House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family by Bertram Wyatt-Brown
New York: Oxford University Press, 1994

Review Essay by William A. Percy III

In House of Percy Bertram Wyatt-Brown presents a compelling case that genetics predisposed at least six generations of my family to clinical depression, the "melancholia" of the subtitle. (In my memoirs I will trace melancholia and what I believe to be the related trait of homosexuality into the seventh and eighth generations.) Bert also argues persuasively that nurture, the flip side of genes, produced its own persistent haunts in the family line--the Percy obsession with "honor," which he sees as aristocratic rectitude combined with a ruthless sense of entitlement to wealth and power. Exhaustively researched, methodically laid out, House is a solid work of history. At the same time it often reads like a Southern-Gothic horror tale.

Suicide blighted five of the six generations under examination, beginning with Charles Percy, the swashbuckling, wife-deserting North American progenitor. In 1794 at age fifty-four Charles drowned himself in a creek, a heavy bucket tied around his neck to speed the process. According to legend he was distraught that an English son from a previous "marriage" had tracked him down at his plantation in the Mississippi wilderness, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of Thomas George Percy, Charles's New World heir.
The area then was under Spanish sovereignty. Local authorities had appointed Charles an alcalde, or magistrate, and he also acquired the honorific "Don Carlos." A man of position and of means, Charles furthermore claimed descent from the noble English Percys, earls and dukes of Northumberland; his three-room home, by frontier standards quite comfortable but far from palatial, he had dubbed "Northumberland House." Thus the arrival of his abandoned son, bringing ungentlemanly implications of bigamy, may have shamed him.

But Charles had for some time been showing signs of mental derangement. He was "subject to a malady that left him coldly suspicious of all around him," Bert writes. His neighbors, the Smith family, poor farming folk, particularly alarmed him. Bert notes however that the Smiths were "by all accounts...uncommonly intelligent and handsome. No one questioned their essential honesty." Nonetheless, Charles was determined to "destroy" them. Why? "James Smith had violated his sense of honor in a way Don Carlos clearly found insupportable. Perhaps there was something more," Bert goes on, "some violent reaction against his own feelings that Percy himself shrank from recognizing but was determined to expel by banishing the whole family from his sight and recollection." One wonders: What feelings might Charles have needed to expel by getting rid of this "uncommonly handsome" family? There is a whiff of the sexual here, though that perhaps is not Bert's intention.
Charles's son, my ancestor Thomas George (Princeton, 1806), prospered and lived quite blantly compared to his father. He died at age fifty-five. From then on all the Percy males of this branch died early, until Walker, the 20th-century novelist and Jefferson Lecturer, became the first to make it past seventy. Yet Walker, as his fiction vividly attests, was no stranger to morbid flights of mind and presentiments of mortality. Little wonder in that, as his paternal grandfather, father, and mother all killed themselves. His mother's suicide echoed patriarch Charles's. Mattie Sue Phinizy Percy drove her car into a country creek and drowned, nearly finishing off as well Walker's youngest brother, Phinizy; she clutched one of his hands, impeding his escape through a window. For years thereafter he suffered from chronic night terrors. Poor Phinizy also happened to have been the only family member present when his father blew his brains out—with a shotgun of the same make and gauge that his grandfather had used, in the same gloomy mansion in Birmingham, Alabama.

House is a provocative and convincing read. It contains, however, a number of small omissions, and one big blind spot: the question of homosexuality, its prevalence in the Percy family, and its relationship both to depression and to heredity. Like his close friend, David Hackett Fisher, author of Historians' Fallacies, Bert falls victim to a common error, "the presumption of heterosexuality."

Of Charles Percy's descendants through his son Thomas George, four can be identified with certainty as lifelong Kinsey
"6's" or near-"6's," that is, as exclusively or almost exclusively homosexual: my great-uncle LeRoy Pope Percy, my first cousin once removed, William Alexander Percy, my aunt, Lady Caroline Percy, and me. But the family history is rife with suggestions that plenty of us were at least bisexual (Kinsey 2's-5's), and that these Percys, like so many other queers labeled as sinners, outlaws, and mentally ill, also grappled with depression, in some cases to the point of suicide.

I can only speculate as to why Bert is not more open to this evidence. First, he appears not to take seriously the theory that heredity predisposes not only depression but also sexuality, which in recent years has become the object of serious scientific inquiry. Bert's reticence perhaps also derives from his background. His father was the Episcopal Bishop of Pittsburgh, his wife is a Marbury of the noted Prince Edwards County, Maryland, family. Moreover, Bert's alma mater, Sewanee, where William Alexander Percy enjoyed near-deity status, was the main Southern manifestation of the Episcopal High Church.

