

Sledd, Benjamin Franklin ^[1]

Sledd, Benjamin Franklin

by John R. Woodard, 1994

24 Aug. 1864–4 Jan. 1940

Benjamin Franklin Sledd, educator and poet, was born in Bedford County ^[2], Va., the son of William Edgar and Arabella Hobson Sledd. Members of both the Hobson and Sledd families had fought in all the wars of the nation beginning with the American Revolution ^[3]. Sledd was later characterized as a "Virginia Gentleman" of the highest class. He never forgot his plantation upbringing, and his early formative years were frequently the sources for his later poems and verses. At the old field schools ^[4], he studied Holmes's readers and Sanford's arithmetics. Sledd learned at an early age to appreciate literature in any form. He was delighted when his teacher and pastor drove up in a gig from Lynchburg, Va., with new books that he had not read. All of Sledd's family were "High Church Episcopalians," but as a youth he began to attend the Hunting Creek Baptist Church near his home and was baptized into its membership by William E. Hatcher.

After Sledd had absorbed all that the old field schools and the neighborhood instructors had to offer, he "gave up the struggle with sassafras bushes, and crabgrass, worn-out soils and hopeless Negro labor, sold a big slice of my world of useless land for the princely sum of three hundred dollars; and one fine September morning [in 1881] with books and clothing packed in a pair of saddlebags, rode away on old Frank (nomen carum et venerabile) across the counties to Washington and Lee University" in Lexington, Va. An excellent student, especially in Latin and Greek, French and German, history, and English, he was graduated with an M.A. degree in June 1886. One of his professors influenced him to enter Johns Hopkins University ^[5] in the fall of 1886 as a graduate student of the Teutonic languages. Sledd in his zeal overtaxed his eyes and for two months had to stay in a dark room and use his sight sparingly. He did not complete his work for a Ph.D. For a short time he was master of Charlotte Hall, a school in southern Maryland. It was during his fear of possible blindness and the aftermath beside the wintry storm-tossed Chesapeake that he began to seriously compose his poems and verse.

In August 1888 the board of trustees of Wake Forest College ^[6] elected Sledd to the chair of modern languages. At this time he was barely twenty-four. From September 1888 to June 1894 the young professor taught classes in French and German and sometimes elementary Italian. He developed the course to consist of two years of work in each language, five recitations a week for the first year and three the second year. As a teacher he inspired many future newspaper reporters, journalists, poets, and educators in the language field. His students called him "Old Slick."

Sledd was in his fifth year as professor of modern languages when, on the sudden death of William Royall, he was transferred to the English department. He was formally elected professor of English and department head in June 1894. Sledd extended the English program from two to three years and required all students to begin with the first year, which stressed composition and included the foremost works of English novelists, essayists, poets, and historians. Many years later, his course load was lightened by additional faculty members, and he concentrated on his course in Anglo-Saxon and other special courses in English and American literature. After fifty years in the classroom, he retired in 1938 as professor emeritus.

Despite a demanding teaching schedule, Sledd found time to write poetry. The first volume, From Cliff and Scaur ^[7], was published in 1897. Five years later The Watchers on the Hearth ^[8] appeared and in 1908, Margaret and Miriam. He edited La Princesse de Clives ^[9] (1896) and Milton's Minor Poems (1908) and published numerous poems in the nation's leading magazines and newspapers. In addition, Sledd conducted critical studies of the poetry of others and published reviews in periodicals in the United States and England. The Wake Forest Student contains many poems, verses, sketches, essays, and writings of Sledd and his students. A posthumous volume of his unpublished writings was edited and published as A Young Man's Vision, an Old Man's Dream ^[10] (1957).

In an autobiographical letter in 1929, Sledd wrote: "My work in literature has not set the world on fire, although I am proud of it in a modest way." Regarding his first two volumes of poetry, he wrote that they "were kindly treated by the critics and brought me some reputation and less money."

In 1889 he married Neda Purefoy, the granddaughter of James Simpson Purefoy, one of the founders of Wake Forest College. They had five daughters, Erma, Miriam, Margaret, Gladys, Elva Douglas, and one son, Arthur Purefoy.

Sledd died of a heart attack in his home at Wake Forest ^[11]. Funeral services were held on 5 Jan. 1940 at the Wake Forest Baptist Church by the Reverends John Allen Easley and Willis Richard Cullom ^[12]. He was buried in the cemetery at Wake Forest.

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