

Thomas Wolfe Overcome

Alan T. Belsches

Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe. By David Herbert Donald. Boston: Little, Brown, 1987. 579 pp. \$24.95.

Before David Donald's biography of Thomas Wolfe, admirers of this North Carolina writer had a variety of smaller and less well documented biographies to consult, chiefly Elizabeth Nowell's *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography* (1960) and Andrew Turnbull's *Thomas Wolfe* (1968). But each of these biographies is limited in its presentation of material. Nowell, who was Wolfe's literary agent, could not speak freely about Wolfe because many of the individuals she discussed were still alive, and Turnbull preferred to discuss Wolfe the man rather than Wolfe the writer. With Donald's biography these limitations have been overcome. For the first time a researcher into Wolfe's life has had unrestricted access to more letters and materials than ever before, he has not had to worry about living Wolfe family members being affronted by what he revealed, and he has tried to create a picture of Thomas Wolfe as a man and as a writer by revealing him in the context of other major American writers in the early twentieth century.

David Donald's background is as a Harvard professor of history and American civilization who has published over a dozen works on Southern history. His *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1960. Donald brings the objectivity and meticulous research skills of the historian to the masses of materials created by a writer whom he calls "extraordinarily brilliant and moving" and yet who also "wrote more bad prose than any other major writer I can think of."

The picture of Thomas Wolfe that Donald's biography creates is that of an intensely energetic man whose appetites, both physical and sexual, were immense and who was able to turn all of his experiences into a prodigious outpouring of words that used his remarkable memory to recount in great detail the events of his life. Donald shows how Wolfe's writings draw from his earliest

memories of infancy in Asheville, N.C., his turbulent youth in his mother's boarding house, the Old Kentucky Home, his education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard, his unsuccessful attempts to become a playwright in New York, his tempestuous relationship with Aline Bernstein, his many wanderings throughout Europe in the 1930s, and from his own difficulty to form the masses of materials that he produced into publishable novels.

Donald carefully traces three major characteristics through his examination of Wolfe's life. He first expands upon C. Hugh Holman's ideas, expressed in *The Loneliness at the Core: Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (1975), of Wolfe's lifelong tendency to turn to older adults to provide him guidance and support. In the midst of the fighting between his parents in his early youth, Wolfe had turned to Mrs. Margaret Roberts, an early teacher, for encouragement. While he was at the University of North Carolina, Professor Horace Williams had become his mentor, exposing him to a variety of intellectual ideas. At Harvard, Professor George Pierce Baker in his playwrighting class attempted to lead Wolfe in paring down the masses of family material he continually wanted to include in his plays. And later in his life Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, became a kind of father figure to him both emotionally and literarily in helping him shape the manuscripts of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935) for publication. In his sexual life, Aline Bernstein, nineteen years his senior, became both a mother and a lover for him.

A second major characteristic of Wolfe that Donald carefully documents is his endless telling about himself and his family in his writings. In discussing the genesis of Wolfe's works and his creative process, Donald shows that Wolfe, like many twentieth-century novelists, wanted to write of himself and his own experiences. The antagonism among the members of the Wolfe family and the political events in a booming Asheville become the plot of *Look Homeward, Angel*. Wolfe's wanderings and studies in Boston and New York become the raw material of *Of Time and the River*. And as a result of Wolfe's inability to mask successfully the actual sources of his fiction, his publishers were constantly worried about libel suits. Even the account of his love affair with Aline Bernstein which Wolfe wanted to include in "The October Fair" was rejected by Maxwell Perkins for fear of lawsuits from her family.

A final problem with Wolfe that Donald adeptly handles is the controversy over the number of editorial changes Edward Aswell at Harper & Brothers made to the manuscripts that Wolfe

entrusted to him before his death from tuberculosis in 1938. The manuscripts, running to 1,500,000 words, were in varied states of readiness when Wolfe left on his final trip to Purdue. Aswell was limited by his contract with Wolfe to making "no changes, additions, or alterations in the title or text" without written consent of the author," and the executor of Wolfe's will, Maxwell Perkins, felt that Harpers had "no right whatever for detailed editing" of the manuscript. At the time *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) were published after Wolfe's death, Aswell did not admit the extent of his editorial changes in the manuscripts. Only in the collection of short stories, *The Hills Beyond* (1941), did Aswell append a short "Note" that stated he had written transitional passages in Wolfe's final novels. After a careful study of all of the manuscripts that Aswell had worked with, Donald concludes that Aswell's changes in the first work were extensive but still within the rules of the will and dictates of Wolfe. Aswell's changes in *You Can't Go Home Again* were much more extensive and not nearly as easily justifiable.

This weighty and extensively researched biography is easily readable and well documented. Instead of numerous footnotes that could distract the reader, all citations of sources are given at the end of the volume by page and line number. An excellent descriptive bibliography of helpful works on Wolfe is included, and the indexing is accurate. This work is the closest yet to an authoritative biography of Thomas Wolfe and must rank along with Richard Kennedy's 1962 literary biography, *The Window of Memory*, in its accurate depiction of Thomas Wolfe.