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Charles R. McDowell, Jr. : one man's view of the national folklore

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CHARLES R. McDOWELL, JR.

ONE MAN'S VIEW OF THE NATIONAL FOLKLORE

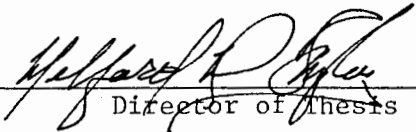
BY
SANDRA LEIGH SPRATLEY

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
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FOR THE DEGREE OF
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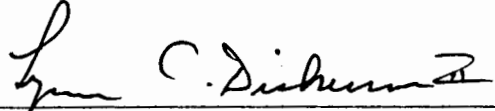
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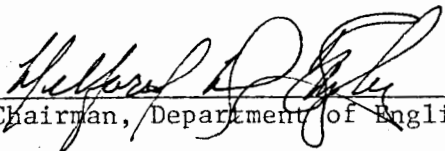
APPROVAL SHEET



Director of Thesis



Second Reader of Thesis



Chairman, Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School

DEDICATED TO
CHARLES RICE McDOWELL, SR.

With love and special thanks to
Charles McDowell, Jr., Welford D.
Taylor, my parents and Frank.

CHAPTER I

Journalism is a useful tool in recording noteworthy occurrences and feelings of a given time period. Because certain journalists may choose to comment on these occurrences, many articles contain information vital to keeping people aware of their world as well as interpretations to help them understand the many confusing situations of the day. The journalist preserves the spoken word in transferring it to the page.

Newspaper and magazine articles are, however, only as timeless as the subject matter. Whereas an article recording Buffalo's city council meeting may only interest a certain group of people for a period of time, an article about singing Christmas carols by the fire may pass from generation to generation. In other words, an article needs mass and traditional appeal if it is to sustain a long life. Both types of articles, dated and timeless, are useful in capturing the characteristics of a group, as both politics and holidays, as well as many other subjects, may be included in the journalist's range of interest.

A journalist's range of interests may be as varied and complex as the range of interests of the audience to whom he is appealing. Whereas Samuel Feinberg in Women's Wear Daily writes mainly for persons interested in business, a perusal through decades of Time shows its

writers trying to reach a larger audience and thus writing on scores of different topics. The longevity of an author's work correlates to the success with which he captures his audience's characteristics and oral traditions. We find that such writers as E. B. White, Finley Peter Dunne, and Mark Twain have succeeded in almost becoming folklore heroes through the use of numerous journalistic styles, ranging from straight reportage to subjective commentary; thus their works are read and cherished for many years.

Charles Rice McDowell, Jr. is another such journalist. In recording and frequently commenting upon various traits of our culture, I believe that his work captures our national folklore (that is, the characters, characterizations and oral traditions that make the group recognizable as a group in the present and the future), and therefore merits serious consideration. It is this writer's intent to study Charles McDowell's definition of our national folklore by reviewing its traits as revealed by his many modes of journalistic interpretation. It may be enlightening first to take a look at McDowell's literary and personal background.

McDowell was born in Danville, Kentucky on June 24, 1926. He was the son of Charles Rice and Catherine Feland McDowell. Charles McDowell, Sr. was a professor at Washington and Lee University and was recognized for his tales as for his lectures. Many alumni remember fondly sitting at the bottom of old porch steps, listening to Professor McDowell recount his stories. In addition to numerous articles concerning the legal field, he published a picaresque novel, The Iron Baby Angel, which is as humorous and cherished today as it was forty years ago. McDowell's mother was also quite well known for her storytelling

abilities. Thus young Charles grew up as did Mark Twain, with a strong feel for the oral tradition.

McDowell attended public schools in Lexington, Kentucky and Virginia. His final year of high school was spent at Lee High School in Jacksonville, Florida. He then attended the University of Miami. After one year there, he transferred to Washington and Lee University, from which he graduated in 1948 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. While there, he wrote sports and feature articles for the school newspaper, the Ring-Tum Phi, and ultimately was given his own by-line for humorous stories. He also spent some of his college summers working as a sports-writer for The Roanoke Times. At Washington and Lee, he became a member of the SAE, ADX, and ODK fraternities. In 1949, he received his Master of Science degree from the Graduate School of Journalism of Columbia University.

