STARS

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 75
Number 4 *Florida Historical Quarterly, Volume 75, Number 4*

Article 5

1996

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Recommended Citation

Mayfield, John (1996) "Review Essay--Hope Among the Ruins: The Percy Family and the Southern Imagination," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 75 : No. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol75/iss4/5

REVIEW ESSAY

Hope Among the Ruins: The Percy Family and the Southern Imagination

by JOHN MAYFIELD

The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family. By Bertram Wyatt-Brown. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. xv, 454 pp. Preface, acknowledgments, prologue, photographs, illustrations, appendices, selected list of manuscript collections, notes, index. $30.00)

The Literary Percys: Family History, Gender, and Southern Imagination. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994. xiii, 110 pp. Preface, notes, index. $19.95.)

IN 1777 there drifted into British West Florida one Charles Percy, late of His Majesty's army and an ambitious man. Born of dubious lineage in England or perhaps Ireland but claiming kin with the Northumberland Percys ("Harry Hotspur" of Shakespeare's histories) Charles Percy had acquired a few hundred acres as bounty for his military service, and he used that, his hard work, and his family tree to settle in as a planter. He married, acquired yet more land, sided with the Loyalists, and became an *alcalde,* a magistrate, when the Spanish took over in 1781. Thus did Charles Percy become Don Carlos, and he prospered.

He was not happy, however. A proud man, he was also dreadfully insecure, perhaps with good reason. Don Carlos, it turned out, had more than one wife, and in 1790 the past caught up with him in the form of Robert, his son by a marriage (never dissolved) in London. Was it also possible that he was not one of the Northumberland Percys? Though no one at the time seriously questioned his lineage, at least openly, Charles Percy was touchy about his honor. Beyond that, he was given to moodiness, insomnia, and mysterious illnesses. He fought needlessly with neighbors,

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and he seemed to hear voices. In 1794 the voices caught up with him. Don Carlos went down to the river, tied a large iron pot around his neck, and threw himself in.

Don Carlos' fortunes and miseries compress much of what has contributed to the unique (but elusive) nature of the Southern gentry. He was, first of all, adventurous and ambitious to a self-destructive degree, and for those who romanticize the South into a land of gentlemen and chivalry his chicanery and unscrupulousness are healthy reminders that the reality was different. Even before the Gulf Coast became the Deep South, the Cotton Kingdom, Dixie, or whatever, it was Eden for those who possessed the drive to acquire land and slaves under extremely hazardous and constantly changing circumstances. Charles Percy had that drive, but he instinctively recognized that mere possession of land in itself was not enough. He had to have lineage, family, and style. His acquisition of a wife and heirs and his title were no less important than his field hands and acreage. All were elements in an elaborate code of honor, a Southern way of esteeming oneself and others that went beyond possessions even if it never entirely escaped them. Don Carlos' family tree may or may not have been all that he claimed, but no one could dispute that he knew what mattered or how to obtain it.

In any event Don Carlos' heirs accomplished his dream. They turned the Percy name into a Southern dynasty similar in certain ways to the Adamses of Massachusetts or the Byrds of Virginia. On the political side, prominent Percys include Confederate soldier Colonel William Alexander Percy, Senator LeRoy Percy of Mississippi (best remembered for his forthright condemnation of the Ku Klux Klan), and a wide-ranging group of namesakes who turn up as influential lawyers and such throughout Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. They have been emblematic of the professional class in the New South. More remarkable were the literary Percys. These include the novelist Catherine Ann Warfield and her niece Sarah Ellis Dorsey, plus William Alexander Percy, a hero of the first World War and author of the excellent, Henry Adams-style autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee.* And of course there was Walker Percy, author of *Love Among the Ruins, Lancelot,* and much, much more.

These heirs also perpetuated Don Carlos' self-destructiveness. While the British branch of the Percy tree has been reasonably fortunate over the years, melancholy, major depression, and suicide have plagued the "American" limb well into the twentieth century.

