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JOHN CHARLES McNEILL

North Carolina Poet, 1874-1907

A Biographical Sketch

by

Agatha Boyd Adams



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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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JOHN CHARLES McNEILL was born July 26, 1874, in Scotland County, North Carolina. This southeastern section of the State had been settled in the early part of the eighteenth century by emigrants from Scotland, and Scots continued to move into the warm and fertile region from their bleak homeland. Both of John Charles' grandfathers, John McNeill and Charles Livingston, came from Argyleshire. His parents were Duncan McNeill and Euphemia Livingston McNeill. His father had been one of the first graduates of Trinity College (now Duke University), which was then located in Randolph County. In addition to managing a sizeable farm, he had been at various times an editor, lecturer and writer. His mother was a descendant of Daniel White, a pioneer Baptist preacher who founded many churches in North Carolina. Those who knew her have described her as a woman of unusual beauty and of forceful character. The deep impression which she made on her poet son is evident in the many references to mothers and motherhood throughout his writing.

John Charles was the youngest in a family of five: his sisters were Mary Catherine, Ella and Donna; his older brother, Wayne Leland. For the first twelve years of John Charles' life the family lived on a plantation called Ellerslie, not far from the little settlement of Wagram. During McNeill's childhood the county in which the farm was located was still Richmond County. It did not become Scotland County until 1899. This accounts for the fact that the poet has been variously described as

coming from both counties. As is true in the history of several eastern North Carolina counties, a river had been the reason for separating Richmond County from a still older county, Anson; the Pee Dee River frequently reached such a flood in the spring that the people could not get across to attend Court at Grassy Island, so Richmond County was formed from Anson in 1779.

Rivers played a determining role not only in the history of the county, but also in the life of the young poet. His was a fluid country, tilted gently toward the sea and drained by many streams in addition to his favorite, the Lumber River, which he preferred to call the Lumbee. The very names of some of these waters conjure up a picture of the region: Juniper Swamp, Deep Creek, Shoe-heel Swamp, Bear Swamp. The Lumber River had once been known as Drowning Creek. The fertile silt brought down by the rivers made the county one of the most productive in the state, especially for cotton.

The McNeill farm was a prosperous one, comfortable for those who lived there and lavish in hospitality toward friends and strangers. The fare abounded in the game and fish of the region, as well as in the fruits for which the county is still famous; cantaloupes, watermelons, peaches and dewberries. His father recalled that John Charles "from boyhood was delicate in his appetite. The table might be loaded with luxuries, but he would choose only bread and milk, with butter and dainty fruits, not taking meats." Perhaps a doctor might discover in this limited diet for a growing active boy one of the causes of the tragic illness of his early manhood.

The family life reflected the pious standards of its Scottish inheritance, and also the Scottish veneration for

learning. Duncan McNeill owned a good library, well stocked with the works of such respected nineteenth century authors as Scott, Thackeray and Dickens, Tennyson, Wordsworth and Burns. Here young John Charles discovered his first enthusiasms and admirations in literature.

In spite, however of his dainty appetite and bookish tastes, he grew up strong and vigorous; "tall, slender, and beautiful in form and feature," his father described him. As the youngest child in a closely united family, he was naturally adored by his parents, brother and sisters, but his innately lovable personality drew the neighborhood children to him also. His boyhood was a happy one, never burdened with responsibility for the duties of the farm. He had the freedom of the woods, the creeks and river, and the endlessly fascinating swamps, with their great variety of bird and insect and animal life. By his own witness, he was very early filled with that love of the outdoor world which never left him:

"The first thing I remember of this world or of any world, for that matter is the being lifted up by a big boy in a cadet uniform to get a peep of four blue eggs in a hollow. The big boy explained how they were bluebird eggs, how the bluebird's noggin was not hard enough nor his bill enough like a chisel for him to dig out a hole for himself, and how he waited until the sapsucker had made and abandoned the nest, when he, the bluebird, moved in and took charge. I don't know when George III died, but I know when that stump fell; will never forget where it stood nor the day, which now seems a thousand years gone, when I gazed with wonder at those eggs."

In the carefree wandering of these childhood days, John Charles McNeill learned to imitate the call of every bird which came to that region; learned to know a buck track from that of a sheep or a shoat; he knew where the

coveys of wild birds used, and where they would pitch. He watched and followed mink, otter, wild turkeys, herons, kingfishers. "I have lain at baited places half a day," he said, "waiting for the wild duck to come." He hunted squirrel, possum, turkeys. He went fishing for bass, redbelly, cat, sun perch and pickerel. He knew intimately the stretches and windings of the Lumber River, the yellow of its gravelly shallows darkening gradually to black; he "spent whole summers in dalliance with the river." He absorbed into his sensitive memory the notes of thrushes, meadow larks and whippoorwills; the fragrance of horsemint, water honeysuckle and sweet bay; the colors of wild flowers and autumn leaves and sunsets. Out of these materials the texture of his poetry is woven.