Bert notes that three male Percys exhibited traits at odds with the family's masculine ideal: second-generation Thomas George, third-generation Leroy Pope, and fifth-generation William Alexander. He characterizes all three as "passive," not inclined to the bluster, swagger and impetuousness typical of the Percy style. Thomas George's intense lifelong friendship with one John Walker, whom Thomas George met while a student at Princeton, and who, when both were still bachelors, lived with him for more than
a year in Natchez, is of some interest to Bert. But he rules out sexual relations. As for Leroy Pope, Bert notes that this lifelong bachelor died by his own hand, and that, like his grandnephew William Alexander, he lived his entire life in the house in which he was born. Apart from family memories that LeRoy Pope was "sad-eyed," Bert comments little further. About these two I have more to say. First I will address the case of William Alexander.

"Uncle Will" (1885-1942), as my mother instructed me to call William Alexander in hopes of inheriting a chunk of what we believed to be his immense fortune, was a poet of some distinction and the author of the classic Southern memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941), a nostalgic and bitter ode to the vanished values of the aristocratic Old South. For decades *Lanterns* occupied pride of place on the bedside tables of faded, wistful belles, along with such other Dixie scripture as *Gone with the Wind* and the King James Bible itself. Today, *Lanterns* comes across as the effusion of a grand old queen coming out to other gays and gambling that few straights would be able to decipher his code—as an act of calculated daring. Will won that bet for a surprisingly long period of time. Since the advent of the sexual revolution and gay liberation, however, most enlightened readers of *Lanterns* see very clearly that he was ever so gay. Consider, for example: "Perhaps a poet whose dear words have died should be content if once, no matter how briefly, they have made two lads in a
greensward more shimmery and plumed." Lanterns is packed with such sentiments. So are his four volumes of poetry, published by Yale University Press and later, following the success of Lanterns, reissued by Knopf in a single volume as the Collected Poems.

But the evidence is hardly confined to the memoir and the poetry. To his credit, Bert addresses much of it. This required a degree of courage. Novelist Walker Percy—like me, Will's first cousin once removed, but unlike me Will's adoptive son following the suicide of his mother—repeatedly threatened to deny Bert permission to quote from his works if Bert portrayed Will as gay. It was a wrongheaded, ridiculous maneuver on Walker's part. Long before the appearance of Lanterns Will had published under the name A. W. Percy two poems in the anonymously edited Men and Boys (1926), a collection of "Calamite" poetry. He consorted with "Uranians," poetic devotees of the youthful male ideal. He frequently vacationed at Taormina, home to the photographer Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, whose attraction to "Sicilian shepherd boys" Will shared, and at Capri, where his friend Norman Douglas presided over a louche émigré band of moneyed homosexuals. Will even wrote a campy preface to one of Douglas's books, in which he spoke of boy guardians in Etruscan tombs who "powdered" their bodies, "even their eyelashes." His dear New York City chums, Huger Jersey, Gerstle Mack, and Lindley Hubbell, lifelong bachelors all, in correspondence referred to each other in such terms as "poor darling." Like Carl Van Vechten, Will haunted
Harlem nightspots, where he befriended the gay black poet Langston Hughes, who later visited Will's Mississippi home, coming in the front door much to the astonishment of local blacks. It goes on.

Walker Percy wanted all of this suppressed. How he thought he could get away with that, I cannot imagine. And, he didn't. Bert exposed much of it. But at a cost to the truth: in House he portrays Will as a homo who loathed his bent and found meager satisfaction in it. "The sexual feelings that Will Percy entertained," Bert writes, "gave him little apparent pleasure." Indeed, Bert goes so far as to suggest that while visiting gay hotspots, Will avoided sexual scenes. Bert writes of Will's relationship with Norman Douglas on Capri:

Douglas sometimes brought his street pick-ups along on excursions with friends simply to be outrageous. At the same time he was a man of great dignity, wit, and sensitivity when he wished, and many who knew him never saw at first-hand his seamier side. With his puritanical views about public display of vice, Will Percy undoubtedly belonged to the latter group of admirers. ... Not for a moment did the Mississippian accept Douglas's aesthetic amorality that justified pleasure for its own sake.

This claim is astonishingly naïve. It is true that Will denounced certain Baptists who notoriously "rutted" in farm fields surrounding their hellfire-blazing revival tents. And it is true that we have no eyewitness accounts of Will frolicking with the "Sicilian shepherd boys" featured in his verse. But Will's reasons for vacationing at the premiere gay resorts of his day are perfectly obvious. He fled small-town, stagnant, gossipy Greenville, Mississippi--the headquarters of his father's vast plantation, banking, railroad, and levee-board empire--to seek
the freedom to act on his sexual desires. Why else frequent
magnets for aesthetes with precisely the same motivations?