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Between Don Carlos' death in 1794 and 1929, at least one Percy in every generation committed suicide. Others died young of natural causes, and it is no surprise that, as Will Percy explained, the best code for a Percy was stoicism. How else could one bear up under so deadly a heritage?

That's a question for Southerners in general. The Percys, it may be argued, condense into one family story two strains of Southern identity: the courageous, rash, eccentric, almost theatrical Southern aristocrat and his/her *alter ego,* the moody, introspective, pessimistic fatalist. Almost forty years ago William R. Taylor categorized these antithetic selves into Shakespearean archetypes, the Southern "Hotspur" and the Southern "Hamlet."[1] It is no small irony that Don Carlos picked the model for the former as his family root; it may be an even larger statement that, at the other end of time, Walker Percy's antiheroes rationalize, brood, fret over sexual conducts and misconducts, and lay waste their lovers and enemies. At the same time there is no question that a certain creativity can emerge from all this tension, whether on the battlefield or in the courtroom or at the pen, and for someone interested in the links among heredity, social conditioning, madness, and imagination the Percys are an inviting lot.

But writing this kind of family biography, or any kind, for that matter, is particularly demanding. It is, at one essential level, genealogy, and most family histories follow exactly this path. On a broader base, the "family" appears as a social organism– shaped by tradition and evolving in response to change. For readers interested in Southern history Jane Turner Censer and Joan Cashin, among others, have written superb studies of the dynamics and stresses in family development, particularly as Southerners moved west, and one gets from these works a sense that family for the Southerner was every bit as important and as conflicting as William Faulkner said it was.[2] But to examine one family over time adds several dimensions. The biographer must be an historian, of course, but also a psychological analyst at least passably familiar with the kinds of things to which his or her subjects devoted themselves. In

1. William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character* (New York, 1961)
2. Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1984); Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York, 1991).

the case of the Percys, these include the literature and politics of a particularly complicated region. For psychologists, their legacy is yet another chapter in an ongoing inquiry into the causes of madness– genetic or environmental? Natured or nurtured? For the historian, the issues are cultural, for the Percy obsession with honor, family, and name is so Southern as to be archetypal.

Fortunately, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Richard Milbauer Professor of History at the University of Florida, has skills adequate to the task. Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor* (1982) was a crucial step toward demystifying the Southern code of honor and its patriarchal foundations.[3] In that book he surveyed an astonishing range of topics, from law and literature to violence and sexual conduct to baby-naming and sport, and his central thesis– that Southerners constructed a whole ethos around patriarchal expressions of honor and violence not far removed from their Celtic antecedents– has prompted other historians to reexamine the code of chivalry a bit less dismissively. *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* transfers some of these themes to the study of one family. Wyatt-Brown is not hemmed in by his own previous work, however, and this collective chronicle never attempts to fit its subject to a preconceived conclusion. *The House of Percy* and its offshoot *The Literary Percys: Family History, Gender, and the Southern Imagination* are complicated, sensitive, and in many ways disturbing books.

It is notable that the creative streak first appeared among the Percy women. Thomas George Percy, Don Carlos' "American" son, made money, collected books, and lived cheerfully despite the goings-on around him. His sister Sarah, however, was so moody and depressed after the birth of her children that the family had her committed– for eleven years– before she died. (Her eldest daughter also fell victim to postpartum depression.) Two surviving daughters by a second marriage, Catherine Ann and Eleanor Ware, took up writing to give, in Wyatt-Brown's analysis, "a sense of control over an undependable world" *(HoP,* 111). That's a common enough incentive for writers, and the sisters, in true Southern fashion, expressed their anger in works that idealized the chivalric and genteel while simultaneously dwelling on the hopelessness of life. It was a bitter pronouncement on the vicissitudes of the Southern gentry.

3. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982).

