

Book world

Tracking America's past and present



Michael Skube

A Tar Heel writer from an old line

It perhaps will come as a profound shock, but venture beyond North Carolina and you may learn that this state enjoys a peculiar reputation for good newspapering and for good journalists. This is not to say Idaho has a thing to gain by trading a bushel of potatoes for a cattle-car crammed with North Carolina news hacks. But it is a fact still, and one substantiated by a long line of journalists who not only have distinguished themselves in newspapering but in various ways have been part of the cultural life of their day. W.J. Cash, Jonathan Daniels, Harry Golden, Vermont Royster, Tom Wicker, Jonathan Yardley — there are many more, past and present, natives and late arrivals, but Edwin M. Yoder Jr. is singularly notable.

He is, as you probably know, a syndicated columnist for The Washington Post who appears in this paper and many others. Before leaving North Carolina for the Washington Star he wrote editorials for the Charlotte News and the Greensboro Daily News. That simple sentence is an unintended reminder that two of these once-excellent newspapers have closed, and that the third is now the Greensboro News & Record as a consequence of still another paper's demise. That's life, I suppose, but when your life is journalism something more needs to be said. The loss of a good newspaper, whatever one's personal involvement, represents also a public emaciation.



Edwin M. Yoder Jr.

Easy, of course, for me to say. I'm fortunate enough to write for people who actually read. So too is Ed Yoder, who writes infinitely better than I. His new book, "The Unmaking of a Whig" (Georgetown University Press, \$22.95), is what in another day might have come from the pen of Lippmann or Macaulay. Mr. Yoder's subtitle calls these 19 pieces "essays in self-definition." Whatever he means by this, he and his publisher needed a catchphrase with which to bundle together more interests than a half dozen other writers might come up with. Ed Yoder (he was born in Greensboro but grew up in Mebane) is at home with history, literature and jurisprudence, and he approaches all from a point of view that is Southern without being provincial. Anyone familiar with his previous collection of essays, "The Night of the Old South Ball," knows that he can write intelligently one day about the fiction of Peter Taylor, the next about Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the next about Gilbert and Sullivan.

Two jousting justices

The centerpiece of his new book is a shrewd and psychologically compelling portrayal of two U.S. Supreme Court justices — Robert J. Jackson and Hugo Black — whose dislike for one another foreshadowed our own disputes over the court's proper role. Before Jackson and Black's feud became public in 1946, the Supreme Court seemed the one institution in American life immune to politics and personality. The legal issues behind this feud are too tangled to set forth here, but it is the larger public dimension that arises from Mr. Yoder's narrative.

The Black-Jackson clash was an instance of the unending debate over activism by all means, noisier and most spectacular, engaging the most interesting minds and pens, in the history of the Court. There have been canings on the floor of the Senate, and equivalent indignities at the White House. There are no other such episodes in the annals of the Court. The debate over the business of judges in the thickets of politics is a struggle that continues in many forms, though less visibly and with less intensity, every day in every era. And it continues . . . because it reflects a permanent tension not only in great appellate courts but in the minds of men.

Mr. Yoder has a particular interest in the law, but it is more the law as history and as literature that engages him. Besides law, Mr. Yoder writes here of W.J. Cash, of the human instinct for storytelling (he teaches a course at Georgetown University on "Great Narrators"), of the American inability to separate piety and politics. It is the title essay, "The Unmaking of a Whig," that most closely defines him. Like many young Americans who came of age in the 1950s, he inherited the illusion that we were living in the American century, that the beneficent marriage of Providence and history had begun and that things would be swell from then on.

The religion of Progress

Then, as a Rhodes Scholar from the University of North Carolina, he was assigned to read Herbert Butterfield's elegant little book, "The Whig Interpretation of History." He came away from it with a chastened, if more realistic, understanding of the schedule by which history operates. It is not always linear, after all, and our civil religion of Progress is more often than not an infatuation with ourselves. In examining the past, it is the losers who, as much as the winners, have something to teach us. A Southerner should know this in his bones, having experienced defeat and privation afterward, but by the mid-20th century Americans had convinced themselves they were all winners. Indeed they were the winners.

