



*Looking down Fourth Street from Wabasha  
toward Kilmarnock Books, about 1925*

# Thomas Boyd

## JAZZ AGE AUTHOR AND EDITOR

*Brian Bruce*



During the 1920s Minnesota could hardly have been called the center of American letters. New York had the Algonquin Round Table and major publishing firms such as Charles Scribner's Sons and Harcourt Brace. Paris was the home of an expatriate community that flourished around the salon of Gertrude Stein and the cafes of Montmartre. Still, Minnesota was the home of Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, two of America's most famous Jazz Age authors. In addition, St. Paul nurtured a thriving literary scene that included a group known as the Nimbus Club, the Kilmarnock bookstore, and the now little-known author Thomas Alexander Boyd.

American literature came of age during the 1920s, when many classic works were published: Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Boyd was a

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member of this generation of authors who established their careers and earned international acclaim for themselves in the decade. Arriving in St. Paul in 1920 at the age of 22, he soon became literary editor of the *St. Paul Daily News* and manager of Kilmarnock Books. From these positions he became an important figure in the city's world of books and authors and refined his own talent as a writer. By the time he moved away in 1925, he had published a highly respected fictional account of World War I and earned a reputation as one of America's most promising young novelists.

Boyd entered the world on July 3, 1898, after the death of Thomas Boyd Sr. had forced his mother, Alice Dunbar Boyd, to retreat to the family farm in Defiance, Ohio. Shortly, however, Alice moved to Chicago to pursue a career in nursing, leaving her young son behind with his grandparents, Samuel and Martha Dunbar. Though they were never cruel, they made little effort to make him feel welcome in their household. At age 15, he moved in briefly with an aunt and uncle in Chicago, but when accused of stealing money, he walked 50 miles to the home of Eleanor Wilde, a paternal aunt in Elgin, Illinois. Here Boyd found acceptance. In addition Wilde, her daughter Marion, and his cousin Mark Yarwood instilled in the teenager a love of literature and a desire to write. He particularly idolized George Bernard Shaw, whose prose he tried to imitate.<sup>1</sup>

In May 1917 young Boyd and a friend enlisted in the Marine Corps. After several months of training he and many other recruits of that year became part of the newly formed Sixth Marine Regiment, which sailed for France in late 1917 and joined other marines to become the Fourth Brigade of the U.S. Army's Second Division. Boyd's subsequent experiences in the First World War provided the material for his first novel and numerous short stories.<sup>2</sup>

The Second Division, and the Fourth Brigade in particular, saw a great deal of action. Boyd participated in the crucial battles of Belleau Wood, Soissons, and Mont Blanc. He received the *croix de guerre* for rescuing wounded comrades during a poison-gas attack



*Boyd in his World War I uniform*

and was himself a gas victim. As a result he spent the rest of the war in hospitals and returned to the United States before his comrades. Still requiring medical attention, Boyd lived with his mother in Defiance until he recovered. Permanently weakened lungs prevented him from doing strenuous work for the rest of his life.<sup>3</sup>

In 1919, Boyd moved to Toledo, Ohio, where he worked in a machine shop and became involved with a married woman. His damaged lungs forced him to give up the job, and he left for Chicago. There he met a former commander who helped him get work in a cigar store. Boyd was briefly engaged to the store owner's daughter, but that relationship ended when he met Margaret (Peggy) Smith, a third cousin on

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Grace Boyd, biography of Thomas Boyd, senior thesis, Vassar College, 1943, 16–30 (hereafter Boyd biography).

<sup>2</sup> Boyd biography, 29–32; William K. Jones, *A Brief History of the 6th Marines* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, 1987), 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *6th Marines*, 6–17; Boyd biography, 36–39.

his mother's side of the family. Smith was different from the other women with whom he had been involved. She was not only beautiful but financially independent, living on her own and working as one of Chicago's first female newspaper reporters. Placing a high value on intellect, she had no desire to subjugate her own career or thoughts to any man. In fact she had broken an engagement to someone she felt was too controlling.<sup>4</sup>

After first meeting Boyd, Smith was much more impressed with his looks than his mind. Still, she wanted to get married. Her education at the University of Chicago had been interrupted by a family financial crisis, and she thought that marriage, to the right sort of man, would provide her with support for pursuing her dreams of writing. In Boyd, she believed she had found an attractive man with intellectual potential. Almost everything about Peggy Smith appealed to Boyd, and they began to see one another regularly. Unsure of her feelings, however, Smith moved to Minneapolis, where her mother, Grace, a former high-school principal, and father, Duncan, a socialist-leaning newspaperman, were living. Not long after relocating, she invited Boyd to join her.

In late summer of 1920, he did. Smith found him a room near her parent's home and they became engaged. While she planned their wedding, Boyd found work as a clerk but was barely able to pay his rent. Realizing they would never be able to get married on the money he was making, Smith decided that Boyd should apply for a job as a newspaper reporter. This would, she felt, provide enough income for marriage and for her to begin writing a novel. Boyd, however, refused, claiming that he could not write despite her frustrating attempts to teach him. Unconvinced, Smith tricked him into meeting her downtown one day and then led him to the offices of Minneapolis's new *Daily Star* newspaper. She introduced herself to the editor as a reporter for Chicago's *Daily News* and told him that Boyd had been one of the paper's best writers. Her ruse worked, and the editor hired Boyd. An apprehensive Boyd believed he would be fired after his first day, but he fortunately was assigned to work at the central police station under the tutelage of a veteran reporter named Jim Fitzgerald.

