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## The Man Behind "Trees"

by

James A. Eaton

If Joyce Kilmer is remembered today, the frame of reference is not in the context of a man who once was a minor star in American social thought; his immortality seemingly rests upon a military post, now turned Job Corps Center, near New Brunswick, in New Jersey.

It is not difficult to understand why Kilmer is so little remembered. If one reads the Memoirs included with *The Complete Works of Joyce Kilmer*, Volumes I and II, and intended to be a biography of Kilmer, one finds very little beyond sentimental dribble from a loyal friend who seeks to immortalize his friendship via the printed page. Furthermore, literary critics seem to ignore Kilmer, nor are his works included in such volumes as *The Oxford Book of American Essays*.

In spite of these attempts to bury Kilmer as a writer and as a person, it is still a fact that as one proceeds to glean some ideas from the writings and speeches of Joyce Kilmer, one finds something upon which to reflect in the life of this man who was tremendously popular among some groups in America for a brief hour before he kept his "rendezvous with death" on a battleship during World War I.

The plaque of commemoration at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, states that Sergeant Alfred Joyce Kilmer was born 6 December 1886 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and was killed in action near Oureg, France, 30 July 1918. It further states that this army camp is dedicated to his memory in respect for his contributions to American freedom and his heroic death in the call of duty. Perhaps that is a good point of departure, for in many ways, Kilmer's importance rests upon his being "an American" at a time when being an American probably meant something a little nicer than it now does. "If there is one word which more than any other should be linked with the name of this gallant figure now claimed (and rightly) by so many elements of the nation, that word certainly is 'American'. A character and a career so racy, typical of all that everybody likes to believe that at our best we are, can hardly be matched, I think, outside of stories." In this manner Robert Cortes Holliday characterizes Joyce Kilmer.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the justification for trying to revive interest in Joyce Kilmer as a representative of American social thought is to be found somewhere in the above two paragraphs. There is a distinct disadvantage in not having available copies of many of the lectures Kilmer gave before groups prior to his becoming a Roman Catholic in 1913. Most likely these lectures, given before literary groups, for the most part, could supply some evidence of how he felt about some of the social issues of his time. Unfortunately, in those early days of his career, he was not prone to pay much attention to the preparation of his

<sup>1</sup>"Memoirs" *Joyce Kilmer's Complete Works*, Vol. One, p. 17.

lectures. Holliday gives an interesting sidelight on this aspect of Kilmer's character:

On frequent occasions, at any rate in his early talks, he neglected altogether to prepare any outline before hand, and even sometimes to choose a subject. Every now and then, I have known him repeatedly to say to his companion at dinner, without, however, any trace of nervousness: "Now, look here: Put your mind on this. Stop all that gossip. Tell me, what I'm to talk about. I have to begin" (looking at his watch) "in twenty-five minutes."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of not having much written evidence available to substantiate the facts, it seems certain that for the first few years after his graduation from Columbia University in 1908, Kilmer was a "burning young radical". In those days, being a radical meant putting one's political faith in socialism. As a young socialist, Kilmer subscribed for and wrote articles for the *Daily Worker*. He has been described as being at "the height of his offervescence" while delivering addresses at meetings of the proletariat.

As a socialist, it is assumed that he believed in government control of the railways, women's suffrage, labor unions, and all of the other things for which the party of Eugene Debs stood at that time. As a result he seemed to have been joyously conscious of his "radicalism" and cultivated friends and jargon from his movement which afforded him immense delight, and which caused his old friends to agree that he was merely enamoured of an intellectual idea, not the socialist movement.

Perhaps it is just as well that there are no political statements included here as being pronouncements of the Socialist Kilmer. For Kilmer was not long a socialist; before too many moons had passed, Joyce Kilmer was transferred from a political speaker to a "man of letters." He passed from the proletariat to the literati quietly. From thence forth until the entrance of the United States into World War I, Kilmer could be safely called a neutral in the political sense.

If Kilmer's influence was not political, then what was it? Perhaps the first lasting important effect of Kilmer on his age was his biased affinity for the "Irish Cause." The second was his position as a Catholic writer and speaker.