After Eleanor's untimely death (of yellow fever) Catherine gave herself to married life and domestic duties for most of a decade, but in 1860 she startled everyone with the publication of *The House of Bouverie; or, the Elixir of Gold*– a surprise bestseller in the gothic mold patterned much after Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre.* The very act of publishing seemed to liberate her, and it is here that Wyatt-Brown begins to make the connection between honor, melancholy, and imagination. Catherine Warfield feared madness in herself, resented it in her family, and might have swooned and given in. Instead, "she drove toward the power that came with publishing novels. . . . That compensatory exercise of will would help to explain the creative energies of so many in the Percy line, but most of all its literary members" *(HoP,* 114). Provocatively, the structure of *The House of Bouverie* bears a strong resemblance to Walker Percy's best novel, *Lancelot.*

What is remarkable about her fiction is not its literary merit but the rage it expresses at the patriarchal society of the South. Other female writers of the mid-nineteenth-century South– Caroline Lee Hentz, for example– usually lost themselves in gooey celebrations of feminine virtue and masculine honor. There were elements of that in Catherine Warfield's novels– how else could they sell?– but there was more. She chose the gothic over the sentimental, and Wyatt-Brown's excellent textual analysis reveals the book as a sustained critique of the Percy line and particularly its errant and unpredictable males. Catherine's grandfather was a suicide, her uncle Thomas George a disconnected collector of books and finery, her father Nathaniel Ware a remote pseudo-intellectual embarrassed at his wife's madness, and her husband a gambler and a debtor. *The House of Bouverie* rewrote the family history in gothic form, subverting the patriarchal authority on which such men leaned by portraying them at their absolute worst– manipulative, domineering, sexually obsessed. Catherine became a minor literary icon of her time, and that in itself suggests she struck a responsive chord among her largely female readers. It also suggests that Southern writers were less distanced from their Northern counterparts than has often been assumed. After all, the next major influences on women's literature in the South were Kate Chopin and Ellen Glasgow. Like these better authors Catherine Warfield found release, and sanity, in the act of writing. She wrote, as one interviewer noted, because she had to. The same interviewer noted an aloofness, a reserve, in her manner.

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Her niece Sarah Ellis, on the other hand, was anything but reserved. The darling child of a doting father (who died when she was nine) Sarah Ellis came about as close to outright raciness as a respectable Southern woman of the mid-nineteenth century could. Certainly she was gifted, as her stepfather Charles Dahlgren recognized. "When I took charge of the family," he noted, "I discovered she had a wonderful intellect, which I determined to develop. I spent a fortune doing it, but I never regretted the result" *(HoP,* 123). Dahlgren sent her to a private academy in Philadelphia; there Sarah acquired not only music and French but a taste for the world of the intellectual. It was hard, then, for her to return to Natchez (where she married Samuel Dorsey), but she maintained her interests in books and the arts and even attempted a "salon"– a kind of regular drop-in stop for poets and artists. During the Civil War the Dorseys were burned out; nonetheless they hung on to their money. Sarah helped tend a Confederate field hospital. After the war she travelled with her husband and on one memorable trip actually endured an attack by a camel-driver in the Arabian desert, a burglar in Paris, and a shipwreck off the coast of England.

In the midst of all this she wrote and fantasized. Her novels (e.g., *Agnes Graham, Lucia Dare, Panola)* were popular and even achieved a reputation for "realism," although her biography of her friend Henry Watkins Allen, Confederate war governor of Louisiana, was better. It showed a fine command of context and place, and, as Wyatt-Brown argues, it homed in on the one attribute that Southerners were most likely to revere– a sense of honor. When Allen challenged a Union officer to a duel, she wrote, the bewildered "Federal did not understand *Sir Lancelot, redivivus" (HoP,* 134). Yet the South had lost, honor notwithstanding, and it was becoming increasingly clear that the Hotspur streak in the Southern ethos was something that needed serious rethinking. Gloom, defensiveness, and a restless yearning to explain it all away began to set in, not only in Sarah Dorsey but among other Southern writers. For Sarah, the response was a constant physical and psychic motion– she spent time in England flirting with Eastern mystic philosophies. Perhaps more suggestively, at this time one of her favorite reads was the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and its code of stoic endurance. By translating chivalry into forbearance, she was one of the first to anticipate and articulate a favorite Southern reaction to the catastrophe of war. She thus helped accentuate the Hamlet aspect of the Southern *personae.* Yet in a final act of unstoic defiance,

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she brought Jefferson Davis to her home, Beauvoir, to write his memoirs. Davis's wife Varina was understandably outraged, yet Sarah Dorsey pressed on, urging Davis to explain and defend himself. When she died, Beauvoir went to the Davises.

