

"The Imaginative Spirit"—A Public Library Focuses on Local Writers

Julian Mason

Early in 1983, Brent Glass, Executive Director of the North Carolina Humanities Committee, mentioned to Jack Claiborne, Associate Editor of *The Charlotte Observer* and a member of the North Carolina Humanities Committee, an exhibit he had seen in the San Francisco International Airport which focused on writers of that area. Claiborne, an avid student of and supporter of local history of all kinds, took the idea to the director of The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Out of that beginning emerged in April 1985 a public forum and a permanent exhibit entitled "The Imaginative Spirit/-Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Literary Heritage."

Anne McNair, literature specialist in the reference department of the library, served as project director and wrote the grant application which was approved by the North Carolina Humanities Committee in summer 1984 in the amount of \$6,895. Primarily to make possible the permanent exhibit, additional funding of \$3,250 was provided by two local newspapers, the Friends of the Public Library, a local foundation, two individuals, and seven local businesses. Mary Kratt, a local writer, was hired as chief researcher for the project, and Katie Henderson, a local artist, as designer of the exhibit. To form the committee to set policy for and plan the progress and fruition of the project and make the selections of the authors to be included, these three were joined by Macy Creek of Central Piedmont Community College, Julian Mason of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Maxine Moore of Johnson C. Smith University, Paul Newman of Queens College, and Sue Ross of Davidson College. The committee began meeting in August 1984 and had completed its deliberations by the end of the winter.

The purpose of the project was to focus more fully and clearly on the literary heritage of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County and, by doing this, also to help encourage its continuation and extension—to assist awareness on the part of both readers and writers of the fact that, wher-

ever one lives, there are experiences there which are both local and universal. These experiences are worthy of being shared with others through the written word, as had been done and is being done still by local writers with many types of literature, styles, interests, and contents, and at various levels of skill.

The committee quickly became aware that it had undertaken a task much larger than it had realized and that the quantity of local productivity over the decades dictated a policy of selectivity if the focus and results were to be manageable. Therefore, while one did not have to be a local native to be included, one did have to have resided locally. The focus was restricted essentially to belles lettres (basically fiction, poetry, drama—and excluding academic and scholarly writing and topics such as religion, business, politics, history, etc. per se). However, significant and sustained periodical editing of belles lettres was included because of its impact on and encouragement of local writing; and Wilbur J. Cash, Harry Golden, Billy Graham, and Bruce and Nancy Roberts were included as notable exceptions to the policy, along with several notable biographers. Of course, in considering the well-over-two hundred writers brought to the committee's attention, some consideration also was paid to seriousness of intent, the quality of the writing, and the author's relation to the area as shown in the writing and/or life of the author.

The project came to first full fruition on the evening of April 23, 1985 with a public forum at the main branch of the library and the first showing of the exhibit. Presentations were made by members of the committee, the first one on the early decades and then several on various facets and genres of the twentieth century literary heritage of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. During the reception that followed, the public initially viewed the permanent exhibit, shaped like a 6½ by 5½ foot open book, on wheels and made of wood, paint, paper, and plexiglass. On its inside it featured sixty-six past and present writers, including Carson McCullers, William Styron, Paul Newman, Burke Davis, John Charles McNeill, Ruth Moose, Charles Chesnutt, Edgar Lee Masters, Erskine

Julian Mason teaches in the English Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Caldwell, LeGette Blythe, Gail Haley, and Betsy Byars. Included were books, manuscripts, letters, photographs, and various memorabilia. Booklets with the display told about these sixty-six featured writers, their works, and their local connections. On the back of the exhibit were listed the names of sixty-six other Charlotte-Mecklenburg writers.

The project . . . led to . . . a heightened awareness by the community of its literary heritage and of the central role of the public library in making this happen.

The project also led to an hour-long television program, a radio series focusing on its poets, several newspaper stories and an editorial, and a heightened awareness by the community of its literary heritage and of the central role of the public library in making this happen. This awareness should continue as the exhibit is shown at various branches of the library, shopping centers, businesses, banks, and area colleges. The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County can be pleased with what it accomplished through this project in service to the community and for itself. Other libraries might well follow its lead in this and help make those they serve more aware that:

This place too sings and inspires,
For on its soil and in its air
Burn universal fires.

