
Review Essay by William A. Percy III

When Simon & Schuster was bringing John Barry's Rising Tide to publication in 1997, its publicity department wrote to ask if I would provide a blurb. The request delighted me because I surmised that Barry's account of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 included the roles that members of my family had played in the flood's aftermath, and long before that, in the creation of Delta levees during the 19th century. Flood control was the essential first step to open up the region's incomparably fertile topsoil to cotton cultivation. The system worked well enough that, in time, Natchez accrued fabulous wealth, on a per-capita basis exceeding even the richest districts of New York City. But it was wealth built in the shadow of a mighty and temperamental river. Slaves had literally walled off the Mississippi between the highland bluffs of Memphis and Vicksburg, a distance of 226 miles as the crow flies. Given the river's meandering course, the levees were very much longer. To look at that dyke and think of the tremendous volume of water behind it, to imagine the cataclysm should it thunder through, could only produce a shudder. When the levees failed in 1927 the worst natural disaster in American history ensued, unsurpassed until Hurricane Katrina.

I read the galleys with mounting astonishment and admiration. Barry had gotten almost everything exactly right--
including his depiction of the homosexuality of my cousin, William Alexander Percy II, a poet of some fame who in 1941 would publish a classic memoir of Southern life, *Lanterns on the Levee*, a bestseller still in print today. The memoir's title referred to night watchmen patrolling the levees with lanterns, on the lookout for "boils," turbulent water bursting from embankments. Unplugged boils could lead to levee collapse and flood. It is a poignant title, evocative of Uncle Will's lifelong sense that what remained of the Old South's aristocratic planter culture required vigilant defense, lest it too be swept away. The Civil War had already erased much of it. Yet in 1927 formidable remnants continued to thrive. William Alexander's father, LeRoy, the brother of my grandfather, William Armstrong I, exemplified the enduring power of the past. Master of vast plantations, lawyer, banker, U. S. senator, director of foundations with national reach, and a pioneering railroad entrepreneur, LeRoy had ensured that the Percy family remained dominant in the Delta.

William Alexander II, whom my mother later instructed me to address as "Uncle Will" in hopes that we would inherit part of what we believed to be his immense fortune, revered his father. He also feared him, as did almost everyone else. But LeRoy did not reciprocate Will's respect. He considered his frail, literary, effete, non-womanizing son a disturbing departure from Percy tradition, with one notable exception: Will had served in World War I, calmly facing enemy fire while nearby fellow soldiers were blown apart. His bravery earned him medals.
Percys have always valued martial prowess. In legend and perhaps in fact the family history stretches back to the earls and dukes of Northumberland, back to Hotspur himself of Shakespearean fame. LeRoy’s father, William Alexander I, after whom Will was named, had fought with distinction for the Confederacy in the Civil War. He raised a regiment in his twenties, entered and left the Confederate ranks a colonel, and ultimately acquired the sobriquet, “Gray Eagle of the Valley.” War was in the Percy blood.

LeRoy, however, had never served in the military; history provided no wars to give him the opportunity. The fact that Will had come back from Europe a hero made him proud. I believe that it also was one of the reasons that he did not exile Will from Greenville, the port town that headquarterd the Percy fiefdom. His only living son, to be blunt, was an embarrassment. People in small towns talk when a local grandee, the sole heir to boot, strays from convention. In 1927, at the age of forty-two, Will Percy, dutifully practicing law with his father but escaping whenever he could to New York and Europe, had not married and showed no signs that he ever would do so.

Then came the flood.

Herbert Hoover, at the time commerce secretary under Calvin Coolidge, was directing federal relief efforts. Will had worked for Hoover’s emergency food-distribution program in Belgium just as World War I began. Later Will headed the Red Cross in Washington County, Mississippi, of which Greenville was the seat.
When the flood hit, inundating Greenville and huge stretches of the Delta, Greenville's mayor also appointed Will chief of an emergency relief committee. Will's connection with Hoover added greatly to his clout. Never before had the aesthete poet assumed so much responsibility or commanded such power.

