

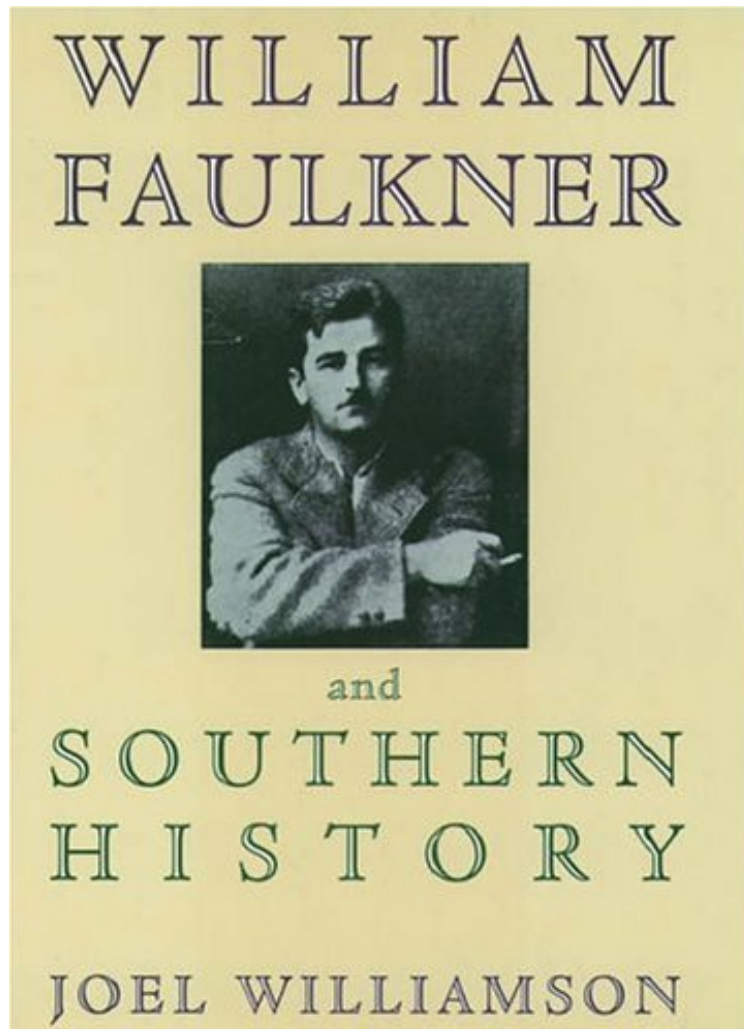
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Joel Williamson

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(Mobile book) William Faulkner and Southern History

William Faulkner and Southern History

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One of America's great novelists, William Faulkner was a writer deeply rooted in the American South. In works such

as *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner drew powerfully on Southern themes, attitudes, and atmosphere to create his own world and place--the mythical Yoknapatawpha County--peopled with quintessential Southerners such as the Compsons, Sartoris, Snopes, and McCaslins. Indeed, to a degree perhaps unmatched by any other major twentieth-century novelist, Faulkner remained at home and explored his own region--the history and culture and people of the South. Now, in *William Faulkner and Southern History*, one of

America's most acclaimed historians of the South, Joel Williamson, weaves together a perceptive biography of Faulkner himself, an astute analysis of his works, and a revealing history of Faulkner's ancestors in Mississippi--a family history that becomes, in Williamson's skilled hands, a vivid portrait of Southern culture itself. Williamson provides an insightful look at Faulkner's ancestors, a group sketch so brilliant that the family comes alive almost as vividly as in Faulkner's own fiction. Indeed, his ancestors often outstrip his characters in their colorful and bizarre nature. Williamson has made several discoveries: the Falkners (William was the first to spell it "Faulkner") were not planter, slaveholding "aristocrats"; Confederate Colonel Falkner was not an unalloyed hero, and he probably sired, protected, and educated a mulatto daughter who married into America's mulatto elite; Faulkner's maternal grandfather Charlie Butler stole the town's money and disappeared in the winter of 1887-1888, never to return. Equally important,

