

The thorny legacy of Vanderbilt's Fugitives and Agrarians

Pride *and* Prejudice

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS AND CHERISHED PHOTOGRAPHS in Vanderbilt's history. Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson. Five balding white men, dressed impeccably in suits and ties, are seated outdoors, obviously posed by photographer Joe Rudis to appear as if lost in conversation. Despite the artifice, the subjects seem relaxed and even playful, what with Moore practically sitting on Tate's lap, Warren leaning in as if to insert a word edgewise, and the entire group looking to Allen Tate as if expecting a clever remark.

It was a happy moment for the old friends. It was 1956, and after three decades of being ignored by the University, the Fugitives had returned to campus in glory for a colloquium devoted to their literary work.

There is a new generation of English professors at Vanderbilt who have no personal or professional loyalty to the Fugitives and Agrarians, and whose critical perspectives cause them to question Vanderbilt's long-held reverence for these writers.

Heroes

The five writers photographed in 1956 were Vanderbilt graduates. They were known as “Fugitives” after *The Fugitive*, the widely praised but little purchased poetry magazine they self-published, along with 11 other colleagues over the years, in Nashville between 1922 and 1925. All save Merrill Moore were also known as “Agrarians” because of a book of social criticism, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), which they co-authored with eight other literary and university colleagues, in which they defended the virtues of the South as a community of civilized farmers facing down the onslaught of modern progress and industrialism. Ransom, Tate and Warren were also known as “New Critics” because of their then-fresh approach to literary criticism that focused on analyzing the text of literature itself and explaining its function in detail, rather than dwelling on matters outside the work to explain or justify it. As a group these writers were among the most admired in literary circles in America in the 1950s. But none of their efforts had received

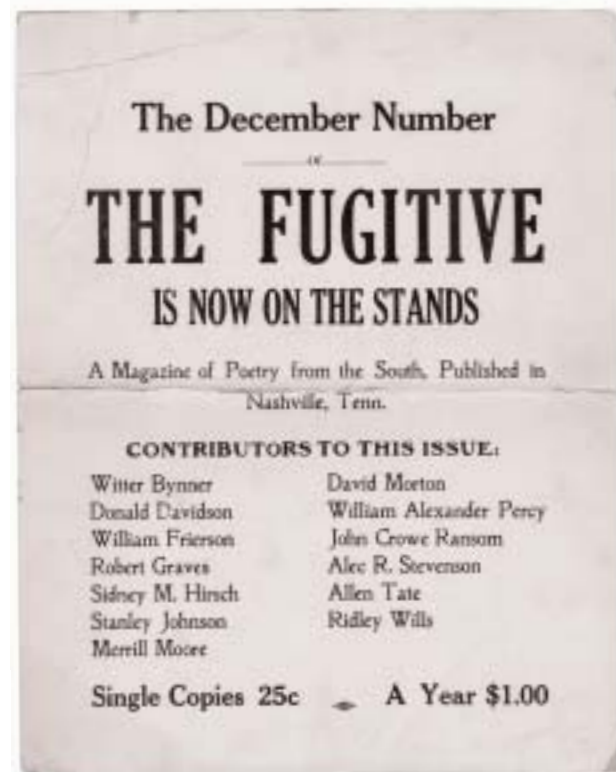
When the first issue of *The Fugitive* was published in 1922, the authors were so uncertain of the magazine's success that they chose to publish under pseudonyms, publishing under their real names with the second issue.

any official support or recognition from Vanderbilt until this reunion in 1956.

The photo remains a powerful memento, with an iconic resonance for those who know something about this group. Even for those who see it for the first time, the portrait says: These men belong together; they are civilized and cultured. For Vanderbilt, it's an image on par with the flag-raising at Iwo Jima in 1945. It's Vanderbilt's Mount Rushmore, a symbol of Vanderbilt's intellectual and literary stature.

“Nothing in Vanderbilt's history has come anywhere close to the Fugitives and Agrarians in giving it a national reputation,” confirms Paul Conkin, distinguished professor of history, emeritus, and the author of definitive histories of both Vanderbilt University and the Vanderbilt Agrarians, among other scholarly books. “It's still by far the most significant aspect of Vanderbilt history in the larger university world.”

And yet, as Conkin and other members of Vanderbilt's faculty have noted increasingly over the years, the legacy of these men is a decidedly mixed one with some very dark corners.



