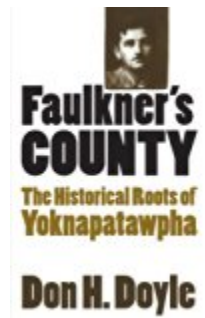




Don H. Doyle. *Faulkner's County: The Historical Roots of Yoknapatawpha*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xv + 536 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-4931-6.

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True Stories: The Actual History of Faulkner's Imaginary South

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Characteristic of his taste for contradiction, William Faulkner called the setting for his novels and stories both "actual" and "apocryphal." Yoknapatawpha County is the place where he resolved his simultaneous impulses to invent and to document. Setting the imaginary Yoknapatawpha within the real Lafayette County, Mississippi, Don H. Doyle demonstrates how remarkable was Faulkner's synthesis, how well Faulkner's fictional setting meshed with the history of his source, and why his neighbors marveled about Faulkner's recall of local history. A voracious collector of hometown stories and gossip, Faulkner claimed the literary question he most often provoked around town was, "How in the hell did he remember all that" (p. 6).

Faulkner's fictional world is a county where "The past is never dead," as he contended, "it's not even past." Malcolm Cowley saw that "Yoknapatawpha County is a region where every landmark has a story of its own, and every story goes back to earlier times." [1] Doyle mines Faulkner's fiction and finds illustrative references in the lives of Colonel Sartoris and Thomas Sutpen, in the McCaslins, Snopeses, and Coldfields, for much of what he wants to say about the tragedy and endurance he finds in Southern history. Faulkner's characters help Doyle tell a long story, from the early years of white settlement on the Mississippi on the lands of the dispossessed Chickasaws, through the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the

Civil Rights era. Reading the novels as primary sources, Doyle finds himself coming to admire Faulkner "not only as a writer but also as a historian – an interpreter of the past" (p. 1).

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha may be the most extraordinary place in American fiction, but it is Lafayette County's unexceptional story that provides Doyle with the rationale of his book. "We can learn from this kind of case study," Doyle asserts, "not because Lafayette County was in any way exceptional or because events took place here of great significance to the nation's history. On the contrary, this county and its people present a rather typical, even ordinary, portrait of the southern past" (p. 3). Doyle writes a form of micro-history, intending to make Lafayette characteristic of the South as a whole, using this "postage stamp of native soil" to review the entire sweep of Southern history (p. xiii). The region is too varied to have ever been defined by any one of its counties, but Doyle's Lafayette well represents the turbulent, frontier, fire-eating, and redeemed Deep South.[2]

Doyle triangulates among three points—Faulkner's novels, Lafayette county history, and the broader perspective of Southern history. In so doing, he taps into Faulkner's sense of drama and his ironic humanism. "Faulkner," he claims, "was very conscious of the massive forces of change that had swept through his part of the world, and that is what his Yoknapatawpha saga chronicles" (p. 373). Faulkner's accounts, in fact, often read like primary sources. For example, John Eaton was

a chaplain with the Union army who wrote about ex-slaves in their first days of freedom flowing into camp. “Faulkner’s own depiction of the exodus of slaves out of Mississippi,” Doyle writes, “bears a remarkable resemblance to Eaton’s” (p. 220).

Doyle begins by translating that famous and difficult word, Yoknapatawpha (and provides the pronunciation, YOK-na-pa-TAW-pha), which Faulkner took from the Chickasaw name for a river that flows through Lafayette County. He translates it into English as “land divided” or “split land,” an apt and symbolic name for the troubled history he traces. Doyle sees the settling of the frontier as a continuous, roiling movement. “The so-called Old South was no tradition-bound society of landed gentry with deep ties to place; especially in its western regions, it was young, opportunistic, and forever moving” (p. 101). Across a landscape of pine-covered hills and rich river-bottom passed an unending stream of migrants and settlers, from the Chickasaws to DeSoto and his adventurers, from a swarm of cotton planters, slaves, yeomen, and poor whites, moving westward, unceasingly, through the course of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century’s migrations, to the city and the north. He creates a rich and fast-paced sense of the frontier of the 1830s, the antebellum boom times, and the hardships and trauma of homelife under the siege of war and during Reconstruction.

