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Theresa M. Towner
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Chapter 1

Life

William Cuthbert Falkner was born late at night on September 25, 1897, and died early in the morning of July 6, 1962; were we to honor his wishes on the matter of his biography, we would not inquire into it any further than that. He was a quiet and intensely private man who once observed that "it is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history"; "in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died" (*FCF* 126). In his fiction, subconsciously and on purpose, Faulkner used the materials of his life in very subtle, often tertiary ways, and more than one biographer has gone terribly astray while trying to use the life to explain his work or the work to explain his life. Another problem in writing Faulkner's biography is raised by the fact that he was first and foremost a *fiction* writer. When asked a question about his private life, he was just as likely to make something up as he was when he sat at his typewriter at home inventing characters and plots. Early in his career, for example, he wrote to an editor who had asked for biographical information that he was "Born male and single at early age in Mississippi. Quit school after five years in seventh grade. Got job in Grandfather's bank and learned medicinal value of his liquor. Grandfather thought janitor did it. Hard on janitor" (*SL* 47). Yet Faulkner had a very interesting life, and we have a full record of it, and readers are understandably curious about the man who made the books and died. He came from a family with origins in Scotland who emigrated to the Carolinas. In about 1842 a man named William Clark Falkner walked from Missouri to Pontotoc, Mississippi, in search of an uncle by marriage, and thus did William Cuthbert Faulkner's great-grandfather settle in the state that would become as synonymous with a writer as Stratford-upon-Avon is with Shakespeare.

The first William Falkner married twice, fathered nine children, fought and commanded troops in the first part of the Civil War and ran blockades in the latter part, sired a "shadow family" with a former slave, made money in land speculation during Reconstruction, founded a railroad, and died of a gunshot fired by a former business partner with whom he had been feuding. Two things about him seem to have stuck in his famous great-grandson's imagination.

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First, he was successful as an author as well as a man of action. His romantic novel *The White Rose of Memphis* (1881) appeared in thirty-five editions and sold 160,000 copies; his travel memoir *Rapid Ramblings in Europe* appeared after he took his daughter on vacation in 1883. Second, he made the family name both famous and infamous (Williamson 55–6). He was "a considerable figure in his time and provincial milieu," and in writing fiction the younger William both followed his lead and did him one better, changing the family name in the process: "Maybe when I began to write," he said, "I was secretly ambitious and did not want to ride on grandfather's coat-tails, and so accepted the 'u,' was glad of such an easy way to strike out for myself" (*SL* 211–12).

By all accounts the William Cuthbert Falkner born in 1897 to Maud and Murry Falkner in New Albany, Mississippi, had a happy boyhood. In 1902 the family moved to Oxford, Mississippi, where Murry worked first as a street construction supervisor and then as the owner of a livery stable, and a fourth son was born to them. Maud's mother, Leila, whom the boys called "Damuddy," moved in with the family, and from her and Maud William learned to draw, to appreciate music and the arts, and to read. During these years, William "gained an intimate knowledge of the Bible" (Williamson 145), a knowledge that would emerge time and again in his fiction, as would certain events of his early youth, like the death of his maternal grandmother. The family was joined in 1902 by Caroline Barr, the black woman born in slavery whom the Falkner children called "Mammy Callie" and who would help to raise them. Two doors away from their home in Oxford lived Lida Estelle Oldham, seven months older than William. In 1903 Estelle called the family maid's attention to that young gentleman: "See that boy, Nolia? The one in front? – the one riding the pony by himself? That's the one I'm going to marry" (Williamson 149). (Twenty-six years, one ex-husband, and two children later, she did.) As children in Oxford, William and his three younger brothers rode their ponies, learned to hunt and fish, and once even built and attempted to fly an airplane, with Billy as chief engineer and pilot (Blotner 34–5). All the boys listened to the stories told by their paternal grandfather, John Wesley Thompson Falkner, and by Callie Barr and other black retainers associated with the family; some of these, including chauffeur Chess Carothers and the blacksmith on his grandfather's farm, became prototypes of certain characters in his fiction (Blotner 31).