Later in 1949, he began writing for the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Since 1952 he has covered sports, the police beat, the Virginia State Capital, politics, and all national political conventions. He has had his own column since 1965. In the spring of 1965, the Times-Dispatch announced that they were moving McDowell to Washington, D. C. "to permit him greater mobility in reporting on national affairs."

Since that time, he has become increasingly involved in the national political scene, though he continues to write on a variety of subjects. His column has been syndicated by about two dozen newspapers, including The Baltimore Sun, The Toledo Blade, The Olympia (Wash.) Olympian, The Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel, and The Register and Tribune Syndicate. In 1960 he won the National Headliner Award for his column in the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

In addition to this column and other feature articles for the Times-Dispatch, McDowell has also published articles for a number of magazines, including The Atlantic, Reader's Digest, The Saturday Evening Post, The Commonwealth, College and University Journal, Newsday, and Newsweek.

He has published three books. One Thing After Another, published in 1960 by Richmond's Dietz Press, is a collection of selected articles from his newspaper works. In 1963, William Morrow & Co. published What Did You Have In Mind?, also a collection of articles, including some revised articles from the first book. Both collections were fairly successful, as was his third book: Campaign Fever: The National Folk Festival from New Hampshire to November, 1964, (Morrow, 1965), which covered the Johnson-Goldwater campaign.

McDowell can often be seen on public television. In the late sixties he appeared for a time on "Newsroom." He now is a frequent panelist on "Washington Week."

McDowell has won quite a few awards for his literary efforts, including first prize for local column writing in the Virginia Press Association Annual Competition, which he won in 1957. In March of 1961, he was named to Phi Beta Kappa by the Washington and Lee Chapter, and in April of that year won the Pi Delta Epsilon certificate of merit. In 1971 he was appointed by the Standing Committee of Correspondents as its liaison man in press arrangements for the 1972 presidential nominating convention. (He also served as chairman of the standing committee for a time.) He was awarded an honorary doctorate from Washington and Lee in 1975 and on March 28, 1977, he became the

first recipient of the William and Mary Heritage Award for Excellence In Journalism for "outstanding contributions to the field of journalism and mass communications."¹

In recent years, McDowell has become increasingly sought after on the lecture circuit. His ability to capture the traits and traditions of the people orally as well as verbally cause many to invite him to speak to different groups. His style has become unmistakable and often instantly recognizable, whether encountered on the podium or on the written page.

CHAPTER II

The Range of McDowell's Writing

McDowell's writing deals with an incredible number of topics. These topics range from journalistic assignments to politics to human interest stories and colorful personalities. Each topic relates to a certain aspect of our national folklore. The World Series is a good example of these topics. As McDowell explains:

The World Series is a significant national event. It is the perfect example of an essentially trivial occurrence that achieves genuine importance simply because so many people get interested in it and experience it together. Massively shared experiences-- presidential elections, the World Series, really bad storms--keep us in touch with one another and build a national folklore.²

We should explore a variety of McDowell's writings to appreciate his view and understanding of this folklore. Examples from his finest work concerning the range of topics suggested above reveal McDowell's success in capturing this folklore.

McDowell is firstly a journalist. As such, he reports the news on paper in an objective manner. He has had a great many experiences in this area, having spent his college summers writing sports articles and having covered countless political meetings. His articles of straight reporting such as "Computer Technology Comes To Congress"³ not only give

us a better understanding of today's political machinery, but serve as a record on this subject for future generations. Similarly, in "Virginia Politics: A Short History," McDowell reviews Virginia's political history from Pocahontas and her husband, John Rolfe, who "became the first Byrd Democrat in Virginia," to Henry Howell and John Dalton.⁴ In "Some Reflections On the Space Age," he contemplates on how our space program has developed since the days of John Glenn.⁵ McDowell thus preserves history on paper, as do all journalists, through straight reportage.

McDowell is valued as a skilled journalist, but he does not stop here. He prefers to delve deeply into many subjects, to give his opinion thereon, or to give colorful descriptions. He also delights in the "human side" of a situation. He believes that "humor is hard to come by in this world of solemn conformity. People are too glumly serious about too many things, often the wrong things. If more of them could be approached lightly with a readiness to recognize nonsense in all its pompous guises, some good might come of it." This belief pervades almost everything he writes, including his articles dealing with human interest topics, personalities and politics.

