

Morison & Commager falling in love with a good line--actually it's only a so-so line--and hanging onto it through 3 editions & 00 years

(see also my graf that was deleted in LA Times review of Oxford History of the West)

survey of racial, ethnic, and cultural flashpoints (its subheadings include "Delano," "San Francisco City Hall," and "Florence and Normandie") is the most California-centered piece in the book.

Ox/oxd,
p. 648,
p. 651,
p. 655

Let us now dispraise the "Literary West" segment and get it over with. Thomas J. Lyons' ^{chapter} ~~essay~~ is one of the most traditional in the book, and the tradition I have in mind ^{old} ~~is the~~ one of historians ^{staying} ~~being~~ determinedly out of date, by a decade or two, about anything that smacks of modern writing. (In three successive editions of their standard American history textbook, between 1937 and 1950, Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager opined that the Southern author of The Sound and the Fury wrote "tales signifying nothing;" their 1950 edition thus missed the news that William Faulkner had won the Nobel Prize for Literature the year before.)

Growth
of American
Republic,
4th ed.,
p. 568

For anyone wanting ^{specifics on} ~~an appraisal of~~ prose in the American West since, say, A River Runs Through It was published in 1976, this 1994 Oxford treatment is shy of Sherman Alexei, Rudolfo Anaya, Rick Bass, Mary Clearman Blew, ^{Michael Dorris,} Joan Didion, Harriet Doerr, ~~Gretel Ehrlich,~~ Louise Erdrich, Judith Freeman, Molly Gloss, Linda Hogan, Teresa Jordan, Barbara Kingsolver, ^Maxine Hong Kingston, Craig Lesley, Cormac ^MCarthy, Thomas McGuane, Norman Maclean...

HISTORIANS AND THE EMBARRASSING MR. FAULKNER

Landlord in a brothel; now there, William Faulkner mused to his interviewer, would be "the perfect milieu" for an artist to work in.

The place is quiet during the morning hours, which is the best time of the day to work. There's enough social life in the evening, if he wishes to participate, to keep him from being bored; it gives him a certain standing in his society; he has nothing to do because the madam keeps the books; all the inmates of the house are females and would defer to him and call him 'sir.' All the bootleggers in the neighborhood would call him 'sir.' And he could call the police by their first names.¹

To a remarkable extent, U.S. historians have written of Faulkner much as if he were holding down his dream job in the house next door and embarrassing them half to death every time they had to ease past his bawdy shop on their way to seminar.

¹Interview by Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, Writers at Work (New York, 1965), 124.

The writers of college history texts generally have been several years behind the swing of literary criticism in their treatment of Faulkner. The evident embarrassment and confusion my text-writing colleagues have shown toward this experimental novelist are cause to wonder whether many history texts have any real value as chroniclers of our literary history. Assuredly, such a chronicle is attempted by every history textbook writer worth the ink on his note cards. But the assessment of William Faulkner in college history texts over the years suggests that we are the academic citizens of not simply two cultures, but of any number of cultures which do not bother to talk to each other across the campus quadrangle.

Unless a novel is born a rampant best-seller -- an Uncle Tom's Cabin or a Gone with the Wind -- the lasting fame of its author depends a good deal on the critics' appraisals and re-appraisals. Literary men pondering the status of modern American fiction have had to assess Faulkner and evaluations of him by other critics in shaping a viewpoint for their own books. Out of such process emerges the outline of reputation which the text-writing historian may then scan and report to posterity. A close look shows that first various literary critics and then historians in impressive numbers did not resolve their embarrassment and confusion about Faulkner until long after it was evident he likely was one of the most significant writers in America in the twentieth century.

From his first word printed on a page, William Faulkner was the sort of figure a social surveyor has trouble with. His novels began appearing in the mid-1920s, but he does not jibe with the famous writers of the Lost Generation -- Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis. He went off to serve in World War I, but before long it was obvious that something besides war-born disillusionment haunted his work. His brief exile from the U.S. -- if it even was that -- he eclipsed with unflinching residence in his home county. He admitted in the preface to the Modern Library edition of Sanctuary he had laced the book with horror so it would sell. Critics blanched and then howled, although Malcolm Cowley has pointed out that the real importance of the preface was Faulkner's qualifying remark that when the galleys came, he rewrote the book and paid for the changes so the final version "would not shame The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying. . . ."

A more subtle problem than the inexplicable writer was his writing. Later it would be argued, with considerable plausibility, that nearly all of Faulkner's work was a process of experimenting, and critics would agree at least on the sweep of his imagination. But as the books came out, many literary critics found them noisy, unfathomable intruders, each somehow rowdier than the last. And yet . . . and yet, when it came time to put down on the printed page what seemed to be going on in American literature from the late 1920s on, there was the embarrassing bulk and texture of

Faulkner's achievement. By the end of World War II, he had written seventeen books, eleven of them creating Yoknapatawpha County and among them The Sound and the Fury; in 1949, he received the Nobel Prize for literature.

This study will scan first the assessments of Faulkner by literary critics and then, at greater length, those in history textbooks. Admittedly, historians are entitled to a longer perspective than literary critics. If historians knew as quickly as the literary men which writers likely are of lasting importance, there would not be much need for critics, after all. So, it is easy enough to grant historians a few years to decipher Faulkner's reputation. Histories written between 1956 -- nearly a decade after the Faulkner surge began and at least five years after a deluge of esteem was in high flow -- and 1966 have been sampled. To make the study manageable, only works which can be considered college textbooks -- most of them general histories of the United States in the twentieth century -- are included, and 1966 is the cutoff date simply to overcome the problem of trying to assess a field even as new books pour out.

Finally, not every college history text written in the decade may have been unearthed for this study, but the selection seems extensive enough that most of today's upperclassmen and graduate students probably encountered one of these texts in a basic history course.

What was the graph of critical reputation historians have had to work with when they came to consider William Faulkner of Mississippi? In 1934, when Faulkner had risen above his first novels with The Sound and The Fury, As I Lay Dying, and Sanctuary, literary critic Harry Hartwick surveyed The Foreground of American Fiction and found Faulkner not a very wholesome practitioner:

The whole age is definitely naturalistic in temper, and to expect art to contradict its environment on any large scale would not be justified by the evidence of history. Faulkner, however, does represent a kind of dead end; and naturalism, which follows science closely, will no doubt change, as it has been changing, with new developments in science. So that if it continues to rule the novel, it will perhaps take the shape of a 'new naturalism.' Just now it is being slain by its apostles, whose broncho excesses have redounded to its discredit.

