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W.J. Cash: A Life (Book Review)

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W. J. Cash: A Life. By Bruce Clayton. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. xvi + 236 pp. \$24.95.)

The fifty years since the publication of W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* have witnessed an unflagging interest in both the book and its author. Bruce Clayton's biography does justice to both.

Born in 1900, Wilbur J. Cash grew up in the Piedmont of North Carolina, the son of deeply religious parents. The bookish and somewhat odd young man found a haven at Wake Forest College, where he discovered an exciting and liberal atmosphere. After his graduation in 1922, Cash drifted from job to job, aspiring to become a writer in the mold of Joseph Conrad. Often sick, probably from hyperthyroidism, and fearing a nervous breakdown, Cash returned to the home of his parents. He managed a trip through Europe and brief stints at newspapers, writing articles inspired by Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, and Theodore Dreiser, yet the neurasthenia continually reappeared.

The year 1929 brought something of a breakthrough: H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury* accepted one of Cash's articles, a biting portrayal of North Carolina's Democratic boss, written in Menckenesque baroque. Encouraged, Cash turned out several other essays in the sardonic and sarcastic style, dreaming of a book about the South. Laboring in a back room of the post office, living with his parents as town gossips bemoaned his laziness, Cash wrote the first three hundred pages of *The Mind of the South* in 1936. For the next five years, Cash worked on the book whenever he could summon the energy and the courage, whenever he could steal the time from his job at a Charlotte newspaper.

The book was an act of love and desperation. Cash wrestled with the persisting pat-

terns of southern culture, its violence and religiosity, its racism and touchy pride. Writing largely out of his own imagination and experience, Cash offered a brilliant and original interpretation of all southern history. While the book did not win the large sales Cash and his publisher had hoped for, it did garner enthusiastic reviews in the South and elsewhere. Cash's life seemed to turn a corner in 1941; he met a woman whom he soon married, and he won a Guggenheim to write a novel.

No sooner had this long-delayed fulfillment come, though, than it was stripped away. Cash's mental unrest returned with a vengeance, aggravated by illness and his forced abstinence from alcohol. His moods began to oscillate wildly, and he became violent. Cash, anguished by the threat building in Germany, began to hear voices, of Nazis he thought, outside his door. While his wife looked for help, Cash, desperate, hanged himself with his necktie.

Bruce Clayton handles every facet of this difficult story with grace and assurance. Though deeply sympathetic to Cash, Clayton makes neither excuses nor inflated claims for him. He allows us to understand both the allure and the terror of the early twentieth-century South, how it could produce a man such as W. J. Cash and a book such as *The Mind of the South*.

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