



## McAlmon, Robert (1896-1956)

by Richard G. Mann

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American publisher and writer Robert McAlmon made significant contributions to twentieth-century literature. As owner of Contact Editions, he was responsible for publishing such important modernist works as Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), while in his own books of the 1920s, he treated controversial subjects in a straightforward manner.

Most notably, in *Distinguished Air: Grim Fairy Tales* (1925) McAlmon recorded life in the gay subculture of Berlin with a frankness that was unequaled in the era. Compared to his stories, Christopher Isherwood's later and more famous tales of the city seem almost tame.

Among expatriates in Paris during the 1920s, McAlmon was regarded as a writer of significant talent and potential. However, he never attained the financial success and critical acclaim that Ernest Hemingway and many of his other associates did. Commercial publishers were unwilling to distribute McAlmon's work, at least in part because of his honest treatment of queer sexuality.

Compounding his professional difficulties, McAlmon conducted his personal interactions with the same bluntness that distinguished his written work, and he refused to pay homage to influential figures, who might have helped him to attain the acclaim he craved. By the time of his death, his early achievements had been forgotten.

### **Background and Early Years**

The youngest in a family of ten children, Robert Menzies McAlmon was born on March 9, 1896 in Clifton, Kansas. His father, Reverend John Alexander McAlmon, was a conservative Presbyterian minister. During Robert's early childhood, Reverend McAlmon uprooted his family from Kansas to South Dakota, where they moved constantly from one small town to another. In later years, Robert recalled many aspects of his childhood with loathing, maintaining that his father made him feel inferior because of his lack of interest in sports and other supposedly "manly" pursuits.

However, McAlmon's siblings offered strong emotional support, as they would throughout his life, and they encouraged his early interest in reading and other intellectual pursuits. Despite his fascination with books, however, he was not a good student and frequently played hooky from school.

After graduating from high school in 1912, McAlmon spent several years in a variety of temporary jobs, ranging from laying railroad tracks to working as a copywriter in an advertising agency. In 1916, he entered the University of Minnesota, where he quickly became disillusioned with literature courses. He soon followed his mother to California when she moved there after the death of her husband in 1917.

Enlisting in the military in March 1918, McAlmon was assigned to the Air Corps base in San Diego, where he gained publishing experience by editing the camp newspaper for the remainder of World War I. Discharged shortly after the Armistice of 1919, he took courses at the University of Southern California, which he had

previously attended briefly in 1917, and edited *Ace*, a magazine about flying. In March 1919, six of his poems were published in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry Magazine*, which previously had featured works by T. S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats. Placed on academic probation in 1920, McAlmon dropped out of school; after living briefly in Chicago, he settled in New York City's Greenwich Village.

McAlmon quickly became integrated into the Village's vibrant bohemian community and established friendships that would endure for the rest of his life. Although he changed the names of his acquaintances, McAlmon provided a generally accurate and lively account of his experiences in Greenwich Village in the short novel *Post Adolescence* (1923). Like Peter, the central character of that book, McAlmon supported himself by posing nude for artists at Cooper Union and elsewhere. In describing Peter's work as a model, McAlmon eloquently conveyed his pride and sensuous delight in his own thin, lithe body.

Among those whom McAlmon got to know in Greenwich Village was the modernist painter Marsden Hartley. In describing the "stand in" for Hartley (Brander Ogden) in *Post Adolescence*, McAlmon mocked his "dowager gestures" and "fierce grandmother's profile" and emphasized the "repellent force" of his "savagely repressed rhapsody of eroticism."

Such remarks suggest that McAlmon--despite his participation in the emerging gay subculture--may have been uncomfortable with transgressions of gender and sexual norms and with his own homosexual desires. However, McAlmon's ambivalent responses to homosexuality need to be understood within the context of a predominantly homophobic era in which conceptions of gay identity were still in the process of formulation.

Despite the complexity of McAlmon's feelings regarding Hartley, the two men considered themselves close friends. In their later years, when they were both impoverished and overlooked by most other members of the avant-garde, they offered strong emotional support to one another through their correspondence.