In any case, Will had plenty of sex with males even in
Greenville. Bert does not discuss the curious case of Will's
close friendship with a white Greenville policeman. When this man
died Will had him buried, to my own mother's disbelief, in the
Percy family plot. Mother had no details, none at least that she
related to me, about the nature of their relationship, but she
and her sources thoroughly understood it.

Bert does discuss Will's black chauffeur, Ford ("Fode")
Atkins. As to their lengthy sexual relationship, he is silent. I
do not criticize Bert for this. He had compelling reasons.

Millie Commodore, my good friend and sometime neighbor on
Tremont Street in Boston's South End, grew up in Greenville. A
beautiful, light-skinned black woman, she had many stories to
tell about clandestine interracial sexual relations, both hetero
and homo. She herself had much white ancestry—all of it upper
class!

Millie's husband had been Fode Atkins's classmate in high
school and best friend; they rode around with Fode in a car that
Will had given him. Millie told me that it was common knowledge
among blacks in Greenville that Will had sexual affairs with at
least three of his black chauffeurs: Fode, Ernest, and a
beautiful pool-shark dandy named Honey who wore a mink tie. I
tape-recorded hours of her reminiscences on this and many other
subjects. Later, when Bert came to visit me here, I gave him
copies of the tapes and introduced him to Millie. The two
conversed for hours in my house on East Concord Street, Bert
tape-recording it all.

A few years later Millie became a source for John Barry,
who was preparing Rising Tide, a study of the catastrophic
Mississippi River flood of 1927. The flood inundated Greenville,
the Percy plantations, and much of the Delta. Rising Tide was
subsequently made into a television documentary in which Millie
extensively appeared. She deserved and much enjoyed that moment
of fame.

Millie interested John Barry in part because he wanted to
learn about the family dynamics between Will and his father,
LeRoy Percy, the model planter and a former U.S. senator. Will
and LeRoy played critical but conflicting roles in managing the
flood's aftermath. Barry needed insight into what made them tick.

He learned quite a lot from Millie and from sources to whom
she introduced him (and had tried to introduce to both Bert and
me), several other high-toned Greenville blacks who insisted on
anonymity because Percys still held sway in the area. Unlike
Bert, Barry had no fear of Walker Percy's estate. He did not need
to quote from Walker's works. Therefore he felt free to publish
Millie's sexual revelations and those of her contacts.

Will's relationship with his father had long been fraught.
Like many fathers of gay sons, he distanced himself from Will
when Will was quite young. Will did not fit the family mold.
However, his younger brother, also named LeRoy, did--he loved
hunting, horseback riding without a saddle, all the traditional
manly pursuits of the Deep South. Father LeRoy had seen in him a
worthy heir. But LeRoy the son died at age twelve from wounds
incurred in a hunting accident. Will then was seventeen, a
connoisseur of poetry and music, effete, a budding dandy. Those
traits became all the more glaringly out of place with the sudden
and tragic loss of his virile kid brother. Young LeRoy had seemed
destined to carry on Senator Percy's fiefdom. His death made Will
the sole heir.

Relations between father and son entered a critical phase
at the height of the flood disaster. For more details, please see
the companion piece on this website about John Barry's Rising
Tide.

My first contact with Bert Wyatt-Brown came in a phone call
from out of the blue. Bert informed me that he had found my name
in alumni records at Princeton, and wanted to know if I am a
member of the family whose history he was researching for his
book. Yes, I replied, pleased to learn of the project, as I have
always found the family history fascinating, ever since my
widowed paternal grandmother, Big Mama, regaled me when I was a
small child with tales of nobility, conquest, and derring-do. I
descended from the earls and dukes of Northumberland, she assured
me, the Percy Lords of the March who defended England from the
bloody Scots. Shakespeare had written about their exploits.
"Hotspur!" Big Mama exclaimed. The name thrilled me. Later I
learned that my family's Hotspur connection is a bit sketchy.
Bert then said that my novelist cousin Walker Percy had denied the existence of my side of the family. "No other living Percys," Walker assured Bert. This astounded and annoyed me, for Walker had visited me several times after I took my first teaching job, in 1963, at Louisiana State University/New Orleans. Walker and his wife, Bunt, lived across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans in Covington. Although Walker famously, to my mind inexplicably, loved the rustic company of Covington's "good ole boys" (today Covington is paved with strip malls, but then was still backwater country), he and Bunt made urban getaways to the Big Easy one weekend a month, staying in fancy hotels and enjoying the famous restaurants. From time to time they would invite me out to Gallatoire's, Walker's favorite spot. Once they came for drinks at my apartment in the Quarter, at the corner of Burgundy and Toulouse, very close to where John Barry now has a house, its fate as of this writing uncertain in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

I detected in Walker a rather peculiar interest in me. It crossed my mind that he might be looking for a model on which to base a fictional character. In The Moviegoer he'd drawn a female character based on Uncle Will, and a male character based on Will's best lady friend, Charlotte Gailor, the doyenne of The University of the South at Sewanee. What might he do with me, a novice teacher at a university run by rednecks in Baton Rouge? Later, in The Last Gentleman, Walker told the story of an uppity
Princeton student who moved into the New York City YMCA. I see a few glimmers of myself in that character.

