

“Reece’s Legacy: Songs within Our Reach”

Dr. John Kay

As most of you know, brother Terry and I grew up on a 44 acre farm in Hart County, Georgia, in a family consisting of our parents and their 12 children. We grew cotton, corn, wheat, and oats, along with a sizable vegetable garden. We plowed with mules. We had hogs and chickens and cattle for milk and beef. Like the Reece family, we were largely subsistence farmers.

But our father was also a nurseryman. He propagated and sold shrubbery, fruit trees, and as a specialty, pecan trees. Ours was a busy life. Upon laying by our crops in the fall, we immediately turned our attention to digging the trees and shrubbery purchased by customers of Kay Nurseries. We hardly had time to get into trouble.

I think a lot about those pecan trees. They were a bugger to dig, consisting as each did of a deep tap root and numerous lateral roots, and our father insisted that we must not short-change the system. Today, when I travel anywhere in the Northeast Georgia area where we lived, and observe orchards or stands of pecan trees here and there, I see products of our father, for I know these ancient trees were once seedlings that were graft-budded by the skillful hands of Toombs Hodges Kay, Sr. Those trees stand as a memorial, an enduring legacy of this man of the soil. Daddy would agree wholeheartedly with Nelson Henderson’s wise saying, “The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit.” That, in essence, is the true significance of any legacy. Or as John Allston noted, “The only thing you take with you when you’re gone is what you leave behind.”

I wish to speak today about the legacy of Byron Herbert Reece—about what he left behind—and also about our commitment to ensure its survival and extend its reach. My purpose is not to convince you of the worthiness of this objective. I take that to be a given. Nor do I propose to offer fresh new insights into the legitimacy of his legacy. I will leave that task to the truly wise. In fact, I suggest that by appealing to his own

words and experiences, we can allow Reece himself to validate all that he bequeathed to us in his living and his labor.

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying, "If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead, either write something worth reading or do something worth writing." By such an estimate, Reece deserves to be remembered because he wrote a great deal that critics agree is worth reading. Overwhelmingly the critical reviews of his four volumes of poetry and two novels were favorable. That this widespread endorsement of his literary output did not translate into economic success was a sore point for Reece, but it does not diminish in the least the reputation he gained as a first-rate lyricist, balladeer, and novelist.

So let me cite a few examples of critical responses to his work. Following the publication of *The Ballad of the Bones*, his first published volume of poems, William Rose Benet, an established poet and editor, said this:

Byron Herbert Reece is effortlessly and artlessly at home in the ballad, the lyric and the sonnet. Yet the artlessness conceals artistic method of great precision. He is a natural singer, and he conveys to me something of the very soul of youth as no one has conveyed it for a long time—possibly since I read *A Shropshire Lad*.

Responding to the publication of *The Season of Flesh*, syndicated critic Edward M. Case, wrote:

I know of no living poet writing in the English language, or pretending to, who has written lyrics equal to the best poems in "The Season of Flesh," by Byron Herbert Reece...It seems to me that with the exception of Robert Frost, Reece is our greatest living poet, and even Frost is not so pure a lyricist, nor as strong and lonely a voice."

And Ralph McGill, the highly regarded editor and publisher of *The Atlanta Constitution* and one of Reece's greatest advocates, wrote this about the man he so admired:

He is beyond any argument one of the great poets of our day, and it is high time a lot of people—especially those in his home state—finds it out...God alone understands how talent gets into a man, but Reece has a feeling for sounds, for color and music. The folk rhythms, folk themes, the nuances of life, the feeling for old forms and language of poetry—all these Reece has.

Dr. Raymond Cook, author of the seminal Reece biography, *Mountain Singer: The Life and the Legacy of Byron Herbert Reece*,

and arguably the person to whom we are most indebted for initiating the effort to advance knowledge of the writer and his works, had this to say when asked about Reece's legacy: "It is difficult to comment on it because it would probably sound simply like 'dogmatizing.' Few poets have 'moved' me as has Byron. He seems (to me!) to be the most lyrical poet ever from Appalachia and important on the national level as well."

Dozens of similar accolades from critics could be cited, but these should suffice.