McNeill's boyhood was not a solitary one. He became a leader among the neighborhood boys, "the sunburnt boys," as he later named them in his rhymes. He excelled in running, jumping, rowing and swimming; he knew to the full the cool delight of diving from "the springboard extended over the old deep swimming hole, and watching the mellow bugs on the surface scattered by plunging naked bodies." He built boats to use on the river, one called "The Wild Irishman," another "The Nereid." The river and the nearby swamps and woods were as truly his home as the big farmhouse of his father, and to them he loved to return in memory and in writing.

When John Charles was twelve, the family moved from Ellerslie to another farm called Riverton, about a mile and a half south of Wagram on the Maxton highway. His beloved river remained in sight, and his pleasures and pursuits were unchanged. As he grew older, his

taste for hunting, fishing and all outdoor pastimes increased. He experienced the keen excitement of hunting possums at night, when the lightwood torches stained with red the undersides of the leaves of black gum and cypress. Once when he was wandering in the woods he found a mother possum and her litter of soft furry babies. The sight so enchanted John Charles that he wanted to take them home for pets, to play with and stroke. But how to get them home? What could he put them in? Not to be defeated by the lack of basket or bag, the boy stripped off his pants, tied them together at the bottom, coaxed the possum family into the improvised bag, and appeared at home pantless, redfaced and hot, with his burden over his shoulders, to the great hilarity of his family.

One of the most important parts of his education began and went on in the woods and fields. His book education and his great love of reading began in his father's library. But Duncan McNeill could not be content with any desultory education, no matter how rich in implication it might be. John Charles started his formal schooling at Richmond Academy, about three miles from his home. The Academy, later called Spring Hill, had been established a hundred years before the time he entered it, another evidence of the esteem of this Scottish community for learning. Even in his earliest student days, John Charles, without ever seeming to work very hard, succeeded in knowing most of the answers and winning most of the prizes. His keen memory, ability to read quickly and lively curiosity were the tools of the born student. The master of Richmond Academy, Mr. J. A. Morrison, said to the elder McNeill, "Your son,

John Charles, is the brightest and best scholar I ever had, and I have taught for twenty years." His gay and friendly personality won him popularity with his fellow students, so that he never had the reputation of being a grind.

When he was seventeen, McNeill spent a year with his sister, Mrs. Jasper L. Memory, and attended Whiteville Academy. Whiteville is the county seat of Columbus County, still further east than Scotland County, and like it veined and webbed with swamps and big creeks. McNeill could continue here the outdoor explorations which delighted him. The academies of that period had little to offer in the way of scientific training, and his scientific interests were never either stimulated or trained, but he undoubtedly had the makings of an excellent observer of nature, perhaps a botanist or ornithologist, as well as a poet.

After the year at Whiteville, the eighteen-year-old boy accepted the responsibility of teaching a one room school near Statesboro, Georgia, where another sister, Mrs. Watson, lived. The costume which he adopted for this first venture in teaching was eccentric, to say the least; probably he felt that his youth needed the prop of something extraordinary and impressive in the way of clothing. He wore a long-tailed "Jimslinger" coat, such as country preachers used to wear, and with it a pair of copperas-dyed homespun breeches, several inches too short for his long legs. But this piper of a boyish teacher, in his strange garb of black and blue green, commanded the respect not only of his pupils but of their parents.

In September, 1894, John Charles McNeill entered Wake Forest College as a freshman. Here his ability

gained quick recognition; he won the Dixon medal for the best essay his first year, and was appointed a tutor in English while still a freshman. One of his English teachers, Dr. William Sledd, became a good friend of McNeill's, and influenced strongly his already awakened interest in literature. Sledd was a writer of verse himself, as well as an enthusiastic teacher and a great lover of poetry. He and McNeill used to spend long hours talking over the poets, hours which Sledd sometimes felt should be devoted to correcting themes, but which proved much more entertaining in the company of this eager student.

In addition to his major field of English literature, McNeill also studied French, German, and oddly enough, law. It seems quite likely that he had no great interest in law, but felt the need of providing himself with a profession. Whatever his reasons, he succeeded in passing an oral bar examination in 1897, and received a license to practise in the State. He continued at Wake Forest for another year, graduating in 1898 with a Master's degree *summa cum laude*. During his college days he had edited the *Wake Forest Student*, in which his own poems sometimes appeared; he had also sung in the college choir. As in his academy years, he was well-liked by his fellow students. One of them said, "We recognized his genius, but we appreciated him more for the charm of his personality, for he was one of us."

