

# Raising a Flag for Mr. Davidson

by Randall Ivey

*"An outlaw fumbling for the latch, a voice  
Commanding in a dream where no flag flies."*

—Donald Davidson, "Lee in the Mountains"

**Where No Flag Flies:  
Donald Davidson and the  
Southern Resistance**

by Mark Royden Winchell

Columbia: University of Missouri Press;  
386 pp., \$29.95

The University of Missouri's publication of *Where No Flag Flies: Donald Davidson and the Southern Resistance* does much to redress a literary grievance. Donald Davidson, the late poet and professor of English at Vanderbilt University, has often appeared as either a peripheral figure or a "co-star" in works that attempted to decipher or debunk the mystique of Agrarianism. Not since Thomas Daniel Young's and M. Thomas Inge's 1971 *Donald Davidson* has there been a book devoted exclusively to the life and achievements, both creative and philosophical, of Davidson. The appearance of Professor Winchell's excellent and thorough new biography is a welcome event; it may also turn out to be something of a milestone.

Winchell's study owes its origin to M.E. Bradford. Bradford had collected



material over the years for a projected biography of his teacher, but by his untimely death in early 1993, he had written only one chapter. Two years later, Bradford's widow, Marie, urged Professor Winchell to take up where her husband had left off.

In his preface, Winchell sums up his case for Davidson:

He is universally regarded as one of the four most important poets of the Fugitive movement, which is it-

self one of the two most important groups to write in English during the twentieth century. . . . As a social and political writer, he was one of the most significant influences on conservative thought in the twentieth century. . . . [H]e produced a substantial body of literary criticism, the libretto of an American folk opera, a widely used composition textbook, and a remarkable novel, which was published nearly three decades after his death.

Davidson's compatriots John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren have not lacked for serious attention, and Winchell considers Davidson's poetry the equal of the verse of these three men. But Ransom, Tate, and Warren made peace with a world and a mindset that remained alien to Davidson. The three of them wound up in "enemy" territory: Ransom escaped to Ohio to edit the *Kenyon Review*; Tate, to New York to pursue fame and his many mistresses; and Warren, to New Haven, Connecticut, to write of his native Kentucky. Davidson, however, remained in Nashville for the rest of his career and life. Ransom tossed off his Agrarian armor in later years and embraced the smooth silk robes of the New Deal, while Warren wrote tracts chastising the South for its

Randall Ivey is a fiction writer who teaches at the University of South Carolina in Union.

position in the War Between the States. Only Davidson remained unreconstructed to the end, an ardent hater of centralization in all its guises in government, in the arts, and in American social life; he never trimmed his political sails to meet the winds of fashion. In many ways, he was the Last Agrarian (to crib a chapter-name from Winchell's book). While the Democratic Party, once the sacred home of the white Southerner, veered off into Rooseveltian socialism, Davidson remained Jeffersonian to the end, as did his good friend and fellow Bread Loaf retreat instructor Robert Frost (a reactionary who would have embraced the epithet with some pleasure and justification).

In matters of art and literature, Ransom, Tate, and Warren experimented with modernism and accepted many of its tenets at face value. Davidson, on the other hand, was a more pragmatic modernist. He could never appreciate Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "What he found most lacking in Eliot's verse," says Winchell, "was 'memorableness'—that is 'happiness and ultimateness of expression.'" As Davidson observed to Tate,

No matter how adequate a form of expression may seem to you as a poet, you must consider that artistic expression in a void is a pretty poor proposition; that is where Eliot is going. . . . He is . . . in a vacuum, in [The] Waste Land, which I have read three times, with no gleam whatever of comprehension.

Davidson also loathed the Joycean notion of the artist as alienated from his own community, defying its conventions and shaking off its bonds. For him, the artist was a bard of his place, a recorder of its deeds and denizens; the only way a proper and accurate record could be kept was if the artist were *part* of the community, not estranged from it. He distrusted literature that could not be shared by a community at large, whether its members were learned or not. "A poetry that puts itself in a position not to be recited," Winchell quotes him saying at the 1956 reunion of the Fugitives, "not to be sung, hardly ever to be read aloud from the page where it stands, almost never to be memorized, is nearing the danger age of absurdity."