In Creating the Modern American Novel in 1935, Harlan Hatcher also found the Mississippian frightfully extreme: ". . . he defines the farthest limits to which the innovations and revolts that were at one time necessary to the continued well-being of our literature can be carried without final self-defeat." In The American Novel 1789-1939, Carl Van Doren defended Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell for being "frank" but found little else to praise: "In earlier and later novels dealing with different social groups, and in various short stories, Faulkner added to his savage evidence that America had not been able to isolate itself from universal cruelty and misery."

By 1941, with The Wild Palms and The Hamlet the most recent additions to Faulkner's list, Joseph Warren Beach in American Fiction 1920-1940 would venture only: "It is too

early to say that he is a more important writer than others -- like Caldwell and Farrell -- whose technique is so much more normal." In Writers in Crisis: The American Novel Between Two Wars, Maxwell Geismar in 1942 chimed in regretfully: "Here is in some respects the history of a dissipated talent, but the history of the dissipation becomes as remarkable as the talent." When Bernard De Voto in 1944 spurned the 1920s' writers of reputation in The Literary Fallacy, he rated Faulkner fit only to be brushed aside with the general group, although several others rated specific strafings.

And yet . . . this was the Faulkner whom Alfred Kazin in 1942, with a touch of exasperation, had to compare with Tolstoy:

Like Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana, he has in one sense been a provincial fastening upon universality, a provincial whose roots are so deep that the very depth and intensity of his immersion have made for a submarine cosmopolitanism of the spirit. His imagination is of itself so extraordinarily rich and uncontrolled, his conscious conceptions so few and indifferent, that he has been able to create an irony of a higher order than he himself shares. For his imagination is not merely creative in the familiar sense; it is devastatingly brilliant, and at the same time impure; it is a kind of higher ventriloquism, a capriciousness at once almost too self-conscious in its trickery and inventiveness, yet not conscious enough, not even direct or responsible enough, in its scope and deliberation.

This was the Faulkner who had made the cover of Time, who had forced critics' attention if not their general approval. In 1944 this Faulkner would make the rare gesture of answering a letter from a stranger -- one Malcolm Cowley, author and critic -- and from that answer would come Viking's The Portable Faulkner;

Cowley's remarkable introductory essay; and an immeasurable boost to the growing fame and esteem for the novelist. Before this turning point, it should be recounted that despite the literary critics' general testiness, Faulkner earlier had won smaller pennants of recognition. Enough, in fact, to alert historians they would have to notice Faulkner -- and enough that the notice he did receive should have been more discerning than it was.

There have been two valuable studies of criticism of Faulkner in the period this article is concerned with. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery captured a spectrum of critical essays in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism. Perrin H. Lowrey's monograph, "The Critical Reception of William Faulkner's Work in the U.S., 1926-1950," surveyed the literary critics' treatment of Faulkner between his 1926 first novel (Soldier's Pay) and his 1949 Nobel Prize for literature.

Lowrey summarized:

That Faulkner's reputation was high in 1932 . . . seems to admit of no doubt, and that he was ranked with Hemingway and Dos Passos as a major American writer is equally clear. Within the next three years Faulkner's literary reputation . . . dwindled perceptibly; it was not to return to such heights again until 1946, and it was not until 1948 that he began to receive what amounted to a literary ovation.

Hoffman and Vickery's broader and more thoughtful treatment does not agree that Faulkner had a "high" reputation by 1932, but grants that there was a reputation of sorts by then. In the introduction to William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism,

Hoffman observes:

In the 1920's, Faulkner was scarcely known and indifferently reviewed; in the period from 1929 to 1932, when a large share of his best novels appeared, he was given much attention, but it was hesitant and puzzled when not downright indignant; after 1946, the date of the Portable, each new Faulkner publication was recognized widely and some effort made to consider it in the light of past achievement. . . .

Lowrey, in turn, offered this explanation for a reaction against Faulkner during the Depression:

What the course of critical opinion of Faulkner suggests about critical preconceptions is that many of the critics of the Thirties, for a variety of reasons, wanted fiction to provide a realistic picture of life. . . . But in the late thirties, there was evidently a change; the fact that mood and action are proper means of expressing ideas in fiction was reaffirmed, as was the idea that narrative forms have qualities different from dramatic forms, and particularly that the author's voice does not necessarily constitute a blemish.

Here Hoffman agreed, at least in general: "Leftist criticism, when it did not ignore Faulkner, severely chastised him for writing in ignorance or defiance of the brave new world in the making." He cited 1939 as a year of mild resurgence in Faulkner's favor, primarily because of perceptive essays by novelist Conrad Aiken and critic George Marion O'Donnell.²

So, the first two decades of Faulkner's career as a novelist inspired some appreciation, considerable dismay, and a rising suspicion that the troubling author was a major figure in American

²Lowrey in "Critical Reception," 223, remarked that by the early 1940s, literary surveys at least had to note Faulkner. He cited: "G. Harrison Orians (ed.), A Short History of American Literature (New York: Crofts, 1940); Willard Thorp, Merle Curti and Carlos Baker (eds.), American Issues, II, The Literary Record (Chicago: Lippincott, 1941); Ferner Nunn, The Wind Blew from the East (New York: Harpers, 1942); Floyd Stovall, American Idealism (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction (New York: F.S. Crofts, 1943)."

literature. Confirmation of this suspicion would come not with startling new work by Faulkner, although he remained prolific and venturesome, but by heightened appreciation of what he had achieved to date. The 1946 Portable Faulkner, bringing to critical attention a lode of fiction that was almost entirely out of print before that volume, undoubtedly burnished Faulkner's reputation. Yet if Malcolm Cowley's editing coup was the major effort we look back on, it was far from the only one. Caroline Gordon, herself a Southern novelist, boosted the Faulkner revival with her review of the Portable in the New York Times Book Review. Then Robert Penn Warren, both writer and critic, challenged critics to a re-evaluation of Yoknapatawpha's master.

By 1948, the year of Intruder in the Dust, critics in legions has switched from wondering whether the creator of Sartoris and Snopeses had any real worth to pondering whether his latest work was up to his customary level of genius.³ Faulkner's reputation in Europe long had outshone his reputation in the U.S. By 1950, he had both the Nobel Prize and the surprised respect of his townspeople in Oxford, Mississippi.

Faulkner would live and write another dozen years. By the time he died, his passing rated headlines and literary accolades. Even his leave-taking strengthened the legend of Faulkner's

³Hoffman, Three Decades, 22: ". . . The reviews of Intruder in the Dust provided a remarkable cross section of a considerable body of criticism, of an artist firmly established and widely read." Lowrey, 227-8 of "Critical Perception," called the critical reaction an accolade.

uncanny affinity for his South, for the funeral in Oxford could have been from one of his novels. Novelist William Styron, who has said he is a literary debtor to Faulkner, remembered the July heat "like a small mean death itself, as if one were being smothered to extinction in a damp woolen overcoat."