As he approached his teens, Billy Falkner began to develop a romantic interest in Estelle Oldham that was nurtured by their mutual love of poetry. He had always told stories and drawn pictures, and he brought Estelle poems that he thought she might like, including some he had written. He noticed that Estelle noticed him when he dressed well, and he developed a lifelong love of fine clothes and, as we shall see, of costumes and disguises. Undeniably a beauty,

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with dark hair and eyes and a vivacity made for the dances and music of America in the 'Teens, Estelle attracted handsome men. One of these, Cornell Franklin, gained the approval of her parents – an approval that the quiet, shy Billy did not have, primarily because of his poor earning potential and the higher social status of her family. They talked of but did not attempt elopement. Pressure from her parents increased; the marriage to Franklin was inevitable. Billy did not wait to see Estelle marry Franklin. Instead, he tried to enlist in pilot training for service in the Great War; his application was rejected, probably because he was too short.

In order to help his miserable friend, Oxford native and Yale student Phil Stone invited Billy to New Haven. A mutual friend had introduced them in the summer of 1914, saying that Billy wrote poems but did not know anyone who could help him figure out what to do with them (Blotner 44). Stone began to direct Billy's already avid reading, which came to include everything from Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, the humorist of the Old Southwest, to Sophocles, Plato, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. The invitation to New Haven came because Stone feared that Billy and Estelle would elope after all; he believed that marriage would ruin Billy's future as a writer, and Stone had been encouraging and directing that future for four very intense years of friendship and mentoring. To New Haven Billy went, and there, in consultation with Stone and his friends, a plan was hatched for him to enlist in the Canadian Royal Air Force for training that would eventually post him at the Western Front of the war in Europe. Such enlistment required massive deception on Billy's part: he started by changing the spelling of his last name to "Faulkner," learning and affecting a British accent, claiming an earlier birthday, and listing his hometown as Middlesex, England. He got in. The Armistice was signed while he was still in flight school in Toronto. His younger brother Jack served with the Marines in some of the war's most ferocious battles, but the most danger Billy saw in the war was the influenza epidemic of 1918 when it came through Toronto.

Bill Faulkner spent his discharge pay on the full dress uniform of an RAF pilot, including the chest-crossing Sam Browne belt and a cane. He came back to Oxford with a limp, claiming to have flown his airplane (while drunk) upside down through a hangar, which had resulted in the limp and a metal plate in his head. The disaffected RAF pilot was the first and arguably the flashiest of many personae that he would adopt throughout his lifetime. In Virginia near the end of his life, for instance, he wore the red coats and silks of the fox hunting club he frequented; he posed with airplanes and automobiles to suggest the figure of the man of motion; he let the camera capture him bearded and in an overcoat as a bohemian in Paris's Luxembourg Gardens. He was not always the dandy; he had a hick image that he put on to keep intellectuals and literary

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types at a distance, and he appeared in torn khakis and worn tweed jackets in photographs taken in every decade of his life. When he returned to Oxford after the Armistice, the townspeople saw the RAF uniform and the studied mannerisms and no visible means of financial support and consequently began to call him "Count No Account," or "Count No 'Count" for short. Even after he entered the University of Mississippi as a special student, the name stuck. For the next few years, he worked at odd jobs, the most famous of which was a three-year stint as postmaster at the university branch of the Post Office. He and his friends would play cards in the back while the public's mail went unattended or undelivered; he would read what mail he liked, primarily the literary magazines; he wrote much of the poetry for his first book there. In short, he was an awful postmaster, and when he was finally removed from the job, he said, "I reckon I'll be at the beck and call of folks with money all my life, but thank God I won't ever again have to be at the beck and call of every son of a bitch who's got two cents to buy a stamp" (Blotner 118). In an irony he would appreciate, the United States Post Office issued a William Faulkner stamp in 1987, so for a brief while he was at the beck and call of anyone with twenty-two cents to buy a stamp.

