

# Enigma & Anomaly – Brian Booth & his Deep Impact on Oregon Creative Life

**A**uthor, attorney and lifelong cultural wunderkind, **Brian Booth's** recent departure from our visible universe will be long lamented. His impact and inspiration deserve much discussion, for they should and will affect us more than we've yet to realize. Here follows one colleague's attempt to capture a few memories, offer a brief analysis of where we've been together, and inspired by his best sentiments and actions, suggest how we might move forward to build effectively on his foundation.



April 25, on the train.  
Dear Harry:  
The man behind the man behind the gun—the man who  
hazard their lives in order to get the "News"—and who, when  
they get that news—forward it with all possible haste to the  
public, use Corona Folding Typewriters.  
John Reed, Mexican War Correspondent of the Metropolitan Magazine,  
is pictured above. We also reproduce excerpt from a letter he wrote his  
Managing Editor just after he had first used a—  
**CORONA**  
Folding Typewriter

**Journalist John Reed was man  
of the hour during WWI**

We met for the first memorable time at the October 22, 1987 centennial fest for John Reed's birth in Portland. The event flowed from a Walt Curtis story on Reed I edited for *Clinton St. Quarterly*. Presenting at the event were Katherine Dunn, Sharon Doubiago, David Horowitz, among a stellar cast of authors and culture figures unafraid to honor that talented, controversial native son. Then Mayor Bud Clark helped set us up in Pioneer Courthouse Square and issued a proclamation declaring it *John Reed Day* in the Rose City. Near our reading and discussion of Reed's wide-ranging career, Martina Gangle and Henk Curl displayed wares from their intrepid John Reed bookstore. A born-again rabble picketed, commanding us to head back to Russia where we belonged. Sensing that something of a cultural moment was at hand, several TV stations covered the event. Prescient?

Few high-rise attorneys frequent such a setting. Brian's resemblance to his cultural predecessor, that high-risk counselor Charles Erskine Scott Wood who helped mold our city and state's very artistic sinews, became increasingly apparent as the years have gone by.

In late 1987 Brian, Walt and I came together to discuss future possibilities at Vat and Tonsure, which featured classy pub grub—pot pies and Cornish game hen—and those single-serve aluminum espresso pots then representing the “state of the art” of Portland coffee culture. Sitting where Ringside Fish House in Fox Tower sits today, V&T bordered such downtown hotspots as IHOP, Park Avenue Records, and Hamburger Mary's, a once lively block now abiding solely in memory.

Flowing out of our conversation, during which Brian detailed his “brand new baby” — the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts – OILA — we hatched plans for what would soon become Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission – OCHC. That both emerged almost exactly 25 years ago makes that a propitious moment in extending our cultural gridwork, linking it to shared roots in Oregon and NW creative history.



**Brian Booth at an OCHC event in  
Acanthus Gallery [later Mark Woolley]  
presenting his beloved Stewart Holbrook**

**S**oon thereafter, literary cognoscenti experienced firsthand the public unveiling of OILA, at an impossible to forget Round One of the Oregon Book Awards. Brian sat on stage in Portland Art Museum's Whitsell Auditorium in tandem with Gwyneth Gamble Booth, his formidable wife and partner in creative crime. We were literally ushered into their presence. In the best sense of the phrase, here was a “power couple” dealing out their cards before God and country. God in this case was ably played by the voice-from-above Thomas Vaughan, the transformative chief of Oregon Historical Society. Country was essayed by iconic novelist Ken Kesey, up from Pleasant Hill SE of Oregon's second city Eugene. Dueling for maximum stage time, both in good form, Kesey and Vaughan bared their souls.

In the course of the evening, audience and stage were rife with the likes of Ursula K. Le Guin, Vi Gale, William Stafford, Craig Lesley, and dozens of inklingers who've lodged Portland and Oregon firmly among the stellar literary settings worldwide. Not to deny the roles played by a host of bookstore operators and other cultural institutions, Brian and Gwyneth Booth deserve great credit for implementing their vision. Putting their money and reputations on the line, they consciously expanded the literary community to include readers, authors in the wings, soon-to-be-if not-actual supporters of OILA, OCHC and the like, and down the line dozens of initiatives ranging from pedal-powered book delivery to the Writers' Dojo.