Since the 1946-50 developments that made Faulkner's significance inescapable, there inevitably has been a surge in criticism and other perquisites of fame. Revising his original collection of Faulkner criticism, Hoffman in 1960 found that 17 essays could be added "from the rich assortment of new materials that have appeared since 1951." He noted too that "some eleven books on Faulkner have already appeared." There have been at least two dozen more since he counted. Critics surveying American literature find it comparatively painless these days to discuss Faulkner as one of the three or four most important writers in U.S. history, as Richard Chase did in 1957 in The American Novel and Its Tradition. The more adventurous students of literature now plumb the complex Faulkner as the exemplar of their pet theories.⁴ The withdrawn author has been accorded even that ultimate nosegay of greatness, the memoir by a close relative or friend -- in his case, My Brother Bill, by John Faulkner, and more recently, The Faulkners of Mississippi by the FBI brother, Murry C. Falkner.⁵

⁴The titles of three such works where Faulkner bulks large are self-testifying: Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel; Arthur Mizener, The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel; and Walter J. Slatoff, Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner.

⁵For other examples of this genre, see Leicester Hemingway, My Brother Ernest Hemingway; Vincent Sheean, Dorothy and Red (Dorothy Thompson and Sinclair Lewis); and Sheila Graham and Gerold Frank, Beloved Infidel (F. Scott Fitzgerald).

In outline, then, such has been the course of Faulkner's standing with the literary critics. Scope and intensity of the same sort should not be expected of the history text writers who have to fit such an author into a panoply of other personalities and topics. In admission that we are all frail, especially outside of the topics we have worn familiar in our own classrooms, the simple criteria here are whether the historians indicated ~~that~~ Faulkner could be judged a writer of major significance and attempted, briefly, to suggest why.

As a historical note, it is worthwhile to check on a few major historians to see what Faulkner's stock was worth before 1955, the real beginning point of this study. Charles A. Beard, in two books written in the early 1940s, never displayed more than confusion about the difficult Southerner. He could only remark that Faulkner surprisingly had made a slave the heroine of The Unvanquished.⁶ And in the 1951 edition of The Rise of Modern America, Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. was content to ride with his 1941 try: Soldier's Pay was one of the works standing out "among the books which stressed the unheroic side of war" and As I Lay Dying belonged to a group typifying "the older tradition of social protest."

In the second edition (1937) of their many-lived The Growth

⁶Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, America in Midpassage (New York, 1940), 668. The authors omitted Faulkner's work from a list of "novels of recognized quality" in A Basic History of the United States (New York, 1944).

of the American Republic, Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager lumped Faulkner with Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Hemingway, and concluded: "But most of (their) novels suffered from the connotation suggested by the title of Faulkner's book (The Sound and the Fury); they were tales signifying nothing." Finding this thought reassuring, they cherished it through their third edition in 1942 and their fourth in 1950.

Was it, then, impossible to know that Faulkner was looming larger and larger in American literature? When Lloyd Morris in Postscript to Yesterday (1947) undertook "to sketch the principal social changes that took place in American life between 1896 and 1946," he included two perceptive pages on Faulkner. Referring to Cowley's 1946 observations, he shrewdly drew on that source in his own evaluation:

(Faulkner's) books recorded an exploration, a sustained and consistent effort to arrive at a coherent explanation of the nature of his environment in his own time. His exploration was imaginative rather than purely historical. His purpose was to understand events in terms of the human experiences which had produced them; the ambitions, the needs, the attitudes of mind and heart that had shaped destiny. The result was a series of volumes which, collectively, formed a single saga.

Morris's example was lost on his colleagues, perhaps suggesting that historians not only fail to read literary critics, but fail to read other text writers as well. Moving to the histories written in 1956 and the decade after, it is lamentably easy to compile a list of works in which the handling of Faulkner is mediocre or worse.

The results range from the gap in The United States:

Experiment in Democracy (1962), where Avery Craven and Walter Johnson avoided any mention of Faulkner but smiled on Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, and Hemingway, to William Appleman Williams's allegiance to the leftist shibboleths circa 1933. In his 1961 work, The Contours of American History, Williams's sole reference to Faulkner reads: "When concerned with (social reform), therefore Whitman walked away, as many of his heirs from Mark Twain to William Faulkner were to do, and became 'a way farer down the open road.'" Thomas A. Bailey in The American Pageant (1961) typified those taking the safe and not very helpful approach of merely listing Faulkner and other Nobel Prize writers and briefly characterizing their themes.

Many historians merely murmured that Faulkner was a leading American writer -- or if they stopped to wonder why, neglected to say anything meaningful about his experimentalism, the scope of his imagination and achievement (including specific mention of his most notable works), or the power of his themes.

Such achievements had been recognized in Faulkner, remember, since the early 1950s or before by many literary critics -- enough, at least, to make hailing Faulkner an identifiable trend. But among the historical works which stumbled either before or somewhere amid these criteria: 1957 -- Harold U. Faulkner, American Political and Social History; 1958 -- George H. Mayer and Walter O. Forster, The United States and the Twentieth Century; 1959 -- Oscar T. Barck Jr.,

and Nelson M. Blake, Since 1900: A History of the United States in Our Times; 1961 -- Harvey Wish, Contemporary America: The National Scene since 1900; 1962 -- Rembert W. Patrick et al., The American People: A History; 1963 -- Henry Bamford Parkes and Vincent P. Garosso, Recent America: A History; Thomas Bonner, Our Recent Past; 1964 -- Dexter Perkins and Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The American Democracy: Its Rise to Power; John W. Caughey and Ernest R. May, A History of the United States; Gilman M. Ostrander, A Profile History of the United States; 1966 -- Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, A Short History of the United States.

Some authors compensated in a later edition for uninspired evaluation of Faulkner on the first try. In 1965, David A. Shannon paused to do a more thoughtful job than in 1963's more general Twentieth Century America. (His 1965 work was Between the Wars: America, 1919-41.) John D. Hicks and George E. Mowry in A Short History of American Democracy (1956) could grant only that Faulkner after 1930 moved beyond the hard-boiled mood of Sanctuary to become "engrossed almost entirely with his acute probings into the unexplored recesses of the Southern mind, not excluding that of the Negro." In 1966, Hicks, Mowry, and Robert E. Burke found considerably more stature for the novelist:

Of the many able writers the South produced in the twentieth century, the most notable was William Faulkner. . . . His real literary fame was won by a series of novels which examined the relationship between the decaying aristocracy and the poor white classes of his mythical Yoknapatawpha County. . . . Faulkner's prose is often extremely complex, and his search for the threads of guilt and expiation in the human mind makes his books difficult and obscure. But few have written about the modern South with such power and understanding.