But back to the question of Walker's knowledge of my side of the family. John Walker Percy, who was Walker's grandfather, William Armstrong, who was my grandfather, and Will's father LeRoy were brothers who paid close attention to each others' personal and financial affairs. My grandfather, the family historian of that generation, died of Bright's Disease at age forty-nine in 1912. In the 1930's during the Depression, Will bought three quite valuable family portraits from my grandmother, Big Mama; they hung in Will's Greenville house, where Walker lived after his father's suicide. The circumstances of the sale provoked a bitter family dispute in which my hot-headed, homophobic father accused Will of having shortchanged Big Mama. Moreover, Daddy had lived at the Greenville house during his senior year of high school, an uneasy stay as Daddy loathed Will's effeminate manner--although my father himself, while at Stanford and Stanford Law School had a sexual affair with his roommate. More on that, later.

Walker most definitely knew of my side of the family. I realized that he had denied our existence because he didn't want me to tell Bert about Percy homosexuality. When I first met Walker, in 1963, just after he had won the National Book Award for The Moviegoer, I concealed my orientation as best I could for I at once detected his extreme homophobia. In 1985 I began publishing gay advocacy pieces that eventually included a chapter
in a book, Carryin' On in the Gay and Lesbian South (1997), and a journal article, "The South I Fled: A scion of the Percy family reflects on the emergence of gay activism in the 'closeted' South" (Brightleaf, March-April 1998). Both pieces outed Uncle Will. Walker did not live to see either of them. But he knew what I was up to and he fervently did not want to see that sort of thing seeping into Bert's family history, which was shaping up as by far the best of the many books on it. Hence, Walker simply annihilated us--Aunt Lady, my two sisters, and me.

Diligent Bert nonetheless tracked me down through the Princeton records. I demanded that he refuse to knuckle under to Walker's threats and tell the truth, and even contacted Bert's mentor, the eminent C. Van Woodward, to request that he urge Bert to stand firm. C. Van, as he was called, assured me that Bert would play fair.

But as has been seen, Bert couldn't completely play fair on account of threats. He acknowledges that Will was gay, he discusses Taormina and Capri and Norman Douglas, he quotes homoerotic passages from Will's poetry, all of which must have brought great consternation to Walker's estate and his survivors (Walker died of cancer compounded by alcoholism in 1990 at age seventy-four, four years before the publication of House). But the estate reluctantly weakened Walker's ultimatum, allowing Bert to quote from Walker's works even while the heirs were denouncing and disdaining him. Bert recently was delighted to tell me that now, after the publication of far more explosive material in John
Barry's *Rising Tide*, they tolerate him a lot more than they used to.

At any rate, I personally witnessed an episode that underscored the awareness of my immediate family that Will was gay. Not long after the publication of *Lanterns*, Ernest, Will's former chauffeur and lover, showed up unannounced at the back door of our house in Memphis. He asked to speak with my father, whom Ernest had gotten to know during Daddy's senior high school year in Greenville. Daddy was surprised but gracious. He and Ernest sat down at the dining room table. After a few pleasantries, Ernest blurted out that he wanted Daddy to sue Will on his behalf.

What on earth?, Daddy asked, slightly scandalized. Because, Ernest explained, Will in *Lanterns* had falsely accused him of stealing. Yes, Daddy said, recalling the episode in Will's memoir.

It was an awkward moment. I watched and listened from a distance. At first I couldn't imagine how Ernest could think that Daddy would sue such a rich relative who might leave us a bundle. But even at age nine, I was sexually precocious. It came to me: Ernest, of course, knew that Daddy hated Will because he was a prissy, stuck-up homosexual. That explained how Ernest, who may well have known that Will intended to disinherit us, felt bold enough to cross the significant barriers in play--class, race, sex, the kinship ties. He thought that Daddy's homophobia might trump all of those considerations. Later, overhearing
conversation between Daddy and Mother, I gathered that this was indeed the answer.

Daddy laughed in a kindly manner and said that Ernest needed to find a lawyer without blood ties to Will Percy. He escorted Ernest out.

