

Book Reviews

Compiled and Edited by

Walter Darrell Haden

32 Votes Before Breakfast. By Jesse Stuart. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

Fronnie Powderjay blames it all on the War Between the States, that war that was awful in Kentucky, where Yanks made Rebels climb trees and then shot 'em out, and where Rebels returned the favor when they could. "We ain't over it yet," she says. "But our children ought to be over it." Mrs. Powderjay is one of the hundreds of Kentucky hill folk who people the landscape described by the twenty sketches and tales that make up Jesse Stuart's thirty-fifth book, **32 Votes Before Breakfast**. Her son Shan, the title figure in the story "One of the Lost Tribe," is trying to rise above his peculiar predicament, an outgrowth of his father's stubborn Republicanism in a "deestricht" of Democrats. And she is trying to explain to herself, the daughter of a Democrat who disowned her at her marriage, why politics in this old border state generates such intense feeling, such loyalty to party, and such human absurdity as is the basis for almost all of these comic stories.

The political parties here, of course, are the two we all know, Lincoln's party and the other one, sometimes called by their real names but more often transposed—like other kinds of reality in the stories—into entities somewhat (if only slightly) less plausible: Greenough and Dinwiddie Big Party and Little, Right Party and (you guessed it) Wrong. The time, even in the few "modern" stories where speeding tickets and freeways and food stamps have their place, is the near past, a vaguely delineated era that took shape sometime after The War and which will perhaps persist—in Kentucky and farther south as well—as long as there are small towns and good country people. And the place, of course, whether Rosten or Crummit or Sand Suck, in Lantern or Greenwood or Seymore Counties, is Jesse Stuart's own demesne, a rural Kentucky of the mind.

The stories are varied but not wide-ranging. Moonshining, family feuds, vote-rigging, and elaborate subterfuges crop up again and again. Here is a ludicrously corrupt world where the dead on Lonesome Hill (and in other places) show up at the polls; where "The Voting Good-laws," who look so much alike, vote interchangeably; where many pints of "medicine" doctor many ailing campaigns; where—as in the penultimate, title story—a Dinwiddie with a fast car and driver can put off eating and **almost** vote, in various guises and as stand-in for the absent and deceased, in **all** the 32 precincts of his county. Perhaps because of the selection process by which the book developed, almost every aspect of the personal lives of characters assumes political significance here. This is a world where it helps to have the "Law in Poppie's Vest Pocket" if he is to get even richer in the cock-fighting business; where a handsome young county judge turns out to be a leading wife-swapper; where "The Election" of trustees is hotly contested by two factions who disagree over whether a woman should teach school, or whether her

place is "in the house;" where disagreements over politics lead to fist-fights, knife-fights, pepperings with buckshot, and an ear bitten off; where a leading "herbs" dealer who takes a busload of his best customers to Chicago (to see the home team lose a ball game) decides en route that he is "The Governor of Kentucky," and easily convinces restaurateurs and highway patrolmen that it is their good luck to meet up with him; where "My Brother Erric," found guilty of "breaking and entering" by a lower court, has his conviction overturned by a more enlightened "higher court," which perceives that under the circumstances (he got into a men's clothing store which was undergoing repairs by climbing a wall and letting himself down) he could not possibly be said to have "broken and entered." This is a world where a family that counts for not much else counts, more or less, nine votes.

Stuart's book, obviously timed to reach a national audience with its political consciousness—and conscience—raised by recent events, draws together old stories previously published in **Georgia Review**, **American Mercury**, **Esquire**, **Country Gentlemen** and elsewhere, adding others perhaps more recent but not really distinguishable except in the minor trappings. The stories seem to say, in effect, "Why, here in Kentucky we've had some real cute little skulduggeries going on all along." Maybe it is being too straight-faced to note of these funny little tall tales that they lack complexity or real substance. Certainly some are uproarious comic epics on a small scale. And Stuart's purpose, one assumes, is not to explore character or to moralize, but rather to tell good stories, to show us again some scenes from the divine comedy in hyperbole.