Whether or not Kilmer was a cultural pluralist is a debatable question. However, it is positively true that Kilmer identified himself with the Irish and considered the Irish people and Irish culture as something apart which should remain apart to prevent its being spoiled by outside contamination.

Perhaps Kilmer's interest in Ireland—her literature, her lore, her traditions, and her people—was due in part to his ease of identifying himself with the "under dog." The immigration laws were being drawn tighter to keep more and more Catholic Irish out of the

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 40.

country. Ireland itself was experiencing sorrow and bloodshed in its old struggle to win political independence from England. This psychological identification rather than the doubtful "one-fourth Irish" he claimed, probably accounted for his feelings of superiority of the Irish and Ireland. The Irish, themselves, felt that the fact that they were Irish accounted for Kilmer's interest in them and whatever they wrote. He liked all manners of Irish—fairies, Lady Gregory, and most especially, the poor Irish people who went to the Catholic Church. But his special favorites were Irish fighting men.

And yet to call Kilmer a cultural pluralist is not exactly true. The significance of his affection for the Irish is to be found in his own poetical nature. Speaking of this, Christopher Morley has this to say about Kilmer:

In him, as in many idealists, the Irish theme had become legendary; it was part of his religion and his dream-life, and cropping out many times in his verses. The Irish Problem as it is reflected in this country is not always clearly understood. Ireland, in the minds of our poets, is a mystical land of green hills, saints, and leprechauns, and its political problems are easy.<sup>3</sup>

A more definite position which had a more widespread effect was Kilmer's position on religion. Until six years prior to his death, Kilmer had been an Anglican. As a result of the sickness and death of a daughter, Kilmer decided he should become Catholic. From then on, in his time and place, he was poet laureate of the Catholic Church. "In all matters of religion, art, economics and politics, as well as in all matters of faith and morals, his point of view was obviously and unhesitatingly Catholic."<sup>4</sup>

This point of view he stressed not only in his poetry but in his lectures. His lectures took him all over the country and through them he developed into a quickening influence in the Catholic world. To audiences at educational institutions and at clubs and societies, he carried his point of view to "seekers after that real but elusive thing called beauty, a thing which they found in their submission to her who is the mother of all learning, all culture, and all the arts, the Catholic Church."<sup>5</sup>

But not only was the Catholic Church these things to Kilmer, but it was the ideal of democracy. In his essay, "The Poetry of Hilaire Belloc," he says: "And therein is Hilaire Belloc most thoroughly and consistently a democrat. For in this twentieth century it happens that there is on earth only one genuine democratic institution. And that institution is the Catholic Church."

That Kilmer carried his love for the Catholic Church to the point of making it a near-vocation becomes clear from a few lines taken from a letter he wrote to Father James Daly, June 15, 1915. Speaking

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<sup>3</sup>*Modern Essays Selected by Christopher Morley*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>*Holliday, op. Cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

of his coming lecture tour, he said, "I have delight chiefly in talking veiled Catholicism to non-Catholics, in humbly endeavoring to be an Apostle to Bohemia. I have no real message to Catholics; I have *Catholicism's* message to modern pagans. So I want to lecture chiefly to Pagans."

It seems highly doubtful that Kilmer is noteworthy simply because he took a fling at socialism (fortunately before the day of loyalty witch hunts, and also fortunately, he died before having to account for his youthful interest in socialism before a Congressional Inquisition). It can be doubted also that Kilmer's love for the Irish or the Catholic Church (psychologically one love) was such as to bring him fame, except as any well-known man can bring honor to the things he loves by extolling their virtues in public. It is to be conceded, however, that being a spokesman for the Irish and for the Catholic Church at a period in this country's history when both the Irish and the Catholic Church were looked upon as foreign and unwelcome, might have been an important role for him to play.

But Joyce Kilmer probably left his greatest mark on American social thinking by epitomizing the "holy warrior," the bright-faced American soldier who went forth singing, if not "Onward, Christian Soldiers" (that was Protestant), at least a hymn in recognition that.

Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.

Americans were engaged in a foreign war. It was a terrible, bloody, costly thing which caused many to pause and reflect not just upon its causes and consequences but upon its deeper implications in regard to the things America had always thought she held dear — political freedom, personal integrity, religious convictions about the sacredness of human life, and other ideas like these. The incongruity of it all needed more than Liberty Bonds and more than political slogans to give meaning to this inner yearning for a sort of "spiritual rationale" for the mass murder of the world's young manhood and the utter destruction of much which to the Americans had symbolized culture, even though it was European culture.

Joyce Kilmer supplied this basic need for a rationale by sending back from the battle fields of France lines of poetry which spoke words Americans of all sorts wanted so desperately to hear and to believe. What could have done a better job of answering questions and solving consciences than did this poem, "The Peacemaker?"

Upon his will he binds a radiant chain,  
For Freedom's sake he is no longer free.  
It is his task, the slave of Liberty,  
With his own blood to wipe away a stain.  
That pain may cease, he yields his flesh to pain.  
To banish war, he must a warrior be.  
He dwells in Night, eternal Dawn to see,  
And gladly dies, abundant life to gain.  
What matters Death, if Freedom be not dead?  
No flags are fair, if Freedom's flag be furled.

Who fights for Freedom, goes with joyful tread  
To meet the fires of Hell against him hurled,  
And has for captain Him whose thorn-reathed head  
Smiles from the Cross upon an unconquered world.

It is through giving the war a "holy cause" and by paying his own life as part of that cause that Kilmer finds justification as a social influence in America during a period when he was uniquely adapted to be a spokesman not just for the underdog, but for a nation which sought to justify its religious and moral beliefs while participating in World War I. Joyce Kilmer sanctified the fight for freedom.

Is Freedom only a Will-o'-the-wisp  
To cheat a poet's eye?

Be it phantom or fact, it's a noble cause  
In which to sing and die! ("Apology")

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## Needed: A Program To Save Freshmen!

by

James A. Eaton

In the young, dreams that must die should die with gradual ease, not with abruptness. But it is usually with a traumatic jolt that the dream of what college life is going to be, dies for the freshman coming into many of our colleges. Somewhere in the space of a few short days, the dream about college life as something truly great is smashed to bits by archaic systems of doing things in the usual confused manner that characterizes many college activities. It is at this point, when the freshman first confronts the operations of the college, that the greatest possible impressions of a positive nature should be made. To the contrary, often it is here that the college begins a long series of planned activities that turn the freshman from an idealist who might become a being worthy of the name "college student" into a cynic who has no loyalty to his alma mater and no real desire to be a scholar—just to be a student who by hook or crook must "beat the system" or fall by the wayside. This is not the way it ought to be.

What is the cause of the great breach between the "is" and the "ought"? During the first ten days of a student's stay on the campus, there are many factors which make notable contributions to this breach. Many of them are overlooked because they have become part of the hallowed "way we do things", and this endowed with a sacredness that cannot be touched by change.

A good example of what does happen is to be found in the plight of an actual group of freshmen who were discussing with me their experiences during their first week on campus. With tones of voice still colored by the emotions produced by the events they were discussing, the group talked about that "terrible long day of test after test" (referring to freshmen placement tests; the results of only two or three of the battery administered would have any practical use to the college): the manner in which "we were herded from place to place in such an impersonal manner"; the matter-of-fact way in which the rules and regulations affecting their lives were spelled out to them, each additional rule robbing them of the precious freedom they had hoped that college would bring. Then there were the usual stories, perhaps slightly exaggerated, of how freshmen in the men's dormitories were subjected to various stunts of "initiation" by returning upperclassmen. Finally, there were the admissions of feeling homesick and lonely and disappointed. These were their first impressions of their alma mater less than two weeks after they had come to college.