Politics, a subject often treated with extreme sobriety, is often dealt with a lighter touch by McDowell. He spends a great deal of time observing and writing about politics, and considers it a vital and fascinating feature of the national folklore.

Many of his columns on politics consist of commentary on the human side of politicians, and events and persons associated with them. Nothing escapes his intense scrutiny. For example, in writing

of a visit to the White House in 1963, he observed:

At a ceremony at the White House, I saw Mrs. Kennedy in a remarkably simple blue dress. She looked just fine, but the dress was so simple that it looked unfinished--no collar, no sleeves, no belt, no pockets or decorations, no particular form to it. not even a waist in the middle of it. I asked a lady reporter standing nearby if I could safely refer to the dress as 'an informal house dress.' The lady reporter was horrified, and began to laugh nervously. She informed me that the dress was an original by somebody of incomparable fame, chic in the extreme, and the price she mentioned still makes me foolish when I think of it.

McDowell considers many aspects of the political world. He looks at it definitively in his feature article "Lexicon of Politics" (January 1964),⁶ in which he described a "poll" as "an ingenious method of telling the country what a few hundred self-conscious people said they were thinking two weeks ago; the system that elected Thomas E. Dewey President of the United States."

He defines a "dark horse" as "Presidential; any governor, former governor or Member of Congress who has been on the cover of Time, likes dogs and children, and is not under criminal indictment." A "nominee" according to McDowell is "Presidential, sole survivor of a great madness; the child of storms and chaos, plots and whimsies; one who probably deserves a chance to be President after all he has been through."

McDowell discusses aspects of presidential campaigns, the General Assembly, the Senate race, Senate meetings, Congressional records, President Carter's energy program and thousands of other issues. He even looks at politics from the candidate's point of view. In his article, "Can A Candidate Stomach This?," the candidate worries about

his response when his wife asks him how he would like his eggs cooked for breakfast. The candidate frets: "Well, scrambled eggs are a great American breakfast and I have never hesitated to endorse them. But I am well aware, too, that fried eggs are the breakfast of the common man. On the other hand, while making it crystal clear that I am for eggs in all forms, I must say that considering the unsettled, not to say queasy, condition of my stomach at this time, I had better have a soft-boiled egg."

The above example shows McDowell at his top form. He truly revels when he can overstate the understated. As he says, "I am on the outlook for (such) trivial devices all the time. That is my line of work--to try to say some truth through observing and over-explaining small matters."⁷

Another device used by McDowell is his employment of Reliable Source, one of his personae. Reliable is a valuable mouthpiece for many of McDowell's political statements. He is also a means by which McDowell can link his involvement in politics with a concern for literary humor in journalism. Reliable started as McDowell's "spoof of journalistic affectations" and has now become his spokesman for pieces of real news that he acquires from other sources. Though Reliable Source is the least developed of McDowell's characters, he is important, being useful primarily to give McDowell someone to banter with and to present and represent other views about politics in his column. They are a compatible team: McDowell is often the straight man to Reliable's glib remarks.

Among other political items, McDowell has commented on the extraordinary sounds found in the great hall of the Library of Congress;

having lunch with Walter Mondale; "The White House on a Sunny Day;" campaigning by helicopter; Henry Howell in the North; Henry Howell in the South and President Carter's budget. Through all these and many more, McDowell manages to ferret out a light side in dark situations and to be entertaining when discussing potentially dull subjects.

McDowell also devotes some of his articles to describing political figures. He has commented on countless national and local politicians and others involved in the political scene. He has won praise for his articles on Hubert Humphrey, Harry Byrd, S. I. Hayakawa, Roger Mudd and Eisenhower, among others. Studies of political figures show a degree of public temperament and remain a part of the nation's history. Thus, though the political issues of a news story may be long dead, McDowell's feature captures a certain angle of the issue on characters involved which remains important as part of our national folklore.

Though perhaps a majority of McDowell's writings have centered on politics, the range of his subjects goes far beyond the political arena. McDowell's finest work is found in his celebration of everyday life, including its frustrations. His columns that deal with human interest are those which will be passed through generations and treasured by all of them. McDowell notes that E. B. White, the writer he most admires, has observed that "newspaper prose, particularly the humorous kind, has a way of dying, 'like a snake with the setting sun'."⁸ When McDowell was reviewing a number of his earlier articles, he found that "Mr. White was right as usual."⁹ McDowell felt that his columns dealing with issues in the news were the ones that seemed "uniformly dead or sadly infirm. The columns that seemed to me to have life in them

were for the most part the essays that did not have much to do with the news in the first place, the ones concerned with mankind's timeless tendency to foolishness." This tendency to foolishness is firmly entrenched and its different aspects reveal a good deal of national folklore.