Beyond this, Mowry in his 1965 history, The Urban Nation: 1920-1960, felt it important to ponder the philosophies that may have guided Faulkner's work.

Arthur S. Link provided a solid treatment of Faulkner in his 1955 American Epoch, then in the 1963 edition stepped up to comments which are highly notable when compared with the efforts of his colleagues:

These same basic human qualities (compassion, courage and endurance) were also the primary concern of William Faulkner, despite the themes of violent conflict, decadence, and greed that pervaded so much of his work. His reputation as America's foremost living novelist became firmly established after 1945 and endured until his death in 1962. In all of his major novels Faulkner probed the meaning of life through a many-sided portrayal of southern society, with its tensions between a meaningful but archaic past and a rapidly changing present, and between the established but often degenerate older families and the rapacious, petty, materialistic instincts of the rising poor whites. . . . Readers could not be sure from his novels of the twenties and thirties whether Faulkner was affirming or denying the values of the past. . . . (But) for all his preoccupations, which at times seemed almost morbid, with the bitter antagonisms and dark violence that he saw in southern life, Faulkner insisted that his ultimate message was one of hope. 'I believe that man will not merely endure,' he said. 'He will prevail. He is immortal . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.'

An odd eddy in the historical flow toward Faulkner is seen in textbooks by Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, and Frank Freidel. Their 1959 A History of the United States provided a livelier and more meaningful treatment of Faulkner than did their 1961 American History: A Survey.

A few historians have done creditable jobs on Faulkner the first time around. True, they could profit from the example of their colleagues, but they did profit. In 1959, Foster R. Dulles

in The United States Since 1865 offered a careful look at Faulkner, concluding: "He wrote with such power, feeling and beauty that he won a unique place in American literature that gave every indication of permanence." Dumas Malone and Basil Rauch in Empire for Liberty (1960) dealt discerningly with the novelist's legacy of criticism as well as his themes. In The National Experience: A History of the United States, John M. Blum in 1963 briefly but trenchantly handled Faulkner's theme of tension between the self and society. The Democratic Experience: A Short American History, a 1963 work by a crowd of historical writers, provided Thomas C. Cochran's adequate look at Faulkner's early career and reputation and Carl N. Degler's short and solid discussion of the novelist's later stature.

A swatch of the better comment on Faulkner which distinguishes these historians can be taken from John A. Garraty's The American Nation: A History of the United States (1966): "Probably the finest talent among modern American novelists was William Faulkner. . . . But Faulkner was more by far than a local colorist. No contemporary excelled him as a commentator on the multiple dilemmas of modern life." Then, after pointing out some of the confusion and disparity in Faulkner's work, Garraty concluded: ". . . Nevertheless, his great stature was beyond question. . . ."

Such a viewpoint positively had become less rare. In 1962, with the fifth edition of The Growth of the American Republic, Even Morison and Commager gave Faulkner something besides a

look down the nose:

Faulkner came in time to share with Hemingway dominion of the American literary scene. . . . Faulkner is the greatest of American literary experimenters -- a writer of dazzling virtuosity who can reproduce the folk speech of the poor white and the rhetoric of the Old Testament, the crude, and often perverse, humor of a Mark Twain and the complex symbolism of a T.S. Eliot. He had learned something from Proust, something from James Joyce, but his use of the stream of consciousness technique, of the flashback, of a jigsaw puzzle technique, of symbolism, is all his own.

Put the strong treatments of Faulkner beside the weak or the initially fumbling and the count is simple. More than thirty years after his most highly-regarded work, fully ten years after critical judgment swung heavily in his favor, William Faulkner was not receiving his due from American history texts.

The British historian Harry C. Allen once came across the historical opinion that 19th century Americans had been slow to settle the Great Plains; it took fifty years. "Half a century!" he exclaimed. "Let them see the Frenchman still ploughing with his ox! None but an American could have thought of such a comment." The American sense of time may be foreshortened, and over the course of history it may be trifling that a writer began receiving his historical recognition a few years late.

But U.S. historians here are skewered on their own purpose. If they profess to be writing meaningful history so near the event -- as the historians examined here do, at least implicitly, in their textbooks of "recent history" -- there is no defense in the alibi that they cannot see clearly because of the nearness. The literary critics' testimony on Faulkner by 1956 seems to have been at

least as clear as the record of President Truman's administration, which few professional writers of recent history hesitate to handle at least broadly. And their textbooks, after all, are full of confident discussions of Sinclair Lewis, whose significant writing was done only a few years before Faulkner's most memorable work.

This is not to say that historians by now should have chorused their acclaim for Faulkner as the greatest American novelist. Greatness is a matter of opinion. But again, the criteria of a writer's apparent significance and the major reasons why should be as much a part of the historian's effort to write general history as political events automatically are. The past itself says so. Which figures have turned out to be more important in understanding the story of the United States -- the writers Mark Twain and Henry James, or their contemporaries, the Presidents Cleveland and Harrison?

The critical evidence on Faulkner was available to historians at least a decade before publication of most of the history texts studied here, but the texts too seldom showed it. After all, the man was difficult, out of the ordinary -- an embarrassment to keepers of a tidy past and academicians who do not look up from their own garden plots to note any other. A suggested recreation for the 1970s: watching the authors of history textbooks discuss Norman Mailer in terms of The Naked and the Dead.

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grad school paper done for Bob Burke's seminar

Being landlord in a brothel would afford "the perfect milieu" for an artist to work in, William Faulkner mused to an interviewer.

"...The place is quiet during the morning hours, which is the best time of the day to work. There's enough social life in the evening, if he wishes to participate, to keep him from being bored; it gives him a certain standing in his society; he has nothing to do because the madam keeps the books; all the inmates of the house are females and would defer to him and call him 'sir'. All the bootleggers in the neighborhood would call him 'sir.' And he could call the police by their first names."¹

The trim little gent from Oxford, Mississippi, customarily showed more concern for bordello belles and bootleggers than for critics and historians. As long as they could, many critics and historians reciprocated by regarding Faulkner much as if he were holding down his dream job in the house next door.

