# Byron Herbert Reece: Mountain Farmer, Mountain Poet

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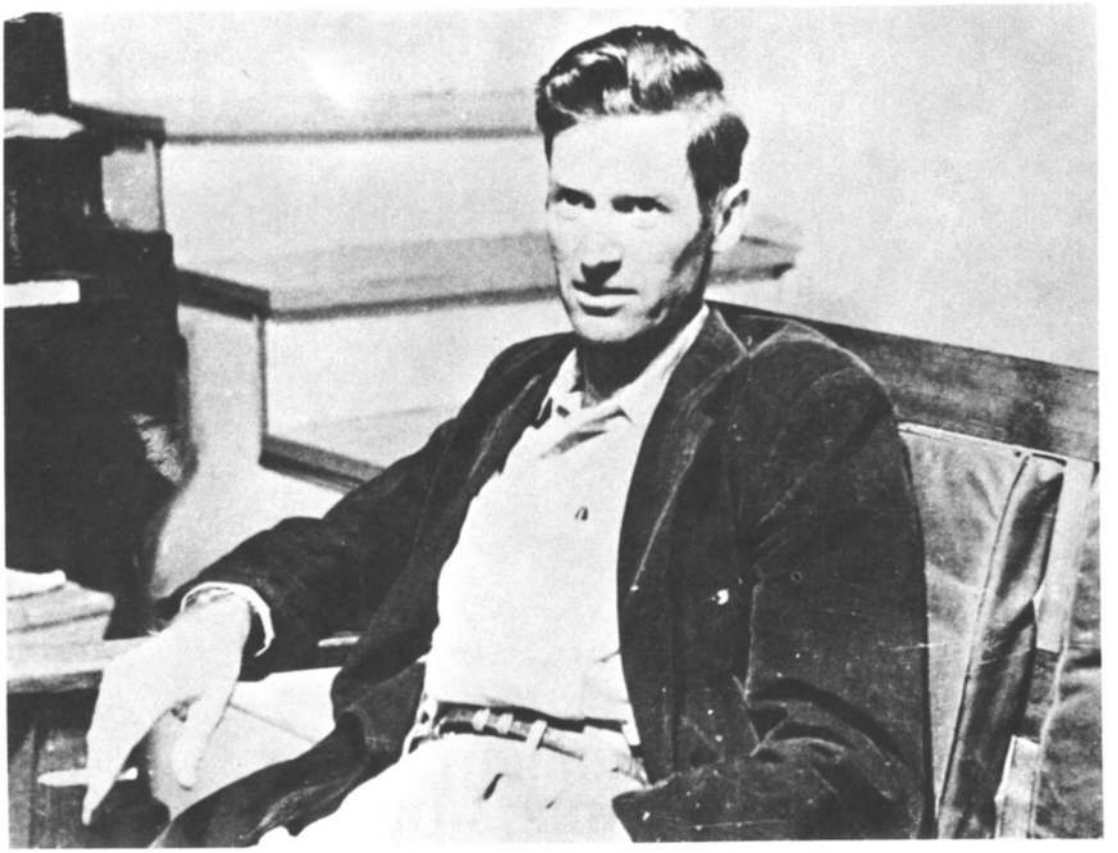

## BYRON HERBERT REECE, (1917-1958)

Byron Herbert Reece was born and grew up in a secluded mountain area of North Georgia near Blairsville. He read *Pilgrim's Progress* and much of the *Bible,* upon which many of his later ballads were based, before he entered elementary school. As an adult, he was a lonely mountain man who was a modestly successful dirt farmer and a poet of surpassing genius. Reece had the ability to say new things in the old traditional forms, distinguished by their simplicity and accuracy. His poetry was mystical, lonely and often seemed preoccupied by death. Reece was perhaps the greatest balladeer of the Appalachians. During his short life, he received two prestigious Guggenheim awards and lectured as Writer-in-Residence at UCLA, Emory University and Young Harris College. Reece died by his own hand on the campus of Young Harris College in early June 1958.

