



Wescott, Glenway (1901-1987)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2008 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

American writer Glenway Wescott is the author of a series of critically esteemed novels, including *The Grandmothers* and *The Pilgrim Hawk*, which are distinguished by their polished, poetic language and vivid symbolism. He also published several collections of poetry, short stories, and essays. Following his death, a journal he kept from the late 1930s was published as *Continual Lessons*, a work that provides a valuable portrait of pre-Stonewall gay life among New York City's artistic and literary communities.

Wescott developed extensive ties to the expatriate American community in France, where he lived in the 1920s and 1930s and was familiar with Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein, among others. He and his life partner Monroe Wheeler subsequently became central figures in New York's artistic and gay communities in the 1950s and 1960s.

Wescott was in a dedicated relationship with the book designer and museum director Monroe Wheeler, with whom he lived for sixty-eight years, beginning in 1919 until his death in 1987. Although their relationship was not physically monogamous, the two men thought of themselves as married and never wavered from their commitment to each other.

Some eight years into their relationship, they met and fell in love with photographer George Platt Lynes and accommodated him into their lives for 17 years.

Wescott published his last novel, *Apartment in Athens*, in 1945. Although he never stopped writing, he was unable to complete another novel and during the remaining forty-two years of his life did not publish any new fiction.

"To read the body of work that he has left behind," the critic Bruce Bawer notes in an essay written shortly after Wescott's death, "is not only to marvel at its charm and polish but to admire its probity and seriousness of purpose."

Biography and Education

The oldest of six children, Glenway Wescott was born April 11, 1901, on a pig farm in rural Kewaskum, Wisconsin. He grew up a thoughtful and sensitive child and often ran afoul of his father's expectations. As Wescott recalled years later, "I couldn't work for my father on the farm. He was so sorry for himself because he had more work than he could do, and I was sickly and irritable. Most of the time he was exhausted and had difficulty feeding us all."

Wescott attended the local one-room schoolhouse until the age of twelve, when he found an excuse to leave the farm. He moved to West Bend, Wisconsin, about 11 miles from Kewaskum. There, he attended West Bend High School, living with his maternal grandparents and then later rooming with an uncle and his family.

In 1914, Wescott began a relationship with a fifteen-year-old classmate named Earl Rix Kuelthau, who "relieved" Wescott of his "virginity." The secret romance apparently lasted more than a year.

Wescott excelled in his high school studies and at the age of sixteen earned a scholarship to the University of Chicago. He attended the university from 1917 until 1919, but left without graduating due to ill health.

As a freshman, Wescott was elected president of the university's prestigious Poetry Club. The club included such writers as Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts. The poetry they wrote and shared would later become known as Imagist, a movement devoted to "clarity of expression" through the use of common speech and precise visual images.

One afternoon in the spring of 1919, during a meeting of the Poetry Club, Wescott, then seventeen years old, met and fell in love with the strikingly handsome, twenty-year-old Monroe Wheeler (1899-1988), the son of a Chicago fish broker. The two men would go on to create a life together that lasted sixty-eight years. Wheeler encouraged Wescott both to pursue a vocation as a writer and to accept his homosexuality without apology.

Shortly after that first meeting, Wescott contracted Spanish flu; he eventually recovered from the virus, but left school at the end of the term. He then traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico to help recover his health and to continue work on his poetry, while Wheeler remained in Chicago.

In 1920 he published his first work, *The Bitterns: A Book of Twelve Poems*.

Move to Europe

In the fall of 1921, with their own meager savings and valuable letters of introduction provided by Harriet Monroe, founder of the influential journal *Poetry*, Wescott and Wheeler traveled to Europe. They arrived first in England, where they stayed with the writer Ford Madox Ford at his home in Sussex.

Wescott and Ford spent hours discussing poetry and fiction, and Ford was deeply affected by these conversations. In his 1933 memoir, *It Was the Nightingale*, Ford wrote "if Mr. Wescott had not paid me a visit of some duration, I do not think I should have taken seriously again to writing."

