

*In Faulkner's
Shadow*

————— *A Memoir* —————

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LEGACY

GAYLE AND THE CHILDREN WENT TO LIVE IN BIRMINGHAM with her parents. After Christmas she moved to Kentucky and married the young man at the other end of the telephone line. I wished only the best for her, but I missed my children terribly. Such is the brutal aftermath of divorce.

I believed fate brought Dean and me together but as far as she was concerned our meeting was a combination of fate *and* luck. A couple of times over the years, glancing at me in a thoughtful way, she remarked, “You remind me of Pappy.”

Dean herself bore a stunning resemblance to her uncle. They both had dark hair, brown eyes, and a deliberate manner. She was soft-spoken yet with an air of total assurance. Faces brightened when she entered a room. People felt that they were in William’s presence. When Faulkner’s mistresses Meta Carpenter Wilde, Jean Stein, and Joan Williams met Dean on separate occasions, each burst into tears and gripped her hands. Perhaps they even saw in Dean the child they might have had with Bill.

It helped that she did not judge them. That they made her uncle happy was all that mattered to her.

We began the eternal process of getting to know each other’s past. One night at the kitchen table I asked what it was like to grow up at Rowan Oak. She didn’t like being asked. It was as if her memories were too dear to part with.

“Every Halloween,” she told me, “Pappy would light a candle and tell ghost stories. He made up a poltergeist named Judith, the daughter of Colonel Sheegog, original owner of Rowan Oak. In Pappy’s story, Judith committed suicide by jumping off the balcony. We never tired of hearing the story. Pappy would tell the bravest among us to carry the candle to Judith’s grave. If the flame went out, he said, we could be sure Judith blew it out. Holding our breath we walked on tiptoe to the magnolia under which Judith was allegedly buried. When the flame went out, as it always did, we looked to Pappy for reassurance. Of course he’d slipped away and was nowhere to be seen.”

“What did you do then?”

“Ran like hell. Every man for himself.”

Maud Falkner was a huge influence in Dean’s life. She called her granddaughter “Lamb,” told her bedtime stories, and painted bucolic scenes on the bottom of her milk glass. To see the picture she had to finish her milk. Yet as with most of her Faulkner relatives Dean came to love “Nannie” not because of her virtues but in spite of her faults.

Miss Maud was a Spartan personality with a skeptical nature and a tendency to hold a grudge. She was proud of William’s writings and compulsively defended him against his critics.

One day I noticed stacks of old *Time* magazines in the attic. When I asked about them Dean smiled, saying, “Nannie loved *Time* and kept her old issues, but when the magazine published an article about Pappy getting off a plane drunk, she canceled her subscription.”

When Faulkner’s sensationalistic novel *Sanctuary* was published in 1931, he was quoted as saying it was “deliberately conceived to make money.” Maud’s friends were more than eager to know if Faulkner had based the character “Temple Drake” on a certain judge’s daughter, an Ole Miss coed and flapper in the Roaring Twenties. At a game of bridge one afternoon, one of the ladies summoned the nerve to ask, “Maud, why did Billy write that book?” Miss Maud lowered her cards. “My Billy writes what he has to,”

she replied, biting off each word. She finished playing the rubber and—this according to Dean, who'd heard the account from eye-witnesses—never played bridge with that foursome again.

Maud's disapproval could be formidable. She adored her four sons but not their wives—with the possible exception of Dean's mother, Louise. Known to friends as "MoWese" she had been widowed at twenty-two when her husband died in the plane crash. She lived with her mother-in-law until Dean was born.

When Dean was a teenager, her aunt Lucille, who was John Faulkner's wife, paid a call at Thanksgiving. She'd baked a cake for her mother-in-law. Delighted to see her aunt, Dean called her grandmother to the door. Maud held out her hands as if to take the cake, but when Lucille presented the cake box she dropped her hands. The cake fell to the floor and broke into pieces. Lucille stood shocked and incredulous. Maud told Dean, "Lamb, throw out the cake. It may be poisoned." Lucille fled in despair.

Dean never learned what caused her grandmother's grievance. Maud's maxim, "Don't Complain, Don't Explain," and its implied "Don't Apologize," caused unintended and hurtful separations.