Will was, of course, a depressive. His nostalgic yearning for vanished aristocratic values, his disdain for what he saw as soulless modernity, masked a deep rage with his not fitting in—as a son, as a gay man. Will suffered to his final days with the terrible feeling, especially haunting because it was accurate, that he had not earned his father's respect. This in fact has been a persistent Percy trait, almost itself like a hereditary disease. I myself suffered from it. But early on, by age twelve, when Big Mama took me to visit Aunt Lady and her lover, Nancy, in Hollywood, I realized that my father's homophobia made him a worthless lout. I came to see that Uncle Will, like my homosexual heroes in Greek and Roman antiquity, far outshone Daddy. It evaporated the Percy curse of feeling inferior to the father.

Alienation between fathers and gay sons is of course very common. When fathers sense that a male child is peculiar they often distance themselves, withdraw emotionally from that child. Will's father called Will when very young "a queer chicken." He didn't know what to make of this odd creature. That kind of perception can have devastating consequences. In Will's case it was compounded by the sense that he belonged in a different era, one of brooding, virtuous knights, a romantic world he revered
but the imagined supermasculine standards of which he could not
meet. He felt, in short, thoroughly inadequate.

Enough on Uncle Will, at least for the purposes of this
little essay.

I do not have much information on the sexuality of Percy
women. As mentioned at the outset, my aunt Lady Caroline Percy
was a Kinsey 6. She never married and had a succession of female
companions. Lady, who got her information from her adoring and
accepting mother Big Mama, was fond of remarking that an
unusually large number of elderly loners of both sexes
congregated—in rocking chairs, sipping drinks—on the front
porch of the house of her planter grandfather, William Alexander
Percy (Princeton, 1853). Perhaps some of the spinster relatives
never married because of Sapphic inclinations. Lady certainly
thought so. In her mind William Alexander’s establishment almost
qualified as a kind of gay retirement home. Without doubt, that
goes too far. Colonel William Alexander Percy, the "Gray Eagle of
the Delta" (Bert refers to him as "Eagle of the Valley," and it
is true that he won fame in the Shenandoah, but we always said
"Delta"), served heroically in the Civil War. A man of means, he
of course took in widowed and orphaned kinfolk after the South's
defeat. But Aunt Lady was on to something.

On the male side there is rather more evidence, some of it
very clear, some of it less so but still quite suggestive.

Charles Percy, "Don Carlos," the North American progenitor
who drowned himself, left behind him swirls of lust-related
controversy everywhere he went. As mentioned, he had abandoned his first "wife" in England in favor of an adventurer's life at sea. En route to North America, he abandoned another "wife" in Bermuda and indulged in behavior that one commentator dubbed, "lamentable, lamentable." After a brief stay in the Carolinas he lit out with a gang of slaves for what then was far-west Florida, eventually to become Mississippi, to stake land claims in the remote and swampy but fertile Delta. Sexual mores in such territory were notoriously fluid. Dominant males pretty much did as they pleased. All available evidence suggests that Charles certainly did so. Then there is the question of his relationship with the "uncommonly handsome" Smith family, discussed above. What "feelings" was Charles trying to repress in seeking the family's exile? I rate Charles a Kinsey 2--predominantly heterosexual but incidentally homosexual.

His first son, Robert, entered service in the Royal British Navy as a cabin boy at age eight. While cabin boys in those days came from respectable and even noble backgrounds, with expectations that they were destined to become officers--Lord Nelson himself had first shipped out as a cabin boy at age twelve--it is well documented that sex with male superiors was common. Indeed, British sailors lusted after one another with abandon. Not for nothing did Winston Churchill, after being criticized for lack of knowledge when appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, sum up the traditions of the Royal Navy with the words, "Rum, buggery, and the lash." But Robert never displayed
any of his father Don Carlos's depressive bent. Neither did most
of his descendants--in great contrast to the descendants of his
half-brother, Thomas George.

Thomas George (1786-1841) also presents quite a different
picture from that of the North American patriarch. He was eight
when his father killed himself, making his mother a wealthy
widow. She died shortly after Thomas entered Princeton in 1803,
where he met the man who was to be his lifelong closest friend,
the tubercular John Walker. On graduation in 1806 Thomas returned
to his plantations in the Natchez District of Mississippi and
settled in as a full-time planter. Unlike his father he evinced
no interest in political office or warfare.

John Walker, recovering from tuberculosis, joined him
there. The two young men shared the spacious Percy home for a
year. The parents of both were dead. John Walker took his
orphanage hard; if Thomas George Percy did, his unexcitable
nature did not show it. But Bert argues that one basis for the
pair's very strong bonding was a shared sense of parental
abandonment. He quotes John Walker's avowal that Thomas had
replaced "relations, friends, and home and almost of Love."