For the most part, Davidson avoided experimentation. Only in his first collection, *An Outland Piper*, did he employ

such mythological figures as dryads, nymphs, and dragons to differentiate the "world of mundane experience from the realm of imagination." To many of the critics who have bothered to read Davidson's later verse, he seems hopelessly antiquated, provincial, and unworthy of further critical attention. Instead of following in the footsteps of Joyce and Eliot, Davidson wrote about the mountain people of Tennessee, the "tall men," as he dubbed them: men such as Andrew Jackson and his own frontier kinsman, Andrew Davidson (the indefatigable Indian fighter), and, of course, tall men of even broader regional significance such as Robert E. Lee. While depicting the sterility of modern life, he contrasts it with his people's rich past—the history of those men and women who cleared the wilderness and made a place for civilization. Where there is confusion in his poems, it is over an industrialism that has supplanted the old ways, the old dispensation.

In Davidson's one novel, *The Big Bad Jamboree*, published posthumously, he celebrates *real* country music, the music of these very real people, with its roots buried deep in the folk and bluegrass traditions of the region and bearing no resemblance to the pop-saturated confectations churned out by the likes of Shania Twain and Garth Brooks (who claim Elton John and Billy Joel as their main influences).

Davidson's earliest aspirations were not literary; like many young boys of his day, he wanted to be a train engineer. He showed no real interest in literature until his second matriculation at Vanderbilt following a stint with the U.S. Army during World War I. (In France, he nearly lost his life under enemy fire.) Upon returning to Nashville, he fell in with a group of young men who gathered around a rather eccentric Nashvillian named Sidney Hirsch. Hirsch acted as a kind of intellectual mentor to Davidson and his young friends, all of whom would gather at Hirsch's home on 20th Avenue to discuss linguistic and literary matters and to be entertained by Hirsch's various flights of fancy. Later, when Davidson brought along his Vanderbilt Shakespeare professor, John Crowe Ransom, the group's discussions focused on poetry. Ransom also gave the proceedings a much-needed dose of gravity. The first fruit of these informal meetings was the *Fugitive* magazine, a brilliant literary journal featuring poetry and essays that

was published from 1922 until 1925. Although each member of the group made some contribution to the *Fugitive*, the bulk of the "dirty work"—the editing, the selling of subscriptions, etc.—fell to Davidson, who performed the tasks often without recompense or recognition but out of sheer love for the thing at hand. The later, and much greater, result of the *Fugitive* meetings, of course, was *I'll Take My Stand*.

As a young man, Davidson considered himself a political moderate, although he was careful to delineate *his* liberalism as the 18th-century Jeffersonian variety, not New Deal liberalism. His early political views were probably influenced by Dr. Edwin Mims, the president of Vanderbilt and author of the Southern Progressive bible, *The Advancing South: Stories of Progress and Reaction*. Following Mims' cue, Davidson assumed a "progressive" stance regarding the Scopes trial: He was concerned that the people of Dayton, Tennessee, were drawing unnecessary attention and thus exposing themselves and their state to the rest of the nation as a mob of ill-informed hicks bent on thwarting progress. Still, a case can be made that Davidson was never a liberal in the modern sense, because his foremost concerns were always regional and, therefore, conservative. He believed that, through the wisdom earned by its collective experience, Tennessee knew what was best for Tennessee just as South Carolina knows what is best for South Carolina, and New England knows what is best for itself. He feared and despised centralization of any kind and thought that the concentration in the Northeast of power and prestige in the arts would lead to mediocrity in culture. Davidson believed that local communities should form their own artistic traditions. In a searing essay on contemporary art entitled "New York and the Hinterlands," he excoriated cultural centralization:

To a people the greater part of whom were schooled in Protestant religion and morality New York presented, with a knowing leer, under the guise of literary classics, the works of voluptuaries and pervers, the teeming pages of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and all the choicest remains of the literary bordellos of the ancient and modern world. German Expressionism, French Dadaism, the erotic primitivism of D.H. Lawrence, the gigantic *fin de*

siècle pedantries of James Joyce, the infantilism of Gertrude Stein and various Parisian coteries—these furnished the catchwords of the clever people.