Williamson uses these stories to underscore themes of race, class, economics, politics, religion, sex and violence, idealism and Romanticism--"the rainbow of elements in human culture"--that reappear in Faulkner's work. He also shows that, while Faulkner's ancestors were no ordinary people, and while he sometimes flashed a curious pride in them, Faulkner came to embrace a pervasive sense of shame concerning both his family and his culture. This he wove into his writing, especially about sex, race, class, and violence, psychic and otherwise. *William Faulkner and Southern*

History represents an unprecedented publishing event--an eminent historian writing on a major literary figure. By revealing the deep history behind the art of the South's most celebrated writer, Williamson evokes new insights and deeper understanding, providing anyone familiar with Faulkner's great novels with a host of connections between his work, his life, and his ancestry.

From *Library Journal* In this masterful blend of family history, biography, cultural history, and literary criticism, noted

Southern historian Williamson (Univ. of North Carolina) explores the elements that make up Faulkner's fictional universe. Williamson demonstrates that the themes of race, class, sex, and violence that dominate Faulkner's fiction arise out of the conflict between an idealism generated by the Southerners' desire for an Edenic world in which individuals enact well-defined cultural, political, and social roles and a realism, fostered by modern industrial society, that challenged such roles. Williamson applies this thesis with particular force to the roles of sex and community in Faulkner's writing. The book also provides a clearer picture than other Faulkner biographies of his time in Hollywood, his insatiable desire for younger women, and his recurring drinking bouts. Williamson's study is a fine complement to

Joseph Blotner's *Faulkner: A Biography* (LJ 4/15/84) and a nice addition to cultural histories of the South. Highly recommended for public libraries.- Henry L. Carrigan Jr., Westerville P.L., Ohio Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. From *Kirkus* s In a perceptive and sympathetic account based on extensive research in archives and public records, Williamson (Humanities/Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; *The Crucible of Race*, 1984, etc.) offers some revelations about Faulkner's ancestry and background, along with a comprehensive commentary on the novelist's life and works. Ashamed of his background, Faulkner, Williamson tells us, spent as much energy reinventing himself as he did creating his fiction. Rather than his descending, as he claimed, from Scottish Highlanders or an aristocratic slave-owning southern family, Faulkner's paternal grandfather, "the Colonel," was an eccentric businessman, while his maternal grandfather was a sheriff who shot the editor of the local paper, embezzled public funds, and ran off with a mulatto girl. Faulkner's fictions about his own life were similarly less colorful than reality. He represented himself as,

variously, an RAF pilot wounded in WW I, a bootlegger, a gentleman farmer, and, in his final invention, as a gentleman equestrian who rode the Virginia hunts. In fact, Faulkner never flew and his farm was a failure. He began writing while tending a boiler all night, married a divorcee, and ended up raising and supporting her children and family as well as his own. His real-life travels, seductions, and alcoholic bouts--especially with Howard Hawks, Clark Gable, and Humphrey Bogart while adapting Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*--are more interesting than his invented role as simple southern farmer, and than the other roles he assumed, such as literary ambassador (after his 1950 Nobel) and academic. Similarly, Williamson's Platonic schematization of Faulkner's work is less interesting than the intense experience and vitality of the fiction, which may or may not have had roots in Faulkner's life, culture, and beliefs. The biographical material here and the social history involving racial issues, sex, and class are especially significant--but there's not much on the southern history of the title. -- Copyright 1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. "Superbly researched, elegantly written."--*New York Newsday* "In this masterful blend of family history, biography,

cultural history, and literary criticism, noted Southern historian Williamson explores the elements that make up Faulkner's fictional universe....Highly recommended."--*Library Journal* "A perceptive and sympathetic account based on extensive research...offers some revelations about Faulkner's ancestry and background, along with a comprehensive commentary on the novelist's life and works."--*Kirkus* s "The first definitive treatment we've had of the Butler ancestry

of Faulkner's mother Maud."--Nashville Banner