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Memories of Warren

CHARLES EAST

When I arrived on the Louisiana State University campus as a freshman in the fall of 1942, I had never heard of Robert Penn Warren. I would very shortly learn who he was from the people I worked with as a student in what was the university's public relations office. At the time it was called the News Bureau. The room I worked in had until a few months earlier been Warren's office as co-editor of the *Southern Review*, one of the country's most distinguished literary quarterlies.

Until I reported for work at my student job, I had never heard of the *Southern Review* either, and I suspect it would have been a while before I did, had the magazine's former offices in the North Administration Building not become my workplace. Members of the News Bureau staff that fall of 1942 all spoke frequently of Warren and his co-editor Cleanth Brooks, who remained on the English department faculty after Warren's departure for the University of Minnesota earlier in the year.

To place Warren's fame in context, let me say that by 1942 the Kentucky-born writer had coauthored two college textbooks that were widely used in literature classes, had written and published his first novel, *Night Rider* (1939), and was about to publish his second, *At Heaven's Gate* (1943). It would be 1946, however, before the publication of *All the King's Men*, the novel that brought him the first of his Pulitzer Prizes and attention as a major American writer.

Warren had also published a good deal of poetry. But he was in fact more than a novelist and poet: he was a Literary Figure. Much of his reputation rested on his earlier association with the Nashville Fugitives, a small circle of scholars, townspeople, and poets that included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson. Warren, the youngest of the four and a student at Vanderbilt University, had been in Ransom and Davidson's classes. What the Fugitives had in common was a love for poetry – one might say a passion for poetry – for writing it, reading it, sometimes arguing over it. The four would later be among the twelve so-called Agrarians whose essays appeared in the 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*.

It goes without saying that Warren's reputation also rested on the success of the literary quarterly he and Brooks had founded. From the beginning the *Southern Review* drew praise from the community of writers and intellectuals who made up the literary establishment. As the editor and critic Lewis P. Simpson has noted, in the course of its brief life the magazine “demonstrated such a remarkable literary and intellectual quality

that it not only achieved wide recognition in its day but has won a lasting place both in American literary history and in the general history of modern letters.”

One of the members of the LSU News Bureau office staff when I worked there in 1942 and 1943 was a bright young woman named Kathleen Hough. Kitty Hough had taken a class under Warren and was full of praise for him as a writer and teacher. Not long after my arrival she took me to one of the adjoining rooms and showed me the remaining stock of the *Southern Review*, whose sudden demise (and Warren’s sense that he was no longer wanted) had prompted his decision to leave LSU.

The magazine’s first issue had come out in the summer of 1935. Its last was dated Spring 1942 and was still in wrappers. Later I would spend more time in that room and read some of the stories published in its pages – among them, stories by Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty.

As an undergraduate in those years I read some of Warren’s poems and at least two of his short stories in literature classes I was taking. I also talked to students who had sat in his classes and who were eager to sing his praises. I did not, however, meet Warren until the mid-1960s. By that time I had joined the staff of the LSU Press as editor and was scouting for books that would have a place alongside the press’s strong list of titles in Southern literature and Southern history, which were my own fields of interest.

In the spring of 1965 – April, it was – I drove up to Oxford, Mississippi, to attend a Southern Literary Festival that I was told would bring Warren and Eudora Welty to the University of Mississippi campus as speakers. I had met Miss Welty at a similar gathering on the Millsaps campus in Jackson two years before, and I was very much interested in what she and Warren would have to say on the announced theme of the festival in Oxford – the work of William Faulkner.

Warren’s address, “Faulkner: The South, the Negro, and Time,” was a good one, though

I remember finding his delivery something of a challenge. He read it in a rather low voice that must have been lost on some of those in the back of the auditorium. He was given a warm reception, however, and appeared to be enjoying himself as he talked with those who came up to introduce themselves and get his signature on one or another of his books that they had brought with them.

At a reception at the Country Club following his address that evening I had an opportunity to meet Warren and talk to him at some length. I remember asking him about his new book *Who Speaks for the Negro?* which would be coming out the following month. He had interviewed black leaders, North and South, and had spent several months on the road in Alabama and Mississippi, he told me. Though I don’t recall it, I’m sure I must have told him about my book of short stories *Where the Music Was*, which was scheduled for September release by Harcourt Brace, his publisher – and at that time, Eudora’s.

I found Warren easy to talk to and utterly unaffected. I asked him if he was committed for breakfast the following morning. He told me he was not and that I should by all means come to his room at 7:30 and we would go down and have breakfast together. Like the speakers, I was staying at the Alumni House on campus.

