

Russell Cheney
by Wesley Gryk, Jr.

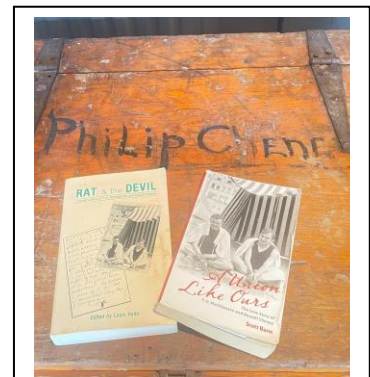
Wes, a native of Manchester, graduated from St. James School in 1963, and East Catholic High School in 1967. He has lived since 1980 in London, England, where he has pursued a career as an international human rights lawyer, working as Legal Adviser to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and Deputy Head of the Research Department of the International Secretariat of Amnesty International, before setting up his own law firm specializing in immigration law involving human rights and civil liberties. In the early 1960s, he moved with his late parents, Wes, Sr., and Bernice Bieluch Gryk, to the Philip Cheney Mansion at 50 Forest Street, a stone's throw from Russell Cheney's studio, but with no inkling then of the courageous role which Russell Cheney had played in forging one of the early 20th century's best documented artistic-literary gay relationships.

I have fond memories of growing up in Manchester and of the early education I received there. I therefore very much appreciate the efforts which the Manchester Historical Society plays in reminding us of the town's rich and varied heritage and the role which the Cheney family played in building the community. Well over a hundred years ago, my two paternal grandparents had travelled from villages in what are now eastern Poland and western Belarus to work in the Cheney mills and put to use the weaving skills they had honed during the long winter months in that region. My father worked in the mills when young and I spent one summer in the 1960s in one of the factory buildings now converted to apartments at the end of Forest Street typing up shipping labels for velvet being produced and shipped out as lining material to casket companies.

I've felt moved to write this contribution, however, to supplement the Society's coverage of the life and career of Russell Cheney. Russell was the youngest of the eleven children of Knight Dexter Cheney, and the only one of K.D.'s five sons who didn't go on to become managers in the family business after studying at Yale. Russell was the "artistic one."

The Society's website and newsletter have documented in much detail Russell's artistic career, recently highlighting for example the upcoming exhibition of his work at Ogunquit, Maine, Domestic Modernism: Russell Cheney and Mid-Century American Painting August 1–November 17, 2024.

Russell's personal life as well is of considerable historical interest. His relationship with the celebrated Harvard writer and critic F.O. Matthiessen, from their first meeting aboard the ocean liner *Paris* in September 1924 until Russell's death in 1945, has been extensively documented in two books: • *RAT & the DEVIL, Journal Letters of F.O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, Edited by Louis Hyde, Alyson Publications, 1988 (first published in hardback version in 1978 by Archon Books, an imprint of the Shoe String Press, Inc., Hamden, Connecticut); and • *A Union Like Ours, The Love Story of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*, by Scott Bane, Bright Leaf Books That Illuminate, an imprint of the University of Massachusetts Press, 2022.



RAT & the DEVIL and A Union Like Ours on display on an old steamer trunk of Philip Cheney which has a position of prominence in my London living space, reminding me of my Manchester past.

These books outline how, from near the very beginning and throughout their relationship, “Rat” (one of Matthiessen’s pet names for Russell) and “the Devil” (one of Russell’s pet names for Matthiessen) were honest to one another and to a close circle of friends and family around them about the true nature of their relationship.

In March 1925, just a few months after their meeting aboard the *Paris* (Matthiessen heading towards the second year of his Rhodes Scholarship at New College Oxford and Cheney travelling to Florence and Venice to broaden his artistic horizons), Matthiessen wrote to his former Yale classmate Russell W. Davenport about how, on their fourth night at sea together, he screwed up the courage to “come out” to Russell after offering him a piece of fruit. He records the response he received:

“The munching of the pear died away. There followed perhaps half a minute of the most heavily freighted silence I have ever felt. Then, in a far away voice I had never heard came the answer, ‘My God, feller, you’ve turned me upside down. I’m that way too.’”

Clearly, being honest about such a relationship even to a limited coterie of family and friends was incredibly challenging in that era.

From the establishment of Connecticut as a self-ruling colony in 1639 until the early 19th century, sodomy had been a capital offence, and several executions were carried out during the 1600s. In 1821, a newly enacted criminal code prescribed a life sentence as the maximum penalty, and this was reduced to 30 years’ imprisonment in 1909. Only in 1971 was the sodomy law with respect to consensual acts repealed.

Russell’s beloved niece Helen Bayne Knapp describes how, “Individually, and as a family, all the Cheney’s dearly loved Russell...[they] loved him without truly understanding him... In spite of their kindly natures they were helpless to combat those repressed instincts of their subconscious... They were quite incapable of comprehending the sort of person Matty was. They were incapable of appreciating his intellect, quite oblivious of the intellectual national reputation he was acquiring as writer and teacher. If they had comprehended they would not have cared. The best I ever heard one of them say of him: ‘Matty is a nice little man.’ And that much was only said to be polite to me.”

The couple nonetheless built a strong life together, spending substantial periods of time together at a house which they shared in Kittery, Maine. Russell’s career as an artist mostly flourished and Matthiessen went on to become, as a professor at Harvard, one of America’s most important 20th century literary historians and critics. Both battled personal demons as well, however. Alcoholism frequently exerted its grip on Russell throughout their lives together and Matthiessen suffered dark depressions, the last of these leading to his suicide on April 1, 1950, at age 48, five years after Russell’s death from an asthma-related thrombosis, at age 63.

Times have moved on and – happily -- many couples in such a situation today would have no difficulty in leading their lives openly and without disapprobation from society around them. At the same time, this is not a universal situation and, depending on one’s social, cultural, and religious background, the process of “coming out” can be a difficult and prolonged one. (I’ve written about this a couple of years ago from a personal perspective:- <https://www.gryklaw.com/50-years-a-gay-man-a-personal-life-in-a-historical-context-by-wesley-gryk/>.)

In my own case, it would have been enormously helpful in my personal journey if, when I was growing up, I had known something of the brave story of Russell Cheney whose studio was located a mere minute's walk from the Philip Cheney house where I was living with my mom and dad. And I would have been proud to learn that Philip Cheney and his wife were particularly close and supportive to Russell in difficult times, for example offering him accommodation in their home to "dry out" in April 1938 following a severe alcoholic "bender."

In a final coincidence of fate, in 1968, after my freshman year at Harvard, I was awarded an academic book prize and, still without any knowledge of his connections to Manchester and the Cheney family, chose *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, edited by none other than F. O. Matthiessen. A very nice coincidence of fate.

Given this background, it has given me great satisfaction -- albeit a bit late -- to learn about the brave relationship which Russell Cheney and F. O. Matthiessen pursued against all the odds in the first half of the 20th century. It seems important now -- almost exactly one century after that relationship began -- to offer tribute to it and gives some publicity to the two important books setting out details of that relationship. I have no doubt that, at least for some readers, the inspiring example of these two courageous men will offer some positive inspiration.