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## *Shadowing Old Red: The Editor as Gumshoe*

WILLIAM BEDFORD CLARK

My wife is fond of quoting that old Jesuit adage “God writes straight in crooked lines,” and looking back on my career, such as it is, I must concur. I trace the start of my professional life to the fall of 1965, when, as a freshman at the University of Oklahoma, I took a long bus ride south to Shreveport, Louisiana, where I hoped to win a young artist’s competition and play the Schumann piano concerto with the local Philharmonic. By Sunday morning, when I climbed aboard yet another Trailways, headed north, it was painfully apparent to everyone, myself included, that I had stretched my small talent and even smaller hands beyond their limits. I was not, nor would I ever be, Oklahoma’s answer to Van Cliburn. That trip home was one of the longest of my life, but not without its rewards, for I had with me a book, a Bantam paperback of *All the King’s Men*, and that, as Robert Frost remarked on a not-altogether-dissimilar occasion, “made all the difference.” I would not want to suggest that I underwent some kind of immediate conversion. As a matter of fact, it was much later before I actually finished reading the novel. I was, you might say, distracted. But I did find something in Robert Penn Warren’s book that nagged at me, that would not leave me alone with myself. In time, this author and his work would become the primary focus of my own critical and scholarly writing.

When we consider the sheer range of Warren’s achievement, as fictionist, poet, critic, and social commentator, it is not difficult to see why his influence continues to play a formative role in American literature as we enter the Third Millennium. He may not have dominated his age in quite the same way Samuel Johnson did a portion of the eighteenth century, but at least one critic has argued that, given the centrality of his place on the literary scene, it might be useful to label the middle-third of the twentieth century as the Age of Warren. “What of Faulkner?” you ask. I would point out

that it was in large part “Red” Warren – along with Malcolm Cowley – who rediscovered Faulkner and introduced him to a new generation of readers in the 1940s, when much of his best work was out of print, thus assuring the Mississippian’s place of preeminence in the canon.

It is hardly surprising that Faulkner’s biographer Joseph Blotner wanted to do a life of Warren, and by the early 1990s he was putting the finishing touches on it. Blotner had followed up his biography of Faulkner with an edition of that author’s selected letters, and naturally he was in a perfect position to do the same for Warren. Joe demurred, and through the good graces of John Burt and the Warren family the task fell to me. It was daunting at first. Warren wrote many letters. Multiple volumes would be involved. Moreover, like most Americanists who came through graduate school in the late 60s and early 70s, I was most comfortable employing a New Critical *cum* American Studies approach and knew next to nothing about archival research and textual editing. I learned, haphazardly, by doing, and I came to love the detective work involved. With your indulgence, I would like to relate my most satisfying “adventure” in the Warren trade, adopting the idiom of Jack Burden, the tough-guy narrator of *All the King’s Men*, who owes much in turn to hard-boiled detective fiction and *film noir*.

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When it comes to pounding the pavement and getting the goods, nobody can lay on glove on Gentleman Joe Blotner, so when he finished that biography of his on “Red” Warren we all guessed he would make one more pass around the track and edit Red’s mail, like he did in the Faulkner case, which had made his name and lined his pockets with limitless jack. But old Joe had other ideas. “I’m hanging up my hat,” he said, “I got me a good woman, and we’re heading for the hills of Ole Virginny.” “*You do it, Brazos Billie,*” Joe said, flashing two first-class tickets to Charlottesville. “Red’s letters have a tale to tell. There’s things out there nobody has ever turned up, including me. And besides, you could use the work. You’re out there still riding on a shoe shine and a back slap. They have post-tenure review in your shop now, don’t they?” And Joe give me a wink and flashed that kid’s grin of his that had kept

him alive in the stalag after the krauts took down his big bird back in ’44.

