unsatisfying those speeches were—the core lacking—the terms of an abstract philosophy applied to hunger and thirst."

Through this personal turmoil Wolfe continued his work, particularly his work as *de facto* editor of the *Tar Heel*. In the aftermath of the influenza epidemic Wolfe found a new guide in Professor Frederick Koch, the founder of the Carolina Playmakers. Possibly at Wolfe's insistence, Koch was elected to honorary membership in the Di Society in the spring of 1919.

Under "Prof" Koch's direction, Wolfe wrote his first play, *The Return of Buck Gavin*, which was based on the death of a Texas outlaw, Patrick Lavin. Wolfe changed the initial of his last name and transferred the setting to the mountains of North Carolina. Perhaps with the memory of Ben as a catalyst, Wolfe had Gavin return to put flowers on the grave of a fallen comrade. To complete his creation, Koch encouraged Wolfe to play the part of Gavin, which appealed to Wolfe's penchant for acting. Soon after the play's production, Wolfe acquired the nickname "Buck."

Credited with this first success, Wolfe surpassed himself in campus life again and again, becoming editor of the *Tar Heel*, winning the coveted Worth Prize in Philosophy and attaining the honor of membership in the Golden Fleece. At his graduation, Wolfe was of course the standout, reading his farewell ode as class poet, and being voted Best Writer, Wittiest and Most Original by the senior class.

Although his career was just being launched with the approval of all his fellows, at heart Wolfe still felt the loner. Indeed, at the end of his life, Wolfe wrote: "From my fifteenth year, save for a single interval, I have lived about as solitary a life as a modern man can live." He lived as an actor, hiding his fear of mortality, concealing this inner core behind a facade which many enjoyed but few could pierce.

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Tom Shales, *The Washington Post*, July 9, 1975

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