The year after graduation, McNeill went to Mercer University at Macon, Georgia, to teach English grammar and composition. The struggle to guide unwilling freshmen through the intricacies of syntax must have been a dull and irksome task for a youthful poet with a head full of dreams. Whatever his inner conflicts and rebellions,

however, he proved a competent teacher. A pupil thus described his manner: "In teaching he was simple, direct, forceful. His vein of quaint elusive humor appeared here at great advantage. Tactfully, and yet without the least indication of studied effort, he held the attention of his class. His rich low voice, marvellously musical, possessed a holding power such as is rarely met."

Teaching did not however yield sufficient satisfaction for him to choose it as a profession. During his first few years out of college he evidently floundered a bit, unsure of his goals and of what to make of his talents. Possessed of a considerable literary gift, plus the ambition and industry necessary to acquire a law degree and a Master's degree in literature, he had no clear idea as to how to put these attainments to work. Undoubtedly deep within himself he wanted most of all to write poetry; to make songs about his beloved eastern river country as lovely and as sonorous as those he used to read about England in his father's dim old library. But in those days, in that section, a young man would scarcely dare to say that he had chosen to be a writer; he would have been laughed at, called a sissy, or at the least, a ne'er-do-well. Writing for the gentleman, the professional man, must be an avocation, something amusingly done on the side, never a serious purpose. The South at the turn of the century had little interest in the making of literature. The literary awakening which brought Julia Peterkin, Dubose Heyward, Paul Green and many others, was still twenty years away. The world in which John Charles McNeill found himself, once he left Wake Forest College and the discussions with Dr. Sledd, was for the most part an unbookish and unliterary one. That strong Scotch con-

science inherited from generations of stubborn forebears demanded that he justify himself in the eyes of his own world. So he turned from teaching to law. In 1900 he put out his shingle in Lumberton, over on the east bank of the Lumber River in Robeson County.

The practice of law in a small North Carolina town did not offer great variety or much of a challenge; nor did John Charles McNeill give himself up to it with any notable industry. The spell of the river extended to the very door of his office; the mysterious and enticing smells of the woods floated among his law books, and wild bird calls summoned him to explore. Clients often found the office locked because he had gone fishing. Naturally his practice did not flourish, but after his own fashion he was preserving his soul. Fishing expeditions meant also the storing up of images and observations which could be used later in poems. The only part of his law practice which really seemed to interest him was that among Negroes; here again he could record and store away for future use the dialect and turns of speech which give reality to his Negro poems.

While in Lumberton, McNeill bought an interest in a newspaper, the *Argus*, for which he wrote occasional editorials. In 1902 he sold his interest in the paper and returned to his native county, Scotland, where he formed a law partnership with Angus McLean in Laurinburg. During this period he won an election to the State Legislature as a representative from Scotland County, and served a term in Raleigh. This political experience left little or no trace in his writing, except perhaps in his ability to cover political gatherings when he later worked for the *Observer* in Charlotte.

By 1902 poems of John Charles McNeill had begun to appear in the *Century Magazine* and the *Youth's Companion*. During his two years in Laurinburg he had already acquired something of a local reputation as a poet and man of letters. Perhaps because of this reputation, H. E. C. Bryant (Red Buck), then city editor of the *Observer*, came one day to call on McNeill in his law office in Laurinburg. He found a restless and dissatisfied young man, frankly bored with the law, and uncertain what to do next. "How would you like to write for the *Observer*?" asked Bryant. McNeill seized the idea eagerly; how much more to his taste than the dull sophistries and formularies of law, this opportunity to do what he had always wanted to do anyway, to write, but with the respectable sanction of a paid job! In the fall of 1904, largely through the good offices of Mr. Bryant, McNeill became a member of the Staff of the *Observer*, in Charlotte, and entered his fullest and freest years as a writer.

The editor of the *Observer* at that time was J. P. Caldwell, a man of lively intelligence and genial disposition. He encouraged his "boys" to maintain high standards of literary work, and was himself regarded as one of the ablest editors of the time in the State. The contract which he gave McNeill expressed the confidence which Caldwell must have had in his talent; it stated specifically that he could "write whenever and whatever he pleases." Surely that was a charter of emancipation from a country law office.

Soon John Charles McNeill had become an accepted and popular member of "the hard-working and rollicking bunch that got out the paper in the 'Mule Pen.'"

The editorial offices were so called because the floor covering had been torn up many times. McNeill supposedly had a private office up on the next floor, in the rooms of the Manufacturers' Club, but he liked to be with the boys, and seldom worked in his office except when everybody downstairs was too busy to lend him a typewriter. Apparently he never possessed a typewriter of his own. His habit was to compose in pencil on a ten cent tablet, and then copy what he had written, pecking it out slowly with two fingers. Sometimes a reporter would rush in and yell, "Mac, you are using my typewriter, and I've got to turn in this story right away."