When I knocked on Warren’s door he was seated on the side of the bed putting on his shoes and called to me to come in. His manner of dress gave me an impression of a man older than the one of the evening before. I remember particularly his old-timey high-

topped black lace-up shoes and his galluses. On the other hand, he seemed full of energy for that hour of the morning.

Downstairs Warren and I went through the breakfast line and sat down at one of the tables where we almost immediately got onto the subject of James Meredith and the Ole Miss riots three years before that accompanied Meredith's arrival on campus – the first African-American to enroll at this most Southern of Southern universities. It was an historic event played out against a backdrop of teargas, the Mississippi National Guard, and federal marshals.

Now, events that had taken place here two days earlier were painful reminders of that. A biracial delegation of five students and a teacher from largely black Tougaloo College had come to the Oxford campus with the intention of participating in the Southern Literary Festival, or at least attempting to, and had abruptly walked out when they were informed that a policy imposed by the Board of Trustees, which oversaw higher education in the state, excluded blacks who were not students from taking part in events held in buildings at state-supported colleges. The teacher, who was white, issued a statement protesting the school's refusal to allow the delegation to participate and demanded that the festival be cancelled.

Warren had as a matter of fact appeared on the Tougaloo campus the year before and when invited to speak at the 1965 festival had given the University of Mississippi a chance to disinvite him as a speaker. He very much wanted to speak, particularly because the event celebrated the work of Faulkner, but feared a racial incident that would embarrass the university. He also knew that his recent interviews with Mississippi blacks for his forthcoming book would have come to the attention of the white Citizens Councils and other groups opposed to integration. In response to his letter the head of the Ole Miss English department, Evans Harrington, as well as the chancellor of the university, assured him he would be welcome.

However, this left Warren on the horns of a dilemma, as we know from a later account by Robert Hamblin, an Ole Miss graduate student and Ph.D. candidate assigned to escort the speaker around the campus and serve as his driver. According to Hamblin, Warren spent much of the day he was to speak trying to decide what he should do in light of the protest. It was a miniprotest, true, but Warren apparently gave it a good deal of thought. Should he walk out, as the Tougaloo delegation had done? Or stay?

By day's end he had decided and was at ease with himself. "Dammit," he told Hamblin, "I came here to deliver a speech, and I intend to deliver it."

In our conversation over breakfast that morning Warren's view was that when Meredith was enrolled as a student in the fall of 1962, the chancellor should have invited him to live in his home as an unambiguous show of where he stood. I heard Warren out in noncommittal silence, but had I engaged him (unlikely) I would probably have said something along the lines of "You don't know Mississippi." Many years later, recalling the event in a note that I put away in a file folder, I wrote: "I remember thinking how far removed he was from Southern realities. In retrospect, maybe he was not as far removed as I thought."

That morning I mentioned that sometime in the 1940s, at LSU, Cleanth Brooks had shown me his copy (that Warren had given him) of the verse play "Proud Flesh." I told him I had found it an extremely interesting work, particularly as one that anticipates his novel *All the King's Men*. I think I praised his use of background choruses: the

uniformed state patrolmen who escort the governor around the state, the uniformed college football players, the doctors in surgical masks who work to save the life of the mortally wounded governor, Talos, whose name would be changed to Stark in the novel. Warren seemed pleased, but as I remember, did not respond to my suggestion that the play ought to be published. At a later time I would pursue this with him.

I thought I was retiring from book publishing in the summer of 1975 when I resigned as director of the LSU Press to devote my time to my writing. In 1980, however, I was approached by the University of Georgia Press to join their staff and surprised myself by accepting. High on the list of projects that I hoped to give my attention to at Georgia was a scholarly edition of the verse play by Warren.

In December of the following year I sat down and wrote Warren to tell him of my interest in bringing out an edition of the still unpublished play. But first I wrote Cleanth Brooks to get his thoughts on the subject. As I hoped he would, he said he liked the idea of publishing “Proud Flesh.” “It has special merits of its own – especially Warren’s imaginative use of the choruses. . . . I hope to see him on Thanksgiving and I’ll see if I can’t ask him about it then – at least to the extent of saying that I, for one, would like to see it in print.”

In Warren’s letter to me dated January 30, 1982, in reply to mine of the month before, he wrote: “Your letter has been much on my mind, and if it hadn’t been, Stan Lindbergh [sic] and Cleanth Brooks would have been putting it there.” I had enlisted the support of my friend Stan Lindberg, editor of the *Georgia Review*, as well as that of Brooks, whom I had known since my student days at LSU.