The stories where the characters move fast, like "The Governor of Kentucky" and the title tale, are the best: we don't have time to worry about the two-dimensional, stereotypic, stock-gag aspect of Stuart's method. Occasionally, when he does offer a more sober piece, as in "The Senator is Dead" (where none of the many constituents the senator befriended in life show up to sit with his body in death), we get something maudlin and implausible. But one had best emphasize the stories' real virtues—as cartoons of grass roots politics, as old-style local color, as engaging narratives, and as projections of a genial-natured, sharp-eyed man who takes pleasure in the comic spectacle around him, without worrying us very much about any ultimate significance or complexity beneath its surface.

Neil Graves

Gone With The Old River. By Evilena Filbeck. Paducah, Kentucky, 1972.

When eighteen year old Katie McCoy leaves Gilbertsville, Kentucky, in 1939 for Texas to join her parents, who have been forced to sell their land to the TVA for the construction of Kentucky Dam, the author comments that Katie "didn't realize then that all her life she would seek for what she was leaving today." Several chapters earlier, the author had said that the people of Gilbertsville had few neuroses in the late nineteen thirties. These statements, coupled with the book's title, lead the reader to believe that the story will celebrate the idyllic life of Gilbertsville

before TVA obliterated it. However, the episodes in the book itself seem to work at cross purposes with the author's intention.

Pre-TVA life in Gilbertsville seemed to have more in common with neuroses-ridden Winesburg, Ohio, than with Tom Sawyer's Hannibal, Missouri. The town had little charity for some of those who deviated from its tight norms. For example, the Broghs were nearly ostracized because they did not attend the basketball games and sometimes criticized those who did. The Board of Education fired Bendell Johnston, one of the town's best teachers and the son of kindly old Doc Johnston, because when he was drunk he once propositioned Barbara Thanning, a good looking girl with a bad reputation. Nor was the most ghastly violence absent from Gilbertsville. Scott Falbert got drunk on moonshine and chased his father with a butcher knife. When his mother shoved a chair in front of him, he fell and died, the knife running through his own chest. Jed Thanning, the no-account father of Barbara, shot and killed Johnny Motts, the young man Katie had married (but never loved) right after graduation. In the confusion, Barbara, who was carrying Johnny's child, accidentally killed her own father.

There were other less lurid signs of neurosis and unhappiness. As she is growing up, Katie thinks of her neighbor, Mrs. Gilbert, as an "old bat" who "horns in" on her life. Salvatore Bryant, a generally good man, cruelly jeers at his son's dream for a new Gilbertsville made possible by the dams and lakes. Katie, ashamed of her younger brother Tommy and having little in common with her sister Sandra, quarrels and bickers with them both. She married Johnny merely because she wanted an ostentatious wedding to make Anita Brogh jealous. After she married him, she wouldn't allow him to get in the same bed with her. In fact, Katie's life was little more than a series of strategies to win any man who rejected her, as she seemed to seek adulation, not love. From her point of view, Gilbertsville women typically "burped out loud, had onion breath and flabby stomachs that sagged . . . Housewives cooked three square meals a day and were old after they reached thirty. Then they lamented about their ailments, gushed over babies, moaned about morals and eyed young girls with suspicion." It is in passages such as this that the author's prose has the convincing ring of truth.

In addition, there are some smaller authentic touches in the book, reminders of how rapidly Western Kentucky—and America itself—has changed. We are told that in 1938 "few people owned cars and the ones who did walked to save the good tires," that "shorts and halters would have been scandalous in Gilbertsville," that TVA men introduced sunglasses to the town, that "telephones and listening on the party line had not yet come to Gilbertsville," that people fanned themselves with the "palm-leafed fans or cardboard affairs" provided by funeral homes. Authentic, too, is the state basketball tournament where Gilbertsville girls try to get the boys to play with their shirt tails in, the Faulkner-like episode involving TVA's attempt to remove Bell Bowers from her home, and the outhouse vignette where Tommy McCoy saw "Flora's bottom dollar."