Sarah Ellis's journeys were not the Percy norm, however. After the Civil War, the Percy families joined in the creation of the New South. This took two paths. Some migrated to the cities and attained the sort of quiet, lawyerly respectability that railroads, iron, and timber offered. These included the Birmingham family from whom Walker Percy was born. Others stayed in the small towns, and the most prominent of these were Colonel William Alexander Percy and his son LeRoy of Greenville, Mississippi. These were political men, and for a time the literary streak disappeared– although not the errant behavior. LeRoy Percy, for example, worked hard to affirm his sort of "unabashed corporate conservatism" *(HoP,* 174) over local politics, despite the fact that Mississippi was so poor even the rich were deeply in debt. He fought the likes of James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo– race-baiters and opportunists– with a savagery that only a true conservative and an idealist can visit on the parvenu. For a short time he was a senator (by appointment after an incumbent's death), but in the regular election in 1911 his own snobbishness and Bilbo's machinations brought him down. Defeat was a self-inflicted wound, yet in 1922 LeRoy Percy redeemed himself– more exactly, his honor– with as blistering and courageous a denunciation of the Ku Klux Klan any Mississippian could give and stay alive. It was a direct, calculated, and nationally famous attack on Vardaman and company and one perfectly in line with a Southern male's quixotic blend of impetuosity, honor, and despair. As Wyatt-Brown argues, LeRoy Percy was "a gambler by instinct" who often overplayed his cards; he was aloof yet "had a vitality that few men possess"; and he was often in despair *(HoP,* 178). There was in him an almost perfect union of the Hotspur and Hamlet *personae.* Who could bear up to such a dizzying image?

His son certainly tried. William Alexander Percy of Greenville was a small, delicate boy who frankly puzzled and infuriated his imposing father. For one thing, he was overly religious– at least overly so for the son of a respectable Southern family. He inherited his mother's Catholic faith and at one point offered to become a priest. She stopped him flat, yet he prayed on. "One can guess," writes Wyatt-Brown, that Will Percy's inner strife may have been less a

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theological problem than "the issue of sexuality– so often uppermost in teenage boys' thoughts" *(HoP,* 196). Therein lay a dilemma, for Will Percy never paid romantic attention to women, although he certainly loved and idealized them. His autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee,* makes little mention of any female friends other than a black nanny and a Jewish English teacher, Carrie Stern, who shared his love of poetry. The book does, however, include a rather suggestive encounter with a boy on a Greek hillside.[4]

LeRoy Percy was never comfortable with his son, but then the son was uncomfortable with his father. "He wanted no legal, civic, political, or financial fame or power," writes Wyatt-Brown. "But to be an intellectual in the South– particularly one so sexually sequestered and vulnerable– was no career at all" *(HoP,* 205). Female Percys had discharged their ambitions through writing, and so could Will had he made a deliberate decision to escape, physically, to New York or Paris. In one sense he tried, taking a long tour of Europe and opting for Harvard over Virginia for law school, but in another sense Will Percy dug in, searched his possibilities, and came up with a wholly Southern and wholly eccentric response.

He discovered Stoicism, or at least a Southern version of it. Will Percy came to embrace loneliness and dissatisfaction in his private moments, self-abnegation and sacrifice in his public ones. Going to law school and practicing law (which he hated) was one way to appease his father; so was staying in Greenville– of all places on earth the farthest removed from Paris and New York. There he stayed until his death in 1942, the tender of his grandfather's mansion and his own flower gardens (so good they were featured in *National Geographic).* He obtained a hard-earned reputation for kindness and benevolence, and the big house became a salon to the likes of Carl Sandburg and Stephen Vincent Benet. Sarah Ellis would have envied him.