Boyd's assignment was to uncover the details of any important police activity and call them in

to the newspaper, where someone else would write a story. In time Boyd began to write his own accounts, some of which gained the favorable attention of his editors. His success confirmed his fiancée's belief that Boyd could get a better job, and she soon persuaded him to apply to the *St. Paul Daily News*. To his surprise, he was hired with a \$5-a-week raise.

Boyd's improved position and salary allowed the couple to proceed with their wedding plans, and on October 20, 1920, they were married at the Minneapolis city hall. They moved into a small apartment near the St. Paul newspaper offices, where Peggy began writing and Tom settled into his job as a reporter. But Peggy had more ideas. She suggested Boyd write a literary column for the paper and encouraged him to propose the idea to his editors. With assurances of help from his wife, Boyd presented his plan. Though uncertain about its likely success, the paper agreed to a trial run in the Sunday edi-

*Peggy Boyd, known as novelist Woodward Boyd*



<sup>4</sup> Here and four paragraphs below, Boyd biography, 39–62.

tion. Entitled “In a Corner with the Bookworm,” the page was a success.

By February 1921 Boyd was devoting most of his time to the book page. It consisted of book reviews written by the Boyds, excerpts from his correspondence with famous authors, and articles solicited from celebrity writers including Willa Cather, Zona Gale, Carl Sandburg, Sinclair Lewis, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. As books editor, Boyd also entertained visiting writers. He met Sherwood Anderson and became friends with Lewis and Fitzgerald. Boyd also gained entry into the local literary community, and he and Peggy were invited to join St. Paul’s Nimbus Club. The informal group of authors, aspiring authors, and newspapermen met once a week at an Italian restaurant, where they ate spaghetti,

drank homemade wine, and discussed books and authors before retiring to someone’s office or home to continue their discussions. Members included critic and future novelist James Gray, poet and St. Paul mayor Lawrence C. Hodgson (Larry Ho), and poet Robert Cary.<sup>5</sup>

At club meetings Boyd met authors Charles Macomb Flandrau, his sister-in-law Grace Flandrau, and entrepreneur Cornelius Van Ness. Charles Flandrau was a local celebrity as well as the author of several collections of travel essays. He formed a close and lasting friendship with Boyd, never actively promoting him but supporting his early efforts. Van Ness, who also remained Boyd’s friend throughout his life, provided him with something of more immediate importance: extra income. Van Ness, a recent Harvard University graduate, wanted to open a bookstore where people interested in literature could gather to discuss and buy books.<sup>6</sup>

Through a government program that paid war veterans to learn a trade, Van Ness was able to make Boyd the manager of the bookstore without having to pay his salary. Kilmarnock Books (Boyd’s family claimed to be descended from the Scottish Earl of Kilmarnock) opened for business in 1921 on an upper floor of an office building at 84 East Fourth Street, a few doors from the *Daily News*. The store’s atmosphere was intentionally informal and eclectic, with tea available by the fireplace in the afternoon. Books were arranged by jacket color in order to please the eye and encourage browsing. As manager, Boyd oversaw the day-to-day business of the store and ordered books from New York publishing houses. Alfred Knopf and Boni and Liverwright were Kilmarnock’s most frequent suppliers. In 1923, when the *Daily News* moved up the street, Kilmarnock also moved one block west to Fourth and Cedar Streets.<sup>7</sup>

The store quickly became the center of the St. Paul literary community. In a letter written to Boyd in 1934, Robert Cary reminisced about the atmosphere at Kilmarnock Books: “It’s a long time since Nimbus nights. . . . For a while our little Greenwich Village or Montmartre, whichever designation you prefer, seemed to place a halo over Kilmarnock Bookshop, the New York Coffee Rooms, and other institutions

*Boyd (left) greeting Sinclair Lewis in St. Paul*



<sup>5</sup> Boyd biography, 72–73; Cary to Boyd, Dec. 29, 1934, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries, Princeton, N.J.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd biography, 63–74; Charles Flandrau to Boyd, Mar. 22, 1923, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>7</sup> Boyd biography, 4, 73–75; Boyd to Perkins, Aug. 3[?], 1923, Archives of Charles Scribner’s Sons, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University (hereafter Scribner’s Archives).



