BOOK REVIEWS

The Faithful Heart

Christopher Clausen


Donald Davidson, who died in 1968, is now an almost forgotten figure in American literature, but from the 1930s through the 1950s he was known for two reasons. First, he was an important member of the Fugitive poets, the group of Southern writers who had clustered around Vanderbilt University in the 1920s and included Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and a number of lesser figures. Davidson was arguably as good a poet as any of these better-remembered three.

The second reason for his onetime fame ironically helps explain the eclipse of his literary reputation. Alone among significant Southern writers, Davidson defended not just a general notion of the agrarian Old South but segregation and white supremacy, as vociferously as he knew how, when these issues exploded like Roman candles in the national sky. Like other white supremacists, most of whom lacked anything approaching his talents and intellectual sophistication, Davidson found himself increasingly isolated even in the South. Today few anthologies of American poetry include any of his work. Insofar as he has any reputation at all today, it is as a minor Fugitive and a crank.

Mark Royden Winchell, a professor at Clemson University whose many previous biographies include a 1996 one of the Southern literary critic Cleanth Brooks, tries hard to remedy the neglect of Davidson with this handsome, ambitious work. The book is somewhat defiantly dedicated to the late Melvin Bradford, a student and disciple of Davidson whose own expressions of Southern patriotism made him too controversial to be confirmed as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities during the Reagan administration. As the subtitle indicates, the main focus is on Davidson as an embattled defender of a Southern way of life that was melting away before his disapproving eyes. The result is about as enthralling a story as the life of an English professor can reasonably be.

At least by implication, the story is as much about the South since the Civil War as it is about Davidson. “From the very beginning,” the first sentence of the book declares, “the South was two nations. One was a land of planters and aristocrats—a group that included the original leaders of this country and the first note-
worthy southern writer, William Byrd of Westover." The other South, in this di-
chotomy, consisted of frontiersmen, usu-
ally Scotch-Irish by descent—"uncouth, violent, and frequently illiterate." It was
from the latter group that Donald Davidson's family descended. The first
group, however, constituted the ideal that
Southern patriots, at least
intellectual ones, have usu-
ally adhered to the Old
South of which Mount
Vernon and Monticello rep-
resent the chief architec-
tural monuments and Gone
with the Wind the most popu-
lar literary reflection.

One could plausibly ob-
serve that there have al-
ways been two other
Souths, the Old and the
New, and that both are con-
stantly changing. The Old
South of history and leg-
end is by no means the same
as it was when Davidson
was born in 1893. Its social and political
significance has altered repeatedly to pre-
serve its continuing relevance as an ide-
alized contrast to the succession of New
Souths that have come into being since
1865—from the Georgia newspaperman
Henry Grady's first New South of piety and
textile mills and segregation, to the Newer
South of the civil-rights movement, to the
prosperous Newest South whose shop-
ing centers and high-tech industries
make it seem much like the rest of the
country.

Less than four decades after it ceased
to be solidly Democratic, this latest land
of Dixie has become the geographic base
of the Republican Party. Even at the end
of his life Davidson would not have rec-
nized a South in which a Democratic presi-
dential nominee from his own Tennessee,
while splitting the national vote with the
Republican candidate, gained not a single
electoral vote in the old Confederacy.

Nor, in all likelihood, would he have rec-
ognized a Democratic Party that was un-
ambiguously part of the occupation force
against which the "resistance" of the
book's subtitle was directed.

Because so much of Davidson's life was
that of a Vanderbilt student and profes-
sor, as well as book editor of the Nashville
Tennessean (he needed the
money), Winchell neces-
sarily ekes out the story of
his life with a lot of back-
ground and information on
related subjects. When
Davidson goes off to col-
lege, his biographer gives a
brief history of Nashville,
followed by one of the
Vanderbilt English pro-
gram. Actually, both of
these small digressions are
useful, given the two bases
of Davidson's reputation
noted above. We need to
know what his various en-
vironments looked and felt
like before we can understand how he
reacted to them.

Likewise the most outwardly eventful
episode in Davidson's life, his service as
an infantry lieutenant in the First World
War, is explained in some detail and illus-
trated with a long extract from his diary of
the time. As literary movements make
their appearance in the story, Winchell
explains them also in detail. When
Davidson becomes a teacher at the Bread
Loaf School of English, the history of that
venerable summer session is narrated
with the same thoroughness. There are
also many photographs of Davidson's
forebears and comrades in arms at vari-
ous stages of his life.