Davidson so hated New York and all it represented that, when he drove to Vermont to attend the Bread Loaf every year, he did his best to circumvent the city, even if it meant going hundreds of miles out of his way.

Davidson was a merciless critic of big business; in fact, the primary targets of *I'll Take My Stand* are rampant industrialism and materialism. In his contribution to the forum, "A Mirror for Artists," Davidson worries about the influence of big business on the production and dissemination of art, which he feared would be turned into just another commodity to be bought and sold. "The leisure thus offered [by mass industrialism]," he writes,

is really no leisure at all; either it is pure sloth, under which the arts

take on the character of mere entertainment, purchased in boredom and enjoyed in utter passivity; or it is another kind of labor, taken up out of a sense of duty, pursued as a kind of fashionable enterprise for which one's courage must be continually whipped up by reminders of one's obligation to culture.

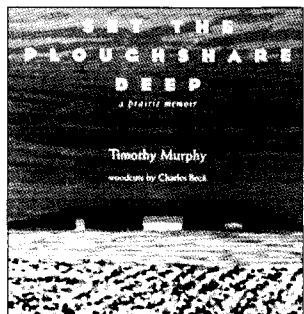
The consistency of Davidson's political philosophy occasionally embarrassed his Vanderbilt colleagues. Winchell's chapter "Who Will Speak for the White Man" provides the key to understanding why Davidson's work has been largely ignored: He was an unapologetic supporter of segregation. He did not hate black people (as some of his less thoughtful detractors have claimed), but he believed in the old system because it was all he had ever known. While such an arrangement remained in place, he reasoned, society could maintain proper social and political order. He was neither an agitator nor a violent protester in this cause but worked quietly through legitimate means, including cofounding the Tennessee Founda-

tion for Constitutional Government, which paid for legal aid for those who had been arrested in public demonstrations against forced integration.

If Davidson attained greatness, it was probably not as a poet but as a teacher and polemicist. For more than 50 years at Vanderbilt, he sowed seeds in the minds of some of the 20th century's finest poets, novelists, and critics. The roster of his students includes Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, Jesse Stuart, Cleanth Brooks, James Dickey, Elizabeth Spencer, Madison Jones, Mel Bradford, and many others who have publicly remembered their former teacher with great reverence and gratitude.

While most of the Agrarians eventually renounced the beliefs expressed in *I'll Take My Stand*, embracing more fashionable—and profitable—views, Davidson remained steadfast to the end. Winchell's Donald Davidson is not a cold, humorless, austere ideologue but a man deeply in love with music, literature, his wife, his state, and with his region and its rich and enduring culture and heritage.

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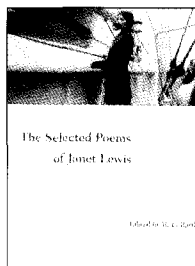


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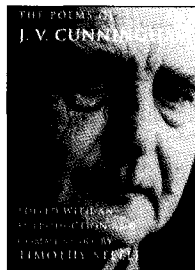
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## Mr. Clinton's Legacy

by Clark Stooksbury

### "Feeling Your Pain": The Explosion and Abuse of Government Power in the Clinton-Gore Years

by James Bovard

New York: St. Martin's Press;  
426 pp., \$26.95



Bill Clinton has often been compared to Warren G. Harding, and considering that president's scandals and adulterous affair within the White House, the parallel seems valid. The better comparison, however, may be with Harding's predecessor, Woodrow Wilson. At least that is the impression one gets reading James Bovard's book. Under Wilson, the country witnessed a huge growth in government through such things as the income-tax amendment, the Federal Reserve, and the Espionage Act. The century's teen years also witnessed the Great War, the Creel Commission, and the Palmer raids. The 1990's gave us the bombing of Yugoslavia, Barry McCaffrey's insertion of drug-war propaganda into network TV, and Janet Reno. While Clinton's record is modest compared to Wilson's, Bovard—a libertarian journalist—has still assumed a formidable burden in documenting eight years of lies and abuse of power.