Walker eventually settled in newly developing lands in
northeast Alabama. There he married Matilda Pope, daughter of a
wealthy planter, LeRoy Pope, descended from a brother of the poet
Alexander Pope. (One testament to the impact Walker made on
Thomas George can be seen in the ubiquity of the names Walker and
LeRoy among Thomas's descendants.) But Walker missed Thomas
deeply, and also another, older, boon companion, Samuel Brown. He wrote to them urging that they join him in Alabama, adding, "The heart-sick exile whom you knew in the wane of his thought & brokenness of his spirit, will never cease to cherish next his heart the remembrance of those who so unreservedly noticed & caressed him."

Thomas Percy and Samuel Brown heeded Walker's call. They closed down their Natchez business interests. Thomas transported his slaves to Alabama, a few miles from the newly booming town of Huntsville, and established a plantation adjacent to Walker's. He also married Maria Pope, the sister of Walker's wife Matilda. The two friends thus became both brothers-in-law and neighbors.

John Walker a few years later was elected the first U.S. senator from Alabama along with the homosexual Rufus DeVane King, a roommate of James Buchanan, the only president who never married. Was this a gay coterie? Whatever the case, John Walker retained his intimate ties to Thomas George Percy. When he was away in Washington, Thomas oversaw his personal and business affairs.

Bert notes that Walker and Thomas George shared a keen interest in "belles lettres," "an intellectual avocation that scarcely had a wide following in the hunting and gambling society to which they belonged." Thomas departed from the prevailing masculine norm, and indeed from the Percy tradition of combativeness, in other ways as well. When war with Creek Indians broke out in Mississippi, the governor called to arms a regiment
in which Thomas had served as a colonel. Thomas declined to fight. When he was challenged to a duel after apparently imaginary allegations that he had bedded the wife of a former friend, he refused to respond. Indeed, the duel challenge seems to have been a factor in his departure for Alabama.

On the other hand, Thomas George Percy fathered eight children. But then, as Kinsey, C. A. Tripp, and I contend, those with a high sex drive often swing both ways.

What can one make of all this? By Percy standards, Thomas George seems to have been something of a sissy. Of course, at this stage in time only Thomas's colorful father, his half-brother the Royal Navy lieutenant, and the legend that they descended from the uber-martial Lords-of-the-March Percys, Hotspur among them, had set those standards. Still, Thomas George did not fill the shoes of the nascent Percy tradition in America.

Then again, so what? History reveals that many ardent heterosexuals were sissies. At the same time, history shows that many prolific sires, and celebrated warriors to boot, also enjoyed the sexual companionship of males. So maybe it's a wash. But I suspect not.

Bert quotes another of John Walker's several remarkable declarations of his love for Thomas Percy: "My heart knows him not as a common man, an every day friend it loves as a brother, & is proud of its love. By heaven, Sir, we will bring Celibacy into credit; Our bachelor hall shall be the hall of hospitality & content, a caravansary to the weary, the head-quarters of sport
and good fellowship." Even taking into account the floridity with which 19th-century American males expressed affection for each other, there is something a bit over the top here. The liveliness of that bachelor hall did not, I think, encourage celibacy, except perhaps with regard to women. I rate Thomas George a Kinsey 5 as a young man, but overall see him as a Kinsey 2.

Of Thomas George's children, three died in childhood and a son died unmarried at age twenty-two. John Walker Percy (note the name) died at age forty-seven, married with one child. Another son, Charles Brown (again, note the name), married but without issue, died at thirty. Leroy Pope, a lifelong bachelor, died a suicide in 1882 at age fifty-eight. The only distinguished Percy of this generation was my great-grandfather William Alexander Percy I, father of five. He died in 1888 at age fifty-one.

Leroy Pope Percy, described as "sad-eyed," was a physician who did not practice. He killed himself with an overdose of laudanum one day before his desperately ill niece, whose care he was overseeing, herself died. As mentioned he lived his entire life in his brother William Alexander's house, along with the widow of his brother John Walker and her child. He was "the intellectual" of the family, Bert writes, and like Will Percy, the future poet, he suffered from hypertension. Evidently he also suffered from depression. According to Aunt Lady he was homosexual--one of the loners sipping drinks in rocking chairs on the front porch of his brother William Alexander's plantation house. I rate Leroy Pope Percy a Kinsey 6.
William Alexander, the Civil War hero who came to be known as "The Gray Eagle of the Delta," raised a regiment in his twenties. He entered and exited military service to the Confederacy at the rank of colonel. He married Nannie Armstrong, first cousin of General George Armstrong Custer and daughter of William Armstrong, the wealthy Indian agent for whom I am named. Bert missed this link, which includes the fact that George Armstrong Custer and Nannie Armstrong were grandchildren of General James "Trooper" Armstrong, a hero of the War of 1812. The most important Percy family portrait is of Nannie and her two sisters. It is in Knoxville with the descendants of my great-aunt Lady Percy McKinney. I suppose that Bert did not learn of all this because novelist Walker and his brothers did not wish to be connected to the Yankee general whose middle name I proudly share.