"All right, bubber," and John Charles would move over to another machine and go on with his typing. His amiable, even and happy disposition won the affection of his fellow workers. They liked to kid him and play jokes on him as a green countryman and a Scotchman, but they really loved him. J. P. Caldwell thus spoke of his relationships in the office:

"Under this roof, where men are judged by each other, where friendships are cemented and characteristics discerned, no harsh words of his, no unkindly criticism by him of any human being can be recalled."

McNeill, by the witness of his contemporaries, was a striking figure in those days. His height and his thick prematurely gray hair added to his look of distinction. "His head was high and full above the ears, with a heavily arched brow over introspective eyes which could also twinkle quizzically," said one friend. Other adjectives used to describe him were lithe, angular, shambling, "an overgrown boy." His photograph shows a clear, direct and thoughtful look, and a humorous mouth.

The Charlotte Observer of those days was a somewhat informal folksy paper, with emphasis on human interest. In the background hung the somber clouds of the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian Revolution, the massacres of Jews in Odessa, the yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans, race riots in New York, but always in the foreground were the happenings in the State and especially in Charlotte: weddings, runaways, funerals, fires, political meetings, banquets, sermons. More people died of tuberculosis, appendicitis and typhoid fever in those days. More gentlemen shot each other in political rows. Lynchings were fairly common, and were handled by the paper quite casually. In fact on at least one occasion the *Observer* reached a triumph of understatement in the following headlines:

"MOB KILLS TWO NEGROES
QUIET SOUTH CAROLINA CRIME."

The paper had an odd habit of headlining one piece of news from the middle of a miscellaneous despatch from a town, which sometimes brought about such startling combinations as this:

"CULMINATION OF ROMANCE
PROMINENT COUPLE TO WED."

Salisbury, October 22. John White and Garfield Austin, two negro youngsters, are in the lock-up today, both carrying the scars of a fierce battle last night . . ."

And it is only several paragraphs later that the bewildered reader learns about the culmination of that romance, when he comes to "There will be in the first Presbyterian Church Tuesday November 4 a wedding . . ."

John Charles McNeill's column for the *Observer*, usually carried on the editorial page, reflected the wide

reach of his interest. He evidently took full advantage of the liberty which his contract guaranteed; his column appeared quite irregularly. Sometimes a week or more would go by without anything initialled J.C.M. When the column consisted of poems, often six or seven of them, he used the heading "Songs Merry and Sad," later to become the title of his first published volume of verse. For his prose comments he played around with various titles. For a while he was very happy with "Squaw Talk and Ginger"; it had, he said, "that delicious quality of vagueness." Later on, when Editor Marshall of the *Gastonia Gazette* objected to this title, McNeill sweetly admitted that it bored him too, and never used it again. Some of the titles he employed at one time or another were: "Pot Pourri," "Weeds of Idleness," "A Little Street Talk," "From Street and Lobby," "Tales of a Traveller," "Sundry Observations," and every now and then quite baldly, "Unclassified Stunts." In these informal paragraphs he wrote at random about whatever happened to interest or move him; from conversations overheard on the street and trivial anecdotes of children to a passionate expression of grief for the massacred Jews in Russia, and an exuberant pouring forth of delight in his first discovery of the letters of Abelard and Heloise. Sometimes he published what amounted to short stories and slight sketches; more often his column contained brief intimate essays. His great enthusiasms were for nature and for poetry. Some of the best of his prose is to be found in the descriptive passages which conjure up so deftly a scene or a memory, such as the sight of robins stopping on their southward pilgrimage to chatter over the fresh black gum berries and possum

haws in a swamp, or the petals of pine burs scattered by squirrels, or the realistic details of a Carolina swamp, its wasps, dirt daubers, cypresses and scorpions with bright blue tails, or a Sunday afternoon ride on the streetcars "to buy a glass of country lemonade and eat a slice of watermelon under the shade of a big oak tree." That last evokes in a few touches a whole forgotten past. The poets for whom he expressed admiration in his column were Tennyson, William Watson, Newbolt, Stephen Phillips, and especially Swinburne, "the wonderfulest artist in rhythm that has ever played upon the English language as an instrument."

In addition to his regular, or rather highly irregular, column, McNeill covered several other sorts of assignments for the *Observer*. Sometimes he reviewed current books; he could be as tough with a trashy novel as he could be awestruck by some literary discovery such as Stephen Phillips' *Marpessa*. He wrote a spirited review of *The Clansman*, by his friend and Wake Forest classmate Thomas Dixon. *The Clansman*, both as novel and as play, stirred up a great deal of controversy. McNeill did not like the use of the novel as a tract, or propaganda, and said so very frankly. Sometimes he contributed brief notes on the current magazines under the heading "Books and Other Things": *Tom Watson's Magazine*, the *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *Pearson's*, *The Smart Set*, *The Century*.