We know better now. And yet the excessiveness of Know-nothingism, of nativism, of crude ignorances are everywhere about us. What would come of us, as Mr. Yoder implies, is not self-flagellation but a little modesty and humility. Lacking them, we delude ourselves that the world really was made for us, and put off a more unpleasant reckoning. But now I'm beginning to sound like another self-righteous writer. It's one of Ed Yoder's graces that he never does.

In a footnote to his story of the Jackson-Black clash, he quotes an apt phrase of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s. Jackson, said Schlesinger, was an intelligent man "but given to playing with ideas rather than possessing them." Ed Yoder is that rare writer who can possess them and yet be playful about it.

MAKING TRACKS
An American Rail Odyssey. By Terry Pindell. New York: Grove Weidenfeld. 599 pages. \$22.95.

By MARVIN HUNT

Decades of neglect notwithstanding, it remains true that the song of the railroad tracks is the song of America. In "Making Tracks" Terry Pindell reminds us of this fact. Fleeing trouble at home in New Hampshire, Mr. Pindell set out to travel 30,000 miles of America's passenger lines, pursuing, as the dust jacket says, an "integration of past and present . . . history and headlines . . . mind and memory."

Between the covers of this book is the complete manifest of American railways, inseparable from the stuff of the American dream itself: the Lakeshore Limited, the California Zephyr, the Sunset Limited, the City of New Orleans, the Empire Builder, the Crescent and Silver Star. These names in turn evoke the ghosts of departed conquerors, tamers of a wild, astonishingly beautiful landscape: Grenville Dodge, James Jerome Hill, Collis Huntington, Cornelius Vanderbilt — a rogues' gallery of brilliant, hard-bitten, absolutely ruthless men who amassed staggering fortunes in the drive to link the extremities of a vast, formative nation.

In alternating sections of historiography and reportage, Mr. Pindell juxtaposes the now benign, mythical elements of railroad history with the stories of wandering souls he meets along the way. To ride the rails in his company, then, really is to integrate past and present, mind and memory, and also to threaten the cozy comfort of a sleeper car.

Accounts of Casey Jones' violent end, the infamous Angola and Great Circus Train wrecks, the Indians Wars and murdering desperadoes who preyed upon trains in a bygone era deepen the disquiet we feel when the Eagle, rumbling over a lonesome stretch of Texas track, decapitates a young man driven to suicide by some unknown calamity. The nostalgia of hobo stories is similarly checked in the lounge car of the City of New Orleans where contemporary drifters sneer and mumble threats at passengers, and in Meridian, Miss., where one disheveled young man among a group of homeless men idling by an empty boxcar responds to Mr. Pindell's approach "with the universal sign of contempt, an upraised middle finger."

In the present renaissance of American railways, when Amtrak is adding new engines and rolling stock, and can't accommodate the numbers of people who want to travel by train, we are reminded of the legacy of the past registered in the blighted cityscapes through which today's trains



The Central Pacific's Jupiter, left, and the Union Pacific's No. 119, right, as they met on May 10, 1869 in Promontory, Utah, to establish the first transcontinental railroad. Workers had laid 1,085 miles of iron rails west from Omaha to meet the Central Pacific's 690 miles of track from Nevada.

pass, where teenagers who can't afford a ticket across town scowl at us. Climbing the grade from Salt Lake City to Promontory, Utah — site of the famous Golden Spike ceremony marking the completion of the first transcontinental rail route — we are obliged to recall the toil and suffering of thousands of Chinese and Irish workers who built the line.

For all of this, though, Mr. Pindell does not always put past and present in balance. In fact, he dwells altogether too long on rail travel's history, at the expense of what one imagines are more compelling scenes being played out onboard the train itself. While historical minutiae will always interest rail buffs, universally an obsessive, readers more interested in travel may find parts of Mr. Pindell's book tedious going. Moreover, the people we do meet on these trains are, with a few notable exceptions, rather prosaic. My suspicions were aroused, for example, by the Iranian exile whose diction and cadence bore a remarkable resemblance to the author's. Equally spurious was the "boisterous and opinionated" itinerant actor

who presented to the occupants of a lounge car his theory of "ironic countertruth": the idea that truth is not at all elusive in American society, it is usually the exact opposite of that which our myths propagate.