Problematic Ideology

For nearly five decades after the 1956 Fugitive reunion, Vanderbilt celebrated and venerated these writers. In 1969 the Vanderbilt Library created a special collection to house their published works and papers. Elsewhere on campus, their disciples could point with pride to a plaque at Old Central memorializing the Fugitives, framed photographs of the Fugitives on the wall of the English department's library and lounge, and a special display cabinet in Kirkland Hall

devoted to the Fugitives and Agrarians. The 1956 reunion was followed by an Agrarian reunion and symposium in 1980. That event, though, seemed to mark a high tide for the Agrarians and Fugitives on campus.

In the two decades since that last reunion, the mementos of the Fugitives and Agrarians have quietly disappeared from Old Central, the English department lounge and Kirkland Hall. Now there is a new generation of English professors at Vanderbilt who have no personal or professional loyalty to the Fugitives and Agrarians, and whose critical perspectives cause them to question Vanderbilt's long-held reverence for these writers.

Michael Kreyling, professor of English, has been a member of the Vanderbilt faculty since 1985. His specialty is southern literature, and he has studied and taught the Fugitives and Agrarians for many years. His book, *Inventing Southern Literature*, discusses how the Fugitives and Agrarians shaped a notion of southern literature in the first place. He admits a certain grudging respect for their achievement as poets in their day (“they were writing the disciplined modern poetry that T.S. Eliot and people like that were pioneering”), but over the years he has come to find real problems with the political views that many of these writers expressed in *I'll Take My Stand*.

“One of the problems with this business is you have to keep rereading these things over and over in the presence of newer and younger colleagues who see things differently,” says Kreyling. “In rereading these things you realize this is a really misogynistic book—this is not a friendly volume to women. First of all, there aren't any women in it who are authors. And second, when the feminine does appear as a metaphor or as an adjective or something like that, it's always derogatory. And then you read some more of it and think, This is not very progressive in terms of American racial policy. This is racism. I mean, it's not walking around in a hood with a burning cross, but it's racism.”

Because of the conservative ideology of these writers and because he feels they are increasingly less relevant in a multicultural world, Kreyling devotes just a week in his

undergraduate courses on southern literature to these writers. On the graduate level, Kreyling says master's and doctoral students in his department read them only occasionally and then “only to deconstruct them—to expose the subliminal, to expose the blind spots, to question why we still read them with reverence, why we still think they provide a model or a path for behavior, why we still include them. Frankly, as time goes on, they're just one facet in a rapidly diversifying, changing southern cultural scene.”

Kreyling's colleague Kate Daniels, associate professor of English, also finds that the Fugitives have less of a place in her classroom than they might have had in another generation. As a poet herself and a teacher of poetry, she recognizes the talent of some of the Fugitives, particularly Warren, Tate and Ransom, but Warren is the only one of these writers she teaches to undergraduates.

Daniels is quick to note that she prefers to separate the Fugitive poetry from the Agrarian social commentary, even though the four best-known Fugitives—Ransom, Tate, Warren and Davidson—all participated in *I'll Take My Stand*. “I find the Agrarians appalling: The racism coming from some of them is so much more overt, and that is really hard for me.

“Warren, he's Parnassus material. He's right up there at the top as far as I'm concerned. And because he was a person who was capable of change, because he did not fossilize in a way, he and his work and his reputation made the transition into the post-modern era. And I'm not sure that's true of poets like Tate and Ransom. I see them almost as if they're consciously antique objects in a way. They say something about an era, and they certainly testified to a high degree of talent, a genius level of talent as far as making poems was concerned. But I'm not sure that their work overall has a lot of relevance for students who are still alive and studying literature today.”

The views of Daniels and Kreyling are by no means outside the current academic mainstream, according to John Lowe, A'67, a professor of English at Louisiana State University. “I have to say that I don't teach many of them myself. ... Nobody is going to be teaching a

Fugitives and Agrarians

Donald Davidson (1893–1968)

BA'17, MA'22; Vanderbilt English department, 1920–1964; poet, literary critic, historian, novelist, English professor. *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (1938); *The Tennessee—Rivers of America Series* (1946, 1948); *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* (1957)



John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974)

BA'09; Vanderbilt English department, 1914–1937; poet, literary critic, English professor. *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927); *God Without Thunder* (1930); *The World's Body* (1938); *The New Criticism* (1941); *Selected Poems* (1945)



