

Joyce Kilmer: The Man Who Wrote “Trees”

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast.*

*A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair.*

*Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

—Alfred Joyce Kilmer, 1913

Joyce Kilmer, the man who wrote “Trees,” surely one of the best known and loved poems in the language, had a Wisconsin connection. He found the beautiful tree-shaded grounds of Campion College in Prairie du Chien much to his liking. In 1912, the busy editor, writer and lecturer began a correspondence with Father James Daly, a professor of English literature at Campion. It developed into a firm friendship. In 1913 the poem “Trees” appeared in the literary magazine *Poetry*, and was almost immediately acclaimed. But Kilmer did not make his first visit to the bluffside Catholic College at the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers until 1916. He embraced it at once. According to his secretary, John Bunker: “Certainly there was no visiting place to which Kilmer looked forward with such pleasant anticipation and from which he returned so physically and spiritually refreshed as Campion.”

Although Kilmer wrote 87 poems collected into three volumes, none achieved the fame of “Trees,” a fame that saw eastern trees vying, through their human spokesmen, for the honor of having inspired it. Among the contenders are a white oak on the campus of Rutgers, his alma mater; a maple in Montague City, Massachusetts; oak trees surrounding his home in Mahwah, New Jersey; maple trees in Swanzey, New Hampshire; and a woods near Darien, Connecticut.

Kilmer first visited Campion to lecture on the topic “The War and the Poets” in April 1916. He later



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delivered the Campion College commencement address on June 15, 1917, while wearing the uniform of the New York National Guard, in which he had voluntarily enlisted. Soon after returning east, he requested a transfer to the infantry and on October 31, sailed for France.

The next year, on July 30, 1918, at the age of 31, he died in action, the first American man of letters to fall in “the war to end all wars.” According to his correspondent and friend, Father Daly, he was “the most distinguished and widely regretted American to fall in battle during the Great War.” He is buried near the field of battle a few miles from Seringes on the River Ourcq.

Friends and family dedicated the Kilmer Library at Campion in 1937. The poet’s correspondence with Daly, other letters, personal effects, books by and about him, manuscripts and typescripts of poems, periodicals containing Kilmer’s verse and essays, photographs and other memorabilia form the basis of the library. His widow, Aline Kilmer, said, “The Library at Campion is, I believe, of all memorials the one Joyce would have loved best.”

When Campion closed its doors in 1978, the Kilmer collection went to Marquette University Memorial Library in Milwaukee.

Sources: Philip M. Runkel, Milwaukee
Griff Williams, Prairie du Chien