

# NORTH CAROLINIANS *of* NOTE

## Thomas Wolfe

*Writing to paint a portrait of N.C. life*

By Rylan Miller

Thomas Wolfe said during a speech he gave as a student at the University of North Carolina that his portrait would one day hang beside former Gov. Zebulon Vance's in the university's Old West building.

His prediction came true. Because of his success as a 20th century author, Wolfe's portrait hangs today in Old West.

### *A quiet childhood in Asheville*

Wolfe was born Oct. 3, 1900, in Asheville, the eighth child of William Oliver and Julia Westfall Wolfe. Before the Great Depression when Asheville's population was booming, his father worked as a stone carver and had a gravestone business. Noting the influx of tourists to Asheville, his mother invested in real estate and bought a boardinghouse, known as the Old Kentucky Home.

Wolfe spent much of his childhood in the Old Kentucky home, a house painted sunny-yellow and located at 48 Spruce Street, observing the tenants, reading and writing. He attended the North State Fitting School, a prep school where his teachers marveled at his advanced writing skills.

### *Learning his craft at UNC*

In 1916, the 15-year-old Wolfe left his hometown and enrolled as a freshman at UNC-Chapel Hill. Studying drama under famed Professor Frederick H. Koch, he wanted to become a playwright. Koch taught Wolfe how to explore his personal experiences and relationships to write folk plays.

During his four years in Chapel Hill, Wolfe displayed his talent for writing. Two plays, "The Return of Buck Gavin" and "Third Night," debuted on the UNC Playmakers Repertory Company stage. He also worked as an editor at The Daily Tar Heel, the university's student newspaper, and published poetry in the University of North Carolina Magazine.

Wolfe's classmates and professors saw him as an eccentric but likeable student, tending to move quickly from one activity to another and always working with passion.

"He can do more between 8:25 and 8:30 a.m. than the rest of us do all day," a caption under Wolfe's picture in his 1920 yearbook said.

When he completed "The Return of Buck Gavin," he insisted on taking the lead role. He refused to use typewriters, and wrote in pencil so intensely that he developed a large callous on his finger. Even his looks distinguished him from others. His dark mane of hair and 6-foot-6 stature made him easily recognizable on campus.

### *Life beyond N.C.*

Wolfe attended Harvard University as a graduate school student in 1920-22. He continued to write plays and stories, but he could not earn enough money to support himself, so he moved to New York City and taught writing classes at New York University for seven years.

Wolfe journeyed to Europe in 1924 and, on the return voyage, fell in love with Aline Bernstein, a theatrical set designer, married woman and mother, who was 18 years older than he. Though the two never married, his relationship with Bernstein lasted over five years, one of many intense relationships that shaped Wolfe's work.

Wolfe's writing career took off in 1929 with the publication of his first novel, "Look Homeward, Angel." The story follows the life of Eugene Gant, a character that Wolfe based on himself. Gant grows up in a fictionalized version of Asheville called Altamont. The novel features over 200 characters that Wolfe created from people he knew during his childhood in Asheville.

The novel caused a stir in Wolfe's hometown. Many of his family, friends and neighbors criticized him. He returned to Europe for eight years and avoided their negative reactions. In a telegraph to his sister Mabel, Wolfe wrote that he had only the best intentions when writing it.

"No novel should ever be judged by line and detail but only as a whole," Wolfe told his sister.

"And when you look at it that way, you will see that I have painted all of you, all the Wolfes and all of Asheville, as a great people."

### *Returning to his roots*

"Look Homeward, Angel" and Wolfe's second novel, "Of Time and the River," brought him international recognition. Published in 1935, "Of Time and the River" records Wolfe's life in the character of Eugene Gant, after he has left Altamont for Harvard and New York.

Wolfe died from tuberculosis of the brain at



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Johns Hopkins Hospital 18 days before his 38<sup>th</sup> birthday. He left his final publisher, Edward Aswell, an 8-foot stack of manuscripts.

Today, reminders of Wolfe's success appear across the state. The Old Kentucky Home in Asheville is now the Thomas Wolfe Memorial. It contains a museum about his life and work, and several rooms in the house look like they did when the author lived there from 1900-15.

UNC has an 850-pound brass sculpture of an angel on campus that pays tribute to Wolfe's first novel. The Thomas Wolfe Prize and Lecture and the English department's Thomas Wolfe Scholarship acknowledge excellent writers. The scholarship provides full four-year tuition for recipients.

Wolfe knew that he would return to UNC one day, if only in a portrait adorning a wall in a campus building. But even during his hiatus from his native state, he kept North Carolina close through his writings.

"What merit the book has, I do not know," Wolfe once wrote in a letter about "Look Homeward, Angel."

"But it sometimes seems to me that it presents a picture of American life that I have never seen elsewhere."

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