Also while living in Greenwich Village, McAlmon became acquainted with the poet William Carlos Williams, who would become his closest and most loyal friend. To provide a forum for adventurous young American writers, McAlmon and Williams founded the literary magazine *Contact*. They published the magazine five times in 1920 and 1921 and released a single, more luxurious issue in 1923. Although an economic failure, *Contact* presented work by many of the leading figures of the early 1920s, including Ezra Pound and Marianne Moore, among others.

## **Marriage**

On Valentine's Day, 1921, McAlmon married Annie Winifred Ellerman (1894-1983), who preferred to be called Bryher, her literary pseudonym. Bryher was the daughter of Sir John Reeves Ellerman, a British shipping magnate who had become one of the wealthiest men in the world by the early 1920s. From the first announcement of the wedding, controversy surrounded this marriage.

Eager to protect his daughter from fortune hunters, Ellerman greatly restricted Bryher's contact with the world outside his house. Nevertheless, he allowed her to travel in 1918 to the United States with the poet Hilda Doolittle, called H.D. Undoubtedly, he was unaware that H.D. was Bryher's lover.

McAlmon first met Bryher when she stopped briefly in New York on her way to Los Angeles in September 1920, but he did not have the opportunity to get further acquainted with her until she returned to New York early in 1921. According to Williams and many of McAlmon's other associates, he initially knew Bryher only by her pseudonym and did not realize her wealthy family background until shortly before the wedding.

However, rumors, widely reported in American tabloid newspapers, characterized McAlmon as a "gold digger" seeking access to the Ellerman fortune. In later years, Bryher endorsed these claims, insisting that the marriage had been strictly a business arrangement, which she proposed in order to secure the freedom

to live outside her father's home. Some recent queer commentators, including Gore Vidal, also have endorsed the theory that McAlmon understood that he was entering into a marriage of convenience and have disparaged his apparently selfish intentions.

Maintaining that he chose to marry Bryher because he loved her, McAlmon repeatedly asserted that he was both surprised and distressed by her refusal to consummate their union. Williams, Sylvia Beach, and many other intimate friends strongly supported McAlmon's account.

Although McAlmon steadfastly refused to blame Bryher for his later difficulties, most of his friends maintained that the circumstances of the marriage caused him to become cynical about human relationships and thereby ultimately contributed to the isolation of his later years. Sanford Smoller, the author of the most comprehensive study of McAlmon's career yet published, also blames most of McAlmon's professional setbacks to the failure of his relationship with Bryher. Thus, Smoller maintains that if McAlmon had married a more compatible woman, "he might have experienced the professional and personal satisfaction that consistently eluded him."

Underlying most of the discussion about McAlmon's marriage is the unstated assumption that his sexuality must be defined in terms of the binary categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality. However, McAlmon emphatically described himself as a bisexual throughout his life, and his assertions can be supported through an analysis of his writings. Although heavily edited, the published editions of *Being Geniuses Together*, his memoirs of his life in Paris, provide ample, though subtle, indications of his romantic and sexual interest in both men and women.

Furthermore, McAlmon's bisexuality may also be expressed in the story "Green Grow the Grasses," which is infused with a warm, idyllic romanticism, unusual in his work. Ironically, this story is frequently cited as a demonstration of McAlmon's exclusive homosexuality. To this end, the loving gazes between the narrator and the handsome Antoine have been discussed in isolation, rather than in the context of the actual grouping of the narrator, Antoine, and the beautiful Enid.

### **McAlmon in Europe: 1921-1923**

Through his marriage to Bryher, McAlmon realized his ambition to become part of the dynamic community of expatriate writers and artists in Europe. On February 26, 1921, he and Bryher set sail for Great Britain. After spending a few weeks in London, McAlmon moved on alone to Paris.

In various interviews, Sylvia Beach maintained that McAlmon was one of the first Americans to patronize her bookstore, Shakespeare and Company. Assuming the role of older sister, Beach allowed him to use her store as his address and introduced him into the expatriate community. Encouraging him to write, Beach tried to prevent him from squandering his talents through heavy drinking, but she noted that "the drinks were always on him, and alas! often in him." In *Being Geniuses Together*, McAlmon acknowledged that there had been "much ordering of drinks," which helped to foster "moments of enjoying the sodden destruction of time in a weary world."

