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The Other Librarian

Clara Baldwin and the Public Library

Movement in Minnesota

— Page 4



Clara F. Baldwin in 1936, shortly before her retirement from her position as the director of the Division of Libraries in the Minnesota Department of Education. She was a long-time leader in the Public Library movement in Minnesota whose career is profiled in this issue. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 42, Number 3

Fall 2007

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS IN JULY 2003:

The Ramsey County Historical Society shall discover, collect, preserve and interpret the history of the county for the general public, recreate the historical context in which we live and work, and make available the historical resources of the county. The Society's major responsibility is its stewardship over this history.

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A Message from the Editorial Board

The theme for this issue is the creativity of diverse Ramsey county residents as they responded to change. Bob Garland adds an important chapter to Minnesota women's history with his account of Clara F. Baldwin, who headed the drive to build a library system in greater Minnesota as its population grew. From the time she graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1892, Baldwin worked to make books accessible to all Minnesotans. As state librarian from 1900 to 1936, she first oversaw the development of traveling libraries, then a comprehensive system of local libraries. James Brown follows an earlier article for this magazine with more lively reminiscences of growing up in the 1920s and '30s in Frogtown, which was then a vital neighborhood near the state capitol that included African-American residents. His early relationships and activities, followed by his education on racism at the neighborhood barbershop, make a compelling read. And Anne Beiser Allen tells the intriguing story of Rev. Henry B. Whipple's election as the first Episcopal bishop of Minnesota in 1859, as that denomination was expanding in the new state. We hope you enjoy reading it all.

Anne Cowie
Chair, Editorial Board

Book Reviews

Dial M: The Murder of Carol Thompson

William Swanson

St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006

211 pages, \$19.95

Review by Thomas H. Boyd

On March 6, 1963, Carol Thompson was brutally attacked in her own home in the Highland Park neighborhood of St. Paul. Badly beaten and stabbed in the neck, she somehow managed to escape her attacker. She staggered to a neighbor's house and was eventually taken to the old Ancker Hospital where she died later that day. In the meantime, the killer had disappeared seemingly without a trace.

This stunning and unsettling sequence of events sent shock waves through the city and around the state. Today, if you ask someone who lived in St. Paul then and was old enough to remember, they will likely recount vivid recollections of the sensation caused by this terrible murder. This was a sensational crime and a true mystery at the time—and, at least for some, that sense of mystery has persisted to this day.

William Swanson was eighteen years old when Carol Thompson was murdered. Now a senior editor with *Mpls. St. Paul Magazine* and veteran writer with more than thirty years of experience, he has written a compelling account about the crime and, more importantly, its aftermath. His very readable book, *Dial M: The Murder of Carol Thompson*, is extensively researched and filled with references to scores of interviews with individuals who have first-person, direct

knowledge of the material facts. Swanson has done a masterful job describing the events as they unfolded, and a careful and thoughtful examination of how this crime has haunted the community and the Thompson family.

The citizens of St. Paul were horrified that such a crime could occur in one of the city's quiet, prosperous neighborhoods in broad daylight. Panic spread as



the police launched a massive effort to track down the killer. Although initially surmised to be a foiled robbery, there was wild public speculation as to the identity and motive of the attacker who some feared was a crazed homicidal maniac who could well strike again.

At the same time, there was also a public outpouring of sympathy for the victim, who was described in the news-

papers by friends as “a lovely, lovely person,” and her distraught, grieving husband—T. Eugene Thompson—and the Thompsons’ four young children—Jeffrey, Margaret, Patricia, and Amy—who laid Carol Thompson to rest at the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Maplewood three days after the murder, while the law enforcement officials pursued countless leads in their determined efforts to find the killer and solve the crime.

The panic and sympathy was soon transformed to intrigue and voyeuristic fascination with T. Eugene Thompson as a potential suspect. Rumors circulated that this man, who was known to his friends as “Cotton,” had been leading a double-life. By day, he was a respected up-and-coming young attorney, devoted husband, attentive father to a young family, and deacon in his church. By night, he frequented nightclubs and gambling institutions with his mistress, and affiliated with dark characters who lurked in a seedy criminal underworld.

