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Thomas Boyd: Lost Author of the "Lost Generation"

Brian Bruce

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Thomas Boyd
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Thomas Boyd
Lost Author of the “Lost Generation”

BRIAN BRUCE

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one  “they made him feel as if he were . . . a limb of Satan”  1

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Today the phrase the “lost generation” calls to mind romantic images of Hemingway scribbling in a notebook in a Paris café, Fitzgerald on a drunken spree in New York or the south of France, or the members of the Algonquin Round Table arguing about plays, books, and art over lunch. While many Americans recognize the names of Hemingway and Fitzgerald and may have read one of their books, few people know the name or work of American author Thomas Boyd and fewer still would place him alongside the other, more famous authors of the “lost generation.” But of all the American authors of this period, Gertrude Stein’s phrase more aptly describes the life of Thomas Boyd than the lives of his more famous contemporaries. No American author’s life and work were more affected by World War I and the events of the first third of the twentieth century than Boyd’s.

Compared to Boyd, Fitzgerald and Hemingway had all the advantages. Both Hemingway and Fitzgerald were born into middle-class or upper-middle-class homes and had at least one devoted parent and the opportunity to receive a first-class education. Boyd grew up a virtual orphan without his father and separated from his mother, and had a sporadic education. During World War I, Fitzgerald served as an officer in a unit that never left the United States, and Hemingway served as ambulance driver in the Italian army. Boyd joined the Marine Corps and served as a combat infantryman at the battles of Belleau Wood, Soissons, Saint-Mihiel, and Mont Blanc. He was wounded in a gas attack and probably suffered from post-traumatic stress. After the war Fitzgerald and Hemingway pursued their dreams of becoming writers without serious thought or concerns about earning money. Boyd struggled to find work and to find his niche in society while keeping
alive his desire to be a writer. Eventually, Boyd gained the confidence to try his hand at being a newspaper reporter, and from there he became a literary editor of a Minnesota newspaper. By the time Boyd sat down to write his first book, Fitzgerald had already published his second. During their careers Fitzgerald and Hemingway received high praise for their writing and innovative approaches to fiction, were paid top dollar for their short stories, and earned substantial royalties from the sale of their books. Of all Boyd's books, only *Through the Wheat*, his autobiographical World War I novel, received broad and universal critical praise and only three of his books sold more than five thousand copies. Fitzgerald's and Hemingway's struggles to sustain literary greatness contributed to their self-destructive behavior. Boyd's fight to get his work into print and to earn a living as a writer led to his decision to embrace communism. While Fitzgerald and Hemingway eventually committed suicide, either by drink or gunshot, Boyd died of a cerebral hemorrhage brought about in part by wounds he suffered during the war. Unlike Fitzgerald and Hemingway, who strove for literary greatness, Boyd entertained few such notions. Boyd wrote for much simpler reasons. He wrote because he liked being a writer. He wrote in order to earn a living. And he wrote because he had stories that he wanted to tell and believed needed to be told.

Boyd never belonged to any school of literature or followed any distinct literary style. If he was a realist it was because realism suited the subject of his books and his personality. If he was a romantic it was because he romanticized people and events from the past that were the subjects of most of his books. His books can be loosely grouped into three categories: autobiographical books, Ohio books, and Marxist propaganda. These three categories represent the things Boyd cared most about: his experiences and those of his family, Ohio and its history, and, at the end of his life, advancing the communist cause. All of his books, regardless of their subject or the category they fit into, are about men placed in trying situations who often emerge dissatisfied and misunderstood. The struggle of the individual against difficult or impossible circumstances is the theme that unified Boyd's work and reflects the way he saw his own life.
And Boyd led a fascinating life. In his thirty-six years, he was an orphan, a military school cadet, a Marine, a recipient of a medal for bravery, a factory worker, a husband, a socialist, a reporter, a literary editor, a father, a friend and protégé of Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, a novelist, a biographer, an adulterer, a failed screenwriter, a communist, and a politician. Throughout his life Boyd searched for acceptance, success, and meaning. This quest made him open to the social and cultural movements that changed the United States. In many ways Boyd's own life mirrored those changes.