In the above category of human interest stories, I include McDowell's articles concerning man's dealings with machinery and seasonal traditions. He has quite a bit to say in these areas. Concerning man's dealings with machinery, McDowell has commented on many modern inventions and how they frequently make man feel foolish. He describes a special answering service for telephones, one that allows you to listen to your calls. It records all of them, and gives you the option of turning up the volume to hear the caller or turning it down if you do not want to listen. McDowell describes the use of the machine by the Bargle family and wonders about the implications: "Have we achieved a level of rudeness, commercial and personal, that justifies the cynical screening of Aunt Suzy's call? Aren't we duping the old girl, leading her on to speak to a machine while we furtively listen in to be sure she is not somebody from Heavenly Estates?"

Since McDowell published this article in early 1978, phone tapping electronics have become much more developed and accessible. Nonetheless, the article is still humorous. Many years hence, even if everyone has one of these machines, the article will retain its humor as it will still be embarrassing to talk to one; we will continue to be self-conscious when listening in or talking to one. The "humaness" of the situation makes these types of McDowell's articles timeless.

Another subject of McDowell's comment in this area of mechanized society is the many types of long, exhaustive computerized forms which

we are often called upon to complete. One such form is sent by the Census Bureau. McDowell's careful scrutiny of the form uncovered some interesting points. As a guide, the government included a sample form as filled out by the hypothetical Vernon family. The family includes Alexander Vernon, forty-one; his wife, Estelle, thirty-four; and three children--Marcia, ten, Carol, six, and Alexander, Jr., just weeks old. They also have a lodger named George Drayer, twenty-two and single. There is also a visitor in the home, James T. Wood from Connecticut. Furthermore, according to the form, McDowell discovers the presence of a mystery person named Susan L. Mills. This discovery disturbs him very much, as no reason is given for her presence there, nor is her age or relationship to the family revealed:

Now who in the world is Susan L. Mills? She is not a new baby still in the hospital, obviously, and we already have a lodger. The addition of a female lodger to the household would confuse things thoroughly to say the least. Who is she, then? No hint of Susan Mill's age or relationship to this household is given.

The question of Susan Mills' identity and position in all this disturbs me, and it may be nagging at the minds of literally tens of thousands of people who have studied the example. Here is a form that went into every home in America, showing us how to count our family, evaluate our home, and report on our plumbing, but hidden away in the form is the mystery of Susan Mills to distract us from the business at hand.

Is she a baby nurse, perhaps, who goes home at night? If so, Mr. Vernon shouldn't have listed her, and surely the Census Bureau wouldn't put an error in the example.

Is she a little girl spending the night with Marcia and Carol? It seems unlikely that Mrs. Vernon would have let her daughters invite a friend at this crowded and hectic time.

Did she arrive with Mr. Wood? I prefer to think not, somehow.

Assuming that the explanation of Susan Mills' presence is simple, why was Mr. Vernon "not sure" whether to list this mystery woman?

To this day, the Census Bureau has not offered an explanation to America's mind at rest.

One can readily note from the above example how McDowell delights in "observing and over-explaining small matters," thus trying "to say some truth." Census Bureau forms are definitely a part of our national folklore.

Other machines for which McDowell spares no curse are the soft drink machines. In a classic McDowell article, "Better Dealing with Machinery,"¹⁰ he explores the various trials he underwent in dealing with the office drink machine. When the knob was turned to Coca-Cola, the machine took the money and gave the customer orange drink, or, on one occasion, gave him a cup half full of warm water. Sometimes the machine accepted the money for coffee, ejected the cup onto the floor and poured the drink down its own drain. McDowell describes other antics of the drink machine as follows: "The machine dispensed a cup of coffee and then dropped its heavy cream nozzle into the cup with the coffee, splashing some all over the customer and giving him a nozzle he didn't want. The machine...with its nozzle missing...accepted a dime and sprayed a customer from head to foot with a stream of coffee. (This was too much to bear, but what could the customer do? He couldn't punch the machine in the nose. What I did was go home and change my suit.)"