Within weeks, these rumors were inflamed with a case-breaking confession given by Dick Anderson, a nervous, chain-smoking salesman who claimed he had been hired by an underworld character named Norman Mastrian to kill Carol Thompson. The sordid and chilling facts unfolded in the daily newspapers. Mastrian and “Cotton” Thompson were longtime acquaintances. Mr. Thompson had purchased an inordinate amount of life insurance on his wife and engaged in a variety of other suspicious activities shortly before she was murdered. Thompson was eventually indicted and went on trial for the murder of his wife. Both he and Mastrian, were convicted in separate trials, and subsequently served

and completed lengthy prison terms. The case received nationwide attention and notoriety that lasted until late November of that year when it was eclipsed by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Six years after the murder, Donald John Giese wrote a comprehensive and detailed account of the criminal investigation and trials that arose out of the Carol Thompson murder, which he entitled *The Carol Thompson Murder Case*. Giese was a determined newspaperman who had reported the story at the time. Through his intense fixation and deep involvement in covering the case, he produced a fascinating book about the criminal investigation and legal proceedings that had ensued after Mrs. Thompson's murder. Given the detail of its coverage, Giese's book seemed to have left very little room for other authors to write about the murder.

Swanson's book, however, actually provides the perfect complement to Giese's earlier work. Although far less detailed than Giese had been on these subjects, *Dial M* nonetheless provides a perfectly adequate description of the criminal investigation and prosecutions that had ensued after Carol Thompson's death. It is certainly sufficient to set the table for the reader. The great contribution of Swanson's book comes about through its endeavor to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of the impact of this crime. Swanson depicts the aftermath in human terms, exploring the reasons for the community's fascination and describing, in particular, the impact this awful crime and tragic loss had on the Thompson children.

Mr. Swanson has provided an interesting and provocative comparison regarding the local community's truncated reaction to the brutal murder of Mary Bell, a teenage girl who had been found dead in Minnehaha Park less than a week before Carol Thompson had been killed. "Gruesome and close to home as it was, though, Mary Bell's murder lacked mystery almost from the start,

so the fear it sparked—of a homicidal maniac who preyed on teenaged girls—was short-lived, almost nonexistent." Mary Bell's murder had been quickly and conclusively solved, with the perpetrator promptly apprehended, a confession made, a guilty plea entered, and a life sentence imposed. "[A]s a subject of public wonder, dread, and speculation, the case was quickly overwhelmed by the shock waves that followed Carol Thompson's murder . . ."

The most interesting part of the book—and really its focus—is its fascinating account of the Thompson family following the murder. Mr. Swanson has engaged in extensive interviews of a variety of individuals with knowledge, and had extraordinary access to the Thompson children, as well as friends, neighbors, and others who were involved in the case. He has poignantly described the Thompson children's recollections of the events that immediately followed the murder, and how the horrible loss of their mother and the conviction of their father altered their previously normal and placid lives.

Jeff, the oldest, was just thirteen years old at the time and understandably has the most extensive memory of the events that immediately followed his mother's murder. Jeff actually testified as a witness in his father's trial. His younger sisters, Margaret, Patty, and Amy, also have vivid and touching recollections. Mr. Swanson does a fine job describing how the children's lives have unfolded from that time to the present. Their childhood was filled with considerable turmoil as they coped with a destabilized family life and the ongoing notoriety of the infamous case. As adults, they have made determined efforts to move on with their lives, with varying degrees of success. Swanson has thoughtfully presented their fascinating stories—as individuals and as a family—in a respectful and highly interesting manner.

In some ways, the most intriguing subject relating to the Thompson children is their relationship with their father.

Although he declined the author's interview requests, T. Eugene Thompson is a constant presence throughout the book and seemingly in the lives of the Thompson children. He stays in touch with his children, attends family gatherings, and was even present when Jeff, who went to law school and became a prosecutor, was sworn in as a state trial judge in southern Minnesota. While they are civil to their father, understandably there is for them a constant tension between his compelling charisma and the realization of the crime for which he was convicted. In an effort to come to terms with their feelings toward their father, the children actually conducted a private trial and gave their father the opportunity to convince them of his innocence. While this provided for some closure, it is quite apparent and perhaps inevitable that the tension will never go away.

The alleged duplicity of a conspiring husband, the tragic images of the victim and the young children she left behind, and the fascination with the mystery surrounding an arranged murder, have all fueled continued interest in the case even now more than forty years later. For at least some, there are still lingering questions surrounding Carol Thompson's murder and the extent to which her husband was actually involved. For his part, T. Eugene Thompson remains as enigmatic as ever. He has consistently professed his innocence of this brutal crime that has had and continues to have such a profound impact on the lives of his children. While the case seems destined to always remain somewhat of a mystery and a topic of debate for at least some, Swanson's fine book provides a much deeper and interesting examination of how this awful crime affected the community and the Thompson children.

