

4-1-1966

## William Faulkner's Caledonia: A Note on Intruder in the Dust

Elmo Howell

*Memphis State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Howell, Elmo (2013) "William Faulkner's Caledonia: A Note on Intruder in the Dust," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 3: Iss. 4, 248–252.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol3/iss4/6>

This Notes/Documents is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

William Faulkner's Caledonia:

A Note on *Intruder in the Dust*

Caledonia Chapel stands on a pine-covered ridge of Beat Four in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, beside the burying ground of the Gowries, Frasers, McCallums, and Workitts, who used to be Urquharts. The name Caledonia is not accidental (a neighboring hamlet is called Glasgow), for it is part of William Faulkner's design to draw a parallel between the hill country South and Scotland, where, according to Faulkner, most upland Southerners trace their heritage. Like the South, Scotland has known defeat and witnessed the slow diminution of her distinctive culture under the influence of a more powerful neighbor. And like the South, she has been sullen, perverse, and at times rebellious.<sup>1</sup>

This parallel appealed to Faulkner's imagination. When he was in Japan in 1955, he told a group of Japanese students that the people in his country, meaning the South, are mostly of Scottish origin. "We have lived remote from railroads, communications, until a few years ago, and so our talk, our expressions, are identical to ones you hear today in Scotland." He cites as examples *redd*, meaning "clean," as "to redd a room"; and *reaver*, or "thief," which he was to use later with a different spelling as the title of a novel. "In all the dialect of that section, you find any number of words, terms just like those used in Scotland, for the reason we are of Scottish descent."<sup>2</sup> In *The Town*, Gavin Stevens says that even he can remember when whisky was "usquebaugh," produced in the "pathless perpendicular hill country of McCallum and Gowrie and Frazier and Muir."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In addition to *Intruder in the Dust* and *The Town*, which are cited in this paper, Faulkner traced the connection between Scotland and the South in the Compson Appendix, which he added to *The Sound and the Fury* in 1945. For incidental reference, see also *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, 1936), p. 241; *The Hamlet* (New York, 1940), pp. 4-5; the short story "Monk" in *Knights Gambit* (New York, 1949), pp. 40-45; and *Faulkner in the University*, eds., Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, 1959), pp. 126, 135. The short story "Victory," first published in 1931, about a Scottish officer in the World War is laid in Britain and France and bears no relationship to the South.

<sup>2</sup> *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed., Robert A. Jelliffee (Tokyo, 1956), pp. 74-75.

<sup>3</sup> *The Town* (New York, 1957), pp. 316-317.

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

In the linguistic parallel, Faulkner is pressing a point, for "usquebaugh," like "reaver" and "redd," is no longer in common use, even among the most culturally isolated of Faulkner's North Mississippi. When *The Reivers* appeared in 1962, the local reviewers were as puzzled as everyone else over what appeared to be a capricious title. Faulkner is engaging in a bit of nostalgia in trying to hang on to the old associations, but more importantly he is establishing a parallel which assists on occasions to illuminate his art.

In *Intruder in the Dust*, for example, the Gowries are the Negro-phobes, the would-be lynchers, who seem to represent Faulkner's indictment of a certain element of Southern society. Paradoxically, however, the Gowries, particularly the old one-armed father, emerge with the reader's respect, if not admiration. Beat Four, a patriarchal society interlocked and intermarried, is a world apart from Jefferson and the rest of the county. Its discipline is instant and fierce. County officers by-pass it, and Federal officers have gone into the country and vanished. The extra dimension which lifts the Gowries above the stereotyped Southern poor white derives from the conscious portrayal of Beat Four as a Highland fastness.

Chuck Mallison describes the hill-country to the east of Jefferson as he and his uncle approach it: "the long lift of the first pine ridge standing across half the horizon and beyond it a sense a feel of others, the mass of them seeming not so much to stand rush abruptly up out of the plateau as to hang suspended over it as his uncle had told him the Scottish highlands did except for this sharpness and color."<sup>4</sup> The church, not much larger than a single room, is built of wood, weathered, unpainted, and solitary among the pines, suggesting the austere faith of the Covenanters. The boy from Jefferson remembered other churches, "the tall slender spires which said Peace and the squatter utilitarian belfries which said Repent and he remembered one which even said Beware but this one said simply: Burn."<sup>5</sup> This description of Caledonia has been quoted to suggest the sinister relationship between man and his church in the South, a sort of Cameronian fanaticism translated to the Bible Belt. Like Scott, Faulkner disapproves of the immoderate view, but not with malice. Bigotry is transformed into character. The church is a wretched frame box, but it is not shabby, nor in neglect or disrepair. "He could see where sections of raw new lumber and scraps and fragments of synthetic roofing had been patched

<sup>4</sup> *Intruder in the Dust* (New York, 1948), p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

and carpentered into the old walls and shingles with a savage almost insolent promptitude."<sup>6</sup> The impression is one of character and strength.