Yet, despite his participation in bohemian revelries, McAlmon managed to be productive as a writer, especially during his early years in Paris. By January 1922 (but possibly in late 1921), McAlmon had printed at his own expense *A Hasty Brunch*, a collection of short stories, previously rejected by a British publisher who found the book to be obscene. These stories of life in the American Midwest were favorably reviewed by Ezra Pound in the *Dial*. McAlmon was also encouraged by the unpublished praise offered by Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, and other writers whom he admired.

Also in 1921 and 1922, McAlmon found time to assist James Joyce with the difficult tasks of editing and typing early versions of *Ulysses*. Throughout the 1920s, McAlmon continued to offer various kinds of support to Joyce, including substantial financial gifts. However, scattered remarks in *Being Among Geniuses*

indicate that he did not share the awe of Joyce's work widespread among the expatriate community.

Although primarily based in Paris, McAlmon traveled extensively throughout Europe. The several weeks that he spent in Berlin in the fall of 1921 provided the basis for *Distinguished Air*. While in Capri in 1922, he met a Swedish couple, Ludvig Nordström and Maryka Sternstedt, both writers, who invited him to spend Christmas 1923 in Stockholm and who helped stimulate interest in McAlmon's writings in Scandinavia.

### **Contact Editions**

Although the Ellerman family was initially suspicious of McAlmon's motivations for his marriage to Bryher, they quickly became fond of him. Thus, late in 1922 or early in 1923, Sir John entrusted him with about \$70,000 to support his literary endeavors. McAlmon immediately resolved to use the money to establish Contact Editions to publish innovative works without concern for profit.

Shortly thereafter, he released two of his own books: *Post Adolescence* and *Companion Volume*, a collection of short stories, one of which "One to Set Her Up" offers one of the earliest portraits of a "fag hag" in American literature. Between 1924 and 1929, Contact published three further volumes of his work, including the highly regarded *Village* (1924), comprised of interwoven stories set in a small Midwestern town.

Eager that Contact not be regarded as a vanity press, McAlmon sought to publish works by authors with distinctive perspectives. Although he did not find Hemingway's emphatically hard-boiled and deliberately simple style entirely congenial, he published *Three Stories and Ten Poems* by him in 1923. While working on this project, McAlmon, Hemingway, and Hadley (Hemingway's wife) undertook a trip to Spain, at McAlmon's expense. Despite McAlmon's generosity, Hemingway relentlessly complained to mutual acquaintances that McAlmon was not "a real man" because he did not share his own unequivocal love of bullfights and other sports.

In 1925, McAlmon published five important books, including Gertrude Stein's *Making of Americans*. Although he recognized its importance, McAlmon found the publication of Stein's monumental work a very frustrating and exhausting experience. Because of the small demand for books published by Contact, McAlmon generally limited editions (including his own works) to approximately 150 copies. However, without consulting McAlmon, Stein instructed the printer to produce 600 copies of *Making of Americans*, and she refused to assist him with the printing bill of 60,000 francs (then equivalent to about \$3,000) or with the storage costs of the hundreds of unsold volumes. The production of *Making of Americans* undermined the financial stability of the press, which closed in 1931.

### **McAlmon at the Height of His Literary Career: 1924-1926**

During the mid-1920s, Williams and others noted that McAlmon increasingly suffered from severe depression, which was intensified by disparaging comments made about his work by Ford Maddox Ford and other figures in the literary establishment. His heavy drinking also distressed his friends. In the spring of 1925, he created a scandal by his drunken behavior at the Quatre Arts Ball; by the end of the evening, he had stripped off his cheesecloth toga and was cavorting naked. Throughout the period from late 1924 through early 1925, McAlmon spent a great deal of time partying with the wealthy socialite, Nancy Cunard. According to gossip of the era, McAlmon initiated an affair with Cunard, but he emphatically denied this.

