



Wheeler, Monroe (1899-1988)

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Publisher, book designer, and museum director, Monroe Wheeler is perhaps best known today for his leading position in New York's artistic and gay communities of the 1950s and 1960s, with his partner of sixty-eight years, the writer Glenway Wescott.

Although they were not physically monogamous--for example, some eight years into their relationship, the two men met the photographer George Platt Lynes and accommodated him into their lives for the next seventeen years--Wheeler and Wescott never waived from their commitment to each other and enjoyed one of the longest gay "marriages" in glbtq history.

Monroe Lathrop Wheeler was born on February 13, 1899, in Chicago, Illinois, the first son of a prosperous fish broker. Two years later the family moved to Evanston, an affluent suburb of Chicago.

The Wheeler family enjoyed Chicago's thriving cultural scene, and interest in the arts was strongly encouraged. Wheeler, with his family, regularly attended concerts, operas, poetry readings, and art exhibits.

His father, Fred Monroe Wheeler, was an avid bibliophile who collected books and made his own book bindings, as well as a skillful artist who helped establish the Businessmen's Art Club of Chicago, enthusiasms he evidently passed on to his son.

On his eighteenth birthday, instead of the motorcycle he had hoped for, Wheeler received a small, but expensive, printing press from his parents. He subsequently developed a love for typography, layout, and fine art printing, pursuits he would later turn into a career.

Despite his interest in books and learning, Wheeler was an unexceptional student, and after completing his secondary education, refused to attend college, much to his parents' disappointment. Instead, he lied about his age and found a job as a copywriter in a prestigious Chicago advertising agency.

In early 1919, at a meeting of the University of Chicago's prestigious Poetry Club, the strikingly handsome and elegantly well-dressed, twenty-year-old Wheeler met and fell in love with freshman student, and newly-elected president of the Poetry Club, Glenway Wescott (1901-1987), then seventeen years old.

In an interview given late in his life, Wescott recalled, "Monroe was more beautiful than the sun . . . and radiantly joyous. His personality expressed that everything was the best it could possibly be and everything was just around the corner, and the arts were the only thing that mattered on earth."

The two men embarked on an openly romantic relationship during a time when the practice was far from safe legally or acceptable socially. Wheeler encouraged Wescott both to pursue a vocation as a writer and to accept his homosexuality without apology.

The men created a life together that lasted sixty-eight years.

Early in their relationship, Wheeler convinced Wescott that they could live more freely and comfortably, as both artists and homosexuals, in Europe than in the American Midwest. Consequently, in the fall of 1921, with their personal savings and invaluable letters of introduction provided by Harriet Monroe, founder of the influential journal *Poetry*, the two men relocated to Europe.

Moving first to England and then to France, Wheeler and Wescott, both physically attractive and loquaciously social, had little trouble meeting and making friends with such writers and artists as Ford Maddox Ford, Isadora Duncan, and Jean Cocteau.

While both men were considered witty and memorable conversationalists, with a fondness for social gossip, Wheeler was particularly remembered as a perceptive and observant storyteller. The writer and journalist Janet Flanner, also living in Paris during this time, said of Wheeler: "[He] has an excellent raconteur's mind, memory, vocabulary and tongue, brings in a story just at the right time, in the right manner, serves his anecdotes perfectly either piping hot or ice-cold as tragedies The bases of his success with people are the nourishing quality of his enthusiasms and his connected recollections in conversation."

In 1926, some eight years into his relationship with Wescott, Wheeler met eighteen-year-old George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), a minister's son from East Orange, New Jersey, sent to France by his parents to prepare him for college.

Wheeler immediately became infatuated with the young man. Instead of causing a rift between Wescott and Wheeler, however, Lynes was accommodated into their relationship for the next seventeen years, with the three men often sharing the same home.

As Wescott biographer Jerry Rosco noted of Lynes, "[His] intimacy was generally with Wheeler, and occasionally with Wescott. . . . From the start, their threesome was daring, original and unpredictable."

Lynes, with encouragement from Wheeler, pursued photography as a career, and later achieved worldwide fame as a fashion and portrait photographer, whose works were distinguished by their dramatic lighting and stylized settings. His most lasting achievement, however, was his series of intensely homoerotic dance images and male nudes, although very few of these photographs were exhibited publicly during his lifetime.