It is the purpose of this book to preserve a record of Boyd's life and work for those with an interest in the period and in the “lost generation,” to provide a new perspective on the world of American letters during the 1920s and 1930s, and to encourage a reexamination of the life and work of one of America’s least-known authors.
On July 3, 1898, the United States Navy scored a stunning victory over the Spanish navy at Santiago Bay, Cuba. That victory doomed the garrison of Spanish soldiers in Santiago and guaranteed eventual American victory in the Spanish-American War. By winning the war, the United States established itself as a world power and began taking a greater part in world affairs. On the same day, in a small, green, wood-frame house in the sleepy Ohio town of Defiance, Thomas Alexander Boyd was born. The birth took place without recorded difficulties, but little else about Boyd’s youth would be as uncomplicated. For the next fifteen years, he would live as a practical orphan, moving from one town to another and from family member to family member until, finally, on his own he found a true home. His early personal struggles made him restless and uncertain. That restlessness often brought him into the center of the changes that the United States went through during the first third of the twentieth century. His uncertainty and self-doubt affected his personal and professional relationships for the rest of his life.
Given the disparity between his mother’s and father’s families and the brevity of their marriage, Thomas Boyd’s birth was something of a miracle. His father, Thomas Alexander Boyd Sr., known as Alec, came from a wealthy Montreal family, and his mother, Alice Dunbar, from one of the least successful lines of one of western Ohio’s oldest families. They met by chance in Chicago in 1892.

According to family legend, the Montreal Boyds descended from the Scottish earl of Kilmarnock, who fled, along with his eldest son, the first Thomas Alexander Boyd, to North America after losing an eighteenth-century dispute. Alec Boyd took the legend, though unconfirmed and even disavowed by some members of the Boyd family, seriously enough to name his first son after himself and the son of the Scottish earl and to tell his wife the story.

The Boyds of Montreal had done well in the pharmaceutical business, and by the early 1890s had secured a place in Montreal society. Unfortunately for Alec Boyd and his brother Walter, the family’s money began to run out in the 1890s. Their father decided to expend the remaining family fortune launching his daughters into society in the hopes that a good marriage would save the family position. His sons would have to make their own way in the world, and he advised them to go to America to search for work.

Heeding his advice, Alec and Walter moved to Chicago and went to work in a real estate firm. Alec, a charming young man of slight build, large sympathetic eyes, and delicate good looks, did very well. Walter, a dark-haired bull of a man with a loud voice and violent temperament, found sales much more difficult and quickly settled on the idea of marrying a wealthy widow. He eventually succeeded.

After a few years, Alec could afford the fine suits and natty attire he loved, and he began to think seriously about marriage. His fine features and sharp dress had made him popular with the young ladies of Montreal and helped him in his business, but in Chicago he had no easy means of introducing himself to women. He wanted to marry but could not find a suitable girl. A chance meeting in Chicago’s Grant Park changed that situation.
By 1892 Alice Dunbar had become a beautiful woman. Slim-waisted, narrow-haired, with beautiful red hair and ramrod-straight posture, she gave the appearance of someone of dignity and importance, but she had not always been a regal beauty.