Though ashamed of her grandmother's behavior on that occasion, Dean refused to take sides. At the same time, she was determined not to become the miniature Maud that her grandmother thought she was bringing up. Maud's motto was "Don't expect anything good to happen and you will never be disappointed." Dean's buoyant nature ran counter to such skepticism. Like her outgoing father she took life one day at a time. As an undergraduate she played tennis and swam freestyle. She inherited her father's love of sports and William's love of the written word.

At age thirteen she devoured Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust* the night before attending the 1949 movie premiere. This was her first real awareness of her uncle's fame. In Oxford's Lyric Theatre she experienced the glare of celebrity with William, his wife, Estelle, and their daughter, Jill.

But it was seven years later that she became fully aware of her uncle's influence and reach. At twenty she was sailing to France to

study abroad. William, who was paying for it, flew to New York to see her off. The night before she was to sail, “Pappy” and Random House editor Saxe Commins took her to dinner. She noticed heads turning as they walked down Park Avenue to her uncle’s favorite restaurant. She felt certain they were staring at her, dressed in her black cotton sheath, her hair cut like her idol Françoise Sagan. But they were all staring at her uncle. That was the day she realized just how famous Pappy really was. This wasn’t Oxford, Mississippi, where everyone knew his name, but New York City with total strangers gawking at the author.

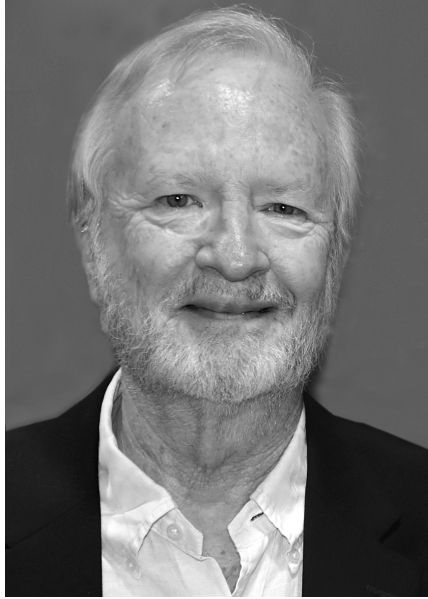
My introduction to her uncle’s work came rather late for an English major. I put off reading Faulkner until I was a senior at the University of Alabama. I began with *The Portable Faulkner*, Malcolm Cowley’s explication of the “Yoknapatawpha saga.” When the anthology first appeared in 1946, most of William Faulkner’s books were out of print. Due in part to Cowley’s masterful analysis Faulkner’s achievement became more widely appreciated and he was awarded the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature.

At first glance I recognized Faulkner’s characters. Every town had a Flem Snopes. In my hometown of Ozark, Alabama, I remembered a wealthy loner whose hobby was collecting coke bottles for the deposits. In the doomed Sartoris I saw my Wells grandfather, vice president of a bank that failed during the Depression. The McCaslins were close kin to the McGees, my mother’s Scotch-Irish clan, gregarious and proud. My only problem with Faulkner’s writing was how to pronounce *Yoknapatawpha*, the Chickasaw word that could be interpreted as “slow water,” or “the people of the gentle water.” *Yokkety-paw-paw?* *Yokata-paw-ful?* This word was Faulkner’s curse on his readers. It was like talking with a mouthful of marbles.

I could not have imagined that ten years later I’d meet Malcolm Cowley at the inaugural Faulkner Conference at the University of Mississippi. Or that I would operate an indie press which its first owner named Yoknapatawpha Press. Or that together, Dean and I would publish books by William Faulkner, Willie Morris, James

Autry, Elise Winter, and Edwin Yoder Jr., publish *The Faulkner Newsletter & Yoknapatawpha Review*, establish the “Faux Faulkner” parody contest, and stage judging parties at Elaine’s. And I damn well learned to pronounce *Yoknapatawpha*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lawrence Wells began his publishing career at Yoknapatawpha Press by editing the photo-biography *William Faulkner: The Cofield Collection*, by Jack Cofield. Author of two historical novels, *Rommel and the Rebel* and *Let the Band Play Dixie*, Wells received the 2014 Faulkner-Wisdom award for narrative nonfiction at the Words and Music Festival. He scripted an Emmy-winning 1994 Mississippi ETV documentary, *Return to the River*, narrated by James Earl Jones. His magazine articles have been distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.