Though drink machines are considerably more developed and no longer dispense coffee that costs a mere dime, they are also no more efficient and no less troublesome and frustrating. Thus, this piece offered first in the late 1950's may still be appreciated by today's mechanized society.

Dealing with machines is part of our lives every day. Some days of the year, however, have special significance for us. Holidays and other seasonal happenings have their own set of traditions which make them a strong, unique part of our national folklore.

One holiday that McDowell comments upon is Christmas. He produces in December an annual letter of Christmas greetings from the Fuzzwit family. This column shows McDowell at his finest, his sharpest and wittiest.

The letter comes from the Fuzzwit family every year with the other Christmas greetings. Almost everyone has received this type of letter, with different names and events, but usually coming from a family only dimly remembered. The McDowell's letter is written by Mrs. Fuzzwit, who begins "Dearest friends all: How tempus fugits! Another yuletide rolls around and I set me down at the trusty old Royal in the solarium we recently added to Big Bunny's trophy room. As I gaze out at the blue-green Gulf in the sunshine, I realize that it is thoughts of you dear friends, that put the sunshine in our hearts at this season."

Mrs. Fuzzwit chronicles the triumphs and tragedies of the families year, including the death of their Aunt Veronica, who passed away "almost 200 years to the day from when Gov. Bidwell, to whom she had devoted a lifetime of selfless genealogical research, would have signed the Declaration of Independence if he had not been delayed by muddy roads...." Mrs. Fuzzwit also writes of Big Bunny's brother's close brush with death, as well as the death of a family pet. She continues with the tales of Little Bunny, "or Bunny, Jr. as Big Bunny tries to call him now that he is president of his own corporation," their daughter Verna, and young twins, Rab and Tab. The precocious twins, aged ten, attend a private

school and are taught by Ph.D.'s, who "cleverly smuggled advanced mathematics, science and languages into the outwardly standard primary school curriculum." As a matter of fact, she maintains they seem "just like other little boys except when they speak to each other in Greek."

Mrs. Fuzzwit completes her newsletter with news of herself, though she claims there is really nothing to say. She holds that "... with me, being a housewife always will come ahead of being a Red Cross president, a real estate agent and a part-time law student." Again, as through the entire letter, we clearly see the dramatic irony of the piece. The more intensely Mrs. Fuzzwit extols the humble values to be found in her home, the more intensely she boasts of their superficial accomplishments. McDowell's father once warned the young Charley about people who were obviously modest. He claimed this implied they had a fairly exalted notion of themselves. This claim seems exemplified by the Fuzzwits and their annual Christmas note.

The Fuzzwit's type of Christmas greeting is common to all of us, and assuredly is part of the seasonal traditions which reinforce our feeling of national unity. McDowell speaks of many other special times of the year which are shared by all of us.

One such special time is springtime. McDowell writes about the changing weather, the gardening, the tennis and the commencement exercises that occur in the spring. He writes about these subjects from many different angles. At commencement time, he frequently will contribute a column about the commencement speakers at colleges and universities and the successes of these speakers, judged often by the audience's reaction and the length, hopefully brief, of their speeches. In a wonder-

ful McDowell piece, the favorite of E. B. White, McDowell writes about the commencement exercises at Miss Dixon's Nursery School.

After realizing that their five-year old daughter would start graduating so early, the McDowells and other parents attended the outdoor ceremony. It began with the Pledge of Allegiance, which went smoothly for the twenty-seven five-year olds "until they encountered the part about 'one nation indivisible,' but that knocked their rhythm out of kilter and they finished in waves. Incidentally, one young man with a strong voice pronounced the hard part 'one neighbor underbiddable.'" The students then sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee," before starting the performance of "Sleeping Beauty." This performance included the King and his Queen, who was a head taller than he and had a protective arm around his shoulder. As McDowell describes: "...at center stage, the Queen stopped strolling and said distinctly to the King, 'Oh, I wish we had a little baby.' The King said nothing. The Queen gave him a severe look. The King still said nothing. Mrs. Dixon spoke to the King from the wings. Then the King said with resignation 'I do too,' and rolled his eyes at heaven. Curtain." The next scene reveals the baby Sleeping Beauty, who is the same size as her royal parents. The Wicked Witch enters and announces that the child would prick her finger on a spinning wheel when she was sixteen and sleep for a hundred years or thereabouts. The King is distraught at hearing this and proclaims, "Every spinning wheel in the Kingdom must be boined!" (McDowell expresses some wonderment at hearing this Brooklyn pronunciation of "burned," but extols it as a splendid curtain line.)