*Clerk in a Minneapolis bookstore with popular titles, about 1915*



*The St. Paul Daily News building on the south side of Fourth near Minnesota Street, about 1920 (C. P. Gibson photo)*

in the vicinity of Fourth Street. Scott Fitzgerald, Charles Flandrau, Hal Garrott, James Gray, Larry Ho are among the many to still wander into Kilmarnock to ‘browse’ in the unheard melodies of memory.” Boyd, who began his Minnesota career as a sales clerk, had quickly become a prominent figure in this literary scene, a transformation prompted by his wife, who pushed him to use his talents. As a result, Boyd met people who further nurtured and guided him to become, if only briefly, one of America’s leading young authors.<sup>8</sup>

**T**he most important career relationship during Boyd’s years in St. Paul was his friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald. Though he was just two years his senior,

Fitzgerald became Boyd’s mentor. Their first contact was in February 1921, when Fitzgerald, obviously responding to a request from Boyd, submitted a letter for publication in the *Daily News*. Its subjects were “the overworked art-form” of young men’s novels and the sheeplike quality of the American reading public. Fitzgerald was not kind to either, although, he noted, “At last we have a few brilliant men like [H. L.] Mencken at the head of American letters.” Even “the stupidest people,” Fitzgerald continued, “are reading ‘Main Street,’ and pretending they thought so all the time.” Fitzgerald also wrote a personal note to Boyd in which he mentioned that the *Daily News* had never reviewed any of his books. Boyd more than rectified that situation by becoming an unwavering Fitzgerald supporter.<sup>9</sup>

The two men first met in person in July 1921 when the Fitzgeralds left the heat and repressive social climate of Montgomery, Alabama, for the cooler and more progressive atmosphere of St. Paul. They rented a home on White Bear Lake and moved quickly into St. Paul’s social and literary society, while Fitzgerald worked to complete his revision of *The Beautiful and the Damned*, which had already appeared in serial form in the *Metropolitan Magazine*. As a literary editor in search of book news, Boyd motored to White Bear Lake and then followed an obliging laundry-truck driver to the Fitzgeralds’ home. He described their first meeting in a serialized article titled “Literary Libels” that appeared in the *St. Paul Daily News* on three consecutive Sundays in March 1922.<sup>10</sup>

Led to believe that Fitzgerald was a snob and a drinker, Boyd was surprised by the author’s healthy appearance (in “Alice-blue pajamas”) and friendly manner. After trading quips about each other’s appearance—Fitzgerald expected Boyd to be “wearing a frockcoat and a long white beard”—the two men began a lively conversation about books and authors. Boyd drank the “synthetic gin” he brought as a gift, but Fitzgerald abstained. In Boyd’s write-up of the interview, he did his best to debunk the myths about Fitzgerald’s drinking, noting that his “strong boyish voice could not have ascended from a liquor-parched throat.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cary to Boyd, Dec. 29, 1934.

<sup>9</sup> *St. Paul Daily News*, Feb. 20, 1921, Arts sec., p. 2; Fitzgerald to Boyd, Feb. 9, 1920, F. Scott Fitzgerald Additional Papers, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University (hereafter Fitzgerald Papers).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1993), 185–88; *St. Paul Daily News*, Mar. 5, 12, 19, 1922—all City Life sec., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Here and below, *St. Paul Daily News*, Mar. 5, 12, 19, 1922, City Life sec., 6.

In the course of the conversation the two men touched on many topics. They disagreed about the importance of poet Carl Sandburg and his work; Fitzgerald claimed to find Sandburg “not half as lyrical as the feet of Charlie Chaplin.” They agreed on the quality and significance of H. L. Mencken. (*Main Street* would not have been written, Fitzgerald said, “if Mencken hadn’t been born.”) On movies, which Boyd detested, Fitzgerald said, “You might as well protest against . . . the income tax . . . [they are] here to stay.” Then Fitzgerald allowed Boyd to look at the revised manuscript of *The Beautiful and the Damned*. It was, Boyd wrote, “written on ordinary sized paper and not typed. The pencil scrawl was in large letters and altogether it must have been two feet thick.” After skimming over the first few chapters, Boyd told Fitzgerald that the revision was much better than the earlier serialized version he had read. This made the author uncomfortable, so Boyd changed the subject. When he asked what had inspired him to become a writer, Fitzgerald explained that he had made the decision after reading 100 pages of a novel by Hugh Walpole—if Walpole could get books published, so could he.

Fate conspired to bring Boyd and Fitzgerald closer together during 1921. In October the Fitzgeralds’ landlord evicted them, and Scott and Zelda moved into the Commodore, a new St. Paul residential hotel. After the move Fitzgerald made what Boyd described as daily visits to Kilmarnock Books. In addition, Zelda Fitzgerald and Peggy Boyd both entered Miller Hospital to give birth to her first child. Scottie Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Grace Boyd arrived during the same week of October 1921. Tom and Scott saw each other on visits to the hospital, and Fitzgerald even threw a party to celebrate the births. (According to Boyd family legend, the party was spoiled by Zelda’s jealousy of Peggy’s quickly returning figure.) A close friendship had developed between the two men, a friendship that would prove beneficial to both Boyds’ careers.<sup>12</sup>

Several factors might have accounted for Fitzgerald’s interest in Tom and Peggy as writers. First, Fitzgerald enjoyed playing the role of talent scout for his publisher, Charles Scribner’s Sons. He took pride in the careers of authors like Thomas Boyd and Ring Lardner, whom he had introduced to Scribners. Second, Boyd was in a position to reciprocate any kindness shown

him. A letter from Fitzgerald to Maxwell E. Perkins, the famed editor at Scribners, indicated that Boyd and Kilmarnock Books went to extraordinary lengths to promote *The Beautiful and the Damned*, including funding an “advertising moving picture to be shown in all St. Paul theatres.” In the same letter, Fitzgerald declared Boyd’s book page to be the best one west of the Hudson. (Fitzgerald later noted with humor that his name had appeared there more than 40 times.) Finally, in addition to being grateful to Boyd for his help, Fitzgerald would have been impressed by Boyd’s military record. Fitzgerald had been a lieutenant during World War I but never saw combat or the front, and he

*Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald at White Bear Lake’s Dellwood in September 1921, one month before their daughter’s birth*



<sup>12</sup> Bruccoli, *Life of Fitzgerald*, 178; Boyd biography, 70, 71.



the book into its final form and to secure reviews from important authors and critics. While *The Love Legend* did not make the best-seller list, it did make Peggy a local celebrity.<sup>14</sup>

Peggy's success allowed Tom to make valuable contacts in the publishing world, but it might also have made him jealous. His wife had done something that he, too, had wanted to do. It probably did not help that one of Perkins's earliest letters to Tom was addressed to Mr. Woodward Boyd.<sup>15</sup>

In June 1922 Boyd traveled to New York on business for the bookstore. He met with Perkins and Sinclair Lewis, both of whom encouraged him to write a book of his own, and when Boyd returned to St. Paul he began work. He wrote in a back room of Kilmarnock, often ignoring his managerial responsibilities and sometimes staying at the store all night. Pouring all of his energy into his book in an impressive feat of physical and creative stamina, he finished his novel in less than seven weeks.<sup>16</sup>

Publishers did not fight over the opportunity to accept what became *Through the Wheat*. Boyd first sent the manuscript to Harcourt Brace; in September 1922, editor Harrison Smith turned the book down, believing that John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921) had eliminated the need for any further fictional treatment of America's experience in the First World War. Perhaps Boyd was counting on a good word from Sinclair Lewis, Harcourt Brace's leading author at the time, but if so, he did not make this clear to Lewis. In a December 1922 letter, Lewis indicated to Perkins that he had great confidence in Boyd but had never seen the manuscript. Disappointed but undaunted, Boyd sent the novel in late September to Perkins, who on October 4 wrote Boyd that Scribners had also rejected it. Perkins explained that while the manuscript was good, the publisher did not feel the book would be economically viable. The letter devastated Boyd, who wrote an angry response: "I think that the belief that people are sick of war books," he argued, "is false. . . . The same thing was said when *Three Soldiers* was published. But it went, and well. Because it was a different kind of war book. And so is this again."<sup>17</sup>

Boyd's protest would have had little impact



*Peggy Boyd and daughter Elizabeth, as featured in the St. Paul Daily News society section, August 26, 1923*

if he had not also sent the manuscript to Fitzgerald shortly after Scribners rejected it. Almost immediately, Fitzgerald began lobbying Perkins on Boyd's behalf. A December 4 letter from Perkins to Boyd indicated that he was reconsidering his rejection. In late December 1922, the editor relented, and he and Fitzgerald wired Boyd with the good news. Boyd wrote Fitzgerald an effusive letter of thanks:

<sup>14</sup> Boyd biography, 44, 79, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Perkins to Boyd, Feb. 27, 1922, Scribner's Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Boyd biography, 88–89.

<sup>17</sup> Boyd biography, 89–90; Lewis to Perkins, Dec. 11, 1922; Perkins to Boyd, Oct. 4, 1922; Boyd to Perkins, Nov. 13, 1922—all Scribner's Archives.

Dear Scott:

To attempt to tell you of my honest gratitude would only show up my inability fully to express myself. When Scribner's turned down *Through the Wheat* I cried in reading the letter of rejection—as I also did when I wrote certain parts of the book. And besides, I felt that so long as it remained unpublished I could never write anything else: the best of which I am capable is in *Through the Wheat*, and to dam that would be to dam all subsequent transcriptions of thought and experiences. I feel quite aware that it is only through you and your inexhaustible exuberance that Scribner's took the book. I hope for all your sakes that it exhausts one edition. Strange, but I doubted that you would like it; why, I don't know. And when I sent it I did not believe that you intended doing [anything] with it. I thought you wanted only to read it! Well, it was a surprise. The wire came early in the morning over the telephone and getting me angrily out of bed at seven—I had not planned to do anything with it for five or six more years. But while the MS. was sunk, my ambition was sunk also. You know how much I appreciate what you've done, don't you? . . .

Love to Zelda,  
Tom (Boyd)

While Fitzgerald's friendship had secured publication of Boyd's first novel, its success would depend on its quality and the promotional efforts of Perkins.<sup>18</sup>

Scribners issued Boyd a contract for *Through the Wheat* in January 1923. Its terms were the same as his wife's contract: no advance money and a royalty of 10 percent on the first 5,000 copies sold and 15 percent on additional copies sold. Boyd spent the first three months of 1923 revising the manuscript in order to have it ready for publication in spring. With the exception of grammatical and spelling corrections, he made few changes. Perkins, now Boyd's editor and soon to be his good friend, did suggest that the ending of the book be changed for the sake

of clarity, and Boyd made several attempts before he wrote one that satisfied Perkins and himself.<sup>19</sup>

Scribners released *Through the Wheat* in late April 1923 to rave reviews by New York critics. Fitzgerald did his part in the *New York Evening Post*, praising the honesty and lack of sentiment with which Boyd approached the subject of war. The *New York Times* proclaimed, "After the tornado of war books has swept by . . . it has remained for Thomas Boyd to write the least partisan and the most brilliant of the doughboy reminiscences."<sup>20</sup>