The oldest daughter of a struggling farmer who had nine daughters before his first son, Alice Dunbar seemed destined for the harsh life of an Ohio farmer's wife. Her father, Samuel Dunbar, was the grandson of William Rohn, one of the earliest settlers in western Ohio. Rohn had established a large, successful farm near Defiance, Ohio, on the very spot where General Anthony Wayne encamped prior to the pivotal Battle of Fallen Timbers. Rohn's daughter Mary married Samuel Dunbar Sr., who eventually took possession of the five-hundred-acre farm. Their son Samuel Dunbar Jr. was Alice Dunbar's father and Thomas Boyd's grandfather. In the 1850s Sam Dunbar Jr. bought a large tract of land in the wilderness outside Defiance and cleared the land for a large farm. The farm eventually failed in part because of the lack of sons who could help with the farm work and in part because of risky loans Sam took to buy expensive farming equipment. At sixteen Alice, in order to relieve some of her father's financial burden, went to live with and work for her great-aunt Charity Rohn. Her cousin Grace Woodward, the granddaughter of Charity Rohn, described Alice during this time as a gangly, awkward, rough-handed, cross-eyed girl whose unkempt hair constantly fell in her face as she worked. Grace often encouraged Alice to go to college and escape farm life, and eventually Alice followed her advice. She turned down an offer of marriage from a young successful farmer and instead moved to Chicago, where she began training to become a nurse at the Illinois Nursing Institute. After completing her training, she worked as an assistant to the superintendent of a Chicago hospital and underwent surgery to uncross her eyes. She lived alone, and her salary made it possible for her to afford the fine clothes she desired. Alice enjoyed her position and independence. Her self-confidence grew. During breaks from her work, she often strolled along the lakeshore in Grant Park. It was there that she met Alec Boyd.

Though they met in 1892, Alec and Alice were not engaged until 1896. Reluctant to give up her independence and career as a nurse for the life of

“they made him feel as if he were . . . a limb of Satan”
a housewife, Alice prolonged their courtship. Alec proposed and Alice finally accepted Alec’s proposal during a boating excursion on Lake Michigan during the summer of 1896. They married December 28 that same year.3

At first things went well for Alec and Alice Boyd. Alec continued to prosper in real estate and Alice settled into the life of a middle-class Chicago housewife. She looked up her cousin Grace, who lived in Chicago with her husband, Duncan Smith, a local newspaperman, and went to their apartment. Alice’s transformation into a beautiful woman surprised and delighted Grace, though Alice’s boasts about wealth and Alec’s status as a “gentleman” irritated her. The reunion with her cousin proved fortuitous in the months that followed.

Everything changed for Alice and Alec Boyd in the winter of 1897 when Alec contracted pneumonia and was unable to work. They had saved little money, so Alice, though pregnant with their first child, returned to nursing to support them. Their new poverty forced Alice to sell many of the fine clothes she had purchased, and as Alec’s illness lingered, he lost his position at the real estate firm. When they could no longer pay the rent on their apartment and as work become increasingly difficult for Alice, the Boyds moved in with Grace and Duncan Smith.

With the approach of spring 1898, Alec Boyd began to recover. Determined to find work and reestablish his independence, he left the apartment on a cold day in March to look for a job. The exposure to the cold weather caused him to relapse, and he died on April 13, 1898. Alice, destitute financially and emotionally, no longer wanted their baby and was unable to make any decisions. She received no direct help from Alec’s family, though they eventually arranged a quick and quiet funeral for Alec. Walter Boyd appeared one day at the door of the Smiths’ apartment and demanded whatever money Alice had to help pay for the funeral. Prostrate with grief and unwilling to stand up to Walter, Alice would have given him the little money she had if her cousin Grace had not intervened. Grace took the money from Alice and informed Walter that the money would be needed to help care for the unborn child. When Walter threatened to take the money by force, Grace thrust the money inside her blouse and told Walter
that if he wanted the money, he knew where he could find it. Unwilling to assault a woman, Walter left without the money. Despite Grace’s heroic efforts, the meager amount of money was not enough to cover Alice’s expenses. Without a husband or money, she had no one to turn to but her parents.

Alice returned to Defiance and to her parents, who were unsure what to make of their daughter and were equally uncomfortable with her circumstances. The citizens of Defiance reveled in the fall of the uppity Alice and circulated rumors about her baby’s legitimacy. In this atmosphere she gave birth to Thomas Alexander Boyd Jr.4

After a brief period of recovery, Alice returned to Chicago and her position with the superintendent of the hospital. She had determined to earn enough money to provide her son with a first-class education. Unfortunately, severe headaches (a side effect of her corrective eye surgery) made working long hours painful. To ease her suffering, a doctor at the hospital prescribed morphine for Alice, and over time she became addicted. Her addiction interfered with her work and caused her to lose her job. The next fifteen years of her life were spent in swings between periods of full-blown drug use and periods of recovery. Alice’s work and dependency kept her away from her son for most of his childhood. When she gained control of her life, she worked and saved money for Tom’s education; but when she relapsed, she could not work enough to afford to keep him in any private school.