They do have post-tenure review in Aggieland, and so I took the hint. No place to hide once you get an unholy alliance of bottom-line legislators and turncoat deans crowding your heels. So I took the case, and for a long time the dope I was after seemed to drift over the transom like I was living right (which I wasn’t) and with no more bother than the cost of postage and xeroxing and a few dimes dropped now and then for long distance. Red Warren had never spared postage himself. He left a long and incriminating paper trail, just like Joe had said, and I was going to go public with it. Now lots of guys in the racket undervalue librarians, but I had learned back during the Punic Wars that if you ever want to find your way home to Mama you cultivate archivists like a pothead weeds hemp. My nose was several shades of brown by now, and after trips to New Haven, Nashville, and DC I was cocky enough to think I had things pretty well sewed up and figured it was about time to call in the press, kick up my dogs, and open up that long desk drawer where my flask of Old Faithful lurks unseen. Then Bo Grimshaw, Red’s bibliographer and a born huckster if there ever was one, threw me a knuckle-ball that would have shamed Hoyt Wilhelm in all his myopic prime. “*Cherchez la femme,*” Bo said. I looked at him like he was even more wasted than he was. “*Pardon my French,*” says Bo, “but there was that stash Cinina took with her when she and Red split back in ’51.” I knew what he was getting at.

Cinina, aka Emma Brescia, was some dish. Red had met her out on the coast when he was jiving his way through the M.A. program at Berkeley in the twenties. They didn’t make them like Cinina back in Guthrie, Kentucky, the burg Red reluctantly called home. “Guthrie is a good place to be *from,*” he was wont to say to anybody who would listen. So when he rattled the well-wrapped package that was Cinina Brescia, Red was hooked and hooked good. They got hitched on the sly a few years later when Red was putting on the dog as a Rhodes man at Oxford.

What the dons didn’t know the dons couldn’t do nothing about, and when Red returned to God’s country to teach at that college in

Memphis they came clean. Now folks in on the lowdown said Cinina had a “latin temperament,” by which they meant no compliment. She was feisty, quick-tempered, and jealous of her lover boy’s time, but still she offered him compensations not easily come by. He took what he had to and took what he could get. This went on for two shaky decades from Tennessee to Baton Rouge to Minnesota and on both sides of the Atlantic, give or take time out, when Cinina would high-tail it for the coast to see her daddy, a composer who taught Scarlatti and such to rich girls in Frisco (or Oakland, to be exact). Now Cinina wanted to write like Red, but she couldn’t make it work, and Red’s down home Southern pals, Allen “the Masher” Tate and Andrew “Polecat” Lytle, never had much use for her being Italian and all and made it plain to her face. Things like that get under a bride’s skin, and hurt feelings are seldom assuaged by gin. Just the opposite in fact. Cinina drank when she was angry and got angry when she drank. By the late 40s, she was a lush and a candidate for the boobey-hatch. Her shrinks thought Red was at the root of her misery, and when she raised the question of D-I-V-O-R-C-E he took off for Nevada like a pop-bottle rocket. Red remarried, had a pair of kids like he had always hoped, and eventually wound up as Poet Laureate. Cinina dropped off the screen.

But she was not finished. She gave up the sauce, moved to the Big Apple, and took a doctorate from Columbia to prove she had the stuff. She married a blue-blood she’d run across at AA meetings and took to teaching languages at little colleges clustered like forlorn debutantes on both sides of the Long Island shore. She was Dr. Emma Gardner now, but she carried her old self with her like an infection you can’t shed. When the Big C finally caught up with her in 1967, she was tool-pusher for the language department at Mitchell College in New London, just a hop-skip-and-jump from that summer place Gene O’Neill made famous in that play he wrote about how his own mother was a dope-fiend. Cinina, or I should say Dr. Emma, lost her wrestle with the crab, and one day not long after the obsequies her widower pulled up in front of the Mitchell library and presented them with a hulking white elephant: an oversized vacuum-cleaner crate that bulged like a Sumo’s tush with yellowed envelopes, reams of crumpled paper, and a dozen or so

