T. S. Stribling and the Florence Trilogy

Benjamin Buford Williams

THE FORGE, 525 pages; THE STORE, 571 pages; UNFINISHED CATHEDRAL, 383 pages. By T. S. Stribling. With introductions by Randy K. Cross. The Library of Alabama Classics. The University of Alabama Press. $27.50 cloth. $12.95 paperback.

No Southern writer, and certainly no Alabama writer of major significance, with the possible exception of William March, has been more neglected by modern critics and readers than T. S. Stribling. Thomas Sigismund Stribling was born in Clifton, Tennessee, on March 4, 1881. His mother was Amelia Waits of Lauderdale County, Alabama, whose brothers had served in the Confederate Army, and his father was Christopher Columbus Stribling, of Lawrence County, Tennessee, who had served in the Union Army. His father was a staunch Republican and his mother an unswerving Democrat so Tom Stribling, as he put it, was always "neutral" on the Civil War and politics. He grew up in Clifton, but spent much of his childhood at his grandfather's place near Gravelly Springs, Alabama. In his autobiography, *Laughing Stock*, Stribling recounts his experiences of coming down the river on a steamboat and walking the country roads of Lauderdale County alone. His parents ran a small country store in Clifton, and as Tom grew older he clerked in the store and was able to observe the characters who frequented the place. The slow pace of minding the store allowed him to read a wide variety of books and to begin writing stories of his own. At the age of twelve, he sold his first story which was published and distributed as a grocery store pamphlet. After brief stints as a weekly newspaper editor and as a law clerk, Stribling attended Florence Normal School (now the University of North Alabama), graduating in 1903. He taught school in Tuscaloosa for a short time, and attended the University of Alabama Law School, receiving the law degree in 1905. He began the practice of law in the office of Emmett O'Neal, a distinguished Florence attorney and son of former Alabama gover-

nor Edward Asbury O'Neal. (Emmett O'Neal became governor in 1911, the only father-son governors of Alabama.) Stribling's position with the O'Neal firm lasted only eight months as it became apparent that Stribling was more interested in writing stories than in a law career.

Stribling had submitted a few pieces to the *Taylor-Trotwood Magazine* in Nashville, Tennessee, and when the editor, John Trotwood Moore, offered him a job on the magazine at ten dollars a week, he readily accepted it and bid farewell to the law forever. Although his job amounted to little more than office boy, Stribling relished the opportunity to be involved in an enterprise that encouraged creative writing, which his parents, especially his father, had tried to discourage. One of the by-products of this job was that Stribling met an aspiring writer who told him of the money to be made from stories written for Sunday School publications. In addition, Stribling found another ready market in adventure stories for such periodicals as *American Boy.* Though the price paid for these stories was minimal, he was able to sell a sufficient number of them to finance travel in the United States, the Caribbean, and South America. Stribling's career as a novelist began in 1917 with the publication of his juvenile sea story *The Cruise of the Dry Dock.* The sales from this book provided him with enough money to give up his reporter's job on the *Chattanooga News* and return to Clifton to devote full time to writing. He sold stories to *Adventure Magazine* and *Everybody's Magazine* while working on his second novel. He completed this book-length story dealing with the plight of an educated black who returned to the South hoping to serve his people. By 1921, having failed to find a publisher for the novel, Stribling decided to take a trip to the Caribbean. He left his manuscript with a friend and asked him to circulate it among New York publishers. While he was on this trip, he received word that *Century Magazine* wanted to publish the novel serially, and with his permission *Birthright* appeared in *Century* beginning in the fall of 1921. The same publishing firm brought out the novel in book form in 1922. On his return to the United States, Stribling wrote and published two novels based on his Latin American adventures, *Fombombo* (1923) and *Red Sand* (1924).

When Stribling turned again to novels of his native South and the social problems brought about by changes wrought by the Civil War, he was on solid ground. *Teeftallow* (1926) was published by Doubleday, his publisher for all of his later books, and was his most successful novel up to that time. He wrote a stage play version of the book which had a limited run in New York under the title *Rope.*

Two more novels with Southern settings followed: *Bright Metal* (1928) and *Backwater* (1930). Sandwiched between these books was his final return to the Latin American theme with *Strange Moon* (1929).

Stribling's major contribution to the Southern Literary Renaissance was embodied in his "Florence trilogy," *The Forge* (1931), *The Store* (1932), and *Unfinished Cathedral* (1934), recently reprinted by The University of Alabama Press in its Library of Alabama Classics series. It was for the second novel of the trilogy that Stribling was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1933. These novels, set in and around Florence, Alabama, center on the Vaiden family whose lives and actions symbolize the changes taking place in Florence and the South from the 1860s to the 1920s.