The humdrum reporting of local events, weddings, funerals and the like, or what the *Observer* at that time called "The Pastimes of Society" bored McNeill and he evaded such assignments whenever possible. But he would voluntarily go to the Recorder's Court, and

through his great interest in people and his understanding of Negroes, get a story which no one else could have obtained. The accounts of the Recorder's Court were at that time written up in conversational narrative style, with dialect accurately reported, and no ban on rough language. McNeill's gift for characterization is evident in many of his reports on special events; as for instance, when reporting the trial in North Wilkesboro of two revenue officers for an assault on an editor, he described the plaintiff as a "most harmless faded-looking little man with a bloodshot eye, sandy hair and sober clothes"; or when he described the principal speaker at the Gibson family reunion, "He took his task easily, spoke in a conversational tone, and fanned himself calmly with a palm leaf fan as he went along." Sometimes McNeill's creative imagination got the best of him as a reporter. This is notably true of his reporting of the Dargan case in Darlington, South Carolina, which reads like the most lurid of murder mysteries, and leaves the reader titillated by a dozen unanswered questions. Was Robert Keith Dargan a suicide? Had he robbed the Independent Oil Company of more than a million dollars? Did his brother poison him to spare the family disgrace? Or did the two brothers conspire to fake a suicide, outwit a coroner, and contrive an escape? McNeill wrote this up with evident relish and gusto, but as novelist rather than journalist.

He was the *Observer's* acknowledged emissary and reporter for events of literary or intellectual significance. Dr. W. L. Poteat, after giving an address in Charlotte, wrote McNeill that the newspaper account was much better than the original. During an address by Dr. Edwin

Mims at the old Academy of Music the lights went out for fifteen minutes, the lecturer continued in the dark, and McNeill reproduced the whole speech from memory for the paper the next morning. He covered such meetings and occasions as the dedication of the new agricultural building at State College; the Baptist State Convention in Raleigh; the Manufacturers' Club banquet at High Point, with speeches by Secretary of Labor Metcalf, and Senators Simmons and Overman; the sensational Gattis-Kilgo libel suit in Raleigh; the inauguration of President Roosevelt, and commencement exercises at Trinity College and Chapel Hill. "Chapel Hill," he remarked, "is an isolated village and hard to reach." Forty years later that is still true.

McNeill by no means always flattered the speeches of famous men, but he probably never went quite so far to the extreme of dispraise as in his report of a speech by Ex-Senator Marion Butler at Chapel Hill. Butler had been a stormy figure in North Carolina politics in the nineties. Himself a Populist, he had brought about a fusion of the Populist and Republican parties in the State, and had been elected to the United States Senate. When the Dialectic and Philanthropic Literary Societies invited him to speak at their annual banquet on June 4, 1906, there was considerable comment and opposition in the State. One stalwart trustee, when reminded that there were Republicans in the student body, muttered, "If there are that many Republicans among the students, we'd better close the University." But the traditional right of Carolina students to hear speakers of all kinds of political thinking was in this instance upheld. McNeill described Butler's speech for the *Observer* as "a harm-

less sorry effort." The Senator had apparently made no preparation for it whatever; he first read an oration which he had presented on his graduation from the University twenty-one years before, and then, in McNeill's words, "the rest of his two hour speech was entirely didactic, marvellously rambling, and might be fairly summarized as follows, "To do the right thing, is broadly speaking, the right thing to do.'" McNeill ended his report with, "But I am too bored to write any more." Later, when a friend taxed him with the severity of this criticism of the Senator, McNeill replied that Butler, in failing to prepare his speech, had failed to live up to the opportunity of the occasion and had thus cheated the students who had invited him.

Sometimes McNeill reported the plays which appeared at the Academy of Music. In those pre-movie days plays were much more frequent and varied than they are today in a city the size of Charlotte. A backward glance at them almost makes the reader envious. Among those who played in Charlotte during John Charles McNeill's years on the *Observer* were Viola Allen in *The Winter's Tale*, Rose Coghlan in *Diplomacy*, Louis James in *Two Orphans*, Walker Whiteside in David Garrick's *Love*, Florence Davis in *The Player Maid*, and Thomas (son of Joseph) Jefferson in *Rip Van Winkle*. Johanna Gadski sang there, and Paderewski played.

McNeill's prose column often expressed that understanding of children which is also apparent in his poems; such sketches as "Santa Claus' Whiskers Scorched," "Little Girls at Play," or "What a Sandhills Boy Knows about Nature," are full of tender insight into the ways of youngsters.

Not only children, but all simple folk and folkways attracted him. Frequently he would set down folk beliefs in telling phrases. For instance, at Hallowe'en:

"If you go to a south-running spring and dip your left shirt sleeve in it, hang the wet sleeve up to dry and lie down near the fire, at midnight you'll see your consort come and turn the drying garment."

"Take some hemp seed and sow it in a lonely place, saying 'Come after and harrow,' and over your left shoulder you will see the object of your care in the attitude of harrowing."

