

WHO IS A NORTH CAROLINA WRITER?

Frankly, I do not know how so simple a question can become so complex, but indeed it can. Nor do I quite understand how heated arguments can arise over just who is a North Carolina writer and who is not, but they do. Is O. Henry, born in Greensboro, a Tarheel, and is Wilbur Daniel Steele, born in the same place, not? Do we claim Inglis Fletcher, for only eight years a resident of Chowan County, but disdain Carl Sandburg, who resides near Flat Rock? We Tarheels are indignant when New Yorkers speak of Thomas Wolfe as belonging to them, but they do; indeed, there is as much in his novels of Manhattan as there is of the Old North State, and truly he did most of his writing in New York. Mississippians have a fit, perhaps with justification, when we call James Street ours; but we go right ahead calling him ours just the same. As I said, this simple question can become very, very complex.

The question is, after all, of only academic importance until librarians and English teachers start getting together book collections, literary maps, and handbooks of writers. At those times, decisions must be made; and the arbitrators are very much aware that there will be little agreement by those who inspect their products. Custodians of large collections of North Caroliniana generally get around the decision by putting everybody in. If the writer was born in the state, lived in the state, or wrote about the state, IN he goes. Map compilers do not have so easy a time, as the North Carolina English Teachers Association found out when its own map was being prepared. Fearlessly, however, the map was produced and issued. Then the clamor started.

Apparently nobody was happy about the names chosen for the map. One Raleigh columnist opined that a North Carolina writer was a native who had lived in the state long enough for its life to have influenced his literary development and who preferably, though not necessarily, had expressed some aspect of North Carolina life in his work. Now, those are beautiful sentiments, but entirely unworkable. Half our most influential, our most prominent writers would be eliminated. For instance James Boyd would be consigned to Pennsylvania, Inglis Fletcher to Illinois.

The problem of choosing North Carolina writers was an even more hazardous one when the North Carolina Library Association joined with the North Carolina English Teachers Association to produce a Handbook of North Carolina Writers. Actually, as it turned out, the Handbook was not to consist of North Carolina writers at all—but a “select list of writers who have been significant in the North Carolina literary scene, whether or not they were native born.”

Since the Handbook was originally designed as a workable tool for use by librarians and English teachers, all attempts toward inclusiveness were abandoned in favor of those writers about whom information might be needed. Major figures were certainly to be there—including, for example, Gerald Johnson, who now lives in Baltimore. North Carolina “firsts” were planned for inclusion, like Lemuel Sawyer, the first Tarheel dramatist. Authors of juvenile books were to be copiously represented—Arah Hooks, the Corydon Bells, the Latrobe Carrolls, and so on. There were to be a few historians and other writers who, even though more technical than literary, were those about whom data might be sought by the librarian and the teacher—Hugh Lefler, Howard Odum, Jonathan Daniels, and others.

The listings in the Handbook about these 150 writers will be made up of three types of information: (1) a biographical or autobiographical sketch of from 100 to 500 words; (2) a bibliography of all titles (exclusive of textbooks, magazine articles, and similar materials), the date, and the place of publication if in North Carolina; and (3) references for extended study.

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