used books. This was what you could call an endowment, but the head librarian at the time was a sleepy man who would not be vexed. He did have enough sense to recognize that a book is a book and duly stamped the aforesaid volumes “Mitchell College Library” and put them into circulation, where there were few takers. If he had been a more energetic man, he might have sold the remainder of the contents of the scruffy Kirby box for scrap, but that would have meant a phone call, so he had some goofus carry it unexamined down to the basement where cellar seepage could gnaw at it every once in awhile. Years passed, like in some novel by that wacky dame Virginia Woolf, but in the fullness of time another library director landed at Mitchell, and she turned out to be quite a lady.

Barbara Van der Lyke had done time at the Connecticut State Archives, so she was street smart and knew how to boogie. When she eye-balled the territory, she spotted the moldering Kirby crate and naturally pegged it as dumpster-fodder. But a wee, still voice tickled her ear, and she decided to have a look-see. What she saw she saw for what it was worth, and she sprang for a slew of acid-free envelopes and a score of proper archival boxes. You know, them big, heavy-duty gray eminences. She tucked the Cinina papers away for safe-keeping and combed the stacks for stray books bearing Red Warren’s John Hancock or somebody else’s who was part of the same gang. Pleased with her hand, Barb put the word out on the street and settled back to wait for hardcore Warrenistas to line up outside her door for a fix. The word never reached the usual suspects, though, so Barb waited and waited some more and finally got on with her life. Things settled down in New London: Fog horns moaned where the Thames met the Sound; big sharks were taken off Montauk; and at night the Cinina papers glowed on their shelves in the dark.

Meanwhile, following a tip from Johnny Burt, I had managed to trace the footsteps of the first Mrs. Warren to Mitchell College, their sad terminus, and I thought I might be able to sweet talk the simple folk out of a personnel file marked “deceased” if nothing else. There was no reason to believe the rumored stash of Warren memorabilia still existed, or ever did when you got right down to it, but there just might be some doddering old codger or biddy still

this side of Jordan who had known Emma Cinina Brescia Warren Gardner and be willing to relive old times over a snifter or two of MetaMucil. So I got on the horn, and some gruff Yankee dame put me through to Barbara Van der Lyke. She played it cagey. "We do have some things," she said. "Be a doll and shoot me some copies, won't you sweetheart?" I purred into the receiver. Barb laughed, long and loud: "No way. I don't have the staff to comply with such a request." "Baby, I'm desperate," I pleaded. "If you want it, come get it," she said and broke off the connection.

So I packed my gear and winged my way back east, with the nagging suspicion that I was being played for a sucker. I get a bad case of the heebie-jeebies in New England, where they can't even get a man's name right. "Welcome to New London, Mr. Clock," the skinhead at the desk of the Light House Inn sneered, while another model youth made a grab for my bag and was half-way to my room before I got my sea legs (cost me a dollar to get it back). The Light House Inn wasn't the College Station Hilton by a long shot, but what it lacked in antiseptic amenities it strove to make up in quaint harbor charm and things that went bump in the night. I was hunting ghosts, alright, but not those kind, so I pretended to ignore most of the spirit-rapping under my bed. The next morning I did a little rattling of my own, until they condescended to open the doors of the Mitchell library to the day's business. I have to say Barb seemed glad to see me, and why not? Archivists feed on researchers like researchers feed on the dead. They served up the first course, one of those big gray boxes I mentioned earlier. I opened it and felt like that old limey Lord Carnarvon peeping into Tut's tomb: "What do you see?" / "Wonderful things."