This kind of endorsement is supported also by the awards he received. Five times he was honored for achievement by the Georgia Writers Association, and in one year of these awards he was the winner for both poetry and fiction. He was considered for the Pulitzer Prize for *Bow Down in Jericho*. On several occasions he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and he was invited to be a writer-in-residence and instructor at prestigious universities like UCLA and Emory. All in all, he received sufficient acclaim in his lifetime to confirm the significance of his work for generations to come.

But you cannot separate the person from his or her legacy. For that reason, I'd like to offer a few impressions of the makeup of this Appalachian farmer, about whom I must say, as did Philip Lee Williams, he is a man I never met. Some aspects of his persona are evident on the surface of things—his superior intellect, his talent, and his devotion to family and friends. I will confine my remarks to what I perceive to be several additional distinguishing characteristics.

To begin with, Byron Reece was to himself and to others a *complex personality and something of an enigma*. He was in fact complicated, a man of many moods, constantly vacillating about his feelings and viewpoints, second-guessing and making allowances for his strongest intuitions. Yet he was always driving toward clarity and absolute transparency toward himself and others. These comments from a letter he wrote to George Broadrick speak to this tendency.

All feelings and situations are complicated beyond measure. That's one reason writing is so difficult, and that's why we are never certain about our feelings for another person. To make one's meaning clear would take too many qualifications. If I followed my train of

thought and added every qualification that comes to mind I would end up on the judgment day qualifying my latest qualification. I am a ruthlessly faithful person on general principle, but my feelings for another person are in constant turmoil. People who know me think I lead a drab and uninteresting life; they should have to skip to my damned mental apparatus. There was an English girl studying to be a doctor who committed suicide because she could see two sides to every question. If I see only two I count myself fortunate, there are usually dozens of sides.

In another letter, this one to Leon Radway, Reece says, "while I am at it I might add that I live by two things, hate and love. I can't seem to go half way in anything. I do nothing half heartedly...I hide behind a thousand false fronts, but I see nothing wrong with frankness."

The reference to frankness brings me to a second notable feature of Reece's personality, *his propensity for honesty*. Shakespeare, in "All's well That Ends well," observes that "no legacy is so rich as honesty." Reece opined that he had "a terrible regard for the truth." He stated in a letter to Pratt Dixon, "I am an honest creature and my honesty frequently leaves me open for blows the devious never receive." He readily recognized how the adage that "honesty is always the best policy" does not necessarily ring true when one is navigating the channels toward both professional and economic success. He fretted about how people would view him if they were privy to his deepest thoughts and convictions. To Leon Radway he confessed, "If I aired all my beliefs, not a soul this side of God's heaven would speak to me, and I wouldn't like that too much." Reece's honesty could evoke cynicism on his part, as when he noted to Dixon, "Yes, I know the lounge lizards in charge of the poetry in the University quarterlies. I am contemptuous of them, which stymies them completely because it is an attitude they have reserved for me and all of my ilk." But his passion for honesty also led to moments of self-deprecation, as when he noted, "I think less of me than of any person I know."

Finally I observe that Reece was *plagued by loneliness, illness, thoughts of death, and a general state of misery*. In one of his letters, quoted in *Mountain Singer*, Reece wrote:

I get mighty damn lonely for somebody who knows books are written, music is played and heard, and that ideas have consequences, to filch from the title of a new book. I bloody near bust a seam

longing for the few friends I've found in a lifetime, but I know they can't come and settle down here just to comfort me.

Reece's gifted mind and his introspective, somewhat reticent personality, limited for him the scope of close friendships. But to those who were capable of sharing his interests and communicating at his level, he demonstrated an inordinate devotion, the kind that led him to compose letters deep into the morning hours after days of exhausting toil in the fields of the farm. Those letters are an important part of his legacy.

Much of the time, especially in the waning years when the declining health of his parents and his own illness became pronounced, he was altogether unhappy. To Radway he wrote, "I myself am perfectly and completely miserable. I hardly see how I could feel worse and endure." And this: "Anything I write is a monument to misery." The responsibility of farm work, attending to his parents, teaching in order to supplement the meager income, extending himself in order to follow his true passion of writing, struggling with constant depletion of energy and the ravages of tuberculosis—it is small wonder that his literary output gravitated toward morose themes such as betrayal and death.