All went well until LeRoy objected to Will's plan to evacuate thousands of black sharecroppers marooned on miles of levee stretching north from Greenville. LeRoy feared that if the sharecroppers left the Delta they would never return, a nightmare for the planters given their chronic manpower shortage for the growing and picking of cotton. A system of debt peonage bound blacks to the plantations almost as coercively as had slavery. State law, however, dissolved such debt in the event of natural disaster.

Will had expeditiously arranged for a flotilla of barges to be towed down from Memphis. They were to be loaded with blacks and brought south to Vicksburg, the nearest downriver bluff. A steamer had already docked; hundreds of blacks were boarding it, to the great chagrin of whites who hadn't already shipped out. Will was angrily attempting to bring order to the chaos. LeRoy approached and accosted him. He insisted that they go for a walk together on the levee.

They chatted, striding through throngs of desperate black refugees clutching all that remained of their paltry worldly possessions, the Mississippi swollen and turbid to the west, Greenville and all of Washington County submerged to the east as
far as the eye could see. It was unseasonably cold, which added to the misery. Panicked livestock shivered on the levee, hungry dogs brawled. Everyone and everything that could climb, crawl, swim, row, or slither had made for attics, roofs, tree limbs, anywhere to escape the violently rising water. But the destination of choice was the levee. It provided the only large platform above the river and the newly created inland sea. More significantly, it was the sole feasible staging ground for evacuation. Steamers and barges coming downriver could moor at it. Railroad tracks had been destroyed. Roads had been wiped out. The river was the only exit.

The only first-hand report we have of what Will and LeRoy discussed as they strode through the misery huddled on the levee, mud caking their boots, is Will's description in Lanterns. He says that his father broached the question of the evacuation quietly, asking if Will had considered the reaction of planters who would lose their labor. Of course he had, Will retorted. He pointed out the obvious, that the planters, by his standards uncultivated, redneck racists, were incapable of seeing beyond money considerations. They had no conception of what, ethically, was the right thing to do. He would not submit to their pressure. LeRoy understood that kind of language. Percys did not tolerate intimidation. In Will's case I can imagine that it had already bordered on the physical, although Will does not so say in Lanterns. Physical intimidation of a Percy? Unthinkable to a man like LeRoy. He wanted to defend his son. However, in this case,
Will's actions from a practical standpoint were, quite simply, intolerable.

It is hard to imagine today the violence of the forces at play. The flood had not only washed out the planters' communal buildings and crops, killed their livestock, and in most cases, although not in that of the Percys', demolished their grand homes. The cataclysm also jeopardized what the planter class had always taken for granted, what they felt that, by birthright, they were entitled to: black muscle creating elite white wealth. Will Percy thought he could take that away? The poet of exquisite refinement and noble sensibilities, who extolled the grandeur of the Southern past, now wanted literally to send that past down the river? Will in the eyes of the Delta planters was a traitor to his class, to his race, to the entire tradition of mint juleps on the verandah, of lavish parties at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, at the Boston Club in New Orleans.

An ironic predicament for Will it most certainly was. But he was, in his own way—in the way, it is worth pointing out, of many a grandiose queen—a man who could focus grievance with terrible intensity. When he got mad, he got very, very mad. When he knew that he was right and that everyone else was wrong, he would stay his course, even if suicidally. This was, after all, the war hero who had faced enemy fire without flinching.

LeRoy knew this. I am sure that in some ways he respected it. Homosexuality ran in the family. One of LeRoy's uncles had been a Kinsey 6 and many other Percys, male and female, were
bisexual to varying degrees. I am also sure that his son's headstrong idealism, a certain uptight moralism not uncommon among gay men then and since, aroused in him more than a little contempt.

In any case, LeRoy had his hands full. He needed to do something. I do not think that Will told the full story of their walk together down that woebegone levee. We know from Will's account that LeRoy did extract, with some difficulty, agreement from Will to consult one last time the members of his emergency committee. But I think that LeRoy forced Will to do it with this admonition, or something very like it: "Look, son. If you ship out all those hands, I will no longer be able to protect you. And you do know what I mean. I will no longer be able to keep you safe from men who will despise you for the rest of your life, and worse, who do not believe that you are a man."

