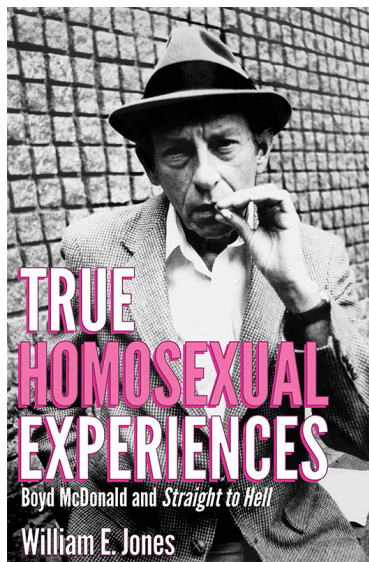


Horrigan, Bill, "An Experiment in Biography," *Wexarts.org*, March 21, 2016

wexner center for the arts

An Experiment in Biography

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The Wex's support of visual artist William E. Jones began in 1991 with the screening of his film *Massillon*. An Ohio native based in Los Angeles since the late 1980s, Jones has since become a recurring participant in our Film/Video Studio Program, and in advance of his forthcoming residency here in April, he and I conducted an email exchange (March 3–4) about his most recent book, *True Homosexual Experiences: Boyd McDonald and Straight to Hell*. While here, Jones will be doing a reading and booksigning on April 13, as part of his residency. The book's an invigorating and empathetic inquiry into the life and vocation of a writer uninterested in any easy or well-mannered assimilation into the gay culture of his time, which was that of the declining decades of the American 20th century.

Bill Horrigan (BH): Your early work, in film and video, mined autobiographical veins. You talked about yourself in voice-over or text, not in a diaristic or confessional mode, but simply about how your thoughts and behaviors took form in relation to a set of larger concerns—politics, sexuality, visual representation, pornography, etc. That first-person subjectivity has extended into your gallery-based projects—photos and looped digital pieces—but in those cases, the autobiographical grounding is located in the writing you produced for their accompanying catalogue or wall text, writing that gives an account of the logic and the impulses you were following in creating those works.

True Homosexual Experiences (THE) is intriguing to me in relation to your adherence to autobiography because, like your earlier book on a gay porn outsider, *Halsted Plays Himself* (2011), it's technically a biography of an elusive artist who steadfastly resisted being known. And precisely because neither one of these men, Boyd McDonald and Fred Halsted, would probably have been recognized by most people, even gay people, as being "worthy" of full-scale biographical treatment (which is what in the end you miraculously provide), it's their having been marginalized within a censorious public culture that all but forces you to explicitly and more than once declare your hand as you reconstruct their lives and careers. I guess what I'm saying is, given who each of them was and what each of them did, your own "autobiographical" investment in writing about them would be as inevitable as it would be natural.

William E. Jones (WEJ): An autobiographical form has interested me all along, but never in a "pure" form like confession or diary. I must have a subject outside myself to engage with even if that subject is as close to me as a work of art I made. I rarely write anything solely in the first person or the third person; an alternation between the two is more dynamic.

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My first film *Massillon* (1991) is my most autobiographical, but even it has long passages of third person narration providing social and historical context. At some point before I started my second film, *Finished* (1997), I realized that there simply wasn't enough autobiography to sustain a practice—my life is pretty boring, at least to me. Some people who saw *Finished* thought that I was more worthy of a film than my biographical subject, Alan Lambert, a gay porn star who committed suicide in the early 1990s. Such a reaction misses the point entirely; I need my subject as much as he "needs" me for the film to come into being.

While I was working on *Finished*, a difficult period when I grappled with the question of how to continue making films, I discovered a key text: *The Quest for Corvo* (1934) by A. J. A. Symons. Symons had an unfashionable enthusiasm for a neglected author, the so-called Baron Corvo, an eccentric who could be difficult if not downright hostile to those trying to help him. As Symons discovered, Corvo was a homosexual who preferred to live as an indigent in Venice, a beautiful city where he could indulge his desires, than to have anything resembling a respectable existence in Edwardian England. Symons never knew Corvo, who had died about 20 years before he started writing his book. Many elements of *The Quest for Corvo*—a subject considered beneath the consideration of conventional society, a body of work that is not a given but is fragmentary and must be assembled by the biographer, and an implicit condemnation of a repressive society—struck a chord with me as a reader and later became useful in my own writing.

BH: That's actually a great analogy, in that it raises the question of whether Symons's superb resurrection of Corvo had as either one of its intents or effects Corvo's establishment as a major figure—one who, up until then, had been destined to survive, if even there, as a footnote in biographical studies of his less-eccentric betters.

Getting back to Boyd McDonald, when you assembled and expanded his *Cruising the Movies: A Sexual Guide to Oldies on TV*, which first appeared in 1985, you added considerable biographical information on him, so it really surprised me that you were able to discover so much more about him for *THE*, much of it about his family, his time at Harvard, and his straight journalistic work. I do remember commenting to you, when you were in the process of producing the book, how amazed I was at the stuff you were able to uncover. I wonder if you'd want to say something about that, and if you feel certain elements or periods within his life were simply beyond the biographer's reach?