Allen Tate (1899–1979)

BA'22; Vanderbilt visiting professor, 1967; poet, literary critic, biographer, novelist, English professor. *Stonewall Jackson* (1928); *Jefferson Davis* (1929); *Mediterranean and Other Poems* (1936); *The Fathers* (1938); *Poems 1922–1947* (1948); *Collected Essays* (1959)



Robert Penn Warren (1905–1989)

BA'25; Vanderbilt English department, 1931–1934; novelist, poet, literary critic, English professor. *All the King's Men* (1946); *Brother to Dragons* (1953); *Promises: Poems 1954–1956* (1957); *Audubon: A Vision* (1969); *Now and Then* (1978)



They stirred the waters intellectually and even politically. They become a needed reference point because they have a voice that's unique in the complicated attempt to understand our polity and our economy as well as the attempt to deal with the arts and with literature. They have a unique place.

southern literature class these days without lots and lots of African-Americans and women because, frankly, they're some of the very best writers. So they're pushing out some of these more minor figures that might have been taught previously and that were taught when I was at Vanderbilt."

But it's not just a matter of newer women and African-American writers crowding out older, less relevant Fugitives and Agrarians, Lowe admits. "I mean, they're not politically correct. The way they're always featured is when they're at their worst as far as I'm concerned, which is the case in *I'll Take My Stand*. The only thing people are going to look at when they study *I'll Take My Stand* these days is the racial situation. And they can't win. I mean, there's no way they come across as sympathetic at all in the racial situation, and that's a roadblock because I think in other ways they could come across as people who have something to say to us."

Repudiated

Walter Sullivan, who retired from Vanderbilt in May 2001 after more than 50 years in the English department, is well aware of the current tide of opinion in the teaching of literature at Vanderbilt and on other college campuses. But as a friend and supporter of these now out-of-favor writers, he admits it pains him.

"We are in a situation now where everything they stood for has been repudiated by the postmodern group of poets and scholars. They were not concerned really with such matters as being politically correct. And everything has to be politically correct now. A lot of these people who are my ex-colleagues repudiate, for example, Aristotle. They believe nothing Aristotle ever said was any good for one reason: Aristotle believed in slavery. Now when you're dealing with that kind of mindset, that takes a lot off the table. In any event, neither the Fugitives nor the New Criticism movement is at all respected now. They're in



eclipse. I think it will come out all right in the long run, but right now they're not everybody's heroes.

"The Fugitives are not the only ones who have been repudiated," continues Sullivan. "You must understand, pretty much everybody who was writing in that generation has been repudiated. They don't like T.S. Eliot because of his politics. We're no longer judging literature as literature.

"You can find something that just about anyone did or said that will disqualify them from all consideration because of our enlightened approach, and I think that's a bad thing. I believe you ought to judge people in terms of the lives they were living and the milieu in which they were living at that time, but it's not done anymore.

"Nobody talks about the Agrarians anymore. There's not much talk about the Fugitives, either, but there's no comment about the Agrarians except to denigrate them."

Racism

Those who studied literature at Vanderbilt before, say, 1970 may well agree with Walter Sullivan and wonder what all the fuss could possibly be about. The problems that most scholars have with these writ-

ers begin with *I'll Take My Stand*, not the poetry of *The Fugitive* magazine.

"The Fugitives are quite different from the Agrarians," says Paul Conkin. "They were a group of students and faculty members here who enjoyed literary discussions for several years, and then *The Fugitive* became the name for the little poetry journal they established.

"There is nothing in the Fugitive poems or in what the Fugitives were trying to do that would indicate any of them would write *I'll Take My Stand*. . . . They did it because of outside criticism and changes in their personal lives. They did become crusaders for the South, and certainly that had not been any aspect of *The Fugitive*. But when you read the poems, they're not pro southern; they're not pro anything. In that sense they're not political as a whole."

By 1928, when Harcourt Brace published an anthology of the group's poems titled *Fugitives: An Anthology of Verse*, many of the Fugitives had either moved away from Nashville or were too deeply involved in other professions to focus on poetry anymore, and the Fugitive chapter of the group closed. However, the core of the group—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson and Robert Penn Warren—took up a new cause on the heels of the ending of the magazine, and that is where the ideological trouble starts.