In the early 1920s Faulkner had published a few poems and pieces of literary criticism; in 1924, after the publication of his first book, he set out for New Orleans. There he met the established American writer Sherwood Anderson, whose *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) showed a new generation of writers new possibilities for the subjects and techniques of fiction. In particular, Anderson had revealed the claustrophobia and hopelessness of small-town modern America. He advised Faulkner to write about what he knew best: "You're a country boy; all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from. But that's all right too. It's America too; pull it out, as little and unknown as it is, and the whole thing will collapse, like when you prize a brick out of a wall" (*ESPL* 7). Before he took that advice, however, Faulkner had written (and Anderson had helped him to publish) his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), about the wounded generation of men and women that survived the Great War. He wrote that novel in New Orleans and set his second one there; *Mosquitoes* (1927) concerns a group of artists and artist-wannabes on a houseboat trip, and it includes a short self-portrait of Faulkner himself as an "awful sunburned and kind of shabby dressed" man who "said he was a liar by profession." The mention of his name generates this response: "'Faulkner?' the niece pondered in turn. 'Never heard of him,' she said at last, with finality."[1]

With his third novel, *Sartoris*, and his fourth, *The Sound and the Fury* (both published in 1929), the literary world heard of him, indeed. This fiction began an intensely productive period in Faulkner's writing life. The years between

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1929 and 1942 saw the publication of eleven novels, two collections of short stories, about forty-five individual stories, and a collection of poetry. He made his living as a writer during the entirety of the Great Depression and was nearly always desperate for money. He wrote and sold short stories as fast as he could (which he called "boiling the pot" [*SL* 114]) because popular magazines with large revenues and budgets paid extremely well. The *Saturday Evening Post* and *American Mercury* would pay up to $1,000 for a story, but Faulkner just as often let *Story* magazine publish his work, so badly did he need the $25 that it paid. During these years, Faulkner's private life took some increasingly sad turns – one of which, it must be admitted, was his marriage to Estelle Oldham Franklin. Her divorce from Cornell in April 1929 brought her and their two children back to Oxford; she and Faulkner were married in June of that year, and Faulkner took full financial responsibility for the children. Neither the new husband nor the wife had the starry eyes of a first love any longer. Bill had had an unsuccessful relationship with Helen Baird in 1926; Estelle's marriage had failed. Both had begun to consume more alcohol than was good for them individually or as a couple. Bill devoted the most part of his interior life and a large portion of his time to his writing. Estelle, still a sociable woman, got lonely. In 1931 a daughter, Alabama, was born to them; she lived nine days, and Faulkner rode to the cemetery with her coffin on his knees. Two years later, their daughter Jill was born; she grew up in a home into which her father would not let her bring a record player. Their finances were strained by modernizing an antebellum home they bought in 1930, naming it Rowan Oak. In 1935 Faulkner's youngest brother, Dean, was killed while flying an airplane that Bill had bought him. The family, especially Maud and Bill, were devastated, and Dean's widow and namesake daughter soon moved into Rowan Oak. Faulkner captured the desperation of these years in a letter he wrote to one of his literary agents in 1940:

> Every so often, in spite of judgment and all else, I take these fits of sort of raging and impotent exasperation at this really quite alarming paradox which my life reveals: Beginning at the age of thirty I, an artist, a sincere one and of the first class, who should be free even of his own economic responsibilities and with no moral conscience at all, began to become the sole, principal and partial support – food, shelter, heat, clothes, medicine, kotex, school fees, toilet paper and picture shows – of my mother . . . [a] brother's widow and child, a wife of my own and two step children, my own child; I inherited my father's debts and his dependents, white and black without inheriting yet from anyone one inch of land or one stick of furniture or one cent of money; the only thing I ever got for nothing, after the first pair of long pants I received (cost: $7.50) was the

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> $300 O. Henry prize last year. I bought without help from anyone the house I live in and all the furniture; I bought my farm the same way. I am 42 years old and I have already paid for four funerals and will certainly pay for one more and in all likelihood two more beside that, provided none of the people in mine or my wife's family my superior in age outlive me, before I ever come to my own. (*SL* 122–3)

In 1935 Faulkner also began working as a scriptwriter at Twentieth Century-Fox Studios, work which he did intermittently for the rest of the decade. At the studios he met fellow southerner Meta Carpenter, and their intimate love affair would continue on-and-off for fifteen years, interrupted by Meta's marriage to another man and complicated by Faulkner's marriage to Estelle and commitment to Jill.