Despite personal problems and numerous distractions, McAlmon had reason to be proud of his significant professional accomplishments of the mid-1920s. In addition to making his works available through Contact, McAlmon published pieces in other venues. For example, in the first issue of *Transatlantic Review* (January 1924), his story "Elsie" was published, along with poems by e. e. cummings and Williams and fiction by Ford and Joseph Conrad. However, McAlmon's delight in this achievement was dissipated when Ford published harsh and condescending criticism of the *Village* and other works in subsequent issues of the *Review*.

Published in 1925, with McAlmon's funding, by William Bird's Three Mountain Press, *Distinguished Air: Grim Fairy Tales* was immediately hailed by Joyce, Pound, and other leading modernist writers as the author's most important book, and it retains that reputation today. Pound ardently promoted *Distinguished Air* among his acquaintances, and Joyce arranged for it to be translated into French and published in the magazine *900*. Although Bird printed only 115 copies, the book quickly became widely known in avant-garde circles.

The esteem in which the book was regarded by creative individuals on both sides of the Atlantic is suggested by the fact that the prominent American modernist painter Charles Demuth commemorated it in a watercolor, *Distinguished Air* (1930, inscribed "For 'Distinguished Air' by Robert McAlmon"). Most of Demuth's watercolors that reference literary works were conceived as illustrations for publications. However, there is no documentation of an edition in which this image would have fit. Rather than visualizing a specific incident, Demuth sought to convey the free morality of the stories through an image of an art gallery, a setting not utilized by McAlmon. In the watercolor, an abstract but distinctly phallic sculpture is being studied attentively by several individuals, including a provocatively dressed woman and a male couple (cruised by a supposedly "straight" man).

The characters of *Distinguished Air* seem larger than life because they refuse to be restrained by conventional morality. As Edward N. S. Lorusso has stated, McAlmon's drag queen character "Miss Knight jumps off the page as an outrageously comic figure." Resolutely honest, Miss Knight makes no effort to hide her addictions to drugs and alcohol, and she thus seems to be superior to those who pride themselves on their adherence to normative patterns of behavior. Often revealing the rough masculine edges underneath her drag persona, Knight notes in a description of an encounter "I can act like a real lady when I needs to, but that night I talked like rough trade."

Characters in the other *Grim Fairy Tales* of *Distinguished Air* also freely recount anonymous sexual encounters. For instance, in "Distinguished Air," Foster (probably based on Marsden Hartley) acknowledges that he is "too married to the pissoir" but declares "one must have a tea engagement now and then." The collection also has the distinction of offering some of the first depictions of gay bars in American fiction.

Although he participated eagerly in the decadent nightlife of Berlin, McAlmon was distressed by the poverty that compelled middle-class Germans to support themselves by selling sexual favors and drugs. Like the characters in his stories, he ultimately felt oppressed by the mood of the city and abandoned it. Trying to convey his experiences in Berlin with honesty and without moralizing judgments, McAlmon emphasized that he did not intend the conclusions of the stories to be interpreted as indictments of the lifestyles of the characters.

Nevertheless, some recent queer commentators have maintained that the stories embody McAlmon's self-loathing and that they constitute a harsh critique of queer life. Thus, for example, Richard Zeikowitz asserts that McAlmon reinforces the superiority of heteronormative standards through his emphasis upon such "negative terms" as "casual sex; gender abnormality; unproductive lifestyle." However, straight and queer characters in McAlmon's stories share many patterns of behavior, including, for instance, heavy drinking and casual sex. Thus, one might say, that McAlmon envisioned queers as participating fully in the panorama of a decadent world, rather than occupying a separate space in it. Ultimately, it seems no more reasonable to interpret McAlmon's stories as an indictment of queer life than it would be to regard F. Scott Fitzgerald's contemporaneous novels as a condemnation of heterosexuality.

Building upon the critical (if not financial) success of *Distinguished Air*, McAlmon published a book of poetry, entitled *The Portrait of a Generation* in the spring of 1926. Included in this volume, "The Revolving Mirror" is considered one of his most important poems. Utilizing a montage of many different narrative voices, "Mirror" eloquently conveys the disorder and emotional emptiness of mechanized society.

