Ovid Pierce, Weldon: "Courage To Offend"

(Editor's Note—The article below is a chapter from "Tar Heel Writers I Know" by Bernadette Hoyle, a book of interviews and photographs of outstanding North Carolina writers, published in 1956 by John F. Blair, Publisher, Winston-Salem, N. C. Reprinted by special permission from the author in connection with the observance of Library Week March 16-22).

When Ovid Williams Pierce's novel, "The Plantation," was published last year, the critics declared that at last here was a Southern novel without magnolias and mint juleps.

Time magazine greeted it with a lead review, declaring that "If Ed Ruffin (the main character) seems almost too good to be true, so does the novel which makes him believable."

Time's reviewer added, "When a Southern novel rolls off the presses, it is an odds-on bet that it will land either in the dark bog of Gothic violence or in the moonlit magnolia patch. Ovid Williams Pierce's 'The Plantation' does neither; it is a first novel of grace, style and quiet excellence."

Orvinne Prescott, in The New York Times, declared, "This novel has demonstrated such impressive artistry and has revealed so understanding a heart that all those interested in the emergence of new writers of great promise should take care not to miss 'The Plantation'."

Other Praise

The New York Herald Tribune said, "Beautiful, poignant . . . Nothing is more finely handled in Ovid Williams Pierce's book than the relationship between black men and white."

Harnett Kane, in the Chicago Tribune, called it "a gem of rare polish."

How did such a novel come to be—one which has been called "the most Southern novel imaginable?"

Its author, a native of Weldon, is a bachelor, a college professor, fortyish, graying, quiet spoken.

His mother was Minnie Deans of Wilson. His father, Ovid Williams Pierce, of Halifax County, was born just after the Civil War, the son of Dr. Alexander Blucher Pierce, son of Rice Bolton Pierce, who came to Halifax County after the War of 1812, from Southampton County, Virginia. The Pierces settled the area now known as Pierce's Cross Roads near Weldon.

Soon after the Civil War his father's family left Pierce's Cross Roads and came to Weldon. "Grandfather Pierce was one of the few doctors around at the time," said Ovid. "He covered the countryside in a buggy. My father and his brothers were farmers or planters, depending on what the word means. To an extent they revived a pattern shattered by the Civil War. In The Plantation, Mr. Ed's life is roughly contemporaneous with that of my father, but there is no other analogy, except time, place and problem."

The Plantation evolved slowly, he said, and was written over a period of five years, mostly during his summers at home.

The book incorporates that which was so common to a generation of people: After The War, the disintegrating plantation, the predominance of women, their dependence on the men, and the realization that an old code would be insufficient for survival in a new world.

"And yet I wanted to do something in addition to this regional theme," he said, "I wanted the characters to be people first and Southerners second, to render the atmosphere and the motivations of the characters so convincingly that their behavior should appear to the outsider as inevitable under the circumstances."

That he succeeded is evidenced by the opinion of Lee Barker, a doubleday editor, who called The Plantation "the finest first novel I have seen in twenty-five years of publishing."

Graduate of Duke

Ovid Pierce has been writing since college days. After finishing high school at Weldon, he went to Duke University, where he was graduated in 1932. There he was Kappa Alpha, Phi Beta Kappa and editor of The Archive. "It was during this period that I suppose I developed my first real concern with matters literary," he smiled. "I remember that I was enormously interested in the publication of 'I'll Take My Stand,' the collection of twelve essays by twelve Southerners. This book helped to launch me on my long preoccupation with the problem of interpreting the complete Southern scene.

"Of course, the South is tremendously complex — there are many 'Souths'. Before World War I, Southern writing was almost exclusively regional, all novels followed set patterns: glorification of the past, mostly defensive or chauvanistic. What we lacked, as Ellen Glasgow pointed out, was 'the courage to offend,' or the ability to interpret or assess with objectivity and perspective."

When he went to Harvard for a Master's degree, Ovid studied writing under Robert Hillyer. "It was then that I began to write seriously," he said. Most of the stories he wrote then were later published in "The South West Review."

On The Defensive

"Hillyer is a wise man and a good teacher," said Ovid Pierce. "Looking back, I see that he did what any good teacher does: he helped us find where our directions lay. At Harvard, associating with 'Yankees' for the first time, I was made to feel acutely conscious of being a Southerner. I found myself on the defensive, among doubting foreigners, about the whole history of the South. It seems naive now, but at least I was loyal! All this finally served the purpose of making me think about my own home and people with perspective. It helped me to see the strong sense of continuity which has been a governing force in Southern life, also to examine the advantages and disadvantages of tradition, which in a sense is one of the problems of The Plantation."

After Harvard and a few more stories, his writing stopped. He went into the Army in April, 1941, was a member of the counter Intelligence Corps and was stationed on the Mexican Border, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and British Guiana. After his release in 1945 he became a member of the faculty at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where his main course was Creative Writing. After four years at SMU he took a year off because of illness. Then he taught the modern novel at Tulane University. Last year he travelled in Europe and now plans to return to the faculty of SMU this fall.

Inveterate Reader

He is an inveterate reader, his taste running to novels and Southern history. "I read all Southern writers—the last generation, that is—Dubose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Ellen Glasgow, a little Cabell, some Caldwell, all Faulkner and Wolfe," he said. "I had to teach Henry James and through him learned more about the problems of writing than from any other: his effort to reduce the poorly defined practices of fiction to something answerable to 'art'—assessable and organic."

Last year the dramatic rights—both stage and movie—of The Plantation were bought by John Patrick, who will probably begin work on the stage production in the near future.

Latest news on The Plantation is that Flon, the French publishing firm, will publish a French translation of the novel this win-

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