But that was kindness. There was also in Will Percy a fierce, possibly even self-destructive (although Wyatt-Brown does not belabor the possibility) streak of motion and engagement. In 1911, at the worst moment of his father's failing senatorial campaign, his uncle summoned him and his cousin Leroy Pratt Percy (father of Walker Percy) to a hotel room and declared that their nemesis, Theodore Bilbo, had to be shot. Will Percy spent the night practic-

4. William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (New York, 1940).

ing quick-draws in front of the mirror, "trying to remember to release the safety" *(HoP,* 189). When his uncle tried to draw Bilbo out the next morning, Bilbo turned conveniently deaf, and nothing happened. But that, and his father's overwhelming defeat, was the first of many times in which Will Percy discovered the importance of honor.

To such a man and countless others, World War I offered redemption. Southerners, argues historian Charles Reagan Wilson, threw themselves into the conflict in disproportionate numbers as a means of honoring their fathers and grandfathers and expunging their defeat.[5] The same, on a much more intensely personal scale, may be said of Will Percy. Turning frailty into wiriness, and sensitivity into cockiness, Will jumped into the war even before the United States became formally involved. He joined Herbert Hoover's Belgian Relief Agency, barely escaped imprisonment in Germany itself, and soon after became a soldier. After grueling, horrendous engagements in the Argonne and elsewhere, he returned home with a chestful of decorations, including the *Croix de Guerre.* More than that, he came back with something else: He had been through actual war with other human beings, not make-believe war with ducks and deer, and that was something his father had missed. Back in Greenville, Will Percy took on two more challenges during the 1920s– the threat against his father after LeRoy had denounced the KKK and the devastating flood of 1927.

In 1929 he took on other challenges. His father and mother died, and in one sense he was finally free to do as he chose. He could have moved, but before he had time to ponder the option his cousin LeRoy Pratt Percy, who also had been part of the challenge to Bilbo in 1911, turned a gun on himself. His father had done the same thing in 1917. These were the Birmingham Percys, lawyers who had gotten rich off Tennessee Coal & Iron yet who, for whatever reason, could not live comfortably with themselves. LeRoy Pratt left a widow– who died in an automobile accident not long after– and three boys, one of whom was Walker Percy. Will Percy– at the very moment he could have run free– stuck to the Stoic code. He took the boys in, raised them, and when they were gone he died at the age of fifty-seven.

5. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens, 1980).

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In a sense Will Percy left two legacies. One was a memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee.* It is a marvelous book, and Wyatt-Brown's analysis of it is first-rate. Will Percy was a poet, and his prose has a lyric quality that implies more than it actually states. Unlike *The Education of Henry Adams,* wherein the author adopted the third-person style and distanced himself from himself, so to speak, Percy's book is all capital *"I."* On the other hand, it has no sustained theme. Adams saw his life as a metaphor for the ironies of the nineteenth century; Percy viewed his as a series of engagements that could be borne or enjoyed depending on the attitude of the observer. These attitudes run from the fanciful to the self-deprecating as Will Percy runs through his experiences, but through it all a sense of reality is certainly missing. From Don Carlos on through Will's own father the Percy clan had had its share of rogue dealings and soiled hands, not to mention the suicides and breakdowns. *Lanterns,* however, chronicles it all through a lens of honor and romanticism that is almost a parody of the Southerner's talent for mythologizing. Some chapters on race relations, argues Wyatt-Brown, were at once reflective of Southern attitudes and hopelessly paternalistic. He quotes a contemporary Southern critic's acid review that Southerners "feverishly continue to blow ourselves up from miniature dimensions to the magnificent proportions of a super race and a super class" *(HoP,* 281). "In both his writing and his self-understanding, Will Percy closed his eyes to the cultural maze in which he lived," writes Wyatt-Brown. The maze was a complex combination of race and class, obviously, but more to the point it was a maze of family honor. For Will to have viewed his heritage critically would have been to indict the very father he never pleased and the family he had chosen to protect. "Legend-making would suffice," writes Wyatt-Brown, and legend-making became a Percy tradition that Will "codified . . . in *Lanterns on the Levee* and passed . . . to his ward Walker, who then wove it into his fiction." That became Will's second legacy.