In 1925 the famous Scopes trial in Dayton, Tenn., which pitted the teaching of evolution against biblical accounts of creation, brought withering criticism upon the South. Though they were intellectuals and not committed religious fundamentalists, the ring-leaders of the Fugitives—Ransom, Tate and Davidson—felt they were southerners first and were stung by the barbs of H.L. Mencken and other northern journalists. Ransom, Davidson and Tate began to recognize their common and growing reverence for the South as a distinct region.

Through letters and discussions, they began to formulate a general point of view and, by 1928, began gathering a group of like-minded southern intellectuals to write a book of essays defending rural farming and southern culture from the threat they perceived in the North's rampant industrialism. As had been the case with *The Fugitive*, the group

they assembled consisted for the most part of men connected with Vanderbilt: Frank Owsley and Herman Nixon from the history department; Lyle Lanier from psychology; John Donald Wade from English; Andrew Lytle, a 1925 Vanderbilt graduate and a former contributor to *The Fugitive*; and Henry B. Kline, a graduate student in English. To the eight with Vanderbilt connections were added John Gould Fletcher, an Arkansas poet who had published in *The Fugitive*, and the novelist and drama critic Stark Young, then living in New York. In November 1930, Harper & Brothers published their book, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners*, the title being a lyric lifted from the popular 19th-century song "Dixie."

The book didn't quite rise to the level of manifesto because all the authors could never come together to meet and form a consensus of ideas as had *The Fugitive's* editorial team. (In fact, the authors had difficulty even agreeing on a title, with Warren and Tate in particular pushing for the misleading *Tracts Against Communism*.) Each author wrote in his own way about the South and about his idealized vision of what it was and what it should be, though all of them did ratify an introductory "Statement of Principles" authored by John Crowe Ransom for the book.

Taken as a whole, the Agrarians' ideas had aspects that people from many walks of life could readily endorse. The writers were firmly against modern materialism and the rise of rampant industrialism. They supported family subsistence farms over corporate farming. They were concerned about protecting the rural environment. They feared that man's natural connection to farming and the rural life was being torn asunder and that, with that trauma, religion and the arts would suffer.

"They felt they were doing something daring and radical," says Conkin, "trying to reverse many of the economic trends of the 20th century—restore property and restore a type of culture they identified with, the Old South."

"They saw the South as a kind of harbinger of traditional values," explains Don Doyle, Nelson Tyrone Jr. Professor of History and the author of two books on the history of Nashville. "It was a very romantic version of

Fugitives



Merrill Moore (1903–1957)
BA'24, MD'28; Psychiatrist.
The Noise That Time Makes (1929); *M: One Thousand Autobiographical Sonnets* (1938); *Clinical Sonnets* (1950)

Walter Clyde Curry (1887–1967)
Vanderbilt English department, 1915–1955; English professor
Chaucer and the Medieval Science (1926); *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (1937); *Milton's Ontology, Cosmogony and Physics* (1957)

William Yandell Elliott (1896–1979)
BA'17, MA'20; Vanderbilt instructor in English, 1919–1920; Political scientist, Harvard
The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics (1928); *Political Economy of the Foreign Policy of the United States* (1955)

James Marshall Frank (1866–1944)
Nashville businessman

William Frierson (1897–1955)
BA'20; Scholar of French literature
L'influence du Naturalisme Français sur les Romanciers Anglais, 1885–1900 (1925)

Sidney Mtttron Hirsch (1883–1962)
Playwright
The Fire Regained (1913)

Stanley Johnson (1892–1946)
BA'16, MA'24; Journalist, educator, novelist
Professor (1925)

Laura Riding (1901–1991)
Poet
A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927); *Progress of Stories* (1935); *Collected Poems* (1938); *Lives of Wives* (1939)

Alec Brock Stevenson (1895–1969)
BA'16; Nashville businessman
Investment Company Shares: Their Place in Investment Management and Their Use by Trustees (1947)

Alfred Starr (1898–1957)
Attended Vanderbilt 1917–1920
Nashville movie-theater chain owner

Jesse Wills (1899–1977)
BA'22; Nashville businessman
Early and Late: Fugitive Poems and Others (1959); *Conversation Piece and Other Poems* (1965); *Nashville and Other Poems* (1973)

Ridley Wills (1898–1957)
BA'23; Journalist, novelist
Hoax (1922); *Harvey Landrum, a Novel* (1924)

The book imagines a utopian South that hardly acknowledges women or African-Americans. Though it's important to note that not every contributor to *I'll Take My Stand* had an aristocratic vision of an ideal South, most of the book's contributors imagined a South in which blacks remained forever second-class citizens.

the South, and one that I think they were reading their own values into—into a South of old that in many ways continues to hold a powerful grip on American imagination. It's the idea that the South is a more aristocratic, less capitalistic, more cultivated kind of society that was not just running after the dollar. It's a very powerful idea."

