
North Carolina Books

Alice R. Cotten, Compiler

David Herbert Donald. *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1987. 579 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 0-316-18952-9.

Before publication of David Donald's *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe*, we had two full-scale biographies on North Carolina's most important writer. The first of these, *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography* (1960), was written by Elizabeth Nowell, Wolfe's capable literary agent and friend. Her associations with Wolfe enriched her book, but since many of the persons who played important roles in Wolfe's life were still living, she had to work under numerous restraints, especially those imposed by Edward Aswell, the administrator of Wolfe's estate. Andrew Turnbull's *Thomas Wolfe* (1967) was a more complete and objective account, though Turnbull's interest was more in Wolfe the man than Wolfe the artist. C. Hugh Holman judged Turnbull successful in creating "a convincing and living image of the man who wrote books." David Donald, who rediscovered Wolfe the writer during the 1970s, wanted to write a full-scale biography that would chiefly be an account of Wolfe's evolution as a writer.

There could be, of course, no escaping Wolfe the man, for no American novelist used the detail of his own life so consistently for his fiction. "By God, I have genius," Wolfe declared as a Harvard graduate student. The price of genius seems to run high for American writers, and none proves the point more than does Wolfe. Having access to all of Wolfe's papers, Donald did not have to labor under constraints that hampered other researchers. He traces Wolfe's life more fully than Wolfe's other biographers could. Readers of this new biography will learn things about Wolfe's tortures and triumphs that will make a lengthy book seem none too long.

Recounting Wolfe's story required immense energy, for although Wolfe died just short of his thirty-eighth birthday, he was a prolific writer. Moreover, from an early age he saved every scrap of paper that might be of possible value. The collection of his papers is one of the largest of any American author, and the biographer dealing

with them—especially one interested in the evolution of the writer—faces many quandaries. The papers that became Wolfe's last two novels and the collection *The Hills Beyond* were often drafts (sometimes variations of the same episode) and far from the shape Wolfe had planned for them. Edward Aswell did a great deal of shaping (some think warping) of the manuscripts to bring those books, especially *You Can't Go Home Again*, before the public. Although Aswell believed strongly in Wolfe's genius, he took liberties that Donald finds unacceptable.

Donald's book is valuable not only for recounting Wolfe's publishing and editing problems so thoroughly, but because it discusses Wolfe's growth as a writer. Wolfe had, Donald says, the best formal education of any American novelist of his day. (One of the best, one might qualify. Wolfe's friend Vardis Fisher had the Ph.D. from Chicago.) Because Wolfe was a prodigious reader, he learned a great deal from other writers, and Donald does a good job of portraying the influence of such writers as James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and Marcel Proust on Wolfe's work. Although he gives us the essence of Wolfe's relationship with Scribner's other giants—Hemingway and Fitzgerald—he refrains from letting those comparisons loom larger than necessary. Some readers may quarrel with Donald about just where the excellences in Wolfe are, and some may find Donald's sense of the literary tradition slightly oversimplified. *Look Homeward, Angel*, Donald observes, did not fit any of the accepted categories of Southern fiction. What were those? Donald takes Wolfe's word: "the better known gentlemen and lady writers of the South were writing polished bits of whimsey about some dear and mythical Land of Far Cockaigne (like James Branch Cabell), or ironic little comedies about the gentle relics of the Old Tradition of the South (like Ellen Glasgow), or fanciful bits about Negro fish mongers along the battery in Charleston (like Dubose Heyward), or, when passion was in the air, about the romantic adulteries of dusky brethren and sistern on a plantation in South Carolina (like Julia Peterkin)." Unfortunately, Donald (the preceding parentheses are

his) goes along with Wolfe in this put-down of Southern writers who had their own struggles to do different and honest work, writers who helped to create the Southern Renaissance, helped to prepare the way for Wolfe. And if there was something *sui generis* about *Look Homeward, Angel*, it did belong recognizably to the tradition of the Bildungsroman; and although Whitman would become more important to Wolfe after 1929, his novel did belong to a recognizable American literary tradition. It goes back to Emerson's American scholar as well as to Whitman's "Song of Myself." Wolfe liked to play the role of mistreated genius. The truth is that *Look Homeward, Angel* (controversy in Asheville notwithstanding) received enthusiastic praise (few novels do so well), and it has never gone out of print.

But, in the main, Donald is excellent in not letting Wolfe call the shots. Admitting that Wolfe "wrote more bad prose than any other major writer that I can think of" yet committed to the premise that Wolfe "ranks among the very great American authors," Donald comes close to his aim of writing a biography without a hero or a villain. He has been notably successful in not relying on fiction as a source for biographical fact, always a temptation to biographers dealing with overtly autobiographical writers. Perhaps Donald's training as a historian was especially valuable for a biography of so Faustian a subject. His tone is right, and his thoroughness in a gigantic task is impressive (the study was six years in the making). All in all, this new biography is a cause for celebration. It ranks with the best literary biographies on American writers. And libraries in North Carolina will surely wish to make it available to their readers.

Joseph M. Flora, *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Jack Claiborne. *The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869-1986*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986. 357 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 0-8078-1712-0

Many North Carolinians—and not only residents of Mecklenburg or surrounding counties—consider the *Charlotte Observer* the best newspaper in the state. By any standard, it is an outstanding regional journal with a well deserved reputation for accuracy and integrity. In *The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869-1986* Jack Claiborne, associate editor of the *Observer*, gives us a history of the paper worthy of its rank and reputation. Claiborne sets himself the ambitious task not only of writing an internal

history of the growth of the *Observer*, but also of placing that history in the context of the development of Charlotte, the state of North Carolina, and the South.