Nannie bore the Gray Eagle five children. He I rate a Kinsey 0. I do not infer his complete heterosexuality from his marriage to a kinswoman of the doomed Indian fighter—although, to judge from what happened in successive Percy generations, their union did perhaps consolidate suicide genes. I mean that lightheartedly, but then, who knows. Rather, there is simply no trace at all in what is documented about William Alexander's life to suggest that he was the least bit bisexual.

The next generation brings us into the 20th century. My grandfather, William Armstrong Percy I, I rate a Kinsey 1 or 2. After his first wife, Lottie Galloway Morris, died quite young he
waited many years before he remarried, to my poor, orphaned grandmother, a beautiful and spirited equestrienne, Caroline Yarborough (Big Mama). FaFa, as we referred to him, was a great dandy with an unusually strong sex drive. Underage females attracted him; his affair with Big Mama began when she was only fifteen. He sent her away to a finishing school in Tarrytown on the Hudson, then married her. I strongly suspect that he had liaisons with young males as well.

Uncle Will's father LeRoy I rate a Kinsey 0. Again, no indications that he may have been bisexual. His wife, Aunt Camille, had two old-maid sisters, Aunt Tonk and Aunt Nina, who lived together in Greenville. My aunt Lady often mentioned that they seemed to be in love with each other. About LeRoy and FaFa's sisters, Fannie and Lady, I cannot say. Fannie married but died young under Leroy Pope's care. Lady married Charles McKinney; their daughter, Mary McKinney, married James Godson of Knoxville. Lady also suffered from periodic nervous breakdowns. A third brother, John Walker—there's that name again—died a suicide at age fifty-four.

John Walker had had a nervous breakdown five years before, a bit before my grandfather's premature death. FaFa and his brother LeRoy took Walker to the Mayo Clinic for an evaluation. There they challenged the doctors to identify which one of the three was suffering from mental problems. The doctors chose LeRoy the former U.S. senator, whose steely-eyed, commanding demeanor may have seemed somehow off. Certainly he could not have felt
comfortable confronting experts who might dare to confirm that something was wrong with a Percy. John Walker received treatment and seemed to rebound nicely. Why he took his own life is a mystery. He had married well, fathered two children, was a successful lawyer, a social and business pillar of Birmingham, Alabama. A devoted golfer who founded a country club and belonged to several other clubs, he was sociable, widely liked and admired, although he was said to have cheated at cards, as my father did. One day his son, LeRoy Pratt, father of novelist Walker, came over to discuss a planned hunting vacation. Both were looking forward to it. John Walker went to a trunk room to clean his guns. Sometime later, LeRoy Pratt heard a gun go off. John Walker had blown out his heart with a shotgun. I heard from Big Mama that a major factor in his depression was the death of my grandfather, whom he dearly loved.

Twelve years later, LeRoy Pratt put a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger. A "brilliant" graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School, where he served on the Review, he was like his father a successful lawyer, well married with children, and a prominent member of Birmingham society. He, too, had had nervous breakdowns and had made at least one suicide attempt before he blew his brains out. But he also had savored life—in ways that frequently took him far from home. Energetic, a fanatic aviator and hunter, he suffered from mania as well as depression.

It is hard to discern sexual components in what drove this father-son pair to kill themselves. There are reports that John
Walker's wife, Mary DeBardeleben Percy, was not entirely faithful. What might that mean? Absent more evidence it is difficult to say. Bert speculates that both John Walker and Leroy Pratt had difficulty adjusting to the industrialization of the South, to the ebb of the region's, and the Percy family's, agrarian ties to the land. John Walker's marriage to Mary DeBardeleben, an heiress of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, landed him the position of chief counsel to it. In that capacity he helped manage its sale to Andrew Carnegie's United States Steel Corporation. Did he feel he had betrayed his heritage by selling out to the North? Quite possibly, Bert suggests. I am not persuaded. Poet Will Percy, respectively the nephew and first cousin of John Walker and Leroy Pratt, pined for the vanishing Old South. But John Walker and Leroy Pratt--slick, hard-headed corporate attorneys--did not manifest that kind of weepy nostalgia.