The method Doyle uses to follow these movements is social history. “Politics and economics, along with many other types of history, must take place within a broader, national or international framework,” he claims, “but social history requires us to scale down to the local context within which ordinary people lived” (p. 5). Doyle creates a synthesis that looks at the broad sweep of politics, economics, agriculture, and geography in the way they operate as a whole within a particular locale.

Doyle relates the building of the railroads in the 1830s, for example, to the developing social organization of the county. He considers religion in the way it blends the county’s various communities. He talks about “migratory streams” of slaves and settlers. His consideration of slavery sees it as having been integral not only to Lafayette’s economy, but also to its society and culture. Slavery under such frontier conditions as existed in northern Mississippi, where slave and master often met as strangers, was less paternalistic, possibly more rationalistic, probably harsher. Doyle looks at the war ceremonies observed in Lafayette County, as throughout the South, as an anthropologist would, and he describes rit-

uals, wrapped in the flag, that placed women in a central role, providing purpose to the Confederate soldier.

Doyle explores the way slaves, poor whites, and women formed their own cultures, and relates them to Faulkner’s fully realized portraits of all kinds of people, freedmen and white yeomen, slave women and fire-eaters, planters and dirt-poor sharecroppers. “It was the slaves themselves who proclaimed their own emancipation,” Doyle writes, and goes on to claim that Faulkner, too, invested his black characters with an exceptional degree of agency. Doyle criticizes Faulkner, however, for falling into “the stock caricatures of the Black Legend of Reconstruction. . . . With other chapters of southern history, Faulkner was often ahead of the historians, but with Reconstruction he seemed unable or unwilling to question the orthodoxy of the day” (p. 254).

Doyle emphasizes the role that freedmen and northerners played in establishing schools for African Americans. But he also follows the development in Lafayette County of sharecropping, documenting the way it forced most farmers, black and white, to cede their independence in free-market peonage. Doyle shows how sharecropping fueled race and class resentment in Lafayette County politics through the turn of the century, and he traces that resentment in Faulkner. “Pretty and white, ain’t it?” Faulkner’s poor, white Ab Snopes sneers to his son, glaring at the plantation house of the farm they’re sharecropping. “That’s sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain’t white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it” (p. 308).

Doyle charts the migration of white, rural families from Lafayette’s farms to Oxford at the turn of the twentieth century and through the Progressive Era, and he makes a defense of this new class against the snobbery of established families, such as Faulkner’s. Doyle also looks at the last of Oxford’s lynchings in the 1930s and at the long Great Migration of African Americans northward between the world wars. He examines Faulkner’s consideration of the civil rights movement; Doyle sees him placing more weight on the benevolence of white liberals than on the activism of black citizens.

In general, Doyle’s nineteenth century, with its detailed account of planter culture and the anthropology of frontier slavery, is richer and more memorable than the Lafayette County he portrays from the 1920s onward. He does little with the county during the Depression, during which Faulkner was publishing *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), among other novels and nu-

merous stories.

Doyle explains that, “Well into the 1920s and 1930s country ways of living continued to pervade the town as much as town ways penetrated the country” (p. 336). True enough, but rural Lafayette County was also being electrified and transformed by mechanization, and its culture was changing just as rapidly. He mentions a county overrun by the kudzu that was planted by the Civilian Conservation Corps, but doesn’t cover other ways the New Deal affected either rural Lafayette County or Oxford. He does far more with the psychological role played by Lafayette’s women during the Civil War, for example, than with their ability to cope with the Depression. Doyle thoroughly examines Lafayette’s Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan, but not the Klan’s resurgence in the 1920s.

A fuller exposition of how World War II changed both Lafayette and Yoknapatawpha Counties would have com-

pleted the theme of ceaseless transformation he had so well begun. Even without it, though, Doyle’s emphasis on the dynamic character of Lafayette County’s history, built on Faulkner’s vivid and acute sense of the past, is a well-crafted synthesis of broad Southern themes in a local social history. Like Faulkner, Doyle sees ceaseless change in a place where the past forever exists in the present.

Notes

[1]. William Faulkner, *The Portable Faulkner*, Malcolm Cowley, ed. (New York: Viking Press. 1946): p. xxxiii.

[2]. As J. William Harris demonstrates, the Southern states can be seen as at least three distinct regions, in terms of geography, culture, agriculture, and industry. J. William Harris, *Deep Souths: Delta, Piedmont, and Sea Island Society in the Age of Segregation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2001).

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