How can I be sure that LeRoy confronted Will with his homosexuality? Because LeRoy must have seen very clearly the consequences for Will down the road, especially after LeRoy's death. Will with his willfulness, so to speak, might have shrugged off the possibility of planters holding a grudge. But I do not believe that he could have dismissed the prospect of what later became known as gay-bashing. The Klan, after an ugly political power struggle, had even tried to assassinate his father the former senator! Others who have studied this father-son relationship might doubt that LeRoy could have taken such a step, or even that LeRoy knew that Will was gay. Nonsense! The
whole family knew. My father, who lived in the Percy home during his senior year at Greenville High School, in 1923, came away shocked and disgusted with Will's effeminate ways and sexual liaisons with black employees--although, in the manner of many homophobes, partly because he distrusted his own sexuality. Later, at Stanford and then at Stanford Law School he had a wild affair with his roommate, Frank McNamee, the future chief justice of the Supreme Court of Nevada.

More to the point, LeRoy would of course play the sexuality card to have his way. Not only was he ruthless in matters of money and power. He was also a practical man, clear-eyed, unsentimental. He knew well what would happen to Will if the question of his "eccentricity" escalated into charges that he had betrayed the planters. It was one thing if Will wrote poetry and kept up appearances with the occasional participation in a parade commemorating military service. Quite another if this confirmed bachelor used his sudden and quite unexpected powers to wreck the social order.

In fact, Will barely kept up appearances as it was. He had affairs with black adolescents in Greenville, prompting much gossip among the servants. The more worldly of Greenville's residents knew that Will frequently repaired to New York City, where a coterie of bachelor friends lived, and that he regularly vacationed "on Greek islands and Anatolian hillsides"--the wry reference of a reviewer who years later expressed doubt that Will
was visiting gay resorts to find a wife who "could live up to his mother," as some apologists had suggested.

Will continued to resist LeRoy, or at least pretended to. But he stopped the loading of the steamship, returned to Red Cross headquarters, and called an emergency meeting of his committee. LeRoy meantime secretly lobbied the committee, which had previously voted unanimously to evacuate. Vote down the evacuation, he urged, but don't tell Will I told you so. Will in Lanterns professes to have been shocked some hours later when every last member voted against his plan. But I think he knew it was coming.

He sent the barges downriver to Vicksburg, empty.

I believe that LeRoy, other leading Washington County planters, and Will struck a kind of Faustian bargain. If Will let the planters keep their labor, they would leave Will alone. As it happened, Will continued to live in Greenville unmolested, although with increasing flamboyance, even after LeRoy's death in 1929, until his own death in 1942.

John Barry does not speculate that LeRoy threatened Will in the manner I suggest, but he rightly concludes that the frail, literary gay son could not stand up to his legendarily domineering father. Rising Tide provides an accurate analysis of their relationship, in the process giving the fullest public account to date of Will's sexual nature. For example, Barry describes Will's affairs with three of his black chauffeurs--a subject that not even Bertram Wyatt-Brown, author of House of
Percy, the most comprehensive and far the best of the many Percy family biographies, discusses. There is an irony here. I provided Bert Wyatt-Brown with a prime source on Will's sex life in Greenville. He did not pursue it. But John Barry did.

Millie Commodore, a lovely old black lady with café-au-lait skin, years ago lived two doors down from me on Tremont Street in Boston's South End. She always was most friendly, which I at first thought derived from simple Southern graciousness. Then one day she informed me that she had grown up in Greenville and had many memories of my relatives there. In fact, she was very familiar with Uncle Will's memoir, *Lanterns*. This intrigued me. To my fascination she recounted detailed stories about Ford ("Fode") Atkins, Will's chauffeur of many years who appears in *Lanterns*. Millie's husband had been Fode's classmate in high school and best friend. They often motored about town with Fode in a car that Will had given him. Moreover, Millie also had stories about many other clandestine interracial sexual relationships, both homo and heteros. Millie knew whereof she spoke. She herself had white ancestry.