They might be surprised, as we were, at the quantity and quality that such a project brings to light and focuses. Following is the first of the presentations given at the public forum on April 23, 1985, which illustrates some of the variety of what this project "turned up."

Some Highlights of Belles Lettres in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, 1777-1907

During the early years of Mecklenburg County, the decades at the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, undoubtedly most of the writing done by its inhabitants was religious, political, legal, related to agriculture and other occupations, or in letters or diaries. Given the stage of development then of that area of southwestern North Carolina and of its society and culture, it is not at all surprising that belles lettres were delayed until there was a larger

and more stable community. Such is not an unusual pattern in the cultural history of any place; and in the nineteenth century, local writing with a more esthetic intention gradually did increase there.

In such a context, poetry is usually the first of the more artistic literary genres to emerge. There is no doubt that poetry was being written in early Mecklenburg County, even though apparently little of it was being published through the first decades of the nineteenth century. The earliest poem that we know of which was written in the county was not printed, but was circulated locally in a few handwritten copies in 1777. It was by Adam Brevard, a local blacksmith and lawyer, and it was entitled "A Modern Poem, by 'The Mecklenburg Censor.'" (Some other poems from the early decades also exist, but without our knowing who wrote them.) Brevard's frontier verse is not strong on literary merit, but its satire of local leaders probably was effective. His poem began:

When Mecklenburg's fantastic rabble
Renowned for censure, scold and gabble
In Charlotte met in giddy council
To lay the Constitutions ground-sill
By choosing men both learned and wise
Who clearly could with half shut eyes
See mill-stones through or spy a plot
Whether existed such or not
Who always could at noon define
Whether the sun or moon did shine
And by philosophy tell whether
It was dark or sunny weather
And sometimes when their wits were nice
Could well distinguish men from mice.



In 1824 Charlotte got its first printing press, and in 1825 its first newspaper, the *Catawba Journal*. By mid-century Charlotte's population had grown from 325 in 1790 and 730 in 1830, to the then current 1,065. Out of this developing culture emerged a somewhat melancholy and nostalgic poet named Philo Henderson, who after education at Davidson and Chapel Hill, returned to Charlotte and edited the newspaper called the *Hornet's Nest*, to which he contributed a good many poems, often about the sadness of lost love. At least one of his poems, "The Long Ago," appeared in several anthologies.

The Long Ago

Oh! a wonderful stream is the river
of Time,
As it runs through the realm of tears,
With a faultless rhythm and a musical
rhyme,
And a broader sweep and a surge sublime,
And blends with the ocean of years!

How the winters are drifting like flakes
of snow,
And the summers like buds between,
And the ears in the sheaf—so they come
and they go
On the river's breast, with its ebb and flow,
As it glides in the shadow and sheen!

There's a magical Isle in the river of Time,
Where the softest of airs are playing;
There's a cloudless sky and a
tropical clime,
And a song as sweet as a vesper chime,
And the Junes with the roses
are staying.

And the name of this Isle is Long Ago,
And we bury our treasures there;
There are brows of beauty, and bosoms
of snow,
There are heaps of dust—but we loved
them so!
There are trinkets and tresses of hair.

There are fragments of song that
nobody sings,
And a part of an infant's prayer;
There's a lute unswept, and a harp
without strings,
There are broken vows and pieces of rings,
And the garments she used to wear.

There are hands that are waved when the
fairly shore
By the image is lifted in air;

And we sometimes hear through the
turbulent roar,
Sweet voices heard in the days
gone before,
When the wind down the river is fair.

Oh! remembered for aye be that
blessed Isle,
All the day of life till night;
When the evening comes with its
beautiful smile,
And our eyes are closing to slumber
awhile,
May that 'greenwood of soul
be in sight.'"

This and two other of Henderson's poems also were reprinted posthumously in the magazine *The Land We Love* in May 1866.