—Cherokee Publishing Co.

# BYRON HERBERT REECE: MOUNTAIN FARMER, MOUNTAIN POET

by
**Bettie Sellers**

Byron Herbert Reece is buried in Old Union Cemetery, less than a mile from Young Harris College where he was a student, where he taught, and where he died. A few miles to the east and south a bronze memorial plaque, now removed by vandals, was affixed to a huge granite boulder in the pines on the road between Choestoe and Walasiyi. It contained his epitaph:

Poet Farmer Educator Author

It was Kentucky writer Jesse Stuart who first discovered the young Georgia poet. Stuart wrote in his introduction to *Ballad Of The Bones And Other Poems,* published by E. P. Dutton in 1946, that he had come across a ballad "Lest the Lonesome Bird" in *Prairie Schooner,* and had been impressed that there was "something of the mood, something of the very life, blood and thought" of the old Americans who had lived when and where the

ballad was still a popular form of expression. He praised "Ballad of the Rider," read the young man's lyrical words and sensed the kinship to both early English and Irish poets. And it was Stuart who took Reece's poems to Dutton and persuaded them to publish that first book.

As *Ballad Of The Bones* was followed by three other volumes, critics praised not only his ballad style, but his lovely retelling of Biblical tales. Of these, Sarah Henderson Hay wrote that he "employs all the rich color and splendid sonorities of a poetic language which is really timeless and ageless, and under no copyright."

The feeling and language of the King James Bible are in the poems. Reece revered the old *Bible* and combined the lilt of its words with a fresh metaphor daily observed in the Appalachian landscape that he loved. In "Ballad of the Bones" the reader observes the bones "dry as grass in a drought," stones "dark as soot." When the skeletons have been reassembled, they are like a wood "when winter grieves in the branches bare of the shape of leaves." "Lest the Lonesome Bird" is a harsh story of murder and guilt familiar to mountain people even in this day of law books and district courts. The images are homely: ridges "curtained by the rain," "hills green with the young leaf," and a tormented lover likened to an angry cat. Whatever the subject of the poem, the metaphor and image is that familiar to the inhabitant of the foothills which surround Choestoe and the Brasstown Valley nearby.

Byron Reece was also a man who loved the soil of his native mountains—and hated it when it took too much of his time and strength. The farmer whose face Ralph McGill once likened to that of a young Lincoln was close to the feel of the earth in the long green valley stretching west from Walasiyi. He once wrote to a friend: "Well, anyway, the earth still feels good to the foot. I've been plowing today, with a tractor, more's the pity. I'm tired with a good sort of tiredness. . . ." Later he wrote from California where he was teaching at UCLA: "This is not my climate really. I think I'll have to get back on the ground, North Georgia and vicinity, before I can do much with the novel." Despite the problems of combining writing and farming, Reece reveals the deepest love and concern for his area. He wrote of spring: "At this time of the year I always get nostalgic for eternity. Did I ever define nostalgia for you? It is the instantaneous recognition of our mortality." That sense of the brevity of life appears in many of his poems and is tied to the natural wonders which he sees around him. In "We Could Wish Them a Longer Stay," [they are] ". . . lovelier, dearer now/Because they are soon to go,/ Plum, peach, apple and pear/And the service blooms whiter than snow."

A brief passage from his first novel *Better A Dinner Of Herbs* reveals the sensitivity with which he saw winter and the snow which comes to blanket the roughness of a fall landscape:

> Going to the kitchen Danny saw that the niggard sky had failed to fulfill its promise.
> 'I wanted it to snow,' he said.
> 'It didn't oblige you,' Uncle Enid said in a bantering tone but his nephew looked at him with an affronted stare and he knew that he was very disappointed. Then he remembered with a dim sense of hurt because it came no more the sense of joy with which he had awakened to a morning of snow in the days of his boyhood.
> 'I guess snow's a boy's weather, all right,' he said.

