Allen Tate

By CARISSA CULKIN

Allen Tate was born John Orly Allen Tate in Winchester, Kentucky, on November 19, 1899, to parents John Orly Tate and Eleanor Varnell Tate. Because of his father’s precarious financial problems, Tate grew up in an unstable environment. His family moved around and they had to sell pieces of inherited land to make ends meet (University of Tennessee). As Tate later recalled, “We might as well have been living, and I been born, in a tavern at a crossroads.” By 1911 his father’s business ventures and his parents’ marriage had failed. The youngest of three boys by almost ten years, Tate found himself in “perpetual motion” with his mother, a native Virginian whose family seat in Fairfax County later became the “Pleasant Hill” of Tate’s only novel, The Fathers (Modern American Poetry).

From 1916 to 1917 Tate studied the violin at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Tate once said that by not fulfilling his dream of pursuing a career in music was “the death of youth” (Modern American Poetry). He began attending Vanderbilt University in 1918 where he met fellow poet Robert Penn Warren. Warren and Tate were invited to join a group of young Southern poets known as the Fugitives, and later the Southern Agrarians, under the leadership of John Crowe Ransom. He contributed to the group’s magazine, The Fugitive, and to the agrarian manifesto I’ll Take My Stand published in 1930.

A brush with tuberculosis forced Tate to withdraw from Vanderbilt in 1922. After months of recuperation in the mountains of North Carolina, he returned to the university in 1923. With a diploma dated 1922, Tate received his bachelor’s degree from the University in 1923 (Modern American Poetry).

In 1924 Tate married Caroline Gordon, a fellow writer, the end of that year. The couple moved to New York City, both determined to become professional writers. There he undertook, but failed to complete, a biography of Robert E. Lee and a memoir about his own ancestors (Southern Literary Journal). Tate was subjected to, and also perpetuated, fictional interpretations of his ancestry. He alternately abandoned and championed Southern culture. Viewing himself as an orphan from a region where family history is identity, he developed a curious blend of spiritual loneliness and ideological assuredness. His greatest challenge was transforming his troubled genealogy into a meaningful statement about himself and Southern culture as a whole (Princeton University Press).

Tate could not finish either project and his inability to meet a publisher’s deadline for his biography of Robert E. Lee led him in 1931 to enlist both Gordon and Warren as ghostwriters. Eventually
he abandoned the project. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1928 took Tate abroad--to London—where he met Eliot, and to Paris, where he took tea with Gertrude Stein, established a friendship with Ernest Hemingway, and cemented his relationships with Ford and Bishop (Modern American Poetry).

In 1930 Tate returned to the United States. His works published immediately after his time in Europe were mainly essays, many of which were included in the *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) in which Tate defended the Southern United States’ traditionally agricultural economy.

Tate became a poet in residence at Princeton, where he remained until 1942. In 1943 he became the consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress, in 1944 the editor of the *Sewanee Review*, and in 1946 editor of *belle lettres* at Henry Holt in New York. In 1948 he served on the jury that awarded, in February 1949, the controversial first Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound for his *Pisan Cantos*. Tate resumed his academic career in 1948 when he accepted a three-year appointment at New York University (Modern American Poetry). In 1951 he accepted an academic appointment with tenure at the University of Minnesota, where he remained until his retirement in 1968. During the 1950s, often through an association with the new Fulbright program, he gave frequent lectures abroad in England, France, Italy, and India.

The last twenty years of Tate’s life witnessed his divorce from Gordon in 1959, his marriage also in 1959 to the poet Isabella Gardner, and his divorce from her and marriage to Helen Heinz, his former student at Minnesota, in 1966. In 1967 he became the father of twin sons, one of whom died in an accident in 1968 after the family’s move to Sewanee, Tennessee. A third son was born in 1969 (Modern American Poetry) and ten years later Allen Tate died in Nashville.