The Land We Love was a very important literary catalyst in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and its establishment should be seen as the first literary event of any magnitude in the community. It was established and edited by General Daniel H. Hill, a South Carolina native, 1838 graduate of West Point, and veteran of the Mexican War. In 1849 he had become a professor of mathematics at Washington College in Virginia, and in 1854 had moved to Davidson College, where he remained until, in 1859, he became superintendent of the North Carolina Military Institute in Charlotte. During the Civil War he had been significantly involved in various campaigns as a leader of Confederate troops, after which he returned to Charlotte and, with James P. Irwin and J. G. Morrison as partners, began publishing his monthly magazine. It included historical, agricultural, literary, military, and political essays, and also regularly had book reviews of both literary and other publications. It also included new poetry and fiction (though Hill really did not like fiction). The emphasis of its contents and editorial positions was on the South and its heritage, and its authors were Southerners, including Hill himself. However, it also contained favorable reviews of works by such Northern authors as Holmes and Whittier and unfavorable treatment of Longfellow. Also included was a good bit of attention to past and contemporary English writers including Milton, Cowper, Tennyson, George Eliot, and especially Dickens. Among the poems by better known Southern writers were reprintings of ones by Poe and Washington Allston and new poems by Hayne and Timrod. In 1867 Hill's magazine claimed twelve thousand subscribers in thirty-two states, including a significant number in the North. *The*

Land We Love was published from May 1866 through March 1869, when it was absorbed by the *New Eclectic* of Baltimore. In 1870 Hill began a weekly newspaper called *The Southern Home*, which continued the literary efforts of some of the writers from *The Land We Love*, but which in October 1881 was absorbed by *The Charlotte Democrat* to create *The Charlotte Home and Democrat*. Meanwhile Hill's continuing interest in education emerged in speeches and articles and in his serving as President of the University of Arkansas 1877-1884. He died in Charlotte in 1889.¹

The Land We Love not only fed and stimulated the literary interests of its readers, it also provided a ready place of publication for at least one prolific Charlotte writer, Fanny M. Downing, whose novel *Perfect through Suffering* was serialized in its pages over fifteen months, from February 1867 through April 1868. She also published at least twenty-two poems in the magazine, assisted editorially, and wrote at least one review essay. The magazine also included a favorable unsigned review of a novel by her, entitled *Nameless*, which had been published in Raleigh in 1865. Fanny Downing was a Virginia native who had left the Norfolk area and moved to Charlotte in 1862, where she lived until returning to Virginia in 1869. During the years of her residence in Charlotte, she was very much an active part of the total local cultural scene, perhaps even serving as an unsigned newspaper editorial writer. She published in various other publications also, including Hill's *The Southern Home*; and a long poem entitled *Pluto: The Origin of Mint Julep* was published in a separate binding in Raleigh in 1867. One contemporary account of her says, "She is thorough, and does nothing and feels nothing by halves." Her first poem in *The Land We Love*, for July 1866, fit well the theme of Southern vindication Hill had intended for the monthly. The poem was entitled "The Land We Love" and was dedicated to Hill. It began:

The land we love—a queen of lands,
No prouder one the world has known,
Though now uncrowned, upon her throne
She sits with fetters on her hands.

Her next poem was "Dixie," (In October) and the third, "Confederate Grey" (in November). However, gradually there was some variety in her themes, as is illustrated by her poem in the March 1867 issue:

Lizette's Lesson

You are lovely and young, Lizette—
Raven ringlets and eyes of blue,

Dimpled cheeks of the carmine hue
In the heart of the musk-rose met.
All of your lovers, near and far,
Call you rose-bud, dew-drop—star.—
Roses wither and buds decay,
Dew-drops sparkle and fade away,
Stars grow dim, in their circles set—
Woman fades faster than all, Lizette!

All God's beautiful things, Lizette,
Not for themselves are made so bright,
—Not for him, shines the sun's warm light,—
Each to another owes a debt;—
He has the most, who pays it best—
Who gives freest, is happiest!
Human hearts, if you wish to win,
Dwell as a cherish'd guest therein,
Make them brighter and better—let
Love be the magic you use, Lizette!