"Go with the tongue of a piebald possum, or the tooth of a senile coon, to an old field graveyard. Sit on a white gravestone under a cedar, and wait there a while. What you will see will be enough."

While he was working for the *Observer* McNeill took his first trip to New York. He went from Norfolk by boat, which reminded him of his pleasure in reading Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. While in Manhattan he enjoyed himself in a thoroughly spontaneous way, following his own belief that "a green man is happier than a world-weary one." He talked to every one he met on the streets; he picked up an acquaintance on a streetcar who took him to dinner at the New York Athletic Club; he "spotted a good many southern Negroes and made friends with them"; he went to a fire; he "fooled about the docks." In short, the young man from Scotland County was as much at home on the sidewalks of New York as in Shoeheel Swamp. He visited McClure's office, where the *Youth's Companion* was published, and the offices of the *Century*, to both of which he had sold poems. He bought two books, Bulfinch's *Age of Fable* and Stephen Phillips' *Paolo and Francesca*. And most thrilling of all, he had lunch at the Players'

Club with an elder poet, Richard Watson Gilder, and was shown the room which once had belonged to Edwin Booth.

Another trip had more direct connection with his work on the *Observer*. In September 1905 he accompanied Governor Glenn on a tour of New England at the invitation of, somewhat inexplicably, the Southern Pacific Railroad. Governor Glenn had been the only southern governor to accept the invitation to visit a circuit of New England fairs. The party went to Boston, Winchendon, Exeter, Concord, N. H., St. Johnsbury, Vt., and Waterville, Me. Everywhere they were entertained with luncheons, banquets, speechmaking. McNeill reported proudly that Governor Glenn's speeches were hailed as the best of them all.

McNeill beheld New England with the fresh and unjaded response that he had turned upon New York. In Boston he visited the offices of the *Atlantic*, to him a sort of holy of holies of American literature, and expressed surprise at its somewhat dingy exterior. But he enjoyed a conversation with the editor, Bliss Perry. He was thrilled by his first sight of the Merrimac River, green and clear, "as old and distant to my mind as Canterbury or Camelot." The rich green fields, the stone walls, the golden rod and wild asters, the woods of white pines and birches, delighted him. The whole country seemed to him like a great park, neatly ordered and groomed. The New England fairs he found "typical southern fairs, from the merry-go-round to the side-shows."

Just outside of Winchendon, Massachusetts, on a narrow road approaching a bridge, the automobile in which

McNeill was riding swerved sharply to avoid striking a wagon, and hurtled thirty feet down a steep slope. McNeill fell under the car as it turned over, and received cuts on his face and scalp which required several stitches. No one else was hurt. McNeill went on with the party, after he had been bandaged, and rested at the Fabyan House and wrote a column for the *Observer* while the others climbed Mt. Washington. "I am too surfeited with fine scenery to exercise properly the faculty of selection," he wrote, "rendered half dormant with rich diet, and bowed double and flattened out from wrestling with a 40-horsepower automobile. For a slow-headed citizen of the sand hills, accustomed to see the hours proceed with majesty, this is too condensed a life, too intense hospitality."

In October, 1905, John Charles McNeill received the Patterson Cup for having "published during the preceding twelve months work showing the greatest excellence and the highest literary skill and genius." The award had just been established by Mrs. Lindsay Patterson in honor of her father, William Houston Patterson. McNeill was the first to win the cup. President Theodore Roosevelt, at that time touring the State, made the presentation for the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association at the annual meeting of that body in Raleigh. The story goes that McNeill, never very conscious of appearances, borrowed a coat to wear on this august occasion. His reply to the President was simple and modest:

"Mr. President, my joy in this golden trophy is heightened by the fortune which permits me to take it from the hand of the foremost citizen of the world. To you,

sir, to Mrs. Lindsay Patterson, our gracious matron of letters, and to the committee of scholars whose judgment was kind to me, all thanks."

Immediately after receiving the cup, he took the first train home to Scotland County to show it to his mother.

On the occasion of this award, J. P. Caldwell of the *Observer*, bursting with pride in the poet whom he had sponsored, wrote "Mark you, masters,—and this may be said without danger of turning his hard Scotch head,—the man is a genius. The only fear concerning him is that North Carolina cannot hold him." Ironically, the North Carolina soil which he loved held him too quickly and too well.

The year after McNeill received the Patterson Cup, his first volume of poems, *Songs Merry and Sad*, was published by the Stone Printing Company in Charlotte. The poems in this collection were gathered from the *Observer*, the *Century*, and the *Youth's Companion*. He dedicated the book to J. P. Caldwell, "The Old Man." This volume, as well as his later *Lyrics from Cotton Land*, was later reprinted by the University of North Carolina Press.

