

MARK ROYDEN WINCHELL:
LAST OF THE VANDERBILT GREATS

by Joe Scotchie

Mark Royden Winchell's death last spring, at the much-too-young age of fifty-nine, has robbed the literary world of one of its brightest lights of the past quarter century. Mark was an old-fashioned man of letters: essayist, biographer, editor, historian, and teacher. He was prolific, too, the author or editor of sixteen books and over a hundred essays and reviews.

If Larry Brown was the greatest fiction writer to come out of the South since 1980, then Mark has to be ranked as a top non-fiction author. Mark took a winding route to that title. Born in Ohio, he received a B.A. from West Virginia University. From there, he did graduate work at Vanderbilt University. With Thomas Daniel Young and Walter Sullivan at the helm, the grand Vanderbilt tradition still had legs on it. And it surely influenced the young Winchell. After Vanderbilt, Mark taught first at Southern Mississippi, then at Clemson, where he would make his academic home.

Mark's career followed an interesting intellectual odyssey. Among his early works were biographies of Joan Didion, Horace McCoy, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Leslie Fiedler. (Mark was a Southern writer, but the books on McCoy and Fiedler illustrate his love for the American West.) The Didion biography was published in 1980, with Winchell maintaining that the winsome Californian was now the finest essayist in all of America. 1984 saw his Buckley biography, published in a year when the editor of *National Review* was riding high, basking in the landslide re-election of his friend Ronald Reagan. Seven years later, in 1991, Mark published *Neoconservative Criticism*, a volume that focused on Joseph Epstein, Kenneth Lynn, and, most significantly, Norman Podhoretz. Mark, it seemed to me, was sympathetic to the cultural conservatism then enunciated by both Buckley and Podhoretz. But that brand of conservatism would soon prove insufficient.

Between those two books, in 1987, Mark co-authored the memoirs of Herman Talmadge, the long-time U.S. Senator from Georgia. That Mark, a native of Ohio, would even be chosen to write a book with such a giant was testimony enough to his growing reputation. That book, one might argue, served as a bridge between the Buckley-Podhoretz world view and the Old Right outlook that Mark later championed. Talmadge, who was defeated for re-election in 1980, was one of the last of his breed: a states-rights Southern Democrat who remained in that party even after it had turned left and the South itself was becoming heavily Republican. Talmadge was a prudent fiscal conservative whose somber view of human nature stood directly opposed to the hysterical optimism that had now overtaken the once equally somber conservative movement.

Later still, Mark's biographies of Cleanth Brooks and Donald Davidson brought great leaps forward in his output. Those two thick books, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (1996) and *Where No Flag Flies: Donald Davidson and the Southern Resistance* (2000), are the ones for which he should be remembered. For they are the volumes that most clarify his world view: A traditionalist in literature and an Old Right conservative



in politics. Most of Mark's earlier biographies were roughly 200-page books published by Twayne. The Brooks and Davidson biographies were much more ambitious. Both were over 400 pages in length and both also placed Southern literature and politics at the center of the American experience in the twentieth century.

More than ever, Mark sided with the cause of the Old Right and the conservative South. He opposed the Iraq War and, on the pages of *The American Conservative*, offered up the America First foreign policy of his fellow Ohioan Robert Taft as a proper antidote to endless foreign meddling. Mark was also a member of the League of the South, for which he published an extensive critique of the legacy of Martin Luther King, one that not only focused on King's plagiarism, adultery, and support for leftist politics, but one that also mourned the passing of the George Washington-Abraham Lincoln America of Mark's youth. His essay collection, *Reinventing the South*, included not only essays on William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, but a strong defense of the Southern literary tradition itself, a subject he first broached in his edited tribute to Thomas Daniel Young entitled *The Vanderbilt Tradition*, an impressive overview that included essays on such popular authors as Jesse Stuart and Roy Blount, Jr., to more formal critics such as John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate.

Mark was prolific to the end. One of his last books showed a side of which I was not aware. It is a book detailing the most politically incorrect films of all time. *God, Man, and Hollywood* bears a subtitle (*Politically Incorrect Cinema ...*), typically enough, that highlights both *The Birth of a Nation* and *The Passion of Christ* as prime examples of Hollywood's often surprising conservatism.

Above all, Mark wrote lovingly about the Vanderbilt tradition in literature. That, to me, was his true home. It may also explain why he was a member of The Libertarian Party. Possibly, he disliked the world of politics he often wrote about, preferring instead, a more honest and competitive Republic of Letters.

Mark was friends with many Vanderbilt writers: Brooks, Bradford, Young, Robert Penn Warren, and Walter Sullivan---the latter being a friendship that he particularly cherished. He wrote not only of these gentlemen, but also of others: Davidson and Ransom, as well as Andrew Lytle and Richard M. Weaver. He defended that literary tradition as essential to both the life of the soul and of any particular nation. And when modern-day academics throughout the South, including those at Vanderbilt, came to attack the Fugitive-Agrarian movement as racist and fascist, Mark responded in kind, publishing a memorable retort, "What They Have to Say About Us," published also in *Reinventing the South*.

And so, we have Mark's own legacy: as a friend, interpreter, and champion of the Vanderbilt giants, Mark, in time, became one of those giants himself.