

*Dana Gioia*

## **Recall Roster**

**Recalling forgotten, neglected,  
underrated, or unjustly  
out-of-print works**

### ***This Man's Army* by John Allan Wyeth, Jr. (1894-1981)**

**J**ohn Allan Wyeth, perhaps the finest American soldier poet of World War I, was born in New York City, the third child of a noted surgeon. His father John Allan Wyeth Sr., a former Confederate soldier and published poet, was a founder of New York Polyclinic Hospital and Medical School. Wyeth attended the Lawrenceville School, a private preparatory school in New Jersey, where he was president of the drama club and class poet. In 1911 he entered Princeton where his literary acquaintances included fellow undergraduate Edmund Wilson, who said that Wyeth was the “only aesthete” in the Class of 1915. After graduating Wyeth went on to earn an M.A. from Princeton in 1917. Wyeth enlisted later that year in the army to fight in World War I. His fluent knowledge of French led him to an assignment in the Corps of Interpreters with the 33<sup>rd</sup> division. By May 1918 he was in France and soon involved in the late battles on the Somme and Verdun. Eventually the 33<sup>rd</sup> division became part of the Army of Occupation in Germany. Discharged in 1919, Wyeth taught French at St. Paul’s school before quitting to become a painter. He spent the next two decades mostly in Europe. He returned to the United States in later life and converted to Catholicism. He died at eighty-six in Princeton.

Wyeth’s literary importance rests solely on one remarkable and neglected book of poems, *This Man’s Army: A War In Fifty-Odd Sonnets* (1928). This striking, naturalistic sonnet sequence chronicles the movements of an American troop division from receiving sailing orders and embarkation in France through the battles across the western front. Using slangy dialogue and vivid description, the poems present the war in brief, memorable scenes. Each sonnet begins by creating a narrative scene but ultimately rises to a lyrical conclusion. Wyeth’s poems are also technically innovative. For the book-length sequence, he created a new

rhyme scheme based on the Petrarchan sonnet, but better adapted to the paucity of English-language rhymes. While formal, Wyeth's language is as fresh, varied, and contemporary as that of most free-verse poets of the period. There are no inversions, no forced rhymes or stale language. (Most of the poetry by our soldiers was written in more traditional Romantic style—as in the work of Alan Seeger.) Wyeth's sonnets have the narrative vitality and stark realism of prose but with the concision and lyricality of poetry. There is nothing quite like *This Man's Army* elsewhere in modern American poetry. It is comparable in scope and quality to the best British poetry from the Great War. Long neglected, it deserves careful reassessment. Wyeth never wrote another volume of poetry. *This Man's Army* is out of print.

The current chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, **Dana Gioia** is also the author of three books of poetry.

## The Train from Brest

A haze of dusk behind low roofs of thatch  
and sloping moors and barren gouty trees—  
dim roads and earth-walled fields—the steady flight  
of blinking poles and the rhythmic sweep of wires.  
Darkness outside—

“Hey Tommy, gimme a match—  
now gimme a Lucky.”

“You're sorta hard to please—  
you don't want much.”

—“Somebody turn off the light

I want to sleep.”

“Hell—with these frog flat tires?”

A stifling blackness—sweat, and the jiggling scratch  
of cloth on your neck and tickling under the knees,  
and the clank of iron beating a rickety tune—  
and like a secret calling in the night  
waking to see the black cathedral spires  
of Chartres against a low-hung lazy moon.

**Notes:** “The Train from Brest.” The port city of Brest on the west coast of France was the disembarkation point for U.S. Troops during World War I. *Lucky*: Lucky Strike, a brand of cigarettes. *frog*: slang for Frenchman. *flat tires*: suggests that it is a bumpy train ride. *Chartres*: Notre Dame de Chartres, a thirteenth-century Gothic cathedral.

## Corbie to Sailly-le-Sec

High staggering walls, and plank-spiked piles of brick  
and plaster—jagged gables wrenched apart,  
and tall dolls' houses cleanly split in two—  
Rooms gaping wide on every cloven floor,  
pictures askew that made your throat go thick,  
and humble furniture that tore your heart.  
“By God let's get out of here!”

We motored through

to the poplar marsh along the river's shore.  
Sailly-le-Sec—her church one candlestick  
on a broken altar, and beyond it, part  
of a rounded apse—a dusty village husk  
of rubble and tile. Low hills ahead, all blue,  
and twinkling with the phosphorescent soar  
of rockets leaping in the fringe of dusk.

**Note:** “Corbie to Sailly-le-Sec.” The title names two towns near Amiens in France, site of one of the last major battles of World War I.

## Fromereville: War in Heaven

A reek of steam—the bath-house rang with cries.  
“Come across with the soap.”

“Like hell, what makes you think  
it's yours?”

“Don't turn *off the water*, that ain't fair  
I'm all *covered* with soap.”

“Hurry up, get out of the way.”  
“Thank God you're takin' a bath.”

“He wants to surprise  
us.”

“Oh is that so, well anyway I don't stink  
like you.”

*“Air raid!”*

We ran out into the square,  
naked and cold like souls on Judgment Day.  
Over us, white clouds blazoned on blue skies,  
and a green balloon on fire—we watched it shrink  
into flame and a fall of smoke. Around us, brute  
guns belching puffs of shrapnel in the air,  
where one plane swooping like a bird of prey  
spat fire into a dangling parachute.

Note: “War in Heaven.” *green balloon*: a barrage balloon used for observation.

## **Chipilly Ridge: Regimental Dressing Station**

Squat walls of sandbags—and above, a sky  
all thin and cool with dawn and very far.  
Black empty stretchers. On the parapet,  
light out before the clangor of the gun.  
The bliss of strong fatigue—and where I lie  
the canvas breathes between me and that star  
a bitter steam of blood. The air feels wet,  
and the stars go, forgotten one by one.  
Time to start back—and watch those towns go by!  
“You ready to go?—we got a lift in a car.”  
“Already?—”  
“Yeh, let’s start, we got a long way  
to go.”  
O God the ruins of Saily-Laurette!  
—like dying men that wake and find the sun  
and shut their eyes against another day.

## **Molliens-Au-Bois: Air Raid**

Reading, at night, the shutters closed and barred,  
a candle by my mattress on the floor,  
my Virgil open to the mellow flame,  
I heard what seemed a racking change of gear—

like some truck mired outside the stable yard . . .  
The stricken pages shook—A vast smash tore  
at the room, and through the rush of blackness came  
a bestial angry grinding drone, and fear.  
Arms crossed, fists clenched against my throat gone hard,  
my body straining at the engine's roar,  
at every blast a thing like joy . . . And soon  
a lifted spell, and life somehow the same,  
dragging me out to join the others near  
the pond—a mud pit gaping at the moon!

## **Brest: The British Front**

Noon on the white cathedral of Beauvais,  
a glaring brittle hull of stone and glass  
long after glittering above the plain.  
A halt at a junction—

“Get back—*Stay* where you are!”

“*All out!*”

“My God I'm *shaving*—”

“Get out of the way—”

“Jump *damn* you—”

“Throw the bags out—”

A breathless mass

crushing and scrambling in the moving train,  
and men and packs plunge out of every car.  
Another train, through slow green hills all day—  
American troops that wave and shout as we pass  
“What outfit—*Hey*—

Long salvage trains. We shunt  
along and stall. And like a pumping vein,  
our eardrums jump and catch from very far  
the muffled pulse of guns along the front.