The Forge, the first novel of the Vaiden saga, covers the period from the eve of the Civil War into the Reconstruction era. The three families whose lives and fortunes are intertwined in the novel are the Lacefields, antebellum aristocrats; the Vaidens, yeoman farmers of pre-war Alabama; and the BeShears, a family of country storekeepers. Stribling treats objectively and realistically such matters as slavery, miscegenation, emancipation,Reconstruction, and the Ku Klux Klan. Whereas the treatment of this same period by most other novels, such as *Gone with the Wind,* deals with the disintegration of the antebellum way of life in terms of the socially prominent, Stribling focuses on the impact of change upon the middle-class Vaiden family. Over the course of the trilogy, the Vaidens embody Stribling's major theme—the passing of social, political, and economic power from the families and institutions of the plantation to the lower and middle class opportunists and entrepreneurs of the post-Civil War period and early twentieth century.

Miltiades Vaiden is the protagonist of the entire trilogy, but *The Forge* begins and ends with the story of Jimmie Vaiden, an Alabama cotton farmer and blacksmith, who fathered three sets of children including Gracie, daughter of his mulatto slave. Jimmie's son, Miltiades, is engaged to Drusilla Lacefield, daughter of the upper-class family that lives on a nearby plantation on which Miltiades is the overseer. Drusilla jilts Miltiades for a more socially prominent suitor, Emory Crowninshield, who, during the Civil War, is colonel of Miltiades's regiment and is killed at Shiloh. During the war Miltiades rose to the rank of colonel, became regimental commander after Crowninshield's death, and returned to Alabama a war hero. After the war, he was the leader of the Klan in the Florence area, and hoped to marry the widowed Drusilla and take over the Lacefield plantation. The Klan's attempt to keep the freed blacks working as

tenants on cotton plantations was thwarted by carpetbaggers who lured the blacks to Florence by promising free food in return for their votes for the Republican gubernatorial candidate. The Lacefields, along with other cotton growers, were unable to maintain their plantation without the black labor and were forced to sell out and move to Florence where they lived in gentile poverty.

Miltiades Vaiden's last hope for a new start in the post-war period was tied to the cotton crop on his father's land. Unable to keep their former slaves as tenants, Miltiades and his sister managed to harvest about $2,000 worth of cotton, their pride forcing them to pick the cotton at night. The money for the cotton was placed with J. Handback, a Florence storekeeper, who accepted the money even though he planned to declare bankruptcy. The loss of the money drove old Jimmie Vaiden from planter and slave owner back to the "forge" where he had begun as a blacksmith, turning out horseshoes at ten cents each. The reversal of fortune of Jimmy Vaiden symbolizes the collapse of the antebellum regime.

For Miltiades, the loss of the money leads to his jilting Drusilla and marrying Ponny BeShears, daughter of the low-class country storekeeper. At the end of the novel, Miltiades came to understand the shifting power structure in the South but was not yet ready to abandon his antebellum code of conduct. He noted that the times

> would require a somewhat different man from the slave owner. . . . who was not too scrupulous about his business methods. . . . The reins of power in the South would be transferred to tradesmen, to shopkeepers, to men like Handback, or even to such a grub as Alex BeShears.

The Store begins in the 1880s with the fortunes of Miltiades Vaiden, now in his forties, at a low ebb. Losing the cotton money in the Handback bankruptcy reduced Miltiades to a squalid existence in a poor section of Florence on the small income derived from his marriage to Ponny BeShears. By accident, he discovered the clandestine relationship between Handback and Gracie, the Vaiden's former slave. Miltiades was able to blackmail Handback into giving him a clerkship in Handback's store, and later manager of Handback's cotton farms. Vaiden secretly sold 500 bales of Handback's cotton for $48,000 and hid the money with Gracie. When Handback had Miltiades arrested so that he could search Vaiden's house, he and the sheriff frightened the pregnant Ponny into a miscarriage and death. In order to avoid a lawsuit, Handback settled with Vaiden for $10,000

of the money, leaving Vaiden with $38,000 to build his future upon.

With his less-than-honorably acquired capital, Miltiades opened a store in Florence. He muses on the fact that the store is not the one he envisioned:

> He had meant to found a large, handsome store, but he had reproduced, almost automatically, Handback's store, BeShears store, and a thousand other stores throughout the South.

