



# William Faulkner and Southern History

*Joel Williamson*

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One of America's great novelists, William Faulkner was a writer deeply rooted in the American South. In works such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner drew powerfully on Southern themes, attitudes, and atmosphere to create his own world and place--the mythical Yoknapatawpha County--peopled with quintessential Southerners such as the Compsons, Sartorises, Snopes, and McCaslins. Indeed, to a degree perhaps unmatched by any other twentieth-century novelist, Faulkner remained at home and explored his own region--the history and culture and people of the South. Now, in *William Faulkner and Southern History*, one of America's most acclaimed historians of the South, Joel Williamson, weaves together a perceptive biography of Faulkner himself, an astute analysis of his works, and a revealing history of Faulkner's ancestors in Mississippi--a family history that becomes, in Williamson's skilled hands, a vivid portrait of Southern culture itself.

Williamson provides an insightful look at Faulkner's ancestors, a group sketch so brilliant that the family comes alive almost as vividly as in Faulkner's own fiction. Indeed, his ancestors often outstrip his characters in their colorful and bizarre nature. Williamson has made several discoveries: the Falkners (William was the first to spell it "Faulkner") were not planter, slaveholding "aristocrats"; Confederate Colonel Falkner was not an unalloyed hero, and he probably sired, protected, and educated a mulatto daughter who married into America's mulatto elite; Faulkner's maternal grandfather Charlie Butler stole the town's money and disappeared in the winter of 1887-1888, never to return. Equally important, Williamson uses these stories to underscore themes of race, class, economics, politics, religion, sex and violence, idealism and Romanticism--"the rainbow of elements in human culture"--that reappear in Faulkner's work. He also shows that, while Faulkner's ancestors were no ordinary people, and while he sometimes flashed a curious pride in them, Faulkner came to embrace a pervasive sense of shame concerning both his family and his culture. This he wove into his writing, especially about sex, race, class, and violence, psychic and otherwise.

*William Faulkner and Southern History* represents an unprecedented publishing event--an eminent historian writing on a major literary figure. By revealing the deep history behind the art of the South's most celebrated writer, Williamson evokes new insights and deeper understanding, providing anyone familiar with Faulkner's great novels with a host of connections between his work, his life, and his ancestry.

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