By 1930, Wheeler, Wescott, and Lynes had settled in Paris, where Wheeler and the wealthy American heiress Barbara Harrison (1904-1977) established Harrison of Paris, a book publishing enterprise with the goal of producing high quality limited editions to be sold at moderate prices. Although Wescott was not an official partner, he provided literary advice and helped Wheeler select manuscripts for publication.

Between October 1930 and December 1934, Harrison of Paris published thirteen books, all of which exhibited, as the journalist Waverly Root noted for the *Paris Tribune*, "uniform good taste, intelligence, and artistic sensibility."

The partnership's first venture was the publication of Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis* (1930), with a cover design by Wescott. That first year the enterprise also published, among other works, the first English translation of Thomas Mann's autobiography, *A Sketch of My Life*, and the first edition of Wescott's novella *The Babe's Bed*, which was dedicated to Harrison.

Other notable works published by Harrison of Paris include *The Fables of Aesop* (1931), with Sir Roger L'Estrange's Elizabethan translation complemented by Alexander Calder's spare line drawings; Constance Garnett's translation of Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Spirit: A Fantastic Story* (1931), with original drawings by the

gay French illustrator and designer Christian Bérard; Wheeler's own *A Typographical Commonplace-Book* (1932); and Wescott's *A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers* (1933), illustrated by the Russian-born gay artist Pavel Tchelitchev.

In 1935, after her marriage to Wescott's younger brother Lloyd, Barbara Harrison returned to the United States. Wheeler, Wescott, and Lynes soon followed. The trio set up households in Manhattan, in a series of apartments, as well as in New Jersey, with their weekend retreat, an old colonial house dubbed Stoneblossom, on a five-hundred-acre farm owned by Harrison.

Wheeler and Harrison had expected to continue operations of their publishing venture in New York, but given the prohibitive costs and the lack of adequate facilities, reluctantly agreed to dissolve Harrison of Paris in 1935.

Later that same year Wheeler began his long-term association with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, when he joined the staff as a guest curator and a member of the Library Committee. His passion for and knowledge of books continued at MoMA, and in 1939 Wheeler was appointed Director of Publications. A year later he was named the museum's first Director of Exhibitions, a post he held for the next twenty-seven years.

Under his leadership, MoMA became known for the quality of its books. Wheeler personally supervised the publication of over 300 works, both monographs and exhibition catalogues, and won acclaim for their scholarship, layout, and design.

With Wheeler's prestigious museum appointment and Wescott's reputation as a novelist, the two men became a well-known gay couple in New York City's artistic community. The writers W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Marianne Moore, and Somerset Maugham, and the artists Paul Cadmus and Jared French were among their close acquaintances.

However, their relationship suffered a great disappointment in 1943 when Lynes ended his seventeen-year relationship with the two men. As Wescott wrote in a letter to his brother Lloyd and sister-in-law Barbara, dated February 26, 1943, "This is a milestone date in our lives: this afternoon Monroe received a letter from George to say he is leaving us." Despite the end of their complicated romantic relationship, the three men continued to remain friendly until Lynes's death in 1955.

In 1951, in recognition of his work in bringing French artists to the attention of American audiences, Wheeler was made a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor by the government of France.

Wheeler remained actively involved with the Museum of Modern Art, even after his retirement in 1967, by serving as a member of the International Council, which supports the Museum's international and education programs. In early 1988, the Museum dedicated a reading room in the Prints and Illustrated Books Galleries to Wheeler.

Wheeler's affiliations outside of the Museum included serving as a Trustee and First Vice President of the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, a Trustee of the Katherine Anne Porter Foundation, a Trustee of the Ben Shahn Foundation, a member of the Council of the Grolier Club, and President of the International Graphic Arts Society.

On February 20, 1987, Wescott died of a stroke. He was 85 years old.

Two days later, Wheeler himself suffered a massive stroke, which left him legally blind and paralyzed on the left side of his body. He died at his home in Manhattan on August 14, 1988, eighteen months after the death of Wescott. He was 89 years old.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.