*Through the Wheat* owed much of its critical success to Perkins. He personally sent advance copies to prominent reviewers such as Richard Connell, Edmund Wilson, Heywood Brown, and Robert Sherwood. Each copy was accompanied by a letter that recalled shared experiences and personal debts to Perkins. *Through the Wheat's* modest financial success grew from its critical acceptance. Some 5,000 copies had sold by July 1923, and Scribners prepared an edition for publication in Great Britain. In August the publisher ordered a fourth printing, and the slim book continued to sell well throughout 1923 and 1924.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the book's immediate success, it faded rapidly from public memory. Other war books, particularly Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on The Western Front* (1929), made more lasting impressions. In 1978, however, the University of Southern Illinois Press reprinted *Through the Wheat* in its Lost American Fiction Series. An afterward by poet James Dickey spoke to the emotional power that the book still retains. Ostensibly telling "the odyssey of an individual soldier in a particular battle," Dickey wrote, Boyd captured the "devastating effect of precision weapons on the fragile human body designated as an enemy" and "operated in his grisly arena with the powers and truth and poetic transcendence of a master." Boyd's battle scenes were more dramatic than Stendahl's description of Waterloo or any in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dickey wrote, and the emotional

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<sup>18</sup> Boyd biography, 92; Perkins to Boyd, Dec. 4, 15, 1922, both Scribner's Archives; Boyd to Fitzgerald, Dec. [?], 1922, Fitzgerald Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Perkins to Thomas Boyd, Jan. 17, 1923, Perkins to Woodward Boyd, Mar. 10, 1922, Perkins to Thomas Boyd, Mar. 5, 1923, and Thomas Boyd to Perkins, Mar. 12, 1923—all Scribner's Archives.

<sup>20</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Under Fire," *The Literary Review*, *New York Evening Post*, May 26, 1923, p. 715; *New York Times Book Review*, Apr. 29, 1923, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Perkins to Connell, Perkins to Wilson, Perkins to Brown—all Apr. 3, 1923; Perkins to Sherwood, Apr. 4, 1923, Perkins to Boyd, July 10, Aug. 13, 1923, Feb. 1, 1924; Boyd to Perkins, Aug. 13, 1925—all Scribner's Archives.

## The platoon wound through the town and out upon the wheatfield

which that morning they had viewed through the scraggly trees. Dazzling sunlight beat upon the full-topped yellow heads of wheat that weighted down the cool green stalks; on the flat, absurdly shaped helmets of the soldiers; on the sharp white bayonets raised above the wheat with which the field was filled. Deploying, the men halted, joined on either side by other men with silly looking helmets, rifles, and bayonets.

From the road a small tank labored up the hill, puffing and creaking in every joint. Another tank, a miniature of the tanks pictured in the recruiting posters, wheezed along on its caterpillar tread. More tanks came. They were all small, ineffectual-looking little monsters, wearing a look of stubborn, gigantic babies. The arrival of the tanks was greeted by the firing of a salvo of shells from the German lines.

The platoon lay down in the wheat, trying to shield their bodies from the sight of the enemy. But the tanks, wheeling and rearing and grinding like devils gnashing their teeth, made perfect targets for the long-range shells. With their small, ridiculous gun-barrels pointing in three directions through holes in their steel armor, they were delightfully impervious to the havoc they were causing the infantry. And their silly camouflage, into the making of which some painter had put his soul—reds and greens, the colors of autumn canvases with black bull's-eyes and rings scored on them. For an everlasting half hour they ploughed and squirmed through the field, struggling to get into position in order that the attack might commence. Meanwhile shells, timed like the ticking of a clock, fell with horrible and spirit-shaking accuracy. At last the tanks had manoeuvred themselves into the proper distance ahead of the front line. Whistles were blowing piercingly. The advance, the men aligned in four waves, had commenced.

Hicks, lying in the wheat, divided his attention between the manoeuvring of the tanks and the frantic scampering of the insects on the ground and in the wheat, whose manner of existence he had disturbed by his sitting down. Black little creatures, they waddled over the ground with as great a seriousness and importance as if they supported the burden of the world. Disorganized, they ran in all directions, even toward Hicks's hobnailed boots and upon his awkwardly rolled puttees. It was the first time since he had enlisted that he had thought much about bugs, save for the kind that infest the body. Now he wondered whether their lives were not as important as the lives of men; whether they were not

conscious of a feeling that, were they no longer to exist, the end of the world would come. He compared them with the hustling, inane little tanks, and almost concluded that one was as important as the other. He stood by carefully so as not to step on any of the insects.

So far the German shells had burst either far behind the platoon or far in front of it. But now the whine, ever increasing, of a shell informed him that in a moment he would be listening to the ripping sound of flying pieces of shell casing. He waited, breathless. Fifteen yards behind him the shell exploded terrifically. He looked back. "Oh, Larson," he called. Larson was nowhere to be seen. . . . [Then] a flock of shells left the long, black mouths of the German guns and began their journey toward Hicks. He winced, tied his muscles into knots, and threw himself flat on the ground, quite forgetful of the insects. The shells all struck within a radius of twenty yards, throwing up dirt, grain, a black cloud of smoke. The whistle blew and Hicks rose again.