*The Portrait of a Generation* was the only work by McAlmon to be reviewed in a mainstream American periodical. The qualities of the poems that appealed to Pound and McAlmon's other modernist associates disconcerted William Rose Benét. In *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Benét declared that the book was "tiring because it is so tired" and condemned the pessimism and lax sexual morality that pervaded it. As McAlmon predicted, this harsh review in a widely read magazine effectively closed off opportunities to secure publication in his native country.

## Later Years

Discontent with his sham marriage, McAlmon sought a divorce from Bryher, which was finalized during the spring of 1927. At this time, Sir John Ellerman, who seems to have become quite fond of his son-in-law, gave McAlmon a substantial financial settlement. Thereafter, McAlmon often was sneeringly referred to in bohemian circles as "McAlimony." Unfortunately, Ellerman's gift did not substantially improve McAlmon's financial situation because he quickly dissipated most of the funds through parties and drinking.

Apparently unable to remain in any place for an extended period, McAlmon traveled throughout Europe, the United States, and Mexico from 1927 to 1940. However, although discontented with the changes occurring in the French capital, he continued to live at intervals in Paris until 1940.

Despite his peripatetic existence, McAlmon continued to write, though at a considerably reduced level. His later publications included the epic poem *North America, Continent of Conjectures* (1929, published through his own Contact Editions) and *The Indefinite Huntress and Other Stories* (Paris: Crosby, 1932). His last published poem was an eloquent attack on the effects of Mussolini's government of Italy, "Encyclical to Pope and Fascist" (1941).

Undoubtedly, *Being Geniuses Together, 1920-1930* was the most significant endeavor of McAlmon's later years. He intended this book to be an honest and comprehensive memoir of his life in Paris and of his interactions with others in the expatriate community. Needing money, however, he agreed to the publication of a shortened and heavily edited version by the London firm of Secker and Warburg in 1938.

In 1940, as he attempted to flee from the advancing Nazi army, McAlmon abandoned the complete manuscript of the memoir in his cottage in Dampierre (France), and it presumably was destroyed during the war. In 1968 and 1984, McAlmon's friend, Kay Boyle, produced revised editions, which supposedly incorporated material from typescripts that McAlmon supplied to Secker and Warburg. However, concerned about rehabilitating McAlmon's reputation, she retained the moralistic approach of the London publishers.

Despite the many emendations of McAlmon's original text, *Being Geniuses* provides a lively, and often provocative, overview of Paris in the 1920s, and it is still widely consulted by scholars of the era. In particular, the book gives many indications of the honesty and bluntness that often disconcerted McAlmon's associates. Thus, he offers strong criticism of the pomposity that he perceives in such iconic figures of the expatriate community as Stein and Hemingway. Unfortunately, missing from any of the extant versions of the texts are the sexual escapades, which Williams and other friends mentioned in their responses to McAlmon's drafts.

During the initial stages of the Nazi Occupation of France, McAlmon was interned, but his family successfully implored United States Senators to use their influence to secure his freedom. His family paid for his return travel to the United States and found him a job selling medical equipment for a company based in Phoenix.

By the time that he returned permanently to the United States in 1940, McAlmon's health had deteriorated significantly. Suffering from tuberculosis and many other serious ailments, he spent extended periods in hospitals.

In 1951, McAlmon retired to a home that his sisters purchased for him in Desert Hot Springs, California, and he lived quietly there until his death on February 2, 1956. After his death, neighbors were very surprised to learn that he had once been considered a notable writer and that he had been an active participant in the dynamic community of expatriates in Paris during the 1920s.

## Conclusion

Editions of some of McAlmon's most important stories, published by the University of New Mexico Press during the early 1990s, have helped to make a new generation of American readers aware of his work. Certainly, such books as *Distinguished Air: Grim Fairy Tales* deserve an important place in queer cultural history. It is to be hoped that future scholars will give McAlmon's achievements as writer and publisher the attention that they merit.

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