But if the 1930s and 1940s were difficult financially and emotionally, some important recognition did begin to come Faulkner's way. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1939, and in 1944 he received a letter from the literary critic Malcolm Cowley describing the project that would infuse new life into his career. By that date Faulkner's novels had all gone out of print; he remained virtually unread outside the literary community, and he had a reputation as a difficult prose stylist. Max Perkins, who edited Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald for Scribner's publishing house, said simply, "Faulkner is finished" (*FCF* 10). Cowley sought to change that by getting the prestigious Viking Press to issue a volume on Faulkner in its popular *Portable* series, which profiled writers by including a variety of pieces by them. In Faulkner's case Cowley proposed that "Instead of trying to collect the 'best of Faulkner' in 600 pages, I thought of selecting the short and long stories, and passages from novels that are really separate stories, that form part of your Mississippi series" (*FCF* 22). Delighted with the project, Faulkner cooperated fully with its development, and the work hit only one serious snag: Cowley's insistence on describing Faulkner's combat experience in the Great War. Some of Faulkner's early posturing had reached print, and some of it was just anecdotal, but Cowley believed that he had a war hero on his hands. "You're going to bugger up a fine dignified book with that war business," Faulkner wrote him; "If . . . you cant omit all European war reference, say only what Who's Who says and no more: Was a member of the RAF in 1918." He even offered to pay for any technical changes that had to be made in the process (*FCF* 82).

The Portable Faulkner (1946) did what Cowley had hoped. It was prominently reviewed by novelists Caroline Gordon in the *New York Times Book Review* and Robert Penn Warren in a two-part essay in the *New Republic*. These literary admirers attracted new readers, and they coupled with an already appreciative European reading public to increase Faulkner's status as an internationally

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prominent writer. 1948 saw publication of Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust* and the film version was shot in Oxford, Mississippi, where it had its international premiere in 1949. Faulkner had good use for the proceeds from both the film and the book, and at last the financial pressures on him began to abate.

When a Swedish reporter telephoned Rowan Oak in November 1950 to tell Faulkner that he had won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature, his years of obscurity were over for good. He initially declined to go to Stockholm to receive it, and he tried his best to duck the reporters intent on talking about it. His extended family ultimately conspired to get him to the ceremony, a process that a week-long hunting trip and a deliberate alcoholic binge threatened to derail. He decided to attend so that Jill could accompany him to Paris afterward, and during the attendant parties and dinners and the ceremony itself he was a model of good behavior. "I want to do the right thing," he said of the occasion (Blotner 532). Undoubtedly, the best "right thing" of the trip was the address he delivered upon receiving the Prize. No one present heard it, however, because he delivered it too far from the microphone and in a characteristically quiet and rushed manner, in a southern accent to boot. The next morning, when the text of the speech hit the news services, it was hailed as a masterpiece of rhetoric. It began by removing the occasion of the Prize from Faulkner's biography: "I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work – a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before." Thus did he keep us out of his private life even as he explained something of what it meant to do the work – the very hard work – that he did. He invoked future winners of the Prize and spoke to them, to encourage them: "I believe that man will not only endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things." He concluded with a gesture encompassing past and future: "The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail" (*ESPL* 119–20).

Faulkner scholars still debate the degree to which he meant those words and the relationship they bear to his fiction, particularly that which appeared after 1950. In the literary world winning the Nobel Prize is regarded as rather a jinx at best, and at worst a career-ending curse. Faulkner's literary production did slow down in the 1950s, but this was due in part to the difficulties he had in writing his most densely plotted and intricately written novel (*A Fable* [1954]) and in part to the increasing number of public duties he accepted as a Nobel laureate.