One doubts that Amtrak passengers really are this wooden. More likely Mr. Pindell, in his first book, simply had difficulty rendering their authenticity in prose. Whatever the case may be, "Making Tracks" does not rank with the best of travel literature.

Still, the majority of it rings true, often sardonically so. It's not surprising to learn that the cowcatcher, that fanlike flange used to brush aside errant cattle and debris, was originally spear-shaped; or that, even today, at the end of every run of the California Zephyr workers must hose carnage from the front of the train. In a nation that produced, enabled and still reveres Collis Huntington, it makes more sense to replace livestock than build fences.

Marvin Hunt is a *Carrollboro* writer and professor of English at Campbell University.

A brittle retelling of the old snob story

THE FINAL CLUB
By Geoffrey Wolff. New York: Knopf. 370 pages. \$19.95.

By JEFF GORDINIER

The sons of Old Nassau are snorting with rage. Sally Frank has won an award for service to Princeton University.

Who is Sally Frank? Eleven years ago, as a student, she sued three of Princeton's eating clubs because they refused to admit women. Since then, two of these clubs have gone coed; the last one is still fighting.

To many students, not just women, Sally Frank is a hero. But drop her name to an Old Guard alumnus and watch his temples flare.

"The award to Sally Frank '80 for alleged selfless service" to the university is a shocking affront to alumni(ae) who give many hours 12 months of the year to the Best Old Place of All," barked a member of the class of '39, in a letter to the alumni magazine.

Change has a tough time at Old Nassau.

So does Nathaniel Auerbach Clay, the main character of Geoffrey Wolff's retelling of a snob story. The tradition is not much honored anymore. We still read F. Scott Fitzgerald, but who reads Booth Tarkington ("Seventeen")? Or Owen Johnson ("Stover at Yale")? Mr. Wolff's subject — is the Fitzgerald's in "This Side of Paradise" — is the habits and prejudices of rich prepriety.

Nathaniel comes to Princeton in 1956. In his first two years, he learns about names. He falls for a bitchy social climber named Diana Carr, who insists on being called "Dee-ah-nah." He rooms with a Newport scion named Booth Tarkington Griggs. He sneaks into a debaucher ball for men: "This year a Cartier, a Lanoni, a Lippincott, a Mellon, a Rockefeller, an Ansell, a Gifford, a Weld."

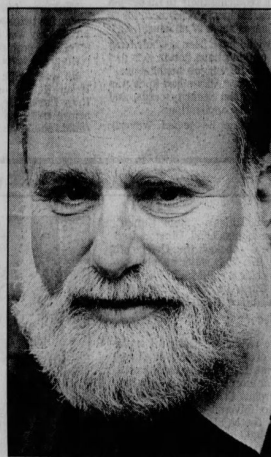
But his name isn't quite up to snuff. Clay is fine — the Lake Forest Clays, of course. His middle name is the problem — Auerbach. That's Jewish, isn't it? The battleground is Bicker 1988, Princeton's version of fraternity rush.

Today, in 1990, most of the clubs are non-selective; if you want to join, you just sign up. But in the 1950s, Bicker was inescapable, unless a student wanted to eat in a lonely solo line.

And in 1958, they called it "Dirty Bicker." When it was over, a small group of sophomores was left without bids. Most were Jewish. They waited on the back porch of the Ivy Club, doused in a winter rain, while Ivy's president, Steven Rockefeller, tried to place each one in a club.

Nathaniel Auerbach Clay is one of those students. Haunted by rejection, he becomes a snob supreme and joins the Final Club, a dozen seniors who meet once a month for candlelight dinners and snooty talk. Mr. Wolff is elegant and playful with words, but this first part of the novel has a lot in common with many another goody college-boy novel:

"Pownall, slumped in a red leather chair, shooes feet on an ottoman, asked Nathaniel: 'Have you noticed our idiom? How chubbable is our



Geoffrey Wolff

discourse, how frothy and light, like mimosas at brunch? Were you to judge, would you not say we were bright as pennies?"

"Ooo," said Booth, 'the subjunctive mood. How feathery!'"

"You sound like strangers. Like actors playing phonies," Nathaniel said.