Wyatt-Brown's two chapters on Walker Percy are integrative rather than innovative– a wise move given Jay Tolson's excellent and recent biography.[6] Still, Wyatt-Brown's analysis, coming at the end of a collective biography, illuminates the novelist's often gloomy creations in interesting ways. For Walker Percy, family and

6. Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York, 1992)

gender were more complicated than usual. His father and grandfather were both suicides; his mother died when he was sixteen; his adoptive father was a bachelor whose sexuality was a matter best kept quiet, given the place and time. Thus as a young man Walker had the doubly unpleasant task of establishing his identity (a matter that involves some measure of rebellion against parents) in the midst of understandable grief and confusion. Will taught him the code of the gentleman and legitimized writing for him; in rebellion Walker turned to science, medicine, and psychoanalysis. He gave up medicine after a bout with tuberculosis, and he gave up psychoanalysis after Will died. He married and lived apparently happily. Yet he turned to writing after all, and his novels are full of young men who drift through life in fits and starts– obsessed with death, which is easy to find, and happiness, which is not.

These cannot be heroes, so Percy made them mock-heroes– a point better explored in Wyatt-Brown's companion volume, *The Literary Percys: Family History, Gender, and the Southern Imagination.* Borrowing heavily from literary critic Robert Salomon, Wyatt-Brown stresses that the mock-heroic takes two powerful myths, both dear to the Southern imagination, and subverts them. One is that of the great hero, who formed the basis for almost everyone from King Arthur to Robert E. Lee. Such heroes are "no longer possible in a secular and industrial society" and are "doomed to fail" *(LP,* 65). A second and closely allied myth is the romantic, passionate assertion of the self. That too is doomed to fail in an impersonal age. "The mock hero does not reject society outright but rather senses an isolating discrepancy between contemporary conventions and the striving for personal uniqueness, a cleavage that reduces the hero to moments of emptiness and despair" *(LP,* 67). And so, we have Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer* at silent war with the code of the gentleman foisted upon him; or Dr. Thomas More in mock war with his neighbors in *Love in the Ruins;* or Lance Lamar– the modern knight-errant in quest for an unholy grail in *Lancelot–* who reduces his family mansion and his wife to ashes. These are not happy men, yet there is a comic quality to them, a sense of the absurdity of trying to find happiness where perhaps a grittier sense of values would be more useful. Notably, Percy became a Catholic as an adult, marching proudly to his confirmation surrounded by children.

In the end, Walker Percy's darkly humorous refusal to give in to the stereotypes sustained him. "What do I know about coon hunts and tale-telling and all those Southern things?" Percy asked

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in 1978. "I was born in Birmingham, next door to a brand-new golf course."[7] The fact is that he knew quite a bit more, since Southern history is itself so much more. By the arithmetic of inheritance, Walker Percy should have lived briefly and died violently. Instead, he came of age as a writer in his forties, challenged us to find something beyond mere happiness to give meaning to our lives, and died with grace. In both life and fiction he took the Southern myth of family and honor, mocked it, and in doing so transcended it.

Wyatt-Brown's masterful books also go beyond their subjects. There is no readily apparent connection between melancholy and creativity; still less between dead ancestors and modern imaginations. But we suspect the connections are there, and that for Southerners they are especially compelling. Wyatt-Brown has helped define the writing of Southern history over the past dozen years, and he has done so with a fine sense both for the power of myth and of the absurdity of clinging too hard to the past. For the literary Percys, he writes, "memory of the past was a source of ambivalence, presenting itself both as a duty and as a threat" *(HoP,* 341). One can sense some of this ambivalence in these two books, but expressed differently. His sympathy and respect for the Percy family is evident; so is his determination to confront, through them, some of the more disturbing, implications of growing up Southern– among them ancestor-worship, honor, and madness. "Better to tell a good tale than to keep the record straight," is Wyatt-Brown's characterization of Will Percy's memoir. But Wyatt-Brown's way may be more compelling: Better to get the record straight, and let the tale tell itself.

7. Quoted in *Birmingham News,* January 18, 1994.