Wescott and Wheeler then traveled to Paris and fell in with the American expatriate community there, which famously included Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway, who may have resented the praise Wescott had received for his poetry, made homophobic remarks about him in private. He also probably based the implicitly homosexual character Robert Prentiss in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) on Wescott; after meeting Prentiss, Hemingway's narrator, Jake Barnes, confesses, "I just thought perhaps I was going to throw up."

Stein was also critical of Wescott. In her book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein wrote, "There was also Glenway Wescott but Glenway Wescott at no time interested Gertrude Stein. He has a certain syrup but it does not pour."

In 1924, Wescott published his first novel, *The Apple of the Eye*, which he had begun three years earlier, immediately before his relocation to Europe. The novel explores the themes of repression and escape, as Dan Strane, a Wisconsin teenager, becomes aware of the puritanical restrictions of his rural upbringing and takes steps to free himself from them. It received a mixed critical reception, with one reviewer calling it "a peculiar hodge-podge." However, as William Rueckert notes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "though it has many of the shortcomings of youthful first works . . . it is an impressive, quite original first novel."

A year after the book's release, Wescott and Wheeler, wishing to escape the expense and distractions of Paris, moved to Villefranche-sur-Mer, in the south of France. They settled into a waterfront hotel popular with artists, including the poet and novelist Jean Cocteau. "We made friends very rapidly," Wescott later recalled of his association with the French writer.

That same year, Wescott published his second poetry collection, *Natives of Rock: XX Poems, 1921-1922*. According to Wescott scholar William Rueckert, "It is with *Natives of Rock* that Wescott [made] his contribution to Imagist poetry and [became] significant, in a minor way, in the history of poetry of the 1920s."

George Platt Lynes

In 1926, Wescott and Wheeler met eighteen-year-old George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), a minister's son from East Orange, New Jersey. Lynes had been 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.

In an undated letter, Wescott wrote to Lynes: "There isn't anybody or any sort of thing to take your place for me." And again, in 1929, several years into their complex, triangular relationship, Wescott wrote: "It is more than affection that makes me want for you, and more particularly for myself, all the quality, the sureness and inquietude, the farewell kiss and the future blessing, of our brotherhood. You are the nourishment and no one of us has failed."

The Grandmothers and Good-bye, Wisconsin

Wescott's second novel, *The Grandmothers: A Family Portrait* (1927), established him, as Bruce Bawer has written, "as one of the major American novelists of his generation."

The novel, a series of short narratives based on the pictures in a family photo album, recounts many actual events in Wescott's personal history. As an early biographer explained, "Wescott first conceived of [the novel] as a history of his own family rather than a work of fiction, but as the work grew, it compelled his imagination to transcend memory, and the work was transmuted from a personal memoir to a skillful and successful novel."

Upon its release, *The Grandmothers* was praised lavishly by critics, many of whom cited it as a major work of uniquely American fiction. For example, C. P. Fadiman of the *Nation* observed that "Wescott's very beautiful and moving chronicle is possibly the first artistically satisfying rendition of the soul of an American pioneer community and its descendants."

Several commentators also highlighted the care with which Wescott had constructed his novel. A critic for *The Atlantic*, for instance, believed that the novel "stands out as a book which has been conceived in deep and quiet perceptions and born in pride, care, and patience."

Bawer describes the novel as marked by a style that includes "sensitively drawn characters; a witty and perceptive eye for detail; a prose of wonderful, almost Flaubertian, control, elegance, and penetration; and above all, a rare delicacy and honesty of feeling--but feeling that has been digested, disciplined, transfigured into art."

The novel was awarded the Harper Prize for distinguished fiction in 1927 and became a best seller.

The following year, Wescott published *Good-bye, Wisconsin* (1928), a collection of stories that again explored the experiences and settings of his own childhood. Some critics saw the book as an "attack" on the U.S. Midwest as a "place that in countless ways prevents the development of the self." As William Rueckert noted, "The stories of *Good-bye, Wisconsin* tell over and over again the sad lives of those who have been victims of the Midwest and found it impossible to flourish there."

The Babe's Bed, a novella-length work also set in Wisconsin, was published in 1930 in a limited edition. However, due to his self-doubts as a writer, Wescott did not publish any other fiction for the next ten years.