In the next scene, the Princess is sixteen and dutifully pricks her finger on the upended tricycle of a spinning wheel. "She fell as

it shot, clutching her middle. Then a large number of people, including a good many soldiers in folded paper hats, rushed in and fell asleep all over the stage. Just before he dozed off, one soldier pushed his hat out of his eyes and said to a lady in the third row, 'Mama, did you get my picture?'" The play and remainder of the exercises finished smoothly.

McDowell's range of subjects also focuses some attention upon national public figures. Public figures are important symbols to Americans, and as such, are an integral segment of the national tradition. This segment includes, among others, political figures, prominent celebrities, and literary personae.

We have seen that McDowell's studies and sketches of political figures are valuable. These studies show a degree of public temperament and remain a part of the nation's history. Thus, though the political issues of a news story may be long dead, McDowell's feature captures a certain angle of the issue or the characters involved which remains important as part of our national folklore. McDowell has commented on countless national and local politicians and others involved in the political scene, as has been reviewed earlier in this paper.

McDowell sometimes writes about celebrities. Harsh words are found in the description of one prominent celebrity. In 1955, McDowell attended an Elvis Presley concert and saw him, "Swaggering, leering, chewing gum and wiping his nose with his sleeve" on stage--actions which McDowell found unusual for a musical artist, though commonly seen on the baseball scene. McDowell passed no judgment on his singing but was disgusted by the gyrations he thought one would only see in burlesque shows.

In remembering Elvis Presley"¹¹ when others were glorifying, almost deifying Elvis after his death, McDowell held firmly his earlier views. He saw the picture of Elvis through one man's view who was "disgusted and outraged" (about Elvis), and claimed "he put on a male sex show, bumps and grinds. Explicit gestures. And all those teenage girls were screaming and crying and rolling their eyes back in their heads. It seemed terribly ominous to me."

The above picture reveals a side of McDowell. As he says, "I wasn't being philosophical in those days, Mr. Bumbleton, [another of McDowell's personae and presented as one of his neighbors] I was being scandalized and bewildered and old. Then, as now, the Presley phenomenon continued to build. I developed another preoccupation. I began to resent him mainly for making me feel like a prude." Though he has quite a different view of Elvis than did millions of American women, he recognized the phenomenon and its importance as part of the national folklore.

Literary figures are also important characters to study. McDowell has written quite a few interesting essays on various writers, such as "Tom Wolfe! Terrific."¹² The article is a study of Tom Wolfe as a writer in view of his style and irreverent pieces. McDowell describes Wolfe but often lets him speak for himself as in the following quotes: "...I made myself feel loose and easy, and I found that I was writing with this combination of colloquial and esoteric language. And that, I suppose, is my so called style...."

McDowell gives examples of Wolfe's style and irreverence: "Yes! And suddenly, after 40 years, it all adds up. Whispering, inconspicuous but courtly--formal, efficient--but sympathetic--perfection!--What are

these but, precisely! the custodian, an undertaker, a mortuary scientist. But, of course! Thirteen years ago, upon the death of Harold Ross, precisely that difficult task befell William Shawn: to be the museum curator, the mummifier, the preserver-in-amber, the smiling embalmer...for Harold Ross' New Yorker magazine." On the attacks following this irreverent sketch, Wolfe claimed "It never occurred to me to be reverent. I didn't take the whole thing seriously. But without knowing what I was doing, I hit right at the core of the New York literary establishment." McDowell also gives attention to Wolfe's background, including his great interest in sports.

After reading these articles, covering various realms of interest, the reader may be better acquainted with McDowell's style. Though never predictable, McDowell's style becomes more recognizable as one studies his work. Whether writing about holidays or dealing with machines or Elvis Presley or Congressman David E. Satterfield, McDowell has the ability to grasp the entirety of a subject, maintain a balanced perspective toward it, and show the humanness of it. McDowell captures minute details of life for us to savor, and helps us appreciate many aspects of our national folklore that we might otherwise overlook.