¹Interview by Jean Stein vanden Heuvel, Writers at Work (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), p. 124.

sp? 2! The gamy themes of his literature -- degeneration, idiocy and violence besides some jarring forms of sexuality -- and his formidable experimentalism made it difficult to know what to do with him. And yet ... and yet, when it came time to put down on the printed page what seemed to be going on in American literature, there was the embarrassing fact of Faulkner's achievement. A close look shows that critics and then historians in dismaying numbers didn't resolve their embarrassment until long after it was evident Faulkner probably was the most significant writer America had produced in the twentieth century.

Unless a novel is born a rampant best-seller -- an Uncle Tom's Cabin or a Gone With the Wind -- its author's lasting fame depends a good deal on the critics' appraisals and re-appraisals. Historians, shopping through the culture to see what seems important and enduring, take it from there. They are lucky that Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery have captured a spectrum of critical essays in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism. Perrin H. Lowrey had^s done a useful study of the literary critics' treatment of Faulkner between his 1926 first novel (Soldier's Pay) and his 1949 Nobel Prize for literature. And literary men pondering the status of modern American fiction have had to assess the Faulkner criticism in shaping a viewpoint for their own books. Out of such work emerges the outline of reputation which the historian then gauges and reports to posterity.

From the first, William Faulkner has been a problem. His novels began appearing in the mid-1920s, but he doesn't jibe

with the famous writers of the Lost Generation -- Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis. He went away to serve in World War I, but before long it was obvious something besides war-born disillusionment haunted his writing.

source? His brief exile from the U.S. he eclipsed with unflinching residence in his home county. He admitted in the preface to the Modern Library edition of Sanctuary he laced the book with horror so it would sell -- honesty which made some critics blanch and then foam.¹ (Malcolm Cowley points out the real importance of the preface was Faulkner's qualifying statement that when the galleys came, he rewrote the book and paid for the changes so the final version "would not shame The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying....")²

An even bigger problem than the inexplicable writer was his writing. Later it would be argued, with considerable plausibility, that nearly all of Faulkner's work was a process of experimenting and critics would agree at least on the sweep of his imagination. But as the books came out, many critics found them merely noisy, unfathomable intruders. By 1934, when Faulkner had risen above his first novels with The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying and Sanctuary, Harry Hartwick

¹Perrin H. Lowrey, "The Critical Reception of William Faulkner's Work in the U.S., 1926-1950" (Microfilmed Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1956), p. 230-1: "The stress which certain critics put upon Faulkner's technical dexterity, followed by Faulkner's own statements, such as those in the preface to the Modern Library Sanctuary, raised the suspicion in many critics' minds that Faulkner was not serious in his artistic purpose."

²Malcolm Cowley, The Faulkner-Cowley File (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 156.

could survey American fiction and find Faulkner not a very wholesome practitioner:

"The whole age is definitely naturalistic in temper, and to expect art to contradict its environment on any large scale would not be justified by the evidence of history. Faulkner, however, does represent a kind of dead end; and naturalism, which follows science closely, will no doubt change, as it has been changing, with new developments in science. So that if it continues to rule the novel, it will perhaps take the shape of a 'new naturalism'. Just now it is being slain by its apostles, whose broncho excesses have redounded to its discredit."¹

In 1936, Harlan Hatcher too could find the Mississippian rather extreme: "...he defines the farthest limits to which the innovations and revolts that were at one time necessary to the continued well-being of our literature can be carried without final self-defeat."² In The American Novel 1789-1939, Carl Van Doren defended Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell for being "frank" but found little beyond that to praise: "In earlier and later novels dealing with different social groups, and in various short stories, Faulkner added to his savage evidence that America had not been able to isolate itself from universal cruelty and misery."³

By 1941, with The Wild Palms and The Hamlet the most recent additions to Faulkner's list, Joseph Warren Beach would venture only: "It is too early to say that he is a more important

¹Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York: American Book Company, 1934), p. 408.

²Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel (Murray Hill, N.Y.: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935), p. 243.

³Carl Van Doren, The American Novel 1789-1939 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 354.

writer than others -- like Caldwell and Farrell -- whose technique is so much more normal."¹ Maxwell Geismar in 1942 chimed in regretfully: "Here is in some respects the history of a dissipated talent, but the history of the dissipation becomes as remarkable as the talent."² When Bernard DeVoto in 1944 spurned the 1920s' writers of reputation, he thought Faulkner fit only to be brushed aside with the general group, although several others rated specific thrashings.³

And yet ... this was the Faulkner who ^{6a} Alfred Kazin in 1942, with a touch of exasperation, would have to compare with Tolstoy:

"Like Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana, he has in one sense been a provincial fastening upon universality, a provincial whose roots are so deep that the very depth and intensity of his immersion have made for a submarine cosmopolitanism of the spirit. His imagination is of itself so extraordinarily rich and uncontrolled, his conscious conceptions so few and indifferent, that he has been able to create an irony of a higher order than he himself shares. For his imagination is not merely creative in the familiar sense; it is devastatingly brilliant, and at the same time impure; it is a kind of higher ventriloquism, a capriciousness at once almost too self-conscious in its trickery and inventiveness, yet not conscious enough, not even direct or responsible enough, in its scope and deliberation."⁴

This was the Faulkner who had made the cover of Time, who

¹Joseph Warren Beach, American Fiction 1920-1940 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 169.

²Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis: The American Novel Between Two Wars (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), p. 145.

³Bernard DeVoto, The Literary Fallacy (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), p. 22, 94-123.

⁴Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 458. Among the first literary surveys to show enthusiasm for Faulkner with few reservations were W.M. Frohock, The Novel of Violence in America (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1950) and Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America, 1900-1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951).

had forced critics' attention if not their general approval. In 1944 this Faulkner would make the rare gesture of answering a letter from a stranger -- one Malcolm Cowley, author and critic -- and from that answer would come Viking's The Portable Faulkner; Cowley's remarkable introductory essay; and growing fame and esteem for the novelist. Cowley and Faulkner together started the flag briskly toward the top; before turning to their achievement, it should be recounted that despite the critics' testiness, Faulkner earlier had won smaller pennants of recognition. Enough, in fact, ~~to alert~~ ^{to alert} historians they would have to notice Faulkner -- and enough that what notice he did get should have been more discerning than it was.