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He also took public stands on the most important political movement in the America of his day – the civil rights movement and the dismantling of racial segregation in the American South. Thus the self-described "country man," "uneducated in every formal sense" (*SL* 348), deliberately took on the role of America's Spokesartist in the 1950s and at the same time inserted himself into incendiary political territory at home. The results were mixed. The US Department of State asked him to serve as a kind of literary ambassador to places such as Japan and Brazil; not least because of his reserved demeanor and polished public manners, he made a good one. His comments on the racial problems of America and the South pleased no one: to liberal whites, he did not protest loudly enough, and they condemned him as an accommodationist; to southern segregationists, he sounded crazy and dangerous, and they threatened his life and property; to some black southerners, he sounded just as crazy, and they stayed out of everyone's way; to other African Americans, he seemed like just another racist white man, and W. E. B. Du Bois even offered to debate with him on the steps of the courthouse in which Emmett Till's murderers had been acquitted by an all-white jury. Complicated in their conception and expression, Faulkner's ideas sprang from his belief in equal opportunity and in exercising personal responsibility in the pursuit of the same. He also deeply distrusted group behavior, and, as a symptom of that distrust, he had deep reservations about the federal government's power to effect change. At the University of Virginia, where he was Writer-in-Residence from 1957 to 1959, he told a delegation from the Department of Psychiatry:

> if I ever become a preacher, it will be to preach against man, individual man, relinquishing into groups, any groups . . . I think that there's too much pressure to make people conform and I think that one man may be first-rate but if you get one man and two second-rate men together, then he's not going to be first-rate any longer, because the voice of that majority will be a second-rate voice. (*FIU* 269)

At least snobbish and at most antidemocratic, such attitudes sprang from his own painful experiences of violated privacy. He did learn, finally, as his best biographer says, how to combine "avoidance and public relations." Asked in 1957 in Athens whether he had "a message for the Greek people," he said, "What message can anyone give to a people who is already the bravest and toughest and most independent people? Your country is the cradle of civilized man. Your ancestors are the mothers and fathers of civilization, and of human liberty. What more do you want of me, an American farmer?" (Blotner 636).

During the last five years or so of his life, Faulkner's deep and abiding thirst for alcohol began to have serious consequences for his health. The earliest

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descriptions we have of him note his desire to drink and his capacity to hold his liquor; accounts from his middle years record a pattern of binge drinking, sometimes deliberate, and always with certain patterns of entry, dissolution, and recovery. He sustained some serious injuries from these episodes. During one in New York in 1937, he fell against a pipe supplying steam heat to his hotel room, and by the time he was able to remove himself from it he had a third-degree burn on his back; the pain from that stayed with him for the rest of his life and was aggravated in his later years by falls from the horses he dearly loved to ride – and, against advice, to jump. A snide *New Yorker* profile of him at work in his editor's office in 1953 unwittingly captures both the physical effort that writing took and the pain he continued to inflict upon himself:

> we retreated to a corner to watch the sole owner and proprietor of Yoknapatawpha County bring forth prose. He typed very, *very* slowly, mostly with the middle finger of his right hand, but with an occasional assist from the index finger of his left . . . He lifted the sheet of paper in the typewriter and read over what he had written, then got up and stretched. "Work hurts mah back," he said.

The reporter did not know it, but he was recording the latter stages of Faulkner's epic struggle to finish *A Fable*; he did know that Faulkner attributed his pain to a fall from a horse and claimed that whiskey would cure what ailed him (*LIG* 75). After he finished writing what would be his last novel, *The Reivers* (1962), Faulkner said that he was "not working on anything at all now, busy with horses, fox hunting"; "I will wait until the stuff is ready, until I can follow instead of trying to drive it" (Blotner 697). By the time the Fourth of July dawned, however, he was drinking and taking prescription painkillers in response to the intense pain in his back. Before he began doing so, he had complained that food did not taste right. He agreed readily – for the first time ever – to be taken to the sanitarium in nearby Byhalia to dry out. In that sanitarium, William Faulkner died of a heart attack.

The family issued a brief message before the funeral: "Until he's buried he belongs to the family. After that he belongs to the world" (Blotner 716). And – nineteen novels, more than a hundred short stories, many dozen poems and essays, and some line drawings and illustrated fables later, having traveled the world in reality and throughout the range of human experience in his imagination – so he does.

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Everyone who reads or ever has read Faulkner has been confused by something. The long sentences, the elaborate syntax, the terrifying action, the obscure pronoun references: saying that his technique and style are difficult and his themes daunting seems like merely stating the obvious. The only way out of such confusion is to go through it. No shortcuts, no substitutes exist for the act of reading Faulkner; but reading Faulkner will teach you how to read Faulkner well. What follows in these pages therefore merely tries to sketch the parameters

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