The disintegration of Miltiades Vaiden's antebellum ideals reinforces Stribling's theme of the shift of power and influence to the shop-keeper class. In summing up his joining the group he despised, Vaiden realized:

> He had no manor; he had no liberal and cultivating amusements, nor was he a patron of the arts. He pursued none of the *post bellum* graces of life, and for all he was getting out of his money, he might just as well be Handback, or his father-in-law Alex BeShears, or any other of the ten thousand money grubbers in the South. He was disturbed and disappointed in himself. After he had transferred the ownership of the cotton from Handback to himself it was a sort of moral duty for him to use it at least with more enlightenment than Handback had been doing.

But, of course, Miltiades became one of the "money grubbers"and ultimately became more successful at the game than any of the others. By compromising his antebellum values, he rose through the "store" to become an opportunistic tenant landlord, banker, and entrepreneur of the "New South."

Unfinished Cathedral moves the story of the Vaidens forward some forty years, and Miltiades, now in his eighties, is the wealthiest and most powerful man in Florence. Although Miltiades remains the symbol of the rise to economic power of the middle class and is the protagonist of the entire trilogy, his nephew, Jerry Catlin, emerges as the central figure in this novel, symbolizing Stribling's theme of the secularization of religion. Catlin is the son of Miltiades's sister and a former Union soldier from Tennessee (reflecting Stribling's own parents). Catlin is a Methodist minister whose beliefs sound very much like a civic club creed. He was brought to Florence through the influence of his uncle to be the assistant minister of the church, but primarily to be a fundraiser for the nondenominational All Souls Cathedral which Miltiades hopes will be his monument and tomb.

Catlin is also troubled by his repressed love for his uncle's young wife, the daughter of Drusilla Crowninshield, who had married the older Confederate hero who had been at the Shiloh battlefield where her father died.

Unfinished Cathedral is set during the land "boom" period of the 1920s in Florence. The basis for the boom is the building of Wilson Dam and the anticipated development of the Tennessee Valley as a new center of industry. The novel abounds in land speculation, racial tension, and religious vagaries. The rape trial of six black boys (obviously based on the Scottsboro case) threatens the land boom because of negative publicity which would frighten away northern capital. The leaders of the community unite to forestall a lynching, not out of moral suasion but by an appeal to the economic interests of the town which could be damaged by such action.

The novel is replete with ironies including the final one in which old Colonel Miltiades Vaiden is murdered in the "unfinished cathedral" which he had largely underwritten. Many people might have had reason to kill Vaiden, but the bomb-throwing assassin is the son of a vicious, white trash tenant farmer who has carried a grudge against Vaiden in a dispute over an eleven-dollar wagon. The bomb, in killing Vaiden, destroyed portions of the building as well. The ruined "cathedral," born of the commercialization of Florence and of religion, symbolizes in its demise the end of the land boom in Florence, and the end of the adulterated religious fervor of Miltiades Vaiden which prompted its building in the first place. The character of the Colonel, the last to bear the Vaiden name and the last link to the Confederate past, is the embodiment of both the passage of the traditions of the Old South and the emergence of the crass commercialism of the New South.

In summary, the trilogy gives us a realistic, if unflattering, picture of the changing South. Jimmie Vaiden of *The Forge* is the representative of the collapse of the slave economy, built on the labor of the blacks and defended by an invented code of behavior that disintegrates under the pressures of war, Federal occupation, and emancipation. With the code goes the political, economic, and social system that had developed out of slavery and the frontier. In *The Store*, Stribling gives us the central theme of the rise to power of the shopkeeper class, supplanting the plantation owners in influence, wealth, and power. The storekeeper, such as Handback, succeeded in the post-war period by foreclosing farm mortgages, untroubled by the honor code that governed the Lacefields on the upper-class level and the Vaidens on the middle-class level. Miltiades Vaiden realized

that he could sacrifice his honor for wealth and position. Even though he justified his theft of Handback's cotton as a retaliation for Handback's earlier unscrupulous taking of the Vaiden cotton money, Miltiades came to know that he had joined the Handbacks and the BeShears as moneygrubbers. *Unfinished Cathedral* is Stribling's ultimate statement of man's pious hope and worldly show. Miltiades's monetary support of the building of All Souls Cathedral is his attempt to provide himself with a memorial that "would tell the passerby that Colonel Miltiades Vaiden had lived." The bomb that killed him and partially destroyed the unfinished cathedral marks the final destruction of the values once held by him, including his commercialization of religion in the building raised to glorify man rather than God.

With the perspective of more than half a century since Stribling published these novels, readers today should be able to judge the accuracy of his portrayals of Southern people and institutions, unencumbered by the contemporary sensitivities of Southern readers and critics of the 1930s. The republication of the Florence trilogy will give modern readers an opportunity to become acquainted with one of the most powerful social realists in American fiction in the twentieth century. Stribling was an uncompromising interpreter of the changes taking place in the South and in Alabama from the Civil War to the Great Depression. □