Some time later my friend Arthur Warner, a leading gay scholar and activist, came to visit. We were sitting on my front stoop when Millie came strolling down the street. I introduced her to Arthur and we began to chat. At my prompting Millie told Arthur some of her stories. Oh yes, said Millie, it was common knowledge that Will Percy had sex affairs with at least three of his black chauffeurs, including Fode Atkins. Arthur, a dinge
queen, became very excited. He urged me to tape-record this invaluable information. I followed his sage advice.

Some years after that Bert Wyatt-Brown came to visit. I supplied him with copies of the recordings. He then interviewed Millie extensively. She came over to my new house on East Concord Street, a few blocks from hers, where Bert made further recordings. Millie mentioned that she had several friends still living in Greenville, high-toned blacks, who could provide more testimony. She offered to introduce them to me and Bert.

Although Bert found Millie's perspective quite interesting, he did not want to pursue her "uncorroborated" account of Pode's sexual relationship with Will or that of other whites with blacks. To be sure, the stories strained credulity. For while tales of interracial heterosexual affairs were, in Will's era, taboo in the extreme, tales of a male white aristocrat bedding his male black employees went utterly beyond the pale. Bert didn't want to go there. He would have faced the wrath of Walker Percy's estate, which controlled permission to quote from the novelist's works. Earlier, Walker himself had threatened to withhold such permission if Bert outed Will. I meantime had threatened to denounce Bert's book if he did not out Will, who, Walker repeatedly and ludicrously insisted to both Bert and me, was straight.

In the face of such family touchiness Bert limited his citations of Millie's testimony to less explosive topics.
Enter John Barry. He not only picked up on Bert's Millie citation and tracked her down, he also interviewed the other Greenville sources that Millie had offered to introduce to me and to Bert. These sources wished to remain anonymous. No surprise there. They were living in Greenville, where the Percy name still loomed large. One of them I remember was a retired high school assistant principal.

At any rate, I supplied a blurb for Rising Tide in which I said that everything in it is true. The blurb didn't appear on the book's jacket copy as more famous names than mine eclipsed it, those of David Herbert Donald and Tom Wicker, for example.

Recently, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Rising Tide rocketed to number ten on Amazon.com's best-seller list. I reread the book and found some minor errors. Barry writes on page 105 that LeRoy Percy sent a letter to a son of his brother, who had committed suicide. The fatherless son was entering Stanford University; LeRoy made a carefully hedged offer to help him should he need and deserve it. The brother of LeRoy's who had committed suicide was John Walker Percy. His son, LeRoy Pratt Percy, did not go to Stanford. He went to Princeton and then to Harvard Law School, married well and practiced law, but, like his father, also committed suicide, leaving three sons fatherless, whom Will adopted, the eldest of them the future novelist Walker. Barry made a mistake. He apparently concluded that LeRoy had written the letter (dated Oct. 11, 1927) to Leroy Pratt. In fact, LeRoy wrote the letter to my father, William Armstrong Percy II,
his ward, who attended Stanford. His father died not of suicide, but of Bright's Disease at age forty-nine, after which LeRoy became my father's, his sister's, and his younger brother's legal guardian. But these are minor issues. Barry's book is important for our family pride and my memories, though most of my Southern cousins do not agree.

Not long ago I telephoned John Barry to inform him of this mix-up. Serendipitously I placed the call before Katrina hit. To judge from his many recent appearances in newspapers and on television, John Barry is very busy indeed. As Bert Wyatt-Brown always has been, he was most gracious to me. I very much look forward to his next book. If it is not about Hurricane Katrina, then he doubtless will at some point address that catastrophe. No other author has better qualifications.

PS. 19 March 2006

John Barry told me that the next book would be on the separation of church and state in America. As an episode in the evolution from Massachusetts Bay Colony to Roger Williams, but he would be a Brooklyn, not a New. I have heard from him since although I have posted on his website a