There were times when the critics chose to misunderstand his life as farmer. This may have led to his writing an article which was published in *The Atlanta Journal Magazine* in 1953. Here he defends himself of the charge that his staying on the farm was an act, and continues: ". . . when I am asked why I stay on the farm . . . I give the best answer I know: Because I want to. The North Georgia countryside is as good a place as any for a man to

wrestle with the angel of his aspiration and his loneliness. Here in the company of the quiet earth, like Jacob at Peniel, he may sometimes prevail."

Another area in the life of Reece concerned his ambivalent feelings toward teaching, a career he was often forced into by financial necessity. The writing of poetry and novels does not necessarily make one a living—a fact indicated by his many references to financial matters in his letters. The farming which had provided a hard living in younger days became impossible as his fight with tuberculosis continued to sap his strength. The man who had once written:

> . . .as I sat before the fire too tired to move I thought what a peaceful, what a virtuous world this would be if everybody had to tail a wood saw every day. . . .

would write with despair in 1957:

> I have been teaching English. . . . It is mostly a dead grind, but one must live. . . I have written nothing since the last day of 1954, when I completed the manuscript of *The Hawk And The Sun.* I doubt if I ever write more poetry, I don't feel it anymore.

But that same man could picture a student turning at the door toward the professor who has just closed "the ponderous book of Herrick's song,/Caught still in the youthful music, caught in the spell/Of its sound on a youthful tongue."

When teaching, whether at Young Harris, Emory, or elsewhere, Reece spent many hours preparing his lectures (a large collection of his class notes in the University of Georgia collection attests to this) and many more out-of-class hours discussing the great literature of the past with his students. Those who found him somber and taciturn most of the time did not know the man whose face was so lighted when he discussed the lyrics of such poets as William Shakespeare, Vachel Lindsay, or Edward Arlington Robinson. Letters from former students testify to his having been an exciting teacher despite his protestations to the contrary.

How Byron Reece felt about his craft emerges in a personal recollection of the tall North Georgian, dressed in a business suit and white shirt, talking on my country porch near Athens where he was attending a conference. Escaping from the literary crowd for a few hours, he relaxed in the darkness. The conversation turned to poets, Poe in particular, and how exciting it would be to hear the poet read his work. Byron disagreed, stating that what he wrote was much more beautiful heard in his mind than he could ever reproduce in the harsh gutterals of his voice. He gave readings, he said, because it was a necessary part of the game, but never felt that he had done his poems any justice by doing so. He had once written to Atlantan Marel Brown, one of the first to discover the shy mountain poet: "I simply refuse to butcher poetry by reading it aloud. I don't mind reading it to stumps and corn shocks, but they have the advantage of not being able to hear." Mrs. Brown wrote in a 1958 issue of *Georgia Magazine* of the man she knew and admired:

> . . .To me the pattern of Reece poems reveals the wise farmer in him; he guided his plow against the lay of the land, always. Where the furrows should hug the curve of the hill, they hugged; where the contour changed, his furrows swerved to the natural heave and dip of the uneven soil of what he called 'God's country.' His variation of rhythm was always in conformity to the underlying substance—never any conscious effort to be bizarre or different. His are true lines, in true rhythms, against the uneven hills of life, as he knew it.

Many pages could be written about a man dogged by illness, pain, and despair. Exactly two years before he took his life, he wrote to a friend about having read a book in which the boy discovered his absolute limit and cut his throat. He commented that he had reached his wall, the absolute limit of energy, and that "waiting it out is a luxury that I can't afford anymore. Success and I just missed connections somewhere along the line. Well, to hell with it. I've got to eat. I don't like to be hungry. So I'll meet my English classes as long as I can."

**Poet Farmer Educator Author Man**

And it was Ralph McGill who wrote a sensitive and loving editorial at that man's death:

> Byron Herbert Reece was a poet—one of our major ones. He was also a novelist, articulate and skilled. But, most of all, he was a poet.