During this time Wescott's reputation waned, partly because the two nonfiction books he published--*Fear and Trembling* (1932) and *A Calendar of Saints for Unbelievers* (1933)--were critical and commercial disappointments.

Return to the United States

In 1935, Wescott and Wheeler moved back to the United States, setting up households at both a farm in New Jersey owned by Wescott's younger brother Lloyd and in New York City, where they shared a series of apartments with Lynes.

It was at this time that Wheeler began a long-term association with the Museum of Modern Art when he joined the staff as a guest curator. In 1941, he was named director of the department of exhibitions and publications, a post he held until 1967, when he resigned to become an adviser to the board of trustees. 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.

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 Pilgrim Hawk

In 1940, Wescott published *The Pilgrim Hawk: A Love Story*, a short novel that revolves around a group of people who spend the afternoon together in the French countryside during the late 1920s. The work was widely acclaimed by critics and is often considered Wescott's greatest achievement.

A reviewer for the London *Times* described the novel as a "haunting, poetic, compressed story of love and art, freedom and captivity."

Bawer, pointing to the work's restraint, complexity, and drama, considers it "an exemplary novella in the classic tradition, its manner stately and elliptical, its characters subtly and ironically etched." He believes it to be perhaps Wescott's "most nearly perfect work--taut, subtle, and exquisitely ordered."

Lynes Ends the Relationship

By the early 1940s, George Platt Lynes had achieved fame as a fashion and portrait photographer, whose works were distinguished by their dramatic lighting and stylized settings, although these assignments did not hold his interest over time. "How I loathe making schoolgirls beautifully vague," he once complained to a friend.

His real passion, and perhaps his most lasting achievement, however, was his intensely homoerotic dance images and male nudes, although very few of these photographs were exhibited publicly during his lifetime.

In 1943 Lynes, having fallen in love with his young studio assistant George Tichenor, decided to end his seventeen-year relationship with Wescott and Wheeler.

"This is a milestone date in our lives: this afternoon Monroe received a letter from George to say he is leaving us," Wescott wrote to his brother Lloyd and sister-in-law Barbara on February 26, 1943.

Writing in his private journal years later, Wescott recalled sadly, "Everyone felt sorry for George. It was young love, and so on. George was so beautiful--and that boy destroyed him! Poor George. I knew he was doomed."

The three men, however, remained friendly until Lynes's death in 1955.

Apartment in Athens

Wescott published his last completed novel, *Apartment in Athens*, in 1945. Significantly different in setting and tone from his earlier works, the novel concerns a Greek couple in Nazi-occupied Athens who must share their living quarters with a melancholic German officer. The tensions between the couple and their unwanted guest are described, as William Rueckert notes, "with the minimal amount of fictional distortion. It is the attempt of an essentially romantic, lyric, naturally symbolic novelist to write realistic fiction."

Literary critic Edmund Wilson, commenting on the novel in his *Classics and Commercials* (1950), observed that "the cramped physical and moral conditions, the readjustments in the relationships of the family, the whole distortion of the social organism by the unassimilated presence of the foreigner--all this is most successfully created."

It was another remarkable success for Wescott.

Late Career

Although Wescott continued to work on novels and stories, he was unable to complete any of them and did not publish any new fiction during the remaining forty-two years of his life.

The reasons for Wescott's silence have long been the subject of critical and biographical speculation. Jerry Rosco, a friend and recent biographer of Wescott's, has commented that the writer simply "lost the feel for fiction" and developed "a curious aversion to being published."

In his essay, Bawer hypothesizes that one reason for the long silence may have been Wescott's homosexuality. As an autobiographical writer, Wescott had already successfully mined his childhood and coming of age. "But few readers, at that time anyway," Bawer notes, "would have regarded [a] sensitive and candid novel based upon Wescott's adult domestic life with anything other than horror."

As Jim Friel has observed, Wescott "could neither write candidly nor, like Thornton Wilder and Somerset Maugham, could he find other means to dissemble his subject. He could only resort to silence--as [British novelist E. M.] Forster had done, hugging *Maurice* to his chest until the world was fit to read it."