As McNeill's reputation grew, he was often asked to give readings to clubs in various parts of the State. Archibald Henderson has described one of these readings, before the Modern Literature Club in Chapel Hill:

"I shall never forget a reading McNeill once gave us here in Chapel Hill—a running fire of dialect verse, humorous commentary, Negro anecdotes and folklore tales. . . . With curious interest I glanced around for a moment to observe the utter absorption in McNeill's personality and its expression. There was not a person in that audience not wholly oblivious

of surroundings, of self, of all else save McNeill, whose fine face lit up with a humorous glow and mellow resonant voice with its subtle note of appeal, held them bound as by some mystic spell of sorcery."

There seems little doubt that the three years during which he worked for the *Observer* were among the happiest, and certainly they were the most productive, of McNeill's life as a writer. This period of activity was brought to an abrupt close by illness, which gradually increased until early in 1907 when he had to give up and go home to rest. His disease has been variously described as a wasting illness which his doctors were unable to diagnose. R. P. Harriss, however, who knew him on the *Observer* staff, has stated that it was pernicious anemia. McNeill was a convivial and friendly soul, and he liked to join in sociable drinking with his newspaper companions. The tendency to drink increased during his last years, but it seems unlikely that this had anything to do with his illness. A tragic conflict must have gone on in the spirit of this gifted and ambitious young man as he realized that the life which had seemed so full of plenty and of promise was slipping away from him. There is genuine pathos in a paragraph which he wrote just before leaving the *Observer*:

"Thoughts on Going Home to Riverton to Rest"

"I want some good old sunburnt blood in me, some sandhill air; want swamp mud up to my belt and fish slime on my back; I want to fight the stream again, swimming, and to pull a canoe miles and miles against a shady current; to make a stubborn springboard, run twenty steps for the jump, and go down amid a roar of bubbles and enveloping coolness. Does it not almost make you feel healthier to think about it? The bass and pickerel have not been molested yet, it being too soon in

the season for the farmer's boy. The drought will have brought the river well within its channel. Fish will be congested in the black pools, fringed with lily pads. There will be thrushes and peewees and tomtits and other swamp birds, possessed of that peculiar, liquid, reedy note which even the mockingbird cannot imitate; the ironweed and bay will be in lavish bloom and busy with bees, the wasp nests will look down at their reflections, and the blue-tailed scorpion will bask on his cypress knee."

These were the things he loved, but no enumeration of them, no evocation of them, had magic powerful enough to restore his exhausted body. He died on October 17, 1907. Thus he achieved the final grace of a poet, that of dying young.

His death occurred in a month which had always appealed to him, and which he had frequently described in both prose and verse. His poem "October" seems almost prophetic:

"And death, who steals among thy purpling bowers
Is deeply hid in flowers.
And if, mayhap, a wandering child of thee,
Weary of land and sea,
Should turn him homeward from his dreamer's quest
To sob upon thy breast,
Thine arm would fold him tenderly, to prove
How thine eyes brimmed with love,
And thy dear hand, with all a mother's care,
Would rest upon his hair."

The personality of John Charles McNeill made a profound impression on all who knew him. "Every one who had so much as half an hour with him continues to think of him as a friend," said one who knew him well. Henry E. Harman described him as "one of the most lovable of men, and one of the most unpretending." J. P.

Caldwell spoke of his openness and merriment, and said that "he lived poetry even when he didn't write it."

A second volume of his verse, *Lyrics from Cotton Land*, was published in Charlotte a year after his death. Both of these books sold well, and are still in demand. Also posthumously published were two articles which he had prepared for Ashe's *Biographical History of North Carolina*, on Stuart Warren Cramer and Thomas Dixon, Junior. McNeill's reputation continued to grow after his death. Book clubs were named in his honor in Laurinburg, Benson, Wagram and Charlotte. There was the John Charles McNeill Literary Society at Wingate Junior College, the John Charles McNeill Library Association in Wagram, the John Charles McNeill Memorial Library at Spring Hill Academy. The Woman's Club of Charlotte raised money to place a bust of the poet in the Charlotte Public Library. And some forty years after his death the school children of the State were still writing themes about the poet of the sandhills.

It is doubtful whether McNeill himself would have considered his work worthy of even that much fame. He himself had written "The little loves and sorrows are my songs." He had quite enough literary acumen to recognize himself as a minor poet. To a friend, Henry E. Harman, he had said, "I find myself writing more than I should. But, alas, the most beautiful songs escape me entirely. What we write is only the faintest echo of what we feel." It is tantalizing to speculate on the possible maturing and developing of his talent had he lived longer than his brief thirty-three years, or in surroundings more favorable to literature than the rural and small town south of the early twentieth century.

He had many gifts of the natural born writer: keen observation, love of beauty, interest in people, deep feeling, a knack for the happy or the arresting phrase. He had a good ear for dialect, and for rhyme. His contemporaries considered him a master of Negro dialect. He had an ability to convey in words his own pleasantly humorous enjoyment of the small things of life. But his poetry lacks depth of thought and originality of image. It is facile, pleasant, reminiscent, rather than imaginatively stirring or moving. He is at his best in evoking the eastern North Carolina countryside of his boyhood.