But the main plot remains that of a
literary man who distinguished himself in
both poetry and criticism, then sacrificed
his time, peace of mind, and reputation to
fight for a cause that had been lost before
he was born. The central chapter of
Winchell's biography is eloquently entitled "Taking Their Country Back." This phase of Davidson's career reached an early climax with the publication in 1930 of the Southern agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. Davidson's contribution had to do with the arts; Warren, Tate, and nine others tackled the seemingly much more controversial issues of social organization.

Yet Davidson was the one who remained loyal all his life to the concept of a preindustrial South freed from the multiple taints of Northern commercialism, liberal relativism, science, literary modernism, and—most controversial of all—racial equality. Within a few years Warren, Tate, and Ransom had all modified the commitments spelled out so boldly in *I'll Take My Stand*; in fact all three had physically moved away from the South. Alone of the major Fugitives, Davidson spent his whole career at Vanderbilt and continued to write for the cause. No wonder Winchell points out that by the late 1930s, "As Brooks, Warren, Ransom, and Tate were gaining power and prominence in the larger republic of letters, Davidson found that his own influence was waning even within Fugitive-Agrarian circles."

Perhaps the chief problem for his wider literary reputation was the extent to which his poetry came to reflect regional commitments and therefore lacked the ironic distance so prized in modernist verse. Yet one has to add that some of these aggressively Southern poems were very good. If they often failed to universalize regional concerns in such a way that the non-Southern reader could appreciate, for example, the Civil War as a symbol of larger modern issues, at least they did not patronize Southern attitudes. Unlike other Fugitive poets in their later years, Davidson rarely reduced his material to picturesque local color illustrating something quite different from what it seemed to be about.

To anyone who is prepared to enter in, a poem such as "Lee in the Mountains"—arguably Davidson's best achievement in verse—still offers a powerful experience of defiance in defeat. The poem's narrator is Robert E. Lee a few years after Appomattox, now president of Washington College (which would soon after his death become Washington and Lee University) in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. As he ponders his native state, ruined and under federal occupation, Lee expresses some of the concerns of the unreconstructed agrarian poet seventy years later:

> Was it for this
> That on an April day we stacked our arms
> Obedient to a soldier’s trust? To lie
> Ground by the heels of little men,
> Forever maimed, defeated, lost, impugned?
> And was I then betrayed? Did I betray?

The only alternative to surrender had been guerrilla war in the Virginia mountains. Lee reminds us that he had urged such a course on Jefferson Davis, but the Confederate president had refused permission. Now he finds himself in those same mountains, a helpless ex-general and virtual prisoner. Now that the Confederate government has ceased to exist, should he order guerrilla war to purge the land of its occupiers? Although tempted, he decides against it—not out of a desire to conciliate, but rather out of faith that the blood of the Confederate dead will itself lead to an indescribable redemption if the South will only keep faith with their memory and their God.

Whether or not the historical Lee felt anything like this complex of hopes and emotions—historians generally depict him as a postwar peacemaker—the end of the poem is as powerful as anything any Fugitive ever wrote:

> And in His might He waits,
> Brooding within the certitude of time,
> To bring this lost forsaken valor
> And the fierce faith undying
> And the love quenchless
To flower among the hills to which we
cleave,
To fruit upon the mountains whither we
flee,
Never forsaking, never denying
His children and His children's children
forever
Unto all generations of the faithful heart.

Yet none of it ever came to pass. If God
was waiting in 1868 or 1938, He is waiting
still, and from the standpoint of Davidson’s
ghost, things have only gotten worse. Southern literature gained national rec-
ognition in the first half of the twentieth
century because of writers like William
Faulkner and the Fugitive poets, who
depicted so effectively a defeated prov-
ince in conflict with itself. Like a kaleido-
scope the turbulent South of Davidson’s
later years, defeated for a second time,
has given way in each succeeding decade
to a new image, from the integrated,
slightly maudlin Carter camp meeting of
the 1970s to the savings-and-loan bonfire
of the 1980s to the Arkansas slapstick of
Bill Clinton and Whitewater in the 1990s—
with the whole spectacle being given a
patina of antiquity by rapidly growing
numbers of Civil War re-enactors.

Today’s South is fast blending into
what I have elsewhere called post-cul-
tural America, a society in which identity
and behavior owe little to any ancestral
past. As the Confederate flag comes down
in more and more places, the peremptory
loyalties that Davidson felt bound by
seem increasingly incomprehensible, or
worse, quaint. This liberation from the
past has both good and bad sides, but it
is on the whole a fact past arguing with.
Insofar as he resisted these trends,
Davidson’s life ended in something like
total defeat. The only hope for his future
reputation, as well as the main justifica-
tion for this affectionate biography by a
man who never knew him, is the possibil-
ity that “The climate may be right for a
sympathetic reassessment of Davidson’s
verse.” Maybe, maybe not, but it would be
pleasant to think so.

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