Actually, this was only the beginning of a series of things that can happen to a freshman student helping to create negative impressions against a college and reducing his effectiveness as a student and as a person. Some of these factors, perhaps most of them, happen to exist not so much by design as out of a custom — a custom

which predates (at least in concept) both functional educational theories and generally accepted student personnel practices.

Many of the faults with the present "system" begin with the beginning: admissions. Admission practices vary with the colleges, but there are many instances when a student has been admitted with little or no respect for the student's welfare. Should a college admit a student if there is sufficient amount of relatively objective data available to indicate that the student is not "college material"? Should a student be admitted to a college which does not offer his choice of major but tells him that he might substitute something else? (Or better still, should a student be required to state a major preference before completing at least a year of general college work?) What, in addition to a high school diploma, is taken into consideration when the student's application is being studied?

Once he is on the campus, the student is then assigned to a dormitory room (providing he is able to get a room on campus, of course). Often, there is little or no thought given to the assignment of roommates. "Students are assigned to rooms in order of the receipt of their reservation fees." So state many college catalogs. And that is often just about all that determines the matter. Attempts at compatible room assignments requires work on somebody's part, and so the work is often left undone.

Registration days are usually well-remembered by freshmen. Long lines, confusion, closed classes (after having been told by the adviser that it was necessary to take these classes), jostling with staff members of the business office — who could forget freshman registration day? And who can forget the tired, vacant look in a freshman's face after the ordeal is finished?

If the lot of the student who enters college in September is difficult, pity the poor freshman who enters the second or third quarter! In one day, he is given about a half hour of orientation to the rules and regulations, herded through placement examinations, and then, if time permits, given classes to put on his registration card (which he often finds "closed" when he tries to register the next day). This student is really the "lost one" who wanders around campus from then on, trying to find the names of buildings, trying to discover the rules for using the library, and often not even remotely aware of college regulations he should know before he begins his student career. Many of these freshmen victims have said that if they had not had "home boys" or "home girls" on campus, they would have been completely lost.

Then comes that first day of classes. The freshman meets his teachers for the first time. If he is fortunate, the experience is at least promising. If he is unfortunate, the experience is at least depressing. Teachers of freshman courses are not always the best representatives of the teaching profession.

Before long, the freshman can find many things about which he would like to register complaints. The dormitory is noisy and not conducive to studying. And so is the library. Studying seems to be a

minor pastime on the campus, according to many upper classmen. Rules and regulations regarding signing in and signing out are too strict, say the girls. Social life is too limited (they are treated like children by teachers and student personnel workers. The food is terrible. The books cost too much. The instructors give too much work. And so the list grows and grows. The freshman, by this time, has found no reason to love with a passion his new alma mater. After all, when he looks at the upperclassman, he sees no such love; if indeed upperclassmen love anything, it seems to be some fraternity or sorority.

Thus, brainwashed by very subtle influences, a hopeless victim of a syndrome of practices and regulations, the freshman begins to conform to his surroundings, and the little dreams he once had in his heart about what college was supposed to mean to him die one by one. It is no wonder that in some colleges as many as fifty per cent of the students do not return for the sophomore year.

It is time that someone came to the aid of the freshman! While that is easy to say, it will be more difficult to do. It will be difficult to do because to give the freshman the kind of aid he needs, many colleges will have to scrap their "freshman handbooks", redesign their "general education" curricula, fire some of their teachers, create a new student personnel program (and hire more people to execute it), and in general, become more "humanized" than they are at present. Is it worth all of that activity just to create a few freshmen who can feel emotions of love swelling within their throats as they sing the alma mater? Many persons would say or imply an emphatic "no". But if one could sincerely say "yes", what would he have to do to come to the aid of the freshman?

Perhaps the most important thing — indeed, the *only* thing that would be necessary would be a change in attitude toward both the freshman and the significance of this first year of college. The typical freshman is an eighteen year old adolescent - not really the "man" many college officials want to make him. As an adolescent, he is still in the process of becoming a man, and he still has some thing of the child lingering. Consequently, he looks with excitement to the anticipated freshman college will bring, but if he is sensible, he does not want his freedom to be his undoing. Therefore, the first item in a changed attitude by college officials would be a recognition of the freshman's need for "freedom within restraint", to use the words of Dean E. G. Williamson. This means that many of the rules in the handbooks will have to go, and freshman students will be given a voice in setting up their own rules of conduct and will be given power to discipline themselves when they break these rules. This freedom would be kept within sensible bounds, but this would hardly be a problem; students can be much more severe with themselves when given the opportunity than their elders often realize.