His chief originality and his chief significance lie in the fact that he considered the humble things of the country fit subjects for poetry. He wrote of fox-fire lamps, of crab grass and peavines, of doodle bugs and rabbit boxes, of boys swimming in the river, of children playing house at the foot of a dogwood tree and "milking may-pop cows." He could translate into verse the smells of fennel, wild mint, and sweet bay; the sounds of bird notes, streams and leaves; the feeling of the deep swamps:

"'Knee-Deep' from reedy places
Will sing the river frogs,
The terrapins will sun themselves
On all the jutting logs."

Sometimes he could catch a flashing picture, as in

"Shrill streaks of light
Two sycamores' clean-limbed funereal white."

And he could rhyme the rapture of the country child the first day he goes barefooted in the spring:

“We feel so light we wish there were more fences here;
We'd like to jump and jump them, all together!
No sleds for us, no guns, nor even 'simmon beer,
No nothin' but the blossoms and fair weather!
The meadow is a little sticky right at first
But a few short days'll wipe away that trouble.
To feel so good and gay, I wouldn't mind the worst
That could be done by any field o' stubble.
O, all the trees are seeming sappy!
O, all the folks are smilin' happy!
And there's joy in every little bit of room;
But the happiest of them all
At the Shanghai rooster's call
Are we barefoots when the dogwoods burst abloom!”

In spite, however, of McNeill's employment of realistic country words and details, he never sufficiently freed himself from the spell of Victorian poetry in which he was steeped to avoid the use of such words as yon, o'er, gloam, prankt, and the like, which are out of tune and time with his subject matter. And he brings milkmaids, Pan, Phoebus, Alcestis, Admetus, and other conventional poetic figures into the woods and swamps of Scotland County.

In his Negro dialect poems, McNeill showed genuine talent for reproducing the humorous and vivid phrases of Negro speech. His attitude toward the Negro is, however, entirely the conventional one of his day and age. This is especially evident in an unpublished poem entitled “The White South.” His Negroes are quaint or comical or pathetic; he enjoys them, but is not concerned with the injustice of their position. He could and did express, both in his prose column and in verse, great sympathy for the fate of the Jews in Russia, but remained unaware of

the plight of another minority group close at hand. For this he is not to be blamed; he simply accepted and reflected the traditional attitudes of his region and his time. Twenty years later he might have been encouraged to view more realistically and more as human individuals the Negroes whom he knew so well from childhood. The Negroes of Paul Green's folk plays are direct descendants of the slight but appealing figures of some of McNeill's poems.

McNeill wrote less lovingly of love than he did of nature. From the internal evidence of his poems to Jane, to Isabel, to Helen, to Margaret, to Lalage, it would be impossible to piece together the story of any one love. No "dark lady" is shadowed in his rhymes. His poems of love are for the most part conventional and derivative, showing the influence of Poe and Swinburne, or in some cases Austin Dobson. Perhaps the reason why he never married is to be found in the indecision expressed in his little poem called "Love's Fashion":

"Oh, I can jest with Margaret
And laugh a gay good night,
But when I take my Helen's hand
I dare not clasp it tight.
'Tis Margaret I call sweet names:
Helen is too, too dear
For me to stammer little words
Of love into her ear."

McNeill's difficulty in establishing himself in his life work, and his briefly ended career, left him little time for such an important decision as marriage.

In his deep love for the country, and his ability to transcribe that feeling into poetry, he was in a way a

forerunner of a later poet of eastern North Carolina, Paul Green. Green's development as an artist occurred within a period much more favorable to realism and originality in literature, and much more appreciative of regionalism, than the era in which McNeill lived. But the poetry inherent in all that Green has written has much the same roots as that of McNeill: loving familiarity with a special place, and the ability to evoke the feel of that region. There is kinship too in McNeill's and Green's interest in the Negro and use of Negro speech. The two poets shared also an interest in collecting folk beliefs and superstitions. And in a curiously prophetic line in his poem "Virginia Dare," McNeill foretold the success of the future author of *The Lost Colony*:

"Thou baby Eve of Saxons in the West
The master yet shall come to sing of thee . . .
Then fear thee not neglect hath done thee wrong,
First born American; for every stroke
That felled the woods, for all the battle smoke
That rose o'er conquest, for each savage throng,
And for the hearts that bore but never broke,
Prouder at last shall flow the master's song."

The haunting story of the colonists who disappeared from Roanoke Island had evidently stirred the imagination of McNeill, as it did later that of Paul Green. Had McNeill lived longer, perhaps he too would have written more fully about this peculiarly North Carolinian and peculiarly romantic bit of history.

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