Described in this way, as it was for decades on college campuses across the South, *I'll Take My Stand* seems innocuous at worst, and at best it seems ennobling and civilizing. Unfortunately, between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow, as the Fugitives' friend T.S. Eliot once wrote. For in the opinion of several of the Agrarians, their utopian vision was intended only for the chosen few: the white, the male, the privileged.

"Their mind-set was in its very nature discriminatory," says Michael Kreyling. "And they were unapologetic about that. It was about dividing the sheep from the goats."

"Anyone from the working class and anyone who is female (to say nothing of African-

Americans and other people of color) is probably not going to be kindly disposed to the Fugitives and Agrarians, particularly the Agrarians," says Kate Daniels.

Yet, for all the criticism directed at *I'll Take My Stand* today, it is not a racist manifesto. It is not even a book consciously about race. Only one essay in the entire book, Robert Penn Warren's "The Briar Patch," deals squarely with the issue of race. And only a few of the other essays even touch on race as an issue. (Donald Davidson, for one, wanted to leave the issue entirely out of the book, believing that every right-thinking white southerner already knew what to think about black southerners.)

But even if most of the 12 essays avoid issues of black and white, the few that do make passing mention of race touch off veritable powder kegs. Frank Owsley's essay on the causes of the Civil War, "The Irrepressible Conflict," offers one of the most inflammatory passages for modern readers: "For ten years the South, already ruined by the loss of nearly \$2,000,000,000 invested in slaves, with its lands worthless, its cattle and stock gone, its houses burned, was turned over to the three millions of former slaves, some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism."

Andrew Lytle, in his loving evocation of a family farm right out of his own boyhood, writes of small farmers owning slaves in the antebellum South as if it were their birthright and refers to "the menace of the free Negro."

Even John Crowe Ransom, who generally preferred not to discuss race at all—"He skated pretty elegantly on the upper rarefied levels of the issues," says Kreyling—makes a passing statement that seems to suggest slavery was merely worse in theory than in practice: "Slavery was a feature monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice; and it is impossible to believe that its abolition alone could have effected any great revolution in society." Today's reader is tempted to respond, Easy for him to say.

One can find as much fault with what the book doesn't say as one can with what it does say, for overall the book imagines a utopian South that hardly acknowledges women or

African-Americans. Though it's important to note that not every contributor to *I'll Take My Stand* had an aristocratic vision of an ideal South, most of the book's contributors imagined a South in which blacks remained forever second-class citizens. Ironically, Warren's "Briar Patch," now seen by some as blatant racism because of its acceptance of racial segregation, expressed the most liberal perspective on race in the book.

"When we look at an essay like 'The Briar Patch,' it seems very problematic to us today," says John Lowe, "but if you looked at it back then, you would see Warren really grappling with the problem and struggling with it. You could trace the trajectory of the way he worked out some very admirable positions later in his career after the start of that essay. But when you pick it up today, it just seems shockingly dated and wrong."

Paul Conkin believes one cannot judge Warren's essay fairly without recognizing the context from which it came. "Actually, that was a remarkably daring essay when it came out, and it almost *wasn't* published because Davidson and others hated it. It was asking equality for blacks—not integration, but equality. Separate but equal. The underlying assumption in the 'Briar Patch' essay is that blacks will remain separate socially, but they should have equal economic opportunity.

"Right now we haven't come close to achieving that type of economic equality. Integration is easy; equality is almost impossible to achieve. So, in a sense, it was more daring than people realize."

Unlike *The Fugitive* magazine, *I'll Take My Stand* was generally not received well by reviewers, though the book was widely reviewed in newspapers and journals of its day. Interestingly, reviewers at the time hardly mentioned the book's attitude toward African-Americans. Most reviewers simply found the book's essays dreamily impractical and unrealistic. In its first two years, it sold only about 2,000 copies.