What I held in my sweaty mitts was a ragged copy of the first American edition of a little number entitled *The Waste Land*, by Tom "the Possum" Eliot, which was a find in and of itself, but the clincher was the scrawl on the flyleaf "Robert Penn Warren / Vanderbilt University / May 28, 1923." This was the smoking gun the boys had always known about but never turned up: the slim volume that lured a previously unsullied and freckle-faced kid named Red Warren away from an honest major in engineering and turned him toward a hardened life in literature. In the margins, there

were even some schoolboy notations in that runic hand I had come to know so well from my prior investigations. This was a treasure alright, but only one of many. There was mail from the likes of Donald Davidson, Allen Tate and his old woman Caroline Gordon, that fox Katherine Anne Porter, and Albert Erskine, the kid Katherine Anne had robbed from his cradle.

Anyone curious about the scope of the racket Red had going for himself could find new leads to follow by perusing the letters from Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke, John Peale Bishop, Dixon Wecter, and that bunch. There were sundry odds and ends that likewise pointed in some interesting directions: shopping lists, notices of overdue library books, demands for payment from impatient merchants, a morning-after note of apology from Scott Fitzgerald, and frail carbon copies of some of Cinina's own stabs at spinning verse (gloomy, but on the whole not bad . . . she could have been a contender). I came out three days later with what I was after, a half-dozen letters old Red had penned himself, but along the way I had seen enough for me to know that this little bequest of Cinina's would likely blow the ceiling off the Warren biz. For one, if Joe Blotner had taken a gander at all the mail the newlyweds received from Red's old lady and old man back in the Blue Grass, he would have done an even better job of nailing down the case in that biography of his. And Cinina's daddy, Maestro Brescia, must have written his little *peperoncina* twice a week for years, but he favored Italian, and my command of that tongue is limited to ordering calamari stewed in its own ink. When they do get that stack of stuff decoded, I'd give better than even odds that the first Mrs. Warren will beat the rap her jeering section has tried to pin on her over the years. She may have taken on a tad too much a tad too often, but Red and his crowd were no slackers in that department, and any citizen Allen Tate and Andy Lytle took the trouble to bad-mouth on a regular basis couldn't be all bad. I say let the lady have her day in court, which is what Cinina likely had in mind when she carried the goods around with her all that time, though by now it was more like having a voice at your own inquest. You can probably tell that I am not given to sentimental musings, but I got to admit that after what I saw and read, I had a better idea what that old

Roman bard meant when he went on about *lacrimae rerum*. In fact, I have half a mind just now to say something about how all of us, Cinina, me, and you, “beat on, boats against the current, borne ceaselessly into the past,” but I won’t.

Instead, I will put the quietus on these poor remarks. Barb Van der Lyke had dropped a heavy hint that Mitchell would part with its play-pretty if the market was right, so back beneath the Texas skies I rang up Steve Ennis at the Emory library on my own dime, mindful of a finder’s fee that never arrived. Steve and Barbara, that blessed babe, struck a deal, and Emory took custody of the Cinina papers for a sum I am forbidden to divulge, though one thing is sure: they didn’t have to go very deep into those Coca Cola coffers of theirs. Not the first time a big guy got what he wanted out of the little guy on the cheap. But I’m not griping, Cinina’s legacy has gone where it can do the most good, and Uncle Sam would have taken my finder’s fee anyway. As for me, now my Volume II is out and on the record, I’ve decided to do a little out-sourcing when it comes to the Red letter biz. A couple of standup guys have agreed to do the heavy lifting, and I think I’d like to do some digging on a dude with the unlikely moniker Orestes Brownson, to see if he was on the up and up. But I am not sure that will make much difference in my nightly dreams, where a tall, dark, and handsome woman leads me into a dank cellar and whispers in a Lucky Strike contralto, “Look, *carissimo* . . . I’ve been saving this for you.”

*(Note: A much-abbreviated and corrupt version of this piece appeared in the newsletter of the South Central College English Association in 2000. This version originally appeared in the Shawangunk Review, the journal of the English Graduate Program at the State University of New York, New Paltz [Vol. 17, Spring 2006, pp. 24-29], and is reprinted here by permission).*