“Frankly,” Warren continued, “I don’t think the piece – that is, the first version of AKM – is worth publishing. The fact that I was not satisfied with it is what drove me to the novel. It exists in various versions. . . . I think I know where there is a great stack of worksheets and versions, but I must look for them.”

I had told him we were prepared to offer a royalty comparable to that of the commercial publishers. He said the matter of royalty arrangement was not of great concern to him: “I am more concerned with looking back at the thing and seeing how much of an embarrassment it might be.”

In early February I got another letter off to Warren saying that I was delighted to hear from him, and I mentioned my pleasure at hearing from Cleanth, whose advice I had sought. In my earlier letter I had told him that the University of Georgia Press would produce a handsome clothbound volume and that I would see the book through press myself.

Our correspondence continued in this vein through 1982 with Warren telling me he would take another look. On December 6, 1982, he wrote me that he had not had a chance to “get at” the various manuscripts of “Proud Flesh”: “That is the key fact. But I still doubt the advisability of publishing the thing. I never was satisfied with it – otherwise I would have written the novel. But I’ll take another look and try to assess the degree of my embarrassment at seeing it made public.”

Toward the end of 1983 I left Athens and returned to my home in Baton Rouge, where

I wrote to tell him of my change of address and once again reminded him of my hopes for publishing “Proud Flesh.” In one of his 1982 letters he told me he was hesitant in part at least because publication of the early work would leave him open to the charge of trying

to exploit the thing. My gut feeling about his reluctance to say yes or no over these years was that he was sorely tempted – in fact, liked the idea – but could not finally override his doubts about it. I decided not to press him but instead to give him time and let things work themselves out.

In October of 1985 LSU celebrated the 50th anniversary of the founding of the *Southern Review*. I saw the celebration as perhaps my last opportunity to get a commitment from him. I knew the two co-founders of the magazine planned to be there and that Warren, though in poor health, would give a reading. Not long before the gathering I was told that he would come to the microphone and read two or three of his poems and that at that point he would take his seat onstage and James Olney, one of the co-editors of the new *Southern Review* (established in 1965) would pick up the reading there.

Warren was indeed a sick man and the evening given to him and his work was not without unsettling moments. He walked onto the stage to loud applause and safely made it past a large potted palm that threatened to waylay him. After Olney's introduction he got to the microphone but was blinded by the overhead stage lights and had difficulty finding the pages. Warren fumbled with the book, turning it this way and that in an effort to bring the printed words into focus. Seconds passed. A minute. Two. Finally he began to read.

Eudora Welty, who would get her own turn to read on another evening, was sitting next to me in the audience. She gave me a sidelong glance and whispered, almost to herself, "It's so sad, it's so sad." Then Warren walked back to his chair and Olney began to read the poems that the poet had marked for him.

One day earlier that week my wife and I were seated at the table with Warren and his wife Eleanor Clark at lunch. Despite the pain he had been experiencing from the first day of the conference, he was in good spirits and full of stories, one about the Warrens' trip to Italy about the time the Warren Commission Report into the assassination of John F. Kennedy came out. With a laugh he told us about the beaming Italian who to the delight of Warren came up to him and told him he had just read his book – the Warren Commission Report, of course!

During the 1985 celebration I had a few minutes alone with Warren to talk about "Proud Flesh." It was a reprise of our letters. I remember telling him that the play would be published – it was merely a question of when, a point I had already made with him in one of my letters. He was as warm and easy to talk to as ever. In the Mississippi town I grew up in we had a word for people like Warren – genuine. Our conversation took me back to my first meeting with him – that breakfast exactly twenty years earlier – and I thought what extraordinarily productive years they had been for him.

There was to be one more letter from him. It was dated November 7, 1985. He said he was sorry to report that his feelings were "against publishing now the old verse-prose play 'Proud Flesh.' Just now after 45 years I have re-read it. So I am speaking as a late reader of the play. This sounds unappreciative but . . ."

Warren died on September 15, 1989, at the age of eighty-four. Eleven years after his death the play I had seen in manuscript when I was still in college – or a version of it – was published by the University of Georgia Press in an edition bringing together three stage versions of *All the King's Men*. The editors, Warren scholars James A. Grimshaw,

Jr. and James A. Perkins, had done an admirable job with it, placing the early version in the context of the later ones.

So *Proud Flesh* was finally in print. The pleasure of getting to know Warren, seeing how his mind turned, listening to some of his stories, had been a gift.

Charles East has had a long career in publishing that included his work as editor and later director of the Louisiana State University Press. In the 1980s, he returned to scholarly publishing as editor of the University of Georgia Press, where he helped establish the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and served as editor of the series. He is author of several books, including two collections of short stories, as well as essays and reviews for literary journals.