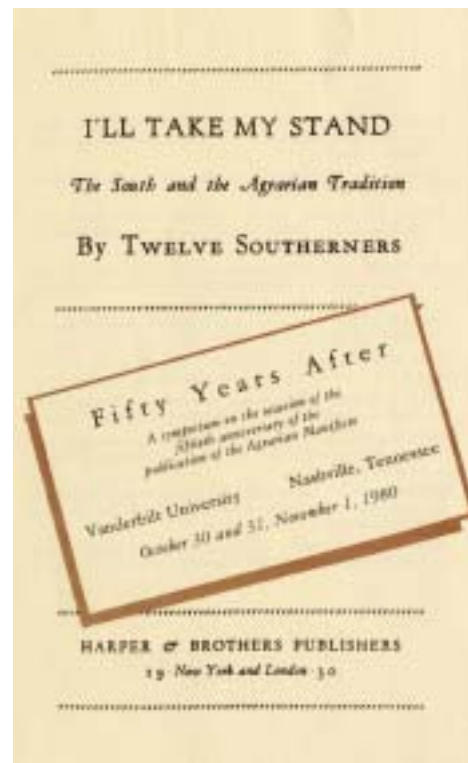
And yet the Agrarians, as they came to be called, did not give up the fight. Ransom, an English professor, plunged deeply for a time into a study of economics in hopes of developing practical programs, and participated in a number of debates with progressive south-

erners on the Agrarian vs. Industrialism question. Tate and Davidson worked along with Ransom, Lytle and others in the group to publish additional Agrarian essays (many of them in *The American Review*) and to develop some sort of political apparatus to promote programs that would further their cause. In 1936 eight of the Agrarians contributed to a sort of follow-up book of 20 essays titled *Who Owns America?*, edited by Allen Tate and Louisville journalist Herbert Agar. But once again the book lacked a definitive focus and cohesion, and this book had even less impact on American thought and public policy than *I'll Take My Stand*.

By 1937, when John Crowe Ransom left Vanderbilt for the faculty of Kenyon College, the Vanderbilt Agrarian movement was essentially dead. By then Robert Penn Warren was at Louisiana State University, and Allen Tate was winding up a brief stint at North Carolina Women's College before heading to a long appointment at Princeton University. Donald Davidson remained a member of the Vanderbilt faculty until 1964, but increasingly he felt estranged from most of the faculty and embattled as Nashville and Vanderbilt changed with the civil rights movement. Davidson could not accept an integrated society, and he doggedly fought and denounced desegregation for the rest of his career, much to the embarrassment of the University administration. But Davidson was the most strident of the Agrarians in this respect.

Paul Conkin maintains that the racial politics of a few Agrarians have been mistaken as the views of the entire group. "I think people concentrate too much on one or two, like Davidson and Owsley and maybe Lytle, because of their rather obstinate and even at times belligerent stand against changes in racial policy. But that's only three of them. What about all the others? With Tate it's a very complicated story. Ransom, being in the North at the time, usually supported what happened in the civil rights revolution. Nixon led the civil rights movement from the beginning. Robert Penn Warren supported it. So I think people tend to see only one side and not the other of the Agrarians."

"It's really interesting if you look at the careers of all those who were caught up in



Conceived as a manifesto defending southern culture and rural farming, *I'll Take My Stand* was largely ignored. The collection of essays formed the basis for charges of racism against the authors.

Agrarians

John Gould Fletcher (1886–1950)

Poet, essayist
Life Is My Song (1937); *Selected Poems* (1938); *Arkansas* (1947)

Henry B. Kline (1905–1951)

MA'29; Journalist, industrial economist

Lyle Lanier (1903–1989)

MA'24, PhD'26 (Peabody); Vanderbilt psychology department, 1929–1938
Psychologist
Studies in the Comparative Abilities of Whites and Negroes (1929)

Andrew Lytle (1902–1995)

BA'25; Novelist, English professor
Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company (1931); *The Long Night* (1936); *A Name for Evil* (1947); *The Velvet Horn* (1957)

Herman Nixon (1886–1967)

Vanderbilt history department, 1926–1928, 1947–1962; Historian, economist
Forty Acres and Steel Mules (1938); *Possum Trot: A Rural Community* (1941)

Frank Owsley (1890–1957)

Vanderbilt history department, 1920–1949; Historian
States Rights in the Confederacy (1925); *King Cotton Diplomacy* (1931); *Plain Folk of the Old South* (1949)

John Donald Wade (1892–1963)

Vanderbilt English department, 1926–1934; English professor
Augustus Baldwin Longstreet: A Study in the Development of Culture in the South (1925)

Stark Young (1881–1963)

Journalist, critic, novelist
River House (1929); *So Red the Rose* (1934); *The Pavilion* (1951)

Further Reading

The Southern Agrarians by Paul K. Conkin. Vanderbilt University Press, 2001.

Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University by Paul K. Conkin. University of Tennessee Press, 1985.

Inventing Southern Literature by Michael Kreyling. University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners. Reprint. Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

The Fugitive Poets: Modern Southern Poetry in Perspective. Edited by William Pratt. Reprint. J.S. Sanders, 1991.

MASQUERADER



The 1933 cover of the humor magazine *Masquerader*, which was published at Vanderbilt, satirizes southern intellectuals writing about rural values. The cover text reads as follows: “Here we have three little Agrarians in their chosen element. By the happiest accident, the tree of Civilization grows in their orchard; but alas! it is vermiculated. D.D. has been puffing away like the very dickens with his little flit-gun to remedy this. One of these little pests which looks like the sort of thing one finds beneath the hood of an auto—but which the eccentric Dr. Werm intended to represent one of the curses of the machine age—growing weary of it all, has accommodately bitten the dust. In D.D.’s eyes may be seen the dawn of a new day. A.T. has allowed himself to become slightly choleric over the derisive behavior of an even less tidy assemblage of spare parts; while J.C.R.—as bonny and blithe as ever you please—thrills to the feel of the good earth beneath his unshod feet. In the background may be seen this and that. In the upper left corner is a bush around which other embattled Agrarians are beating.”

the Fugitive and then the Agrarian movement,” says Don Doyle. “Almost all of them left Vanderbilt, and not all of them voluntarily. Many of them, I think, were regarded with some embarrassment by [then Chancellor] Kirkland and [English department chair Edwin] Mims and others in that they were giving another face to Vanderbilt that was not in keeping with the kind of progres-

sive image the Vanderbilt administration wanted to present to foundations and to the world at large. And so they were shunned and, at best, ignored until much later.”

Thereafter Ransom, Tate and Warren turned their attentions to literary criticism, while Donald Davidson preferred to focus more on regional history and folklore. While Ransom and Tate played leading roles in devel-

oping the theoretical framework of the New Criticism, Warren took the theory out into the wider world. Working with LSU English department colleague and fellow Vanderbilt alumnus Cleanth Brooks, Warren did the most to further the New Criticism through the widely adopted and influential textbooks *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943).

“Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren changed American literature forever in terms of the way it was studied and read because those two, more than almost anybody else, spread the New Criticism,” says John Lowe. “Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks were the ones who wrote textbooks to be used in college classrooms.”

The New Criticism was all the rage in English departments through the 1960s, and at Vanderbilt it was passed along to students through the 1970s. But the New Criticism is no longer in vogue, even at Vanderbilt. Asked what value the New Criticism has for literature scholars today, Michael Kreyling replies, “None,” before pausing to reconsider his answer. “No, that’s wrong. Insofar as the New Criticism disciplines you to read what’s on the page in front of you, and at least to acknowledge that words have an acoustic or literary aspect to their meaning—in addition to their cultural and political and other meanings—then it’s necessary. And insofar as New Criticism makes it compulsory for you to be able to read something and to give at least a sketch of the aesthetic form and the response that it elicited, then it has value. But you can’t get away with doing that only.”

Mixed Feelings

Today the many volumes of poetry published individually by Ransom, Tate, Davidson, Moore, and the other Fugitives are out of print, as are most of their books of literary criticism and essays. Among all the Fugitives and Agrarians, only Robert Penn Warren thrives in the modern marketplace of ideas. Nearly all his novels, poems and essays are still in print to this day. *All the King’s Men* has sold several million copies in several languages and was made into a Hollywood movie.

Yet, the poems of the Fugitives still sur-

vive in a slim paperback anthology compiled in 1965. And *I’ll Take My Stand* remains in print. “That’s amazing to me,” says Walter Sullivan, “because once you set aside the literary classics, there are very few books that stay in print like that.”