Local readers will derive pleasure trying to recognize themselves and their neighbors, even though the author says that no "resemblance is intended to any real person." What the outsider asks, however, is whether the author has followed the contours of truth which the material in the book seems to suggest. The history probably is accurate; the story is not without interest; but the deeper hunger for truth which fiction can supply is left unsatisfied.

John E. McCluskey

Backward Glance. By Ouida Jewell. Fulton, Kentucky: Fulton Publishing Company, 1973.

Although this book purports to be, as its subtitle indicated, "A History of Fulton County . . . and surrounding area," it is rather an anecdotal recounting of certain places, people, and events the author has garnered in her twenty-five years of collecting historical memorabilia. Miss Jewell has divided her work into three distinct sections that are really three separate books.

The first section is a rather unstructured "history" of the southwestern Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee areas. Although it is extremely difficult for the reader to discern any pattern or form in the narrative, this section does contain some interesting material. An example is the letter from a resident of the New Madrid territory to Rev. Lorenzo Dow which is a fascinating eye-witness account of the New Madrid earthquake of 1811-12.

The second section is a chatty autobiography of the author. Miss Jewell has led a varied and interesting life and her telling of it is witty and at times charming. Her experiences during World War II and the nineteen fifties will revive nostalgic memories in many of her readers.

Section three consists of eighty-one short biographies of some of the families of the Fulton area. While they should afford interesting reading for those who know the people personally, the individual portraits lack the depth and breadth to make them come alive for the general reader. Indeed, the author has assumed a formal style in the biographies which is at variance with the tone of the preceding sections.

This is a very uneven work, but the author's personal charm comes through. She obviously loves the people and places she writes about, and this can overcome many of the shortcomings the book may have. The photographs are fine and add immeasurably to the work as a whole.

I must add one last word on the printing and format. To be kind, it is atrocious. It is a rare paragraph that doesn't contain one or more typographical errors. This book deserved better than that.

Frank Windham

Uncle Bud Long: The Birth of a Kentucky Folk Legend. By Kenneth W. Clarke. Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1973.

This little book is an attempt to trace the genesis of a folk legend set in the Clark's Landing vicinity of Warren County, Kentucky. But it is more than just this. Once the legend is substantiated, synthesized, and documented, the author goes forward two more steps: each motif is analyzed and integrated into the pattern of the legend, and there is a final commentary on the interrelations of legend, literary folklore, and historical perspective.

Although Uncle Bud, a menial cutter of railroad ties, can not keep company with such folk heroes as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, or Johnny Appleseed, he was the progenitor of a folk legend in the Barren River area which has lasted for three generations. Uncle Bud came from out of nowhere with his wagon, his jennies, his wife, and his reputedly incestuous family. He left as he had come, except that his wife had died and was buried in the region.

Based on anecdotes collected from a host of informants plus a thorough knowledge of the area, its mores, and its folk culture, the author has reconstructed the humble and mundane world in which Bud Long, his wife, and Frankie and Janey lived and labored. This section of the book reads like fiction, and, although there are streams of nostalgia, they do not veil the harsh realities in the lives of the humble folk of the area.

Mr. Clarke makes a strong point of the interrelations of the well-spring of folk and universal literature, and pleads for further scholarly study of this theory. A strong case also is made for legend as history, however much historians may disagree with this point of view. His well-taken points are convincingly and articulately made.

The book is enhanced by authentic photographs, pencil line drawings, and a detailed hand-sketched map of the Barren River area. Stylistically, the book is graceful and delightful.

Uncle Bud Long: The Birth of a Kentucky Folk Legend is a scholarly book in the best sense of the word. There is much in it to recommend it to a wide audience: the general reader, the amateur folklore buff, and the mature academic folklore scholar.

James E. Spears