WEJ: When I started *THE*, I imagined I would have to reckon with a great gap between Boyd's time at Harvard in the late 1940s—he was a contemporary of John Ashbery, Edward Gorey, and Frank O'Hara—and his early efforts in underground publishing during the late 1960s to early 70s. He dismissed this part of his life completely in the construction of an autobiographical myth. Even close friends knew little about Boyd's past. I decided not to take the man at his word but to try and find out what he did during that time. Tracking down members of Boyd's family proved to be crucial. A niece provided me with clippings he sent to his sister, including an amazing article he wrote for a newspaper in Natchez, Mississippi in 1952, and a few tantalizing letters attesting to his activities and addresses during the period about which he remained silent. (I must acknowledge the help of Jarett Kobek, whose internet research skills are far greater than mine; he found names and addresses of family members as well as references to the McDonald family in South Dakota.)

Even with the documents I was able to gather, there were years for which I could find nothing at all, a "lost" decade during which Boyd must have been increasingly debilitated by alcoholism. I had to rely on the testimony of his nieces. The only image I have of Boyd at that time is from the point of view of young girls who adored him. At least three different men emerge: a studious, obsessive youngster; a loving, indulgent uncle; and finally, a dirty old man, the stereotype most people associate with Boyd McDonald, if indeed they remember him. A few discrete images of Boyd are superimposed, but they do not coalesce into a unified whole, in other words, subjectivity remains out of reach. This jarring effect is especially intense when the subject is a gay man for whom compartmentalizing subjective experience was a necessary survival strategy. I think of a sentence from a Tennessee Williams story about one of his libidinous spinsters: "It is easy to lead a double life in the Delta; in fact it is almost impossible not to." Boyd lived in the Delta for six months (though I uncovered no evidence of his double life there) and copies of *Straight to Hell* were found among Williams's effects at the time of his death. It is possible that the two men knew each other personally, but if so, the story died with them.

"An experiment in biography" (*The Quest for Corvo's* subtitle) is the only recourse I had, aside from declining to write about Boyd due to lack of material. Any reasonably competent writer can arrange the facts of a person's life chronologically; as I see it, my real work is in filling the gaps between those facts with what I readily admit is speculation.

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BH: Even so, you don't come anywhere close to the point of "speculation" that for me at least discredits so many biographical studies—you don't go anywhere near the mode of, "What must Boyd have felt at that moment? Most likely, his thoughts raced to..." Even with so much of Boyd's life being literally irretrievable, and as walls both physical and psychological were narrowing, you extrapolate from what is known about his existence and from the debilitations he suffered. You suggest, with real empathy, that however misbegotten Boyd's life might have appeared to others, on his own terms we might look at it as a bracing success, even exemplary, in the force with which he resisted the pressures he was with burdened by his time and place.

Was there a happy ending? If that's measured in legacy, probably so. As to the life he led, the adversities he faced, were those the constituent materials of tragedy? Absolutely not.

WEJ: I believe that people are rather opaque—a bit strange perhaps that I should gravitate to biography—and I have little patience for the certainties of biography as pop psychology. I resent it when someone says "that explains everything" at the mention of a telling detail. I could have gone very far in an amateur psychoanalysis of the McDonalds, a family of ambitious and obsessive alcoholics from the Great Plains, but when I read this sort of thing in other biographies, I find it presumptuous and silly.

I have a certain gift of intuition, which when combined with investigative skills, can lead to surprising results. Here's an example: Jarett found a few scraps of information about Boyd's brother Mark McDonald. He had owned an antique shop on the Upper East Side of New York and according to his obituary was not married at the time of his death. I immediately suspected he was gay, and I researched his business partner, who I found had lived at the same home address as Mark. When I contacted one of Boyd's nieces, I asked if Mark was also gay, and she said yes, Mark and his partner were both her uncles. Mark McDonald had clearly attained a much higher social station than Boyd, who after 1968 was living in a single-room-occupancy hotel. When I looked through old issues of *Straight to Hell*, I noticed a lot of resentments towards bourgeois homosexuals who lived on the Upper East Side, which Boyd described as a "lifestyle choice" he abhorred. It turns out that Boyd and Mark were estranged, and that after the 1960s they never saw each other, even though they lived only about 20 blocks apart. I don't go as far as envisioning dialogue between the brothers, that is true, but with a little speculation, I was able to reconstruct the pattern of their relationship.

Many have said that there was something almost inhuman about Boyd, with his sexual monomania, his compulsive behavior, his reclusiveness, and I was determined to humanize him and show what was admirable in his character. He overcame alcoholism and never (as far as anyone knows) fell off the wagon; he lived in circumstances that most middle-class people would consider wretched yet thrived; he was consistent in his beliefs, not some noisy "bad boy" artist poised to sell out at the first opportunity. Those closest to Boyd described him as generous and loyal. His politics were scrupulous and conducted on a person-to-person level.

I love a statement that Boyd included in many biographical blurbs for his publications: "I could be happy anywhere, for it is my work, not geography or real estate, that makes me happy." This is an incredibly radical pronouncement to make in New York, where the identities of millions are wrapped up in questions of neighborhood, and where getting (and keeping) a good apartment is a major achievement.

I am interested in a useful past, a legacy that will answer questions for a younger generation. To be of use to those who come after—this is not the kind of happy ending that the mass media conditions us to accept, but it is happy.