As he started forward, abreast of the first wave, he had never before felt so great a stiffness in his legs, nor so great a weight in his shoes. It was as if they were tied to the earth. For a moment the jargon and melody of a once-popular song flooded his brain. Then he thought of the platoon joke about the man from the wilds who had come barefoot to a recruiting officer to enlist, and who, upon putting on a pair of shoes, had stood still for hours, believing that he was tied. "Ha," thought Hicks, "that's a funny one. They had to put sand in his shoes before he would move." War was a business of lightening things, he observed, as he fastened the chin strap of his helmet more tightly. Corroborating the evidence, he tightened his belt over his empty stomach. The men were marching along, an interval of three yards between each. A shell struck directly upon the moving front wave a few yards to the left of Hicks. An arm and a haversack foolishly rose in the air above the cloud of smoke of the exploding shell. Slightly farther on machine guns began an annoying rat-tat-tat, the bullets snipping off the heads of grain. More men fell. The front rank went on with huge gaps in it. On they stolidly marched. Hicks, glancing back, saw that the four waves had been consolidated into but two. But the bayonets glistened as brightly as before.

"Close in there, Hicks," somebody yelled, and Hicks asked whether the men were not being killed quickly enough, without grouping them together more closely. They advanced to a point where they were enfiladed by the enemy's machine-guns. As the four lines had become two, so now the two lines became one. But on they marched, preserving a line that could have passed the reviewing stand on dress parade.

impact of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* paled measurably in comparison.<sup>22</sup>

The success of *Through the Wheat* brought Boyd fame and notoriety in St. Paul. In a letter written to Perkins the day after his book was published, Boyd complained about the unwelcome attention he was receiving. "I wish I could get away from the shop until the sale of my book has died down. I cannot write, think, or do anything else except be extremely nervous."<sup>23</sup>

Obviously he found somewhere to work, for by the end of 1923 he had completed a manu-

### Peggy and Thomas Boyd



script for one novel, made a significant start on another, and finished or worked on six short stories. The completed manuscript had the working title "The Duke Rides Past," but at Perkins's suggestion it was never published. The other, longer manuscript eventually became Boyd's second novel, *The Dark Cloud*. Its central idea and even the plot came from a diary unearthed by his bookshop partner, Van Ness. The journal had belonged to a young man who traveled to America as a sailor, jumped ship, and then wandered across the pre-Civil War Midwest. The six short stories were the result of an invitation from Robert Bridges at the preeminent literary magazine, *Scribner's*. All six stories appeared in *Scribner's*—three in 1924 and three in 1925.<sup>24</sup>

Fame was less of an impediment to Boyd's work, however, than his and Peggy's decision to take an extended vacation in Europe. Never fiscally responsible, the Boyds impulsively dropped everything and left St. Paul for Europe in September 1923. On their way to New York, they visited Peggy's parents now living near Chicago and left Elizabeth Grace in their care. In New York, the Boyds visited with Perkins and the Fitzgeralds, and they met novelist Ring Lardner before boarding ship for France on October 18.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike other American authors of their generation, the Boyds did not linger in Paris. Tom was not an expatriate, and that community of Americans did not impress him. A letter to Perkins painted a much less romantic picture of the expatriate lifestyle than the one in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. Boyd wrote, "Paris is lovely except for the queer places—Montmartre and Montparnasse the two places for poseurs—at the latter Americans pay 8 francs for a 1 franc drink and hear 'Yes We Have No Bananas' (jazz orchestra), see still life pictures on the wall and get elbowed by ugly perspiring women because they hope to escape the curse of the bourgeoisie in that way." By late November 1923 the Boyds had relocated to Hyeres in the south of France, where Tom hoped to do some serious writing and enjoy peace and quiet through the winter months.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> James Dickey, "Afterword," in *Through the Wheat* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1978), 267, 269–70.

<sup>23</sup> Boyd to Perkins, Apr. 28, 1923, Scribner's Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Perkins to Boyd, Nov. 14, 1923; Robert Bridges to Boyd, June 15, 1923, Scribner's Archives; Boyd biography, 104.

<sup>25</sup> Boyd biography, 97–99, 102–03.

<sup>26</sup> Boyd to Perkins, Nov. 22, Dec. 2, 1923, Scribner's Archives.

The Boyds returned to the United States and St. Paul earlier than expected because of Peggy's sudden pregnancy-related illness in January 1924. The new pregnancy was not joyous news to the Boyds, whose twin boys had died shortly after birth in 1922 or 1923. Peggy wished to be near her family and American hospitals, and by mid-February, Tom had returned to St. Paul and begun looking for work and a home for his family.<sup>27</sup>

He stayed with his friend Charles Flandrau until Peggy, who had been recuperating with her parents, joined him in early March, and they moved into a temporary home at 30 South St. Albans Street. Despite the proximity of Miller Hospital and the medical attention that Peggy had hoped would make a difference, her pregnancy ended tragically that summer. Boyd described the event in a letter to Perkins:

Peggy's trouble came to a point and subsided. It was perhaps the most ghastly experience of my life. The baby, twenty seven weeks old, arrived before the doctor or nurse. Then two doctors and a Christian Scientist practitioner (who has been assisting Peggy) came and towards two in the morning the nurse and I drove the baby to the incubator ward of Miller Hospital. It died at six o'clock and my nerve was so gone that I had to get a friend to call the undertaker.