Thomas Boyd spent the first eleven years of his life in the home of his grandparents in Defiance. His mother’s absence from his life taught him that she was not someone he could rely on and affected his emotional development. Sam and Martha Dunbar did their best to provide for Tom, but they were old and unprepared to meet all the emotional needs of a young boy. They fed, clothed, and sheltered him, but Tom never felt completely accepted. His grandfather’s low opinion of Tom’s father carried over to Tom, and the grandfather would often predict a dire future for his grandson. Tom compounded his grandfather’s fears by being a mischievous boy. When Tom accidentally burned down a neighbor’s barn, Sam Dunbar predicted that Tom would end his life at the end of a hangman’s rope. The public schools

“They made him feel as if he were . . . a limb of Satan”
in Defiance provided Tom little relief. His circumstances were widely known to his classmates, who often teased him about his poverty and his status as a virtual orphan. Tom sought refuge in the isolation of the cornfields and forests that surrounded Defiance and spent many hours wandering alone.

Despite his grandfather’s low opinion of Tom’s character, or perhaps because of it, Sam Dunbar made up his mind to teach his grandson the history of western Ohio and the history of the Dunbar family. He took Tom with him on short trips to neighboring towns, pointing out sites of historical interest and telling Tom stories of General Anthony Wayne and William Rohn. These trips and conversations were the highlight of Tom’s life in Defiance, and he grew to love his grandfather. The lessons Sam Dunbar imparted to Tom created in him a true love of the history of Ohio and a deep appreciation for the history of his family. Later both would become the focus of much of Boyd’s work as an author.

When he was eleven, Thomas Boyd’s mother, having temporarily gained control over her addiction and having saved enough money, enrolled him in the Ohio Military Academy at College Hill near Cincinnati, where she worked as a private nurse. Tom remained at the academy from 1909 until 1911. No record of his performance remains, but he did receive confirmation at the Grace Catholic Church in College Hill on April 26, 1910. The confirmation was somewhat unusual, given the lack of evidence of religious upbringing during his years in Defiance. When his mother’s money ran out, Tom returned to Defiance. In the fall of 1911, Alice had again managed to save some money and this time sent Tom to the Porter Military Academy in Charleston, South Carolina. He stayed in the South for one year, but by the autumn of 1912 Tom was back in Defiance and going to public school. Tom spent part of 1913 living with his mother in Cincinnati and attending Woodward High School. At age fifteen he went to live in the home of an aunt and uncle in Chicago, where he worked as a soda jerk in their drugstore. His stay in Chicago was brief. When the drugstore’s register came up short of money, his uncle accused him of stealing and Tom, indignant or guilty, set out on foot for the home of some of his father’s relatives in Elgin, Illinois.
When he arrived at the home of his aunt Eleanor Wilde and explained who he was, his aunt took him in. For the next three years she raised him as though he were her son. In his aunt’s home, which she shared with her daughter Marion, Thomas Boyd found true acceptance and the stability his childhood had been lacking. Not surprisingly, the Wildes wielded a great deal of influence over Tom, and his time with them had a profound impact on his life.

The Wildes were Christian Scientists. In fact, Eleanor Wilde had been a disciple of Mary Baker Eddy and often read to Tom from her book Science and Health. The Wildes and Tom’s cousin Mark Yarwood, who also lived in Elgin, were prominent members of the local Christian Science Church. Tom quickly became a convert and even served as an usher at church services. The anti–medical treatment stance of Tom’s new religion must have irritated his mother, the nurse, and it is possible that his decision to embrace Christian Science was a form of rebellion. In a 1917 letter to his mother, Tom downplayed his commitment to Christian Science: “I gotta hard task mistress believe me. It is no graft trying to please someone who has the C.S. bug as bad and as inconsistently as she [Marion] has. Do you know that I believe I am a little hypocritical at times.” Despite this equivocation, Tom’s acceptance of the basic tenets of Christian Science stayed with him into adulthood.