In the most detailed study of Faulkner and the critics, Perrin H. Lowrey summarizes:

"That Faulkner's reputation was high in 1932, however, seems to admit of no doubt, and that he was ranked with Hemingway and Dos Passos as a major American writer is equally clear. Within the next three years Faulkner's literary reputation... dwindled perceptibly; it was not to return to such heights again until 1946, and it was not until 1948 that he began to receive what amounted to a literary ovation."¹

Hoffman and Vickery's broader and more thoughtful treatment does not agree that Faulkner had a "high" reputation by 1932, but grants that there was a reputation by then. In the valuable introduction to William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, Hoffman observes:

"...In the 1920's, Faulkner was scarcely known and indifferently reviewed; in the period from 1929 to 1932, when a

¹Lowrey, "Critical Reception," p. 203.

large share of his best novels appeared, he was given much attention, but it was hesitant and puzzled when not downright indignant; after 1946, the date of the Portable, each new Faulkner publication was recognized widely and some effort made to consider it in the light of past achievement...¹

Lowrey has this explanation for a reaction against Faulkner during the Depression:

"What the course of critical opinion of Faulkner suggests about critical preconceptions is that many of the critics of the thirties, for a variety of reasons, wanted fiction to provide a realistic picture of life....But in the late thirties, there was evidently a change; the fact that mood and action are proper means of expressing ideas in fiction was reaffirmed, as was the idea that narrative forms have qualities different from dramatic forms, and particularly that the author's voice does not necessarily constitute a blemish."²

Here Hoffman agrees, at least in general: "Leftist criticism, when it did not ignore Faulkner, severely chastised him for writing in ignorance or defiance of the brave new world in the making."³ He goes on to cite 1939 as a year of mild resurgence in Faulkner's favor, primarily because of perceptive essays by novelist Conrad Aiken and critic George Marion O'Donnell.⁴

¹Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (eds.), William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism (Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 15.

²Lowrey, "Critical Reception", p. 262.

³Hoffman, Three Decades, p. 5.

⁴Ibid., p. 8. Lowrey on p. 223 of "Critical Reception" remarks that by the early 1940s, literary surveys at least had to note Faulkner. He cites: "G. Harrison Orians (ed.), A Short History of American Literature (New York: Crofts, 1940); Willard Thorp, Merle Curti and Carlos Baker (eds.), American Issues, II The Literary Record (Chicago: Lippincott, 1941); Ferner Nuhn, The Wind Blew from the East (New York: Harpers, 1942); Floyd Stovall, American Idealism (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction (New York: F.S. Crofts, 1943)."

So, the first two decades of Faulkner's career as novelist inspired some appreciation, considerable dismay, and a rising suspicion that the troubling author was a major figure in American literature. Confirmation of this suspicion would come not with startling new work by Faulkner, though he remained prolific and inventive, but by heightened appreciation of what he had achieved to date. The next lines would be Malcolm Cowley's, and he recalls them engagingly in The Faulkner-Cowley File, a 1966 book based on the slim but important correspondence between the author and the critic. Cowley remembers the lag he saw between Faulkner's worth and Faulkner's reputation:

"By the later years of World War II he had published two books of poems, eleven novels -- each an extraordinary work in its own fashion -- two collections of stories, and two cycles of stories, The Unvanquished and Go Down, Moses, representatives of a hybrid form between the random collection and the unified novel; there were seventeen books in all. In eleven of the books he had created a mythical county in northern Mississippi and had told its story from Indian days to what he regarded as the morally disastrous present; it was a sustained work of the imagination such as no other American writer had attempted. Apparently no one knew that Faulkner had attempted it. His seventeen books were effectively out of print and seemed likely to remain in that condition, since there was no public demand for them. How could one speak of Faulkner's value on the literary stock exchange? In 1944 his name wasn't even listed there."¹

For a fellow who in the first letters couldn't spell "Yoknapatawpha", the marvelous and terrible county Faulkner had created, Cowley had brilliant insight into what the author's work added up to. And he made a discovery which should rebuke both critics and historians: Faulkner was willing to try^{to} explain both his style and meaning if someone bothered to ask politely.

¹Cowley, The Faulkner-Cowley File, p. 5.

The long sentences? He reflected on them for Cowley:

"My ambition," he said, "is to put everything into one sentence -- not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." He went on to explain that in writing his prodigious sentences he is trying to convey a sense of simultaneity, not only giving what happened in the shifting moment but suggesting everything that went before and made the quality of that moment."¹

The "message"? Faulkner replied to Cowley:

"...I'm trying primarily to tell a story, in the most effective way I can think of, the most moving, the most exhaustive. But I think even that is incidental to what I am trying to do, taking my output (the course of it) as a whole. I am telling the same story over and over, which is myself and the world....All I know how to do is to keep on trying in a new way. I'm inclined to think that my material, the South, is not very important to me. I just happen to know it, and don't have time in one life to learn another one and write at the same time."²

By now, Cowley is important to the Faulkner reputation not only for helping to call attention to the author's work but for his view of Faulkner as man and writer.³ Yet if his was the major effort, it was far from the only one. Caroline Gordon, herself a Southern novelist, boosted the Faulkner revival with her review of the Portable in the New York Times Book Review. Then Robert Penn Warren, both writer and critic, challenged critics to a re-evaluation of Faulkner.⁴

By 1948, the year of Intruder in the Dust, critics in droves had switched from wondering whether the creator of

¹Ibid., p. 112.

²Ibid., p. 4.

³Besides the valuable material in The Faulkner-Cowley File and in his introduction to The Portable Faulkner, Cowley has numerous references to Faulkner in The Literary Situation (New York: The Viking Press, 1954).

⁴Cowley, The Faulkner-Cowley File, p. 92-3.

Sartorises and Snopeses had any real worth to pondering whether his latest work was up to his level of genius.¹ Faulkner's reputation in Europe long had ~~outshined~~^{one} his reputation in the U.S.² By 1950 he had both the Nobel Prize for Literature and the surprised respect of his townspeople in Oxford.

Faulkner would live and write another dozen years. By the time he died, his passing rated headlines and literary accolades. Even his leave-taking strengthened the legend of Faulkner's uncanny affinity for his South, for the funeral in Oxford could have been from one of his novels. (Novelist William Styron remembered the July heat "like a small mean death itself, as if one were being smothered to extinction in a damp woolen overcoat."³)

Since the 1946-50 developments that made Faulkner's significance inescapable, there inevitably has been a surge in

¹Hoffman, Three Decades, p. 22: "...The reviews of Intruder in the Dust provided a remarkable cross section of a considerable body of criticism, of an artist firmly established and widely read." Lowrey on p. 227-28 of "Critical Reception" calls the critical reaction an accolade. On p. 224-26, he confirms the vital importance of Cowley's introduction for The Portable Faulkner in swinging critics toward full recognition of Faulkner. Hoffman agrees; see p. 10, Three Decades.