Tom and Peggy never had any other children.<sup>28</sup>

In August 1924, the Boyds moved to a furnished third-floor apartment in an old house at 529 Portland Avenue that could only be entered via stairs at the back. He liked the new place, but she did not. Its walls were so thin that they could only type during the day.<sup>29</sup>

Fortunately, Boyd had completed most of the work on *The Dark Cloud* before these tragedies, moves, and inconveniences interfered. He had sent a completed manuscript of the new novel to Perkins before he left France in January, and Perkins accepted it almost immediately. Scribners issued a contract on February 21, 1924, under the same terms as

his first book. When the book went on sale in September 1924, however, it failed to win much critical or public support. Perkins had warned Boyd that *The Dark Cloud* was unlikely to be a critical success because reviewers would undoubtedly compare it to *Through the Wheat*. The published reviews proved Perkins' prescience. The *New York Times* said, "It is hoped that 'The Dark Cloud' is merely a transition to that splendor of creation which 'Through the Wheat' eloquently foretold." Even reviewers who were friendly toward Boyd found fault with the work. John Farrar of *The Bookman* said it was at times boring. The book-buying public apparently agreed, for by Christmas not 3,000 copies had sold. It became clear that sales would not exhaust the original 5,000-copy printing.<sup>30</sup>

Financially pressed, Boyd completed four stories that would be published in a collection entitled *Points of Honor*. He also reviewed books for *The Bookman* and *Saturday Review*, and he attempted to place short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* and *The Century*. One story, "Uninvited," was published by *The Mercury* in its December 1924 issue.<sup>31</sup>

Boyd also tried his hand at editing. He worked with his friend Charles Flandrau on a collection of Flandrau's essays which he then submitted to Scribners and other publishers. Though Scribners rejected the collection, *Loquacities* was eventually published in 1931. In addition to these projects, Boyd found work writing book reviews for the *Minneapolis Journal*. He did not return to Kilmarnock Books because Van Ness had hired another manager.<sup>32</sup>

Scribners published two more books by Thomas Boyd in 1925. *Points of Honor*, on sale in March, received good reviews. Most of his energy, however, went into the completion of *Samuel Drummond*, the saga of a nineteenth-century Ohio farmer. The idea for the novel had come to him in March 1924, and he was confident that he would be able to complete it quickly. Personal crises and financial necessities in spring and summer 1924 prevented him from beginning work until winter, but he believed he had enough material for three novels about

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<sup>27</sup> Boyd to Perkins, Feb. 14, 1924, Scribner's Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Boyd to Perkins, Mar. 2[?], 1924, July 2, 1924, Scribner's Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Boyd to Perkins, Aug. 25, Sept. 28, 1924, Scribner's Archives.

<sup>30</sup> Boyd to Perkins, Jan. 16, 1924, Perkins to Boyd, Feb. 21, Sept. 8, Dec. 16, 1924—all Scribner's Archives; *New York Times Book Review*, Sept. 7, 1924, p. 8; John Farrar, "Three Novels," *The Bookman* 60 (Nov. 1924): 342.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Bridges to Boyd, Apr. 18, 1924; Perkins to Boyd, Jan. 29, Aug. 15, Oct. 20, 1924; Boyd to Perkins, May 20, Aug. 7, Oct. 27, 1924—all Scribner's Archives.

<sup>32</sup> Perkins to Boyd, June 6, 1924; Boyd to Perkins, Mar. 2[?], Aug. 25, Sept. 28, 1924—all Scribner's Archives.

## Thomas Boyd, St. Paul Author of Historical Novel, Plies Busy Pen in "Garret" Studio on Portland

"The Dark Cloud," Story of Middle West of Fifties, Off Press.

Living in a garret is not what one would imagine after visiting Thomas Boyd, author of "Through the Wheat," in his studio-apartment under the eaves of a large house at 329 Portland avenue.

The words "author" and "garret" went hand in hand in the minds of most people a few years ago. Today, after selling one or two books that have jumped into popularity, the average author leaves the old home town, purchases himself a home on Long Island, and spends most of his time abroad.

Mr. Boyd, however, prefers to do the unusual, even though "Through the Wheat," has gone into its eighth edition, and he has returned only recently from abroad.

### Battle Hard at First.

He is not sitting up nights, however, counting over the royalties nor considering contracts for movie production of his book. First books, although they may be very successful, do not generally bring the author huge profits.

Mr. Boyd is hard at work, and expects to work hard for some time with his writing.

The so-called "garret," although it really is a garret, is also an attractive home wherein Mrs. Boyd, although lending the well known womanly touch, refuses to be known merely as a housewife.

She and her husband are emphatically unconventional, yet they preserve in their home an atmosphere of real homeliness which is a revelation to one whose idea of "art" and "writing" is similar to mind pictures of Greenwich Village.

### Betty Grace "Pride and Joy."

And then there is Betty Grace, 7 years old, of whom her parents are as proud as a Main street father and topper and who is neither more spoiled nor better behaved than one's own child.