College officials must expect their freshmen to rebel at times against authority figures. This is only natural. Adolescence, even late adolescence, is a time for rebellion. Student growth can come from being rebellious if the rebellion is matched by understanding, sincerely con-

cerned college officials who are able to reason with their young charges without allowing their own egos to become too involved or allowing the young charges to believe that they alone must decide their own destiny. There are times when firmness on the part of the college officials will be essential; yet, it, too, must be done not to protect his own ego but out of understanding concern for the freshman.

This corrected attitude towards the freshman will extend to understanding that most freshmen are incapable of making a sufficient appraisal of their abilities and potentialities, and therefore unable to know when they enter college what occupation they are really fitted for. Consequently, the first year of college will truly be what it is often declared to be — one of general education, arranged in such a manner as to enable the student to enter any major field he may desire when the time comes that he knows himself well enough to decide. All during that year, counselors and advisors will use counseling, objective tests, and friendly conversation to help him know himself better and thus become in a better position to make a choice of a major.

The terrifying experience of registration will be reduced to a minimum when college officials get the right attitude that will send them to the aid of the freshman. His individual schedule will be made out for him before he registers. He will not have the frustration of being frozen out of closed classes because a sufficient number of classes in each course will be set up to handle him and his classmates. He will not have the frustration of being thrown to a teacher who hates freshmen; the best, most experienced teachers will be selected to teach him. He will discover in class what college classes are really like, and he will be helped in trying to discover if this academic world is really where he belongs.

Finally, he will find fellowship in this community of scholars. That awful distance between faculty member and student will be bridged by faculty and administration trying to functionalize Whitehead's statement that "education involves an intimate relationship." Faculty, administration, student personnel worker will all strive to be to the freshman that mature friend who helps him through this period of trying to attain maturity. As Dean Williamson often points out, the freshman needs the friendly objectivity of faculty and counselors who understand his need for freedom. He needs someone to hold up standards who is outside the family relationship. He needs a friendly ear to listen as he tries to talk through his puzzling problems. He needs the best teachers — teachers who, in addition to their proficiency in subject areas, have had counseling training at the expense of the college. These teachers will form the bulwark of a thorough counseling and evaluation program to help the student get to know himself as he seeks to take advantages of a college education.

The above ideas are given as a possible working solution to the specific problems mentioned. Beneath those problems are some solid facts which can be found in situations other than the purely local.

It is a fact, for example, that student mortality is a major problem in American Colleges. It has been found from various studies that from 40% to 60% of the students who enter college do not remain to graduate. Why? Studies also show that many who do not survive are just as competent as those who remain. Why do they drop out? It is a fact that many students are under-achievers, one study showed that one-half of the top one-tenth of the students fail to make a B average. Closely related is the under-achieving average student who flunks out. Among the reasons given for this type of behavior is that many students came to college expecting experiences that did not materialize.

It is equally a fact that recent studies indicate that the problems mentioned above are well high universal among freshmen. A study by Myers, for example, indicates that more than 50% of the freshmen studied had the following problems: 1) inability to study effectively, 2) fear of examinations, 3) lack of preparation for academic life, 4) inability to state own ideas, 5) inability to say anything in class about the work, 6) confusion at registration, and 7) lack of personal contact with teachers. Other problems held by fewer than 50% included: 1) confusion in the library, 2) adjustment to housing, 3) too much or too little social activity, 4) adjustment to new roommate, 5) lack of financial means, and 6) procrastination.

These are normal problems in normal situations. Give to them the exaggeration often commonplace on many campuses and it becomes readily apparent why somebody must work out a program to save the poor freshman!

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