Thomas H. Boyd is an attorney who lives in St. Paul and is a member of the RCHS Board of Directors and its Editorial Board. In our Summer 1991 issue, we published his biographical profile of Judge Walter Sanborn.

Thomas Boyd: Lost Author of the "Lost Generation"

Brian Bruce

Akron, Ohio: University of Akron Press, 2006

188 pages, \$42.95

Reviewed by Patricia Hart

Just when you think you have finished your life-list of summer reading books by and about members of the so-called "Lost Generation" of American writers in the 1920s and '30s, another character pops up. Brian Bruce's *Thomas Boyd: Lost Author of the "Lost Generation"* is a biography of a once highly acclaimed and now-forgotten writer whose name and works are alive only in the stacks of our libraries.

When I went to the library and did some research on Boyd beyond just reading this biography, I discovered that only one of his books, *Through the Wheat*, has been reprinted since his death in 1935. The copy of *Through the Wheat* that I read came out in 1978 as part of the Series of Lost American Fiction, an apt title since few readers of twentieth-century American fiction outside of specialists have heard of Boyd's autobiographical novel.

Thomas Boyd was born in Defiance, Ohio, in 1898. He left high school and volunteered for the Marines after the United States entered World War I. The war had a profound effect on Boyd, who saw action in battles at Verdun, Belleau Wood, Soissons, and St. Mihiel before he was gassed at Blanc Mont and earned the Croix de Guerre. After he was mustered out following the armistice in November 1918, Boyd became a journalist in St. Paul, where he was the editor of the book page at the *St. Paul Daily News*. While working for the newspaper, in 1921 he met F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was already an established author for the New York publisher Charles Scribner's Sons. Fitzgerald had read the manuscript of Boyd's first novel, *Through the Wheat*, and he



recommended that Scribner's publish it, which they did in 1923. After the book came out, Fitzgerald also wrote a laudatory review in a New York newspaper, which ended with the statement, "To my mind, this is not only the best combatant story of the great war, but also the best war book since 'The Red Badge of Courage.'" High praise indeed. Launched as a writer, Boyd went on to publish several more novels, a collection of war stories, and some biographies before his death in 1935.

Among the pleasures that I found in Bruce's fine biography are excerpts from some wonderful letters to Boyd from familiar authors such as Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis and the legendary Scribner's editor, Maxwell Perkins. These letters and Bruce's careful research offer a fascinating look at the St. Paul literary scene in the 1920s that included Boyd and his wife, Peggy. They were invited to join the Nimbus Club, an informal organization made up of writers and journalists in the Twin Cities that included Larry Ho (Laurence C. Hodgson, who served four terms as mayor of St. Paul in the 1920s), Donald Ogden Stewart (later a famous screenwriter), Robert Cary, and Charles Macomb Flandrau, who wrote literary and dramatic criticism for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.

For a time after he settled in St. Paul, Boyd also managed the Kilmarnock Book Store, which was located on the corner of Fourth and Cedar streets. Cornelius Van Ness, a young, wealthy St. Paul businessman with an interest in literature who was also a friend of Boyd's, provided the money behind the bookstore. This eclectic shop had comfortable chairs and a fireplace that encouraged reading and browsing. In addition its books were arranged according to the color of their bindings and not by author or subject matter.

As Boyd's column in the newspaper, which he called "The Literary Punch Bowl," caught on with the public, his writing improved with newly won confidence, and he finally completed *Through the Wheat*. Fitzgerald was only one among many readers and critics who subsequently praised the novel's descriptive power and compelling message. Reading it more than eighty years after its publication, I found its language somewhat unfamiliar to me, but its message was strong. The Great War, the "war to end all wars," as President Woodrow Wilson called it, was a horror: dehumanizing, hopeless, and terribly confusing.

Brian Bruce's biography recounts Boyd's subsequent work as a writer, but none of these publications ever approached the stature and acclaim achieved by *Through the Wheat*. Whether Boyd would ever have gained the widespread recognition that many of his peers in the "Lost Generation" subsequently received is moot because Boyd died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1935. Doctors later concluded that the gassing that Boyd had received during his time on the front lines in the war had contributed to his death. Those who like me enjoy American literature, particularly novels written after World War I, will want to read *Through the Wheat* and learn more about that book's author, Thomas Boyd.

Patricia Hart is a long-time resident of St. Paul, a former member of the RCHS Editorial Board, and an avid reader.



A postcard view from about 1909 showing the Carnegie Library in Spring Valley, Minnesota. For more on Clara F. Baldwin and her role in the Public Library movement in Minnesota, see Robert Garland's article beginning on page 4. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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