Yet there were times when he discovered genuine joy in living, as when he observed, "Nothing appeals to me as much as the color in autumn hedges." And this: "Do you ever think suddenly, perhaps from deep enjoyment, God, this day is gone, this hour is gone, and neither will ever come again?"

We cannot divorce the man from his works, or vice-versa, and to understand his poems and prose, we need to appreciate both the author and the culture that framed his thought.

It is important to notice what Reece himself felt about the likelihood of his legacy. There is some ambivalence here. He was modest enough to avoid over-rating his work but honest enough to acknowledge the quality of what he wrote. In a letter to Dixon he noted, "At best a poet will be remembered by three or four poems. We could put the whole of our lyric heritage in one rather small book and never miss what was left out." And in his takedown of the "lounge lizards" referred to earlier, he wrote, "I don't give a damn how much they look down their long noses at

my work, it frames recognizable human experience, and those poems of mine which are well made will endure.” In this statement he was surely prophetic, for the best of his poetry is destined to be remembered. Michael Feinstein said of George Gershwin, “The Gershwin legacy is extraordinary because Gershwin died in 1937, but his music is as fresh and vital today as when he originally created it.” So it is with all great works of art; so it is with the best writings of Byron Herbert Reece. But his honesty led him to create a cover sheet for a ream of unpublished poems he left behind, which read, UNPUBLISHED POEMS. MOSTLY INFERIOR. DO NOT PUBLISH WITHOUT MY PERMISSION.

Fifty-nine years ago, on this very day, June 3rd, in a dormitory apartment on the Young Harris College campus, a single, self-inflicted bullet ended the life of BHR. He was a few months shy of his 41st birthday. Many noted writers have not yet begun their literary ventures by this age. We are left to wonder just how large a legacy Reece would have eventually bequeathed to us had he survived for several additional decades of life.

Reece’s claim to be “a farmer first and a writer second” largely reflects the necessary prioritizing of his daily activities. We emphasize to visitors at the Farm and Heritage Center that farming and writing constitute the twin legacies of this mountain man. The Center seeks to educate folk in both respects, though it has increasingly moved more toward the Appalachian farm culture represented by Reece and his family.

All well and good. This is an important emphasis, given the fact that it is the Farm that attracts most visitors.

But here’s the thing: *the unique legacy of Reece resides in his writings—his poetry and his novels, and yes, in his letters to friends.* Reece put it this way: “my meager success in the literary world is about all by which I can justify myself.” Many of his peers were subsistence farmers, but he alone among them rose to prominence as a writer. Farm implements are now relics, visible reminders of a way of life relegated to the past. They have symbolic value. They are heirs of a bygone heritage,

prompting old timers to become nostalgic and perhaps amusing and hopefully informing the passing fancy of the young.

Literature, like all art forms, stands the test of time—past, present, and future—if it also stands the test of quality. The best of Reece’s work, in poetry, fiction, and letters, easily passes this test.

But in order to endure, legacies require nurture and sustenance. Like crops sown in a field, lasting legacies are carefully brought to harvest by intentional and persistent cultivation. To be productive, soil and seeds depend on stewards committed to their care. In like manner, great literature is not self-perpetuating. It too requires stewards, persons dedicated to its preservation and utilization.

Let us be reminded that the stated mission of the BHR Society is to assume the role of stewardship, of caring for, cultivating, and bringing to greater fruition the works of this gifted Appalachian farmer.

The oft-quoted epigraph to *Bow Down in Jericho* commands our pondering as we soon will celebrate the 100th anniversary of Reece’s birth:

From chips and shards, in idle times,
I made these stories, shaped these rhymes;
May they engage some friendly tongue
When I am past the reach of song.

For 59 years Reece has been past the reach of song. But we are not. And his songs remain within our reach. Our voices at times may be weak and wavering and unconvincing. We may sing off-key to unappreciative audiences. But sing we must, for as Reece declared so hauntingly at the conclusion of one of his best-known poems, “I know a journey that yet wants going, I know a song that is still to sing, I know a fallow that waits the sowing—(There never was time for everything.)”

Dear friends, his time is now in our hands!