

46 The Little-Known Poet Buried in Blawenburg

John Allan Wyeth was a little-known poet in his time, a “war poet” from World War I. His fame rests on one book of “50-odd” sonnets that capture his observation and feelings about “The War to End All Wars.” The poems were published to a limited audience in 1928, and it wasn’t until 80 years later in 2008 that he received more attention when his book, *This Man’s Army: A War in Fifty-Odd Sonnets*, was republished by the University of North Carolina Press.



John Allan Wyeth in World War I

Wyeth was born in 1894 in New York. His father was a surgeon, Confederate war veteran, published poet, and founder of New York Polyclinic Hospital and Medical School. He attended Lawrenceville School and then Princeton University, graduating with the Class of 1915. After a year of teaching in Arizona, he returned to Princeton to study Romance Languages. He earned an MA in Romance Languages in 1917. He had a goal of getting a PhD and becoming a professor, but plans changed for Wyeth and many others when World War I broke out.

Because of his fluency in French, Wyeth was sent to France, where he was assigned to the Corps of Interpreters with the 33rd Division. He found himself in two areas where major battles had been fought—Somme and Verdun. His division became part of the Army of Occupation in Germany.

Poetry

Wyeth’s sonnets capture the attention of readers because of their realistic portrayals of common life during the war. In the poem below, titled *Harbonnières to Bayonvillers*:

Picnic, an officer and a soldier are traveling through a village that has been devastated by the Battle of Amiens. They casually eat despite the stench and decay all around them. It is a joyless, but necessary act.

Harbonnières to Bayonvillers: Picnic

A house marked Ortskommandantur—a great
sign Kaiserplatz on a corner church,
and German street names all around the square.

Troop columns split to let our sidecar through.

“Drive like hell and get back to the main road—it’s getting late.”

“Yessir.”

The roadway seemed to reel and lurch
through clay wastes rimmed and pitted everywhere.

“You hungry?—Have some of this, there’s enough for two.”

We drove through Bayonvillers—and as we ate
men long since dead reached out and left a smirch
and taste in our throats like gas and rotten jam.

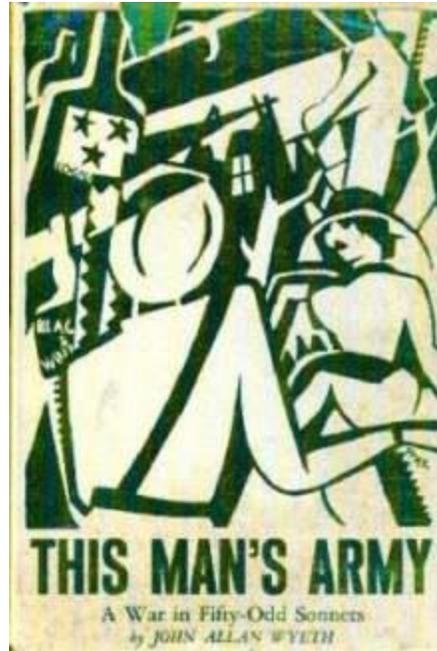
“Want any more?”

“Yes sir, if you got enough there?”

“Those fellows smell pretty strong.”

“I’ll say they do,

“but I’m too hungry sir to care a damn.”



Cover of Wyeth's original book of sonnets

Literature and Art

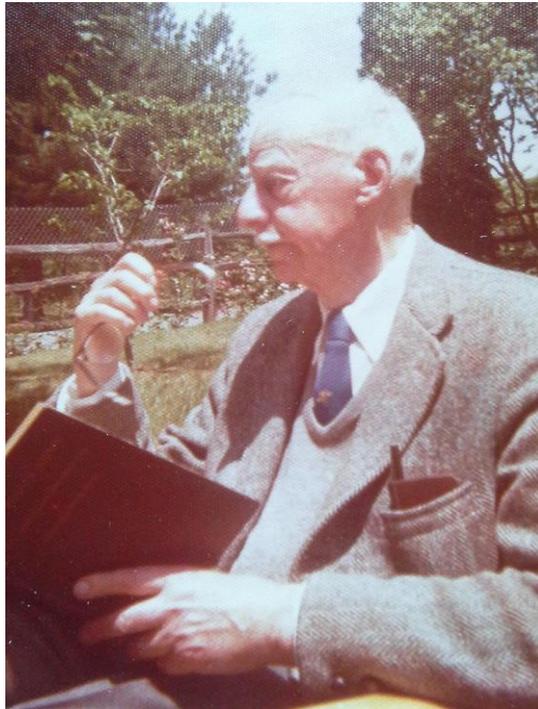
After World War I, Wyeth put Princeton on hold and lived with his brother in Palm Beach, Florida. He won a fellowship to study in Liege, Belgium. He felt called to try his hand at literature, so he joined his sister and brother-in-law, Florence and Alan McLean, who lived in Italy. There he was influenced by their circle of friends, which included literary notables such as Max Beerbohm, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, and Gerhard Hauptmann.



View of the French Countryside by John Allan Wyeth

For much of the 1930s, Wyeth was an itinerant artist, traveling around Europe to study painting under various master painters. He had success with his painting. His works were exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Frank Rehn Gallery in New York City.

For one brief period, he traveled to Germany, where it is believed that he gathered and shared information about the Hitler Youth and the German elite with American and British intelligence.



John Allan Wyeth in his later years

Wyeth served his country again in World War II. He enlisted in the Coast Guard this time. Little is known about the later years of Wyeth's life. He joined and was active in the Roman Catholic Church in Providence, Rhode Island. He included artists and intellectuals among his friends. Toward the end of his life, he spent his time writing sacred music.



Wyeth grave site in Blawenburg Cemetery

In 1979, he came to Skillman, where he lived with family members until his death on May 11, 1981. He is buried in Blawenburg Cemetery with his rank and service dually noted.

When you look at his grave marker, you see that John Allan Wyeth gave service to his country twice, but you cannot know what a diverse life this patriot lived. Were it not for the republication of his book of poetry, we might never know about his poetry or the interesting life he lived.

Blawenburg Facts

1. John Allan Wyeth's grave is located in the northern part of the Blawenburg Church Cemetery near the fence. Each Memorial Day, a flag is placed on his and all other veteran's graves.
2. Many scholars have explored the life of John Allan Wyeth, and many doctoral dissertations and articles have been written about his work. Nevertheless, he is virtually unknown to most people.

Sources

Thanks to Eric Perkins, Chair of the Blawenburg Church Cemetery, who brought John Allan Wyeth to my attention.

<http://danagioia.com/essays/reviews-and-authors-notes/the-obscurity-of-john-allan-wyeth/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Allan_Wyeth_\(poet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Allan_Wyeth_(poet))

<https://mypoeticside.com/poets/john-allan-wyeth-poems>

<https://www.askart.com/artist/artist/86989/artist.aspx>

Photos

Wyeth original book cover - <http://johnallanwyeth.blogspot.com/p/about-john-allan-wyeth.html>

Grave marker—D. Cochran

J. A. Wyeth picture in WWI - <http://johnallanwyeth.blogspot.com/p/about-john-allan-wyeth.html>

Landscape by Wyeth - <https://www.askart.com/artist/artist/86989/artist.aspx>

Wyeth in his later years - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Allan_Wyeth_\(poet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Allan_Wyeth_(poet))

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