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Geoff Puterbaugh

MCALMON, ROBERT (1896–1956)

American writer and publisher.

McAlmon was born in Clifton, Kansas, the son of an itinerant Presbyterian minister, the youngest of ten children. Of his mother (Bess Urquhart), he wrote: "Her love's my prison, / and my pity is the lock." The family migrated through a number of South Dakota towns into Minneapolis and eventually California. McAlmon attended the universities of Minnesota (1916) and Southern California (1917–20), but he received more education as a Western farmhand, as a merchant mariner, and in the Army Air Force, where he was stationed at San Diego in 1918. The airmen inspired his first poems published in college and in *Poetry* (March 1919).

In 1920, McAlmon moved first to Chicago and then to New York City in search of freedom and companions. In New York he worked nude as a male model and formed a life-long friendship with artist and poet Marsden Hartley. With William Carlos Williams, McAlmon founded *Contact*, which in its short life published Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), Kay Boyle, and Hartley.

On February 14, 1921, McAlmon married Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), heiress to a vast English fortune and H. D.'s lover. Their arrangement—"legal only, unromantic, and strictly an agreement," McAlmon wrote—served both Bryher, who received control of her inheritance, and McAlmon, who gained financial independence. (They were amicably divorced in 1927.) After a short stay in London, McAlmon made Paris his base where his Contact Press published (with Three Mountains Press) a group of then-unpublishable authors: Bryher, Mina Loy, Ernest Hemingway, Marsden Hartley, William Carlos

Williams, Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, Mary Butts, Gertrude Stein, H. D., Djuna Barnes, and Saikaku Ihara [*Quaint Tales of Samurais*].

In their magazine Williams and McAlmon had called for an "essential contact between words and the locality." In his own fiction, McAlmon achieved that goal. His own Contact Press issued his first volumes: *A Hasty Bunch* (1922), *A Companion Volume* (1923), *Post-Adolescence* (1923), *Village: As It Happened through a Fifteen Year Period* (1924), *Distinguished Air (Grim Fairy Tales)* (1925); while Black Sun Press published *The Indefinite Huntress and Other Stories* (Paris, 1932). In his portraits of Dakota farm life, Greenwich Village parties, and gay Berlin, McAlmon wrote it down just as it happened, but he did not then find and has not now found a wide audience. His four volumes of poetry found a wider range of publishers: *Explorations* (London: Egoist Press, 1921), *The Portrait of a Generation* (Paris: Contact, 1926), *North America, Continent of Conjecture* (Paris: Contact, 1929), *Not Alone Lost* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1937). But his only book to find wide circulation has been his memoir of the twenties: *Being Geniuses Together* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938). And even it has been somewhat diluted with interleaved chapters by Kay Boyle in the later (New York: Doubleday, 1968; San Francisco: North Point, 1984) editions.

McAlmon became a drinking buddy with both James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. When a prude destroyed the only copy of the concluding erotic soliloquy in *Ulysses*, McAlmon reconstructed the text from Joyce's notes, improvising as he went along. Hemingway's relationship with McAlmon was rockier. McAlmon took him to his first bullfight and published his first two books, but Hemingway was upset by McAlmon's homosexuality. McAlmon teased Hemingway for his friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose cock Hemingway examined at a urinal. Both James Joyce and Ezra Pound declared

that McAlmon was tougher, more courageous, and a better writer than Hemingway.

McAlmon kept his distance from the French homosexuals. From parties, bars, and cafés he knew Jean Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet, René Crevel, Louis Aragon, and others. While his French may not have been sufficient to follow their writings, Dada and Surrealism left him completely cold. His ties were closer with artists Francis Picabia and Constantin Brancusi, but McAlmon saw in Europe only "the rot of ripe fruit."

John Glassco, who arrived as a teenager in Paris with his best friend and who received financial favors from McAlmon, claims that he and his friend did not have to put out for the older man because "he was more vain of being seen with young men than actually covetous of their favors." McAlmon's preferences for men are not entirely clear: he found Marsden Hartley too old. McAlmon liked bullfighters who (like himself) had tight, lean bodies. A Paris bartender describes McAlmon's impassioned speech defending Plato, Michelangelo, and other creative geniuses who celebrated the masculine form. "I'm a bisexual myself," McAlmon shouted, "like Michelangelo, and I don't give a damn who knows it." (A similar speech is credited by other sources to Arthur Craven, Mina Loy's lover, who claimed to be Oscar Wilde's nephew and was a professional boxer.) In the 1950s, McAlmon wrote, "There are no real homos, male or female, but there is the bi-sex, and in more people than know it themselves." The "real abnorms" were the men who swagger "with virility."

How can one explain McAlmon's lack of success? He had little appreciation, but Fitzgerald and Hemingway were ruined by too much acclaim. He drank plenty and enjoyed drugs, but so did Joyce, Cocteau, and Crevel. Coming into money may have been corrupting, but H. D. thrived with the Ellerman wealth. Perhaps he was too far ahead of his time. When Allen

Ginsberg with his poetry or Jack Kerouac with his prose made "first thought best thought" an axiom, McAlmon was dead. Moreover, his precise rendering of gay bar talk in *Distinguished Air* (1925) may be too advanced even now. He uses terms like "blind meat" (uncircumcised hard cock whose foreskin does not pull back), "rough trade," and "auntie."

McAlmon wrote very little after 1935; he was interested in radical politics but found little support among the expatriates. He was caught in France by the German occupation, came down with tuberculosis, and escaped through Spain to the United States, where he joined his brothers in a surgical supply house in El Paso. He died at Desert Hot Springs, California, in 1956.

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McCARTHYISM

The political tactics of the United States Senator from Wisconsin Joseph R. McCarthy (1908-1957) have since the 1950s been labeled McCarthyism. They consisted in poorly founded but sensation-ally publicized charges against individuals in government service or public life whom McCarthy accused on the Senate floor of being Communists, security risks, or otherwise disloyal or untrustworthy. Senator McCarthy's campaign did not spare "sex perverts in government," and so it made homosexuality an issue in American po-