In a wildly different context, the captain in *Cool Hand Luke* drawls, "What we have here is failure to communicate." Brian Booth brought us the polar opposite — a potent charge *to communicate* that keeps on giving — in print, on stage, and, I highly suspect, above and beyond the grave.

**OCHC** began to meet at Tonkon, Torp, Galen, Marmaduke and Booth. Needless to say few law firms open their doors to such a wild and woolly artistic bunch. Yet the same doors welcomed the soon-to-be global Phil Knight and the complex, vital-to-its-existence Nike B stock offering Brian conjured up and troubleshoot into existence, as well as breakout film director Gus Van Sant.

Several members of our initial board still serve. Sadly deceased early members include author Fred DeWolfe, photographer Marian Wood Kolisch, PSU professor Rob Tuttle, and now Brian himself. Our initial focus became all of Oregon and regional literature. We were soon staging programs and symposia on C.E.S. Wood, H.L. Davis and

Stewart Holbrook. Our first resounding success was Hazel Hall Poetry Park immediately adjacent to her NW 22<sup>nd</sup> Place residence. Three large granite slabs present complete poems. A biographical plaque with an image by Stephen Leflar sits in front of her home. The Park was created in collaboration with designer John Laursen of Press-22. Brian and Gwyneth were there at the opening, alongside of dozens of creative souls, reading her words and reviving a too-little-known poet right at the site of her creation. The park has introduced tens of thousands to Hall's work, open to passersby 24/7/365 for seventeen years this Mother's Day, 2012.



Brian celebrates at the OCHC Hazel Hall Poetry Park unveiling



John Laursen guides the creation of Hazel Hall Poetry Park

Soon our work incorporated the range of creative arts, including theater, film, photography, music, fine arts, architecture, and more. Over time OCHC has helped save and professionally restored the murals in two major 1930s Federal Art installations in Portland and Salem; preserved the grave of John Reed's wife /creative partner Louise Bryant from destruction in Versailles, France; staged a daylong symposium on WPA art linked to six major exhibitions; created the selection *Literary Oregon, One Hundred Books, 1800-2000* for sponsor Oregon State Library on its 2005 centennial; produced books, films, more than a hundred *Discovering Oregon Originals* programs, and a website vibrant with content linking Oregon and the NW's deepest roots to our present moment. New connections continually emerge, for example learning that Martina Gangle, a presence at our John Reed centennial, turned out to have been a lead artist in multiple 1930's Federal Art and WPA projects across Oregon.

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Brian engaged collegially with OCHC continually, most deeply involved when it explored his fondest creative figures. They include Dr. Alan L. (Alberta Lucille) Hart, Mary Carolyn Davies, Harlan Cozad McIntosh, Albert Richard Wetjen, and Glen Coffield. Though far from well known, they embody the spirit of the quote he shared with our November 1, 2002 audience: “It was Oregon all right: the place where stories begin that end somewhere else. It has no history of its own, only endings of histories from other places; it has no complete lives, only beginnings. There are worse things.” — “Oregon,” H.L. Davis, *Holiday*, 1956. Like Wood, Reed, Hall, Davis, Holbrook and Stafford, each of these figures began or ended some other place. Exempting his sojourn at Stanford,

Brian rests in peace in Oregon, his lifelong beloved home.

In 1998, Gwyneth and Brian were honored as First Citizens of Portland, one of many awards each garnered over the years. Brian made sure his co-OCHC board members joined the gala affair, posing proudly with us as we shared the moment. Informed by bohemia, unafraid to advance non-mainstream opinions, he found our group refreshing and revitalizing. We did the work. This was one of the rewards.

Brian read adventurously and

widely, collecting the works of regional authors and artists with that rarest of combinations: taste, knowledge, and cash. Furthermore, his urge or urgency was to share rather than secret his discoveries. Again he emulates Col. C.E.S. Wood, who penned the line “Good citizens are the riches of a city” which graces the Skidmore Fountain, the Olin Warner sculpture Wood shepherded into existence. Brian felt happiest balancing his legal work for high ticket clients with his smartly crafted cultural endeavors, most of which he drove personally. He was equally happy to see colleagues carry them off, knowing intuitively that each success they achieve extends and embellishes his vision.