CHAPTER III

The Personae

We have read a sampling of the many elements of the national folklore upon which McDowell comments and describes. Much of what we have seen thus far are McDowell's feature articles. These articles of description, and/or commentary reveal much about McDowell, as well as the feelings and temperament of the nation. Nonetheless, this type of article can be limiting and McDowell often finds it useful to reveal a wider spectrum of views through several differently developed personae.

The least developed of these personae is Reliable Source, whom we met in Chapter II. We have seen Reliable Source as someone with whom McDowell can banter and be a straight man to, as well as a mouthpiece for political statements and news. McDowell has created three other characters with whom he studies and discusses. These major personae are Mr. Bumbleton, Miss Philly and Aunt Gertrude.

Mr. Bumbleton, presented as one of McDowell's neighbors, is a fairly developed character and a spokesman for McDowell's views or opposing views on a variety of subjects. About going to a football

game, he tells McDowell:

My seat will be on the twenty-nine yardline, although I have been assured that it is on the fifty-yard line like most seats. I will be directly behind a particularly loud and unharmonious drum and bugle corps. There will be someone in my seat. There is always someone in my seat. I always expect a rather large man, adamant and surly. There will be a scene before the ushers persuade him to depart. On my right will be a man who keeps calling the plays for the quarterback, bellowing at the coach, and, by the second quarter, bellowing at his wife when she asks him to be quiet. Behind me will be an enthusiastic youth who keeps jumping up and knocking over my thermos bottle. On my left will be a man who is listening to four other games on a portable radio. All very disconcerting.¹³

Mr. Bumbleton grumbles a lot, but keeps up with sports, politics and plenty of everyday occurrences. He is sometimes rather cynical, so McDowell's conversations with him result in a presentation of light and more serious views on a subject. McDowell describes him thus: "Mr. Bumbleton started years ago as a pompous neighbor who gave me a chance to mock pompous people and values; he changed into a fairly sensible and duller fellow."¹⁴

Miss Pilleulah Murkley, known as Miss Philly, is another of McDowell's characters. She fills his need for an older female, eccentric persona. She never speaks to McDowell on a first-hand basis; he obtains her words via his Aunt Gertrude, who sends him Miss Philly's letters. Miss Philly is as outspoken as Mr. Bumbleton, though she is more eccentric and not so close by as he. As McDowell describes her, "She is the senior citizen of the community and perhaps its most original thinker. She attends all public functions and a good many that

were private until she got there."¹⁵

Miss Philly has a comment about everything. At Christmas, she has definite ideas, such as, "Put more brandy in your eggnog if you want to be taken seriously. A good whack of brandy gives eggnog character--and allows you to reduce the bourbon content by at least three times and the volume of brandy added. Most of the eggnog recipes around here were handed down from a generation obsessed with macho competition in the matter of bourbon. I knew a good many of those old guys, so trust me. Anyhow eggnog is supposed to be a festive cup, not an ancestral knockout."¹⁶

Miss Philly is a country woman; many of her suggestions read as anecdotal folklore. She offers advice on many problems. Her advice during a gas shortage: "use mules."¹⁷ Her character is somewhat developed by McDowell. We can see her shaking a cane at the county elders while warning them. She is down-to-earth, very straightforward, outspoken, eccentric, country-wise, and ready to give her advice to anyone on any subject.

McDowell's fourth character is Aunt Gertrude, by far his most complex persona. Aunt Gertrude is written as a true relation to McDowell, and she offers advice to McDowell on a first-hand basis, unlike Miss Philly's. Aunt Gertrude writes often of her rural community and in great detail. One example of many reads as follows:

The barn is full of hay, the pantry and the cellar shelves are full of my canning, and Wade Fernley down at the bank has put his necktie back on. I suppose you can say summer is gone. There are other signs. I am actually sick of sweet corn, so tired of it I didn't have it for dinner one time last week. If I bring a cucumber to the table in any form, your

Uncle Frazier moves the iced tea pitcher so he doesn't have to look at the cucumber. School has taken up just when the tobacco farmers need their kids in the fields, and Tom Frouzer has made his annual mad speech to the school board to the effect that American education is bent upon destroying the tobacco industry."¹⁸

Aunt Gertrude is McDowell's most popular character. She is the closest to McDowell, the one he most often uses, and as such, is the most human and familiar to the reader. Besides the Richmond Times-Dispatch, the Winston Salem Journal and the Alexandria-Fairfax-Arlington Journal also frequently include Aunt Gertrude in the paper. Aunt Gertrude appeals to many readers for a variety of reasons.