The living room, or studio, where



Above is shown Thomas Boyd seated at a table in the corner of his "garret" studio in St. Paul. Although the photographer wished to snap the picture while the author was at work, Mrs. Boyd insisted that her husband don his coat, put aside his pipe and have his hair "slicked down with water." On the table is part of the manuscript of a novel on which Mr. Boyd is working.

*Back from France, Boyd posed in his studio apartment shortly after finishing his novel The Dark Cloud (St. Paul Dispatch, Sept. 15, 1924).*

Ohio, where he had lived for the first 15 years of his life. He planned a trip to Ohio to do research, and in February 1925 the Boyds left St. Paul. Despite Boyd's efforts at authenticity, *Samuel Drummond*, published in 1925, failed to

impress the critics, his friend Fitzgerald, or the book-buying public.<sup>33</sup>

In the years following his departure from St. Paul, the prolific Boyd published numerous short stories; two more novels, *Shadow of the*

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times Book Review*, Mar. 22, 1925, p. 9, 14; *The Nation*, Aug. 12, 1925, p. 194; Boyd to Perkins, Mar. 24, Nov. 15, 1924, Feb. [?], 1925, and Perkins, memo, Dec. 1, 1927—all Scribner's Archives.

*Long Knives* (1928) and *In Time of Peace* (1935); and four biographies, *Simon Girty*, *The White Savage* (1928), *Mad Anthony Wayne* (1929), *Light Horse Harry Lee* (1931), and *Poor John Fitch, Inventor of the Steamboat* (1935). Despite this prodigious output, he failed to create a lasting place for himself and his work in American literary history. After the popular and critical success of *Through the Wheat*, Boyd did not publish another financially successful novel until 1928's *Shadow of the Long Knives*, a story about the Ohio frontier. While this book did not attract critical attention, it sold more copies than *Through the Wheat*. Boyd's 1929 biography of Anthony Wayne was also very profitable, but by the time Scribners published *Light Horse Harry Lee* two years later, the book market had been severely damaged by the Great Depression. The Lee biography failed to earn back the author's advance money.<sup>34</sup>

As economic crisis forced Scribners to be more selective about accepting manuscripts, Boyd's proposals for future biographies were rejected. When he ignored Perkins's advice against writing another historical novel, his professional relationship with Scribners ended. His last two books, *In Time of Peace* and *Poor John Fitch*, published by Minton and Balch, did little to enhance his reputation as an author.<sup>35</sup>

Boyd's personal life became as erratic as his professional life. After discovering the latest of Tom's extramarital affairs, Peggy demanded a divorce. In 1930 he moved to Reno, Nevada, in order to comply and married Ruth Fitch Bartlett, with whom he had been having the affair, shortly after the divorce was final. Peggy won custody of Elizabeth Grace, although Tom had liberal visitation rights. Peggy Boyd's career as an author had been in a steep decline since the publication of *The Love Legend* in 1922. Her next

two novels with Scribners, *Lazy Laughter* (1924) and *The Unpaid Piper* (1927), sold very poorly, but she continued to publish short stories and articles in magazines.<sup>36</sup>

After remarriage, Tom worked briefly in Hollywood as a scriptwriter before settling in Vermont. In 1934, frustrated by lack of money and the larger problems of the depression, he joined the Communist Party, which chose him to run for governor of Vermont the same year. While he succeeded in getting his name on the ballot, he failed to win many votes in the general election. Afterward, he remained a party member but was less active. In January 1935, at age 37, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Ridgefield, Connecticut, shortly after completing *In Time of Peace*.<sup>37</sup>

Though not a Minnesota native, Thomas Boyd was in many ways a product of the state. It was as a reporter and editor on Minneapolis and St. Paul newspapers that he learned his craft, and it was in St. Paul that he produced his best fiction. Without the training and opportunities afforded him there, Boyd might have never authored a single book. As part of the city's literary community, he also contributed to the state's literary culture through the book page he created and his work at Kilmarnock Books.

Boyd never received the lasting fame and recognition accorded many other American writers of his generation. While the novels of Lewis, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Dos Passos remained in print long after their deaths, Boyd's work and reputation quickly faded. Unlike many other moderately successful authors whose writing was quickly forgotten, however, Boyd deserved a better fate. *Through the Wheat* alone should have been enough to secure for him a place in the history of American literature.

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Bruce, "The Life and Career of Thomas Boyd: American Author and Activist" (master's thesis, University of Houston—Clear Lake, 1996), 84–104.

<sup>35</sup> Perkins to Boyd, Oct. 15, 1932; Boyd to Perkins, Aug. 20[?], 1934, Scribner's Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Perkins to Peggy Boyd, July 14, 1927, Feb. 10, 1928, Scribner's Archives. Elizabeth Grace Boyd attended Vassar and later helped found the Acorn Press in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce, "Thomas Boyd," 72–114.

*The photos on p. 4, 5, 6, 11, and 14 are in the collection of Thomas Boyd's daughter, Elizabeth Boyd Nash, Cocoa Beach, Florida. The other images are from the Minnesota Historical Society. The excerpt on page 13 is from Through the Wheat (1923; reprint, Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 186–90.*



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