²In The Faulkner-Cowley File, p. 35, Faulkner in 1945 replies to Cowley's mention of the novelist's standing in Europe: "Yes, I had become aware of Faulkner's European reputation. The night before I left Hollywood I went (under pressure) to a party. I was sitting on a sofa with a drink, suddenly realised I was being pretty intently listened to by three men whom I then realised were squatting on their heels and knees in a kind of circle in front of me. They were Isherwood, the English poet and a French surrealist, Helion; the other one's name I forget...."

³William Styron, "As He Lay Dead, A Bitter Grief," Life, July 20, 1962, p. 39.

criticism and other perquisites of fame. Revising his original collection of Faulkner criticism, Hoffman in 1960 found that ¹⁷ essays could be added "from the rich assortment of new materials that have appeared since 1951."¹ He noted "some eleven books on Faulkner have already appeared."² There have been at least twenty more since he counted. Critics surveying American literature find it painless to discuss Faulkner as one of the three or four most important writers in U.S. history, as Columbia's Richard Chase did in 1957 in The American Novel and Its Tradition.³ The more adventurous students of literature now plumb the complex Faulkner as the exemplar of their pet theories.⁴ The withdrawn author has been accorded even that ultimate nosegay of greatness, the memoir by a close relative or friend -- in his case, My Brother Bill, by John Faulkner.⁵

This is the graph of reputation historians have had to work with. Naturally some have done quite well with it, others not so well; the surprising thing is the number of not so wells.

¹Hoffman, Three Decades, p. vii.

²Ibid., p. 50.

³Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, 1957). On p. 43 of Three Decades, Hoffman summarizes post-1950 critical surveys: "...Critics exerted themselves ... to discover a rationale of the manner applicable to (Faulkner's) work as a whole."

⁴The titles of three such works where Faulkner bulks large are self-explanatory: Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Stein and Day, 2nd edition, 1966); Arthur Mizener, The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964); and Walter J. Slatoff, Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U. Press, 1960).

⁵For other examples of this genre, see Leicester Hemingway, My Brother, Ernest Hemingway; Vincent Sheean, Dorothy and Red (Dorothy Thompson and Sinclair Lewis); and Sheila Graham and Gerold Frank, Beloved Infidel (F. Scott Fitzgerald).

Admittedly, historians are entitled to a longer perspective than literary critics. If historians knew as quickly as the literary men which writers likely are of lasting importance, there would not be much need for critics, after all. So, it is easy enough to grant historians a few years to decipher Faulkner's reputation. This study will sample histories written in 1955 or later -- nearly a decade after the Faulkner surge began, and at least five years after the deluge of esteem was well under way. To make the project manageable, only works which can be considered college textbooks -- most of them general histories of the U.S. in the twentieth century -- are included.

First, however, it is worth while to check with a few major historians to see what Faulkner's historical stock was worth before 1955. This helps to illuminate not only Mr. Faulkner's standing, but the history profession's attitude toward him then.

Charles A. Beard, in two books written in the early 1940s, never displayed more than confusion about the difficult Southerner; he could only remark that Faulkner surprisingly had made a slave the heroine of The Unvanquished.¹ And in the 1951 edition of The Rise of Modern America, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., was content to ride with his 1941 try: Soldier's Pay was one of the works standing out "among the books which stressed the unheroic side of war" and As I Lay Dying belonged to a group typifying "the older tradition of social protest."²

¹Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, America in Midpassage (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 668. The authors omit Faulkner's work from a list of "novels of recognized quality" in A Basic History of the United States (New York: New Home Library, 1944).

²Arthur Meier Schlesinger, The Rise of Modern America, 1865-1951 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), p. 391.

In the second edition (1937) of their many-lived The Growth of the American Republic, Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager lumped Faulkner with Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and Hemingway and concluded: "But most of (their) novels suffered from the connotation suggested by the title of Faulkner's book (The Sound and the Fury); they were tales signifying nothing."¹ Finding this thought reassuring, they cherished it through their third edition in 1942 and their fourth in 1950.

Was it impossible to know Faulkner was looming larger and larger in American literature? When Lloyd Morris in 1947 undertook "to sketch the principal social changes that took place in American life between 1896 and 1946," he included two perceptive pages on Faulkner. Referring to Cowley's observations, he shrewdly drew on that source in his own evaluation:

"...His books recorded an exploration, a sustained and consistent effort to arrive at a coherent explanation of the nature of his environment in his own time. His exploration was imaginative rather than purely historical. His purpose was to understand events in terms of the human experiences which had produced them; the ambitions, the needs, the attitudes of mind and heart that had shaped destiny. The result was a series of volumes which, collectively, formed a single saga."²

mod. needs reworking "in moving" - see
 [Moving to the histories written in 1955 and after,] it is lamentably easy to compile a list of works whose handling of Faulkner is mediocre or worse. No sophisticated literary view is needed; just the simple criteria of whether the historians indicate Faulkner was a writer of major significance and, *or?* attempt to suggest why. The results range from the gap in The *or their attempts*

¹Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, The Growth of the American Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 547.

²Lloyd Morris, Postscript to Yesterday (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 160.

United States: Experiment in Democracy (1962), where Avery Craven and Walter Johnson avoid any mention of Faulkner (while citing Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis and Hemingway), to William Appleman Williams's allegiance to a viewpoint many critics held in the 1930s. In his 1961 work, The Contours of American History, his sole reference to Faulkner is: "When concerned with (social reform), therefore, Whitman walked away, as many of his heirs from Mark Twain to William Faulkner were to do, and became 'a way farer down the open road.'"¹ Thomas A. Bailey in The American Pageant (1961) typifies those taking the safe and not very helpful approach of merely listing Faulkner and other Nobel Prize writers and briefly characterizing their themes.

Many historians merely murmur that Faulkner was a leading American writer -- or if they stop to wonder why, neglect to say anything meaningful about his experimentalism, the scope of his imagination and achievement (including specific mention of his most notable works), or the power of his themes. Such achievements have been recognized in Faulkner, remember, since the early 1950s or before by most literary critics. But among the historical works which stumble either before or somewhere amid these criteria: 1955 -- R.B. Nye and J.E. Morpurgo, The Growth of the U.S.A.; 1957 -- Harold U. Faulkner, American Political and Social History; 1958 -- George H. Mayer and Walter O. Forster, The United States and the Twentieth Century; 1959 -- Oscar T. Barck, Jr., and Nelson M. Blake, Since 1900: A History of the United States in Our Times; 1961 -- Harvey Wish, Contemporary America: The National Scene since 1900; 1962 -- Rembert W. Patrick et al.,

¹William A. Williams, The Contours of American History (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1961), p. 244.