Aunt Gertrude is well liked because she is honest and says exactly what she thinks. In her letters, sharp perception often shows through what may seem on the surface to be country naiveté. This trait is found in "Aunt Gertrude on Being Angry," in which she tries to fathom the reasons behind a demonstration during the Shah of Iran's visit to the United States. As she explains, "To have to confront Iran's passions in the streets around our White House is a progression of history I just wasn't ready for."¹⁹

Aunt Gertrude may especially appeal to those in our country who live in rural areas. McDowell uses her to stay in contact with a rural background and viewpoint and tradition. As McDowell grew up in a small town and spent his summers on a farm in Kentucky, he has a great deal of material from which to draw.

Though Aunt Gertrude may hold special attraction to rural dwellers, she is a universally likeable character, and a significant feature of our folklore.

CHAPTER IV

In a study of McDowell's works, we find that he is much more than an ordinary journalist. Whereas the main intention of many reporters is to present the issues and events as quickly and as well as possible, for the edification of the readers and to increase circulation for the newspapers, for McDowell, this is not enough. McDowell stresses the significance in these issues and events as they cause people to share and stay in touch with each other.

His many articles concern thousands of different subjects that we share. As McDowell notes:

...I am dealing in what I think of as contemporary folklore when I write about Aunt Gertrude; about Mr. Bumbleton and the typical suburban neighborhood he and I live in; about the World Series, the Super Bowl, the Miss America Pageant, garage sales, the Christmas bazaar at a church..., vending machines, the Redskins and tailgate parties in the parking lot, ...spreading fertilizer and raking leaves, giving up on an old car, cleaning the attic, the Tobacco Festival..., 10 years of my running war with the Book-of-the-Month Club's unorder blanks, jargon drifting into and silting over the language, raising a dog..., etc., etc., etc.

All these subjects and a hundred like them connect the reader and me in a familiar, often enduring, essentially American experience.²⁰

FOOTNOTES

1 From the clipping file on Charles McDowell at the Richmond Times-Dispatch. The clipping files on McDowell in different sources are unevenly documented. Where it has been possible to determine the original appearance of an article, this has been placed in the footnotes and the bibliography.

2 "A Former Fan, Full of Guilt," Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 13, 1978.

3 "Computer Technology Comes To Congress," Richmond Times-Dispatch.

4 "Virginia Politics: A Short History," Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 23, 1977.

5 "Some Reflections On The Space Age," Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 17, 1977.

6 "Lexicon of Politics," Rural Virginia, January 1964, pp. 10-12.

7 From personal letter from McDowell to this writer dated April 8, 1977.

8 One Thing After Another, Charles R. McDowell, Jr., (Richmond: Dietz Press, Inc., 1960), p. ix.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., pp. 34-36.

11 "We Present: 'One Man's Views of Elvis Presley,'" The Northern Virginia Daily, 1955.

12 "Tom Wolfe! Terrific!" The Alumni Magazine of Washington and Lee University, Spring 1965, pp. 18-21.

13 One Thing After Another, Charles P. McDowell, Jr., (Richmond: Dietz Press, Inc., 1960), p. 15.

14 Personal letter from McDowell.

15 Richmond Times-Dispatch, April 21, 1977.

16 Richmond Times-Dispatch, Dec. 6, 1977.

- 17 "Miss Philly Gives Gas-Saving Rules," R-T-D, 4-21-77.
- 18 "Aunt Gertrude At Summer's End," Richmond Times-Dispatch,
September 12, 1978.
- 19 "Aunt Gertrude On Being Angry," Richmond Times-Dispatch,
November 17, 1977.
- 20 Personal letter from McDowell.

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- . Letter to author. 13 December 1979.
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- . "Some Reflections On the Space Age." Richmond Times-Dispatch. 17 June 1977, n.p.
- . "Spare Me Your Friendship." Greensboro Daily News, 11 December 1958, n.p.
- . "The Sports Whirl." Reader's Digest, September 1966, p. 179.
- . "Star Performer." Reader's Digest, December 1957, p. 154.
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