Like Forster, who experienced a similar inability to publish a novel in the final four decades of his life, Wescott did publish several works of nonfiction. Among these works are *Images of Truth: Remembrances and Criticism* (1962), a collection of essays on his friendship and admiration for the writers Katherine Anne Porter, Somerset Maugham, Colette, Isak Dinesen, Thomas Mann, and Thornton Wilder.

In 1975, he published *The Best of All Possible Worlds: Journals, Letters, and Remembrances, 1914-1937*.

He also wrote some explicitly gay short fiction that he was unable to publish during his lifetime. One of these stories, "A Visit to Priapus," written in 1938, appears in *The New Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (2003), edited by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell.

Additionally, Wescott began editing for publication the journals he had kept from 1937 until the mid-1950s. Although some of his published work hinted obliquely at his homosexuality, the journals focused on his private life and dealt explicitly with his relationships with Wheeler, Lynes, and others. They were published posthumously in 1990 as *Continual Lessons: The Journals of Glenway Wescott, 1937-1955*.

Wescott also channeled his energies into other pursuits. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and later served as president, from 1959 to 1962, of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. His work helped secure grants and awards for many new, as well as established, writers.

In the 1950s, Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey, founder of the Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction at Indiana University, became a close friend of Wescott's and drew him into the work he was conducting on human sexuality.

Their friendship led Kinsey to ask for assistance with research materials. "He asked me to help him with erotic reading matter," Wescott later explained. "He asked me to . . . look at their library and suggest what they might get rid of, what things to acquire, and to advise the young librarians what things to keep." Over the next several years, Wescott frequently visited the Institute or met with Kinsey in New York.

Wescott also became a central figure in New York's artistic and gay communities in the 1950s and 1960s. The writers W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Marianne Moore, and Somerset Maugham, and the artists Paul Cadmus and Jared French, were among his acquaintances.

On February 20, 1987, Wescott died of a stroke at his home in Rosemont, New Jersey. He was 85 years old.

Two days after Wescott's death, Wheeler suffered a massive stroke, which left him legally blind and paralyzed on the left side of his body. He died on August 14, 1988, eighteen months after the death of Wescott.

Although a well-regarded and best-selling writer in his lifetime, Wescott soon fell into near-obscurity, remembered more as a raconteur and as a partner to one of the longest gay marriages in history than as an author. Indeed, his reputation had severely declined long before his death. However, as Bruce Bawer has noted, this decline is "a measure less of his own failings than of the misbegotten values of the literary culture that has allowed him to fall."

Some of Wescott's works have recently been reprinted. *The Pilgrim Hawk* was reissued in 2001 with an introduction by Michael Cunningham; *Apartment in Athens* was reissued in 2004 with an introduction by David Leavitt; and *The Grandmothers* was reissued in 2006 with an introduction by Sargent Bush. Collections of Wescott's manuscripts are housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and the New York Public Library.

Bibliography

Bawer, Bruce. *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and Its Critics*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1988.

Friel, Jim. "Review of *Glenway Wescott Personally: a Biography* by Jerry Rosco." *Cercles: Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde Anglophone* (2007): <http://www.cercles.com/review/r29/rosco.html#10>

Johnson, Ira. *Glenway Wescott: The Paradox of Voice*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971.

Leddick, David. *Intimate Companions: A Triography of George Platt Lynes, Paul Cadmus, Lincoln Kirstein, and Their Circle*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Rosco, Jerry. *Glenway Wescott Personally: A Biography*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

Rueckert, William H. *Glenway Wescott*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965.

_____. "Glenway Wescott." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 9: American Novelists, 1910-1945*. James J. Martine, ed. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1981. 111-115.

Vargo, Marc E. *Noble Lives: Biographical Portraits of Three Remarkable Gay Men --Glenway Wescott, Aaron Copland, and Dag Hammarskjöld*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2005.

Wescott, Glenway. *Continual Lessons: The Journals of Glenway Wescott, 1937-1955*. Robert Phelps and Jerry Rosco, eds. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990.

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.