The more benign aspects of Clinton's legacy are found in those few remaining government agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, whose calling cards aren't submachine guns, tanks, and no-knock warrants. FEMA was created in the Carter years to cope with natural disasters or nuclear war; President Clinton has turned it into an open spigot, freely dispensing cash. After an earthquake in California in 1994, FEMA sent checks to many residents on the basis of their ZIP codes, including many who had made no damage claim; the agency has performed similar acts across the country, even in less electoral-vote-rich states.

The AmeriCorps "service" program,

one of Clinton's proudest accomplishments, is a massive boondoggle on which Bovard has shone a penetrating light. AmeriCorps would be a waste of money if it consisted of earnest, ponytailed youths collecting aluminum cans in the name of public service. It is, however, far more insidious, much of its purpose being to serve as a backdrop for Clinton propaganda rallies and to engage in illegal political agitation. "Some AmeriCorps projects seem to be largely federally paid rabble-rousing," Bovard writes.

AmeriCorps is paying four members to work with the Political Asylum Project of Austin, Texas. Program director Nidia Salamanca declared: "There are a lot of immigrants who are in detention right now—we see how their rights are being violated by police officers and by detention officers—we document INS encounters with immigrants—if they are respecting their rights." AmeriCorps support for the Whatcom [Washington State] Human Rights Task Force is paying for AmeriCorps members to "organize the Hispanic population . . . to develop a program of monitoring, reporting and stopping INS . . . abuses of the Hispanic population."

When not serving as the Clinton Youth or aiding illegal immigrants, AmeriCorps members recruit people to sign up as food-stamp recipients, engage in toy-gun buy-back programs, agitate for housing subsidies and rent control, and encourage child sex-abuse witch-hunts in Janet Reno's old South Florida stomping grounds. Americorps has also taken up the cause of child literacy, despite the fact that the

largest single item that AmeriCorps spends for training its own members is for General Equivalency Degree (GED) preparation—helping AmeriCorps members get their high school degree.

The meat of "*Feeling Your Pain*" lies in its dozens of examples of federal assaults on the liberty and property of average Americans in the last eight years. Much

of what Bovard recounts is old hat, but it is useful—and terrifying—to see it gathered in one place. The Waco assault was a defining moment in the Clinton years: In this single episode, the administration displayed its dishonesty, contempt for human life, and deadly desire to help "the children." Bovard covers territory familiar to anyone who has studied the raid, but his account still makes for chilling reading as he quotes Democrats, terrified by the prospect of any examination of the government's actions at Mount Carmel, attempting to cover up the disaster. According to then-congressman Charles Schumer, attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice were "an attack on the ATF." This planned hearing was simply some red meat to some of those extreme right forces." Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin perversely explained that the Waco raid could not be understood "outside of the context of [the] Oklahoma City [bombing]" that occurred two years later, the implication being that only some sort of Nazi terrorist would question the raid. When, in 1999, the cover was stripped from some of the government's lies, Janet Reno attempted to preserve a few shreds of credibility; the investigation she called for, however, had problems. "Reno could have recused herself from any role in choosing a new person to reinvestigate Waco," Bovard suggests. "Instead, she personally chose John Danforth, a former senator and a golfing buddy of Clinton's, to be in charge of the reinvestigation."

As Bovard observes, Bill Clinton has been the most anti-gun president in U.S. history: He signed the Brady Bill into law in 1993 and the "assault weapons" ban in 1994. Truth, however, has been the biggest casualty in Clinton's war on guns. The President, who has enjoyed pandering to the police, made a special show of appearing with the widows of police officers killed by "cop-killer bullets," which can penetrate police body armor. Memorializing Daniel Doffyn, a Chicago cop killed in 1995, Clinton proclaimed that, "if a bullet can rip through a bulletproof vest like knife through hot butter, then it ought to be history. We should ban it." But Bovard reveals a minor detail that the leader of the free world left out: "Doffyn died after being shot in the head as well as being shot in the chest