These guys do sound like phonies. So, a reader wonders, why am I reading about them? Somehow, Nathaniel is too naive and the snobs are too obvious.

The second part of the book has more pizzazz, because Mr. Wolff — himself a Princeton alumnus — takes the snob novel onto new turf: the 1970s and 1980s. Nathaniel comes back for reunions and finds a different Princeton. The clubs have lost their stranglehold on student life. The snobs are mess-backs. They frown at the diversity, fiery politics and sloppy clothes of the campus:

"Both saw another slogan, carried by a student, a sandwich man, sandwich gal: 'Male Chauvinists BEWARE!' Wasn't this parade meant to be fun?"

Actually, this is fun. More fun than a clone of a Fitzgerald novel. One chapter, called "Knock-Knocking at the Door of Paradise," is hilarious. In it, the sons of Nathaniel and Booth apply to Princeton's class of 1982. The chapter includes copies of their applications and a visit to the admissions office.

The best part is "A Lovely Father," a revealing short story by Nathaniel's son, Jake. But when you come to Jake's bratty yet tender voice, you see what's wrong with the rest of "The Final Club": Nathaniel doesn't have that kind of spark.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once described The Ivy Club as "detached and breathlessly aristocratic." Geoffrey Wolff's novel is like that — cocooned in its own stuffiness. It is literate and smart, but it lacks a sense of urgency. In 1990, when Princeton alumni mutter about Sally Frank and an aristocrat named George Herbert Walker Bush is president, maybe another novel about snobs isn't irrelevant. But Mr. Wolff doesn't show why this snob novel needed to be written, and so it leaves the reader amused but finally indifferent.

Jeff Gordinier, a staff writer for The News and Observer, graduated from Princeton in 1988.

Speaking frankly on campus

HOT AIR
By Bob Katz. New York: Birch Lane Press. 220 pages. \$17.95.

By PAUL A. GILSTER

Imagine a cross between Che Guevara and Gerardo Rivera, a scruffy, vague character named Zapatu. Once a graduate student in history in an obscure Central American country, he quickly finds his true calling as an intellectual firebrand. Wildly popular, the young revolutionary flees to the hills to avoid arrest by his corrupt government. There he composes songs and gives interviews, peppered with odd and possibly plagiarized aphorisms, to gringo news programs like 60 Minutes.

Zapatu, in other words, is a media creation, and it's his marketing on the lecture circuit that occupies Bob Katz's funny first novel. Mr. Katz has been involved in the lecture business for some years, so he has a feel for the seamy aspects of selling speakers to college audiences. His narrator, one Danny Frank, runs a floundering agency committed to social relevance and intellectual subtlety. Needless to say, the speakers he hires generally put today's college kids to sleep.

Zapatu might change all that if Frankly Speaker — Danny Frank's agency — can get him on the circuit. It takes a trip to Belize to arrange it, but soon the smooth leftist is wowing the campus crowds with his almost Caronesque monologue. He's also getting involved with Danny's frizzy-haired sidekick Mona, who beneath her gruff exterior is looking for an idealist to love. What follows is loaded with vaudevillian gags, jabs at educational mediocrity, and roman a clef figures like Dawn Hall, a secretary once involved in a White House scandal, who's now angling for her own spot on the lucrative tour.

Danny's narrative voice is what makes "Hot Air" work. He's self-deprecating, somewhat bewildered by life, a man of a certain moral fibre doing shabby things to make his business survive. Soon he's got new worries about Zapatu. The revolutionary, infinitely adaptable, has picked up Norteamericano ways like a chameleon, ordering combination platters at truck stops, applying for a VISA card, and chasing after every coed in sight. When renewed violence in his homeland puts the pressure on him to return to his people, both he and Danny face a choice whose outcome is far from obvious.

"Hot Air" doesn't succumb to preachy resolutions or to easy cynicism, though it sometimes swings close to the latter. Mr. Katz is shrewd enough to allow his characters a certain license; they're funny and resilient, especially the sexy Mona, and although we care about them, we're never tempted to take them too seriously. Readers, with a taste for cutting and sometimes slapstick humor will find complaint only with the publisher, who failed to proof-read this book. Printer's errors of omission and commission abound.

Paul A. Gilster is a Raleigh writer.



Bob Katz