Life means laughing to you, Lizette!
Never has sorrow, want, nor care
Laid one line on your forehead fair,
Never a tear your eyelids wet.
Youth and beauty, and mirth and health,
Rank and station, and wit and wealth,
Love and learning, and joy and hope,
Span your lot with silvery scope.—
Value your earthly blessings, yet
Seek the true treasures above, Lizette!

God has granted you much, Lizette;—
Cast not His precious gifts aside,
Nor in a napkin folded, hide,
Rust to ruin, and moth to fret.—
You have five talents—make them ten,
Ready the Master's reck'ning, when
Trembling you stand—heaven not yet won—
Judged for deeds in the body done.
So may this sentence, yours be set;
"Enter the joys of thy Lord."—Lizette!

During the Reconstruction period (again a period of relative social instability), there seems not to have been much publishing of belles lettres by Mecklenburgers; but as the end of the century approached, there was some literary flowering again. Josie Henderson Heard had been born in Salisbury, N.C., in 1861 of slave parents who were permitted to hire out their time and live in Charlotte. After growing up in Charlotte and receiving the education available there, Josie Henderson continued it in nearby Concord and elsewhere until she became a teacher, first in North Carolina, then in South Carolina and Tennessee. In 1882 she married the Rev. W. H. Heard, who even-

tually became Presiding Elder of his denomination's Lancaster District in Pennsylvania, where she continued the literary and musical interests which she had begun in Charlotte. In 1890 she published in Philadelphia a volume of poems entitled *Morning Glories*, which had a second edition in Atlanta in 1901. The poems are usually didactic or occasional and are somewhat form-ridden, with a decidedly Victorian flavor and rather stereotyped subjects (mostly poems for the parlor—though there are a few protest poems at the end of the book). Her favorite topics are religion (in some of her best poems) and love (often treated sentimentally). She mentions admiring Shakespeare, Tennyson, and Whittier, and her opening poem recalls "scenes of my childhood days" in a rather rural context.

. . . poetry is usually the first of the more artistic literary genres to emerge.

Another child of former slaves, Charles W. Chesnutt, as a teenager had taught in Charlotte for several years in the 1770s, eventually becoming principal of the Peabody School on Mint Street between First and Second Streets before returning to his hometown of Fayetteville. Since he had already begun to write before coming to Charlotte, it can be presumed that he also wrote while living there, though the identifiable North Carolina settings of his published fiction are Fayetteville, Wilmington, and the Sandhills area. By the end of the century he had become a nationally known writer of short stories and novels focusing on the lives of blacks, mostly in North Carolina.

Another contributor of fiction to national periodicals at the turn of the century and after was Josephine Davidson Mallard, a Charlotte native and resident until her death in 1912. However, by far the best known Charlotte writer of that period was John Charles McNeill, born in Scotland County in 1874, educated at Wake Forest University, and resident free-lance writer for *The Charlotte Observer* from 1904 until his death in 1907. The *Observer* commissioned him to write whatever and whenever he chose, and many of his extremely popular poems were published in that paper. In 1905 he became the first winner of the Patterson Cup awarded by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Society for excellence in literature, and Theodore Roosevelt was present to make the award. McNeill was often referred to as the minstrel poet or the Robert Burns of the

South because of the folk quality of his styles and subjects, including some poems in black dialect or that of the Scots who were his forebears, and even a few in imitation of the Lumbee Indian English he had heard in the area where he grew up. The two books of his poems were *Songs, Merry and Sad* in 1906 and *Lyrics from Cotton Land* in 1907, both published in Charlotte by Stone and Barringer.² McNeill also received some national acclaim through the publication of his poems in *The Century Magazine*. In often catchy rhythms, his poems usually portrayed rural life or life in the small town, which already was beginning to seem nostalgic to the residents of a Charlotte whose population had grown from eighteen thousand in 1890 to thirty thousand by the time of McNeill's death in 1907, and already had electricity, horse cars, and cotton mills, and soon to come, a skyscraper. The appeal to them of such a poem as this one by McNeill is obvious.

