

“William Buehler Seabrook”

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by Jay A. Graybeal

Carroll County was the birthplace of a number of notable Americans including the enigmatic travel writer William Buehler Seabrook. Born in Westminster in 1886, the son of a Lutheran minister, he traveled the world exploring exotic places and cultures. His several books about cannibalism, witchcraft and voodoo excited and shocked his readers. Following his suicide on September 20, 1945, an article by Winifred Van Duser, entitled “Ending Career Packed With Melodrama,” appeared in the November 2nd issue of the Westminster Democratic Advocate newspaper:

“Big lusty, restless, red-haired William Buehler Seabrook spent more than 20 years seeking fantastic adventure, then putting what he found into books which thrilled some, shocked many. But he never will write the story of his greatest adventure. Secretly and alone he embarked upon it not long ago by way of an overdose of sedative.

The coroner says Bill Seabrook committed suicide. But his friends have a different explanation for what happened. They say he only was making another more drastic attempt to accomplish what he had tried, vainly, all his life to do—to get away from himself.

Thus ends the strange career of one of the strangest personalities of the era, an enigma even to himself. The career moved to staccato rhythm up and down the world, into and out of civilization. Sometimes it blazed with color. Often it was darkened by the shadow of forbidden things. But it never was commonplace. Even his private life was packed with melodrama.

Seabrook lived as a member of a Bedouin tribe. He joined the Druses in the Arabian mountains, moved on into a monastery at Tripoli. He crossed and explored the Sahara by airplane. He lived with Zezides devil worshipers in Kurdistan. He became a disciple of voodoo worshipers in the mountains of Haiti. He joined cannibals in their banquets in Africa.

The restlessness which impelled him to jump from one far corner of the globe to another chopped up his home life into a series of almost disconnected chapters all drenched with hard liquor. Three times married, each union ended abruptly. He swapped his first wife with a friend for his second wife. His third wife induced him to plunge his arms into a bowl of boiling water as prelude to a period of non-elbow-bending.

Liquor and women, if fact, were Bill Seabrook’s undoing. In 1934 when he found himself daily absorbing a quart and a half of whisky, gin, brandy, or pernod, he had himself committed to an institution in Westchester county, New York, to be cured of the habit. His seven months’ experience there resulted in *Asylum*, the book which became a best seller, made his name famous and still is one of the most popular works in the public libraries.

But the cure was not permanent. Only a few days before his death he was discharged from the Hudson River State Hospital at Poughkeepsie, not far from his estate at Rhinebeck, New York. Once again he had been committed at his own request. But this time he left the hospital with the melancholy conviction that his adventures all were motivated by escapism and therefore valueless.

Women, as Bill revealed with astonishing frankness and perhaps more than astonishing showmanship in his autobiography, *No Hiding Place*, bothered him most when they were in chains. He liked to see a girl loaded with bracelets, bangles, anklets. He preferred to see her manacled. Occasionally he met one who permitted herself to be chained up and padlocked. Women of Arabia were especially cooperative in such experiments and tent poles came in handy for use as anchorages.

Born in Westminster, Maryland, 59 years ago, son of a minister, the young Seabrook was the product of back-country parsonages. An ancestor was a Bishop Buehler, a friend of Wesley, who became Bishop of Wales in the Eighteenth century. One of his grandfathers always carried a vial of hard liquor from which he frequently helped himself to a straight two ounces 'medicinally.' One of the grandmothers enjoyed an occasional swig of laudanum which she kept in the cellar.

Bill received his education at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania, Roanoke College in Virginia and Newberry College in South Carolina. He emerged from the latter with an M. A. degree. A few days later he walked into the city room of an Atlanta newspaper wearing dude clothes and spats, plus a beard and carrying a cane. Nevertheless he was put to work. On a day when news was dull he took a balloonist's place and made the leap in a parachute. The leap jumped him from the job of cub reporter to city editor.

In 1908 he went to Switzerland, studied philosophy and metaphysics at the University of Geneva. Then he hoboed about Europe nearly two years. Returning to Georgia, he opened an advertising agency in Atlanta. There, in 1912, he married his first wife, Katherine Pauline Edmondson.

When the First World War broke, Bill returned to Europe, enlisted in the French Army, was gassed at Verdun. Then in 1917 in New York he made his start as a writer with the encouragement of H. L. Mencken. For seven years he wrote news and features for syndicates. His career of adventure began in 1924 with a trip to Arabia. The outcome was his first, book, *Adventures in Arabia*.

A visit to the voodoo worshipers in the mountains of Haiti provided experiences for *The Magic Island*, a Literary Guild choice in 1929. Initiated by witch doctors and sorcerers into the blood rites of black magic on this visit, he still contended that witchcraft was effective only when the victim lent his aid, that it worked, in fact, as autosuggestion.

Not until 1930 did he really horrify a large portion of his readers with his *Jungle Ways*, the tale of eight months spent with Guere cannibals of the Ivory Coast. Determined to go the whole route, he partook of the cannibals' diet which he believed to be human flesh and which he described as 'meat that tasted like good, fully-developed veal.' Later he decided he had been imposed upon, that the flesh had been that of an ape.

About the time *Asylum* was written, Bill announced his secret marriage seven months before, in February 1935, to novelist Marjorie Worthington. His first wife, who divorced him in 1934, married Miss Worthington's former husband, Lyman Worthington. Bill's second wife accompanied him on an airplane trip to Timbuctoo and on a subsequent walking trip in France.

But a little more than five years later Marjorie went on a walking trip, solo, out of the Rhinebeck house and into the divorce court at Newburgh, New York. That, she explained, was after her husband had brought a red-head from the art colony in Woodstock into their home to remain as a permanent guest.

The red-head was Constance Kurh, of Brooklyn. Bill married her in Sharon, Connecticut, in May, 1942. Their two-year-old son, William was a disappointment to his father who had hoped for a girl. 'I am the seventh William Seabrook and there have been too damned many of us,' said Bill."

As noted in the article, Seabrook's personal and professional life was filled with controversy. One journalist gave him the sobriquet "The Maryland Ju Ju Man." A critic, who described him as a "cannibal" and a sadist, wrote in a 1966 review of Marjorie Worthington's book, *The Strange World of Willie Seabrook*, that his "principal literary contribution, it would seem, is the word "zombie." Miss Worthington had a more sympathetic view and wrote, "He was a fine intelligent, and lovable man, with a touch of genius as well as madness."



Controversial travel writer William B. Seabrook. Historical Society of Carroll County.