In his first three chapters Claiborne examines the *Observer's* predecessors, a handful of newspapers printed in Charlotte from 1869 to 1892, most of which carried the name *Observer* in some combination on their mastheads. Claiborne shows that the importance of these papers for the history of the *Observer* is not so much one of corporate continuity as a continuity of personnel: the early papers trained several of the men who created and ran the modern *Observer*.

In his chapters on the history of the contemporary *Observer*, Claiborne is adroit at balancing his treatment of a number of subjects. He deals with the personalities and influence of the people who owned or ran the *Observer* and established its voice, people such as Joseph Caldwell, Daniel Tompkins, Curtis Johnson, Ernest Hunter, John and James Knight, and "Pete" McKnight. He also does justice to the dozens of important reporters, columnists, photographers, printers, and cartoonists whose collective contribution built the overall quality of the paper. Finally, Claiborne integrates the story of the *Observer's* people into an account of the environment in which the paper existed, an environment comprising changing standards of journalism, changing communications technology, and the shifting aspirations and values of the surrounding community.

Claiborne's greatest achievement in *The Charlotte Observer* is his clear, concise, and engaging style. As a historian he goes beyond a skill in marshalling facts to what Barbara Tuchman praises as an ability to perceive the significant detail—the incident or individual, an account of which gives the reader insight into a much larger historical picture. This eye for detail and control of data is matched by a welcome feeling for language and felicity of expression. The result is a book that is always readable and often fascinating.

Probably the weakest area of the book is the linkage of the evolution of the *Observer* with the history of the city and the region. Many of the secondary works on which Claiborne relies for historical background, while they are standards, are nonetheless dated. Since much of the new scholarship is fragmentary or contradictory, mastering it would have taken Claiborne further than he had any intention of going and further perhaps than he could be expected to go. Current scholarship, however, will profit from this excellent work which will form an important part of

the continuing search for an understanding of the growth and significance of southern cities and the impact of news media on modern society.

Harry W. McKown, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

John V. Allcott. *The Campus at Chapel Hill: Two Hundred Years of Architecture*. Chapel Hill: The Chapel Hill Historical Society, 1986. 113 pp. \$16.00, plus \$2.00 for mailing. (P.O. Box 503, Chapel Hill, NC 27515-0503.)

John Volney Allcott, an emeritus professor, Department of Art at the University of North Carolina, performs a masterful task of blending together time, place, people, and space into a highly readable volume on the architecture of the first state university. Readers should not consult this book for lists of professors and students, or even a survey of university politics—although all played a role in directing development at Chapel Hill. Rather, this brief survey gives an excellent history of the growth of the physical campus. It recounts the grand dreams, the economic hardships, and the political realities that were critical factors in making decisions about bricks and mortar.

The narrative comprises five chapters in chronological order beginning with "The Campus in the Late Eighteenth Century" and concluding with "Modern Architecture since 1963." Other chapter titles are: "Romanticism, 1820s to the Civil War"; "Late Romanticism, 1885 to World War I"; "The Colonial Revival, 1921 to 1962." Included are brief sketches of the outstanding architects and designers who have left their imprint upon the face of the university—from William Nichols and A.J. Davis in the antebellum period to the firm of McKim, Mead, and White in the early twentieth century, and more recently Gerald Li and Romaldo Giurgola. A chronology of structures and architects along with extensive notes and a bibliography add to the value of the book as a research tool.

Although it is a short walk from Old East (1793) to Walter Royal Davis Library (1984), it is a journey through two centuries of what the author describes as "a panorama of architectural development in America. It is a North Carolina museum of American architecture." *Campus* is a labor of love about a place loved by many. Books about Chapel Hill enjoy a devoted readership. This comfortable addition should be no exception.

Jerry C. Cashion, *North Carolina Division of Archives and History*

Ernie and Jill Couch. *North Carolina Trivia*. Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1986. 191 pp. \$5.95 paper. ISBN 0-934395-37-3.

James A. Crutchfield, ed. *The North Carolina Almanac and Book of Facts*. Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1986. XLIX, 331 pp. \$14.95. ISBN 0-934395-35-7. (513 Third Avenue, South, Nashville, TN 37210.)

Both of these books should please readers in need of readily available information about North Carolina. Trivia fans will enjoy *North Carolina Trivia*, a slim volume divided into sections pertaining to geography, entertainment, history, arts and literature, sports and leisure, and science and nature. Each page contains from five to seven brief questions and answers. They can be read for entertainment or used in trivia bowls or games.

The North Carolina Almanac and Book of Facts is a much more ambitious work. Its ninety-five categories, ranging from Agriculture to Zip Codes, provide names, addresses, statistics, calendars of events, geographical information, and numerous lists. Although all of the information is available elsewhere, this handy, hardback volume brings it together in a convenient format that includes a thirty-nine-page index. A North Carolina history teacher in our county recently made assignments based on facts contained in *North Carolina Almanac*. Students, parents, and librarians scrambled to pull together the answers, not knowing that all of them were contained in this useful book.

The compilers of both books live and work in Tennessee. This handicap seems to have affected James A. Crutchfield more than Ernie and Jill Couch. *North Carolina Almanac* contains a variety of inconsistencies, omissions, misspellings, and factual errors. Crutchfield states that novelist Inglis Fletcher was a man; that Franklin County was created in 1778 (1779 is the correct date); and that North Carolina's senior United States senator spells his first name "Jessie." Moreover, in the section listing Festivals and Events, Crutchfield leaves out Ayden's Collard Festival and Louisburg's National Whistlers Convention. For shame!

These books do have their places, however, particularly in school and public libraries. Academic libraries may want to purchase *North Carolina Almanac*, but it should be used with caution.

Maurice C. York, *Edgecombe County Memorial Library*