**S**o where does this take us beside lionizing a friend? Early influences — familial and communal — likely cemented the habits that made reading and creative appreciation central to his being. Did such germinal joy flow from bedside reading bedside a parent and relative in his earliest days? Following Brian’s April 12 services, a gentleman from his childhood hometown Roseburg thought Daphne White and Muriel Mitchell, local teachers/appreciators of literature, might have had a major influence. Brian knew well “Forty-Two Washington Square” from John Reed’s *The Day in Bohemia*, 1913: “O life is a joy to a broth of a boy” — in his case an undiminished joy.

Though Brian can now only guide via remembered example, and through those entities he helped birth and nurture, his legacy has growth potential for generations to come. My title called him an “enigma & anomaly.” Here lie the seeds of his rebirth and flowering into the future.



The OCHC gang at Brian and Gwyneth's 1998 First Citizens of Portland award ceremony

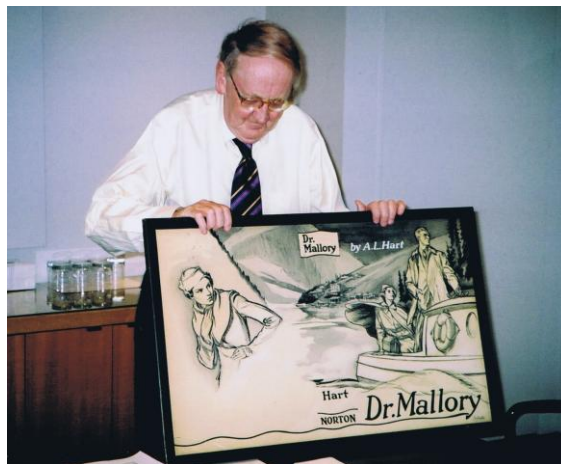


Detail of caryatid sculpture in Olin Warner's Skidmore Fountain graced with C.E.S. Wood's civic slogan “Good citizens are the riches of a city”

At his services speakers repeatedly acknowledged Brian's wry and playful side. At the 2010 OCHC booth at Wordstock he gleefully rounded out a handful of OCHC presenters in reading the bawdy James Stevens & H.L. Davis 1927 *Status Rerum*, a jeremiad against banality they wrote in their cups in a Eugene hotel room. Just picture Brian voicing: "The Northwest — Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana — has produced a vast quantity of bilge, so vast, indeed, that the few books which are entitled to respect are totally lost in the general and seemingly interminable avalanche of tripe." Brian of course knew that Davis went on to win the 1936 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and Stevens was nationally published throughout his career. They plowed the furrows for coming world class authors including Kesey and Le Guin.

Not long ago, Brian popped up at an OCHC meeting with a thrill to share — the original cover art for *Doctor Mallory*, Dr. Alan L. Hart's first novel, a *Literary Oregon* selection long out of print, scarcer than a hen's tooth. For this life-long reader it was the equivalent of the mount of an immense marlin or a huge elk head and rack. Unlike a blood trophy, not a creature was killed, not even a mouse. For though many collect books and art, far fewer explored them and their creators in depth, as did Brian.

Though far from reverent, he saw a critical need to read our roots across the arts, and reward those progenitors' successors. As Brian did for several decades, we must craft and nurture a citizenship and leadership, whose ideas are as shaped by Ken Kesey and Hazel Hall, artists C.S. Price and Martina Gangle, musicians Ernest Bloch and Nancy King, and architects John Yeon and A.E. Doyle, as they are by influential educators, captains of industry, celebrity chefs, and sports



Brian unveils his prize Dr. Mallory cover art

heroes. Appreciation of any one of them should augment appreciation of all the others.

Let us reward Brian with the laurels he merits, a literate and artistically informed populace, in touch with and protective of our natural world. This is far from a dry task, for this man was as apt to toss off a dry aside rumbling into a collective belly laugh as he was to play in a championship tennis match. His nimble mind and extensive works are a great testament.

When he no longer is an anomaly, we'll be all blessed. For Brian Booth realized Oregon deserves no less.

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## Davis Country

H. L. Davis's Northwest



Edited by Brian Booth and Glen A. Love

For David,  
 Fellow founder and  
 the leader of OCHC,  
 with appreciation for all  
 you do for Oregon  
 literature and culture.  
 Cheers!

Oregon State University Press  
 Corvallis

Brian  
 January 2010

A prized gift and one of two books  
 Brian produced with OSU Press –  
 cover and H.L. Davis at right