“They stirred the waters intellectually and even politically,” says Paul Conkin of the Agrarians. “They become a needed reference point because they have a voice that’s unique in the complicated attempt to understand our polity and our economy as well as the attempt to deal with the arts and with literature. They have a unique place. And if you want to develop some sense of the diversity of opinion in the United States, they’re a good reference point because they do stand a bit alone outside the mainstream.

“I think they have, at times, a prophetic challenge to all of us. They push us back on our haunches and force us to examine where we are as a nation and as a culture. And that’s why I don’t think one can quite get around them. Or if one does ignore them or evade them, then they are in a sense a bit cowardly because they have lost a certain needed perspective in looking at our national history.”

In the English department, Kate Daniels and Michael Kreyling see eye to eye on many of the virtues and failings of the Fugitives and Agrarians, but ultimately they have very different responses when it comes to considering what Vanderbilt’s next step should be in dealing with them.

“I’d love it if we’d do something like a huge conference where we just deconstructed the whole thing,” says Daniels, who organized a very successful gathering of the leading contemporary southern writers on Vanderbilt’s campus in 2000. “Let’s just get it out on the table. Let’s let that tension come to the surface and deal with it instead of letting it fester under the surface. It needs to happen here at Vanderbilt.”

For his part, Michael Kreyling isn’t so sure these writers merit much further discussion. Asked if he has anything additional to say on the subject, he replies with a half smile: “Let’s just give it a rest for a few years. Let’s think about something else in connection with Vanderbilt. It’s been 70 years—can’t we think of something else? I really do mean that.” ▼

The Jesse W. Wills Fugitive and Agrarian Collection

When *The Fugitive* magazine was being published between 1922 and 1925, no more than about 200 people ever subscribed. Among those who pointedly refused was James Kirkland, Vanderbilt’s chancellor at the time. But the University did not entirely ignore the upstart poetry magazine that was published by a group consisting mostly of Vanderbilt English professors and students; the Vanderbilt Library subscribed almost from the beginning. Today the library has several complete runs (19 issues) of the hard-to-find magazine, each run easily worth upwards of \$20,000 on the rare book market today. The library also has the handwritten accounting ledger that Fugitive member Alec Stevenson maintained, showing in neat script every subscriber to *The Fugitive*, including the Vanderbilt Library.

These items are just a small part of the single largest cache of Fugitive/Agrarian materials available anywhere: the Heard Library’s Jesse W. Wills Fugitive and Agrarian Collection. Today the Wills Collection encompasses more than 1,600 books and monographs by and about the Fugitives and Agrarians, as well as a voluminous collection of the writers’ letters, papers and published magazine articles. The collection was established at Vanderbilt in 1969 with the financial and collecting assistance of its namesake, the late Jesse Wills, a member of the Fugitives who went on to a career as an insurance executive and served as a member of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust.

Located in the Special Collections department of the Heard Library, the Wills Collection ranges in scope from first editions of all published works by the Fugitives and Agrarians to more than 300 theses and dissertations written about them. Also included within the collection are such unique resources as the working library of John Crowe Ransom, original typescripts and carbon copies of poems the Fugitives wrote and discussed in their group meetings, and the original manuscripts for *I’ll Take My Stand*.

“Our goal is to collect all the scholarly works about and by the Fugitives and Agrarians, as well as the second generation of writers who were their protégés, such as poets Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell,” says Kathy Smith, associate university archivist, who has worked with Special Collections in the Heard Library for the past six years.

Although the Wills Collection is more than 30 years old and the Fugitives and Agrarians are all deceased, it continues to expand and, in fact, has grown substantially in recent years, thanks to additional gifts from the Wills family and the Friends of the Library. “Some people may think that we’ve collected all that we can because we’ve got such a comprehensive collection, but I truly believe there is more material out there and that, by careful collecting, we can trace these layers of influence—for instance, how Allen Tate influenced Robert Lowell.”

Smith says she continues to see a steady stream of visitors examining the holdings. These researchers range from the occasional undergraduate from Vanderbilt and other universities to master’s and doctoral candidates, not only from the U.S. but also from overseas.

“Sometimes people think the materials have been fully researched,” says Smith, “but it’s still a lively collection. There’s still a lot of intellectual discovery going on about what these men were thinking and what they were trying to impart.” — Paul Kingsbury

For more information on Special Collections’ holdings on the Fugitives and Agrarians, visit www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/.