Old Gowrie rules his clan with the authority of a Highland chief. He is clearly distinguished from the sons, who though taller resemble their father in appearance, even to the hooked nose, "except that it was not the beak of an eagle but rather that of a hawk."<sup>7</sup> The old man is named for Nathan Bedford Forrest, for whom he in turn names his oldest son, the successful manager of a cotton plantation in the Delta; but two of the other sons are named Vardaman and Bilbo, as if to emphasize the gulf between the two generations. Crawford, the second son, is a murderer and a fratricide. The blood has gone wrong, but even Crawford's violence suggests the parent stock. He was a deserter from the United States army and lived for almost eighteen months in caves and tunnels within fifteen miles of the Federal courthouse in Jefferson and at the final moment staged his own battle against the Federal government by holding off officers for "thirty-odd hours" with a German automatic pistol.<sup>8</sup>

But if the Negro Lucas Beauchamp had been lynched, it would have been at the direction of the father, Nub Gowrie, who represents the best and worst of his kind. One of the finest scenes in *Intruder in the Dust* is the confrontation between the old man and the sheriff Hope Hampton at the Gowrie boy's grave in Caledonia churchyard. Followed by two of his sons on horseback, Gowrie rides into the clearing on a claybank mare, "in a wide pale hat and a clean faded blue shirt whose empty left sleeve was folded neatly back and pinned cuff to shoulder with a safety pin." He stops the mare and swings himself lightly and rapidly down with his one hand and comes "with that light wiry almost springy rapidity" through the gate and up to them. The sheriff stands beside the grave where two Negroes are at work.

"What's going on around here, Shurf?"

"I'm going to open this grave, Mr. Gowrie," the sheriff said.

"No, Shurf," the other said, immediate, with no change whatever in the voice: not disputative, nothing; just a statement: "Not that grave."

The Negroes break to run, but the sheriff stops them. "That's right,

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

boys," Gowrie says. "I aint going to hurt you. I'm talking to the Shurf here. Not my boy's grave, Shurf." The old man is a match for Hampton, and he has his way, calm, intractable, and ruthless in what he conceives as his right. But the reality of the scene comes "suddenly with amazement," in a surprising note of pathos. "Why, he's grieving," the boy observes, the "violent foulmouthed godless old man" grieving for his worthless son.<sup>9</sup>

Scotland, to Faulkner, suggests the Lost Cause, Prince Charles Edward (for whom a Compson progenitor was named), defeat and valor, old times and old ways. In 1806, after a fervent speech against liberal innovation, Walter Scott was bantered by the arch-Whig Jeffrey of the *Edinburgh Review* and another of his reforming friends. But Scott's feelings had been moved to an extent beyond their comprehension. "No, no," he said, "'tis no laughing matter; little by little, whatever your wishes may be, you will destroy and undermine, until nothing of what makes Scotland Scotland shall remain." And he turned his face to hide his tears.<sup>10</sup> Though William Faulkner was not committed to a Tory cause, he was, as much as Scott, emotionally involved with his country; and his interest in Scotland was part of his attachment to home. Like Scott, he loved all that is venerable and old. No other writer has portrayed with such completeness the manners, speech, and modes of thought of the South. None has evoked with such poignancy the feeling of what it means to be a Southerner. As sectional differences fade away in the growing current of national life, the Southerner should find comfort in the knowledge that his culture is preserved in Faulkner's art. Indeed, what Faulkner has done for the South is commensurate with what Scott has done for Scotland in the early Waverley novels.

But, above all, Scotland to Faulkner means character. The McCallums of *Sartoris* and "The Tall Men" are among Faulkner's finest examples of the manly ideal. Old Anse McCallum walked home from Virginia after Appomattox, built a log house, married and (like Nub Gowrie) fathered six sons, four of whom he named for Confederate heroes. In the backwoods of Yoknapatawpha County, they carry on the frontier virtues of independence and self-reliance. In "The Tall Men," Faulkner describes the McCallum reaction to government intervention during the Roosevelt years. They refuse to subscribe to the

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-161.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1900), I, 460. (Chapter XV.)

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

government acreage control and to accept government aid in the form of subsidies. "Give that to them that want to take it. We can make out."<sup>11</sup> In his dependence on outside help, Faulkner suggests, modern man has renounced his heritage from the old tough fathers, who would have looked upon a welfare check as charity. "We have about decided man don't need a backbone any more; to have one is old-fashioned."<sup>12</sup>

The Gowries, neighbors of the McCallums, possess the same rugged independence, which they brought with them from the Scottish mountains, along with their usquebaugh and pot stills. In their mixed character, they represent the peculiar ambivalence in Faulkner's attitude towards his country. He loves it despite its faults, recognizing even in Gowrie violence an element of character, of manhood, which seems to be disappearing in a mass society. The individual, he says, should oppose the mass. There was a time when individuality, "compounded of resourcefulness and independence and uniqueness," was not only recognized but rewarded. Whatever errors the past reflects, let us abolish it, he says, only when something better can be substituted and not "simply because it was."<sup>13</sup> Caledonia Chapel, rising stark and unlovely from a hill in Beat Four, is a vestige of that past, "solitary but not forlorn, intractable and independent, asking nothing of any, making compromise with none."<sup>14</sup> Faulkner's use of his tough Scots heritage is another way of recalling his countrymen to a frontier ideal, which they have all but relinquished in the growing trend towards conformity.

ELMO HOWELL

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

<sup>11</sup> *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York, 1950), p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> William Faulkner, Acceptance Speech on Presentation of Gold Medal of Fiction, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters*. Second Series, No. 13 (New York, 1963), p. 227.

<sup>14</sup> *Intruder in the Dust*, p. 157.