Away Down Home

T will not be long before they hear
The bullbat on the hill,
And in the valley through the dusk
The pastoral whippoorwill.
A few more friendly suns will call
The bluets through the loam
And star the lanes with buttercups
Away down home.

"Knee-deep!" from reedy places
Will sing the river frogs.
The terrapins will sun themselves
On all the jutting logs.
The angler's cautious oar will leave
A trail of drifting foam
Along the shady currents
Away down home.

The mocking-bird will feel again
The glory of his wings,
And wanton through the balmy air
And sunshine while he sings,
With a new cadence in his call,
The glint-wing'd crow will roam
From field to newly-furrowed field
Away down home.

go for it!
use your library

When dogwood blossoms mingle
 With the maple's modest red,
 And sweet arbutus wakes at last
 From out her winter's bed,
 'T would not seem strange at all to meet
 A dryad of a gnome.
 Or Pan or Pysche in the woods
 Away down home.

Then come with me, thou weary heart!
 Forget thy brooding ills,
 Since God has come to walk among
 His valleys and his hills!
 The mart will never miss thee,
 Nor the scholar's dusty tome,
 And the Mother waits to bless thee,
 Away down home.

Indeed, in a letter to the director of the Charlotte Public Library in 1951, fifty-four years after McNeill's death, Wake Forest University reported that a recent survey had shown that his poetry was still fairly widely known and that this poem remained one of the favorites from McNeill's many, joining such other favorites as "When I Go Home," "Sundown," "Home Songs," "Sunburnt Boys," and "Possum Time Again."

'Possum Time Again

Oh, dip some 'taters down in grease
 En fling de dogs a 'tater apiece.
 Ram yo' brogans clean er tacks,
 Split de splinters en fetch de ax.
 It's 'possum time again!

Catfish tender, catfish tough,
 We's done et catfish long enough.
 We's tar'd er collards en white-side meat,
 En we's gwine have supp'n' wut's good
 to eat.

It's 'possum time again!

De pot's gwine simmer en blubber en bile
 Till it gits scummed over wid 'possum ile.
 But le's don't brag till we gits de goods.
 Whoop! Come along, boys! We's off to
 de woods.

It's 'possum time again!

Church and Synagogue Library Association

The North Carolina Chapter of the Church and Synagogue Library Association exists to promote church and synagogue librarianship and to provide educational guidance on an ecumenical basis. Membership pro-

vides an opportunity to participate in two workshops annually and to receive the chapter newsletter. For further information, call or write Janet L. Flowers (3702 Tremont Drive, Durham, NC 27705 919-383-3430).

The Crow's Shadow

The crow flew high through the summer
 sky,
 But a mute and tireless hound,
 O'er the meadow-sweeps and up the
 steeps,
 His shadow, skimmed the ground.

However so high he climbed in the sky,
 O'er river and wood and town,
 That shade that crept where the wide
 earth slept
 Followed and drew him down.

Like a deathless hate or pitiless fate,
 Like the love of Moab's Ruth,
 Or the smouldering fire of an old desire,
 Or the sin of a reckless youth.

Wherever he went till his life was spent,
 In cloud or in forest dim,
 It chased where he led, and where he
 fell dead
 It was waiting to die with him.

In terms of attempts of, aspirations for, and interests in belles lettres in Charlotte-Mecklenburg during 1777-1907, undoubtedly this quick survey focuses only on the tip of the iceberg; but it is only that tip which rides above the surface and clearly signals the existence of that more which is much harder to approach and to grapple with. These beginnings were forerunners of much more publication as this century progressed; but the earlier efforts and their relative successes not only encouraged others, but remain of interest in their own right and in relation to their own times.

References

¹ For further information concerning *The Land We Love*, see Ray M. Atchison, "The Land We Love: A Southern Post-Bellum Magazine of Agriculture, Literature, and Military History," *North Carolina Historical Review* 37 (1960): 506-515.

² In 1977 the University of North Carolina Press published a small collection of additional poems by McNeill, entitled *Possums and Persimmons*.