But something was very clearly wrong with them. Leroy Pratt's sole sibling, Ellen, like their aunt Lady fell prey to mental disorders. She ended up in an institution. What became of her marriage to a man named Matt Murphy I do not know.

In sum, of William Alexander and Nannie Armstrong Percy's five children, two went crazy, John Walker and Lady. Both of John Walker and Mary DeBardeleben Percy's two children, Leroy Pratt and Ellen, also went crazy. This raises the question of what happened to Leroy Pratt and Mattie Sue Phinizy Percy's children, novelist Walker and his brothers LeRoy and Phinizy. As already
noted, Mattie Sue had also killed herself, nearly taking Phinizy with her.

All three brothers married and had children. Walker is deceased. So is LeRoy. Phinizy lives on at the very advanced age, for a Percy, of eighty-four. LeRoy and Phinizy don't particularly interest me, and in any case I don't know much about them.

Walker is a different story. He has been the subject of numerous literary and academic studies, and he published fiction whose themes borrow from Percy history in ways that yield insight into the family and into Walker himself. One theme in particular stands out: sexual grotesquerie. Incest, compulsive impersonal sex, guilt about sex, sex as a means to ward off depression and suicide, all figure in Walker's opus. I believe that they figure as well in the lives and deaths of his ancestors.

As to Walker's life, there is much to wonder about, enough that it must be addressed in a separate essay. How did he acquire his extreme homophobia? Why did he undergo psychoanalysis on the couch of Janet Rioch, protégé of Harry Stack Sullivan, the renowned, gay, New York City psychiatrist who was a close friend of his adoptive father, Will? What was it exactly that Walker found attractive about Nazi Germany when he studied there? Why did Walker feel compelled to cover up Uncle Will's homosexuality?

Some of the answers may be comparable to issues in the life of my father, William Armstrong Percy II. Daddy, as mentioned, was terribly homophobic, and, it must added, a violent and abusive drunk. But that did not prevent him from having sex with
men. At Stanford, both as an undergraduate and in law school, he
had a wild sex affair with his roommate, Frank McMamee, the
future chief justice of the Nevada Supreme Court. I remember
vividly a visit Frank paid us in Memphis. He insisted on sleeping
with Daddy; Mother had to clear out for the duration. Later,
while Frank was attending a judges' conference at New York
University in the Village, he invited me up from Princeton to see
him. We had drinks. He got quite drunk and propositioned me. The
man was aggressive about it. He died some years after that at the
hands of a pair of youthful male hitchhikers he'd picked up on a
lonely California desert road on his way from Reno to his place
on Lake Tahoe.

As to the case of myself, I will take it up in my memoirs,
which are modeled both on Lanterns and on The Satyricon. I can
only publish the first part, up to the age of twenty-eight, when
I left Princeton for the last time, because the later part,
though no more scandalous, is too libelous. It will have to cool
its heels in a vault until some years after my death.

For the record I will note that in addition to missing the
Percy link to General Custer, Bert also missed the link to a
perhaps even more notable personage. Although Bert found a
Warfield connection through the marriage of Catherine Anne Ware,
daughter of Sarah Percy and Nathaniel Ware, to Eliza Warfield, he
did not trace the connection to the Duchess of Windsor, far the
most famous of the Warfields. This cousin came even closer to the
throne than did Hotspur, and was every bit as remarkable in her
way as was Custer. I was most relieved however to see that Bert did notice that Man of War descended from a Warfield stud (Wyatt-Brown, The Literary Percys, 1994). In that little book he deftly discusses Ellen Lee, Sarah Dorsey, and Kate Ferguson, authors all, and their insane female relatives.

Thus I conclude my overly long, very overdue, and somewhat preposterous review of House of Percy. About the question of reviewing it, here is one last comment. Because my grandfather FaFa had been received by the Duke of Northumberland at the ancient family seat, Alnwick Castle, rather than at Syon House—which is, to this day, the largest private residence in London, remodeled by Robert Adams from a medieval abbey—I thought it appropriate, when House first appeared, that I should review it in my local newspaper, The Boston Globe. The Globe's chief book critic, Gail Caldwell, disagreed. What could she have been thinking? The Globe ended up not reviewing the book at all.

Bert called Gail Caldwell to ask why he had been snubbed. Apparently Caldwell told him that my request to review House had somehow nixed a Globe notice. Bert then called me to complain about this. My request to do a Globe review had doomed all possibilities at that newspaper, Bert said. What an unfortunate mix-up that was. Caldwell, I think, simply dislikes me. Why, I do not know. Perhaps it is my incontestably noble blood. Or my cousinhood with Man of War! But it is in any case a mark of the parochialism of the Globe that a significant book should be ignored simply because the book editor had a personal animus.