The American People: A History; 1963 -- Henry Bamford Parkes and Vincent P. Carosso, Recent America: A History; Thomas Bonner, Our Recent Past; 1964 -- Dexter Perkins and Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The American Democracy: Its Rise to Power; John W. Caughey and Ernest R. May, A History of the United States; Gilman M. Ostrander, A Profile History of the United States; 1966 -- Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, A Short History of the United States.¹

Against such treatments stand several adequate evaluations of Faulkner on the first try or as compensation in a later edition. In 1965, for example, David A. Shannon in Between the Wars: America, 1919-41 paused to do a more thoughtful job than in 1963's more general Twentieth Century America. John D. Hicks and George E. Mowry in A Short History of American Democracy (1956) could grant only that Faulkner after 1930 moved beyond the hard-boiled mood of Sanctuary to become "engrossed almost entirely with his acute probings into the unexplored recesses of the Southern mind, not excluding that of the Negro."² In 1966, Hicks, Mowry and Robert E. Burke found considerably more stature for the novelist:

"Of the many able writers the South produced in the twentieth century, the most notable was William Faulkner....His real literary fame was won by a series of novels which examined the relationship between the decaying aristocracy and the poor white classes of his mythical Yoknapatawpha County.... Faulkner's prose is often extremely complex, and his search for the threads of guilt and expiation in the human mind makes his books difficult and obscure. But few have written about the modern South with such power and understanding."³

¹Whenever page numbers of specific references to Faulkner are not listed here or later, they are indicated in the bibliography.

²John D. Hicks and George E. Mowry, A Short History of American Democracy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 714.

³John D. Hicks, George E. Mowry and Robert E. Burke, A History of American Democracy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 649.

Beyond this, Mowry in his 1965 history, The Urban Nation: 1920-1960, felt it important to ponder the philosophies that may have guided Faulkner's work.

Arthur S. Link moved from a solid treatment of Faulkner in his 1955 American Epoch to a notable one in the 1963 edition:

"These same basic human qualities (compassion, courage and endurance) were also the primary concern of William Faulkner, despite the themes of violent conflict, decadence, and greed that pervaded so much of his work. His reputation as America's foremost living novelist became firmly established after 1945 and endured until his death in 1962. In all of his major novels Faulkner probed the meaning of life through a many-sided portrayal of southern society, with its tensions between a meaningful but archaic past and a rapidly changing present, and between the established but often degenerate older families and the rapacious, petty, materialistic instincts of the rising poor whites....Readers could not be sure from his novels of the twenties and thirties whether Faulkner was affirming or denying the values of the past....(But) for all his preoccupations, which at times seemed almost morbid, with the bitter antagonisms and dark violence that he saw in southern life, Faulkner insisted that his ultimate message was one of hope. 'I believe that man will not merely endure,' he said. 'He will prevail. He is immortal ... because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.'"¹

An odd eddy in the historical flow toward Faulkner is seen in the textbooks by Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams and Frank Freidel; their 1959 A History of the United States provides a livelier and more meaningful treatment of Faulkner than does their 1961 American History: A Survey.

A few historians have done striking jobs on Faulkner the first time around. True, they could profit from the example of their colleagues, but they did profit. In 1959, Foster R. Dulles's The United States Since 1865 offered a careful look at Faulkner, concluding: "He wrote with such power, feeling and

¹Arthur S. Link with William B. Catton, American Epoch: A History of the United States since the 1890s (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 636-37.

beauty that he won a unique place in American literature that gave every indication of permanence."¹ Dumas Malone and Basil Rauch in Empire for Liberty (1960) dealt discerningly with the novelist's legacy of criticism as well as his themes. In The National Experience: A History of the United States, John M. Blum in 1963 briefly but trenchantly handled Faulkner's theme of tension between the self and society. The Democratic Experience: A Short American History, a 1963 work by a crowd of historical writers, provided Thomas C. Cochran's adequate look at Faulkner's early career and reputation and Carl N. Degler's short and solid discussion of the Mississippian's later stature. A swatch of the better comment on Faulkner which distinguishes these historians can be taken from John A. Garraty's The American Nation: A History of the United States (1966): "Probably the finest talent among modern American novelists was William Faulkner. ...But Faulkner was more by far than a local colorist. No contemporary excelled him as a commentator on the multiple dilemmas of modern life." Then, after pointing out some of the confusion and disparity in Faulkner's work, Garraty concludes: "...Nevertheless, his great stature was beyond question...."²

Such a viewpoint must be becoming less rare. In 1962, with the fifth edition of The Growth of the American Republic, even Morison and Commager gave Faulkner something besides a look down the nose:

"...Faulkner came in time to share with Hemingway dominion of the American literary scene....Faulkner is the greatest

¹Foster R. Dulles, The United States Since 1865 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 328.

²John A. Garraty, The American Nation: A History of the United States (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 869-70.

of American literary experimenters -- a writer of dazzling virtuosity who can reproduce the folk speech of the poor white and the rhetoric of the Old Testament, the crude, and often perverse, humor of a Mark Twain and the complex symbolism of a T. S. Eliot. He had learned something from Proust, something from James Joyce, but his use of the stream of consciousness technique, of the flashback, of a jig-saw puzzle technique, of symbolism, is all his own."¹

Put the strong treatments of Faulkner beside the weak, and the count is simple and definite. More than thirty years after his most highly-regarded work and at least ten after critical judgment swung heavily in his favor, William Faulkner was not receiving his due from American textbooks.

write out
The British historian Harry C. Allen once came across the historical opinion that 19th century Americans had been slow to settle the Great Plains; it took 50 years. "Half a century!" he exclaimed. "Let them see the Frenchman still ploughing with his ox! None but an American could have thought of such a comment...."² The American sense of time may be unique, and over the course of history it may be trifling that a writer began receiving his recognition a few years late.

But U.S. historians here are skewered on their own purpose. If they profess to be writing meaningful history so near the event -- as the historians examined here do, at least implicitly -- there is no defense in the alibi that they can't see clearly because of the nearness. The critics' testimony on Faulkner by 1955 seems to have been at least as clear as the record of Presi-

¹Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, The Growth of the American Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 680.

²Harry C. Allen, "The Thesis Upheld," The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?, ed. Ray Allen Billington (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 117.

dent Truman's administration, which few professional writers of recent history hesitate to handle at least broadly. And their textbooks, after all, are full of confident discussions of Sinclair Lewis, whose significant work was done only a few years before Faulkner's most important novels.

Perhaps it is the revealing measure of William Faulkner that first the critics and then historians have fumbled his significance.

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A
 Superb paper, a pleasure to read
 & (with very little more work) publishable.
 You have a talent for finding the
 meaningful quotation & for shrewd
 evaluation, as well. (This is one
 of the finest papers I've had in
 all the years I've given this course)
PerfB

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