In addition to being Christian Scientists, Marion Wilde and Mark Yarwood were also graduates of Oberlin College and lovers of literature. They exposed Tom to what they considered to be great works of literature and tutored him in literature and writing. George Bernard Shaw became Tom’s favorite author, and he began to dream of becoming a writer. His letters to his mother from Elgin contain adolescent bursts of florid prose that showed the influence of the nineteenth-century literature that constituted most of his reading. Tom’s early attempts at more formal writing ended in frustration, and he destroyed them all shortly after completing them.

In Elgin, Thomas Boyd continued his sporadic education. He enrolled in the local Elgin Academy, but the teachers and the curriculum did not impress him, and he withdrew after a few semesters. For a time he became
a full-time pupil of his cousin’s, but eventually he enrolled in a local business school, where he began to learn the principles of accounting and shorthand.9

His interests outside literature were typical: he played football for Elgin Academy, longed to buy a car, and was fascinated by the young ladies of Elgin. His letters to his mother frankly expressed his interests and detailed his exploits.10 In 1916 he wrote, “Marie is leaving for Dubuque tomorrow and she will be gone for the rest of the season. She is a very nice girl ‘all wool and a yard wide.’ I had made up my mind to have a date every night this week.”11 By 1917 Tom’s romantic interest centered around an apparently coy girl name De Ette. That year he wrote his mother:

And the way my best girl acts! Why, it is simply abominable. I have a date with her Saturday afternoon and this evening I have a date with another girl and Sunday night I have a date with the same one. So you see I do not intend to be a bachelor even if De____ gives me the K.O. Oh yes, I am pretty well fixed. And then it wouldn’t be any fun if she threw herself in my arms for you see I would not know what to do with her.12

Despite his seeming nonchalance about De Ette, she would remain the object of his affection even after he left Elgin. Eventually, she eluded him and remained one of the great romantic disappointments of his life.

Though his letters were often boastful, Tom’s popularity with girls in Elgin was understandable. A picture taken of him during this time shows him dressed in a dark suit, complete with bowtie; He is sitting in a chair, staring straight into the camera. His wavy blond hair is brushed from his high forehead, his unblemished skin glows, his nose is perfectly straight if a little long, his lips are full, and his penetrating eyes convey the message of a young man confident of the effect of his looks.

Tom also made friends with the young men of Elgin. One in particular, Bob Hepburn, became his best friend. When Bob and his stepmother had a fight, Tom invited Bob to move in with him and the Wildes. Bob stayed
with the Wildes a short while before moving to Chicago to live with an aunt. Even after his move, Tom and Bob saw one another regularly and even bought a car together. As news of the Great War reached Elgin and filtered into the consciousness of Tom and Bob, they decided that they had to get involved. They attempted to raise the money to outfit themselves with an ambulance and the equipment necessary to join the American ambulance service in France but fell short. Their determination to participate in what they felt would be the great event of their lifetime did not diminish.13

When the United States entered the war in April 1917, Thomas Boyd and Bob Hepburn got their chance. Together they made the trip to a United States Marine Corps recruiting office in Chicago and signed up for immediate service.14 Tom sent a postcard to his mother, who was living in Ottawa, Illinois, and informed her in rather terse language of his enlistment.15 Back in Elgin, awaiting the day he was to report for transport to Port Royal, South Carolina, he wrote her another letter expressing some apprehension about his upcoming military service.16 On May 20, already en route for training camp, Tom sent his mother another postcard in which he confidently expressed his plans for a life in the military: “I expect to embrace my trials and tribulations with great fortitude and much reticence thereby favorably impressing my superiors.”17

Boyd, like most of the men who volunteered for military service in World War I, had no idea just how much “fortitude” he would have to exhibit to live through the war. And he had no idea what an impact the war would have on his life or on the United States of America. The war would be the pivotal experience of Boyd’s life, just as it was a pivotal experience for the United States and an entire generation.